HOME PERFECTED:
PIETER DE HOOCH AND NEW IDEALS OF DOMESTICITY IN THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

by

Theresa L. Handwerk

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I dedicate this thesis to my family, whose belief in me never wavered.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.................................................................................................................. v

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................................... vi

INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................... 1

DOMESTICITY AND THE DUTCH REPUBLIC ............................................................................... 5
  Domesticity Defined .......................................................................................................................... 5
  History Of The Home ..................................................................................................................... 5

ELEMENTS OF DOMESTICITY ...................................................................................................... 7
  History And Role Of Women In The Dutch Republic ................................................................. 7
  History And Role Of Children In The Dutch Republic ............................................................. 8
  Contents Of The Home ................................................................................................................ 9
  Mother And Child Interaction - Breastfeeding ........................................................................... 13
  Mother And Child Interaction - Instruction .............................................................................. 14

THE IDEAL VERSUS THE REAL ................................................................................................... 15
  Space ........................................................................................................................................... 15
  Figures ......................................................................................................................................... 17
  Emotion ........................................................................................................................................ 20
  Light ............................................................................................................................................ 21
  Color ........................................................................................................................................... 24

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................................... 27

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................................. 29

NOTES ............................................................................................................................................. 32
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS


2. Pieter de Hooch, *Children in a Doorway with “Kolf” Sticks*, ca. 1658-166, National Trust, Polesden Lacey, Dorking, United Kingdom.


ABSTRACT

The Delft works of Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684) exemplify domestic virtue in their depictions of scenes of everyday life. Charming and evocative, they portray the household in the Dutch Republic that we think we recognize: mothers keeping their quaint homes clean and orderly and watching over their playful children, while men are absent, perhaps to avail themselves of business opportunities that the Dutch Golden Age offered. This thesis deconstructs two of de Hooch’s works, The Bedroom and Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog. In order to understand the domesticity in de Hooch’s paintings it is important to analyze in detail his use of material culture and the elements that comprised the décor of the times, such as paintings, pottery, and birdcages. De Hooch’s painting present space, figures, emotions, light, and color in a distinct style that is both idealizing and highly realistic. These elements resemble in part and differ in part from the styles of other Dutch painters of the Golden Age. In conclusion, I propose that for the fledgling Dutch Republic, with the ordeal of the Eighty Years War behind it, such artworks offered a useful lesson for a new society. His paintings helped to create and reinforce the Zeitgeist of the new republic. The two paintings at the center of this study confirmed the senses of nostalgic ideas of home and of morality that they put forth and inspired the members of the community to emulate.
INTRODUCTION

In Pieter de Hooch’s charming, peaceful The Bedroom of about 1658-1660 (figure 1) in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, mother and child smile at each other across a room bathed in warm light. The mother performs the morning ritual of arranging the bed linens and tending to the chamber pot near the bed and her daughter clutches a ball in one hand and the door in the other, having arrived from playing outside. The bedroom, with a floor of red tiles, is sparsely furnished, with a built-in bed, just two chairs, a small table on which a tablecloth and jug have been placed, a curtain, a mirror or two and a landscape painting above the door to the front room. That room’s floor, in black and white shades of marble, is visible as is another door—the door to the home itself, which is open as well, and across an outdoor path a garden and the city beyond beckons.

A complementary work by de Hooch, Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog (figure 5), also of about 1658-1660, presents another maternal scene in an interior. Daylight streams in through a window, brightening the corner of a gray-walled kitchen where a mother nurses her baby. As the mother looks down lovingly at her infant, a girl sits next to her near the fireplace and peers out at the viewer while feeding her pet spaniel. In this work, we see the same red-tiled floor and warm-colored wood, but in this scene, there are a few more objects which gives us clues to the daily life of the young family: dishes on the mantle, a birdeage and brazier, an orange placed carefully out of reach of the children.
The production of the imagery of interiors increased significantly with the signing of the Treaty of Munster at the end of the Eighty Years War in 1648—about a decade before The Bedroom was painted.\(^1\) In addition to Pieter de Hooch, artists such as Pieter van Slingelandt, Samuel van Hoogstraten, Caspar Netscher, and Gerard ter Borch, among many others, were all painting domestic interiors. Popular themes were those such as in the works just described that de Hooch created: breastfeeding mothers and mothers taking care of their children’s hair and otherwise going about their daily duties. Dutch artists reveled in depicting aspects of their interiors with their textiles, earthenware, and items of furniture. Yet Pieter de Hooch’s interiors stand out because of the degree to which they are idealized. Scholars have now accepted that seventeenth-century Dutch genre interiors were not representations of reality. To deconstruct the unique power of de Hooch’s works, it is instructive to examine the components of his art which were verifiably real—and which were also charmingly imagined.

Pieter de Hooch’s domestic interiors are today the most popular of his oeuvre but were just one type of the works, known as genre scenes, that he produced. The varieties of seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings are well-documented: the “scenes of daily life,” as they are known, include guardroom scenes, merry companies, soldiers drinking with women—all of which Pieter de Hooch experimented with beginning in about 1650. Yet in the middle of that decade something changed for de Hooch. After his marriage in 1654, along with his images of soldiers and merry companies he began to paint domestic scenes, mostly showing women and children, occasionally in courtyards but most often in thoughtfully constructed interiors like that...
of *The Bedroom*. The theme of the domestic interior remained constant in his oeuvre from that time forward.

De Hooch’s visions of home life are considered to be some of the most poetic in Dutch art. Tranquil, warm and lovely, they draw the viewer in with their portrayals of rooms so real that the audience scarcely thinks to question the possible differences between actual Dutch homes and de Hooch’s depictions of the same. The room of *The Bedroom* as a portrayal of a typical Dutch home has rung true to scholars; yet while scholars today know that these works should not be considered as faithful recordings of reality, the question remains as to why these scenes of mothers and children were so popular with the Dutch audience that de Hooch returned to the theme again and again. Perhaps this particular type of genre painting held a specific meaning for the contemporary viewer of which today’s audience is unaware. In addition, although the interior may seem realistic, it is not to be assumed that symbolism is not still operative in interpretations of the work of art. Unraveling the meaning of a painting would have been an intriguing way to pass the time for a contemporary viewer. In this paper, I intend to explore both realistic elements and symbolic to examine how Pieter de Hooch’s *The Bedroom* and *Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog* might have conveyed new ideals of domesticity in the fledgling Dutch Republic.

In the first section of this paper, I will discuss the history of the idea of domesticity and its depiction in Dutch art. I will then explore elements of the paintings under discussion that contribute to the impression of domesticity of the works, including the women, children, their interactions, and the appearance and contents of the homes themselves.
Finally, I will examine how de Hooch uses his stylistic strategies to create a sense of the idealistic while at the same time painting works that appear highly realistic.
DOMESTICITY AND THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

Domesticity Defined

As Witold Rybczynski, in *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, writes,

To speak of domesticity is to describe a set of felt emotions, not a single attribute. Domesticity has to do with family, intimacy, and a devotion to the home, as well as with a sense of the house as embodying—not only harboring—these sentiments.²

Rybczynski has written that the notion of domesticity was developed by the Dutch.³ The idea is even embedded in their language with a term that has no single-word equivalent in English: *gezellig*. Loosely translated as “cozy,” it refers to a particular feeling that can be had, for example, while comforted at home on a cold rainy day with hot tea, a warm fire, and a good book, and carries with it a sense of nostalgia. In Susan Stewart’s view, nostalgia can be viewed as a longing for a past that did not exist, and that, in and of itself, creates its own narrative—a tale about what the past was and the present should be.⁴ The popularity of *gezellig* paintings of domestic genre interiors such as *The Bedroom* contributed to ideas about domesticity, and may have affected social conventions as well.

History Of The Home

The years after the Eighty Years’ war was a period of tremendous affluence which brought with it not only changes in the standards of civility and privacy but also of the very definitions of home and family, and even in the construction of the home.⁵[5] In the medieval era, homes in Dutch towns and along canals consisted of a front room, which was used as a storefront or workshop, and the
back room, where household activities took place. As years passed and the populace became more prosperous, homes were added onto. But because of spatial considerations—with the water below and the homes on either side—this meant building up. This was often done section by section, so that each floor level was not necessarily contiguous. Until the middle of the seventeenth century, the various rooms—except for the kitchen—lacked specific functions—but then this began to change. The front room, or voorhuis, remained, but its usage evolved from a commercial space to a space for receiving visitors and tradespeople, and it decreased in size. Other rooms, most of which contained beds, became specialized for day or for night use, or for formal or informal use. The commercial activities that had taken place in the front room were moved elsewhere, and the homes were not as often used as places of work: the man of the house increasingly went to work elsewhere, and the woman of the home stayed to take care of it.

In the home depicted in *The Bedroom*, the purpose of the voorhuis as a reception area is served by the half-door to the street and the full door to the separate, private area of the home. In the case of *The Bedroom*, the painting has been traditionally titled as such due to the clear presence of the bed box and of the mother at her morning tasks of airing out the bedclothes and cleaning out the chamber pot; it is, however, a misnomer, since rooms and, indeed, furniture did not have specific functions as they do in today’s homes. Bedrooms in our contemporary sense of the word did not exist for citizens in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. The placement of a bed so close to the front of the home in this scene of domesticity was not unusual and is entirely true to life.
ELEMENTS OF DOMESTICITY

Pieter de Hooch’s works are comprised of a variety of elements which contribute to the sense of tranquil domesticity, including women and children, and the appearance and contents of the homes themselves. In this section, we will examine these components individually.

History And Role Of Women In The Dutch Republic

The portrayal of the women in *The Bedroom* and *Woman Nursing* is one marker of domesticity in the works. Although the role of women in the Dutch Republic was markedly different from the rest of Europe—their literacy rates were the highest compared to other countries, and they often were put in charge of the family business while the husbands were at sea—their position in society was very much that of being in charge of all things relating to the home. In addition to household management, there was cleaning to do on a daily basis—so much that more than one foreign visitor deemed it excessive. In the Dutch Republic, however, notions of cleanliness and orderliness were closely tied to ideas of virtue, pride, and good citizenship and were socially enforced, possibly with the kind of cultural and visual reinforcement offered by a painting such as *The Bedroom*. Children playing were often inserted into works of art to add a contrast to the moral background and to express an element of frivolity.
History And Role Of Children In The Dutch Republic

The prosperity of the Dutch Republic in the mid-seventeenth century had a direct affect on the structure and belief systems of the family unit in Holland. Prosperous members of society were able to own their own homes, and there was no longer the need to share a living space with generations of relatives. This factor, combined with the single function of the home—no longer a place of work—and the limited number of servants per household (compared to other European countries—even the wealthiest of homes in Holland hired no more than three) created a population in which individuality and independence were highly valued. Compared to the rest of Europe, there were more households in Holland consisting simply of parents and their children, leading to a more sedate and private home life.

Domestic virtue and order was regarded as the highest social priority. Although moralizing books on conduct were not new, *Houwelyck* (Marriage) (1625), by Jacob Cats, was extremely popular. It presented the progress of a woman’s life in six stages: maid, sweetheart, bride, wife, mother, and widow. The domestic conduct book was written for the upper classes, but was followed nearly as closely as the Bible by the middle classes. As a moralizing tome, it sought to reinforce the patriarchal system of the society. Although the Dutch tempered the male-centered view of the world with a belief in marriage as an equal and balanced partnership, the Calvinist marriage was based on the husband’s authority, and it was still clear that there was a distinction between the man’s world—the outside—and the woman’s—the home. Theologians, and moralists like Cats, reinforced the idea of the woman in charge of the home. In turn, the changes in the home and in the role of women reflected the growing importance of the family in Dutch society—and children were a crucial element of this unit. The concept of a distinct childhood appeared in Dutch society a
century earlier than elsewhere in Europe. The relationship between parents and children was characterized more by affection than discipline. Calvinists followed classical and humanist thought in seeing the home as the foundation of all society—a microcosm of the state as a whole. Training young children to become productive members of society, it was believed, could be accomplished more effectively in home rather than in church or at school. Children were thought to be highly impressionable—whether they first came into contact with good or evil affected the outcome of their character (hence the desire to avoid wet nurses)—and the primary purpose of teaching them was to create adults who would positively affect society.

**Contents Of The Home**

De Hooch’s depiction of a traditional and familiar-seeming room, with an outdated layout and weathered interior, inspires the sense of safety, security, and of domesticity. The contents and details of the home contribute to this effect. The ceramics used in Holland at the beginning of the seventeenth-century were mostly stoneware imported from Germany or earthenware which was made locally whenever possible. The jug in *The Bedroom*, painted with a beveled surface and with a glint of light on a curved edge which catches the eye, appears to be made of this coarse earthenware which was covered with a transparent lead glaze to make it watertight. But, after about 1650, the market shifted. Wealthier Dutch men and women began to prefer faience and porcelain imported from China. The German stoneware makers began to produce items of simpler designs, such as the stoneware jug in de Hooch’s work, to appeal to a broader market. The location of the bed in the home was also changing around this time. It would no longer be usual to have it near the front of the home; instead, it would be closer to the back or on an upper floor. De Hooch has
painted his interior in *The Bedroom* as slightly weathered, with plaster above the inner door cracking and even missing in parts, and a triangular piece of glass missing from the interior window. It is possible that de Hooch has aged the room as a way to take a step back from the encroaching changes in actual domestic interiors and emphasize time past,\(^1\) and to provide a sense of continuity during this progression of society.\(^2\)

The paintings-within-the-painting may give us a suggestion as to de Hooch’s ideas of nostalgia. There are two paintings within *The Bedroom*: one, its subject not visible, is in the outer room, next to and behind the open door, and the second, a landscape, is above the inner door. The landscape may be a reproduction—strict or otherwise—of an existing painting, or it may be de Hooch’s own creation.\(^3\)

The artwork-within-the-artwork is of a path leading off into the distance, between a curving river and the tree line of a densely wooded area. Peter Sutton has written about the Netherlandish tradition of landscapes and the persistence of late medieval religious themes into the early Modern period. Landscapes depicting saints with a choice of a path—virtue, through the mountains, or vice, through the lowlands—aided viewers’ meditative prayers.\(^4\) While it is not my intention to ascribe religious overtones to *The Bedroom*, the positioning of the playful child underneath the contemplative landscape scene, both of which are in contrast to the woman hard at work in keeping the home up to societal standards, provides a subtle reminder of what is necessary to maintain the peaceful calm of domestic harmony in the Dutch Republic. The positioning of the landscape also spurs viewer’s thoughts about the child’s life and which paths it will take. Reinforcing these thoughts is the placement of the child in the doorway, having just stepped off of the path in front of the home that leads to the world outside. As we imagine the mother speculating about the future of
her child, we might feel the sense of nostalgia that the mother might feel as she views the painting.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog}, another of de Hooch’s visions of domesticity, provides a useful comparison with \textit{The Bedroom} as more illustrative of the society in which these paintings were produced. It allows for more expansive consideration of the theme of domesticity in de Hooch’s body of work and in the setting of a household which appears to be slightly more affluent. In this work we see a mother with her feet on a foot warmer nursing her infant while another child at her side, in a parallel action, feeds the family dog. Light filtering through the windows provides the room with a comforting glow. On the cabinet in the foreground we can just make out an earthenware jug and a textile of some kind, above which hangs a picture or a mirror. Farther above the mother’s head hang a birdcage and, below it, a brazier. In front of dishes lining the mantel sits an orange, and something is bubbling over from the pot in the fireplace. The older child seems to smile out at us as she enjoys her dog’s attention.

Also as in \textit{The Bedroom}, the household objects in \textit{Woman Nursing} are mostly commonplace, and the meanings of some are just as open for debate. The glass on the mantel, a \textit{roemer}, was used for wine. A \textit{roemer} always had prunts—small pieces of glass attached to the stem for a better grip—as it was still common to eat with one’s hands.\textsuperscript{24} The plates on the mantel are \textit{plooischotels}—pleated dishes\textsuperscript{25}—and depictions in paintings of the period suggest that they were used as fruit bowls.\textsuperscript{26} Near to the \textit{roemer} is an orange—to us a commonplace item, but to the seventeenth-century Dutch a distinct luxury. Oranges and lemons were difficult to grow in the Netherlands, but cultivation was attempted by those with greenhouses. They could also be
imported, although they spoiled quickly.\textsuperscript{27} It is possible that the orange and the wine glass, which appears rather incongruously on the mantel, above the scene of the nursing mother, might be referring to an absent husband, frivolity (as might the playing child in *The Bedroom*) or simply to luxury, as de Hooch uses the same items in other works in wealthier settings. This sense of luxury is underscored by the mother’s outfit: in her gold-trimmed outer skirt and fur-lined jacket, she is portrayed as the female head of a well-off household.

A close inspection of the tiles around the fireplace, a common sight in Dutch homes, reveals a contrast to the obedient baby and child: one of them features a *kakkertje*, or a person squatting to relieve themselves in plain view of everyone! This may be de Hooch’s way of providing a bit of comic relief in the midst of all of the propriety,\textsuperscript{28} or perhaps a moralistic reference to the motto depicted in an emblem book: “This body, what is it but stink and shit?” with its religious undertones.\textsuperscript{29}

The bird cage hanging on the wall is another typical item found in paintings of Dutch homes, but it also may be a morality-laden message, as the emblem book by Jacob Cats pictures a caged bird and the poem alluding to the “sweet slavery of marital love.”\textsuperscript{30} The theme of love can also be linked to the Cupid decoration that appears on the right-hand wooden column of the fireplace, below and to the left of the birdcage. One possible interpretation of these items taken together, when considering their juxtaposition against the orange and the roemer (and those objects as stand-ins for an absent husband) is that the security and safety of marital love, hovering above the nursing mother, is of primary importance over that of the joyful love personified by Cupid.
Across the top of the fireplace, hanging from the mantle, is a strip of fabric (known in Dutch as a *schoorsteenrabat*) whose function was to keep some of the smoke from the chimney from entering into the room. De Hooch uses similar fabric in several of his paintings and it appears that it was common to match it to bed linens, table covers, and curtains. By filling his kitchen corner in *Woman Nursing* with items with which most Dutch viewers would be familiar, de Hooch creates a convincing depiction of a daily domestic activity.

**Mother And Child Interaction - Breastfeeding**

In contrast to *The Bedroom, Woman Nursing* is one of de Hooch’s comparatively rare works without the complex use of a particular type of vista, or view through the painting to another complementary scene or the outdoors, known in Dutch as a *doorsein* - literally, a “look through.” There are layers of meaning to be seen here nonetheless. The light streaming through the window creates a glow on the wall behind the mother in a mandala-like pattern. Indeed, the nursing mother may have been perceived by Pieter de Hooch as a secular, Baroque-era version of the Medieval and Renaissance *Madonna lactans*, transforming the love of Mary for her son Jesus into an earthly mother’s love for her child. Although the idea of the *Madonna lactans* was a theme dating back centuries, breastfeeding mothers appeared in Dutch paintings in significant numbers only around the time that de Hooch painted. This should not be surprising. At this time, doctors and moralists alike believed that mother’s milk was best. Although wet nurses were still common, they increasingly were used only in cases of medical necessity (death or disease). Since breast milk was thought to be blood that had whitened in the breast—the same blood that nourished the baby in the uterus—it was thought that if a wet nurse was used the baby
would not only absorb her character traits but bond with her instead. At this time in the Netherlands, doctors, moralists, humanists and theologians debated all aspects of the issue, and theologians held as strong an opinion on the matter as the rest. Breastfeeding was viewed as the most serious of all maternal duties - to fail to undertake it not only was a serious breach of one’s obligations but also proof of lack of love for her child. God had ordained woman for this practice, as could be seen by reading scripture or watching God’s creatures. In portraying the serene act of a mother breastfeeding her child, de Hooch may not only be creating a perfect domestic scene but also taking a stance on moral issues of his day.

**Mother And Child Interaction - Instruction**

The vignette of the child, who is feeding the dog in parallel to the mother’s action of feeding her own baby, carries its own moral undertones. In works of art, dogs perched on their hind legs were often associated with children, reflecting the view that Jacob Cats expressed that the dog is a metaphor for obedience. In his analysis, Peter Sutton emphasizes the scene of the girl and her pet as the perfect foil to Jan Steen’s frequent scenes of the theme of “As the Old Ones Sing, So the Young Ones Pipe”, wherein children automatically imitate the actions of their elders—but in de Hooch, instead of a dissolute household, we have the perfect obedience of both child and pet. Dutch society believed that the home, even more than the church, was the place for moral instruction. De Hooch’s work illustrates that breastfeeding is—or should be—a part of any proper home.
THE IDEAL VERSUS THE REAL

A number of elements in de Hooch’s paintings work together to create a balance between representation of the ideal and representation of the real. These components, including space, figures, emotion, light and color will be examined in this section.

Space

Pieter de Hooch did not always produce paintings that depicted comforting interiors, such as The Bedroom, which practically invite the viewer to step inside and make themselves at home. For a number of years before his marriage, he painted low scenes that reflected the prevailing themes of Dutch genre painting at the time: interiors of stables and guardrooms with peasants and soldiers smoking, drinking, throwing dice and playing tric-trac. An example of the genre, Tric-Trac Players (ca. 1652-1655) (figure 6), the colors are subdued, the lighting dim, and the mood somber. The setting is not clearly defined and the figures are not confidently placed within their space. The narration is indifferent and is not tied to the use of space.

Yet, as de Hooch began to paint his domestic-themed works, the interiors became believable and realistic, as in The Bedroom: he had learned how to build space with the correct use of perspective and how to form it with atmosphere by using bright sunlight and warmer, more luminous hues, as well as how to extend space into other rooms and distant vistas. In order to do so, he used a well-established technique of placing a pin at the desired vanishing point. Strings attached to the pin were covered
with chalk and snapped against the prepared ground leaving easily-sighted orthogonals to assist in laying out his rooms.44

An aspect of de Hooch’s construction of space with particular relevance to the discussion of domesticity is the use of a doorsein. In The Bedroom this refers to the view in the painting from the picture plane through the front doors of the home and beyond, over the garden and out into the cityscape. Of the approximately one hundred sixty paintings attributed to de Hooch, only about a dozen do not make use of this feature (via a back room, garden, street, or courtyard)45 which had become formulaic by mid-century. Most frequently, doorseins were used by artists to provide additional spaces for figures to inhabit or for additional activities to take place as commentary on the action in the foreground.46 In The Bedroom, the doorsein suggests a way to reinforce the domesticity of the scene of the mother and child. The doorsein divides the observed view into a complex, gendered space, in which usually only women are on the inside and the men on the outside, where women are not as welcome. The spaces are almost always separate and exclusionary.47 However, the male-centered world is not only visible but also accessible,48 as is underscored in another of de Hooch’s paintings, Children in a Doorway with “Kolf” Sticks (1658-1660) (figure 2). In this work, de Hooch uses nearly the same setting as in The Bedroom, with a girl in the doorway, but in detail and with a boy standing outside, with both children holding kolf sticks (a game similar to modern-day golf). In both paintings, the doorsein reinforces the idea of the home as the domain of women in which the man’s work is not as often a part. This is but one aspect of The Bedroom by which de Hooch portrays domesticity.
It is instructive to compare complete, realistic spaces and *doorseins*, such as can be seen in *The Bedroom* and in de Hooch’s *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair* (1658-1660) (figure 4) with works of de Hooch’s contemporaries in order to illustrate the difference in effect. Gerard ter Borch’s *Mother Combing the Hair of Her Child* (1652-1653) (figure 7) depicts a domestic activity similar to that in *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair*, but instead of placing mother and child in a fully-realized interior setting, ter Borch has set the pair in an undifferentiated dark space, with a portion of a wall barely articulated in gray on the right side of the picture plane. The scene of the activity in Pieter van Slingelandt’s *Mother Making Lace with Two Children* (ca. 1670) (figure 10) distinctly takes place in an interior—there is a fireplace, a small table, and chairs—but the chimney fades into a black background that fills the space around the figures. Ter Borch’s and van Slingelandt’s works display similar backgrounds which focus the attention of the viewer on the action in the foreground of each picture—one mother carefully combing her child’s hair, the other making lace while watching her young ones. But without complete interiors, the scenes remain dream-like and emblematic, and lack the intense realism of de Hooch’s similar portrayals of domesticity in his expertly constructed interiors.

**Figures**

It was not until after de Hooch had taken considerable care with the construction of the spatial environment of the interior that he added figures. De Hooch is often criticized for his ungainly, stiff and unnatural figures, but his people were ideally suited to their surroundings—softer, more agile figures would disturb the peaceful sense of quiet that viewers observe when experiencing de Hooch’s works on domesticity. Peter Sutton pointed out that no earlier painter had achieved such truth
to life in the relationship of figures to man-made environments. The men and women in each painting are placed carefully into the scene with its intricately planned perspective which enhances the tranquility of the works. Yet it is this careful placement that leads to some of the difficulties with the figures, which is apparent in the figure of the mother in *The Bedroom*. Seen in almost perfect profile, she appears flat, almost as a paper doll, the outlines of her jacket, arm, and head positioned at the exact center of the bed in front of which she stands. Although she seems to glance lovingly at her playful child, her face is painted strictly in contour, with a minimum of lines and relief. Such an outlined figure encourages the viewer to supplant the painted image of the mother with that of herself, increasing her identification with the mother and bringing forth emotions engendered by the touching scene. The child is more three-dimensional and realistic than the mother, her right hand grasping the door handle as she stops in mid-step on entering the room. Her physiognomy, on the other hand, is where de Hooch seems to have encountered some difficulties. The girl’s is disproportionately large for the body and the features are unappealing. The hair appears patchy and thin, although it allows for the effect of the light streaming through it from behind the child.

The figures in *Woman Nursing* are significantly more complete and realistic. The mother, seated and nursing, gazes down at her baby with a soft smile, her cheeks reddened with warmth. The face of this mother, though partially hidden in shadow, has varied surfaces and weight—this is not a paper-doll version of a mother. Here, de Hooch has succeeded in giving his figure a natural, believable and frontal pose, yet the hands, which he did not have to deal with in *The Bedroom*, hidden under blankets as they were, are here disproportionately large as they hold her baby to her.
Her older child, sitting by the fire, does not have the too-large head of the child in *The Bedroom* and her features, though perhaps a bit adult, are not as off-putting as her counterpart’s. This child’s posture is slightly awkward as she leans back to look at the viewer, and she smiles slightly, welcoming him or her into the serene scene.

Intriguing and inviting, the space of *The Bedroom* and the people within it begs the question of just how realistic a scene it is—perhaps it is a portrait of de Hooch’s own home and family. In *Children in a Doorway with “Kolf” Sticks*, de Hooch has made use of the same room, from a slightly different viewpoint. He also used the same room in other works, including *Interior with a Young Couple* (early to mid-1660s) (figure 3) and *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair*. Arthur Wheelock, the curator of the collection that includes *The Bedroom*, suggests that the young child in *The Bedroom* and in *Children in a Doorway with “Kolf” Sticks* is in fact de Hooch’s daughter Anna. It was customary, at the time, to use family members as models, and Wheelock notes that, although it was common in the seventeenth century for both boys and girls to wear dresses, the placement of the older and obviously male child in the painting with the kolf players suggests that he is de Hooch’s older son (born 1655) and the younger child his daughter (born 1656). The appearance of the same younger child in *The Bedroom* may indicate that it is indeed Anna. It has been suggested that the woman in the painting, who also reappears in several of de Hooch’s works, is his wife, Jannetje van der Burch. Although this assertion has not been proven, scholars seem to agree that the woman is indeed the child’s mother and not the maid of the house, even though a high percentage of Dutch homes in the seventeenth century had at least one maid. This conclusion could be reached on the basis of the loving glances between mother and child, and the suitability of the woman’s dress for a matron,
rather than a maid, of the home. It is clear that the woman is a caretaker of both the child and the home.

**Emotion**

If with his realistic-appearing spaces de Hooch created believable, homey settings viewers can imagine walking through, his treatment of the inhabitants of those settings was no less convincing. The actions of the mothers and children relating to one another add to both the reality and coziness of the scenes of home life. In both *The Bedroom* and *Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog*, mothers interact directly with their children, smiling and looking on lovingly as their offspring play or nurse. In *Woman Nursing* the older child smiles shyly out at the viewer, inviting her into the scene. The scenes are believable, but with the blank visage of the mother in *The Bedroom* and the glance of the woman in *Woman Nursing* focused on her infant, it is especially easy for a viewer to insert herself into the space and imagine being overcome with the emotions of de Hooch’s personages: the daylight streaming into the room in *The Bedroom* and the warmth of the fire embracing the pot in *Woman Nursing* help to create the feeling of *gezelligheid* (“coziness”), and of the love the mothers clearly have for their children.

Not every painter of domesticity in seventeenth-century Holland chose to depict emotive figures. In Gerard ter Borch’s *Mother Combing the Hair of Her Child*, mother and child look in the same direction rather than facing each other. The mother approaches her task with dutiful concentration, and her child submits somewhat stiffly, impatiently gripping a ball until it is time to play again. In Caspar Netscher’s *Woman Combing a Child’s Hair* (1669) (figure 11), the mother appears to be going through the motions of her task, delicately touching the locks of her son’s hair while both
figures peer out at the viewer somewhat uncertainly, as though posing for show, and a third child is absorbed in her own play at a small side-table. In neither artwork do mother and child interact as they do in de Hooch’s paintings. A sense of distance is created which is passed along to the viewer.

Jacobus Vrel uses different elements than ter Borch and Netscher in *Interior with a Woman Combing a Little Girl’s Hair* to produce a scene which, while not lacking in emotion, draws forth feelings from quite the opposite of the *gezelligheid* of de Hooch’s oeuvre. The white walls that dominate the painting are emphasized by a cold gray light that pours in through large windows and the door. A boy peers outside rather listlessly, his toys having been dropped unceremoniously in the doorway. He does not interact with the woman in the room, whose face displays only concentration over her task of combing the girl’s long locks of hair. The composition’s cool tones of white and brown contribute to the starkness of the nearly empty room. The combined effect is unsettling, eliciting the viewers’ emotions of unease or even of moroseness. Although the theme is similar to de Hooch’s *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair*, the effect of the two paintings could not be more different. De Hooch uses interaction between family members as another way to entice the viewer into his realistic and idealized scenes.

**Light**

Another aspect of de Hooch’s scenes of domestic tranquility is his skillful use of light. The morning light depicted in *The Bedroom* is one of its most inviting aspects that contributes to its overall *gezelligheid*. It enters the room from two directions, streaming both through the front door of the home, lighting first the gray front door and then the inner door with a warm glow, and through the side window.
Morning light illuminates the mother, although she is tucked inside the room in front of the bed, and also fills the rest of the space. The two light sources converge on the child, making her the logical center of the painting and reinforcing the connection between the mother and the child. Sunshine coming from behind the young child transforms her hair into a frothy, translucent mass, and brighter light from the side window highlights the front of her dress and makes her coverlet and skirt shine. The streams of light also lead the viewer’s eye from the street outside through the outer, marble floor and create a path towards the picture plane on the red tile floor. The light touches a great number of surfaces within the work, and the objects in the painting showcase de Hooch’s abilities with the effects of light.

Once “inside”, the viewer can concentrate on the effects of the oblique morning light: the golden glow reflecting the window panes on the wall, the gold mirror frame and the silk ribbon masking the hook above it, and the dynamic highlights on the mother and on the bedclothes as she goes about her task—down to the tufts of hay peeking out from the bed which she has not yet straightened. The light also shows up on darker surfaces in ways unique to each material, such as the chamber pot, foot warmer, table legs, the Spanish chairs both in and out of direct light, and the shadows created by the chairs and the painting above the door. Though subtle, these effects, taken as a whole, create a unified, believable space that draws in both the viewer’s eye and imagination. This is characteristic of de Hooch’s paintings of this period. The paintings are lit realistically: daylight streams from doors and windows, or glows from a fire, and fills the entire space, illuminating it just as it would in a room the viewer might encounter in his or her own home.
In contrast, an analysis of a selection of paintings with domestic themes of the period shows that not all artists had the ability—or perhaps the desire—to paint convincing interiors. Ter Borch’s *Mother Combing the Hair of Her Child* offers a stark contrast. As in de Hooch’s *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair*, ter Borch’s scene shows a mother dutifully taking the time for her child’s daily care. Yet instead of a spacious room and *voorhuis* filled with a warm glow of light, ter Borch has placed the parent and child in front of a dark background, barely articulating what may be a room by means of a gray strip on the right side of the canvas. The effect is to highlight the interaction between mother and child to the exclusion of a fully realized interior and domestic scene. Samuel van Hoogstraten goes a bit further in his work *Two Women by a Cradle* (figure 8). Here, a soft light in a mostly darkened interior rises from the floorboards at the right of the canvas onto the rich fabric that covers the mother and child, touching the face of the maid and then dissipating, only to illuminate a painting on the left wall and the tooled leather which can be seen through the open door in the background. In this work, the light seems to be present only to focus the viewer’s attention on the luxury of the artwork and textiles in the home—the painting is as much about the accessories as it is about the mother and her newborn child.

*Jacobus Vrel’s Interior with a Woman Combing a Little Girl’s Hair* (ca. 1654-1662) (figure 9) provides the viewer with something that ter Borch’s and van Hoogstraten’s works do not—a combination of light and a fully-realized domestic interior. However, unlike as in de Hooch’s *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair*, the light plays a strikingly different role in Vrel’s *Interior with a Woman Combing a Little Girl’s Hair*. Cold and silvery, the light flows in through the large windows and the
open door. Rough, starkly white-washed walls dominate the scene, against which the woman’s bright white cape and hat stand out as she combs the girl’s blond hair. A boy has interrupted his game with a hoop to peer out the door into a partially visible courtyard. In spite of the similarities to de Hooch’s work, the effect is one of somberness, unlike the coziness created by de Hooch’s orange-tinged light. De Hooch was by no means the only painter in seventeenth-century Holland to depict mothers and children interacting at home, but his talent for using light to imbue his rooms with gezelligheid was unparalleled.

**Color**

Part of de Hooch’s strategy for creating gezellig scenes with lies in his use of color. As previously discussed, his early works, such as *Tric-Trac Players*, were rendered in somber, muted brown tones. But around the time that his focus turned to domestic interiors, he began to use brighter, warmer colors. *The Bedroom, Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog*, and *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair* are perfect examples of his new palette. A preponderance of primary colors, gold accents, and shades of orange and yellow contribute to the comfort depicted in de Hooch’s scenes of motherly care. *The Bedroom* is filled with orange-tinged streams of light which glances off of the tile floor. Shades of yellow and gold are highlighted on the chairs, windowpanes, mirror, child’s dress and the bedding which the mother is holding, and even in the hay that pokes out of the bed behind the mother. The bright spots of red of the tablecloth and mother’s jacket provide highlights in sharp contrast to the earth tones prevalent in the bedding, the landscape painting, chairs and pottery.

In *Woman Nursing*, orange curtains filter the daylight that complements the dancing fire in the fireplace. The earth tones surrounding the fireplace, the textile
and the birdcage are relieved by the cool tones of the mother’s light blue jacket, the shiny surface of the picture or mirror, and the child’s gray dress. The pale daylight and steel and earth tones accentuate the bright red of the mother’s dress and the yellow of the blanket in her lap. *A Woman Delousing a Child’s Hair* is suffused in the warm glow that emanates, as in the other works, in part from the daylight hitting the ceiling, door, and oak-lined bed, and the familiar tile floor. Muted yellow and earth tones predominate in this painting, which shows much more of the same room, including the entirety of the wooden bed, an open and a shuttered window next to it as well as the doors to the *voorhuis* and to the outside. The gold and green curtains on the bed match the fabric hung over the fireplace in *Woman Nursing* to line the bed here, and the young child appears to be wearing on a gold skirt similar to that worn by the girl in *The Bedroom*. It is the mother’s dress which catches our eye, with its scarlet jacket and white collar. The reds, yellows, and golds in this triad of de Hooch’s works contribute to the sense of warmth and comfort experienced by the viewer, and helps bring about the feeling of *gezelligheid*. De Hooch is working from a specific recurring palette to create this sense of domesticity, while his recognizable tonalities of textiles, woods and tile creates realistic and accessible scenes.

A number of de Hooch’s contemporaries also depicted scenes of the mothers caring for their children but without his commitment to soothing colors. Pieter van Slingelandt’s *Mother Making Lace with Two Children* provides an example on this theme. In this work, the mother tends to her craft while watching over her two children playing. The figures are illuminated as is the still life on the table behind the mother, but the rest of the scene is dark, with muted colors. The clothes of the figures are mostly in cool browns and blues, with the golden yellow of the girl’s shirt.
providing the lone glimpse of warm color. It is no match, however, for the darkness encroaching on the trio. The room and fireplace sink into a vast dark background that threatens to overwhelm the picture.

Jacobus Vrel’s *Interior with a Woman Combing a Little Girl’s Hair* confronts the viewer with a complementary problem: the room depicted is dominated by great expanses of white wall and tall windows which admit a cold white light. The mother herself is dressed mostly in white, her dark blue skirt varying only slightly from the brown tones of which the remaining colors of the painting consist. The dominance of cool colors lends a clinical feel to the scene of a mother tending to her child that in de Hooch’s hands would have been tender or even joyful.
CONCLUSION

At no time previous to the middle of the seventeenth century had so many images of contented families been produced. The works of Pieter de Hooch were a significant part of the increase in the number of these scenes of soothing domesticity. Although the social status of his patrons is largely unresolved, inventories show that his paintings were valued from about 15 to 75 guilders. The more expensive pictures would have taken an average worker nearly two months’ wages to be able to afford. If purchasers of de Hooch’s works of domesticity were wealthy merchants, they were not admiring his paintings for their aspirational qualities, with their occasional scenes of a broken window pane or chipped plaster, as we have seen in *The Bedroom*. With the rapid changes in the roles of men, women and the family in society, perhaps a bit of reassuring *gezilligheid* of their own homes was in order.

Furthermore, the immense popularity of emblem books and poetry by moralizers such as Jacob Cats created a market for a visual counterpart—the works of artists such as Pieter de Hooch. Along with their literary counterparts, paintings such as *The Bedroom* and *Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child Feeding a Dog* both helped to create and reinforce the *Zeitgeist* of the new republic. De Hooch’s works portraying domestic genre themes can be seen as a kind of “pictorial capital” - rather like the print capital of Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities that make visible a particular way of life. They confirm the sense of nostalgic ideas of home and of morality that they put forth and inspire the members of the community to emulate.
Pieter de Hooch’s paintings constitute a celebration of calm, harmonious domesticity. For the fledgling Dutch Republic, with the ordeal of Eighty Years War behind it, such works of art offered a useful lesson for a new society. With his skillful use of light and space, a mix of reality and invention, and pleasing scenes of mothers and children in their daily rituals, de Hooch created interiors that a contemporary could emulate and which even today’s viewer might yearn to visit.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


6 In *The Bedroom*, this is the separate room in the background with the black and white marbled floor.

7 Rybczynski, *Home*, 56.

8 Ibid., 59.


12 Ibid., 59.


15 Rybczynski, 59-60.


23 Stewart, *On Longing*.


25 Ibid., 36.


30 Sutton, *Pieter De Hooch, 1629-1684*, 120.


34 Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, 540.

35 Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, 162.


37 Ibid., 155.


42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.


45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.


52 Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, 165.


54 Ibid., 134.


58 Franits, *Pieter De Hooch: A Woman Preparing Bread and Butter for a Boy*, 68.