Visual Narrative in Dutch Golden Age Still Lifes
A theoretical examination of the role of colour, form, perspective and composition in the making and valuation of still lifes

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Narrative: The meeting point of art work and beholder

Between 1618 and 1628 René Descartes (1596–1650) wrote the Rules for the Direction of the Mind. In it he says: “In what concerns the knowledge of things, only two matters have to be considered: namely, ourselves who know and the objects themselves that are to be known. In us there are only four faculties that we can use for this purpose, namely intellect, imagination, sense, and memory.”

This paper examines this knowledge of things, especially how we might come to be hosts of such knowledge. 17th-century philosophy was not alone in exploring the self, the other and workings of both in the world together as implications could also be felt in theoretical treatises on art. As an example this paper will present Karel van Mander’s Groot Schilderboeck and place its content in relation to the making of and looking at works of art.

Descartes describes the working of the mind and the body in correlation to the outer world in order to perceive it. For anyone in doubt about the unity of body and mind, he writes very clearly: “I am most tightly joined, so to say, commingled with it, so much so that I [who am only a thinking thing] and the body constitute one single thing.” Further, Descartes elaborates on the definition of

1 Ariew 2000, 25.
2 Ibid., 136.
space and its relation to the body: “The nature of the body does not consist in weight, hardness, colour, and so on, but in extension alone. \[\text{[i.e.] being something extended in length, breadth, and depth.}\] Those thoughts are of course consequential to the arts at the time. Not only does the face of the works of art transform, as we all know well, but the interaction with, the making and the construction of the artwork also undergo changes.

Within the *Groot Schilderboeck* by Karel van Mander (1548–1606) I am seeking explanations for this changing face of the arts. The focus will lie on the genre of still life. Furthermore, this paper aims to showcase that a new construction of the artwork, with the changing mode of the self, i.e. the beholder, should also transform our analysis of those works of art. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate to the reader that an investigation of primary sources, both of literature and works of art, will allow him or her to reconsider a prevailing reading of works of art from the Dutch Golden Age. I do not wish to override, or overwrite, previous modes of analysis. However, insufficient attention has been paid to major factors in the conception of an artwork, namely composition, perspective and thus colour and form, in making final remarks about the value and meaning, i.e. the interaction of the work of art with the beholder.\(^4\)

In order to include claims about the importance of the conception of a work of art in the final analysis of meaning making, it is crucial to showcase how those elements contribute to the narrative of a work of art. Just like Descartes describes the workings between the self and the outer world as a dialogue\(^5\), this paper will show that although still lifes have been perceived as lacking narrative and dialogue they are in fact full of it.\(^6\)

It is essential to remember that although one can seek symbolisms or an absence of space (and thus a lack of meaning), the key aim here

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3  Ibid., 253.
4  With exceptions such as Hollander 2002, Grootenboer 2005, and Fritsche 2010.
5  Ariew 2000, 25.
6  For an exploration of the lack of narrative and its implications, see: Grootenboer 2005.
is to define the tools and techniques of the artist. Hence, to decode the visual grammar, and present a visible narrative that is constructed in order to translate the depicted from the canvas into a language that the viewer understands. Narrative for me thus not only means story, but poses the umbrella term for a grammatical ordering, a part of visual language.

**Status Quo**

Prevailing perceptions in modern discourse suggest that still lifes either lack narrative, display riches and luxury, or depict *vanitas* thoughts. Yet these readings do not account for the predominant place concepts of space, such as perspective and composition, held in the artists’ manuals of the 17th century.

Although seeking meaning in still lifes has become part of our culture of reading images, it is of importance to reinvestigate how works of art were dealt with in contemporaneous discourse. Art historical sources prove that great stress was in fact placed on the conception of space, thus perspective, and on composition, including the make-up of shapes and their colours.

Much has been done to popularise this approach, but foremost with genre pieces or landscapes. Still lifes are still seen to lack narrative, lack space, and are thus largely excluded from debates that deal with spatial meaning making.

One small example shall show that it is in fact not only the study of 17th-century sources that is urging this re-evaluation, but modern art theory should have already told us to look once again at still lifes from the Golden Age, namely when Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) wrote about representing nature in perspective by means of the cone, the cylinder and the sphere. Exemplifying modern art, the conception as well as the perception of form and colour as meaningful in images above all other attributes, can be seen in Cézanne’s still lifes. From

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7 See Hollander 2002.
8 Cézanne in conversation with Emile Bernard, see: Loran 2006.
this well-known example connects the making and perception of art in the 17th century to our own modern way of dealing with the visual world.

The following part of this paper will present two case studies, both taken from the introduction to Karel van Mander’s *Groot Schilderboeck*. Firstly I will present the ideas of van Mander on ordering space and thus creating room for narrative. Secondly I shall look at his precise advice on the use of colour in order to create beauty and thus meaning in art. Both examples from this art theoretical text will be set in the context of still lifes from the period.

In 1604, Karel van Mander published the *Groot Schilderboeck*. The treatise consists of two parts, firstly introducing the arts and how to make pleasurable art, followed by a description of chosen artists past and present. Of interest for researchers today are not only the lives of the artists van Mander describes, but also his poetic writings on conceiving art. Further, he places special focus on the tales and histories one had to know, which elevated the painter of historical and mythological scenes intellectually.9 This esteem did not extend to the painter of dead things, the still lifes. However, later on we shall see that, although void of grand literary narratives, still lifes still adhered to the visual grammar of the highest forms of art that van Mander describes.

The overarching goal of the *Schilderboeck* is to introduce the reader to what makes delightful art. Describing this throughout the book, van Mander focuses on the five senses, as well as presenting time as a vital issue in understanding and making great art. Ovid’s tales, as well as other mythology present a connection with ancient art.

Nature and her beauty are further key themes in the book. Van Mander stresses the fact that her splendour must be copied to reach

9 Van Mander 1604, fol.3. See especially stanza 22-26 for the contrast van Mander draws between the low and learned artist.

All citations from the *Schilderboeck* are taken from the facsimile of the first publication of the book (Haarlem 1604), which was reprinted in Utrecht 1969, and made available online by the dbnl in 2004: <www.dbnl.org/tekst/mand001schi01_01/>. 
such loveliness also in art, whilst sticking to the rules and regulations nature shows. This refers to the natural balance that should be inherent to the image: firstly the need of a harmonious composition in order to liken the image to nature, and secondly to the fact that a well-balanced composition will make the artwork more pleasurable.

In order to reiterate the importance of balancing the image, van Mander takes to the story of Orpheus and his Harp.\textsuperscript{10} The anecdote demonstrates to the attentive artist that the stance the image takes, the message it wants to convey and the attitude it holds, will cumulatively affect the beholder, just as Orpheus’ music affects its listener. The musician would create thunder with his music to drive away the giants, or, on the other hand, play melodies so sweet they would entice beautiful maidens.

Van Mander thus stresses the expressive qualities of art and, more importantly that art is something made on purpose, conceived with an aim in mind.

It is essential for this paper to therefore look at the process of production in terms of composition, perspective, form and colour—exploring the visual tools that were used by artists to engage the viewer with the piece.

In chapter five of his \textit{Schilderboeck} van Mander deals with his own specialization: history painting. Composition, arrangement, the conception of the whole as well as the language of art are key themes here. Van Mander lays out the importance of an orderly arrangement.

\textsuperscript{10} Miedema 1973, 117 f.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
For us to really understand this passage, to grasp the ‘power of art’, one has to look to the preceding stance, where van Mander describes how nature, the world itself and its institutions, such as kingdoms and countries, are structured from top to bottom in order to function seamlessly.¹³

So not only does a visual order spring to mind when reading van Mander’s second paragraph, but also an order of all things. His view of the world does not end at the picture plane, but the creation of a sub-reality in visual form, for him, also calls for the application of the rules of the real world. He proceeds to lay down the “vaste regels en wetten”¹⁴ for convincingly painting people within a space.

Throughout his treatise on *de ordening en de inventive*, van Mander stresses the conception of the artwork, the scene in the artist’s mind. The word ‘voornemen’ crops up in several paragraphs, and serves each time to remind the reader that in the process of conceiving the artwork the rules for a proper composition must already be thought of, for example:

Houdt u altijts liber binnen den percke,  
En wilt u gronden niet te seer beladen:  
maer als ghy u inventy stelt te wercke,  
Wilt eerst wel grondich met goeden opmercke  
Op dijns voornemens meyinghe beraden,  
Met lesen, herlesen, ten mach niet schaden,  
Vastelijken drucken in u memory  
Den rechten aerdt der voorhandigh’ History¹⁵

Passages dealing with the process of creating a composition describe the moment of merging the spatial conception of the work of art

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12 Van Mander 1604, fol.15r.  
13 Ibid.  
14 Miedema 1973, 129.  
15 Van Mander 1604, fol.15v.
with the narrative content of the image. Crucial for us here is to realise that for van Mander space is conceived first, and then embroidered with the story.\(^{16}\) In composing this interplay of space and narrative van Mander gives crucial advice:

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Want ons ordinancy moeste ghenieten
Eenen schoonen aerdt, naer ons sins ghenoeghen,
Als wy daer een insien oft doorsien lieten
Met cleynder achter-beelden, en verschieten
Van Landtschap, daer t'ghesicht in heeft te ploeghen,
Daerom moghen wy dan oock neder voeghen
Midden op den voorgrondt ons volck somwijlen,
En laten daer over sien een deel mijlen.\(^{17}\)
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Here van Mander describes exactly how to lead the viewer’s eye through the image by means of staging subjects in space. His prose has moved from the mind of the artist and the conception of the work to the representation of space and narrative for another person, the viewer.

The following work by Hans Rottenhammer (1564–1625) is an excellent example for this ‘doorsien’ practice, described above. By building each narrative block, one by one, following each other, the German artist, who clearly shows classical influences, has created a story that can be followed with the eyes.

\(^{16}\) For further remarks on the importance of space in relation to narrative, see: Taylor 2000, 154. "...but he [van Mander] clearly did feel that a composition could enshrine a story aptly...".

\(^{17}\) Van Mander 1604, fol. 16r.
The story of Diana and Actaeon can be read in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In book three, Ovid writes the story of Actaeon, the son of Cadmus, who is out for a hunt with his men and dogs. After a vivid chase without any luck on a stag, Actaeon decides to lead the hunting party homewards. However, on his way back he stumbles across Diana and her nymphs. Ovid describes in great detail the mossy grotto and the activity of the unaware nymphs.

Down in a vale with pine and cypress clad,  
Refresh’d with gentle winds, and brown with shade,  
The chaste Diana’s private haunt, there stood  
Full in the centre of the darksome wood  
A spacious grotto, all around o'er-grown  
With hoary moss, and arch'd with pumice-stone.  
From out its rocky clefts the waters flow,  
And trickling swell into a lake below.  
Nature had ev'ry where so plaid her part,  
That ev'ry where she seem'd to vie with art.  
Here the bright Goddess, toil'd and chaf'd with heat,  
Was wont to bathe her in the cool retreat.
Here did she now with all her train resort,
Panting with heat, and breathless from the sport;
Her armour-bearer laid her bow aside,
Some loos’d her sandals, some her veil untied;
Each busy nymph her proper part undrest;
While Crocale, more handy than the rest,
Gather’d her flowing hair, and in a noose
Bound it together, whilst her own hung loose.
Five of the more ignoble sort by turns
Fetch up the water, and unlade the urns.\textsuperscript{18}

The next stanza of the poem tells of the discovery of the bathers by Actaeon, and his subsequent metamorphosis into a stag as punishment for his prying gaze. This transformation ends fatally, as Actaeon can no longer be recognized by his dogs, which seize the chance of killing a stag. Eaten by his own hounds, Actaeon meets his end. These scenes are of high importance to the understanding of the whole story, and Rottenhammer presents these to the viewer. They are moments of great suspense and anticipation in the narrative. Below I will show that the artist leads the viewer through the depicted story by means of colour, form and their arrangement.

Van Mander, in his description of Hans Rottenhammer’s life in the second part of the \textit{Schilderboeck}, lauds him as being a good colourist and praises his exceptional compositions, which not only justifies the artist’s place in this article, but is also testimony of his early fame in the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{19}

In his work Rottenhammer orientates himself on classical norms. The nude bodies, twisted in many positions to show off his skill as a painter of the human form, as well as the classical inspired ruins in the background pay homage to a revival of the Ancients that had started during the Renaissance. Rottenhammer’s time in Venice and Rome have also contributed greatly to his understanding of form and colour.\textsuperscript{20} Borrowing of motifs from classical art and interweaving

\textsuperscript{19} Borggreve 2007, 8.
\textsuperscript{20} For more Information see: <https://rkd.nl/en/explore/artists/record?query=rottenhammer&start=0>.
them with contemporaneous thought are apparent in both van Mander’s theory and Rottenhammer’s work.

But how has Rottenhammer translated this literary narrative into a visual construct that can be grasped by the viewer, be understood and become meaningful in his eyes?  

The following paragraphs will look at the above image the way that van Mander instructs the student of art: as an interplay of space and narrative. In the foreground, Rottenhammer presents two groups of nudes. Each one is shown in a different posture, draped with fine cloth and jewellery. Although their motions vary, they are compositionally mirroring each other. The different poses the figures assume also lend a platform to Rottenhammer to show off his skill in portraying motion. With the exception of the coy woman in the right foreground, no eye contact is made with the viewer. However, her gaze is not really inviting the viewer in: she is looking in expectation—the viewer is asked to comment on the scene. Her glance is also telling—does she know what is in store for Actaeon? Is she emulating the narrator at the theatre, making remarks on the lavish display of young female flesh? 

Up until now real access to the image has been denied: the prominent bodies in the foreground present us with large areas of nude colour, the nymphs’ eyes are either turned away or filled with expectation, which puts the viewer right back in his own realm—in front of the painting.

Rottenhammer does not use the subjects to create access; he invites the viewer in with the use of arrangement, composition and perspective. The group of nudes enticing the viewer with their young bodies and idyllic activities of bathing and chatter are gathered to each side of the painting in the fashion of a repoussoir, which is echoed by the trees and the grotto. This leaves an entrance for the eye, and thus for the viewer, into the centre of events. The composition

21 Acknowledging the fact that there are female as well as male viewers of works of art, I will from now on proceed in purely using the male gender for the terms ’viewer’, ’beholder’ and other forms that describe the person looking at the images.
is built up like a stage setting, with larger props close to the picture plane and smaller features in the back. We can imagine a vast space and the eyes may roam the scene.

After an initial entry by looking and indulging in the sensual gathering on display at the forefront of the picture, followed by an invitation to plunge deeper into the narrative through the construction of open space, the viewer’s eyes wander towards the depiction of the quartet in the background.

On the open field in the back a nymph on a red cloth, with two maids tending to her needs, is presented. The knowing beholder may conclude with some certainty that this is Diana, at the point in the tale where she is preparing for her bath. The central placement, with the bright spot of red colour ensures us that this scene plays a crucial role in understanding the narrative. The group is very small in comparison to the nymphs in the foreground. However, there can be no question on who is in focus here. All visual tools have been used to lead us towards the group.

Beyond the little hill the nymphs have chosen for their bath, one may notice a man on horseback with a rioting bunch of hounds. Now we realise that we must have come to the origin, the beginning of the story. From this point in the work the story unfolds like a small river running toward the sea. The beholder now has the tools to knot the narrative strings together. From the riding Actaeon in the back with his hounds, over the innocently bathing Diana in the centre, one is lead back to the large bodies at the foreground. One notices the pointing arm and worried gaze of the nymph in red. Anticipation. Following the outstretched arm one recognizes the young man hiding in the woods. The story begins to unravel and picks up in speed. Whereas previously one was admiring skin, cloth, jewellery and vegetation, one is now pressed to find out what is happening. And now, just like Actaeon hiding in the woods, the viewer notices the voluptuous nude in the left foreground. The half moon crescent in her hair reveals that she is in fact the goddess Diana, now at the point where she is being discovered. She is covering her modesty and breasts,
whilst the nymph to her left has jumped up to shield her from Actaeon’s gaze. Whereas the caring nymph is coming towards the viewer, Diana has turned away from us and our gaze.

As the viewer has now tied together the strings of narrative and unravelled the story, he may pause and think, evaluate the clues, and maybe even only now find irony in the goddess crouched at the forefront, where she has been hiding herself in plain sight of the viewer.

Rottenham has used different impressions to illustrate the story. From a slow moving pace at the foreground—maybe even an eerie silence in order not to disturb the nymphs, the viewer’s gaze has picked up speed. Chatter of the nymphs in the grotto, and rattling of the leaves where Actaeon is hiding suggest sound to the viewer. Speaking to all the senses through a work of art is of importance, as van Mander makes clear with, for example, the tale of Orpheus and his Harp, as described earlier in the text.

Although the image is rich in its extensions to the viewer, Rottenhammer does not overwhelm us with stimuli. His choreographed way of presenting the narrative, framed by the grotto to the right, the tree to the left and the steep mountains to the back, precisely guides the viewer in reading the image as if it was a literary story.

Besides the arrangement Rottenhammer has—as van Mander advises—used colour to guide the viewer. In the background the colours are faded. There, only the nymph of the quartet with her red blanket and her golden hunting attire stands out, the rider and his dogs are barely visible. The colour scheme testifies to the tender beginnings of the story: a beautifully bright day for hunting, the cleanliness of the ritual of bathing. Moving towards the foreground the strength of the colours grows, in line with the excitement of the story, and also the vigilance of the viewer in seeking out the storyline. Different highlights, like the red cloth, or large areas of bare skin not only guide the gaze, but transmit a mood or even give narrative clues.

22 The author will go into more detail on van Mander’s writings on colour in the text below.
Once the beholder has taken all of this in, a contemplation of, even a dialogue with the depicted can begin.

Fig. 2: Abraham van Beyeren (1620/21–1691), *Large Still Life with Lobster*, 1653, Oil on Canvas, 125.5 x 105 cm, 1799 from the Galerie Mannheim, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlung, Alte Pinakothek, Inv. Nr. 1620, Image Copyright: bpk 50010717.

Can this conception of space and narrative be traced in still lifes? Van Mander wrote advice for the painter of historical and mythological
scenes. No longer concerning the arrangement of persons but objects, this paper will question if a narrative structure in the organisation of lifeless goods can also guide the viewer. Do the objects placed so closely to the picture plane leave room to enter the space, or can the beholder merely glance across the surface the artist has provided?

Van Mander’s formulas for constructing a work of art do not only apply to depicting histories. His focus on the language of art, again connecting prose and visual pleasure, also makes the fifth chapter of the Schilderboeck relevant to the making of artworks of other genres. The language of the image van Mander stresses is the initial make up, the composition, and the translation of the conceived image to the final product. Placing great stress on composition and arrangement can be clearly seen in still lifes, which are displays of objects.

This work by Abraham van Beyeren (1620/21–1691) is a feast for the senses. Food and drink are on display to stimulate a sense of taste, and a compass watch points towards space and time. Their depiction in all imaginable colours as well as material qualities appeals to the senses of sight and touch. The viewer is enticed: he wants to own all these things, wants to touch them, eat them, tell the time, find the way. He again wonders how he may enter this scene, which actually threatens to spill into his space. How does van Beyeren invite the viewer in when he should stay put, ready to catch the objects, when they do really fall? This paradox of being between spaces might just be the entrance point into these prunken still lifes. The senses are overwhelmed with the luscious display so close to the picture plane that on the one hand one feels an urge to touch and taste, but on the other hand one would not dare to disturb the careful balancing act on display.

This tango of moving toward and yet feeling urged to retreat, in which van Beyeren places the beholder is created by several layers that the artist has choreographed in front of us.

The table on which the objects are placed as well as the curtain rail exceed the picture’s realm, and the viewer may thus be able to relate to at least the unseen half of the two. The tromp-l’ail effect of
the drawn curtain—pretending to be entirely of the viewer’s world—aids this notion and hints at the bag of tricks artists picked from in order to blur the lines between the painting and the viewer. Furthermore, the central bunch of white grapes is urging us to catch it in its immanent fall, again luring the viewer’s hand into the space. The second layer van Beyeren has built consists of the objects firmly on the table. Now, not protruding toward the viewer’s realm or dwelling among his space, the table recedes horizontally. Depth is noticeable. Around different kinds of silverware and a decorative box, all sorts of objects are scattered. On this level, van Beyeren concentrates on the bodily presence of those objects. The melon, cut to present its inner flesh, as well as the peaches reveal a plasticity, which creates a space that can be mapped. Whereas previously the viewer was left to doubt if he could enter the space, maybe reach in, or just surf the face of the image, there is now assurance of the depth of space.

The pyramidal construction of objects is guiding the viewer’s eyes. The round shapes of the handcrafted tazza to the far left are seamlessly leading upwards around the natural voluptuous body of the heavily decorated nautilus cup. Trumping the golden display is a fragile red wine glass, showing off a craftsman’s skill in working this delicate material. Via intertwining wine leaves, the viewer’s gaze reaches the top of the triangular composition and is caught by the round white wine roemer, which is presented steadfast and straight on. The light it catches has many facets: reflections on the out- and inside of the glass as well as cylinders of light, which are dispersed by the liquid.

As the eyes stumble across all this plenitude on display, further evidence of ‘room-making’ can be found: the glass, the nautilus shell as well as the silver dishes are reflecting a space outside the work. They bundle in the light that comes from a space outwith the image, or even portray a room with windows such as the artist’s studio. Furthermore, this gives an impression of mirroring the viewer’s own surroundings. The beholder is thus trapped in a make-believe image, which refers to the world he inhabits. In addition to all the senses, the sensations of reality and illusion are at play here.
However, before getting lost in pondering over what is real and how one’s senses may play tricks, the viewer finds himself staring at a wall. It is bare and dark, thus the gaze has to shift. The only way out is to progress further to the left, where a stormy landscape is awaiting behind what seems to be a classical balcony.

In retrospect, van Beyeren has managed to guide the viewer through the image, telling us about each surface, bringing objects together as well as contrasting them. The artist has staged the objects, like we saw with Hans Rotterhammer, from larger to small—giving an in-depth description of the main characters to the front, and presenting a vista towards the background. By means of perspective and composition he has further demanded the viewer to question his own place—in relation not only to the work, but also relative to the world he inhabits.

The artist has successfully guided the viewer into conversation with the piece by intertwining stages of understanding and grasping the situation with a careful arrangement of space. This demonstrates that van Mander’s advice was also applicable to the painter of still lifes. We find the visual grammar, which the writer suggested in order to make history scenes livelier and better understood, in a painting of lifeless objects.

However, it is not only the conception and making of space and thus room for the viewer that are of importance; colour also plays an essential part in imaging the world and creating a narrative to interact with the viewer.

Van Mander devotes chapter eleven of his Schilderboeck to the use of colour. First of all, he focuses the reader’s attention, whom he addresses directly as ‘jullie leerlingen in de kunst’ 23, the student of art. He instructs him on how to organize the colours on the palette in order to achieve a beautiful result on the canvas. As a primary example for this importance, van Mander tells the parable of Glycera. She

23 Miedema 1973, 246.
arranged her flowers so beautifully by colour that it made Pausias fall in love with her.

Van Mander continues to focus his attention on nature as an example of good colour choices. He wants the artist to pay special attention to the different greens as well as the combination of blossoming flora one finds in spring. Using nature as a source of inspiration reiterates his continuous premise of finding true beauty in nature. With beauty being the final aim of the image itself, nature again is the primary source, here for colour inspiration: “Zo is de natuur, die ons alles leert, voedster en moeder van de schilderkunst.”

Having made his observations, van Mander concludes on the pleasing combination of yellow and blue, red and green as well as red and blue; he also pays attention to dissonant combinations, such as violet and yellow as well as green and white. He continues: purple and green are not too bad together, and blue and purple are pleasant, too, but red should not be paired with colours of flesh, it sits much better with green, blue or purple. The reader can observe a common pattern of sorting colours into primary colours and their derivatives. The aim of pleasing the eye and a harmony of colours stand in the foreground of his advice. Van Mander likens this harmony to a melodic poem or to the feathers of a bird of paradise.

Although van Mander has devoted this chapter to the painting of draperies, the dress of persons, it seems more than applicable to the still life painter. By looking at contemporaneous flower still lifes, I shall clearly demonstrate that van Mander’s theory on colour distribution had a major effect on the making of still lifes.
Fig. 3: Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573–1621), Flower Piece, Oil on Panel, 66.5 x 51.5 cm, 1799 from the Galerie Zweibrücken, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Inv. Nr. 5598, Image Copyright: bpk 00007905
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Fig. 4: Jan Breughel the Elder (1568–1625), Workshop, Bunch of Flowers, ca. 1606/07, Oil on Oak Panel, 1806 from the Galerie Düsseldorf, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Inv. Nr. 824, Image Copyright: bpk 50009447
Comparing and contrasting these two paintings by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (1573–1621) and Jan Breughel the Elder (1568–1625), it becomes instantly clear that there was a system with certain rules of colour placement, which artists used in order to make their images beautiful.

Both of the above artists were widely recognized for their skill already by their contemporaries. Whilst Bosschaert the Elder had fled to the Northern Netherlands with his parents due to religious persecution, Breughel the Elder grew up into a family of artists in Antwerp. The latter also travelled before becoming Dean of the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp. His stays in Germany and Italy have influenced his artistic spectrum, and simultaneously brought him into contact with the fashions and theories of the day. Bosschaert the Elder also knew about European fashions: his work as an art dealer brought him in contact with works by the likes of Paolo Veronese. The flower still lifes of both artists are marked by their high botanical accuracy and observational qualities as well as an eye for mixing and matching the objects in order to suit compositional harmony. The colouring of their works is reminiscent of fireworks, so vibrant is the variety on display. Jan Breughel the Elder is often called ‘Velvet Breughel’ for his exceptional skill of portraying material qualities, such as surface and colour. Both artists combine the practice of painting naar het leven with a concept that was born out of the artist as a genius: inventie. The skill of merging precise study of what God created on earth with one’s own ideas on composition was an attribute of only the finest artists.

Bosschaert the Elder’s flower still life shows a densely packed bouquet in a simple earthenware pot. The spotlight from the left gives the opportunity for the artist to model the blossoms in different tones. It simultaneously presents the little sprouts and insects on the stone ledge or table on which the arrangement is placed as if they were actors on a stage. The silence that is created by the large shaded

areas lends itself as a backdrop to the noisy spectacle of the flowers on display.

The artist has presented a variety of vegetation to the viewer: lilies, carnations, tulips as well as simple meadow flowers. Bosschaert the Elder highlights the more exotic specimen by setting them apart through colour arrangement. He, for example, shows the towering orange Kaiser’s crown only surrounded by its own green leaves. Further below, white tulips frame the deeply blue lilies. These choices in arrangement clearly show that van Mander’s theories were rooted in the reality of the arts, and in return testify to the great technical skill and theoretical knowledge of the artist.

Within the stanza where van Mander describes pleasant and unpleasant colour groupings, he mentions “Breughel” as an example for good combination. Jan Breughel the Elder’s still life shows a decorative vase holding a great variety of flowers. The light falls onto the scene from the right and illuminates the arrangement, which throws a deep shadow. On the ledge there are a few objects, like with Bosschaert the Elder’s work. Two twigs with insects, flowers and fruit frame the composition of flowers in a vase. Looking closely one may also spot butterflies among the flowers in the vase. The blossoming plants range from exquisite and expensive tulips to roses and lilies. The artist has gone to great lengths to ensure that the arrangement pleases the eye. Not only are shapes and sizes varied to keep the eye moving—the colour combinations closely follow what van Mander had written in his Schilderboek. In combining yellow and blue, as seen in the left foreground, Breughel the Elder ensures that both colours come to the fore and support each other. The voluptuous blossoms of the red and pinkish roses are contrasted by green leaves as well as lilies in many shades of blue. The artist has also paid attention not to place colours together, which do not harmonize. He, for example, has reserved the lower right part of the bouquet for colours of flesh. The peachy roses, which twist and turn in all imaginable directions, showing off the skill of Breughel the Elder to accurately

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26 Van Mander 1604, fol. 46r.
portray the flower in all its facets, stand out against the dark background and are far away from the colour red, as instructed by van Mander who disliked the combination of red and tones of flesh. Van Mander stresses two components for the right use of colour: it is essential for the artist to acknowledge the importance of the placement and application of colour, but also to appreciate its power to convince and bring pleasure to the viewer. We saw that coherence and unity are not only achieved here by means of perspective and composition, but also the colour scheme. It is this coherence that is used to give orientation to the viewer in actively looking at the work of art.

Van Mander summarises those threads of thought in his 14th chapter: in the *Betekenissen van de kleuren: wat er mee kan worden aangeduid*. This part of his book is devoted to individual colours and their meaning: starting with an ode to gold, the author moves on to describe the meaning of silver, white and other colours. Important for this chapter are two things: firstly his likening of gold to the sun, and secondly silver to rays of light. The sun as natural light and life giving force is presented in images with gold: “De grootste schoonheid bestaat in de onzichtbare Schone, de genadige oorsprong van alle schoonheid, met wie de lichtgevende zon… analoog wordt gesteld.” The inability to literally grasp the sun and the never-ending fascination with its power also make up the fascination of the colour gold. Further, silver takes a stance as producing rays of light, glitter and sheen. Van Mander’s choice of words to describe both colours could also be used to refer to a *pronk stilleven*.

Below is a great example of the simple, yet powerful exploration of silver and golden light reflections on canvas. Pieter Claesz, (1597/98–1660/61), *Still life with tin pewter, ham bock and silver cup* may give the impression that the artist, like van Mander with prose, was mainly concerned with depicting an ode to gold and silver. The careful arrangement of objects and the composition of this masterpiece

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27 Miedema 1973, 277 f.
aid this notion. The overwhelming beauty and sheen of the objects are of central focus to the construction of this image.

On a table in a rather undefined room a few edibles as well as cutlery and crockery are displayed. In front of the large ham hock, toppled over, there is a silver cup. It used to stand upright next to the silver platter, which is, in contrast to the cup, highly polished and not decorated or adorned with little details. The fall of the cup and the crunched up white napkin, pushing the plate dangerously close to the edge of the table, have caused these two objects to be the only two in disarray in this image. Further elements surrounding the two ‘characters’—the cup and the plate—are nuts, a stoneware pot with a silver lid—maybe for mustard—the ham hock, a *roemer* filled with a greenly golden white wine, a silver pot, which keeps more wine cool, as well as a small knife. From the viewer’s perspective it seems as if all the objects touch each other. This continuous band of things in the image gives the composition coherence, but it also roots the viewer in
a particular spot. The beholder is fixed by the artist’s choices, yet aware of the imaged (or imagined) reality, and that a possible change in viewpoint would deconstruct this unity.

However, coherence and unity are not only achieved here with means of perspective and composition, but also through the colour scheme. Far too often is colour in Haarlem still lifes simplistically referred to as ‘monochrome’. However, after reading van Mander’s ode to nature and her colours, and especially bearing in mind his adoration for the sun and the moon, respectively gold and silver, this painting comes to life and steps beyond a naïve monochrome pallet. The many nuances in golden and silver tones take some time to be seen and to reverberate with the viewer, however it is worth the beholder’s time. Once one discovers the many tonal facets in this work, it becomes clear what great role colour plays within the construct of this painting.

The first aspect to jump towards the viewer—maybe even figuratively poking us for attention—is the empty shaft of the knife holder. The top, which hangs over the ledge of the table, as well as the opening of the sheath itself, play with the border between the viewer and the depicted, marking the surface of the image. Its dark wooden material contrasts the light blue ribbon, which not only secures the top but also leads the viewer’s gaze along the shaft toward the fallen silver cup. Parallel to the line of the ribbon, running up the shaft, highlights give plasticity to the cup. A dark interior of the room as well as the gold brown tones of the roll stretch in long lines from the bottom to the top of the decorative silverware. The round shape of the silver cup’s foot mirrors that of the roll and the plate it is placed on. Although in great intimate unity, the two objects open up the scene and lead the viewer to the other objects on display. Contrasting the silver cup, especially the areas of sheen, is a pink ham hock. The light flesh tones as well as the slightly perspiring brown skin that is rolled back to reveal the meat contrast the silver cup and bring it to the fore. Not only has arrangement thus presented the cup first, the colour tonalities have pushed the cup forward even more.
The contrast of light and darker areas is not only achieved by means of colour, but also through a steep light that falls onto the scene from the left. The long shadows, dark in their tones, work towards the plasticity of the objects and make them stand out individually. For example, the walnuts and hazelnuts, which are scattered in different stages of opening, all throw dark shadows on the prim white table cloth. One of each is shown closed and in stages of opening within the triangle that is left like a stage for the nuts by the ham hock, cup and silver plate. On this silver plate one discovers not only broken nutshells, but also broken glass. A roemer has not survived the hasty departure of the diners. Both the nutshells and the shards of glass are mirroring each other in shape, however they display very different qualities of colouring and refraction of light. One piece of glass is reflecting a window, whereas little pieces of nutshell provide room to vary colour and thus imitate light and shade. Behind this messy plate, one finds the earthenware pot, which has been left open. The spot of light on the lid is of a more diffuse kind than on the glass shards in front of the pot. Here Claesz differentiates surface by means of light and shade, thus colour. In an attempt to fool the eye, the artist has made a precise observation and varied the light that hits the earthenware pot and its lid. By presenting us with different angles of refraction (the light follows the curves of the material it hits), we can map the space in which those objects are placed more realistically.

The long shadow of the pot is cut short by the large silver platter with the ham hock. Diagonally cutting across the background wall, which slightly darkens toward the right side, the ham hock leads the eye towards the top of the composition. Only the bone and the snout of the silver pot are interrupting our gaze, which are, parallel to each other, protruding out from the line that leads from bottom right to the top left of the work. The bone and the snout form a funnel in which one discovers an intact roemer. Its leg is only partially visible as the silver platter on which the ham hock rests covers parts of it. The snout also cuts across the fine glass. At those intersections, Claesz again compares and contrasts the materials and their qualities. The
matte surface of the large silver pot shows soft reflections of its surroundings. The window that can be made out on the different bulges has blurred edges and melts with the surface. The crafted forms of the pot thus are stressed by the different manners the light travels across its surface.

Much harsher is the contrast of light and surface with the roemer. A play with materiality is further continued here. Varying manners of translating light sources, such as the windows highlight the different densities of glass, wine and air. At the brim of the glass, half a window is captured where the light literally hits the glass. The rest of the ‘window’ falls into the hollow body of the vessel and is traced on the opposite side, bending onto the surface of the liquid. Inside the glass, the light refracts and disperses into cones of high illumination, thus also presenting the viewer with darker, shaded areas. Here the palette of the artist ranges from whitish gold to dark brown and reddish tones. A contrast to this golden-red colour spectacle is given by the green tinted adornments on the stem of the glass. The viewer suddenly becomes aware of the surfaces—their materiality, but also the materiality of the agents that carry the light. The thickness of the wine in comparison to the lightness of air and glass is made visible in this comparison of materials and their properties.

Claesz used this part of the painting to image, i.e. to describe, the source of colours and their sheen: light. Shadow is produced by light and refractions within it are, as well as the colours we see, in fact the result of light.

Looking further below at the foot of the glass, highlights of pure white colour mimic glittering light, describing the crafted surface. Those little spots playing with light and shade can be found all over the painting when looking closer. Little specks on the ham, the crumbs of the roll, and the pattern of the silver cup are all brought to life through this technique of colour application.

Claesz’ vivid descriptions of surface and his explorations of light and shade have actively guided the viewer through the work. By exploring each object and placing it in relation to one’s own realm the
beholder is, in a way comparable to the work by van Beyeren, forced to differentiate and contemplate reality. The individual objects matter no longer in their own semiotic extensions, but together, in composition and colour, enable a journey for the viewer that goes beyond the simple gaze and enters a dialogue with contemporaneous themes of the self and the other.

**Implications**

The purpose of this paper was to present the methods and techniques of dialogue and narrative, with which artists of the Dutch Golden Age had transformed their depictions of edibles, decorative tableware and flowers into constructs of colours and shapes in space. They achieved this by means of light and shade, composition and perspective.

This paper derives from one main thought: the depiction of objects within a space adheres to set principles within the making of art. The importance of this space lies above that of the descriptive value of the individual objects depicted.

With Karel van Mander this paper has looked at the *Groot Schilderboeck* and its key theme of great art as a language. Several formal qualities contribute to this language: arrangement, composition, colour and form. In transferring van Mander’s themes to the genre of still life we have found that the rules, which the treatise had set up for the construction of history paintings, demonstrated by Rottenhammer’s *Diana und Actaeon*, can be traced in the still lifes presented.

Abraham van Beyeren’s clever arrangement of fruit, vegetables and other objects on a table in front of classicised architecture and a dramatic landscape was presented first. Interestingly, the appreciation for the perspective, as well as the play with reality and imagination came to the fore when looking at the work through a lens more focussed on the formal qualities. Not only were those used to achieve another reality, but in fact the image showcased the artist’s skill and art’s beauty. The viewer’s senses were stimulated to participate in the work by means of an organisation of space.
Further, Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder and Jan Breughel the Elder demonstrated with their contemporaneous depictions of flower bouquets in vases that van Mander’s colour theory was founded in the reality of the visual arts. Their careful arrangements of colours did not seem to underlie a system guided by semiotics, but in fact a study of colour; its relations with and effects on other colours.

Lastly, the paper looked at light and shade, as well as the colours of silver and gold. With an example by Pieter Claesz it was made clear that the object should in fact be seen as a carrier of colour and a surface to play on with light and shade. It has become apparent that the objects on the picture plane not only have their own character to portray, but are also carriers of artistic methods and theory.

**Summary**

Overall, this paper has presented different angles and perspectives on the topic of narrative in still lifes. Visual narrative was looked at in theory and practice. The ultimate goal was to showcase the importance of visual grammar in an analysis of still lifes of the Golden Age. Although I do not deny the semiotics of images, this paper has shown that still lifes may be beautiful and pleasing to the eye, after all the aim of art, without symbolic connotations. Each analysis presented above has refrained from making conclusions on the symbolic extensions of the objects presented and yet they do not seem incomplete.
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