



The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century

By Svetlana Alpers

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"The art historian after Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich is not only participating in an activity of great intellectual excitement; he is raising and exploring issues which lie very much at the centre of psychology, of the sciences and of history itself. Svetlana Alpers's study of 17th-century Dutch painting is a splendid example of this excitement and of the centrality of art history among current disciplines. Professor Alpers puts forward a vividly argued thesis. There is, she says, a truly fundamental dichotomy between the art of the Italian Renaissance and that of the Dutch masters. . . . Italian art is the primary expression of a 'textual culture,' this is to say of a culture which seeks emblematic, allegorical or philosophical meanings in a serious painting. Alberti, Vasari and the many other theoreticians of the Italian Renaissance teach us to 'read' a painting, and to read it in depth so as to elicit and construe its several levels of signification. The world of Dutch art, by the contrast, arises from and enacts a truly 'visual culture.' It serves and energises a system of values in which meaning is not 'read' but 'seen,' in which new knowledge is visually recorded."—George Steiner, *Sunday Times*

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