

Hierarchies within painting genres  
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"He who paints landscapes perfectly is above the artist who paints only fruits, flowers or shells. He who paints living animals is worthy of more esteem than he who only represents things dead and no longer moving. And since man himself is God's most perfect work on earth, it is certain that he who imitates God in painting the human figure is far more excellent than all the others."<sup>1</sup>

These words, written in 1667 by the architect and historian André Félibien, show how, in the mid-17th century, painting was classified according to a hierarchical order that raised some pictorial genres to a pre-eminent position, while relegating others to a lower status. In order to retrace the roots of Félibien's theory it is necessary to take a step back in art history.

In 1441, the Florentine architect and artist Leon Battista Alberti, in his treatise *De Pictura*, defined historical painting as the highest and most difficult genre, since giving a visible form to an historical event required great artistic abilities and supposed knowledge of all the other arts.<sup>2</sup> During the Renaissance, interest in the hierarchical classification of painting decreased in favour of a debate on the veracity of the representation, which particularly concerned the genre of portraiture and how much the portrait should resemble or improve the features of the ones portrayed.<sup>3</sup>

In the 16th century, with the advent of the Lutheran Reformation and of the Counter-Reformation, the common interest shifted towards religious painting and its decorum and, consequently, pictorial subjects became primarily related to Holy Scriptures and biblical episodes. However, it is only a century later that artists returned to landscape painting, genre painting, animal painting and still life. During the first decades of the 17th century, in the Flemish region, a financially resourceful middle class

<sup>1</sup> Colin Bailey, Philip Conisbee, and Thomas W Gaehtgens, *The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre* (London: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Il ritratto nella pittura italiana del Rinascimento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art* (Auckland: Floating Press, 2008 [1796-90]).

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was born and flourished thanks to prolific trade, developing a specific interest in genre painting.<sup>4</sup>

Genre painting is the faithful representation of intimate and daily life. Its subject is not the heroic, armed and victorious man of the great canvasses of historical painting, but a poor and dirty humanity. In the artistic scenario of the 17th century, Félibien relegated this genre to a secondary position, elevating historical and allegorical painting in particular to the highest rank. His theory laid the foundation for the success of the great canvasses painted after the French Revolution. According to Félibien, historical painting deserved its supremacy since it had a purely didactic purpose, and could convey ethical, moral, and religious teachings. Following his theory, paintings such as Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and *The Death of Marat* (1793) became appreciated by the powerful French aristocracy, and by the very first public museums, which began to display them to teach the history and the values belonging to a modern civilisation.

However, the importance and centrality of historical painting were not just theoretical. From the middle of the 16th century, the hierarchy of the genres began to be associated with painting formats: historical painting was produced in large format, while genre painting, or still life, in small scale. Together with Félibien's theory, this helped to relegate genre and still life painting to a hierarchically inferior position. Who would have wanted to see a laundress with curled sleeves, a poor mother and her barefoot son, or a plate of rotten pomegranates when walking through a beautiful, opulent room of a Parisian museum? Who would have wanted to see these paintings, even smaller than an A4 sheet? Nobody, and certainly not the French aristocrats, dressed in their precious fabrics. A simple man, who earned his sustenance with hard labour and sweat, was considered unworthy of public attention, and was condemned to remain a marginal figure. Likewise, Félibien considered still life to be a minor pictorial genre, since it was

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a mere copy of reality, requiring neither creativity nor artistic talent. Almost a century later, even Sir Joshua Reynolds agreed with Félibien's view. In 1770, in his *Discourse*, Reynolds argued that still life was rightfully relegated to a lower position because its subject, being attached to the materiality of life, did not allow one's mind to idealise the perfect form – conversely, historical painting was capable of doing so by representing the human figure.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of 17th century, aristocratic collectors considered still life as a peripheral pictorial genre, marginal to the grandiose official art. However, some painters revolted precisely against this kind of widely recognised art, making still life and the representation of everyday objects, which were immersed in the immediacy and contingency of life, the focus of their study and practice.

In the 19th century the hierarchy of pictorial genres was thus inverted, and what was previously considered a minor genre, became, with the advent of Realism, the focal point of a movement that changed the history of art. Thanks to artists such as Gustave Courbet, the study of everyday life was made public and historians and collectors started to become interested in it. The study of reality, from still life to genre painting, acquired a pivotal role, while great historical painting receded. This change, which was also the consequence of several historical and social circumstances, allows us to recognise an important shift in the hierarchy of pictorial genres. If great historical painting had not happened, then Realism probably would not have been born as a revolutionary movement that challenged existing hierarchies across painting genres.