

Judith Leyster's Critical Response to the Patriarchal Era of the 'Golden Age'

In an era dominated by male privilege, Judith Leyster defies the expectations of females set by a misogynistic society through her interplay between form, colour and composition, alluding to the plight of female conventions in the 'Golden Age' of Dutch art. Leyster's *The Proposition* (Figure 1) is an epitomizing example of her artistic ability to allude to her feminist principles, littering the scene with depictions of symbols of morality and dishonour. The artist's broad knowledge acquired through travel and education is evident in her adoption of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro style in combination with her inclusion of the Dutch values of genre painting, thus formulating a critical interplay between light and composition. Leyster's inclusion of iconographic symbols induces a metaphorical analysis of female defiance and resilience, heightening the artist's feminine virtues. Yet despite the overarching negative critical analysis, Leyster makes the viewer question the artist's intentions, primarily through her juxtaposition of female resilience with a sense of mutual lust. Leyster's interplay of artistic elements therefore invites critical evaluation, which ultimately formulates a composition which balances itself upon fear and passion.

The equilibrium formulated between the artistic elements of *The Proposition* establishes an aura of anxious distress, emulated through the coinciding relationship between the figures and the painting's composition. A woman sits in the foreground, engrossed in her work, ignoring the neighbouring man's advances as he offers her money, presumably in return for sexual favours. Leyster was concerned with the fall of light, and its interplay with the psychological interactions of the people she portrays;¹ thus, the man's actions paired alongside the contrasting light and shadow heighten the sexual innuendos concerned within the painting. The candlelight casts a wave of illumination, primarily onto the faces of the figures, painting a clear view of the woman's nervous expression, juxtaposing the foreboding features of the man. Moreover, the figures are placed awkwardly to the left of the canvas, with the intense darkness alongside the barren background opposite formulating a blanket of shadow, engulfing the pair and emulating a sense of entrapment.

¹ Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum Of Art, 1976), 138.

This sombre ambience draws upon the tenebrist style of Caravaggio's work, which Leyster would have been exposed to during her time in Utrecht.² His influence is expressed further through the softness of her brushstrokes, seamlessly blending the boundaries between the characters and the shadows, creating the illusion of the figures diffusing into the darkness, emphasizing a sense of unavoidable danger. Building upon this motif, the symbols of male dominance of the seventeenth-century is reinforced through the towering presence of the man. His shadow paired with his form suggest a statuesque diagonal pyramid above the woman's figure, alluding to his higher social status, juxtaposing that of the woman's shadow, which lies on the ground on her right, undistinguishable from the darkness of the background. Leyster skills in manipulation are thus presumed to be in retaliation towards the unfair treatment of women in a patriarchal society, formulating an accurate honest depiction of women and their opinions of unwanted male advances.

The Proposition's portrayal of unrequited lust is presumably Leyster's primary critical response towards the anti-feminist establishment of the Dutch 'Golden Age'. Leyster was continuously overlooked due to her male competitors; yet the accuracy of her depictions of the female viewpoint formulated a unique discriminating response directed towards contemporary male artists' treatment of female subjects, ultimately catalysing her ascent to fame.³ Leyster depicts a woman rejecting the advances made by her male intrusive counterpart. The artist's painting of the woman's dress leaves her figure hidden, forming a statuesque, solid, cloak-like structure, removing any allusion towards the shape of her body, therefore implying that the man's advances are unprovoked by the woman's attire. Furthermore, the light colour of her apparel alongside its luminescence generated from the singular candle juxtaposes sultry darkness of the man's, highlighting her youth along with the purity of her intentions. Leyster further expresses the theme of innocence by directing the woman's attention solely to her sewing, a chore which contemporary tracts precisely insisted should occupy female paragons of virtue.⁴ While the man in contrast immediately contradicts all sense of

² Ibid

³ Lola B. Gellman and Frima Fox Hofrichter, "Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age," *Woman's Art Journal* 13, no. 1 (1992): 34–36.

⁴ Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art & Architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2004).

righteousness, reinforced through his unwelcomed presence in her home. In Dutch culture, the home was a morally purified and vigilantly patrolled terrain, absent from rude matter and beastly instinct, subjected to the regulations of Christian virtues.⁵ Therefore by threatening her privacy, he is simultaneously threatening her reputation as a purified woman. Yet, the male figure is not only intruding upon the woman's space, but he also extends his encroachment into the space of the viewer. Leyster formulates an uncomfortably intimate environment by placing the couple close to the foreground, generating the impression that the viewer is engaging in their conversation, therefore Leyster draws upon multiple sense, utilising visual and auditory imagery. Moreover, by having the table extend beyond the edges of the canvas, Leyster suggests that their environment is extending into our own, heightening not only the viewers involvement in the composition but also the reality of the situation. Thus, *The Proposition* remains as a visual representation of Leyster's feminist undertones and her criticism of the misogyny which dominated Dutch art.

Despite Leyster's predominant symbols of distress, the painting's iconography also contradicts this immediate interpretation, effectuating a sexual tension caused by an allusive sense of mutual sexual desire. The candlelight casts a golden glow over the man's face; the warm shades comfortably complimenting his features, conveying an alluring, inviting character; while the man's smile, although initially concerning, could alternatively be interpreted as an act of genuine kindness and humility. Similar motives are emoted through the iconographic symbols attributed to the woman's character. She is absorbed by her sewing, which during the Dutch Golden Age, "to sew" was slang for sex,⁶ thus alluding to her unspoken lust. Moreover, Leyster's tenebrosity formulates a spotlight upon her hands, directing the viewer's attention towards the act, heightening the importance of its symbolism of desire. The footwarmer would not have gone unnoticed by contemporary viewers, since in seventeenth-century Dutch art, such objects were attributed to symbols of a women's smouldering

⁵ S. SCHAMA, "Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in 17th Century Dutch Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 1980): 5–13.

⁶ Peter Schjeldahl, "A Woman's Work: The Brief Career of Judith Leyster.," *The New Yorker*, June 22, 2009.

sexuality.⁷ When placed underneath the skirt, an erotic sensual pleasure is evoked, as it would have warmed the woman's entire body.⁸ However, one should be cautioned against such an assumption, since primary sources dubbed footwarmers as "Mignon des Dames" (ladies favourite), implying that males must impress women to stray them from the comfort of the warm flames.⁹ Although subtle, Leyster undeniably suggests a mutual lust, yet it fails to overcome the woman's evident discomfort, reinforcing the painting's primary motive as a retaliation against the dominance of the male species.

Although Leyster's composition is one of contradicting connotations, it is evident that the artist's primary focus is that of the feminist virtue. The compositional balance between the dark sombre light of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro style, alongside the desolate background which arguably defined Dutch Genre painting, ultimately depicts a scene of utmost discomfort, especially for female viewers of not only the contemporary era, but also of the modern generation. Leyster's artistic elements therefore act as a vessel into her own disturbing and intrusive experiences as a female artist in a male favourable world, revealing her overwhelmingly negative opinions of the misogynistic society prevalent in northern seventeenth-century art. Yet Leyster undeniably includes symbols of eroticism. She cleverly depicts a sense of desire, stimulated by iconographic symbols of female sexuality, which along with the comforting tones of the candlelight exposing the limiting redeeming elements of the man's attitudes, one can come to terms with the interpretation that perhaps Leyster intended to convey an element of mutual desire. However, the stiffness of the woman's figure alongside her obvious ignorance of his offering of money ultimately trumps the sexual innuendos associated with the painting's imagery, and thus *The Proposition* ultimately acts as physical evidence of the existence of feminist retaliation against a misogynistic northern Europe.

⁷ Jill Swale, "Tulip Fever by Deborah Moggach and Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier: Jill Swale Guides You through the Best Way to Organize a Critical Comparison between Two Long Works of Fiction," *The English Review* 14, no. 2 (November 2003).

⁸ Catherine Morley, "Willa Cather and Dutch Golden Age Painting," *Modernist Cultures* 11, no. 1 (2016): 118–36.

⁹ Roemer Visscher, *Sinnepoppen* (Amsterdam, Willem Iansz: 1614), emblem Lvi



Figure 1:
Judith Leyster
Man Offering Money to a Young Woman (The Proposition)
1631
Oil on panel
24.2 x 30.8 cm
The Hague, Mauritshuis

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