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Making Meaning Happen at the High End of Low-Life

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From early in the 17th century to the late 1660s, the period fondly referred to in Dutch history as the 'golden century', the Netherlands became what is frequently referred to as the first surplus society. The country's favourable location, linking northern and southern Europe; combined with the demographics of a small, rapidly growing county; and economic developments more favourable still, resulted in an unprecedented surfeit of goods and capital. One major factor in this economic development was the country's exploitation of its colonies, where merchants dealt heavily in spices, silks and other highly valued commodities known as the 'rich trades'. And while the Dutch Republic managed to negotiate virtually exclusive trade agreements with the sources of these fantastic commodities in the East, significant 'advances' in banking practices and interest rates were being made at home.¹

Writing on the opulence of this period some two centuries later, historian Mandeville declared that the Dutch had been extravagant to folly, and gave expression to this folly in the stateliness of their courts and private buildings. Yet, he continues, these edifices to the raptures of increased capital were of unexpected magnificence "in a commonwealth where so much equity [was] observed as [...] in Holland".² It was this same so-called equity of distribution that created a market in luxury items priced to suit the fabulously

wealthy merchant classes and the rapidly expanding middle classes alike. This is evidenced in the frequent mention made of the comforts enjoyed across class distinctions in the accounts of those who visited the Dutch Republic in the 17th century, particularly where the affordability and wide dissemination of paintings is concerned. On this score, one English traveller was led to remark that,

many tymes, blacksmithes, cobblers etts., will have some picture or other by their Forge and in their stalle. Such is the generall Notion, enclination and delight that these Countrie Natives have to Painting.³

But more important than the simple presence of excess capital and the remarkable ubiquity of paintings, is how wealth and aesthetics were channelled at that time. It is commonly held, for example, that there was a “new ideological and religious framework” in place in the Republic and elsewhere in the Low Countries, which determined how wealth could be conserved and represented (Israel 548-549). In the broadest of terms, this new ideological and religious framework arose from a fortuitous meeting of capitalism and Calvinism. Hence, it is often claimed that the marriage of these two burgeoning ideologies produced an environment uniquely germane to the management of newly created wealth. Weber, for example, advanced the theory that capitalism was able to thrive where Calvinism prevailed because the latter promoted “the continual accumulation of wealth for its own sake, [...] combining the impulse to accumulation with a positively frugal life-style” (Weber xii).⁴ This assumed, religious frugality and dramatically increased capital came together in the 17th century in a vast outpouring of genre paintings, which gave expression to generalised notions of taste. These small easel paintings depicting scenes from daily life were mass-produced in the 17th century, and were popular with both the wealthy and the middle classes.⁵

Significantly, although genre painting may seem rather unassuming, it expressed a new secular aesthetics and as such, constituted a departure from the contemporary western European poetics of representation. The shift in painting away from biblical and classical themes already begun in the South, flourished in the North where genre painting celebrated the home and private space in astonishing volume.⁶ So whereas academic painting was intended to move the viewer with classical and biblical themes, wrought in pleasing colours and noble proportions, genre painting was actual, its subjects ordinary and its intent to reaffirm the cultural profile of a nation in the process of becoming. In this country, so recently liberated from Spanish occupation and still poldering itself against the sea, a new religious and economic climate made way for a theology of the domestic, and a market hungry for canvases that proclaimed the personal and the national.⁷

However, by saying that the shift from the lofty to the personal enacted in genre painting had the impact I am claiming, also implies an intention to communicate a message of nationhood or selfhood, and the implications of this assumption need to be addressed. To begin with, if an intention to ‘mean’ something about self and nation is assumed, then the questions of what and to whom quickly follow. In light of this most basic of problems in communication, I will be mindful here of various ways in which genre scenes may be meaningful, and to whom, as stemming from the shifts in aesthetics and economics that I have just outlined. Part of this undertaking will involve a discussion of the 17th-century commercial art market, in which genre paintings circulated, as having had a serious impact on painting and meaning.

As the literal meeting place of aesthetics and economics throughout the Republic and parts of the Low Countries in the 17th century, the art market was a crucial factor in how and what

genre painting signified. In this market, creativity and economy were inextricably united, as painters, no longer dependent on the support of patrons, became merchants with studios and shops of their own. In the market setting then, genre painters' intentions or 'meanings', were directed at viewers whom they hoped would become buyers. Sold to the growing and comfortable middle classes of a young, developing nation, that 'meaning' had much to do with image defining, both for the country's denizens and for the world outside.

In approaching a notion as intangible as that of meaning in genre painting through the art market, I have in mind Ricoeur's hermeneutic concepts of 'distanciation' and 'appropriation', which I will attempt to extend from texts to paintings.⁸ What seems appropriate to my line of questioning is Ricoeur's model of how the reader, or in this case the viewer, "appropriates" the "world-of-the-work" (143). In his sense, appropriation is a hermeneutic activity and involves the ideological and cultural background of the one who appropriates, as well as the meeting of this background with the 'world-of-the-work'. In the present case, the 'meaning' of genre painting would be co-determined by painters and buyers: the buyer appropriates and meets the 'world-of-the-work' produced by an artist, who has 'appropriated' and projected some aspect of the surrounding community. Unlike most texts, however, paintings are generally intended for display, which factor constitutes a further moment in the possible, projected meanings of a painting. In terms of the production of meaning then, a painting communicates with the world-of-the-buyer at the moment of purchase and, when displayed, it communicates for the world-of-the-buyer.⁹

To provide an illustration of what I am arguing, I have chosen to study a group of genre paintings known as *Card Players* [*Kaartspelers*], and to trace their religious and economic emergence. These paintings raise questions directly related to both religion and

economics because their shared theme, namely gambling and card playing, is a 'loaded' topic in both domains. If my intuition is correct, these paintings and how they depict gambling constitute a barometer of class-related tastes in a society shifting away from a divine, providential view of personal fortune to a more speculative, capitalist view of the same. This study of various renditions of what is essentially the same scene will then provide a basis for discussing what displaying paintings of gamblers may have meant in a country where a booming, speculative economy produced a market in affordable canvases.

Genre Painting: Card Players

In its permanent collection, the Antwerp Museum of Fine Arts holds a painting of card players by Adriaen Brouwer. The artist painted this rustic scene of gambling peasants in a dark tavern setting on a remarkably small, wooden panel, at the height of his career. In art historical terms, this painting is classified as belonging to a genre known as 'low-life', which includes scenes of brothels, drunken peasants and unruly households. The reasoning behind this classification resides in subject matter rather than technique, as indeed painters of such technical virtuosity as Brueghel, Steen and de Hoogte all produced low-life works. Brouwer himself, almost exclusively a painter of low-life, was a student of Frans Hals and known for his meticulous brushwork and painstaking technique.

Also to be found in the same wing of the Antwerp Art Museum, is a painting of card players by Theodoor Rombouts, from roughly the same time as Brouwer's panel, but differing from it in virtually every aspect but the card playing theme. This canvas of impressive



ADRIAEN BROUWER
KAARTSPELERS

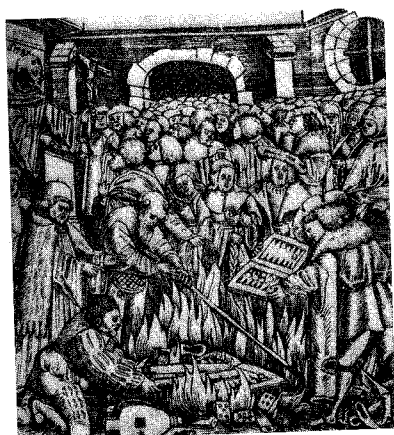


THEODOOR ROMBOUTS
KAARTSPELERS

size, depicts fine men of fortune, judiciously studying their game and gesturing towards a pile of coins on a velvet-clad table—quite the reverse of Brouwer's crude peasants. Although Rombouts' work is also based on the morally suspect theme of gambling, it is classified simply as genre painting rather than 'low-life', not least for the obvious reason that Rombouts painted well turned out gamblers rather than peasants. The Rombouts painting also owes its classification to the manner in which it incorporates elements of canonical figurative painting to which I will return presently. The immediate question is then, how Brouwer and Rombouts communicate generic difference to viewers and buyers while depicting subject matter associated with vice and unseemliness.

Where this last question is concerned, it is worthy of note that when Brouwer and Rombouts were painting their card players, cards had much stronger associations with vice and reprehensible

behaviour than they have today. Cards then had only been in circulation in Europe for a few hundred years and were still closely associated with the gypsies and itinerants who carried them into Europe from the Far East in the 14th century.¹⁰ That cards were also used as randomisers in gambling only served to compound their negative associations with itinerants and oriental 'otherness', and in Brouwer and Rombouts' day it would have been common knowledge that cards had been regularly burned in religious purges throughout Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries.

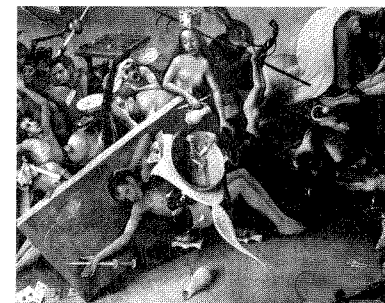


HANS L. SCHÄUFELEIN
*THE BURNING OF THE
PLAYING CARDS*

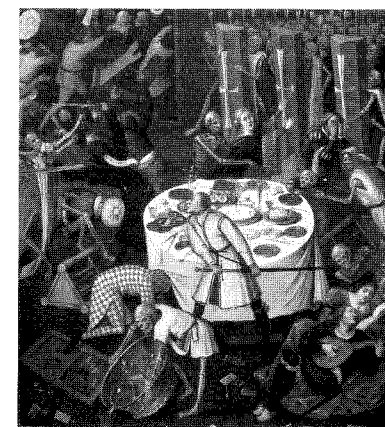


The journey that playing cards made from the purges to being judged suitable subject matter for an entire canvas was a long and interesting one. From their beginnings as extraneous details in set into larger works, card players eventually came to fill entire canvases, in step with the shifting of the economic and religious framework shaping culture throughout the Low Countries. An early example of card players figured in a larger painting is Bosch's "The Gamblers in Hell" in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1500). Here, card players serve to illustrate one of myriad evils for which the damned are punished in the larger structure of Bosch's elaborate hell. This segment of the triptych is contextualised as an allegory of evil in a grand religious narrative, and portrays a gambler with a knife through his hand, while the severed hand of another unfortunate gambler sits upright in a bowl, balancing a die at its finger tips.

Nearer the close of the 16th century, Pieter Brueghel de Oude also saw fitting to paint gamblers into his *Triumph of Death* (ca. 1597) a large and elaborate composition of sin and divine retribution which would later be repainted by Pieter Brueghel de Jonge. In right corner of the canvas, a figure clad as a Joker vainly tries to slip away from death among scattered cards and coins, not as the subject of the work, but rather as one of many evils in a vast and complicated fray. In these paintings and subsequent versions of them, card players are incorporated into a larger narrative of transgression, which



HIERONYMUS BOSCH
*THE GARDEN OF
EARTHLY DELIGHTS*



**AFTER PIETER DE
OUDE BRUEGHEL**
THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH

serves as a motivation for depicting them, rather than approaching gamblers as a study in themselves. Eventually however, subjects such as card playing “that had hitherto been treated as non-essential [or inappropriate] adjuncts” were to become “absolutely independent”, invested with an “autonomous value of their own [as] the artist no longer need[ed] an excuse to portray them” (Hauser 196).



AFTER PIETER DE OUDE
FARMERS FIGHT OVER
A CARD GAME

So as economic pressure exerted by the art market increased, and the role that religion played in aesthetics receded with the advent of Calvinism, card players were increasingly seen as an attractive, if dubious, subject for genre painting. The beginnings of this can be found in Pieter Bruegel de Oude, who painted card players into of his version of *The Triumph of Death*, and later chose card players as the central group for his low-life work, *Farmers Fight over a Card Game*. Yet while a number of the developments I have been describing did indeed take place over the span of Brueghel's career, it is clear that the movement to which I have been referring is not yet complete. In fact, the landscape so dominates this work that it is often understood as an early example of landscape painting, even though the card players occupy the centre of the canvas. In other words, card players are not yet the ‘completely independent subject’ of Brueghel's picture, which is dominated by the ‘excuse’ of a rural setting and comic theme.

Predating Brueghel's brawling card players by a decade or two, Lucas van Leyden's rendering of a genteel card party may be the first example of a full-canvas treatment of the *Kaartspelers* theme. Unlike Brueghel's comedic bumpkins, van Leyden's serious, noble subjects carefully study their cards and a pile of money, which provides the focal point of the canvas. Notice also that the figures

are arrayed in a manner which communicates leanings to the Italian style combined with modest Calvinist dress. This importation of foreign style aligns the painting with Italian genre painting, revealing a trace of the inhering need for a motivational ‘excuse’ in the portrayal of card players. More significant however, is the central positioning of the money in this scene. The players point directly to the pile of money on the table, thus ‘explaining’ what the painting is about, while testifying to the growing popularity of gambling among the upper classes, themselves increasingly involved in commerce.



AFTER LUCAS VAN LEYDEN
THE CARD PLAYERS

The growing acceptability and popularity of card players in painting which began in the 16th century achieved its full measure in the 17th century. By that time *Kaartspelers* had become such a popular scene that they were a staple in the repertoire of many artists, which were then copied and filled in as piecework by lesser studio artists. As I mentioned above, this production occurred in a market where conducive religious and economic conditions prevailed; where art was secularised and artists became merchants. Hence, without regard for church or patron, artists produced a volume of inexpensive copies to be sold to a wide spectrum of the population (Israel 550). Along with the economic developments to which I have been referring, the Dutch Republic became renown for gambling, lotteries, and heavy speculation on the mercurial stock markets of Amsterdam (Schama 306, 347).¹¹ So as Calvinism fostered a shift from the lofty to the secular, the prevalence of speculation and gambling nurtured a culture for which card playing was a charming, if somewhat risqué subject.

Brouwer and Rombouts

I would like now to return to Brouwer and Rombouts with the background I have sketch out in mind, in order to consider a number of elements that affect the reception of their works at the low and high ends of genre painting. Notably, in both of these paintings card players occupy the entire canvas and the focus is clearly not on the setting or any activity other than playing cards. Brouwer, the artist of the first painting to which I referred, was one of the best-known Flemish low-life genre painters although his career, like his life of just thirty-two years, was short. The son of a Flemish stencil printer for carpets, Brouwer spent a period of his career in Holland where he took up tutelage in 1623, at the age of seventeen, under Frans Hals. Finding conditions in Hals' studio unbearable he became an itinerant, selling paintings to finance a life-style lavishly enhanced by alcohol and Dutch tobacco cut with hemp known as *hennepepetuin* (Schmidt-Degener 28).

In 1633, shortly after his return to Antwerp, the Spanish placed Brouwer in the citadel under house arrest, due to his suspected connections with anti-Spanish *geuzen* rebels in Holland. His release was arranged by Rubens whose attempts to reform the derelict young talent are reported to have lasted no longer than a week. When he died in 1638, Brouwer is said to have been deeply in debt to a tavern where several of his paintings, acquired in lieu of payment, were already on display. While he was still alive Brouwer's work and lifestyle earned him the reputation of being the most genuine of the low-life genre painters, so that he was endlessly imitated for the commercial art market. As one art historian has put it, the "name 'Brouwer' [became] a label to be stuck onto any raw, ribald, and scabrous scene of common people [peasants, sailors, soldiers, vagrants, and addicts to drink and tobacco] (Knuttel 61).

One of the more curious aspects of Brouwer's history is the interest taken in him by Rubens who owned seventeen of Brouwer's panels and many of his sketch books, and Rembrandt who purchased eight of Brouwer's paintings. Alpers has accounted for at least some of Rubens interest in Brouwer's work by suggesting that it was part of the great master's attempt to get back to his Flemish roots and authentic rural existence. She goes on to add, however, that the "relationship between the political and aesthetic force [of Brouwer's panels] is hard to gauge" (Alpers 58). In this last case, I understand Alpers to mean that it is difficult to gauge why such a talent would paint mean subject matter and that, in terms of both aesthetics and politics, it is difficult to gauge how his work would have been received by contemporary viewers.

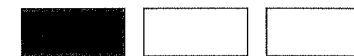
In a similar effort to grasp the significance of Brouwer's work, Fuchs concludes that it is a collection of vanitas "that must be seen as general representations of what may happen to man if he is unaware of the Christian virtues and, losing all constraint, surrenders himself to drinking and tobacco-smoking" (Fuchs 48). However, a closer look reveals a Brouwer who painted his smokers and gamblers with considerable exuberance and appears to celebrate the heightened narcotic effects of tobacco and hemp rather than cautioning against it. Indeed, it hardly seems likely that an artist who immortalised himself as the central figure in a later group of smokers (which was also to be his largest painting), would have undertaken to do with a moralising or, for that matter, entirely parodic bent.



ADRIAEN BROUWER
THE SMOKERS

I am arguing then that, taken on their own, the paintings in question undercut attempts to read them as a lesson in morality or simply as a parody of peasants and low-life characters. What people purchasing them may have made of these paintings is, however, another matter. Returning to notion that when bought, a painting projects the meaning of its owner, I would suggest that a growing and comfortable middle class who subscribed to a Calvinist ethic to varying degrees, may indeed have purchased Brouwer's work with a moralising intent or at very least, with self-gratification in mind. These portrayals of sloth and besotted gamblers were quite reassuringly the reverse of what awaited those who work hard, a message the more appealing given the supposed authenticity of the artist's experience. Having the means to buy the work confirms one's own achievement in escaping such a plight.

At the same time however, gambling and its milder, more legitimate and often more lucrative cousin speculation enjoyed great popularity with the moneyed classes, providing a market sector to be catered to with paintings of card players. From this perspective, it is clear that Rombouts was eager to appeal to wealthier buyers by painting figures that projected 'culture', on a larger and more expensive scale. Rombouts was an academic painter with the St. Lucas guild in Antwerp where he settled after studying in Italy for several years, to become known in Flanders as the leading Caravaggist for his rich pallet and tenebrism. In his *Card Players*, painted in Antwerp, Rombouts has also incorporated elements of Ruben's pallet, thereby citing the great canonical painters of both the north and the south. By referencing Rubens and Caravaggio through the use of theatrical back-lighting and the adaptation of both artists' pallets, Rombouts draws, however superficially, associations with the canon. It is through such associations that the work communicated to the wealthier, more 'cultivated' buyer.



Perhaps more striking than Rombouts' citations at the level of technique, colouring and composition are his figures, which are quite literally 'quoted' from Caravaggio's card players, both in terms of dress and attitude. The point is not, however, to argue whether or not Rombouts actually saw a particular painting in Italy, but rather, that the artist is clearly painting in the manner of Caravaggio. And while Rombouts has incorporated the sartorial style of the Italian master's genre piece, Rombouts also evokes Caravaggio's religious works in the figures who 'bookend' the group at the centre of his *Card Players*. The sage old man and woman, looking worriedly on and proffering counsel lend the composition a hint of cautious morality, as if to keep the scene from getting entirely out of hand. Moreover, the positioning of the figures, in particular the elderly man, recall Leonardo's *Last Supper* and the inclusion of these biblical elements would have made the work more palatable to a predominately Catholic market under Spanish rule. Effectively then, Rombouts has placed his work within a double set of quotation marks, indicating great masters and biblical narrative, thereby asserting his status as a major academic painter for the up-market buyer.

And finally, although both paintings share elements of still life such as the dead fowl arranged in the foreground of Brouwer's painting, or the coins on the table in Rombouts' painting, I would argue that it is with differing effects. For example, the intense diagonal lighting which orders Rombouts' composition is offset by the equally dramatic cropping of the canvas, and this cropping along with the large scale of the work afford the viewer a sense of direct entry. The cropping lends the painting immediacy so that the viewer may entertain the fleeting fantasy of having come upon the scene



CARAVAGGIO
THE CARDSHARPS

quite naturally and joining a card party with those who can afford to gamble large sums. This is significant in terms of buyers in the 17th century for whom, as Elizabeth Honig explains in *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp*, art buying was an assertion of one's "capital of cultural intelligence" and financial status (Honig 151). She argues that, as still life overcame the need for narrative or history, it dispensed with scenic contextual elements that separated painting from the viewer's space and time, and made it less immediate. Hence, "the objects in still life imply not past or imminent consumption but potential access [...] they are captured in a state of perpetual availability to the present appetite, to the possession of the beholder" (ibid.). In this case, the buyer's pleasurable contemplation of gambling and the spectacle of ostentatious wealth is also sanctioned by the reassuring presence of the biblical figures who elevate the tone of the piece and contribute to its acceptability.

The size of Brouwer's small panel on the other hand makes it difficult to comfortably meld with the rough figures it represents, affording reassuring distance from, rather association with, his card players. Likewise, the darkness of his work thwarts ready association, as does the hint that something untoward is taking place in the room to the back. Brouwer's paintings would appeal to the class of buyer to whom Rombouts work is addressed as a *vanita*, by attesting to the owner's moral and financial superiority. And as Alpers has argued in the case of Rubens, owning a Brouwer amounts to a colonising gesture, or the appropriation of unfeigned baseness and genuine artistic experience.

I would like to conclude by returning to the present, to where Brouwer's and Rombouts' *Card Players* are currently on display in Antwerp. Both paintings have now found a home in the 17th-century wing of the Antwerp Art Museum, not as examples of a particular genre, but rather as part of the history of painting and the country's

national heritage. Hence, categories such as 'high' and 'low' are levelled in the service of history, and have proved to be more mobile than stable. By discussing Brouwer and Rombouts together, I hope to have gone some small distance toward showing that the normalisation of canonical taste is motivated by many factors and does not simply arise naturally.

NOTES

1. Cf. Barbour, "Capitalism in Commerce" (85-103), and Schama (301-302) on the incredible range of exotic extravagances available for sale in Amsterdam in the 17th century. Consult Israel on the circumstances surrounding the 17th-century Dutch economic surplus (548-552). On banking in Amsterdam in the 17th century, see Galbraith (13-16).
2. Quoted in Bryson, 103.
3. Quoted in Fuchs, 43.
4. Weber's claim should not, of course, be accepted as being conclusive or entirely unproblematic. Schama and others have argued that the Dutch were capable of being as extravagant as anyone else, while maintaining a frugal-looking style. See Schama (289-343).
5. Although my use of the expression 'mass produced' may seem anachronistic, genre painting is frequently referred to as being one of the first instances of mass production. Cf. Hauser (204-205) and Israel (549).

6. Dutch genre painting was preceded by Italian genre works, but my point is more about quantity than originality. Produced as it was in a country that supposedly spawned an “outpouring of art [...] unequalled by [that of] any other society or age [...] in terms of quantity, quality and variety”, Dutch and Flemish genre painting had a tremendous impact on artistic representation, if by sheer volume alone (Israel 550).

7. According to Hauser, the Dutch “attitude” was expressed in genre painting “without aloofness and based on everyday experience—[regarding] reality as something that has been conquered and is therefore familiar. It is as if this reality were being discovered, taken possession of and settled down in for the first time” (197).

8. See particularly the conclusion of Ricoeur’s “The hermeneutical function of distanciation” (140-144).

9. In *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp*, Elizabeth Honig provides detailed research on the progressively more prominent place that genre paintings of the market were given in Flemish households, linking this to shifts in the greater market. The chapter “Value in Display and the Aesthetic of Judgement” deals specifically with the dynamics of making meaning through display (170-213).

10. See Goggin (126-136).

11. More famously, between from 1634 to 1637, the Dutch Republic distinguished itself with one of the more amazing incidents in the history of economics known as tulip fever, during which people gambled thousands of guilders on just one bulb in the hope of increasing returns. On this point, see Schama (351-356), Pavond (137-178), Dash (106-129).

ILLUSTRATIONS

Brouwer, Adriaen. *Kaartspelers*. [*Card Players*]. Ca. 1635. Oil on panel. 25 x 39 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen.

Rombouts, Theodoor. *Kaartspelers*. [*Card Players*]. 1628 - 1632. Oil on canvas. 152 x 206 cm. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen.

Schäufelein, Hans L. *The Burning of the Playing Cards*. 1519. Wood cut.

Bosch, Hieronymus. “The Gamblers in Hell” in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Ca. 1500-1510, right wing. Oil on panel. 220 x 97 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid.

Brueghel de Jonge, Pieter (after Pieter Brueghel de Oude, ca. 1550) *De triomf van de Dood* [*The Triumph of Death*]. Ca 1626. Oil on panel. 117 x 167 cm.

Jan Brueghel de Oudere. (after Pieter Brueghel de Oude, ca. 1550) *Boeren vechtend over een kaartspel*. [*Farmers Fight over a Card Game*]. Ca. 1626. Oil on panel. 94 x 124 cm.

After Lucas van Leyden. *Kaartspelers* [*The Card Players*]. Ca 1520. Oil on panel. 56.5 x 61 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Brouwer, Adriaen. *De Rookers* [*The Smokers*] Ca. 1635. Oil on panel. 46 x 36.5 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Caravaggio. *I Bari*, [*The Cardsharps*]. Ca. 1594 - 1595. Oil on canvas. 94.2 x 130.0 cm. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

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