PAINTINGS LENT BY THE NETHERLANDS

By HARRY B. WEHLE
Curator of Paintings

Perhaps the most gratifying accompaniment of the return of the Museum’s works of art after their long banishment to their bomb shelter is the opportunity it affords of bringing into proximity the numerous splendid paintings of the Dutch school. Ever since the south wing of the building was installed, some twenty years ago, the Rembrandts and Halses of the Altman collection have been separated from works by these masters in the Museum’s other collections by a distance of approximately three city blocks. Now for a few years at least the Altman paintings are to be seen in the second-floor galleries to the right of the main stairway, the same galleries which they occupied when they first came to the Museum in 1913, while two galleries, C34 and C33, adjoining the Altman rooms are to be devoted to a selected group of the Museum’s seventeenth-century Dutch paintings from other sources. Thus the visitor will be able with greater ease and satisfaction to appreciate the Museum’s magnificent representation of the Dutch school.

In honor of the reopening of the entire series of rooms devoted to paintings, but especially in celebration of the attendant reunion of the Museum’s Dutch pictures, the Rijksmuseum, through the courtesy of the Netherlands Government, is lending two paintings. Both came to America as loans to the New York World’s Fair, and as outstanding features of that and other occasions they have won a host of admirers in this country. They are the famous Milkmaid by Johannes Vermeer and the Linen Cupboard by Pieter de Hooch.

If our visitors have deplored the separation of the Altman Rembrandts and Halses from their natural companions elsewhere in the building, they cannot have failed to notice also the divorce of Vermeers from Vermeers and de Hoochs from de Hoochs. The Netherlands loan of paintings by these masters should serve to increase the general interest in the present reunion, by helping toward an understanding of the evolution of the styles of both artists.

The Milkmaid is generally conceded to be one of Vermeer’s early works, its style indicating a time close to that of the Procuress, in the Dresden Gallery. The Procuress, it will be remembered, is one of the rare instances of a dated picture by Vermeer. It was painted in 1656, when the artist was twenty-four. Another work of those early years is the Girl Asleep of the Altman collection. Its comparatively subdued color may or may not mean that it is an earlier work than the Milkmaid. In any case, both paintings share with the Procuress a thick and opaque matière as contrasted, for instance, with the Museum’s three other Ver-
meers, the Young Woman with a Water Jug, the Lady with a Lute, and the Allegory of the New Testament.

As a subject the Milkmaid is unique among Vermeer's known works. Servants indeed appear in a number of his pictures, but merely as secondary figures and nowhere with such impressive realization of monumental solidity, of incorruptible dignity. While life lasts no softness of character will ever distract this daughter of the people from the round of her appointed tasks, nor will her uncompromising flesh grow weary before the day's work is done and her restricted habitat is scrubbed and mopped and set in perfect order. Her costume is as firm and durable as her face and form, her jugs and jars are heavy and strong, even the bread is crusty and sustaining beyond the usual run of the oven.

But all such powerful expression of quali-
ties rests perforce upon a foundation of great drawing and masterly painting. Technically the method of painting the flesh is here especially interesting. The form is built up with small, blunt, staccato touches resulting in a texture startlingly similar to that observable in many of Corot’s figures. One must suppose the similarity to be merely coincidental, however, for Corot was already seventy years old when Vermeer was “discovered” in 1866.

In the case of Pieter de Hooch’s Linen Cupboard from the Rijksmuseum there is no opportunity for art historians to speculate or pontificate about the correct date. The picture is clearly signed and dated: P. de Hoogh 1663. De Hooch was Vermeer’s senior by three years and appears to have worked for some years in Delft. Hence it is interesting to search the paintings of both men for evidences of influences in either direction. The Museum’s Visit, for instance, is considered to be one of de Hooch’s comparatively early works, and its beautiful Vermeer-like lighting has been praised. Indeed Bürger-Thoré, the modern re-

*The Linen Cupboard, by Pieter de Hooch (born 1629; died after 1684). Lent by the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*
discoverer of Vermeer, included de Hooch's Visit in his list of Vermeer's works. It would be more hazardous to attempt to fit into de Hooch's artistic evolution the Maid Servant from the Friedsam collection or the Altman collection's Interior with a Young Couple.

The Linen Cupboard of 1663 seems to be the only painting which de Hooch dated in that year. In this picture, as in so many by de Hooch, the spectator's eye is afforded the pleasure of following the clean, tessellated floor into a farther room and passing thence into the clear out-of-doors. Looking through the front door in the present instance we can discern wide, clean sidewalks on both sides of a canal and beyond these a good-sized brick house. Hollanders assure us that such sidewalks are a sure sign that we are in Amsterdam, and Valentiner considers the Linen Cupboard as marking the beginning of de Hooch's long sojourn in that city.

The Linen Cupboard, though painted at a time which critics tell us is already too late for de Hooch's best work, seems sufficiently delightful to less specialized eyes. The lighting is bland and cheerful, the composition and action human and pleasing, and the recurrent note of reddish, polished wood decidedly novel and interesting. Students of Dutch manners are agreed that the thrifty older woman who stows away the linen is the mother of the richly dressed younger one. The younger one in turn is presumably the mother of the little girl who plays indoor golf with such becoming forbearance.

A picture book is now in press illustrating twenty-five of the Museum's Dutch paintings, with an introduction by Professor A. J. Barnouw, Queen Wilhelmina Professor of the History, Language and Literature of the Netherlands, Columbia University.