

Claudia Goldstein. *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party*.

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In *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party*, Claudia Goldstein demonstrates that a sixteenth-century dinner in Antwerp was an affair of ostentation and a performance of prestige. Every aspect and object of the dining room, from paintings to spoons to tablecloths, was an element that worked toward establishing the backdrop for a dining event that would display the host's social status. Goldstein tells the compelling story of Jan Noirot, an Antwerp Mint master who owned a number of paintings by Bruegel and whose property had to be sold after he declared bankruptcy and skipped town. Noirot's case is Goldstein's primary example of identity construction through the dining room, where Bruegel's works play just one part in an elaborate social performance. Thus the book may not be appropriate for a reader seeking a deep discussion of particular elements in the artist's paintings since its focus is the dinner party, not Bruegel.

The manuscript is divided into six very digestible chapters. The introduction sets up the structure of the book and presents the notion of the ideal dinner party filled with an excess of food and entertainment, such as practiced by Jerome de Busleyden and described by Erasmus and Thomas More. More details about Busleyden and his banquets are described in chapter 1. The *stoove*, or the small dining space meant for highly intellectual convivial occasions, is also introduced. Chapter 2 sets up particulars about the main character of the book, Jan Noirot, whose bankruptcy led to inventories of all his possessions to be sold at auction, including the Bruegel paintings that graced his dining room. The function of the Mint and its hierarchical structure is broken down in order to clarify Noirot's status as a wealthy businessman, albeit one inferior to other nobles.

Chapter 3 deals with *tafelspelen* (table games) as entertainment. Goldstein argues that while actors dressed up as peasants to perform their plays, the figures in Bruegel paintings would act as additional entertaining characters during parties such as those hosted by Noirot. This performative function differs from the peasant activity in Nicolaes Jongelinc's *Seasons*, which hung in his country house. In that context the paintings extend the space of the dining room and transport the revelers beyond its walls, as opposed to the city room where the painted characters join the fun that takes place within. Goldstein draws an analogy between the *tafelspelen* and

the theatrical nature of the dinner party itself, performed by the host and his guests. In chapter 4, the most compelling of the book, Goldstein describes and illustrates table objects such as silver bells, spoons, and forks, whose decorations would often be taken directly from famous prints. Although not necessarily adorned with peasant subject matter, these objects are essential to the overall construction of the dining space that allows for the exhibition of the host's wealth. Chapter 5 introduces a few more examples of dining rooms, including those beyond Antwerp, and reasserts the ubiquity of the performative function of these spaces around Europe.

In her introduction Goldstein suggests that her study differs from those of scholars such as Margaret Sullivan and Todd Richardson in that she draws a distinction between the real and ideal dinner party, focusing on the social rather than intellectual connotations of such events. However, it is not made wholly clear why the humanist aspect need be negated by the social. The book might prove most useful for a reader very familiar with Pieter Bruegel's paintings since the small black-and-white reproductions cannot serve as an introduction to his works. Nor is it the author's goal to discuss the paintings in any detail; rather, she positions them generally within the larger context of the dining room and its function. The frequent repetitions and the generally uneven editing distract the reader and detract from the flow of the narrative. However, the author is convincing in describing the early modern dinner party and does a nice job demonstrating the unified function of objects, ranging from saltshakers to paintings, in establishing the social status of the host. A deeper consideration of Bruegel's paintings would have aided Goldstein's discussion, but the reader is convinced of their place within the contemporary culture of dinner parties and their mark as a social symbol for players whose dinner games separated them from the very peasants they so prominently displayed on their walls.

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