

indeed escaped and that the girl has lost her “most precious treasure.” An embryo floats in the urinal (fig. 3). The scene with the little bird is about imperiled virginity, and the source of the image is an emblem by Jacob Cats.³

It was with reference to paintings like this in the 1960s that a breach was made in the image of Dutch genre painting as an art that supposedly recorded the daily life of the time for its own sake. Such a Steen or Dou or Schalcken was not an insouciant record of the world. It was imagery, and on top of that the imagery was didactic. And if works like these were representative of genre as a whole, this might well be the rediscovered key that could give paintings of this kind a place in humanist art theory, in which, after all, we are told ad nauseam that art was meant to be useful as well as enjoyable. A new world opened up, so it seemed, and it was not long before art history was inconceivable without this teasing out of the didactic meaning of the presumably emblematic genre scene. However, since there are no sources from the period which speak unequivocally about the visual language of the genre piece, and since the principal scholars who were in at the birth of the new approach believed that the so-called meaning of paintings of this kind had often been deliberately hidden, the interpretation of such works became a tricky business, with limits that differed from one case to the next, and were often uncritically treated as if they were elastic.

An excellent overview of the issues this raised is, in hindsight, to be found in the catalogue *Tot lering en vermaak* (To instruct and amuse), published in 1976 to accompany the eponymous exhibition of Dutch genre painting in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In the introduction to that book, which was pioneering in its day, Eddy de Jongh explained that although the purpose of the seventeenth-century painter's art was to create the most convincing illusion of reality—an aim that the public must have valued very highly—there was another, more conceptual delight to be derived from such paintings as well. That was said to be the discovery of the so-called hidden, usually edifying meaning of the scene, which only revealed itself to the viewer after some detective work. Frans van Mieris's *Draper's Shop* was discussed as a characteristic example of this aesthetic, and it is perhaps worth taking another critical look at the way this done (fig. 4).⁴

Van Mieris's painting, which was made in 1660 for Emperor Leopold of Austria, was one of the most expensive commissions ever awarded for a genre piece in the seventeenth century, and it shows the artist at his best. Unfortunately we do not know whether he was free to choose the subject himself or whether that was decided for him, but what he painted on this occasion was by any reckoning right up his street. Van Mieris was a master in depicting the “passions,” the emotions that accompany and betray our feelings, as well as being a supreme specialist in the imitation of textures—even better, perhaps, than his teacher Dou. The idea of painting an officer trying to seduce the assistant in a *draper's* shop for this prestigious commission was therefore a brilliant find. The richly clad man is sampling a piece of cloth between his fingers while chucking the evidently impressed girl under the chin with his other hand. The compliment speaks for itself. An older man is sitting moping in the back of the room, observing the visitor's behavior with obvious displeasure. The shop is the setting for all kinds of superbly rendered fabrics, from linen and wool to silk; the interior suggests a fashionable house. Hanging above the mantelpiece is a painting with the lamentation over Abel, the son of Adam and Eve who was killed by his jealous brother because Abel's offering had been accepted by God while Cain's had been rejected. Draped over the table on the right is a kind of standard on which, among other things, one can make out the coat of arms of