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TEACHERS' NOTES

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THE
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The Courtyard of a House in Delft

Pieter de Hooch,
1658



We are invited into a quiet space: the serene courtyard of a red-brick house in the 17th-century Dutch city of Delft. Mild spring breezes rustle the trees, birds chirp overhead and footsteps can almost be heard on the brick-covered floor, together with the soft chatter of a little girl speaking to a maid.

Pieter de Hooch has carefully constructed the scene to make us feel as though we are there too. Our view is the same as that of someone standing in the courtyard – we could almost reach out and pick up the abandoned broom. The artist offers us a glimpse into an ordinary day and ordinary lives. However, the scene is an imagined one. Despite its fiction, this little world offers an insight into Dutch life in the 1600s, a time of prosperity and change for a small and relatively new nation.

Interior lives

De Hooch presents contrasting worlds: ordered and ramshackle; public and private; middle class and working class. We find ourselves in a courtyard at the back of a house, a private space, but one where the sounds and smells of the streets and the city beyond drift in over the enclosing walls. A hint of the outside world, a front yard and a gate that leads onto the street, can be glimpsed through the open door on the left.

On the right, a maid holds a girl's hand and they look at each other tenderly. The woman holds a dish (perhaps of food?) and her clothes, particularly the apron, show that she is a servant. She may also look after the girl, who is unlikely to be hers. The child might be helping too – she holds up her own apron as if she is carrying something in it.

Have they entered the courtyard from the open door on the right? This part of the building with its crumbling wall, plain wooden door, crooked planters, and leaning trellis, feels completely different to the left-hand side. The right is simpler and more rustic, perhaps reflecting the lower status of the maid. The left, by contrast, is constructed with vertical lines, smooth brickwork and arches, a carving of an angel's head, and an ornate stone plaque. It could almost be a separate painting, suggesting that the woman in the doorway with her back to us is different too. Maybe this is the lady of the house and the child's mother?

Paintings of this period often commented on society; the split in this painting may reflect that tradition. It highlights the division of the classes and suggests an idealised role for women in the home. Rather than a realistic portrayal of society, it conveys a harmony that may have been attractive to the middle-class owner of the painting. The maid is happy and busy, the courtyard is swept clean and the child is cared for

An ornate stone plaque

The stone plaque high above the doorway is based on a real one – originally from a monastery in Delft that had been destroyed by fire. It was moved to form part of a garden wall, and still exists today in a private collection. The text is written in Dutch, and the English translation reads: *'This is in Saint Jerome's vale, if you wish to repair to patience and meekness. For we must first descend if we wish to be raised'*. The meaning is unclear but it seems to have a moral message.

Women in the home

17th-century Netherlands is considered the birthplace of modern Western ideas surrounding domesticity, and much was written on how to run a good home. While aristocratic men had traditionally worked tending to their estates, now a new middle class of merchants (almost always men) went out to offices and spent time at sea. The home became the domain of women and children, an idea that was only really challenged in the 20th century. This idealised scene does not acknowledge the struggles of real life faced by many Dutch families, for whom an ordered and calm domestic world was more aspirational than realistic.

Building paintings

Many pieces make up this painting, much like a building: some new, and some recycled. De Hooch reused certain elements across many of his paintings while also experimenting with new creations.



A very similar painting by de Hooch, *Courtyard with an Arbour*, shows another courtyard scene. At first glance, it feels like the same location as *The Courtyard of a House in Delft*, with a similar arched doorway and plaque, but other details have been changed. For example, in this version, the child sits on the left with a dog in her lap, and the maid is joined by two seated men. While the paintings look like they show real places, it seems they are largely invented. De Hooch settled on a structure and then changed details to appeal to different buyers.

De Hooch has painted this image with a large amount of skill and attention to detail, outlining every single brick and selecting specific colours for each material of the building. He has also carefully chosen what to include and exclude. Small imperfections help make the space feel lived-in and real – the broom lying on the floor, ivy creeping across the brickwork and doors left open. We can make out a window frame and a shutter on the far left of the painting, leaving us to imagine what lies beyond the painting's frame.

A frame completes a painting, and finding the right one is a difficult task. The original frame was lost centuries ago, and for many years the painting was hung in an ornate gold frame that did not complement the simple scene within. More recently, the National Gallery has given it a 17th-century frame of polished black ebony wood. The dark border makes the scene within appear brighter, and the ripples carved into the wood echo the stones and tiles of the house and courtyard.

De Hooch in Delft

Little is known about de Hooch's life and career – we are not even sure when he died. We do know that he was born in Rotterdam in 1629 and moved in Delft in his early 20s, where he worked as a servant and painter in the household of a cloth merchant. He was also from a working-class family – his father was a bricklayer, and his mother was a midwife, perhaps inspiring the ornate brickwork and theme of childcare in the painting.



Location too makes a huge difference to how we experience a painting. Today, Pieter de Hooch's quiet view usually hangs in a small room, away from the bustle of the Gallery's largest rooms. As you enter, with the lower ceiling and dimmed lights, the little courtyard shines with life.

A new art for a new nation

In the mid-1600s, the Dutch Republic (now the Netherlands) was celebrating winning independence from Spain and became known for making a new kind of art. Instead of grand paintings of biblical and mythological scenes, common in European paintings, a market for domestic art with relatable themes flourished. These works were smaller, more affordable, and more fitting for the home.

The subject of these paintings was ordinary life: taverns, local celebrations, still lifes, or people in the home. One reason for the shift in theme was that the Dutch population was largely Protestant - in contrast to their previous Catholic Spanish rulers - and the new nation was asserting its own values. Protestants preferred plainer churches without figurative art as they wanted people to worship God and not images. Because of this, artists could no longer make a living painting grand altarpieces for churches, and so they painted humbler images with which people could decorate their homes.

An increasing number of Dutch people were able to afford this new art. Although relatively small (home to 1.5 million people, compared to England's 5 million), the Dutch Republic was immensely rich and powerful. The Dutch held lucrative trade routes around the world, buying and selling valuable goods like cocoa, coffee, tea and ebony. Like many other seafaring nations, the country made enormous sums of money exploiting the resources of colonies across Africa, the Americas, and Southeast Asia, and enslaving people to work there.

The opportunity for wealth meant many flocked to the new Dutch Republic. As people and wealth moved in, a middle class grew with money to spend, and one of the many things they wanted to buy was paintings.

Previously, artists had worked to commission, making works for people who would specify the theme and content. Now they produced paintings to appeal to the market and customers they had not met yet, and they tended to specialise. Some artists only ever painted flowers, while others painted landscapes or portraits. De Hooch spent his career painting scenes of people inside and outside homes. *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* shows him at his very best, filling a simple scene with delightful details to pore over.

Discussion points

This painting is an excellent starting point to get children thinking and talking, sharing ideas with each other, building on the ideas of others, and using new vocabulary. Here are some ideas to start discussions, developed in collaboration with students from Mab's Cross Primary School, Wigan. While some questions could be answered with 'yes' or 'no', encourage children to justify why they think that and consider other points of view.

People

Who do you think the people in this painting might be? Do they know each other? Are they related? How can you tell? What might they be doing, and what could they be saying? Who might be the most important person in the house? Is the woman facing away from something or towards something? Does it make a difference? How can we tell how someone is feeling even if we can't see their face? Do you think these people really existed? Does it matter if they did or did not? What makes a painting look or feel real to you?

Places

What is the difference between a house, a school and a shop? What roles do different places have? Does this change what they look like? How do different places make you feel? What makes somewhere feel like a home? Is there a difference between a house and a home? Would you like to live in or visit a place like the one in the painting? What would you change? Where might the windows and doors in the painting lead to? What might those places look like? Does everyone agree? What would your ideal building look like and what would it be used for?

Work

Which jobs can be done at home, and which do you need to go somewhere else to do? What are the different jobs that need to be done in a home? Who does which job, in your experience? Why do you think that is? Is that the same for other people around you? What sort of clothes do people wear when doing different jobs and why? What types of work did people need to do a long time ago that they don't need to do today? What technology do we have now to help? If you enjoy something, is it still work? Is making art a type of work?

Value

If you could have your own painting, what would it be a painting of? Would you prefer a painting of something you could see in real life, or something completely made up? Where would you hang your painting? How big would it be? What sort of frame would you give it? What do you find valuable? What do the other people in your class find valuable? Does something have to be big or grand to be valuable? Can something be valuable without being expensive? In what different ways can something be valuable? How do we decide what's special or valuable?

Related artworks

These artworks have elements in common with *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* - some in style and some in theme. Try comparing them through discussion; do they change how you see de Hooch's painting?

National Gallery

Carlo Crivelli, *The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius*, 1486.

Pieter de Hooch, *A Woman and her Maid in a Courtyard*, about 1660/1.

Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome in his Study*, about 1475.

Diego Velázquez, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, probably 1618.

Johannes Vermeer, *A Young Woman standing at a Virginal*, about 1670–2.

Our exhibitions

Discover Liotard and the Lavergne Family Breakfast 16 November 2023 – 3 March 2024

The Credit Suisse Exhibition: Frans Hals 30 September 2023 – 21 January 2024

Elsewhere

Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard with an Arbour*, 1658–1660. Private Collection

Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, c. 1657–1658. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Johannes Vermeer, *View of Delft*, c. 1660–1661. Mauritshuis, The Hague, the Netherlands

Contemporary

Julie Blackmon, *Metaverse*, 2022.

Birgit Jürgenssen, *Housewives' Kitchen Apron*, 1975.

Edward Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Humberto Tan, *Portrait of rapper and singer Typhoon as Elieser*, 2019.