

Exercise: Annotate an interior view



Figure 1 *The Proposition*, 1631, oil on panel, by Judith Leyster.

In this essay I will examine a seventeenth-century Dutch interior and a nineteenth-century genre painting.

Where appropriate, I must consider the relationship between the figures and the setting, whether the picture contains a story or narrative, what the interior tells us about the status of its owner and what evidence it gives us about art works that the owner has collected. Also, I will identify if there are any possible symbolic meanings.

I have selected the paintings *The Proposition*, 1631, by Judith Leyster and *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa*, 1804, by Antoine-Jean Gros for further study as both artists explore ideas of status, narrative and symbolism in very different ways.

Describing and relating *The Proposition* by Judith Leyster (in the form of three spider diagrams)

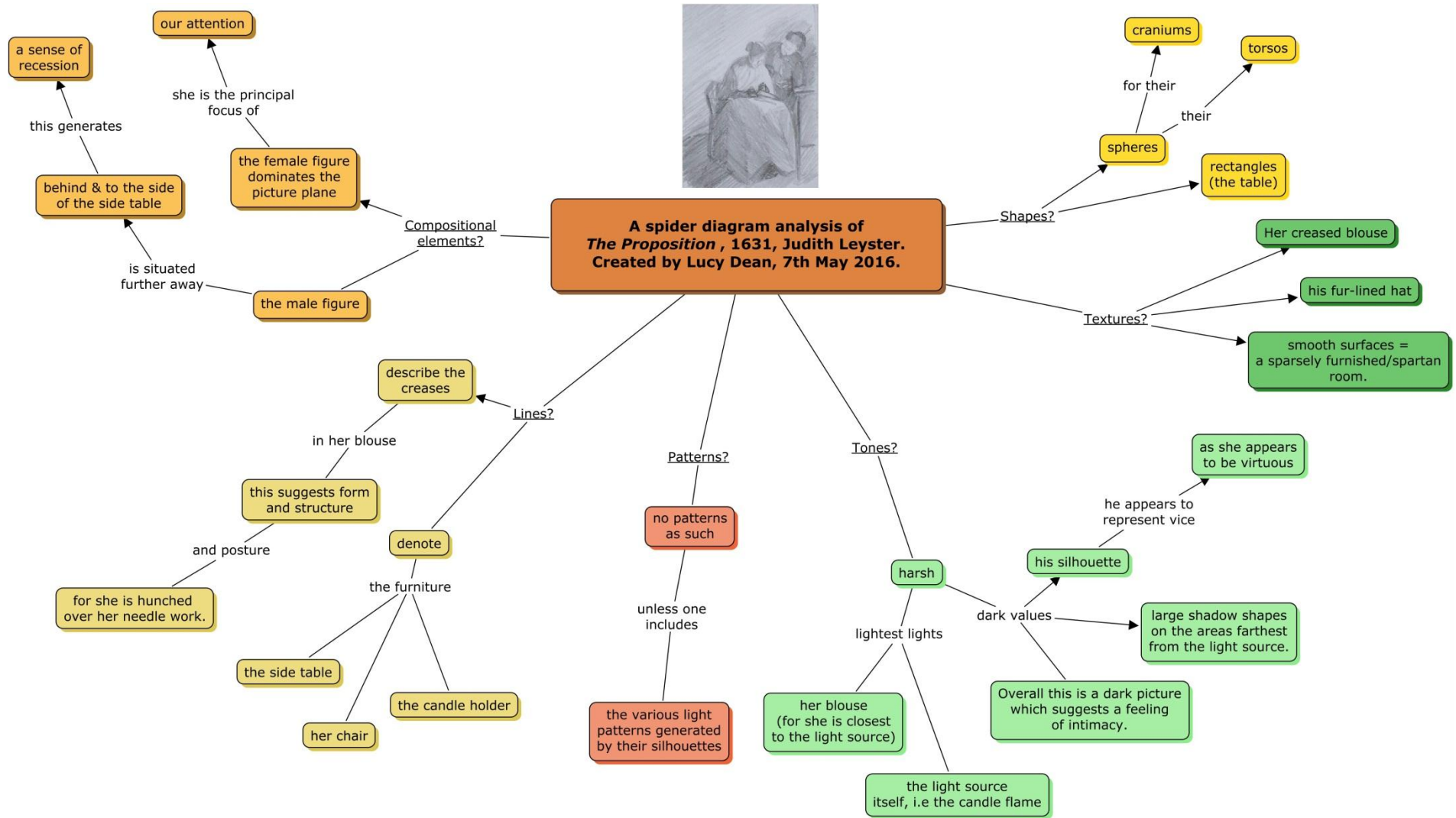


Figure 2 Spider diagram 1 of 3.

Describing and relating *The Proposition* by Judith Leyster

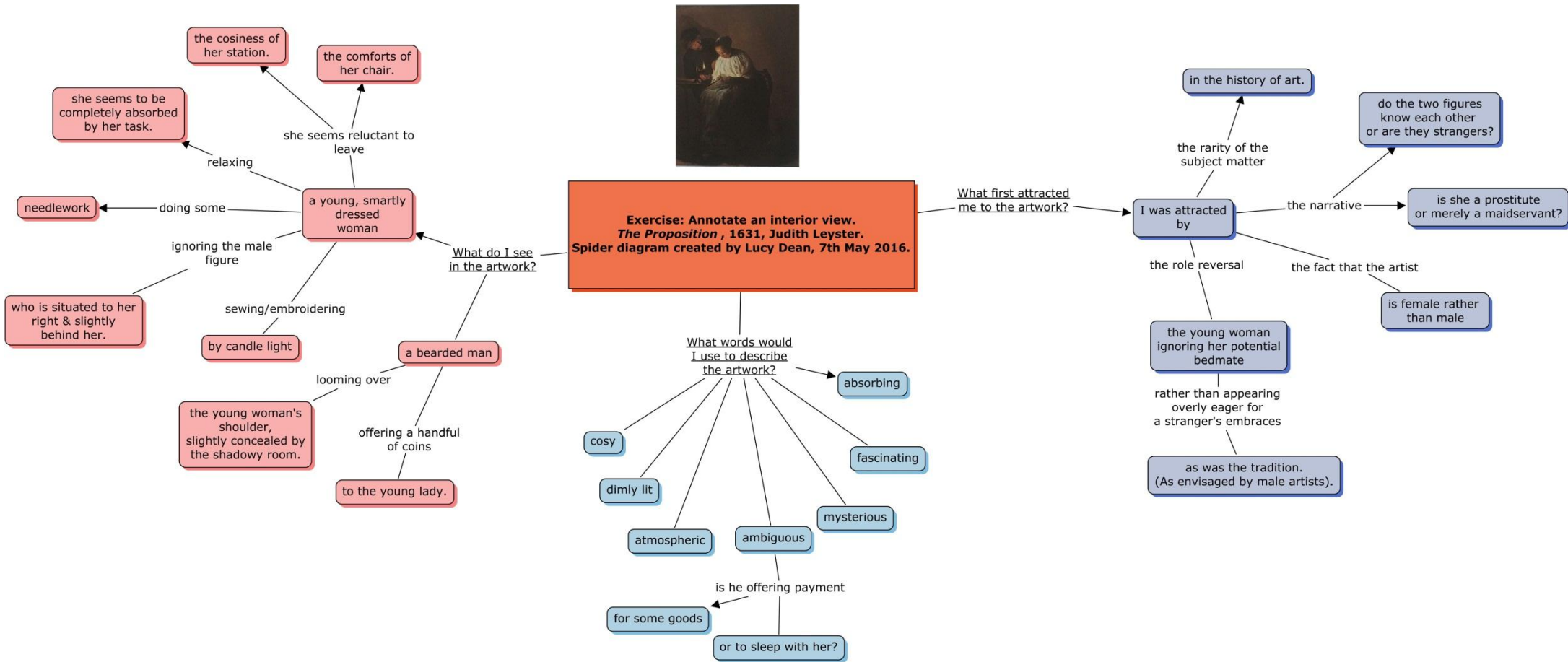


Figure 3 Spider diagram 2 of 3.

Describing and relating The Proposition by Judith Leyster

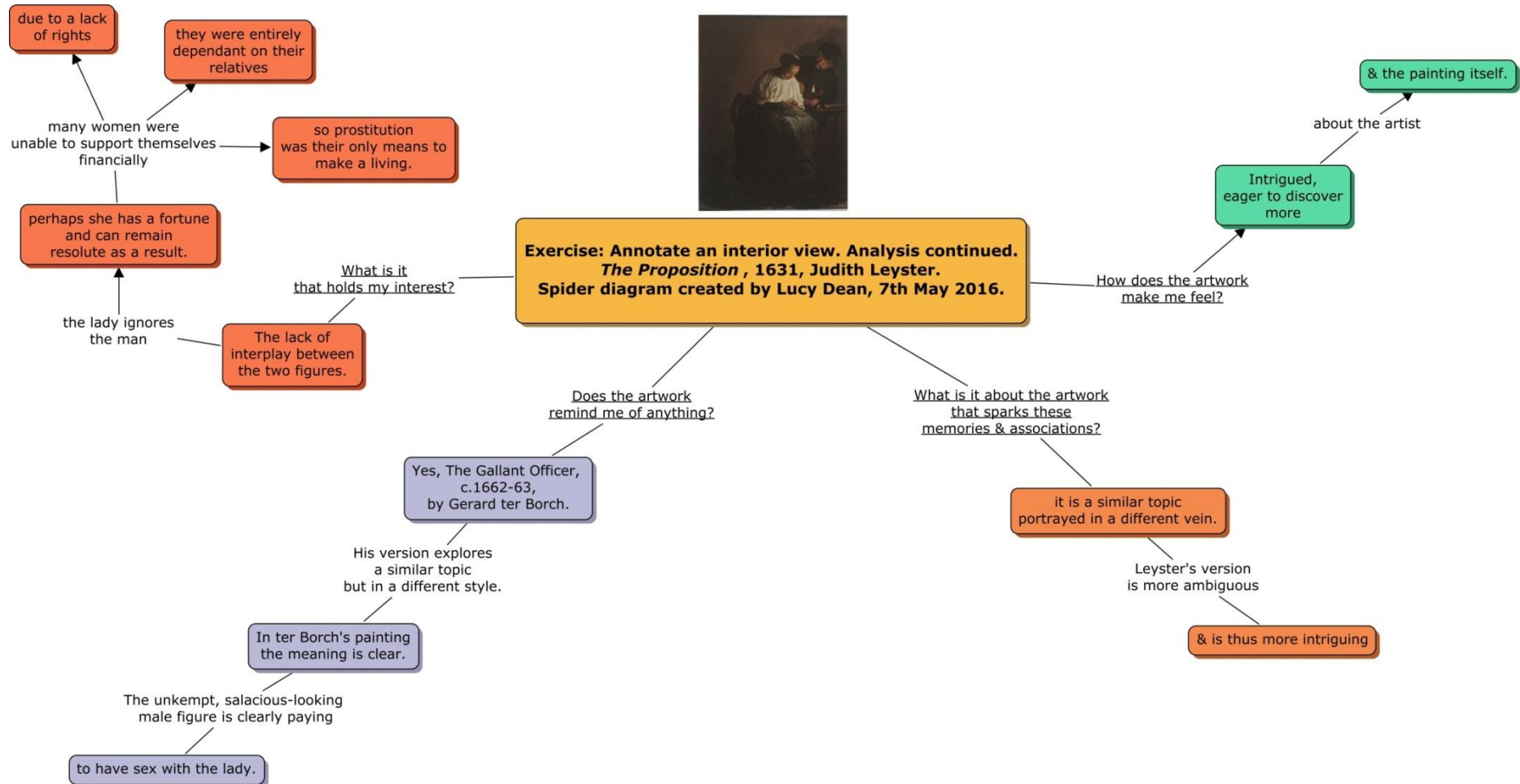


Figure 4 Spider diagram 3 of 3.

Describing the processes and techniques of *The Proposition*, 1631, by Judith Leyster

This is a small-scale oil painting on panel, depicting two figures in an intimate interior setting. The lady is situated closest to us, hunched over her needlework. She seems to be completely absorbed and busily stitches the material which she has clasped in her hands. She completely ignores the man behind, who is offering her some coins with his outstretched hand. He seems to fade into the background due to the darkness of his attire and the lady's lack of interest.

I think the artwork was made in the studio of the artist as she painted directly from life in a shared studio environment with her husband. I think the painting was produced slowly so as to create the delicate harmonies in the pigments and the gentle graduations of tone. The values are very subtle in places so the artist would have had to have paid careful attention to the changing light during the day. It also takes time to develop portraits such as these as she must have spent a considerable amount of time drafting their faces. The interior itself is very sparse to emphasise the intimacy of the scene and to maintain the audience's focus on the key elements. The figures are our main port of call as the narrative centres around them.

The painting is likely to have taken a considerable amount of time as the artist (and models) would have needed to take regular breaks. Models need lots of breaks during their modelling sessions; otherwise they refuse to sit for you again! Also, the poses would have been difficult to hold as they both involve bending at the back – this is a really uncomfortable position to maintain, due to the strain on the body. Also, this is a candlelit scene painted before we had electricity so it seems likely that the canvas would have taken some time to produce!

The artist certainly needed help in creating this image as she needed people to model for her. However I am sure she painted this picture entirely herself as she was a talented artist and was so good that many people mistook her canvases for those of her contemporary Frans Hals!

I am unsure how the picture is framed precisely as I have been unable to source any information pertaining to it. However, it is painted on panel so I am sure that a light wooden frame would have sufficed.

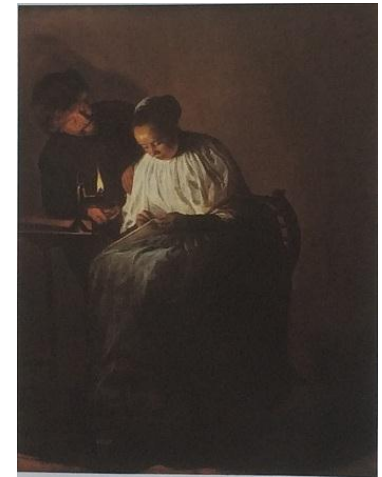


Figure 5 *The Proposition*, 1631, oil on panel, by Judith Leyster.

Interpretation and contextualisation

The Proposition is a highly ambiguous image as it presents a man offering money to a woman who is completely uninterested in him. As was traditional in Dutch paintings of this period, a man depicted offering money to a woman in an interior scene usually implied prostitution. However, the artist subverts the idea as the young lady is instead immersed in her needlework. In fact, in Leyster's view she is totally absorbed in her sewing and is pointedly ignoring his attentions.

Leyster alters the sexual connotations of the image as the lady appears to be refusing him. In other works of the period (produced by male artists), the lady is usually depicted as more than happy to sell herself for a few coins. By contrast, Leyster's lady seems more circumspect and intent on finishing her embroidery rather than having a quick toss-in-the-hay with the mysterious stranger behind her. As previously referred to in Spider Diagram Number Three of this document (see page 4), a fine example of this is *The Gallant Officer*, c.1662- 63 by Gerard ter Borch. Ter Borch was a contemporary of Leyster's, but even in the title it is possible to discern his approval of the situation. He implies that the male figure is 'gallant' simply because he is offering the lady money in exchange for sex. So the artist's opinion is very illuminating. The painting only serves to reinforce the artist's view that it is acceptable for a young, beautiful woman to sell herself to an unsavoury and sordid-looking soldier. (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

Context & History

In 1631 when the painting was created, Holland was at war with Spain in what is now known as the *The Dutch Revolt/Eighty Years War*. This was a turbulent period in Dutch history as the Dutch were in conflict with the Spanish to establish their independence and their own sovereign state. It was only after the signing of the *Treaty of Munster* in 1648 that peace was restored and the Netherlands emerged as an economic powerhouse. The Dutch revolt was a desperate civil war which pitted the Northern Netherlands against the Southern states which were under Spanish control. The war itself led to the vast accumulation of debts and heavy losses. So once the peace treaty had been signed by the respective parties, there was plenty of celebration and jubilation throughout the country.

From 1595-1640 the Dutch were establishing key trading routes throughout the world in exotic locations such as Jakarta, India, Japan, South Africa and many more. They eagerly followed in the footsteps of the Spanish and the Portuguese who had already established their own colonies in these areas. The Dutch were keen to make their fortunes and so they set-up their own company: The Dutch East India Trading Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC). They had to find a way to fund their military operations at home, so this trade of spices, silks, opiates and many more, was necessary to accumulate the vast fortunes required to maintain their authority. They were in essence fighting a battle on two fronts however, as they were competing with the Spanish and the Portuguese at home and abroad in order to establish their own colonies and rites of passage. (Rijks Museum, n.d.)

A moral message

I believe the artwork is influenced more by the ideas of the painter rather than by what was happening socially, politically or economically. Although it is clear that the image itself carries a message which would have been popular at the time.

Paintings which expressed sexual transgressions or moral issues were coveted by the wealthy merchant class who collected works of this nature to adorn their homes. I believe the inherent ambiguity of Leyster's painting would have appealed to merchants and their families as it has a religious/biblical implication. Temptation is a popular theme which has been expressed in the arts for thousands of years. Thus, I think Leyster is telling us how easy it is to give into temptations such as money or lust, particularly when one is struggling to survive (Honour & Fleming, 2009).

Also, I think the overarching idea is one of vice and virtue. The lady is clearly the more virtuous personality due to her immaculate appearance. She is neatly presented, modestly dressed, and is pursuing an appropriate occupation. (As sewing/embroidery were considered suitable activities for females in those days). Furthermore, the skills of embroidery/sewing were considered important accomplishments for young unmarried women, especially those who were impoverished or less wealthy than their affluent counterparts. Also, the time taken to acquire these skills was looked on favourably by society, as a woman who regularly sewed was viewed as being extremely consistent and stable. Furthermore, she was likely to make a good wife which would in turn lead to a highly successful marriage.

It seems to me that the lady is a servant rather than a person of social standing due to the plainness of her attire, the sparseness of the room and also her lack of a suitable chaperone. Until very recently, young ladies were expected to be chaperoned constantly in order to preserve their own reputation and that of their families. Also, a young woman was rarely left alone with a man, unless they were married. Otherwise they risked damaging their precious reputations, their families' social standing, valuable connections and their chances of making a suitable marriage.

In those days, a woman relied on making a good marriage in order to live, so the fact that our lady is alone with someone who is clearly unlikely to be her husband; we can surmise that she is indeed a prostitute or a servant with a dubious reputation.

The artist, her life, influences and art practise

- “Judith Leyster (1609–1660) is the most famous female painter of the Dutch Golden Age” (CODART, 2009), due to her ambitious and characterful genre paintings.
- Unlike many of her contemporaries she created paintings of a so-called “merry company” (National Gallery, 2016), entertainers, interior scenes and lively portraits.
- She differentiated herself from another well-known and much-celebrated female artist of the same period, Rachel Ruysch, as Leyster painted people rather than still lifes (Honour & Fleming, 2009).
- Most artists of this period specialised in a particular genre of painting such as still lifes, portraiture, interior scenes or nautical spectacles. Instead, Leyster ambitiously pursued groups of figures engaged in various activities. This was remarkable for the period as women were banned from studying nude models in the life studio (due to society’s view that it would corrupt young women). So the chance to practise from live models was very difficult for young ladies.
- She was influenced by several artists, most notably her husband Jan Miense Molenaer, Dirk Hals (the brother of Frans Hals) and Caravaggio (Web Gallery of Art, n.d.).
- There is some debate as to whether she studied under the famous Haarlem painter Frans Hals as her style is similar and they were both based in the same town at various points in their career. However, her interest and passion for dramatic lighting effects (inspired by Caravaggio) differs hugely from Frans Hals style.
- In 1633 she became the first female artist to be admitted to the Painter’s Guild in Haarlem where Frans Hals was also a member. This was a very important milestone for her as it brought status and enabled her to establish her own workshop where she could train her own apprentices and in effect pass on her skills and knowledge to the next generation of artists. Her style was praised by contemporaries such as Samuel Ampzing who described her art as: “bold and intelligent” (CODART, 2009).



Figure 6 Self-Portrait, c.1630, Judith Leyster. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art.

Interpretation and contextualisation (continued)

- It seems to me that *The Proposition* was originally created as a piece of art with strong religious overtones. I think the artist painted it with a view to challenging society's views of the relations between men and women and also to express the accompanying themes of vice and virtue (Web Gallery of Art, n.d.).
- The painting would have been intended for display in the home and is likely to have been purchased by a wealthy merchant, to adorn the walls of his home. This type of art was required by affluent merchants who wanted art which was realistic and true-to-life, rather than idealised. The moralising subject matter was hugely popular as people were god-fearing and knew that fortunes were easily acquired and lost, particularly in challenging times of war survive (Honour & Fleming, 2009).
- *The Proposition* differs enormously from her self-portrait as it is of a more serious nature and is a lot less light-hearted. Her self-portrait is certainly a tour-de-force and shows the artist at the height of her powers. She appears relaxed, happy and confident and is situated in a ¾ profile so as to engage the attention of the viewer. In fact it is so life-like one can imagine her turning and leaning back as though to engage us in conversation. It is as though she is about to ask us our opinion of the painting. The self-portrait is essentially a celebration of her skill as an artist as it clearly shows she can excel at portraits, "merry companies" and still lifes (the palette and paintbrushes) (National Gallery, 2016).

Evaluation

- To conclude, *The Proposition* is a magnificent genre painting which describes two figures with the potential to engage in licentious behaviour.
- It certainly depicts the two recognisable figures of a wise young woman and a shadowy male figure in the background. He appears to loom threateningly over her as she contemplates her needlework.
- The painterly style is naturalistic, with just enough artistic flourishes provided to give a sense of warmth and intimacy in the environs of the room.
- It is clear to me that the artist is expressing a moralistic message. She wishes to convey the dangers of lust and greed and the need for presence of mind. In my opinion she is representing the ideas of temptation and of vice and virtue. These are biblical ideas, but she reinterprets the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, by revealing an alternative. Historically, Eve was always the much-hated figure, responsible for the corruption of Adam and for their subsequent expulsion from Paradise. Here however, her male figure is the corruptive source. Her female figure wisely ignores his outstretched palm full of coins, and thereby avoids a rapid descent into chaos and vice.
- Leyster's narrative is very unusual in the history of art as she depicts a woman as the virtuous figure and thereby ignoring the temptations of vice. In *The Gallant Officer*, 1662-63, by Gerard ter Borch, the lady is accompanied by a rough-hewn and salubrious-looking, bearded fellow, who's lustful intentions are obvious. His male figure sits astride, blatant and unashamedly proffering a handful of coins to the elegant young woman opposite him. Ter Borch depicts his lady in a very different manner to Leyster; his lady is downcast, submissive and yet responds to the man's attentions by offering him some wine. Whether she accepts him through genuine pleasure is unclear, but perhaps her lack of enthusiasm indicates her need for money in order to survive (Honour & Fleming, 2009).
- Finally, I think the *The Proposition* was painted in response to the desires of the Dutch people who purchased small-scale works of art to adorn their homes. Scenes such as those described above were hugely popular both with the wealthy merchant class and also with members of the public. In fact, scenes of everyday life were coveted as much as still lifes, landscapes and other genre paintings. The subject matter and sharp details were deemed entirely suitable for their living rooms as they could be viewed as a mirror to current society and its views about the world in general (Honour & Fleming, 2009).
- I also feel that *The Proposition* was issued as a challenge to society's stereotypes of men and women, with a view to offering an alternative vision. After all, in Leyster's version prostitution is merely suggested, whereas in ter Borch's it is displayed in all its ugliness. In contrast, Leyster's male and female figures seem to be quietly dignified in their restraint.

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