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Leeds MA Students  
Interpretation  
Online exhibition

# A WOMAN'S DUTY

Challenging the Idealisation  
of the Dutch Home

Rijksmuseum Group

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# Introduction

The Dutch Golden Age, from 1588 to 1672 was a period when the Netherland's contribution to global science, art and military were highly influential and acclaimed. During this time the concept of genre painting was popularised, with artists focusing on ordinary scenes from daily life.

In these paintings though, there is often a sense of loneliness and oppression, when they supposedly depict the warmth, peace, and beauty associated with family.

The mother is the loneliest person in the family. Everyone needs her: her husband wants her to be a good wife, her children want her to be a good mother, society expects her to be a good housewife.

But what about herself? In addition to being a mother, she is also an independent individual. ***She has the right to pursue the life she wants.***

As contemporary viewers, we experience artworks with intuition, interpreting the oppression of women under the male gaze with a modern-day perspective.

Art should be a conversation, and with the increasing nature of digital life, technology and art should be intertwined. In 'A Woman's Duty', we read the moral constraints and disciplines imposed upon women by a feudal society with a fresh, contemporary perspective, through instant messaging and text conversations.

Most women were shackled in family life, losing their own characteristics and sense of being an individual, to become the stereotypical 'good mother'.

***Using the Rijksmuseum's collections of Dutch Old Master paintings, in this exhibition we aim to show that although it was once perceived to be "a woman's duty" to be a mother and a wife - and that now, it is everyone's duty to critique these previously held views.***

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When classical masterpieces meet contemporary perspectives, what flashes of inspiration are sparked?

Our team consists of five young women from all over the world, and in the exhibition we use WhatsApp dialogue to present the different feelings and intuitions of the curatorial team, during the exchange of ideas.

**We intend a wider audience to join us in this discussion.**



The background is a collage of historical interior scenes, possibly from 19th-century painting or photography. It features ornate architectural details, a large window with a view of a landscape, and various pieces of furniture and objects. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red and orange color scheme and a yellow grid pattern. The title text is centered in white.

# The Fetishised Domesticity

# Doll's house of Petronella Oortman


This is undoubtedly a beautiful art work. All the miniature items in the doll's house are made according to the material of the actual items. It is a symbol of the owner's social class and status. Through this Doll's House, we can glimpse the rich and exquisite daily life of the Dutch in the 17th century.

The owner of this doll's house, Petronella Oortman, was a widow before she decided to make this dollhouse. After she remarried, she spent a lot of time and energy on it, not just to show off her wealth. This doll's house carries her fantasy of a perfect family life; perhaps she was eager to achieve this dream through marriage. Here, the doll's house is not merely a toy, but a teaching device, allowing girls to practise for their future domestic roles.



*Anonymous, c. 1686-1710.  
Cabinet made of oak, glued with tortoiseshell and tin, h255cm x w190cm x  
d78cm.  
Rijksmuseum*





omg, it looks like my gran's house

LEGIT, sooo stuffy

like WHY do they need so many plates?!!

But what was the family and marriage life of Dutch wmen in the 17th century like?

# The Merry Family

At first glance this painting depicts a happy family gathering. The lively scene, with the mother in the center, is full of movement and life.

A piece of paper in the top right-hand corner of the picture reads 'As the old sing, so the young pipe'. This short saying suggests that older members of a family who are not disciplined in their actions, pass bad habits to their children. Is there, then, an expectation, particularly on mothers, that they must behave well in order to raise their children well?

The scene is full of the artist's irony towards unrestrained behaviour. The behaviour is being condemned in favour of a more restricted and disciplined lifestyle.

Does this overblown, even ironic, scene of a family gathering reflect the real state of life of the people of the time? On the contrary, are such happy and harmonious families what people of today aspire to?



Jan Havicksz. Steen, 1668.  
Oil on canvas, h110.5cm x w141cm.  
On loan from the City of Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop Bequest)



A Dutch painting depicting a domestic scene. In the foreground, a woman in a red dress and white headscarf sits on a stool, facing away from the viewer. Behind her, another woman in a grey dress and white headscarf stands, holding a small object. To the right, a third woman in a blue dress and white headscarf is bent over, working with a large metal barrel. The background features a brick wall with a window and a doorway. The scene is set in a courtyard or garden area.

# Stereotypes and Expectations



# Woman Playing the Virginal

This piece shows a woman sitting to play an instrument called a virginal.

During the 17th century, it was rare for women to be seen playing an instrument in public. Instead, they took lessons in the home and were expected to perform to visitors and guests.

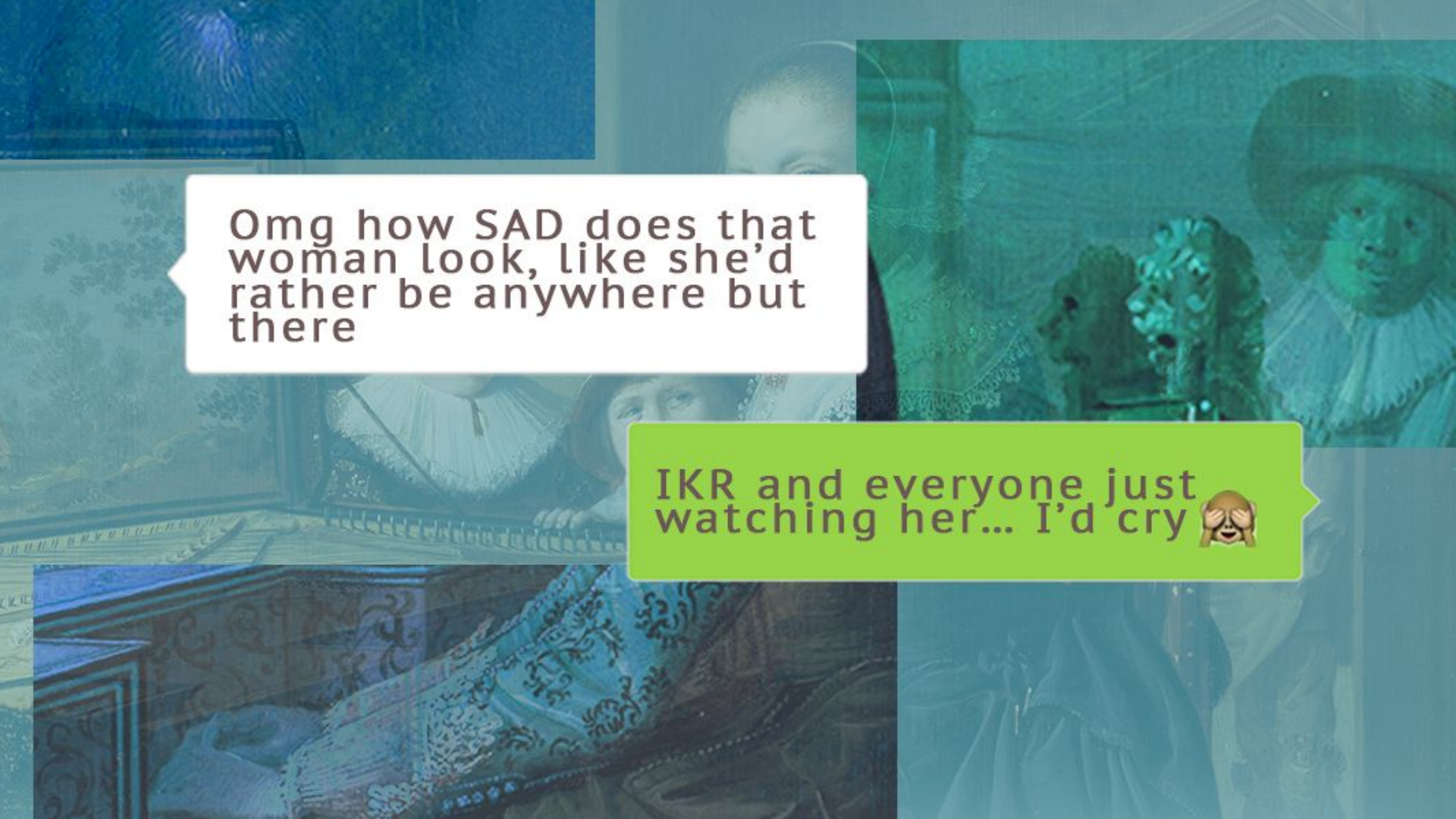
A woman who was trained in the virginal was greatly admired amongst the upper classes. Was Molenaer representing an ideal here?

Various Dutch paintings have portrayed women playing a virginal in the home as it was often considered a symbol of wealth and sensuality. The monkey in chains also symbolises love and lust; he warns of the dangers of worldly desires.

Here the woman's performance is being watched by a man entering the room, and two younger children. Who else could she be performing for?



Jan Miense Molenaer, c. 1637.  
Oil on panel, h38.6cm x w29.6cm.  
Rijksmuseum



Omg how SAD does that woman look, like she'd rather be anywhere but there

IKR and everyone just watching her... I'd cry 🙈

# Piano Practice Interrupted

Similarly to *Woman Playing the Virginal*, we can see the expectations placed upon women to entertain through music: this young girl has already been taught to play the piano, beginning a life of being watched and having to entertain. Her youthful face highlights how early on in a woman's life these 'duties' and beliefs are imposed.

In stark contrast are her brothers, who are allowed to run around carefree and distract their sister. Look at the young girl's face - does she disapprove of their antics? Or rather, does she long to join in?

The boys' clothes are more muted, neutral colours too; our eye is immediately drawn to the girl in her lighter dress, and thus we emulate and reinforce the oppression inherent within the (usually male) gaze.

A girl's childhood, then, is very different to a boy's.



Willem Bartel van der Kooi, 1813.  
Oil on canvas, h147cm x w121cm.  
Gift of H. van der Kooi, Leeuwarden





i'd HATE to be forced to learn the piano

I know, look how sad she looks!

Yeah, she clearly just wants to play with her brothers :((

# Figures in a Courtyard behind a House

This domestic scene shows a young couple sitting outside what appears to be a small home. They are in the presence of two other women doing house work.

Was this an arranged date between the couple? Perhaps in the near future, this young woman will become his wife. His intense stare is full of provocation, but this look is not reciprocated, as the woman continues to squeeze the lemon with no response. There appears to be an ambiguous atmosphere between them.

Is this shyness or avoidance? Maybe she isn't ready to accept this man as her husband, but it seems clear that the woman had little say in the matter. Has the man taken over and made women uncomfortable, in the space that supposedly they embody?



Pieter de Hooch, c.1663-65.  
Oil on canvas, h60cm x w45.7cm.  
On loan from the City of Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop  
Bequest)





Johannes Vermeer, c. 1660.  
Oil on canvas, h45.5cm x w41cm.  
Purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt

# The Milkmaid

Undoubtedly one of Vermeer's most iconic works, *The Milkmaid* depicts what seems to be a maid merely absorbed in her work. However, is this normal? Perhaps we can see the maid as merely fulfilling her duty, and virtuous because of this - but why is this duty imposed upon her?

Vermeer could be hinting at something more suggestive at play here. Where the foot stove is, a laundry basket was painted over, replacing a symbol of domesticity with a symbol of love and fidelity - women would warm themselves by hanging their skirts on these stoves.

Cupid is also present: was Vermeer merely symbolising the maid's love for her household through her chores and these symbols, or can bigger questions be asked about perceived status and power imbalances?

Look at the maid's face; she doesn't seem particularly happy to be doing her job. Content, maybe, but there's an element of sadness and resignation on her face.

A woman in a blue uniform is pouring milk from a can into a glass. The background is a blurred image of the woman and the glass.

Milkmaid? Or MADE to  
pour milk?

Milk is so feminine too!  
It just makes me think  
of motherhood, feeding  
children 🍼 ....like is  
that it for women? They  
were just there to pour  
and provide milk?!

# Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard

Two women place linen into a cabinet whilst a young girl plays and watches in an Amsterdam home. The three generations of women are being taught the task of laundry work. Their virtues are passed on to one another.

The female virtues in the family, which seems to promote the expectation of domestic labour is common throughout Dutch 17th century paintings. Under such a background, women are taught the appropriate and correct behaviour of the home and romanticised through paintings like this.

Did you notice there are no men present here? But what is being hidden - what lies behind the statue blocking the portrait?

Can you use this painting to question the different gender roles in the home? Have these structures changed over time?



Pieter de Hooch, 1663.  
Oil on canvas, h70cm x w75.5cm.  
On loan from the City of Amsterdam



# The Love Letter

Love letters are often seen in Dutch paintings of the home. Here a woman is interrupted as her maid hands her a letter. They both look concerned, but why?

The painting appears to be a romantic exchange between her and an ambiguous lover. Although it is not confirmed who wrote the letter, it is presumably from an absent husband. The love letter is considered a gesture of romance and companionship in 17th century Dutch paintings. But this piece reveals the isolated reality of many women who could not work, due to perceived gender roles.

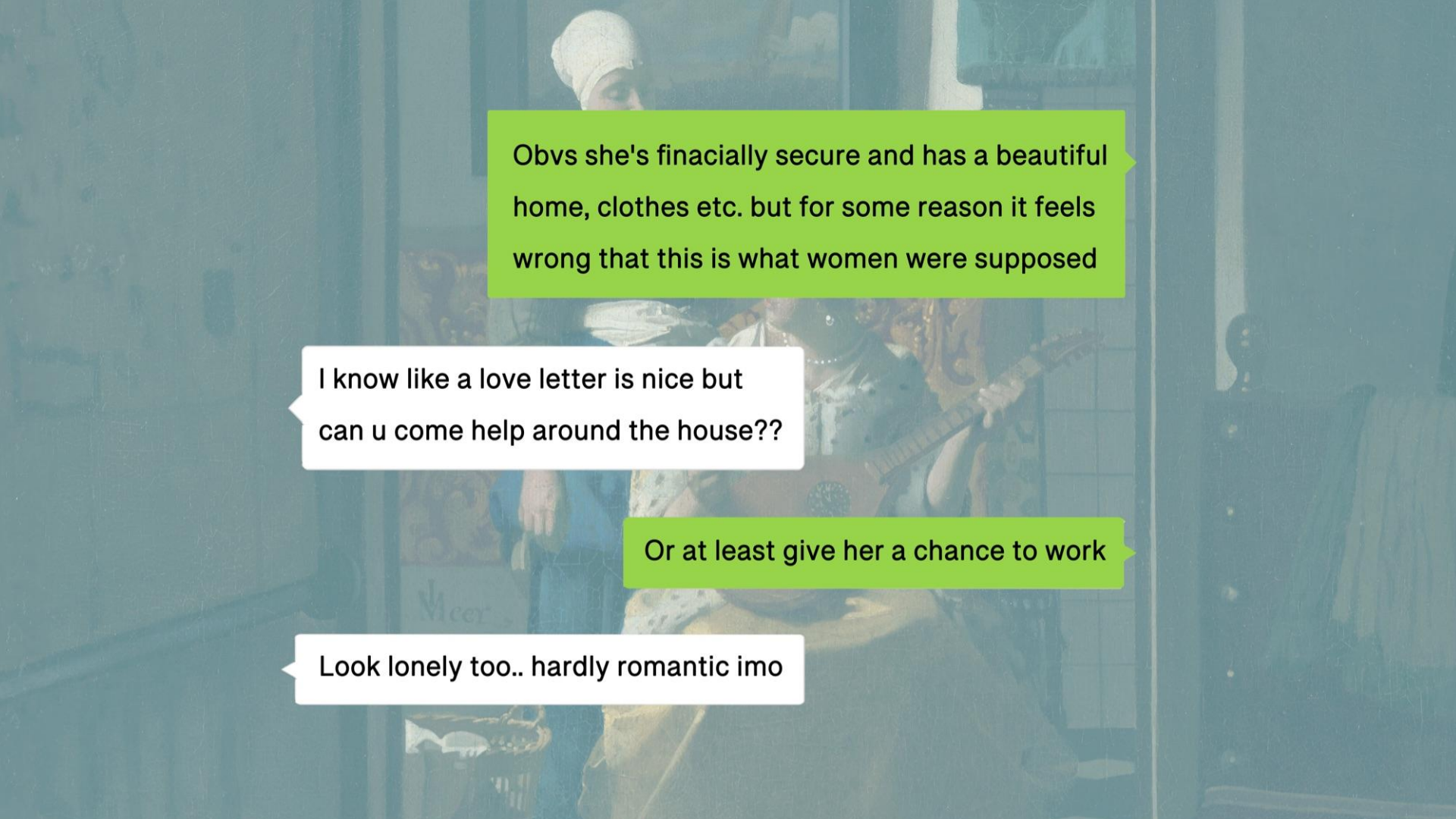
It was common for women to spend long periods of time without a male figure in the home, communicating only through letters. It is suggested that the woman's husband is working away at sea, by the painting of a sailing ship hanging on the wall behind her.

There is an intimacy between the two women, perhaps the shared understanding of loneliness.



Johannes Vermeer, c. 1669-1670.  
Oil on canvas, h44cm x w38.5cm.

Purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt



Obvs she's financially secure and has a beautiful home, clothes etc. but for some reason it feels wrong that this is what women were supposed

I know like a love letter is nice but  
can u come help around the house??

Or at least give her a chance to work

Look lonely too.. hardly romantic imo



# Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House

A woman sits inside an Amsterdam canal house whilst she receives a letter. She is in the presence of a young girl and dog, it appears to be the ideal family scene. In this painting the love letter is the central subject once again.

The link between the inside and outside world is present and as viewers we are positioned to spectate both.

Did you notice the two men on the opposite side of the canal? Why did the artist chose to include this? It could be a small nod towards the gender roles of both men and women during this period.



Pieter de Hooch, 1670.  
Oil on canvas, h68cm x w59cm.  
On loan from the City of Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop Bequest)



# The Mother's Duty



Jozef Israëls, 1890.  
Oil on canvas, h106cm x w129cm.  
Gift of Mr and Mrs Drucker-Fraser, Montreux

## ‘The Joy of Motherhood’

The original title of this painting is ‘Moederwelde’ translated as ‘Parents’. In the painting, a mother with two children is mending her clothes with a calm expression. At the same time, she holds a sleeping baby in her arms.

Through the window, you can see a village in the distance. The mother's inner feelings seem to be captured by the artist. Do you sense any ‘joy’ through the mother? Is there a reason the title is in speech marks. Is “the joy of motherhood” a phrase we are told, but don’t experience?

She seems to have been used to the tedious and monotonous housework day after day. Alongside this she must balance the demands of raising children.

Unlike other paintings of motherhood and the home, this piece is lonely and dark. The contrast of the gloomy interior and the bright outdoors implies a yearning for freedom.



The background image is a dark, somber painting. It depicts a woman with light-colored hair, possibly blonde, holding a small child. The woman is looking down at the child with a somber expression. The child is also looking down. In the foreground, there is a table with some objects on it, including what looks like a small jar or container. The overall tone of the painting is dark and melancholic, with muted colors and strong shadows. The lighting is very low, creating a sense of isolation and sadness.

The title seems SO sarcastic

Yeah this seems like SUCH a joyful moment , so dark and sad

# A Mother's Duty

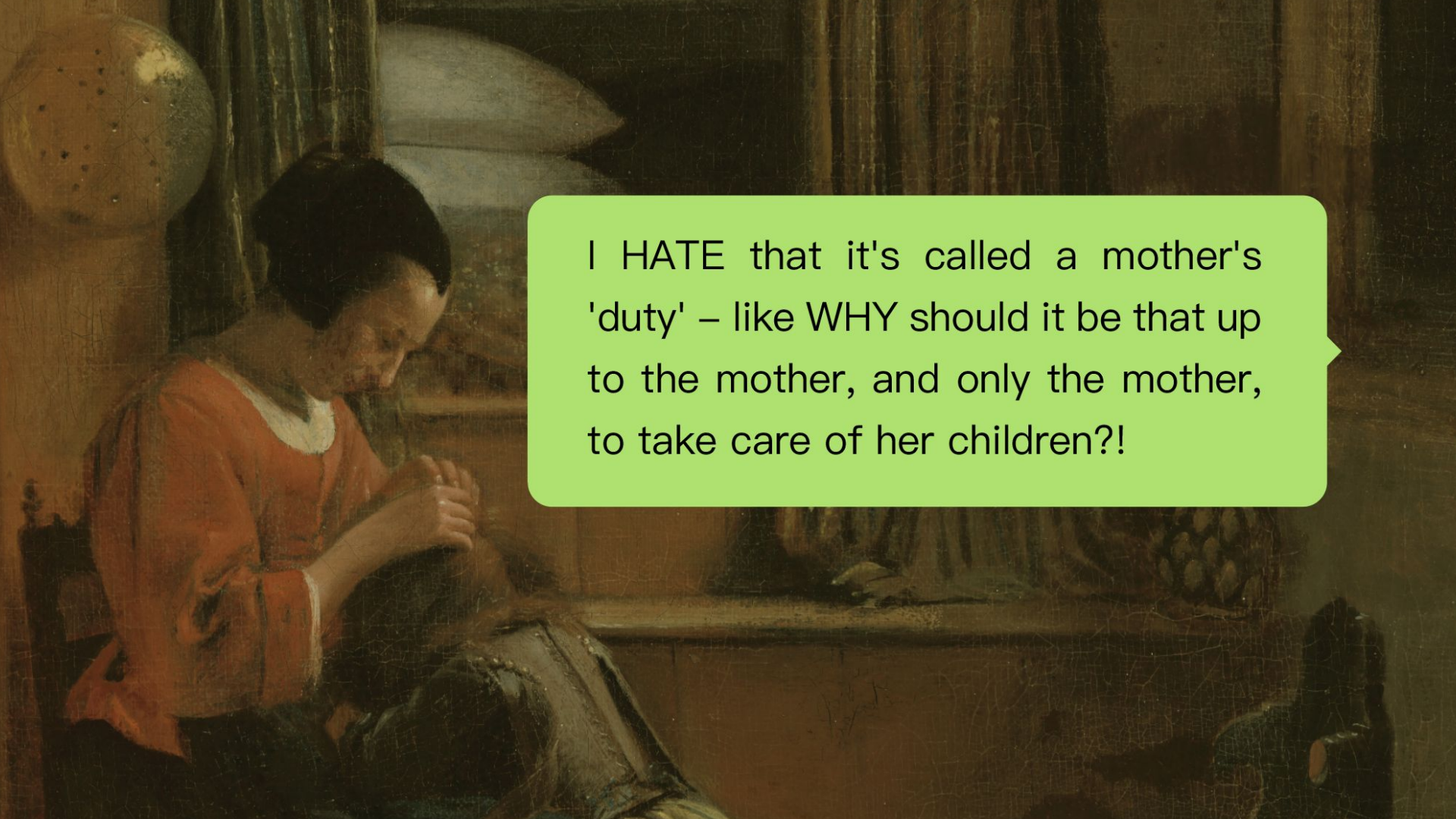
A wealth of detail hides within this intimate painting of a domestic scene. The view of the garden can be seen from the window of the room behind the door, and a glass chandelier hanging over the mother's head gives the painting rich layers. The mother is concentrating on picking out the lice in the child's hair, and we can feel the cosy atmosphere between them.

In Dutch family life in the seventeenth century, mothers seemed to take on most of the responsibilities of educating and caring for children, even such trivial things were dubbed "A Mother's Duty". But why must this be the mother's duty? How is the division of family duties defined?



Pieter de Hooch, c.1660-61.  
Oil on canvas, h52.5cm x w61cm.  
On loan from the City of Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop Bequest)





I HATE that it's called a mother's 'duty' – like WHY should it be that up to the mother, and only the mother, to take care of her children?!

# Woman with a Child in a Pantry




De Hooch depicts the pantry room using two 'throughviews' (sneak peeks through doorways or windows). The contrast of light from outside and darkness from inside conjures up a loving, intimate scene.

The scene looks cosy: the bright orange floor tiles look inviting, warm and homely, and the moment depicted is clearly an intimate moment in the young girl's childhood.

Despite there being no men physically present in the painting, notice the painting of the man in the other room. Can you imagine a woman's portrait would ever be hung in the family home? Why is there this power indifference, where men are to be admired and remembered?

Pieter de Hooch, c.1656-60.  
Oil on canvas, h65cm x w60.5cm.  
Rijksmuseum





The fact that even where there are no men there, women are still being watched by men – that painting in the other room has eyes that follow you round!!

SO TRUE, women are always the spectacle, men are always the spectator...



**FACING THE PAST,  
MOVING FORWARD...**

From these paintings, it is evident that women have always been subjected to the male gaze. Whether males are present in the paintings (physically, or within another painting as in *Woman with a Child in the Pantry*), or whether the audience was primarily male, women are always being looked at by men.

These paintings were all created by men too, so, each painting represents an idealised male gaze, whereby **men trap women inside these domestic scenes, ultimately fetishizing and romanticising women's domestic labour.**

Using digital technology, we have tried to show the evolution of attitudes towards women and their role in the home, showing that domestic labour shouldn't be one sided, as is often seen in art history. **Art should be a conversation starter, so share our exhibition, share your thoughts on the works you've seen today, and share your thoughts on how we can defetishize women's domestic labour.**



Ask yourself:

**Have things truly changed, or is it merely that women no longer want to be merely something to be looked at, housewives and nothing else?**

Does society still expect women to *want* to be housewives, and is the change coming from women only?

Or is it a bigger change - **is there less of a belief that it is “a woman’s duty” to become a wife and a mother?**