



*The Dioptric Review,*

June, 1936.

## A FLEMISH INTERIOR

by

*William van Mieris (?)*

(FROM THE B.O.A. COLLECTION)

## The June Presentation Plate

The critics of the Royal Academy usually feel themselves called upon to pick out one picture from the annual exhibition at Burlington House and call it the "problem picture" of the year. Quite by accident our presentation plate this time has also turned out to be something of a mystery.

It is a reproduction of an oil-painting that was recently added to the B.O.A. Collection on account of its optical interest. Yet despite an exhaustive search, with the co-operation of the authorities at the British Museum and at the Victoria and Albert Museum (to whom we tender our thanks), we failed to gather much definite information about either the painter or the subject which is not already fairly obvious from a casual examination of the picture.

However, we refuse to shelter under the journalistic device of dismissing it as a "problem picture." By piecing together various clues we find that it is probably a copy painted about two hundred years ago of a late 17th or early 18th century Flemish original. No fewer than fourteen names were suggested as possible painters of the original, with opinion slightly in favour of William van Mieris (1662-1747), of Leyden.

### The Points of Optical Interest

It contains several points of optical interest. There is something strange about the illumination. From which direction is the light coming? Neither from the left nor the right, for all the faces are illuminated. If the light were behind the artist we should expect more to shine on the child's cloak. The ordinary laws of the rectilinear propagation of light would indicate that the people were illuminated from the centre of the group, but whatever be that strange object it certainly doesn't look like a lantern. Perhaps the artist painted the various parts of the picture at different times in the day, forgetting the change in lighting due to the varying position of the sun in the heavens. An optician who enjoys a visit to a picture gallery can find considerable interest in applying his knowledge of geometrical optics to some of the pictures and noticing how often artists trip-up over this question of direction of lighting and shadows.

Two optical aids to vision are shown.

The elderly woman wears contemporary nose-spectacles which in the painting can be seen to have a rigid bridge, though this is somewhat lost in reproduction. The design is similar to those in the Thomas More print of August 1935, but these are of metal.

The man on the opposite side is using an ordinary monocular magnifier. He avoids the common error (in paintings, prints and in real life) of screwing up the other eye, but one would like to be able to tell him that he would obtain a larger field of view by holding the glass nearer to the eye and, if necessary, altering his position to focus it.

Now we come to the central object of attraction. What is it? Our first opinion, to which we still adhere, though it has been shaken, is that it is an elaborate form of an optical device that is still occasionally to be seen in toyshops. A circle of tin, in the centre of which is another scrap of metal, is made to rotate rapidly giving the effect of a fish swimming in a bowl of water, the illusion depending on the phenomenon of persistence of the retinal image. This toy and the principle upon which it was based led up through the zoetrope to the modern cinematograph film. It is possible, however, that our conjecture is wrong and that the artist has depicted something entirely different.

We invite our readers to throw any additional light on the matter.

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### Donations to the B.O.A. Collection

- Mr. E. Aves (Romford)*—One pair of orthoptic training spectacles.  
*Mr. O. W. Dunscombe (Bristol)*—John Braham Patent anti-Ophthalmoscopic Spectacles and case.  
*Mrs. Cook (Grimsby)*—Eight pairs of tortoiseshell spectacles.  
*Mr. G. E. Houghton (Margate)*—Shagreen case and silver spectacles.  
*Mr. F. A. Neubert (Southport)*—Chatelaine spectacle case.  
*Mr. A. Stephens (Pontefract)*—Brass spectacles.

### Donations to the B.O.A. Library

- Messrs. Ballière, Tindall and Cox (London)*—"Synthetic Anatomy of the Eye" (J. E. Cheesman).  
*Mr. E. Bateman (Worthing)*—"Outlines of Science" (J. Fernandez), "Cyclopaedic Science" (J. H. Pepper), and "Practical Histology" (W. Rutherford).  
*Mr. E. H. Kiekenapp (Minnesota)*—"Lectures Delivered at the Thirty-eighth Annual Congress of the American Optometric Association."  
*Mr. M. Stettler (Berne)*—"Die Kurzsichtigkeit" (A. Vogt), and "Optik für Optiker" (W. Zschokke).

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On the eve of going to press we regret to learn of the death of Mr. G. B. Adams, F.S.M.C., F.B.O.A., of Leith. It will be remembered that Mr. Adams contributed an article to our February issue on the subject of Saint Triduana. He was a past-President of the Edinburgh Association of Optical Practitioners. His work there, and for the Scottish optical world in general, will be sadly missed.

## The B.O.A. "Problem Picture"

A Theory by

ALBERT H. HILL, F.B.O.A.

Plumstead

*Readers will remember that the colour-print which we presented with our June issue was somewhat of a mystery, both as regards the artist and the strange device suspended in the centre of the picture.*

*We are much indebted to a member of the B.O.A. for some interesting information about this object and for an ingenious theory concerning the picture.—Ed. "D.R."*

Experts have stated that they are unable to say definitely who painted this picture and are equally unable to identify the object suspended in the centre of the picture.



*See presentation plate and page 134 of the June issue.*

The balance of opinion puts the period of the picture between 1662 and 1747, and there is little doubt that this is correct. It is not so certain, however, that the contemporary artist William van Mieris painted it.

I advance the theory that the picture is a portrait, probably a self-portrait, of a Dutch woman artist, Joanna Koerten Block, who was born at Amsterdam in 1650 and who died, after traversing Europe, in 1715.

The object which has been the cause of so much speculation is the strongest evidence in support of my theory. It is a decorative piece consisting of two spheres built up from a series

of paper discs, probably three vertical white or silver discs and one horizontal blue disc.

On examination of the picture the vertical discs are seen to be perforated into a paper filigree. They are also slit along the horizontal diameter sufficiently to allow the smaller blue disc to be inserted.



The vertical discs are placed together and joined at top and bottom by a thread or a ring. The blue disc is inserted into the horizontal slits until it projects equally on each side. The discs on both sides of the central vertical disc are then opened out like the pages of a book until they divide the horizontal disc into equal parts, slits in the edge of the blue disc probably being provided to help retain them in their position. Tassels or cones of fluted paper like miniature umbrellas are then attached to the bottom in the manner of a kite tail.

When completed the piece would be hung near a door or window where, on catching a draught, it would revolve. Whether the figures were so patterned as to take on a kinematic motion during the revolutions of the piece is conjectural; if so, here is a forgotten forerunner of our modern moving pictures.

Now this art of paper filigree cutting similar to the pattern of figures, etc., cut into the vertical sections of the piece, was the speciality of a woman artist, the Joanna Koerten Block mentioned above. For her delicate and intricate paper filigree she gained renown and esteem all over Europe. Her fame and skill earned her the patronage of the Royal Courts. She received 4,000 florins for a trophy executed for the Empress of Germany and specimens of her work were preserved at Vienna in the Emperor's cabinet.

Joanna, apart from her paper-cutting talents, also practised modelling in wax, engraving on glass and crystal with a diamond, and copied paintings in coloured silks. I do not think I am going too far in assuming that with these talents she would also have a certain skill with the brush.

#### A Self-Portrait ?

The peculiar lighting of the picture has occasioned comment.

As the light is falling over her shoulder, Joanna (and I feel it is she) should have her face in shadow. In order to do the fine cutting in preparing the piece she would no doubt prefer the light falling that way so as to see more clearly, and would be wearing spectacles for the same reason.

I suggest that the artist, however, considered the lady too important to be "put in the shade" and perhaps deliberately flouted the laws of natural illumination and painted the face without shadow.

Now who would consider the lady so important as the lady herself?

Again, the picture may have been painted first from models or even copied from another picture with similar grouping and Joanna's face painted in afterwards, being viewed in a mirror. This would

give a different lighting and probably explain the absence of shadow on her face. Another view is that the picture was painted when she was young and for various reasons her face repainted when she became older. On referring to the picture there is plenty of evidence to show that the decorative piece is under construction and that the lady whom I call Joanna is responsible for it. To her right hand is a business-like looking knife, not a fancy fruit knife or letter opener, but a really workmanlike tool with a sturdy handle and a curved blade like a modern linoleum knife. This has been used to cut part if not all of the paper filigree. Beside the knife are pieces of blue and of white paper from which it is evident discs have been cut. On the board (a cutting board?) which the boy is holding are the compasses used to mark out the discs and the paper tassels or cones ready to attach. Since the woman is completing the piece and has the assistance of a boy in doing so (note by the way that he appears to be blowing on it to make it revolve) she must have had the requisite skill and have been sufficiently important to justify the picture, and I think the theory that this is a self-portrait of Joanna Koerten Block with a specimen of her work will bear a good deal of criticism.

It is not surprising that little should now be known of these decorative pieces since they would be so fragile that probably none has survived. There do exist framed examples of similar filigree cut in flat paper after the style of silhouettes, only more fussy and elaborate. These, however, are of later date and have been protected by the framing. The example depicted would need to be hung in a glass case to endure. I have made a reconstruction of the piece which removes all doubt as to the identity of the depicted object.

Perhaps the picture was used as a kind of professional sign or advertisement and hung in or outside Joanna's studio, which might explain the view that the face was repainted in later years to bring it up to date.

From the apparent age of Joanna in the picture I should think it was painted between 1690 and 1715, but if the repainted face theory should be right then the body of the picture would perhaps have been done twenty years earlier. In either case the dates would cover the age of the picture as estimated by the experts.

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### The B.O.A. "Problem Picture" Again

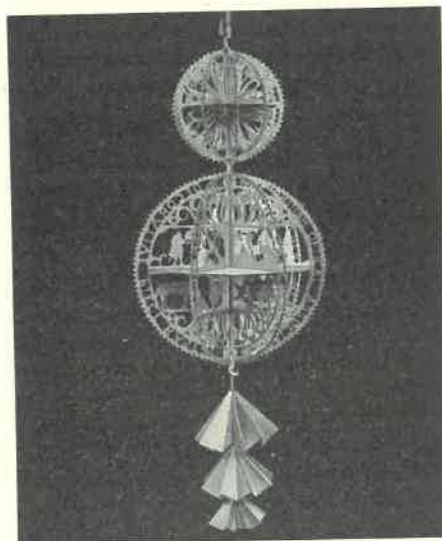
It will be recalled that the reproduction of the painting which was presented with our June issue formed the subject of an interesting theory put forward by Mr. Albert H. Hill, F.B.O.A., in the August issue (page 184).

Mr. Hill has now made for the B.O.A. Collection a reconstruction of the device hanging in the centre of the picture. Experiments with it show that there is a definite suggestion of movement in the pattern when the discs revolve in a current of air—probably it would be hung in windows or doorways—owing to persistence of the retinal image, and Mr. Hill is now engaged in experiments along these lines to see if here we have a long-forgotten forerunner of the cinematograph.

While adhering closely to the original as far as general design is concerned, our reproduction has cut into the periphery of the discs "A RECONSTRUCTION OF A DECORATIVE PIECE BASED ON A 17TH CENTURY ORIGINAL MADE FOR THE COLLECTION OF THE BRITISH OPTICAL ASSOCIATION, 1936, BY ALBERT H. HILL, F.B.O.A."



The late 17th century picture  
in the B.O.A. Collection.



Mr. Hill's reconstruction.

We are indebted to Mr. Hill for the skill and patience which he placed at our disposal in the construction of this interesting addition to the Collection.

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The British Optical Association Library and Collection are open to visitors from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a special extension until 7 p.m. on Fridays. They are closed on Saturdays.