

I. ARGUMENTATION

The present research approach starts on one hand from the personal preoccupations as an artist and, on the other hand, from the idea that the historic moments and the stylistic and thematic elements within this paper are most important for the understanding of the historical itinerary and of the paradigmatic changes that took place during the development of the pictorial artistic medium. We are fascinated mainly by the oil painting, an artistic medium to which the modernity formulated incriminatory pamphlets prophesying its disappearance or observing its so-called desuetude; these pamphlets affirm that during the recent decades there has been a real „triumph of painting”, as the eccentric collector Charles Saatchi¹ postulated.

Regarded from this perspective, the study of the 17th century’s historical period (conventional name we will use in spite of the arbitrary character of such chronological selections) is of the highest importance. The above-mentioned period is not only the one in which the oil painting becomes a „royal way”, if not the only „royal way” to reach the professional acknowledgement and artistic glory.

Moreover, a whole series of social and cultural mechanisms are now generated, which will structure both the producing of the oil painting and the reception and consumption of this type of cultural product.

In other words, from a practitioner’s perspective, this historical period can be assimilated with the painting’s birth in its modern sense, having significant tangent points with what contemporary artistic practice means. The other historical and chronological aspect approached by the present research, is the period of more or less strict modernity, i.e. the period after 1980. The last decades of the painting’s cultural evolution represent in our opinion a real „rebirth”, a revival of this medium.

Relevant, though, in our opinion, are the obvious similarities we have indicated between this medium’s approach modalities by what we can call the artistic world in its whole, in two crucial historical moments of its evolution.

This comparative approach focuses on the 17th century pictorial production of Flemish and Dutch areas, as a reference area of contemporary pictorial developments starting with the last century 80’s.

This is due to the particular and relevant characteristics the respective artistic production has, a result of the specific historical conditions within which it exists.

Firstly, we focused on taste democratization, translated into theme diversity. Of course, we are used to our epoch dominated by contemporary art, whose polymorph character can give to certain people a staggering sensation of an incomprehensible conglomerate. We are aware of the fact that the contemporary painting, like the contemporary art in general, has no thematic „royal way” anymore in order to have access to acknowledgement, glory, success and, why not, even value. At least, from the painting’s approached theme area’s view, it is quite obvious we can use the syntagm *anything goes*, without too much trouble.

At the same time, another extremely important aspect the two historical moments share from the artist’s social status and his/her art system perspectives is the artist’s modern professionalization.

The emergence of new occupations like art dealer, the collector (which should not be taken as a Maecenas of the Renaissance) and institutions, art works auction, illustrates this change and offers reasons for the parallel I tried to make.

The artist as a professional and communicator, the art as ware: here are aspects that remind us inevitably of a series of last decades’ discussions about the contemporary artistic production.

II. HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK: THE 17TH CENTURY’ „REVOLUTIONS”, THE ART AND ARTIST IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

From several points of view, what we call modernity in the largest sense of this word has its functional beginnings in this remarkable period of European history. The capitalist economy’s mechanisms, the core of the political thinking based on universalistic humanist principles, the science as privileged domain of knowledge and its conceptual and pragmatic instruments, ways of understanding art and culture differently from the previous ones, these are only some of the crucial evolutions that took place in the historical period on which the present research focuses; they decisively influence the European art’s concrete developments.

As certain well-known historians showed, Europe of those times is one in which things stabilize, a geo-political world whose principles and boundaries become

fixed and somehow more stable than before. Thus, the 17th century is the epoch in which the Catholic and Protestant denominations are clearly separated.

The European equilibrium geopolitical principle starts rather silently to be accepted more and more as an adjusting factor of the policies and military campaigns on the continent.

From this perspective, the 17th century most ample revolution is in connection with the establishing of radically new ways of regarding the man and the world. Thus, the remarkable progress of sciences leads to a whole new modality of truth defining and turns the scientific knowledge into one that is considered valid, which is not seen as contradicting the Christianity doctrine but rather as completing it.

The faith problem seems to be of maximum importance when we refer to Flanders and Netherlands of this so-called „golden century”. It is religion that, in the traditional social-historical mentality, makes the difference between the two regions, and it should offer them significantly different identities, if not even antagonistic ones. Thus, we know that Flanders remains catholic and will continue to be under the authority of the Spanish catholic crown, while the United Provinces (which, mostly coincide with the present Netherlands) become independent from the beginning of the 17th century, whose official religion is protestant. But things are far from being as simple as they seem since art is a domain that can make us question such abrupt delimitations.

The apparition and exuberant development of certain new artistic genres, like the landscape, still life or genre scene, without burdening it with the art’s classicizing paradigm imperatives, are common to catholic Flanders, subjected to Spain, and protestant Netherlands fiery competitor to Iberian Empire. A modern capitalistic art market is developed at the same time in Antwerp and Amsterdam, rather than in Paris, Madrid or Frankfurt.

Another important aspect that facilitates this communication and, as risky as this term might be, cultural community is the similar economic framework in which both the Northern and Southern Low Countries develop during the historical period that precedes the 17th century.

The Low Countries will be manufacturing, commercial and financial.

The first commodity markets will be set up in Antwerp and Gent at the beginning of the 15th century, and the first commercial companies with real global interests will be Dutch.

The forces governing the material life desire more and more money and market.

This revolution of the economic system will have consequences upon the everyday life and especially upon mentalities. Just like the mental revolution of the 17th century represents the basis of the Industrial Revolution, the changes in the production relationships will influence the people's principles about world and life.

Finally, Northern and Southern parts of The Low Countries are still significantly united by a remarkable common cultural tradition, in the largest meaning of the syntagm, in which the linguistic aspect cannot be neglected. At that moment, the Dutch and the Flemish already spoke mutually intelligible languages (situation that will be maintained and even amplified during the next centuries), a fact that not only facilitates the communication but makes it inevitable with all dogmatic barriers. Moreover, when we have in view the specific domain of art, it is about a Northern pictorial tradition that defines this cultural space significantly different from the Italian Renaissance within the Mediterranean area: the Flemish Renaissance of van Eyck Brothers, Rogier van der Weyden's or Petrus Christus', of the mysterious master of Flemalle.

The care for details, the pleasure to pictorially describe with accuracy and attractiveness the unimportant objects of the surrounding world, the sapid textures and extremely tactile pictoriality, if we are allowed the syntagm, represent the essential elements of a pictorial approach situated at the basis of the 17th century artistic production by many of The Low Countries' artists, be they Dutch, Flemish, catholics or protestants.

We have to deal with the artist freed from the burden of medieval subordinations of all kinds, to enter the modern system of capitalistic conditionings. More important, this means the researched period's artist has both the freedom of artistic choices and the responsibilities that come along with this freedom. More and more themes appear before the painter.

The performing manner and mastery gain significant field before the nobleness' importance of the represented subject. These are only a few of the main challenges of the artist, who performs on the cultural stage of The Low Countries during the „golden century”.

We speak here about a fundamental mentality revolution, with which we enter, we believe, the modern chapter of the European art history, and about the

principle of the art autonomy, more exactly of the artistic field autonomy compared to other domains of activity. Started during the Renaissance, this revolution reaches new dimensions in the 17th century, emphasized through the changing of the ratio between the value of a painting and the theme source to which it refers.

On the other hand, nowhere else more than in The Low Countries, and especially in Netherlands, this revolution of the relationship between the artistic image and the reality to which it refers, had as consequence such a powerful artistic orientation towards the „discovery” and pictorial conveyance of the world in its diverse aspects. The observation becomes the painter’s essential activity from the ones previous to the work in itself. The world’ study becomes a compulsory stage for the Dutch artist, at least to the same extent to which the study of Antiquity was for the Italian artist of the Cinquecento.

Their inventiveness will lead them to a different approach, often sensitive, most of the times intelligent and sapid, of new and pictorially very rich theme genres: the genre scene, the landscape, and still life, in all the ranges of their situations. The Flemish and Dutch painters of the 17th century do this sometimes with satirical and moralizing eye, other times with an indulgent look, if not fascinated by the flesh excess of those alike. They will place before their contemporaries’ fascinated eyes (and ours, for that matter) the superb divine creation which is nature, both in its idyllic situations and in its destroying, angry ones; will discover the beauty of the smallest objects and creatures, as well as the semantic savour and richness hidden behind the apparently most common gestures. They will offer to the world a mirror that would not betray them in any of its essential characteristics.

III. STYLISTIC AND THEME APPROACHES IN THE 17TH CENTURY PAINTING OF THE LOW COUNTRIES

The following pages approach the specific modalities in which different artists of the Flemish-Dutch cultural area are practically positioned, compared to several of the subjects that become important during the 17th century (in the above-mentioned meaning of this chronological-cultural selection). We do not intent to claim that these are the most valuable artists of the respective period, or to make axiological classifications or divisions. We have selected the artists in accordance to their relevance for the approach of certain themes that represent novelties in the European

painting, on one hand, and on the other hand, their relevance for the emphasis of the correspondences between the 17th century painting and the contemporary one, aspect we have assumed as work premise. At the same time, the choice of artists and of the analyzed works of art is achieved according to the importance they have in expressing the personal opinion of this paper's author about the pictorial medium, about the stylistic themes and evolutions that marked its development.

Thus, in Flanders and Netherlands of the respective period, three great theme categories of painting are consolidated, i.e. the genre scene, the landscape and still life.

Within this classification, the painting of this genre is placed below the dignity of the landscape and portrait, which in their turn are clearly surpassed by the historical genre, in the syntagm three essential aspects and meanings: the religious painting (which illustrates the noble spiritual history of the Christian redemption), the mythological painting (which deals with the noble narration of the Greek-Roman classical culture) and the actual historical painting (respectively, the one that illustrates the important facts during war and peace, of the great historical figures of Antiquity or of modern times).

This so-called total inferiority of the still life and animal painting genres seems to have little influenced the Flemish-Dutch artistic medium, demonstrating once more that democratic inclination of the taste in the above-mentioned area.

Jan Brueghel the Elder is one of the first artists for whom, like for many others afterwards, painting means mainly material, textures and their playing. Jan Brueghel the Eldest discovers it and imposes it as mix genre (a combination of landscape and genre scene, with connections with the still life genre, i.e. with the paintings illustrating marine creatures), it is the one of the market illustrations, of the so-called fish markets, especially.

Beyond the rapid descriptivism of static nature, there are others, some of sociological and psycho-social nature.

Willem Claesz (or Claeszon) Heda is, beyond any doubt, one of the most important masters of the 17th century Dutch still life.

The wealth is the main idea that embraces almost rhetorically the painting of Heda, in a manner adequate to a bourgeois taste for a life of pleasures, in the 17th century Netherlands.

A certain almost mystical symbolism is present in his hedonistic rhetoric and image subsidiary.

The interior-exterior dialectic is also present in these representations.

Jan van Kessel represents an excellent example of theme specialization of The Low Countries' painters, be they catholic or protestant.

Finally, what gives even more life, more visual naturalness and truthfulness to Jan van Kessel's composition is the anecdote register, one that especially the genre scene Flemish and Dutch painters will master with directorial craftsmanship. In his painting, it is about both a reflection of the extremely important role of the sea in the life of The Low Countries, and a seductive „passion for images”², images of a bourgeois abundance and of an overflowing life.

The essential characteristic of **Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts'** painting is without any doubt, his never failing passion for the implementation - as closely to perfection as possible - of the *trompe l'oeil* procedures. Some of his most specific and spectacular paintings are realistic, precise and detailed illustrations of *Letter Racks*, wooden panels, relatively big, to which different straps and bends - usually made of leather, vertically, horizontally and diagonally oriented - were attached.

The symbolism of objects and of existent visual elements becomes clear: „the letters and documents faded in time emphasize the ephemeral character of the thoughts written on paper”.

Adriaen Brouwer is, no doubt, the unequaled master of the genre scene with rural theme.

Two are the essential qualities of Brouwer's art, the ones that place him among the most important „golden century” artists from The Low Countries. Firstly, he is a great colourist. The chromatic subtlety he is capable of is equaled by only few of his contemporaries.

The second great quality of Adriaen Brouwer is his out of ordinary capacity to expressively and truthfully illustrate emotions, feelings, physiognomic reactions to certain stimuli of the people around him. A typology psychologist, Brouwer succeeds to paint portraits hard to forget in many of his genre scenes.

David Teniers the Younger is the artist of the rural parties, of the calm and insipid country parties and of scenes of folk celebrations. Teniers paints the parties in a quieter, chromatically steady way than Brouwer, and, at the same time, less

interested in the individualities. The „panorama” is what the artist in Antwerp is interested in.

The allegoric, anecdotal and moralizing approach offers the genre scene an identity clearly shaped by this painter, who, using the fabulist procedure, ironizes the improper or funny human behaviors.

Albert Cuyp achieves a real and complex synthesis of the technical and conceptual Dutch conquests of the landscape area, and, at the same time, he combines them successfully with the elements of the animal painting of the best quality.

An atmosphere of natural is present in all the scenes he illustrates. Some cows on the water bank in the dim light of the afternoon, the commercial hustle and bustle of the ships of Dordrecht on Maas River, the activities and landscapes so familiar to his contemporaries, including his clients – this is the artistic offer of this painter. Thus, his success is due to the fact that the things in which he finds aesthetic potential are the same that arouse aesthetic pleasure in many of his contemporaries.

What **Jan Mostaert** pictorially illustrates is actually a translation into image of one of the numerous accounts of the Spanish explorers about America, which started to circulate in Europe at that time. In his paintings, the utopia is oddly connected with the desire of truthfulness, so clearly assumed by the Flemish Painting School from the Middle Ages' end. The result is at least curious.

The Dutch artists' familiarity with the newly discovered continent will be more direct and deeper, once a direct contact between the Dutch and the indigenous populations of the vast American territories has been established.

IV. ASPECTS OF THE EVOLUTION OF PAINTING IN CONTEMPORANEITY

For two decades now, the fact that the contemporary art is a phenomenon whose beginning can be traced in the years after the 1960's, is a widely-shared opinion among specialists from different scientific areas who have tackled the subject.

As the world of art has observed clearer and clearer throughout the last decades, the contemporary art is not just the art achieved and presented our times, it is also a cultural phenomenon which functions on the basis of some principles, of some perceptions, of some relations that are significantly different from those that have

governed the development of what we can call traditional art and also of the modernism, of the avant-garde.

The diversity without precedent of expressive means, technical mediums and conceptual instruments that are put in the game for the sake of producing and unveiling art, represents one of the most striking defining aspects of the contemporary art and the one that distinguishes it as a cultural phenomenon distinct from the art of other periods or from other types of art that we frame, more or less justified, as in the same large category of art history.

Indeed, this democratizing movement has been seen as an essential given of the contemporary artistic production by the majority of the historians and the philosophers that have tackled the subject.

For centuries, another great trump of the painting in its claim to be an art was the fact that the pictorial image corresponds or answers some aesthetic principles. Even if these principles were free to change completely throughout history, even if totally opposed aesthetic principles coexisted in the same historical period or even in the same cultural- geographic area (what happened in Flanders and in the Netherlands in the 17th century represents an excellent argument in this respect), the painting always undertakes an aesthetic existence or, in other words, an aesthetic substantiation.

It is not surprising that the theoretical theme of the death of the painting has been brought into the discussion regarding modern art in the 19th century or in the first half of the 20th century. As a consequence, for the first time, the death of the painting is predicted as a clear destiny of the artistic evolution along with the appearance of the photography.

The reasons for which the painting has been considered or declared dead with incisive discursive force throughout the first two decades of the existence of the contemporary art, are multiple and cannot be reduced to the ascertainment or the conviction of the artists or of the theoreticians that painting would be a medium with no semantic relevance and which raises no real or formal issues to the contemporary world.

Still, at the beginning of the 1980's a strong revival movement of the traditional mediums arose and it was already a tendency which could not be ignored by any true and careful observer of the contemporary art. We are talking about the contemporary art market, a devil for many and for some an opportunity to access a

financial power difficult to imagine in the decades before the 1980's and the status of faith and mundane press favorites. That is why it is not difficult to grasp why painting is the best sold artistic medium on this explosive market of the contemporary art with which we have been living for the past three decades and which not even the huge financial crises of the last three years was not able to destroy as some analysts with a taste for catastrophic prognosis predicted. What we would clearly like to underline is, on one hand, the benefits that art market has brought to painting, perfectly comparable to the benefits that the painting, at its turn, has brought to the art market, and, on the other hand, besides the situation in which we reject capitalism as a whole based on moral principles, we have no strong reason to try to "exile" painting out of the domain of the true artistic and social acceptable activities.

Figurative painting is more than a fashion and the "old masters" became, for many of the contemporary painters, essential models. Painting, as the savory application of the paste onto a surface, painting, as a craft, but also painting as an image that can convey an attitude, are all aspects of this medium and they have been strongly reaffirmed by the artists of the last decades, who have tackled artistic productions within the borders of this medium. The return to the history of painting was one of the strongest instruments that the contemporary painting had at its disposal in order to affirm its contemporary existence. Even if we refer to the pictorial art produced on the American continent, where we would expect a sort of distancing from the traditions of the predominantly European history of painting (due to the historical given as such), it has been observed that "The most long-lasting aspect of the American painting in that period [the 1980's and the 1990's; our specification]... could be exactly the attempt to find a certain relation to history"². The Dutch Flemish area from the 17th century represented one of the most important cultural sources that lead to the painting rehabilitation as a medium of the contemporary art throughout the last decades.

Therefore, one can certainly say that "the death" of the painting only took place in theory, as Yves-Alain Bois noticed at a certain point. The cultural revival in the quotation of the contemporary artists, its growth as regards not only the market share of the contemporary artists, but also as regards its public reception and its critics approach, all prove this fact up to the point of people talking about a 'triumph of the

painting' in the last years' art (and Charles Saatchi represents just one of these people).or not, this comeback is less important. The important thing is that this recent phenomenon, as others in the previous decades, proves the inadequacy risks taken by an art theory or by an art philosophy that exclude everything that does not fit the intellectual pattern proposed by that specific conceptual device”.

V. CONTEMPORARY ASPECTS OF THE PICTORIAL MEDIUM

Borremans relies very much on the essential attributes of the painting, as they are defined in an historical context: the unity of the composition, sensuality, poetry, in order to extend the borders of the public's taste, taking upon itself the (delusive) ambition to educate it. At the same time, putting at work some defined fundamental and traditional characteristics of the painting, keeps his art far apart from the mimetic temptations in connection with the trend, as well as from the ones exclusively formal and plainly hermeneutical.

There are discontinuities in the Belgian's paintings, a series of incongruity moments that derive not only from a surrealist semantic constellation, but, at the same time, using recurrent themes, tend to surprise something essential about the illusionary aspect of the painting.

What stays as an obsessive impression, is an intense and sharp tranquility, a cold atmosphere, the implied efforts that the characters seem to undertake having a goal the evasion from a possible contamination, in order to establish a the human soul?, of the social body?)

The topics of the paintings of **Eric Fischl** come close to the genre painting, in a way that makes them oddly similar, at a deeper level of symbolical and moral significance with the Flemish Dutch scenes of the period mentioned as historical marker in the above pages. The psychological narration is in the center of his intercession, but the stories told are idiosyncratic and somehow private. The theatre plays a very important part in the composition of Eric Fischl's paintings.

The artist creates some visual narrations without precedent in the contemporary painting and invites the viewer to multiple interpretations, to multiple, plausible, but never exhaustive reconstructions of drama taking place before his eyes.

The theme of this genre painting is widely seen in **John Currin's** art, this being the theme area in which he seems to excel. He manipulates with a true skill and

a talent impossible to deny, traditional tendencies, as well as others that we could name, with a general term, vanguardists of the pictorial medium, finally obtaining unusual artistic accomplishments and a strongly individualized artistic vision in spite of his putting to work of a traditional genre.

Jeff Koons can be properly considered an iconic character of the art of the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. As an artistic strategy, referring here to the proper construction tools of significance that he uses, Jeff Koons succeeds to modify a series of complex conventional hierarchies. The conceptual device with which he operates, includes items as novelty, either technological or of a different nature, the trivial and the object as part, not at all surprising, of the everyday environment of our consuming life and his works evolve from a literary line towards visceral manifestations. From this perspective, the type of objectivity with which he juggles, often with a predominant and assumed momentousness, the art of the American reminds us, as concerns the expression logic and semantic intercession, of the static Flemish and Dutch nature of the 17th century.

Doig's painting truly believes in historical suggestion, at least equally as in the interest that he proves as concerns calm and a bit elliptical descriptions of the moments that are in connection with a hazy expressed biography. In spite of this, in the case of the artist that we are trying to analyze here, it is important to specify that not only his historical allusions, leading to landscape painting, aren't truly historical analyses proposing a certain accuracy as regards the way in which they are responsible for the perception of the past, but also that his works that have as interest object the personal past of the artist having the destiny of a world pilgrim, aren't truly autobiographies. They, more likely, transpose into image an autobiographical fiction that tends towards abstractization, towards generalization and towards an emphasis of the states that the painted surface tends, discreetly, to evoke. Therefore, the artist examines things and states of the memory, wrapped in the light of wisdom and experience. The landscape is the most visibly recurrent genre in the pictorial production of Doig.

Neo Rauch represents an easily identifiable successor of some older pictorial traditions in the European space. Rauch's compositions are populated by a world of stellar organisms that step into the territory of the reality. The painter denies the existence of a concrete visual and immediate source for any of his paintings. The dream world probably offers Rauch the most attainable imagistic markers, no matter

how paradoxical it may seem and it offers him visual sources, even if they aren't coherent, they are at least enthralling. These guide the artist towards those hazard images, in which the manipulation of the visual scenes used by Rauch is obvious. The apocalypse represents a recurrent theme in the 16th and 17th century painting. Rauch borrows and reinterprets the apocalyptic theme, inducing a catastrophic state of huge intensity and tension. His paintings bring back to life the heroic component of the painting, quoting from the historical tradition of the painting, after a critical period.

Luc Tuymans represents an essential exponent of the contemporary art and of the renaissance process taking place at the end of the 20th century. Tuymans is, with no doubt, one of the most subtle and difficult to semantically interpret contemporary artists. One of the specific qualities of his art, considered by the critics his greatest weakness, is, indeed, the fact that the viewer always needs a context in order to be able to fully understand the political, moral or of any other nature inducements that lay beyond the stellar semantic of his work. The psychological register represents, in this respect, a permanent reference that is taken into account and the addressability of his work is always one with a strong emotional component.

Tuymans tries to give back that something that cannot be represented, transforming his audience in an unintentional accomplice of the horrors to which the painting makes reference and which are all connected to the history of horrible things that the human being proved to be capable of doing to other human beings in the course of history.

VI. REFLECTIONS UPON MY OWN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS

In this last chapter, I mentioned, in a structured way, the artistic projects that I have created in the course of the present PhD research program dealing with visual arts. It is about a succession of personal situations, but also situations that are familiar to my generation.