CHAPTER IV

ILLUSIONISM AND COURT DECORATION

Within two years after his return from Italy, Honthorst executed a painting which was revolutionary for the decoration of Dutch interiors. His 1622 signed and dated Musical Ceiling, Collection F. Stonor, London (Cat. Rais. 198; fig. 4), marked the beginning of illusionistic ceiling decoration in the Netherlands. Prior to that time, Dutch ceilings usually consisted of natural oak beams, often painted in a warm red-brown or green, and as a rule, were decorated with carved ornaments such as lion heads and family crests. This break with the traditional Dutch ceiling decoration was not widespread, but it was the beginning of an interest in Italian illusionistic ceilings and an attempt to employ this decorative style in private Dutch homes which later extended to town halls and palaces.

Honthorst’s painting is traditionally said to have come from a private house in Utrecht. It is impossible to determine where it was originally placed, but because of the size it was meant perhaps for the ceiling of a small sitting room or studiolo.

Once again Honthorst depended upon his study years in Italy when he was asked to create this ceiling piece. He called upon the illusionistic tradition begun by Mantegna in his decoration of 1469—70 for the marriage room in the Castello di Conte, Mantua where the figures, a peacock

1 I know of no earlier illusionistic ceiling decoration painted in the Netherlands, but one must always remember that such interior decorations could have been destroyed.
3 The author has not found any documentary evidence for this statement, but a note by Professor Willem Vogelsang on an old photograph in the Kunsthistorisch Instituut, Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht, states that the picture came from a seventeenth-century house on Nieuwe Gracht 6 in Utrecht.
4 The painting covered the beams of such a room or studiolo and was held in place by nails. For a good example of such an installation see Leonaert Bramer's Ceiling in the Prinsenhof, Delft (H. Wichmann, Leonaert Bramer, Leipzig, 1923, no. 161). There the figures are painted on planks nailed to and covering the smaller beams while the larger beams are visible and destroy the illusionism by dividing the ceiling into sections.
and a large plant are placed behind a decorative railing with swirling
clouds above them. The heads look down on the room below and only
in the case of one angel is there more than just the upper part of the chest
and head visible. This tradition is continued in Lorenzo Lotto’s Allegory
of ca. 1532, formerly in the Collection Baron von Hadeln, Florence1 in
which there is a duet between a lute player and a woman singing from
a music book, and which is an early forerunner of the Honthorst ar-
range ment. The figures are still shown cut at the chest but with a new
element of realism, combined with an allegorical overtone. Garofolo,
in his ceiling made for the Seminary in Ferrara,2 used a colonnaded
balustrade which, for the first time, made it possible to see the lower parts
of the bodies. Nicolò dell’Abate, in his ceiling piece in the Galleria Estense,
Modena,3 continued the Mantegna, Lotto, Garofalo line of development,
but in so doing he changed the content of the scene from a serious and
intellectual representation to that of a gay musical party. This tradition
of illusionistic wall decoration also had a strong impact upon Venice,
particularly in the work of Paolo Veronese. His musical groups and his
high color key make one think ahead to the Honthorst ceiling piece.4

This vivid color of Veronese and the gay musical character of dell’
Abate were first introduced to Roman illusionistic wall decoration in the
frescoes of 1611—12 made for the Casino of the Nine Muses in the
Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome, by Orazio Gentileschi and Agos-
tino Tassi.5 In their Concert (fig. 86), the figures were placed in an illusionis-
tic setting behind a balustrade. The bright color and the use of half-
length figures, three-quarter-length figures and singing heads appear
in Honthorst’s Musical Ceiling too (fig. 4). These parallels and the
fact that Gentileschi and Tassi were working for Cardinal Scipione

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1 I should like to thank Helen Noë for pointing this out to me in B. Berenson,
Lotto, Milan, 1955, p. 113, fig. 257.
2 For an illustration see A. Venturi, op. cit., IX, Part 4, fig. 24.
3 R. Pallucchini, op. cit., 1945, p. 50, no. 23, fig. 18.
4 Cf. Paolo Veronese’s Harmony, Villa Barbaro, Maser (For an illustration see A.
Venturi, op. cit., Vol. IX, Part 4, fig. 581.).
5 F. Zeri, “The Pallavicini Palace and Gallery in Rome 1: The Palace,” The Con-
noisseur, CXXXVI (1955), 186f., figs. 3, 4. Zeri writes that it is possible to guess that this
fresco was of great importance in the development of Caravaggesque influence in Europe,
particularly Holland. He goes on to say that not only the details but whole passages
were taken up by a number of painters, among whom Hendrik Terbrugghen and Gerrit
van Honthorst are the most notable. Judging from the reproductions, this last statement
seems exaggerated.