

from too small a tax base in relation to their responsibilities. But one should not give in to the chilling conclusions buried in Giles Waterfield's stimulatingly wide-ranging essay in the catalogue: 'It may be that the idea developed in the late nineteenth century, that each town of any substance ought to express its identity by assembling works of art and scientific collections, can no longer be sustained. Perhaps the future lies in the amalgamation of permanent collections either physically or in terms of staffing, so that some can concentrate on looking after, displaying, and adding to the objects in their care, while others function primarily as they did a hundred years ago: as exhibition halls and places of entertainment.' This is to throw in the towel. If we cannot find ways of regenerating enthusiasm for, and attracting a public back into, regional museums, destroying their individual and historic character by amalgamation will merely postpone the day when – as with churches and railways – these amalgamated institutions will face further threats of closure in their turn.

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*'Art Treasures of England: The Regional Collections*, with essays by Giles Waterfield, Dick Kingzett, Nicholas Savage and Angela Summerfield. 494 pp., fully illustrated in col., with a few b. & w. ill., and including a gazetteer. (Royal Academy, in association with Merrell Holberton, London, 1998). £39.95, ISBN 1-85894-047-8 (HB); £27.50, 0-900946-56-8 (PB).

## London and New York Bonnard

If the retrospective of Bonnard's paintings at the **Tate Gallery** (to 17th May; then at the **Museum of Modern Art, New York**, 21st June to 13th October) underplays the period up to 1900, this may partly be because graphics were then so central to him. There is just enough in the first room to indicate that the elements of his mature work were in place almost from the start. In Nabi exercises such as *Intimité* (1891; no.3) he weaves woolly human profiles amid wallpaper patterns and wafts of pipe smoke. Out in the garden, *La Partie de croquet* (1892; no.4) occurs in a ragged camouflage of colour that henceforth characterises his landscapes. Still lifes of the 1890s already feature vast, tipped-up table tops with flotillas of soft yet vivid vessels. Street scenes are flat and frontal or a fragmented montage of steep-space vignettes. Witty patter combines with real poetry. Toward the turn of the century come erotic confessions of delightfully lost virginity, black stockings left on, or coming off, one at a time. These are celebratory little painterly scuffles; but right from the beginning Bonnard senses his girlfriend's introversion and frustrating self-sufficiency. As early as 1889, meanwhile, in the self-portrait holding brushes and palette, Bonnard is using his personal and touching dabs of paint, not quite pointillist nor impressionist. The gaze will get more disabused, but not lose its candour.

The show's ensuing rooms nevertheless demonstrate the transformations still to be made, to grandly conceived interiors and landscapes of the 1920s and 30s, and the astounding nudes and self-portraits of the mid-1920s onward. Bonnard's increased ambition, in larger easel paintings (as well as domestic murals, pictorial screens and the like), brought dangers. The feline nudes *L'Indolente* (c.1899; no.15) and *La Sieste* (1900; no.17) have heavy, symbolist luminosity and facture. In the former, the ambiguous form of the blankets, looming like a male profile, is the kind of thing that will eventually come into its own in Bonnard's work (he repeated the trick in two other versions). But here it is still stagy. Ten years later, the slightly decadent atmosphere still hangs around paintings such as *Nu à la lumière* (no.25). Bonnard valued *Le Cabinet de toilette* (1908; Fig.57), as a breakthrough, but though it newly emphasises the busy patterning, the dropped perspective of the floor, the mirror and bath water, the flooding light on the slippered nude, what dominates is a familiar *fin-de-siècle* image of the feminine and of mystic rapture. And, as perhaps in *L'Indolente*, the wishful casting of the woman (his lover Marthe again) as for once more receptive – to the ravishing light – alas rings false.

One of the anomalies within the Tate's loosely chronological hang affords comparison between these first large boudoir subjects and a painting of 1923, *Jeunes femmes au jardin* (Fig.56). There is suddenly a complex creation of synthesised light – at once illusionistic of bright sunshine, and, as it were, phenomenal in terms of the optical halations and vibrations of the yellow and mauve pigment. Composition has a snapshot radicalness, with uncomfortable displacements of the faces within an eccentric

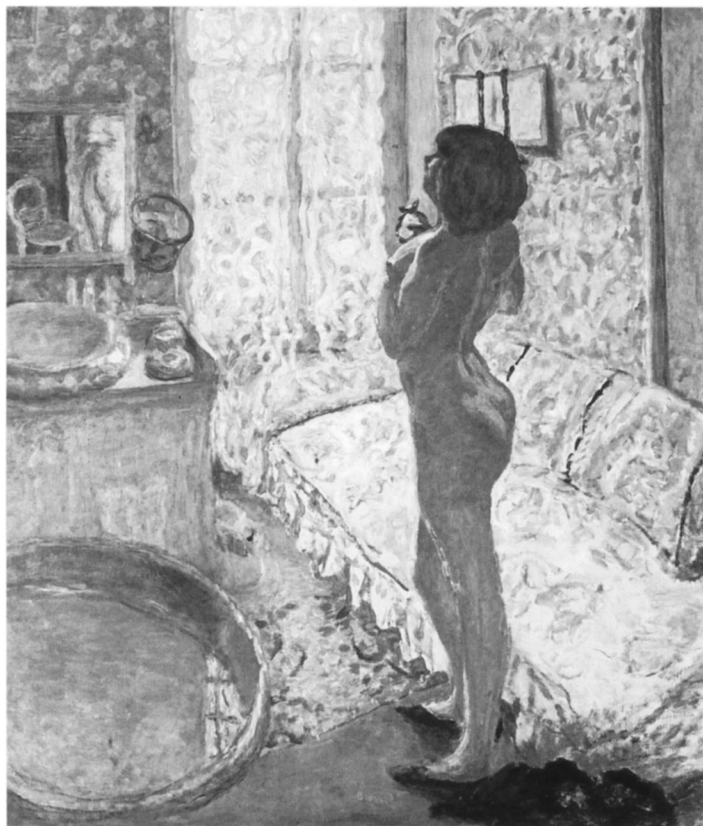
orbiting of forms in the space. Paint has more than token modernist physicality; it is messy. These factors scramble psychological or narrative readings as to the relationship of the figures with each other and the artist, allowing a recognition of difficult currents beneath the seeming *luxe calme et volupté*.

This exemplifies much of what distinguishes other really mature works. For one thing, they transcend simple intention. Meaning emerges during the process of their creation, discovered and nurtured to specificity even within their ambiguity. As such, the works relinquish the Nabi belief in a high decorative art, integrated into architecture, design and daily life. At the end of the nineteenth century Bonnard's symbolist/anarchist circles had imagined a fulfilment of their 'cult' of art not in the unique art work for its own sake, but in art's absorption into life (and vice versa) in a utopian earthly paradise. Like Vuillard, Bonnard long continued to expend energy on essentially decorative wall panels such as *Le Paradis terrestre* (1916–20; no.36). Another colleague, Denis, sought integrating context for his art in Catholicism, but Bonnard's significant works, finally, had their social currency within the burgeoning bourgeois market in easel pictures – one which recognised, even fetishised, the notion of each work's autonomous embodiment of meaning and value, while of course frequently misjudging it. Bonnard's paintings sold well as genre-based celebrations of sensuality. That is part of their truth but, more profoundly, their fierce inherency articulates the tensions of human experience as a *lost* paradise, or a promised land surveyed, but not achieved.

The pain within Bonnard's vision of beauty is nowadays recognised by commentators, including the current catalogue's



56. *Jeunes femmes au jardin* (Renée Monchaty and Marthe Bonnard), by Pierre Bonnard. 1923 (reworked 1945–46). 60.5 by 77 cm. (Private collection, U.S.A.; exh. Tate Gallery, London; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998).



57. *Le Cabinet de toilette*, by Pierre Bonnard. 124.5 by 109 cm. 1908. (Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels; exh. Tate Gallery, London; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998).



58. *Le Grand nu jaune*, by Pierre Bonnard. 1931. 170 by 107.3 cm. (Private collection; exh. Tate Gallery, London; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998).

authors.<sup>1</sup> Biographically, it related to the growing difficulty of his personal relationships. *Jeunes femmes au jardin* depicts Marthe, his increasingly ill and withdrawn partner, and Renée Monchaty, with whom he was having a love affair from around 1920, and who killed herself in the mid-1920s. One of the most superb of the exhibition's large interiors (sometimes compositionally creaky) is the rarely seen *La Veillée* of 1921 (no.41). The vigil that Bonnard envisions is surely Marthe's, waiting at home that year when he was absent with Monchaty on a trip to Italy, talking of marriage. Marthe is alone in a chair, seeming small amid the furniture like a child left idle. Snuggled together on the island of a separate chair are the dog and cat that throughout his work are gently identified with Bonnard and his partner respectively. The dog looks silently across at her.

We do not need biographical details to sense a gravity in Bonnard that refutes the common accusation of not addressing the tragedies and traumas of his century. (Are they not – by extreme extension – tragedies of failure in individuals' relationships to each other and the world?) The treatment of human relationship in the later bathroom nudes indeed becomes so devastating that it is easy to overlook the landscapes and still lifes in this exhibition. Both might fare better in dedicated showing; yet they are important in Bonnard's project, for all it has the human at its centre. In *Nature morte devant la fenêtre* (1931; no.63) bulbous columns of a balustrade outside the window are painted like the transparent decanter on the table. In *Salle à manger sur la jardin* (no.62; 1930–31) they have the same treatment. In the distance are tiny figures, embedded in foliage like pips within the foreground fruit. Belatedly, as so often, we notice the peripheral,

lost-and-found figure in the room, holding a cup, hovering dream-like between the table spread before her and the landscape spread beyond. Such a repertory of elements is common in the middle period paintings, though with considerable variation. Even when Bonnard homes in on pure still life there is usually a suggestion of the containing room, and when he passes out into pure landscape there are glimpses of houses contained in the countryside (compartments from whose windows the land would once more appear compartmented). For Bonnard, this chain of contained and containing objects – the fruit in the bowl, the bowl on the table, the table in the room, the house in the trees – is a continuum with no beginning or end. Human beings are themselves vessels in this scale of things, contained in gardens, rooms, baths, and themselves consuming food and drink, taking in the world. The additional enclosing of all this within the paintings themselves, collectable objects made to be put in rooms, completes the work's complex, active reflexivity.<sup>2</sup> It is in the face – or rather the midst – of this relativism that the artist builds up his loaded richness and density of vision, the accretion of paint-marks suggestive of a fullness of experience which is intensely desirable yet rarely attained in normal consciousness. Reality is usually too much to take in and, faced with that incapacity, the impulse is to shut it out entirely, denying response-ability. Bonnard promotes amplitude of awareness. Since consciousness alone differentiates us from other forms of existence (even, in degree, from the animals which significantly occupy the paintings), Bonnard urges its most acute and sustained development. That, his art suggests, is life. And compared with Cézanne, say, who offers similar enrichment of the perception

of objects and landscape, Bonnard does not seem driven by an essentialist belief – which must end in mysticism – in a 'core' reality within the apple (or person), or an all-enveloping reality at the limits of our environment. The upward, aspirational gaze of the woman in the 1908 *Cabinet de toilette*, ready to tender her heart in the shower of light, is his last hint at such belief, illustrated rather than embodied. When a similar annunciation-receiving pose occurs in *Le Gant de crin* of 1942 (quite exceptionally among the bath nudes – in Marthe's psychic limbo), it is impregnated with sad but saving irony.

Art's self-referentiality is a cliché in the discussion of modernism, but Bonnard prompts particular apprehension that his paintings are about what they also are. He does so, partly, by the screens, partitions, shutters, windows, doors, table-tops, mirrors that structure the paintings, unavoidably referring to the canvas itself. The walls and folding screens that he decorated as a Nabi return as depicted elements, signalling enclosure, apartment, concealment and disclosure. Softened by his myriad strokes, they even represent the skins of human body and eye which keep separate the world which they contact. Indeed, this is anticipated (a little heavy-handedly) as early as 1900, in *Man and woman* (no.16). There the central folded screen of stretched fabric, both phallic and vaginal in association, divides the lovers from each other – and also from the viewer, as if we are looking past the upright of a window frame, or even an easel. In window scenes of the 1930s the vertical of the window frame in conjunction with a centrally placed chair creates the visual sign of an easel supporting a canvas, though whether it is the view through the glass or the table below which is the canvas – a land-

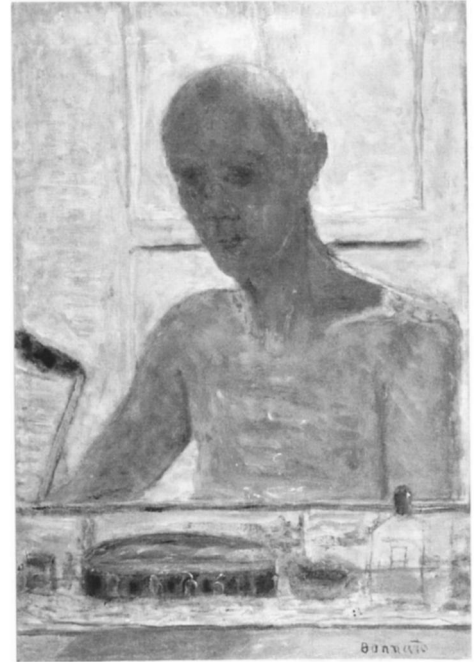
scape or a still life – is left equivocal (Fig.61). Bonnard did not use an easel or have a studio as such; he painted against the walls of rooms. Metaphorically, his easel was everywhere.

These references to painting's illusions and ambiguities continue, more surprisingly but even more pervasively, in the bathroom pictures. Marthe's gestures and stance repeatedly evoke those of an artist painting. She stands, holding cloths, unseen utensils, small tubes of lotion like paint tubes, addressing a mirror or other panel which has the presence of a canvas before her (Fig.58). Parities and polarities are set up between Bonnard, studying her, applying (and frequently scrubbing off) paint, and Marthe, scrutinising herself, applying substance to her own skin, wiping it off. Screens, partitions and mirrors continue to structure the pictures. When the artist's own limbs jut into the scene (e.g. no.46, and perhaps 47 where he may be holding a tray or a palette) it suggests his attempts, having entered the supposed intimacy of the bathroom, to get behind – onto Marthe's side of – yet another screen, the very painting surface.

There are of course more obvious concerns in the pictures – overwhelmingly with Marthe's intense solipsism, variously construed. The special consummation of Bonnard's notion of expanded awareness, in the reciprocity of two consciousnesses, the true alternative to mystic revelation as a heaven on earth, is checked. Extending a leg, cat-like, lowering her head as if almost to lick herself (Fig.60), Marthe never reciprocates her viewer's gaze. In *Le Gant de crin* her deformed arms appear to have grown

redundant through only serving the immediate body. When she is laid out in the bath, her regime seems to have ended in deathly embalming. Elsewhere, in a 1932 *Cabinet de toilette* (no.66) Bonnard comes to terms with her inaccessibility, seemingly, by projecting her as a mythic, shimmering apparition within a psychedelic phantasmagoria of cosmic light and space. But the obvious vulvas that he describes in the forms of the bath and basin show his resistance to such sublimated apotheosis. At other times he tries to affirm Marthe's self-absorption as the epitome of his own approved intensification of experience: as if her washing were the necessary, even laudable purgatory of human embodiment.

Unavoidably, though, the issue of painting's own condition keeps implicating itself in this drama, as when in the show's four full-length bathtub pictures the immersion under water enacts the figure's containment in the flat paint surface. Marthe's detached head looks across the length of the canvas and of her refracted body, just as Bonnard does from as near as he can get to her point of view in *Nu dans la baignoire* (1925). And what emerges through all of this is the painter's identification of himself with Marthe, confirmed by the continuity between the nudes and the utterly disarming self-portraits. These are painted in the mirror of the same bathroom, the same tiles visible behind Bonnard's head as he now turns his scrutiny onto himself (Marthe has died by the time of some of them, though he continued to work on her image also). Marthe's bottled unguents and toilettries are on the shelf below the mirror, like turpentine and

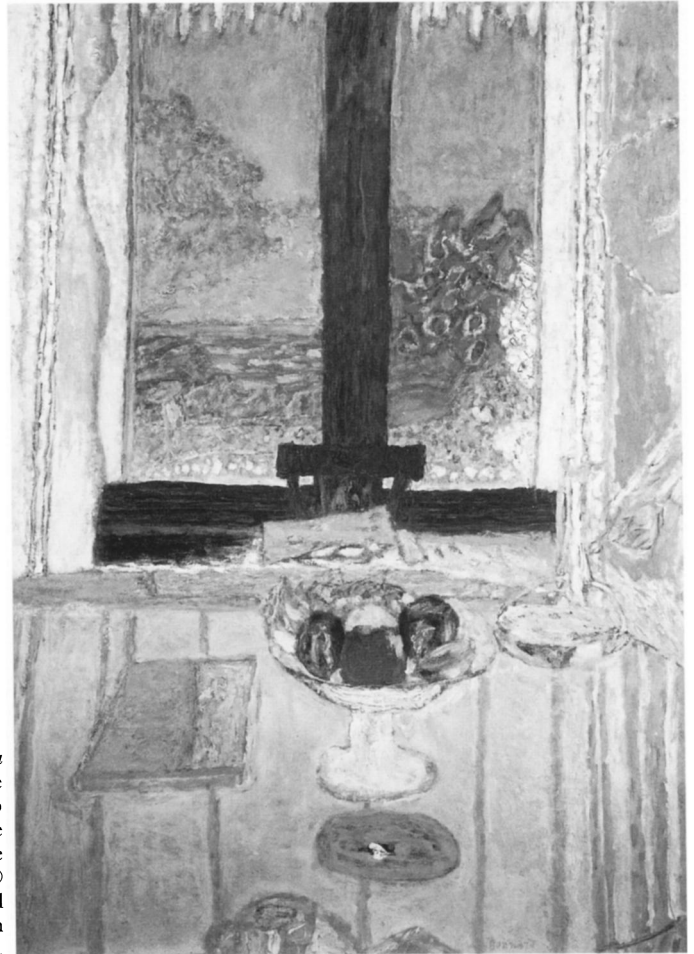


59. *Autoportrait dans la glace du cabinet de toilette*, by Pierre Bonnard. 1943–46. 73 by 51 cm. (Musée Nationale d'art moderne, Paris; exh. Tate Gallery, London; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998).

brushes on the easel's sill (Fig.59). He tends in fact not to meet his own gaze, but to be looking elsewhere – surely in a sense at Marthe. Sometimes he is stripped like her. In *Le Boxeur* (1931; no.61) fists flail feebly, but also mime her gestures with sponge and soap, his own with brush and palette. (Dau-  
mier's Don Quixote comes momentarily to



60. *Nu à la mule verte*, by Pierre Bonnard. 1927. 142 by 81 cm. (Private collection; exh. Tate Gallery, London; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998).



61. *La table devant la fenêtre*, by Pierre Bonnard. 1934. 101.5 by 72.5 cm. (Private collection; exh. Tate Gallery, London; © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1998).

mind, whose shield and lance are also palette and brush.) In another self portrait (1938–39; no.78) he might be doing up, or even sewing on, a button, or perhaps shaving, lathering, taking a tablet. Such hand activities, as throughout his work – say in the Chardinesque *La Leçon de couture* (1926; no.52) of Marthe and her maid – recall the painter's hands, painting.

So Bonnard's nudes of Marthe are themselves, on many levels, self-portraits. That is, they are portraits of her as him, and him as her. They are even self-portraits by her, in which she creates and recreates, depicts and wipes out, completes and immortalises, herself. They are tragic paintings because, given her incapacity to relate to anything but herself, Bonnard, to have her attention, must become her.

MERLIN JAMES

<sup>1</sup>*Bonnard*. By Sarah Whitfield, with an essay by John Elderfield. 272 pp. with 113 col. pls. + 125 b. & w. ill. (Tate Gallery Publishing, London, 1998), £25, ISBN 1-85437-2394 (PB); £35, 1-85437-2432 (HB). With formidable intelligence, both authors put scholarly research (notably on Bonnard's sources in antique sculpture, in Whitfield's essay, or on optics, in Elderfield's) in service to full critical response to the paintings. <sup>2</sup>One function of this reflexivity is to make ornate frames problematic, enclosure within them being both invited and abjured by the paintings. Some frames were grossly inappropriate in this exhibition, and more neutral baguettes, as around the Centre Pompidou paintings, granted the pictures greater self-definition.

### The Hague

#### Frederik Hendrik of Orange and Amalia van Solms

It is impossible to praise too highly the two recent exhibitions at the **Mauritshuis** and the **Historisch Museum** in **The Hague** (closed 29th March) which, one hundred yards apart, combined to present a wonderfully rich and broadly based account of the achievements of the Stadhouder Frederik Hendrik and his wife Amalia van Solms and to set their activities as patrons and collectors within a wider historical and cultural framework. As we have come to expect of exhibitions on the banks of the Vijver, the whole project was, like the main wall of the Oranjezaal, a triumph. In both locations the exhibits were displayed lucidly and with impeccable taste. The labels, Dutch and English, provided a note on the original location, in the prince's or princess's apartments, of the picture (or other object) and an excellent booklet, written for the benefit of the general public, was distributed gratis. Between the two catalogues,<sup>1</sup> which are companion volumes, there is some inevitable overlapping. They are both beautifully produced and provide, for the English reader, invaluable material on the historical background and the varied themes which the exhibitions set out to demonstrate (much of the material is the fruit of recent research and is published for the first time). The catalogue of the Historisch Museum's show, *Princely Display*, is a volume devoted to those themes, illustrated in colour and black and white with a large



62. *Hercules and Cacus*, by Jan de Bisschop. 9.7 by 15.8 cm. (City Archives, The Hague; exh. Historisch Museum, The Hague).

number of supplementary plates. The book is essential for anyone wishing to see the princely couple's interest in the fine arts within a wider framework, but a number of very interesting pieces in the exhibition are regrettably not reproduced.

The catalogue has excellent chapters on the court (by Willem Frijhoff), on the quasi-monarchical nature of the Orange family which attained briefly 'an almost European authority thanks to the ambitions of the Stadhouder and his personal qualities'; on the genesis of the court (by Marie-Ange Delen), particularly interesting for its account of the court and influence of Louise de Coligny; an exceptionally good chapter by Jori Zijlmans on life at court in The Hague with useful information on the central figure of Constantijn Huygens. Marika Koblusek writes on the court of the exiled Bohemian royal family, their status and influence, the rivalry with the Prince of Orange, the furnishing of their palaces in The Hague and at Rhenen, and the education of the children (glimpses therein of Lievens) at Leyden; and Olaf Mörke discusses the Orange court as the centre of political and social life during the republic. In a chapter by Koen Ottenheim on the prince's building activities, the work on his different residences is described in great detail and illustrated, both in the catalogue and in the exhibition, with very good topographical material, ranging from examples of Dutch topographical engraving (for example, by Van Berckenrode, Milheusser or Allard) to some enchantingly evocative wash drawings by Jan de Bisschop (Fig.62). Particularly interesting is the material on Honslaarsdijk and the Huis ten Bosch, the creation of Amalia van Solms. In an equally good complementary chapter on the prince's gardens Vanessa Brezmer Sellers stresses the crucial part played by the prince in ushering in the golden age of Dutch gardening, his gardens coming to represent the 'bulwark of a new, idyllic Bohemia – the "Garden of Holland" protected by the Princes of Orange'. In the final chapter Irene Groeneweg produces some very inter-

esting information on dress in the age of Frederik Hendrik and his wife; but her conclusions on, for example, the relation between Van Dyck's and Mytens's royal portraits are misleading.

Marieke Tiethoff-Splithoff writes at length on the portrait painters in the service of the prince, notably on the contrast between the work of Van Mierevelt and Van Honthorst. She stresses in Van Mierevelt's case the problems, discernible in the exhibition, involved in an extensive studio practice from the time of his fine first portrait of the prince, c.1610, of which an early variant was painted for Sir Ralph Winwood. It was very good to see Van Mierevelt's distinguished, but severely damaged, 1641 portrait of Huygens from the Huygensmuseum Hofwijck at Voorburg. Honthorst, coming to the service of the prince after he had been employed by Charles I and the Queen of Bohemia, presents the same problem. At his best, in, for instance, the profile portrait of the prince painted in 1631, the touch is light, almost feathery, and the atmosphere and characterisation extremely sensitive. In the display of (chiefly) small portraits of members of the prince's and princess's circles, cleverly arranged but sadly not reproduced in the volume, the quality varied from the very good (especially when painted on panel) to the perfunctory. The big royal full-lengths are consistently well-arranged, though the handling can be rather smooth and unfeeling. One question is raised by relating (p.181) the letter, in which the painter informs Huygens that he has prepared the canvas for the painting of the Stadhouder with his wife, to the double portrait (1637) in the Mauritshuis. This is, in fact, made up of two single full-lengths subsequently stitched together. Nor, surely, is it correct to say (p.182) that the prince did not sit for his likeness to Honthorst after c.1640. Honthorst produced a later – a sadder, care-worn – image which is seen in the big family group of 1647 in the Rijksmuseum (A874) and in a number of small portraits, one of them actually held by his widow in