Accompanying essays and texts

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| Art | The Collection & Usher Gallery |
| hand-out-graphic-  Accompanying texts  Cornelis Bega,  *Tavern Scene,*  1662  *Everyday Life and the Art of the Dutch Masters: A Social Historian's Perspective* |

What is a *social* historian? The main thing that marks us out from our colleagues in political or economic history is that we are concerned not so much with the 'great men' or macro-economic developments—which have undoubtedly played their part in shaping our past and present—but with the everyday lives and experiences of ordinary men and women. We want to know what life was like in the past for the majority of our ancestors.

Recovering these experiences is far from straightforward. For the period that I study—the seventeenth century—the subjects of my research have rarely left behind any of their own accounts of what their lives were like. Only 30% of men, and 10% of women, were fully literate, and those that were tended to come from the upper ranks of society. As such, there are few letters or diaries surviving from humble men and women recording the fine details of their day-to-day trials and pleasures.

As a result, the social historian needs to be 'omnivorous' in their search for useful sources of evidence. They need to cast their net wide and glean what they can from surviving court records such as witness statements, from surviving popular ballads and songs, or from the indirect evidence provided by the extant writings of elite social groups. They might also be able to gain insights from the visual culture of the period they study.

In this regard, Dutch Golden Age paintings—such as Cornelis Bega's 'Tavern Scene' (1662) on display here—are a tantalising prospect for the social historian. Many adopt a realist focus on the everyday life of seventeenth-century peasants and artisans. Moreover, many of them depict scenes of tavern culture, an aspect of everyday life that has increasingly come to attract the attention of social historians. There is a frustration here though for the historian of seventeenth-century *England*: there is no English equivalent in this century for the vibrant genre of everyday life paintings being produced in the Netherlands (I'm not quite sure why, but it is a common subject of speculation in conversation with my colleagues). So there is an obvious problem inherent in trying to use paintings of Dutch tavern culture to draw conclusions about English tavern culture, but if we put that to one side for the moment we might think about what sorts of questions a social historian could ask of paintings such as Bega's 'Tavern Scene'.

At first glance we might wonder if the utility of this painting lies more in what it tells us about contemporary attitudes towards tavern culture than what it can tell us about what actually took place in them from day to day. It could be taken to encapsulate a common negative stereotype of taverns that was most closely associated in England with Puritans—those who enthusiastically embraced the new Protestant religion—who were known to be particularly vociferous in condemning drunkenness as an 'odious' and 'loathsome' sin. Is the standing male character slightly off-balance perhaps, his shirt falling open as the decorum slips, drunkenly leering at the bosom of the… serving maid? Taverns were often criticised as sites of inappropriate sexual promiscuity, and we could read this depiction as a visual equivalent to the many sermons that were preached against the immorality of tavern culture in the period.

A closer look suggests that Bega is offering us much more than well-trodden moralising in his tavern scene. The social historian's gaze is drawn to some of the more quotidian aspects in the painting. There seems, for instance, to be crumpled bedding laid out on the bench behind the central female character. This highlights an important fact about seventeenth-century taverns (or as they were more commonly called in England, alehouses) that the modern viewer may not appreciate: unlike the pubs of today, the primary purpose of an alehouse in this period was not to provide a location for recreational drinking. Rather, it had two main functions: one was to sell ale to local people who did not have the means to brew their own at home. Ale (usually weaker than our modern equivalent) was an important part of the daily diet and a key source of calories and nutrients, and was consumed with all meals by men, women and children. In this sense the alehouse was meant to serve more as an off-license. In practice, of course, many allowed drinking on site and they did become sites for recreational drinking and drunkenness, but this was forbidden in legislation. Their other (legitimate) purpose was to provide lodging to travellers. As such they were invariably situated on main roads, something we can see in another painting in this exhibition, Meindert Hobbema's 'A Wooded Landscape' (c.1660). It looks like a drinking house on the left, identifiable by its 'ale-post', the ancestor of the pub sign, protruding into the road to show that ale was available.

With this is mind another reading of this tavern scene is possible. What we have is not a scene of drunken debauchery, but a party of travellers who have spent the night asleep on the alebench (alehouse accommodation was rarely plush, and often involved simply sleeping on a bench or sharing a bed with landlord and landlady!) The man with his back to us is still rousing himself from sleep. The standing character is not yet fully dressed, but is nonetheless taking his 'morning draught' of ale, the seventeenth-century equivalent of that first cup of coffee. What we might be seeing is the depiction of a morning routine after an overnight stay at the tavern, a far from untypical experience in an age when the lower orders did most of their travelling on foot, and only limited distances could be covered in a day.

We are also struck, of course, by the act of reading taking place at the centre of the scene. It is intriguing, given the statistics of female literacy, that it is the female character doing the reading. What is she reading? Could it be a broadside ballad? These were songs printed on a single (sometimes folded) sheet of paper that were sold cheaply—usually for a penny, the same price as a pint of ale—and often took the form of drinking songs to be sung in alehouses, or even pasted up on their walls. Is that one pasted up in the alcove on the back wall? Perhaps one discarded on the floor in the fore ground to the right? These drinking songs have received a lot of recent attention from social historians, who have mined them for insights they may offer into seventeenth-century tavern culture. Is this a depiction of one being performed? Is the standing male responding to a call that was common in these songs to raise a toast to his companions, or to raise a loyal toast to the King, another familiar feature of these songs?

Arguably the scene is too sedate to be a raucous rendition of a drinking song. Another interpretation may be that the reader is relaying the latest news from a printed newsheet—possibly news of a successful sea battle that is spurring the toast of her companion, or even a satirical political broadside that is the root of his mirth. Both of these were common subjects for cheap printed wares that circulated in taverns. Indeed, the discussion of news and politics in taverns was common and widespread long before the emergence of the coffeehouse in both England and the Netherlands from the mid-seventeenth century, the drinking establishment which is more commonly associated with a public thirst for news and politics. Is Bega looking to capture the fact that the politics of 'great men' were not as detached from the world of everyday tavern culture as historians have often thought?

It is, of course, beyond us to know for sure what Bega wanted us to take from his tavern scene, and at best it remains a somewhat indirect form of evidence of everyday life in the past for the social historian. That said, there are a number of aspects of his scene—the tavern as a place of lodging, the circulation of printed ware in these locations—that accord with the evidence of tavern culture in the seventeenth century that social historians have garnered from other sources. It reinforces our sense that tavern culture was about more than mindless drunkenness and sexual promiscuity, providing vital services and a venue for the dissemination and discussion of the issues of the day. Given these areas of overlap between Bega's scene and what we can recover from other sources there may well be cause for optimism for social historians that such paintings can be a reliable guide to everyday life in the past. Or at the least, another component of our omnivorous diet of sources.

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| Contemporary Art | The Collection & Usher Gallery |
| hand-out-graphic-  **The Painting**;  ‘The Martyrdom of St Clement’ painted around 1500 by Bernardino Fungai  Take a closer look at a painting with one of York Museums Trust’s Curators  **The Curator**: Andrew Morrison, Curator of Archaeology |

Archaeology investigates the physical evidence left behind by past societies. Archaeologists collect and interpret this evidence in order to better understand these societies. As the quantity of archaeological evidence is ever-expanding interpretations can easily become out of date.

Examining this painting as an archaeologist, in the 21st century, we can find several instances where archaeology has improved our understanding of the times in which St. Clement lived, since Fungai’s days at the turn of the 16th century.

St Clement was Pope between AD80-99. He was banished to the Crimea by the Roman Emperor Trajan to work in a stone quarry. He is reputed to have sated the thirst of 2000 Christians by making water spring from a rock in the quarry. Trajan, upon hearing of this miracle, ordered Clement to be thrown into the sea with an anchor tied to his neck. The sea is reputed to have withdrawn two miles revealing a shrine containing Clement’s bones. This shrine was discovered in the 9th century when some bones and an anchor were removed and taken to Rome by St. Cyril.

The most obvious feature of this painting is the boat at the centre. Recent archaeological discoveries, in particular within the harbour of Imperial Rome at Ostia, and now on display at Rome’s Fiumicino airport, as well as contemporary images that have come to light over the last 200 years, have shown that a boat of the late first century would have looked very different to this one. The boat from which St. Clement was actually thrown would have resembled a long open-topped galley with one, two or even three banks of oars. It may have had a single large central mast with a square-rigged sail. The boat depicted in this painting is a sailing ship of the late medieval period, of which Fungai would have seen many, living in the busy medieval port of Siena. The construction of even this boat, though, is somewhat dubious, as the hull would have been made from planks running its length rather than the checkerboard appearance of the one in the picture.

St Clement himself would have looked different too. There is very little archaeological evidence to suggest first-century Christian leaders wore distinctive clothing. Most likely they would have been dressed in everyday clothes, as being a Christian at that time in the Roman Empire was outlawed. Archaeology has provided many details as to what Romans of St Clement’s day would have worn, how their hair would have looked and how they would have accessorised. Fungai has painted St. Clement in the papal costume and regalia of his own time.

Even the iron anchor tied around St. Clement’s neck can now be seen to be distinctly late medieval. The Romans did use iron anchors to weigh lay their ships but they differed in design from this one. Instead of the curved arms of a medieval anchor (as Fungai has painted,) Roman anchors had much straighter arms, often without the barbs at the ends.

We also now know from archaeological excavations that the impact of the martyrdom of St. Clement can be seen in the archaeological record. The anchor, for its associations and probably also because of it similarity to the shape of the cross, became a secret symbol of Christianity. Excavations of the Roman period have shown that the anchor was a symbol much used in Roman jewellery and art.

In the late-fifteenth century, little was known about first-century Roman boats, clothes and anchors. Fungai could not have known what we know now. He may even have wanted to depict the story using objects and dress that would have been familiar to his audience.

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| Contemporary Art | The Collection & Usher Gallery |
| hand-out-graphic-  **The Painting**:  ‘Looking for the Mail Packet’ painted in 1861 by Henry Garland  Take a closer look at a painting with one of York Museums Trust’s Curators  **The Curator**:  Josie Sheppard, Curator of Costume and Textiles  Henry Garland’s painting depicts an elderly, middle-class couple and their daughter enjoying an outing to the coast.  In the mid-nineteenth century visits to seaside resorts became very popular, due to the development of an efficient railway system. Many people could now afford to spend a day, or sometimes longer, at a coastal resort. Sea air was considered beneficial, and city-dwellers travelled in large numbers by train to resorts such as Scarborough and Whitby.  In keeping with the holiday atmosphere, the rules of etiquette in dress – which were strictly observed by Victorian society – were relaxed slightly, and people often wore clothes which were less formal that those they would wear in a town or city.  The young girl is fashionably dressed in what would be considered an informal outfit in the early 1860s: She wears a simple white muslin bodice trimmed with coral-coloured silk ribbons. Her green striped silk skirt is very full, and is probably supported by a crinoline petticoat. (The crinoline - a type of hooped petticoat – was at the peak of its popularity in the early 1860s, and many contemporary cartoons dwell on the unfortunate effects of wearing one at the seaside on a windy day!) The girl’s accessories include a feather-trimmed straw hat, and her paisley shawl lies on a stool beside her.  Her mother’s outfit is more formal, and the older woman’s hairstyle and clothes look back to the fashions of the 1850s. In keeping with her age she wears black, and her silk dress has a full skirt trimmed with flounces. Her bonnet ties under her chin with broad yellow ribbons and her hands are gloved. Unlike her daughter, she wears her shawl wrapped around her against the sea breezes.  Both women have parasols; whilst the mother holds hers, the daughter has left her parasol on the ground by her box of watercolours. Although trips to the seaside were valued for the healthy effects of the sea air, unlike today, no one wanted a tan. A pale complexion was considered lady-like, whilst brown skin indicated that you belonged to the labouring classes. Ladies went to great lengths to avoid sunlight, and parasols and wide-brimmed hats both helped to shield their skin from the sun’s rays.  Although he belongs to the older generation, the father wears a fashionable lounge suit made of checked woollen cloth. The lounge suit appeared in the 1850s, and was acceptable wear for informal occasions. A jaunty straw hat completes the father’s outfit, emphasising the relaxed, holiday atmosphere of this day out by the sea. |

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| Contemporary Art | The Collection & Usher Gallery |
| hand-out-graphic-  **The Painting**:  ‘Clifford’s Tower, York’ painted in 1952 by Lawrence Stephen Lowry  Take a closer look at a painting with one of York Museums Trust’s writers  **The Writer**:  Tracy Chevalier, author of ‘Girl with a Pearl Earring’  Humbug  The castle was always a surprise in the otherwise modest landscape. Docked like an alien space ship on a grassy mound, it was the kind of ruin where cawing rooks ought to perch.  We went for a walk there most Sunday afternoons, the whole family with the dog, a black mongrel named Millie of unusual intelligence. She raced up and down the steep hill a dozen times, barking for us to join her. Sometimes we climbed up, but usually we milled about at the bottom, sucking on the mint humbugs Gran always handed out.  This Sunday a low fog muffled the landscape. Once in sight of the castle Millie yipped and strained against her lead. We dragged her to the base but even after we took off the lead she would not move, huddling against our legs with her tail tucked under.  “Millie, what is it, girl? Here, there you go.” Rob tossed his humbug up the hill. Millie followed the arc of the sweet but didn’t budge. Normally she loved humbugs more than we did.  Jane threw hers harder and it landed at the foot of the ruin. Millie stood up, shaking her hind legs and whining. Still she didn’t go after the humbug.  Tom had a strong arm, a hatred of mint humbugs and a fierce competitive spirit. He tossed the sweet up with a flick of his wrist that sent it flying over the hill and castle.  Whatever her fear, Millie couldn’t resist this last challenge. She shot up the hill and disappeared behind the ruin.  After five minutes we went to look for her. Millie was never found. But on foggy days by the castle the air tastes of mint and the dense silence is punctured by an occasional yip.  Tracy wrote this story in 2008, whilst she was writer in residence  at York Art Gallery. This piece was written in less than 300 words  as part of a challenge set by Tracy, for visitors to the gallery to  write a story that would fit on a postcard |

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| Contemporary Art | The Collection & Usher Gallery |
| hand-out-graphic-  Objective reaction to Performance  A member of our youth group describes a performance by Joana Cifre Cerdà .  Written by Rachel Olin  A figure is wheeled into the gallery space on a trolley, pushed by a female gallery attendant, the figure is female. The figure wears a golden brown corseted style floor length dress with a length of the material gathered over the figure’s right arm.  The attendant places the figure onto the floor and arranges her next to a table covered in a variety of flowers. The figure drops her arm and the material falls to the floor at her side. The attendant then begins sorting through the flowers on the table; she selects some stems and returns to the figure. The figure raises her head until she faces directly upwards with her mouth open. The attendant places the flowers into the open mouth of the figure; the figure raises her hand to support the flowers.  The attendant returns to the table and selects three red roses; she runs her fingers over the stems before returning to the figure. She places the roses into the mouth of the figure with the other flowers. The figure’s other arm raises to its chest.  The attendant returns again to table and chooses more stems; she places the stems into the arrangement in the figure’s mouth. She then selects a leaf and arranges it behind the flowers in the figure’s mouth.  The attendant walks around the trolley to the left of the figure to reach the flower arrangement. The attendant then continues to place flowers into the mouth of the female figure. She searches through the remaining flowers on the table and selects another couple of red roses; she prunes them before returning to the figure to arrange them.  The attendant then selects two yellow flowers and puts them into the arrangement in the mouth of the figure.  The attendant walks towards the left side of the figure and takes the fabric gathered at the figure’s side and arranges it around the base of the figure’s dress. She then picks up the table with the remaining flowers, places it on the trolley and wheels them out of the gallery.  The female figure is left in the gallery.  The figure moves her arm, supporting her neck while the other supports the flowers arrangement.  The figure stands motionless in the gallery space.  The figure moves again, swapping its hands. Her left hand now supports her neck whilst the right supports the arrangement.  The left hand moves down to her chest. She stands motionless.  The figure moves her right hand down to its chest, resting on the left. The figure moves again, both hands draw up to the face. The right hand moves to support her neck and the left to support the flowers.  She stands motionless in the gallery space for several minutes.  The figure moves her hand down to her side before raising it back up to the flowers, the same hand then moves to support her neck.  The figure then stands motionless again for several minutes until she moves her right hand down to her chest.  The left hand then lowers to her stomach a minute later.  After standing motionless for several minutes her arms raise to support the flowers.  The attendant returns and checks the flower arrangement, she adjust one of the yellow flowers before leaving again.  After several moments the figure opens its mouth and the flowers fall into a pile at the base of her dress. She gags several times and begins slowly sinking into the interior of the dress. Her arms raise above her head and she sinks further into the dress. She continues sinking until only her hands are visible. She sinks again until the dress is left free standing in the gallery.  The dress trembles slightly before becoming motionless again.  After a moment the material on the dress moves again before becoming motionless.  The dress trembles slightly and the fabric at the back of the dress moves, the figure slowly begins to emerge at the base of the dress. Her head lies on the floor. She then moves again, pushing out of the dress until her head and shoulder are visible. She begins to push out again and her arm emerges from the material. She lays her arm by her head and becomes still.  She moves again and draws out her other arm from the dress and lays it on the floor next to her other arm.  The figure moves again, emerging further from the base of the dress before lying still again. She pushes herself further out until her entire torso is visible, she stops moving and lies still on the floor. She wears a flesh coloured slip.  She begins to move again, pushing herself free from the material, revealing her hip before lying still again. The figure then pushes herself further out of the interior of the dress until both of her thighs are free.  She moves again until her entire body is visible. The figure curls into a foetal position and lies motionless.  The figure moves again, rolling her weigh onto her front and drawing her legs to her chest, she lies still again for a moment before rising into a seated position with her arms crossed across her chest. She lowers again before standing and leaving the gallery.  The dress is left free standing in the gallery with the flowers in a pile at the base of the material. |

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