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Karolina Chowaniec-Stawiarz

National Identities by Jan Banning.

Photographic variations on classic iconic paintings

Jan Banning was born in 1954 in the Netherlands. He comes from an immigrant family of Dutch East Indies origin¹. He studied social and economic history at the University of Nijmegen with the intention of continuing as a journalist. Starting his journalist career in the 80s, from the beginning he perceived it as the combination of text and images. Photography, which first appeared to be just a hobby, became his main means of communication. Banning considers it “a medium which has stronger attraction than text.”²

His youth was influenced by the Vietnam War, and this life-lasting interest in politics is evident in his art – the main theme of his work is state power. “I have never been very submitting with the idea that artists are completely out of society and isolated and just talking about themselves. I don’t want to judge anyone for that but it’s not my cup of tea for sure. [...] My work is about society and it has to play a part in the public debate.”

As an answer to the increasing influence of the anti-immigration Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the omnipresent dispute over assimilation of Arab and black minorities, and the overall xenophobic atmosphere present in European countries, Banning created “National Identities” series of photographs. Vermeer, Rembrandt and Manet-inspired images present migration from the artist’s point of view.

“In this series, based on national cultural symbols, I give immigrants a main role by using them as models in my photographic variations on classic iconic paintings. By doing this, I question the concept of homogeneous ‘national identities’ of European countries.”³

The admirers of Banning’s work will have a chance to see more of “National Identities” photographs as the series is still in progress. At the moment he is gazing upon the Italian masters, as he would like to extend the series to the Italian Renaissance example. Banning considers religion to have great importance in the

¹ *The Clasp of Civilizations. A subversive reimagining of three European masterpieces*, “Newsweek”, Oct. 17, 2011.

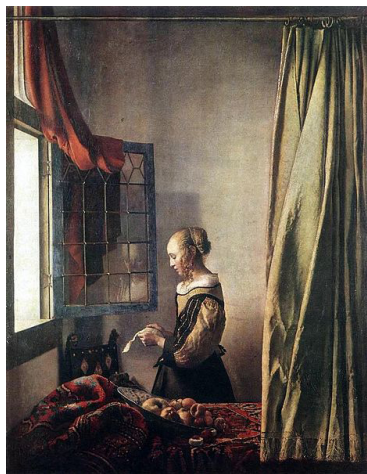
² If not stated otherwise, the quoted lines are records of the conversation with Jan Banning held on Jan. 28, 2012.

³ *The Clasp...*,

ongoing immigration debate present also in Italy, and would like to “reinvent” one of the “Annunciation” paintings.

Moroccan Vermeer

The problem of veiled women of Arab descent, being a part of the public debate gave rise to the first image of the “National Identities” series – the *Moroccan Vermeer*⁴.



Jan Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, 1657–1659



Jan Banning, *Moroccan Vermeer (Nissrine, a Moroccan girl, reads an application for an inburgeringscursus)*, 2007

*Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*⁵ (Jan Vermeer, 1657-1659, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), created in the late 1650s, is one of the paintings of the transitional phase closing the early and starting the mature period of Vermeer’s works.⁶The mature stage is characterized by emphasizing the importance of light and shadow and accentuating the texture of the objects in the picture.⁷Vermeer must have possessed an exceptional gift of observation and reality re-creating skill, as his paintings are valued for their well-considered composition, intimate atmosphere and the lifelike quality. At the time of creating the *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open*

⁴ All pictures come from Jan Banning’s archives and are reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.

⁵ The illustration of Vermeer’s *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* is quoted from: Essential Vermeer, http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/girl_reading_a_letter_by_an_open_window.html [19.02.2012].

⁶ See: David Gariff, *Najsłynniejsi malarze, ich inspiracje i oddziaływanie. Historia ukrytych powiązań między dziełami sztuki*, Arkady, Warszawa 2009, p. 76.

⁷ Alejandro Vergara, MariëtWestermann, *Vermeer and the Dutch interior*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid 2003, pp. 251–252.

Window, Vermeer was improving his new painting technique – using small dots of light, to keep the viewer's attention on the particular area of the image.⁸

The composition of the painting is inspired by works of Pieter de Hooch (another master of interiors in Dutch Baroque) – the background room in the picture seems too spacious for a portrait of a single figure. “The open window on the left indicates the way of illumination of the room, its space and form of objects. The objects themselves – the chair, the bowl of fruits, the curtains and the table, covered with a crumpled rug – enrich the composition and show off the masterful imitation of texture.”⁹

The main and only figure presented in the picture – the young girl – is engrossed in the letter and her own thoughts. Although, comparing to the vast space, she seems small, the girl is depicted very precisely. The light from the open window illuminates the figure and the letter in her hands. Her reflection in the open window lets the viewer catch a glimpse of her face while she is reading the message.

X-ray examination revealed that in the early stage, the picture included an image of a cupid in the right top corner.¹⁰ The cupid, eventually erased from the painting and covered with the green curtain, would straightforwardly indicate the amorous character of the letter. “The idea of including a curtain in the painting which seems to form part of the space occupied by the spectator has numerous precedents and became popular in Dutch art around the mid-17th century. This device was partially inspired by reality, as we know from inventories and from paintings of picture collections that some paintings [...] were covered with cloths.[...] Curtains also added an effect of mystery and surprise to a scene, and contributed to its lifelikeness in that it confused the painted with the real space.”¹¹

Elimination of the Amor figure simplifies the form, but not the message of the scene. It creates the aura of mystery and ambiguity, forcing the viewer to muse. It shows the way Vermeer enriched simple activities of everyday life with intriguing uncertainty of their story.

The intimacy, calmness, and the girl's focus on the letter prove Vermeer's mastery in eliciting the intended mood.

Banning chose Vermeer's painting because “it seemed so logical - there was this scarf involved and the fact the way a lot of these women in the Vermeer paintings look is quite similar to how Islamic young girls look. It seemed interesting and provocative idea to ask a Moroccan girl to use her own clothes, but in colors that strongly relate to work of Vermeer, and to photograph her.”

Vermeer was known as the painter of “everyday life” – not only depicting everyday activities, but also presenting women from his milieu. Similarly to the painter, the photographer decided to capture the element of everyday life. Banning's idea was to describe the important part of Dutch society, visible not only in the

⁸ Ibid., pp. 251–252.

⁹ D. Gariff, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁰ Alejandro Vergara, Mariët Westermann, op. cit., pp. 251–252.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 251–252.

Netherlands but also in other western European countries - the veiled Arab female community. The Moroccan veiled girl is in fact the daughter of a Moroccan lady cleaning Banning's house.

Many of the painter's subjects were in caps or veils covering their hair, and those not wearing any kind of headdress were captured with their hair tied back, creating an aura of humility and modesty. Their clothing and the attitude of serenity brings to mind Arab women. Hiding one of their most important physical attributes is a sign of deep obedience and loyalty to Muslim tradition and religion.

The differences between the painting and the photograph are partially caused by difficulty in finding a suitable room – Banning was looking for space which had this 17th century atmosphere without necessarily having to look exactly the same as the scene in the picture. The author admits he had problems finding the right place, due to the modernization most of the houses coming from the period have undergone.

Still, some dissimilarities were intentional – such as the fruits or the content of the letter. More exotic pomegranates and kiwanos replaced typically European apples and peaches, as if to emphasize the girl's foreign origin.

The content of the piece of paper the girl holds in her hands is hard to identify, but the description of the image unravels the mystery - it is not a love letter the figure is reading. It is an application form for an "inburgeringscursus" - Civic Integration Course any immigrant living in the Netherlands is obliged to take.

The dissimilarity of the two above-mentioned letters is striking. A love letter replaced by an application form shifts the meaning of the message from romantic to pragmatic. Is the letter portending good or bad information? Is she forced to take the course to become a part of the society? Or maybe the new motherland with its freedom and possibilities is what the girl longs for? And "inburgeringscursus" is the price she is willing to pay to achieve her dream?

The most important distinction is the window. In Banning's variation of "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window", the Moroccan character is depicted reading a letter at... a closed window. The message of a closed window combined with the letter foreshadows the future seclusion. The girl is suspended between two worlds – the modern one with its promiscuity and focus on individuality, and the Arab one with its customs and submission to strict rules of faith. In spite of the fact that we know her name (Nissrine), the young woman is separated from others, from the public space, and in a way invisibly blocked. The closed window expresses a symbolic meaning – out there lies the promised land, yet somehow, it is still forbidden.

Although, as the Author says, this difference wasn't a part of his initial vision, he wouldn't have changed the effect if he could: "I have to say that the fact that the window was closed, that was a wonderful detail, but it was a coincidence, which I think fitted well. [...] It was in harmony with idea of it."

Turkish Rembrandt

From the Dutch point of view there are two main Islamic groups whose religion, tradition and customs are widely commented on publicly. One is of Moroccan, the other of Turkish origin immigrants.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Jan Six*, 1654Jan Banning, *Turkish Rembrandt*, 2010

*Jan Six*¹² (Rembrandt van Rijn, 1654, The Six collection, The Netherlands) is considered to be one of the most important and beautiful examples of the 17th century portrait. It was not the first time Rembrandt had portrayed his dear friend and patron – Jan Six. The history of the artist etching *Jan Six* dates back to 1647. The painting itself might have been inspired by Rembrandt's previous etching depicting Clemendt de Jonghe, also presented in a full brim hat, a coat and gloves.¹³ Though the body composition is slightly different, it's possible to sense the common denominator between the two figures – both are looking the viewer straight into the eyes.

Rembrandt's technique changed with the dramatic changes in his private life – the loss of his beloved wife and his only child. The strokes of paints became thicker and less precise – it seems as if the painter didn't pay much attention to details, as if hair, buttons or the clothing ornament weren't important enough to bother.

His portraits weren't typical pictures flattering the 'elites' tastes. Rembrandt was interested in revealing the true face of his subjects, unveiling or emphasizing their traits of character. Jan Six's grey riding frock reveals fondness for the countryside, and unbuttoned draped sleeves along with a doublet (in vogue in the 16th century) expose him as a fashionable man.¹⁴

The paintings, including *Jan Six*, prove the mastery of presenting the psychological aspects through the long-studied facial expression.

A viewer may notice that although the artist and his patron originated from different backgrounds, they knew each other, and maybe this acquaintance enabled

¹² The illustration of Rembrandt's *Jan Six* is quoted from: Rijksmuseum, <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/jansix> [19.02.2012].

¹³ See: *Portret Jan Six te zien in Rijksmuseum*, <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/tentoonstellingen/rembrandt-en-jan-six?lang=nl> [17.02.2012].

¹⁴ Ibid.

the painter to create such a casual atmosphere. "Six is depicted in an unusually informal, relaxed and nonchalant manner, creating the illusion of a snapshot. [...] Considering the strikingly relaxed manner of painting used for the portrait, Six must have been a great admirer of Rembrandt's work. For his part, Rembrandt must have known that his style, which was very unusual for the time, would be well-received and that his portrait would be accepted by Six."¹⁵

The figure is looking straight into the painter's eyes and is in the middle of putting on gloves, as if he was impatient with the long posing process Rembrandt was known for.

Turkish Rembrandt came to Banning's mind when he was preparing an assignment for the Rijksmuseum, which displays many of Rembrandt's masterpieces. After finishing his initial *Reconstructing the Rijksmuseum* series¹⁶, he decided to use the museum studio and the previously photographed building worker to create another image for *National Identities*. Banning recalls that "the museum was full of models" – the immigrants of different origins.

This time he chose the member of the second big Islamic group in the Netherlands to play the main role. He thought of re-creating *Jan Six* with someone from the Turkish community and, having already depicted a woman, he chose to have a man in the second case.

As the author admits, "the Turkish version of Rembrandt's Jan Six is pretty straightforward", and the dissimilarities are mainly caused by the concept of updating the portrait to fit the political and social realities of the present Netherlands. The full brim hat is replaced by a blue crash helmet, the grey riding frock by the worker's suit, the cloak and gloves by pieces of the worker's suit – a jacket and protective gloves.

Judging by the model's relaxed pose and slightly seductive gaze, it wasn't his first encounter with the camera.

Banning recreated the color diversity of *Jan Six* – the red jacket contrasts against the dark, almost pitch-black background and enriches the image and the subject with a noble element. Although the photograph depicts just an immigrant physical worker, the viewer may not resist the impression that the model is somehow in rank of a gentleman.

The labour and status of an immigrant doesn't give way to pride and dignity, which radiate from the figure. The image presents a typical immigrant physical worker in an unusual aura of majesty and glory.

Danae Olympia

After having created two previous images, Banning concluded that the problem he was trying to take a stand on was not restricted to the Netherlands only. He

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See: *Reconstructing the Rijksmuseum*, <http://www.janbanning.com/gallery/rijksmuseum-builders/> [16. 02. 2012].

decided to reach out to different European countries and enrich his series with a Manet-inspired Jamaican – Dutch Olympia.



Eduard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863



Jan Banning, *Danae Olympia (Jamaican woman, Yanique, as Olympia)*, 2011

*Olympia*¹⁷ (Eduard Manet, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France) is one of Manet's most controversial paintings. Although the image was inspired by a classical piece of art, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, it was widely commented as a public scandal.¹⁸

The two paintings are quite alike – the viewer may spot the similarities in composition, form and even size. Still, there are many differences. Titian presents the mythological goddess of love, while Manet depicts a well-known Parisian courtesan, using the pseudonym of Olympia. It was neither the first time Manet immortalized Victorine Meurent, nor the first painting to be called scandalous – she was the female figure in *Luncheon on the Grass (Le déjeuner sur l'herbe)*.

Olympia was widely criticized for the ugliness of the model and homogeneous colour of her skin, but the true reason of the ostracism was the painting's lasciviousness. The secret of the painting's rejection lies in the details – although both images portray a naked woman, Manet's model was captured in a provocative pose. Her unabashed expression and bold gaze straight into the viewer's eyes suggest that she wasn't ashamed of her profession.¹⁹ The figure's body-language conveys the message that the woman was no romantic goddess – as a courtesan she was fully conscious of her sexuality and sex appeal. Olympia isn't totally naked, but dressed in accessories – high-heeled shoes, a bracelet and a ribbon as a necklace – which make the scene even more perverse. "In fact the ribbon itself strips the body even more, and by the force of contrast it emphasizes the pearly hue of the skin."²⁰

The dog from Titian's painting, a symbol of faithfulness, was replaced by a black cat, a symbol of independence and rapaciousness.

¹⁷ The illustration of Manet's *Olympia* is quoted from: WikiPaintings, <http://www.wiki-paintings.org/en/edouard-manet/olympia-1863> [19.02.2012].

¹⁸ *Manet*, the series *Klasycy sztuki*, vol. 17, edited by „Rzeczpospolita”, Warszawa 2006, pp. 54–55.

¹⁹ D. Gariff, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁰ *Édouard Manet*, the series *Wielcy Malarze – ich życie, inspiracje i dzieło*, no 5, ed. Joanna Bonis, Christine Gaudin, Liliana Sonik, Eaglemoss Polska, Siechnice 1998, pp. 14–15.

The pitch-black servant's face is almost impossible to see and to clearly distinguish from the incredibly dark background. The flowers in her hands are white orchids, probably sent in as a gift by one of the lady's lovers.

The painting is unusual in terms of contrast between light and darkness – the servant's dark skin is in contrast with her white dress, the dark background is in contrast with white sheets covering the bed.

Trying to draw inspiration from other European countries, Banning chose *Olympia* to be the third archetype in *National Identities* series.

"I thought of this Manet's painting "Olympia" rather quickly because it was so obvious. There was this white woman, and the black servant behind it, so it seemed like an interesting idea to take this French cultural icon and turn that around." The author admits that *Danae Olympia* was the most challenging of the three images he had created. Banning describes the three most important factors of creating this image, as: the light, the model, and the idea. He didn't have problems with the right model – a Jamaican woman taking part in "inburgeringscursus" Civic Integration Course was not only enthusiastic about the project, but she also shared Banning's political view.

Still, there were numerous difficulties, such as Manet's "flat" light, which basically doesn't have one source, the composition elements, or the complexity of the two figures' arrangement. "The basic idea was of course to turn around black and white. But then the visual aspects such as composition start to compete with its content." Switching all dark elements into their light version had its both artistic and practical flaws, especially that the photographer can't afford as much freedom in creating the image as a painter.

Except for the obvious difference, *Olympia* and servant's skin colour swap, the viewer may notice the difference in background lightening and composition – the artist inserts a painting in the place of the problematic "rectangle" in the background behind the servant's head. Banning considers inserting Titian's painting to be not only too obvious but also regarded it as a boast on the knowledge of the masterpiece. Instead, he came up with the idea of Rembrandt's image *Danae* (1636) also presenting a naked mythological beauty. The subtle joke of the photographer was the arrangement of Danae's body with her hand stretched as if she wanted to greet the modern *Olympia*.

Another dissimilarity lies in the flowers the servant brought. Instead of white luxurious orchids, she holds a bunch of deep orange and red flowers, bringing to mind the exotic origin of Banning's *Olympia*. Jamaican *Olympia* also differs from the original – there is dignity and strength emanating from her facial expression and body-language. Lustful ribbon is replaced by a simple string of beads in vivid orange-red colour, and sleek hairstyle gave way to rampant African dreadlocks exposing pride in her descent.

One of the most noticeable differences is also the lack of a cat, or Titian-inspired dog next to the main figure. The artist's vision wasn't to copy the painting with the camera, but to reinvent it. "I started thinking how to find the opposite of the cat, which also speaks this international language [...] and which works in different

cultures and languages. So you can think of birds, a hawk is interesting, but then again a hawk would be kind of ridiculous. In the end I thought of a mouse. It is also an interesting contrast to the cat, it is very vulnerable, fragile. Of course the problem is it is really hard to see it in the reproduction, but if you see it in an exhibition and there is the big print you would see the mouse. Not immediately, but you'll see."

Inserting modern immigrants into the masterpieces of great masters leads the viewer to muse about the immigrants of the past. As the first images of *National Identities* series were based on the 17th century Dutch paintings and the series itself was the Author's answer to the immigration debate in the Netherlands, the viewer tends to focus on the country.

Although we consider the phenomenon of immigration to have occurred in the 20th century, this opinion is not true. The period marked by the influx of immigrants was the Golden Age of the Netherlands. According to Johan Huizinga, "the Dutch army consisted mostly of Germans, Frenchmen, Swiss, Englishmen and Scots. In this way many foreign families joined the circle of Dutch aristocracy. [...] Many officers of navy were of foreign descent, and navy service was not only the nationality-creating factor, but also means of consolidating the society."²¹

Despite the fact that the cultural diversity of that period had no strong reflection in the 17th century art, the immigrants' omnipresence since then is unquestionable, not only in the army or navy but also in such spheres as literature and philosophy. "The 17th century was economically and culturally Holland's Golden Age. The percentage of immigrants in the Netherlands was about the same as it is now. One quarter to one half of all the sailors, soldiers and other employees of the Dutch colonial VOC (East-Indies Trading Company) fleet were from foreign countries. Many of the <Dutch> national figures or their offspring were immigrants themselves: philosophers Descartes (France) and Spinoza (Portugal), the great writer Joost van den Vondel (present-day Germany), painters such as Frans Hals and Gerard de Lairese (Flanders), Govert Flinck and Caspar Netscher (Germany)."²²

Maybe the message Banning wants to convey is the fact that immigrants are not the outsiders who appeared out of the blue, but that they form an important part of the society their ancestors have built. The countries involved in the immigration debate such as the Netherlands, Great Britain or France, were partly created by the hands of foreigners.

In our pursuit of multicultural Europe we have gone too far to recreate fossilized national schemes. Would we really like to take these steps back? If we fairly take a look at the history of Europe, can we deny the contribution of immigrants to the development of the Western-European civilization?

And if we honestly look deep inside the history of our families, would we really be able to find ourselves non-foreigners?

²¹ Johan Huizinga, *Kultura XVII-wiecznej Holandii*, transl. Piotr Oczko, Universitas, Kraków 2008, pp. 64–65.

²² *The Clasp...*

„Tożsamość narodowa” według Jana Banninga. Fotograficzne wariacje na temat ikon malarstwa

Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje prace holenderskiego fotografika Jana Banninga, który w swoim cyklu *National Identities* podejmuje kwestię imigracji obecną w krajach Europy Zachodniej.

To właśnie antyimigracyjne nastawienie, wszechobecna dyskusja nad problemami mniejszości etnicznych oraz atmosfera ksenofobii poddały artyście pomysł na serię pastiszów dzieł Vermeera, Rembrandta i Maneta. Odtwarzając obrazy europejskich mistrzów malarstwa we współczesnych realiach kulturowych, autor przedstawia swoje stanowisko w toczącej się w Holandii debacie politycznej.

Artykuł krótko opisuje oryginały, ich unowocześnione fotograficzne wersje, jak również istniejące między nimi różnice i ich symboliczne znaczenie.

Karolina Chowaniec-Stawiarz
studiuje na kierunku
filologia angielska na Wydziale Filologicznym UP