Review
Reviewed Work(s): Rembrandt. The Painter at Work by Ernst van de Wetering
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pieces, especially those painted for the Northern Netherlands, receive the greatest weight of attention, since they are entirely autographic works on which Bloemaert lavished all his resources of figural invention, seldom reusing motifs. Seelig avers that the transition from the 1610s to the 1620s, such as the Adoration of the Magi of c.1623 and the Adoration of the Shepherds of 1623, painted respectively for the Jesuit church in Brussels and a huijskerk (house church, i.e. concealed church) in The Hague, are so distinct that they mark a change in the artist's notion of church - as well as the many Jesuit altar-pieces, and court commissions. He concentrates on the three great altar-pieces devoted to the eschatological Augustinian themes of the Holland Mission. He does not expound the artist's skilful manipulations of 's-Hertogenbosch, which in turn incorporates the signature iconography of Bloemaert's patron, Bishop Gisbertus Masius, devoted to the eschatological Augustinian doctrine of the double intercession. The corollary case studies of the Eucharistic print of 1629, show how invention functions for Bloemaert as a programme of drawing.

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The study of Rembrandt's painting technique has been one of the most rewarding areas of research over recent decades and, although they were not alone in advancing our knowledge in this respect, Ernst van de Wetering and his colleagues on the Rembrandt Research Project have been among the leaders in the field. The Corpus is, however, concerned not with the overall enamel painting by painting. The present book extrapolates Van de Wetering's own contributions to the latter to provide an excellent synthesis of what has been learnt from the close examination of every part of the make-up of a panel or a canvas painted by Rembrandt. The author also adds new enlightening ideas and information, notably in his discussion of Rembrandt's later works, not yet covered by the Corpus which has so far reached only 1642. Van de Wetering takes a very broad approach to his subject, working with the methods and techniques going back to the Italian renaissance. As one would expect, the example of Titian plays a major part in this discussion. Given the ground that it covers, the book could easily have become a straightforward handbook to the subject, and a very welcome one at that. But what gives it its particular quality is that the author has written from a personal point of view, sometimes writing on his own experiences. The book is - if one may be allowed to say such a thing about a serious scholarly work - a gripping good read.

Van de Wetering makes clear that the book does not claim to provide all the answers, and it is essentially a report on work in progress. One unresolved area is discussed in the chapter entitled 'The Search for Rembrandt's Binding Medium'. But how far technical analysis has progressed can be seen when current knowledge is compared, as it is here, to what was known in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the works of such scholars as Max Doerner. The author demonstrates an impressive grasp of the literature of both theory and practice going back to the artist's day and beyond, to the period of Cennino Cennini. He makes, for example, very good use of the treatise by Juan de Nostradamus, which, although essentially derivative in its ideas, can be quarried for personal recollections about Rembrandt. From Van Hooogstraten's remark that 'Jan Lievens was expert in seeking wonders in smeared pigments, varnishes and oils', Van de Wetering is able to argue convincingly that it was Lievens rather than Rembrandt who was the more adventurous in technique. There is necessarily much scientific information, but it is readily comprehensible since the author writes as an art historian (and former painter). Some readers may be glad to know that there are relatively few of those paint samples so beloved by scientists.

Van de Wetering takes us through the whole process of producing a picture, starting with a detailed analysis of supports, both panel and canvas. In addition to other supports, the author has drawn attention to Rembrandt's use of mahogany boards which had served as boxes to transport sugarloaves from America, proving once more Rembrandt's inventive attitude towards materials. There are illuminating remarks about grounds, especially the use of a tinted ground which provided the artist with a middle tone. This is followed by a study of Rembrandt's method of laying in his basic composition in monochrome. Unlike Rubens, in whose works underdrawing can often be detected, Rembrandt worked directly on his support, which explains the relatively small number of related drawings. It also establishes that assistants were not used on paintings - or at least not until a relatively late stage - since Rembrandt's method required an overall holding-together ('houting') of the compositional elements.

Developing the discovery made in the Corpus, Van de Wetering shows that Rembrandt followed a consistent pattern in working from background to foreground (as recommended by Gerard de Lairese in his Groot Schilderboek), which was repeated in his method of working up an etching plate. (There are good parallels made between Rembrandt the painter and Rembrandt the etcher.) But this procedure was not de

This is an eminently useful, generously illustrated collection of fourteen articles on aspects of seventeenth-century Dutch realism, eight of which were newly commissioned or translated. Wayne Franits’s introduction and Konrad Renger’s essay give a historiography of interpretations of Dutch realism, and Franits especially focuses on the competing interpretations of realism as feint for symbolic value (Eddy de Jongh) and as pictorial, inherently meaningful expression of a Dutch way of knowing the world through vision (Svetlana Alpers). Franits’s inclusion of lengthy hard-to-find introduction to an exhibition of 1971 does justice to the iconographic position, which is further bolstered by Jan Emmens’s essay on Gerard Dou. Alpers’s much less ambitious article, originally written for a more general audience, seems a choice of convenience; it is not an equally weighty or detailed record of her seminal argument. Celeste Brusati’s essay on the self-referential, mirroring trickery of still-life painters lends support to Alpers’s abbreviated claims for the premier Dutch artists placed on re-crafting optical and technical attempts to offer historical terms for the stakes attached by artists and viewers to cunning imitation are well represented in articles by Eric Jan Sluijter on the seductive lifelikeness of painting, Alison McNeil Kettering on divergent responses to Terborch’s thrilling satins, and Lawrence Goedde on conventions that produce the ‘natural’ in landscape. Walter Liedtke makes a cogent plea that art historians might adopt seventeenth-century concerns for hand and style.

For all the sage inclusiveness of Franits’s understanding of realism, there are absences. No article addresses the ‘low’ comic character of much Dutch genre painting, the kind of picture most widely derided and praised for its scruffy realism from the eighteenth century on. Ivan Gaskell’s consideration of the painting of smokers is a nuanced socio-historical reading of a subgenre of painting, Alison McNeil Kettering on divergent responses to Terborch’s thrilling satins, and Lawrence Goedde on conventions that produce the ‘natural’ in landscape. Walter Liedtke makes a cogent plea that art historians might adopt seventeenth-century concerns for hand and style.

As a final bonne bouche, Van de Wetering publishes as the frontispiece a new self-portrait, the details of which are printed on the inside of the dustjacket, posing, incidentally, a nice problem for librarians. (If the front figure was finished first and the portrait, the details of which are printed on the inside of the dustjacket, posed, inciden
tally, a nice problem for librarians. (If the front figure was finished first and the second then fitted in behind. In the late Rembrandt, as Van de Wetering himself notes, the artist varies his procedure, but invariably maintains the background as the tonal base for the picture.

There is an especially rewarding chapter on the question of smooth and rough surfaces in Rembrandt’s use of glazes, which, Van de Wetering implies, were not as fundamental to his technique for differentiating colour in his later years, as Max Doerner in his seminal book on artists’ techniques had argued. He is also able to establish that in, for example, The Night Watch, Rembrandt applied a completely clear varnish, and did not, as some have said, use coloured varnishes.

Van de Wetering does not confine himself exclusively to the medium of painting and follows up new ideas in other fields. Recalling his war-time experience of depri
vations in Holland, when, because of the shortage of paper, he found himself drawing on slate, which could be re-used, he develops the theory that Rembrandt, and other artists, may have used ‘tafellets’ for sketching, either in the landscape or in the studio, the results of which would of course have been lost as soon as the slate was wiped. And he points to a number of drawings from Rembrandt’s earlier years, which can be interpreted as a reflection of such a practice.

As a final bonne bouche, Van de Wetering publishes as the frontispiece a new self-portrait, the details of which are printed on the inside of the dustjacket, posing, incidentally, a nice problem for librarians. (If the latter despair at finding a solution to the problem, they can take comfort that the article will, however, be re-published in a forthcoming number of Oud Holland.) The painting, now in a private collection, has been known for some time, but has always been regarded as a copy. It is now rightly reinstated as a genuine signed and dated panel of 1632, with clearly identifiable references to other contemporary works by Rembrandt.

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