

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Rembrandt. *The Painter at Work* by Ernst van de Wetering

Review by: Christopher White

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pieces, especially those painted for the Northern Netherlands, receive the greatest weight of attention, since they are entirely autograph works on which Bloemaert lavished all his resources of figural invention, seldom reusing motifs. Seelig avers that contemporary altar-pieces of 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 *huiskerk* (house church, i.e. concealed church) in The Hague, are so distinct that they mark a change in the artist's notion of style, which becomes a mode of pictorial diction altered to accommodate various discursive fields.

In Part I, Seelig wields the venerable tools of *Stilgeschichte* with great finesse, dwelling on two radical stylistic alterations that initiated the transition in Bloemaert's conception of style: first, his assimilation of Caravaggesque devices in paintings of 1621–22, such as the *Supper at Emmaus*, that respond to works by his former student Gerrit van Honthorst, who returned to Utrecht in 1620; and second, his use of pastoral conventions in court commissions, such as the *Theagines* series of 1624–28, that seem once again to follow Van Honthorst's lead. Seelig opposes Marcel Roethlisberger's view, stated in his magisterial catalogue raisonné of 1993, that 'thematic changes are rather rare in Bloemaert's *œuvre*', arguing instead that such transpositions play a major rôle in his practice of emulation (the *Cimon and Pero* of c.1613, for example, cites Rubens's *Samson and Delilah* of c.1609). This practice is based in drawing, which is the means through which Bloemaert appropriates his sources and perfects his inventions.

In Part II Seelig examines the conditions that circumscribed Bloemaert's production of altar-pieces and court commissions. He concentrates on the three great altar-pieces painted for the major churches of 's-Hertogenbosch – the *Adoration of the shepherds* of 1612 for the church of the Poor Clares, the *Double intercession of Christ and the Virgin* of 1615 for the cathedral, and the *Vision of Ignatius at La Storta* of c.1625 for the Jesuit church – as well as the many Jesuit altar-pieces that attest the artist's service to the aims of the Holland Mission. He does not elaborate sufficiently upon these aims, however, nor does he explain how these works – one of which, the *Vision of Ignatius at La Storta*, became canonical within the order – functioned as objects of devotion. These are crucial issues, given Bloemaert's documented attachment to the Jesuits, whose programme of reform, as school texts such as Cyprien Soarez's *De arte rhetorica* and meditational manuals such as Jeronimó Nadal's *Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia* make clear, embraced artifice, both pictorial and rhetorical, as a prime agent of renewal. Seelig also neglects to consider the nature of Bloemaert's success as a court painter: although he refers to paintings such as the *Amaryllis and Myrtilla* of c.1635 as idylls, he does not expound the artist's skilful manipulation of the devices of poetic lyric. Nor does he interrogate closely R. Schillemans's suggestive observation that the *huiskerk*, being both a habitation and a church, conditions the format and function of the North

Netherlandish altar-piece, underscoring its status as *Andachtsbild*.¹ Seelig's disinclination to interpret his findings fully correlates with his reluctance to set forth the notion of style upon which his analyses are predicated. Throughout his book, style seems a curiously ahistorical category, grounded neither in contemporary poetics and rhetorical theory nor in any doctrine of imitation.

The book's chief strength lies in the author's brilliant anatomy of Bloemaert's faculty of invention, which operates in and through the practice of drawing. In Part III, Seelig provides three case studies of Bloemaert's use of compositional drawings to explore thematic problems. In Seelig's view, these drawings, rather than illustrating a set theme, serve as a matrix for the crystallisation of both iconographical and pictorial form. The Berlin drawing of the *Angelic Pietà* of c.1615, based on Hans Baldung's woodcut *Angelic Pietà* and Philip Galle's *Adoration of the Trinity* after Marten de Vos, proves surprisingly to adumbrate the great composition drawing for the cathedral altar-piece 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 *Euphraxia* print of 1612 and the *Four church fathers* print of 1629, show how invention functions for Bloemaert as a programme of drawing.

WALTER S. MELION

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

¹R. SCHILLEMANS: 'Schilderijen in Noordnederlandsche katholieke kerken uit de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw', *De zeventiende eeuw*, VIII [1992], pp.41–52, esp. p.42.

Rembrandt. The Painter at Work. By Ernst van de Wetering. xv + 340 pp. incl. 331 col. pls. + b. & w. ills. (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 1997), £49.95. ISBN 90–5256–239–7.

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 with piecing together the overall *œuvre* 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, with an analysis of methods and practices 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 drawing on his own practical 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 Samuel van Hoogstraten, which, although essentially derivative in its ideas, can be quarried for personal recollections about Rembrandt. From Van Hoogstraten'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 species of panel, 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, particularly 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 ('*houding*') of the composition.

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 Lairesse 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 as *de*

rigueur in Rembrandt's earlier work as Van de Wetering implies; David Bomford has pointed out to me that it was not, for example, followed in the painting of *The two philosophers*, dated 1628, in Melbourne, in which 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 manners of painting – often combined, as in *The Night Watch*, in one work. Titian is naturally rated as a major *exemplum* in this matter, but Van de Wetering believes that it was the legend of the great Venetian as much as his direct example which influenced Rembrandt. As the author demonstrates, Rembrandt was no slavish imitator, and differed from all others, including Titian, by his remarkable variation in the handling of paint. This is followed by a study of Rembrandt's use of glazes, which, Van de Wetering proves, 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 sometimes 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 deprivations 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 '*tafelets*' 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 republished 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.

CHRISTOPHER WHITE

Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered. Edited by Wayne Franits. 274 pp. incl. 122 b. & w. ills. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), £45/\$70. ISBN 0-521-49609-8.

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 realist painting, and they inevitably focus on the competing interpretations of realism as feint for symbolic value (Eddy de Jongh) and as pictorial, inherently meaningful exponent of a Dutch way of knowing the world through vision (Svetlana Alpers). Franits's inclusion of De Jongh's 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 premium Dutch artists placed on re-crafting optical experience. Other promising attempts to offer historical terms for the stakes attached by artists and viewers to cunning imitation are well represented in articles by Eric Jan Sluiter 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 paintings of smokers is a nuanced socio-historical reading of a subgenre of this sort but hardly examines its artistic challenges and rewards. To fill this void, a translation of Hans-Joachim Raupp's article on renaissance comic theory as a framework for the production and reception of these works (*Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, XLVI [1983], pp.401-18) would have been welcome. Jan Emmens's charting of the critical reception of such realism, which can also be phrased as anti-classicism, still awaits wider accessibility, and a section of his *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (1968) might have been translated for this purpose. These omissions are felt especially because the last essays in the collection show only tangential interest in the issues Franits sets out as central problems. Yet their presence is justifiable for their vigorous insight into the mediation and refraction of social experience in pictures. These contributions by Ann Adams and Herman Roodenburg on the historical anthropology of physical bearing, and by Elizabeth Honig on the gendering of interiors, begin to realise Franits's hope that more varied attentiveness to the cultural rôles of painting will complicate a binary debate that pits representation against symbol.

MARIËT WESTERMANN
Rutgers University, New Brunswick

The Buildings of England. London 1: The City of London. By Simon Bradley and Nikolaus Pevsner. 704 pp. incl. 155 b. & w. ills., and 59 figs. and maps. (Penguin Books, London, 1997), £30. ISBN 0-14-071092-2.

In a century's time bibliophiles and book dealers will have a field day with *The Buildings of England* volumes for London. Their story must be as convoluted as any in the history of publishing. So for the record: the present volume is one half of the 1952 *London 1*, which in addition to the Square Mile treated Westminster and that funny slice of Holborn sandwiched between the two historic cities. At that time, two volumes were thought to be quite enough for the metropolis: one for the real historic centre and another for the largely mediocre periphery. Peckham and Islington had no historic architecture, surely? There was, in addition, a sad, slender volume for Middlesex, that long-lamented county. Then came the Greater London Council (1965), good news for some but bad news for Pevsner, whose carefully laid plans had now to be redrawn. At a stroke the Great Wen's boundaries had been bumped out to the line that would soon be marked in concrete by the M25, swallowing all Middlesex and embracing the suburban verges of Kent, Surrey, Hertfordshire, and Essex, London's backgarden.

Administrative changes are not the only things with which the inexorable Pevsner project has had to contend. In the decades after the first *London 1*, an already huge London literature swelled to mammoth proportions, and a whole new specialism in London's more recent architectural and urban history was born. The craze for Victorian architecture came just a little too late to make much difference to Bridget Cherry's 1973 revision, the most recent before that under review here, in which Simon Bradley has made full use of the myriad historians, who have slowly and steadily been filling in the mosaic of London's history. As a result London now needs a total of five (to be honest six) Pevsners. Some have already appeared (*London 2: South and 3: North West*), and others are waiting in the wings (*4: North and 5: East and Docklands*). Muddying the bibliographic waters further is the advance publication of that bit of *London 5* devoted to the Docklands (timed to coincide with the winding up of the LDDC), as well as a special selection from the present volume under review on the City Churches (published in July 1998). And because *London 2* and *London 3* appeared before it was deemed necessary to give the City and Westminster their own volumes, the new and improved *London 1* will be split into two parts, of which Bradley's is one.

Bradley's first Pevsner (let's call it *London 1 [A]*) is beyond reproach, almost beyond criticism partly because, like all such writing it does not need to present an argument and so is by nature constructed to frustrate discourse. But mostly it is beyond reproach because it is of such uniformly high quality. As with all Pevsners the writing is elegant and wonderfully condensed. Thus, of the galleried library at the heart of the Patent Office, designed in 1897 by Sir John Taylor