Michiel van Musscher and Bartholomeus van der Helst: theft of honour or creative imitation?

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Aemulatio

Imitation, emulation and invention in Netherlandish art from 1500 to 1800
Essays in honor of Eric Jan Sluijter

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Michiel van Musscher and Bartholomeus van der Helst: Theft of Honour or Creative Imitation?

F R A N S   G R I J Z E N H O U T

In 1981 the Amsterdams Historisch Museum bought a charming picture by Michiel van Musscher (1645-1705) dating from 1668 (fig. 1, color plate 28): a view of the Haarlemmerdijk in Amsterdam towards the Haarlemmerpoort in the west, with a female vegetable seller behind a heavily laden wheelbarrow, and a couple of children - one of whom inflates a pig’s bladder - standing to the left, while others play in the street in the background. In the distance, cattle are being driven into the city on their way to a local butcher.¹ The museum bought this painting primarily because of the topographical precision with which Van Musscher depicted this part of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, which did not attract many painters.² Van Musscher’s rendering of the houses between the Baanbrugsteeg and the Haarlemmerplein affords a unique view of a variety of shops along this lively street in the bustling city. From the left can be discerned a baker’s shop with bread and biscuits on the counter, a cheese seller, the signboard of a school, a red deer antler sign (of a grocery store or apothecary given the two pots of herbs on the outside counter), and a signboard with a sun. When the painting was restored in 1983, a complete pig’s carcass on a stepladder emerged, which had obviously been painted over at some point in time. The carcass radically changes the balance of the composition and also explains more clearly the presence of the pig’s bladder in the boy’s hands and the dog sniffing in the foreground (fig. 2).

Van Musscher’s view of the Haarlemmerdijk is one of his earliest known paintings. Houbraken, apparently on the basis of a written statement by Van Musscher himself, notes that young Michiel, who was born in Rotterdam in 1645, received his first drawing lessons during a two-
Michiel van Musscher, *View of the Haarlemmerdijk in Amsterdam to the West, with a Female Vegetable Seller*, 1668, oil on canvas, 87 x 75.5 cm (before restoration), Amsterdams Historisch Museum.
Michiel van Musscher, View of the Haarlemmerdijk in Amsterdam to the West, with a Female Vegetable Seller and a pig on a Stepladder (after restoration), see fig. 1.
month period in 1660 from Martinus Saeghmolen, who then lived in Amsterdam. Van Musscher then studied for some time with Abraham van den Tempel (1622-1672), in or from 1661, also in Amsterdam. He received seven lessons from Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667) in 1665 and completed his artistic education with a three-month apprenticeship in the workshop of Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685) in Haarlem in 1667. Until recently Van Musscher was believed to have settled permanently in Amsterdam only after his formative years. However, in 2001 Lambour demonstrated that Van Musscher’s father, Jan Jacobsz. van Musscher, a grocer and a painter, had already moved from Rotterdam to Amsterdam early in 1662, together with his second wife Catalina Martens, Michiel van Musscher’s stepmother. Jan Jacobsz. van Musscher may have done so for the same reason as the father of his deceased first wife, Michiel (I) Comans, who left the Rotterdam Mennonite community over some divisive religious issues and moved to Amsterdam in the same period. Michiel van Musscher portrayed his son, the calligrapher and painter Michiel (II) Comans, together with his third wife Elisabeth van der Meersch in 1669, probably as proof of their close ties of family and friendship. The relationship between the two families was so strong that Jan Jacobsz. van Musscher was buried in a grave belonging to Michiel Comans in the graveyard of Sloterdijk Church near Amsterdam in 1670. Thanks to the record of Jan Jacobsz.’s burial, we know that the Van Musscher family actually lived on the Haarlemmerdijk in 1670, precisely the street Michiel van Musscher painted in 1668. The painter seems to have lived there until his first marriage in 1678. We know of another painting by Van Musscher, dated 1669, with a scene of the Eenhornsluis, which bridged the Prinsengracht between the Haarlemmerstraat and the Haarlemmerdijk, only 200 yards away from the spot he had painted a year earlier (fig. 3). This picture shows a view of the Prinsengracht to the south, with the tower of the Westerkerk in the back, and, again, a female vegetable seller, this time carrying baskets filled with groceries, in conversation with a maid. The profession of the women in both paintings was that of a so-called uitslijtster, a woman allowed by the city to buy groceries at the vegetable market on the Prinsengracht (just beyond the Westerkerk in the background of Van Musscher’s painting) - which basically served as a wholesale market - and sell them elsewhere in town. There is little doubt in my mind that Van Musscher used the same person as his model in both pictures. He ‘portrayed’ this woman, whom he probably knew quite well, twice in her daily activities on and around the Haarlemmerdijk, incorporating her into a peculiar mix of realistic cityscape and genre elements.
One wonders if Van Musscher took such pains to represent the houses on the Haarlemmerdijk because he lived in that very part of the street himself, and if the woman he depicted twice was a friend, relative or neighbour. We know that Van Musscher’s family did not live in one of the houses on the Haarlemmerdijk depicted by Van Musscher, but rather close by. The widow of Jan Jacobsz. van Musscher, Catalina Martens, is mentioned in 1674 as living on the same side of the Haarlemmerdijk, but five to eight houses east (i.e. to the left) from the corner with the alley painted by her stepson in 1668. She lived with her stepchildren in the house of,
or very near to the house of, a certain Lambert Goosens Das, who was a speckvercoper, a seller of bacon, which brings us back to the pig on the ladder. Did Van Musscher paint this picture for him, as a gift for a friend, or as payment as a tenant or customer? And, how does the woman behind the wheelbarrow relate to this? We can only speculate.

We must also take into account the possibility that Michiel van Musscher ‘invented’ this realistic looking row of houses and shops, or even devised a new combination of existing stores in a new composition, and tried to sell it on the free market as the enchanting painting it still is. The fact that a baker, Jan Lindeman, appears to have owned a house on the opposite corner of the Baanbrugsteeg must caution us again that Van Musscher’s painting is not necessarily a mirror of a situation that once really existed. The vine tendrils curling in the upper left corner of the painting - a plant not likely to have grown in seventeenth-century Amsterdam - also point to a new invention by Van Musscher. Together with the pig - traditionally slaughtered in the month of November - and the different kinds of cabbage in the wheelbarrow, the vine may refer to the season of autumn, which harmonizes with the reference to the theme of vanity as represented by the children playing with the bladder. Van Musscher must have decided not to depict ‘autumn’ in any explicit or allegorical way, but merely allude to it by ‘picturing’ this scene in a deceptively realistic looking shopping street in seventeenth-century Amsterdam.

Trying to position Van Musscher’s invention in the context of his personal and artistic background, it is useful to remember that he came from Rotterdam, where Hendrick Sorgh (c. 1610-1670) painted market scenes in the 1660s, and that he had studied both with Metsu and Van Ostade. We know of a beautiful view of the Amsterdam vegetable market painted by Metsu around 1660, now in the Louvre, which is not only another fine mixture of cityscape with genre elements, but also of the intermingling of art and personal life in seventeenth-century painting. Metsu, in fact, lived in an alley that came out onto this part of the Prinsengracht. In addition, we know of pigs on ladders in paintings by Van Ostade, albeit mostly in stables. Van Musscher may also have been aware of Jan Victors’ (1619-1676) uncomplicated scenes of a swine butcher or a greengrocer’s store in a village from around 1650, and of some works by Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693) from the late 1650s - for example his picture of a slaughtered pig with some children playing with a pig’s bladder, his images of milk or vegetable sellers at the door, usually with a cityscape in the background, and his entertaining market scenes with wrangling female vendors, perhaps a mild critique of the lower
Van Musscher, however, seems to have been unwilling to make a critical or ironic statement. On the contrary, his work honours the day-to-day-labour of a working woman he seems to have known quite well, without comment. One might well say that Van Musscher succeeded in integrating different aspects of their work into a coherent composition without explicitly quoting one of his possible sources of inspiration.

Our view of young Van Musscher’s performance in terms of artistic invention and independence may, however, have to be corrected by our knowledge that his composition bears a striking resemblance to a picture by Bartholomeus van der Helst (1613-1670) of 1666 (fig. 4). Van der Helst gives a view of the Amsterdam Nieuwmarkt to the north with the Sint Antonispoort in the background, a female vegetable seller arriving at the right, and a pig’s carcass figuring prominently to the left, accompanied by four children with a bladder – exactly the same ingredients in Van Musscher’s two-year later painting.

The similarities between the two are so conspicuous that it is hard to believe they are coincidental. We must surmise that Van Musscher knew Van der Helst’s picture one way or the other. But what prompted Van Musscher to follow Van der Helst in so many respects, and how should we assess this pursuit in terms of imitation and emulation?
We do not know for what purpose Van der Helst painted the picture that may have inspired Van Musscher. Van der Helst’s widow kept it, together with some 30 other paintings, after her husband’s death in 1670. In need of money, she sold many of them in 1671, but kept this particular one. Several days before her death in 1679, she tried to reclaim the picture from her daughter, with whom it had been stored for some time. On that occasion it was described as ‘a large painting, being a female vegetable seller with a wheelbarrow with fruit, together with a pig hanging from a ladder, everything painted after life by her deceased husband’. After that, we lose track of the painting until 1756, when it was sold as ‘a capital piece with a view on the New Market and life size figures, painted extraordinarily beautifully and pleasingly by P. van der Elst’ at an Amsterdam auction. From there it entered, directly or indirectly, the famous collection of Count Gotzkowski in Berlin, and then the collections of Empress Catherine the Great in 1764.

It is, indeed, a ‘capital’ piece, measuring 201 x 220 cm, which implies that the common uitslijster at the right is painted on a truly royal scale! Despite the many similarities with Van Musscher’s painting, we must remember that size and scale really matter when comparing the two works. In Van der Helst’s painting the woman to the right and the carcass to the left protrude from the canvas in a direct, almost confrontational way. The remark that ‘everything’ in this picture was painted ‘after life’ confirms its particularly realistic qualities. Again, as in Van Musscher’s painting, the woman is so individualistically rendered that she can hardly be taken for a common genre figure. The same applies – to a lesser extent – to several of the four children at the left. The vantage point from which the view of the Sint Antonispoort is taken conforms exactly to the location of the house rented by Van der Helst. Seen in this light, the painting is another example of a genre scene with possible portrait elements and references to the painter’s personal topography and biography.

Even more than is the case of the Van Musscher, Van der Helst’s painting represents a true exception in his oeuvre. Not only do we know of no genre paintings of this kind or cityscapes by his hand, the social status of the woman is also completely at odds with the ones he portrayed in the course of his long and very successful career. All of Van der Helst’s sitters are from the most distinguished mercantile and regent classes of Amsterdam seventeenth-century society, and he was able to procure the highest possible prices for his fashionable likenesses. However, commissions diminished little by little and his work was fetching lower prices by the 1660s. When Van der Helst produced this painting, he was involved in a bitter struggle with one of his clients, Pieter van de Venne, over a suitable
price for a family portrait that the artist had painted in 1664. A striking element in the legal dispute is that Van der Helst confessed to witnesses twice in 1665 that he was willing to paint an extra picture of a male or female fish-monger to compensate his client for the difference between the price they had settled upon originally (Dfl. 1000) and the estimated value of the family portrait (Dfl. 400). Thus, Van der Helst may have painted (or have been willing to paint) a genre scene of the kind we are discussing and appears to have brought it into price negotiations. Did the piece with the vegetable seller serve a similar goal? Given its size, this is hardly conceivable. Why was it still among his belongings at his death, and why did his widow want to keep it with her throughout her life? This led Van der Helst’s biographer, De Gelder, to assume that the scene reminded Van der Helst’s widow of happier and wealthier days. However, this may be an overly romantic interpretation of a scene that would have appeared to most contemporaries as a representation of low city life.

The work of earlier Flemish artists may have resonated with Van der Helst - who seems to have had Flemish origins - when he conceived this particular painting. In the final decades of the sixteenth and early years of the seventeenth century, painters like Lucas (1535-1597) and Marten van Valckenborch (1534-1612) and Frans Snijders (1579-1657) wrought many capital images of vegetable and fish stalls on the marketplace, sometimes with a recognizable cityscape in the background, and sometimes as clear allegories of the seasons. It may have made sense that a painting of the same size (and of the same value) of a dead swan and dead cattle by Valckenborch or Snijders served as a pendant to the Van der Helst in the Gotzkowski collection.

Now, did Van Musscher try to imitate, or indeed to emulate, Van der Helst with this particular painting? When Van Musscher painted his view of the Haarlemmerdijk, he had recently finished his artistic education and was just starting out in the competitive Amsterdam art market. Van der Helst, on the other hand, was an established artist who until then had been immensely successful. Earlier in his career, in 1642, he seems to have entered into a wager with one of his clients that he could deliver a certain group portrait earlier than his supposed master Elias Nicolaesz. Pickenoy (1565-1640) could finish a militia company. The two-year difference between the Van der Helst and the Van Musscher, however, makes it highly improbable that they were executed in any kind of direct competition.

Van der Helst kept his view of the Sint Antonispoort among his personal belongings, which does not help us to understand the possible relationship between this work and Van Musscher’s painting of two years later. We have no knowledge of close personal or professional contact between the
older Van der Helst and the young Van Musscher (or his teachers), let alone of young Michiel’s urge to imitate, equal or even surpass the work of his successful older colleague. Yet were this case, we may conclude that he succeeded quite well. Although both paintings suffer from a certain *horror vacui*, Van Musscher’s painting looks more coherent, probably because he made clever use of the perspective of the houses along the street, which contributes to the overall integration of the different elements of the composition. Van der Helst, in contrast, created a fairly brutal transition between the dark and anonymous wall behind the carcass and the Sint Antonispoort in the middle ground.

This case study cannot and will not account for the applicability of the concepts of imitation and emulation to Dutch painting of the seventeenth century in general. The concept though is very useful when analyzing the development of young artists, especially in their formative years, and particularly in cases where they trained in a larger workshop. It seems plausible that a master like Rembrandt encouraged his pupils to compete with each other (as is common practice in education of all times) and with himself in the 1630s, making them copy and imitate his own work and indeed, in the end, emulate his standards. However, this is much more difficult to verify for artists trained in smaller studios, like Van Musscher.

As to mature artists, the theory and practice of imitation and emulation is far more complicated. The few art theoretical treatises that refer to the principle (and practice) of emulation in the Netherlands are deliberate attempts to comply, one way or the other, with the requirements of classicist literary theory. Contemporary discourse on emulation in art seems to concentrate on the merits of Netherlandish art as compared to Italian painting or even to the art of antiquity. And, anecdotes of explicit rivalry and emulation in Netherlandish art usually involve individual, highly ambitious artists, like Rembrandt (1606-1669) and Rubens (1577-1640). In his studies on the principle of imitation in European literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Jeroen Jansen highlighted the fact that praise for an artist’s performance in terms of emulation of an older or more famous master - as is so often the case in the writings of Van Mander (1548-1606), Van Hoogstraten (1627-1678), Houbraken (1660-1719) and others - primarily functioned as a literary *topos* and does not necessarily imply that the poet or the artist intended to emulate in the true sense of the word. A final complication is that emulation in itself is an intra-artistic principle with no particular client or consumer orientation: at its best it was recognized by a small circle of erudite connoisseurs who formed only a very small part of the open and highly competitive Dutch art market of the seventeenth century.
Were Van Musscher’s work to have been judged by an informed contemporary public, he probably would have been severely criticized for following Van der Helst too closely. He might have been accused of *eerdieverij*, theft of honour, because he imitated too slavishly and practically stole all constituent elements of Van der Helst’s composition without adding anything substantial to his invention. Van Musscher might have argued, on the other hand, that great painters like Rubens and Rembrandt had followed closely the example of artists they admired like Leonardo (1452-1519), Raphael (1483-1520) and Caravaggio (1571-1610), in clear attempts to train their faculties in the distribution of figures in pictorial space. He might argue that, like Van der Helst, he was just trying his hand at the complete immersion of the beholder in a ‘real performance’, of which Junius spoke, albeit this time not in a classical or biblical history with a higher moral or educational implication, but in a simple scene of Amsterdam street life. In the end, his critics might have forgiven him - as we do - since he could be taken for a pupil who had just finished his education, trying to successfully integrate some of the most divergent elements of his training into a single pictorial scheme, all clearly imitating a work by Bartholomeus van der Helst.
Notes

1 J. van Gent, in: N. Middelkoop (ed.), De oude meesters van de stad Amsterdam. Schilderijen tot 1800, Amsterdam 2008, 144-145. Acquired from Robert Noortman Galleries, 1981; the picture was probably sold in Rotterdam, 3 April 1850 (Lugt no. 19760), no. 43, Dfl. 91. According to labels on the back of the painting, at some point it belonged to anonymous collectors in Paris and Vienna. I would like to thank Gusta Reichwein, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, for putting the museum’s documentation on the painting at my disposal, and Robert Gerhardt and Judith van Gent for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

2 Hendrik Cornelisz. Vroom, View of the Haarlemmerpoort, 1635-1640, oil on canvas, 71.5 x 109.5 cm. Amsterdams Historisch Museum, is a rare example: Middelkoop, ibid., 73.

3 A. Bredius, N. de Roever, ‘Iets over Martinus Saeghmolen’, Oud-Holland 6 (1888), 123-128.

4 A. Houbraken, De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen, 3 vols., Amsterdam 1718-1721, III, 210-212.


7 Michiel I Comans sold his Rotterdam house on 13 January 1662: Municipal Archives, Rotterdam, Oud-notarieel archief, inv. no. 234, fol. 457. His sons Michiel II and Pieter had bought a house on the Lijnbaansgracht at the corner of the Bloemstraat, Amsterdam, on 27 April 1661 (Municipal Archives, Amsterdam, Kwijtscchildingen, inv. no. 52, fol. 114). The house was later designated as ‘In de verwerp van d’Son’ (‘In the dyehouse, called the Sun’). Van Thiel, op. cit. (n. 5), 14-20 gives many details of the background of this conflict and the involvement of Michiel Comans senior and junior.

8 For an extensive analysis, see Van Thiel, ibid. I would also like to suggest that the painting with Mary, Jesus and Joseph that Comans seems to be working on, may be read, together with the carpenter’s tools, as a tribute to the profession of his father, whose portrait probably figures in the background on the floor. According to some Rotterdam notarial deeds, Michiel II Comans worked as a carpenter as well. The image of the Amsterdam town hall on the cupboard at the left probably refers to the fact that the sitter was responsible for the calligraphy of a poem underneath an ornamental by Govaert Flinck in that building in 1658: A.W. Weismann, ‘De schoorsteen van het Amsterdamsch stadhuis’, Oud Holland 25 (1907), 71-82, esp. 73-74.

9 Municipal Archives, Amsterdam, DTB Sloterdijk, inv. no. 74, fol. 78, cf. Lambour, op. cit. (n. 6).

10 Many thanks to Ruud Lambour, Amsterdam, who provided me with valuable information concerning Van Musscher’s whereabouts.

11 In the back room of Paulus Hunthum’s house on the Herengracht was found on 8 April 1718 ‘een groenvrouwtje van Musscher’ (‘a female vegetable seller by Musscher’), worth Dfl. 30: Municipal Archives, Amsterdam, Notarial Archives, inv. no. 6671, deed 90; this can also be found in the Getty Provenance Research Databases. The painting was sold at an anonymous auction in Amsterdam on 10 October 1742 (Lugt no. 561), according to G. Hoet, Catalogus van naaduitjes van schilderijen met derselver preijzen, 2 vols., Amsterdam 1752. II, 71, no. 87: ‘Het gezigt van de Wester Kerk met een groenvyf en een myt, door denzelve’, together with no. 86 ‘Een doctor in zijn studeerkamer door Musscher’, Dfl. 80. Both pictures were the auction of the belongings of Maria Theresia Andrioli on 20 April 1820 in Amsterdam (Lugt no. 9773), lot nos. 31-32, Dfl. 95 and Dfl. 63 respectively. The former picture was in the Adrian Hope sale, London, 30 June 1894, lot no. 45, and in the collection of J.W. Dreesmann until 1960; it was last offered for sale in New York (Sotheby’s), 24 January 2008, lot no. 18.

12 R. Kitsmaker et al., Amsterdam marktstad, Amsterdam 1984, 12, 45-49, 92.


14 Municipal Archives, Amsterdam, Archief van burgemeesters, Stukken betreffende verscheidene onderwerpen, inv. no. 662, Kohier van de 200° penning, 1674, fol. 512r: ‘widow of Jan Muisjer’. Catalina Martens is not mentioned in the registers of taxes on residential property in the years 1677-1680, so she probably rented the dwelling. Later on, in 1688, she registered as a ‘verfverkoopster’ (seller of pigments), probably continuing the grocery business of her late husband, who was a ‘kruydenier’ and a painter. Catalina Martens was buried on 9 May 1701 from a house in the Vinkenstraat, which runs parallel to the Haarlemmerdijk, ‘beyond the last cross street’ (i.e. the Baanbrugsteeg): Municipal Archives, Amsterdam, DTB, inv. no. 1168, fol. 442.

15 The 1668 tax registers of house owners in this part of the city have been lost. Later registers, including the tax register of 1674 mentioned in note 14, and deeds of sale allow us to somewhat reconstruct the situation of ownership around that year.

Dr. Anton Zeven, Wageningen, kindly identified the vegetables in Van Musscher and Van der Helst’s wheelbarrows: green savoy cabbage, a basket of round white turnips (‘herfstapen’), cauliflower, purple red cabbage, red beet, orange carrots and some corn blades. Van Gent, op. cit. (n. 1), mistook the turnips for potatoes. See A.C. Zeven and W.A. Brandenburg, ‘Use of paintings from the 16th to the 19th century to study the history of domesticated plants’, Economic Botany 40 (1986), 397-408.


For a broader discussion of this aspect of ‘topographic self-referentiality’ in the works of several other Dutch painters, such as Dou, Steen, De Hooch and Metsu, see M. Westermann, The Amusements of Jan Steen. Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century (Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History 1), Zwolle 1997, 263.

De Gelder, op. cit. (n. 25), 114 sees a likeness between one of them and the Christ Child in a painting by Van der Helst, dated 1660, in the Centraal Museum, Utrecht.


For a more detailed discussion, see among others: De Gelder, ibid., 160-161, cat. nos. 27-28.

De Gelder consulted the only surviving catalogue of this auction in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, noted that it was sold for Dfl. 235 to a Mr. Van der Land on behalf of Pieter Leendert De Gelder, ibid., 568-477. Cf. De Gelder, ibid., 160-161, cat. nos. 27-28.


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De Gelder, op. cit. (n. 25), 113-114. For the poor reputation of vegetable sellers in 17th- and 18th-century Amsterdam, see Kistemaker et al., op. cit. (n. 12).

For example, see Lucas van Valkenborch, Allegory of Autumn: Market Scene on the Weinmarkt in Frankfurt, 1594, in: A. Wied, Lucas und Merten van Valkenborch (1535-1597 und 1534-1612), Freren 1990, cat. no. 65.

In Gotzkowsky’s ‘Specification’, as published by Frank, op. cit. (n. 27), 171, the painting is listed as ‘Valkenburg’; it is presently in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, listed as a work by Frans Snijders.

De Gelder, op. cit. (n. 25), 140-141, doc. nos. 64-66.

For the heated debate on Rembrandt’s workshop and the possible role of assistants and apprentices, see among others:


40 Weststeijn, *op. cit.* (n. 36), 142-145.

41 Robert Gerhardt kindly pointed out to me that Van Musscher followed Gerard ter Borch quite closely in one of his other early works: the standing figure of a messenger in Van Musscher’s *Piskijker*, 1665-1669, now in a private collection, is a clear quotation from Ter Borch’s *Woman Reading a Letter in Front of a Messenger of 1658*, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon. As Van Musscher’s teacher, Gabriel Metsu may have functioned as an intermediary in this instance.
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Colophon

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