



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**[Review of: P. van den Brink, J. van der Veen (2008) Jacob Backer (1608/9-1651)]**

Weststeijn, T.

*Published in:*  
HNA Review of Books

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Weststeijn, T. (2010). [Review of: P. van den Brink, J. van der Veen (2008) Jacob Backer (1608/9-1651)]. HNA Review of Books, 2010(11).

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

# historians of netherlandish art

*Dedicated to the Study of Netherlandish, German and Franco-Flemish Art and Architecture*

- [Home](#)
- [About HNA](#)
- [Join HNA](#)
- [Membership/Dues Form](#)
- [HNA News](#)
- [HNA Conferences](#)
- [HNA Review of Books](#)
- [Exhibitions](#)
- [Museum News](#)
- [Scholarly Activities](#)
- [Opportunities](#)
- [Endowment](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Marketplace](#)
- [Contacts](#)

## HNA Review of Books

### Seventeenth Century Dutch

**Peter van den Brink, Jaap van der Veen *et al.*, *Jacob Backer (1608/9-1651)*. [Cat. exh. Museum Het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam, November 29, 2008 – February 22, 2009; Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen, March 12 – June 5, 2009.] Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 2008. 270 pp, 339 illus. ISBN 978-90-400-8565-9.**

To secure a place in the history of art, it was not always useful to have been considered Rembrandt's pupil. Few seventeenth-century painters were as unfortunate posthumously as Jacob Backer. Due to Thoré-Bürger's sloppy reading of a Dutch source, Backer was long held to be one of Rembrandt's adepts who, moreover, failed to emerge from the master's shadow. Although the error was set right in the 1980s, it took art historians three decades to adjust.

This book is a revisionist biography, thorough oeuvre catalogue, and passionate homage. It begins by noting that Backer's contemporaries saw him as one of the century's greatest artists. The speed of his technique may have been one reason. In a mere two decades, he built a sizeable oeuvre of portraits, character heads, and history pieces. The new catalogue identifies 135 authentic works; a separate DVD lists a great many others known from prints and archives.

Jaap van der Veen's biographical essay makes the most of the meager documents on a painter who never married or encountered legal quandaries. It speculates that Backer's first Amsterdam teacher was Jacob Pynas, who may have shared his Mennonite beliefs. The artist then approached Lambert Jacobsz. in Leeuwarden to acquire the principles of Rubensian history painting. Upon returning to Amsterdam, various of his innovations were successful, including portraits *all'antica*, arcadian scenes inspired by Guarini's drama, and uncustomary Biblical scenes. Scaling the social ladder, Backer's finest hour was a commission for the Stadtholder's palace: a maidenly personification of the Dutch Republic, Italianate in symbolism but clad in red, white, and blue. We glimpse some of the master's self-esteem when another princely patron demanded a price estimate in advance. Backer, alluding to his hurt pride as budding courtier, answered that "he could not do this and was not wont to do so, but he would demonstrate to be acting honestly." Despite such pretensions he ultimately failed to reach the top end of the market.

Peter van den Brink's essay, exploring all aspects of Backer's art, identifies many hitherto unknown works and brings the master's qualities as a portraitist to the fore. In history painting, it recognizes Rubens rather than Rembrandt as his example. Prints in particular provided models for dialogue scenes involving half figures. Backer reused the same hands, faces, and poses in different settings; this observation provides a *raison d'être* for works that have usually been interpreted as character heads.

A series of drawings reveals how Backer sat next to Govaert Flink and Jacob van Loo making "academy figures", studies from the nude.

He probably thought out historical narratives in advance and drew his models in appropriate poses. This method seems to underlie the painting *Venus, Adonis, and Amor* (Fulda) and the monumental *Diana and her Nymphs* (St. Petersburg). The latter work, now recognized as a Backer, is the master's tribute to no one less than Titian, improving wittily on the image tradition. The painting shows Diana's naked back close at hand. We, the viewers, are put in Actaeon's position: the goddess is about to turn her head. In a second, she will discover our presence and set her dogs on us.

Backer, a "good colorist", "understood well how to make a good nude", to quote his Antwerp colleague Jean Meyskens. Lively brushwork, especially in representing flesh, was probably his main asset. Van den Brink's detailed analysis relishes the artist's *joie de peindre*. It is unlikely that Backer used assistants since he had such a swift brush. (Yet, one is sometimes reminded of Michelangelo's retort, when Vasari boasted about finishing his work so quickly: "So it appears!") A contemporary reported that one could arrive in Backer's studio and have one's portrait done, including the hands, collar, and fur, on the same day. A catalogue entry by Michiel Franken suggests that this report was more than an anecdote, analyzing how precise wet-in-wet brushstrokes exploit the ochre ground for the middle tones. One of Backer's finest works, however, does not display such bravura but depicts a woman in elaborate dress as a pensive Muse Euterpe. Due to its "unparalleled evocation of swishing satin," the portrait is among the most beautiful of the Dutch Golden Age, as Bob van den Boogert concludes.

The book adequately reconstructs why Backer's contemporaries held him in such esteem. It is therefore an important contribution to our knowledge of one of the most exciting decades for history painting in Amsterdam, the 1640s.

Backer's works must have made an impact on his pupils in particular, including Jan van Noordt, and colleagues such as Flinck and Ferdinand Bol. This realization opens up avenues for further research, which is highly desirable if only for further nuancing such a contested notion as 'Dutch classicism.'

Thijs Weststeijn  
*University of Amsterdam*

[<<BACK](#)

**Email Us:** [info@hnanews.org](mailto:info@hnanews.org)

[Members Enter Here](#)