Preface: Approaches to a multifaceted master

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THE UNIVERSAL ART OF SAMUEL VAN HOOGSTRATEN (1627–1678)
Painter, Writer, and Courtier

Edited by Thijs Weststeijn

Amsterdam University Press
Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) was one of the most distinguished of European artists, according to the Swiss abbot Gabriel Buzlin (1599-1681). Buzlin included him in a list of 166 painters of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, *Pictorum Europae praecipuorum nomina* (c.1664). This judgment may have been colored by the abbot’s own collection: his Weingarten monastery contained Van Hoogstraten’s only full-fledged altarpiece, *The Vision of Saint Benedict*. And later scholars did not share his praise of the self-styled ‘painter of His Holy Imperial Majesty [Ferdinand III]’. The literary historian Peter Schull, writing in 1833, asserted that Van Hoogstraten’s poetic qualities greatly surpassed his talents in the visual arts. Even nowadays, the painter is probably better known for a set of cumulative factors rather than for the quality of his figurative works: as one of Rembrandt’s pupils, as a key author in the seventeenth-century theory of art, and as a social climber who achieved success through a combination of prolific painting, poetry, optical experiments, and European travels.

As the discipline of art history has increasingly highlighted the socio-economic context of paintings and other interdisciplinary issues, scholarly interest in Van Hoogstraten’s multifaceted career has caused his position to shift from that of a marginal figure in Rembrandt’s studio to someone central to the art of the Dutch Golden Age. In the last two decades, not only museums and departments of art history but also historians of literature, science, and even the new media have increasingly paid attention to the Dordrecht master. The closing of the millennium produced six monographs about the artist and his work, most of which consist of more pages than his own treatise on painting.

The present book, resulting from a symposium in Amsterdam in 2009, is the first collective effort addressing Samuel van Hoogstraten. Nine scholars explore different facets of his life and work: his theoretical treatise, artistic terminology, still life and genre paintings, perspective boxes, as well as his travels, novels, and reputation. The different vantage points extend the analy-
sis to Van Hoogstraten’s teacher, Rembrandt, as well as his own best-known student, Arnold Houbraken, and other members of the Van Hoogstraten family. Furthermore, not only does the present book confront divergent scholarly backgrounds, it is also the first time that some of the authors have published their work in English, coming originally from Dutch, German, and French academic traditions.

The present anthology thus intends to do justice to the works of, in his own words, the ‘universal master’ from Dordrecht (universeel of algemeen meester). Echoing a sentiment formulated most cogently by Leonardo da Vinci, who may have served as his example especially when pairing artistic and scientific interests, Van Hoogstraten advises his readers to practice ‘universal art’ or even ‘universal knowledge’ (algemeene wetenschap). This ideal not only joins painting to poetry. His treatise enumerates the manifold particulars of the visible world that are the object of the painter’s knowledge. Van Hoogstraten’s statement that an artist’s ambition should know no limits within the sublunar realm responds to the ideal of the polymath current in the scholarship of his day. He refers to the Dutch Republic’s foremost Universalgelehrter, Gerard Vossius, to argue that:

It is harmful to think … that one would not be able to understand everything: because is there anything that can satisfy our mind completely …? Put so much science in it and fill it with so much knowledge of things as you can, it will only grow in desire and the more it holds, the more it seeks, being given neither a headache nor bad stomach by this. Our cupboards, says Cassiodorus, cannot hold more once they are filled: but this treasure-house is never overloaded. When it has taken in very much already, it still yawns constantly after more, all the more so, says Cicero, since all liberal arts have a common linkage and are joined together as if through a kind of parentage.

Do we hear an echo here of the young Samuel who set out, after being trained in Rembrandt’s studio with its encyclopaedic collection of natural and artificial curiosities, to see the world?

Where are we now: Van Hoogstraten’s writings

In 1924, the historian of European art theory Julius von Schlosser leveled his criticism at Van Hoogstraten’s writings, concluding that the Dutch Republic was ‘vastly uncommunicative in its main utterances’: its masters ‘painted diligently in their studios; they did not talk, and any literary aspirations were alien to them’. The German scholar’s verdict illustrates how Van Hoogstraten’s treatise, Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst, anders de zichtbare werelt (Introduction to the Academy of Painting, or the Visible World, 1678), played a role in the still-topical division of the history of art into national schools that would reflect specific qualities. As late as the 1980s, Svetlana Alpers quoted from the Inleyding to argue for the ‘descriptive’ essence of Dutch art – leaning towards science rather than literature – in contrast to the ‘narrative’ Italian one. Eddy de Jongh, on the other hand, found the treatise a useful source to argue for the contrary thesis: the
presence of disguised symbolism in Dutch painting. Van Hoogstraten’s book, which Jan Emmens described as a ‘not uncongenial amalgam’ of different viewpoints, may therefore be interpreted as reflecting contradictions inherent to the Dutch Golden Age itself. (The most profound paradox, perhaps, was expressed in those still lifes that focus on the most ephemeral aspects such as reflections and surface qualities, relishing the pleasing appearance of the visible world while at the same time highlighting its transience).

In any case, the variety of views expressed in this treatise has made possible four different readings: Celeste Brusati (1995) has explored how the Inleyding showcased Van Hoogstraten’s artifice in the service of his personal, social ambitions. Hans-Jörg Czech (2002), by contrast, highlighted the book’s more general aim of founding the art of painting on international theoretical standards after the Dutch art market’s collapse following the Rampjaar (‘disaster year’) of 1672. Jan Blanc (2008) has called attention to the profoundly practical import of Van Hoogstraten’s theory, while the most recent analysis (2008) extended to the treatise’s rhetorical premises.

The possibility of different views towards Van Hoogstraten’s art theory highlights precisely that the author took the project of writing a comprehensive theory of art more seriously than his Dutch contemporaries. He aimed at an encyclopedic work: his ‘visible world’ – the treatise’s subtitle – in book form is conceived as a microcosm. Each chapter is associated with one of the nine Muses and one of the planets, governing all visible things, the works of nature and man. The treatise reflects not only his experiences with Rembrandt in Amsterdam but also his work in Germany, Vienna, Rome, and London. What is more, compared to his colleagues in the Netherlands and elsewhere, Van Hoogstraten was a much more avid reader. As the data collected by Blanc have revealed, the Inleyding draws from more than 130 different literary sources, while other authors of painting treatises such as Karel van Mander, Joachim von Sandrart, and Gerard de Lairesse used only two or three dozen. Few works in the European tradition of art theory refer to a similarly broad range of literature as the Inleyding, from drama and poetry to moral philosophy, history of the church, travelogues from the Far East and the New World, and texts about archaeology, law, gemstones, and Anglo-Saxon history – many facets which still remain to be explored.

The master’s encyclopedic ambitions extended to practical knowledge, which explains the book’s enduring capacity to yield information about painting technique and style: Ernst van de Wetering’s most recent work on Rembrandt’s art theory, in A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings (2011), continues to use Van Hoogstraten as its main source, while Paul Taylor’s and Ulrike Kern’s analyses of individual stylistic concepts also depend on the Inleyding. In effect, the present book proves the treatise’s continuing topicality as all contributions derive theoretical and practical information from it.

Despite the Inleyding’s display of erudition, how much of Van Hoogstraten’s ideas were based on more than superficial literacy remains a moot point – whether he went to Dordrecht’s Latin school, for instance, is unclear. An open question in this respect (broached by Michiel Roscam Abbing in 1993 and again by Czech) relates to the treatise’s projected second volume, De onzichtbare werelt (The Invisible World), which may suggest that the painter’s interest in
the seventeenth century’s ‘new philosophy’ went beyond his experiments in mathematical perspective and acquaintance with members of the Royal Society. In the present book, Hendrik J. Horn discusses this issue in connection to Arnold Houbraken’s intellectual outlook. Some of the other contributors address Van Hoogstraten’s wider literary production: his drama, novels, and courtiers’ manual *The Honest Youth,* one issue that comes to the fore is the painter’s knowledge of literature in English (addressed by Roscam Abbing).

The lettered network of the Van Hoogstraten family has recently been illuminated by Gijsbert Rutten’s 2006 study of Samuel’s nephew, David van Hoogstraten (1658–1724). The social and scholarly ambitions of the Van Hoogstraten family involved a brisk rise in status without any setbacks, moving from humble beginnings to a central position in the European Republic of Letters within a mere three generations. Whereas Dirk van Hoogstraten (1596–1640) had been a craftsman – a goldsmith and an immigrant from the Southern Netherlands – his two sons Samuel and Frans became writers in addition to their chief professions of, respectively, painter and publisher. Frans’s son David then became one of the foremost academics of the Dutch Republic. The intertwined careers of the family members demonstrate how closely the worlds of art and letters could be related in the Netherlands. This also makes it highly unlikely that literature, for Samuel, was merely a means of advertising his qualities as an artisan. We should probably take his literary ambitions just as seriously as those of his brother and nephew: the painter may even have been the first Dutch novelist, as Marijke Spies suggested in 2002.

**Van Hoogstraten’s paintings**

‘Van Hoogstraten is incomparable to any other seventeenth-century master for his variety and versatility of styles’, according to the 1998 *History of Dordrecht.* This observation has not yet resulted in a monographic exhibition. As early as 1994, a symposium in Dordrecht first addressed the diversity of the master’s artistic production, but the state of research concerning the figurative works lags behind the scholarship on the treatise. Research on individual paintings has progressed as various works by or attributed to Van Hoogstraten were included in at least seven exhibitions in Europe and the United States between 1999 and 2009. The oeuvre catalogue established by Brusati has remained largely in place; Blanc added sixty paintings, including references to lost works and some extant works, bringing the total to almost two hundred [Fig. 1]. In the present book, Brusati discusses the recent find of a *trompe-l’oeil* of 1663 [Fig. 20]. A very different work that surfaced in 2012 is the *Self-Portrait Wearing a Turban* that graces this book’s cover. Furthermore, Jonathan Bikker attributed two paintings to Van Hoogstraten that had earlier gone to Rembrandt’s pupil Willem Drost (1633–1659). One portrait, whose historical value Brusati denied (although she identified it as an authentic Van Hoogstraten), has a particular afterlife: historians of philosophy keep identifying the sitter as Benedictus de Spinoza, even though Rudi Ekkart has confirmed that the identification is misguided.

As for Van Hoogstraten’s studio, the precise identity and activity of his pupils remains to be explored. Studying the relationship with Drost, Bikker even suggested that Van Hoog-
Straten had his own independent studio in Amsterdam for a few years: ‘The parallels with Van Hoogstraten’s oeuvre suggest that Drost perhaps received instruction from the older artist. This would have probably occurred in the mid-1640s’. This went contrary to the older scholars who argued that Van Hoogstraten continued in Rembrandt’s studio after his apprenticeship, which was concluded in 1644 when he produced his first signed work. ‘In that case Van Hoogstraten might have supervised Drost during his early days in Rembrandt’s studio. The possibility that Van Hoogstraten set up shop for himself in Amsterdam in the mid-1640s and that Drost was his pupil cannot, however, be excluded.’

Of Van Hoogstraten’s students, Aert de Gelder’s (1645–1727) reputation is most firmly established. Nicolaes Maes (1634–1693) has recently moved to the background in comparison to his former glory, while Godfried Schalcken (1643–1706) has come somewhat to the foreground; Cornelis van der Meulen (1642–1692) features briefly in the present book. Arnold Hou-
braken remains essential to art historians because of his biographical writings, made more accessible through Horn’s 2000 analysis. In addition, John Loughman suggested recently that the Dordrecht master Abraham van Dijck (1635–1680) was one of Van Hoogstraten’s students. Exploring the master’s relationship to his disciples might be a particularly revealing topic of further research, as arrangements in his studio may have reflected those of his own teacher, Rembrandt. Currently, Rembrandt scholarship seems to benefit in particular from the analysis of his pupils and their role in the workshop. Van Hoogstraten may have imitated his own training in Amsterdam when he returned to Dordrecht; moreover, for his students, moving from basic training with him to additional experience with Rembrandt seems to have been the logical thing to do. The most recent volume of A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings has demonstrated to what extent Van Hoogstraten’s treatise may be the basis for a reconstruction of Rembrandt’s teaching, even though it seems that the Dordrecht master did not mention his training in Amsterdam to his own students.

A major lacuna in the state of research is Van Hoogstraten’s drawings. Numbering almost two hundred, many of which are signed, they form a sizeable part of Sumowski’s Drawings of the Rembrandt School (1979–1992). Blanc added nineteen works to this corpus. Yet the images have only been studied in the context of Rembrandt’s teaching of draftsmanship.

By contrast, some more idiosyncratic aspects of Dordrecht’s ‘universal master’ have increasingly attracted attention from historians of science, visual culture, and the new media – in particular, the perspective boxes and his performance of shadow figures (the so-called ‘shadow dance’) as an early instance of the projection of moving images. A 2010 exhibition in Berlin, for instance, suggested that Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz adopted an idea from Van Hoogstraten’s Inleyding when he included shadow projections in an ideal palace of Baroque inventions and scholarship. Such interest has not been confined to academia; in 2009, the cinema set designer Christopher Hobbs (who worked with Derek Jarman and others), expressed his indebtedness to Van Hoogstraten’s perspectival experiments for creating optical illusions.

Two contributions to this aspect of the master – that may herald his increasing relevance for contemporary visual artists – came from Japan. One was the 2009 exhibition by the Musée du Louvre and the DNP Museum Lab in Tokyo, entitled Samuel van Hoogstraten, ‘The Slippers: Experimenting with one’s Gaze’. A sizeable digital reconstruction allowed one to virtually enter the painting, while multimedia features highlighted contextual matters such as the London perspectival box and the treatise on painting. The second project was a movie about Van Hoogstraten’s life and work in Dordrecht and Amsterdam, for the televised series The Great Masters of Art. The lineup of other European artists is worthy of note. For 2008/2009, it included Caillebotte, Corot, Degas, Dufy, Ernst, Géricault, Van Gogh, Holbein, Khnopff, Millet, Modigliani, Picasso, Rembrandt, Sisley, Titian, De la Tour, Turner, Velazquez, Vermeer, and Leonardo da Vinci. Was Samuel van Hoogstraten the odd one out in this group, which would otherwise have been completely familiar to any mid-twentieth-century art historian? Or is he tentatively assuming his place as a canonical figure in Western art?
This book

Our first chapter asks a fundamental question: what, to Van Hoogstraten, was the ‘theory of art’? Jan Blanc observes that the master was the first to use the term theory in Dutch artistic literature. Broaching this matter obviously involves the notion of the ‘rules of art’. An exploration of Van Hoogstraten’s response to the classical sources and to French academism highlights that he saw rules as practical solutions that facilitate the fabrication of convincing images. As the example of decorum demonstrates, Van Hoogstraten himself broke with the issue of antiquarian exactitude for the sake of the image’s spatial legibility. Blanc’s chapter underscores the learning behind the master’s ideas that allow theoretical reflections on a meta-level, while otherwise the artist’s focus on practice comes to the fore, as precisely the element setting him apart from the literary tradition.

The strong interrelationship between Van Hoogstraten’s theory and his painting practice emerges more clearly in the next chapter. Celeste Brusati focuses on his use of frames. After a summary of the manners in which Van Hoogstraten’s own work has been framed in the later scholarship, she analyzes a variety of works, from an early self-portrait to an architectural view, the London perspective box, the large ‘threshold paintings’ and a newly discovered trompe-l’œil in order to argue that Van Hoogstraten used feigned frames to set up visual equivalences, create spatial sequences, and pace the act of viewing. These perceptual experiments stimulated the imagination in terms of thinking about what was absent in the painting and in terms of the temporal experience of the work. This insight leads to a new interpretation of the Inleyding’s statement that painters should include accessories (bywerk) that covertly explain something: Van Hoogstraten’s works offered visual prompts that invited speculation in regard to optics and perception rather than merely providing answers to questions of literary meaning.

The next chapter explores the foundation of Van Hoogstraten’s art: training in Rembrandt’s studio. Ben Broos studies the provenance and qualities of a document dating from Van Hoogstraten’s apprenticeship in Amsterdam. The master regularly required his students to study their own faces. A drawn self-portrait by Van Hoogstraten, which belongs to his earliest known work, testifies to teaching procedures: the chapter identifies pen strokes correcting the figure’s anatomy as carried out by Rembrandt. The drawing was the basis for a painted self-portrait of around 1650 which demonstrates the long-term impact of Rembrandt’s pedagogy.

Van Hoogstraten’s theory of art also expressed his reaction to his master. Paul Taylor studies the lines from the Inleyding that have been quoted most often in the literature on Dutch art: the characterization of Rembrandt’s Night Watch as zwierich van sprong (sinuous of step). This chapter pairs stylistic insights – relating Van Hoogstraten’s expression to the original shape of the Night Watch – to an analysis of the semantic field covered by the term zwier in the seventeenth century. Zwier was constantly being used in extended senses: loose graceful curves could lend themselves to all kinds of metaphorical applications, and few authors applied these metaphors as eagerly as Van Hoogstraten, in connection to figure drawing, composition, and brushwork.

Chapter 5 extends the analysis of Van Hoogstraten’s thematic and stylistic choices to a social factor: his ambitions of a courtier’s career, expressed in his manual The Honest Youth.
Michiel Roscam Abbing focuses in this context on the painted ‘personal’ letter racks. The traditional view towards the paintings that included objects belonging to Van Hoogstraten himself is that these works were alternative self-portraits. However, as the original owners, intimates or acquaintances of the painter, were in a position to appreciate the objects’ personal nature, the letter racks may also have been gifts. Ultimately, these highly personalized tributes developed into a separate genre, demonstrating how the Dordrecht artist’s creative solutions to individual problems sparked wider imitation.

A perspective box in the National Gallery in London is arguably Van Hoogstraten’s masterpiece. Herman Colenbrander couples biographical data with a detailed visual and iconographic scrutiny for a new interpretation. Asking the question of the raison d’être of this work, Chapter 6 begins by observing that Van Hoogstraten depicted rooms that contain no human beings in the foreground – one of its themes, similar to the empty space featured in *The Slippers*, is absence. Without ignoring the erotic aspect that earlier interpretations of the box have highlighted, the argument results in a personal interpretation, supported by the work’s dating and signature: that it was a marriage gift for the artist’s wife, Sara Balen.

Fatma Yalcın casts a fresh look at Van Hoogstraten’s travels through Central Europe and Italy which ultimately inspired his extended stay in England, exploring the impact of these journeys on his works. She asks why, after first trying to sell his British patrons trompe-l’oeil painting harking back to his career in Vienna and Dordrecht, the master soon chose to focus on an entirely new topic in his oeuvre: architectural scenes. He adapted the works to his patrons’ tastes, as appears from stylistic and iconographical elements in the depicted architecture which may be related to the attitude of religious reconciliation favored by the British monarch, Charles II.

Van Hoogstraten’s novels are a neglected aspect of his universal art. Chapter 8 addresses how his literary ambitions may make it possible to consider him the first Dutch novelist. His two works of pastoral fiction, *Beautiful Roselijn* and *Haegaenveld*, expressed his rising social status among the Dordrecht establishment but diverge in style and content from his figurative art. The elements of horror, magic, and violence make them stand out among contemporary Dutch experiments in the pastoral genre. This inspires a new consideration of the validity of an integrated analysis of Van Hoogstraten’s painted and written works.

Finally, Hendrik J. Horn brings into focus Arnold Houbraken, who may have been Van Hoogstraten’s last student; he was also his oldest student and a kind of prefect to the others. Combining new biographical findings with a theoretical approach, the chapter explores similarities in the two masters’ careers as well as in their ideas. This involves looking to the lost supplement to the *Inleyding* and to the other Van Hoogstratens: Frans and his sons, Jan, and David. Houbraken’s judgment was conspicuously ambivalent: Van Hoogstraten apparently ‘possessed a great intellect in almost all matters; he particularly well understood the rules of Art so completely in all aspects that I do not believe that anyone after him understood them better; but he was therefore no high flyer in the practice of the same.’40
Notes


3 Inscription on Van Hoogstraten’s letter-rack painting in Kingston Lacy, The Bankes Collection (The National Trust), inv.no KLA/P/203; cf. Michiel Roscam Abbing’s essay in the present book. As Roscam Abbing remarks, there is no conclusive proof that Van Hoogstraten was ever in the Emperor’s service.


6 *Inleyding* 71.


8 ‘t Is schadelijk te denken, zeyt eender, datmen alles niet zoude kunnen bevatten: Want wat is’er dat ons verstand verzadigen kan? zegt Philips Mornay, breng’t er zoo veel wetenschap in, en vervult het met zoo veel kennissen der dingen, als gy kunt, het zal in begeerlijkheyt verwakkeren, en hoe’t meer houdt, hoe’t verstand verzadigen kan? zegt Philips.


13 Chapter nine is devoted to the fixed stars.


18 3 December 1994, Dordrechts Museum.


21 Oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm, Private Royal Collection, Qatar. All specialists whom I consulted about this painting pointed out that, besides being unsigned, the painting has been heavily restored. Michiel Roscam Abbing called attention to a reference in a 1666 inventory in Dordrecht (Vijgenboom) of ‘Den conterfeysts van Hooghstraten met eenen tulbant om thoof’, Roscam Abbing 1993, 90, but he also pointed out that this may allude to Samuels brother Jan van Hoogstraten and that it remains unclear who was the painter. The Art Institute in Chicago has a similar work (Sumowski nr. 844); Blanc 2008, cat.nr. P33, mentions another one with different dimensions, sold in Amsterdam in 1970.


The universal art of Samuel van Hoogstraten | Preface

30. This is one of the main perspectives of the conference series organized by Queens University, Kingston, in Herstmonceux (UK) in 2009, 2011, and 2013.
31. Van de Wetering 2011, noting that Houbraken had to learn about his master’s time with Rembrandt from reading the Inleyding. He only knew about Rembrandt’s role ‘because on page 237 of his book on the art of painting [Van Hoogstraten] calls him his “second Master after the death of his father Theodoor”’. See the Appendix that concludes the present book, p. 247.
33. These are mostly the works sold as by Van Hoogstraten at recent auctions. Blanc 2008, cat. nos D10, D33, D67, D76, D77, D90, D121, D135, D136, D140, D175, D179, D180, D181, D182, D184, D186, D187, D195.
34. The most recent studies are M. Plomp, ‘Rembrandt and His Circle: Drawings and Prints’, Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art 64/1 (2006), 3-48, and B. Binstock, ‘Samuel van Hoogstraten’s Westertoren’, Master Drawings 45 (2007), 187-200; some of the master’s drawings were exhibited in Rembrandt et zijn navolgers uit München, Amsterdam, Museum het Rembrandthuis (7 September-17 November 2002) and Munich, Alte Pinakothek (5 December 2001-10 February 2002).


Literally ‘Giants of Beauty’, Nexus Producers, aired on TV Tokyo. The movie features a life-size, three-dimensional reconstruction of *The Slippers* as the stage for a cinematic narrative.