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Lady of the House

The Household, Art and Memoria in the Dutch Republic

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Lady of the House. The Household, Art and *Memoria* in the Dutch Republic

Ever since Michael Montias published his ground-breaking book *Vermeer and his milieu: a web of social history*, we realize how closely related the Delft painter may have been to the wealthy, but somewhat mysterious, Pieter Claesz van Ruyven.

On 30 November 1657, Johannes Vermeer and his wife, Catharina Bolnes, acknowledged that they owed Van Ruyven a sum of 200 guilders, to be repaid within a year's time.¹ Eight years later, on 19 October 1665, Van Ruyven's wife, Maria de Knuyt, disposed of her possessions. In the case that her husband and her only daughter should die before her, she bequeathed most of her possessions to some protestant charities in Delft, and some considerable sums of money to some of her relatives. To the painter Johannes Vermeer she bequeathed 500 guilders, under the specific condition that after his death none of his descendants would be entitled to this sum from her estate, probably meant to bar Vermeer's catholic wife and children from her bequest.²

Montias brilliantly laid the connection between these documents, and the known fact that in the estate of Van Ruyven's son-in-law Jacob Dissius more than 20 paintings by Vermeer were mentioned, including the famous *View of Delft*, *The Little Street*, *Woman standing at a virginal*, and many more. All these paintings – almost two thirds of the known and recognized oeuvre of Vermeer – were sold after Dissius's death at auction in Amsterdam in May 1696. Montias's conclusion was that Pieter Claesz van Ruyven must have been a devoted collector of Vermeer's work at least, maybe with a first right of refusal of new works by Vermeer, or even a personal friend, guarantor, maybe even mecenaz to Vermeer's artistic production. With this in mind, we cannot help but look at some of Vermeer's compositions, like *The glass of wine*, from a male perspective.

In a later publication,³ Montias elaborated on the possible relationship between Vermeer and Van Ruyven. Trying to find out more about the sources of his wealth, it transpired to Montias that the input of his wife, Maria de Knuijt, may have been much more important to the couple's wealth than he had realized before. Together with the explicit mentioning of Vermeer in her will (and not in his), and the fact, not mentioned by Montias, that young Vermeer and Maria de Knuyt were for many years practically neighbors on the Delft Market, one wonders whether her role in the relationship to Vermeer may have been bigger than previously thought, either by shaping favorable financial conditions for Vermeer's production as a painter – next to his perhaps much more time consuming activities as an art dealer – or by committing or at least buying a large number of his works. Many authors have already commented on the importance of the female element in many of Vermeer's compositions, but with this new information in mind, our perspective of the same works may change considerably.

This is just one example of the possible impact of women on the Dutch art market in the seventeenth century. How many more may there have been? The most straightforward

¹ Montias 1989, p. 312, doc. 271.

² Montias 1989, pp. 322-324, doc. 301.

³ Montias in Vermeer studies.

answer to this question is: we just don't know. And by want of written sources or otherwise, we may have to say: we cannot and will never know.

The grand *doyenne* of research into the history of women in the Netherlands, historian Els Kloek, has outlined the characteristics of their position, and its imagology, in several publications.⁴ In the context of today's sessions, it is important to realize that it was difficult for women to operate independently in the public domain. In principle, married women were supposed to be under the guidance and supervision of their husbands. They were not allowed to spend larger sums independently, other than on the daily household.

Nevertheless, in practice, Dutch women had much more freedom of personal and economic movement than most of their sisters in other countries like England, France, Italy or Germany. Foreign visitors to the Netherlands frequently commented on the independent, sometimes even dominant behavior of wives towards their husbands, and we know from many sources that there must have been a substantial number of independent, usually widowed, female merchants, the so-called *koopvrouwen*. They were allowed to act as fully competent and well-respected participants in the buzzing economic life of their time. In the field of Old Master painting, there are indications that Judith Leyster practically managed the painter's shop of her husband Jan Miense Molenaer, even going after debtors and appearing in court if necessary.⁵

We know from other sources, that women of a competent age – i.e. 20 years or older – were allowed to depose witness statements before a notary, and women regents of charitable institutions could take far reaching financial decisions, not only on their own portraiture, but also on the appointment of employees and the housing of the inmates of their institutions.

All this indicates, that the position of women in the Dutch art market may also have been substantially stronger than we have thought so far.

This point is corroborated by a satirical poem written by Hieronymus Sweerts, *De tien vermakelikheden des huwelyks* (The ten delights of marriage), published in Amsterdam in 1678. The second delight occurs soon after the wedding and wedding night. The bride goes out to buy household goods to furnish the house ('huisraat'), which, it specifically says, *she* chooses. Her shopping list is long and the longer she works on it, the more lavish it gets:

'Because your Honey speaks of purchasing large Venetian Mirrors, Indian Egg-Shell porcelain, Velvet Chairs, Turkish Tapestries, Amsterdam Gold Leather Wall Hangings, expensive Paintings, Silver Dinnerware, a wooden ('Sakkerdaan') Cupboard, an Ebony Table, a separate Cabinet and a small Diaper Cupboard, multiple Napkins and Table linens, fine and coarse linen, expensive lace and thousands of other things and hodge-podge, [a list] too long to narrate. ... And at least all this, we certainly must have, so says the Wife, before we are to receive any person of honor in our home.'⁶

⁴ E.g.: Els Kloek, 'De vrouw', in: Beliën, van Deursen, van Setten, *Gestalten van de Gouden Eeuw, Een Hollands groepsportret*, Amsterdam 1995, 241-279, esp. 270-278.

⁵ Kloek e.a. in cat. Judith Leijster, Haarlem & Washington.

⁶ Want je Bekje praat erover om grote Venetiaanse Spiegel, Indisch Kraakporselein, Fluwelen Stoelen, Turkse Tapijten, Amsterdams Goudleer Behang, kostbare Schilderijen, Zilveren Servies, een Sakkerdaanhouten Kast, een

Hieronymus Sweerts, *De Tien Vermakelijkheden des Huwelijks*, 1678; edition Querido's Uitgeverij, Amsterdam 1988, pp. 29-30

This passage is illustrated with a print depicting the bride who is followed by a man with a cart carrying all sorts of household goods, including several paintings.

The author warns the groom against the assault the bride will make on his purse, but also advises him to let her have her way. After all, her opinion does not count for nothing; she did bring something to the marriage as well (albeit in real estate, such as houses, orchards and lands often located far from the Province).⁷

Admittedly, this poem accuses women of nearly everything, but the crucial role in furnishing houses attributed here to women is probably no mere invention. How do we establish what actualities provided the basis for Sweerts's satire? This new question warrants a closer look at women and their role in the household and on the art market. Curiously, as opposed to adjacent centuries and specialties, this work has barely begun for the seventeenth-century Republic.

This is surprising because women have long been considered ladies of the house. The household – private, protected – is her domain, while the public realm is male. Thousands of Dutch seemingly lifelike interior scenes, often inhabited by women performing household duties, illustrated this modern and gendered idea about domesticity. Elizabeth Honig has interpreted interior scenes like those by Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch as gendered spaces that accommodate women and portray them in reclusive moments, secluded from the hustle and bustle of the world, the latter at best implied by views through windows, open doors, and vestibules.⁸ But while some art historians have tentatively proposed that it is likely that women as well as men were the purchasers of works of art and that they spent more time looking at the pictures hanging on the walls of their homes than did their husbands, whose time was often taken up with business elsewhere, we still know far too little about women as patrons.

This paper brings together documented cases of autonomous female patronage, all suggesting that the position of women in the Dutch art market may have been substantially stronger than we have thought so far, and, perhaps more importantly, that it is both timely and promising to study their purchasing behavior. As always with socio-economic research, our main sources are archival documents, predominantly estate inventories, in the City Archives of the Netherlands.

Ebbehouten Tafel, een apart Kabinet en een Luierkastje, diverse webben Servetten en Tafellakens, fijn en grof linnen, kostbare kanten en duizend andere spullen en prullen te kopen, te lang om te verhalen. ... En dit, zeker, dit alles moet er ten minste wezen, zegt de Vrouw, zal er een mens met ere in ons huis mogen komen.

⁷ 'Je weet, je liefstetje heeft ook wat om in de melk te brokkelen en ook vrij wat ten huwelijk gebracht, ofschoon het uit verscheidene vaste goederen bestaat, zoals huizen, boomgaarden en landerijen die dikwijls buiten de Provincie liggen.' Sweerts, p. 30

⁸ Elizabeth Honig, 'The Space of Gender in 17th-Century Dutch Painting,' in Wayne Franits (ed.), *Looking at Dutch Art*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 187-201

Today, we concentrate on Haarlem, because the 112 known inventories of collections of paintings in this town have been diligently researched, published and digitized through the Getty Provenance Index by Pieter Biesboer. Thanks to his work, we were able to distill several study cases of women who appear to have autonomously owned, purchased or collected art.⁹

Such cases, however, are rare. After all, most women did get married and by default inherited, or at least were allowed to have its usufruct, as long as they survived and did not remarry. Thus, it may come as no surprise, that in many of these cases, the women involved were widows or spinsters. Any art work that appears on their inventories could have been purchased by her, or, perhaps more likely – but this is the question – her late husband.

In archival documents, the decision-making process of individual (art) purchases is rarely relevant. For instance, the preamble to the inventory of Judith Loreijn mentions a witness who specifically states that Loreijn's late husband, Dammas Guldewagen, had bought all of the paintings in the inventory himself ('dat alle dese schilderijen door de gemelte Heer Guldewagen zijn aen en ingekocht'). Such explicit mentions are rare. Our selection has therefore concentrated on defect cases, where the woman's independency as a purchaser or patron of the arts is beyond dispute.

An enigmatic case is the inventory of the collection of Agatha van Stuyvesant, whose uncle was the mannerist painter Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem. Around twenty paintings in the possession of her deceased husband, Nicolaes Suycker the Younger, had been valued in 1641, but none of these can be found with any certainty in Agatha's larger and later inventory. Since we know that Suycker bought and sold pictures on occasion, these paintings may have belonged to his stock and may have been sold after taxation. In 1646, the portraits of Agatha Stuyvesant, her husband and a number of their relatives hung in the anteroom ('voorhuijs') of their house on the river Spaarne. Among the circa 65 paintings in her possession is 'a painted piece of Cimon by Soutman' ('Een stuck schilderij Chimon van Soutman'), probably depicting Cimon and Pero, a unique subject in the oeuvre of Pieter Soutman. Another interesting piece is a fish still life ('een stuck met vissies') by Agatha's uncle, Cornelis van Haarlem, which is listed in the kitchen, along with eleven other paintings by his hand. Again, the subject is rare for the artist. Was it made especially for his niece to hang in her kitchen? [The presence of two pieces by the 16th century Haarlem painter Jan Mostert also reminds us of the fact that Nicolaes Suycker was his grandson and may have kept these pieces as a memory.]

Another woman close to Cornelis van Haarlem was Aeltie Pieters Begga, whose mother was the sole heir of his estate, artistic and otherwise. She inherited all of his paintings and drawings (and prints) in 1639. In 1684, when her daughter passed away, her inventory makes separate mention of all the prints and drawings left by Cornelisz ('Alle de prenten en teijckeninge bij Mr. Cornelis van Haarlem en Cornelis Begga naergelaten'), as part of her inheritance. However, the artistic legacy of Cornelisz, it specifically states, was hers and hers alone. The role of women as protectresses of artistic legacies was already acknowledged in Frans Grijzenhout's inaugural lecture on cultural heritage and the concept of *memoria*, and seems to apply to Aeltie Begga, and possibly Agatha van Stuyvesant.¹⁰ The rest of Begga's

⁹ Cf Biesboer & Tognari, *Collections of Paintings in Haarlem*, 2002.

¹⁰ *Pro memoria*, 2011

inventory is also interesting, but there is no way of knowing whether Aeltie or her husband purchased any of the individual works of art.

A similar set of documents survives about the possessions of Cathalijna Buijcx, who ran a lace shop and was married twice. Inventories were made of the possessions of her first husband in 1647, and her possessions right before she married the second in 1649. The contents of the inventories are almost identical, but Cathalijne may have added one piece, depicting the five senses ('De vijff Sinnen'), that is not mentioned in 1647 but is in 1649. Conversely, she obviously got lost of two big and two small globes in the front hall of the house. Cathalijne may not be the grandest of women patrons, but it is rare to be able to designate an individual purchase to a woman in the Dutch Republic, which makes her case worth mentioning today.

Claudia Hofstee, recently graduated as a Master student at University Utrecht, is currently studying Agatha Dix who ran Haarlem brewery 'the Little Ship' ('het Scheepgen'). Her two marriages were brief and the inventory from 1667 indicates, in several ways, that she purchased most, if not all, of the paintings, as well as the beautifully carved wall paneling, the overmantel, the cupboards, and bed, which were removed from the extant building in the late 1920s and are now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The living quarters of het Scheepgen also had a room with gold leather wall hangings. Valued at 150 guilders, the costliest painting is a large chimneypiece by the Swedish-born painter Koort Witholt, who was, according to Claudia's research, only in the Netherlands during a brief trip in 1641-1642, when Agatha was in between marriages. In all likelihood, she was the one who commissioned Witholt, which would make it a rare – albeit it circumstantially – documented example of a burgher woman independently commissioning an artist. Agatha also owned a large landscape by Hercules Seghers, valued at 60 guilders, as well as paintings by Porcellis, Van Wieringen, and a great number of anonymous paintings, such as those in her late husband's small room and her daughter's room. In business, as well as the household, Dix was clearly used to making decisions autonomously and, based on her taste in art, she must have had a mind of her own.

Maria Baillij (born in 1620) is a unique case in the Haarlem City Archives. She never married and owned more than one hundred paintings at the time of her death in 1697. As the presumed sole heir of her brother, who died without issue, she was independently wealthy. She owned six houses within the city walls and a garden house and garden outside. Her costliest possession was a square-cut diamond ring and a point-cut diamond ring. She also owned a collection of gold coins, an extensive wardrobe with fine linen and lace, damask tablecloths and napkins, Chinese porcelain and books. Among her paintings are a drummer and a banquet of the Gods, both by Cornelis van Haarlem. The paintings on the ground floor are listed and described independently. Upstairs are nineteen paintings in a small room above the hallway, fourteen in the large backroom, six in the smallest room in the back, fourteen in the landing etc. Some of her paintings may have been second hand, or part of her inheritance, either from her parents or her brother, but it seems more than likely that an independently wealthy woman who never married purchased at least some of the paintings she chose to live with her whole life.

The autonomy with which women may or may not have purchased works of art is often impossible to determine, because women are less visible in archival documents than men.

Our arguments today – that we should nevertheless study the subject and just search harder and cleverer, which is now possible because many archival documents have been or are being digitized, allowing systematic study – is spurred by our final and most striking individual purchase mentioned in the Haarlem City Archives.

The separate document concerns a transaction between Maria van Thilt on the one hand and her uncle Geldolph van Vladeracken and his wife Maria Roosterman on the other. The painting, depicting the Last Supper and painted by Tintoretto, was sold together with a diamond ring, for the incredible sum of 4,000 guilders. Even the costliest of diamond rings are rarely worth more than 500 guilders, making the Tintoretto painting, worth about 3,500 guilders. According to Pieter Biesboer, this means that the Tintoretto painting is the most expensive one recorded in over 51,000 records of art objects in Dutch notarial inventories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, he overlooked the potentially paradigm-shifting fact that the buyer was in fact a woman. To this day, women remain perhaps the least studied group of patrons of the Dutch Golden Age.

We are currently designing a new research project to bring the invisible women patrons of the Golden Age into the light, to study their role on the art market and to better understand the degree to which they could and would purchase works of art autonomously. We realize, of course, that much work has to be done to study individual cases like these in more detail. And we will possibly have to look for other documentary sources as well, like the minutes of the meetings of women regents in charitable institutions, the transcriptions of debtor's books that are often included in death inventories, and other personal documents. But we hope to make use of the many digitization projects of the last decades: the Getty Provenance Index and the Montias Database, the Ecartico database, CREATE at the Huygens Institute in The Hague, and RKD Explore. Another promising project is the so-called Many hands project at the Amsterdam City Archives which disclosed and digitized all notarial documents, including those relating to seventeenth-century Amsterdam. How to use, link and contribute to this growing set of Big Data, we are currently studying and discussing with colleagues who running these projects. But with every digitized document, the opportunity rises to study what has long been invisible: Women patrons, and we believe it is now time to at least try and open up what continues to this day to be the greatest male narrative of Dutch History: the Dutch Golden Age.

Thank you for your attention.