Culturele ondernemers in de Gouden Eeuw: De artistieke en sociaal-economische strategieën van Jacob Backer, Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol en Joachim von Sandrart
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Summary

Jacob Backer (1608/9-1651), Govert Flinck (1615-1660), Ferdinand Bol (1616-1680), and Joachim von Sandrart (1606-1688) belong among the most successful portrait and history painters of the Golden Age in Amsterdam. The four painters enjoyed fame and distinction during their lifetimes, which stands in stark contrast to the public’s relative ignorance of them today and the negligible and even disparaging assessment of them in the modern art historical literature. Typically seen only in the light of the extraordinary artistic quality and influence of Rembrandt (1606-1669), who was active in the city at precisely the same time, they understandably fall short. This perspective, however, cannot be reconciled with the contemporary success of these artists. The central question of this dissertation is thus, which artistic and socio-economic strategies facilitated the success of Backer, Flinck, Bol and Sandrart on the art market in Amsterdam between 1635 and 1660, and in which networks of patrons did they seek to position themselves? Given this focus on the artists’ agency, this investigation dismisses the vague term “influence” in favour of an analysis of the artists’ intentional choices and strategies.

In order to frame the four artists’ careers in their historical context, chapter 1 describes the values and practices that regulated the social interactions of their patrons and buyers, the seventeenth-century burgherly elite of patricians and influential commercial entrepreneurs. In place of the common concepts of “patronage” and “free market”, an alternative interpretative model is introduced: “the economy of service and service in return”. This model expresses the socio-economic structure of the seventeenth century as a cluster of maagschappen that function side by side; closely-knit networks of families that were connected with established friends, clients, and suppliers. Familial, business, and political concerns were intimately intertwined in these deelmarkten van afzonderlijke kooplui (market segments of individual entrepreneurs). Each segment of the market functioned as an “economy of service and service in return”, in which the magen and friends divided up the available offices, services, favours, and commissions. It was not the mechanism of supply and demand that dominated this familial structure but the strict observation of the conventions of reciprocity and faultless honour and reputation that reigned. Contemporaries termed this reciprocal relationship vrientschap (friendship), or what would today be characterized as “social networking”.

This investigation proceeds from the supposition that the market for high-quality paintings functioned within this socio-economic context. Artists who aspired to expensive commissions in the top segment of the market kept in mind that not only their artistic excellence but also faultless reputations were expected of them. Early modern artist-theorists (Van Mander, Angel, Van Hoogstraten, De Lairesse) recognized the importance of this and urged painters to mind the balance between the deugt (virtue) of the artwork and the deugt of the painter. Rembrandt did not yield to social conventions, which ultimately cost him his position and reputation among the upper
level of patrons. He would still receive commissions due to his great reputation as an artist, but he depended on varying clients for his sales and was thereby relegated to financially insecurity.

Backer, Flinck, Bol and Sandrart had better career opportunities because they carved out their own portion of the market, which was concentrated around a particular maagschap. As soon as they had invested their artistic status and social position in the service of a maagschap, they were guaranteed commissions and financial stability, and were thereby freed from the uncertain mechanisms of supply and demand on the open market. The majority of commissions from known patrons to these four artists, in fact, came from maagschappen with which they were associated. The artists’ self-positioning in these networks manifested itself in different ways, which are analysed in three case studies. The model of “the economy of service and service in return” is the point of departure for the systematic study of the patrons and buyers networks of each artist combined with the stylistic analyses of a select number of works that served as building blocks in their careers.

In Chapter 2, the careers of Flinck and Bol are considered as a pair, as they ran parallel to each other but developed quite differently. As a son of the bailiff of Cleves, Flinck had the advantage of sharing a set of values and conduct with his patrons from the Amsterdam urban elite. He was thereby guaranteed support and services of prosperous bloedvrienden (blood friends) upon his arrival in Amsterdam. Such social capital, combined with his flexible use of the different styles that he had mastered through his apprenticeships with Lambert Jacobsz. and Rembrandt, was decisive for his career.

Bol, in contrast, was the son of an affluent, reformed surgeon in Dordrecht and had nobloedvrienden to support him in Amsterdam. When he settled there in 1636 after his apprenticeship with Jacob Cuyp, his decision to study with Rembrandt was of great importance. Flinck had already preceded him in Rembrandt’s studio by three years. Through their strategic choices, the young painters learned the esteemed, modern style of Rembrandt in the hope that it would lead them to success. They also profited from his status and relationships in the Amsterdam network; this last aspect worked out better for Flinck than Bol.

Flinck studied with Rembrandt when the latter headed Uylenburgh’s atelier. Flinck mastered Rembrandt’s style quickly, and when the latter established his own practice in 1636, Flinck assumed his position as Uylenburgh’s chef d’atelier. In the approximately five years that Flinck worked for the art dealer, he learned the skills of a cultural entrepreneur while increasing his social capital through his connection with Uylenburgh’s network, which interwove seamlessly with his own Mennonitebloedvrienden.

Bol, however, came to Rembrandt when the latter had just established himself as an independent master. It was the moment in which Rembrandt’s portrait production had decreased significantly and his social reputation had begun to waver. The master was clearly not the best ally for an artist who sought to build up a network of elite patrons, but working in Rembrandt’s style still served an artist well. As a newly established painter, Bol not only worked in Rembrandt’s style, but he adopted a particular market strategy from his master: over the course of three years, Bol painted five self-portraits in Rembrandt’s manner of the elegant gentleman-artist. This method of self-fashioning was a provocative calling card that should be perceived as an expression of
artistic strategy, one by which Bol constructed his reputation and hoped to attract clients. Yet, it would be ten years and one marriage later before Bol would break into the top segment.

In spite of his modest social status, Bol concluded in 1652 a fortunate marriage with Elysabeth Dell, by which he was taken as bloedvrient into the influential Dell-Spiegel maagschap, with its high positions in the magistracy and the admiralty. Naturally, Bol had to continue delivering high-quality paintings, but given the socio-economic concern that magen and friends had for each other, his network led to many commissions. Bol’s socio-economic breakthrough came along with his stylistic turning point at the beginning of the 1650s, when he shed his Rembrandtesque style and assumed the colourful, Flemish-oriented manner of painting. Bol’s socio-economic and artistic strategies yielded fruit, for at the beginning of the 1650s, his production increased and remained at a constantly high level. He abandoned painting after his second marriage in 1669 to the wealthy widow Anna van Erckel, who came from the milieu of the admiralty. In his last self-portrait, Self-Portrait with a Cupid, Bol presented himself in his new position as a well-established member of the Amsterdam elite.

While Bol would make waves only in the 1650s, Flinck was already one of the most sought-after painters in Amsterdam in the mid-1640s. Flinck had demonstrated earlier in his career that he could work in Rembrandt’s style, but in the public confrontation with his former master in the Kloveniersdoelen, Flinck established that he was also competent in the heldere (bright) style. With this artistic strategy he could break out from the familiar Mennonite network of his magen and friends into the segment of monied, Remonstrant patrons of the regents’ circle and the grote burgerij, men with ambition for the highest positions in the civic government. Flinck would profit from their pursuit of upward social mobility: they had themselves portrayed by him in the more fashionable and aristocratic style of Van Dyck, which was a fitting endorsement of their social status.

As regards the artistic orientation Flinck followed in the footsteps of Sandrart; when the latter returned to Germany in 1645, Flinck assumed his place in the top segment of the market. He could circulate with ease in this level, as he had grown up among the city elite of Cleves. Flinck was indeed an artistic but also possibly a personal – through his background – link in the political and personal alliances between Cleves, Brandenburg, and Amsterdam. At least eight ducal commissions came from this connection. Houbraken writes that Flinck enjoyed the trust of the stadholder of Cleves Johan Maurits and the Amsterdam burgomasters Cornelis de Graff and Joan Huydecoper as a vrient. The latter two were leading figures behind the building of the town hall and also behind Flinck’s receipt of the commission for the Batavian series in 1659. This would have been the crowning commission of his career had he not died unexpectedly in 1660.

The third chapter describes the profile of Backer’s elite clientele and their interconnections. The chapter begins with an art historical examination of a history painting by Backer and culminates in the identification of the patrons, Eva Ment and Marinus Lowysse, who appear to have been a link in Backer’s network. Almost half of the commissions that he was known to have painted were obtained through the network of the maagschappen Hasselaer, Bas and De Graeff, which were interconnected by marriage. A tentative discovery is that a pattern of commis-
sion-granting in the *maagschappen* Hasselaer, Bas and De Graeff seems to have proceeded from its women; Backer’s commissions appear to relate to each other in this particularly manner.

After his training with Lambert Jacobsz. in Leeuwarden, Backer established himself in 1633 in Amsterdam, where he adopted the effective strategy of offering a stylistic alternative to Rembrandt. He was one of the first artists in Amsterdam to paint in a more Flemish style oriented to that of Rubens and Van Dyck. With this style Backer broke into the elite network of the Hasselaers, Bas and De Graeffs, which consisted of very influential Remonstrant ship-owners, merchants, and directors of VOC and WIC, who were richly represented in civic and social offices and in the magistracy. The reconstruction of Backer’s commissions leads to the presumption that he came into contact with this portion of the market through the Hasselaers. Backer was a neighbour of the Hasselaers in the Nieuwendijk, and apparently they knew each other. This was crucial for his career, as on his journey to the top segment Backer lacked the customary steps necessary to climb socially. As a baker’s son, he had a modest origin in the *brede burgerij*. And as he remained unmarried, he could not elevate his status through marriage. The initially Mennonite Backer probably adapted to his circle of clients, for he was baptized as a Remonstrant in Amsterdam in 1651.

There is no evidence, though, that Backer had intensely personal relationships with his patrons. But, given the continuous nature of his commissions, he was certainly a respectable and trustworthy associate. This, combined with his distinctive *heldere* style, must have been key for his artistic status and success in Amsterdam.

In the fourth chapter, Sandrart’s artistic production and his Amsterdam network are discussed in relation to the relevant parts of the *Teutsche Academie* and his biography in the *Lebenslauf*. Sandrart’s distinguished origins and his focused artistic education laid the foundation for a career unequalled by any other artist. His early years were spent internationally – in Prague, Utrecht, London and Italy – where he cultivated acquaintances and gained knowledge. His stay in Amsterdam (1637-1645), however, was the true springboard for his career. Sandrart fashioned himself as an aristocrat-artist through his worldly experiences, his learning, his courtly virtue, and his knowledge of languages. Through this characterization of the aristocrat-artist, he launched a new image of the artist and his lifestyle into the Amsterdam cultural network. His settling into a patrician’s house on the Keizersgracht upon his arrival in Amsterdam further strengthened Sandrart’s embodiment of the aristocrat-artist. This was a cunning professional strategy, for he situated himself immediately in the network of influential commercial leaders, connoisseurs, and magistrates and thereby raised his social status above his fellow artists. For an easy entry into the civic elite network, Sandrart had wealthy *bloedvrienden* with large political and social networks: the banker Johan de Neufville and the artist-agent Michel le Blon, who also lived on the Keizersgracht. This network quickly rewarded the painter. He executed portraits of five famous men of letters, including Vondel and Barlaeus, who penned approximately fifty poems on Sandrart’s character and work and who thereby greatly contributed to the spread of his fame. For the Bicker *maagschap*, Sandrart painted more portraits, including the militia portrait of Cornelis Bicker that came to hang in the Kloveniersdoelen.
Stylistically, Sandrart was pioneering in his use of the Van Dyckian manner in the portrait of Hendrik Bicker (1639) and also in the picture *Odysseus and Nausicaa* (1641), which he executed in a classicizing Italian style for Huydecoper’s grand townhouse. These were important pieces not only in Sandrart’s oeuvre but also in the portrait and history painting of Amsterdam. It would be almost ten years before the stylistic shift toward academicism would become definitive in the city, but Sandrart was the artistic frontrunner of this style through these early works.

Due to his eclectic artistic outlook, Sandrart served as a paragon of stylistic flexibility. His series of *The Twelve Months*, which Sandrart painted for the Elector of Bavaria, is exemplary of this. After 1641 he would work primarily for the German market, concentrating upon history paintings, from Amsterdam. This practice would set Sandrart on the path to his return to Germany in 1645, where he painted mostly monumental altarpieces for churches and cloisters in Southern Germany.

From these case studies, it appears that the artistic and socio-economic strategies of Backer, Flinck, Bol and Sandrart were indeed varied, but that they moved within the contemporary conventions of “the economy of service and service in return”. Their careers illustrate that social capital and stylistic flexibility were of decisive artistic and economic importance in the success of the seventeenth-century painter.