The Gender of Colors in Dutch Art Theory

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Philip Sohm’s 1995 article, ‘Gendered style in Italian art criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia’, revealed a striking constant in art theory below the Alps: ideas about painting styles, techniques and materials were defined to a great extent by a gendered vocabulary centering on the masculine-feminine opposition.1 One of Sohm’s key quotations, Michelangelo’s reported negative judgment on oil as a binding medium, deserves elaboration in the context of Dutch art. The sculptor allegedly preferred fresco and condemned oil paint as ‘effeminate’; the art of the Netherlands, traditionally associated with the new oil medium, was likewise, in Michelangelo’s view, only appreciated by women — especially very young or very old ones at that, as well as nuns.

In Francisco de Holanda’s original account, Michelangelo asserts that the art of the Northerners is only suitable for the feeble-minded and has a strong emotional effect on them, for it concentrates on the mere surface of things and on deceiving the eye: ‘in Flanders they paint to deceive the gaze directed at the external’.2 We do not know whether the master ever said this; what is more important is that contemporary Dutchmen took the statement seriously. Both Karel van Mander and Samuel van Hoogstraten repeated that Michelangelo regarded oil as only fit for the weaker sex (calling it vrouwens ambacht, woman’s craft, and wijvenwerk, wives’ work).3 In their treatises, which contain specific information on artists’ materials and practical issues such as brushwork, the gendered language attributed to Michelangelo resonates. The gender division was related to the Italian stereotypical view of painting materials in the Netherlands, an assumption rooted in the myth about the invention of oil paint. It was said that this Netherlandish technique was pitting a deceptive, seductive, and illusory art against the true conception of art based on antiquity’s linear purity.4 Van Hoogstraten, for instance, said that Jan van Eyck only discovered oil paint ‘after long, alchemistic research’, a view he shared with his Italian predecessor, Vasari, who for the same reasons described Van Eyck as a ‘sophist’, seeking intellectual misdirection.5 As late as the eighteenth century, Arnold Houbraken condemned a style that indulged in the blending (verdrijven) of colors, which led to weak chiaroscuro and soft highlights, calling this a feminine (vrouwelyk) manner — in this, we hear a remote echo of De Holanda.6

This article explores the afterlife of Michelangelo’s remarks in Dutch art theory. Even though the fresco versus oil dichotomy lost its practical significance for painters in the Netherlands, the opposition of a masculine
versus a feminine choice of materials, brushes and illusionistic techniques kept determining the debate throughout the century. The male-female opposition thus adds to that great opposition that Jan Emmens identified as the key differentiation in Dutch art theory: the pitting of learned against vulgar painting, which was essentially an elaboration of the ancient division between the Attic and Asian styles in rhetoric. As this article argues, Emmens ignored the opposition’s fundamentally gendered nature.

It is striking that a very practical element of art theory — relating to binding medium, pigments and brushwork — became attached to a very indeterminate and wide-ranging one, namely gender. ‘Color, in effect, appears as a problematic term with meanings ranging from the most material one (the pigment itself) to a metaphorical one (for instance, in relation to a woman’s makeup) and ultimately an ideological one (the ‘rhetorical colors’ that should be applied with utmost care for a text or relation to a woman’s makeup) and ultimately an ideological one (the ‘rhetorical colors’ that should be applied with utmost care for a text or artwork to remain persuasive). An echo of all these connotations resonates in the modern English — and Dutch — usage of the term ‘colored’ as, according to the Oxford Dictionary of English, ‘imbued with an emotive or exaggerated quality’.

This article explores, firstly, the metaphor comparing the painter’s colors and a woman’s makeup; and secondly, the association of the ‘rough’ paint layer with a ‘masculine’ style. This reveals how a specific kind of brushwork could turn the ‘weak’ art of oil into a respectable demonstration of virtuosity.

**Frail as mirrors. Women and oil paintings**

Dutch art theory often identifies paintings as women — and Pictura, the art of painting, as a particularly seductive one. Van Mander, for instance, compared the deceit of women who adorn themselves with cosmetics to that of an artwork: these ladies ‘are nothing but paintings, as women are called as ‘frail (...) as the glasses where they view themselves, / Which are as easy broke as they make forms’; they are ‘soft as [their] complexions are, / And credulous to false prints’. The mirroring quality of oil paint, similar to a sophistical delusion dissimulating the object’s true substance (namely mere pigment and canvas), is associated with women enhancing their beauty through a deceptive layer of makeup colors.

A key term in discussions of the seductive quality of the paint layer is therefore ‘ornament’, which stems from rhetorical theory. The ancient rhetoricians used ornatus to refer to the colores rhetorici, or ‘lively colours of Rhetoric’ to quote Francisca Junius: the figures of speech with which the speakers tried to make their arguments more persuasive. The orators and speakers of rhetoric were able to use this allure of figurative rather than literal speech with feminine charm. Some therefore criticized rhetoric in general, such as Agrippina of Nettesheim, an author well known to Van Hoogstraten: ‘Rhetoric [is] nothing but (...) an art of persuasion, and of stirring the inclinations; charming the souls of the unthinking with (...) well-wrought gaudery, and deceptive semblance (...) [by] those strumpets’ cosmetics of exposition’.

These remarks all have their roots in the classics; the poet Propertius’s criticism of his sweetheart’s only-too-obvious makeup is perhaps the best known example. It inspired the Italian author Lodovico Dolce to make a literal equation of painterly coloring and the colors used in makeup. He observed that Titian never allowed his colors to descend into artificial ornament (ornamenti affettati), but focused on ‘the warm softness and delicacy of nature’. In the Dutch literature, the painterly metaphor was treated as commonplace in relation to female vanity. Jan de Brune, for instance, compared the deceit of women who adorn themselves with cosmetics to that of an artwork: these ladies ‘are nothing but paintings, made to deceive the eyes’.

**Painting skin, paint as skin. Cosmetic colors**

The gendered appreciation of color comes to the fore most clearly in relation to the painting of faces. Painting’s great power, in comparison to sculpture and even to poetry, rests to a large extent in its ability to make visible the motions of the mind through the colors of the face (and according to the Aristotelian theory of the passions this should be interpreted literally: the passions consist of the heating and cooling of the blood, rising from the heart to the head, thus changing the colors of the face). ‘Picture,’ says Junius, is able ‘to performe greater matters with one colour, then any other Art is able to effect with diverse means: shee doth
Thijs Weststeijn

The nature of soft flesh color is so appealing that no cosmetic can come success from its 'naturalness' and the recognizably artificial 'cosmetic': shew the shadowes, she observeth the diversitie which is in the looke of a commonly ravish our sight with the bewitching pleasure of delightsome severall effects and properties of life and spirit, so doe they most 'coloured pictures for all that, as they shew a more lively force in the with that of alchemy.36

The affective power of the colors of gems, comparing their effectiveness his Italian predecessor Gianpaolo Lomazzo, who analyzes in more detail elemental qualities are inherent to particular colored stones 35; he echoes copper).25 But Junius's statement on alloys is more subtle. The artist beneficence; a statue of the murderous Duke of Alva should be made from temperament (a golden effigy of Mary of Burgundy expresses her great providence. A good painter would consider that a great injury had been done to him and would have just occasion to become indignant against him who would wish to correct and remake a picture or likeness that he had perfected with great care and diligence.37

Yet, as Junius's theory makes clear, this critical aspect of art is also most prone to failure. When an artist's colors betray their artificiality, the effect of lifelikeness is lost — just like the application of the wrong colors in a woman's makeup destroys the effect of beauty by betraying its falsehood: 'Adorne a thing purely and soberly (…) and it shall grow better and better; daube it over on the contrary with the painting colour of women, and it shall resemble a jugglers delusion.'38 He refers to versieren, coloristic ornaments, and ascribes 'bewitching' powers to them, which is in effect a commonplace from the tradition of art theory39: 'coloured pictures for all that, as they shew a more lively force in the several effects and properties of life and spirit, so doe they most commonly ravish our sight with the bewitching pleasure of delightsome and stately ornaments'.35

The Dutch equivalents of the term ornatus, such as verzieringen and opsmuk, are associated with color as the added embellishment of the foundation laid down by drawing.40 Van Hoogstraten, for one, makes a clear distinction between the rendition of flesh tone that derives its success from its 'naturalness' and the recognizably artificial 'cosmetic': 'The nature of soft flesh color is so appealing that no cosmetic can come near.'38 Van Mander, who also uses the term versieren in connection with paint,40 conceives the metaphor so literally that in his chapter on color, he discusses the depiction of jewelry (sieraden) and gems — and, in the case of ultramarine, there was indeed a direct connotation between gemstones and pigments.41 We may only refer obliquely to the rich connotations between the supposed magical power of gemstones to 'act at a distance' and the equally seductive powers attributed to women's attire and the art of painting alike.40 As Van Hoogstraten tells us, certain elemental qualities are inherent to particular colored stones42; he echoes his Italian predecessor Gianpaolo Lomazzo, who analyzes in more detail the affective power of the colors of gems, comparing their effectiveness with that of alchemy.43

The comparison between the painter's pigments and female makeup is popular in early modern literature. Artistic metaphors occur in this context in books that codify civilized behavior. The best example may be a French treatise by Jean Lébaut, featuring a woman who criticizes the use of cosmetics (De l'embellissement et ornement du corps humain, 1582). The text advises that women should follow the example of good painters and be moderate in their use of gaudy colors, or avoid them altogether:

[The virtuous woman] thinks that colors, paints, and all types of pigments most often serve as stimulants to all the immodesties that infect, pollute, and contaminate the singular beauties of the spirit. That it does harm to nature to disseminate, sophisticate, and adulterate the form and figure of the body, which [nature] has shaped with such great providence. A good painter would consider that a great injury had been done to him and would have just occasion to become indignant against him who would wish to correct and remake a picture or likeness that he had perfected with great care and diligence.37

In the context of the paragone between color and draftsmanship, theories of painting might develop a more positive appreciation of pigments and paints. Jacqueline Lichtenstein has analyzed recently how the French Academy (especially the Rubénistes among them, who favored the master's art) judged Rubens's brushwork using traditional terminology that compared it to feminine makeup, but in a positive sense. The academician Gabriel Blanchard, for one, used the expression le beau fard (beautiful cosmetics) to characterize Rubens's art.45 Lichtenstein observes how the rhetoricians' 'metaphorization of makeup', when discussing the rhetorical colors, developed in the seventeenth century:

[The metaphor] acquired even more resonance to the degree that its object, coloring, appeared in the work as a physical fact. Coloring, when applied to painting (...) became no longer just a word but sensible, tactile, and visible, made of paste and ointments, genuine pigments like those used in women's cosmetics. The seductive artifice of the coloring praised by the colorists (i.e., the Rubénistes) partook of the courtesan's and prostitute's allure.

When the art critic Roger de Piles wrote that the work of Rubens was based on deceptive coloring and pretense, he was being positive: 'it is true that it is only cosmetics [en fard]; but one would wish that all these paintings that are made nowadays had been similarly fake [fardes]'.47 Turning the reproach of alluring pigments into a positive statement, De Piles echoes P.C. Hooft's Dutch epigram that praises Rubens's Maidens Crossing the Tiber for the physical excitement aroused by the painted female nudes.48

In this context, we may also think of the many seventeenth-century poems in which the seductive qualities of a painting are specifically connected to the flesh color (liefserwe, in Junius's vocabulary) of the
Rubens’s Venus at her mirror and Rembrandt’s Young woman trying on earrings present these associations (figs. 2–3).

In this context, we should observe how art theory presents ornament, a subjective quality, as the opposite of beauty, an objective quality; this opposition responds to the paragone pitting color against design. Beauty is seen as a property of the thing that the painter depicts. Ornatus, in contrast, is an added value that the painter only achieves in the stage of the handling of the brush (the relevant Dutch term is handeling, equivalent to the rhetorical concept of actio): adding colors to the framework laid by drawing as a ‘final touch’. Ornatus, closely associated with the quality of grace, is essentially a subjective illusion. It has to persuade the beholder of an impression of beauty: ‘to persuade our souls in regarding it, such that one truly greets them as beautiful’, as Willem Goeree’s treatise on painter’s anatomy puts it. This grace is a rhetorical effect that derives not from innate physical proportions but ‘from a sweet and charming gesture or motion of the eyes, mouth and hands that expressly accompanies the caressing tones of the tongue’. Goeree associates verciersel directly with deception: beauty, he says, must be simple, and so true to itself ‘that it is not easily achieved by a cosmetic embellishment’; ornament can only be an effective ‘bewitchment of the eyes’ where it acts as ‘a wise and well-used adornment’. He refers for confirmation of this view to Cicero’s opinion that ‘feminine beauty’ consists of women’s ability to suggest that ‘they are pleasing in the eyes of men because of it; and spur them to caresses’. This view of the affective power of beauty was supposedly why, in antiquity, it was regarded as ‘less of an offence to have abused a beautiful woman than an ugly one’.

The term ornament is thus connected with how art theory contrasts subjective charm or grace (related to colorito) with objective beauty (related to disegno) using a gender-related vocabulary. The supposedly feminine grace has a treacherous character that shows only on the outside, whereas masculine beauty is said to arise out of physical health and good proportions, which cannot be faked. Junius, for instance, says that what matters in art is not the paint surface, but its underlying strength or essence: ‘the true following of a rare Masters Art, doth not consist in an apish Imitation of the outward ornaments, but rather in the expressing of the inward force’.

Paintings as shields. The manly brush

Dutch theories of painting do not consistently condemn color. By contrast, they often elevate it above draftsmanship; texts such as Van Mander’s and Van Hoogstraten’s stand out from the tradition of art theory by devoting an inordinate amount of attention to the subject. We can therefore begin with the hypothesis that in addition to the Propertian condemnation of feminine paints, another ideal was developed that foregrounded a ‘masculine’ manner of coloring.

Masculinity, in Van Hoogstraten’s book, seems to come to the fore especially in his many military and martial metaphors, which have been identified by Celeste Brusati. Essential here is the etymology that derived
Van Hoogstraten praises in particular the weaponry of the Rhinelanders.

Praising the military virtues of the Germanic tribes — virtues that allegedly reflected cultural values — was problematic, because the ancient Romans, especially Tacitus, had presented them as a primitive people. Therefore, as a study by Hans van de Waal has shown, Dutch writers reiterated a commonplace of ancient historiography for describing and appropriating foreign civilizations: the simplicity of the barbaric tribes was deemed a positive value that had been lost by the Romans themselves. For our discussion, it is relevant that the ‘rhetorical colors’ were the main metaphor to articulate this paradoxical appreciation of the barbarians.

The preference for Germanic antiquity follows closely the topical preference of ancient authors for the ‘roughness’ and ‘crudity’ of an earlier age. Cicero’s formula in De oratore was made famous by Ernst Gombrich: ‘How much more brilliant (...) in beauty and variety of coloring are new pictures compared to the old ones. But though they captivate us at first...’

The gender of colors in Dutch art theory

The Dutch verb for painting, schilderen, from schilden, shields: the metaphor of the painting as a mirror is replaced by a manlier one — the artwork as a piece of armor. Van Hoogstraten explains that ‘one will easily admit that the ancient Batavians have known no other paintings than their shields.’ Hence he states that Teutons and Batavians should be represented wearing shields with painted images. Contemporary prints confirm this idea; Philip Cluverius represents Germanic soldiers with large, rectangular shields, one of them decorated with a painted bird (fig. 4). Van Mander and Junius cite the same etymology of the ‘Dutch verb Schilderen (...) since it is probable that for a long time, the ancient martial inhabitants of these lands have used Art only to ornament their shields’. This belief reflects a fundamental attitude in the Dutch appreciation of their ancestors. Ultimately, the ‘Golden Age’ of Dutch painting (gulde eeuwe in Junius’s Dutch) reflects the aetas aurea of Germanic history when Tacitus praised the Batavians for their martial prowess and their noble simplicity. Junius highlights the stoutmoedigheid der Duytschen, Germanic courage; Van Hoogstraten praises in particular the weaponry of the Rhinelanders.

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The topical remarks on primitive virtues are echoed in Junius’s theory, where the appreciation of uncorrupt civilization and that of an art which is ‘close to nature’ apparently overlap. In fact, many of Junius’s Dutch terms reflect a gendered opposition: he speaks of effeminate (verwijft) and unmanly (onmanlick) art. 63 To strengthen his aversion to coloristic (valschverwij) artifice, he uses the term blancketsel — which originally refers to cosmetic pigmentation — as a term of art criticism, a synonym for bedrieglick verwen cieraet, the ‘deceptive ornament of color’. 64 Yet, it is harder to establish what practical matters he has in mind when he praises

sight the pleasure does not last, while the very roughness and crudity of old paintings maintain their hold on us.” 65 This primitive civilization was positively judged in gendered terms: its ‘uncorrupt nature’, simplicity and masculinity served as a foil to the Romans’ ‘whorish’ or ‘effeminate’ appearance. 66 One English author, discussing the Dutch, praised their ancestors’ ‘honesty of lyf, a rare thing among pagan people; Caesar would have reported that ‘the youth of Germanie were not given to the lusts of the flesh’: these healthy men refrained from intercourse with women younger than twenty years and married only virgins. 67

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a work’s ‘very manly boldness’ (gantsch mannelieke kloeckheyd), its ‘masculine impression of stateliness’ (maanhaftige schijn-staateliekhed), or when he contrasts masculine ornatus with effeminate fucus.75

Junius, for whom Germanic antiquity was a central focus of his studies (although most of these developed only after his treatise on painting), equated masculine appearance and behavior with a certain crudity that was the opposite of ‘smoothness.’76 Moreover, he thought that the painter should evade gaudy effects and give the impression that a minimum of colors had been used. His book quotes Quintilian: ‘The dignitie belonging to a man must be stout and uncorrupted; it cannot abide an effeminate smoothness, nor such a colour as is procured by choice painting; seeing bloud and strength must make it goody and faire.’77 The Dutch text speaks about healthy coloring (ghesonde verwe) that contrasts with the ‘consumed smoothness of gaudy-colored cosmetics’ (de vertaerde glattigheyd van hoogh-verwighe blancketsels).78 It is worth quoting a longer passage where Junius explains his vision of ideal antiquity, determined by the virtues of virile, martial simplicity, and praises plain coloring above gaudy ornamentation:

Those who are taken with an outward shew of things (…) judge sometimes that there is more beautie in them which are polled, shaved, smoothed, curled, and painted, than incorrupt Nature can give unto them: even as if pulchritude did proceed out of the corruption of manners. (…) if any man study to trim bodies with an effeminate kinde of polling and painting, the very labour and affectation of such a forced beauty shall make them most ill-favoured and ugly.

Junius continues this simile with a quote from Lucian, which declares that refined dress is not befitting to masculine strength, and he concludes that painters should address the subject matter around them in an uncorrupted, simple painting style. In Dutch, Junius speaks here about the painter’s use of ‘whorish makeup’ (hoerachtige cieraeten):

If any man should offer to adorne a lusty and stout wrestler (…) with purple cloaths and other whorish ornaments, disguising likewise and painting his face; would he not seeme to be very ridiculous, for shaming the man after this manner? Even so is it for the most part better to decke his worke in a rug [i.e., rough] gowne, than to adorne it with strumpet-like ornaments.79

Among Dutch painters, Van Hoogstraten, for one, retains Junius’s preference for nature above artifice. Thus, he not only mentions the sobriety in the attire of the Teutonic tribes,80 but he also repeats Junius’s criticism of extravagance, quoting Vitruvius’s statement that ‘a ship should look like a ship, an image like a human being, or (…) a known or natural creature.’81

Here, we may introduce an artwork as an example illustrating these ideological debates on the ‘roughness’ of ancient Dutchmen, combining a subject from Batavian history with a decided lack of ‘smoothness’ in the execution: Rembrandt’s Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis (fig. 5). Rembrandt’s painting demonstrates a stylistic roughness of brushwork, using blurry contours as a technical shorthand and for spatial effect, which may have contributed to the Amsterdam Burgomasters’ discontent with the work.82 Junius foreshadowed what Van Hoogstraten and others would later write about loose brushwork: the artist must take care that when ‘he hitteth the maine and weightiest points of art aright, in making of an entire body, the same needs not trouble himselfe much about the neatnesse of some little haires, and of the uttermost ends of the nailes’.83 Yet Rembrandt may have sought to create an impression of ‘rough’ materiality for iconographical reasons too. The master was not only faithful to Tacitus’s account that Civilis, the Batavians’ leader, let his beard grow from the beginning of the uprising, as the tribesmen were wont to do before they killed a man; he also depicted Civilis’s full face with his one eye, identifying him as an apparent enemy of Rome, similar in appearance to Hannibal. The rough paint surface accorded with the kind of antiquity preferred by Junius – not ‘polled, shaved, and smoothed’, but unadorned. In the Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis, the crusty paint surface was no longer a mirror — if any metaphor might come closer, it may be that of the battered shield of one’s forefathers. The female attribute was replaced by a manly one. Calling attention to a work’s materiality was, perhaps, a conscious effort to avoid the accusations of effeminate fraud and frailty that were traditionally associated with oil painting.
The rough paint layer as a ‘mask of ignorance’

We see here the fundamental division that Jan Emmens recognized as the most enduring dichotomy in Dutch art theory. He traced it back to the ancient ‘Attic’ versus ‘Asiatic’ styles. Seventeenth-century authors use the terms net en fijn, meaning ‘smooth’ or ‘fin’, versus rouw en los — ‘rough’ or ‘loose.’ The distinction derives in essence from a line of verse by Horace, which Van Hoogstraten quotes: ‘You may look at this Painting from close by;...And the other has a more pleasing appearance from farther away.’ The statement suggests that the painter has a choice here, as a remark by Gerard de Lairesse seems to confirm: ‘The handling of the brush is of two kinds, very different from each other, for the one is fluid, and tender or smooth; the second is robust and quick, or bold.’ Dutch art theory presents a couple of topics in which this debate is particularly relevant: Rembrandt’s manner, in which the very surface structure of the paint is used to illusory effect (discussed in some detail in Van Hoogstraten’s book), and the smooth painting style of the fijnschilders (whom Van Hoogstraten fiercely criticizes at several points in his treatise). Van Hoogstraten regards those among his countrymen who produced ‘unnecessarily finicky work’ as particularly objectionable, criticizing painters who finish their works with ‘a smooth strictness, or precise finickiness, a “sleepy” manner of working that only pleases “mindless” art lovers — we are reminded of Michelangelo’s condemnation of those works that only appeal to women. The liefhebbers are clearly in love with the wrong sort of Muse — one who paints her face, and is only after their money.

Instead, Van Hoogstraten prefers an impression of simplicity and sincerity: an artist’s brush must always be honest, and never false, in order to properly express virtue and truth. It is therefore not surprising that he expresses his dislike of an excess of ornament in a comparison with the cosmetics used by damsels (jufferen): artificial ornament actually causes them ‘to lose that which they seek with such fervent desire’. The ultimate paradox is perhaps a ‘forced looseness’ (lossicheyt) in outward appearance, ‘this all too forced casualness’ that provokes disgust ‘because we see that everything is artificial.’ Here, in the context of ‘seeming artlessness’, the courtly ideal of sprezzatura comes to the fore as an essentially manly manner of dissimulation (and an echo resonates with the Italian poets, including Bronzino, who compared the painter’s brush to the male sexual organ).

Although Van Hoogstraten does not explicitly call the fine manner feminine and the rough one masculine, there are older sources for this idea, especially in relation to Titian’s style, which is a great topic of discussion in Dutch art theory. Titian’s late works are consummate examples of the Venetian pole of the paragone pitting design against coloring: Van Hoogstraten contrasts the fine manner of the painters from Rome and Tuscany with the more vivid handling of the Northern Italians who ‘not only adorned art with beautiful colors, and shining varnish, but gave it all life.’ In connection to the master’s much-discussed brushwork, Van Mander analyzed Titian’s sprezzatura as hiding consummate skill behind an appearance of looseness. In Italy, Titian’s late style was defined as a masculine one in contrast to his earlier, more feminine works: Titian (…) sometimes painted with so many and so diligent brushstrokes that he almost seemed to want to make the hairs countable, and sometimes he contented himself with suggesting his works roughly with few and extremely sketchy strokes. Intelligent viewers of such a different manner will recognize the qualities of Titian’s late manner: ‘There is much more difficulty in it than one would think (…) the labor is concealed by great art (…) things appear effortless, which were yet done painstakingly.’

The courtly virtue of sprezzatura presents an interesting parallel between the painter’s colors and the ‘lively colours of Rhetorike’. When the poet and statesman Constantijn Huygens, whose ideas on painting echo his rhetorical ones, praises the portraitist Michiel van Mierevelt, he points out that the master demonstrates simplicity and naturalness both in his manner of painting and in his style of speaking: ‘No one has been able to state that [Van Mierevelt] was not himself (…) When one looks at his actions, one sees that they echo his manner of painting. In the treatment of difficult subjects his behavior, attitude and language are plain. What is described here is professed artlessness: Van Mierevelt deliberately hides behind a mask of ignorance and in so doing makes it very difficult for experts.’

This way of thinking about the rough manner is probably what made it possible for Dutch authors to be so positive about brushwork in oil painting; carelessness could be a manly virtue only when it gave the impression that it hid great skill. For a literary source confirming the qualities of the rough manner, Van Hoogstraten may also have been inspired by his reading of Juan Huarte’s Examen des ingenios para las sciencias, a text combining rhetorical and painterly metaphors that was translated into Dutch in 1636. This author bluntly asserts that affected speech is distasteful to right-minded people: ‘the putting together of pure and smooth words is not to be found in men of great understanding.’ In this context, Huarte compares Socrates’s awkward, unhistorical manner of speaking to a ‘roughly’ painted picture that in fact conceals true wisdom and ‘excellent work and painting.’ Aristotle himself would have deliberately written in ‘an obscure, rough style (…) thus ponderously and carelessly, without including any embellishment of his words, or any fine manner of speaking.’ Supposedly, the paradox became very clear in the
example of Saint Paul, whose lack of education enabled him to speak with
great persuasive force despite the fact that ‘his innate ability was not
trained sufficiently to learn foreign languages, and to express them with
perfect and refined polish (netticheyt), and add all the necessary
ornaments (vercieringen)’. For a similar view in the context of the art of
painting itself, we may point to the ‘handling’ in Rembrandt’s Self-portrait
as the Apostle Paul (1661); here, the artist consciously sought a rough style
in contrast to ‘refined netticheydt’, perhaps to harmonize form and content
and ally them to the reputed oratorical style of the subject (fig. 6).

According to Michelangelo, Netherlandish art would please only
women, especially the most emotionally unstable ones, and also monks
and ‘gentlemen without genuine feel for harmony’. Although Dutch art
theorists may have realized that the ‘weak’ art of oil was wijvenwerk; and
coloring in general was hard to reconcile to the manly intellect, there was
a clear way to turn the medium of oil into an exemplary masculine
technique: a demonstration of the paradoxical quality of sprezzatura,
hiding consummate skill behind a mask of looseness and ease. This
studied nonchalance was seen as a clear demonstration of virtus (related
to vir, man), according to the courtly ideas put forward authoritatively by
Baldassare Castiglione, who was among the authors quoted in the
introduction to Junius’s book — and who indirectly (via a French
translator, Nicholas Faret) influenced Van Hoogstraten, too. Again,
Junius’s treatise is the most enlightening about such an argument in
which brushwork may acquire masculine virtues through ‘unstrained
facilitie of working’, masking great skill behind an impression of
carelessness. He coins the expression ‘negligent diligence’, and his
formula is paradoxical indeed as it refers to the kind of ‘pure ornament’
that renders feminine grace into an attribute worthy of a man, and manly
simplicity into a fitting attribute for a woman: ‘so doth want of ornament
make many women more comely’. Junius gives the example of the
Assyrian Semiramis, reported as ‘the fairest of all women living, though
shee did very much neglect her beautie’. 

Conclusion
Our analysis suggests that we may bring nuance to the Emmensian
division contrasting vulgar coloring with intellectual linear design in
Dutch art theory. One answer to the criticism leveled at colorism and at
the medium of oil in general was, paradoxically, calling attention to the
work’s materiality through its rough manner. Only by leaving the
brushstroke visible could the allegations of the fraudulent, superficial,
mirroring qualities of oil painting be countered: like the rhetorician who
 evade d colored speech to avoid allegations of sophistry, painters using
the shorthand of the rough manner avoided the accusation of duplicity
that came with painterly illusionism. In fact, the rough manner
encouraged the viewer to pay attention to the painted surface. The
virtuosity of the rough manner could be properly evaluated only by
contrasting the materiality of the visible brushstroke to the illusionistic
effect that occurred at a certain distance — just as how in Titian’s late
style, according to Van Mander, the artist’s ‘bold brushstrokes and

6
Rembrandt, Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul, 1661, oil on canvas, 91 x 77 cm,
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (photo: Image Collection Institute of Art History, University
of Amsterdam).
patches’ were visible from close at hand ‘but were highly effective seen from afar’.97

Rembrandt’s Apostle Paul suggests that painters who demonstrated their preference for the rough manner in a self-portrait expressed topical assumptions about their temperament. Obviously, in painting as in play-acting, style is rooted in the body according to the early modern view, as Sohm has remarked in a recent publication: if ‘every painter paints himself’, how then can there not be ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ style and technique?98 We may note that the majority of woman painters of the Dutch golden age chose to keep to their supposed lasts and painted their self-portraits, which demonstrated who they were and how they painted at the same time, in a fine manner, highlighting the mirroring qualities of oil paint. When they made still lifes, they may have indulged even more in the ‘finicky work’ that Van Hoogstraten condemned (in theory only — he is infamous for not obeying the ideas set out in his treatise in his painting practice!).99 What is more, when the biographical literature deals with special skill in materials, some women get special attention: Van Mander describes a certain ‘Propertia of Bologna’ who was not only schoonlijvich herself but who apparently made works of ‘Persian stone’ , marble and copper. Houbraken’s account of one ‘Juffrou Rozee’ stands out; she made images using pieces of colored silk. Apparently, the consummate words of praise for these works, which seemed to have ‘magical’ properties, were that ‘the colors of the nude were so softly merged together in a melting manner, just as if it were painted in oil’.100

One exception to women applying colors in a womanly fashion was Judith Leyster. Our findings suggest, however, that Leyster had a specific reason to choose the manly, loose manner that left visible some of the traces of her brush (fig. 7). In her well-known self-portrait, this painter who obviously belonged to the female sex handled her colors in a distinctly robust way in suggesting the texture of her dress and collar: in this fashion, she demonstrated the ability to beat her male colleagues on their own field.
49 'De schitter – com est genees de gheest gheejt de skyn, 
Liefhebbers oft neevals seaers jelers
is' , Van Mander 1604, Leven der moderne, 98.
50 (te) disagreerende reacties: Hoogstraten 1678, 171.

9 'De Schitter – com est genees de gheest gheejt de skyn, 
Liefhebbers oft neevals seaers jelers
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is' , Van Mander 1604, Leven der moderne, 98.
50 (te) disagreerende reacties: Hoogstraten 1678, 171.
Dit moge je niet denken dat het altijd beter is te kiezen; er schijnt verloren gouden: Het beste behoudt niet verdere gletschert te worden: het is dicht bij de der hand, en met de dinghun sebro sebro vermengt, datmen door het zijn oogen licht glemeluckelijck kunnen uytvinden, ‘t en sy opgeheven der oude, die haer kamers, gaenderyen dingen vertoonde: tegen de gewoonte Vitruvius zegt, dat de verdorven gewoonte ken, aen een te klampen. “Gelijk by te gaen’, Junius 1641, 278. Dit is een pootier gemaakt had, men kan er zin voor te zien, goedenthans bistaat. Van Mander zegt dat by de verwe, die’t vlees en hair te inzijn verdiende waerde, maer hau deaelen en zyne stuiten, zy in het spreekvvel ben, in goede kennis, en wetenschap ben ik daarmee by haar niet minder.” Haarle 1561, 239.

37 [...]'En lesten wacht'en [Titaan] zijn dingeven met chique penseel-streken baren, en geheele, zoo dat het by geen perfecte, meer van te zien, goedenthans bistaat,’ Van Mander zegt, “die uyt der handen van de onpolished conception of the Batavians’ , Van de onzekerheid en ydelheid der onzekerheid en ydelheid der moderne, oft des- tijtse- dorpachtige doorzichtige Italiaansche schilders,’ 177r. For the references to Castiglione in Van Mander 1659, 230.

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R. Averni, ‘Francisco d’Ollanda e o juizo de Miguel Angelo sobre a unpolished conception of the Batavians’ , Van de onzekerheid en ydelheid der onzekerheid en ydelheid der moderne, oft des- tijtse- dorpachtige doorzichtige Italiaansche schilders,’ 177r. For the references to Castiglione in Van Mander 1659, 230.

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