Ingelijst werk. De verbeelding van arbeid en beroep in de vroegmoderne Nederlanden

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Summary

Framed Work
The representation of labor and profession in the early modern Netherlands

Two different stories can be told about the representation of labor and profession in the early modern Netherlands (circa 1500 - 1700). The first one is short. It shows that the remarkable economic growth of the Netherlands, culminating in the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, did hardly spark the imagination of contemporary artists. In that period economic activity could be seen, heard, and smelled everywhere in the public space of cities. However, the theme of labor and profession only occupied a modest place in paintings, drawings, and prints of that period. Especially when the available visual material is compared with the impressive production of art of the seventeenth century, this conclusion seems almost inevitable. This impression is reinforced by the far from representative distribution of the available visual material across different economic domains. Certain trades are hardly depicted. The relatively modern agricultural sector of the Republic, in fact its largest economic segment, has left a visual trace that one could hardly call realistic. Of the rustling life of craftsmen in cities, especially the more traditional basic crafts (such as shoemaker, tailor, and weaver) have been visualized, certainly in so far as the art of painting is concerned. The visual material therefore gives an incomplete and thus a distorted view of the socio-economic reality of the period. The documentary value of the material is not absent, but it is too fragmentary to be of use as a source for historical research. Therefore, the socio-economic historian cannot use the material other than for purposes of illustration, and for the art historian an additional problem presents itself. The available visual material randomly spans across the work of varying artists and diverse types of representation, and therefore fits only with great difficulty in the usual - painter or genre oriented - method within the discipline of the history of art. Moreover, in the visual material few pieces of exceptional quality can be found.

However, a more interesting story can be told about the visual material with economic motifs. This second story forms the center of this cultural and historical study. It stems from the paradox that in the apparent weakness of the image as an empirical source, its strength can also be found. Precisely due to its distortion of the social and economical life of those times, the visual material can reveal something about the possible meanings of that reality in daily life. The manner in which early modern notions concerning human labor and professions were being visually expressed - and formed - qualify this visual material as an important historical source. Besides examining the representations of economic activity, this study also addresses vocational portraits, narrative depictions in which representatives of professions figure and other visual renderings of professional activities such as the attributes of the guilds.

In exploring and interpreting the multifaceted visual material in this study, two lines of questioning are principal. The starting point of the first concerns the early modern concept of labor. This notion, visualized according to Christian-Humanist legacy, is discussed in chapter 1. Since the late sixteenth century and onwards, the representation of labor as a societal virtue and its adversary - idleness as a vice - increased considerably. Several series of prints were published in which the contrast between industriousness and idleness was dramatically represented in visual images. Depictions that were accompanied by texts left no doubt as to what the intended meaning was for the contemporary beholder. A similar focus on this conceptual pair can be traced to the manner the visual motif of the working Adam and Eve "by the sweat of your brow", 187
and the motif of the *harvest of wheat* were represented. Both motifs prevailed in late medieval religious context (bibles for the poor, the breviary, ecclesiastical sculpture), but received their proper accent in the course of the period in the art of painting and printing.

Initially, biblical and agrarian-based images dominated the depiction of conceptions and motifs concerning industriousness and idleness. For example, there are many images illustrating Adam tilling the soil with a spade and cultivating the land together with his sons. Within the recurring image of the work of farmers, their unambiguously agricultural activities such as plowing, sowing and harvesting are given an honored place. Also *Labor*, the personification of work, is illustrated with its permanent attribute, a spade. However, during the last decades of the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century the visual language started to focus more and more on urban imagery. Biblical and agrarian motifs did not disappear, but the urban newcomer just gained more terrain. At this point, the second line of inquiry of this study emerges, which focuses on the urban practitioners. They started to appear more frequently and in different forms in the visual arts. The case studies concerning the notary, the minister, the merchant-banker, the shoemaker, the bag carrier, and the spinner testify to this shift in remarkable ways (chapters 2 to 7). Practitioners can be found as mere participants or as messengers of religious-moralistic learning and thereby signaled something of the economic or social importance that was ascribed to their work (in the case of the bag carrier), and to industriousness in general (in the case of the shoemaker and the spinner). The regular pattern with which practitioners were propelled into this role also reveals the appeal that the motto of the *homo faber* (laboring man) must have had for contemporary viewers. In addition, work and occupation acquired an ever more prominent position in the visual identity of individuals and groups of individuals, a development that is easily traceable in the seventeenth century. Identity in this context should be understood as a mixture of self-image, self-realization, and the image that others have of us. Vocational portraits not only show the self-image that professional practitioners had of themselves - or would have liked to have diffused (notaries, ministers) - but also the influence of social opinions upon this very image (ministers). Also the manner in which the social construction of images concerning professional practitioners manifested itself in other visual genres, contributed to the visual identity of quite a few of these practitioners (minister, merchant-banker).

The case studies presented in this book are exploratory and interpretative in nature. The image and its analysis have a dominant role in this realm. Thanks to the relatively balanced spread of the investigated professions over the early modern urban profile as a whole (often characterized in terms of type of labor and economic clustering, they offer to a certain extent a meaningful frame of interpretation for the multifarious features proper to the visual material. A central premise of this study is that interpretation is impossible without context. Not only the developments in the nature and status of visualized professions (professionalization, social acceptance) are crucial, but also the relevant visual traditions and changes that occurred in the art market.

The importance of visual traditions for the attribution of meaning in the study of the early modern visual material is undisputed. Visual traditions stand for typical and common modes of representation. They demonstrate both continuity and changing accents, both of which are or can be relevant for the attribution of meaning. However, the determining role of visual traditions also has its limits. Indeed, the manner in which the beholder appropriated the possible meanings of works of art can never be fully captured by them. Not every epoch will have had the same associations when confronted with comparable visual types. And also during the same period, works of art may have been perceived differently, depending on the public. For example, the
representation of the visual motif of the money balance was most likely connected with other connotations in the seventeenth century than it had had in the sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century this motif was still primarily associated with various kinds of financial professionals that were socially regarded with a certain amount of suspicion. In the seventeenth century the unspecific figure of the old miser was no longer connected to contemporary professionals; in the later representations only the reference to the general social vice of greed and miserliness remained.

The art market expanded towards mass selling and was characterized by large-scale production and a broadly constituted buyers' public. The gradual rise of income, and the remarkable decline of the prices of this consumer good that had previously been a luxury product, brought paintings within the reach of large groups of the population. Among them, also representatives of the investigated professions could be found. Household inventories not only give insight into the actual possession of works of art among these professional practitioners, but they also endorse the fact that practitioners shaped their professional identity with the help of visual means. Moreover, they demonstrate that professional identity was also socially constructed (as was the case with the portraits of ministers, made for third parties or for the public at large).

The case studies show that the role of the profession in the visual identity of individuals or groups of individuals differed remarkably, depending on the position the profession occupied in the social hierarchy. The making of recognizable portraits was a widely known phenomenon, especially for the so-called middle groups. This can easily be seen from the investigated emerging professions: the notary and the minister (chapters 2 and 3). Central elements in making these occupations more professional such as knowledge and skills, service and public authority—were given much attention in vocational portraits. The honest notarius publicus and the learned and eloquent minister succeeded in placing their visual mark in the visual arts. Whereas professional portraits of notaries were primarily for personal use, portraits of ministers were also made at the request of third parties or by public demand. With or without these professional attributes, portraits of ministers fulfilled an important role in creating a spiritual identity during the religiously turbulent late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. The presence of vocational portraits in the group of emerging professions has much to do with the developments in the very nature of these professions, but also demonstrates that, for many of the middling sort, the profession was a status-enhancing factor. It contributed to the honor and fame of the portrayed individuals and it was for this reason that they indulged in it. The developments in the seventeenth century art market offered ample opportunity to meet this personal or societal need for the painting of (vocational) portraits.

Lower in the social hierarchy vocational portraits were rarely seen, but this circumstance does not imply that shoemakers and bag carriers lacked professional identity (chapters 5 and 6). Numerous visual expressions in the context of guilds (altarpieces, funeral shields, façade stones) leave little room to doubt about the existence of a collective professional identity for organized practitioners on the lower side of the labor market. The pride and know-how of the craftsman's skill or profession was often aptly visualized. Occasionally it is even possible to discern a glimpse of the individual experience of the profession in question. The incidental vocational portraits of artisans show that, in their own eyes, their profession was a factor of considerable importance. The reference to craftsmanship in the many seventeenth-century painted workshop-interiors must have struck a cord for artisans. Even though they might not have personally owned those paintings - and inventories remain silent on this matter - they may very well have encountered such paintings in social intercourse or at public auctions. The experience of these representations
was, in that case, probably more equivocal than the widespread interpretation of these paintings as representations of industriousness suggests. Indeed, what is unknown might very well have existed. However, in the depictions of unorganized female workers such as the spinner we search in vain for clues as to how they might have individually experienced their profession (chapter 7). They are completely obfuscated behind the social conceptions and values that they were deemed to represent. Anyway, the commonplace iconography of the spinner, as the virtuous housewife, should be differentiated. The core of early modern female virtue was not necessarily the amount of domesticity a woman had, but rather being industrious at various levels both inside and outside the domestic realm.

To the other extreme, the expressions of professional identity are relatively scarce, but for a different reason (chapter 4). At the top of the social ladder, individuals were portrayed not as professionals but rather as being wealthy and prosperous burghers. No merchant-banker could acquire prosperity without financial and commercial worries, but the portraits of these merchant-bankers show little, if any at all, of those occupational activities.

Whereas seventeenth-century merchant-bankers flaunted luxurious clothing and mansions in their portraits, their sixteenth-century counterparts were more likely to be depicted in full regal of their occupation. The painting of vocational portraits - or the lack of them - illustrates that there was an emancipating aspect involved. The unvarnished sixteenth-century vocational portraits certified the social rise of a new commercial group. Whereas in the sixteenth century portraits openly confirmed and enhanced the professional identity of those whom were portrayed, in the seventeenth century it was the other way around. The many portraits of 'hidden bankers' - i.e., portraits without professional attributes - illustrated the social integration of previously contested, but economically necessary, professional practitioners.

Through the representation of merchant-bankers, it became remarkably visible that praise for human labor in the early modern period did not evolve without hesitation. To practice a profession meant to do so in an honest and Christian way. Excessively energetic labor, inspired by greed, was deemed reprehensible. If the caricatures of moneychangers and tax collectors in sixteenth-century office scenes represented anything, it was that these financial practitioners were in the eyes of the public all too capable of exerting their profession in a dishonest fashion.

The homo faber was a subject of special interest in the early modern Netherlands. The visual motif may have been partially influenced by an older and geographically diverse visual tradition, yet the systematic way in which it has been elaborated on in various representations, especially in the seventeenth century Dutch Republic, is quite unique. The fact that an urban visual language fulfilled a dominant place, illustrates that there was a connection between the concepts of labor and industriousness on the one hand, and the urban context on the other. It was in the economic thriving cities of Holland, in the Republic, that this legacy flourished and became the norm. The earnest labor of working men was both literally (visually) and figuratively (appreciatively) framed. Industriousness and honorable pursuit of a profession became social virtues. Professional practitioners associated themselves gleefully with these virtues, or were perceived by beholders to have them. In contrast, the dark picture of antagonists of industriousness and honorable professional practice—i.e., those associated with the vices of idleness and dishonorable professional behaviour—gave the virtuous representations even more distinction and profile.

However, for the present viewer, this framing is a subtle warning. The ideas expressed in these images were a highly stylized view to which the practices of the everyday world did not always live up to (e.g., industriousness) or with which they did contrast in a favorable way (e.g., idleness).
At the same time, we observe a stylized professional practitioner. His is represented at its best or instead precisely as a caricature. By no means does this circumstance diminish the meaning and importance of the visual material. To emphasize this more strongly: in the distortion lies its very meaning. How effective its influence was, is demonstrated by the charm that this visual material exerted and still continues to do so, even until today.