Technical art history: painters' supports and studio practices of Rembrandt, Dou and Vermeer

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LOOKING THROUGH PAINTINGS
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THE STUDY OF PAINTING TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS IN SUPPORT OF ART HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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The Antwerp Brand on Paintings on Panel

Jørgen Wadum

Introduction

In a painting of a studio scene by David Rijckaert II (1586-1642) we see the master engaged in painting a pipe-smoking peasant (fig. 1). To the right an assistant is grinding pigments in oil, and in the left background another artist is working on his painting. At this man's feet, next to his easel, we see the back of a panel which is standing against the wall. Looking at this panel carefully we observe that it is issued with the Antwerp brand. Rijckaert signals in this way, that he is buying the best, approved panels from his fellow guild members, the panel-makers. The branding iron with the Antwerp Coat of Arms would have been carried by the dean to the panel-maker's workshop where, if the panels were approved, it would be heated enough to burn its image in the oak. The Antwerp brand is often present on panel paintings produced in Antwerp in the seventeenth century, many times in combination with a panel-maker's mark.

Hitherto no comprehensive list of the diverse designs of the Antwerp brand, two open hands above a castle with three towers, has been published.

This article is a first attempt to list the different Antwerp brands as found on early 17th century panels, their design, size, and other characteristics, in chronological order. The information is presented in conjunction with the frequently recurring panel-makers' marks, as well as the dates of the painters who actually used the recorded panels. The original marking of the support is a documentary source that was largely neglected in the past but which provides new evidence on art production in the seventeenth century in a broader, informative framework. Therefore it will be of assistance to the (art)historian in placing a specific painting in time and context.

The Antwerp Brand

To date the only published list of brands is that of H.J. De Smedt, concerning Antwerp retables dated between 1493-1525. De Smedt informs us that the presence of an Antwerp brand is often not even mentioned in the literature describing these retables. He also states that knowledge of these marks could add more information than just the provenance or the quality control of the object. J. Van Der Straelen's publication of the guild rules of St. Luke in Antwerp is a rich source of information concerning the examining and branding of retables, sculptures, and altarpieces. The practice of marking retables and sculptures is described for the first time in Antwerp in the St. Luke Guild's regulations of November 9th, 1470. Two years later,
in the ordonantie from July 30th, 1472, the regulations are stressed, saying that ‘...one is not allowed to paint the pieces, neither to sell them in their raw version, nor to take them out of Antwerp, before they have been checked and marked by the masters or deans of the guild’. Further in 1493, on the 20th of March, one in # 12 reads, that ‘...the representatives of the sculptors should visit each sculptor’s house...’ in order to check that their accepted works were properly branded.’ In 1990 Van Der Stock made an evaluation of the extent to which these regulations from the first quarter of the sixteenth century should be taken literally, and concluded that many questions remain as to the exact procedure in evaluating artefacts. ‘The enigma of the Hand and the Castle will remain,’ he writes, ‘maybe because of the inconsistent application of the regulations and the ineffective control by the guild and their keurmeesters’. We concur with this, however, by compilation of a large amount of empirical data a certain pattern has become apparent when it comes to the early seventeenth century, as the following will show.

The branding of Antwerp panels for easel paintings was not described until 1617, where it was carefully laid out in the Joiners’ Guild regulations, first published by Van Damme in 1987. The first paragraph declares, that no joiner was allowed to let ‘...any joined panel, large or small, leave their house before they have had it checked and branded by the dean of the Guild in order to be sure that the aforementioned panels have neither resi-
nous areas or are damaged by fire, and that neither white or red worms are present, on the penalty of twelve guilders for each panel.\footnote{10} This paragraph is very strict about the quality that panels would have to conform to in order to be branded. However, reality seems to have been different. We have encountered numerous panels with weak, worm-eaten sapwood in the join (dating from before the panel was sold to the painter); panels with partly charred planks, all of them nevertheless branded by the dean and thus accepted as a painters’ support. The regulations for panel making were initiated at a time when about twenty or more panel makers’ workshops were trying to supply the demand for panels. A better organisation of the profession was necessary, with restrictions about schooling and proof of mastery, which had earlier not been put on paper.

As a consequence, when examining Antwerp panel paintings, one often finds an individual panel-maker’s mark stamped on the back in combination with the Antwerp brand.\footnote{11} With Van Damme’s discovery of the set of rules for the Joiners’ Guild in Antwerp from 1617, mentioned earlier, our knowledge of the practice of marking panels, by branding them and stamping them with individual panel-maker’s marks, has increased. In his later article, which contains a list of paintings with individual panel-makers’ marks, the scale of this practice was demonstrated.\footnote{12} Individual panel-makers’ marks were mentioned in \# 4 of the regulation of 1617, which reads: ‘...Item is from now on every joiner obliged to impress his mark on frames and panels made by him, against a penalty of three guilders.’\footnote{13} However, as we published in Technologia Artis\footnote{14}, having 1617 as a very convenient \textit{terminus post quem} for marked panels did not prove completely accurate. A number of individuals had already started marking panels in 1612. Nevertheless, empirically we can state that these can be considered exceptions due to the scant amount recorded, and that marking on a larger scale took place after 1617.
In this context it is interesting to note that often paintings which stylistically would be dated to the sixteenth century are painted on panels bearing marks on the back from well known 17th century panel-makers. For example a painting attributed to the circle of Ambrosius Benson (d. 1550) bore two marks between the battens of a cradle: that of the Antwerp Guild and that of the panel-maker Guiliam Aerrssen (1612-1626 +). This demonstrates the interest in Antwerp in copies after 'old masters'. Many were produced in the early 17th century.15

Standardisation of panel formats

While compiling a list of panels with marks it became obvious that the majority of the panels apparently consisted of standard sizes. The standardisation of elements in art production in Antwerp goes back to the large retable production in previous centuries.16 Therefore, at the end of the sixteenth century, we already find panels with measurements that are similar, and thus standardised. Furthermore, the joiners' regulations of 1617, # 7, explicitly state, that panels from now on should be made in sizes based on the models kept at the guild office.17 Here one speaks about dosijn wercken [works in the dozen], and the sizes had the following names: sessentwintich stuivers [twenty-six stuivers], guldens [guilders], acht stuivers [eight stuivers], stooters [= ½ stuiver], and halven stooter. In # 11 of the 1617-regulations it states, that the panel-makers should call the dean or keurmeester only when they had a dozen or more panels to be checked. If they only had a few ready which they wanted to be delivered to his studio, they could in fact all have identical marks, although of differing size. However, the painters may not have required such a large number of panels at one moment, so the newly branded panels may easily have been distributed to a number of studios.

The term dosijn wercken does therefore not necessarily relate to a mediocre quality of paintings as suggested by Floerke in 190518, but to the standard sizes of the joiners or panel-makers' panels. It should be mentioned that frames were also made to fit these standard sizes, and in some cases were even marked with the maker's house-mark.19

The size we have most frequently found, which also showed brands, is a size not mentioned in the above-mentioned list, and is called a salvators [name of a coin with the image of the Saviour] size, which measures 50 x 60 cm.20 The twenty-six stuivers size, 75 x 110 cm, is frequently recorded with brands and personal maker's marks. Panels which clearly diverge from a standard size, but which have a brand, have either been cut down on one or more edges, or been furnished with additions. This is often the case with panels used by Peter Paul Rubens, and most interestingly, almost exclusively for his 'private', not commissioned, paintings such as landscapes or family portraits.21 A portrait of Helena Fourment in the Mauritshuis offers a good example. The panel was extended at three sides, left, right, and bottom edge (here the grain runs perpendicular to the rest of the panel). On the back of the panel, partly over the bevelled edge at the very top, we find the Antwerp brand and the makers' monogram of Michiel Vrient.22 The position of the brand clearly indicates that
the panel was originally longer at the top when it was approved by the keurmeester. Whatever accident caused the trimming of the top we cannot know, however it resulted in the addition at the bottom, before Rubens began his portrait. From archival sources we know of at least one case where Rubens's panel was modified by his favourite panel maker, Michiel Vrient. On the 11th of May 1626 Vrient was paid 38 guilders for enlarging the panel, which for the High Altar in the Antwerp Cathedral was found too small.23

**Chronology**

The brands show a large variety of shapes of the towers and hands indicating the many different irons used. The Guild papers of the Panel and Frame Makers in 1663 mention '...the old container with the painted shield of St. Luke, in which the branding irons (plural!) are kept with which the works of the producers are to be signed and branded...'. How many branding irons the Guild would actually have in circulation at one time is not known, but to date we have recorded 18 different brands used on panels dating from c. 1600 to 1650.

De Smedt found that the brands on late fifteenth and early sixteenth century retables changed from concrete forms towards a more abstract design over time, which also seems to be the pattern of our findings concerning branded panels used by painters during the first half of the seventeenth century. From very detailed renderings of the castle and the hands they become more conceptual. The exact form and dimension of these marks, so far often ignored, are for example important additional information for dating the objects and should therefore be taken into account.

More than a hundred different rubbings and more than five hundred recorded panels with the Antwerp guild marks either alone or in conjunction with the personal marks of panel-makers whose dates are known, make it possible to organise the brands. The shape of the hands and the castle have sometimes only undergone slight changes from one branding iron to another. In other cases there are very significant differences. The position of the hands may vary, they may be parallel or at an angle; the thumbs may point inwards or outwards. The castle may have a detailed architecture with windows, archways and gun slits, or may be just stylised or simply seen as a silhouette. With a few exceptions it seems that after c. 1615 a single iron, rather than two or three, was used for the Antwerp brand. This means that the original idea of first branding with the hands for the quality of the wood and subsequently with the castle to approve the polychromy and gilding, had been dropped, something common when branding e.g. copper, silver and gold. However, in a few instances, one finds in combination with a panelmaker's mark, only one hand, or the same hand burned in twice side by side. In some cases one might find the castle not necessarily directly under the hands. The panels showing these phenomena may be from the transition period before the new guild rules of 1617, when the old branding irons for the separate approval for the carving and polychromy were still in use.
The panel-makers' personal marks found in combination with the Antwerp brand may indicate when a particular iron was in use. Often the same iron was used to brand many of the panels of an individual panel-maker, which would be logical when considering that the panel-maker would normally have at least a dozen panels ready for evaluation at a time. Out of a total of 10 recorded brands from iron no. 12, four appear in combination with François De Bout's personal mark, F/DB. Iron no. 4 is found in combination with Lambrecht Steens's mark, LS (interlaced), seven times out of 25 panels with this brand. Yet more significant is the presence of Guillaume Aertssen's mark on six out of the eighteen known panels branded with iron no. 3. Furthermore the brand from this iron is the only one found in conjunction with Aertssen's mark, with one exception. This could be explained by suggesting that the keurmeester, the guild representative making the evaluation, was always the same person, visiting this specific panel-maker, and using the same (his preferred) iron. If so it could suggest that this individual was favoured by the panel-maker for approving his work. Or was the keurmeester, elected by the members of the Guild, in fact the panel-maker Guillaume Aertssen himself?

Panels from panel-makers such as Guillaume Gabron (GG) and Michiel Vrient (MV), were branded with the largest variety of branding irons, which in Gabron's case could be explained by his very long career, from 1609-1662. Vrient's career, on the other hand, was not long, 1615-1637.

It has not as yet been possible to make any firm terminus ante or post quem for the branding irons. However, there seem to be certain periods when they were in use. These can be discerned by comparing the active period of the panel-maker and the dates of the artist who painted on the panel bearing his mark.

Panels 'signed' by a panel-maker which are also branded with the Antwerp mark indicate, if the craftsman's dates are known, the period a specific branding iron was in use. However, knowing which years the painter who used the panel was active, also helps us to date the branding irons.

Branding iron number 130, was used for branding panels made by the panel-makers G. Aertssen (1612-1626 +), Guillaume Gabron (1609-1662 +), Hans Claessen (1615-1622/2.3) and Lambrecht Steens (1608-1638 +). It must have been in use before Hans Claessen died. This early dating is also confirmed by the fact that the painter Pieter van der Hulst I (1573-1628) used a panel branded with this iron together with Gabron's early personal mark34, which thus would have been painted before 1628. Branding iron number 10A has only been found once in conjunction with a panel-maker's mark, namely that of Michiel Vrient (active 1615-1637)54, on a panel painted by David Teniers II (1610-90). Teniers became a member of the Guild of St. Luke in 1633, after which date we may expect him to have required his panel.53 Therefore this particular iron was in use between 1633 and 1637. A panel of Pieter Breughel II (1564-1638) was also branded with this iron, which together with the other information seems to encircle the use of this branding iron to the middle of the 1630's (fig. 3-19).
Fig. 3 The Antwerp Brand (not identifiable) and the monogram of Guillaume Gabron. The monogram was made with Gabron's second punch (1619-1662). On Jan Breughel I, Landscape with Animals (Rubbing courtesy of B. Habolt, Paris/New York).

Fig. 4 Brand no. 1 (> 1617-1626 <), and the letter “A” on the back of a panel painting by Pieter Breughel II, Peasants Outside a Tavern (Photo courtesy of Christie's, Amsterdam).

Fig. 5 Brand no. 1 (> 1617-1626 <). On Anonymous, The Adoration of the Shepherds (Courtesy of E. Mösenbacher, The Hague).

Fig. 6 Brand no. 2 (> 1617-1637 <), and Michiel Vrient’s monogram. On Jan Breughel II and Hendrik van Balen, Landscape with Ceres (Courtesy of Phillips, London).

Fig. 7 Brand no. 3 (> 1618-1626 <), and the monogram [as a punch and written in red chalk] of Guillaume Aertssens (?). On J. de Momper II, Mountainous Landscape (Courtesy of J. -M. Tassel, Paris).
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Fig. 8 Brand no. 4 (1619-1638). On the back of a panel by Simon de Vos, Portrait of a Woman (Courtesy of Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. no. RF 1982).

Fig. 9 Brand no. 6 (1619-1638). On Fr. de Momper (?), Winterlandscape (Courtesy of Musée de Beaux-Arts, Lille, inv. no. 1482).

Fig. 10 The Antwerp Brand composed of the hands from iron 6 (1620-1637) and the Castle from Brand no. 3 (1618-1626); branded in two sequences. In between is the early monogram of G. Gabron (GG, 1614-1626). On W. van Nieuwland, The Story of Laban (Courtesy of R. Valls, London).

Fig. 11 Brand no. 7 (1620-1638), and the monogram LS, Lambrecht Steens. On G. Lietsens, Winterlandscape, Instituut Collectie Nederland, Amsterdam, inv. Nr 1882/1406.

Fig. 12 Brand no. 8A (1626-1642), and the maker’s monogram, MV, Michiel Vrient. On A. van Eertveld (signed: AVE), Men ‘o’ War engaging in Battle (Courtesy of Phillips, London).
Fig. 13 Brand no. 8B (> 1630-1658 <), and the monogram of Lambrecht Steens. On J. van der Lamen, Interior Scene (Courtesy of J. van Haeften, London).

Fig. 14 Brand no. 9 (> 1626-1637 <), and the Michiel Vrient’s monogram, MV. On F. Francken II, The Crossing of the Red Sea (Courtesy of Musée d'Auxerre, inv.no. 838.1.15).

Fig. 15 Brand no. 10 (> 1620-1625 <). On Anonymous, Diana and Acteon (Courtesy of R. Valls, London).

Fig. 16 Brand no. 11A (> 1634-1638 <), and the maker’s monogram LS, Lambrecht Steens. On H. Andriesen (signed), Vanitas Still-Life (Courtesy of V. Waterman, Amsterdam).

Fig. 17 Brand no. 11b (> 1638-1700), and the maker’s monogram B/MD (?). On Anonymous, Christ Healing the Blind (Courtesy of Dorotheum, Vienna).
An exhaustive cataloguing process is necessary in order to date the different irons more accurately. Only cautious dating of the period of use for a specific branding iron is possible at the current time. During evaluation of the information on more than 500 panels and their different marks, either the Antwerp coat of arms, (Table 1; Table 2) the panel-makers' marks and the branded letter A, some general observations were made.

Based on the data, available from the recording of panels with the Antwerp brand on the back, we can now presume that several branding irons were already available in 1617, when the regulations on branding were established. The irons no. 1 to 4 seem the earliest, staying in use until into the 1620's or late 1630's. Around 1620 three irons were introduced, two of which, 6 and 7 were in use almost until 1640. Branding irons 8A, 9, 10A & 10B all seem to have been introduced in the second half of the 1620's, and are used during the following ten years approximately. Irons like 8B, 11A, 12, 11B & 11C are, we deduce, the latest brands to be issued, between 1630 and 1638, probably as substitutes for the large numbers that are no longer in use during this period. Three of these brands are found in use well into the 1650's, after which date we have no secure records of the practice of branding panels.
THE ANTWERP BRAND ON PAINTINGS ON PANEL.

Antwerp Brands Between 1617 - 1658

Table 1: Graphic illustration of the distribution of time in use for each recorded branding mark. It is notable that there seems to be three distinct periods where a new set of branding irons were issued, 1617/20, 1626, and 1637/38. Simultaneously most earlier issued irons seems to disappear from use.

Table 2: List of the branding irons and their period of use. A concordance between the brand no.'s used in this article and those used previously is added for convenience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1997</th>
<th>former no. 's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no. 1</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1617-1626&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 2</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1617-1637&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 3</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1618-1626&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 4</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1619-1638&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 5</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1620-1637&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 6</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1620-1638&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 7</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1626-1642&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 8A</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1626-1637&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 9</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1626-1637&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 10A</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1626-1637&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 10B</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1626-1637&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 8B</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1630-1638&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 11A</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1634-1638&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 11B</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1637-1658&lt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 11C</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1638-?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no. 12</td>
<td>in use &gt; 1637-1650&lt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Obviously through continually adding to the list of documented brands, especially on securely dated paintings with marks, it may be possible to refine the above mentioned list further.

As has been shown the Antwerp Brand and panel-makers' marks may contribute to the correct dating of a painting on panel and to placing it in a broader context. We therefore appeal to museums and collections to share information on marks, or reproduce them in catalogues, as has become common practice with watermarks found in drawings and prints, which are comparable to panel makers' marks as a source of information. Many marks are still present on panels, however, it takes a highly trained eye to discover the more fragmented impressions, just as it requires a trained dendrochronologist to correctly record the year rings on a panel.
When deducing the probable period of use of a given Antwerp branding iron, several factors play an important role: the active years of the panel maker and the active years of the painter. However, although we have tried to eliminate the most ambitious attributions of a painting to a master, several data may occur which are in fact not fully reliable. Quantifying data with so many variables will therefore to some extent be based on a subjective interpretation. The dates given below are to be seen as the outside period within which a specific mark occurs. More information on marked panels with exact dates is therefore needed in order to refine the results. The present results must be regarded as a first attempt to give an overview of the potential for the registration of branding marks.

In order to give the reader an insight into the deduction of dates presented in this article representative examples shall be given. All dates written in italics are the author's estimates given by the present evidence. It will be obvious that there are many cross-references of exact dates but also of tentative dates, which widens the error margin considerably. It should further be noted, that panel-makers' and artists' dates are based on their active years as masters of the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp.

Before the examples of the probability of distribution of the periods of use of the recorded branding irons with the Antwerp Coat of Arms are presented, the frequent occurrence of the branded letter A will be examined. Fifteen panels were recorded with the letter A branded on the back, in several cases also with a panel-maker's mark and/or with an Antwerp brand. In the following scheme the panels are listed chronologically according to active years of the panel-makers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DBase id-no.</th>
<th>Dated painting</th>
<th>Branding iron no.</th>
<th>Probable period of use</th>
<th>Panel-maker's monogram and active years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>140</td>
<td></td>
<td>mk:1</td>
<td>&gt; 1617-1626 &lt;</td>
<td>VHB, active 1619-1622 &lt; GA, active 1612-1626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>214</td>
<td></td>
<td>mk:2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>351</td>
<td></td>
<td>mk:2</td>
<td>&gt; 1617-1626 &lt;</td>
<td>MC, active 1590-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>mk:3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>1621-22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>255</td>
<td>1622</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>191</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DBase id-no.</th>
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<th>Panel-maker’s monogram and active years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>1619-1626</td>
<td>mk:1</td>
<td>1617-1626</td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>1632</td>
<td>mk:4</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>1619</td>
<td>mk:?</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>mk:?</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>1619</td>
<td>mk:?</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>1619</td>
<td>mk:?</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>MV, active 1615-1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>273</td>
<td></td>
<td>mk:?</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>&quot;6, active 1619-1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>276</td>
<td></td>
<td>mk:?</td>
<td>1619-1638</td>
<td>&quot;6, active 1619-1650</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GA = Guilliam Aertssen; MC = Michiel Claessen; MV = Michiel Vrient; "6 = unknown master with a six-pointed star; VHB = unknown master monogram

The figures left are id no.'s in the database, followed by paintings with a signed date or with relatively secure evidence of dating. The third column indicates the no. of the Antwerp Brand, if recorded at all, which as the question marks show, is often not the case. After the brand number the probable period of its use is noted, based on a deduction of the frequency of use within specific periods. Examples will follow below. Finally the right column gives the monogram of the panel-maker whose mark was identified on this specific panel, followed by an indication of his active years as a supplier of wooden supports to the artists in Antwerp.

From the list we can see that the letter A occurs on panels dated between 1619-1622, except in one instance, where a tentative dating was set to 1632. This could, however, be explained either by an erroneous dating or by the fact that this particular panel stayed in the painter's studio for a considerable period before it was actually used.

When the letter A is found with an Antwerp brand (marks: 1 and 4) it is seen to have been in use during the period between 1619-1622. Panel no. 214 has the Antwerp brand no. 1 on the back, which was probably in use between > 1617-1626 < . This seems to confirm an early date for the letter A. Also the end of Guilliam Aertssens career in 1626 supports this conclusion.

One of the most productive Antwerp panel-makers, Michiel Vrient (active 1615-1637), is clearly the one on whose panels the letter A appears most often: nine times out of a total of fifteen.

The estimated date, 1619-1622, of the use of the branded letter A on Antwerp panels has been included in the further conclusion below. The same goes for some calculations relating to active years of unknown panel-makers or for a specific panel-maker’s use of two or more distinctly different punches for the marking of their monograms.55

After this introduction a few examples will be given to demonstrate how we have reached the probable distribution of the periods of use of the branding irons.

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THE ANTWERP BRAND ON PAINTINGS ON PANEL

Example 1:

Branding mark no. 1 [mk: 1]: 12 in total.

3 have the letter A on the back:

214 + GA who died 1626
351 + MC who died 1637
206 + MV who died 1637 but artist 1597-1625

233 + GG-I
359 + GG-II and artist 1598-1640
443 + GA who died 1626
213 + GA who died 1626
239 + HC who died 1622
243 + LS who died 1638 but artist 1597-1625

(A = branded letter A; GA = Guillaume Aertssen; MC = Michiel Claesens; MV = Michiel Vrient; GG = Guillaume Gabron; HC = Hans Claessens; LS = Lambrecht Steens)

Branding mark no. 1 has been recorded on 12 independent panels. Out of these, three panels also show the capital letter A branded into the back, the use of which has been set to between 1619-1622. A panel with the id-no. 206 also carries the maker's monogram, that of Michiel Vrient, who is active between 1615-1637. However, the artist, Jan Brueghel I, who painted the panel was active only between 1597-1625, confirming an early use of the letter A.

Six further panels with branding mark no. 1 also have makers' marks, four of whom ceased to work between 1622 and 1626. This would further confirm the use of branding iron no. 1 to the period before 1626. This indication is subsequently affirmed by panel no. 233, which bears the early mark used by Guillaume Gabron, here called GG-I, which was hypothetically used in 1614-1626.

Conclusion: branding mark no. 1 is tentatively set to be in use between 1617-1626

Example 2:

Branding mark no. 4 [mk: 4]: 23 total.

47 1637 + MV who died 1637 + A 1619-1622
152 1630-32 + MV who died 1637
480 1640 + MV who died 1637
129 1632 + GG-II 1626-1658
30 1634 + GG-II 1626-1658
Based on the presence of the letter A on no. 47 the date 1619-1622 forms the earliest date for branding iron no. 4. This is further confirmed by panel no. 410, which was painted by an artist active between 1602 and 1674. The *terminus ante quem* can be set to 1638 based on the statistical evidence provided by 16 panels out of the 25 definitely being made before this date, as shown by the death of the respective panel-makers. Seven other panels have been made by panel-makers' or painted by artists active within a period of between 1619 and 1638.

Conclusion: Branding iron no. 4 is tentatively set to be in use between >= 1619-1638 <.

Example 3:

Branding iron no. 12 [mk:12]:

10 total.

477 1642 + NV active 1638-1676/77, artist 1628/9-1660
478 1650 + NV active 1638-1676/77, artist 1628/9-1660
124 + GG-II 1626-1658 <
420 + artist 1620-1638/4 + F/DB active 1637-1643
112 + artist 1620-1643 + F/DB active 1637-1643
303 + F/DB active 1637-1643
304 + artist 1609-1647 + F/DB active 1637-1643

(NV = Nicolas Vrient; GG = Guilliam Gabron; F/DB = François De Bont)
Panels issued with branding mark no. 12 have in two cases been art historically dated to between 1642 and 1650. The latter, panel no. 478, also shows the mark of Nicolas Vrient, the son of Michiel Vrient. Nicolas is active between 1638 and 1676/77, however, the artist who used his panel was only active until 1660.

Out of the ten panels with brand no. 12 four were produced by Franchois De Bont, active between 1637 and 1643, within this period the three artists using his panels were also active. Panel no. 124 show Guilliam Gabrons second punch (GG-II) which he presumably has used between >1626-1658<.

Conclusion: Mk: 12 is tentatively set to be in use between >1637-1650<

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Notes

1 David Rijckaert II: A Painters' Atelier. Panel, 73,8 x 108 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. J.126, Dijon.
2 This survey is to be seen as the result of what until now has been documented by the author. Further accumulation of branding as well as panel-makers' marks is necessary to refine the results. We are grateful for any further information on marks, either in the form of rubbings or photographs.
3 U. Härting's monograph on Frans Francken der Jüngere (1581-1642); Die Gemälde mit kritischem Ouvrekatalog, Freen 1989, is one of the most excellent and useful examples of this practice.
4 H.J. De Smelt, 'Merktekens op enkele Antwerpse retabels', in: Merken Opmkeren / Typologie en Methode, Leuven 1990, pp. 145-183. This article gives a very useful introduction to the practice of branding Antwerp retables, and describes the origin of this procedure (see also the following note).
5 Jaarboek der vermaarde en konstrijke gilde van Sint Lucas binnen de stad Antwerpen (1434-1739), misgaders der de Koninklijke Academie sedert hare afscheiding tot hare overvoering naer het klooster der Minderbroeders; with comments by J. Van Der Straalen and published by P.TH. Moons – J. Van Der Straalen, Antwerpen 1835.
6 '...dat men die werden nyet en sal moghen van schilderyen stofferen, noch nouw verkopen oft leuereen, noch buyen Antwerpen vure, 20 en zyn eerst gewaardeert ende geteyckent by den meesters oft regreederen van den gulden', J. Van Der Straalen, op.cit. (see note 5), p. 19.
7 'Item dat de geswoorne van den beeldsnyders om-megaen sullen tot elck beeldsnyders huysen...', J. Van Der Straalen, op.cit. (see note 5), p. 33.
10 'J. Van Damme, op.cit. (see note 9), '...eenige gelijmde panneelen tsij groot oft cinege vut henen huisje te mogen laeten gaen ten zij de selve ierst ende voor al gevisiteert ende gebrandertekent sijn bijden deken vanden selven ambachtte op dat men macht versekert wes en dat vnoor vorscheven panneelen noch sepck noch vier noch witten noch rooden wormen in en is op de pene van tweelf gulden voor ieder paneel.
13 J. Van Damme, op.cit. (see note 12), p. 235: 'Item sal voertaen elck schrijnwercker gebouden ween opde lijsten ende panneelen bij hem gemaakt te slaeen sijn merck opde pene van drie gulden's'.
17 J. Van Damme, op.cit. (see note 12), p. 235: 'Item...
omne voorder bedroch te schonen sullen voortaan sekere maeten van panneelen op de camere van de ambachte gebrocht en bewaerr worden, naementlijck de naervolgende maeten te weten ...'.

18 H. Floerke, Studien zur niederländischen Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte: Die Formen des Kunsthandels, das Atelier und die Sammler in den Niederlanden vom 15.-18. Jahrhundert, München/Leipzig 1905, pp. 17-18, where he writes that ‘... Was sie feilboten, mochte niets anderes sein als Schülerarbeiten und Kopien, die bei Malern, welche grosse Ateliers hielten, sehr häufig im überfluss zu haben waren...Die billigsten Malereien dieser Art kamen aus Brabant und hießen dann auch “Brabanter Dutzendware”.’ [What they offered were rarely more than apprentices works and copies, which were available in large amounts from artists with large ateliers... The cheapest paintings of this kind came from Brabant and were called “Brabant Works-in-the-Dozen”].


22 Rubens married Helena Fourment in 1635, and as Michiel Vrient died in 1637, we have a period of four years within which the painting must have been executed. See the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the Portraits in the Mauritshuis (1999).


24 ‘... Item, betaelt Machiel Vrindt, van het voorschreven paneel te vermederen, d’welcke te cleyn was, 38 gulden’ [... paid Michiel Vrient to enlarge the previous mentioned panel which was too small, 38 Guilders].


26 J. van Damme (1990), op.cit.


29 The numbering of the irons is based on my classification.

30 When we prepare our documentation, we make a rubbing of the mark on a piece of non structured paper using a not-too-soft pencil. This will produce a 1:1 reproduction of the mark. An added scale from a ruler enables us to later reproduce the mark in all medias, still enabling us to make comparisons with other marks. The advantage of rubbings is that they can easily be compared with each other by superimposing them on a light table. More important, this kind of documentation is very simple as it only requires a minimum of equipment. Black and white photographs with the main light source from the left at an angle of 45°, is also of importance for the documentation. On the contrary, drawn reproductions often lead to subjective interpretations which conflict with the ideal documentation, which should have the highest degree of objectivity.

31 A number of panel-makers changed their punch for a new one, often showing slight differences in design. A forthcoming article will be dealing with this aspect, which indicates a dating of the panels based on this alteration.

32 M. Vrient was 1605 recorded as apprentices but did not become a master until 1615. Due to a lapsus Van Damme, o.c., records his active years as from 1605.


34 Ph. Rombouts, Th. Van Lerius, op. cit. (see note 23).

35 A forthcoming article will present this puzzle.
Note

After the deadline for submitting this article I had the opportunity to examine the Rubens's sketches in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, made for the Medici-Cycle, now in Paris. The contract for the series, which consists of 21 oil sketches, 16 of which are now in Munich, was submitted to Rubens on February 22, 1622. This commission was, with a few exceptions, completed by the end of that same year. On the reverse of the sketches, executed on panel (of mainly three standard sizes, 49 x 39 cm, 65 x 50, and 55 x 92 cm), on every single panel one finds identical brands of Antwerp, Michiel Vrient's monogram, as well as the letter ‘A’. This discovery adds considerably weight to the hypothesis that the letter 'A' is a year letter (as first suggested by J. Van Damme in 1990).

This conclusion is further substantiated by yet another painting by Rubens, Portrait of an Old Man, 64.7 x 49.5 cm [Staatlichen Museen Preussisches Kulturbesitz, Berlin, inv. 776F], which is dated 1622-25. On its back is the Antwerp brand, Vrient's monogram and the ‘A’. Further this panel was dendrochronologically examined and its two planks proved to originate from the same tree as was used for planks for some of the Medici-sketches in Munich. The earliest felling date of the Munich and the Berlin panels was established as ± 1618.

Therefore my -above- proposed dating of 1619-1622 for the branding of Antwerp panels with the letter 'A' can be narrowed down to 1621-1622.

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