The fingerprint of an old master: on connoisseurship of Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century paintings: recent debates and seventeenth-century insights

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As a curatorial assistant at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., I was closely involved in the preparation of the Gerard ter Borch exhibition in 2004-2005. One of my tasks was to make a preliminary selection of paintings to be included in the show. Among the works I initially selected was a painting that had long been accepted as a Ter Borch: *Soldiers Carousing in an Inn* (1658, Philadelphia Museum of Art) (fig. 0.1). I had not yet had a chance to see the work, but in reproduction it looked promising: an appealing example of Ter Borch’s interior scenes with soldiers (a so-called *kortegaerdje*). At first, the painting seemed a good choice. None of the experts involved in planning the exhibition objected to the inclusion of this particular work. Moreover, the Philadelphia Museum of Art had decided to clean the painting, and it promised to look even better once its yellowed varnish had been removed. However, in the process of cleaning the work, the conservators made a surprising discovery. The painting was signed, not by Ter Borch but by one of his most talented pupils, Caspar Netscher. Although the painting had long been accepted as a work by Ter Borch, the signature by Netscher proved that the painting was, in fact, by another artist that had imitated Ter Borch’s style. Instantly, the work lost its relevance for the exhibition, which aimed to show the quality and variety of Ter Borch’s paintings. We quietly removed it from the selection.

It was neither the first nor the last time that I witnessed a change in attribution, yet this one made a particularly strong impression on me. The attribution of paintings to Ter Borch had not sparked any public debates of which I knew, and I had tacitly assumed that there was little risk in relying on accepted attributions. Much art historical research builds on existing attributions out of necessity. A basic classification of “who did what and when” functions as a point of departure for more interpretative questions. As long as there was a certain consensus among the leading scholars in the field, it seemed a fairly safe practice to me. However, the remarkable find of a Netscher signature on the painting formerly attributed to Ter Borch made me realize how much our understanding of seventeenth-century painting is subject to change on this very fundamental level. In fact, the contours of the oeuvres of virtually all known seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish master painters continue to be (re)defined to some extent.

During the three years that I worked at the National Gallery of Art, I learned that many attributions and re-attributions are done quietly outside of the public domain. Experts discuss attributions freely among themselves, and a lot of
the considerations involved never make it into print. In general, positive attributions are much more likely to be published than doubts and de-attributions. Understandably, attributing old master paintings is often a delicate matter. As an important collector from the late Golden Age, the Duke of Chandos, eloquently put it: a possibly important old master painting ‘ought to be as tenderly handled as a lady and the least question upon them casts a stain upon their reputations, which is hardly ever washed off.’ In the United States in particular, such a stain on a painting’s reputation can have serious legal implications, which further complicates public debates about attributions.

Having seen some of the foremost connoisseurs at work, I became increasingly interested in the methodology of the attribution process. What exactly did these experts look for? How did they decide about a specific attribution? In what ways did they agree and disagree? And how should one ideally go about attributing these old master paintings?

During my studies in art history at the University of Amsterdam, I had been fortunate enough to participate in a seminar organized by the Rembrandt Research Project (1996). Professor Ernst van de Wetering, the leader of the Rembrandt project, and his team members taught us how to conduct preliminary research on potential Rembrandt paintings by studying the works with various types of light (including X-rays, reflected infrared light and UV-light), by analyzing scientific data about the materials used, and by reviewing the literature on the painting. Subsequently, we were asked to use our observations and interpretations to build a case in favor of or against an attribution to Rembrandt. It was an instructive task, since it showed us how complicated it can be to make a decision about authorship. During the seminar sessions, it was particularly interesting to see how Professor van de Wetering refined his own thinking by systematically questioning his own observations and conclusions. After over forty years of Rembrandt studies, he had acquired an extraordinarily knowledge about the master and he used it to sharpen his observations. This weighing of arguments and the process of decision-making came to fascinate me even more than the actual attributions.

At the National Gallery of Art, I was privileged to be introduced to a wide range of attribution matters by Arthur Wheelock, curator of Northern Baroque paintings and Professor in Art History at the University of Maryland. Wheelock is not only one of the foremost Rembrandt and Vermeer connoisseurs but also one of the most well-known specialists of Dutch and Flemish painters. Tellingly, he is

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a member of the TEFAF vetting committee – the small circle of outstanding connoisseurs who have the final word about the labeling of old master paintings at the TEFAF art fair in Maastricht. The breadth of Wheelock’s knowledge, in particular, was inspiring. He distinguished a dazzling variety of painters’ hands, had a very thorough understanding of the technical and conservation issues involved, and an extraordinary tact in presenting his opinions. He made me aware of various unexpected patterns in painters’ developments, such as Aelbert Cuyp’s habit of painting in two distinct styles at the outset of his career.3 Interestingly, the National Gallery of Art’s well-reputed conservation scientist, Melanie Gifford, had discovered a similar characteristic in the oeuvre of Esaias van de Velde. As these specialists (and many others) helped to sharpen my eye, I started to compile files with observations and sources relevant to matters of connoisseurship. As one of my daily tasks was to conduct research for upcoming exhibitions, I read many seventeenth-century sources and when I came across remarks about attribution issues, I made a note of it. One of the texts I flagged was an intriguing passage in Roger de Piles Conversations sur la Connoissance de La Peinture, in which seventeenth-century connoisseurs discuss the difficulties of attributing paintings; they remark, for example, how impossible it could be to recognize works by a painter who was in the process of changing his style.4

It was not until the spring of 2003 that I eventually consolidated my notes into a research proposal, and that I found the right supervisor for the project: Eric Jan Sluijter, Professor in Renaissance and Early Modern Art at the University of Amsterdam and visiting Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University (2002-2007). Sluijter is an erudite connoisseur who also has an extraordinarily thorough knowledge of seventeenth-century writings on painting. Moreover, he has an exceptional capacity to survey the field as a whole and to follow and recognize the achievements of a wide range of specialists. His many thoughtful comments greatly improved my research proposal. I am very grateful for his confidence and enthusiasm, which gave me not only the courage to start this rather ambitious project but also the strength to complete it.

When I started to look for published sources on the methodology of connoisseurship, I noticed that they were rather few in number. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries connoisseurs such as Giovanni Morelli and Max Friedländer had eloquently outlined their methods and principles.5 However, since the Second World War, no handbooks on the topic had been published, and only a handful of connoisseurs had explicitly addressed their

3 See chapter 4.
4 See below ‘A Closer Look at Seventeenth-Century Sources: An Introduction’ and chapter 4.
5 See chapter 1.
working methods in their writings. Secondary studies on developments in the field over the last fifty years were even less. Therefore, I set out to outline developments in the field since the end of the Second World War (chapter 1). The survey is far from complete, and it is best seen as an introduction to my topic of research: a rough indication of experts’ approaches and some matters of contention. It was a difficult chapter to write since I regularly found myself faced with contradictory interests. From a scholarly point of view, I found it indispensable to focus on the ways in which experts differed in their approaches and opinions. At the same time, I realized that this emphasis on controversies might potentially undermine the credibility of some of the experts involved by not sufficiently acknowledging the many uncontroversial and uncontested attributions and discoveries that earned these experts their good reputations. After all, trust is crucial to connoisseurs. Both on the market and in an academic context, many people rely on their opinions. And their reputation – like that of particular paintings – should be handled with care. Balancing these different interests was daunting at times, and I hope I have done so successfully. My goal has been to focus on disagreements among well-reputed connoisseurs only in as much as these illustrate important methodological questions. Ultimately, as we will see, positive attributions are inherently interpretations with varying degrees of certainty. They build upon assumptions.

Some of these assumptions cannot really be tested, and there is no clear right or wrong. For example, the question of whether a connoisseur should ultimately make an intuitive or a rational decision has long been an issue of debate. In fact, the seventeenth-century writer Franciscus Junius was already ambivalent about the matter. On the one hand, he believed that experts could only judge paintings if they thoroughly analyze the work using their reason. In his *Painting of the Ancients* (1638), he wrote, ‘wee should seriously weigh and consider every part of the work, returning to it againe and again, even ten and ten times if need be. For our sense doth seldom at the first judge right of these curiosities, it is an unwary Arbitrator, and mistaketh many things: all the soundness and truth of our judgment must proceed only from reason.’ However, only a few pages later, he approvingly cited the ancient writer Dionysius Halicarnassensis, who claimed the opposite, namely that exercise and experience resulted in an ‘unexpressible feeling’ that enabled experts to differentiate between artists’ hands but could not be rationally explained. Junius’ ambivalence also illustrates the difficulty of

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6 Junius 1638 [ed. 1991], 305.
interpreting seventeenth-century sources, as these writings often contain some contradictions.⁸

Besides such general choices, connoisseurs also make many more concrete assumptions that can, in fact, be partially tested. For example, one has to estimate how much consistency is to be expected in a painter’s oeuvre when attributing a work to his or her hand. Did the painter’s style evolve in a consistent manner, or did he or she change styles abruptly? Did he or she even use various styles simultaneously? Can we expect a master to have painted authentic paintings entirely by his own hand, or is it more likely that the painter collaborated with pupils and/or assistants on the same composition?

To these types of historical questions I have dedicated the larger part of this dissertation. Chapter 2 discusses the main distinction that was made when classifying paintings in the seventeenth-century, namely the distinction between originals and copies. It explores both how these categories were defined and what outward signs were seen as characteristic of each category. Chapter 3 addresses the difficult and rather controversial question of whether or not we can expect seventeenth-century painters to have created a core oeuvre entirely by their own hand. Chapter 4 explores seventeenth-century thoughts on style in order to outline the types of patterns and irregularities that we might expect in the stylistic development of seventeenth-century painters. Chapter 5 puts the various sources on seventeenth-century connoisseurship into a broader perspective by addressing who was considered a capable judge of paintings in the seventeenth century and on what grounds. Chapter 6 discusses the essence of seventeenth-century connoisseurship, specifically the interpretation of quality and the terms that were used to describe it. Finally, the epilogue consists of a unique case study that enables us to compare relatively recent connoisseurship with seventeenth-century insights: a disputed Rembrandt painting.

Throughout the various chapters my goal has been to enhance our understanding of seventeenth-century views on style and authenticity, so as to create a clearer framework for current attributions to seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish masters. Given the scope of the topic, my conclusions should be seen as working hypotheses, which will hopefully be refined by further explorations of seventeenth-century connoisseurship as well as in-depth studies of individual painters’ oeuvres.

During my research I have profited greatly from the insights and feedback of various colleagues, students, friends and family. I am particularly grateful to the

⁸The rhetorical way of arguing of employed by many seventeenth-century writers did not require their arguments to be entirely coherent. See Junius 1638 [ed. 1991], introduction; and Weststeijn 2008, chapter 1.
participants of the 2003 Codart study trip to Boston and New England, whose expertise, advice and warnings gave me a clearer sense of direction at the outset of the project. My talks with Paul Huvenne, Jan de Maere and Gary Schwartz were especially helpful. I also extend my sincere thanks to my colleagues at the University of Amsterdam, who have helped to sharpen my thinking throughout the past years, among them Junko Aono, Piet Bakker, Marten Jan Bok, Inge Broekman, Margriet van Eikema-Hommes, Koenraad Jonckheere, Elmer Kolfin, Arjan de Koomen, Bert van de Roemer, Michiel Roscam Abbing, Madelon Simons and Thijs Weststeijn. Also, I am very grateful for the advice and suggestions from a variety of other specialists, among them Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, Edwin Buijse, David Burmeister Kaaring, Jephta Dullaert, Rudi Ekkart, Michiel Franken, Nico van Hout, Hessel Miedema, Petria Noble, Sheldon Peck, Daniel Rockmore, Nicolette Sluijter, Adriaan Waiboer and Aidan Weston-Lewis. Furthermore, I would like to thank the students that enrolled in my BA and MA courses at the University of Amsterdam for their interest and questions, which have helped me to structure my thoughts. In addition, I have greatly profited from a gifted editor: Jacquelyn Coutré, who very ably and swiftly checked my English, compiled the bibliography and kindly alerted me to many little mistakes and oversights.

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