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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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTERS 2-6:
A CLOSER LOOK AT SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SOURCES

Characteristics that are important to connoisseurs can vary considerably depending on the type of art they date and attribute, and the period in which it was made. How useful is for example Morelli’s suggestion to pay special attention to the contours of hands and ears when looking at an impressionist painting? Or at a Rembrandt in which forms are sometimes defined with bold patchy brushstrokes rather than clear contours? Or at any Renaissance or Baroque portrait in which the hands are not painted by the master himself but rather by an assistant? A connoisseur’s method or approach can only be evaluated in general terms without taking into account the historical specifics of the objects studied, without understanding what characterizes both the period and specific artists. Thus connoisseurship of Dutch seventeenth-century paintings cannot really be discussed without looking at the peculiarities of the Golden Age itself. Identifying pictures means comparing; one must weight one artist’s characteristics against those of his surroundings and contemporaries and compare one’s own standards and presumptions with the habits and views of the past.

As we have seen, some of the most complicated and controversial attribution debates concern paintings that are considered autograph masterpieces by some connoisseurs, and good studio work by others (see for example figs. 1.27 and 1.28). Indeed, one of the most difficult tasks of connoisseurs of Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century paintings is to differentiate between a work done by a master and a work done by one of his assistants, possibly under the master’s supervision or even with his help. The difficulties inherent in such decisions beg the question how seventeenth-century painters and art lovers thought about issues of style and authenticity. Were seventeenth-century artists and art lovers also concerned with differentiating between the master and his studio, and did they distinguish different hands within a picture? When attributing and pricing pictures, did they use methods similar to ours? Did they have similar assumptions as to how much consistency is to be expected in the work of one master? Who was credited with the ability to attribute pictures and judge their quality? And what artistic qualities would they have considered important?
In the seventeenth century as now, experts of Dutch art were certainly not all Dutch. In fact, one of the most erudite art lovers who (among other things) had a taste for Dutch pictures was the Parisian writer and collector Roger de Piles. His *Conversations sur la connaissance de la Peinture* (1677) contains one of the seventeenth century’s most revealing discussions of the attribution of pictures. This work is written as a dialogue between three connoisseurs. One of them, Damon, is said to have made a good impression on fellow connoisseurs by discerning an original from a copy and attributing both pictures. The other, Pamphile, does not seem to attribute pictures often and when Damon asks him why he never replies when being asked his feeling (*sentiment*) about a picture, he answers:

‘Because it is not easy to decide in this way on all sortes of Paintings, and because I prefer to remain silent to giving random opinions.

What, answers Damon, do you want a Painting to remain without a name and that the connoisseurs cannot find it?

Why not, replies Pamphile; in all the Painting Schools there have been a quantity of skilled people who have made beautiful things, and of whom the name has not come down to us, either because they have not lived for a long time, or because they have stayed almost their entire life with Masters, whose great reputation has not allowed their Pupils to acquire one for themselves. And if one would know all the styles and the names of all the painters, there are [still] such doubtful Paintings that it would be a temerity to want to be sure of the name of their Author. The majority of skilled painters have changed from one style to another and in between they have made works which do not belong to the first style nor to the second.

That means in all honesty, I interrupt, that in fact you do not attach much importance to the knowledge of names.

On the contrary, replies Pamphile, I highly esteem this knowledge; and if one has a beautiful Painting (even if one doesn’t know all the beauty of it) it is always very pleasant to know who made it. But to be honest with you, the true knowledge of Painting, consists in knowing if a painting is good or bad; in making the distinction between what is good in a certain painting and what is bad, and to rationalize the judgment one has made of it.’

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1 ‘Parce qu’il n’est pas aisé, dit Pamphile, de décider ainsi sur toutes sortes de Tableaux, & que j’aime mieux me taire que de prononcer au hasard. / Quoy, repliqua Damon, vous voulez qu’un
They continue to discuss issues of attribution. According to Pamphile there are two ways of recognizing who made a picture. One can look at the ‘character of the hand’ and ‘the character of the mind’, the first being ‘the habit that every painter has in handling his brush’, the second being the ‘genius’ of the painter, which can be seen in ‘his inventions’ and in ‘the particular air’ he gives his figures and the other objects he represents.2

The first way of attributing a picture is the one Damon used when he attributed the ‘original’ and the ‘copy’ in the presence of fellow connoisseurs, as he himself admits. He describes it as looking at ‘very noticeable marks’ like ‘the touches of the brush, strong or weak colors, certain ‘airs’ [sic] of heads which some painters make frequent use of, certain repetitions of drapery, of styles of arranging the hair, of attributes and of entire figures, in short an external ‘je-ne-sais-quoi’ which strikes [...] the eye’.3 It is a method which is useful but rather superficial, according to Pamphile.4
Interestingly, the connoisseurs in this imaginary dialogue talk about painters who have never been able to acquire a reputation of their own as they have always worked for masters with a great reputation. This suggests that painters working for a well-known master painted in a style which was very close to their master’s style rather than in a distinctive style of their own for which they could take credit. This puts Pamphile’s subsequent remark that every painter has a recognizable habit in handling the brush in perspective. While a painting could be done in the style of a well-known master, one could in some instances still recognize something distinctively individual in the handling of the brush, which explains how Damon could even attribute a copy to a specific painter. Unfortunately he does not specify what criteria he used when doing so and if he considered some elements more telling than others.

The question which elements exactly can be seen as ‘characteristic’ for a certain painter becomes even harder to answer when one realizes that a well-known master did not always have just one style. Pamphile and Damon might give the impression in this passage that they regard style as a linear phenomenon, each master having a style of his own but also the ability to change from one style to another, but in fact their concept of style is more subtle. When discussing the particularities of Rubens’ life and style, they both agree with a third connoisseur, Philarque, who praises the diversity of Rubens’ manners. According to Damon, ‘it seems that after having made one [painting] in one taste, he seems to have changed his mind [literally: ‘genie’] and taken another spirit, to make another [painting] in another taste’. Philarque remarks that Rubens had ‘barely at all a particular way of handling the brush or a habit of employing always the same tones or colours’. Rather than a particular habit, it is ‘the great effect’ and ‘firm and happy execution’ which characterizes his work.

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5 See passage quoted above, third paragraph.

6 Pamphile: ‘Toutes ces beautez qui vous surprennent ne sont point un effet du hazard, elles partent d’un genie grand & solide, dont le portrait se voit presque en autant de façons que Rubens a fait de Tableaux. / En effet, repartit Damon, ce qui me surprend davantage & que je n’ay jamais veu dans les ouvrages d’aucun Peintre, est la diversité de maniere que l’on remarque aux Tableaux qui sont en ce cabinet [i.e. the cabinet of the Duc de Richelieu], car il semble qu’apres en avoir fait un dans un goust, il ait change de genie & pris un autre esprit, pour en faire un autre dans un autre goust.’ De Piles 1677, 222-223. See also below, chapter 4, ‘Style and Country’ and ‘Variation and Virtuosity’.

7 ‘Or comme Rubens n’avoit presque point de faço [sic] particuliere de manier le pinceau, ny d’habitude d’employer tousiours les mesmes teintes & les mesmes couleurs, & qu’il entroit tout entier dans les sujets qu’il ait a traiter, il se transformoit en autant de caracteres, & se faisoit a un nouveau sujet un nouvel homme [...] il est fort different des autres [peintres] par le grand effet que font ses Ouvrages; mais cela n’empesche pas que dans la diversité de ses Tableaux, il ne soit fort different de luy-mesme. Ce que vous pouvez remarquer mieux que toute autre chose, ce sont les
Although the sheer difficulty of some attributions of seventeenth-century paintings makes them all the more intriguing, it is not the only interesting aspect of these pictures. Roger de Piles warns novice connoisseurs in the introduction to his dialogues against over-focusing on one particular aspect of a picture. It is common mistake, he writes, to look only at that aspect about which one knows something, for example, only at the story that has been depicted, the expression of the passions of the soul (‘l’expression des passions de l’ame’), the geometrical perspective or the use of colours. Later, it is as if De Piles’ own opinion resounds when Pamphile states that it is not so much the identity of the maker of a picture that is important, but the quality of the work, that is, all the different good and bad elements in the painting.

Seventeenth-century comments on the practice of dating and attributing pictures are exceedingly rare. However, a variety of sources sheds some light on the question of how representative De Piles’ connoisseurs are, and whether the views on authenticity and style they express were fairly widespread and also present in the Netherlands, for example. Inventories, auction catalogues, legal documents, guild regulations, letters, treatises and, of course, the pictures themselves provide a wealth of information about the views on authenticity and style prevalent in the Golden Age.

maximes de son Art qu’il a observeées par tout, & qui luy ont donné une execution ferme & également heureuse.’ De Piles 1677, 223-225.