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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SUMMARY

Attributing old master paintings is one of the most difficult tasks of the art historian. Moreover, the stakes can be high, especially when the painting in question may be by a famous master. The difference in price between an authentic old master painting and a work ‘in the manner of’ a well-known painter can amount to several million dollars. In addition, a revised attribution can also have dramatic consequences for our understanding of art history. For example, the idea that Vermeer had expressed a ‘deep religious emotion’, a sentiment not often encountered in the artist’s paintings, in *The Supper at Emmaus* became instantly obsolete upon the exposure of the painting as a forgery by Han van Meegeren in 1947.

In spite of the complexity and importance of attribution, little theory has been devoted to connoisseurship. Within academic art history, hardly any methodology has been elaborated on how to attribute Dutch and Flemish of the seventeenth century. Nor is there a handbook to train aspiring connoisseurs, and only a few authorities have published reflections on their working methods. Moreover, no survey of the recent developments in this field exists.

This doctoral dissertation discusses attribution issues in the field of Dutch and Flemish paintings of the seventeenth-century. At its center are fundamental questions related to the practice of determining authorship of these paintings. For example, how have experts defined the attribution process over the past 60 years? From which premises does an expert start when assigning authorship of paintings from this period? What do we know about seventeenth-century views on style, authenticity and other relevant issues? And to what extent can the answers to these questions give us a clearer framework for the attribution of paintings from this period?

Chapter 1 is a concise survey of experts’ views on the attributions process since the end of the Second World War. Based on published texts, it distinguishes two different views of this practice. Experts disagree as to the very essence of the connoisseur’s assessment: the ‘flash’ insight based on his/her visual impression of a painting (also known as the connoisseur’s ‘intuition’), or rationally defined arguments. Although both these components play a role in sound connoisseurship, they cause tension in practice and theory. On a methodological level, the difference in emphasis is crucial, for one view ultimately bases connoisseurship on trust in the connoisseur’s capabilities and the purity of his assessment, while the other view renders connoisseurship systematic and offers the possibility to develop concrete methods to attribute paintings.
The Van Meegeren forgery scandal marked an important turning point in the history of modern connoisseurship. It caused experts to plead for a more rational and academic approach, which, in turn, contributed to the development of new and improved research techniques. In spite of the increasingly refined use of scientific aids, however, the attribution of paintings to old masters remains a matter of interpretation. Consequently, opinions continue to be divided as to the essence of the attribution process. On one hand, this has led to the development of computer programs aimed at quantifying the characteristic ‘handwriting’ of old masters. On the other hand, recent research has significantly refined our understanding of the connoisseur’s ‘intuition’.

Both ‘flash’ insights and carefully phrased analyses build upon assumptions. When attributing an old master painting, the expert is confronted with a multitude of questions that can be tantalizingly hard to answer. For example, to what extent did the painter change his style? Did he work independently or did he use assistants or pupils in the execution of his masterpieces? Was he consistent in the design and execution of his works, or did he experiment with these elements? Although these questions can seldom be answered with certainty, the connoisseur must form an image of what he believes to be characteristic of the painter and the variations within his oeuvre. Consciously or unconsciously, the expert thus defines the painter’s hallmark characteristics of style and working method. The validity of the expert’s attribution hinges upon the correctness of these assumptions.

Although the shock of the Van Meegeren scandal has long fostered fears that another forgery might challenge the authority of established connoisseurs of Dutch (or Flemish) old masters, no widely celebrated seventeenth-century painting has been proven a fake since then. On the contrary, upon technical investigation, many paintings which were expected to be eighteenth- or nineteenth-century forgeries have turned out to date from the seventeenth century. As a result, the attention of connoisseurs in this field has focused increasingly on disentangling the various types of seventeenth-century paintings: on distinguishing originals from copies and the master’s work from that of his pupils, assistants and followers.

Chapters 2 through 6 address how seventeenth-century painters and connoisseurs thought about matters of style, quality, authorship and workshop practice. The reconstruction of seventeenth-century views and practices is based on various primary sources, including art theoretical treatises, inventories, notarial deeds, guild regulations, personal writings, and to a limited extent, sales catalogues. In several instances, the information gained from these sources is clarified by its
application to specific seventeenth-century paintings. These chapters gauge the extent to which knowledge of the seventeenth century can provide guidelines for the attribution of its paintings.

Chapter 2 focuses on the distinction between originals and copies, which was one of the most important differentiations made at the time. Although the status and monetary value of copies could vary enormously – the term ‘copy’ was also used to describe forgeries – it is striking that copies were occasionally valued very highly. Nevertheless, the ability to discern originals from copies was crucial to connoisseurs. Loosely painted passages in the rendering of highlights, shadows, leaves, skies, drapery and hair, as well as hesitations in execution, were thought to be revealing in the evaluation of a painting. Furthermore, several sources indicate that early experts were well aware of the different types of copies that circulated. For example, they did not necessarily expect copies to be inferior or to show a certain hesitation; some were purposefully executed in a loose manner and deviated intentionally somewhat from the original. According to these sources, the most successful experts were not only able to identify copies without knowing the original, but they could also recognize repainted works. Copies that had been retouched by the master that created the original constituted the greatest challenge. The fact that very few paintings today are seen as such retouched copies makes the remarks of these early experts all the more relevant.

Chapter 3 addresses the rather controversial question of whether we can expect painters like Rembrandt to have painted the majority of their works entirely by their own hand. Although this assumption is quite widespread in recent literature, some scholars have conjectured that it is anachronistic. Only four documents show that a seventeenth-century buyer was concerned that a painting be executed entirely by the master himself. Such evidence is too slim, however, to elicit the supposition that most seventeenth-century painters created a core oeuvre of entirely autograph works. Moreover, a wealth of sources indicates that it was common practice to use assistants and pupils in the production of originals and that such collaborative works counted nonetheless as ‘by the hand of the master’. The signature of the master did not certify that a painting was done solely by him; rather, it was seen as a guarantee of the master’s characteristic quality. Several painters even used their signature to indicate different grades of quality, as ancient Greek painters had reputedly done. They added the term ‘fecit’ to their name to designate their best works. Further study is necessary to determine how widespread this practice was and what this difference in quality entailed. Gerrit van Honthorst, Hendrick ter Brugghen, Karel van Mander and David Teniers, among others, signed both with and without the addition of ‘fecit’.
The realization that seventeenth-century painters did not necessarily create a principal group of autograph paintings, and that some artists consciously created works of varying levels of quality, has far-reaching implications for connoisseurship today. It makes the insights of seventeenth-century connoisseurs all the more interesting. As far as we know, these early experts based their attributions on characteristic, masterly aspects such as the design of a painting and the execution of its main passages. This raises the issue of how we would perceive the oeuvres of seventeenth-century painters if we could no longer take as a point of departure a group of autograph paintings, but had to focus instead on these masterly features, keeping in mind the potential for various levels of quality.

Chapter 4 analyzes seventeenth-century views on style in order to produce a clearer idea of typical patterns and irregularities in the stylistic development of seventeenth-century painters. Twentieth-century connoisseurs often interpreted the painting style of an old master as a sort of fingerprint that changed gradually as the painter aged. However, seventeenth-century sources indicate that it was common for painters to consciously change and adjust their styles throughout their career.

According to seventeenth-century art theory, certain distinctive elements in a painter’s method depended on his ‘spirit’ or innate character. This held true for certain representative inventions and the recognizable features in his loose or ‘spirited’ brushwork. The painter was believed to exert relatively little control over these elements. However, he could alter his style or adjust his manner of painting according to the price of the work, to its location and format, to a foreign style, to the subject and/ or to its function. Moreover, the ability to vary one’s style at will was perceived as a sign of virtuosity. In particular, lighting, perspective and execution were elements to be adjusted to a specific location or viewpoint. Also, a rough manner of painting was associated with loose or manly subjects, and a softer style with female subjects. Such conscious variations and adjustments demand caution from connoisseurs when they trace linear developments in an old master’s painting style or when they de-attribute paintings that do not fit into a prescribed development.

Chapter 5 places the primary sources used in this dissertation into a broader perspective. In the secondary literature, it is often assumed that everyone agreed in the seventeenth century that only painters were able to accurately assess paintings. This would discount the remarks of connoisseurs who were not painters as (largely) irrelevant. Upon closer examination, this assumption turned out to be incorrect. The question of who was ultimately the best judge of paintings was already a topic of debate in the seventeenth century. Some writers claimed that non-painters were, in fact, better suited to judge paintings, and in
practice not only painters but also knowledgeable connoisseurs were called upon to attribute and price paintings.

Chapter 6 discusses the essence of seventeenth-century connoisseurship in terms of the definition and vocabulary of quality. According to seventeenth-century writers on art, assessing quality was not a matter of taste so much as a matter of applying clear rules. Although some authors doubted if high quality could be captured in rules (‘grace’, in particular, seemed to defy definition), most writers expressed very precisely their understanding of ‘high quality’ and its opposite.

In general, Dutch and Flemish painters were known for their subtle use of color, light, and shade, which they used to infuse their scenes with a sense of ‘reality’ and unity. Also, it was common knowledge that Dutch and Flemish painters rarely idealized and that they tended to fall short (partially because of this) in the drawing of figures, the use of the rules of proportion and perspective and even in the selection of the subject. Indeed, these qualities and shortcomings caused the most debate throughout the century.

Although most writers agreed that a characterization of quality could be summarized in rules, they certainly did not always agree on how to achieve this. Moreover, different types of paintings required different criteria. The so-called ‘history paintings’ were seen as the most complex works and were therefore subject to the greatest number of rules.

Seventeenth-century terms of art criticism, such as ‘schilderachtig’ (painterly in the sense of worthy to be painted) and houding (the subtle balancing of colors and tones to achieve a sense of depth and unity) provide guidance when reconstructing seventeenth-century points of view. For example, it is striking that colors, light and shade are consistently discussed in relation to the intended effect of a painting, that is: the suggestion of depth and unity. The terms used to praise successful inventions – which were not necessarily seen as a forte of Dutch and Flemish masters – are also enlightening. The term ‘eygentlick’, for example, was deemed very important in the seventeenth century but is now largely forgotten. It meant ‘real’ in the sense of convincingly natural and befitting the character of what was depicted. In order to make a scene look ‘real’ in this sense, painters need not follow a textual source literally. Instead, it was looked upon favorably for artists to elaborate upon biblical and mythological accounts using their own inventiveness, so as to best represent the heart of the story.

The term ‘eygentlick’ is well-suited to describe to the painting discussed in the epilogue of this dissertation, David and Jonathan (Hermitage, St. Petersburg). A contested Rembrandt, this painting provides an unique opportunity to compare seventeenth- and twentieth-century connoisseurship. Sir Ernst Gombrich used the
painting to describe the essence of Rembrandt’s art in his well-known survey *The Story of Art* (1950), but the work was nonetheless de-attributed by the Rembrandt Research Project in 1989. The provenance of the painting adds to its allure for it can be traced back with certainty to the seventeenth century. It was owned consecutively by two important collectors, Laurens van der Hem (1621-1678) and Jan van Beuningen (1667 - 1720), both of whom considered the painting to be a valuable Rembrandt. Van der Hem was even a contemporary of Rembrandt, living in the same city and sharing some acquaintances with the famous master.

An analysis of the painting based on terms of seventeenth-century art theory shows that the painting must have been successful according to contemporary standards of appreciation, that is, worthy of carrying Rembrandt’s name. Apart from an innovative, ‘*eygentlicke*’ invention, the powerful suggestion of emotions, (*beweegingen van de ziel*) also contributes to the painting’s high quality. Rembrandt, in particular was well-known at the time for his inventive designs and powerful portrayal of emotions. The master’s contemporaries also praised his use of ‘*houding*’, and indeed the color, light and shade in this painting create a convincing suggestion of space and unity while highlighting the main passages. This case study demonstrates, therefore, the importance of having a better understanding of seventeenth-century perceptions in the assessment of paintings from this period.

The question of an autograph work, however, remains. When de-attributing the painting, the Rembrandt Research Project assumed that the work was painted either by Rembrandt alone or by one of his pupils. This range of solutions may be too limited for this scenario; Rembrandt’s own pupil, Samuel van Hoogstraten, suggested otherwise. Moreover, The Rembrandt Project’s analysis included several anachronistic assumptions about Rembrandt’s stylistic development and his use of color. On the other hand, this de-attribution illustrates the importance of rationalizing attributions in great detail, for only those assumptions of which we are aware can be checked and refined.

As discussed above, attributions to old masters will always – to a certain extent – remain interpretations, and this is probably for the better for the future of the discipline. Ultimately, it gives us art historians the opportunity to help define the old masters we admire, and to leave our own fingerprint in the history we write.