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Constantijn Huygens, de kunst en het hof

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Summary

Constantijn Huygens is one of the most famous courtiers of the Dutch Golden Age. He is known as the secretary of Frederik Hendrik and Willem II, the composer of a large oeuvre of poetry, the author of memoirs, and the father of four sons and one daughter. Between 1629 and 1631, he wrote the first of two autobiographies, and in it, he devoted a vast amount of attention to, among other subjects, the young painters Rembrandt and Lievens. This passage is unique, as it is one of the earliest texts about these artists, and the manner in which Huygens characterizes their styles demonstrates his connoisseurship. In addition, Huygens’ correspondence includes many letters from artists, among them Rembrandt. There are also various types of documents that show that Huygens was involved in the decoration of the Oranjezaal in the Huis ten Bosch. On the basis of these sources, Huygens has come to be recognized as a connoisseur of art.

This dissertation addresses the question of the meaning and function of sources, such as Huygens’ autobiography Mijn jeugd, Rembrandt’s letters and the Oranjezaal documents, as they are critically analyzed within the framework of all his statements about art. Research on Huygens and art has been conducted foremost from the art historical perspective, and a relatively selective number of sources have been used. The objective of this dissertation is to examine what the aforementioned important, known texts about art in Huygens’ oeuvre mean in the biographical context of his multifaceted life. How can Huygens’ poems about art be characterized, and how did they function? Did Huygens have a personal art collection, and if so, what did it look like? What were Huygens’ responsibilities when it came to the artistic policy of stadholders Frederik Hendrik and Willem II? And finally, how should the passage on painting in Huygens’ biography of his youth be read?

Primary, seventeenth-century sources are at the foundation of this dissertation. The starting point of this research was the careful reading of Huygens’ complete writings, that is, his surviving correspondence, his poetry and his ego-documents. A recurring element in this research is the role of these texts. For what purposes did Huygens use certain poems, and what were the originating circumstances of his poetry? How did a list with names of painters function in the context of a decorative commission, can it be determined from a letter who was involved in the decision-making? How did Huygens’ biography of his youth, in which he expresses himself so adeptly about Rembrandt, function?

To place in perspective Huygens’ most familiar statements on art, chapter 1 draws upon all of his poems in which painting is mentioned. This collection encompasses poems of various sorts, such as poetry in which painting appears as the central theme, like epigrams on painters and their work. Huygens wrote approximately one hundred fifty poems on portraits, plus another ten poems on paintings other than portraits. These poems on portraits comprise by
far the largest subcategory of art-related poetry. One also finds in Huygens’ oeuvre dozens of “special occasion poems” that functioned in both personal and professional circumstances. In these poems, painting was invoked to support an argument on another topic.

In 1656 Huygens wrote a number of poems which highlight painting. He published them in Korenbloemen (1658) in the section “Snel-dicht”, or “Epigrams”. These poems originate from a “vondst” an association that is often literary. It does not, by definition, relate to the poem’s subject. An example of this is the poem “Schilerijen” (“Paintings”), which is composed of two epigrams. Study of the original document reveals the so-called word play. In the margin Huygens wrote the words “malen schilderen”, which he crossed out after he completed the poem. In these verses, Huygens plays with the multiple meanings of the word “malen”; in the seventeenth century, this meant not only “to paint” but also “to contemplate” and “to muse”. The poems which have painting as a central theme are characterized by a powerful literary ingenuity. Furthermore, they often include a moral message.

The majority of Huygens’ poems on portraits are written in Latin. He also wrote poems about portraits in French and Dutch. In terms of content, these poems conform to the general parameters for early modern portrait poems; the subject is, above all, topical. Literary commonplaces were used to sing the praises of the person represented – rather than to demonstrate esteem for the work of art itself – and Huygens also played epigrammatic word games in order to present himself as an erudite poet. The same applies to the poems that he wrote about non-portrait pictures. In practically none of these poems can an art critic’s tone be detected. Instead, literary ingenuity predominates.

Huygens’ poems on art distinguish themselves by their social pragmatics. Gift exchange played an important role in the court circles in which Huygens traveled. Each gift that he received invited a gift in return according to the rules of reciprocity; in these circumstances, poetry was an important instrument. When Huygens received gifts that related to art in particular, he wrote poetry that invoked art in return. He also wrote funerary poems in which painting figures prominently. These address artists that he knew personally, such as Van Mierevelt, Van Campen and Netscher. For all of these poems, the work of art is subordinate to the poems’ objective, be it the declaration of thanks or the expression of mourning.

In a professional context Huygens used poetry to open the door to “veilige, goede en snelle onderhandelingen” (“safe, good, and quick negotiations”), as he attests in his second autobiography. He wrote poems about painting when he knew that the intended recipient admired art. This is how he made contact with the Loménie family, counts of Brienne, during his diplomatic trip to France in the 1660s. In these years Huygens knew of their love of painting through contact that his son Christiaan maintained with the family. Huygens praised their collection of art in letters and poems. It is clear that his poetic activity was governed by
social pragmatics, however, as the alleged friendship ended when Huygens realized that the French courtiers could not help him achieve his diplomatic goal.

Poetry was Huygens’ most important networking instrument, and he used it to make himself known in courtly circles. This applies to the majority of poems in which painting is discussed. This may be seen in the poems that he exchanged with important associates, but also in their publication in collections like Korenbloemen and Momenta Desultoria, which include a significant amount of art-related poetry. After Huygens returned from the aforementioned trip to France, he made an outline for the unpublished collection of poems titled Parerga Peregrina. For Huygens, poetry lent itself principally to intellectual self-representation. His personal taste, therefore, cannot be established through his art-related poems, and it is even less valid to read them as a reflection upon contemporary art.

In order to explore whether the known art-related texts by Huygens indicate that he was also a collector, chapter 2 focuses on his art collection. As no inventory or sales catalogue has survived from Huygens’ year of death, scholarly publications about Huygens’ supposed art collection often use the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century catalogues of his descendants’ possessions. In this chapter, seventeenth-century sources are crucial. Through material from Huygens’ written legacy – letters, poems, autobiographies, his journal and various fragmentary documents from the family archive – it is possible to sketch an image of his collection.

During the years that Huygens worked as secretary to stadholders Frederik Hendrik and Willem II, he purchased a few paintings. These include the double portrait of Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms that Huygens ordered from Honthorst and a landscape that he commissioned from Vroom. This painting is presumably the River Landscape with antique sepulcher now in the Frans Halsmuseum. There were also family portraits in his collection that he had inherited from his parents, as well as portraits that he had made of himself and his family members. In addition to purchasing and inheriting paintings, he also received pictures as gifts during this period. Rembrandt, for instance, probably offered him The Blinding of Samson, though it is debatable whether Huygens accepted it. It is certain, however, that Huygens owned work by Pieter Saenredam, as well as paintings by Laurens Craen and Daniël Seghers.

In the years after 1650 Huygens spent considerably more time and money on the expansion of his collection. He bought tronies from the art dealer Musson and portraits from the old aristocratic family Van Egmond. On the occasion of his research into Petrarch’s residence, he commissioned portraits of Petrarch and Laura, and he also spent money on a portrait of the sixteenth-century Latin poet Janus Secundus, whose work had long been an example for him. Huygens also continued to receive paintings as presents. Henri Louise de
Loménie gave him a copy of his portrait of Erasmus by Holbein the Younger, and Huygens received a portrait of Louis XI after his stay at the French court. He was also interested in the work of women painters such as princess Louise Hollandina van de Palts and Jeanne van Aerssen. He expanded his collection of portraits with depictions of, among others, Béatrix de Cusance and Christina of Sweden.

Huygens emerges from this research primarily as a collector of portraits. He had representations made of himself and his family, and he collected portraits of friends, colleagues and important national and international acquaintances. He may have seen the collecting of portraits as a way to raise his family status. It is striking that most of the paintings that Huygens received as gifts from painters were not by artists who worked on commission for the court, work by these painters appears in his descendants’ inventories. It is possible that Huygens, as a courtier, was not in a position to display art by painters working for Frederik Hendrik in his house. This would also explain why Huygens bought relatively little art in the years prior to 1650; he may not have wanted to compete with his employer. There is only one non-portrait painting of which it is certain Huygens purchased it himself: the landscape by Vroom.

In chapter 3 the role of art in Huygens’ professional career is addressed. His known writings about art, such as Rembrandt’s letters and the documents concerning the Oranjezaal, are analyzed here in the context of his function as secretary. Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms built and renovated more castles than their predecessors, and they also decorated their palaces in order to display their princely status. Huygens, as secretary to the stadholder, took care of the prince’s correspondence, including that with artists. His name appears in different written sources about these castles and their decoration. The letters that Huygens wrote to Amalia about her husband’s activities are an important source for this discussion. In this chapter, I will nuance the image of Huygens as a courtier influential in the stadholder’s purchases of art. First, Huygens’ contribution to the stadholder’s artistic policy will be analyzed according to sources related to these palaces. Then Huygens’ function, as seen by artists, will be studied.

In the documents relevant to the decoration of Paleis ter Nieuberg, Kasteel Buren and Huis Honsealaarsdijk, Huygens appears to be the one responsible for the practical side of art commissioned for the stadholder. Communication was the most important part of this. For the portrait gallery of Ter Nieuberg, he corresponded with foreign contacts. Documents about the decoration of Kasteel Buren reveal that Huygens acted an intermediary between the stadholder and his advisers. Pieter Post sent a report of his visit to the painters working on the Kasteel Buren commission to Laurens Buysero (clerk to the prince) in The Hague. Buysero subsequently sent this report onto Huygens, who was in the camp of Frederik Hendrik. In the
case of Huis Honselaarsdijk, the signatures of both Huygens and Jacob van Campen can be found on a contract for the decoration of a fronton. From Huygens’ involvement in a court commission by the painter Gonzalez Coques, it appears that his connoisseurship did not have much influence on the stadholder’s purchases.

Huygens’ name appears most often in the documents concerning the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch. Both Northern and Southern Netherlandish painters received commissions for this space that Amalia had decorated in memory of her deceased consort. Analysis of the various documents that discuss the division of tasks in the decoration of other palaces reveal that Post, but above all Van Campen, played an important role in the development of the Oranjezaal’s decorative program. As with the other palaces, Huygens’ responsibilities involved the coordination of activities, correspondence with the Southern Netherlandish painters and communication with Amalia, Van Campen and Post. Amalia herself was closely associated with the decoration of the Oranjezaal, which Van Campen was most likely responsible for reproducing as an epic painting ensemble detailing the life of Frederik Hendrik.

Examination of the ways in which painters perceived Huygens’ role at court underscores the image of a secretary charged with many tasks, including coordination of the Prince’s artistic commissions. Even though many have attributed to him the delegation of commissions at the stadholder’s court, it appears that only the painters who were brought to Huygens’ attention by other courtiers received commissions. That Huygens dedicated himself to championing specific painters and that his personal taste played a role in the assigning of commissions cannot be established. From Huygens’ correspondence about Frederik Hendrik’s commissions with painters like Rubens, De Verwer, and Willeboirts Bosschaert, it appears that the stadholder himself knew exactly what he wanted. The information from Rembrandt’s seven letters to Huygens combined with the commentary on the painter in Huygens’ autobiography show that the secretary worked closely with the stadholder.

Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms used art to endow their court with a princely image. An understanding of art was therefore indispensable to the courtiers entrusted with the execution of this artistic policy. Clearly, Huygens was educated in the areas that were important to the stadholder; the question of influence, however, is another issue. It is not likely that Huygens, as a self-employed secretary, went in search of art to buy art for the stadholder. From this research, Van Campen surfaces as the court member charged with the guiding of selected painters and the supervision of execution. In addition, there were others involved in artistic projects, like Willem Frederik, Constantijn Huygens, Jr., and Pieter Post. Huygens’ responsibility consisted of process control, correspondence with people that worked at a long distance from the court, and keeping Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms as informed as possible of these developments.
Chapter 4 considers the autobiography that Huygens wrote between 1629 and 1631. The artistic concepts perceptible in it are here situated within the entire autobiography and in relation to the literary milieu in which it was written. This is important because this passage, and foremost the sentences about Rembrandt, are often quoted without outlining the underlying literary context. The genre of courtier literature is important in this context, as are the contemporary art literature and classical works to which Huygens implicitly and explicitly refers. At the basis of this research lies the study of the original document that now resides in the Royal Library in The Hague.

The section about painting is introduced with an explanation about the place of art education in a gentleman’s upbringing. Huygens candidly reveals his most important source for this passage, Pliny’s *Naturalis historia*. He takes from this ancient text the entire foundation of his discussion that a courtier must be able to speak about painting, as well as other subjects customary in court circles, in appropriate ways. Prevention of disgrace through an ignorant remark was very important. In order to achieve this intellectual dexterity, it was necessary to have an understanding of drawing and painting practice. Huygens was instructed in this by Hondius. From the examples that he later gives of the practical application of such training – the sharing of drawings and small paintings with well-placed youths, for instance – it becomes increasingly clear how Huygens’ artistic skillfulness served a social goal. Finally, he writes extensively about the painters of his time. He discusses successively father and son De Gheyn, Goltzius, Cornelisz, Vroom and Porcellis, landscape painters, history painters, Rubens, portrait painters, Rembrandt and Lievens and, lastly, Torrentius.

Broadly speaking, it is worth noting that Huygens mentions painters whose work was highly visible in the circles in which he circulated in The Hague in the first three decades of the seventeenth century. He was raised, for example, in the milieu of the De Gheyns, while the majority of the landscape painters he cites were active in The Hague in the late 1620s. Under the label “Amsterdam history painters”, Huygens lists artists with whom he, or his father, likely had acquaintance a few years earlier. The work of the Utrecht history painters mentioned by Huygens was beloved at the courts of Frederik Hendrik and Elizabeth Stuart. In his discussion of portrait painters, Huygens treats Van Ravesteyn and Van Mierevelt, artists with whose work he had come into contact at an early age. For his description of Rembrandt and Lievens, he based his comments on his visit to the painters’ studio and the subsequent contact with the artists. Torrentius was even entrenched in a scandal in The Hague for allegedly making blasphemous statements, a situation in which Frederik Hendrik involved himself.

Huygens’ *Mijn Jeugd* describes the education of a seventeenth-century courtier. Pliny’s *Naturalis historia* shaped Huygens’ thinking and gave him a frame of reference for his
remarks about painting. Huygens surveyed the painters around him and, entirely in the spirit of his time, designated one artist that, to his eyes, surpassed the ancients: Rembrandt. Analysis of his description of Rubens suggests painters’ versatility was admired. Following Pliny, Huygens ascribes special value to portraiture. This was important in the preservation of ancestry, which was an important element in Huygens’ life.

The text also functions in a larger literary tradition. The ability to speak fluently about art – and other subjects that could come up in conversation at court – is prevalent in early modern courtier literature. Castiglione’s Il libro del cortegiano is an important example of such literature. In the passage about painting, Huygens conducts a type of virtual tour of the places where his opinion about painting is, or could be, asked. But there are also parallels to be found with early modern art literature. For example, Huygens recounts implicitly in his discussion of Goltzius an anecdote about the painter that may also be read in Van Mander’s Schilder-Boeck.

In the study of Huygens’ text, a number of elements emerge. Foremost is the interplay between literary tradition and everyday reality. Huygens comes from a classical perspective in his belief that one must be able to speak about art, and he did so in a period in which the status of art was growing considerably. Here, I also focus on Huygens’ description of Rembrandt and Lievens. His analysis of their artistic development is razor-sharp and demonstrates that he was perfectly able to distinguish developments in art. Research into the original document unearthed a remarkable detail: Huygens only later inserted the names of Southern Netherlandish painters into his text. Only Rubens’ and Brill’s names appear in the original text. Other exceptional elements in his autobiography include Huygens’ reference to maintaining friendships with painters and his declaration that artists should record their production by keeping lists of their work. All of these elements make Huygens’ text unique.

In this dissertation, an image comes to light of Constantijn Huygens as a courtier that presented himself in very practical ways as an intellectual, and when the situation demanded, as a connoisseur of art. His exceptional knowledge of art was particularly suitable for his position as court secretary. Huygens was not so much a pioneer; rather, he should be seen as an “honette homme” or a “homo universalis” that was at home in all of the arts and sciences, which served his patron in specific ways. He followed court conventions closely and lived in houses that he decorated with portraits of people in whose company he gladly found, or would find, himself. During the First Stadholderless period, he tried with great vigor to maintain his status as courtier. As a descendent of a non-noble family, Huygens drew upon all his resources to consolidate his position and that of his family. His connoisseurship of art was one component of his social strategy.