

A Portrait of the Market as a Seismograph

Dutch Masters on the Art Market

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Caravaggio and Vermeer are among today's most popular Old Masters. They enjoy some kind of star status and any exhibition of their work is guaranteed to be a blockbuster. But what is so singular is that their paintings have not always been so well regarded. In fact, for a long time they were little known or little loved.

What do the prices that were paid for artists' work on the art market in the past tell us about changes in the appreciation of their work? How much is paid for a painting depends on a great many factors. It is not only the artist's reputation that counts, but also the authenticity of the work (did the artist create the work of art entirely with his own hands?), the method of execution, the subject, the format, the number of figures depicted, and the condition and provenance of the painting. And in addition there are all manner of economic factors that have an influence on the price of a work of art, such as supply and demand. Whether the work is sold by auction or privately also has an effect. In what follows, I shall take a closer look at this issue on the basis of a case study. I shall be concentrating primarily on seventeenth-century Dutch painting.

Changes in supply and demand

Unlike such painters of the Southern Netherlands as Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, who received numerous commissions from the church, nobility and court, and had impressive international careers, painters in the Republic of the United Netherlands worked mainly for the open domestic market. It's true that there were occasional exports, but they were by no means regular or on a large scale. This all changed around 1700: the demand from abroad started to increase dramatically. Although the Italian art of the High Renaissance continued to be the most well regarded among collectors almost all over Europe until well into the nineteenth century, with the work of Raphael in the undisputed lead, Dutch art increasingly gained ground.

At the end of the Golden Age, the economic position of the Republic deteriorated in relation to that of other countries. Domestic demand for luxury consumer goods stagnated, while a huge supply of Northern-Netherlandish paint-



Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*,
c. 1512/13, oil on canvas,
256 x 196 cm,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister,
Dresden

ings was available on the art market. At the same time, good Italian paintings were relatively scarce and expensive. So foreign collectors were now able to get their hands on most Northern-Netherlandish paintings quite easily and at a relatively favourable price.

The influence of traditional academic art theory

The traditional academic theory of art that developed mainly in Italy and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been a decisive factor in the history of taste. In this context, the sixteenth-century Italian painting of the High Renaissance and seventeenth-century French painting were considered to be high points in the history of art. The work of such masters as Raphael





Philips Wouwerman, *Battle Scene*, c. 1655-1660, oil on canvas, 127 x 245 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague.

This painting was purchased for 4,575 guilders by Prince William of Orange at an auction in The Hague in 1764 making it one of the most expensive Dutch paintings in the eighteenth century.

and Nicolas Poussin set the standard of quality by which all others were to be gauged. These painters had taken their cue from both the formal idiom and the subjects of the art of classical antiquity. They also painted many biblical subjects. Their art was based very much on reason: universal rules for art were formulated and they had to be strictly adhered to. For example, only the most beautiful elements in nature were to be selected. Works of art that were composed using the imagination received greater approval than paintings that were done directly from nature. In addition, the design and the line were considered more important than the use of colour.

Dutch art was accepted only with difficulty

Because most Dutch painting did not fulfil these ideals, it was for a long time subject to criticism. It was only at the start of the eighteenth century, after the triumph of the *Rubénistes* (the followers of Peter Paul Rubens, from the Southern Netherlands) over the *Poussinistes* (the followers of Poussin) in the *Querelle du coloris*, the dispute about whether colour and drawing were of equal importance in painting, that tastes changed and the tide turned in favour of the masters of the Southern Netherlands and then also those of the Northern Netherlands. In France, writing on the artists of the Northern Netherlands gradually became more positive and their work also became more avidly collected. The following quote from an eighteenth-century collector is typical: 'I have distinguished two sub-schools within the school of the Low Countries, and they are the Flemish and the Dutch, and I have even added a number of German painters to them, because they worked in the same genres (...) In some respects, the Dutch school successfully distinguishes itself from other schools. It handles nature with the highest possible degree of faithfulness (...) The paintings are executed in extreme detail. The Dutch have also thoroughly mastered the art of shades and contrasts of colour: in this way they succeed in painting the light itself, if one may so express it.'

Trendsetters

When it came to collecting works at the top end of the art market, certain royal courts and noble families in Germany and France will have played an exemplary role, guided by their agents in the Republic. Arnold Houbraken, an early eighteenth-century biographer of several artists, described how collectors imitated each other in their preferences, taking as his example the paintings of Philips Wouwerman: 'It is true that the products of his brushwork have risen to a much higher price many years after his death than during his life, since the Dolphin [Dauphin] of France, and the Elector of Bavaria (which prompted other courts to do the same) had all his works in Holland purchased for them.'

So you might say that seeing others buy makes you yourself buy: according to Houbraken, virtually every royal collector tried to acquire works by this Haarlem painter, in imitation of such trendsetters as Louis of France (1661-1711), the eldest son of King Louis XIV, and Maximilian II Emanuel, the Elector of Bavaria (1662-1726).



Adriaen van der Werff, *Lot and his Daughters*, 1711, oil on panel, 44.5 x 35 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

This painting sold for 4,100 guilders at an auction in Rotterdam in 1713 making it one of the most expensive Dutch paintings in the early eighteenth century.

Which Northern Netherlands masters?

The average yield from paintings at Dutch auctions in the early eighteenth century would seem to give a good indication of the popularity of the various artists.

Among the most expensive paintings were those of Adriaen van der Werff (an average of 858 guilders), a painter in the classical style at work in the late Golden Age, who was tremendously popular among European collectors in the eighteenth century, because to a large extent his work met the demands of the traditional academic theory of art – whereas in later periods it was hardly appreciated at all, though for the very same reason. The same applies to the



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1644, oil on oak, 83.8 x 65.4 cm, The National Gallery, London

This painting sold for 2,510 guilders at an auction in Amsterdam in 1733 making it one of the most expensive paintings by Rembrandt in the early eighteenth century.

work of another classicist painter of the late Golden Age, Gerard de Lairese, though the average yield from his paintings was not so high (272 guilders). By comparison, the annual income of a Dutch teacher, grocer or pharmacist in 1742 amounted to between 600 and 800 guilders.

Rembrandt

Although it's true that the art of Rembrandt van Rijn was well liked by collectors in the Netherlands, France, Germany and England in the eighteenth century, he was also the subject of much criticism, especially in France. He was said to have drawn outlines incorrectly and not shown any interest in the art of classical antiquity, only wanting to imitate living nature, which he copied

exactly as it was and not in an improved, idealised form. His sketchy manner of painting also regularly attracted criticism, though sometimes great praise too. According to the seventeenth-century biographer and art theorist André Félibien, the effect of his painting only really became apparent from a distance: '[Rembrandt] juxtaposed his tints and half-tints so well and rendered his areas of light and shade so effectively that the things he painted so roughly and which often appear like sketches do not come across when one stands too close to the painting. But when one moves further away, the thick and vigorous brush-strokes become less visible and merge into a single whole whereby the desired effect is achieved.'

The diverging estimation of Rembrandt's art seems to have had an effect on the average yield from his paintings at auction in the early eighteenth century. The average price of 140 guilders is considerably lower than for the work of Adriaen van der Werff and Gerard de Lairesse.

Gerrit Dou, *The Night School*, c. 1660-1665, oil on panel, 74 x 64 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

This painting sold for 4,000 guilders at an auction in Leiden in 1766 making it one of the most expensive Dutch paintings in the eighteenth century.



Genre works

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Leiden painters Gerrit Dou and Frans van Mieris the Elder were the most highly regarded Northern-Netherlandish genre painters, both in their home country and abroad, and it was their work that yielded the most: Dou an average of 440 guilders and Van Mieris 437 guilders. The great attraction of these small paintings was their extreme precision and convincing illusionism. The work of Gabriel Metsu (179 guilders) and Godfried Schalcken (188 guilders) also did well on the art market and increasingly benefited from international interest. With an average of 107 guilders, Johannes Vermeer did not do badly, but he was relatively unknown, especially outside the Netherlands, because of the small number of works he produced.



Johannes Vermeer, *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, c. 1670-1674, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 88.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

This painting sold for 500 guilders at an auction in Amsterdam in 1718, making it one of the most expensive paintings by Vermeer in the early eighteenth century. It's an historical painting and not a genre painting, rather atypical in the oeuvre of Vermeer.

Portraits

One possible explanation for the limited popularity of Northern-Netherlandish portraits among eighteenth-century collectors is to be found in the writings of Johan van Gool, a biographer of artists who in 1750 had observed that portraits were in general not much collected because they had little value outside the subject's family circle, except in the case of such renowned artists as Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Rembrandt and Frans Hals, who were popular because of their artistic worth. For that matter, in the early eighteenth century Hals, a portraitist *pur sang*, achieved only an exceedingly meagre average of nineteen guilders, compared to 641 guilders for the work of Van Dyck and 292 for that of Rubens (though of course in the two latter cases they included not only portraits but also history pieces).

Italian and Dutch landscapes

It was landscapes, sometimes populated with biblical figures, shepherds, hunters or soldiers, that generally made up the majority of Northern-Netherlandish paintings in eighteenth-century collections. These almost always included a substantial number of paintings by the much-loved *Italianisanten*,



Nicolaes Berchem, *Shepherds beside Roman Ruins*, after 1661, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.5 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague
This painting was purchased for 2,105 guilders by Prince William of Orange at an auction in Amsterdam in 1765 making it one of the most expensive paintings by Berchem in the eighteenth century.

Northern painters who had painted sun-drenched, Italian-looking landscapes, often inspired by travels to Italy. Such artists as Jan van Goyen, who had concentrated exclusively on the Dutch landscape, were significantly less popular. He achieved an average yield of only six guilders at Dutch auctions in the first half of the eighteenth century.

The highest yields were for the work of Nicolaes Berchem (an average of 133 guilders), Adriaen van de Velde (167 guilders), Paulus Potter (204 guilders) and Philips Wouwerman (232 guilders). Wouwerman's landscapes, in which horses almost always played a leading part, were particularly in vogue among royal and aristocratic collectors. The appeal of Paulus Potter's paintings was due to his highly detailed and refined technique and his choice of subject: farmers or hunters with their animals in a landscape. Huge prices were often paid for them. We can easily illustrate the speed at which the price of his work increased in the course of the eighteenth century on the basis of the well-known work *Grote Ossendrift* in the Braamcamp collection, a major work that Catherine the Great purchased in 1771, but which was lost in a storm at sea on its way to Russia. In 1707 it cost 455 guilders, in 1734 it was already at 1,760 guilders, in 1754 no less than 3,110 guilders, in 1761 3,975 guilders and in 1771 finally reached the astronomical price of 9,050 guilders.



Paulus Potter, *Cattle in a Meadow*, 1652, oil on panel, 35.8 x 46.9 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague

This painting sold for 730 guilders at an auction in Amsterdam in 1738 making it one of the most expensive paintings by Potter in the early eighteenth century.



Jacob van Ruisdael, *The Jewish Cemetery*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 84 x 95 cm,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

*This painting is possibly identical with one auctioned in 1739 in Amsterdam for only eleven guilders.
Before 1754 it had been purchased by August III, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland.
Goethe's 'Ruisdael as Poet' from 1816 made it very famous.*

Translated by Gregory Ball

To conclude, a brief observation on an artist who is currently one of the best-known landscape painters of the Golden Age: Jacob van Ruisdael. Although his paintings of North European landscapes could be purchased relatively cheaply on the art market in the first half of the eighteenth century (an average of only forty-two guilders), this changed in the second half of that century when the appreciation of his work appeared to increase rapidly. A little later still, during the Romantic period, he became one of the best-loved painters of the Golden Age. ■