

Not A Random Sample of Amsterdam Inventories

Social Class and Ownership of Cheap Paintings in Amsterdam, 1650-1700

Angela Jager, Universiteit van Amsterdam

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A number of factors have contributed to the general notion among art historians that the purchase of history paintings was limited to the intellectual and financial elite. These include the complexity of the content of these paintings, together with the fact that the most renowned artists of that time, such as Rubens and Rembrandt, were primarily history painters as well as the high value estimates—over 1,000 guilders—for these paintings in seventeenth-century inventories. But an observation by Samuel van Hoogstraten (1678) suggests that such a conclusion may be unwarranted: “For we reject everything that is without artistry and disapprove of what cannot hold its place among good things. Otherwise the third and highest degree [of painting = history painting] would be the most contemptible, for we see everywhere illustrious history paintings that are a dime a dozen.”ⁱ

My research on three low-end art dealers active in Amsterdam, who had hundreds of paintings in stock with an average value of below 4 guilders, brought forth not only a considerable number of unknown painters who produced paintings *en masse* for these art dealers, but also a sizable number of subjects that seems to have been popular in this low segment of the art market - in particular history paintings with biblical subjects. Therefore, an important question is: who bought these paintings? Is it possible to acquire insight into the economic, social and religious background of the owners of such paintings?

In this working paper I would like to address one crucial question: can we say something about the relation between social class and preference for specific genres and scenes?

Montias' 'Works of Art in a Random Sample of Amsterdam Inventories' (1996) demonstrated that landscape became the most dominant category of painting in the seventeenth century and that the ownership of history painting decreased rapidly. However, an earlier and lesser cited article by Montias (1991) showed that this trend - although clearly apparent in inventories with one or more attributions to painters (generally the more wealthy estates) - was not distinct in inventories with just anonymous works (generally the less wealthy estates). This last group displays, in contrast with the more wealthy collectors, a continuing ownership in history painting - unexpectedly, since in art history it is commonly believed that the appeal of history painting was limited to the intellectual elite. This paper will explore the ownership of paintings in different social classes in Amsterdam in the second half of the seventeenth century, and focus on the 'smalle burgerij' in particular.

I have composed a dataset of Amsterdam household inventories drawn up between 1650 and 1700. I have limited my selection to complete estate inventories composed after the death of the owner. I have excluded painters and art dealers. The full dataset is composed of 271 household inventories. The subset consists of the 131 of inventories in the full dataset that are appraised. In order to distinguish the paintings owned by the 'smalle burgerij' from those of the 'brede burgerij' and the 'grote burgerij', two different indicators are used: number of paintings (full dataset) and total value of art objects (subset).

The starting point of my first analysis is that the more paintings one owns, the wealthier one is. The smallest collection consisted of 4 paintings, and the largest

of 230 paintings. I have divided all household inventories in seven groups, which are compiled based on the number of paintings present in the household. The history paintings are expressed as a percentage of the total number of paintings that were listed with subject. The graph demonstrates that the households with up to 10 paintings relatively contained a larger share of history painting than the households with more than 10 paintings.

The starting point of my second analysis is that a higher total art value indicates more wealth. The lowest total value of the listed art objects was little over 6 guilders and the highest total value was more than 3000 guilders. I have divided the households in groups based on the total value of their art objects, and calculated the relative weight of history painting. The result of this analysis underscores the previous one: households with less valuable art objects own comparatively more history painting than households with more valuable art objects.

The relationship between history painting and paintings with other subjects displays that people without any other subjects of paintings, generally owned an average of 1.5 history painting. With every painting of another subject that is added, the number of history painting increases with 0.2 paintings. This means that, on average, as a collection of paintings is growing, the number of paintings with other subjects increases five times faster than the number of history painting.

Did the less wealthy prefer different genres and subjects than the well-to-do professionals, rich merchants and regent class?

In order to compare the subjects of the history paintings of owners on both sides of the social spectrum, I have composed an extensive dataset of all inventories

of households with up to 15 paintings (Group 1) and all inventories of collections with 75 paintings and more (Group 2). Through archival research I have confirmed that the two groups differ in social characteristics, such as profession (artisans and small shopkeepers vs. professionals, merchants and regents) and address (Jordaan and small streets in the Medieval City Center vs. Grand Canals). Whereas Group 1 is the lower middle to middle class, Group 2 is the merchant and regents elite.

Group 1 displays a strong preference for religious scenes (80% of all history painting), as opposed to Group 2, in which the difference between ‘pagan’ and ‘religious’ history painting is much less distinct (40 and 60% respectively). The most ‘popular’ subcategory in Group 2 is, together with New Testament, classical mythology, while this type of scenes almost did not play any role in the households of Group 2. In contrast, Group 1 favored Old and New Testament subjects equally. The preference for classical iconography in Group 2 is strong evidence for a difference in intellectuality between the groups.

I can also make some statements about the specific scenes owned by the different groups. The mythological paintings owned by Group 2 are generally erotic in nature: Venus and scenes with other fertility gods are very common. Remarkably, Venus is totally absent in Group 1. It might be significant that the only goddess depicted in their households was ‘Diana’ (2 times), protector of chastity.

For religious paintings: Group 2 shows a significant preference for paintings with the Virgin Mary, devotional images as well as narrative scenes. This preference is not as such detectable in Group 1 - with the exception of the *Nativity*-scene (owned by 6 different people) the Virgin Mary was not present in their houses. Another clear preference of Group 2 is the Passion-cycle; the most

common being *The crucifixion*. This scene is totally absent in Group 1. In Group 1 we can find relatively more scenes from the public life of Christ. With the exception of two scenes that do not occur at all in Group 2 [*The journey to Emmaus of the two disciples* and *The multiplication of loaves and fishes*], there is nothing remarkably different between the two groups. As for the Old Testament, both groups owned mostly scenes from Genesis. In Group 2 *Lot and his daughters* was popular. Paintings with *Abraham and the visit of the three angels* and *Abigail* were exclusively found in Group 1.

The preference for Mary and the Passion-cycle in Group 2, typical Roman Catholic subjects (Montias 1991), might be evidence for a difference in religion between the two groups.

Were cheap, anonymous paintings also owned by the wealthier part of the population?

The composed dataset can answer this question. In Group 1 six percent of the history paintings are described with the name of the painter, as opposed to twenty-one percent in Group 2. Remarkably, in Group 2, thirty-nine percent of the landscapes are described with the name of the painter – they were less often anonymous.

About sixty percent of the history painting in Group 1 were valued at 5 guilders and less. More surprising is that fifty-four percent of all history painting in Group 2 were also valued at 5 guilders and less. In fact, most history painting can be found in the price range of up to 10 guilders. In contrast, landscapes had a larger range of prices, mostly between 0 and 50 guilders, and they must generally have been more expensive, although an individual history painting could rise to much higher prices.

In order to answer the question if the cheap paintings had another function in their household than the expensive ones, I will look at the placing of the paintings in the household.

The placing of the paintings do not show very striking differences. The anonymous and cheap works were hung more equally through the different rooms in the house, whereas the more expensive works and works described with painter's names, seem to have been more clustered in the *zaal* (hall), *zijkamer* (side room), *binnenkamer* (inside room) and the *voorhuis* (front hall). These halls and rooms on the ground floor served for representative purposes. They did not contain only important paintings; usually they were combined with anonymous and cheaper works. For example, of all paintings inventoried in the *zaal*, forty-one percent was described with name. Cheaper works could be found in the more private parts of the house: rooms upstairs and in the back of the house. In my sample, the *hofstede* (country house), *zolder* (attic) and the *comptoir* (workshop), contained only anonymous and cheap works.

Conclusions:

1. History painting was not only for the elite: history paintings are inventoried in small households of common people, and there were art dealers specialized in the selling of cheap history painting.
2. History painting was in fact the first type of painting to buy. Extra budget for paintings in wealthier households was translated into more variety of painting genres.
3. Common people preferred almost exclusively history painting with biblical subjects, while the ownership of the merchants' elite display significant more paintings with mythological subjects. These preferences might be linked to a

difference in intellect, religion or availability (we might even use the word taste).

4. The elite owned cheap, anonymous history painting. They hung equally through the house, generally more in private spaces, but also amongst the ‘center pieces’ in public rooms.

5. The data seems to suggest that landscape painting generally had more status than history painting: they were more often described with the name of the artist, and they were generally valued higher in inventories.

ⁱ From Samuel van Hoogstraten’s discussion of the three ranks of art in his treatise on painting, *Introduction to the Academy of Painting* (1678). Dutch translation by Jaap Jacobs and Celeste Brusati (forthcoming, Getty Research Institute publication). Original Dutch: “wij verwerpen al wat onkonstig is, en keuren af, al wat geen rang onder goede dingen kan houden; Anders zoude den derden en hoogsten graed der konst wel den alderverachtsten zijn; want men ziet overal dozijn werk van doorluchtige Historyen”: Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: Anders de zichtbaere werelt* (Rotterdam: Fransois van Hoogstraeten, 1678), 87.