

Rembrandt's Rivals: History Painting in Amsterdam 1630–1650.

Eric Jan Sluijter.

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This book follows upon a monumental project titled “Artistic and Economic Competition in the Amsterdam Art Market, ca. 1630–1690: History Painting in Amsterdam in Rembrandt’s Time” conducted by Eric Jan Sluijter and Marten Jan Bok, together with colleagues and graduate students at the University of Amsterdam and New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts. Bok and Harm Nijboer developed a database (<http://www.vondel.humanities.uva.nl/ecartico/>) that makes available information on more than 20,000 people who worked in the cultural industries of Amsterdam, enabling users to compile and visualize data in a wealth of formats to reveal, for example, patterns in migration to and from the city and around the world as well as points of contact among networks of artists, collectors, and dealers. A number of important dissertations, articles, and book-length studies have emerged from this project already, with more on the horizon.

Sluijter’s book focuses on Amsterdam history painting during two decades, from 1630 to 1650, of immense growth in production and innovation. Without unduly privileging Rembrandt, this study adeptly situates and contextualizes him, highlighting his peculiar contributions to the industry while also clearly distinguishing his personal, professional, and stylistic characteristics from those of his rivals. This blend of sociobiographical investigation and stylistic analysis — the two are not separated, but rather seen as interwoven in a complex, emergent, and rapidly expanding market — provides a model approach to the field.

Sluijter draws both acute and broad-ranging conclusions about stylistic influences, patterns of patronage, notions of quality and value, and the economic and social prospects of the artists who lived and worked in this cosmopolitan city. The book opens with an important chapter on the place of Amsterdam in the larger context of the European market for painting and particularly the prominence of history subjects and the significant position of Old Testament scenes. The role of competition and reputation in the construction of value lays the foundation for this remarkable surge. The next

several chapters are case studies on individual artists and clusters of artists at the high, middle, and low end of the marketplace. Sluijter sees artists making conscious decisions about the conduct of their careers based on their individual strengths and ambitions to find their way in this dynamic market.

What made artists successful? There was no set answer, as some artists like Rembrandt sought individuality and valued their own artistic aims above almost all other considerations, while others pursued more accommodating approaches with fewer degrees of challenges in style and/or passionate content — Sluijter calls them “lite” manners. Numerous interesting patterns emerge. For example, whereas the influential artists of the first quarter century, led by Pieter Lastman, were mostly born-and-bred Amsterdammers, in the first new wave after 1630 the most important painters were primarily immigrants. This includes Rembrandt, Joachim von Sandrart, Govaert Flinck, Jacob Backer, and Bartolomeus Breenberg, all of whom were influenced by Lastman but sought their own particular paths to success, responding with, and often contrary to, the early successes of Rembrandt’s style. Each of these artists came from solid if not well-to-do mercantile backgrounds with no professional artistic familial connections; perhaps this predisposed them toward innovation and risk in the new marketplace, rather than entrenchment and tradition. Other than Breenberg, each of them engaged in portraiture alongside history painting, whereas none of the major history painters of Lastman’s generation had done so, nor had any of these artists prior to coming to Amsterdam. This engagement with portraiture strengthened new social relationships with patrons, and competitive rivalries and networks of artists, together with the poets who lauded them publicly in verse, reinforced the innovative drive and the elite patrons’ receptivity. Curiously enough, Sluijter also demonstrates that individuality in style and in subject matter was valued at the low end of the marketplace as well. It remains to be seen in a future study if the patterns of Amsterdam in this period hold true in other locales as well, and to see what changes in the two subsequent decades, when the Golden Age reaches its crescendo and the politics of Amsterdam become even more complex, the social elite become increasingly centered on international prestige, and the primacy of history painting gives way to other genres of production.

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