



Eric Jan Sluijter, Rembrandt's rivals: history painting in Amsterdam, 1630–1650

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To cite this article: Rebecca Tucker (2016) Eric Jan Sluijter, Rembrandt's rivals: history painting in Amsterdam, 1630–1650, *The Seventeenth Century*, 31:1, 118–121, DOI: [10.1080/0268117X.2016.1146437](https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2016.1146437)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2016.1146437>



Published online: 09 May 2016.




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early modern Christian Europe, this collection of essays helps to shed new light on an important figure of the scientific revolution.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2015.1135073>

Rembrandt's rivals: history painting in Amsterdam, 1630–1650, by Eric Jan Sluijter, *OCULI: Studies in the Arts of the Low Countries*, vol. 14, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2015, x + 485 pp., with 297 b/w and 329 full colour illustrations, €297.00/\$210.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-272-4966-1

How does one write a history of Dutch art in the seventeenth century? Even the briefest of surveys of writings over the past decade or two reveals the difficulty of this proposition. During this period, this small country encompassed a number of different artistic centres, each with startlingly different styles, large numbers of practising artists in different media, vibrant and diverse markets, shifting regulations and standards for guild operations, a wide range of private, public, and institutional patrons, and volatile historical circumstances. Making sense of the sheer volume and variety of art produced in the Dutch Republic from 1580 to 1700 is a daunting task. Some statistics may help illuminate the scope of the problem: while the population in the Northern Netherlands increased steadily in the early seventeenth century, the numbers of painters grew exponentially. In Haarlem, as Marion Goosens estimates (Goosens 2001), between 1605 and 1635 the population rose by a third (30,000–40,000) but the numbers of artists multiplied four-fold (from 17 to 90). In Amsterdam – the geographical focus of Sluijter's book – the numbers of painters rose from about 75 in 1620 to over 200 in 1660. The amount and variety of production is equally astounding, as students of the discipline know. According to Ad van der Woude (1991), between 1640 and 1660 almost 2 million new paintings were produced, a number that grew steadily into the eighteenth century. Specialization and economic pressure helped spawn a wide range of genres, sub-genres and types in painting, each with their own set of practitioners, traditions and styles, and each competing for the attention of the Dutch art-buying population.

In this context, the arrival of Eric Jan Sluijter's new book, *Rembrandt's Rivals*, is a noteworthy moment. This impressive volume (485 pages, and 5 pounds) represents an attempt by Professor Sluijter to do what some might say is impossible: to write a history of Dutch art that prioritizes great masters (such as Rembrandt) while also providing a comprehensive view of the complexity of Dutch art production in the seventeenth century, including particularly research on the market and social networks that has been so crucial for Dutch art history in the past decade. Historians have struggled with balancing these modes, on the one hand running the risk of presenting elite artists such as Rembrandt as typical and normative, while on the other focusing on economic statistics and inventories rather than visual objects. Professor Sluijter's book is the first of two volumes that will together cover the bulk of the seventeenth century. It compiles a tremendous amount of biographical, iconographic and stylistic information about the Amsterdam history painters of the period, creating a central reference on the subject that will be a key source for the field.

Sluijter's book has some clear parameters. The author focuses his attention on one city – Amsterdam – between 1630 and 1650. He limits the painters he studies to history painters (though this category also includes artists who mixed some history paintings in with their

other specializations). Within these constraints, however, Sluijter's text provides a history of Amsterdam painting that encompasses several key areas central to Dutch art history: aspects of style, iconographic development, market issues, patronage, art theory, the function of biography and artistic reputation in the creation of visual innovation, etc.

The book is both about Rembrandt, and a history of painting in Amsterdam. How these two things go together is a bit of a puzzle, as Rembrandt was in this period engaged in fairly typical career activities (as in developing a portrait practice) and at the same time an anomaly in Dutch artistic circles (for example in his assertive relationships with patrons). As a history, Sluijter's approach utilizes biography as the central approach. The book contains generously illustrated biographies of all the active painters in this genre, organized in concentric circles expanding outward from (but always in relation to) Rembrandt. Sluijter connects the biographies by drawing upon research in social network theory. He sketches the interconnected networks in which these artists moved, whether class-based, religious, generational, professional or market-based. Sluijter aims to situate competition as a market practice and strategic approach, arguing that artists knew of each other, often worked in close proximity, and practised habits such as quoting, reworking and improving compositions and themes introduced by other artists. Such ongoing visual competition is, Sluijter argues, a key part of Amsterdam art production. Rather than simple influence, he suggests that this discourse operated as both an economic incentive and a theoretical agenda. Rivalry thus not only spurred artists like Rembrandt to prioritize originality and invention, but also enabled others to participate in a vibrant visual conversation about style, execution and theory, and to successfully establish and maintain their market niches.

Sluijter begins his text with a dense 45-page analysis of Rembrandt's work of the 1630s and 1640s. This mini-biography draws on much of the scholarship on Rembrandt since 2000 to introduce a wide range of topics: the artist's training, career trajectory, market position, style and depictions of emotion, art theoretical basis, relations with patrons and the court, rivalry with other artists, pricing, and personal life. Sluijter's theme of competition appears in the explicit pairing of his Rembrandt text with a biography of Joachim von Sandrart, a well-travelled German artist who worked in Amsterdam in the early 1640s. Sandrart moved in different social, intellectual and geographical circles from Rembrandt, and espoused a radically different style and concept of art. Writings by Hoogstraten and Sandrart provide a set of guidelines for how to understand the opposition of these two artists and their varied painting styles.

Sluijter's next circle includes artists who were also in their heyday in the period, including Rembrandt's peer Jacob Backer, his former student Govaert Flinck, and the Italian-trained Bartholomeus Breenbergh. In these biographies, Rembrandt is never far out of the picture. Discussion of Rembrandt's work threads through all the biographies. For example, the section on von Sandrart ends with an excursus on the *Nightwatch* (1642), while Backer's paintings of female nudes spark a discussion of Rembrandt's *Danae* (1640) and its reframing of Italian models. Breenbergh's lyrical landscapes are seen in the context of the work of Lastman and Pynas, paralleling the methods Rembrandt used in the 1630s. Followers and minor masters such as Willem Bartsius appear in Chapter VI, adding to the complex mix of artists circling around Rembrandt.

A chapter on established artists in Amsterdam looks at painters who worked for Christian IV, such as Claes Moyaert and Adriaen van Nieulandt, and artists like Salomon Koninck, whose success with regents and nobles derived from mixing older styles with motifs and compositions repackaged from Rembrandt's exciting new images. Chapter V examines history paintings by established artists who specialized in other subjects and genres of art, again with the theme of rivalry and competition preeminent. The biography of Thomas de Keyser, for example, contains an extended discussion of imagery of the Crucifixion, in which

works by 9 different artists are put into visual relationship in order to explicate de Keyser's work. The comparative approach, long a fundamental method in art history, is used deftly to sketch relationships, and to show how style and iconography played into reputation building – and thus into market share.

As his circle of artists around Rembrandt expands, Sluijter heads into new and intriguing territory. Chapter IV focuses on less well-known painters who simply served the market, including a section on “minor masters of whom we know almost nothing.” Professor Sluijter and his students have made tremendous efforts to uncover artists who enjoyed more modest reputations in Amsterdam. Painters such as David Colijns and Rombout van Troyen were prolific history painters whose works drew much lower prices but who commanded a significant market share: Sluijter labels Van Troyen “the star of modest collections.” Other artists examined appear to have combined art dealing and copying with their art production, testifying to the disparate strategies artists used to make a living in the competitive Amsterdam market. Using prints and other paintings, artists like Jan Micker churned out scenes from pastoral romances, theatrical plays and relatively obscure Old Testament subjects for a wide audience. Valued at between 1 and 3 guilders, such objects would have been widely owned, and viewed, in Amsterdam houses and institutions. Since so much of the lower end of the paintings market has disappeared, both the paintings themselves and the records of their makers, this chapter offers an important contribution to the field.

In the final chapter of the book, Sluijter takes on the next generation of artists, who came into their own during Rembrandt's heyday. Sluijter argues that these artists' position in relation to Rembrandt, the most important and influential artist of the day, was a crucial factor in their career development. For students of Rembrandt like Ferdinand Bol, navigating the famous master's work meant finding a way to separate one's style from Rembrandt's while retaining key elements that signalled their familiarity with his signature approach. For Bol, this dynamic of deference and self-assertion provides a very fruitful start, which he then parlayed into successful scenes of half-length figures in landscapes enacting poignant storylines. Others, like Gerbrandt van den Eeckhout and Jan Victors, skirted around the Rembrandt model by selectively borrowing motifs and compositions while employing different styles. Jacob van Loo reveals that some looked elsewhere, to The Hague and Antwerp, for inspiration. Here an analysis of these different artists' approaches would be welcome, as the increasing distance from Rembrandt raises questions about the way Sluijter's visual network operated.

The book concludes with a summary overview of the artists considered and their relationships to one another: readers looking for a “big picture” view of Amsterdam history painting might well consider reading this epilogue first. Concise sections on subject matter and pricing recap the themes of ownership and patronage that thread throughout the book. Sluijter raises interesting questions in these summaries, such as about social position and subject choice, or on the relation between pricing and reputation. Though brief, these sections provide much material for further investigation. Strengths of Professor Sluijter's book are the remarkable amount of information about Amsterdam history painting here gathered together; his intensive work on iconography that maps visual relationships among the artists active in Amsterdam in this period; and his insightful arguments about the way rivalry and competition influenced art markets, networks and ownership in the city. Students and scholars in the field will find rich material here for further study and investigation.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2016.1146437>