Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam

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CHAPTER 3

Extant Records of Auction Sales in Chronological Perspective

A few sales records dating to the years 1530-1534, written on loose sheets of paper, have been preserved. Works of art – some of which were fairly expensive, in terms of the much lower prices that prevailed in those times – were included among household goods in these sales. But the only available corpus of data consists of the records of the 1597-1638 auction sales, which are consigned in the 29 Notebooks preserved in the Amsterdam archives. Of these, all but one was said to contain the results of estate sales (erfhuizen). The exception is a Notebook of “voluntary sales” (willige verkopingen) for the period 1608-1610. In point of fact, the Notebooks of erfhuizen actually contained numerous voluntary sales, and it is not certain that other notebooks of voluntary sales ever existed.

Some of the Notebooks recording estate sales that occurred between 1597 and 1638 have been lost: there are no records of estate sales held by Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh covering the period July 1604 to June 1605 or February 1615 to May 1616 or from December 1617 to February 1620. There is a gap in the estate sales organized by bode Jan Dircksz. van Beuningen running from February 1623 to the end of November 1624; in the estate sales organized by Daniel Jansz. van Beuningen, the gaps run from August 1630 to May 1635 and from September 1636 to January 1637. The records of the sales held by Abraham Jansz. (appointed as a third bode in 1636) are entirely lost.

I have found a few references to sales that were apparently held under the auspices of the Orphan Chamber whose records have been lost. On 19 May 1607, the servant of the goldsmiths’ guild circulated an announcement addressed to all the prominent jewelers of Amsterdam in which he informed them that an auction sale of a large quantity of pearls was going to be held at the house of Anna Vrancken, called “de drie Morianen”, on the Nieuwendijk. There is no record in the surviving notebooks that such a sale was ever held by the Orphan Chamber. On 26 November 1619, Pieter de Wit, merchant in Amsterdam, declared at the request of the painter Jacob van Nieu- landt, representing Franchoys Seghers living in Antwerp, that “about two years ago, the precise time unrecalled”, at the public sale held in the house of the late Abraham Vinck, painter, of the heirs of the late Louys Vincon, painter, he had bought a painting, being the crucifixion of St. Andrew, which the sellers claimed to be a painting by Michael Angelo Caravaggio. Louys Vincon was the painter Louis Finson (or Ludovicus Finsonius). It should be noted that Abraham Vinck died in 1619 and that the sale, which was held at his house, was that of Finson’s estate. If the memory of the
witness was more or less reliable, “two years ago” would place the sale in late 1617, in the gap cited in the text in the records of Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh (December 1617 to February 1620).

Another, even more specific reference was found in the papers of the Orphan Chamber relating to the estate of Catalyne van Conincxloo, the daughter of the painter Gillis van Conincxloo and the widow of the painter Jonas van Meerlen (alias van Maerlen). According to this source, all the movable goods of Catalyne van Conincxloo were sold on 8 January 1618 at a public sale “by Gerrit Jacobsz. the servant of the Orphan Chamber” for 289 ƒ 1 st. All the items sold, including a few inexpensive works of art, were recorded in this accounting, along with their prices, but with the omission of the buyers’ names.78 The records of this sale have also been lost.

Finally, from a notarial document dated 7 June 1618, we learn that the art dealer Michiel le Fort had received an advance of 550 ƒ from bode Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh for paintings that were to be sold at auction “as quickly as possible.”79 The record of this sale has also disappeared. The sales of Catalyne’s estate and of the paintings consigned by Le Fort were probably included in the same missing Notebook of 1618-1619 as the sale of the Finson estate.

I have already alluded to an Orphan Chamber auction of August 1634 where Frans Hals was a buyer, the records of which fell in the missing gaps between Notebooks.

Isabella van Eeghen found references to a notebook, dated from 28 February 1618 to 27 April 1619, containing “executive sales” (sales of bankrupt estates), which Jacobus Noordkerk consulted in the Town Hall in the 18th century but which later disappeared.80 (I have checked this source and found no more information on the sales of the Desolate Boedelskamer than she did). Isabella van Eeghen also noted the total proceeds of a few sales held by the boden Abraham Jansz. (appointed in 1636) and Hartman Hartmans (appointed in 1646), including the sale of Susanna de la Vigne, held in 1647, which brought a total 16,000 f. It is not known what portion of this total was represented by works of art. There is also some evidence, including a printed handbill, relating to the sale of art works from Rembrandt’s bankrupt estate. In general, the inventories of bankrupt estates under the Desolate Boedelskamer (ordinarily unassessed) that are dated from 1643 on have been preserved, but not the records of the corresponding auction sales.81

The Van Uffelen sale took place in September 1639, a year after the last record entered in a preserved Notebook. As we have already seen, the total proceeds of the auction, which seem to have consisted mainly or entirely of works of art that had been shipped from Italy, came to 59,456 ƒ.82 Among the most expensive works of art at the Van Uffelen auction were the portrait of Baldassare Castiglione by Raphael which sold for 3,500 ƒ (bought by Alphonse Lopez) and a painting of the Virgin Mary by Titian, for 3,000 ƒ (bought by Joachim Sandrart). The most expensive lot recorded in the notebooks of the Orphan Chamber that have been preserved was a konstboeck containing drawings by Lucas van Leyden which sold for 637 ƒ 10 st. in
the Jan Basse sale of 1637 (bought by Leendert van Beyer, a pupil of Rembrandt). It is not clear whether the Van Uffelen sale was a harbinger of large international sales to come or an “outlier”, a sale that was much larger and featured much higher prices than both those that preceded it and those that followed it. In any case, it already had the earmarks of a sale of genuine international importance. The principal buyers, Alphonse Lopez and Joachim Sandrart, were both foreigners, in contrast to the sales recorded in the Notebooks where there were no foreign buyers and few out-of-town buyers of any sort.83 The Amsterdam auctions at that time were still essentially a local phenomenon.84

One (tenuous) indication of the local character of these early auctions is that there was no overlap whatsoever in the set of known buyers at Amsterdam auctions and of the hundreds of buyers identified at a major auction of paintings by artists domiciled in The Hague that took place in 1647.85 To be sure, nine years separated the end of the period for which we have auction records in Amsterdam from the date of The Hague auction, but many of the same buyers must have been active in Amsterdam in 1647 as in 1638, so that, if there had been a great deal of overlap, we should have expected to observe some sign of it.

I begin now my statistical analysis of the contents of the sales. In my near-exhaustive selection of sales recorded in the Notebooks, I have included all the sales that comprised at least one work of art that sold for more than 5 f. or that contained works of art that sold for a total of at least 12 f.86 These were arbitrary limitations: I have in fact included many sales that were well within these limits, that is, that contained no work of art that sold for more than 2 or 3 gulden or that sold, in total, for less than 12 f.

How important were the Orphan Chamber sales relative to the Amsterdam market as a whole? I can provide only an order of magnitude to answer this question. Consider the year 1609 when the notebooks of both estate sales and voluntary sales have been preserved. There were 571 paintings in the sales in my sample for that year (which, as we saw, included all the sales in the notebooks containing any but the cheapest and most inconsequential works of art). This would seem to be a small fraction — perhaps of the order of 3-5% — of the total market for paintings in Amsterdam.87 Even in 1625 when, due to some important sales, some 1,170 paintings were auctioned, the fraction represented by the auction sales of the Orphan Chamber probably did not rise above 5 percent of the capacity of the market, which had become substantially greater than in 1609. An indication that purchases at auction in the preserved Notebooks did not represent a very high proportion of the paintings acquired by Amsterdam burghers comes from the evidence of notarial inventories, from subsequent post mortem auction sales, and in a few cases from the inventories of bankrupt individuals (Desolate Boedelskamer). An analysis of inventories or sales of individuals who are known to have bought at Orphan Chamber sales earlier shows that their purchases at these sales, when they can be recognized, represent only a small percentage of their subsequent inventories or post-mortem sales.88 It would
appear that most collectors bought the greater part of the works of art in their collections from art dealers (including small-time operators at fairs), from the artists themselves, or from private transactions, rather than at auction. A relevant fact to consider in this connection is that the overwhelming majority of the buyers at the auction sales whose records have been preserved (other than dealers or other professionals related to the art trade) bought only at one or two auction sales in the preserved Notebooks in the entire period 1597-1638 (or the part of this period when they were active). This relative lack of importance has not been, nor should it be, a deterrent to the study of the Notebooks that have survived. They are, after all, a virtually unique record of the prices that were actually paid for works of art, in contrast to notarial inventories and the inventories preserved in the archive of the Desolate Boedelskamer, the art works in which, if they were assessed at all, were only estimated, in most instances, by sworn appraisers, who were not necessarily familiar with the market value of rare paintings. And, of course, the Notebooks supply us with a set of names of collectors beyond the scope of any other source.

Because most sales of the Orphan Chamber contained either no works of art or only a few inexpensive ones, the 524 sales in my database represent only about 20-25 percent of all sales conducted by the Orphan Chamber in the period 1597-1638. Yet the value of the art works they contain probably exceeded 95 percent of the value of art works sold in those years.

The names of the buyers of nearly 10,000 of these lots were recorded by the clerk of the Orphan Chamber. In the case of the remaining 3,328 lots that were sold for cash, we can still learn the names of 428 buyers, whose names were inscribed and then crossed off. These buyers, who were initially given six-weeks credit, are presumed to have brought in their cash payment at the end of the sale at which their names were inscribed, or soon thereafter.

The Orphan Chamber sales for which we have records got off to a slow start. In the years 1597 to 1600, almost all the lots that were sold were either for cash, to immediate members of the deceased owners of the goods sold, or to uitdraagsters. Prices of paintings, mainly bortgens (little boards), were exceedingly low, almost all of them under 2 gulden. To be sure, prices in general were lower at the end of the 16th century than in 1607, when really high auction prices for works of art were first recorded; nevertheless, making all possible allowance for inflation, the prices of these early years were much lower in real terms than those attained in the best sales of later years.

In this early period, art dealers, artists, and jewelers who had a professional interest in the art market, bought only very occasionally and, when they did, at low prices. The silversmith Felix van der Hoeve, the brother of the painter Varlerius van der Hoeve, bought a lot for 3 gulden in 1598 at the sale of the unidentified Anne van Moerenturffs. At this same sale, the painter Hans Rem bought five lots, all for prices under 1 gulden, except for a bortgen that went for 4 f and another representing a maidservant (an unusual subject for this early period) for 3 f and 4 st. The first inde-
pendent, non-professional buyer who ventured into a sale conducted by the Orphan Chamber in the house of the deceased was a merchant named Antony Fouace, who, to judge by his name and by his known business contacts, was probably of South Netherlandish origin. He only purchased a painting for 18 stuivers (0.9 gulden), at the same Moerenturffs sale. The first sale that attracted a more distinguished clientele was that of the estate of the Antwerp-born merchant Hans van Geel (or Gheel) on 15 February 1601. The total value of the goods sold came to slightly more than 5,589 f, of which works of art amounted to 405 f. The buyers in that sale were either family members (some of whom, like Maximiliaen and Pieter van Geel, the sons of the deceased, were quite wealthy), and artists and art dealers (Lucas Luce, Jan Basse, Pieter Pietersz. I), but also a few merchants with no known family relation to the late owner (Wouter Woutersz., originally from Gouda; Guillam Bert, from Dornik; Jan Tronquoy, from Namur; Andries de Graeu I, from Antwerp; and Marten Spil, of South Netherlandish origin). With the exception of Wouter Woutersz., these merchants were all immigrants from the South. Some of these Southerners, related and unrelated to the late Hans van Geel, may have been introduced to auctions in Antwerp, where they were already highly developed in the 16th century. The prices at this auction were already much higher. Maximiliaen van Geel paid 33 f for one lot and 22.5 f for another; Pieter van Geel paid 51 f for one painting.

Nevertheless, neither the clientele nor the prices at the Van Geel sale bear comparison with the first really successful sale held by the Orphan Chamber, which took place on 1 March 1607 when the estate of the landscape painter Gillis van Conincxloo was brought under the hammer (if hammer there was). The proceeds of the sale, almost of which consisted of works of art, came to 3,557 f and 17 st. The Conincxloo sale attracted the cream of the artistic and merchant community, “le tout-Amsterdam” of its time. The highest-priced lot was paid by Hendrick van Os, a merchant and rentier of Antwerp origin, who bid 350.0 f for a Tower of Babylon (probably by Pieter Bruegel). Van Os also purchased a Fire scene by the “young Bruegel” for 58 f. Other high bidders included the painter Barent Theunisz. (56 f for a lot), the Haarlem-based painter Frans de Grebber (32.5 and 30.5 f); Philips Thijsz. (40 f); the merchants Laurens Charles (57.5 f), Willem Jacobsz. (probably Van Rijn) (90, 31.25, and 28 f), and Rombout Jacobsz. bidding with Nicolaes Colyn (90 f and four smaller lots); the merchants Gerrit van Veelen (56 f), Hugo van der Mast (60 f), and Denis Bave (47 and 44 f); the painter Hans van Cleef (38 f), the merchant Hans Martensz. (86 and 25 f); the art dealer Lucas Luce (48 f); Harmen Huysman (26 and 42.5 f); Mr. Joost (56 f); the painter David Colyn (40 f); the merchants Jacques Rombouts (44 f), Symon Root (38 f), and Gregorius van den Broeck (42 f); the cyther-maker Nicolaes Coop (40.75 f); and Hendrick de Haes (82 f). These merchants and artists were mainly of South Netherlandish origin (Hendrick van Os, Laurens Charles, Rombout Jacobsz., David and Nicolaes Colyn, Harmen Huysman, Hans van Cleef, Hans Martensz., Gregorio van den Broeck, and Hendrick de Haes), but some were “pure” Hollanders (Philips Thijsz., Frans de Grebber, Willem van
Rijn, as well, probably, as Gerrit van Veelen, and Hugo van der Mast, who was born in Delft). Based on these fragments of evidence, I have come to the tentative conclusion that immigrants from the South played a dominant, although far from exclusive role, in the gradual ascent of Orphan Chamber sales from a local, neighborhood phenomenon to a major Amsterdam institution.

From 1607 on, one or two important sales were held each year. None probably exceeded in importance the Claes Rauwart (or Rauwert) sale of 1612, at which the works of art that had belonged to his father Jacob Rauwart, the friend of Karel van Mander, were dispersed. This sale attained the unprecedented sum of 14,411 f and 5 st. This and other important sales will be discussed in later chapters.

The number of works of art per sale increased about 50 percent from 1597-1619 to 1620-1638, but this was entirely due to the much larger number of prints sold per sale in the second period (especially in the great Jan Basse, Van Someren and Spranger sales of 1637 and 1638). The median number of art objects per sale stated virtually constant (14 in the first period, 15 in the second). The average number of paintings per sale actually fell by 25 percent (from 24 paintings per sale in the first period to 18 in the second). This was in marked contrast with the significant increase in the number of paintings per notarized inventory in a random sample of notarized inventories that I collected for the first four decades of the 17th century. The arbitrary mix of estate and voluntary sales, the elimination in my sample of very small sales, and the dominance of a few sales with very large numbers of works of art help explain these differences.