Art Collectors and Painters III: Marten van den Broeck and Rembrandt’s Losses at Sea

When Rembrandt, in July 1656, applied to the High Court in The Hague for permission to assign his remaining assets to his creditors to obtain relief from their demands (*cessio bonorum*), he cited as the reason for his financial difficulties “losses suffered in business, as well as damages and losses at sea”. These alleged “losses at sea” have generally been ignored in the Rembrandt literature, presumably because they could not be connected with any known facts in the artist’s life. In this chapter, I develop a conjecture regarding the putative participation of Rembrandt in the ill-fated shipping ventures of the auction buyer Marten van den Broeck.

Marten van den Broeck, regardless of any direct connection with Rembrandt, holds an important place in the study of the artist’s patronage because he owned five paintings by Rembrandt in 1647, including the first self-portrait that has been found in any contemporary inventory. The inventory drawn up after his bankruptcy in September 1650 contained many paintings, all without attribution, some of which, I will argue, were works that may have been by Rembrandt or are more likely to have come out of his atelier. (The works of art in his insolvent inventory are listed in the Appendix to this Chapter.)

Marten van den Broeck, born around the turn of the 17th century, was the son of Gregorius van den Broeck I and of Catherina Soolmans. His mother was the sister of Isaack Soolmans, who bought prints by Dürer along with Rembrandt in the Gommer Spranger sale of 1638. Soon after Isaack’s son, Marten Soolmans, born in 1615, married Oopje Coppit in 1634, the couple had their portraits painted by Rembrandt (now in the Rothschild collection). The portrait of Marten van den Broeck’s cousin is the only explicit connection with Rembrandt. The rest is based on circumstantial evidence.

Marten van den Broeck’s known purchases at auction were limited to the Jan Basse sale of 10 March 1637, where he bought 18 lots for a total of 42 f 12 st. Most of the lots were sheaves of untitled and unattributed prints (12 lots for 21 f 19 st.), ranging in price from 9 stuivers to an exceptional 10 f 5 st. In addition, he bought a drawing for 6 f 10 st., two inexpensive portraits, for 1 f 8 st. and 2 f 4 st., a painting of Adam and Eve for 4 f, two little untitled paintings for 1 f 6 st., and one little painting, also untitled, for 5 f 5 st. Beside a certain taste for works on paper, there is little we can infer
about his collecting (or his art-dealing) proclivities from these modest purchases.

Marten van den Broeck’s primary occupation was that of a merchant dealing in silk cloth. On 25 June 1643, two dyers testified concerning a dispute they had had with Van den Broeck concerning the quality of the work they had done in dyeing 55 pounds of silk cloth that he had entrusted to them. On 14 February 1645, he signed a contract with Abraham Fonseca, a Portuguese merchant, according to the terms of which Van den Broeck would deliver to Fonseca eight bolts of white saaijen (a type of silk cloth) a week for the next six years. Fonseca undertook to buy saaijen from nobody else. Fonseca, a merchant of the Portuguese nation (Jewish), was 38 years old at the time, a few years younger than Marten van den Broeck.

Two years later, on 28 March 1647, Van den Broeck signed another contract which was much less routine than the one he had entered into with Fonseca. This time he undertook to deliver to Sr. Andries Ackersloot, under the supervision of a certain Isaack Marcusz, various diamonds, mounted and unmounted, a silver cup on a silver foot, some pearls, cloth, and some valuable paintings in exchange for ship’s equipment (fine rope, 27 masts now reposing in Bicker’s Island, iron bars and poles). The ship’s equipment that Ackersloot was to supply exceeded the considerable sum of 8,000 f. The counterpart in diamonds, silver, and paintings was presumably worth the same sum. The paintings were these: a large landscape representing the mountain of Monsante in Granada; an old tronie dated 1493; an Ascension of the Virgin; a lute player by Ter Burg (probably Hendrick ter Brugghen); a portrait of the priest Jan Sebetino, very fine (heel raar); a portrait of the wife of Rembrandt; a portrait of Rembrandt; Abraham with the three angels by Rembrandt; the wetnurse (minnemoer) of Rembrandt; a brothel, judged to be by Sotte Cleef (Cornelis van Cleeff); an Italian landscape; a marine by Porcellis; a woman at the well (the Samarian woman), judged to be by Lucas van Leyden; a landscape by Rembrandt; a little Chinese painting where the Migool [Mughal] goes hunting (ter jacht gaet); a woman’s tronie, very fine, judged to be by (Anthony) Mor or Holbein; a man’s portrait, very fine, judged to be by Dirck Barendsz.; a large landscape by Esaias van de Velde; a woman’s tronie by Jan Lievenssen; a man’s tronie, very fine, judged to be by Kay (Willem or Adriaen Key); an Italian Flora; a small tronie, judged to be by Kay (Willem or Adriaen Key); a woman who heats diapers (die warmt luijeren) very fine, judged to be by Alberduijr (Dürer); an image of Maria by Hans Sibbelbeen (probably Hans Sebald Beham); a Jeronimus (St. Jerome), very fine; a Prodigal Son by Frans Hals; a man with armor, Italian; a Venus by Goltijus (Goltzius); a Nativity (karsnacht), judged to be Italian; a tronie by Anthony Mor; a painting where Pan is skinned alive; a Virgin Mary, judged to be by Jacques de Backer; a Nativity by Badens; all of which had been seen and inspected by Sr. Ackersloot. In addition, Ackersloot had seen and accepted some cloth, 250 pounds of couleur (probably dyed cloth), 20 ells in length of felt, and 5 dozen rubies. I will say something about the paintings that Van den Broeck had undertaken to deliver when I come to analyze the works of art in his insolvent inventory of 1650.
Andries Ackersloot can most probably be identified as the son of the Haarlem burgomaster Auwel Ackersloot and of Anna de Wit. He and his wife Dorothea Steijn were related to some of the richest and most prominent families in Haarlem. A 1651 document refers to a loan of 45,000 f that Dorothea’s mother, Cornelia van der Meijden, had made to her son-in-law Andries Ackersloot, at some unknown date (probably no earlier than 1645). This large sum of money may have been used, at least in part, to finance the transaction with Marten van den Broeck. Ackersloot died between 1670, when he was still occupying a minor post in the Haarlem municipality, and March 1672 when Dorothea Steijn was cited as his widow. Apparently the couple had not prospered. In 1679, the aldermen of Haarlem sold eleven houses that had belonged to the repudiated estate of the late Dorothea Steijn, widow of heer Andries Ackersloot, the former secretary of the town of Haarlem. So far, it has not been possible to trace the paintings acquired by Ackersloot, either in a testament or in a probate inventory. More research in the Haarlem archives may reveal what happened to this extraordinary collection.

Returning to our 1647 transaction, we may well ask why a silk cloth merchant should ever want to exchange very valuable paintings and other precious objects for ship’s equipment. The answer seems to be that Van den Broeck was in the business of freighting (or possibly equipping or repairing) ships with his old partner Abraham Fonseca. We learn from a document dated 4 May 1649 that Van den Broeck and Fonseca were joint owners of the ship “de Vergulde Pauw”, which had foundered off the coast of Barbados. According to this act, the two partners gave the skipper of the “Vergulde Pauw” a procuration to sail on their behalf from Hoorn to Barbados and there take command of the ship (which had apparently been repaired) and bring it back to Amsterdam. On 11 November of the same year, Van den Broeck notified the insurers of the “Vergulde Pauw” that he and his partner had not been compensated for their loss, which included 37,100 pounds of tobacco. The story of the Barbados affair stretched into 1650. On 28 January of that year, a witness declared that the Governor of Barbados had stated that the price of tobacco was 3 stuivers a pound on credit and 2 stuivers a pound in cash. This declaration of course related to the loss of the tobacco. On April 29, he submitted insurance policies that he had drawn for 9,300 f on the ship “De Goude Pauw”, together with 4,200 f on the cargo and 6,600 f on another ship, “De Witte Leeuw.” Whether the ships were properly insured or not, the partners apparently failed to recover their money.

Van den Broeck was still afloat, financially speaking, on 22 January 1650, when he and Notary J. van der Ven, before whom he had passed a number of acts in previous years, bought a piece of land on Staten Island near Nieuw Amsterdam. Whether it was the loss of tobacco on the Barbados coast, the purchase of the land on Staten Island, or another venture, Van den Broeck had lost a great deal of money by the fall of 1650, enough to become insolvent. An inventory of his possessions was taken for the Desolate Boedelskamer on 6 September 1650 (listed in the appendix to this chapter). The works of art in this inventory will be discussed along with those that Van den
Broeck traded for ship’s equipment with Ackersloot.

Van den Broeck apparently did not ask for *cessio bonorum* from the High Court of Holland in The Hague, probably because his mother, Catharina Soolmans, the widow of Gregorius van den Broeck, came to his rescue. On 16 October 1651, she appeared before the notary, assisted by her oldest son, Marten van den Broeck, and declared that she owed Pieter Mol 2,000 f. Pieter Mol, born in 1614, was a sworn *proefmeester* of the College of the Admiralty of Amsterdam. As collateral for the loan, she transferred to him 112 paintings. This money had probably been lent to her son to pay Marten’s creditors. On 18 April 1652, she declared that she desisted from the claim of 12,000 f that she held against her son Marten van den Broeck. Three weeks earlier, Marten had transferred to Sijmon Barckman and Jan de Wael, an important merchant, a cargaison of merchandise that had been sent to Barbados for 11,855 f, together with any claims that he might have had against Christoffel Verman, the recipient of this merchandise. It is very probable that, with the help of his mother, Van den Broeck was able to satisfy his creditors. In any case, he did not live long enough to recover his fortunes. He was buried a year later, “in his own grave”, on 28 October 1653.

The works of art that Van den Broeck had exchanged against ship’s equipment in 1647 might well have come out of an artist’s or a dealer’s stock (or both). There were no identified family portraits, such as one generally finds in private inventories. Most of the portraits that it did contain dated back to the 15th and 16th centuries: one was dated 1493, two were attributed to “Kay” (Willem or Adriaen Key), one to Mor or Holbein. The only contemporary portraits were those by Jan Lievens and Rembrandt. In addition to the old portraits, there was a genre painting attributed to Albrecht Dürer, a brothel by Sotte Cleef (Cornelis van Cleeff), a Woman at the Well by Lucas van Leyden and an image of the Virgin Mary by Hans Sibbelbeen (probably Hans Sebald Beham), which all dated back to the first half of the 16th century. The paintings by Dirck Barendsz. and Jacques de Backer were also at least a half century old. Unusual too for a private collection of the first half of the 17th century were the Italian paintings – the landscape, the Flora, the man with an armor, the Nativity – all said to be Italian but left unattributed. The emphasis on old master paintings reminds one of Rembrandt’s bankruptcy inventory of 1656, the paintings in which consisted “chiefly of deceased Dutch and Flemish masters” and of Rembrandt’s well-known interest in the art of Lucas van Leyden, Hans Holbein, Albrecht Dürer, Porcellis, and Lievens.

Another extraordinary feature of this precious little collection consisted of the five paintings by Rembrandt and the one by Jan Lievens. The Rembrandt scholar Ernst van de Wetering has recently argued that the presence in this inventory of the self-portrait by Rembrandt, the portrait of his wife, and the portrait of the wet nurse implies that Rembrandt had produced these paintings for the market. This is certainly possible, although one might also argue that Rembrandt had painted them for himself or for his workshop and had been forced by financial necessity to sell them. Even more importantly, the presence of the three portraits suggests that Marten van den Broeck,
if he acquired the paintings himself, was closely acquainted with Rembrandt. For I doubt whether any one but a close acquaintance would have recognized the wet-nurse, or perhaps even Rembrandt’s wife, as a member of the artist’s household. (A person less familiar with Rembrandt might have called the portrait of the wet-nurse “een minnemoer van Rembrandt” and the portrait of his wife “een vrouwen tronie van Rembrandt”.) But there is also an unattributed painting among the works of art exchanged with Andries Ackersloot that may point to Rembrandt’s previous ownership. This is the little painting of a “Mongol going hunting”. Rembrandt is known to have made copies after Mughal miniatures. One album of miniatures which were perhaps Mughal turned up in his 1656 post-bankruptcy inventory. However, none of the 21 Rembrandt copies after Mughal miniatures that have survived represents a “Mongol going hunting”. Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer in her important article on Rembrandt’s copies after Mughal miniatures suggests that there may have been lost copies and illustrates her article with a miniature (now in Vienna) of a Mughal prince on horseback with a retinue, which may very well correspond to the subject depicted in the Van den Broek-Ackersloot exchange. If so, Rembrandt may have copied this miniature or one like it as an aide-mémoire before he sold it. This would put a new complexion on Rembrandt’s decision to copy exotica of this type.

It is with these hypotheses in mind that I will now analyze the inventory of Marten van den Broeck prepared for the Desolate Boedelskamer. The 1650 inventory consisted of 64 lots containing 72 works of art, including 64 paintings. It appears to have been at least in part a dealer’s or an artist’s stock, perhaps what was left of Van den Broeck’s stock after he had exchanged the best pictures for ship’s equipment in 1647. One obvious parallel with the 1647 transaction was the absence of family portraits in the insolvent inventory. Another was the unusual incidence of paintings that were very old. Characteristic of an artist’s stock (and of some dealers’ stocks) was the repetition of subjects. There were three paintings of Mars and Venus in the inventory and four old man’s tronien. Another characteristic of an artist’s or dealer’s stock was the relatively high incidence in the 1650 inventory of paintings and drawings without frames (there were six of the former and one of the latter). The backroom (achtercamer) seemed to have been a repository of the less expensive paintings in the stock. It contained a total of 26 paintings (over 40 percent of the total number of paintings in the inventory). This high concentration of paintings in a back room, compared to the other rooms, would be extremely unusual in a private collection. Of the 25 paintings in the backroom, five were without frames. Eleven represented tronien, including one of Christ (tronitie uytbeeldende de gedaante Christi), several without frames. The old men’s tronien as well as the figure of Christ were typical subjects for Rembrandt and his pupils. One painting in the backroom deserves special mention. It represented a “patriarch down on one knee” (een oud vader op syn knie liggende). This is likely to have been a copy of Rembrandt’s “St. Peter in Prison” of 1631. In Rembrandt’s painting, the saint leans conspicuously on one knee. This painting, as Schama has observed, is so bare of ac-
cessories – the only hint that the old man might represent Saint Peter is a set of keys lying next to him – that the clerk who drew up Van den Broeck’s insolvent inventory may easily have missed the identification.  

The sequence of events I have described leads me to advance the following series of conjectures. Van den Broeck had been engaged in overseas trade for a number of years when Rembrandt, perhaps because he was already pressed by the difficulty of financing the purchase of his house on the Breestraat, ceded a number of paintings to him in exchange for a share in his shipping ventures. Van den Broeck exchanged some of the best paintings he had acquired from Rembrandt (and possibly from other sources) for ship’s equipment in 1647. A couple of years later, two of his ships were lost. Pressed by his creditors, Van den Broeck was declared insolvent. The inventory of his possessions made for the Desolate Boedelskamer in 1650 included some of the unsold works of art that he had obtained earlier from Rembrandt. The “losses at sea” that Rembrandt suffered contributed to his mounting financial difficulties, which culminated in his bankruptcy of 1656.  

Appendix to chapter 18

Table 18.1

Works of Art in the Insolvent Inventory of Maerten van den Broeck of 6 September 1650

In the front hall (voorhuis):

A painting of Cleopatra with a plain frame
A painting of Judith with the head of Holofernes with a black frame
Three tronien with fool’s caps with black frames
A painting of a philosopher with a book in his hand and a finger on his mouth
A painting of a Maria image (Maria beeltje)
Another painting being a tronie with a gray vestment (graeu cleet)
A painting where a woman stands and scours, with a can and a few dishes
A painting being a fight wherein a peasant with a pitchfork with a black frame
A small painting being a landscape with a black frame

In the inner room:

A painting being the storming of the heavens (storming van de hemel) with a black frame
A painting of the Samaritan woman with a black frame
A painting of Coridon sitting and playing with his cattle
A painting being a Charity with a black frame
A painting of Abraham’s sacrifice

In the zaeltje

A painting with two naked persons one of them with his hand in the tree (d’hant in de boom)
A portrait of an old Holland tronie with a cap on (clapmus aen)
A portrait of a Danish lady
A painting of a nobleman (joncker) and a lady (dame) in a black and gilded frame
A painting of a woman representing Peace
A painting representing Justice (justititia)
A painting representing Time

In the front room (voorkamer):

A painting of Mars and Venus with an ebony frame
Another painting of Mars and Venus with a plain black frame
A painting of Maria Magdalena with a black frame
A painting of Orpheus with a black and gilded frame
A painting of David and Abigail with her maids with a black frame
A painting of luxury and poverty (de weelde en de armoede) with a black frame
A painting of the awakening of Lazarus with a black frame
An old man's tronie with a black frame
A tronie on paper without frame
Two drawings being little ships (scheepjens) with white pine frames
An image of Maria on canvas, damaged, in an oak frame

Back room (achtercamer):

An old man's tronie bearing the date 1525 (hebbende d'dat 1525)
A painting with the Last Communion of Christ ('t avontmael Christi) with a black frame
A painting being a fire wherein a rider, painted dark (doncker geschildert)
A portrait of a man writing wearing old-fashioned clothing (hebbende een outwets habyt aen)
A painting being a battle on horseback with an ebony frame
A painting of a Turkish woman having a child on her arm with an ebony frame
A large vase of flowers without frame
A painting wherein a hunter in an ebony frame
A painting of the Nativity (de geboorte Christi) without frame
A tronie of a man with a flute in his hand
An old man's tronie without frame
A painting of a father of the church (oude vader) kneeling (op syn knie liggende)
A painting of a landscape and mountains with a few persons wherein a pillar, with a black and gilded frame
A man's little tronie (troniete) without frame
A tronie representing the figure of Christ (de gedaente Christi)
A painting being a viol player
A round painting with a few persons, painted dark
Two small paintings being little tronien of children in plain frames
A small round painting with a man's tronie
A painting of a boy playing a rommelpot
A man's tronie with a cap on (clapmuts aen) with a black frame
A man's tronie with a black beard in an ebony frame
An old man's tronie without frame
An image of Maria with a black frame
A painting of the Wise Men coming from the East with an ebony frame
In the side room:

A landscape with cliffs of Tobias
A little tronie of a child of plaster
A little statue of alabaster
Three stone statues
Two portraits of a man and woman
A dead little child with an oak frame
A painting being a Venus and Mars with an oak frame

Source: GAA, DBK 5072/356