Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam

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For the most part, the buyers I have singled out in this second part of the book are shadowy creatures. They lack those “traits de caractère” that define and illuminate an individual. Among the exceptions might be cited the art dealer Hans van Coninxloo III who was accused by the consistory of Emden of denying the existence of God and the Devil; of the rich jeweler Jan van Maerlen in Chapter 19 who was too avaricious to help his poor sister-in-law who was dying of the plague, with two children in the house, and had little more than a barrel of butter to her name; and of, Pieter van den Broeck in Chapter 22, who, devoured by a passion for gossip, did not have the courage to tell the police the truth about his contribution to the “St. Nicholas” pamphlet and offered his services to the Sheriff to help catch those who had done the deed.

In the course of my research, I learned some distinctive traits about the characters of a few other buyers, but I lacked the background canvas on which to embroider my yarn. Here are two examples, one from the proceedings of a consistory of the Reformed Church and the other from a notarial deposition. Anna Vermou belonged to a family of dyers, some of whom were married to painters (Jacques and Guillaume de Ville, Jean Basse). The family was Reformed. She, too, married first one painter and, after his death, another. She married her first husband, Barent Poelman, before 1632. He was an unsuccessful painter (and a modest buyer at auction), who only left 200 fl to his daughter after his death. On the third of November 1639, two days after presenting her young daughter to the Orphan Chamber, she remarried with Guillam (du) Gardijn. This little known landscape painter, of whom a few drawings done in Italy have been preserved, was born in Cologne in 1597 or 1598. She contributed goods worth 600 fl to the marriage, he, only 300 fl. But even this small sum was only nominal: when his goods were sold, they brought so little that he was compelled to declare soon afterwards that his heirs could assume, after his death, that he had contributed nothing at all to the marriage. He was, by religion, Roman Catholic. However, he converted before the marriage took place in a Reformed church in Amsterdam. His conversion emerges from the record of his appearances before the consistory (kerkeraad), which had responsibility for administering discipline over members of the Reformed Church who had strayed from the narrow path. He told the consistory that he had only converted “to get the woman”. But his heart was not in it. According to his accusers, he had promptly proceeded to utter “defamatory remarks” against the Church and to make fun of the consistory. Only the thought about his small children had kept him from blasting aloud the preachers on the Dam
Daniel Rademaeker was a major buyer of prints at the auction of Jan Basse in 1637 (where Rembrandt had also played a major role). Fifteen years earlier he had been summoned by the consistory after a girl had sworn that he had fathered her child. Daniel denied it, even though she had persisted in her accusation until the day of her death, a short while after the birth. He claimed that the consistory should rather believe a pious man like himself than a whore. The consistory hesitated. It was later learned that the woman had suffered from advanced syphilis, which probably exonerated her putative lover.

The merchant Otto de Hart came from a Roman Catholic family, like the painter Du Gardijn, but one that was situated several notches above the artist’s. He was the nephew of Hillebrant den Otter, who descended from a long succession of burgomasters and aldermen of Amsterdam before the Alteration. On 17 March 1625, a child of Otto de Hart was buried. Ten days later he bought a painting of an Annunciation for 6 f 5 stuivers at an Orphan Chamber auction. He was 44 years old in 1636 when the following incident occurred. On the 4th of September of that year, Eduardo Pels, notary, 29 years old, made a sworn deposition at the request of Hans Dircksz. Can, who was probably also Roman Catholic, concerning the following facts. A short while ago, he had been attracted by cries he had heard that emerged from a cellar near the brewery “De Hoyberg”. The cellar was dark. In spite of the darkness, he had perceived Otto de Hart, who was kneeling, holding the head of the petitioner Hans Can between his legs. Can’s head, which was all bloody, was lying hard on the stone floor. Pels had then asked De Hart why he was doing this, and De Hart had answered that Can was a scoundrel who had drawn a knife against him. De Hart had then pointed to a sack resting on the floor and said that the knife was in the sack. The witness had looked into the sack and found no knife. The incident, about which nothing more is known, was probably recorded before the notary as a piece of evidence in a legal proceeding. Yet nothing untoward seems to have happened to De Hart. His violent character did not keep him from being called “honest” when he sold some property a year later. Being called honorable, apparently, depended more on one’s wealth and status than on one’s moral character (at least if we can assume that the head-banging incident of the previous year had become generally known). Violence among middle-aged gentlemen of distinguished families was probably far more common and acceptable than it would be today.

Several buyers at auction who were members of the Reformed Community incurred the censure of the Church Council either for dancing or for allowing dancing...
in their home. Three wealthy burgers/buyers balked at the criticism. In 1623, Lucas van Valckenburg argued that dancing could hardly be considered a serious sin. In the same year, his sister Margarita van Valckenburg, the widow of the wealthy merchant Marcus de Vogelaer, was denied access to the Lord’s Table (to take communion) because dancing had taken place at her daughter’s wedding. She said that she was very surprised at this “rigueur”. She had not herself taken part in the activity, but she pointed out that young people were used to dancing. This indifference to sin offended the members of the consistory. Earlier, in 1604, when Arnout Cobbaut de jonge (II), also a buyer, was confronted with the accusation that young people had danced at a wedding in his house, in full view of passers-by, he did allow that dancing was a sin but that he “had always been a great amateur of it”.894 There’s a joie de vivre in this answer which chimes with the conviviality of buying art at auction.

These vignettes may illuminate the characters of the people to whom they allude, but they are too fragmentary and detached from the milieu in which they occurred to justify separate profiles.

For the first half of the 17th century, at least in Amsterdam, we must be content with the evidence we can gather from notarial acts and, to a very limited extent, judicial documents and consistory records. The letters that have been preserved (of Constantijn Huygens I, Pieter Cornelisz. Hooft, Caspar Barlaeus, and others) are seldom revealing of the personality traits we have been looking for. In any case, they rarely allude to buyers at auction.895 The correspondence of Hans Thijisz. I and the accounts of his children in the Thys fund of the University of Leiden, exploited in Chapter 16, revealed a good deal about the milieu in which the family circulated and a little about their art purchases, but virtually nothing that was worth reporting about their personality. There are very few personal diaries to draw on. Arnold van Buchel’s famous diary, which is so valuable a source on artists and contemporary art collections, has little information to offer about buyers at auction. Virtually the only exception is David Beck’s “Mirror of my life”, which covers only one year but does contain some worthwhile remarks about buyers at Orphan Chamber auctions (as well as about one of the individuals whose collection was sold by the chamber).896 The following vignette is the most interesting. On 27 December 1624, Beck went to visit his colleague Michiel Parent (a buyer at auction), who had invited him for lunch. Parent, like Beck himself, was a school-teacher. They went to the stock market together and there they met Anthony Smijters, another well-known school-teacher, a fiery Calvinist, and also a buyer at auction.897 Smijters was the grandfather of Michiel Parent’s wife. Wandering along the galleries of the stock market, Beck and Smijters talked about poetry for an hour, while Parent got the table prepared for lunch.898 Afterwards, the three men shared their meal with “young Bartjens” (the school-teacher Johannes Bartjens), and his wife Catharina, the daughter of the well-known printer and book publisher Zacharias Heijns.899 Beck’s journal entry is not very revealing, but the convergent tastes in poetry and art that it reflects gives us an idea of the affection for the liberal arts that these enlightened citizens harboured.
To conclude on a cheerful note: there is perhaps one generalization that can be made about the character of auction buyers, which requires no sources at all. Buying at auction in and of itself made them a bit distinctive from the rest of the population. They had the initiative and the gumption to compete with other attendants at auctions and to make winning bids. If they had not succeeded, at least some of the time, we would not have heard about them. If they had not outbid the art dealers and the resellers (the *uitdraagsters*), again some of the time, this book would not have been written.