

## SUMMARY

### **The Visible World. Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Seventeenth Century**

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Departing from the ongoing debate on 'Dutch realism', this book examines Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Introduction to the Academy of Painting, 1678), with a focus on his endeavour to raise the intellectual status of painting. By referring to various intellectual traditions, Van Hoogstraten formulates arguments to 'legitimize' specific aspects of his profession. The art that the *Inleyding* describes is distinguished by its exclusive attention to the visible world. In the analysis of Van Hoogstraten's arguments, the study of the period vocabulary of speaking and thinking about art is complemented by an exploration of the rhetorical frame in which these concepts functioned.

For a reconstruction of the ideological framework for Van Hoogstraten's art theory, it is necessary to determine his position in the seventeenth-century 'republic of letters'. This prolific painter-poet may have been educated at the Latin school in Dordrecht; he received a particular literary impulse during his stay in Rembrandt's studio in Amsterdam. Through his travels and foreign contacts he had access to the wider tradition of European art theory. Van Hoogstraten's undertakings attest to his intellectual ambitions; in particular his experience with the theatre made its mark on his ideas on painting. The supplementary volume to the *Inleyding*, the *Onzichtbare Werelt* (Invisible World), which has not survived, may have been of a philosophical nature. It may have contained references to traditional ethics or to current discussions on the merits of the so-called 'new philosophy'.

Van Hoogstraten's explicit ambition to contribute to the tradition of art theory, to raise painting's intellectual status, and to write to a public of pupils, painters and art-lovers alike, constitute the aims of his project. The chapter division of the *Inleyding* appears to be an inventive adaptation from the examples provided by Junius' *Painting of the Ancients* (1641) and Van Mander's *Book on Painting* (1604), and provides the first interpretation of the general didactical and ethical framework to Van Hoogstraten's thought. The encyclopaedic nature of the *Inleyding* is related to its character as an epideictic treatise, a text 'in praise of the art of painting'. Van Hoogstraten's borrowings from the classical theory of rhetoric explain the rhetorical nature of the 'rules of art' he describes. Ideally, a painter's behaviour answers to certain 'rules of conduct', determined by didactic notions from rhetorical theory, which ultimately have an ethical function.

The concept of the 'visible world' is given a central position in Van Hoogstraten's treatise; it appears in the subtitle and in the illustrations to the book. It is part of a central argument to raise the status of painting among the other arts, an argument which is only fully understood by an analysis of its roots in the tradition of art theory. The concept of the visible world relates both to Van Hoogstraten's opinions on the value of successful imitation, which also makes depiction of ugly or base things valuable, and to a traditional stress on painting's 'universal' ambition to depict all visible things. Van Hoogstraten's remarks are similar to Zuccari's elaboration of the all-encompassing concept of *disegno*, with which he endeavoured to give the art of drawing not only the status of a foundation for all the visual arts, but for all other arts and sciences.

Van Hoogstraten's conviction that art is a 'sister to contemplative philosophy' is rooted in the theoretical tradition. However, it is clear that he does not share the view that the painter's attention to nature should aim at the 'true nature of things', the ideal forms of which the phenomena are mere shadows. Van Hoogstraten explicitly stresses that not only is it not necessary for the painter to do this – his focus on the visible aspects of reality is apparently sufficient to merit a philosophical status – but it is also impossible: painting's domain is exclusively the visible world. Instead of concentrating on ideal, unchangeable forms, the painter's attention must be directed towards the 'eternal difference', those elusive details that ensure that 'no two drops of water are identical', as a poem by Huygens states.

Van Hoogstraten's focus on the painter's careful examination of the details of the visible world can be related to his Calvinist background, and to the formulation in the Dordrecht catechism that revelation takes place not only through scripture, but also through the 'Book of Nature'. The notion that creation is God's artwork, and that the painter in particular should pay attention to this, are commonplaces in the international tradition of art theory. However, Van Hoogstraten's stress on the doctrine of the 'two Books' can be related specifically to a view of the visible world as expressed in Philippe de Mornay's *Bible of Nature*. The Calvinist focus on personal communication with God, sidestepping religious authorities and exegetic traditions, has a parallel in a preference for the sensory approach to the divine through contemplation of God's visible works.

There was a broad discussion on pictorial and literary imitation in the seventeenth century. Van Hoogstraten's painting didactic is founded on a general 'ideology of imitation', in which various elements are interrelated. The putative tension between 'imitation of the ancients' and 'imitation of nature' is played down by the insight that Van Hoogstraten's doctrine of the imitation of the visible world is based on antique sources. The stoic doctrine to 'follow nature' in a simple and uncorrupted way appears as an essential train of thought.

The imitation of other works of art is central to the painter's education, as a selection process leading to the discovery of the inborn talents from which one should not deviate. Paradoxically, the ideal imitator does not aim at 'artisanal' aspects of art such as colour and

line, but at the elusive qualities of 'force' and 'grace', which, ultimately, cannot be imitated. These terms are central to Van Hoogstraten's adaptation of a theory from the Second Sophistic concerning the role of the spectator. This antique theory regards images as performative acts of transposition into a virtual reality. The spectator, just like the ideal imitator, should react to the image with a mental re-creation of the original reality, an act of the imagination which involves all four senses.

Pictorial imitation should be directed at the evocation of a virtual reality in which the artistic medium disappears altogether. In this reality, the artist, the depicted figures, and the spectator may 'meet' each other; they are connected by the shared *ethos* of naturalness. This result cannot be achieved through the imitation of technical aspects of the work of art, but of its theatrical qualities, as is demonstrated by Van Hoogstraten's remarks on the methods of Rubens and Rembrandt. When the painting itself refers to this procedure through deliberate deviations from the original, it appeals particularly to the 'learned eye' of the experienced art lover.

The productive reaction to the works of others fuels the development of the history of art, as Van Hoogstraten makes clear. He praises the art of the Republic as in a 'second Greece', an equal to the art of antiquity.

The depiction of the passions, as intermediaries between the realms of body and soul, is an important element in seventeenth-century arguments in favour of the intellectual status of painting. In Van Hoogstraten's theory, it is connected to the examination of the visible world: the passions cannot be learned from theory or example books, but only from the observation of one's surroundings.

The artistic theory of the depiction of emotions and the affective function of images is determined by the classical theory of rhetoric. The ethics proclaimed in this theory stress the orator's ability to control his passions, in such a way that he can counteract the natural state of affairs and hide his true intentions. In a similar way, the painter should not only be skilled in simulating different passions, but particularly in deceiving his public. This deception makes it possible that painting, like tragedy, has a salutary effect on the spectator. The close connection in early modern psychological theory between man's 'external' and 'internal' aspect, accounts for the physical change that the art of painting can produce.

The depiction of the passions is of great importance to the painter's self-image: his insight into human character, his powerful imagination and ability to empathize with different emotional states without losing his own equanimity, determine his qualities as *pathopoios*, or designer of the passions. These qualities are subordinated to his task as *ethopoios*, able to influence the public's character for the common good. Van Hoogstraten reformulates the theory of lifelikeness in classical tragedy, thematizing the idea in his own concept *oogenblikkige beweging* or 'instantaneous [emotional] movement'. The sudden, strong

affective impression, leading to the transposition into a virtual reality, is obtained in particular by means of an illusionistic 'snapshot' of the visible world.

As an expert on human character, the painter should also be able to convince a large and unschooled public. The recognition of one's own ethical standards and the conviction of sharing with the painter a knowledge of nature and of human behaviour, contribute to efficient persuasion. Various factors lead to the conclusion that when Van Hoogstraten praises Rembrandt for his abilities in the depiction of the passions, he allots to his master exemplary rhetorical qualities.

In Van Hoogstraten's theory, not only the depiction of human bodily and emotional movements has a rhetorical function; all pictorial 'illusionism' should be understood in terms of persuasion. Not only the choice of subject matter, but also the means of rendering this on the canvas are essential to achieve this goal. In the tradition of art theory, colour, which more than drawing, has an impact on both the passions and the body, is identified with persuasion. The early modern concept of *coloriet* refers not only to the depiction of colour and light, but also to specific kinds of brushwork.

The role of colour in Van Hoogstraten's theory can be explained by several terms derived from rhetoric, such as *ornatus*, *brevitas* and *varietas*. In the discussion on 'loose' versus 'fine' brushwork, issues of persuasion and performativity are explicative as well. The 'loose' brush gives rise to a twofold perspective on a work of art: on the one hand the immersion in a virtual reality, and on the other the view up close to the paint surface, which reveals the painter's skill. The play with these two perspectives, which complement each other, contributes to the 'pleasing deceit' of the art of painting.

The literary tradition singles out the colouristic skills of Dutch painters in their depiction of landscape. The theory of colouristic persuasion provides a legitimation for the subject of landscape, which is not explained in standard theoretical themes. Van Hoogstraten contradicts the traditional condemnation of the broad focus of Dutch painters when he gives central attention to the range of their interests and abilities, encompassing all contingencies of the visible world. For a painter who wants to develop into a 'universal master' skill in landscape must be a prerogative.

The 'mute rhetoric' of the depiction of the visible world not only has a recreative function, but can also demonstrate that the visible world is but a fleeting semblance. This is illustrated by Vondel's usage of the concept *schilderachtig*, or picturesque, when he compares painters focusing on transitory details to philosophers who stress the contingent character of the visible world.

When Van Hoogstraten's definition of painting as a 'mirror of nature' is studied with regard to its historical connotations, it becomes clear that the metaphor calls attention to the fact that painting only depicts the outside of things, 'seeming' without 'being'. The deceitful character

of painting, however, can be understood positively when seen in the context of the courtly virtue of 'dissimulation', the construction of external appearance.

The theory concerning the metaphorical character of art thematizes the dualism that is at the heart of pictorial semblance; it is what brings these two incompatible variables together. In seventeenth-century art literature, this dualism is not only described in terms of the difference between the lifeless panel versus the living virtuality of the image, but also in terms of outside versus inside, or appearance versus essence. This dichotomy is expressed in works of art, such as a perspective box by Van Hoogstraten, and in experiments in different 'layers' of pictorial fiction. The mundane amusement offered by these objects appears thus to have a serious connotation, relating to the dualism of the deceitful world of the senses versus the afterlife.

These ideas reflect a notion that was a recurrent train of thought to authors in Van Hoogstraten's circle: that painting is only an indirect and imperfect entrance to the 'true nature of things'. In the visible world we see 'through a glass, darkly'; and painting, 'mirroring' the visible world, can function as an admonishment that only in the afterlife any 'true' vision is possible. On the one hand painting is able to overcome transience and to preserve the *veranderlijkheid*, or continuous change, of the visible world; on the other, its focus on just those fleeting and transient aspects can convince the spectator of the vanity of his own earthly existence. The painter's ambiguous position with regard to the 'visible' and 'invisible' worlds may not only have been expressed in Van Hoogstraten's etched self-portrait in the *Inleyding*, but also in Rembrandt's self-portrait now in the Kenwood collection.

Van Hoogstraten reveals an interest in contemporary philosophical literature, and it is possible that the philosophical discussions of his age were a factor in his project to intellectually legitimize his profession. The solution developed by Spinoza to many problems of Cartesian philosophy may have been one of the elements that played a part in his effort to make 'the visible world' a central theme in his theory.

Spinozism arguably has at its core an 'optical paradigm', and may for this reason have reached the discourse on painting, even without many literal borrowings in the theory of art. Its attraction lies in Spinoza's solution to a problem inherent to the theory of the 'two Books', the two kinds of revelation. How can the plurality and imperfection of the visible world be reconciled with Divine unity? Spinoza's answer states that God 'is' what he 'does': He and His creation are two sides of one coin. The stoic idea that man's greatest good exists in a determination to the natural order is radicalized by Spinoza in an ethics in which the only human freedom consists in an acceptance of complete predestination.

The notion of the complementary nature of different viewpoints, which is thematized in seventeenth-century art, is applied by Spinoza to reality itself. He states that reality appears from the point of view of the temporal as the visible world, and from the point of view of eternity as the invisible God. For the theory of art, his observation that the visible and

invisible worlds are overlapping concepts would mean that one should not condemn the simple copying of the visible world. The visible world appears in its entirety worthy of contemplative attention, and none of its particulars is in Spinoza's view ugly or imperfect. Though it is improbable that Van Hoogstraten fully agreed with Spinozist ideas, he was obviously drawn into the discussions to which it gave rise, through his correspondence with Willem van Blijenberg. These discussions may have resounded in Van Hoogstraten's formulations concerning the visible world, and the Spinozist view corroborates his remark that painting that encompasses all of the visible world is a 'sister to contemplative philosophy'.