

Imitation and Collaboration in Seventeenth-Century Flemish Genre Painting: Deconstructing "Originality"¹

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To Postmodern thinking, the Modernist concept of originality in an artist's work is employed freely and often far too loosely as a criterion of aesthetic excellence. A presumed lack of originality in the work of seventeenth-century Flemish genre painters has led twentieth-century critics to discount its importance. One such artist was David III Ryckaert (1612-1661) who has been dismissed time and again as an artist "de second rang", handicapped by a deficiency of the creative faculties (de Mirimonde 1968:177).² Drawing on the example of David III Ryckaert, I mean to argue that the conventions and circumstances surrounding the production of artworks by genre painters like him make it difficult or impossible to employ the term originality in assessing the work.

A brief outline of Ryckaert's artistic endeavours seems appropriate as a means of introducing this relatively unknown artist. During the first years of his professional career (1636-1639), David III Ryckaert, like his father, concentrated on the depiction of peasant scenes in an interior. His iconographic schemes show regular and distinct borrowings from both Brouwer and Teniers, as well as occasional references to the work of Jacob Jordaens and Rubens. Apart from his adaptations of popular peasant scenes, he discovered new territory in the representation of the cobbler in his workshop, a theme which he treated throughout his career. From 1639 onwards, he extended his range of subject matter in order to make a name for himself. He started representing children's games outdoors, alchemists in their laboratory, people enjoying a meal or celebrating the feast of Epiphany, and scholars studying by candle-light. At this stage the *oeuvre* of David II Teniers still exercised the most notable influence on Ryckaert, but he also borrowed ideas from Jacob Jordaens. The year 1649 was a turning point in Ryckaert's career. The acquisition of four of his paintings for the collection of the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm boosted his popularity as well as his self-confidence. From then onwards, he tackled themes far removed from his established repertory, including peasant kermesses and plunderings; conversation pieces with elegantly dressed men and women, placed indoors and *en plein air*; musical parties; religious and mythological themes; as well as diabolic scenes. Because he ventured into fields of painting in which he had no previous experience, references to and borrowings from the work of other painters appear more frequently. His sources varied from the paintings of Rubens, Jacob Jordaens and Frans Snyders to those of David II Teniers, Jan van den Hoecke, Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert, Gonzales Coques, Joos van Craesbeeck, Willem van Herp and Erasmus II Quellinus.

In this summary I have drawn specific attention to the sources used by Ryckaert. According to the most banal critics of Modernist aestheticism, such references point to a lack of originality, making Ryckaert at best an imitator of others or at worst a mere copyist. Such glorification of originality or simply novelty was, however, alien to the culture of Flemish painting in which David III Ryckaert flourished. Drawing on the work of other artists, sometimes employing other artists to complete works or consciously incorporating elements of famous paintings as a signatory compliment, were all part of the creative community of art in David's day. A critique of the disregard for this particular culture of art, implying a recognition of the socio-cultural authenticity of the work, allows a wider appreciation of artists such as David III Ryckaert. Such a critique similarly demands a shift away from universalist aesthetic ratings of artists according to an altogether rigid paradigm based on the *ignis fatuus* of originality. An understanding of the context of Ryckaert's art provides another, and I would suggest, a more sensitive, certainly a fairer, way of appreciating the individual endeavours of David III and possibly the work of other artists as well.

In seventeenth-century Flanders, the making of art was conditioned by the popular practice of imitation. The imitation of art was seen in a decidedly positive light³ and the evidence which supports this view, is threefold. First and foremost, the considerable quantity of copies and less faithful imitations produced in seventeenth-century Flanders constitute primary evidence of the favourable attitude towards the imitation of art. Secondly, the writings of the period disclose a similarly appreciative view, recommending the imitation of art, but not unconditionally. In addition, the seventeenth-century terminology relevant to the practice of imitation is surprisingly varied and extensive, but mostly devoid of any pejorative connotations.

The writings of the period suggest a positive perception of imitation, though not always in explicit terms.

Unfortunately for the art historian, no treatises on the theory of art were published by Flemish authors in the early seventeenth century.⁴ The only reliable sources which can provide information on the Flemish perception of imitation, are seventeenth-century Flemish publications related to the arts, and surviving - but at the time unpublished - comments written by artists. To the first category belongs *Het Gulden Cabinet* of 1661 by Cornelis de Bie, while Rubens's notebook on theory and his correspondence give an indication of current Flemish trends on this issue.

Although it was not de Bie's intention to write a treatise on art theory (de Bie 1661:15), his book is more than just a lexicon. It is relevant in the present context as an art theoretical source revealing the contemporary attitude towards imitation. To single out de Bie's views on imitation, one has to turn to his conception of proper education which he saw as an indispensable component in the struggle for the recognition of painting "as a legitimate intellectual pursuit" (de Villiers 1987, 2(1&2):6). Although de Bie believed that natural talent - "ingenium" or "gheest" - was inborn and even hereditary,⁵ it did not guarantee a painter's fame. The artist had to practise the art of painting vigorously and devote himself whole-heartedly to it. Inborn talent or genius should also be guided by tradition, making the copying of earlier masters not only desirable but imperative (de Villiers 1987, 2(1&2):6).

Most important about the issue of education is the fact that it was an ongoing process. As a pupil, an aspiring artist was expected to copy paintings by his and other masters - a common practice in the seventeenth century and, according to De Pauw-De Veen (1969:329), one of the most important exercises for the student painter.⁶ The purpose of this exercise is explained by Martin as a means for the pupil to develop manual skills,⁷ but above all, to try to surpass his master in some way (Martin 1905,7:427).⁸ The pupil's striving to emulate and eventually surpass his master did not suddenly disappear on the day that he was admitted as a master to the painters' guild. He would continue to practise the selective imitation of art, which, judging by Rubens's writings, was considered equally crucial for master painters to perfect their own art.

Rubens was the only artist of that time who left undeniable evidence of his ideas on the imitation of art.⁹ To postulate that his contemporaries upheld the same views would be a blatant generalisation, but considering his dominant position in the artistic scene, his ideas form a reliable frame of reference against which the attitude towards imitation can be judged. Rubens formulated a theory of artistic imitation in his essay *De Imitatione Statuorum* (Muller 1982, 64(2):229 and 1989:9).¹⁰ He argues that the painter should make judicious and discreet use of past art in order to obtain perfection, but keep in mind that the purpose of his art is the idealised imitation of nature (Muller 1982,64(2):229-231 and 1989:11). Through a process of elimination,¹¹ the painter thus works towards a progressive synthesis of the contributions of his predecessors, improving upon them by his study of nature. Rubens's theory of imitation rejected exclusive dependence on either art¹² or on the accidental appearances of nature. He "consciously espoused the selective imitation of nature as well as of art" (Muller 1982,64(2):235).¹³ This viewpoint resulted in the belief that the function of imitation is the enrichment of an already formed and integrated artistic personality. By acknowledging this function, the tensions between originality and adherence to tradition, individual manner and the imitation of models are relaxed (Muller 1982,64(2):235). Selective imitation has to be of a transformative nature. Models are absorbed by the artist and corrected by his study of nature to culminate in a new and personal style. In this way imitation ensures that personal style is reconciled with tradition and verisimilitude (Muller 1982,64(2):247 and 1989:11).

Judging by Rubens's testimony, one may conclude that in seventeenth-century Flanders the critical imitation of art - ancient statues, Renaissance and contemporary paintings alike - had a positive function. It enabled the artist to enrich his own art, provided that the selective imitation of art was balanced by an equally selective and not too simplistic imitation of nature.¹⁴ Although Ryckaert was not sufficiently talented to reach the same degree of perfect balance as did Rubens, his imitations of Brouwer and Teniers should be viewed in the same positive light. His personal taste led him to imitate their works because they were models closest to his own sensibilities. He derived from them their most appealing qualities and introduced them into his own work in a fresh and dynamic manner, adding to them what he had learnt from his studies from life. Cornelis de Bie also commented on this practise of Ryckaert,¹⁵ and the fact that he did not employ any of the then current terms used to describe the copying or even imitation of other masters, testifies to de Bie's belief in the creative capabilities of Ryckaert.

The copying of paintings by other artists was not only condoned as a means of instruction for both the apprentice and the established painter. Paintings were also avidly imitated by many master painters in order to satisfy the great demand for specific types of paintings by popular masters (De Pauw-De Veen 1969:330). Pictures executed in the style of some popular artist and even blatant copies were produced in large numbers in seventeenth-century Antwerp. Proof of this is to be found in *De Antwerpsche "Konstkamers"* (Denucé 1932) which is a collation of inventories of art collections in Antwerp in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Browsing through the pages one encounters the expression "een

schilderye naer..." (a painting after...) almost as frequently as "*een stuck van...*" (a painting of...). The notaries compiling the inventories also made sure to list copies, labelling them "*een copyken*" (also *kopyken*) or "*een conterfeytsel*" (also *konterfeytsel*). These inventories show in the first place that the Antwerp citizens were avid collectors of paintings.¹⁶ The high percentage of non-originals further implies that art collectors considered imitations and copies not merely as good enough, but valuable acquisitions on their own merits. If the public disliked or opposed the mere idea of imitation, there would have been no demand for this type of painting and no need for artists to abundantly supply this market. Thus this attitude of the general public led to a great demand which could not be met by only the best and most famous artists. The latter attempted to solve the problem by turning out pictures from their workshops executed by assistants.¹⁷ But still there was plenty of opportunity for less gifted artists - or *derderangsschilders* as Van der Stighelen (1989:303)¹⁸ calls them - to make a living from their paintings, even if they had to adapt their talents to the copying of the works of their more fortunate colleagues.¹⁹ It must be noted, however, that because of their extensive engagement in copying (Van der Stighelen 1989:319) as opposed to critical imitation, these tertiary artists working in serial or semi-industrial fashion for the free market were not held in high esteem by their more creative and prominent colleagues (Van der Stighelen 1989:321).

Although Antwerp citizens were themselves avid art collectors, the majority of the art works produced in Antwerp were destined for the foreign market (Van der Stighelen 1989:318). An effective export trade, controlled by merchants with a wide network for distribution, assured a steady outlet for the Antwerp producers of luxury goods such as paintings, sculptures, books and other kinds of art (Boston/Toledo 1993-93:204). Although the producers of art works for the foreign market²⁰ largely belonged to that group of highly specialised artisans referred to as "*dozijnschilders*" or "*broodschilders*", even more reputable painters would accept commissions from art dealers.²¹ Such commissions would usually be specified according to public demand. While the buying public was not particularly fastidious about the identity of the maker, their expectations with regard to iconography and manner of execution were very specific (Van der Stighelen 1989:318).²² For example, paintings in the manner of David II Teniers became very popular in France around 1660. The firm Musson-Fourmenois supplied this market, but the demand increased so dramatically that Matthijs Musson and his wife were forced to call on several Antwerp artists to provide them with imitations (Duverger 1968:65-66). Ryckaert's name appears several times in the diaries of this firm (Duverger 1968:124, 127, 233). Whereas it is possible that the artist only made use of the services of this art dealer to distribute his works, in view of his competence as an imitator of Teniers it is more likely that he was commissioned by Musson to produce works *à la Teniers* for the French market. Several paintings by Ryckaert are also listed in the business notes of the Forchoudt firm (Denucé 1931,I), which distributed his works both within the borders of the Southern Netherlands²³ and beyond.²⁴ The knowledge of Ryckaert's involvement in the export industry goes a long way to explain his practice of imitation. If the art dealer required paintings in the manner of a then popular painter, Ryckaert had no choice but to produce imitations - and perhaps even copies.

While this situation in the art market serves to illustrate the positive attitude towards the imitation of art, it brings into question the position and value of the "original". In seventeenth-century Flanders there was a virtual absence of copyright in the modern sense. An artist could copy anything at will. Moreover, his copy was regarded as a work of art in its own right. This line of reasoning can still be taken one step further. Not only did the copy have its own merit as a piece of art: it also accrued to the painter's prestige as an excellent artist, capable of imitating to perfection the best of masters and of fooling the most experienced connoisseurs (Muller 1982,64(2): 238). This attitude gave rise to an interesting phenomenon. An artist who succeeded in imitating another artist very successfully could build up a reputation as a great artist on account of that very ability. Possibly the most illustrative and substantial example is David II Teniers, who owed his initial success to a skilful imitation of Adriaen Brouwer and became after Brouwer the most important painter of the Flemish peasant genre.

The superiority, however, of the original was not jeopardised in the process and the distinction between an original and a copy was definitely made. An artist trying to pass off his copy as an original of another artist committed fraud, as he deliberately deceived the public.²⁵ The inventories of the art collections of some Antwerp citizens (Denucé 1932,II) reflect the awareness of authenticity very clearly. The notaries who compiled the lists of their clients' possessions were not meticulous in their descriptions of the art works,²⁶ but always very conscientious in defining the work as an original (*originael* or *principael*),²⁷ an imitation or a copy.²⁸ The "original" artwork finally vindicated its superiority in the art market, where it fetched much higher prices than even the best of copies. Although the subject matter was an important criterion in the assessment of a picture's value, it appears that prices of paintings varied mainly according to attribution (Brulez 1986:68). For example, in a document dated 24 September 1673, "1 Mosselkruyer van Davit Rijkaert" was valued at 24 guilders (Denucé 1931,I:136).²⁹ In comparison, "1 Moeselaer naer Davit Rijkaert (een manneken dat op de Moesel spelt)" was expected to fetch no more than 9-5 guilders (Denucé 1931,I:151).³⁰

It must be noted, however, that instead of imitating or copying entire pictures, artists would more often "borrow" a popular motif invented by a reputable colleague.³¹ A well-known case related to Ryckaert is the motif of the head of a child, represented in the Hamburg painting of *The curly head*,³² the author of which was probably Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert. Both Jan van den Hoecke and David III Ryckaert made use of this particular head in a number of their respective works, without any noticeable adjustments. Ryckaert made his own copy of Bosschaert's original version to keep in his studio for easy reference. Many such head studies were created by seventeenth-century Flemish painters, which again provides proof of the tolerant attitude towards imitation. Instead of jealously guarding his invention, the author shared it with some friends, allowing them to copy his study and to use the motif in larger compositions. This practice occurred irrespective of the various painters' fields of specialisation. Despite the fact that Bosschaert employed the head to feature in religious and mythological scenes,³³ Ryckaert adapted the motif to his genre paintings by providing new bodies and new contexts.

Collaboration between artists is another practice which affected the making of art in seventeenth-century Antwerp and refutes the notion of originality as a criterion of artistic excellence. As observed by Vlieghe (Boston/Toledo 1993-94:159),³⁴ "it had long been customary...for painters to have specific parts of their work executed by specialised colleagues". Van der Stighelen (1990-92,172:5-15) states that various collaborative networks of vastly different artistic standards were operative in Antwerp in the first half of the seventeenth century. On the one hand, she cites the example of distinguished artists such as Rubens, Frans Snijders, Jan Wildens, Cornelis and Paul de Vos who "helped each other according to their respective specialities" (1990-92,172:15). They produced large-scale, decorative compositions that were thematically homogenous and relatively expensive. In this case, collaboration was encouraged for the sake of optimal quality,³⁵ as well as increased productivity. On the other hand, there is the case of Andries Snellinck - a *derderangsschilder* (third rate painter) who collaborated mainly with other "*dozjnschilders*" (painters-by-the-dozen). This network of co-operating artists of another standard focused on the production of small-scale paintings of versatile nature. The single advantage of this work distribution was increased productivity, which guaranteed low prices.

According to Van der Stighelen (1990-92,172:10), the farming out of professional specialisation was even more current among painters who were bound by family ties. David III Ryckaert was the offspring of an extended family of artists. While his grandfather David I confined his talents to the craft of decorating woodwork,³⁶ his father David II became a painter, as did his uncles Marten and Pauwel Ryckaert. Gonzales Coques, first a pupil of David II Ryckaert, became part of the family by marrying David III's sister Catharina. The painter Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert was the godfather of David III's second child, named Thomas Willeboirts Ryckaert. Obviously the existence of family ties between these artists implies personal contacts, creating a forum for the exchange of ideas on matters of art and an opportunity for collaboration.

Unfortunately no documentary evidence exists to prove that Ryckaert ever collaborated. In the inventories of the Antwerp art collections (Denucé 1932,II) and in the correspondence of art dealers (Denucé 1931,I; Duverger 1968), not a single painting is recorded as being by the hand of Ryckaert and another artist. To prove collaboration without factual evidence is a tenuous procedure. Most paintings were not signed nor dated. The problem of attribution is aggravated by the fact that the number of artists specialising in a particular genre was considerable and that they did not work in isolation, borrowing freely from one another. This makes it extremely complicated to trace a pattern of mutual influence or to establish collaboration or even authorship. Of all the possible collaborators of Ryckaert, two artists stand out as prime candidates, namely his father David II and his brother-in-law Gonzales Coques. In the case of David II, the chances of collaboration are increased due to the fact that David III served his apprenticeship in his father's workshop. Gonzales Coques can be singled out as the next candidate because his works show close affinities in iconography and style with Ryckaert's paintings of elegant companies. Although it is entirely conceivable that Ryckaert would work on collective paintings with his relatives, it must be kept in mind that he did not belong to either of the two groups of artists identified by Van der Stighelen. He did not specialise in large-scale history paintings or glamorous portraits. Nor was he a "*broodschilder*" (bread painter), turning out serial work for the free market. He was a reputable genre painter portraying the middle and upper classes. It would seem that this category of artist had no stake in collaboration, because they were all-round specialists within their own field. Under normal circumstances, therefore, Ryckaert would not need the help of other colleagues, even if they were relatives or friends. When venturing beyond his field of specialisation, however, the chances that he relied on the expertise of colleagues become more realistic. Furthermore, judging by the considerable number of signed and dated paintings of 1650, it may be assumed that Ryckaert was inundated with orders to such an extent that he battled to cope with the demand (Bénézit1960:446). In view of the fact, however, that I could trace only three paintings which betray the possible intervention of other artists (these being Jan van den Hoecke and Thomas van Apshoven), it seems that Ryckaert was more prone to merely borrow and adapt motifs from fellow painters instead of collaborating with them.

It has been shown that contemporary painting practices and local market conditions informed Ryckaert's practice of imitation and possible collaboration. Armed with this knowledge, it becomes clear that his association with other artists such as Brouwer and Teniers has largely been misunderstood and much overestimated. Certainly he was influenced by other artists, but he was not just a follower, and even less of a copyist. Ryckaert's achievement - and that of other genre painters like him - cannot be measured according to the blunt terminology of greatness, ranging from absolute masters such as Rubens down to the *dozijn* - or *derderangsschilders*. The artistic conventions of his day dictated his actions and it is only fair to evaluate his work accordingly. He wins our attention for his patient imitation of other artists which demanded, and involved him in, the minute examination of their strengths and weaknesses yet at the same time allowed him to define himself and express a rare aesthetic probity within the artistic idiom of his day.

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