

Collecting Netherlandish Art in France in the 17th and 18th centuries

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The history of French taste for painting of the ancient Low Countries during the 17th and 18th centuries is a fascinating field which has given rise these last years to a major historiographical revival. The works of some researchers have recently made it possible to understand better the distribution networks of Netherlandish painting in France during the Ancien Régime, the role played by art-dealers in promoting Northern painting, the evolution of the criteria of taste which favored Northern art, as well as the major art-lovers and collectors of Dutch and Flemish art who greatly contributed to its influence. Thanks to these works, some generally accepted ideas have been challenged by reasserting the value of Northern painting in the French collections of the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, we should reconsider the still widespread idea that quality Northern painting only entered French collections after the mid-eighteenth century.

As early as the first decade of the 17th century, a considerable supply of Netherlandish painting was kept up on the Parisian market thanks to the dynamism of Antwerp art-dealers who had settled in the annual Fair of Saint-Germain. Although the role played by these dealers had been fundamental for the promotion of art in France, it has so far not been sufficiently acknowledged. This neglect is basically due to the rise of the classic-academic ideal of the "Hierarchy of genre", of which Félibien was the best supporter in claiming the primacy of high history painting and of Italian models. Nevertheless, current research has revealed that Flemish dealers of the fair of Saint-Germain, such as Goetkindt or Pieter van Haecht, did not sell only cheap second-rate paintings to ordinary buyers. They also offered quality paintings from the best Flemish painters of the time. Moreover, far from being limited to Paris, Flemish dealers took an active part in the art market in the major cities of the French province, such as Lyon, Bordeaux and Lille.

From the mid-17th century, some Flemish dealers settled in Paris where they maintained a regular and intense commercial relationship with Antwerp. They played a major role as mediators of taste for Netherlandish visual culture: Jean-Michel Picart ordered a lot of works of art from the famous firm Musson in Antwerp, specifically aimed at the Parisian art market and adapted to fit the trends of local taste. Even then, the style of David Teniers-the-Younger won public favor, a preference that never failed throughout the next century. Furthermore, in the 1670s, the art of Rubens was reappraised, thanks to Roger de Piles who put the Antwerp master at the core of the debate on the *Quarrel of Color versus Line*. The exceptional collection of Rubens' works, built up during these years by the Duc de Richelieu, provides a striking example of this craze.

During the 18th century the market evolved. Fairs became less important in Paris while public auction sales multiplied – sales with printed catalogues which enabled purchasing from afar. The market in old master's paintings developed thanks to a new kind of connoisseur-dealer,

of whom François-Edmé Gersaint was the best representative in the first half of the 18th century. Gersaint went at least twelve times to the Low Countries to buy paintings and “exotica” that he displayed in his Parisian shop. He showed the way to the greatest Parisian art-dealers of the 18th century such as Remy, Helle, Paillet and Le Brun. The study of the contents of Gersaint’ sales catalogues has recently allowed Hans Van Miegroet to demonstrate that even before 1750 Netherlandish paintings were usually most common within Parisian collections and that their resale value was markedly higher than that of Italian or French paintings. Gersaint played also a major role in the promotion of Netherlandish painters who were not yet in great demand among the French public, such as Nicolaes Berchem for instance. The study of prices reached during these sales shows that the Northern painters most praised by the French were neither Rubens nor Rembrandt, but Teniers and Wouwerman whose finish was particularly appreciated. These trends were confirmed during the comtesse de Verrue’s sale, in 1737. In the first third of the 18th century, the comtesse owned one of the greatest cabinets of Northern painting in Paris. Even though works by Teniers and by Wouwerman were particularly popular, the significant body of works by the Dutch *Fijnschilders* (like Gerard Dou or Frans van Mieris) should be noticed too, heralding a tendency that would develop at the end of the century.

The evolution of taste for Netherlandish painting dramatically increased in the second half of the 18th century and unquestionably prevailed from the 1780s on. Even though that phenomenon was clearly identified by art historians a long time ago, the reasons for its success and the evolution in people’s tastes have been recently analyzed by Patrick Michel: the poor attraction of genre painting for men of the *Grand Siècle* is no longer the same for men of the Enlightenment. The writings of Dezallier Dargenville or Lafont de Saint Yenne clearly state that great changes have occurred in the assessment of Northern painting. The quality of the technique, the trueness to life, the beauty of the color and the deftness of touch greatly appealed to them. Prices soared during the breaking up of the greatest collections of Netherlandish art in Paris, such as Jullienne (1767), the duc de Choiseul (1772), Blondel de Gagny (1776) or Randon de Boisset (1777). Even though Teniers and Wouwerman were still well ahead, they began to be challenged from the 1770s onward, by the rise of *Fijnschilders* (among whom Gerard Dou was the favorite), and by the growing interest for Italianizing landscape painters (Berchem, Both, Potter, Dujardin...). These trends clearly bear witness to the art lovers’ diversity of taste; they also highlight their freedom when they faced the increasing growth of the neo-classical ideals of academic circles, i.e. coming back to the *grand goût* and the *grande manière*.