

Civic Guardsmen, Governors and Guild Members: Amsterdam Institutional Group Portraits | 1525-1850

Thesis by Norbert E. Middelkoop – short summary

More than a century has passed since Alois Riegl (1858-1905) published the authoritative *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* in 1902. He was one of the first to analyse in greater depth the specific compositional and visual qualities of the Dutch institutional group portrait genre. Although many paintings of militiamen and civic guardsmen, governors and guild members have been the subject of, or have been included in, both historical and art historical research, Amsterdam's institutional group portraits have never before been studied as a whole. *Schutters, gildebroeders, regenten en regentessen – Het Amsterdamse corporatiestuk 1525-1850* (in Dutch, with an English summary) seeks to rectify this. By considering the civic guard, governor and craft guild group portraits in their shared context and bringing them back to their pre-museum origins and existence, I hope to make this painting genre, which is so typical of Holland, more accessible, at least for Amsterdam, and at the same time provide a sound foundation on which further research can be based.

Research

The Amsterdam institutional group portraits owned by Amsterdam City Council are in the custody of the Amsterdam Museum (ninety-eight works) and the Rijksmuseum (thirty-two works). Others are still held by the original institutions or are outside Amsterdam. Although 165 have survived, all 228 documented works are referred to in this study. Where possible, the illustrated overview includes black-and-white images with numbers for identifying individual sitters.

The key focus is on the individual organizations and, flowing from that, the people who commissioned the works. Who was depicted and why? Where are they in the composition? And what function did the paintings perform for the clients and their successors? A significant part of the investigation is devoted to the relationship between the paintings and the rooms they were made for, and thus also to the buildings they were housed in. Research shows that commissioning a group portrait was not solely a function of the initiators' need to be represented and remembered. It was influenced just as much by the availability of sufficient wall space in the buildings. No wall, no commission.

Some initiatives for group portraits followed renovation works, new construction or an organization's anniversary, but the most important driver for such a commission was the periodic renewal of the group of officials as a whole. New momentum behind an initiative to issue a commission did not usually develop until everyone immortalized in the last group portrait that was commissioned had moved on – or had passed away. The same regularity is found in the commissioning of group portraits among the craft guilds, where significant changes among the group of electable officers were a requirement.

From a prosopographic scouting study of the members of the city's male population who were eligible between 1578 and 1793 for unpaid supervisory positions in public administration, it emerged that many positions as officers or governors were held for extended periods by members of the same families. A certain informal hierarchy in such posts also emerges, such that a job at the town hall was

the ultimate objective of many former governors or officers. Female governors of charitable and correctional institutions occupied a special position. Because a governorship was the only position available to them in public life, in most cases they belonged to the same elite upper crust as the leaders of the city government. The burgomasters primarily appointed widows, wives or daughters of male members of the urban elite. Their origin in a class above that of their colleagues gave them a strong position in the organizations.

By definition, the initiators of a portrait commission acted jointly. In principle, however, each participant paid for their own likeness. Efforts were made in this study to identify as many of the main figures as possible in order to reconstruct what drove the clients to have a group portrait painted. The provenance and dating of the painting are the logical starting points in this process, together with the surviving name boards and lists, escutcheons, and paintings containing the coats of arms of newly appointed governors, supplemented with archival research and comparison with other portraits of the same sitters. The totality of data collected reveals that between 1617 and 1650 approximately eighty percent of 600 civic guard officers, governors, church wardens and town hall officials active at the time were portrayed in a civic guard or governor group portrait. Some individuals are found in more than one civic guard group portrait, or are depicted both as a civic guardsman and as a governor.

It was up to the painter to develop solutions for portraying a group convincingly, for instance by enlivening the composition with (non-paying) additional figures. Analysis of surviving preliminary studies and comparison with the final result show that the painter had to comply largely with his clients' wishes when preparing a group portrait, especially when hierarchy was concerned. Whereas in civic guard paintings the various military functions can be deduced from the weaponry carried by the officers and the guardsmen, it appears that in governor and guild group portraits hierarchy was determined by the order in which the board had been joined. The longest-serving members sit in the best light in the foreground, while the governors who joined after them sit further back, and the most recently appointed members are depicted standing. The both creative and commercial interaction between the painter and his clients, combined with reciprocal influence between artists, has led to a great richness and variety in the genre.

Later history

Sooner or later, most Amsterdam civic guard and governor group portraits found their way into the custody of the city as the organizations were wound up or merged, mostly in the years around 1800. This obvious route arose from the fact that the buildings where the paintings were hanging were owned by the city. On the other hand, unfortunately, many group portraits of the craft guilds were subsequently lost trace of after 1820. Only the Surgeons' Guild collection was ultimately largely recovered.

The gradual absorption of the Amsterdam institutional group portraits into newly founded museums also changed their function. From objects to decorate a particular room and commemorate the people depicted in them, they became works with both artistic and historical value, one aspect more relevant than the other depending on the painting and period concerned. During this process some seventeenth-century group portraits were acknowledged as masterpieces and the identity of the people portrayed in them became less important.

The redistribution of the municipal collection prior to the opening of the Amsterdam Historical Museum in the former Civic Orphanage in 1975 was the basis for the current displays in both the Amsterdam Museum and the Rijksmuseum, which give priority to exhibiting seventeenth-century group portraits. Since 2014, exposure has increased substantially thanks to the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* in the Hermitage Amsterdam, which focuses on the Amsterdam institutional group portraits presented in their historical context.

In Conclusion

The number of institutional group portraits could be so much greater in Amsterdam than elsewhere in Holland and Zeeland because of the relatively broad support base from which the demand arose: hundreds of wealthy citizens associated with the three civic guard houses, twelve charitable and correctional institutions and ten craft guilds. Competition between these organizations in their pursuit of 'enhancement and commemoration' must have had a catalytic effect on issuing commissions and on the availability of outstanding portraitists, who were attracted by Amsterdam's thirst for portraits and, in competition with their fellow painters, could develop their artistic skills and continue to innovate the genre. That extraordinary balance between supply and demand resulted in an unparalleled group of works.

Norbert E. Middelkoop - Amsterdam Museum
(Translation: Lynne Richards)