Van Hoogstraten's Theory of Theory of Art

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Nowadays, it is quite common to remark that theory and practice are two different things. For many artists – and art historians – theory is nothing more than mere speculation. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) considered his paintings and ‘ready-mades’ the practical productions of a theory that he was thinking about and working with. In 1972, Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) outlined this modern conception of theory by exhibiting his Plastische Theorie on a blackboard, as if his ‘theory’ was in fact a kind of schoolroom course [Fig. 4]. In this context, theory describes first of all an intellectual and abstract quality, that serves the purpose, according to Arthur C. Danto, of legitimising soap boxes as a work of art, like the Brillo Boxes (1964) by Andy Warhol (1928–1987). In our modern and post-modern world, it seems to be possible to understand the theories of works of art without seeing them, as if the theory was the prerequisite of the practice. But was this always the case? And was it especially true for the seventeenth century? What did it mean for a painter like Samuel van Hoogstraten to write a theory about art – and, especially, about his art? He is one of the first in the Dutch artistic literature to use the word ‘theory’:

In order to answer this question (is art supported more by nature or by teaching?), we must know that nature without teaching can do a lot, whereas teaching is vain and useless without any assistance of nature; but also that, when teaching fortifies some common gifts of nature, these gifts seem to grow and give more than the understanding may grasp. ... We speak of the same kind of difference when we think of theory (Theory) and practice (practijk). If we were asked if art is principally supported by teaching or by practice, we would answer that teaching without practice is vain and that, even if practice without teaching may sometimes be promising, art cannot rise to perfection if it is not often put to practice and if one does not devote oneself to the infallible rules of the lessons.
Why does this Dutch painter and art theoretician choose to use the term *theorie*? What meaning does he give to it? And is it possible, as Ernst van de Wetering recently suggested, to regard this theory as a kind of ‘Rembrandtesque theory’? These questions will be the main purpose of this paper. We will see that Samuel van Hoogstraten does not want to evoke the ideal image of an erudite and literate painter but rather that of a perfect and brilliant craftsman. His theory of theory is structured around this ambition, pointing out the necessity of extrinsic learning – involving poetry, philosophy, science, etc. – while at the same time giving pride of place to the artistic profession’s technical and mechanical parts. In this view, as I would like to show, Van Hoogstraten’s theory of theory could be interpreted as an anti-aesthetic conception of art.

**Problems**

Did Samuel van Hoogstraten develop a personal and elaborate theory about his own artistic theory? Surely, the question is not easy or simple. After Van Hoogstraten’s death and the publication of his magnum opus, the *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst*, in 1678 [Fig. 5], Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719), in the biography he dedicated to his former master, developed the legend of a painter who had ‘great understanding in almost all the fields of art’ but was unable to ‘put it to practice’. This statement strengthened the idea that Van Hoogstraten was a mere theoretician and that his book had nothing to do with the reality of seventeenth-century artistic practice, an idea put forward most authoritatively in one of the first books where the *Inleyding* was carefully described, read and analyzed: Jan Emmens’s (1924-1971) *Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst* (1968).
Fig. 5 Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Young Painter Surrounded by the Nine Muses*, from *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst*, Rotterdam 1678, Special Collections, University of Amsterdam
Indeed, Van Hoogstraten’s book, published at the end of a versatile artistic career, was built on many topoi borrowed from the literary, philosophical, theological, and rhetorical traditions. And it is certainly not without great efforts that some contents of this book can be linked with some real and concrete pictorial practices of the Dutch Golden Age. However, these remarks and limits are not extraordinary for a book about art published during the seventeenth century. As Ann Moss and Terence Cave have explained in their major contributions regarding conventions of early modern writing, the borrowing of commonplaces was the only manner for an author to write and think about an art or practice. Moreover, for a painter and poet like Samuel van Hoogstraten, who wanted to keep his profession within the circle of the liberal arts, it would not have been possible, and even thinkable, to write and think about his art without including the formal and conceptual frames of his discourse in the traditional rhetorical and literary traditions of the art treatise.

In this context, our business is not only to know what Van Hoogstraten knew, but also to understand how he knew it and – which could be more important – how he makes it possible to be understood by his readership. It is necessary to not only read the lines of the Inleyding, but also to explore what lies between and under these lines, without projecting our own preconceptions on the text and attributing to the artist our own bookish and anachronistic education. And for that, it is an essential preliminary task to understand the historical and original significations of the word ‘theory’ (theorie) in seventeenth-century Dutch and in Samuel van Hoogstraten’s language.

‘Theorie’

Unfortunately, the word theorie appears in only one passage of the Inleyding. In this passage, which I quoted at the beginning of this article, Van Hoogstraten denounces those artists who boast of never having had a master. As usual, the Dutch painter begins his argumentation by quoting an authority: the Institutiones oratoriae of Quintilian (ca. 35–100 CE), which he may have discovered via Franciscus Junius’s (1590–1677) De schilderkonst der oude:

I am aware that it is also a question whether nature or learning contributes most to oratory. This inquiry, however, has no concern with the subject of my work, for a perfect orator can be formed only with the aid of both, but I think it of great importance how far we consider that there is a question on the point. If you suppose either to be independent of the other, nature will be able to do much without learning, but learning will be of no avail without the assistance of nature. But if they be united in equal parts, I shall be inclined to think that when both are but moderate, the influence of nature is nevertheless the greater; but finished orators, I consider, owe more to learning than to nature. Thus the best husbandman cannot improve soil of no fertility, while from fertile ground something good will be produced even without the aid of the husbandman; yet if the husbandman bestows his labor on rich land, he will produce more effect than the goodness of the soil of itself. ... In a word, nature is the material for learning; the one forms, and the other is
formed. Art can do nothing without material, which has its value even independent of art; but perfection of art is of more consequence than perfection of material.\textsuperscript{9}

This reference enables Van Hoogstraten to prove, with major \textit{auctoritas}, that theory is an intentional construction, to use Edmund Husserl’s terms – that theory is the direct result but also the corrective agency of practice. By producing artworks, the painter learns at the same time the rules of art and to build his own artistic theory.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Rules}

Since \textit{theorie} is an abstraction and a generalization of \textit{praktijk}, it is necessary to have a middle term between these two realities: it is what Van Hoogstraten calls, in the \textit{Inleyding}, the ‘infallible rules of the lessons’ (\textit{onfylbaere regels der leere}) or, elsewhere, the ‘rules of art’ (\textit{regels van de kunst}).

What is a rule? The question is quite complicated since the signification of this term has drastically changed during the centuries. These rules are different from the restricting norms meticulously described by Ernst Hans Gombrich (1909–2001)\textsuperscript{11} and Jan Emmens.\textsuperscript{12} These \textit{regels} are rules in the most literal sense of the term: rulers, tools that aid in the correct depiction of forms, colors and proportions. Also, metaphorically speaking, they are the ‘tools’ related to the intellect, perception, and the body that help to paint right. We could say, with Ludwig Wittgenstein, that these ‘rules’ are ‘infallible’ not because they are always accurate, but because they are necessary to succeed in specific actions. In this understanding, rules cannot be judged by their adherence to an absolute norm, but only by observing their efficacy in specific instances.\textsuperscript{13}

Many examples could be mentioned in Van Hoogstraten’s theory of this definition of \textit{rules} – I would like to quote a significant one: the rule of decorum (\textit{gevoeglijkheyt}).\textsuperscript{14} It is necessary, says Van Hoogstraten in a somewhat Aristotelian passage of the \textit{Inleyding}, to ‘be strongly attached to the truth or the verisimilitude, and only to represent what exists or, at least, what can exist’.\textsuperscript{15} To corroborate this remark, Van Hoogstraten explains, for example, how the Ancients used to recline at a table: on beds instead of chairs.\textsuperscript{16}

What are the sources that Samuel van Hoogstraten did use to make this observation? He certainly wrote this passage by compiling extracts from Flavius Josephus and from the Old and New Testaments.\textsuperscript{17} It may also have been inspired by other books published on the subject of the Roman \textit{triclinium}, like those by Petrus Ciacconius (1525–1581), Johan Wilhelm Stucki (1542–1607), Johannes Rosinus (ca. 1550–1626), Jerónimo de Prado (1546–95), and Juan Bautista Villalpando (1552–1608).\textsuperscript{18} It is furthermore possible that Van Hoogstraten studied an engraved version of the famous \textit{Eucharist} painted by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) for the Roman scholar Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657)\textsuperscript{19} or read Philips Angel’s \textit{Lof der schilderkonst}, where the author praises Rembrandt’s painting \textit{The Wedding of Samson},\textsuperscript{20} and that he understood how his former master tried to find a sort of compromise between archaeological exactitude and \textit{welstand} – the visual effect of his work.\textsuperscript{21}

The rule of \textit{gevoeglijkheyt} demands a perfect adequacy between the literary or discursive
sources, the iconographical traditions, and the visual representation. Whereas some painters try to be as truthful as possible to the sources and textual evidence, like Philippe de Champaigne (1602-74) who, in his *Feast in the House of Simon*, chose to follow Ciacconius’s advice concerning the forms and uses of the ancient *triclinium*, Rembrandt’s picture presents only the figures in the foreground lying on a kind of *triclinium*, in order to make the background and the figure of Samson more clearly visible. A similar choice can be observed in the variant of Rembrandt’s *Supper in Emmaus*, engraved in 1634 by one of his pupils, Constantijn van Renesse (1626-80). And Van Hoogstraten seems to have made the same pragmatic choice. In two of his drawings, illustrating the theme of ‘Abraham and the Angels’, he tests two different spatial configurations. He derived the first directly from the picture painted by Rembrandt in 1646. Yet, in the second drawing, Van Hoogstraten chose to use the motif of the *triclinium* to distribute the different figures around the table, even though the overall design of the work remains quite close to Rembrandt’s painting; the inverted position of the figures may result from the use of a mirror or from a first sketch on a paper that was then turned over for drawing on the verso.

In these different instances, the rules are respected in as far as they can be adapted to produce a beautiful picture. For Van Hoogstraten, *gevoeglijkheid* is an essential rule of art, which every serious painter must know, but it cannot be considered to be a universal law. Like any *regel*, *decorum* is first of all a practical solution that facilitates the fabrication of a convincing image. If Van Hoogstraten stresses the importance of the ‘rules of art’ he is therefore aiming less at legitimating the liberal art of painting than at censuring improper rules or, to speak more precisely, the improper nature of their use. Whereas Quintilian (and Junius) promote the idea of universal yet flexible rules, Van Hoogstraten explains more clearly that these rules are meant to serve the practice of art since these rules are only possible on that condition.

‘*Teorica*’

This empirical and experimental conception of theory is not entirely new. The word *theorie* appeared in Dutch during the second half of the sixteenth century and probably derived from the French *théorie*, which comes from the Greek *theoria*. This word is itself derived from the verb *theorein*: to behold attentively, to contemplate, to survey. The *theoros* is a special witness who gets to know the secrets of the world, as if he were outside the *antrum platonicum*. This etymological tradition has been followed by the great majority of art theoreticians. In his *Due trattati* (1568), for example, the Italian sculptor Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) discusses the use and manipulation of furnaces for the fabrication of bronze casts and explains that ‘it is necessary that sculptors should be aware of all this advice and informed of the nature of metals and of many other things which are taught by the theory (*teorica*) and practice (*prattica*)’. Cellini adds: ‘It happened many times that I saw men with a great experience in our art (*pratichissimi*) men who, after having made various marvellous casts, spoiled their works due to a little accident, the origin of which they did not know.’ For Cellini, the ‘theory’ of a sculptor is not only a direct offshoot of practice; it is also the only route to get to ‘know the causes’ (*conoscere le cause*) of every one of his choices.
Like Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), who says that ‘practice must always be grounded on a good theory’, Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) emphasizes also the importance of ‘practical theory’:

Who is not aware that one must be able, in whatever work one is seeking to carry out, to reject or adopt everything for oneself after mature consideration, without having to depend on help from someone else’s theory (Teorica)? Since theory, when separated from practice (pratica), is generally of very little use; but when the two happen to come together, there is nothing that is more helpful to our life, both because art becomes much richer and more perfect when helped by science, and because the counsels and writings of learned craftsmen have in themselves greater efficacy and power of persuasion than the words or works of those who know nothing but mere practice, whether they do it well or ill.

As we can see here, Van Hoogstraten refers to the traditional meaning of theory, and the manner in which he uses his reference to Quintilian does not come as a surprise. The quotation appears in the second paragraph of the first chapter of his Inleyding, where he tries to deconstruct traditional theories concerning inborn talent. Shortly after citing Junius, Van Hoogstraten refers to personal experience: he tells how he had to curb his younger brother Jan, impatient to go to Italy without having consolidated the foundations of his art, by ensuring him that his practice was too deficient to provide a consistent theory. Along this argumentative line, the distinction of theoria and praxis, proposed by the authoritative reference to Quintilian, is ultimately collapsed in order to construct another theory of theory:

Things which need a high and contemplative understanding are thus useless for untrained and obscure eyes. In this case, they are trampled without being remarked. I have likewise taken note that those who, with their sharp judgment, tried to get involved too early in the most subtle quarrels of great art, got lost so much in literary knowledge that they then were unable to put to practice the smallest element of their knowledge. The practical sciences must be exercised and they require action as well as understanding.

For Van Hoogstraten, the science of art is both contemplative and practical. To him, there is no use, like there was in more ancient and traditional philosophies, to distinguish the vita activa from the vita contemplativa, since the art of painting cannot be considered as a purely liberal and intellectual art.

In this context, the chief business of a painter is to concretize the visual content of his ideas and perceptions, since theory, as a sort of mental seeing, does not precede practice but follows it. In this traditional meaning, that Van Hoogstraten refers to, theorie could be explained as a form of intimate and almost intuitive understanding based on a visual model. The concept theorie conveys the idea of the priority of sight over the other senses and reveals that sight may be a metaphor for knowledge itself or even that sight is a way of attaining visual and practical knowl-
edge. We can therefore note that, for Van Hoogstraten, theory is not necessarily a written or oral discourse but essentially a non-verbal kind of knowledge, produced with and by artistic practice.

In the passage quoted above, Van Hoogstraten actually expresses an implicit condemnation of learned criticism that interprets painting as a solely intellectual activity. Elsewhere, Van Hoogstraten mocks these ‘authors who have never handled the brush but have written a lot, and are unable to speak about this subject [i.e., painting] and, whereas they have sometimes succeeded in attaining their goal through brilliant expressions, they often make one laugh: the pupils of Apelles, for instance, laughed at Alexander [when he tried to speak about art].’ 32 For Van Hoogstraten – and this expression is very significant – painting is essentially a ‘practical science’ (werkdaadige wetenschap), a kind of theory of practice.33

‘Lucri causa’

In this short chapter, it is impossible to give all the characteristics of Van Hoogstraten’s ‘practical theory’. I will only highlight the most striking aspect: his theory of money.

In the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapter of the Inleyding and in the frontispiece of the chapter devoted to the Muse Urania, Van Hoogstraten describes what he calls the ‘three fruits of art’. 34 The phrase amoris causa refers to the loving feelings that an authentic painter has for his art. The phrase gloriae causa regards the pursuit of fame and glory. And the phrase lucri causa has to do with the pursuit of money. This trilogy has been borrowed from a passage of De beneficis where Seneca quotes a statement by the sculptor Phidias. 35 The two first terms are perfectly traditional in the context of laudative discussions of one of the liberal arts. The third one, however, is more interesting, as it breaks a theoretical taboo. Van Hoogstraten tells us that an artist must not only love his art and strive for glory, but must also seek substantial retribution.

For modern readers, this idea is certainly a cliche. But it is necessary to recall that, in early modern art treatises, money – and notably the love of money – was usually associated with merely mechanical craftsmanship and with bad painters. At the same time, it was seen as a kind of deprivation of the absolute and abstract purity of love. Yet Van Hoogstraten does not seem to be so convinced by the ideal of the vir bonus pingendi peritus – that a ‘good painter’ ought likewise to be a ‘good man’. The example of Adriaen Brouwer, whom he quotes in the beginning of the Inleyding, 36 demonstrates that a bad man can be a very good painter indeed. And in his famous perspectijfkas, 37 where Van Hoogstraten represents the above-mentioned three fruits of art on the three exterior sides of the open box, the statement ‘lucri causa’ occupies a good place, on the external longitudinal side, as if the artist wanted to show that the richness and the beauty of his representation partially depends on the successful resources of wealth. This ‘love of money’ is also compared, through the cornucopia, to the notion of abundance (copia), one of the major qualities that artists or writers could demonstrate in their work.

Van Hoogstraten’s theory of art does not pretend that the market or the social and economical realities of the artist’s craft does not exist. Contrary to Van Mander, he does not accuse the guilds of being responsible of the so-called decline of the arts or the attitude that painting is
a menial rather than a noble and liberal craft. He even speaks of his century as a new ‘Golden Age’, comparable to the aetas aurea of Hesiod or the ‘Pericles Century’. And he encourages the States-General of the United Provinces to be more active in the control and the regulation of the art market and their support of export, speaking of the French example of Henri IV. Van Hoogstraten does not seem to be a liberal like his countrymen Dirck Graswinckel (1600-1666), Pieter de la Court (1618-1685), and Hugo Grotius (1633-1645), but rather a mercantilist, similar to Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1715).

Craftsmanship
Van Hoogstraten is not afraid of saying – or showing – that one always paints for money, to allude to the title of David Solkin’s brilliant book. And he provides evidence for this state of affairs through his attitude towards the question of fashion (mode in Dutch). For most of the Dutch art theoreticians, like Arnold Houbraken and Gerard de Lairesse (1640-1711), but also for some foreign authors, like Abraham Bosse (1604-1767), fashion is similar to an infectious disease. It compels painters to follow short-lived fluctuations in taste and not the timeless rules of art. Yet Van Hoogstraten is more pragmatic and realistic. He does not believe in permanent rules of art or in universal beauty. As a result, he blames fashion (moode), since it is a major component of contemporary artistic life: painters cannot ignore the goût des nations without being condemned to paint like blind men or bad artists, ignoring the principles of competition or – and this may be the worst aspect – by painting pictures that remain unsold. Van Hoogstraten put this belief to practice in his own career. His pictorial and iconographical versatility was certainly the result of a personal choice, rather than the mark of a capricious or curious character. After having left Rembrandt’s workshop, he decided to adopt his former master’s manner (handeling). At the court of Ferdinand III (1608-57) in Vienna, he imitated local successful painters like Frans Luycx (1604-c.1688) and included in his work references to pictures from the imperial collections, painted by Hans Holbein (1497-1543), Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), and Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527-1606). In London, Van Hoogstraten painted in the manners of Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) and Peter Lely (1618-80). In The Hague, he created portraits and history pictures similar to those of Adriaen Hanneman (c.1603-71) and Jan de Baen (1633-1702). And at the end of his career, Van Hoogstraten relinquished the notion of having his own manner: he could paint with the fine touch of Jacob Duck (c.1600-67), Gerrit Dou (1613-75), and Caspar Netscher (1639-84); imitate the genre scenes of Cornelis Saftleven (c.1607-81) and Willem Kalf (c.1622-93); mimic the great portraits of Ferdinand Bol (1616-80); and paraphrase the still-lifes of Gabriel Metsu (1629-67).

Rhetoric
As we can see, Van Hoogstraten’s theory does not shun posing some tricky questions. Actually, he is not afraid of saying things even when it is difficult for him to find the right words for the right concepts. Is this the reason why, as has been remarked above, his vocabulary partially follows the topical language of philosophy and rhetoric? This is certainly no obvious conclusion.
Among the numerous examples that could be quoted, I will mention the more illustrative. Trying to give the best description of the difficult notion of *houding*, Van Hoogstraten does his best to follow the traditional interpretation of the Latin terms *tonos* and *harmoge* that he found in Pliny and Plutarch: ‘Art differentiated itself [from monochrome painting] and invented light and shadow, the varying differences of color making them stand up together. Later, highlights were added, which is something quite different from light. The specific relations between light and shadow they call *tonon* and the measured transitions of colors they called *harmogen*. Although he mentions these concepts, Van Hoogstraten is aware that his definitions are too general. He therefore tries to be more specific and proposes another, far more original analogy.

In the frontispiece of the eighth chapter, Van Hoogstraten represents Glycera, a famous weaver of flower wreaths [Fig. 6]. The Greek legend says she was loved by the painter Pausias because of her ‘art of matching colors’ (tuiling) when she ‘weaved his little crowns, his festoons and her bouquets’. Through this topical example, Van Hoogstraten tries to make it obvious that the mixing (vermenging) and adding (samenvoeging) of colors are the principal conditions for a good *houding*. To further explain this statement, he refers in several parts of his book to weaving, as a kind of model or metaphor for the chromatic construction of a painting. This metaphor allows him to introduce another complementary notion, again borrowed from workshop jargon. Van Hoogstraten describes the concept of *binding* – what we may call the ‘chromatic linkage’ – as the ‘softness of the harmonious masses’ that plays a formative role as the ‘thread’ of the work.

The notion of *binding* refers originally to the texture of a textile, that is to say, to the criss-cross pattern of the warp and weft threads. The concept of *binding* refers to a color that, repeated in several places of a composition, contributes to the whole chromatic unity and consistency, like the red, white, and blacks tints in Van Hoogstraten’s painting *View of the North Transept of Westminster Abbey*, and like the golden and yellow tones of his *Two Women Leaning on a Cradle*.

In these terminological *bricolages*, to use the term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), Van Hoogstraten undoubtedly explores the theoretical tradition of his art by using or translating ancient concepts. However, this tradition does not seem to be sufficient for him: it is too general, too imprecise, and maybe too far removed from the actual practice of a Dutch seventeenth-century painter. The vocabulary of the *Inleyding* – old and new at the same time – allows his theory of art theory to connect to intellectual authority as well as to sever these connections. Van Hoogstraten goes certainly *ad fontes*, yet also *adversus fontes*. This is intertextual piracy: the tradition is taken up in order to be hijacked.

**Conclusion: a practical and personal theory of art**

When we enter into Van Hoogstraten’s theoretical and practical world, we may be surprised when we discover what made him similar to his contemporaries; but our surprise may be even greater when we perceive what made him different. It is true, in accordance with the historiographical tradition, that the *Inleyding* was conceived in order to enhance the author’s reputation as an artist, to consolidate his social network and give a new legitimacy to painting. Yet it is also
essential that we understand that this theory was written to express the personal experience of a single painter. Van Hoogstraten did not have the pretension to embody the entire century’s opinions about art theory and practice. On the contrary, he criticized his colleagues, even the most famous ones such as Rembrandt, in order to give himself, to quote a concept coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), a noteworthy place in the ‘social field’ of his craft and a prominent position in the history of his art.
His book epitomizes his own textual erudition that was probably superior to, or in any case different from, Rembrandt’s cultural background, as well as his personal conception of artistic practice that was partially predicated on the rules he learned in Rembrandt’s workshop – yet only partially, as I pointed it out in relation to the concept of gevoeglijkheyt. In this regard, it seems awkward, if not simplistic, to read and analyse the Inleyding as nothing more than a version of ‘Rembrandt’s handbook’ and suppose that its every idea and artistic concept could be associated unproblematically with the pictorial experience of the famous Amsterdam master. Concluding that ‘Rembrandt’s presence in Van Hoogstraten’s book is much greater than has hitherto been assumed’, Ernst van de Wetering grants that ‘Rembrandts’ practical/theoretical ideas are found side by side with passages that reflect Van Hoogstraten’s own quite different ideas’. Nonetheless, Van de Wetering’s recent and enlightening studies within the Rembrandt Research Project seem to have excessively ‘Rembrandtized’ Van Hoogstraten’s ideas, whose paintings – especially the late ones, produced during the conception and the writing of the Inleyding – cannot be easily compared with Rembrandt’s works of or those by his most faithful followers.

In fact, Van Hoogstraten’s theory does not entail a revolutionary development, but rather a dialectical one. His conception of the theory of art is certainly intelligent and refined, but it is not a merely intellectual project. For him, what makes painting specific in regard to the other liberal and mechanical arts is the ‘doing’ (het doen), the meaning of which is not far from the French eighteenth-century faire or the Italian fare. Van Hoogstraten might have said, like Annibale Carracci (1560–1609) allegedly said to his brother Agostino (1557–1602): ‘We, painters, have to speak with our hands’ (Noi altri dipintori habbiamo da parlare con le mani). It is true that in his own engraved self-portrait Van Hoogstraten does not depict himself explicitly as a painter [Fig. 7]. Yet the pen he holds is an ambiguous sign – a tool for writing and for drawing. He signs and dates the sheet of paper in front of him in the same manner as he signed and dated some of his letter-rack and perspective paintings, as if he were not writing his book, but instead drawing it. And if the small statue beside him, representing the Atlas Farnese, permits Van Hoogstraten to convey the idea of the ‘visible world’ (zichtbare wereld), it is also a figure represented in action, and it was considered in this time, maybe with the Borghese Gladiator, to be one of the best examples of the representation of physical and muscular exertion. Even in this scholarly and idealized picture, Van Hoogstraten did not forget to recall that there cannot be a real theory of art without the artist’s hands and without the human body.

His ideal painter is, therefore, not a pictor doctus but a pictor faber. In his treatise, Van Hoogstraten expresses the necessity that painting and philosophy should communicate and exchange ideas. However, he also points out the singularities of two different kinds of artistic activity: a peintre philosophe is a bad painter and a bad philosopher. This anti-aesthetic theory, which opposes some ideas from contemporary treatises in Dutch, calls to mind the letter written by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) to Franciscus Junius in 1637. In this long text, the painter expresses his admiration for the scholar’s erudition but also his wish that another kind of theory will once be written:

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I, for my part, would like it if at some time it were possible to compose with the same diligence a like treatise on the paintings of the Italians. They provide examples, or prototypes, which to this day are before the public. One can point to them with one’s fingers and say ‘here they are.’ For those things which touch our senses are more sharply imprinted on the mind; they remain with us and demand a more minute examination than what we represent ourselves only by imagination, and as in dream.  

Like Rubens, Van Hoogstraten denounces the inanity of theoretical discourses that are inspired only by other discourses. Whereas Junius’s project aims at writing a ‘history of the arts’ and at thinking about the ‘nature of the imitative arts’, Van Hoogstraten wants to describe the picto-
rial practices of his time. And he analyzes quite reluctantly aesthetic or ontological problems concerning the principles and origins of the arts or purely speculative analyses of them. For him, painting is a liberal art, not because it is no mechanical art, but because it is an extremely sophisticated craft.

This new form of art theory, which we may compare, for the seventeenth century, to that developed by Roger de Piles (1635-1709) and, for the eighteenth century, to the discourses of sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), has not often been taken seriously by art historians, maybe because it is too different from the kind of theoretical discourse on art that we are accustomed to study in our discipline. Van Hoogstraten knew quite well that books – and not insubstantial ones – had been written on painting, and by painters. He quoted some of them: Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72), Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgio Vasari, and Karel van Mander (1548-1606). That being the case, the long introductory sentence of the Inleyding meant not only that he wanted to write a painter’s book on painting, but also that he desired to get away from a certain tradition of painter’s books on painting. Using this tradition and departing from it, Van Hoogstraten expresses a paradoxical theory, a sort of anti-theoretical theory that certainly needs – in order to be understood fully – a new theory of the theory of art.

Notes
4  ‘Maer om deze vraege, of de konst grooter baet van de natuur, of van de leeringe heeft, te beantwoorden, zoo is te weten : dat de natuur zonder de leeringe veel vermach : en dat in tegendeel, de leeringe zonder eenige hulpe van de natuur, ydel en te vergeefs is. Maer wanneer middelmatige gaven der natuure door leeringe geholpen worden, zoo schijnt de natuur zich te beteren, en geeft meer uit, als’t verstand begrijpt : … Dit zelve verschil wort ook gedongen onder de naemen van Theory en practijk. Wanneer men vragt, of de konst meest door de leeringe, dan of door de oeffeninge geholpen wort ? Waer op wy antwoorden, dat de leeringe zonder de oeffeninge nietch is. En schoon de oeffeninge zonder de leeringe somtijts wel iets belooff, dat de konst tot geenderley volmaektheyt kan rijzen, ten sy men die gestaedich oeffene, en nae de onfeylbaere regels der leere bestiere’, S. van Hoogstraten, Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst, Rotterdam 1678, 16. See also J. Blanc, Samuel van Hoogstraten: Introduction à la haute école de l’art de peinture (1678), Geneva 2006, 94-95. All translations from the Dutch are my own.
5  See E. van de Wetering, ‘Towards a Reconstruction of Rembrandt’s Art Theory,’ in: A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings, Vol. V: The Small-Scale History Paintings, Dordrecht 2011, 3-140, and especially 11: ‘Van Hoogstraten deals with the basic aspects of the art of painting in all cases in a strikingly different way from Van Mander. In the analysis of these differences, it will become apparent that a considerable number of the pictorial ideas and narrative procedures that Rembrandt developed, and which he must have taught to his pupils, are adopted in Van Hoogstraten’s book’.
8 See Blanc 2006, 24-43; J. Blanc, Peindre et penser la peinture au xvir siècle: La théorie de l’art de Samuel van
Hoogstraten, Berne 2008, 126-129.
9 Quintilian, Institutiones oratoriae, II, xix, 1-3, quoted in F. Junius, De schilderkonst der oude, Middelburg 1641,
book 1, chapter 4, part 1, 36.
11 E.H. Gombrich, The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences’, in: Norm and
12 J. A. Emmens, Rembrandt en de regels van de kunst, Amsterdam 1968.
13 See J. Bouveresse, La Force de la règle: Wittgenstein et l’invention de la nécessité, Paris 1987; Pettit, Rules, Rea-
sons and Norms, Oxford 2002.
14 This notion has been evoked only marginally in Van de Wetering’s recent article, Van de Wetering 2011, 53.
15 Inleiding 93; Blanc 2006, 193. This passage is actually a very interesting paraphrase of a paragraph on fiction
in the Poetics: ‘The poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of
three objects – things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought
to be. The vehicle of expression is language – either current terms or, it may be, rare words or metaphors.
There are also many modifications of language, which we concede to the poets. Add to this, that the stand-
ard of correctness is not the same in poetry and politics, any more than in poetry and any other art. Within
the art of poetry itself there are two kinds of faults- those which touch its essence, and those which are acci-
dental. If a poet has chosen to imitate something,[but has imitated it incorrectly] through want of capacity,
the error is inherent in the poetry. But if the failure is due to a wrong choice – if he has represented a horse
as throwing out both his off legs at once, or introduced technical inaccuracies in medicine, for example, or
in any other art – the error is not essential to the poetry. These are the points of view from which we should
consider and answer the objections raised by the critics’, Aristotle, Poetica xxv, 1466b7-23.
18 W. Stucki, Antiquitatum convivialitatem libro III, Zürich 1581; J. Rosinus, Antiquitatum Romanorum corpus
absolutissimum, Leiden 1663 (ed. princ. 1585); P. Ciaccionius, De triclinio sive De modo convivandi apud priscos
Romanos, & de conviviorum apparatu, Heidelberg 1590; J. de Prado and J.B. de Villalpando, In Ezechielem
explanationes et apparatus urbis ac templi hierosolimitani commentarioris et imaginibus illustratus, 3 vols, Rome
1596-1604. On this subject, see H.W. von Löhneysen, ‘Die ikonographischen und geistesgeschichtlichen
Voraussetzungen der Sieben Sakramente des Nicolas Poussin’, Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte
19 Nicolas Poussin, The Eucharist, 1647, Edinburgh, National of Gallery of Scotland. See A. Blunt, Art et ar-
21 P. Angel, Lof der schilderkonst, Leiden 1642, 47.
22 Philippe de Champaigne, The Feast in the House of Simon, 1676, Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts. See E.

49
23 Constantijn van Renesse, *The Supper in Emmaus*, c. 1660, Boston, Collection Dr. Sheldon Peck. See Blanc 2008, fig. 64.


27 B. Cellini, *Due trattati, uno interno alli otto principali arti dell'oreficeria, l'altro in materia dell'arte della scultura*, Florence 1568, 55r.


30 Inleyding 91-98.

31 Inleyding 96.

32 Inleyding 78.

33 Inleyding 96.

34 Inleyding 499-519.

35 Seneca, *De beneficis*, book 1, chapter 33, parts 2-3.

36 Inleyding 93, 155.


38 Inleyding xiv.

39 Inleyding 481-2. Even if it is possible that Van Hoogstraten thinks of Louis XIV, he speaks in his text of ‘Hendrik de Groot Koning van Vrankrijk’, that is to say Henry IV. Cf. K. van Mander, *Het schilderboeck*, Haarlem 1604, 125r.


41 Inleyding 448.

42 Inleyding 336-60, 421-2.


For example, *Inleyding* 308.


Van de Wetering 2011, 11.

A precise account of Van Hoogstraten’s ‘quite different ideas’ is precisely what I tried to write in my book *Peindre et penser la peinture au XVIIe siècle: la théorie de l’art de Samuel van Hoogstraten*, Berne 2008. Similar problems concerning theoretical distinctions and discriminations result from the systematic comparison of Karel van Mander’s and Rembrandt’s theoretical and practical concepts, as proposed by Van de Wetering, that appears to suppress and erase the differences between the two painters as well as the very different artistic and historical contexts in which they developed their concepts.


*Inleyding* 77-8.

*Inleyding* xiv: ‘Dewijl’er onlangs niemand geweest is, die de geheele Schilderkonst met alle haeren aenkleven heeft gelieven te beschrijven, want de groote meesters, die dit werk best machtig waren, zijn door de groote winst, die hen d’oeffening der konst gewoonlijk geeft, zoo karig, of liever zoo gierig geworden, dat zy niets van den tijdt, die hen zoo vrugtbaer was, hebben willen missen, om de zelve aen de armzaelige penne te besteeden, zoo heeft dit gebrek noch een veel groter nae zich gesleet, namentlijk, dat de Schilderkonst, by de meeste menschen, als een andere gemeene konst of handwerk is geacht worden: en hier op is gevolgt, dat’er duizenden aen de konst gevallen of gevoert zijn, zonder de zwaerigheden, die’er in steeken, eens te overweegen, jae min noch meer, dan of zy een Schoenmaeckers ambacht hadden blycklik genomen: zonder eens te weeten dat deeze konst de geheeste Zichtbare Wereld gehelsde; en dat’er naaulijx enige konst of weetenschap is, daer een Schilder onkundig in behoorde te zijn.’
The Universal Art of Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) Painter, Writer, and Courtier

Amsterdam University Press

Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age
THE UNIVERSAL ART OF SAMUEL VAN HOOGSTRATEN
Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age

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THE UNIVERSAL ART OF
SAMUEL VAN HOOGSTRATEN
(1627–1678)
Painter, Writer, and Courtier

Edited by Thijs Weststeijn

Amsterdam University Press
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Cover illustration: Samuel van Hoogstraten (attr.), Young Man in a Turban, canvas, 65 x 50 cm, Qatar, Private Royal Collection

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Approaches to a Multifaceted Master

Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–1678) was one of the most distinguished of European artists, according to the Swiss abbot Gabriel Buzlin (1599–1681). Buzlin included him in a list of 166 painters of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, *Pictorum Europae praecipuorum nomina* (c.1664). This judgment may have been colored by the abbot’s own collection: his Weingarten monastery contained Van Hoogstraten’s only full-fledged altarpiece, *The Vision of Saint Benedict*. And later scholars did not share his praise of the self-styled ‘painter of His Holy Imperial Majesty [Ferdinand III]’. The literary historian Peter Schull, writing in 1833, asserted that Van Hoogstraten’s poetic qualities greatly surpassed his talents in the visual arts. Even nowadays, the painter is probably better known for a set of cumulative factors rather than for the quality of his figurative works: as one of Rembrandt’s pupils, as a key author in the seventeenth-century theory of art, and as a social climber who achieved success through a combination of prolific painting, poetry, optical experiments, and European travels.

As the discipline of art history has increasingly highlighted the socio-economic context of paintings and other interdisciplinary issues, scholarly interest in Van Hoogstraten’s multifaceted career has caused his position to shift from that of a marginal figure in Rembrandt’s studio to someone central to the art of the Dutch Golden Age. In the last two decades, not only museums and departments of art history but also historians of literature, science, and even the new media have increasingly paid attention to the Dordrecht master. The closing of the millennium produced six monographs about the artist and his work, most of which consist of more pages than his own treatise on painting.

The present book, resulting from a symposium in Amsterdam in 2009, is the first collective effort addressing Samuel van Hoogstraten. Nine scholars explore different facets of his life and work: his theoretical treatise, artistic terminology, still life and genre paintings, perspective boxes, as well as his travels, novels, and reputation. The different vantage points extend the analy-
sis to Van Hoogstraten’s teacher, Rembrandt, as well as his own best-known student, Arnold Houbraken, and other members of the Van Hoogstraten family. Furthermore, not only does the present book confront divergent scholarly backgrounds, it is also the first time that some of the authors have published their work in English, coming originally from Dutch, German, and French academic traditions.

The present anthology thus intends to do justice to the works of, in his own words, the ‘universal master’ from Dordrecht (universel of algemeen meester). Echoing a sentiment formulated most cogently by Leonardo da Vinci, who may have served as his example especially when pairing artistic and scientific interests, Van Hoogstraten advises his readers to practice ‘universal art’ or even ‘universal knowledge’ (algemeene wetenschap). This ideal not only joins painting to poetry. His treatise enumerates the manifold particulars of the visible world that are the object of the painter’s knowledge. Van Hoogstraten’s statement that an artist’s ambition should know no limits within the sublunar realm responds to the ideal of the polymath current in the scholarship of his day. He refers to the Dutch Republic’s foremost Universalgelehrter, Gerard Vossius, to argue that:

It is harmful to think … that one would not be able to understand everything: because is there anything that can satisfy our mind completely …? Put so much science in it and fill it with so much knowledge of things as you can, it will only grow in desire and the more it holds, the more it seeks, being given neither a headache nor bad stomach by this. Our cupboards, says Cassiodorus, cannot hold more once they are filled: but this treasure-house is never overloaded. When it has taken in very much already, it still yawns constantly after more, all the more so, says Cicero, since all liberal arts have a common linkage and are joined together as if through a kind of parentage.

Do we hear an echo here of the young Samuel who set out, after being trained in Rembrandt’s studio with its encyclopaedic collection of natural and artificial curiosities, to see the world?

Where are we now: Van Hoogstraten’s writings

In 1924, the historian of European art theory Julius von Schlosser leveled his criticism at Van Hoogstraten’s writings, concluding that the Dutch Republic was ‘vastly uncommunicative in its main utterances’: its masters ‘painted diligently in their studios; they did not talk, and any literary aspirations were alien to them’. The German scholar’s verdict illustrates how Van Hoogstraten’s treatise, Inleyding tot de booge schoole der schilderkonst, anders de zichtbaere wereldt (Introduction to the Academy of Painting, or the Visible World, 1678), played a role in the still-topical division of the history of art into national schools that would reflect specific qualities. As late as the 1980s, Svetlana Alpers quoted from the Inleyding to argue for the ‘descriptive’ essence of Dutch art – leaning towards science rather than literature – in contrast to the ‘narrative’ Italian one. Eddy de Jongh, on the other hand, found the treatise a useful source to argue for the contrary thesis: the
Van Hoogstraten’s book, which Jan Emmens described as a ‘not uncongenial amalgam’ of different viewpoints, may therefore be interpreted as reflecting contradictions inherent to the Dutch Golden Age itself. (The most profound paradox, perhaps, was expressed in those still lifes that focus on the most ephemeral aspects such as reflections and surface qualities, relishing the pleasing appearance of the visible world while at the same time highlighting its transience).

In any case, the variety of views expressed in this treatise has made possible four different readings: Celeste Brusati (1995) has explored how the *Inleyding* showcased Van Hoogstraten’s artifice in the service of his personal, social ambitions. Hans-Jörg Czech (2002), by contrast, highlighted the book’s more general aim of founding the art of painting on international theoretical standards after the Dutch art market’s collapse following the *Rampjaar* (‘disaster year’) of 1672. Jan Blanc (2008) has called attention to the profoundly practical import of Van Hoogstraten’s theory, while the most recent analysis (2008) extended to the treatise’s rhetorical premises.

The possibility of different views towards Van Hoogstraten’s art theory highlights precisely that the author took the project of writing a comprehensive theory of art more seriously than his Dutch contemporaries. He aimed at an encyclopedic work: his ‘visible world’ – the treatise’s subtitle – in book form is conceived as a microcosm. Each chapter is associated with one of the nine Muses and one of the planets, governing all visible things, the works of nature and man. The treatise reflects not only his experiences with Rembrandt in Amsterdam but also his work in Germany, Vienna, Rome, and London. What is more, compared to his colleagues in the Netherlands and elsewhere, Van Hoogstraten was a much more avid reader. As the data collected by Blanc have revealed, the *Inleyding* draws from more than 150 different literary sources, while other authors of painting treatises such as Karel van Mander, Joachim von Sandrart, and Gerard de Lairesse used only two or three dozen. Few works in the European tradition of art theory refer to a similarly broad range of literature as the *Inleyding*, from drama and poetry to moral philosophy, history of the church, travelogues from the Far East and the New World, and texts about archaeology, law, gemstones, and Anglo-Saxon history – many facets which still remain to be explored.

The master’s encyclopedic ambitions extended to practical knowledge, which explains the book’s enduring capacity to yield information about painting technique and style: Ernst van de Wetering’s most recent work on Rembrandt’s art theory, in *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings* (2011), continues to use Van Hoogstraten as its main source, while Paul Taylor’s and Ulrike Kern’s analyses of individual stylistic concepts also depend on the *Inleyding*. In effect, the present book proves the treatise’s continuing topicality as all contributions derive theoretical and practical information from it.

Despite the *Inleyding’s* display of erudition, how much of Van Hoogstraten’s ideas were based on more than superficial literacy remains a moot point – whether he went to Dordrecht’s Latin school, for instance, is unclear. An open question in this respect (broached by Michiel Roscam Abbing in 1993 and again by Czech) relates to the treatise’s projected second volume, *De onzichtbaere werelt* (The Invisible World), which may suggest that the painter’s interest in