Visiting Vermeer: Performing Civility

HERMAN ROODENBURG

Calling on Artists

Johannes Vermeer may be a celebrity now, but in his lifetime – or so a parade of scholars has told us – he was sorely neglected. The Delft painter was a bit of a mystery, a genius manqué, making him all the more beloved among the art historians and the public at large. Even John Michael Montias, who finally gave us a historically sound Vermeer, found it hard to believe that, in fact, the painter’s fame may have extended beyond the city walls of Delft in his own day, and that – as two contemporary diaries suggest – it had spread among the highest circles in The Hague. Indeed, some art enthusiasts went to visit Vermeer in his studio. On 11 August 1663, the French diplomat Balthasar de Monconys (1611-1665) traveled from The Hague to Delft with only one objective, to meet the painter: “A Delphes ie [je] vis le Peintre Verme[e]r.” Six years later, on 14 May 1669, The Hague regent Pieter Teding van Berckhout (1643-1713) made a similar trip: “Estant arrivé ie vis un excellent Peintre nommé Vermeer.” On June 21, he even paid a second visit: “[je] fus voir un celebre Peintre nommé Verme[e]r.” Michael Montias published the latter notes in 1993. He was clearly surprised: “...it would never have occurred to me that he would be called ‘célebre’.”

Two or three diary notes are not much to go on. But there is also the imposing figure of the poet and courtier Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687), who probably accompanied Berckhout on his first visit to Vermeer. So did two other gentlemen, the Rotterdam regent Ewout van der Horst (c. 1631-before 1672) and a former ambassador to England, Willem Nieupoort (1607-1678). Huygens ranked as the greatest artistic authority of his day, having earned that reputation in his capacity of secretary to the Court of Orange. He advised Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms as to the best architects, sculptors, and painters to build and decorate their palaces.

Huygens may very well have sent de Monconys to Vermeer. The two
courtiers had met two months earlier, at a session of the London Royal Society in June. Moreover, both before and after his visit to Vermeer, de Monconys called on the Huygens family in The Hague. There he admired Huygens’s art collection and invited his host to join him in an excursion to see various painters in Leiden, among them Gerard Dou and Frans van Mieris. Unfortunately, Huygens had to decline, as he had to leave for the province of Zeeland that day.6

Did Huygens play a similar initiating role in 1669? Was it he who organized the trip or was it his friends who invited him? When reading these and similar diary notes, one is struck by the group nature of such visits. Berckhout was accompanied by three friends and de Monconys by two Catholic gentlemen: a priest, called Father Léon, and Lieutenant Colonel Gentillo. As Samuel van Hoogstraten, a pupil of Rembrandt, confirms, this was undoubtedly how such things were arranged.7 Visits to notable collections exhibited a similar social structure. In 1625, Jacob van den Burch, secretary to Count Johan Wolfert van Brederode, invited Huygens on a visit to the Leiden merchant Matthias van Overbeke to inspect his collection of paintings by Rubens, Bailly, Van Coninxlo, Porcellis, Van de Velde, Savery, and Vrancx. Initially, Huygens refused: “The man is rich, but he seems very plain to me.” Five years later, after a second invitation from Van der Burch, he had changed his opinion, answering that this time he would join him.8 Such excursions, then, were both collective and exclusive undertakings. These early connoisseurs were not overly interested in a plain merchant’s cultural capital.9

In this paper, I would like to survey some of the seventeenth-century social codes involved in visiting artists. Clearly, for the likes of Huygens and his friends, such visits meant that one might buy or order a work of art to include it in one’s collection. But the social aspects of the studio visits and of viewing each other’s collections were hardly less important. These visits were part of the art of conversation, and of the prevailing notions of civility. Among the Dutch elite, the upper crust of nobles, courtiers, and regents, a lively and well-informed interest in the arts and sciences was de rigueur. It was the hallmark of every bonnête homme. Baldessare Castiglione, in his well-known Book of the Courtier (1528), had advised his audience, nobles, and non-nobles alike, to be versed in all the arts and sciences, without becoming an artist or scholar oneself; for centuries since, Castiglione’s guide was part and parcel of the codes of civility.10

Huygens and his circle were well aware of such requirements as was the Dutch elite at large. Like their counterparts abroad, they knew about civilité, and much more so than historians and art historians have hitherto assumed. Leafing through the book sales catalogues that have come down to us, we find a wealth of civility texts.11 This suggests that for a growing segment of this elite (including lawyers and university professors), such manuals had
become instrumental in developing notions of *civilité*. While before 1600 this elite may have been small with a relatively large share of well-to-do-immigrants from the Southern Netherlands, it grew quickly in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Among the seventeenth-century libraries described, we find those of Daniel Heinsius, Adriaen Pauw, Joan Huydecoper, Jan Six, and Petrus Francius. But here I will focus on three libraries, that of Huygens himself and those of his two eldest sons, Constantijn Huygens Jr. (1628-1697) and Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695).\(^{12}\) Constantijn Jr. would follow in his father’s footsteps and become a secretary to Prince William III, later the king of England. Indeed, as his father had advised Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms, he would advise the prince and his wife, Princess Mary, on matters of art. Christiaan, the scientist, would embark on a very different career, which would lead him to the London Royal Society and to the Paris Académie des Sciences. But like his father and his brother, he cherished the arts. Examining such libraries and the values they represented can enlighten us on the performative dimensions of calling on artists, on how “selves” could be defined through different types of interaction with works of art, and on how these art works in such processes of connoisseurship acquired a performativity of their own.\(^{13}\)

**Civility and Books**

As the three book catalogues attest, Huygens and his sons knew their languages. They read Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, English, German, and Dutch. They all studied law, which was the natural preparation for all public servants. And books on law were the most numerous in their libraries, followed by theology. But it is in the catalogues’ *libri miscellanei* that we recognize the more gentlemanly and cosmopolitan bearings of the three men. What they consulted in the area of civility was almost exclusively in French or Italian, sometimes even in Spanish, English or German. They read what was published abroad and they were interested in much more than manners alone. Their *libri miscellanei* cover a wide range of topics, from the arts of conversation, letter writing, music, and connoisseurship to those of fencing, horsemanship, gardening, and war. It is these texts that allow us to discern what their education was aimed at: a world of civility in which they could converse both with princes and courtiers and with the urban elite of the Dutch Republic.

In 1625, Constantijn Huygens (Sr.) published a long poem called *Een wijs hoveling* (A Prudent Courtier). It was part of his *Otia ofte Ledighe Uyren*, a collection of poetry with which he would garner his first literary fame in the Dutch Republic.\(^{14}\) Singing the praises of the prudent courtier, the poem has been rightly connected to Castiglione’s *Cortegiano*.\(^{15}\) Its influence is clear.
Indeed, Huygens owned a copy of the *Cortegiano*, a French translation called *Le parfait courtisan* published in Paris in 1585. The *Cortegiano* was not the only civility text in Huygens’s library. We also find *Le favory de cour*, a 1557 translation of Antonio de Guevara’s *Aviso de privados y doctrina de cortesanos*, first published in 1539. And, among the more recent volumes are two copies (one in octavo, the other in duodecimo and bound in calf-skin) of Eustache de Refuge’s *Traité de la cour*, originally published in 1616, and a copy of Baltasar Gracián’s *El discreto* (the Spanish term for the *bonnête bomme*), originally published in 1646.

The list is fairly modest and we may surmise that Constantijn Jr. or Christiaan might have taken some of his father’s civility books. However, that Huygens Sr. had copies of Castiglione, de Guevara, du Refuge, and Gracián, is an interesting fact. The manuals must have had a bearing on his functioning at court along with, we may assume, numerous other books listed in the catalogue: books on heraldry and the European nobility, the arts of war and diplomacy, conversation, letter writing, and so on. Even the art of gesture features in the catalogue. Huygens Sr. also owned a copy of Giovanni Bonifacio’s *L’arte de’cenni*, published in 1616.

Like their father, both Constantijn Jr. and Christiaan possessed civility books. Constantijn Jr. owned a 1575 edition of Stefano Guazzo’s *Civil Conversatione* published in Venice. He also had copies of du Refuge’s *Traité de la cour* and René Bary’s *L’esprit de cour*, both remarkably enough in a German translation. Antoine de Courtin was well represented on Constantijn Jr.’s bookshelf, with his Nouveau traité, one of its Dutch editions, and also its sequel, the *Suite de la civilité française*, including its rules *pour converser et se conduire sagement avec les incivils et les fâcheux*. He also kept a 1658 copy of Erasmus’s *De civilitate* in his library. Perhaps some of the texts were meant for his son, also named Constantijn, who – having led a far from exemplary life – died young.

Christiaan, the man of learning, boasted a far larger collection of civility texts. He owned two duodecimo editions of the *Cortegiano*, as well as copies of the French translation by Chappuys and the Spanish translation by Juan Boscán. Other manuals in his library were a French translation of Giovanni della Casa’s *Galateo* and copies of du Refuge’s *Traité de la cour*, Nicolas Faret’s *Honnête bomme*, Jacques Du Bosc’s *Honnête femme*, Bary’s *Esprit de cour*, and another one of *The Gentleman’s Calling* (1660), attributed to Richard Allestree. He also possessed Gracián’s *El discreto* and two French translations of it. Perhaps Gracián was a favorite with Christiaan: he had his *Obras* and an English translation of his novel *El críticón*. Other civility texts were an English translation of de Courtin’s *Nouveau traité*, a copy of its sequel, a copy of Joachim Trotti de la Chétardie’s *Instructions pour un jeune seigneur* (and an English translation of it), and finally Jacques de Callières’ *La fortune des gens*
de qualité. One wonders which of the older books, for example, those by Castiglione, della Casa, Faret or Du Bosc, were first purchased by his father.

Clearly, the Huygenses did not come from the gutter. As Huygens’s father jokingly phrased it: “we are born from respectable folk, are not washed to shore on a straw or pissed down at the horse-fair.” Theirs was a world of culture and civility, and this applied to Christiaan no less than to his father and brother. Raised, like his brother, for a career at court, Christiaan became one of the most respected scientists of his day, famed for his work on optics, the planets and the pendulum clock. His would seem to be an altogether different world, more that of a scholarly recluse. But, as the cultural historian Steven Shapin argued in his study on civility and science in seventeenth-century England, science was to a remarkable degree a gentlemanly undertaking. The members of the Royal Society, including Christiaan, who joined in 1663, preferred to present themselves not as scholars but rather as free and independent gentlemen, as “disinterested amateurs.” This was already Castiglione’s view. His courtier was to be more than “passably learned” in all the arts and sciences of his day, but not to have mastered any of them professionally. As Shapin wrote, it was exactly the conventions and codes of gentlemanly conversation – this gentle identity – which offered a new and authoritative domain within seventeenth-century science for solving problems of scientific evidence, testimony, and assent.

Interestingly, this was precisely how Huygens had dabbled in science, like Descartes, Mersenne, Galileo, Oldenburg, and Boyle, without ever posing as more than a mere amateur. In 1636, he wrote: “I am really not a scholar but take an interest in all sciences.” And, he would have agreed with Blaise Pascal, whose Pensées were in his library as well: “We should not be able to say of a man: ‘he is a mathematician,’ or ‘a preacher,’ or ‘eloquent,’ but that he is an honnête homme!” In short, one should know a bit about everything.

Accordingly, there was a world of difference between the Huygenses and, for instance, that other famous inhabitant of Delft, the draper and microscopist Antoni van Leeuwenhoek. As Christiaan wrote of him, he was “a person unlearned both in sciences and languages” and communicated his findings to the Royal Society through rough and vulgarly styled letters, thus compromising his credibility. Indeed, Leeuwenhoek admitted this himself, writing in his first letter to the Society that he had “no style or pen to express my thoughts,” and that he was not raised “in languages or arts, but in trade.” The gentlemanly conversation among the members of the Royal Society (and one may presume of the Académie des Sciences, which Christiaan joined at its foundation in 1666) exemplifies how the codes of conduct set forth in the civility texts worked. As Anna Bryson has noted, these were both a means of definition and a means of orientation. In construing the “natural” superiority of the gentleman as embodied in his demeanor, deportment, gesture, and
conversation, the codes served to define social status and to enforce hierarchy and social exclusion. Obviously, as a representative of the merchant classes, Leeuwenhoek could not claim such superiority.

It is clearly these codes of conduct that the libraries of the Huygenses (and those of the Dutch elite at large) epitomized. The *bonne homme*, so proclaimed all the promoters of civility from Castiglione to the Chevalier de Méré and beyond, was never to be pinned down on any of the arts and sciences: no pedantry for him. Yet he should be sufficiently versed in them to display successfully his *sprezzatura*, a kind of effortlessness in which no exertion or intentionality was ever to shine through. Viewed from this perspective, the three libraries largely stood for all the effort, all the art, that had to be concealed. As Castiglione explained (in the words of Count Ludovico), *sprezzatura* was the art “which does not seem to be art.”

**Civility and Connoisseurs**

To be a “virtuoso” or, as Count Ludovico put it, to have “a knowledge of how to draw and an acquaintance with the art of painting itself,” was another of the courtier’s accomplishments. Such knowledge was “decorous and useful.”

Huygens and his sons were well aware of this. The elder Huygens learned to draw at an early age, primarily, so it seems, to hone his powers of judgment. As he told us, it was his father’s conviction: “that in the field of painting...it is impossible to arrive at even a partially founded judgment unless one has actively tried to practice the basic principles of this art oneself.” The father had noticed how learned men without such practical experience made fools of themselves by ponderously proclaiming their views on painting; he wished to spare his sons such ridicule. Moreover, he found that a trained hand and a drawing pencil might be useful in mathematics (it certainly proved so in the scientific work of his grandson Christiaan). Similarly, the traveler would be saved from having to write lengthy descriptions were he able to draw the places of interest he came upon. Castiglione had already forwarded similar advice, though more focused on the aristocrat’s military pursuits. Besides “being most noble and worthy in itself,” the count explained, the art of painting was useful “in many ways, and especially in warfare, in drawing towns, sites, rivers, bridges, citadels, fortresses, and the like.”

Huygens was first instructed by the painter and printmaker Hendrik Hondius, and in later years he took some additional lessons in miniature painting from his nephew Jacob Hoefnagel, son of Joris Hoefnagel. Similarly, he had his own children, not only the boys but also his daughter, Susanna, taught by the painter Pieter Moninx. While attending Leiden University, Constantijn Jr. and Christiaan were subsequently tutored by the painter Pieter Couwen-
hoorn. The father praised the talents of his children, especially those of Christiaan and a younger son, Philips, who died too young. Constantijn Jr., however, became the most remarkable draftsman of them all; he often worked with his friend and fellow liefhebber (art lover) Jan de Bisschop (1628-1671), and joined his private drawing academy in 1660. It was all part of an aestheticized social arena, in which a growing part of the elite sought to unite the ideals of otium and art. None of them professionals, but merely liefhebbers or virtuosos, they all “performed their expertise as a recreation,” as Michael Zell has noted, “never as an arduous or laborious application.”

Fleeing the town, the daily cares and worries of their negotium, these liefhebbers had a marked preference for landscapes and, like Huygens and his son Constantijn Jr., were often avid collectors and connoisseurs.

Huygens’s artistic acumen was impressive. That he was a true connoisseur is well known from his notes on the famous and not-yet-so-famous painters of his time. In addition, Huygens collected paintings by Scorel, Bruegel, Elsheimer, Saenredam, Brouwer, Palamedes, Vinckboons, Molenaer, and Teniers. These were all highly valued painters, and de Monconys duly praised the collection.

What treatises on painting did Huygens own? Surprisingly, his book catalogue includes only a 1619 edition of Giorgio Vasari’s Trattato della pittura and a copy of Franciscus Junius’s Painting of the Ancients (1638). The catalogue includes far more titles on architecture, from Vitruvius to Sebastiano Serlio. This suggests that many of the books on painting may have been transferred to the libraries of his sons. Interestingly, Huygens also dabbled in architecture. Both the imposing, classicist family house finished in 1636 and his country retreat Hofwyck finished in 1641 were designs of his own, though he certainly consulted two of his accomplished friends, the architects Jacob van Campen and Pieter Post.

Far more impressive is the collection of painting texts in the possession of Constantijn Jr. For instance, he owned Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo’s Trattato della pittura (1585), Karel van Mander’s Schilder-boeck (1618), and the French 1651 edition of Leonardo da Vinci’s Della pittura. We also find two editions of Vasari’s Vite de’ pittori (1648 and 1668) and of Charles Alphonse DuFresnoy’s L’art de peinture (1668 and 1684). Other titles are André Félibien’s Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des peintres (1666), Alexander Browne’s Ars pictoria (1669), Roger de Piles’s Conversations sur la connoissance de la peinture (1677), and an English translation of Roland Fréart’s Idée de la perfection de la peinture (1689). As Martin Weyl has pointed out, much of French art theory, in particular Félibien’s, was preoccupied with notions of civility and honnêteté. In addition, contemporary Italian authors, such as Baglione, Bisagno, Bellori, Dati, and Soprani, were represented in his library. These were all books “very necessary to the amateurs of our art,” as Con-
stantijn Jr. phrased it in his praise of Baglione’s *Vite de’ pittori*. And so was his collection on architecture, which rivaled his father’s. As a *liefhebber* he was also keen on the available practical writings. He owned Abraham Bosse’s *Traité des manières de graver* (1645) and three works by Willem Goeree: his *Inleydinge tot de algemeene teykenkonst* (1668), his *Menskunde of inleydingh tot de teykenkunde, schilderkunde, beelthouwery* (1680), and his *Natuerlijck en schilder-achtigh ontwerp der mensch-kunde* (1682). The latter volume was even dedicated to Constantijn Jr. for his encouragement of the author. Another book, Jan de Bisschop’s *Signorum veterum icones* (1669), a well-designed collection of prints of classical statues, was also dedicated to Constantijn Jr., a good friend of the author.

Christiaan’s drawing talents as a child may have equaled or surpassed his brother’s (in the 1650s they still exchanged drawings in their correspondence), but he would subordinate his art to his scientific investigations, often adding drawings to clarify an argument. This did not prevent him from reading widely on the subject and having ready opinions. In addition to Félibien, DuFresnoy, de Piles, and Fréart (again the English translation), he also owned Bosse’s manual on engraving and his *Le peintre converti* (1667). Moreover, like his father and brother, his bookshelves boasted a considerable number of books on architecture.

**Conclusion**

In an important article on collaborative painting in seventeenth-century Antwerp, Elizabeth Honig has drawn our attention to two types of artistic value: one to be traced in the artist’s hands as inscribed in the work of art, and the other “generated by and for its beholder, who enacts a certain performance before it.” Honig also pointed out that only in the first half of the seventeenth century did connoisseurship arise and an actual vocabulary of art discourse emerge. One fine and convincing example of this is Abraham Bosse’s *Sentiments sur la distinction des diverses manières de peinture*, published in 1649. In this paper I have only hinted at the performative aspects of connoisseurship, a subject that deserves much more attention. But I hope that my exploration of the subject has pointed out that the contemporary vocabularies of connoisseurship and civility were closely interwoven (an aspect missing in Honig’s text); indeed, we may write not only a social history of truth but also, in Shapin’s sense, a “social history of beauty.” That is another subject to explore.
On the long and impressive legacy of Castiglione's text, see Peter Burke.  

On Matthijs van Overbeke, see Aernout van Overbeke.  

Like Berckhout, Van der Horst was a member of the Gecommitteerde Raden van Hol-

land.

For a modern edition, see Constantijn Huygens.  

Quoted in H.A. Hofman, Constantijn Huygens, 1596-1687: Een christelijk-humanistisch

bourgeois gentilhomme in dienst van het Oranjehuis (Utrecht: Hes, 1983), pp. 118-19;

22 Quoted in Van Berkel 1982, p. 188.


32 Heijbroek 1983, p. 29: “tres necessaire à des amateurs de notre art.”

33 Heijbroek 1983, pp. 32-33.