

3. Individual Style and Workshop Production

Despite the progression towards a production process that involved the joint efforts of several people, during Rubens's lifetime there is no evidence of a particularly high esteem for single-handed execution as a result of this development. Although some painters achieved significantly higher prices than others, autograph work was hardly ever a requirement or part of a contract.⁶⁶ The situation is different concerning the question of authorship, which was in time affected by the previously-described changes in the art market.

3.1 The Value of Authorship in Rubens's Time

In 16th-century inventories, most of the listed artworks were not recorded with the artist's name and when they were, only a handful of painters were considered sufficiently important that their names were listed.⁶⁷ In Antwerp at the end of the 16th century, this canon of noteworthy names included around twelve artists, most prominently Frans Floris, Pieter Brueghel and Hieronymus Bosch.⁶⁸ Especially in the lower price segment, a strong deference to identities can confidently be ruled out. The standing of a painting was ensured by its image content and its fine craftsmanship, while the identity of its maker was largely considered negligible. An artist was primarily judged by his workmanship and paintings could be evaluated without background knowledge of their origin. After all, techniques such as fine painting were easily ascertainable by simply inspecting the painting in question.

66 See: Helmus 2006, p. 206. In Rubens's case, there are a few instances in which a contract between him and his patrons includes a section, which dictates an execution by the master himself; for instance, for the Medici Series the contract stipulated that Rubens was to paint all hands and faces by himself. Considering the number of paintings, this seems rather implausible and it likely that this section was included to assure the upmost quality. See for instance: Büttner 2006, p. 119.

67 See, among others: Büttner 2008b, p. 32; Sluijter 2008, p. 22; Montias 1982, p. 58; for instance, Montias references the art collection of Cornelis van Coolwijck – a tax collector from Delft – which was assessed in 1605. Not one artist's name is mentioned in connection to the 120 paintings in his possession.

68 For detailed patterns of attribution in those Antwerp inventories that contained more than one attribution (between 1550 and 1650), see: Honig 1995, p. 296–297.

However, during Rubens's lifetime the perception of artists' names associated with artworks changed: from the beginning of the 17th century onward, the percentage of paintings attributed began to rise slowly but gradually.⁶⁹ This circumstance must not be falsely understood as a growing appreciation of authorship, equal to the modern understanding. The majority of the works produced in the Netherlands were still made for the free market, and especially in this sector the names of the artists were generally less relevant. However, it cannot be denied that a growing number of artists acquired notable reputations, which transferred directly to a higher monetary value of their work.⁷⁰ If a painting was evidently higher priced simply through being connoted with the identity of a certain artist, where lies the difference to the modern understanding of authorship? To find an answer, one must examine the aspects in respect of which importance was attached to an artist's identity.

During Rubens's lifetime, writers such as Karel van Mander continued a tradition of recording artists' biographies, which had been begun by Giorgio Vasari in the middle of the 16th century.⁷¹ One crucial purpose was to create a work of reference by which one could determine "good" art. These *literati* understood themselves as protectors of quality by establishing canons of noteworthy artists.⁷² After all, fine taste was still considered an objective item, the limits of which could be rationally argued and determined. However, the previously-discussed changes to the way in which art was sold and the broader variety of consumers altered the situation. During prior centuries artworks were predominantly bought or commissioned directly from the artist who made them. Introducing third parties to the trade in the form of dealers and agents gave rise to uncertainties concerning the origins of the merchandise and numerous contemporary accounts

69 Research on inventories and sales records has been conducted by a number of scholars with varying focal points. Concerning the phenomenon of rising attributions, inventories show similar patterns, irrespective of the collections' proprietors or the town or region of origin. See: De Marchi/Van Miegroet 1996, p. 43; Honig 1995, p. 267; Tummers 2008, p. 38; John Michael Montias is especially aware of the fact that published inventories tend to over-represent the collections of wealthy burghers featuring a large number of attributed paintings. This can obviously lead to distorted results. However, he is confident that the rise in the relative importance of attributions represents a real phenomenon. See: Montias 1982, p. 222–227.

70 For examples of documents testifying to this *valore di stima*, see: Sluijter 2008, p. 10–13.

71 On Giorgio Vasari, see: De Girolami Cheney 2012; Olschki 1926. Mander published his first edition of the "*Schilder Boeck*" in 1604, in which he described the lives of over 250 artists. See for instance: Van Mander 1617.

72 It should be highlighted that the term "quality" was not used during the 17th century. To distinguish between varying degrees of workmanship, one generally used terms such as "good" and "beautiful".

bear testimony to legal disputes relating to artworks sold under false names.⁷³ In most cases, the claimant had purchased a painting from a dealer under fabricated or misleading information and the truth had come out coincidentally at a later date, usually through the input of a more knowledgeable third party.⁷⁴ Naturally this encouraged a growing demand for labelling and categorising. Moreover, the increasingly diverse consumer class was not always well equipped to identify inferior products and from the 1630s onward independent connoisseurs (neither dealers nor artists) appeared on the scene. Attaching more significance to the names of artists can thus be understood as a development within the scope of quality assurance. This is also emphasised by the fact that the elevation through reputation does not solely apply to the names of artists; indeed, the same can be said about appraised styles and schools.⁷⁵ A well-known artist did not bestow value upon his work by adding his personal, inimitable creative touch; in truth, the vital point was the quality associated with a well-known name. The argument against the valuing of an artist's personal touch is further strengthened by the fact that an artist's name did not represent a one-person show in any case, but rather a whole workshop, especially in the case of the more noteworthy artists.

3.2. Single-Handed Execution: Valued or Disregarded?

When discussing the importance of single-handed execution, it remains equally important to be conscious of the fact that our modern perceptions strongly differ from 17th-century views and opinions. Similar to the previous issue of valuing authorship, 17th-century workmanship is not compliant with our modern sense of value. The authenticity of a painting cannot be equated with the single-handedness of its execution. On the contrary, all paintings originating

73 Interestingly, at times the artists themselves opposed to the new developments. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Amsterdam Painters Guild filed a complaint to the mayor about dealers importing cheap copies and selling them for excessive prices. For details of this case and a listing of further accounts, see: De Marchi/Van Miegroet 1996, p. 36.

74 For a collection of such cases, see: Van der Veen 2005, p. 5ff.

75 Pieter Brueghel is a noteworthy example of an artist who deliberately copied the highly-esteemed style of Hieronymus Bosch to profit from its popularity. Likewise relevant in determining the monetary value of a painting was the purchasing patron. The Italian art dealer Giulio Mancini – familiar with the particularities of the trade – remarks in his *“Considerazioni Sulla Pittura”*: *“a painting in itself cannot have a definite price, [it] is linked to the quality of the patron who owns it and the artist who makes it”*. On passages by Giulio Mancini, see: Tummers 2008, p. 46. The Rotterdam-born philosopher and satirist Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733) wrote similarly: *“The Value that is set on Paintings depends not only on the Name of the Master [...] [but also on] the Quality of the Persons in whose Possession they are as well as the length of Time they have been in great Families”*. See: Mandeville 1924, I, p. 326.

from an artist's studio – even copies after his own creations – must be classified as “authentic” artworks. At the 23rd International Congress of Art History in 1992, Claus Grimm stated that when determining authorship in any 17th-century painting, the basic premise should be that of a collaborative painting process.⁷⁶ He suggests that contrary to the conventional approach – which considers most paintings autograph unless reason to doubt this is found – one should assume that a painting was completed with the help of assistants until substantial evidence suggests differently.⁷⁷ After all, it is well established nowadays that it was common practice for an artist to maintain a workshop. Producing artworks in collaboration with a workshop should be considered the standard practice of the 17th century. However, questions concerning the degree to which assistants were involved and more importantly how artists, dealers and buyers behaved towards these collaborative production procedures give rise to a variety of views.

Contemporary sources provide selective insights, which prove to be rather difficult to assemble into one coherent picture at first sight. On the one hand, it seems to have been a pleasurable elitist pastime to collectively analyse and dissect paintings, looking for characteristic brushstrokes that would allow for attribution.⁷⁸ This would virtually imply a strong consciousness of individual style. On the other hand, there is little room to doubt that the collaborative painting process represented common practice. Anna Tummers even speaks of a “*paradox of the seventeenth-century connoisseurship*”.⁷⁹ She concludes that the solution to finding a connection between these seemingly contradicting issues lies in the art lover's deliberate limitation to masterly passages.⁸⁰ However, a further possible solution to this “paradox” lies in relinquishing the assumption that a pupil's input comprised an individual, stylistically-uniform contribution. Rather than applying our modern role concept to the issue of a disciple's artistic influence, we should bear in mind that it was not intended, that a pupil's brushstroke should strongly differ from his master's “style”. On the contrary, members of a workshop were expected to strictly follow their master's

76 See: Grimm 1993, p. 643.

77 Grimm states that the document proving an artist did *not* employ a workshop should have to be found as proof for the unusual case of working alone, not the other way around. See: Grimm 1993, p. 634.

78 For an contemporary account of such an approach, see: De Piles 1677, p. 5–7.

79 See: Tummers 2008.

80 Provided that assistants completed only less important passages of a painting, one could still indulge in looking for characteristic brushstrokes, as long as one steered clear of the subsidiary parts. To a certain degree, it may be expected that the most difficult passages were indeed completed by the master himself, but unfortunately this cannot fully be relied on. See: Tummers 2008, p. 49ff.

stylistic instructions.⁸¹ Stylistic conformity with the master's style was certainly a prerequisite for working in Rubens's workshop, with a letter from Rubens to Annibale Chieppo – Minister to the Duke of Mantua – plainly revealing Rubens's attitude towards the stylistic characteristics of his helpers.⁸² When passing through Valladolid on a diplomatic mission to Spain, Rubens received a commission, which he was to complete as quickly as possible with the help of local painters. Rubens exasperatedly describes his assigned helpers as incompetent and careless, and he plainly complains about their lack of stylistic concordance. It becomes clear from this letter that during his travels to Italy, Rubens was already accustomed to assistance at this early point in his career. He also considered it essential to ensure that his assistants' style was similar to his own. It is most likely that these same preferences influenced his choice in staff when setting up his workshop in Antwerp a couple of years later. The participation of assistants can consequently not be seen as an individual contribution and looking to attribute paintings within a workshop is technically not compliant with a historically accurate understanding of an assistant's role.

In addition to stylistic compliance, it is necessary to take into account a considerably multi-faceted collaboration: paintings, and even small sections within one painting, cannot simply be categorised into being either autograph or a product of the workshop. Defining a pupil or colleague's involvement is much rather a matter of proportion than a choice between two mutually-exclusive alternatives. An oil painting is built up in a vast number of layers and the contribution of assistants must be seen as super- as well as juxtaposed. Put simply, it is not only a question of who completed the head of a figure and who painted the folds of garment, but also a matter of who applied the base coat versus who added the finishing touches. Of course, proficiency played a role and most likely not every assistant was capable of imitating his master convincingly on the whole. However, it can be reasonably assumed that ideally tasks were assigned according to expertise. After all, vouching for a satisfying result by means of expertise and supervision was a master's key selling argument. Every painting that left a studio *should* demonstrate the respective master's style and craftsmanship, irrespective of who contributed.⁸³ In reality, there are visible fluctuations in the performance of most well-known artists, and it is very likely that

81 This deference to stylistic conformity is documented by a Utrecht guild regulation from 1641, which prohibited the staff members of a studio to paint in any style but their master's. Wetering 1993, p. 628.

82 For the complete letter see: Magurn 1955, p. 33.

83 This is consistent with contemporary accounts such as the description of Van Dyck's studio practice given by Everhard Jabach, which indicates that the master maintained all responsibilities irrespective of who additionally contributed to an artwork. De Piles 1969, p. 291ff.

assistants were responsible for many of them.⁸⁴ However, it remains to be emphasised that these fluctuations were most probably undesired and involuntary and did not occur in every painting. Most importantly, a thoroughly satisfying result cannot automatically be associated with a lack of assistance.

These collaborative working methods raise the issue of how 17th-century patrons felt about the contribution of pupils. Answering questions in this context satisfactorily is particularly difficult when keeping in mind what the historian Reinhart Koselleck called the “*veto power of sources*”, namely the notion that sources can only give reliable information about what *cannot* be said about past events.⁸⁵ In other words, sources of any nature should never serve as the basis for interpretations. Eddy de Jongh says quite plainly that “*a general fixation on authenticity, such as we have known for years definitely did not exist*”.⁸⁶ Max J. Friedländer was of a similar opinion, stating that autonomous execution was not taken for granted by contemporary patrons.⁸⁷ By contrast, some scholars like to see our modern fixation on single-handed execution legitimised by the tastes of 17th-century connoisseurs who supposedly shared these same preferences. Contemporary preferences of this sort would naturally invalidate the accusation that the search for a master’s autograph core œuvre is an anachronistic endeavour. Ernst van de Wetering of the Rembrandt Research Project addressed the issue in a lecture in the following, unambiguous terms: “[without contemporary regard for a master’s single-handed execution] *the idea [...] that there is a need to isolate works of Rembrandt’s hand from that of his pupils and assistants, would be a complete anachronism, a wrongly applied projection of the 19th-century cult of genius to everyday 17th-century workshop practice*”.⁸⁸ In the sixth and final volume of *A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings*, Van de Wetering addresses the issue of autograph paintings and their contemporary evaluation by referring to Jaap van der Veen’s essay on the subject, which was published in the fourth volume

84 In this regard, Roger de Piles sought to defend Rubens’s honour by making his assistants responsible for any lack of quality. De Piles describes his issues in the following words: “*La réputation de Rubens s’étant étendue par toute l’Europe, il n’y eut pas un Peintre qui ne voulut avoir un morceau de sa main; et comme il était extrêmement sollicité de toutes parts, il fit faire sur ses Desseins coloriez, et par d’habiles Disciples un grand nombre de Tableaux, qu’il retouchait ensuite avec des yeux frais, avec une intelligence vive, & avec une promptitude de main qui y répandait entièrement son esprit, ce qui luy acquit beaucoup de biens en peu de tems: mais la différence de ces sortes de Tableaux, qui passaient pour être de luy, d’avec ceux qui étaient véritablement de sa main, fit du tort à sa réputation; car ils étaient la plupart mal dessinez, et légèrement peints*”. See: Teyssèdre 1958, p. 134.

85 See: Koselleck 1995, p. 153. For a discussion of Koselleck’s principle regarding Rubens’s biography, see: Büttner 2015, p. 10.

86 See: De Jongh 1990, p. 2–3.

87 Friedländer 1942, p. 168.

88 Wetering 1993, p. 627–628.

of the series.⁸⁹ Van der Veen assumes that while single-handed execution primarily concerned the very high end of the art market, it was indeed a major concern during the 17th century. To support this assertion, he cites numerous documents that – in his opinion – allude to the appreciation of single-handed execution.⁹⁰ His reasoning is postulated in particular on his interpretation of the term *original*, which he defines as “a work made by the hand of a certain master”.⁹¹ Van der Veen thus attaches an additional meaning to the word, interpreting it as more informative than the term *principaal*, which is best described as the first version of a subject, the exact opposite of a copy.⁹² He supports this hypothesis with a quote from Franciscus Junius’s *Schilder Boeck* in which Junius describes the term *original* in the following words: “most are wont to prove their knowledge of art by being able to immediately distinguish originals from copies. The works that the excellent masters themselves have made after life, are here referred to as original pieces”.⁹³ However, it is difficult to deduce a precise interpretation of the term from this text passage. “Original” may well solely refer to the initial version of a subject, without necessarily presupposing single-handed execution. In accordance with Anna Tummers and Jan Sluiter, the two terms *principaal* and *original* can be seen as synonymous and the notion that the term *original* offers additional information about a painting’s authorship should be neglected.⁹⁴

89 The final volume was published in 2014 with the subheading “A Complete Survey”. Van de Wetering writes: “What led to Van der Veen’s research [...] was the increasingly urgent question of whether the goal of the RRP – the compilation of a canon of Rembrandt’s autograph paintings – was not perhaps in the end anachronistic. [...] On the basis of numerous 17th-century sources Van der Veen established that art-lovers in that period in fact attached as much significance to the authenticity of works from the master of a workshop as we do today”. Van de Wetering 2015, p. 51–52.

90 For instance, Van der Veen mentions cases such as that of the painter Bartolomeus van der Helst, who was asked if he alone had worked on a painting in question, after having already attested to the fact that the painting was a *principaal*. Van der Veen interprets this as a repeated inquiry and a testament to the fact that single-handed execution was valued highly. At the same time, one could also argue that this case shows that the term *principaal* only alluded to the fact that the painting in question showed the first version of a composition. Accordingly, the description did not yet offer information concerning the execution of the work, thus warranting the second question. See: Van der Veen 2005, p. 9; and the following footnote below.

91 See: Van der Veen 2005, p. 4.

92 There are numerous different interpretations for these two frequently-cited terms. For instance, similar to Van der Veen’s interpretation of *original*, Frits Lugt interpreted the meaning of *principaal* as “original by the master concerned” in his article on Italian painting published in 1936. See: Van der Veen 2005, p. 3.

93 Van der Veen additionally cites the Dutch translation of the “De pictura veterum libri tres”, published in Amsterdam in 1637: “[...] plagten de meeste kracht haerer Konst-kennisse daer in voornaemelick te bewijzen, datse d’originelen staends-voets van de copijen weten t’onderscheyden. d’Oorspronckelicke wercken die de treffelicke Meesters nae ’t leven selver ghemaect hebben, worden alhier door den name van originele stucken te verstaen ghegeven”. Van der Veen 2005, p. 4 (footnote 7).

94 See: Tummers 2009, p. 94.

Although it seems highly likely that a master primarily committed himself to the initial version of a subject (and left the less demanding copying activity to his pupils), it cannot be presumed that all first versions were one hundred per cent single-handedly completed. Consequently, when documents attest to preferences towards the *original* or *principaal* version of a subject, they were not necessarily triggered by a desire for single-handed execution. However, the fact remains that *original* works were more valuable.⁹⁵ If it was not the single-handed-execution aspect of a painting that made it more desirable, which key aspect added value? It could be argued that until the 19th century a painting was primarily the product of craftsmanship, as well as costly material. Therefore, art was sold like any other commodity and prices were primarily determined by hourly rates.⁹⁶ Coming up with new compositions undoubtedly took a certain amount of time, which in turn was saved when making copies, which could consequently explain the lower price.⁹⁷ In other words, the difference in price would lie in the monetary compensation for additional effort rendered. However, this leaves open the question of the first version's sales argument. If there had been no consumer preference, surely the additional costs would have been evenly divided between all versions of a subject, leaving all paintings equally expensive. For first versions to be saleable at higher prices, they must have had a key selling point valued by collectors. Neil de Marchi and Hans van Miegroet argue that it was the remuneration for *inventio* that added monetary value to the *original*.⁹⁸ The Latin term *inventio* was used from the 16th century onwards to define the process of designing a work of art and is derived from classical rhetoric. On the other hand, art theoretical texts such as the previously-quoted treatise on the painting of the ancients by Franciscus Junius show a different understanding, underlining the regard for *imitatio*. In his treatise, Junius exemplifies that the distinction between original works and their copies dates

95 De Marchi and Van Miegroet have done extensive research on the price difference between originals and copies. See: De Marchi/Van Miegroet 1996; De Marchi/Van Miegroet 1994. In Rubens's case, a list of paintings Rubens himself sent to Sir Dudley Carleton offers insights into his pricing policy. See: Magurn 1955, p. 60–61. It should be noted that compared to today's standards, the difference in price was marginal. Generally copies were in high demand; for instance, from the end of the 16th century onwards, paintings by "old masters" ("older" from the viewpoint of the 16th century viewer) were copied for the growing market, a practice in which Rubens also participated. See: Büttner 2006, p. 117.

96 Nils Büttner makes reference to Adriaen van der Werff, who kept meticulous records and who charged 25 Guilders a day. See: Büttner 2006, p. 114. In addition to the cost of labour, expensive materials such as wood panels and pigments influenced the price.

97 A deposition from 1621 relating to a bet attests pointedly to the "quality aspect" of assessing art: The portrait painter Hubert Grimani boasted he could make a copy of a painting that would surpass the original. As Montias highlights, "*it did not matter so much who painted the original and whether his idea or conception had been imitated or purloined; what really mattered was whether an artist had the craft and skill to do a 'better job'.*" Montias 1982, p. 235.

98 See: De Marchi/Van Miegroet 1996.

back to antiquity and that the imitation of nature as the highest goal of art production caused this distinction, whereby every copy of a work of art can only be inferior since it is no longer modelled directly after nature.⁹⁹

One further aspect that might have played a role in securing the high regard for *principaal* work is quality. It has already been highlighted that the involvement of assistants should never be categorically ruled out, not even for the first versions of a subject. On the other hand, copies present a situation that is slightly easier to assess: although not all *principaal* versions of a subject were necessarily entirely completed by the master himself, making copies in turn was typically solely the assistants' job.¹⁰⁰ In terms of a painting's quality, this means that *if* a workshop produced a painting of lesser quality, it was more likely to be a copy than a *principaal*. After all, paintings are very difficult to identically reproduce. A significant example in this context is an exchange of letters concerning a barter trade between an English minister Sir Dudley Carleton and Rubens from 1618. Sir Carleton was looking to trade a collection of antiques for several paintings, and he specifically requested the paintings to be by Rubens's hand.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, Rubens also included paintings executed by his pupils in a list, which Carleton initially rejected. After Rubens had guaranteed that all works were of great quality – including the ones begun by pupils – Carleton relented.¹⁰² This telling correspondence will be discussed in further detail in a following chapter, although at this point it serves to show that for Carleton the motive for preferring an original was in fact a way of ensuring that he would receive the best quality possible. In conclusion, it can be said that contrary to general concerns regarding a painting's quality, the appreciation of authorship in our modern sense concerned with the intrinsic value of a specific individual's contribution is not detectable during the 17th century.

99 For excerpts of Junius's treatise in original language and further considerations, see: Büttner 2006, p. 115.

100 See for instance: De Marchi/Van Miegroet 1996, p. 34.

101 Magurn 1955, p. 59.

102 Rubens writes: "*Your Excellency has taken only the originals, with which I am perfectly satisfied. Yet Your Excellency must not think that the others are mere copies, for they are so well retouched by my hand that they are hardly to be distinguished from originals. Nevertheless, they are rated at a much lower price*". Magurn 1955, p. 61–62.