

2. Innovation and Art: Antwerp as a Centre of Production and Sale

Given that our modern outlook on art and its appreciation so strongly differs from historical circumstances, these past conditions must be closely examined to make constructive progress when examining workshop processes. In order to avoid potential bias and adequately discuss the making of 17th-century art, it is necessary to establish an understanding of the then-existing conception of artistry and craftsmanship. This also includes details on an artwork's reception by contemporary viewers, and in a further step the issue of which factors played a role in determining an artwork's value. A strong awareness of historic cultural perceptions should precede – and form the foundation of – any consideration. Accordingly, the following chapters aim to provide the reader with a concise and solid overview, invoking the current state of research.

2.1. An Evolving Art Market

To begin with, it seems necessary to clarify the potentially confusing and somewhat elusive term of “art market”. In the context of this work, the term will stand for the arena in which works of art were transferred from the producer to the buyer, either directly or through a third party.²⁵ It should be made clear that the art market was a heterogeneous structure, influenced by a wide range of diverse production and various buying patterns. With this in mind, the main focus of this publication will lie on developments in the Southern Provinces, particularly Antwerp. The conditions of sale could strongly vary from city to city, partly due to diverse guild regulations. Additionally, varying forms of production and intermediate trade contributed to sustaining a multiplicity of selling practices and helped to mould a very heterogeneous market.

When artworks initially became increasingly accessible to a broader stratum of society during the 15th century, they were mainly commissioned for religious purposes such as private devotion.²⁶ During the 16th century, paintings had newly risen to the status of a key player in market economics and economising changes to the production process helped to meet the demands of an ever-growing range of customers. It is important to note that the price spectrum was wide ranging and it would be a mistake to make general statements about paintings or artworks without taking this into account.

25 For a corresponding definition of “art market”, see: Tattersall 1996, p. 558.

26 For an study on the development of the art market in the Southern Netherlands during the 15th century, see: Campbell 1976.

The more expensive side of this spectrum was still by no means accessible to the wider public. However, it is safe to assume that paintings had never previously been bought by a wider range of people.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the methods of producing and marketing art in the Netherlands underwent noticeable changes. A lot of scholarly attention has focused on developments in the Dutch Republic during the 17th century, and although this was indeed a time of great innovation, a lot of change had already taken place in the preceding century. Most notably, it would be an error to assume that the Southern Provinces were isolated from developments in the Dutch Republic. These two territories cannot be seen as segregated cultural areas and the assumption that they were split into two religiously-homogenous zones – namely an altogether catholic south and a completely protestant north – has been refuted.²⁷

During the 16th century, there were substantial changes concerning the way in which art was bought and sold. Prior to the 15th century, the church and nobility would commission art almost exclusively, and regardless of whether it was a commissioned work or not paintings were generally bought directly from the artist who made them, without intermediation of third parties.²⁸ The artist's studio not only served as a production site, but also simultaneously as a showroom and selling location. Buyers knew whom they were buying from, and the ownership of artworks was generally linked to patronage. Moreover, the whole selling process was strongly regulated by the towns' guilds. As previously mentioned, guild regulations varied from city to city, but despite varying degrees of stringency, a common goal was to exercise quality control and maintain a certain monopoly. This was achieved through policies such as regulating imports and openly practising nepotism. For instance, sons of masters enjoyed facilitated conditions of entry.²⁹ Even though the written-down regulations cannot always be equated with historic actualities and a certain "rules versus play" must be considered, the guild rules allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the art market. For instance, only masters were permitted to sell paintings for their own profit and the privilege to sell was limited to one site per person in some cities. The guilds

27 In this context, the international symposium on "Art and Catholicism" held in the *Städel Museum* in Frankfurt offered key insights. In respect to Rubens's relevance and reputation in the Dutch Republic, as a painter who is often deemed to be perhaps the most significant artist of the "Counter Reformation", the Evening Lecture of Nils Büttner proved very insightful. Büttner convincingly illustrated how the work of Rubens – a catholic painter by all means – was overwhelmingly represented in Amsterdam during his lifetime.

28 This is not applicable to tapestries, which were already then commonly sold by dealers. This is mainly due to the extremely high cost of production, which often prevented weavers to act as their own retailers and necessitated investors who put up the capital. See: Thomson 1973, p. 189–222.

29 On the regulations of Antwerp's Guild of Saint Luke, see: Vermeulen 2003, P. 130ff; Maximiliaan Martens offers in-depth insights on the statutes in Bruges: Martens 1998, p. 19ff.

likewise monitored which artists had the right to display and sell their produce via a shop window and the sale of imported paintings was often restricted.³⁰ Conditions were relaxed at annual fairs – so-called *jaarmarkten* – during which the regulations were suspended and trading with art produced outside of the respective city was made possible.

During the course of the 16th century, markets became increasingly relevant as points of sale, and in the case of Antwerp the so-called *panden* emerged.³¹ *Panden* were sale halls specifically designed to market luxury goods. Although they originally opened concurrently with the *jaarmarkten*, from the mid-16th century onwards these sales locations were accessible all year round. The *panden* were a vital part of Antwerp's commercial infrastructure and numerous sales halls existed throughout the city.³² Over time, most of the halls specialised in a specific luxury product. For instance, the *schilderspand* primarily focused – albeit without limitation – on paintings.³³ Foreign artists and merchants could rent a stall and the *panden* played a significant role in establishing Antwerp's export trade.

In addition to these specialised markets, entirely new selling models developed. Aside from shop windows and annual fairs, art was sold via unprecedented channels such as auctions, lotteries and most importantly through professional dealers. Art dealers became influential to such an extent that it became customary to admit *beeldvercopere* into the Guild of Saint Luke.³⁴ In addition to the primary market, a notable secondary market for paintings developed.³⁵ This market was largely fuelled by the selling of estates and is comparatively well documented due to probate records.

30 On workshops and working methods of painters active in the Southern Netherlands during the 15th century, see: Campbell 1981.

31 In 1517, the *pand* nearby the Church of Our Lady practically became permanent fixture. See: Van den Brink 2001, p. 20.

32 This was not a phenomenon specific to Antwerp. In Bruges, from 1482 onwards the annual market was held in the “*Pand*” close to the Franciscan friary. In 1508, a second market took place each January. Van den Brink 2001, p. 16.

33 On the emergence of the *panden*, a unique Antwerp phenomenon see: Vermeylen 2003, p. 15ff.

34 In Antwerp, the art dealer Jan Meduwael became a master of the guild as early as 1518 (See: Rombouts/Van Lerijs 1961a, p. 89). However, Meduwael was somewhat of an isolated case and the acceptance of dealers (*beeldvercooper*, *cunstvercooper* or *heylichvercooper*) only became more habitual from the 1560s onwards. See: Rombouts/Van Lerijs 1961a, p. 217ff.

35 For instance, it was possible to acquire paintings by Rubens on the secondary market from around 1620 onwards. These works are not to be confused with “paintings after Rubens” by other artists, which were also available in the open market. Since Rubens's specific style of painting was in high demand, other artists created imitations based on Rubens's recognisable stylistic characteristics. These works are generally categorised as “school” of Rubens today. See: Büttner 2006, p. 118.

Antwerp rose to a central position within the European trade network when shipping routes moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean and general economic growth went hand in hand with the expansion of the art market.³⁶ In contrast to other artistic centres across Europe, where painters were primarily active for regional buyers, the Flemish market was spurred by pan-European demand.³⁷ Thus, Antwerp provided numerous venues for selling art and a large wealthy elite increased the demand for luxury goods. Linked to high demand, the number of working artists rapidly increased. In Antwerp, between 1470 and 1479, a total of 114 masters and apprentices were newly registered in the Guild of Saint Luke.³⁸ By the 1520s, this number had grown by 150% to a total of 286 registrations.

This prosperous expansion of Antwerp's economy and the art market did not continue steadily until Rubens's lifetime. The political crises and the recession during the second half of the 16th century left a disastrous impact on the artistic sector. The luxury market was particularly susceptible to any form of political turmoil as it was dependant on long-distance trade and foreign markets. Religious conflict and a period of Calvinist rule that perpetrated waves of iconoclasm led to large-scale emigration, including a large part of the previously-thriving artistic community. It is difficult to determine when exactly full recession hit the city, but in 1585 the river Scheldt was closed and at that point Antwerp had doubtlessly lost its huge economic importance.³⁹

Antwerp never fully re-established itself as the capital of commerce north of the Alps and during the 17th century the Dutch Republic emerged as the new major player in the art market and international trade.⁴⁰

36 On Antwerp's rise to becoming Europe's most powerful mercantile city, see: Van der Wee/Materné 1993, *passim*.

37 For instance, Italian collections show significant shares of imported works. See: Nuttall 2004.

38 The preserved records of the Guild of St. Luke are kept in the Royal Academy of Antwerp and were published by Philippe-Felix Rombouts and Theódoor van Lerijs between 1864 and 1876: Rombouts/Van Lerijs 1961a. The accounts begin with 1453 and from 1469 onwards apprentices and their respective instructors are listed in addition to newly-accepted masters (Rombouts/Van Lerijs 1961a, p. 19).

39 Even long before this date, Antwerp had experienced a number of economic setbacks. For instance, in 1557, the Spanish state bankruptcy had dire consequences for the city's financiers, jeopardising the city's dominant position as a financial hub. However, the city was able to recover and experienced another economic upswing around 1560. See: Vermeylen 2003, p. 40; Van der Wee 1963, II, p. 213–222.

40 According to probate inventory attributions, the number of artists active in the Dutch Republic blew up during the first decades of the 17th century. In 1619, there were four times as many working painters than there had been in 1600, and by 1639 this number had doubled again. See: de Vries 1991, p. 256ff.

Nevertheless, prosperity eventually returned to the city. During the first decade of the 17th century, the number of guild registrations showed a staggering 610 new admissions.⁴¹ To some extent, Rubens's choice to reside in his war-torn hometown further contributed to rehabilitate the city's reputation as an artistic centre.

2.2. Changes in Painting Processes and Workshop Organisation

As discussed in the previous chapter, by the middle of the 16th century Antwerp had become the main location for both the production and distribution of art in the Netherlands, as well as being a major player in the European art market. However, not only the selling and marketing aspect continuously progressed throughout the century, but also the production of art itself, which underwent economical adjustments. With growing demand and a rising number of active artists, it is unsurprising that the way in which paintings were manufactured adapted to changing circumstances.

For one, the painting process was progressively streamlined to enable maximum efficiency and output. This not only applied to paintings, but the production of other forms of art such as sculptures and carved retables underwent a similar process of rationalisation.⁴² Not all changes were new and unprecedented, but developments picked up with growing demand.⁴³ Painters increasingly used one design for a number of compositions – in simple terms, recycling their ideas – and a collection of reusable patterns became an important component of any painter's

41 See: Rombouts/Van Lierus 1961a, p. 94–113/p. 410–459. To some extent, any increase in admissions is naturally linked to the demographic expansion of the city. Around 1500, Antwerp had a population of approximately 50,000. Before the start of the Eighty Years' War in 1568, the city had grown to over 100,000 inhabitants, making it an enormous metropolis by contemporary standards. However, during the first decade of the 17th century, the total population had declined again to around 50,000. The rise in enrolment thusly indicates a growing artistic sector. See: Vermeylen 2003, p. 37.

42 On the standardisation process of carved retables for the open market and an extensive bibliography, see: Jacobs 1998.

43 Paintings have been produced on a serial basis since the 15th century; for instance, Jan van Eyck duplicated his compositions.

equipment.⁴⁴ These sketchbooks went beyond the model books of the previous decades, whose purpose had primarily been to provide a stock of motifs rather than being tools to aid the painting process. Designs were at times transferred by auxiliary techniques such as the tracing of outlines and pouncing, and in some instances these working steps can still be identified under the paint surface with the use of modern technologies.⁴⁵ Although it is very difficult to make general statements, it is safe to say that across the board paintings were produced as efficiently as possible and the general trend went towards producing paintings on spec for the open market rather than designing individual pieces for specific customers.⁴⁶ For obvious reasons, this excluded genres such as portraiture, although in most other genres the growing market and its indirect sales outlets encouraged anticipatory production.

The changing the method of production was accompanied by a change in the structure of workshops.⁴⁷ In general, it is assumed that the size of workshops grew, not least because the growing importance of periodic markets required artists to build up a supply of paintings in advance. However, the extent to which the workshops grew and whether they expanded across the pricing spectrum has been subject to debate. Maximiliaan Martens and Natasja Peeters have shown that according to the membership lists of the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke, the vast majority of masters employed three apprentices or fewer.⁴⁸ However, these numbers do not paint an entirely accurate picture in the sense that these lists only reveal the number of masters and apprentices, the only two professional groups who were required to register. The structures within

44 The extent to which studies and drawings were esteemed an important part of artistic property is shown in a dispute between Gerard David and his former pupil Ambrosius Benson. The details of their legal confrontation were complicated, but emphasis on the right of ownership becomes abundantly clear. For a summary of the dispute, see: Ainsworth 1998, p. 7. With time, working with a collection of designs became standard practice, which was especially the case for Rubens, who treasured his collection of drawings to such an extent that he specifically mentioned them in his will. He stipulated that his sketchbook was only to be sold after the last of his sons – or future sons-in-law – had decided against the profession of a painter. Consequently, the collection of designs remained family property until 1657 – seventeen years after Rubens's death – when his youngest daughter entered a convent. Rubens's testament was published by Pieter Génard in 1882, see: Génard 1896.

45 For a study on changes in technique such as pouncing, particularly in the oeuvre of Gérard David, see: Ainsworth 1994. On the usage of cartoons in the workshop of Bernard van Orley, see: Van den Brink 1995.

46 A change in technique and signs of collaborative working methods can be seen in the works of numerous artists scattered locally, such as Bernard van Orley, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, Gerard David, Jan van Scorel and Maarten van Heemskerck. See respectively: Ainsworth 2006; Jansen 2006; Berrie/Metzger 1995; Faries/Steinbüchel/Van Asperen de Boer 1995.

47 On the issue of cost-cutting strategies, division of labour and changes in workshop practice, see: Martens 1998, p. 19; Vermeylen 2003, p. 5; Faries 2006, p. 1ff; Campbell 1981, p. 44ff.

48 According to guild records, between 1500 and 1579 only seven masters employed more than five apprentices. See: Martens/Peeters 2006, p. 211ff.

a studio were undoubtedly much more complex and involved a number of different working relationships, depending on the employee's level of expertise and many other factors. One occupational group that was not required to register with the guild were journeymen, referred to as *gezellen* or *knapen*.⁴⁹ Unlike apprentices – whose contracts generally included the agreement on what instructions the pupil was to receive and entailed an apprenticeship fee – journeymen were trained painters who were hired for their workforce. As Lorne Campbell highlights, a study of the Tournai guild records reveals that painters took an average of 7.7 years between finishing an apprenticeship and becoming independent masters.⁵⁰ Furthermore, there was a high degree of mobility and most artists who became masters had not served their apprenticeship in Tournai. The Haarlem guild even stipulated that in order to become a master, a painter had to work for a minimum of three years as an apprentice and at least one additional year as a journeyman.⁵¹ This would indicate that at any given time at least one-quarter of the apprenticed workforce operated under the radar of guild records. Presumably this number was many times higher, given that not all painters ended up becoming masters and some must have remained as employees throughout their career.

A closer look at the Antwerp's guild records show a very similar picture. While a comprehensive study of all apprentices registered would exceed the scope of this dissertation, samples indicate a strong resemblance to the conditions indicated above. Not all apprentices stayed in Antwerp to acquire the status of master, and if they did, it generally took six to ten years.⁵² The extent of the deviation between guild records and actual workshop size at times is further exemplified by the workshop of Frans Floris, who – according to Karel van Mander – had 120 assistants working for him throughout his lifetime, employing a large and highly productive studio.⁵³ However, the guild records only mention a single pupil.⁵⁴

49 In general, a *gezel* was a person who associated with or accompanied someone else. As Liesbeth Helmus highlights, within the context of craftsmen's guilds the term more specifically characterised an individual who was no longer an apprentice or servant, but had yet to achieve the level of a master. See: Helmus 2006, p. 203.

50 See: Campbell 1981, p. 48.

51 The elaborate draft statutes date from 1631. See: Tummers 2009, p. 98.

52 Random samples include Damian Ortelsman (apprenticed in 1534/registered as master in 1545), Bertele Goes (1540/1549), Cornelis Priers (1549/1554), Cornelis Mettereeren (1550/1556), Nicasus Duryin (1550/1557), and Coppen Ghenoets (1523/1535). For a publication of the full records, see: Rombouts/Van Lerijs 1961a.

53 Van Mander 1617, p. 321.

54 See: Van de Velde 1975a, p. 441.

In any case, forms of expansion inevitable promoted changes in execution such as a division of labour. With differing proficiency levels within a workshop, distributing tasks according to the members' abilities seemed the only logical consequence to ensure a consistent product.

The major changes to the way of selling and the production of art left an irreversible imprint on local practice and a declining market could not fully undo newly-developed habits. This becomes apparent when looking at artists who left behind extensive *œuvres*. They confirm these methods of production, simply due to the fact that they generated an output far beyond the abilities of any individual. Rubens himself serves as a good example: on average, his studio produced three paintings every two weeks, a production rate that is only conceivable against the background of a well-functioning workshop.

2.3. Catalysts for Changes in Subject Matter

The increase in efficiency changed artistic output in more ways than simply the number of paintings produced per artist. Inevitably, the product itself also became amended, due to new methods and the changing market. The degree of interdependence of economic factors and creative work is still subject of scholarly debate. For a long time, changes in technique and style were only conceivable as results of artistic creativity, affected at the very most by a continuous progression of style. However, John Michael Montias rightly states that in art it hardly possible to keep “product” and “process” innovation distinct, as any cost-cutting innovation will generally affect the appearance of the product.⁵⁵ Accordingly, it is impossible to alter the way in which a painting is made without changing its appearance to some extent. Changes manifested themselves not only in the manner of execution, but they also contributed to shaping the content of paintings.

One development lay in the phenomenon of artistic specialisation. In a large market, excelling in a certain field undoubtedly offered unparalleled opportunity to distinguish oneself and defy competition. The result of this development had a strong impact and opened the way for an emergence of new distinct genres within painting. Furthermore, the range of subjects worthy of artistic representation adapted to a growing and changing clientele. The Antwerp Mannerists can be cited as one example among many, as a group of painters who produced specific subjects in a recognisable style, in line with international demand. This specialisation on particular genres

55 In the late 1980s, John Michael Montias strongly influenced the field of interdisciplinary research between art history and economics. The introduction of the concept of product and process innovation in relation to artworks is referred to as the “Montias innovation thesis”. See: Montias 1990, p. 52ff.

opened the way for fruitful collaborations between different studios, a phenomenon that was later often found in Rubens's oeuvre. Indeed, Rubens would collaborate with fellow masters such as Frans Snyders, an expert in the depiction of animals.⁵⁶ Even within a specific genre, there was sufficient competition to allow for further specialisation. Certain artists made conscious use of stylistic differentiation to encourage the development of distinctive market identities and thus achieve a competitive advantage. Frans Hals can be cited as a noteworthy example in this regard, as he employed his pictorial methods intentionally, successively emphasising the characteristic sketchy execution.⁵⁷

Furthermore, new production processes naturally promoted the production of copies and similar versions of compositions. Until today, numerous variants of a design pose a difficulty when it comes to determining their origin and the chronological order of their creation.⁵⁸ Opinions on the main cause of more elusive changes in art such as style and subject matter strongly differ. Some scholars see the Italian influence as a driving force. Flemish artists were indeed increasingly influenced by Italian art, notably by the works of Michelangelo and Raphael. During the 15th century, painters from the Netherlands began visiting Italy more frequently to perfect their training. Commercial routes simplified the journey and besides further aspects such as religious motives, Italy increasingly offered various job opportunities for northern artists.⁵⁹ Concurrently, influential compositions found the way north, making Italian ideas accessible to those who did not undertake the prestigious journey themselves.⁶⁰

56 Snyders would paint the animal for subjects such as "*Prometheus Bound*". One version of this subject is kept in the *Philadelphia Museum of Art* (W1950-3-1).

57 Christopher Atkins refers to Hals's specific stylistic differentiation as his "signature style". He derived this term from two concepts coined by Richard Wolheim, namely that of "individual style", which Wolheim describes as intentional and personal, as well as "signature" elements, which can reveal authorship but are not necessarily intentionally applied by the artist. Atkins 2012, p. 15. On the market's impact on Frans Hals's stylistic specialisation, see: *ibid.* p. 16ff.

58 On the subject of numerous version of one composition, see for instance: *Cat.-Tokyo 1993*; Van den Brink 2001; Büttner 2017.

59 In art theory, the benefits of a journey to Italy were reflected at a comparatively late stage. Karel van Mander – who himself had visited Italy between 1573 and 1577 – highlighted the importance of visiting Rome in 1614. On artists' journeys to Italy, see: Plagemann 2008.

60 Influential compositions such as Raphael's cartoons for the "*Age of the Apostles*" tapestry series found their way north and made huge impressions on local artists. Ainsworth 2006, p. 99ff.

Besides the more obvious stylistic references, the Italian influence is also seen as a factor concerning the shifts in workshop practices and painting techniques.⁶¹ For instance, Maryan Ainsworth argues that Italian working methods were increasingly introduced to the Netherlands throughout the century, influencing the way in which paintings were designed and completed.⁶²

Others see the reasons in a much wider, socio-economical context and regard the rise of capitalism as the main driving force.⁶³ For instance, Elizabeth Honig writes: "*In the course of the 16th century, capitalism emerged as the dominant, indeed the only mode of social organization of the economy; earlier modes of production persisted, but only insofar as they fit into a socio-political framework rooted in capitalism*".⁶⁴

Ultimately, like any market, the art market was a demand-driven structure and while traditionally the majority of patrons were clergy or nobility, the 16th century brought an additional range of secular clients such as civic institutions and private patronage.⁶⁵ This included a strong demand for religious paintings for devotional purposes, although to a growing middle class a variety of secular genres also presented a way to heighten and cultivate their status. The extent to which artistic output is linked to demand is not least documented by Rubens's himself, whose production of numerous large format altarpieces is inseparably linked to the trends of the Counter Reformation.

61 For example, this was the case with underdrawings, which show certain changes in technique. On developments in underdrawings within the works of Jan van Scorel or Bernard van Orley, see respectively: Faries/Steinbüchel/Van Asperen de Boer 1995; Ainsworth 2006.

62 For an overview of Italian influences – particularly Raphael – on workshop practices of Bernard van Orley, see: Ainsworth 2006, p. 103ff.

63 The aforementioned American economist John Michael Montias strongly contributed to this assertion that market forces were a key factor in shaping the development of new styles and methods. See: Montias 1982; Montias 1990.

64 Honig 1998, p. 4.

65 For a study on how a continuous demand for artworks propelled the Italian art scene, see: Goldthwaite 1993. Filip Vermeulen applies the same categories to the Southern Netherlands. See: Vermeulen 2003, p. 141ff.