

Adriaen Van Ostade's Quacksalvers

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The small etching by Adriaen van Ostade, called *The Quacksalver*, offers a glimpse into the complicated and exciting world of seventeenth century Holland's artistic and domestic world. The depiction of the every-day scene containing peasants and, quite specifically, a quacksalver in the midst of "quacking", was a common theme for Dutch artists to focus their art on because this kind of talent for trickery was on the rise as the commercial market in the Netherlands developed. The fast changing society and culture of post-reformation Holland affected the type of art being produced in that time, and the way in which that art was being sold. As a guild member Adrian Van Ostade was directly affected by this new world of capitalism and developing art markets. He saw how these dramatic changes in the Netherlands changed the production, quality, buying, and selling of art. *The Quacksalver* can be seen as a rejection of, or comment on, the new developments in art that emerged during in the 17th century.

The economic and religious developments of the Netherlands, urbanization, growth in markets, and the commercialization of daily life had a profound impact on the ideology and actions of the Dutch in the Seventeenth century¹. Economics and business took on a new importance, deeply affecting Holland and its culture. Ideas about science and the capabilities of humanity began to circulate, and, combined with the emergence of a supply of disposable income from previously excluded persons produced an environment that cultivated many new businessmen but also tricksters and con-men. Quacksalvers were unlicensed medical

¹ "Art at Auction in 17th Century Amsterdam" John michael montias, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2002, (11)

practitioners that aggressively and persuasively sold their concoctions at the kermis². The market place was an important hub in every town and village and the quacksalvers invaded this bustling space with trickery and shady goods, taking advantage of those who were easily persuaded, like the children, old people, and women shown in Van Ostade's etching.

With the growth of disposable income, amongst the lower and middle classes in seventeenth century Netherlands, the changes in commercial culture extended to the art culture, and a surge of newly claimed "artists" entered the market. Because of the newly expanded clientele base, and the high demand for art, there was mounting optimism for the economic prospects of starting artists³. The economic changes in the Netherlands had disrupted the classic manner of art production and distribution. It allowed for the world of art to open up to previously excluded sellers and buyers. The art guilds could not help but notice that the world they had so carefully maintained control of was slipping away. Van Ostade, as a member of the Guild of St Luke, was keenly aware of the perceived dangers of these up and coming dealers and developing markets. The guilds had enjoyed a monopoly over the art world and were integrated into all principle art centers⁴. As alternative channels began to emerge and become institutionalized the guilds passed laws that prohibited "foreign" works, or anyone who was not a local guild member or town citizen, from being sold. They also forbade "uncontrolled" art lotteries and action sales⁵.

Quacksalvers appeared during the rise in capitalistic style markets and these trends were paralleled in the world of art. In response to the intense competition in the buying and selling of

² Carol Jean Fresia, "Quacksalvers and Barber-Surgeons: Images of Medical Practitioners in 17th-Century Dutch Genre Painting." Dissertation Abstracts International, 1993.

³ "The role of Dutch actions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", Neil De Marchi, Department of Economics, Duke University, Durham, NC, Received 20 April 1993; Revised 21 March, 1995, (206)

⁴ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988), pp. 244-256 Published by: Stichting voor Nederlandse Kunsthistorische Publicaties, jstor. (247)

⁵ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (247)

art opportunities arose for a variety of people to become involved. In addition to professional and illegal dealers, those integrated in art production, like painters and frame makers, bought and sold works⁶. Women, who were already intimately involved in the economic aspects of the home, began to work as second hand dealers called *uijtdreagsters*, as well as domestic decorators⁷. In Holland during the seventeenth century it began to appear as if everyone was an art aficionado. Inn and tavern owners displayed the art that they had acquired, and sold them on the side to customers. As the middle class expanded, and they began to devote a larger portion of their income to art, a host of new specialties developed in 17th century painting and its market. Works of art from amateurs and artists from outside their specific cities began to become common place⁸. The large majority of the demands from consumers had changed and the art being produced reflected this. Landscapes, still lifes, and interior spaces were most commonly seen because they could be produced quickly and without much skill going into the process⁹. Easily accessed art was no longer exclusively local but much of it was brought in from elsewhere and resold for high profit.

The guilds, and men like Van Ostade, feared that unlicensed selling of art and the new developments of art dealing would lead to deteriorating quality of art being sold. They attempted to protect consumers by creating galleries that would ensure the statue of the art being sold¹⁰. While these dealers controlled the demand for art and focused on quality, others concentrated on increasing the supply available in market and, because of this, sold mostly less expensive,

⁶ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (244-45)

⁷ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (245)

⁸ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (248)

⁹ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (251)

¹⁰ "The role of Dutch actions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", Neil De Marchi, Department of Economics, Duke University, Durham, NC, Received 20 April 1993; Revised 21 March, 1995 (205)

poorer quality works¹¹. These types of galleries were what Van Ostade undoubtedly saw as villainous and was portraying in his etching. Many new artists were not guild members and did not have the connections they needed to sell their art successfully so thus they were at mercy of the gallery owners. Since there were so many works being produced by a huge number of artists some were put in unfair situations. One such artist was Issac Van Ostade, who was paid only 27 guilders for 13 paintings. This amounted to barely 2 guilders per painting. It was a shocking low sum, so low that his uncle, Adrian Van Ostade sued the dealer for compensation on Issac's behalf¹². Van Ostade was not only involved an institution that created laws preventing the new developments of the art market he was also personally involved in the dangers that it could create.

Similar to Van Ostade's devious quacksalver, the "interlopers", from the Southern Netherlands, were believed to have introduced large numbers of paintings questionable quality. They would set up illegal actions and markets in which to persuade less knowledgeable buyers about the art they sold and convince them to pay overly high prices for the actual value of their pieces¹³. The guilds accused them of having "mostly undistinguished copies" or "simple student work" which they would present as originals, and sell them "far above their worth"¹⁴. With the flooding of markets with perceived copies or works of lesser value it was feared within the guilds that this would take money away from the prestigious art that was being produced alongside the "trash"¹⁵. Even legitimate institutions could become involved. Some auctioneers, in an attempt to make as much money as possible for themselves and their clients, would praise the worth of a

¹¹ "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (246)

¹² "Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands", John Michael Montias, (245)

¹³ "The role of Dutch actions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", Neil De Marchi, (207)

¹⁴ "The role of Dutch actions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", Neil De Marchi, (206)

¹⁵ "The role of Dutch actions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", Neil De Marchi, (206)

work much higher than its actual value and thus start the bidding at an inappropriately high level¹⁶.

The expansion of the art market, and the technical and economic innovations that took place in the seventeenth century, opened up differing venues and categories for art in Holland. The inexpressive art that began to be produced at large quantities, and the changes in who was buying and selling art resulted in the expansion of this market, as well as the growth in specialization and a change and expansion in depiction. Artists like Van Ostade reflect these changes in the social and economic world of Holland in their art as well as in their politics. Van Ostade's career developed in a time of dramatic change and these developments were shocking to a generally conservative guild member. He saw the market, an extension of the home, invaded by conmen and amateurs, both in the commercial and artistic spheres. By creating *The Quackslaver* Van Ostade portrayed the conflicts that existed at the time, as well as the modes of discourse circulating in seventeenth century Netherlands.

¹⁶ "The role of Dutch actions and lotteries in shaping the art market(s) of 17th century Holland", Neil De Marchi, (207)

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