

Drunken Artist: An Exploration of Motives for a Drunken Depiction

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Abraham Bloemaert's sketchy drawing made with a drab brown ink may strike it's viewers with a feeling of sympathy for the sorry looking man who is depicted. This first impression proves important in researching this piece as it cued a topic which is rather fascinating. *Drunken Artist* is a drawing that focuses on an artist sprawled out on a bed of hay. Propped up in front of him is an in-progress landscape painting, there is a bag of supplies next to him, and his hand loosely grips a bottle of what is assumed to be alcohol. The topic derives from the intersection where the subject matter within the drawing meets the fact that this man that Abraham Bloemaert has depicted is an artist like himself. The image he created includes a handful of elements that give it this curious subject matter. Why might he have created such an image of a person who shares the same niche in society as he does?

Certain information about Bloemaert's career, especially his beginnings, offers some insight to what may have triggered such a depiction. Further insight can be considered by means of researching certain iconography contained in the image. More specifically, the historical significance of the depiction of an artist in works of art, and the role of alcohol in art and society during *Drunken Artist's* time will be considered. Researching these areas of interest should help us understand that *Drunken Artist* is a reflection of

Bloemaert's living, and his producing art within 17th Century Dutch Society.

It is understood that Bloemaert had not made any work worth mentioning before 1591, when he was twenty-seven years old.¹ He was raised by his father who was an artist, so he had been introduced to art making starting at a young age. A twenty-seven year old artist who had yet to gain any recognition for his craft, especially after many years of practice may very well have had a depressed attitude toward himself as an artist, or toward artists in general. Perhaps the role of alcohol in his society and his early experience as an artist had come together to create this rendering. This points one to try to find significance in some of the objects in the drawing, mainly the artist and his drink.

While considering that Bloemaert's depiction of an artist as drunk has some correlation to his own experience as an artist, it is relevant to mention Diego Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas*, in which he depicts himself in a composition among the Spanish royal family. It is understood by some that he did this in order to elevate his status as a painter, claiming he belongs with royalty. This is a widely known work of art that includes the presence of an artist, and it is the artist's presence that is often paid the most attention when the painting is the topic of discussion.

Expanding on the relevance of *Las Meninas*, there is a long history of artists portraying themselves in a way that comments on their social and

¹ Jaap Bolten *The Beginnings of Abraham Bloemaert's Artistic Career Master Drawings* , Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1998) , pp. 17

economic status. This includes a long list of artists who have portrayed themselves or other artists with objects and in scenarios that speak of their social status. Julie Codell's entry in *The Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography* focuses on the inclusion of the artist within artworks, and gives several examples of these instances. One dating back to before Bloemaert's time is Parmigianino's *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. According to Codell this painting "... expresses the Mannerist Play and distortion of Renaissance centrality and geometric order, evoking a new artistic psychological detachment and ironic wit while focusing on the artist's hands and face, as if to represent the struggle between notions of artists as genius and craftsman."² A few other good examples she gives include Joshua Reynolds's self portrait from 1773 in which he depicts himself in doctoral robes, insisting he is an academic and an aristocrat, and Hogarth's *Self-Portrait with Pug* that includes books by William Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift and John Milton to suggest he is part of the great British literary tradition.³

While *Drunken Artist* is not a self-portrait of Bloemaert, these examples are important and relevant. Apparently the context of how the artist is portrayed in an artwork has been a historically prevalent method of making a comment on their society, and an artist's status within it. With this being known, it seems imperative to research the significance of Bloemaert including

² Julie Codell. Art and Artists. *The Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography. Themes depicted in Works of Art*, (volume 1) 1998. pp.63

³ . Art and Artists. *The Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography. Themes depicted in Works of Art*. pp. 62

drunkenness in his portrayal of an artist.

Intoxication has been a subject of art and culture dating back to Greek and Roman mythology. Only until the twentieth century did artists begin to shift attitudes about drunkenness from ridicule and condemnation to analysis and introspection in response to the rise of interest in psychology.⁴ In Codell's essay concerning the role of intoxication throughout the history of art, she explores drunkenness over several periods and genres that exist in art's history. Most always the context in which alcohol is a part of is one of gluttony, moral weakness and promiscuity.

Seventeenth century Holland is mentioned specifically in a short section, which is very relevant in terms of the time frame in which *Drunken Artist* was drawn. She states, "Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings of ordinary life called attention to moral issues..."⁵ Dutch art during the baroque period had an entirely different role in society than the art being produced in other European countries at the time. While Italian and Spanish art in particular were geared towards religious subjects and were commissioned mostly by the church, Dutch art was mostly created for the average Dutch citizen as décor for their home. The subject matter was more pointed towards models of everyday life in their society rather than biblical references, allowing Bloemaert to produce a work like *Drunken Artist*.

⁴ Beth S. Gersh-Nesic. Drunkenness and Intoxication. *The Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography*, (volume 1) 1998. pp. 268

⁵ Drunkenness and Intoxication. *The Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography*. Pp. 267

Upon researching the role of Alcohol in 17th Century Dutch Republic, a lot of information arose to make it clear that the consumption of alcohol was a subject of much controversy. Excessive drinking among young people in particular was very common; to the point of it mounting to a significant social and moral problem.⁶ Societal perceptions of gender and class were heavily influenced by one's level of consumption. For citizens of the 17th century Dutch Republic, the social influences that encouraged drinking alcohol greatly conflicted the wishes of the church and its high officials. This created a double standard surrounding alcohol consumption, particularly for the male gender. At this intersection existed a major point of vulnerability for Dutch citizens to make or break their reputation.

To elaborate on the double standard that existed when it came to appropriate alcohol consumption, considering the contents of Benjamin Roberts' essay *Drinking Like a Man: the paradox of Excessive Drinking for Seventeenth-Century Dutch Youths* becomes relevant. In this essay, Roberts illustrates the many forces of society that Dutch youths face in terms of pressures to consume or not consume alcohol.

The influence of alcohol penetrated a young man's life from many directions. It is understood that excessive drinking, which went hand in hand with gambling and womanizing, was a symbol of manliness and coming of age. Young men were among the only demographics to attend schools and

⁶ Roberts, Benjamin. "Drinking Like a Man: the Paradox of Excessive Drinking for Seventeenth-Century Dutch Youths." *Journal of Family History* (volume 29) p.237

universities where the drinking culture was inevitable. Drinking games were extremely popular and caused heavy intoxication among students. One game involved a special glass called a *pasglas* was often portrayed in Dutch still-life painting.⁷

While young men wanted to be accepted and respected by their peers, other entities of society perceived them in a totally different manner. Religious authorities urged their congregations relentlessly to abstain from alcohol, and it was not uncommon for abusers of alcohol to be thrown out of the church. Moralists went as far as publishing books and pamphlets dedicated to the discouragement of excessive drinking in order to reach the youth.⁸ Young men also faced scrutiny over drinking from their parents. While it was a respectable act for a family's son to go to school, a paradox arises from the inevitable drinking that would occur there, then tarnishing the family's reputation.

During the 1620s and 1630s, depicting youths drinking became a popular subject matter for painters.⁹ Not only did society make it common for depictions of drunken citizens to be in art, but there were also cases of artists being depicted as drinking and smoking degenerates apart from *Drunken Artist*. Painter Adriaen Brouwer produced a number of self-portraits in which he was smoking, and several paintings of him and other artists acting wildly in tavern-

⁷ "Drinking Like a Man: the Paradox of Excessive Drinking for Seventeenth-Century Dutch Youths." Pp. 240

⁸ "Drinking Like a Man: the Paradox of Excessive Drinking for Seventeenth-Century Dutch Youths." Pp. 238

⁹ "Drinking Like a Man: the Paradox of Excessive Drinking for Seventeenth-Century Dutch Youths." Pp.247

like settings. Drinking created a glaring problem for society in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century. While art during this time most often reflected on daily life and common moral issues, it should come as no surprise that alcohol consumption would make its way into the art that was produced. The intersection of alcohol's presence in Bloemaert's society and the role that art played in seventeenth century Dutch Republic presents an understanding for why he may have been influenced to draw *Drunken Artist*.

References

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