Success and chance in Dutch art literature (1604-1752)

Success attracts, also in art history. In recent decades it has become, almost imperceptibly, one of the biggest themes in the study of seventeenth-century Dutch art. The socioeconomic success of artists has been examined from a variety of perspectives, with a focus on product and process innovation, networking and mobility. However, little consideration has been given so far to the fact that chance could also be a factor in the achievement or otherwise of success on the art market. Its capricious, contingent and elusive nature sets chance at odds with the scholarly quest to uncover patterns. Nevertheless, the most important texts in early-modern Dutch art literature make remarkably frequent reference to the role played by chance in artists' lives. Chance was evidently something of which artists were supposed to take account. Examining the relationship between chance and success in some of these texts offers an insight, therefore, into a contemporary perspective on this elusive phenomenon, which was held out unambiguously as a powerful existential force, with which artists were obliged to deal.

The texts analysed for the purposes of this study are the biographies of antique, Italian and Netherlandish painters by Karel van Mander, published in his Schilder-boeck (1634); Arnold Houbraken's Groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen (1718-1721); and Johan van Gool's Nieuwe schouburg der Nederlantsche kunstschilders en schilderessen (1750-1752). Samuel van Hoogstraten's more theoretical Inleyding tot de hooge schole der schilderkonst (1678) includes a chapter on how painters were advised to deal with chance, and so this publication is also discussed. To highlight the way themes and motifs were repeated and expanded upon, these texts are discussed here in chronological order. The point of departure in each instance is the explicit use by the authors of terms referring to chance.

Terms for 'chance'
The Dutch word 'toeval', or chance, defined as “an event or circumstance that was not anticipated or desired in advance, an unpredictable, unforeseen occurrence” did not become current in the Low Countries until the late eighteenth century. It appears only rarely in Van Mander's biographies of artists and a little more frequently in those of Houbraken and Van Gool. More common terms were 'fortuin' (fortune), 'lot' (fate), '(on)geval' ((un)fortunate accident) and 'ongeluk' (misfortune). Van Mander also used the term 'avontuur' (adventure, in a sense now current in English only in the negative 'misadventure'), but Houbraken and Van Gool did not. The situation for 'fortuin' is reversed: Houbraken and Van Gool used it, but Van Mander did not. Each of these terms had other meanings too, as revealed by the context. 'Fortuin', for example, was also used to mean 'wealth' (in the same way as the English 'fortune'), 'geval' to mean 'event' and 'geluk' 'happiness'. These meanings have not been included in the present analysis. 'Lot' (fate), which rarely appears in Van Mander and is common in Houbraken and Van Gool, is complicated for two reasons.
Firstly, it was used a great deal in compounds such as 'noodlot' (fate/destiny), 'huwelijkslot' (fated to marry) and sterflot (fated to die), where it is not always clear to what degree the author intends to imply chance or necessity. This reflects the fact – and this is the second reason – that the word 'lot' was itself ambivalent. The dictionary *Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal* (*WNT*) defines it as “chance, also: luck”, but it can also refer to a necessity, the reasons for which might not be apparent (hence the paradoxical equation with 'toeval' or chance). The *WNT* also states, however, that 'lot' was used historically without the meaning of necessity: “fate, coincidence, the fortune that causes worldly affairs to occur.”

Counting reveals that terms alluding to chance increase in frequency from Karel van Mander to Arnold Houbraken and Johan van Gool. It is not entirely clear whether this indicates an increasing interest in or awareness of the theme. On the other hand, as individual biographies grew longer and above all more complete – given that more recent biographers were better informed about the lives and their context – there was plainly more scope for chance to manifest itself. The fact that the same terms occur far less frequently in Samuel van Hoogstraten’s work tallies with a comment by the historian of science, Yemima Ben-Menahem, who has devoted an essay to necessity and contingency in historiography, to the effect that the citing of these factors is genre-specific. Contingency, closely followed by coincidence, fits well with the narrative nature of the biographical genre, which focuses on individuals and the choices they make between the possibilities that present themselves along the way and shape their lives.

It is likewise clear that the terms are often used where there is an element of ignorance on the author’s part regarding causal connections, for instance. This was already apparent in Pers’ translation of Ripa’s entries on Fortuna and the associated fate, and tallies precisely with what the historians of science Christoph Lüthy and Carla Rita Palmerino conclude in an article in which they analyse the history of thinking about chance from classical antiquity to the modern era in philosophy, theology and the natural sciences. The most important conclusion, however, is simply that all these authors give a prominent place to chance in their biographies. Closer analysis of the context in which they allude to it confirms that, in their view, it had an influence on artists’ lives and that artists responded to it actively.

**Chance in artists’ biographies**

According to Van Mander, Houbraken and Van Gool’s texts, chance manifested itself particularly in terms of a person’s place and time of birth and their family circumstances, in the possession of talent, in disaster, war, economic conditions and the art market, and in illness and death, love and marriage. It also reared its head remarkably often during journeys and in encounters that prompted a decision to become an artist, or which shaped training and patronage.

Talent, illness and love feature, for example, in two anecdotes in which Karel van Mander explains how Quinten Massys I (1465–1530) came to swap his initial profession of blacksmith for that of painter. According to the first, Massys was ill in bed just before Lent, when someone suggested that he earn his keep by colouring in popular prints of saints. He turned out to be so good at it that he became a painter. According to the second version of the anecdote, Massys fell in love with a woman who was keener to marry a painter than a blacksmith, prompting him to retrain. Van Mander did not know which of the anecdotes was true but also felt they were not mutually exclusive. More significantly, he used the anecdotes to show that circumstances cannot prevent a person’s natural inclination from expressing itself. Chance merely offered a helping hand to this process, and the precise form it might take was irrelevant. According to Samuel van Hoogstraten, Van Mander’s anecdotes showed that artistry could be triggered by “by opportunity or coincidence”. Arnold Houbraken quoted this verbatim and added two examples, that of Ludolf...
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de Jong (1616-1679) and Johannes Verkolje I (1650-1693). Without mentioning Van Mander, Van Gool presented variations on the story, to explain, for instance, how Coenraad Roepel (1678-1748) came to be a flower painter.17

To Van Mander, Houbraken, Van Gool and Van Hoogstraten, chance was thus a familiar and important force in the life of an artist. It could provide a stimulus in the shape of talent, an artistic family or access to good teachers. Conversely, in the form of war, disaster, illness and occasionally that of love or marriage, it could be a force that frustrated the individual’s development as an artist or perhaps even created unexpected opportunities. Arnold Houbraken, for example, attributed the development of Allart van Everdingen (1621-1675) as a painter of Norwegian landscapes to the “certain accident” of a fierce storm that cut short the artist’s sea voyage and forced him to disembark in Norway. Having discovered the country’s scenery as an artistic theme, he put it to good use after returning to the Netherlands. Van Everdingen was able to secure himself a unique position in the competitive Dutch market for landscapes, in which he went on to achieve no little success.18 These painter-authors invariably viewed chance circumstances as a force to which an artist had to respond. The subject was so important that Samuel van Hoogstraten actually devoted an entire chapter to it: ‘Hoe zich een Konstenaer te draegen heeft tegens ‘t gewelt der Fortuine’ (How an artist has to conduct himself to counter the power of fortune).19 It was a question that each of them asked and regarding which they all had ideas.

Chance and success

Before we can answer how artists were expected to deal with chance, we first have to clarify the goal of an artist’s life as it was this, after all, that set the course for how they dealt with chance. When it came to this goal, the authors were unanimous: artists were supposed to strive for fame, which would bring with it a social position of honour, financial gain and even immortality.20 Fame was bestowed upon them by their fellow artists, who imitated, emulated and produced variations on their work; by patrons who gathered artists around them and secured their paintings for large sums of money; and by art lovers who collected their work and publicly promoted it in speech or in writing.21 This complex of factors tallies with the definition of success by Albert-László Barabási, a network scientist who studies how social success comes about. He defines this type of success as “the rewards we earn from the community we belong to.”22 Three of the four networks that the art historian Allan Bowness has identified as contributing to the dissemination of artistic success since the late nineteenth century are also clearly recognizable, namely fellow artists, collectors and critics.23 While the fourth network – the mass public – did emerge in the early-modern period, it was less relevant at that point than it would be in the modern era.24

If the life-goal of artists can be defined as achieving success, and if chance was an acknowledged force in their lives, the question arises as to the influence that chance had on success. In other words, was success a matter of chance? A comment by Houbraken is important in this regard, as it shows that at least some of the public believed this to be the case. In his life of Philips Wouwerman (1619-1668), he noted that: “No one should suspect me [Houbraken] of wanting to claim that the success of painters depends entirely on their benefactors or blind chance, not at all.” The sentence occurs in a passage that is worth studying more closely. It continues: “the works must be solid in order to support the master because then the fame is permanent which would otherwise be short-lived and vanish like smoke. But I call such painters fortunate who, during their lifetime encounter patrons who honour and reward their art works according to their worth and, by contrast, those unfortunate who never meet benefactors nor are paid the worth of their work during their lifetime. Of them we have already met many whose work was not paid for according to its worth until after they had died, from which they profited no more than dead swine when their hams are purchased at a high price.”25
Houbraken argues here that the success of a painter does not depend on blind chance or on having patrons. Fame begins by doing good work.26 But it is an extra help if artists enjoy patronage, have a patron who buys their work and praises it publicly and does so during their lifetime rather than afterwards. The fact that chance and patronage are mentioned in the same breath is no coincidence.27 The relationship between the two is a complex motif in the texts of Van Mander, Houbraken and Van Gool and even a theme in Van Hoogstraten’s chapter. It remains to be seen whether they are also linked with the mobility of artists.

**Art stronger than chance: Karel van Mander**

Chance to Van Mander was an important force, but not the only one. To some extent, he believed that artists could control their own destiny. Van Mander even viewed art as a means of escaping misfortune and poverty. In his life of Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1600), he wrote “that cruel fortune, the bane of this world, has less power over a skill than over riches, and the art which one has learned in one’s youth is often the last resort in necessity and the refuge of consolation to avert the shipwreck of oppressive poverty.”28

In other words, material wealth is more susceptible than artistic practice to the vicissitudes of fate, since artistry is a skill that cannot be taken away and on which one can fall back in times of need. Hoefnagel experienced this at first hand when, having trained as a merchant while also being schooled in art, he had the misfortune of being robbed of all his merchandise (expensive jewellery) during the ‘Spanish Fury’ in November 1576. He later found he was able to make a better living from his art than from commerce, thanks to the patronage of the Dukes of Bavaria, Albert V (1528-1579) and William V (1548-1626) in Munich, Archduke Ferdinon II (1529-1595) in Innsbruck and Emperor Rudolf II in Prague – something that is explicitly mentioned below his portrait by Johann Sadeler I (1550-1600) (fig. 1).29

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1 Johann Sadeler I, Portrait of Joris Hoefnagel, 1592, engraving, 14.8 x 8.2 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-P-1940-967.
Possessing talent and developing it through diligent study were the prerequisites for success. It helped to have good teachers and a fertile artistic environment, as did finding patrons to purchase and extoll your work. Artists could exert a degree of influence on all these conditions except the first. To do so well required networking, which generally involved travel, as is shown by Hoefnagel’s life. The pursuit of success often encouraged travel, therefore, which was seen as a means of warding off unfavourable chance.

Patronage was so important to Van Mander, who hoped that his book would recruit patrons for art, that he opened the text with it. He wrote in his dedication to the art collector and patron Melchior Wijntgis (d. after 1626): “Yet luck [gheluck] or benevolent fortune [goedertieren Avontuere] sees to it in all centuries or times that our art and its artful practitioners are granted several substantial and good benefactors.”

It is significant that he makes patronage dependent here on chance. Patronage helped art, yet was a capricious benefactor. Apelles initially enjoyed the good fortune of Alexander the Great’s patronage, but this turned to misfortune when Alexander’s successor, Prince Ptolemy ceased to favour the artist. The life of Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530), meanwhile, who fell into disfavour with King Francis I (1494-1547), shows that not every painter was good at managing patronage. Bartholomeus Spranger (1546-1611) fared better, but even he did not always possess the requisite patience at court. He decided to leave the Emperor Rudolf’s service, but the head chamberlain was able to prevent his departure. In short, the fate of an artist at court was precarious: “Hofsche avontuer is wisselbaer” (“fortune at court is inconstant”).

Yet it was also difficult to comply with the wishes of clients belonging to the wealthy burgher class. In the Northern Netherlands, where court patronage barely existed, Van Mander complained that Gerrit Pieters’ (1566-1612) Amsterdam clientele was only interested in portraits rather than in large history paintings, with the result that Pieters’ inventive mind and his skill in painting nudes were unable to develop to their full potential.

In addition to patronage, it was important to have people praise your work in public. Simone Martini (1280-1344) was fortunate enough to have no less a figure than Petrarch (1304-1374) do this for him, with the result that art brought him not only a pleasant life and wealth but lasting fame too: “Truly may they be called happy, whom nature inclines to such art as brings them that benefit and wealth, and makes them esteemed and loved by high and low. Yet people are of the opinion that those are yet more fortunate still, who achieve eternal fame in every mouth with their praiseworthy works. This may best be accomplished when renowned poets mention a person’s name in their verse, for they will remain there more firmly than if carved by diamond into hard porphyry. Such fortune [geluck] befell Simone of Siena, who, living in the time of Francesco Petrarch, painted the image of that most excellent poet’s beloved, Laura. He was granted a place in return in the latter’s poetry, to Simone’s imperishable memory.”

Van Mander borrowed the story and its interpretation wholesale from Vasari’s Lives, in which the author speaks in the same terms of chance and fortune. It is the only time Van Mander alludes to praise in relation to chance. But the importance he attached to it is evident from the fact that this is all he had to say about Martini, whereas Vasari’s account of his life is considerably longer.

According to Van Mander, for those who got it right, art was stronger than chance. It could even be an instrument for turning one’s destiny around. He placed great emphasis on possessing and developing talent and on the importance of patronage, even though it was inherently capricious. He does not describe how you might go about obtaining and retaining patronage or whether you could arm yourself against its vicissitudes. Van Hoogstraten, Houbraken and Van Gool were much more explicit in this regard.
Resisting chance according to Samuel van Hoogstraten

Like Van Mander, Samuel van Hoogstraten was in no doubt as to the existence of chance. He associated it with, among other things, Melpomene, muse of the tragedians who wrote of how humankind fares in the face of Fortuna’s vicissitudes. He gave the muse a place in the upper right of the title print (fig. 2), where a nude woman balances unsteadily on a globe besides a wheel symbolizing her capriciousness. She scatters tokens of wealth and status, which the people reach out to seize. Her long, wavy hair is a symbol of opportunities to be grasped. Van Hoogstraten also cited the muse when discussing the organization of the composition of paintings and in relation to patronage. He invariably regarded chance as a force that artists should – and to a very large extent could – resist in their pursuit of success.

When thinking about visual representations, Van Hoogstraten systematically contrasted chance with rules. The opening of his book sets the tone right away. Art was not a craft but required knowledge, and anyone who failed to take this into account placed themselves in the hands of blind chance, with little likelihood of success. Or, as Houbraken put it later, they leaned on a reed. Those who proceeded with their training “hastily and haphazardly” rather than with deliberation would thus achieve nothing. Even mature painters ought not to rely on chance. Van Hoogstraten here recounts a competition that was once organised between Jan Porcellis (1584-1632), François van Knipbergen (1596/1597-1664) and Jan van Goyen (1596-1656), in which each had to paint a landscape in a day. The first artist stood for painting based on careful reflection, the second on routine working and the third on trusting to chance. The winner was Porcellis.

A thorough knowledge of art and its rules was also a prerequisite for judging beauty in art. In his book, Van Hoogstraten includes a discussion with Francis Bacon (1561-1626) on how to explain artistic beauty. In it, Bacon argues that it could be brought about “through luck or by accident” and not through principles, implying that such beauty could be neither known nor explained. Van Hoogstraten retorts that this opinion is typical of people who know nothing about art. He is, in fact, acknowledging a phenomenon here to which Lüthy and Palmerino have referred, namely the invocation of chance in order to provide a place for the unknowable. As an artist who did boast a knowledge of such principles – as he discusses in detail and in all their complexity in his book – Van Hoogstraten therefore disagreed with Bacon, whom he accuses of being mistaken because he had ventured beyond his area of expertise. Beauty came from the founding principles of art, “although sometimes an accident of Grace has lent a helping hand.”

Like the artists’ biographers, Van Hoogstraten believed that making good art with planning and deliberation, rather than relying haphazardly on chance, was the foundation of success, although not the only precondition. The others lay in the social sphere. In his chapter ‘Hoe zich een Konstenaer te draegen heeft tegens ‘t gewelt der Fortuine’, he stated that an artist ‘must, it’s true, first seek his good fortune in his own achievements, that is, in the virtue and pleasure of his work, but next he must take care that through diligent Maecenasses, he acquires the favour of powerful princes and kings, or gains the esteem of prosperous merchants. For without the help of well-disposed intercessors and advocates who loudly sing his praises he will hardly become known.”

Artists had to network, therefore, in order to find patronage at court or among the wealthy burgher class. In many cases, this entailed travel, of which the biographers never fail to provide examples. A degree of prosperity, a good reputation and conversational skills were also indispensable, as they enabled painters to present their work with modesty and courtesy but also assertively. These qualities had been just as important as the ability to produce good work ever since Alberti (1404-1472), whose ideas still clearly resonate in Van Hoogstraten’s passage and in the texts of the Dutch artists’ biographers.

Some who were lacking in that area resorted instead to pseudo-artistic prattle, subterfuge and tricks: “But some have filled in that which they were lacking in art by idle chatter, others have beguiled the eyes and ears of injudicious art lovers with seductive tricks, and still others have through cunning alliances made minions extoll their works..."
and controlled the ball of fortune by bouncing it around with two or three conspirators."

Such behaviour harmed the reputation of art and hindered the success of genuinely good works in favour of those that did not deserve it. Yet even if Van Hoogstraten did not approve of them, these too were social skills deployed in the service of networking. And as we will see, according to Van Gool, a painter like Theodoor Netscher (1661-1727) did indeed resort to subterfuge to gain access to a network of patrons.

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Van Hoogstraten nevertheless felt that patronage had serious drawbacks too. Many patrons were insufficiently knowledgeable about art, which limited their vision and their taste. Those who produced work other than what these patrons called for were excluded from participation, whatever the quality of that work. Van Hoogstraten cited the dramatic career of Hercules Segers (1589-1633) as an example, and Houbraken later concurred. Segers’ art was not understood until after his death, when it suddenly became highly desirable. The work itself had not changed, but connoisseurs’ tastes had. All this meant that patronage was fundamentally arbitrary and Van Hoogstraten was keen to do something about it. By acknowledging that artists depended on patronage for their success and art in order to flourish, and by arguing for a broad outlook and for faith in artists’ expert judgement, he simultaneously addressed his chapter to artists and patrons alike, thereby instructing both on what was expected of them. The biographies in Houbraken and Van Gool show that as time went by and the art market evolved, the practical situation became increasingly intractable.

**Resisting chance according to Arnold Houbraken**

Arnold Houbraken too was firmly convinced that life was subject to chance. In a revealing philosophical passage, he approvingly quotes the sorrowful lament of Titus Vespasian (39-81 AD) when the Roman Emperor suddenly realised that his “honour and greatness depend on the favour of unstable Fortune.” Houbraken regularly affirms the idea that chance renders life inconstant. In the lead-up to his biography of Adam Frans van der Meulen, for instance, a few pages after the anecdote about Vespasian, he wrote: “Fortune, by her highly changeable nature at first raises some to a happy state. But later the sail of prosperity shifts without looking back, which has given ground to the Spanish saying: Fortune tires of always carrying the same man on the back. It has (to say it in a Dutch way) many eat their white bread in advance. The least number of people keep her favour from the beginning to the end of their lives.”

Given this inconstancy, one is best advised not to place one’s trust in chance. Houbraken quotes a poem to substantiate this in the same passage in which he cites Vespasian: “He who puts his faith in the fortune / Of chance occurrence in this vale of the world; / Leans on a reed. / For the things of this world are only wind.” Despite the power of chance, painters must therefore seek to shape their own lives, something that worked out well for some, less so for others.

Houbraken explained how this was possible in his biography of two now almost entirely forgotten Groningen painters. Johan Starrenberg (active 1670-1691) and Jacob de Wolf (active 1650-1685) were both reasonably competent artists: “But the one appears to have been born under a lucky planet, the other under a disastrous one. The one had fortune as sweet girlfriend, the other as stepmother.” The major difference between the two was their character. Starrenberg “had a flattering and eloquent tongue and unequalled impudence, by which he was able to insinuate himself into the favour of the Prince of Friesland and most of the courtiers.” In other words, his well-developed social skills helped him build a network. Houbraken goes so far as to write that social graces were more fruitful than being a good painter: “Aided by the combination of [flattering and eloquent speech, and boldness], mediocre art often passed as excellent.” Jacob de Wolf was very different: he was not socially adept and relied exclusively on his art, but “found himself mistaken” and “was compelled to see how others, who were lesser in art, were picked out by fortune while he was left sighing.” According to Houbraken, it was resentment of this injustice that led him to commit suicide in 1685.

Houbraken’s account is strikingly similar to an anecdote in Barabási concerning the New York painters Jean Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) and Al Diaz (1963). In the late 1970s, they formed the graffiti artist duo SAMO, but Basquiat later exploited his social skills to gain access to Andy Warhol, who took him under his wing and opened up his network to him.
Diaz did not follow suit: he remained a street artist and is now more or less forgotten, whereas Basquiat went on to become one of the most expensive artists of all time. Barabási’s conclusion also applies to Starrenberg and De Wolf: where performance cannot be measured objectively, as is the case in art, success is achieved through networking rather than achievement.66

Houbraken’s anecdotes reveal that he and the seventeenth-century artists were well aware of this too. The key word was patronage, from which flowed networking, mobility, courteous but assertive behaviour, a developed sense of artistic fashion and being alert to opportunities. Artists who were good at this, according to their biographies, included Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674), Govaert Flinck (1615-1660), Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678), Job Berckheyde (1630-1693), Adam Frans van der Meulen (1632-1693), Jan de Baen (1633-1702), Gerrit Berckheyde (1638-1698), Jan van Nijken (1655/1656-1721), Adriaen van der Werff (1659-1722) and Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723).67 Most of these belonged to the same generation as Houbraken or were only slightly older. Houbraken was well acquainted with their lives, must have felt an affinity with them and also saw them as an example.

All these artists were assertive, travelled to international art centres where they sought contact with courtiers and were aware of and accommodated themselves to their patrons’ taste. Where this all worked out well, Houbraken spoke in terms of making one’s own, persistent luck.68 Luck seemed to shadow Godfrey Kneller, for instance, because – according to Houbraken – it flowed from several conscious decisions on Kneller’s part.69 He switched, firstly, from history painting to portraiture, and from Rembrandt’s by then old-fashioned style to a more contemporary classicism. In doing so, he deliberately took advantage of the growing market for this style.70 Mobility was likewise an instrument for success and hence a remedy against chance – first of all during an artist’s study phase and then in the search for promising markets. He travelled to Rome and then by way of Nuremberg to Hamburg to study German portrait painters and it was there that he found a patron to promote him. When Peter Lely (1618-1680) happened to die in London, Kneller took advantage by travelling to England where he managed to wangle his way into the favour of Charles II (1630-1685). It is also possible, however (Houbraken was uncertain), that Kneller had already travelled to England during Lely’s lifetime and that he tapped a Hamburg connection, or was carried on the wheelbarrow of good fortune (to use the Dutch expression), to bring him to the king’s attention.71 Having done so, he was able to hold onto his position when Charles was succeeded by James II (1633-1701) and later by William III (1650-1702) and Queen Anne (1665-1714). Whichever version is correct, it was Kneller’s networking skills that did the trick. Travel, networking and adaptability in terms of style and subject, allowed him to manoeuvre himself into positions that held out the promise of patronage – opportunities he was able to exploit to the full.

According to Houbraken, even though life is subject to chance, success need not be arbitrary. It was achieved by finding patronage, which entailed travel, social skills, networking, knowledge of style and taste, adaptability and a constant alertness to opportunity.72 While this offered the greatest chance of success, it still could not guarantee it: misfortunes such as war, disaster, illness or the death of a painter or a patron could always throw a spanner in the works.73 And those like Jacob de Wolf or Hercules Segers who were temperamentally unable to conduct themselves according to the necessary conditions for success were bound to struggle.74

The instruments are exhausted: Johan van Gool

Even though he referred to Houbraken, Johan van Gool emphasised the elusive nature of success much more strongly than his predecessor had. Van Gool believed that there were two types of chance: “things that exist beyond them [people], but also in matters entirely proper to their own persons.”75 He appears to be alluding in the first instance to circumstances...
over which individuals have little influence, such as war and illness, but also the art market.
The second refers to factors such as innate talent and character traits, which Van Mander and Houbraken also considered to be chance elements. He went on to state that the miscellaneous interventions of “fickle and blind luck” (“het wispelturig en blint geluk”) were unconnected to a person's character and actions: “Thus does one often see that Fortune / to those who slave, toil, root, / shows the bald back of her head. / While those who with ungrateful feet / Trample her gifts, to their ruination and own harm, / Are yet pursued by her favour and raised to the throne of her grace.” Van Gool stated that Houbraken's book offered many examples of this kind and that things were no different in his own time: “If one attentively consults the biographies of the painters which we have staged so far, one finds that artistic fortune has bade them play different roles; causing some, as her favourites, to succeed effortlessly and naturally, while hindering others at every step and, in spite of all their efforts and merits, confronting them with obstacles throughout.”

If some are simply lucky and others unlucky, the instruments held out by Houbraken as a means to force success will thus have appeared ineffective to Van Gool. A substantial number of biographies suggest, all the same, that he continued to accept Houbraken's conditions for success. Each of them makes an appearance, for instance, in his lengthy entry on Theodoor Netscher.

Netscher was trained by his father Caspar in The Hague and it was no doubt through his father's network that he was introduced to the court of the French ambassador, Jean-Antoine de Mesmes, Count of Avaux (1740-1709). To escape his cruel mother, the young Netscher left for Paris in the count's retinue, together with his friend, the physician Adriaen Engelhardt Helvetius (1662-1727). The pair swiftly ran out of money in the French capital, but during an outbreak of dysentery, which also felled a parliamentary councillor, Theodoor Netscher – “who, with his bold and forward nature, was able, when pressed by necessity and the pinch of poverty, to get by everywhere” – saw an opportunity: “Barely [had he heard of] the perilous condition of this councillor, than he instantly formed the idea of using this opportunity [toeval] to test his hard-pressed and ill luck.” With Helvetius' coaching, Netscher presented himself as a doctor who could cure dysentery. The remedy – actually concocted by the more timid Helvetius – proved efficacious. After it transpired that the two were a Dutch painter and doctor respectively, Helvetius was appointed personal physician to Louis XIV and died a rich man, while Netscher “having become known to the highest nobility and wealthiest of the city, began to paint life-size portraits; which he made in the French style, so nobly and artfully that his fame continued to grow and filled his hands with work.” He would achieve further success in London in 1715, fifteen years later, and likewise in The Hague in the period in between.

Netscher exploited his privileged background, nose for opportunities, assertive character, talent for networking and a chance occurrence to break into the network of the Parisian court nobility, where he could look forward to patronage and commissions that would bring him honour, fame and money, provided he was able to work in the desired French manner. Mobility, social skills, networking, knowledge of style and taste, adaptability and a constant alertness to patronage opportunities were precisely the conditions which, according to Houbraken, offered the greatest likelihood of success. Not everyone succeeded, however, nor boasted as privileged a starting position as Theodoor Netscher. A neat counter-example is provided by Van Gool's biography of Herman van der Mijn (1684-1741), the son of an orphan who advanced no higher than substitute minister. He too managed to create opportunities, but then wasted them, apparently due to his social maladroitness: “No sooner did he think that Fortune had paved the way to his happiness than he became haughty and extravagant so as to make a great impression; which proved his undoing.”

To understand why Van Gool was so much more fatalistic than Houbraken, despite taking a similar view of the necessary conditions for success, we need to examine more
closely his view of sales opportunities, as they presented themselves through patronage and the open art market. Van Gool referred to the “inconstant commotion of the court”. He must therefore have agreed wholeheartedly with Van Mander, who—as we saw earlier—wrote that “fortune at court is inconstant” and with Job and Gerrit Berckheyde, whom Arnold Houbraken had declare that “life at court is nought but a sea of vicissitudes and changes” and so preferred to rely on the open market.

All the same, he did not believe that the latter offered a sufficiently firm foundation either. Painters depended on the judgement of others, were saddled with unsold work, or did not command higher prices until they were dead. Another affliction that many had to bear—even the likes of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669)—was the fact that prices were so volatile. Artists had no influence over this whatsoever: they were entirely at the whim of the market. Such was the experience of Adriaen van der Werff (1659-1722), along with “some ten other masters of my time, which was not attributable to their art, the quality of which did not vary, but depended solely on the caprices of art lovers, and to the uncertain flow of their preferences.” The same unpredictable market could also drive prices to unprecedented heights, as happened once again to Adriaen van der Werff and to Jan van Huysum (1682-1649): “If art lovers can buy something at first at a modest price and they see that the art of the seller and artist is beginning to rise in value, they pursue that art, so as to boost the importance and price of the works that they own: for even though the paintings are as lovely and artful as ever, one only begins to talk them up when all pursue them avidly; only then do the art lovers see the beauty that is in them from close by, and do the best works, as well as the lesser ones, of such a fortunate master change hands as eagerly and willingly.”

Lesser works too could fetch high prices. Van Gool describes the astronomical amounts paid for paintings by der Werff and Van Huysum in terms that recall Barabási’s disproportionate relationship between achievement and success. According to Barabási, this is typical of objects such as art, the success of which cannot be measured objectively and is hence determined by social relations within networks. A feedback loop can then arise within the closed network of an exclusive group, which is certainly what Van Huysum’s collectors constituted: purchasers have spent so much on an artist’s work that, as a group, they can no longer afford to allow prices to fall, as they stand to lose too much. As Van Gool put it, they continue to pursue this art so as to drive up the price of the works they already own even higher, or at least to prevent that price from falling. Few artists got (or indeed get) to enjoy such a situation, in which they no longer depend on a patron but the latter depends on them. And even where this is the case, they were still not out of the woods. Van Gool presented Van Huysum, for instance, as someone who received an unduly low price at auction after too much of his work was offered at once, and Van der Werff as a person who had suffered from the volatility of the market.

All in all, Van Gool believed that his generation lived in a century of “declining art” (“kunstquynende eeuw”), in which it was “rare good fortune” (“zeltzaem geluk”) if an artist produced work “that is esteemed and desired among connoisseurs.” In a circumstance like this, where patronage is risky and the market volatile, mobility largely ceases to be effective as an instrument with which to seek out better sales opportunities. Many tried their luck in England, hoping to match the success of the previous generation, yet found themselves disappointed. Gerard Wigmana (1673-1741), for instance, “made a journey to London in the hope of finding more benefactors for his art, yet his artistic fortune succeeded there as little as it had in this country, so that the journey did him more harm than good”, although he did not admit his failure on his return. The same happened to Robert...
Griffier (1675-1760) and John Graham (1705-1775) in England and to Herman van der Mijn (1684-1741) in France. Travelling could actually cost more, therefore, than it yielded. 103

Success seems to have been more subject to chance for Van Gool than it had been for Houbraken. He presents the proven instruments of mobility, networking, knowledge of taste and adaptability as less effective in a period when patronage and the market for art were perceived as only slightly subject to contingency or, to put it in Ben-Menahem’s terms, not very open to change. 104 These instruments were linked, moreover, to the character of the artist, which was itself a chance factor: that is to say, one associated with the individual. In Van Gool’s view, artists of his own generation had to contend with a declining art market and were unable to respond to this effectively, which would seem to explain his fatalism.

Conclusion
Chance was unmistakably an important force in the life of an artist. The books of Van Mander, Van Hoogstraten, Houbraken and Van Gool can be read as guides on how to mitigate this factor when pursuing success in a market which, in the eyes of contemporaries, seemed very much shaped by chance. This was no coincidence: their books set out to contribute to as favourable an artistic climate as possible and were thus targeted at patrons and artists. They presented – both implicitly and explicitly – the ideal relationship between the two groups. 105 Patrons in this context had a good knowledge of art, broad tastes, an understanding of artistry, were willing to support artists and knew how best to go about it. 106 Artists knew how to find patrons and were able to deal with their whims. If everyone played their part, therefore, success need not rely on chance and the instruments of mobility, networking and social skills would be effective enough. The reality, however, was more complex, as the painter-biographers knew from their own experience and also made plain in their artists’ biographies.

Marten Jan Bok and, more recently, Harm Nijboer have argued that the art market in the seventeenth century was perceived by artists as fundamentally unstable. 107 The associated uncertainty, opportunities and risks meant that artists had to be constantly alive to developments in taste and prices, something that is plainly visible in the reflections on chance and success. The four authors discussed thus lived in times where the state of the market for Dutch paintings differed. This left its mark on how they thought about the relationship between chance and success, or rather on how they viewed the extent to which an artist was dependent on chance. The art market was growing in Van Mander’s time (1604), while Van Hoogstraten (1678) looked back over a boom period, in which the market had widened and developed a more refined infrastructure. Houbraken (1718-1720), by contrast, saw decline and Van Gool (1750-1752) stagnation and an art market in a trough. 108 Van Mander believed most strongly in the pliability of chance. Van Hoogstraten and Houbraken, who saw shrinking opportunities for selling art on the open market, described the instruments available to artists when it came to winning patronage: mobility, networking, identifying opportunities, knowledge of fashions and taste, and adaptability. Van Gool, lastly, who witnessed a sharp downturn in both the open market and in patronage, suggested that these instruments were no longer effective, yet saw no alternatives to them.

It took a special set of skills to contain the influence of misfortune on the likelihood of success (or to encourage good fortune). In their effort to raise the status of art, the painter-authors made no reference at all to materials, technique or manual skills: these belonged to the sphere of the studio and mastering them was a basic requirement. The furthest they went was to recommend a great deal of practice and study. Much store was set, however, by intellectual skills – especially in Van Mander’s _Grondt_ and Van Hoogstraten’s _Hooge schoole_. Good painters knew how to elaborate a subject, which ones were ambitious and which less so, how to shape the subject into a persuasive configuration, and how then to get it all convincingly onto canvas. This required intellectual skills. But successful
painters also had to market their works: they seized every opportunity to network or else created such opportunities themselves. This certainly helps explain the high degree of mobility of artists in the Low Countries. The aim was to find patrons and clients who would commission works or make it possible for artists to study. A large part of an artist’s life thus consisted of seeking out opportunities and taking advantage of them.

The fact that painters had to seize their opportunities was expressed very literally by Pieter Isaacsz (1598-1649) in 1601 in the cartouche around a portrait of his friend and teacher Hans von Aachen (1552-1612) (fig. 3). On the right, Pictura grabs Occasio (Opportunity) by a strand of her hair, Hercules stands on the left as Fortitudo, alluding to the virtue of wise choice, as indicated by the cartouche below with Hercules at the crossroads. Von Aachen’s social success is evident from his self-confident pose, expensive clothes and gold chain, a traditional gift from princely patrons. The inscription around the portrait refers to this patronage. At the very beginning of the seventeenth century, therefore, Isaacsz was alluding to the link between opportunity, choices, patronage and success. What was most required in order to seize these opportunities were social skills, as Alberti had already pointed out. The successes and failures in this regard are described in the artists’ biographies, which set out to be a mirror for artists and patrons for the greater benefit and glory of art.

3 Jan Saenredam after Pieter Isaacsz, Portrait of Hans von Aachen, 1601, engraving, 40.2 x 32.3 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. RP-P-OB-10.650.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elmer Kolfin (1969) lectures in art history at the University of Amsterdam. His chief focus is Dutch painting and printmaking in the seventeenth century, and he has previously published on genre art, Jan van Huysum, the Oranjezaal at Huis ten Bosch (with Margriet van Eikema Hommes), print publishing, and the depiction of black people in seventeenth-century prints and paintings. His forthcoming book, The power to persuade: Four essays on the paintings of the Batavian uprising in the town hall of Amsterdam (1660-1665), deals with the Batavian cycle and its patronage in the Royal Palace, Amsterdam. Elmer Kolfin is editor-in-chief of Oud Holland.

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NOTES


2 K. van Mander, Het schilder-boeck, Haarlem 1634; A. Houbreken, Grote schouburg der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen, The Hague 1718-1721; J. van Gool, Nieuwe schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen, The Hague 1753-1755. Since this study is language-specific, J. von Sandrart’s German Teutsche Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste, Nuremberg 1675, has not been included. C. de Bie’s Het gulden cabinet van de edel vry schilderkunst, Antwerp 1662, meanwhile, was largely written in rhyme, making it a different kind of text to the prose of the other authors. J. Campo Weyerman’s De levensbeschrijvingen der Nederlandsche konstenschilders en schilderessen, Dordrecht 1729-1769, was based substantially on Houbreken’s book and is hence also not considered here.

3 S. van Hoogstraten, Hooge schole der schilder konst, Dordrecht 1678.

4 "Gebeurtenis of omstandigheid die vooraf niet voorzien of gewild is geweest; onberekenbaar, onvoorzien voorval’’, Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal, lemma ‘Toeval’, see gth.ivdnt.org.

5 Adjectives such as ‘onbestendig’ (‘inconstant’) and ‘onzeker’ (‘uncertain’) were less common than the nouns and were mostly used to qualified them.


7 ‘Toeval, ook: kans’, Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal, lemma ‘Toval’; nos. 4 and 7, see gth.ivdnt.org. C.H. Lithby and C.R. Palmerino, ‘Conceptual and historical reflections on chance (and related concepts)’, in K. Landsman and E. van Wolde (eds), The challenge of chance, Cham 2016, p. 13 also note that ‘chance’ was used to indicate a lack of explanation or understanding. ‘Noodlot’ is ‘The destiny that, according to the belief of the Greeks and Romans, necessarily befalls a person; either due to an irrevocable decision by a higher power, or conceived as an inescapable consequence of previous matters, fate.’ (“Het lot dat naar geloof van der Grieken of Romeinen een mensch noodzakelijk ten deel vault; hetzij als gevolg van een onherroepelijk besluit van hoogere macht, hetzij opgevat als een onontkoombaar gevolg van voorgaande zaken, het fatum.” Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal, lemma ‘Noodlot’; see gth.ivdnt.org.
8 "Het lot, het toeval, de fortuin die de wereldsche zaken laat gebeuren," Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal, lemma 'Lot', no. 6, see gth.ivdnt.org. In his translation of Ripa, Pers virtually equates 'lot' and 'fortuin,' see Pers 1643 (note 6), p. 320: "There is little difference between fate and fortune." ("Daer is weynigh onderscheyt tuschen het Lott en de Fortuyne").

9 Van Mander 1643 (note 2) provides approximately 93 instances of the words 'toeval', 'fortuin', 'lot', 'avontuur', 'ongeluk' and 'avontuur', in a variety of spellings, out of a total of about 275,000 words; Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2) approx. 160 in some 300,000 words; and Van Gool 1753-1751 (note 2) approx. 150 out of about 200,000 words; as counted in the online editions of DBNL, see dbnl.org; and Google books, see books.google.nl.

10 Y. Ben-Menahem 'Historical necessity and contingency,' in A. Tucker (ed.), A companion to the philosophy of history, Malden 2008, pp. 127-128. In Van Hoogstraten's 1678 book (note 3), it occurs about 15 times in around 145,000 words, as counted in the online edition of DBNL, see dbnl.org. The terms are found more frequently in G. de Laireau's Groot schilderboek, Amsterdam 1712, but rarely in the modern sense of 'chance,' as counted in the online edition of DBNL, see dbnl.org. Where this is the case, he often employs it in didactic opposition to rules, just as Samuel van Hoogstraten does.

11. Pers 1643 (note 6), pp. 139-143, 308; Lishy and Palmerino 2016 (note 7).


15. "gelegenheit of door 't geval" , see Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 146. "(on)geval" , as counted in the online edition of DBNL, see dbnl.org; The terms are found counted in the online editions of DBNL, see dbnl.org; Where this is the case, he often employs it in didactic opposition to rules, just as Samuel van Hoogstraten does.

16. Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, pp. 70-71. The translation is taken from C. Brusati and J. Jacobs, Hooftman tot een dieren prys verkogt worden." , see H.J. Horn and R. van Leeuwen, "Houbraken's 1678 (note 3), p. 73 alludes to something similar, where he states that ambitious painters are attentive to the kind of art that is loved in the place where they work: "a good mind takes into account what part is esteemed where he is located" (‘een bref geest staet na dart deel, dat inachte is daer by zich beviend' ); see Bruuti 2021 (note 15), p. 129.


18. A. Bowness, The formula: The universal laws of success: The science behind why people succeed or fail, New York 2008, p. 12. Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 3, p. 73 alludes to something similar, where he states that ambitious painters are attentive to the kind of art that is loved in the place where they work: "a good mind takes into account what part is esteemed where he is located" (‘een bref geest staet na dart deel, dat inachte is daer by zich beviend' ); see Bruuti 2021 (note 15), p. 129.

19. For the mass market for cheap, serially produced history pieces, see A. Jagos, The mass market for history paintings in seventeenth-century Amsterdam: Production, distribution and consumption, Amsterdam 2020.

20. Niemand moet my verdenken, als of ik beweren wilde dat het geluk der Konstschilders alleen van hunne begunstigers of 't blint geval af hangt, geheel niet; de werken moeten vasten grond hebben om den maker op te beuren; want dan is de roem bestendig die anders van kort kreuc is, en als rook verdwen. Maar ik noem zulke Konstschilders gelukkig, welke in hun leven Mecnasssen ontmoeten die hunne Konstwerken roemen en naar waarde belooven, en in tegendeel zulke ongelukkig, die nooit begunstigers ontmoeten of de waarde van hun Konst by hun leven betaald krygen. Van deze zyn 'er ons al vele ontmoet wier Konst eerst na hun dood, naar waarde betaald werd, daar zy even zoo veel van hebben als de doode zwenen, wanneer hunne hamanen tot een dieren prys verkogt worden," see Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 70-71. The translation of this and subsequent passages is taken from H.J. Horn and R. van Leeuwen, Houbraken translated: Arnold Houbraken's Great theatre of painters and paintresses, The Hague 2021, see houbraken-translatedakstudies.nl. Where I believe the translation to be mistaken, I offer a correction together with the original.


22. The precise definition of patronage in Dutch art is actually quite unclear. Kok 2003 (note 1), p. 25 rightly
points out that there has been little study of the subject. She notes that the concept of patronage has not been precisely defined and identifies its fixed elements as: “a persistently asymmetrical relationship between social unequalis, in which the patron can call upon scarce resources such as money, position, influence and protection. The patron offers assistance and protection to the client, who is bound in return to provide loyalty and services.” (“een duurzame asymmetrische relatie tussen sociaal ongelijken waarbij de patroon beschikt over schaarse bronnen als geld, ambten, invloed of bescherming. De patroon biedt hulp en protective aan de cliënt die zich in ruil daarvoor verplicht tot loyaliteit en wederdienst.”). B. Timmermans, Patronen van patronage in het zeventiende-eeuwse Antwerpen: Een elite als actor binnen een kunstwerk, Amsterdam 2008, p. 21, defines patronage as: “the totality of direct and indirect activities on the part of individuals and organizations that support the production, distribution and reception of art and do so via both tangible and intangible resources.” (“het geheel van directe en indirecte activiteiten van individuen en organisaties die de productie, de distributie en de receptie van kunst ondersteunen en dit met zowel materiële als immateriële middelen.”). Haskell 1980 (note 20), pp. 3-24 defines patronage in the Italian long seventeenth century as all forms of commission situations, which he distinguished from the open market, in which painters produced work for an anonymous public of purchasers.

28 “[... ] dat de quade avontuer oft ongeluck van dese Weereht minder macht heeft over de Const, als over den rijckdom, en dat de Const, die men in zijn jeught heeft gehelert, dickwils den uytsten plicht-ancker in den noot, en eelst een troostlijck toelucht wort, om de ellendelijck schipbreuck van de persende armoede voor te comen,” see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 262r.


31 These themes are also found in the ‘Exhortatie’ of the ‘Grondt’, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 3v-8v. Talent as a happy accident, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 131v, 124v, 163r, 229r, 297v. Chance cannot stop talent from developing, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 23r, 253v, 282r. Chance enables talent to flourish, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 94r, 238v, 247r, 254v, 287r, 292r. Van Mander consistently states here that artistic tendencies cannot help but be expressed. Hard work compels success, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 177v, 113r, 274r. See also Osnabrugge 2008 (note 1).

32 For teachers and artistic environment, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 238v, 292r. For patrons, see Van Mander in note 34.

33 Talent as a happy accident, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 131v, 124v, 163r, 229r, 297v.

34 “Maer t’geluck oft goederijen Avontuere voegt gemeenlijk in alle Eeuwen oft tijden, dat onze Const, en haer constringe ofeennia, eeneij treffelijke goede Liechefbers zijn toegheedan”, see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 3v. For the importance of patronage in terms of chance, see also Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fols. 76v, 79v, 103r, 166v, 125r, 129v, 156r-v, 168v, 181r, 265r and 272v. For Van Mander and Wijntgis, see M. J. Bok, Vrazg en aanbod op de Nederlandse kunstmarkt, 1580-1700, PhD dissertation University of Utrecht 1994, pp. 84-93.

35 Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 79v.

36 Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 125r.

37 Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 272v. For the life of Spranger, see S. Metzler, Splendor and eroticism in imperial Prague: The complete works, London 2014.

38 Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 28v.


40 ‘Wiel is waer, dat sy gheluckich worden ghebacht, die van de Natura aenherleyck zijn tot saluice Const, die hun tot nut en welwaren brengt, en maect het wel gesien en bemint by groot en cleen: maer de Menschen hebben deze meeninghe, datse bysonder noch gheluckigher zijn, die een euwighen faen naelaten in ygelijckest moeys, en van hun lolijckste werken, en welck alderbest can te wege ghhebracht zijn, als vermaerde Poeten yemants naem in hun gheschreven stellen, daer sy vaster blijven als in harde Porphyren met Diamanten ghesneden. Dit geluck hadde Simon van Siena, welcken levende ten tijde van den gheauswerden Poet Fransoys Petrarcha, diens vriendinne Laura by conterfeytte, en was van hem daerom zijnen naem in zijn versen plaatse ghegeeven, tot onsterfelycke ghedachtenisse,” see Van Mander 1604 (note 2), fol. 100r.


42 Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 245: “Hier is ons afgebeeld de braefst der Zangheldinnen [...]. Treur richters worden meest door haer genaat bereed: / Fortuin, of wel t’geval, verdraeit zich op haer schreeden ‘Hier the most heroic of the muses is depicted [...] / Fortune, or rather fate, turns upon her footstep.”, see Brusati 20/ (note 15), p. 279; Ben-Menahem 2008 (note 10), p. 128 points out that necessity, the impossibility of escaping fate, is precisely a characteristic theme of tragedy. Van Hoogstraten’s emphasis was on changing one’s fate. Since Fortuna casts darkness or light upon people’s lives as she sees fit, he linked her, albeit rather tenuously, with the theme of light, on which this section of his book centres.

43 Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), fol. **2v.

44 “haestig en by geluk,” see Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 28; Brusati 20/ (note 15), p. 82.

45 See also Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), pp. 45-36.


Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 283 called it "onkennelijk" (imperceptible), see Brusati 2021 (note 15), p. 311.

"schooner somtijts wel eenige toeval van Gratie de" Alberti 1991 (note 20), book 3, section 52, p. 87, after he said that "[Een kunstenaar] moet, 't is waer, voor eerst zijn goede schoon'er somtijts wel eenige toeval" Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 280 approvingly quotes the scholar and art connoisseur Gerard Vossius in this regard. He does not agree at all with Jan de Bruyn, however, who stated in his Wetsteijn der vernuften (Amsterdam 1644) "that it was all done haphazardly, like the throwing of the sponge by Protegenes", referring to the anecdote in which the Greek painter brilliantly, yet by chance, depicted foam around a horse’s mouth, see Van Hoogstraten 2021 (note 15), p. 312; "dat het [bereiken van artistieke schoonheid] al luk op raak, was gelijk het werpen van Protegenes spons", see Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 283.

"[Een kunstenaar] moet, 't is waer, voor eerst zijn goede fortune in zijn egen verdienden, dat is, in de deugt en in 't aengenaemheyt van zijn werk zoeken: maer daer naar moest hy omzien, dat by door yverige Mecenaten in de kunst de machtige Prinzen of Koningen geraken; of by de welwaerende kooplieden in achtinge koome. Want zonder hulpe van gunstige aenleyders, en voortkuirjers, die hem luitruchtich opschreeuwen, zal hy bezwaerlijk bekent worden," see Van Hoogstraten 1678 (note 3), p. 319; "Van Hoogstraten" Brusati 2021 (note 15), p. 335. The passage on the importance of people publicly singing your praises seems to echo Van Mander's previously quoted text on Petrarch and Simone Martini, see Van Mander 1634 (note 2), fol. 130a:

See, for example, Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 1, p. 291 (Paulus de Vos); vol. 2, p. 161 (Samuel van Hoogstraten); vol. 3, p. 234 (Godfrey Kneller); vol. 3, p. 239 (Gerard de Lairesse); vol. 3, p. 243 (Johannes Voorhout); Van Goel 1750-1759 (note 2); vol. 1, p. 316 (Arnold Houbraken); vol. 2, p. 143 (Robbert Griffier); vol. 2, p. 316 (Johannes Antiquus).

Van Hoogstraten's interest in social skills is evident in his book Den eereijken jongeling, of de edele kunst, van zich by groote en kleyne te doen eeren en beminnen, Dordrecht 1657, see T. Weststeijn, "De middelbare Konst heeft dikwils voor uitmuntend" (Amsterdam 1644) "that it was all done haphazardly, like the throwing of the sponge by Protegenes", referring to the anecdote in which the Greek painter brilliantly, yet by chance, depicted foam around a horse’s mouth, see Van Hoogstraten 2021 (note 15), p. 312; "Van Hoogstraten" Brusati 2021 (note 15), p. 335. The passage on the importance of people publicly singing your praises seems to echo Van Mander's previously quoted text on Petrarch and Simone Martini, see Van Mander 1634 (note 2), fol. 130a:

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Van Hoogstraten's interest in social skills is evident in his book Den eereijken jongeling, of de edele kunst, van zich by groote en kleyne te doen eeren en beminnen, Dordrecht 1657, see T. Weststeijn, "The visible world: Samuel van Hoogstraten’s art theory and the legitimation of painting in the Dutch golden age", Amsterdam 2008, pp. 65-73. Van Mander also paid considerable attention to social behaviour in his Grundt der edel vry schilderkonst, and stresses the need for sophisticated politeness (‘wellevendheid’), see Van Mander 1634 (note 2), fol. 2v-3v. Alberti 1991 (note 21), book 3, section 52, p. 87, after he has explained that an artist should master the craft of painting to capture the eye and to touch the heart of the beholder, continues: "I would have the painter first of all be a good man, well versed in the liberal arts. Everyone knows how much more effective uprightness of character is in securing people's favour than any amount of admiration for someone's industry and art. And no one doubts that the favour of many people is very useful to the artist for acquiring reputation and wealth. It so happens that, as rich men are often moved by kindness more than by expert knowledge of art, they will give money to one man who is especially modest and good, and spurn another who is more skilled but perhaps intemperate." There is still an echo here of the old topos of virtue as a weapon against fate.

Hercules Segers is an example of the former and Samuel van Hoogstraten of the latter, see Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, pp. 137, 168, respectively.

"Die op ‘t geluk van ‘t los geval / Vertrouwen set, in ‘s Waerelds dal; / Steunt op een Rietstok. / Want ‘s Wijmans arm’/, see Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 308; Horn 2021 (note 25), p. 335. The passage on the importance of people publicly singing your praises seems to echo Van Mander’s previously quoted text on Petrarch and Simone Martini, see Van Mander 1634 (note 2), fol. 130a:

Alberti 1991 (note 21), book 3, section 52, p. 87, after he has explained that an artist should master the craft of painting to capture the eye and to touch the heart of the beholder, continues: "I would have the painter first of all be a good man, well versed in the liberal arts. Everyone knows how much more effective uprightness of character is in securing people's favour than any amount of admiration for someone's industry and art. And no one doubts that the favour of many people is very useful to the artist for acquiring reputation and wealth. It so happens that, as rich men are often moved by kindness more than by expert knowledge of art, they will give money to one man who is especially modest and good, and spurn another who is more skilled but perhaps intemperate." There is still an echo here of the old topos of virtue as a weapon against fate.


2021 (note 25), pp. 312-313. Horn's translation is incorrect and misses the point. Houbraken does not say that Jacob de Wolf "had an entirely different nature and tried to make himself esteemed instead of flattering with his art, found himself mistaken" but "Jacob de Wolf, who had an entirely different nature and tried to make himself esteemed by his art instead of flattery, found himself mistaken." Houbraken explained forty pages earlier what constitutes social skills, see Horn 2021 (note 25), p. 265.

65 Barabási 2018 (note 22), pp. 54-57.

66 Barabási 2018 (note 22), pp. 54-57.

67 Rubens would normally belong to this category too, but Barabási 2018 (note 22), pp. 37-77.


70 Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 335 gives an example in the life of Jan de Baen of stylistic flexibility as a condition for success.

71 Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 3, p. 234, 235. For 'carried him on the wheelbarrow of good fortune', a familiar Dutch expression for giving a person a leg up, Horn 2021 (note 25), p. 235 gives ‘lifited him on to the fast track to fortune’. Kneller arrived in London in 1674, during Lely’s lifetime. Karst 2021 (note 1), pp. 63-69 draws on correspondence to reconstruct the precise, deliberate steps that Kneller took, in which he recognises the strategies outlined by Van Hoogstraten and Houbraken.

72 Kok 2013 (note 1) has shown how Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, Jacob Bakker and Joachim von Sandrart developed skills which could make them successful by applying these skills.

73 For Hercules Segers, see Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 137. Another painter who did not achieve success is Ernst Stuven, see Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 3, p. 372. Houbraken 1718-1721 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 259 cites the example of Rembrandt van Rijn, who was too stubborn to accede to a patron's not unreasonable request to paint out an unsolicited monkey in a family portrait, leaving the painter in possession of the painting. He does not, however, link the incident to the painter's character or career as a whole.

74 'dlingen die buiten hen [mensen] bestaan, maer ook in zaeken die geheel tot hunne eigen Personen behoren’, see Van Goell 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 1, p. 152.

75 This accords with Thomas Aquinas, who described character traits in terms of the chance confluence of different possibilities, see Lüthy and Palmerino 2021 (note 7), p. 27, ONabrugge 2018 (note 1) discussed this category of chance in artists’ lives.

76 "Zo ziet men veeltyds, dat Fortuin! Aen hen, die slaven, sloven, wroeten, / Zich kael vertoont van achterkruin. / Maer hen, die met ondank'tre voeten / Haer gaven als verschoppen, ten Bedevre en tot hun eige schade. / Met haere gunste als naloopt, en Ten Troon verheft van haer genade’", see Van Goell 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 153.

77 "As men de Levensbeschryvingen der, tot dus ver, door ons ten tonele gevoerde Schilderkonspersonadigheid met oplettenheit nagaat, zal men bevinden, dat de Kunstfortuin hen verschillende Rollen heeft doen spelen; zommigen, als haere gunstelingen, alles zonder moeite en van zelfs doende gelukken, anderen gedurig den voet dwars zetende, en, tegen alle poging en verdensten aen, overal in hinderlyk zynde., see Van Goell 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 152. On Houbraken, see Van Goell 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 495: "[...] that author, [who] went before with his Groot Schouwburg der Schilders; where he presents a wealth of examples, who, despite all their efforts and with no misconduct on their part, invariably continued to suffer with their art, leading some to excessive, and others to desperate decisions. If this latter occurs, it is certainly to their dishonour, as Goell will be alluding here to the suicide of Jacob de Wolf and the descent into alcoholism that resulted in Hercules Segers’ fatal accident[], even though their misfortune might have given them cause to do so; others on the other hand, who were caressed by the goddess of Fortune, yet spurned her, he indicates with overwhelming evidence." (‘[...] die Schryver, in zyn groot Schouwburg der Schilders, voorgegaan is; daer hy na eene lenger van voorbeelden van opgeeft, die, tegen alle poging en buiten eige wengedrag, alzuyt met hunne Kunst vleeven zuchtten, het geen eenige tot buitensporige, en andere tot wanhopige besuiten vervoerde, as dit laetste gebeurt, verstrekt het zyrekelyk tot oner, schoon hunne ongelukken hen hier aneeling toe gegeven hebben; andere daarentegen, die door de Lakgodin gestreelt wierden, en zulks verwaarloosden, geeft hy met doorslaende bewezen te kennen.’)

78 The most successful painters are listed in De Vries 1990 (note 12), p. 96.


81 This ambassador served in The Hague from 1678 to 1689 and again from 1701. It is not known when this second term came to an end, but he died in Paris in 1709, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Antoine_de_Mesmes_ (diplomat), accessed 15-12-2020.

83 Helvetius, or Schweizer, was the son of the physician Johan Frederik Schweizer (1629/30-1709) and is remembered for discovering the healing power of ipecacuanha (Racine Brazil), see P.C. Molhuysen and P.J. Blok, *Nieuw biografisch woordenboek*, vol. 3, Leiden 1911-1937, p. 569, column 1. Cases of healing are described in A.E. Helvetius, *Pour guérir tout sorte de fièvres sans rien faire prendre par la bouche: Découverte et donné au Roi*, Paris 1764, pp. 48-47.  
86 See also De Vries 1990 (note 12), pp. 77-83.  
88 Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 1, p. 179.  
90 “dat onder de Kunstkenners geacht en gewilt is” , see Van Gool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 299.  
91 Van Gool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 1, p. 38. The ways in which Van Huysum stumbled upon his fortune are discussed by E. Kolfin, *Voor koningen en prijzen:*  
92 Van Gool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 1, p. 179.  
93 Barabási 2018 (note 22), pp. 63-68. See Kolfin 2007 (note 95) for Van Huysum’s network of collectors.  
95 Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, pp. 20, 399 respectively.  
97 Barabási 2018 (note 22), pp. 63-68. See Kolfin 2007 (note 95) for Van Huysum’s network of collectors.  
98 Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, pp. 20, 399 respectively.  
99 “dat onder de Kunstkenners geacht en gewilt is”, see Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 299.  
100 Things did occasionally still work out in the Netherlands, as in the case of Arnold Boonen, see Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 297.  
101 Jacobus de Baen did actually succeed in this regard, as he departed earlier and was able to draw on the network of his father, the painter Jan de Baen, see Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, p. 467. Van Goool himself, incidentally, was also in England in 1777.  
102 “deet, op hoop van meerder begunstigers voor zyn Kunst te vinden, een reis naar Londen, maar zyn Kunstfortuin gelukte daer zo weinig als hier te lant, zo dat hem die tocht meer schade als voordeel toebreekt,” see Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 1, p. 393.  
103 Van Goool 1750-1751 (note 2), vol. 2, pp. 143, 277, 41 respectively.  
106 See De Vries 1990 (note 12), pp. 78-83 for the ways in which an ideal patron could help the artist advance: by facilitating study and development, for instance, donating works to socially higher-placed art lovers, praising an artist publicly, opening up their network, offering positions or appointing court artists.  
107 H. Nijboer, ‘Een bloeitijd als crisis: Over de Hollandse schilderkunst in de zeventiende eeuw’, *Historisch Tijdschrift Holland* 42 (2015), pp. 193-235. Bok 1994 (note 34), p. 205 had already noted that “the balance of the art market was, however, extremely shaky” (“Het evenwicht op de kunstmarkt was echter uiterst wankel”).  
108 For the evolution of the market, see Rasterhoff 2017 (note 1), pp. 169-283.  
110 For the iconography of the Occasio figure, see R. Wittkower, ‘Chance, time and virtue,’ Journal of the Warburg Institute 1 (1938), pp. 313-321; Miedema 2001.
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SUMMARY

The idea that chance plays a role in a person’s life seems trivial nowadays. Yet early-modern Dutch writers on the lives of painters did not see it this way at all. Despite all the attention that recent socioeconomic art historiography has paid to routes to success, the structural focus of early-modern writers on the role played by chance in the pursuit of painterly success has not previously been noted. The painter-authors Karel van Mander, Samuel van Hoogstraten, Arnold Houbraken and Johan van Gool, whose texts are analysed in this article, reveal that chance was perceived as a dominant force that artists had either to exploit or to resist.

This article discusses which instruments these practical men believed were available to artists. It shows how and why faith in the efficacy of these instruments gradually eroded and how the writers went about supporting their arguments. As the seventeenth century progressed, chance and patronage were mentioned in the same breath. Securing a patron was viewed as the best guarantee against the vagaries of fate, which ruled an open art market that had been in decline since the third quarter of the century. Achieving success was thus considered to be primarily a social matter too, a conclusion consistent with recent theoretical formation in sociology and network science on the subject of artistic success.

Finding patrons required a special set of social skills, a willingness to travel and a readiness to change painting styles. Whether or not this social talent was available, however, was itself regarded as a matter of chance, while patronage was seen as fickle. To mitigate this, the painter-authors sought to instruct artists on how to become adept networkers, and patrons on how to be reliable and knowledgeable partners. In this way, they and their books did their bit for the greater glory of art within the never-ending struggle to ward off misfortune and to attract good fortune. A struggle which, in their view, constituted the life of artists.