

CHAPTER SEVEN

PEDDLING IN TEXTS AND IMAGES: THE DUTCH VISUAL PERSPECTIVE*

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Introduction

Street sellers were common throughout early-modern Europe and their presence is recorded in a variety of written and visual forms in each and every country. But how, specifically, these peddlars were received and their activities documented not only varies from place to place, but, as is discussed in the general introduction, fluctuates in response to diverse cultural streams within any one society. These differences often reflect distinct, idiosyncratic factors, ranging from how the local government and guilds engaged with these hawkers legally, to fads in local art markets where the buyers' whims and purse helped determine which images of peddlars would be produced and popularized.¹

To date, several scholars have taken on the difficult task of trying to determine the social and economic significance of these (usually) anonymous itinerant salesmen and women in various European countries.² One such project was recently undertaken at the University of Utrecht. Here, the focus was on the role played by peddlars in the distribution of printed matter (texts, songs, prints, etc.) in the Netherlands and, as a point of comparison, England, in the period 1600–1850.³ Initially, work on this project

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¹ For examples of the former, see Jeroen Salman's article in this volume, and for an example of the latter, see that of Melissa Calaresu.

² See, for example, L. Fontaine, *History of Peddlars in Europe*, trans. Vicki Whittaker (Oxford, 1996); and M. Spufford, *The Great Reclothing of Rural England: Petty Chapman and their Wares in the Seventeenth century* (London, 1984).

³ Funded by a VIDI grant from the NWO (Nederlandse organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek), this project also supported Jeroen Salman's research on the general scale and specific social and economic characteristics of the Dutch itinerant trade in printed matter, as well as Roeland Harms's doctoral research on the distribution of pamphlets in the Netherlands. See R. Harms *Pamfletten en publieke opinie. Massamedia in de zeventiende*

focused on what archival and textual sources could reveal about this group of pedlars and their place in society. As is discussed in Jeroen Salman's article, these sources have disclosed previously unimagined relations between pedlars and regular booksellers, as well as attempts to regulate and suppress itinerant salesmen. Nonetheless, they often (by necessity) remain limited to specific examples of controversial or illegal behaviour and lack an overview of the cultural contexts in which these pedlars worked.⁴ In order to ameliorate this restricted perspective, I would like to consider what visual sources can add to our understanding of which types of pedlars were active in the Netherlands, the circumstances in which these pedlars interacted with their potential clients, and how they were received in the early-modern Dutch Republic.

Obviously, all works of art are the result of some creative, interpretative process, often undertaken in the hope of satisfying (and profiting from!) current demands in the art market (as Melissa Calaresu also argues in her article). Consequently, they must be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the sheer diversity of these images and the quantities in which they were produced also readily attests to their constituting a "popular" subject matter, as defined in the general introduction. Thus, although impossible to determine definitively, it remains important to consider the extent to which these images were capable of moulding public opinion regarding pedlars and the extent to which they simply reflect it. At present, however, I will focus on probing how effectively these images can be used to envision and understand the general, every-day context in which pedlars worked. To this end, I examined a broad sampling of Netherlandish images of pedlars selling printed wares in order to determine which views of these pedlars were conveyed and what this, in turn, says about the society that produced them and those for whom they were made. I will be using the term Netherlandish to refer to works of art produced in both the northern and southern Netherlands (the present-day Netherlands and Belgium). As there was a regular flow of artists, prints, and paintings between these areas in this period, as well as no significant regional differentiation in the representation of comparable scenes, I will consider all such works

eeuw (Amsterdam, 2011) and J. Salman, *Pedlars and the Popular Press: Itinerant Distribution Networks in England and the Netherlands 1600–1850* (Leiden & Boston 2013; in press).

⁴ For an overview of these results, see J. Salman, 'Between reality & representation. The image of the pedlar in the 18th century Dutch Republic', in M. van Delft, F. de Glas & J. Salman, eds., *New Perspectives in Book History: Contributions from the Low Countries* (Zutphen, 2006), 189–202.