Auction Sales of Works of Art in Amsterdam (1597-1638)

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In the economic development of Western Europe, urbanization, markets, and the commercialization of art followed parallel trends. In the course of time, when markets became fairly developed, auctions of general merchandise and of art works emerged (in ancient Rome\(^1\), in early 16\(^{th}\) century Venice, Antwerp, and Amsterdam\(^2\) as a quick and efficient way to dispose of goods. In Amsterdam, the Orphan Chamber (Weeskamer) and the Bankruptcy Chamber (Desolate Boedelskamer), created by the municipal authorities, soon fastened on auctions to raise money for orphans and for creditors. We are exceptionally fortunate that the detailed records of auctions held by the Orphan Chamber have been preserved for a number of years between 1597 and 1638. In this article, I will study the works of art in these records systematically, with special emphasis on the buyers whose names have been preserved in them.\(^3\)

**General Characteristics of Orphan Chamber Auctions**

Orphan Chamber auctions are mentioned in Amsterdam city regulations as early as 1507, when they stipulated that sales were to be made for cash, unless someone stood surety (borg) for the buyer, in which case he would have six weeks to pay for his purchase.\(^4\) This regulation was still in effect a century later (although it was not strictly followed).

A few sales records dating to the years 1530-1534, written on loose sheets of paper, have been preserved. Works of art – some of which were fairly expensive, in terms of the much lower prices that prevailed in those times\(^5\) – were included among household goods in these sales. But the only available corpus of data consists of the records of the 1597-1638 auction sales, which are consigned in 29 notebooks preserved in the Amsterdam archive. Of these, all but one was said to contain the results of estate sales (erfhuizen). The exception is a notebook of ‘voluntary sales’ (willige verkopingen) for the period 1608-1610. In point of fact, the notebooks of erfhuizen actually contained numerous voluntary sales, and it is not certain that other notebooks of voluntary sales ever existed.\(^6\) In the period covered by the notebooks, several officials, known as boden, named by the burgomasters, were in charge of these auctions: Gerrit Jansz. Block from 3 June 1597 to May 1603; Gerrit...
Jacobsz. Haringh from June 1603 to 1637; Jan Dirksz. van Beuningen from 1617 to 1627; Daniel van Beuningen, the son of Jan Dirksz., from 1627 to 1648, a period that overlapped in part with the stewardship of Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh.

Some of the notebooks recording estate sales that occurred between 1597 and 1638 have been lost; there are no records of estate sales held by Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh covering the period July 1604 to June 1605 or February 1615 to May 1616 or from December 1617 to February 1620. There is a gap in the estate sales organized by *bode* Jan Dirksz. van Beuningen running from February 1623 to the end of November 1624; in the estate sales organized by Daniel Jansz. van Beuningen, the gaps run from August 1630 to May 1635 and from September 1636 to January 1637. It is a calamity that the records of Daniel Jansz. van Beuningen end in April 1638, for it was precisely one year later that the greatest auction took place that the Orphan Chamber had ever held (at least to our knowledge). The total proceeds of this auction of the goods belonging to Lucas van Uffelen, which seem to have consisted mainly or entirely of works of art that had been shipped from Italy, came to 59,456 f. This sum represents nearly two thirds of the total value of works of art in my sample of 423 Orphan Chamber sales, dated from 1597 to 1638, where I have left out of consideration only sales containing the most insignificant works of art. Among the most expensive works of art at the Van Uffelen auction were the portrait of Baldassare Castiglione by Raphael which sold for 3,500 f. (bought by Alphonse Lopez) and a painting of the Virgin Mary by Titian, for 3,000 f. (bought by Joachim Sandrart). The most expensive lot recorded in the notebooks of the Orphan Chamber that have been preserved was a *kunstboeck* containing drawings by Lucas van Leyden which sold for 637 f. 10 stuivers in the Jan van Basse sale of 1637 (bought by Leendert van Beyeren, a pupil of Rembrandt, perhaps on his master’s account). The auctions of the period 1597-1638, insofar as we can judge them from extant records, were curtain raisers for those of subsequent years that have been lost. It was only in those later years that a genuine international market developed. In this earlier period there were no foreign buyers and few out-of-town buyers of any sort. The Amsterdam auctions at that time were still essentially a local phenomenon. It is also remarkable that the nobility, with the exception of a few very rich merchants who had been ennobled by a Doge of Venice, Louis XIII of France, or Charles I of England, were not represented at these auctions. This is in marked contrast to the auctions conducted in the Southern Netherlands – in Antwerp, in particular – where the nobility (and high Roman Catholic prelates) played a prominent, if not dominant, role as buyers.

According to the 18th century historian Jan Wagenaar, the estates of orphans, both of whose parents had died, were to be sold by auction by the Orphan Chamber ‘to the highest bidder’ (*aan de meest biedende*). I know of only one document dating from the period of the extant notebooks that states explicitly that a painting was sold to the highest bidder. On 14 August 1634, an Amsterdam notary, acting at the request of Frans Hals, called at the house of the *bode* Daniel Jansz. Van Beuningen to issue a complaint (*insinuatie*) regarding a painting by Goltzius which he, Hals, had bought at auction for 86 f. The sale had been held the preceding Thursday at the house