Rubens Meets Brouwer

Confrontations with Low-Life Genre Painting

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Arnold Houbraken narrates in his *Groote Schouburgh* (1718) how Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) visited the imprisoned Duke of Arenberg in the Antwerp Castle and, at the same time, had an encounter with Adriaen Brouwer (1605/06-1638). He added that shortly before, Brouwer had finished a painting figuring card playing Spanish soldiers, made at the Duke's request as proof of his capacity.

Upon seeing it he [Rubens, who never saw Brouwer before] said at once, stunned with amazement: *Upon my soul* [...] it is by BROUWER, and immediately offered the Duke 600 guilders for it, but he wanted to keep this picture for his own enjoyment, and in remembrance of this event. RUBBENS, who could not tolerate that such an outstanding painter was being treated so badly, first went to the Governor, whom he informed that an artful painter, come from Holland, had been detained by soldiers and imprisoned simply under the suspicion that he was a spy; that they had seized him under wrongful suspicion, that his Highness could rest assured that he had not come to Antwerp with this intention: but only to practise his Art, and because of this could be given his freedom, which the Governor granted on RUBBENS' word. So he was let out of the prison, and was happy about his liberation. RUBBENS took him along to his House, had a suit of clothes made for him right away, and brought him along amongst virtuous company, of temperate lifestyle, showing thereby that he had great respect for him.

Allegedly, Rubens was filled with such an enthusiasm that he was not only prepared to pay a handsome 600 guilders on the spot for the picture, but also obtained Brouwer's freedom and even provided him with lodging. However punctuated with anecdotal frills, literary *topoi* and contaminated facts, this extract contains an underlying statement that deserves a closer look. The point of Houbraken's anecdote lies in illustrating Brouwer's brilliant gift for painting, which not only enabled him to extricate himself from a difficult situation, but also earned him instant recognition from the chief connoisseurs and artists of the day, such as Rubens. This fascination displayed by an aristocratic artist who was the most distinguished practitioner of the *genus grave* (history painting) with a so-called wandering, debt-laden