Cornelis Ketel, Fingerpainter and Poet-Painter

H. Perry Chapman

In the Kerck der deucht (Temple of Virtue), his allegorical poem of 1600, Karel van Mander imagines an artist looking in a mirror and painting ‘a male figure [whose] every finger is a brush, and who thus shows with intelligence that he is depicted by his own hand’. With this metaphorical inhabitant of the Temple of Virtue, Van Mander casts the virtuous painter as a self-portraitist who seeks self-knowledge in the perfected image of himself that is reflected in the mirror of virtue. Strikingly, this painter’s fingers have turned to brushes, much as Daphne’s sprouted leaves. A kind of Edward Scissorhands whose hands and tools have become one, he embodies the enthusiasm that leaves him no choice but to devote his life to the Art of Painting.

This ideal painter who represents himself and embodies his craft, whose hand is literally in his work, is a dream image. Yet he is based on a curious and singular aspect of van Mander’s friend, the ‘poet-painter’ Cornelis Ketel (1548-1616), to whom the poem is dedicated, who in 1599 took up painting with his fingers and, in 1600, with his toes. His renown for painting without brushes was such that Ketel was later pictured in the title print of book 6, ‘Terpsichore’, from Samuel van Hoogstraten’s Inleyding tot de hoooge schoole der schilderkonst (Introduction to the Elevated School of Art), published in 1678 (fig. 1). At center is Terpsichore, the muse of poetry, whose elaborate plumes and lute signify her poetische geest or poetic spirit. She is surrounded by painters. Curious liefhebbers, art-lovers, look on as Ketel, at right, paints with the toes of his left foot. Van Hoogstraten devotes Book 6 of his Inleyding to coloring, the animating ‘soul’ of painting, which he esteems above drawing, and to color’s importance for the naturalistic imitation of flesh, hair, and clothing, of animals and landscape. In the final chapter of book 6, which treats the ‘handeling van maniere van schilderen’ (handling or manner of painting), van Hoogstraten advises the painter: ‘seek not an individual style but only naturalness’. It is here that Ketel features as having achieved just such naturalness by painting with his fingers and toes. In characterizing Ketel as painting without brushes ‘in order to demonstrate that the master, not the brush, is the painter’, van Hoogstraten suggests that life-giving representation after nature is not a skill or mechanical process but the product of an individual with a distinctive ‘hand’ or style. Through direct touch and stylistic purity, Ketel had mastered an