A Confusion of Names: Jacobus Victors and Jacob van de Kerckhoven

Since the 1970s, there has been much confusion concerning the identities of two seventeenth-century minor masters who specialized in the depiction of birds and who were active for a period in Venice: the Dutch Jacobus Victors and the Flemish Jacob van de Kerckhoven. This problem was further compounded by the appearance of the names of Giacomo da Castello and Giacomo Cimiterio, as painters active in Venice and the Veneto in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and also specializing in the genre of bird painting.

The first published reference to Jacobus Victors occurs during his own lifetime, in Martini's addendum to Sansovino's Venetia Citta Nobilissima of 1663. The artist is recorded in Venice at the time, as ‘Iacobu Fichtor olande$... mirabile nel formar Animali volatili.’ Most of our contemporary knowledge of Victors, however, derives from the extensive archival research of Abraham Bredius, whose documentary and genealogical investigations firmly establish him as the brother of the Delft painter Victor Victors and half-brother to the better-known Rembrandt pupil Jan Victors. Based on Bredius, it was previously believed that Jacobus Victors stopped painting in 1675, to devote himself to a more lucrative use for his models—a feather and bedding business. An old reference to a signed and dated painting of 1678 in Harenstadt (present whereabouts unknown) may obligé us to amend that date, but the inventory of Victors' estate of 14 December 1701 confirms that his relatively substantial holdings (valued at more than fl.30,000) derived largely from his commerce and not his art. Nevertheless, Victors' extant paintings provide rich testimony to his artistic talent. Executed in a sharp, realistic style, his voelreukke are strongly lighted and meticulously rendered, their painstaking detail making them, in effect, avian portraits that enable the viewer to identify each particular species of bird depicted (figs. 1 and 2).

The Appendix to the present article lists all documents now known on Victors in the Amsterdam Archives.

Jacob van de Kerckhoven is a much more obscure figure than Jacobus Victors. Apparently, it was not until Rombouts and Van Lerius' pioneering publication of 1864, on the St. Luke's Guild in Antwerp, that Van de Kerckhoven was recognized as a pupil of Jan Fyt in 1649. His name, nonetheless, is absent from all of the subsequent standard reference compendia; neither Wurzbach, nor Thieme-Becker, nor Bernt mentions him. Nearly a century after Rombouts and Van Lerius, Edith Greindl compiled a brief sketch of the artist amongst the followers of Jan Fyt, with a list of four monogrammed paintings and eleven attributed works. She rightly describes the style of those catalogued still-life pieces as tempered by ‘un peu de fantaisie,’ with Van de Kerckhoven frequently including overly ripe fruits and vegetables in his compositions, in the lush manner of his master (figs. 3 and 4).

Documents confirm the singularity of Giacomo Cimiterio and Jacob van de Kerckhoven. The extant rolls of master painters in the Venetian Academy include the following references:

19 April 1685
'ser Giacomo Semiterio'
3 October 1686
'S Giacomo Semiterio'
5 June 1690
'Giacomo Van den Kerckhoven d'anni 55'
1712
'Giacomo Zimiterio vechissimo, non fu chiamato.'

In 1811, Moschini compiled a more complete list of painters enrolled since the year 1687, and noted: 'Giacomo Cimiterio o Van den Kerckhoven 1687-1712.' Clearly, these two cognomens were used interchangeably, 'Cimiterio' (a derivative of 'cimitero' or 'cemetery') representing merely an Italian translation of the Flemish name 'Van de Kerckhoven' (from the churchyard).

In 1777, L. Antoniazzi Rossi published a citation from the inventory of the collection of the Marshall von Schulenburg (begun in 1744 in Venice), listing ‘Giacomo Cimiterio da Castello’ as the author of a kitchen scene filled with human figures, animals, and poultry. This conflation of the two Italian surnames suggests, perhaps, that the native Flemish artist took up residence in the Castello district of Venice after his emigration to Italy and the informal adoption of his Italianized name.

Already in 1972, C.-G. Marcus had identified Jacob van de Kerckhoven with Giacomo da Castello, based on the stylistic similarities between the signed paintings of the former and those traditionally attributed to the latter. R. Pallucchini unduly took
this identification one step further, when he insinuated the name of Jacobus Victors into the bird painter’s aliases. He founded his hypothesis on the parity of the artists’ first names (Jacobus and Giacomo), their specialized subject matter (the bird piece), and the fact that Victors is known to have been in Venice in 1663. But surviving documents in Amsterdam and Venice, prove this conflation of Victors with Van de Kerckhoven/Cimiterio da Castello untenable.

As was quoted above, Giacomo van de Kerckhoven’s age was given as 53 in 1690 in Venice. But on 15 February 1686, Jacobus Victors was cited as 45 years old in Amsterdam, and therefore would have been 50, not 53, in 1690. When Jacob van de Kerckhoven was first documented in Antwerp in 1649, as an apprentice of the Flemish master Fyt, Jacobus Victors would have been only 9 years old and a bit young to begin his professional training. Victors, furthermore, signed notarized documents in Amsterdam on 28 August, 7 September, and 17 October of 1686 (see Appendix, document #9); it is unlikely that he could have been in Venice on 3 October of that year, when ‘Giacomo Semiterio’ paid his dues to the Accademia. Finally, Jacobus Victors died on 5 December 1705, was buried on 11 December in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam (see Appendix, document #21), and an inventory of his estate was drawn up on 14 December. The elderly ‘Giacomo Zimiterio’ was listed, but not called, in the roll of painters in Venice as late as 1712—the year in which he is marked as deceased by Moschini. There can be no doubt that these incompatible references represent the biographical data on two different and distinct artists.

This conclusion accords well with the thematic and stylistic evidence of the paintings. In general, Victors shows a marked penchant for depicting live birds in an outdoor barnyard setting, while Van de Kerckhoven varies his still-life subjects to include dead birds and/or game, shellfish, and abundant produce filling a dark architectural interior. Because of his greater variety of still-life motifs, Van de Kerckhoven tends toward a more coloristic palette than Victors, in whose works richly modulated tones of