Herman van Swanevelt and his Prints*

Although Herman van Swanevelt’s name has found its way into much of the literature on both northern and southern seventeenth-century art, there has been no comprehensive study of his work either as a painter or as a printmaker. Malcolm Waddingham’s 1960 article on Swanevelt in Rome is only a foundation for further study and no exhaustive study of Swanevelt in the Roman or Parisian archives has been published or, to my knowledge, undertaken. Swanevelt, the youngest of the first generation of seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painters to come to Rome, has been regarded until recently as a figure who was greatly influenced by the work of his supposed housemate, Claude. Descamps’ short biography of the artist in his 1756 Vie des Peintres flandres . . . is typical of this attitude when it says that ‘Swanevelt was struck by the beauty and success of the work of Claude Lorrain, and he chose him for his model and became his pupil.’

A similar passage is found in the introduction to a 1777 edition of Claude Lorrain’s Liber veritatis that states: ‘[Claude’s] own excellence is further seen in the works of his scholar, the elegant and pensive Swanevelt.’ This view is also expressed in the entry on Swanevelt in Nagler’s 1848 Künstler Lexicon. It was only in the 1950s that Swanevelt began to emerge from Claude’s shadow. Careful examination of his paintings by Waddingham and Michael Kitson has revealed that Swanevelt was a much more inventive and forward looking artist than had been previously thought, and that it may have been Swanevelt who influenced Claude.

Herman van Swanevelt was probably born in Woerden, near Utrecht, around the turn of the seventeenth century. It has been suggested that his earliest artistic training would have been with some of the minor masters active in Utrecht in the 1610s. By 1623 we know that he had left the Netherlands and gone to Paris, since there are two signed and dated drawings, now in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Brunswick, that situate him in the French capital by this date. By 1624 he was living in Rome. Some confusion has arisen concerning whether or not Swanevelt shared a house with Claude Lorrain in 1627-1628. The 1627 Statii delle anime for Santa Maria del Popolo lists Claude Lorrain and his ‘compagno fiandego’ as living in the strada Margurita. The 1628 Statii lists Claude in the same house with an ‘Enrico fiandego pitore.’ This information has been used by many scholars as documentary evidence that Swanevelt lived with Claude in these years. No matter how tantalizing this suggestion is, it can only remain a suggestion. Swanevelt’s Italian name was Armando or Ermano and not Enrico and ‘compagno fiandego’ is far too vague a term to equate it with any one artist. It is interesting to note, however, that Swanevelt does not seem to appear in the Statii for 1627 and 1628, but appears in 1629 in Sant’Andrea delle Fratte as living next door to Michelangelo Cerquozzi in the Isola della Salita di San Giuseppe. Swanevelt is listed at the Sant’Andrea address until 1634. In 1630 he is living with
Herman van Swanevelt, Sant' Adriano in Via Flaminia, etching and engraving. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, William Pritchard Fund, by exchange (St.82:3).

In 1631 he is listed as living alone, with Cerquozzi still his neighbor. In 1632, 1633 and 1634 Swanevelt is listed with one ‘Carlo Vadram, intagliatore’ who must be Swanevelt’s publisher, the French artist Charles Audran. We do not know where Swanevelt lived from 1634 until he went to Paris in 1641, since there is then a gap in the Stati records until 1643.

It makes little difference whether Swanevelt and Claude were actually housemates since, from the information gleaned from the Stati and Sandrart’s first hand account of the artist in his Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Malerrey-Künste, it is clear that Swanevelt was in direct contact with the French artists in the city, as well as with fellow northern artists. Swanevelt’s association with the mainstream of the Roman artistic community can be further confirmed by his membership in the Academy of St. Luke, in whose records he is listed in 1634 as one of the four northerners in the rolls.

Swanevelt left Rome via Florence for Paris in 1641. In the French capital he executed many major commissions, including canvases in Le Vau’s Hôtel Lambert. His patrons also included Cardinal Richelieu, who owned two of Swanevelt’s mythological paintings, and Gédon Tallement, to whom is dedicated a series of prints depicting Roman views. In Paris he became ‘peintre ordinaire’ to the King and, in 1651, a member of the Academy. Although Swanevelt died in Paris in 1655, he returned to the Netherlands at least three times: in 1643, 1649 and 1650.

Swanevelt was a prolific printmaker, and Bartsch and Hollstein attributed a total of 117 prints to him. There is, however, very little direct evidence for determining the chronology of these prints. We can begin to understand Swanevelt’s working method from an examination of his extant drawings. Preparatory drawings and studies exist for a great number of Swanevelt’s prints. The largest single repository for Swanevelt drawings is the Gabinetto disegni e stampe degli Uffizi in Florence. The presence of these sheets in Florence can be dated back to 1673 when they appear listed in Baldinucci’s Lista de’ Nomi de’ Pittori, di mano de’ quali si hanno Disegni . . . , as ‘Ermando 62 disegni.’ It is an interesting possibility that the drawings remained in Italy when Swanevelt left for Paris in 1641, thus dating the actual etching of all the plates, including the Venus and Adonis series (H. 18-23), to his Italian sojourn. This suggestion, however, should be rejected, since several of