Fruits and vegetables: new information on the workshop practice of Pieter Aertsen*

Recently Wouter Kloek discussed the problems involved in defining the oeuvre of Pieter Aertsen. One of the difficulties in this regard is the extensive collaboration of assistants in Aertsen's studio. Among other things Kloek pointed out that Aertsen was inventive in finding ways to produce variations on his most successful paintings by repeating and rearranging motifs of his compositions, a studio practice in which assistants may have participated. Proceeding from the viewpoint of workshop practice, I would like to consider some concrete examples of Aertsen's use of a transfer device for individual still-life motifs in his paintings.

It has already been noted that similar still-life motifs appear in different paintings by Aertsen. Among these paintings are the Vegetable Pedlar in Berlin (fig. 1), the Still Life with Figures in Stockholm (fig. 2) and the Still Life with Figures in Rotterdam (fig. 3). The still lifes of these paintings share similar bunches of white and red grapes, squashes, pumpkins, melons and arrangements of cabbages. A combination of three parsnips appears on both the paintings in Rotterdam and Stockholm, while part of this parsnip grouping is visible in the Berlin Vegetable Pedlar. In each painting the comparable fruits and vegetables are placed in different positions.

In order to find out more about the specific relationship between these still-life motifs, I made tracings on transparent mylar paper of the two bunches of grapes, the two melons, the squash, the pumpkin and the parsnip arrangement of the Rotterdam painting. Subsequently, each of these tracings was placed over the similar fruits and vegetables in the other two paintings for comparison. The results of these comparisons show that in nearly every case the similar still-life motifs are in fact exactly the same size and form. Only in a few instances are some slight adjustments in placement apparent, as in the stalks of the melons in the Stockholm Still Life with Figures. Furthermore the inner design of the squash in the Vegetable Pedlar is slightly different in form. In the same painting the end of the overlaying parsnip is a little bit shorter. However, the results clearly point to the use of a tracing device for transferring these still-life motifs onto the panels.

Additional evidence for the practice of tracing was obtained by examination with infrared reflectography of the Rotterdam Still Life with Figures. A clear image of the underdrawing of the bunch of white grapes shows unbroken, mechanically looking contour lines defining every single fruit (fig. 4). This suggests the use of a pattern for transfer. The most likely working procedure in this case would have been for the artist to blacken the cartoon of each motif on the reverse and then trace the design onto the grounded panel with a stylus. The artist could also have made a separate sheet of blackened paper to be placed between the cartoon and the panel for the same purpose. In either case, the design traced on the panel would then be touched up with black chalk or another medium.

An early source of information on Aertsen's use of cartoons is 'Het Schilder-
Pieter Aertsen, *Vegetable Pedlar*, 1567, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatliche Museen

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Pieter Aertsen, *Still Life with Figures*, Stockholm, Hallwylska Museet