Flatness in Dutch Art: Theory and Practice

Book V of Gerard de Lairesse’s *Groot Schilderboek* is devoted to the topic of light and shade, and the seventh chapter of this book, ‘Van de Slagschaduwen in de Zonneschyn’, discusses the ways in which shadows are cast in differing forms of sunlight. As is often the case in his treatise, Lairesse mingles advice to painters in general with criticism of painters in particular, and, at the end of the chapter, he engages in a diatribe against those who, he claims, always want to paint their subjects as if they were in broad sunlight. These ‘Sunpainters’ as he calls them, *Zonschilders*, turn their backs on diffused or indirect light, *gemeen licht*, which Lairesse himself contends is the most perfect form of lighting in a painting.

‘It isn’t flat, they say: by which they mean, that it isn’t sunny, nor clear and sharp in the shadows, as it normally is when they depict things in their sunlight. Flat, flat, they say to their pupils, or disciples, in a soft voice, so that strangers cannot hear: as if it were a secret, unknown to art itself. They say that the good Philemon was so enamoured of things which had flat lights and shades, that he only painted pictures with sun or moonshine. He made his preference plain when he put all his intellect into a depiction of Jupiter and Alcmena, in which the two of them were on their way to bed, and the sun was shining pure and clear through the windows into the room, so brightly that you could have counted all the squares of the window on the floor. Poor Jupiter, how cruelly you are treated! Shall Phoebus shine through the windows against your command, when you had expressly ordered him to keep himself hidden for three times twenty-four hours? But never mind about that, thought the painter: it has to be flat; so the sunshine has to be there, even though it was the middle of the night.’

The painting Lairesse describes probably never existed – the subject of Jupiter and Alcmena is extremely rare in art – and it seems likely that he has chosen this example only because, in the myth, Jupiter told the sun to hide while he slept with Alcmena, the mother of Hercules. It is also unclear who ‘Philemon’ might be, and whether this is meant as a disguised name for a real painter, or a pure fiction. But despite these uncertainties, the passage is an interesting one, since it suggests that there were painters in Lairesse’s day who treasured the word ‘flat’ – in Dutch, ‘vlak’ – as a piece of precious jargon, which, in their view, captured an important aspect of art.

One might think, from the satirical tone of Lairesse’s text, that ‘flat’ was the favourite word of a small group of unusual artists he happened to know; but the history of ‘flatness’ can be traced back over a hundred years in Dutch art theory, via Samuel van Hoogstraten and Willem Goeree to Karel van Mander’s *Schilder-boeck*. 
‘Vlak’ was a key term in the aesthetics of seventeenth-century Holland, and this article is an attempt to reconstruct its meaning.\(^8\)

In modern Dutch-English dictionaries, ‘vlak’ is given as ‘flat’, ‘level’ or ‘smooth’; in geometry, ‘een vlak’ is a plane. But whether ‘flat’ is the perfect translation of ‘vlak’ as used in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art theory may be questioned. Samuel van Hoogstraten used the word to describe the brushstrokes of the late Titian,\(^9\) which are famously raised and impasted, so we should not suppose that by ‘flat’ is meant ‘smoothly or evenly painted’.\(^10\) John Frederick Fritsch, who translated the *Groot Schilderboek* into English in the eighteenth century, rendered ‘vlak’ consistently as ‘broad’,\(^11\) and this certainly fits well with Hoogstraten’s\(^9\) use of the word to describe Titian’s late work. The problem however is that, since Fritsch’s day, ‘broad’ has taken on a meaning which would always be associated with Titian’s late manner; ‘broad brushstrokes’ are invariably loose and thick, but ‘vlak’, as I hope to show, could also be used for the work of fine painters such as Gerrit Dou. It seems best, therefore, to continue to use ‘flat’, since this has no obvious connotations in modern art theory: but the flatness being suggested is not a flatness of the pigments themselves on the support, but rather a visual flatness, an impression that the objects depicted have no or little relief.

This statement should become clearer if we return to the passage by Lairesse quoted earlier. Lairesse associated ‘flatness’ with sunlight; and at the end of the chapter from

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