Early Dutch Painting: Thirty Years On*

The lavish exhibition *Vroege Hollanders*, organised by the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in 2008¹ gave me the enviable opportunity of seeing side by side a large number of the works which my research had focused on for many years leading to a publication in 1980.² Since the publication of this work, few studies have approached the subject as a whole, apart from the Rotterdam exhibition which had a similar ambition. Importantly, two new techniques of panel painting analysis, infrared reflectography and dendrochronology, which were only making their appearance at the time of my research, are now widely practised, and thus have brought new information. Consequently, it was tempting to return thirty years later to the questions raised by my original study, to bring the necessary corrections, and to determine what can be consolidated in the light of these new informations. A symposium organised by the Rotterdam museum at the end of the exhibition gave me the opportunity to engage in this exercise.

The originality of my research resided in its attempt to offer quite a precise chronology of the evolution of painting in the Northern Netherlands in the fifteenth century combining all available methods of dating. This is why the new information provided by dendrochronology can be valuable in confirming or contradicting my original proposals. This data must, however, be used with caution, carefully assessing its exact value. The only scientifically-established element brought by this analysis is the date of the last identifiable ring. One should remember that this date is established by comparing the cross-section of a painted panel with a series of dated cross-sections, so that one cannot exclude the possibility of an error, whether the operation is conducted by the naked eye or by a particular computer programme. From there, everything is hypothetical: indeed, in order to establish the date when the wood was used, one needs to assess – necessarily arbitrarily – the total number of sapwood rings which the tree must have featured when it was felled and how long it was left to dry. Peter Klein, whose work has been essential to this field had preferred in his first analyses to opt for long timespans – fifteen years of sapwood growth, ten years of drying – so as not to underestimate the time taken by the process. As a consequence, by accepting this raw data, one runs the risk of adopting too late a date for the works. The art historian should thus only take into account the lowest estimates for these two elements – i.e., nine years of sapwood growth, two years of drying, evaluations which could still be occasionally too long – and examine whether the date thus obtained, and therefore a later date for the execution of the painting, is compatible with historical data.

Jan van Eyck in Holland

Although this topic occupies a very important chapter in my book, I shall not discuss it at length here. Indeed, I have extensively published on this subject in a study
originally intended to accompany an edition of the Turin and Turin-Milan Hours, initiated and subsequently abandoned by Electa editions. Faksimile Verlag took over the project without taking into account the work which I had already completed, and asked Anne van Buren to write the commentary volume. This publication, not easily accessible because of the exhorbitant price of the facsimile, only contributes minor elements to the particular question of the eyckian intervention. A hitherto unknown single leaf acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum has recently yielded important new information regarding the history of the manuscript. The last owner to commission miniatures for the manuscript was none other than Engelbert I, Count of Nassau, and it was Jean de Pestivien, also known as the Master of Jean Chevrot, who realised the greatest part of these illustrations, and probably oversaw the rest of the programme. The book must have passed to the House of Savoy in 1502 when the grandson of the Count of Nassau married Françoise-Louise of Savoy, daughter of the Count of Romont.

Albert van Ouwater, also known as Lambrecht van Alpas (Alphen)

Friso Lammertse, in the Rotterdam exhibition catalogue, delivered the most surprising conclusion concerning this mysterious Haarlem artist. No trace of this painter could be found in any document, except in a payment made for the funeral of his daughter, however this turned out to be the result of a misreading of the document. I had therefore suggested that his name had perhaps been transcribed erroneously by Karel van Mander. One should remember that van Mander had only obtained his informations in 1604 from Albert Simonsz, then aged sixty, who therefore had not known the master of Geertgen tot Sint Jans. He had heard about him from Mostaert who himself only knew the fame of this painter. The oral transmission of information over more than one hundred and fifty years, i.e. at least three generations, could well have caused the corruption of certain names. This is why I suggested that Lambrecht Rutghensz, a painter who was apparently important in Haarlem and documented from 1426 to 1468 could well be the artist we are looking for: a corruption of Lambrecht into Albrrecht is an easy mistake, which can have resulted from an uncertain memory of the final ‘brecht’ to lead to the more common name of Albrrecht. Antonio de Beatis changed in the same way the name of ‘Hubert’ into ‘Roberto’. The Ouwater mystery still remained to be elucidated. After methodically searching the archives, Sjoerd Bijker found that this artist was also called ‘Lambrecht van Alpas’ in the Haarlem municipal accounts for 1446, which curiously had gone astray at the time when I was myself researching these records. Alpas must be understood as a variation on the name of the city of Alphen aan den Rijn located on the Oude Rijn, about twenty kilometres from Oudewater. P. Plemper explained in 1714 that its inhabitants were called ‘Alpannen’ because their ancestors had come from alpine regions, and that the town was sometimes called Alpan, or Alphpet. The corruption of Alpan into Alpas could be the result of a simple clerical error, or could have been induced by its closeness to the name of the river ‘Alblas’ in the same region. Confusing Oudewater with ‘Oude Rijn’ on the banks of which Alphen is located, is again possible, especially since these places are close, only about thirty kilometres away from each other. This precision regarding the name of Lambrecht Rutghensz thus seems to corroborate my hypothesis which was already supported by the payment made for the “cleaning” of the backgrounds behind the apostle figures on the Saint Bavo pillars painted in a style very close to that of the Berlin Raising of Lazarus.

I had dated the Berlin Raising of Lazarus (Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie) to between 1435 and 1445 because it seemed to me that this work was earlier than the Exhumation of Saint Hubert at the National Gallery in London. Dendrochronological examination has here proved me wrong. Yet, it is not the date