BOOK REVIEW / BOEKBESPREKING


In 1961 Emil Reznicek published his monograph on the drawings of Hendrick Goltzius, which was followed in 1983 by the publication of Jon Quirijn van Regteren Altena's book on the drawings of Jacques de Gheyn II (and of his relatives of the same name), and in 2007 Jaap Bolten rounded off the trio of leading late sixteenth-century northern Netherlandish draughtsmen with his catalogue of the drawings of Abraham Bloemaert. A clarion call to mark this joyful event would not have come amiss, an article in a national newspaper would have been warranted, and an exhibition of the artist's most beautiful sheets would have been no more than logical. Instead it was greeted with a resounding silence. Worse than that; up until now there has not even been a review.

The silence is remarkable. It is not as if the author had already published so much about the subject during his many years of research that he had bored his confreres to death. Is the enormous amount of material too daunting, or have people been put off by the fact that he published the book privately? Bolten himself may have identified the reason indirectly in his book, and that is the unproblematic, immediate accessibility of the work. With Bloemaert one hunts in vain for multi-layered interpretative puzzles that the drawings of Goltzius and De Gheyn often throw up to delight today's art historians. An artist who tells a story plainly and simply would not be so interesting nowadays, according to Bolten. Added to that, the fact that Bloemaert depicts those stories in a superb, sometimes charmingly seductive way, apparently composing them with the greatest of ease, would hardly be a recommendation either.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Jaap Bolten has given us a wonderful present with this impressive two-volume catalogue, and for that we can only be extremely grateful. At last we have firm ground beneath our feet with this important, influential artist, one of the forefathers of the Dutch Golden Age. From all the small sketches to the highly finished pictorial drawings, a total of more than 1,700 sheets have been exhaustively documented and illustrated. In addition, there is a thorough inventory of replicas and copies. Second, third and even sixth versions of drawings are included and reproduced.

Bolten accounts for the huge total of 1,700 sheets (compared to the 500 or so by Goltzius and around 1,000 by De Gheyn II) by suggesting that almost all of Abraham Bloemaert's studio archive has survived, which means that the oeuvre does not just consist of fine, highly wrought scenes but also of countless small trial-and-error studies. Goltzius and De Gheyn probably had an oeuvre of roughly the same size, but Bolten believes that it was "purged" by their heirs at an early date.

The first volume opens with a brief introduction on Bloemaert as a draughtsman in which Bolten discusses the size of the oeuvre, its chronology, the subjects and the reception history. This is followed by the catalogue proper, and here the author displays a firm grip of his material by dividing it into sections by subject: narratives, portraits, genre, animals, plants, studies and landscapes, with the studies being subdivided into people, animals, plants and landscapes. Expressed in numbers, there are nearly 500 drawings of religious subjects and around 100 with scenes from classical mythology. The figure studies and drawings of landscapes, plants and animals come to around 850 sheets. The strict iconographic arrangement is underscored by the inclusion of the Iconclass codes.

The possible function of each drawing is briefly mentioned under the formal data: sketch, picture drawing, print design, presentation drawing and so on. The heading 'Related Works' lists the painting or print for which the drawing was made, if known, and associations with works by other artists or even with authors classical or modern are also identified. There is a fine example of this in the case of *A Woman with a Distaff and a Cat, Sitting outside, Combing her Hair* in Teylers Museum (cat. no. 642), for which the very erudite Bolten presents an interesting parallel with a sonnet by Gerbrand A. Brederode about a young woman.
combing her hair. In short, these sections are often small goldmines of information.

Finally, Bolten supplies commentaries on groups of drawings. These are mini-essays on typical [Bloemaert] subjects like *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, bishops of Utrecht, *Theagenes and Chariclea* and hermits. Here, too, Bolten is very generous with relevant information. The playful *Sea Cavalcades*, for example, are given a detailed historical context (cat. nos. 541-553). A footnote running to more than 1,000 words discusses the subject, from the first scenes by Andrea Mantegna and Raphael to deep in the eighteenth century with those by Giovanni Battista Cipriani.

The second volume presents some 2,000 black-and-white illustrations. Some are full-page, while other pages have several small ones (up to 15). At the front are 16 colour reproductions, but they are of rather mediocre quality. The illustrations are generally very legible, although sometimes the focus and contrast leave a little to be desired.

The prelude

In the final analysis very little has been published on Bloemaert’s graphic art. Articles devoted to the drawings alone are few and far between, amounting to fewer than a dozen between Kamanskaja’s in *Oud Holland* in 1937 and Bolten’s in *Delineavit et Sculpsit* in 2009. There are, of course, several important exhibition catalogues and printroom collection catalogues with first-class essays about the Utrecht artist, but between them they do not cover even a third of the material. Bolten, in other words, started from scratch on over 1,000 sheets.

His only serious colleague in Bloemaert studies is of course Marcel Roethlisberger, who has written several publications about the Utrecht master’s paintings, drawings and prints since 1990. In 1993 this Swiss art historian published a two-volume catalogue of Bloemaert’s paintings. In addition to the 209 pictures it included 624 prints after Bloemaert’s designs as well as most of the dated drawings as reference material for undated paintings.

The two authors adopt rather different approaches. Roethlisberger’s is chronological, Bolten’s thematic. By and large, these different principles mesh in well together, and both authors agree with each other on the whole. They certainly disagree on details, though. Bolten, who had the advantage in this respect of coming second, rejects the attribution of the curious *Last Supper* painting in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden, and rightly so in my opinion. The imposing drawing of *The Ascension* in the Albertina, which has long been given to Bloemaert, is dismissed by Bolten but accepted by Roethlisberger. Here I would like to have known Bolten’s reasons, because the attribution does not seem all that strange to me. The lively linear style matches that of other, securely attributed sheets, such as *The Adoration of the Kings*, *The Raising of Lazarus* and *John the Baptist in the Wilderness* in Leiden, Leipzig and Paris respectively (cat. nos. 115, 146, 248). The first of these also has the same tautly defined clouds with the heads of angels here and there. The vegetation in the foreground of the Vienna sheet and the rendering of the hill in the middle with long parallel lines are not untypical of Bloemaert either (see also footnote 9).

The situation is almost reversed in the case of two figure studies in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin. Roethlisberger considers them to be the work of Bloemaert’s son Adriaan, while Bolten regards them as autograph. They belong to the so-called Berlin Sketchbook, which is the master’s earliest known work, according to Bolten. I almost got the feeling when looking at the reproductions of the two sheets that they could be by two different artists. *Standing Halberdier* is drawn in a rather ponderous and nearly amateurish way with a pretty simplistic handling of the light. Each individual line can be followed, in the hatchings as well. *Standing Officer*, on the other hand, is in quite a sophisticated drawing style in which the fall of light is handled skilfully. The hatchings are so tightly packed or stumped as to create an effect approaching sfumato. But leaving that aside, all in all, there are points of discussion between the two Bloemaert connoisseurs, but broadly speaking not that many.