The Test of Time: Art Encyclopedias and the Formation of the Canon

of Seventeenth-Century Painters in the Low Countries

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Abstract

This paper deals with the process of canon formation for Flemish and Dutch painters from the seventeenth century onwards. We examine how the essential art-historical treatises and art encyclopedias since Houbraken's *Grote Schouburgh der Nederlandsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen* ranked and evaluated the leading painters, based on the attention given to them in these volumes. Using standardized *z*-scores, we map the relative importance the selected artists received in these publications over the three centuries. In doing so, we emphasize the path-dependency and the dimension of time in explaining the endurance of certain artists in the long run. From our research it emanates that the canon of Netherlandish painters is much more volatile than previously assumed.

"When one does a thing, it appears good, otherwise one would not write it. Only later comes reflection and one discards or accepts the thing. Time is the best censor."

Frédérique Chopin (letter to his family, Nohant, Oct. 11, 1846)

Numerous scholars have attempted to identify the factors that determine the reputation and success of an artist. These queries tend to focus on the central tension between intrinsic talent of the artist on the one hand and the impact of social, economic, cultural and political variables on the other. For instance, art sociologists have emphasized the importance of determinants such as nationality, access to networks, formal education and artistic style in explaining the enduring success of some artists (Bevers, 2005; Braden, 2009; Finney, 2003). Scientists have consequently turned to processes of canonization to ascertain which artists stood the test of time, and why. This paper aims to contribute to this debate by addressing a key question relative to canon formation in the arts: were the leading artists consistently recognized by art lovers and critics in the course of art history, or is the continued success of certain artists and the disappearance of others the result of historical processes? And if so, to what extent are these changing notions of taste and appreciation made explicit by the attention bestowed upon these artists in art encyclopedias across time?

Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton has been one of the leading voices in the debate surrounding artistic success. His research focuses on the hereditary and social characteristics of geniuses throughout history, applying statistical methods within a historiometric approach. Simonton collected biographical information about famous politicians, scientists and artists and quantified indicators of success such as the attention received in authoritative books, the number of translations etc. He makes a distinction between judgments of contemporaries and judgments of posterity, and has shown that eminence assessments of great men and women are reliable both across measures and across time (Simonton, 1991, 1997, 1998).

Economists Victor Ginsburgh and Sheila Weyers take a different approach by taking into account different assessments of creativity throughout history in their research. In a seminal article on the theme of persistence and fashion in art published in the journal *Poetics* in 2006, they observed that a significant number of Italian Renaissance artists passed the test of time and maintained a canonical status over four centuries, while others lost their reputation and were forgotten in the course of time. For their data, Ginsburgh and Weyers used the length of the entries and their relative ranking in several encyclopedias devoted to Italian *Quatrocento* artists in the leading art-historical surveys starting with Vasari in 1550 and ending with Jane Turner's 34-volume *Dictionary of art* published in the late 1990s. Even

if some painters come and go, they found a large degree of consensus among experts whereby the top-ranked painters remained dominant in a time span of four centuries.

Ginsburgh and Weyers (2010) saw their results confirmed in a follow-up article published in *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, in which they also included Flemish artists. They formulated a clear conclusion: half of all artists were bestowed with a canonical status in their own time, some notorious exceptions notwithstanding. For instance, influential fifteenth-century painters such as Robert Campin, Dieric Bouts, Petrus Christus and Gerard David were only included in the canon at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was not due to changes in aesthetic appreciation, but because new research allowed only relatively recently for the attribution of several major works to these forgotten artists (fifteenth-century painters only rarely signed their paintings). Ginsburgh and Weyers thus claimed that changes in taste and other historical processes have a minor role in the canonization process both in Italy and the Low Countries. Although aware of the historical variations in artistic assessments, their exercise begs further exploration and a comparison, both in terms of methodology and scope. Rather than relying on Spearman's rank correlation as Ginsburgh and Weyers have done, we opted to use standardized log-transformations of z-scores as a statistical tool to compare encyclopedic entries. In doing so, we examined how a select number of essential art-historical lexica surveyed and ranked leading seventeenth-century painters from the eighteenth century onwards, based on the attention that was given to them. We investigated the extent to which these encyclopedias and artists' biographies were in agreement with each other, just as Ginsburgh and Weyers did, but we also took into account the path-dependent trajectories of particular artists. This methodology refines the current approaches by adding a historical perspective which takes into consideration the vicissitudes in status through time.

Houbraken and the Netherlandish canon

Houbraken's (1718-21) *Grote Schouburgh* is a classic reference work for any art historian interested in Flemish or Dutch painting of the early modern era. In the introduction of his *magnum opus*, the Dutch painter and art critic declares that he intends to complete and extend the work of his famous Flemish colleague Karel van Mander (1548-1606). Houbraken announces that he will narrate the lives of several sixteenth and seventeenth-century artists which were not included in Van Mander's (1604) *Schilder-boeck*. Indeed, Van Mander ended his survey of Flemish and Dutch painters at the dawn of the seventeenth century, and was thus unable to dwell on the so-called Golden Age of the visual arts in the Southern and Northern Netherlands. Houbraken proceeded to fill this gap and built on Van Mander's famous pioneering work[1], and completed it by adding up-to-date information on painters active after

the publication of the *Schilder-boeck* – in other words, covering the period from 1604 onwards. This is important since the Dutch art market flourished as never before during the first half of the seventeenth century. Moreover, it was also the time period in which Antwerp and the Southern Netherlands experienced a genuine Indian summer for the arts, personified by Pieter Paul Rubens and his prolific and highly innovative workshop. Writing at the dawn of the seventeenth century, Van Mander thus missed these highlights – Rembrandt was not yet born, Van Dijck was a toddler, and Rubens was studying in Italy – rendering the *Groote Schouburgh* as one of the earliest possible starting point for our inquiries.[2]

Houbraken lists no fewer than 600 painters in chronological order, and provides essential information regarding the life and work of these artists in varying degrees of detail. Interestingly, halfway through the second volume Houbraken suddenly interrupts his series of biographies and announces to his reader that while the arts have continuously blossomed in the Low Countries since the days of Jan van Eyck and his followers, this was never the case more than in the century spanning 1560 and 1660. He subsequently lists 61 Netherlandish painters by name, whom Houbraken considered to be the greatest talents of this period and who deserved special attention due to their outstanding artistic achievements (see Figure 1).[3] Describing them as 'full moons contrasting with so many little stars'[4], and as 'torches that illuminated the Low Countries'[5], Houbraken introduced in this passage unmistakably the notion of artists with a canonical status. After all, it is without a doubt one of the first and most poignant instances where an attempt is made to single out the leading artists in the Low Countries. Houbraken hereby closely followed the tracks of Van Mander who had paved the way for the art-historical narrative tradition and artists' biographies in the Netherlands.

As was common practice amongst contemporaries, Houbraken did not distinguish the Flemings from the Northern masters and considered them all Netherlandish painters without further geographical labeling. Although the Northern and Southern Netherlands had been separate nations for decades at the time of his writing, the art of painting dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had always been regarded as the art of an entire region, including both parts of the Low Countries as well as the German-speaking region along the Rhine (Dacosta Kaufmann, 1997; Vlieghe, 1998).[6]

Houbraken has the advantage that he presents us with a ready-made sample of great artists. It offers a golden opportunity to explore the process of canon formation and the persistence of artists and their work over time because he makes two remarkable statements: (1) the golden age of Netherlandish art is situated in the era 1560-1660, and (2) a select group of 61 artists make up the top painters of this golden age. According to Houbraken, the canon

of the seventeenth-century golden age is made up by the top 10 percent of all artists described in his survey.

There has been much attention in the literature with respect to canon formation in the arts, as well as in society at large (Halbertsma, 2007; Stuurman & Grever, 2007).[7] This phenomenon has been tackled within many disciplines including sociology, psychology, history, art history, cultural economics and aesthetics. These varying perspectives have enriched the debate considerably, but have not resulted in a consensus. A number of theorists have proposed that visual artworks are endowed with certain properties which can cause them to persist over time, or to be forgotten. These properties include the traditional Renaissance quality standards of expression, drawing, coloring and composition, which were later expanded to include concepts such as invention, novelty, grace and handling (De Marchi, 2008; Ginsburgh & Weyers, 2008; Richardson, 1719). In addition, Simonton (1991, 1998) and Murray (2003) have found intrinsic reasons for the consistently strong position of certain individuals in the canons of other artistic disciplines. However, other researchers contend that no objective criteria for quality can be defined, let alone accurately measured, and that evaluations depend on credibility of experts who harbor sufficient knowledge of the specific art forms and its makers (Bonus & Ronte, 1997).

The observation of Houbraken's list of painters as well as the criterion used to make the selection (i.e., their artistic merit) does raise the difficult question as to whether objective criteria of quality really exist in the arts, or do some of the 'canonical' artists obtain a place in the ranking apart from such objective criteria? A study of the canonization process of painters can help us to solve this problem, because a stable and unchanged canon of artists across different contexts in time would support the idea of objective criteria for the evaluation of artworks, while a dynamic and highly volatile list of artists would point at the contrary, namely the lack of objective benchmarks. And, if objective criteria were not the determining factor, could their persistence over time then be understood primarily as an historical development—a true test of time?

Method

According to scholars such as Eric Jan Sluijter (2002) and Bart Cornelis (1998), the impact that Houbraken's biographical dictionary as a whole had on the developments in the art-historical field cannot be overestimated: *"If painters weren't discussed in Houbraken's treatise, this has had a considerable impact even today"* (Sluijter, 2002, p. 394). Within the art-historical community, Houbraken's work still functions as a point of departure for researchers working on early modern painting in the Low Countries. This high status of

Houbraken's *Grote Schouburgh* as a standard reference work raises the question as to whether his choices were indeed made on the basis of objective quality criteria. Art encyclopedias are supposed to have an objective character (e.g., Simonton 1991); we expect them to offer information without formulating value or personal judgments or to shape opinions – a completely different approach from the well-known art treatises written by eminent French art lovers and critics like Dezallier d'Argenville (1745-52) and Théophile Thoré (1858-60). Both these connoisseurs had the ambition to define 'the true character of Dutch painting', and realized this ambition either by highlighting the Italianate character of landscape painting[8], or by reading political-ideological ideas into so-called 'Dutch realism'.[9] These authors redefined and shaped the canon of the Dutch art of painting based on their own subjective and specific notions of what constitutes artistic value. Indeed, art historians have pointed out that both art treatises – even if they perceived the art of painting through a strong theoretical paradigm based on personal preferences – had an enduring impact on the formation of the contemporary art canon as well (Cornelis, 1998; Hecht, 1998, 2009; Sluijter, 2002).

To gauge the extent to which encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries were decisive in constructing the art canon of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we screened and ranked the 61 painters listed in Houbraken's *Groote Schouburgh* in six different painter biographies that were diachronically selected (Table 1). These six art encyclopedias or artists' biographies all represent a specific period in time, and can be considered as reference works of their respective epochs.[10] The intended objectivity of this type of source makes them most suitable for a screening of the presence and hierarchies implicitly used in them. Each of the 61 painters mentioned in Houbraken's *Groote Schouburgh* has been traced in six other art biographies, each of them representing a singular period between 1700 and 2000 (Table 1).

Our method consisted of a counting of the number of lines these authors devoted to describe the painter under investigation, and secondly, ranking the obtained results for each publication separately. The approach itself is not entirely novel as J. McKeen Cattel (1903) more than a century ago counted the number of columns devoted to eminent men in six biographical dictionaries to ascertain their excellence. Others since then have followed in Cattel's footsteps by using space allotments in relevant publications to gauge prominence, with especially valuable contributions by Rosengren (1985), and the earlier mentioned Simonton (1991, 1998), Murray (2003) and Ginsburgh and Weyers (2006, 2010).

In terms of analysis, we opted to use standardized log-transformation of the original number of lines since this method allows one to compare scores on diverse tests on a relative basis. The transformation from the initial absolute numbers into logarithmic values reduces

the exceptional attention for some artists. The second transformation from logarithmic values into z-scores resulted in seven series of standardized and highly comparable variables. These z-scores take the ratio between the average and the standard variation as a measure, and thus differentiate between 'typical' and 'rare' scores on the basis of the observed score and the population mean. In other words, it primarily looks at the range rather than source specific values, which makes a comparison between heterogeneous sources possible. Indeed, z-scores facilitate a standardization of different types of measurements. In our case, it allowed for a comparison between different encyclopedias over time by making an abstraction of the different fonts, layout styles, number of volumes, etc. The chief disadvantage of this method is that z-scores are always based on averages – like many of the current statistical tools for that matter – and that the results are therefore very sensitive to outliers. However, this does not offer serious problems in our study because (1) outliers are in fact the focus of our research, (2) all variables are positively skewed, and (3) the use of z-scores offers some clear advantages to other existing methods.

In applying z-scores, we pursue a different approach than Ginsburgh and Weyers (2006), even if we borrowed their idea of counting lines in historical publications as a proxy for the attention given by art theorists and biographers through time. Ginsburgh and Weyers were without a doubt conscious of the difficulties in comparing heterogeneous sources. Using a Spearman's rank coefficient, they were able to detect fluctuations and commonalities between the different biographies and encyclopedias. As such, their methodology served as an analytic tool to establish the relationship between two distinct sources. The calculation of the K-statistic further allowed these authors to ascertain the coherence of the different correlations.

However, while the statistical method used by Ginsburgh and Weyers is sound and the results clear, the interpretation of these results is subject to debate from an historical point of view.One drawback is that one cannot trace the paths of individual artists over time, as they appear in these publications. We therefore only know the rank of an artist within one given source, and it is not clear what this rank stands for and we miss out on relevant information. A correlation only compares the ranking within two datasets, while z-scores make it possible to compare at different levels. First, it enabled to map the position of one particular artist throughout all the sources by means of a time series analysis. Secondly, z-scores produce values that provide a clearer and more nuanced indication of the relative weight of a certain rank as it takes into account the historical dimension. This is essential because canonization by its very nature is a sequential and chronological process. After all, the ranking between

artists may remain unchanged over a certain period of time, but the range between the various ranked artists may fluctuate significantly, as we will demonstrate in the case of Rubens and Rembrandt. Moreover, the interpretation of Ginsburgh and Weyers runs the risk of arriving at a-historical conclusions since it reduces the complex process of canon formation to one statistic. They focus on the confluences between set authors, but fail to take into account the historical changes in appreciation of art by the various authors, and the sequence and path dependency of their respective writings. Although *z*-scores may not overcome these pitfalls completely, they can be used to address the question of historical continuity or discontinuity.

In our approach, we wished to take into account the chronological development of art theory and scholarship as it was reflected in these publications. For instance, present day-art encyclopedias are not directly influenced by Vasari alone, but build on and borrow from centuries of scholarship on Italian art. A *mere* correlation between Vasari and Jane Turner's *Dictionary of Art* does not do justice to the innumerable important writings on Italian painting which have since the sixteenth century contributed and shaped our knowledge and appreciation of these artists. Moreover, it is by definition impossible to ignore this accumulated knowledge in assessing the value of old master paintings today.

The advantages and limitations of Ginsburgh and Weyers' use of the Spearman's rank coefficient become apparent when applied to our own data. Table 2 contains the correlations between the different datasets from which we can deduce that there is a strong correlation between Turner and Thieme and Becker.[11] Going back gradually further in time, the correlation with Turner seems to be declining slowly which is in line with our notion of path dependency. At least, this is the case going back until 1750 because De Piles correlates more with Turner than Descamps, Smith and Kramm which poses a problem of interpretation. Does it mean that Turner relied heavily on De Piles and ignored the encyclopedias in between? This cannot be ascertained by these simple correlations and requires a more fine-tuned approach.

The problem of interpretation is further exacerbated when we take De Piles as a point of departure, and gauge to what extent there was a rupture in the canon building process between his *Abrégé de la Vie des Peintres* and Descamps. De Piles and Descamps correlate significantly (.81) which renders the previous observed correlations starting from Turner null and void. As a result, this example shows that the interpretation of these correlations is a-historical, to say the least, but it does not take into account the path dependency of these writings. This chronological development is visualized in Figure 2. We therefore not only advocate a method which allows us to add nuance to these comparisons, but also helps to

formulate more specific questions about the sequential dependence between art historical works.

<div align="center">**Results and Discussion**</div>

In Table 3 we have retained those artists who at least once received extraordinary attention in the time span of our research. High attention is defined by a *z*-score higher than 1, as these are painters with values above the standard deviation. *z*-scores quantify the distance between the original values in our data set, and the average in relation to the standard deviation. As a result, a *z*-score of 1 means that the original value equals the standard deviation. This indicates that the appreciation measured by attention for a certain artist was more than average. We argue that this demonstrates the canonization of certain artists to the extent that the painter in question also received extraordinary attention in subsequent encyclopedias. It is important to note that the distribution of all original datasets is (extremely) positively skewed, although some differences can be found.[12] Table 3 summarizes the *z*-score of the top artists – who received at least once a *z*-score higher than 1 – and shows that canonization is not a linear and straightforward process.

It is striking that the top three artists – Rubens, Van Dijck and Rembrandt – already dominated the canon during the eighteenth century onwards. This is noteworthy since the process of canon formation in the arts is usually associated with the formation of nineteenth-century nation states, and the building of national identities. Art played an important part in this process. The creation of the artistic canon was therefore not solely fostered by the architects of the nation states during the nineteenth century. Rather, already existing notions of who constituted the leading Netherlandish artists were equally reinforced and utilized (Halbertsma, 2007). The early origins of the canon are confirmed by Figures 2-3. Figure 2 shows that the eighteenth-century art encyclopedia had more in common with current assessments of artists than the nineteenth-century encyclopedia which were produced during the heydays of the nation state. Figure 3 demonstrates that 54% of the variance in Jane Turner's art publication can be explained by the scores of these artists in de Piles' work.

Furthermore, the dominance of the triumvirate Rubens-Rembrandt-Van Dijck persists over time and remains in place throughout the period under consideration. The significant gap in attention devoted to the triumvirate on the one hand and the rest of the pack is already visible in the early art-historical writings. Moreover, we should note that Rembrandt gains the top position from Rubens in the twentieth century. Art theorists clearly exhibited a desire to create a select number of top artists who receive a disproportionate amount of attention (and praise), which suggests that a 'winner takes all market' was already in place early on.[13]

Interestingly, Simonton (1998) and Murray (2003) also found in their research that a very select number of composers and other eminent personalities dominate the canon from the time of the earliest assessments by critics.

Finally, there are some other noteworthy trends to be distilled from Table 3. Philip Wouwerman enjoyed quite a following during the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but fell from grace in modern times. Govert Flinck, Gaspar Netscher, Frans Mieris and Abraham Genoels were considered top painters during the eighteenth century, but their stars faded in modern times. Even more remarkable is the path of David II Teniers. His genre paintings were not considered exceptional during the eighteenth century as is demonstrated by his highly negative *z*-score. However, Teniers did receive a disproportionate amount of attention in John Smith's *Catalogue Raisonné* a century later, only to see his reputation dwindle again during the twentieth century.

It would be most interesting to make a comparison between the rankings and appreciation produced by art theorists on the one hand, and the prices fetched for these artists on the market on the other. The study and analysis of early modern auction data is in many ways still in its infancy, but some partial price studies do seem to confirm some of the trends that emanate from artist biographies. For instance, Dries Lyna concluded from his examination of eighteenth-century art auctions in Antwerp and Brussels that Rubens and Van Dijck indeed claimed the lion's share of the highest prices paid for paintings between 1739 and 1794, but hefty amounts were also paid for Philips Wouwerman and David II Teniers (Lyna, unpublished). Figure 4 shows a typical example of a Wouwerman painting, and his popularity was mirrored in art-theoretical writings as well. His fame stretched across the borders of the Low Countries as collectors in Paris and elsewhere scrambled to snatch up a Wouwerman (Van Miegroet, 2005). The invisibility of Rembrandt is due to the fact that his work simply did not show up in Lyna's sample of Antwerp and Brussels art sales.

The eroding effect of time is demonstrated by Table 4. These data show the evolution of the position of the ten authors that were mentioned in all consulted art lexica. Indeed, only 16% of our list of 61 painters were selected by all authors. The triumvirate of Rubens, Van Dijck and Rembrandt are included in all lexica, and they consistently dominate the rankings by claiming the top three spots. Gerrit Dou and Jacob Jordaens comprise a sort of sub-top. Their stature in the canon of Netherlandish art declined somewhat at a certain moment, but all in all, they were able to maintain their position. The most remarkable conclusion that can be drawn from Table 5 is that it identifies those artists who would eventually fall through the cracks of history and lose their appeal. For instance, the earlier mentioned Gaspar Netscher

claimed fourth place in De Piles' art survey, but he stranded on the 42nd spot at the end of the twentieth century. Ginsburgh and Weyers were certainly right when they asserted that some artists were able to persist through time, but this was rather an exception than the rule for Netherlandish artists. In fact, only a select group of artists remained at the top of the canon.

Turning back the hands of time

Doing the exercise in reverse by taking Jane Turner's *Dictionary of art* as a point of departure affords the opportunity to verify which artists were not among the chosen by Houbraken, but were considered as part of the canon by the late twentieth century. We retrieved the names of the seventeenth-century artists mentioned in the entries "Flemish art" and "Dutch art" in the *Dictionary*. These two essays feature a survey of the highlights of the artistic production in both regions, and we can therefore assume that they are an indication of who is regarded as a significant artist. Subsequently, we took stock of the amount of attention given to these painters in the *Dictionary* (by counting the lines of the individual entries) to produce a ranking. Table 4 captures this canon and an "X" in the last column indicates that Houbraken considered this artist to be exceptional, and therefore a member of his canon. Together with the rather odd omission of Vermeer, Houbraken also left out Hendrick Goltzius and Hercule Segers in the top-ten of featured artists in Turner. Nevertheless, with seven out of ten matches in the top-ten, this still means that there is significant agreement between both experts, even if they are separated by almost three centuries in time. It is remarkable that these correlations seem to vanish further down the ranking. Again, this seems to suggest that only a small group of highly gifted painters was able to survive the test of time.

The case of Vermeer can illustrate the importance of canon formation during the nineteenth century. He was virtually absent in art-historical literature prior to his 'discovery' during the 1850s and 1860s (Barker, 1999; Cornelis, 1998) when he was propelled to stardom by Theophile Thoré in a series of publications (Bürger, 1866; Thoré, 1858-60). His fame reached its zenith in the twenty-first century - after the publication of the *Dictionary of art* - and was fueled by major exhibitions in Washington and The Hague, and by a novel and a movie.[14] The addition of Johannes Vermeer to the list of 61 top painters listed in Houbraken's survey shows how the process of canon formation challenged the set ranking of top painters in the Low Countries. Vermeer tentatively appeared for the first time in 1850, but his steep rise to the top shook up the canon of Netherlandish painters during the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Our research shows a strong endurance of the leading Netherlandish artists over time. Counting lines in art encyclopedias may not be the perfect method to ascertain the canonical

status of artists, but it does provide an indication of the attention given to particular artists by experts, in this case the art historians who authored these biographies. By applying *z*-scores, we used a method which allows for a nuanced path dependant interpretation of our results, and which takes the historical dimension of the formation of the canon into account as well as the relative shifts in importance attributed to each of the featured artists. Moreover, our findings have underscored the hypothesis that processes of canonization evolve slowly over time. The addition of this historical methodology is an important addition to the current historiometric approaches.

Our results show that a historical approach is essential for a good understanding of the complex process of canon formation. Indeed, this methodological refinement enabled us to demonstrate that the triumvirate Rubens, Van Dijck and Rembrandt dominated the rankings since the eighteenth century, and that their canonization was certainly no modern construct promoted by a desire to create national heroes in the context of remerging nation states and their quest for national identities. In addition, despite a large degree of consensus among the experts whereby the three top-ranked painters remained dominant, many other painters did rise to fame while others disappeared with the passage of time. The examples of Vermeer and Wouwerman respectively are most illustrative in this respect. Two other artists – Dou and Jordaens – were never forgotten and remained in the picture, but always in the shadow of the Big Three.

Nevertheless, based on the attention experts devoted to individual painters in art encyclopedias and artists' biographies, we determined that the leading Dutch and Flemish painters were regarded as high-quality artists early on, as much as they are today. However, it is unclear whether the quality criteria by which they have been (are) judged, have remained unchanged. In this sense, more research needs to be undertaken to establish what explains the continued success of certain canonical artists over time. Our data suggest that this was not due to the formation of the nation state during the nineteenth century, but might be attributed to other factors such as social status of the artist, changing tastes (introduction of new styles, secularization of themes, etc.), modifications of art theory, growing purchasing power of the middle groups, dissemination and popularization of art history etc. Further research is required to test the data for these variables.

The branding of big name artists, the staying power rendered by notable collectors and the display of the work of already famous painters in (semi-) public places such as churches, palaces, town halls and museums have no doubt contributed to the sustained visibility of these artists. In addition, the continued availability of their works on the art market is without a

doubt another necessary condition to remain in the limelight, but much more study is needed to gauge the impact of the market on canon formation.

        In the end, we are left with the question if objective criteria of quality really exist in the arts, or did artists claim a place in the art history apart from such verifiable benchmarks? Addressing this key question relative to the historical rootedness of quality evaluations in the arts would require us to identify the properties that bestowed certain artists with a canonical status *at a given time*. While notions of quality in the visual arts appear to have been neatly defined in past times, there are strong indications that quality and how we define it has become more diffuse and contested with the globalization of the art market. The study of historical development of canon formation is thus necessary to fully understand the nature of this process. Further research is needed to ascertain to what extent the quality rubrics of the past are still being applied or have shaped decisions on what is "good art" in the contemporary museums, galleries, and auctions. In tracing their staying power, old and new ways of measuring artistic worth need to be compared with each other. A lack of concurrence between the two interpretative models may very well lead to the conclusion that the 'test of time' in itself is a determining measure for quality.

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Footnotes

[1] Which Houbraken literally mentions in the introduction of each volume: *"[...] zynde een vervolg op het Schilderboek van K.v. Mander."*

[2] In addition, Houbraken himself was convinced that the Netherlandish art of painting never before attained such a high quality as during the years 1560-1660: "[De schilderkunst heeft in de Nederlanden] *altyt met luister gebloeit; maar nooit schooner als in den tusschentyd, van 't jaar 1560, tot 1660."* (Vol. 2, p. 130)

[3] *"'T Lust my een lyst van wakkere Mannen die gebloeit hebben binnen den Levenstyd van een dier Konstenaars op te maaken, en hier onder te stellen."* (Vol. 2, p. 130)

[4] *"Ja hoe schaars die zyn welke als de volle Maan by de Starren affsteken."* (Vol. 2, p. 132)

[5] *"Wy hebben gezien wat een groot getal van Konstfakkels de Nederlanden hebben bescheenen in een bestek van min als 100 Jaren [...]"* (Vol. 2, p. 133)

[6] About three quarters of the artists favored by Houbraken had their workshops in Amsterdam (17), followed by Antwerp (11), Haarlem (8) and Utrecht (8).

[7] We can refer, for instance, to the debate that took place in the Netherlands relative to the 'official canon' of the seminal historical events that have shaped and determined the history of the Netherlands.

[8] In his influential art-historical treatise, d'Argenville copied ca. 100 names of painters' names from Houbraken's *Groote Schouburgh*. This selection took place on the basis of contemporary aesthetics and a personal appreciation for the specific genre of the Italianate landscape painting. Nevertheless, d'Argenvilles' selection had a significant impact on the eighteenth-century art canon. Painters that were not mentioned in d'Argenvilles' treatise, like Hals and Vermeer, were barely or not visible at all in the eighteenth-century art market.

[9] In contrast to d'Argenville, Thoré felt great appreciation for the so-called Dutch realists. By focusing on this for the Dutch painters' characteristic attitude of realism, Thoré was the first to make a strong distinction between the Dutch and the Flemish School. For Thoré, the development of a democratic society was strongly intertwined with a taste for realistic art. Dutch painters who did not fit into this particular mold of 'Dutch realism' disappeared out of the art canon and were undervalued in the nineteenth-century art market.

[10] Given the abundance of contemporary art encyclopedias, the choice of Jane Turner's *Dictionary of art* requires some justification. With its 34 volumes, it is one of the most comprehensive art encyclopedias to date and which drew on the expertise of scores if art historians. Interestingly, the instructions to the authors included specific guidelines relative to the length of the individual entries based on the eminence of the artist in question (oral communication, Hans Vlieghe, November 2010). Finally, the choice of Turner allows for interesting comparisons with Ginsburgh and Weyers, who relied on the same source.

[11] Other correlations are less pronounced, except when we are looking at the relationship between two subsequent publications.

[12] The skewness of the values of the seven art lexica is 2.8 (De Piles), 2.1 (Houbraken), 3.3 (Descamps), 1.8 (Smith), 3.1 (Kramm), 3.2 (Thieme-Becker) and 4.5 (Turner). All the standardized LOG-transformations of the original data are normally distributed with a skewness between -1 and 1.

[13] De Piles, on the other hand, divided his attention more equally between the featured artists, with the exception of Rubens whom he adored.

[14] *Johannes Vermeer* (1994-95), National Gallery in Washington and subsequently in The Mauritshuis in The Hague.

Table 1. *The consulted art biographical dictionaries (encyclopedias) in chronological order.*

Period of publication	Author	Title	Place of publication
c. 1700	R. De Piles	*Abrégé de la Vie des Peintres*	Paris
c. 1725	A. Houbraken	*Grote Schouburgh der Nederlandsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen*	Amsterdam
c. 1750	J.-B. Descamps	*La Vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandois*	Paris
c. 1830	J. Smith	*A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch and Flemish Painters*	London
c. 1850	C. Kramm	*De levens en werken der Hollandsche en Vlaamsche kuntschilders, beeldhouwers, graveurs en bouwmeesters van den vroegsten tot op onzen tijd*	Amsterdam
c. 1900-50	U. Thieme & F. Becker	*Allgemeines Lexicon der bildenden Künstler*	Leipzig
c. 2000	J. Turner	*The Dictionary of Art*	London

Notes. c = circa.

Table 2. *Correlation coefficients between art encyclopedias.*

	1700	1750	1830	1850	1950	2000
1700 (De Piles)	1	.81**	.61	.39	.50*	.66**
1750 (Descamps)		1.	.57**	.53**	.48**	.50**
1830 (Smith)			1	.64**	.54**	.47*
1850 (Kramm)				1	.65**	.51**
1950 (Thieme-Becker)					1	.65**
2000 (Turner)						1

Notes. * $p < .05$ (2-tailed), ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 3. *Top artists based on z-scores.*

Painter	c. 1700	c. 1725	c. 1750	c. 1830	c. 1850	c. 1950	c. 2000
Rembrandt van Rijn	1.33	**2.24**	1.88	1.06	1.91	**2.58**	**3.24**
Peter Paul Rubens	2.3	1.83	**2.6**	1.28	**2.04**	**2.54**	**2.4**
Anthony van Dijck	1.39	1.36	**2.2**	1.06	**2.26**	1.97	**2.4**
Jan Steen	-	**2.09**	0.71	0.71	0.94	**2.08**	1.42
Pieter Lely	-	0.68	0.04	-1.06	0.65	0.65	1.36
Frans Hals	-	0.68	-0.13	-	0.05	0.88	1.17
Jacob Jordaens	-0.05	0.04	0.83	-1.21	0.75	1.28	1.05
Gerard Honthorst	-0.35	-1.3	-1.04	-	1.15	0.94	1.03
Cornelis Poelenburgh	-0.41	-0.79	0.2	-	0.64	-0.08	1.03
Gerrit Dou	0.38	0.69	1.29	0.56	1.3	0.69	0.49
Adriaen Brouwer	-0.31	1.89	1.25	-	0.19	0.6	0.49
Nicolaes Berchem	-	0.52	1.14	0.79	0.52	0.11	0.49
David Teniers	-1.2	-1.09	-1.37	1.05	0.73	0.99	0.04
Philip Wouwerman	-	0.74	1.36	1.03	0.86	0.25	0.04
Frans Mieris	-0.73	1.45	1.27	0.36	0.17	-0.1	-0.12
Paulus Potter	-	0.45	0.75	0.46	1.00	0.29	-0.14
Philip de Koning	-	-0.36	-	-	-0.31	1.01	-0.36
Gaspar Netscher	1.02	0.29	0.97	0.26	-0.43	-0.16	-0.57
Govert Flinck	-	1.29	0.38	-	0.38	1.22	-0.83
Abraham Genoels	-	1.30	0.77	-	-	0.20	-0.92

Notes. c = circa, bold = *z*-score > 2.

Table 4. *Assessment through time of top 10 painters according to De Piles (c. 1700).*

Painter	c. 1700	c. 1725	c. 1750	c. 1830	c. 1850	c. 1950	c. 2000
Peter Paul Rubens	1	4	1	1	2	2	2
Anthony van Dijck	2	6	2	2	1	4	3
Rembrandt van Rijn	3	1	3	3	3	1	1
Gaspar Netscher	4	25	9	17	37	34	42
Hendrick Verschuuring	5	28	22	/	45	55	/
Gerrit Dou	6	14	5	10	4	12	13
Jacob Jordaens	7	30	11	22	12	5	7
Pieter van Laar	8	17	18	/	14	13	22
Adriaen Brouwer	9	3	7	/	26	16	13
Gerard Honthorst	10	56	49	/	5	9	9

Notes. c = circa.

Table 5. *Assessment through time of painters present in all art encyclopedias (1700-2000).*

Painter	c. 1700	c. 1725	c. 1750	c. 1830	c. 1850	c. 1950	c. 2000
Rembrandt van Rijn	3	1	3	3	3	2	1
Peter Paul Rubens	1	4	1	1	2	3	2
Anthony Van Dijck	2	6	2	2	1	5	3
Jacob Jordaens	7	30	11	22	12	6	8
Gerrit Dou	6	14	5	10	4	13	14
Jan Both	12	28	30	12	42	50	24
David Teniers	18	51	51	4	13	9	26
Eramus Quellinus (II)	17	23	42	23	36	36	27
Frans Mieris	14	5	6	15	28	34	29
Gaspar Netscher	4	25	9	17	38	35	43

Notes. c = circa.

Table 6. *The canon of seventeenth-century Netherlandish artists in Turner's Dictionary of Art*

(2002).

Rank	Name	Dates	Mentioned in Houbraken's list
1	Rembrandt van Rijn	1606-1669	X
2	Pieter Paul Rubens	1577-1640	X
3	Anthony van Dijck	1599-1641	X
4	Johannes Vermeer	1632-1675	
5	Jan Steen	1626-1679	X
6	Hendrick Goltzius	1558-1617	
7	Hercules Segers	1589/90-1633/8	
8	Frans Hals	1581/5-1666	X
9	Jacob Jordaens	1593-1678	X
10	Gerrit van Honthorst	1592-1656	X
11	Cornelis van Poelenburch	1594/5-1667	X
12	Aelbert Cuyp	1620-1691	
13	Jacob van Ruisdael	1628/9-1691	
14	Karel van Mander I	1548-1606	
15	Pieter Saenredam	1597-1665	
16	Gerard ter Borch	1617-1681	X
17	Pieter de Hooch	1629-1684	
18	Samuel van Hoogstraaten	1627-1678	
19	Antonis Mor van Dashorst	1516-1576	
20	Hendrick ter Brugghen	1588-1629	
21	Abraham Janssen	1575-1632	
22	Willem Buytewech	1591/2-1624	
23	Adriaen van Ostade	1610-1685	X
24	Frans Snyders	1579-1657	X
25	Adriaen Brouwer	1605-1638	
26	Gerrit Dou	1613-1675	X
27	Nicolaes Berchem	1620-1683	X
28	Bartholomeus Breenbergh	1598-1657	X
29	Jacques de Gheyn II	1565-1629	
30	Maarten de Vos	1532-1603	
31	Pieter Lastman	1583-1633	
32	Nicolaes Maes	1634-1693	
33	Jan van de Capelle	1626-1679	
34	Cornelis de Vos	1584-1651	
35	Jan Breughel Velvet I	1568-1625	X
36	Jan van Goyen	1596-1656	
37	Salomon van Ruysdael	1600/03-1670	
38	Gerbrand van den Eeckhout	1621-1674	
39	Jan Lievens	1607-1674	X
40	Jan van der Heyden	1637-1712	

Table 7. *Top artists based on z-scores with the addition of Vermeer.*

Painter	c. 1700	c. 1725	c. 1750	c. 1830	c. 1850	c. 1950	c. 2000
Rembrandt van Rijn	1.33	2.24	1.88	1.06	1.92	2.42	3.13
Anthony van Dijck	1.39	1.36	2.2	1.06	2.27	1.83	2.31
Peter Paul Rubens	2.3	1.83	2.6	1.28	2.05	2.38	2.31
Johannes Vermeer	**-**	**-**	**-**	**-**	**0.42**	**2.5**	**1.84**
Jan Steen	-	2.09	0.71	0.71	0.94	1.94	1.36
Pieter Lely	-	0.68	0.04	-1.06	0.65	0.58	1.29
Frans Hals	-	0.68	-0.13	-	0.04	0.79	1.11
Gerard Honthorst	-0.35	-1.3	-1.04	-	1.15	0.85	0.98
Adriaen Brouwer	-0.31	1.89	1.25	-	0.18	0.53	0.44
Gerrit Dou	0.38	0.69	1.29	0.56	1.3	0.62	0.44
Nicolaes Berchem	-	0.52	1.14	0.79	0.52	0.06	0.44
David Teniers	-1.2	-1.09	-1.37	1.05	0.73	0.9	0.01
Philip Wouwerman	-	0.74	1.36	1.03	0.86	0.2	0.01
Frans Mieris	-0.73	1.45	1.27	0.36	0.16	-0.14	-0.15
Paulus Potter	-	0.45	0.75	0.46	1	0.24	-0.17
Ludolf Bakhuizen	-	1.22	0.56	0.51	0.44	-0.64	-0.54
Gaspar Netscher	1.02	0.29	0.97	0.26	-0.44	-0.2	-0.59
Govert Flinck	-	1.29	0.38	-	0.38	1.12	-0.84
Abraham Genoels	-	1.3	0.77	-	-	0.2	-0.92
Hans Jordaens	-	-1.56	-1.56	-	-1.58	-1.35	-1.95

Notes. c = circa.

Figure 1. Facsimile reproduction of Houbraken's canon (Houbraken, 1718, pp. 130-131).

'T luft my een lyft van wakkere Mannen die
gebloeit hebben binnen den Levenstyd van een
dier Konftenaars op te maaken, en hier onder te
ftellen.

SCHILDERS EN SCHILDERESSEN. 131

Abrah. Bloemaart.
Tobias Verhaegt.
Mich. Mierevelt.
Paulus Morcelze.
Roelant Savry.
Pet. Paul. Rubbens.
Hendr. van Balen.
Jaques Jordaans.
Franc. Snyders.
Daniel Segers.
Jan Breugel.
Frans Hals.
Korn. Poelenburgh.
Ant. van Dyk.
Jan Davidz de Heem.
Gerard Honthorft.
Job. Parcelles.
Palam. Palamedefz.
Rembr. van Ryn.
Emanuel de Wit.
Erasm. Quellinus.
Jan Lievenfz.
Ferdinand Bol.
Adr. Brouwer.
Jak. Bakker.
Herm. Zaftleven.
David Teniers.
Adr. van Oftade.
Korn. Bega.
Ger. Dou.
Gabriel Metzu.

Bartol. vander Helft.
Nicol. de Helt, Stokade.
Bartol. Breenberg.
Ludolf Bakhuizen.
Pieter van Laar.
Gerard Terburg.
Hans Jordaans.
Nicolaas Berchem.
Tomas Wyk.
Abraham Genoels.
Govert Flink.
Pieter Lely.
Hendr. Verfchuuring.
Otto Marceus.
Guilh. van Aalft.
Phil. de Koning.
Willem Doudyns.
Phil. Wouwerman.
Jan Both.
Adam Pynaker.
Melch. de Hondekoeter.
Jan Babt. Weeninx.
Frans Mieris.
David Beck.
Gafpar Netfcher.
Jak. vander Does.
Jan Steen.
Johannes Lingelbag.
Willem van de Velde.
Paulus Potter.
          en meer andere.

TEST OF TIME

Figure 2. Pearson correlation coëfficiënt of six historical art encyclopedia with Jane Jane

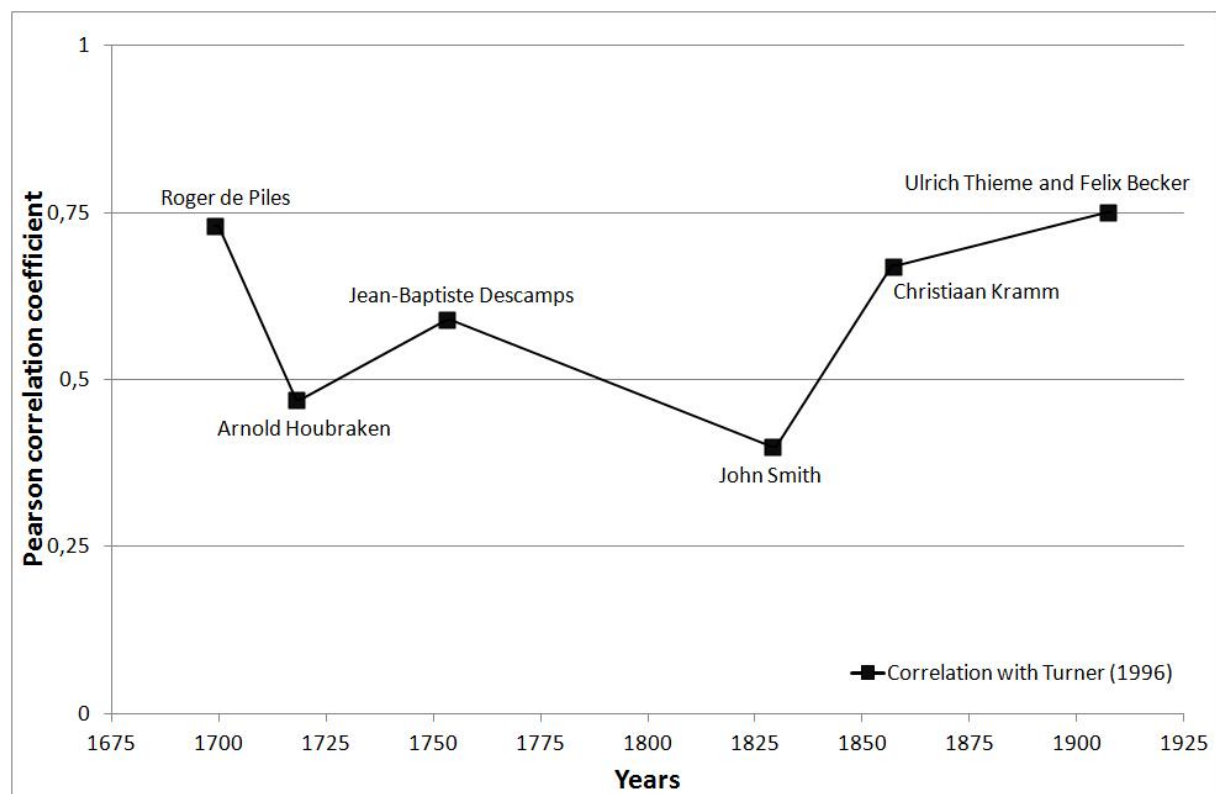Turners *Dictionary of Art* (1996)

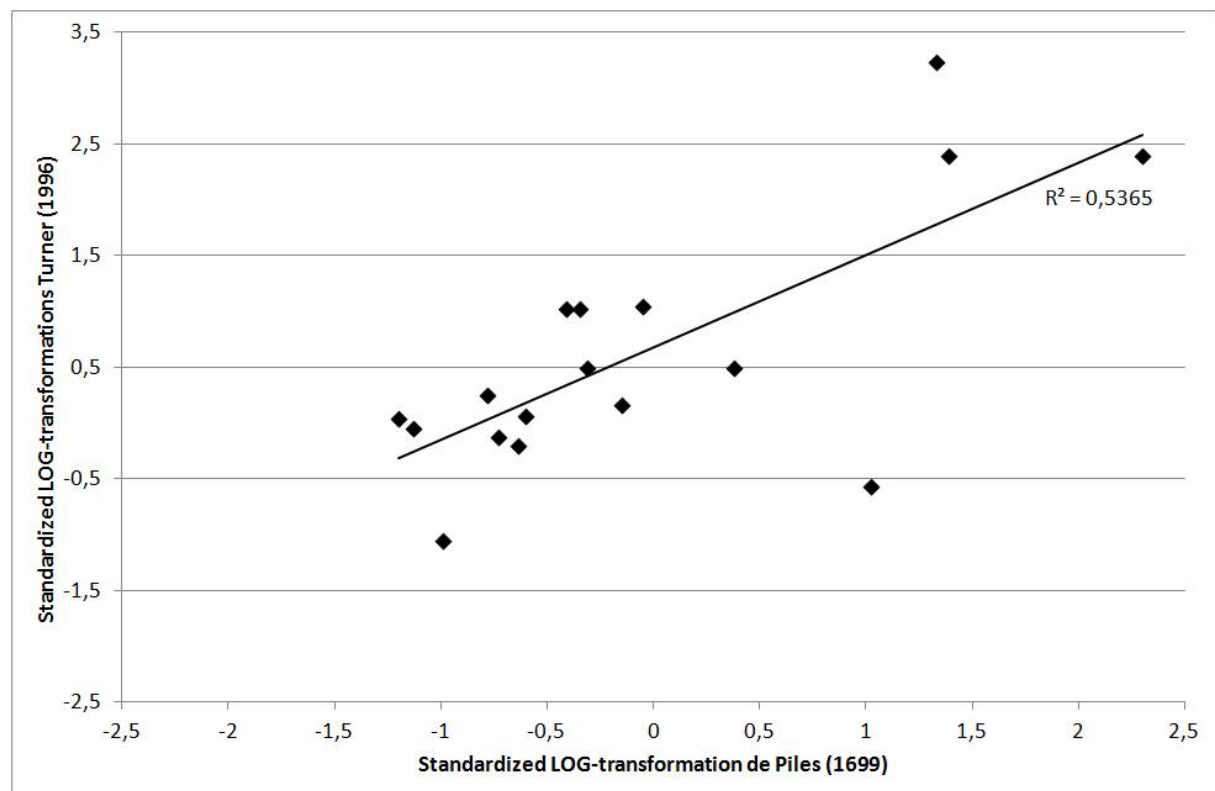*Figure 3.* Relation between position of artists in de Piles and Turner

Figure 4. Philips Wouwerman, Setting out on the hunt, 1660. Oil on panel, 45 x 64 cm.

Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.