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## Constantijn Huygens

EXCERPTS FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF CONSTANTIJN HUYGENS, 1629-31

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*Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) was the Northern Baroque incarnation of the ideal Renaissance courtier described in Baldesarre Castiglione's treatise. In addition to his professional activities as a diplomat and personal vocation as a poet, Huygens was a talented musician and composer, well-versed in most fields of knowledge of his time, and a true connoisseur of, among other things, art. He served in this last capacity as artistic advisor to Frederik Hendrik, the Prince of Orange. This was probably Huygens' motive to seek out Rembrandt (1607-1669) and Jan Lievens (1607-1674) in their shared studio in Leiden in 1628, although he only committed his account to paper in his fragmentary autobiography, composed in 1629-31. Several paintings by Rembrandt and Lievens from 1628 are listed in the inventories of the prince's collection and these correspond closely to Huygens' characterizations of the two artists. Their subsequent works are less easy to distinguish due to their mutual influence, especially of Rembrandt on Lievens.*

*Huygens clearly betrays more personal affection for Lievens, yet he recognized Rembrandt as by far the more important artist. His allusions to antiquity and Aeneas (who brought Illium to Italy) are routinely dismissed by commentators as topoi, or conventional topics, a gloss so common that it has itself become a topos. This is ironic, since Huygens explicitly directs his remarks against those who naively assert that there is nothing new under the sun, a point he repeatedly returns to throughout his autobiography, as he reminds us here. Elsewhere in his manuscript he cites further examples of the moderns and specifically the Dutch surpassing the ancients, such as the Dutch invention of glasses, prince Maurits' reforms of the army, the scientific studies of Francis Bacon, and Dutch landscape painting, and he praises the simplicity and practicality of the Dutch tongue. His remarks about the commoner fathers and mediocre teachers of the "noble pair of youths" likewise jibe with his general point about the selfinvention of the young Dutch nation in the face of aged antiquity. Far from empty rhetoric, then, Huygens' claim that Rembrandt had surpassed the art of antiquity and Italy is a self-conscious celebration of nascent Dutch culture and identity, which Rembrandt himself helps to found, as a modern Aeneas.*

*Huygens' one caveat concerning the two painters' reluctance to make an artistic pilgrimage to Italy is highly significant. Their ostensible response that the best Italian paintings in their time were found north of the Alps is borne out by examples such as Raphael's portrait of Baldesarre Castiglione, which Rembrandt viewed and copied at an auction in Amsterdam and then adapted in several works. Rembrandt and Lievens also already borrow from graphic reproductions of Italian art in their earliest paintings, a practice Rembrandt continued throughout his life, expanding his dialogue with the classical tradition and ultimately justifying in his late works even the over-generous praise Huygens bestowed upon him at the outset of his career.*

**Benjamin Binstock**

I have deliberately reserved for last a noble pair of youths from Leiden. Were I to say that they alone can vie with the greatest among the superior mortals mentioned earlier, I would still be underestimating the merits of these two; were I to say that they will soon surpass them, I would merely be expressing what their astonishing beginnings have led connoisseurs to expect.

Considering their parentage, there is no stronger argument against the belief that nobility resides in the blood. Some men pride themselves solely on this point, although I recall how cleverly they were refuted by that most brilliant of Italians, Traiano Boccalini, a modern author who writes with the greatest care and clarity. In a tale about an anatomical dissection of a nobleman's corpse, he relates how the doctors, after carefully examining the veins, unanimously declared that nobility did not dwell in the blood, since in this respect the man in no way differed from a commoner or peasant. As for my two youths, one was the son of a common embroiderer, the other a miller's son, although certainly not of the same grain. Who could help but marvel that two such prodigies of talent and skill should spring up from such rustic roots? Inquiring as to their boyhood teachers, I discover men who are barely known outside the common classes. Due to their parents' modest circumstances, the boys were compelled to take teacher's whose fees were low. Were these teachers to be confronted with their pupils today, they would feel just as abashed as those who first instructed Vergil in poetry, Cicero in oratory, and Archimedes in mathematics. Let it however be said, with due respect for everyone's feelings and without detracting from anyone (for what is it to me?): these two owe nothing to their teachers but everything to their aptitude. Had they never received any tuition, but instead left to their own devices and suddenly been seized by the urge to paint, I am convinced that they would have risen to the same heights they have now attained. They are wrongly thought to have been led to this point by others.

The first, whom I called an embroiderer's son, is named Jan Lievens. The other, who is descended from a miller, Rembrandt. Both are still beardless and, going by their faces and bodies, more boys than men. It is beyond my capacities and the scope of this record to judge each individual according to his works activity. As suggested earlier in the case of Rubens, I wish these two would draw up an inventory of their oeuvres and a chart of their paintings. Such a modest record of a few facts would demonstrate, for the wonder and edification of all ages, the reasoning and judgment behind the design, composition, and elaboration of each of their works. I venture to make the following brief pronouncement about each of them: Rembrandt surpasses Lievens in his sure touch and in the liveliness of emotions. Conversely, Lievens is superior in invention and a certain grandeur of his daring themes and forms.

Due to his youthful spirit, Lievens breathes only that which is magnificent and lofty. He is not content with equalling the true scale of objects and figures in his paintings, but depicts them larger than life. By contrast, Rembrandt, wrapped up in his own art, loves to devote himself to a small painting and present an effect of concentration which one would seek in vain in the largest pieces of other artists. His painting of the repentant Judas returning to the high priest the silver-pieces which were the price of our innocent Lord illustrates the point I wish to make concerning all of his works. Compare this with all Italy, indeed, with everything beautiful and admirable that has been preserved from the earliest antiquity. The singular gesture of the despairing Judas-leaving aside the many fascinating figures in this one painting-that one furious Judas, howling, praying for mercy, but devoid of hope, all traces of hope erased from his countenance, his appearance frightening, his hair torn, his garment rent, his limbs twisted, his hands clenched bloodlessly tight, fallen prostrate on his knees on a blind impulse, his whole body contorted in wretched hideousness. Such I place against all the elegance that has been produced throughout the ages. This is what I would have those naive mortals know, who claim-and we have rebuked them for it elsewhere that nothing is said or done today has not already been expressed or achieved in antiquity. I maintain that it did not occur to Protogenes, Apelles or Parrhasius, nor could it occur to them were they return to earth that (I am amazed simply to report this) a youth, a Dutchman, a beardless miller, could bring together so much in one human figure and express what is universal. All honor to thee, my Rembrandt! To have carried Illium, indeed all Asia, to Italy is a lesser achievement than to have brought the laurels of Greece and Italy to Holland, the achievement of a Dutchman who has seldom ventured outside the walls of his native city [ . . . ]

I can scarcely tear myself away from discussing these outstanding youths, yet I can not help but censure them for the one fault which I have already noted in Lievens. They are securely contented with themselves and neither has hitherto found it important to spend a few months traveling through Italy. In such great talents there is naturally a touch of madness, which can destroy young spirits. If only someone could drive this folly from their young heads, he would truly contribute the sole element needed to perfect their art. Oh, if only they could be acquainted with Raphael and Michelangelo, how eagerly their eyes would devour the monuments of these prodigious souls. How quickly they would surpass them all, giving Italians due cause to come to their own Holland. If only these men knew that they were born to raise art to consummate heights! But I will not be silent about the pretext with which they excuse their apathy. They claim to be in the bloom of their youth and wish to profit from it; they have no time to waste on foreign travel. Moreover, since these days the kings and princes north of the Alps avidly delight in and collect pictures, the best Italian paintings can be seen outside Italy. What is scattered around in that country and only to be tracked down with great inconvenience, can be found here en masse so that one can have his fill.

I do not wish to pass judgement on the validity of this excuse. I can however attest that I have never observed such diligence and application in men of any sort, pursuit, or age. Truly, they are "redeeming the time," and that is their sole occupation. More remarkably, they regard even the diversions of youth as a waste of time, as if they were already old men burdened with age and long past such follies. Such indefatigable persistence at difficult labor may quickly yield great progress, yet I have often wished that these outstanding youths would practice moderation and consider their constitutions, which a sedentary occupation has already rendered less vigorous and robust.

Excerpt from the manuscript *Autobiography of Constantijn Huygens*, (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague), published in *Oud Holland*, 1891, translated by Benjamin Binstock.