

'THE PAINTING CONTEST '

By Peter Arguimbau

The time a Renaissance painter took in finishing an oil painting is random, however it is astonishing to note how swiftly some great Masters worked. There are rare documented accounts of the speed an Old Master would take on a painting as well as painting practices. These are not descriptions of oil sketches or studies but finished paintings. Paintings that are completed quickly are the product of an exalted superior painting technique, where the execution of a painting at the mercy of cumbersome slow drying oils could not qualify in a competition of this kind. 'The Painting Contest' is one of these accounts although anecdotal in historical terms it has been substantiated by authorities.

'The Painting Contest' was a recorded event that took place in the Flemish town of Leiden in the 1630's and was a full day event. The source comes from Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilder-kouste* from 1678. Hoogstraten was born in Dordrecht in 1627. Investigations of the artists painting practices involved have confirmed Hoogstraten's description by Van Mander, Emmens, and Melanie Gifford. It is conceivable that Rembrandt himself could have attended the competition as he lived in Leiden around 1630's . The contest is attended by art lovers and connoisseurs and is quoted in full by Hoogstraten:

"The first of these painters, Knibbergen by name, put a rather large canvas on his easel and, hand and brush doing his bidding, began at once dapper to write, that is, to paint in such an accomplished fashion that everything he put on was at once finished: for sky, distance, rocks, trees and rushing waterfalls all flew from his brush like the letters from the pen of a scribe. He applied his foliage and his sinuous greenery in a fixed manner: the drifts of clouds seem to glide from his hand, the rocky cliffs, the rough ground were as though born from his paints. (Knibbergen studied in Italy and was influenced by Jan van Goyen) "Mountainous Landscape", canvas 38"x59"

"Beside him sat Jan van Goyen, who went about his work in an entirely different way; by covering his whole panel at once, here light, there dark more or less variegated agate or marbled paper, he succeeded in creating various amusing drolleries, almost effortlessly it would seem, with delicate touches: so that yonder appeared a pleasant prospect, adorned with peasant villages, here could be seen an old stronghold with gateway and landing stage and, reflected in the lapping water, ships and barges laden with cargoes or passengers, embarking or disembarking. In short, his eye, as though looking for forms that lay hidden in a chaos of paint, steered his hand and mind in true wise so that one saw a complete painting before one realized

what he intended. (Jan van Goyen {1596-1656} lived in Leiden and The Hague) River view with the Ruin of the Church of Warmond, c. 1635, panel 16"x 24"

"The third was our Porcellis, the great Raphael of Sea Painters. But art lovers had almost given up hope when they saw how slowly he handled his brushes it seemed at first even that he was deliberately wasting time, or knew not how he should begin. And the reason for this was that he was first forming in his imagination the whole conception of his work he was first making the painting in his mind before he put his brush into the paint. But the outcome showed that this was the right way to proceed; for though he persisted in his slowness, he knew what he was about, and by the evening had completed his piece as well as his competitors and though Knibbergen's piece was bigger, and Van Goyen's was filled with more detail, Porcellis had in his well-chosen naturalness and in the art something extraordinary which one never senses in paintings that flow easily from the hand (Knibbergen), or by searching and finding in random images (Van Goyen). In the end, this piece by Porcellis was prized above the other two by the connoisseurs, though neither of the other two, in their own way, were to be dismissed. Jan Porcellis, "Riverscape", panel 23"x 31"

This remarkable event with these outstanding artists took place in one day in a public place as they were finished that very evening. These are not plein-air studies or sketches, but imagined finished oil paintings and sizable as noted by their size and titles. The use of sketches as aids and an initial drawing were probably used, however the sophistication of the artist's medium to layer and finish in so short a time must be taken into account. To be able to superimpose the many layers of glazes and have them all dry quickly so as not to run together is suggestive of a superior fast drying medium.

Van Dyck is another example of how quickly he could paint. Roger de Piles writes in "Cours de Peinture par Principes," that Eberhard Jabach, a Paris art collector who knew Van Dyck in Antwerp and sat for him three times, described the artist's studio practices: "Van Dyck told people what day and hour to arrive for a sitting, and he never worked more than one hour. In this manner he worked on many portraits with extraordinary speed. After lightly sketching a portrait, he had the person stand in the position he had just sketched, and with grey paper and white and black chalk he drew in fifteen minutes his figure and clothing in a grand manner and with exquisite taste. He then gave the drawing to capable assistants whose job it was to paint in the clothing..." Not to mention that Rubens painted 15,000 paintings in his life time including his workshop paintings.