

My reflection in Clio's mirror

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In June 1986 I was interviewed for two mornings at a residential house in London – it felt like a John le Carré safe house – for a project of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (now the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles). The interviewers were out to record the personal experiences of art historians in relation to their intellectual endeavors. The edited results were published in 1988 under the title *Object, image, inquiry: the art historian at work*.

One of the interviewers was the anthropologist William O. Beeman. When the discussion turned to my first scholarly article, he made a comment that has always stayed with me. I quote from the transcript of the interview that was provided to me by the Getty.

... my own theory of intellectual careers is that the germs of almost anything anyone writes is usually in their first published article. And it's proved to be true so many times that it's kind of shocking to me. But, in a way, I'm not surprised. I think that many times we play out a lot of our - - We come to scholarly life with a certain set of existential beliefs and also personal feelings that we would like to work out. And your first published article - - You sometimes wonder if you're ever going to publish anything again.

This insight turned out to fit my case uncomfortably closely. My first article was "Saenredam, Huygens and the Utrecht bull," published in 1966 in the second issue of the new art-historical journal *Simiolus: kunsthistorisch tijdschrift* (now *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*). In subsequent publications I thought to have made new breakthroughs. This was particularly the case of "Jan van der Heyden and the Huydecopers of Maarsseveen" (1983) and *Rembrandt: a new biography* (1985; first published in Dutch in 1984). Especially in the Rembrandt book I felt like I was breaking new ground. Then came a remark by Beeman:

The thing I found really interesting is how this [the Saenredam article] dovetails with your book on Rembrandt. I was actually delighted to find how much the two seemed to inform each other in terms of the general religious historical background that you delve into here.

To which I replied:

I didn't realize that when I was writing Rembrandt. Interesting. I mean, you're right. The first one who pointed this out to me actually is Walter Liedtke, the curator of Dutch paintings in the Metropolitan Museum. I met him in New York again last year; we had been in touch for a long time. He has an extraordinary memory, he really has the proverbial elephant's memory, and I said something to him about how much I changed as an art historian, and how I got interested in this business of patrons and the relationship between artists. He said, "Well, that's exactly what you did in the Saenredam article, isn't it?" And that was right.

The lessons I seem to have been learning from the muse were in the first place lessons about myself. The muse was quietly bringing my existential beliefs to the surface, in a way more recognizable to others than to myself. The muse who had this on her conscience – if muses have a conscience, which I have reason to doubt – was Clio, the muse of history, and therefore of art history, at least as I practice it.



Pieter Saenredam (1597-1665), *The nave and choir of the Mariakerk in Utrecht*
Signed and dated 29 January 1641
Oil on panel, 121.5 x 95 cm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

It all started in the Rijksmuseum, in the winter of 1965/66. I stopped in front of *The nave and choir of the Mariakerk in Utrecht* by Pieter Jansz Saenredam, the great portraitist of churches. It showed the glowing interior of a church built in the eleventh century and demolished in stages in the nineteenth. The structure is more complex than it appears at first sight, with its splendidly balanced systems of construction and architectural articulation. In the Romanesque nave are massive piers, pilasters and columns, round arches and molded vaulting, imposing gallery and clerestory; in the Gothic choir high pointed arches, mullions and lancet windows. The choir is filled with bright, even light, while the nave, crossing and side aisles show variegated illumination, from deep brown in the vaulting to light caramel on the walls of the aisles. The wall between them, with two closed doors, was not an ecclesiastical feature. It stood there because the church rented out the choir as a commercial sales space.

The warm tonality of the elevation is set off by blue, pink and white floor slabs covering graves in the nave. The function of the church as a place for burials is also brought out by memorial coats of arms

mounted on two pilasters. Although the Mariakerk was available for the services of the Netherlands Reformed Congregation, nothing in Saenredam's interior refers to the use of the building as a place of worship, not even a pulpit, the main appurtenance of a Reformed House of the Word.

Those are observations that came later, in concentrated admiration for Saenredam's success in creating such an engrossing interior, with all of its structural elements, its light-and-dark transitions and contrasts, its historical resonance. Architectural painting is the single specialty most unforgiving of slips, sloppiness and shortcuts, the Mariakerk one of the most complex buildings in the country. Saenredam carries off this most demanding of artistic challenges with understated, unforced mastery.

As the overtrained graduate student that I was, I was always on the lookout for evidence that disproved existing assumptions, and *The nave and choir of the Mariakerk in Utrecht* was made to that order. It presents a forthright contradiction of the easy cliché that Saenredam's name tends to evoke, even among art historians: that his interiors breathe a Calvinist spirit, with bare white walls from which all Romish traces have been expunged. There are indeed no altars or statues of saints in the church, as there are in some other interiors of Dutch churches by Saenredam. But the church walls are anything but white. In fact, the piers are adorned with painted golden cloths of honor against which statues of saints once stood. Although the actual state of such decorations, more than half a century after the Reformation, must have been pitiable, Saenredam paints them as fresh as new. To ensure the effect, he actually used gold foil where gold is depicted. The cloths honor missing saints even in their absence, creating a void that every curious viewer fills in. Saenredam was not playing down the Catholic origins of the Mariakerk, he was playing them up.

But there was more, and that more is what changed my life. The tone in the study of Dutch architectural painting was set by the German art historian Hans Jantzen in his dissertation on the subject of 1908. To Jantzen, architectural painting was an exercise in form, the creation on a flat surface of a convincing illusion of space. This fit in with the view of Jantzen's teacher Heinrich Wölfflin, who subtitled his book *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1915) "das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst." In college I had already developed a perhaps unhealthy aversion to the premises underlying this kind of formalism, which was still the dominant mode in art history in the 1960s.

What I saw in Saenredam's painting was a bearer of meaning more significant than the mere evocation of space. In the left foreground is an eye-catching passage that captures and holds your attention. It is a group of three elegantly dressed figures seen from the back, a man and two women, and the object at which two of them are looking. The man and one of the women stand a few feet apart, holding gloved hands in the air. Their gaze is directed at a picture and an inscription on a nave column. They are viewers, and we viewers with them. Looking over their shoulders, we see the hind quarters of a bull and two incomplete lines of Latin. This is the most compelling detail in the painting, the motif that commands attention and demands explanation. More than the means used by the painter to create space, what we want to know about the painting is what the bull is and why the couple is looking at it with such reverence, making such a personal gesture.



Drums from the Mariakerk, Utrecht, with the date MXCIX [1099, the death year of the bishop who founded the church], the painted relief of a steer and a two-line Latin verse
 Utrecht, Centraal Museum

In the literature I found only an answer to the first question. The image that in Saenredam's panel looks like a painting on stone, is actually a polychromed sculptural relief carved into a drum of the column. As I was thrilled to discover, it still exists, in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, having been preserved from the debris of the Mariakerk. The inscription reads: "Accipe posteritas, quod per tua secula narres / Taurinis cutibus fundo solidata columna est." (Accept, posterity, that which you may tell through the ages: the column is grounded on the hides of bulls.) A learned humanist with total recall would recognize that the lines are a play on words, taking off from a dedicatory motto in the Roman temple of Fortuna in Praeneste, with the same first line. In the second the name of the Roman founder, Taurinus, is tweaked into the word for the plural adjective form of *taurus*, bull. He would also know that there was an old story about the Mariakerk concerning a construction problem. One of the piers stood on a spot so marshy that the foundation stones kept sinking into the ground until a Frisian artisan came up with the idea of underlaying it with the waterproof hide of a steer. This worked, but when the Frisian came for his reward, he was turned down, whereupon he killed the bishop who built the church.

The thrill of finding the relief was more than intellectual. It was one of many new Utrecht loves. My response to Saenredam's painting was bound up with events of the past months and years of my life. One thread – it is more like a cable – stands out. From 1961 to 1965 I pursued a Ph.D. in art history at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. The chair of the department, Adolf Katzenellenbogen, was specialized in medieval art, and I chose a thesis subject from that field. A phenomenon that fascinated me was the equestrian statue. Everyone knows the great Italian examples of the fifteenth century, Donatello's *Gattamelata* in Padua and Verrocchio's *Colleoni* in Venice. They are invariably linked to the ancient masterpiece *Marcus Aurelius*, then displayed in the Lateran in Rome as a statue of Emperor Constantine. My plan was to investigate the intermediate millennium, in which other, lost monuments of the kind were erected. I even had hopes of uncovering traces of a forgotten ancient example in Tirana, for which I had found a suggestive reference.

The death of Katzenellenbogen on 30 September 1964, at the beginning of my last year of studies, left me without a supervisor for this subject. I was moreover increasingly discouraged in my ambitions as a medievalist by my ignorance of Latin. Katzenellenbogen never made a point of this, but I did. His standing as a scholar was based on his readings of patristic texts in relation to artistic forms. He had acquired his Latin at the Goethe-Gymnasium in Frankfurt, a model institution that pioneered new methods for teaching Latin that were adopted by all the gymnasiums in Prussia. My unhappy suspicion was that Katzenellenbogen, knowing that none of his American students could match a background like that, lowered his expectations of what we might achieve. That was not a basis on which I wanted to found a career in art history.

My search for a new dissertation subject was tied in with my search for a new homeland. As always, the United States of America was at war – in the early 1960s not only with Vietnam but also with itself. There was no party or grouping or even civic ideal which I could embrace – not surprising, given my conflicted feelings towards my country – and I wanted out. A double opportunity had presented itself in the first days of the very month of September 1964. I had spent the summer in Rome, working as an editor on the *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Art*. Rome was a daily miracle, and I would have liked nothing more than to stay there and build up a new life. However, in the course of the summer I came to realize that not a single foreigner I met there, not even those who had married an Italian, had an independent existence or a local livelihood. Every last one of them worked, like me, either for a foreign company or an international agency like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. It might not be obvious at first glance, but Italian livings were reserved for Italians. Others were very welcome to take a place in one of the city's age-old colonies, with their own networks and connections abroad. That too was not the basis I was seeking.

On the way home another miracle took place. I booked a flight leaving from Amsterdam so that I could spend a few days in the Netherlands, nearly the only country in Europe I had not yet visited. Entering Amsterdam, I went into a trance. Here was a European city of incomparable charm, inhabited by people who showed palpable respect for each other, even in the street. Dutch art was already a love of mine, and I flew home with the intention of shifting fields. So that when I returned fourteen months later, in November 1965, with a Kress fellowship for one academic year, I had a lot invested in the move.

It was not Amsterdam to which I came but Utrecht. This was upon the recommendation of my surrogate supervisor, Horst Janson, who had been my professor at New York University as an undergraduate. At the art history institute of Utrecht University I found a warm reception from the staff and students. It was there that I met the love of my life, Loekie, and her daughter Anne, who adopted me as I adopted her and her city. My exploratory walks in Roman, medieval and seventeenth-century Utrecht brought new revelations day by day. The art history institute was located in temporary quarters on the Nieuwegracht, the *New Canal*, new because it was dug as late as the 1390s, a century before Columbus landed in America. I surrendered myself to a particular

intoxicating illusion. Rising above the earthly paradise in van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece (1432) is the tower of Utrecht cathedral, the Domtoren, added to the painting, it is thought, in the sixteenth century by the learned Utrecht painter Jan van Scorel. In Utrecht I felt like I was living in the background of the Ghent Altarpiece, and I felt at home there.

My education by the muse could be reconstructed without bringing in these interwoven strands of memory. But the account would be misleading as well as incomplete. These are circumstances that set me up for what I experienced in the Rijksmuseum and for the research campaign that ensued. There were others. The article on Saenredam was unrelated to – more exactly, substituting for – the Ph.D. thesis I was supposed to be writing. That project stranded in February 1966 when Loekie and I traveled to Manchester to meet the man appointed to replace Katzenellenbogen, John White. My proposal, itself a replacement for my original plan – the iconography of globes in Dutch still-life painting – was to study the significance of the constellations of objects in Antwerp *kunstkamer* paintings. White had me present my ideas at the Manchester City Art Gallery to the deputy director Fritz Grossmann, who had written in his book on Pieter Bruegel that the constellations had no particular meaning. Grossmann heard me out and told White he was convinced that my ideas were worth pursuing. Although White had said beforehand that he would abide by Grossmann's judgment, he did not. Driving us to his house for dinner with his wife, White blithely declaimed "You know, I don't beLIEVE in iconography," and there, after four-and-a-half years of graduate study, went my chances for a Ph.D.

So that the opportunity presented by Pieter Saenredam's *Nave and choir of the Mariakerk in Utrecht*, to demonstrate the importance of iconography in architectural painting, the last bastion of pure formalism among the specialties in Dutch art, also was a way to get even with perfidious John White. I was teaching a lesson as well as learning one.

The decisive clue to the function of the painting lay in its provenance. The earliest mention of the painting dates from 1725, when it failed to sell at the auction of the estate of the Vrouwe van Ste. Anneland. That lady was the granddaughter of the prodigious Constantijn Huygens. The painting came from Huygens's house on the Plein in The Hague, where it remained until 1876, when the house was demolished – another Dutch monument of immense importance that like the Mariakerk fell victim in the nineteenth century to government progress freaks out to replace historical buildings by historicistic ones. There is no reason to doubt that the painting was acquired by Huygens, and that he acquired it directly from Saenredam, with whom he had personal and professional ties.

It was a small step to look into Huygens's writings to see whether he had anything to say about the Mariakerk. I was deeply gratified but not really surprised to find that he did. On 9 January 1649, on the road in Elspeet, he wrote a Latin quatrain that enters into discussion with the Mariakerk inscription. "It matters little, posterity, nor need you tell the ages that this column stands based on a springlet in the ground. What matters more is that within these columns [the church building] the Savior himself edifies souls – not stones – from eternal springs." There was an answer to my second question: why is the couple looking at the relief with such reverence? Not to satisfy their curiosity about a disgruntled Frisian but to undergo edification by the Savior.

Here was a coalescence of profound values in the realms of architecture (the Mariakerk), engineering (the story of the spring under a column that stood for 800 years), painting (Saenredam's masterpiece), sculpture (the relief, credited to Jan van Scorel), folklore (the Rumpelstiltsken-like story about the Frisian), history (the sources for our knowledge come from the great Utrecht chroniclers of the middle ages Beka and Heda), classical studies (the effortless play with a Roman dedicatory inscription), theology (Huygens's elevation of the motif to the level of divine salvation), literature (in Huygens's epigrammatic mode), private life (in our imaginings of the feelings and action of the couple) and reception (in my impassioned and intense inquiry into the painting and its meanings). The painting was as rich a cultural artefact as one could possibly imagine, with qualities that had been neglected until then. In the course of a few months, with the indispensable aid of my new love,

with her mastery, among other languages, of Latin and German – she translated entire articles for me, as well as long Latin texts – and her critical acumen, my first article came into being. Loekie read draft after draft after draft, helping me to find a tone that was personal as well as scholarly and a writing style intended to be optimally communicative and enjoyable as well.

My muses (Loekie as much as Clio) had not only educated me, they had shown me how all-encompassing the reach could be of a work of art, how much an artist could convey in a single image. Most of all, they taught me that the humanities are truly human, that works of art have their reason for being not in themselves but in society and its individuals. And so do I.