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Orphan Chamber Auctions in Amsterdam

Auctions were held by the Orphan Chamber (*Weeskamer*) of Amsterdam at least as early as 1507. Auction sales of bankrupt estates, conducted by the “concierge” of the Town Hall, are first mentioned in 1544. These “executive sales” were taken over by the Bankruptcy Chamber (*Desolate Boedelskamer*) after about 1622. Ships and other merchandise were sold separately by the Chamber after 1637. In the 17th century, auction sales of goods brought from overseas territories were held under the auspices of the Orphan Chamber, by the United East Indies Company (V.O.C.), and by the West Indies Company (W.I.C.). All these, of course, were officially approved sales.¹¹ There were also unauthorized (“wild”) sales that the artists’ Guild of St. Luke, in particular, tried hard to interdict, but with only limited success. For merchandise that was not subject to guild control, such as flower bulbs, auction sales took place in inns without municipal or other supervision.

The records of executive sales and of all other sales held outside the jurisdiction of the Orphan Chamber are irremediably lost. We are exceptionally fortunate that the detailed records of auctions held by the Orphan Chamber have been preserved for a number of years between 1597 and 1638 in the 29 Notebooks already cited.¹² How precious and rare these records are may be judged from the following considerations. We have no actual records of other auction sales held in Amsterdam until the 18th century, and certainly no records containing the names of buyers.¹³ Only very few records of auction sales held in other cities of the United Provinces have survived for which buyers’ names are available.¹⁴

This book systematically exploits the information about the nature of the art objects sold in these auctions – paintings, drawings, prints, textiles with designated subjects, and so forth – the subjects they represented, their prices, and the attributions set down by the clerks in the Orphan Chamber notebooks. But it concentrates especially on the buyers whose names were recorded. As it turns out, four out of five buyers did not pay for their purchases in cash, and their names (as well, often, as their addresses) had to be set down by the clerk recording the sale in case they had to be traced if they failed to pay up. Many of these were professionals: art and print dealers, painters and sculptors utilizing the paintings and prints they bought in their ateliers or in their stock in trade. A majority were ordinary collectors, of whom most, we may suppose, were just intent on furnishing their homes. A significant minority, however, were art lovers (called *liefhebbers* in Dutch). These had a real interest in the quality of the works of art they bid on, as we may judge from the high prices they sometimes paid and from occasional notarial documents in which their collecting ac-

tivities were mentioned. I have also assembled all the information that I could find on the owners of the estates that were sold and of the individuals at whose request certain “voluntary” sales were held. Not all this information on buyers and sellers at my disposal is explicitly reproduced in this book: much has been aggregated in large groups (all buyers, all estates) or in subgroups (taxpayers, signers of the Remonstrant petition of 1628, artist-buyers, and so forth.) The detailed information can be retrieved from my database, available at the Frick Art Reference Library in New York. More information about the works of art collectors purchased is provided in the appendices to the chapters in part II of this book, which focuses on selected buyers.

In addition to man-made works of art, I have taken note from time to time of the “naturalia” – the products of nature, from ostrich eggs to dried lizards – that were included in certain sales and even of the artist’s materials – from frames to sacks of mineral earths from which paints were made after they were ground – in the post-mortem sales of artists. These “naturalia” and artists’ materials are generally included in the “total value of the works of art” of the sales where they appear.

The dates of sales covered by the Orphan Chamber notebooks – 1597 to 1638 – are of course due to the chances of the individual notebooks’ survival. If only one more notebook had been preserved, it would have comprised the most important art sale held by the Orphan Chamber that took place in the first forty years of the 17th century. This was the sale of goods brought by ship from Italy by Lucas van Uffelen, the total value of which amounted to 59,546 *f*. This sum amounted to nearly 60 percent of the total value of the works of art I have extracted from the Orphan Chamber notebooks during the entire period 1597 to 1638. What appears to have been the most expensive painting in the Van Uffelen collection – the portrait of Baldassare Castiglione by Raphael – sold for 3,500 *f*, which was equal to almost five times the value of the most expensive work of art sold in the previous 41 years (an album of prints or drawings by Lucas van Leyden). What we know about this sale comes from a sketch that Rembrandt made of the Castiglione portrait on which he jotted down the auction price of the portrait and the total value of the Van Uffelen shipment (*cargaison*) and from some scattered notes that Joachim von Sandrart made about the paintings sold in his book, *Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675*.¹⁵

The Orphan Chamber of Amsterdam dates back at least to 1500 when three former aldermen and members of the Amsterdam Council (*Raad*) were appointed to serve as Masters of the Chamber (*weesmeesters*).¹⁶ In 1624, the number of Masters was increased to four and later to five or six. They were named by the Burgomasters on February 2nd of each year. The regulations stipulated that they had to have been citizens of Amsterdam for at least seven years and to be “forty years of age or thereabout”.¹⁷ Most of the Masters were present or past members of the *Raad* of Amsterdam, from among whom the burgomasters and aldermen who ran the city were chosen. Masters were frequently appointed at the end of their political career or as a consolation prize for having been denied a more important political post.

The Orphan Chamber was administered on a daily basis by a secretary and by one or more “delegates” (*boden*) who were also the auction masters in charge of sales. The *boden* had to put up a sizeable security (*borgstelling*) of 10,000 *f* to hold their job (raised to 15,000 *f* in 1637).¹⁸ The expanding scope of the Orphan Chamber sales is perhaps reflected in the growing number of *boden*: there was only one *bode*, until 1617; there were two from 1617 to 1636; and three from that year on. Gerrit Jansz. Block was in office from 3 June 1597 to May 1603; Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh, from June 1603 to 1637; Jan Dircksz. van Beuningen, from 1617 to 1627; Daniel Jansz. van Beuningen, the son of Jan Dircksz., from 1627 to 1648, a period that overlapped in part with the stewardship of Gerrit Jacobsz. Haringh. A third *bode*, named Abraham Jansz. (Croonenburgh) was added in 1636 (whose records are entirely lost).

The Masters and their staff were essentially responsible for disposing of the estates of deceased residents – not necessarily citizens of Amsterdam – who had left heirs of minor age (less than 25 years old and unmarried). Each week, the gravemakers of the churches and the cemeteries of Amsterdam were obligated to hand over to the Orphan Chamber the names and addresses of men or women who had died leaving heirs of minor age. Whereupon the surviving husband or wife (or if neither had survived, the nearest relative) was summoned by the *bode* of the Chamber in order to show evidence of the estate. This had to be done within six weeks of burial, except in the case of death from the plague where delays were allowed. It was apparently at this point that the testament of the deceased was read. If the testament formally excluded the Orphan Chamber from administering the estate,¹⁹ the Chamber handed over responsibility to the heirs. But if it had not, the oldest heir had to make an inventory of the entire estate, which was to be shown to the nearest relatives. It was then determined whether the estate showed a positive or a negative net worth, that is, if the value of the movable goods, real estate and other valuables in the estate exceeded its outstanding debts.²⁰ If both parents were dead, the estate was sold at auction, and the proceeds were deposited in the “drawers” (*laden*) of the Orphan Chamber.²¹ Whether or not the estate was immediately sold, the Orphan Chamber took over the administration of the estate until the heirs reached majority age.

In the 1620s, between 200 and 300 heirs and guardians made an appearance before the Orphan Chamber each year.²² This was only a small fraction of the total number of Amsterdam inhabitants who were buried each year – an average of approximately 5,000 per year from 1617 to 1630.²³ Even assuming that the number of adults leaving heirs of minor age only amounted to 30 to 40 percent of the number of burials, or about 1,500 to 2,000 per year, this would still imply that a mere 10-15 percent of those adults made an appearance on behalf of the heirs of minor age before the Chamber. The rest of the “estates” were so small (or negative in value) that there was little or nothing for the heirs to collect in the Chamber. These poor people, who made up the overwhelming majority of the population of Amsterdam, were generally buried *pro deo*, for God’s sake. Interestingly enough, the percentage of the adults making an appearance on behalf of heirs of minor age before the Orphan Chamber is

roughly equal to the percentage of households paying a tax of 5 *f* or more in the records of the 0.5 percent tax on assessed wealth for Amsterdam in 1631. In subsequent chapters, I shall frequently advert to these tax records for 1631, which are unique for the period under consideration (1597-1638).

There is evidence that many rich citizens tried to avoid the involvement of the Chamber in their succession. In 1603, the masters of the Chamber complained that people disposing of means (*vermogende lieden*) excluded the Chamber with the consequence that the Chamber was left burdened with “less productive” inventories. This was the reason the Masters gave in 1603 for raising the “benefit of exclusion” (the charge on estates that had excluded the Chamber) from 4 stuivers to anywhere between 10 and 20 stuivers, at the discretion of the Chamber. This modest charge probably had little effect in discouraging better-off citizens from excluding the Chamber. It was also on this occasion that the Masters of the Chamber redefined the orphans under its jurisdiction to include “all persons who had lost one or both of their parents”.²⁴

A primary responsibility of the Chamber was to appoint guardians for the orphans. Normally, these were blood relatives, but the Masters could also choose other persons if there were no close relatives or, in case there were, if these relatives were thought unsuitable. Relatives who were named as guardians had to accept the responsibility, unless they had good and sufficient reason (absence, illness, age, or other impediments) to escape it. Guardians received 2.5 percent of the proceeds of sales of estates and 1.5 percent of any rent-yielding obligations deposited with the Chamber on behalf of the heirs.

A complaint that was sometimes expressed was that the relatives did not have sufficient influence on the choice of guardians, which made the Chamber “unpopular”.²⁵ The guardians who were not blood relatives were called *suppoosten* (aids or suppliants). They were bound to the Orphan Chamber during their entire life. They received the same emoluments as guardians who were blood relatives. These could amount to substantial sums for the estates of wealthy citizens, and there was apparently no lack of candidates for the job of *suppoost*.²⁶ As we shall see in chapter 8, many buyers at auction were recruited from the milieu of the Orphan Chamber’s administration, including the auction masters (*boden*) themselves, but also from among the secretaries of the Chamber and the *suppoosten*.

Did the sales of the movable goods in the estates under the custody of the Orphan Chamber comprise all the goods that these inventories contained? Some sales appear reasonably complete, as may be inferred from the presence at the sale of close family members who bought lots which they might otherwise have obtained privately before the sale took place. However, there is no doubt that family portraits were generally retained by the family. Very few were auctioned off. We also know of a few instances where family members bought items from the estate before the Orphan Chamber held the sale. One clear instance of a sale that did not comprise the entire estate of a deceased citizen occurred in the case of the 1629 inventory of the estate of the

wine dealer Garbrant Claesz. van Hooren and Trijn Pieters.²⁷ The clerk writing down the inventory added the following note: “Household items, including paintings and the wine-dealer’s equipment, were sold to various persons, including the son Pieter, whose debts have been listed among the debtors to the estate, and the rest was sold by the servant of the Orphan Chamber, which brought a sum of 845 *f*, after deduction of all costs.” Many sales comprised no clothing. I have systematically omitted these patently incomplete estates from my calculations of the percentage value of works of art in the total value of estates sold at auction (although I am well aware that many of the estates that I did include were probably incomplete as well).