



Fred G. Meijer: The Collection of Dutch and Flemish Still-life Paintings Bequeathed by Daisy Linda Ward (= The Ashmolean Museum Oxford: Catalogue of the Collection of Paintings), Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers 2003, 336 S., 96 Farb-, 130 s/w-Abb., ISBN 90-400-8802-0, EUR 49,95.

Rezensiert von:

Alan Chong

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

Permanent collection catalogues are not terribly popular at the moment, and many institutions have stopped producing them, just as journals have stopped reviewing those that do appear. Although expensive and time-consuming to produce, these printed catalogues have not yet found an adequate scholarly replacement on the web. Collection catalogues, therefore, remain immensely valuable for revealing less well-known collections, presenting technical discoveries, advocating new attributions, or examining collecting taste. Fred Meijer's catalogue of the Ward collection of Netherlandish still lifes, bequeathed to the Ashmolean Museum in 1939, admirably fulfills several of these functions. Although the collection is well-known, not least because of J. G. van Gelder's 1950 catalogue, Meijer's connoisseurship has resulted in revised attributions, while his entries contribute significantly to our knowledge of the many still-lives artists represented. No technical analysis is attempted of the materials or facture of the paintings, but the collection as a whole represents an important stage in the rediscovery of still-life paintings.

The history of the Ward collection is somewhat murky. Although the collection bears the name of Daisy Linda Ward (who was born in New Jersey), the paintings seem to have been bought almost entirely by her husband, Theodore Holzapfel of Newcastle, who - because of anti-German sentiments at the start of World War I - adopted his mother's name, Ward. T. H. Ward was a true pioneer in the collecting of Netherlandish still lifes. In the first decades of the 20th century, he bought an impressive array of paintings at a time when they were not much valued by museums and "serious" collectors. For this reason, the Ashmolean Museum possesses a larger and broader range of Netherlandish still lifes than the "official" collection at the National Gallery, London. The Ward collection is notable for having beautiful works by artists like Adriaen Coorte, who now enjoys an almost cult status among contemporary collectors and connoisseurs. Nor was Ward afraid to collect subjects that remain unfashionable to this day: gory paintings of dead game, lovingly depicted dead fish, and even pictures of copper pots and kitchen utensils. The many paintings - often in superior condition - by lesser known artists make the catalogue an ideal project for a still-life specialist.

The book begins with a valuable essay marshalling the surviving evidence on the mysterious Theodore Holzapfel Ward and his family. Meijer sifts through shadowy recollections to outline an intriguing picture of the collector and his motives. Ward was proud to have discovered so many beautiful still lifes, "sometimes bought for a few pounds" (14). In the 1920s and 1930s, the collecting of flower pictures and still lifes was considered somehow undignified or even "sissy", and thus Ward would pretend to buy such decorative pictures for his wife. After the collection had been given to Oxford in 1939, Ward contemplated making additions to enhance its luster. Most significantly, he attempted to purchase, shortly after World War II, Willem Kalf's masterful still life with a nautilus cup (now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid) from H. E. ten Cate in the Netherlands but was unable to conclude a deal.

The collection is testimony to Ward's discerning taste and broad-mindedness at a time when a bounty of still lifes were available for pittance. This was also true for many other genres, but Ward's pioneering collection should not be underestimated. For example, although he seems to have been friendly with Ralph Warner, a British dealer who compiled a brief survey of Netherlandish still lifes in 1928, Ward does not seem to have depended upon Warner for advice in forming his collection. Although paintings were bought almost entirely in London in the early twentieth century, it is difficult to accept Meijer's assertion (32) that the collection directly reflects English taste of previous centuries; the fluidity of the art market in Europe since the seventeenth century makes it risky to draw conclusions about the provenance of pictures. Meijer is less interested in documents and issues of significance and patronage. The abbreviated essay on the meaning of Dutch still life is too summary to be of any real use, and should have been omitted.

Fred Meijer is perhaps the principal connoisseur of Netherlandish still-life painting, and the entries contain a wealth of important new material, in particular new observations on attributions and the stylistic relationships between artists. Despite the popularity of still lifes and abundant scholarly activity in the field, surprising gaps remain in our understanding of the principal still-life painters. For example, one of the only truly comprehensive scholarly catalogues of a major Dutch still-life painter is Lucius Grisebach's book on Kalf, from 1974. We lack reliable complete catalogues of the work of Pieter Claesz, Jan Davidsz de Heem, Willem van Aelst, Clara Peeters, Osias Beert, Willem Heda, Abraham van Beyeren, and Simon Verelst. Therefore, Meijer often provides new and essential information of the chronological development of the painters.

To pick just one prominent example, in an authoritative entry on Clara Peeters, Meijer convincingly establishes a new chronology for the artist by refuting a myriad of misreadings and errors. Books by N. Vroom and P. Decoteau, among others, have severely confused our understanding of Peeters by suggesting that she painted into the 1630s and beyond. J. G. van Gelder, relying on the misidentification of a coin, thought he could securely date the Oxford painting to the 1620s. These mistakes are swept away as Meijer persuasively shows that nearly all of Peeters' work was

produced between 1610 and 1620.

Entries on copies often prove just as enlightening as those on originals, for the exact nature of the artist's accomplishments can be gauged and understood. Discussion of Willem van Aelst is particularly illuminating because his work was so often and so ably copied. These imitators include Simon Verelst, an artist from The Hague who moved to London in 1670. Meijer suggests that Verelst's copy of a flower piece by Willem van Aelst (number 1) may have been made in London. Here it would have been useful to have a characterization of Verelst's style, rather than a simple assertion that an unsigned painting is by Verelst.

The author focuses on attributions and the development of the artists, and has wisely avoided comprehensive summaries of previous scholarly interpretations of these and similar still lifes. We have thankfully been spared the tedious taxonomic diagrams identifying flowers, insects, or shells (which have become popular in catalogues). In a few cases, Meijer discusses significant objects, such as a Wanli vase in a Balthasar van der Ast, or a decorated knife in Clara Peeters' work. Meijer wisely dismisses overwrought symbolic interpretations of still lifes, but on occasion, one would like to know what Meijer makes of certain elements, for example, Abraham van Beyeren's own reflection in a silver jug (number 12); or the intriguing combination of objects in Peeters' grand still life.

No review would be complete without a few small points of (minor) argument. While Meijer is certainly correct that a game piece (number 6) is by Philips Angel, I see only a very vague relationship of a still life with fruit (number 22) to the signed works of Abraham van Calraet; the muddy forms of the textiles suggest another hand, perhaps a copyist. Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Interior with a Young Man* of 1628 seems to me to have only an approximate relation to a painting in Lille, usually attributed to Pieter Codde. The two images are so different in mood, and telling details differ; they may both be based on earlier images of melancholic scholars. Significantly, Meijer now calls the painting in Lille "Leiden school" - a new attribution explained in a long footnote, where Meijer convincingly suggests that the painting is too good for Pieter Codde and that the long-reported monogram may be apocryphal.

Similarly hidden in entry number 79 is Meijer's seeming rejection of Frans van Mieris's contribution to a still life in Chicago painted by Adriaen van der Spelt. Eric Jan Sluiter in 1988, by reference to a Leiden inventory of 1667, assigned the brilliantly painted curtain in that picture to van Mieris. [1] If this authorship is now being questioned, some commentary is called for. These examples show just how rich and insightful the catalogue is. While on occasion the author should have been more expansive and complete in justifying his conclusions, Meijer's connoisseurship commands attention, which gives his book an importance far beyond the collection under consideration.

Anmerkung:

[1] Eric Jan Sluijter: Leidse fijnschilders. Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge, 1630-1760. Exhibition catalogue Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden 1988, 40. The attribution to van der Spelt and van Mieris has usually been accepted since.

Redaktionelle Betreuung: Dagmar Hirschfelder

Empfohlene Zitierweise:

Alan Chong: Rezension von: *Fred G. Meijer: The Collection of Dutch and Flemish Still-life Paintings Bequeathed by Daisy Linda Ward*, Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers 2003, in: **sehpunkte** 4 (2004), Nr. 7/8 [15.07.2004], URL:
<<http://www.sehpunkte.historicum.net/2004/07/3926.html>>

Bitte setzen Sie beim Zitieren dieser Rezension hinter der URL-Angabe in runden Klammern das Datum Ihres letzten Besuchs dieser Online-Adresse ein.

Diese Rezension erscheint auch in KUNSTFORM.

ISSN 1618-6168