

## Out of the Shadows, into the Spotlight: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Theory of Art

Dutch artist and writer Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) is perhaps best known for a time in his life when he was hardly known at all. Having moved to Amsterdam in 1640, Van Hoogstraten began training as a student under Rembrandt, before producing his first known signed work in 1644. Historically, discussion on the artist has not strayed far from this fact, and until recently, he has generally remained a marginal figure in the shadow of his former master. Indeed, the *Study of a Nude Youth* (c.1646) in the exhibition [Fig. 1] – which was acquired by the Barber in 1936 as by Rembrandt, but is now attributed to Van Hoogstraten – perhaps tells us more about Rembrandt's teaching methods than Van Hoogstraten's own artistic development. Yet, Van Hoogstraten was an artist of great ambition and versatility, who adopted a range of styles and subjects throughout his career.

More recent research has extended beyond the confines of Rembrandt's studio, as Van Hoogstraten's multifaceted contributions to art have increasingly been considered independently of his famous teacher. This is not to say that his time as a student was insignificant. On the contrary, although the artist later came to reject aspects of Rembrandt's style, he frequently expressed the importance of training to an artist's development. For example, in his art theoretical treatise, 'Introduction to the Academy of Painting, or the Visible World' (*Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderconst, anders de zichtbaere werelt*, 1678), Van Hoogstraten writes:



[Fig. 1] Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Study of a Nude Youth*, about 1646, pen and ink with brown wash, 274 x 160 mm. © The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham (No. 36.5).

*Teaching is vain and useless without any assistance of nature; but [...] when teaching fortifies some common gifts of nature, these gifts seem to grow and give more than the understanding may grasp [...]*<sup>1</sup>

Much like the current exhibition in which he is featured, the themes explored within Van Hoogstraten's treatise serve to deconstruct the traditional image of the 'artist-genius', and the notion of natural-born talent. Rather, Van Hoogstraten takes a more practical, pragmatic approach. He encourages artists to 'sketch and re-sketch', for 'theoretical knowledge will hardly serve, if you do not fix it fast with practice.'<sup>2</sup>

For Van Hoogstraten, theory and practice are inextricably intertwined. His conception of art is not some higher, abstract set of ideas reserved for the realm of the intellect; art is both contemplative *and* practical. In fact, he criticises those who have a lot to say about art, and yet have never 'handled the brush.'<sup>3</sup> This empirical understanding of the creative and cognitive processes of the artist is closely linked to the notion of the 'thinking hand', which often made an appearance in the widely popular European emblem books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [Fig. 2]. The 'thinking hand' privileged the artist's *physical* interaction with a work above all else. Lampsonius (1532-1599), a Netherlandish writer and poet, even used this idea to distinguish Dutch and Flemish artists from their Italian counterparts, writing that, 'the intellect of Italian [artists] is in their brains, that of the Dutch in their hands.'<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Van Hoogstraten's approach evokes the image of a skillful, intuitive craftsman, who only gains knowledge and theoretical understanding through artistic practice.

It is in the final chapters of Van Hoogstraten's treatise that we see his theoretical pragmatism take its most remarkable form. Here, he

expresses his views on art and money, writing that, 'there are three drives which spur one on to learn the arts: Love, profit, and in order to be honoured by all.'<sup>5</sup> Much like the final section of the exhibition, which focuses on how artists made a living, Van Hoogstraten explicitly acknowledges the economic realities for the artist. His suggestion that, 'the practice of the arts ought to be nourished by a reasonable return', is a marked rejection of the Renaissance preoccupation with the moral function of art, and the perception that the dignified artist should be unconcerned with financial gain.<sup>6</sup> Of course, selling work is how artists made their living, so this image was certainly not the reality. Yet, publicly acknowledging monetary considerations was viewed as somehow detracting from an artist's authenticity. In light of this, then, Van Hoogstraten is incredibly transparent in his writing. Art historian, Jan Blanc, attributes the



[Fig. 2] Roemer Visscher, *VIII Dapper gaet voor* ('Courage comes first') part of *Sinnepoppen* ('Emblems'), 1614, engraving, 137 mm × 188 mm (detail). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

artist's own versatility to economic factors, suggesting he continuously adapted and adjusted his manner to suit market trends.<sup>7</sup>

Like many other Dutch artists of his time, Van Hoogstraten has often been viewed through Rembrandt, a shadow obscuring understanding of his own work. His theoretical treatise is no exception, having often been regarded as a simple recounting of his former teacher's views. It is inevitable that some of Van Hoogstraten's ideas would have stemmed from Rembrandt, especially given the value that he places upon teaching within his treatise. Yet, Van Hoogstraten also openly criticises his contemporaries, Rembrandt included. May we therefore conclude that the traditional reading is too simplistic? Van Hoogstraten's realistic portrayal of the artistic profession broke a theoretical taboo. His openness about money and, if one is to agree with Jan Blanc, the artist's efforts at self-fashioning, make him appear ahead of his times. That the current exhibition engages with ideas expressed by Van Hoogstraten almost 350 years ago, perhaps serves as a testament to this view, and highlights the extent to which his independent contributions to art have influenced our understanding of what it means to be an artist today.

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### Further Reading:

Jan Blanc, 'Van Hoogstraten's Theory of Theory of Art', *The Universal Art of Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678): Painter, Writer, and Courtier*, ed. by Thijs Weststeijn, Amsterdam, 2013, pp. 35-53

David Galenson, 'Artists and the Market: From Leonardo and Titian to Warhol and Hurst', *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art*, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 324-43

Yannis Hadjinicolaou, 'Primacy of the Hand', *Thinking Bodies – Shaping Hands: Handeling in Art and Theory of the Late Rembrandtists*, Leiden, 2019, pp. 66-107

Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Visible World*, trans. by Charles Ford, UCL, 2018, [www.ucl.ac.uk/grondt/visible-world/introduction](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/grondt/visible-world/introduction)

Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Samuel van Hoogstraten's Introduction to the Academy of Painting; or, The Visible World*, ed. by Celeste Brusati, trans. by Jaap Jacobs, Malibu, 2021

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten in Jan Blanc, 'Van Hoogstraten's Theory of Theory of Art', *The Universal Art of Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678): Painter, Writer, and Courtier*, ed. by Thijs Weststeijn, Amsterdam, 2013, p. 35

<sup>2</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Visible World*, trans. by Charles Ford, UCL, 2018 [accessed: 9/2/21]

<sup>3</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten in Blanc 2013, as at note 1 above, p. 42

<sup>4</sup> Dominicus Lampsonius in Yannis Hadjinicolaou, 'Primacy of the Hand', *Thinking Bodies – Shaping Hands: Handeling in Art and Theory of the Late Rembrandtists* (Brill: 2019), p. 69

<sup>5</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Visible World*, trans. by Charles Ford, UCL, 2018 [accessed: 9/2/21]

<sup>6</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Visible World*, trans. by Charles Ford, UCL, 2018 [accessed: 9/2/21]

<sup>7</sup> See Jan Blanc, 'Van Hoogstraten's Theory of Theory of Art', *The Universal Art of Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678): Painter, Writer, and Courtier*, ed. by Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam, 2013), pp. 35-53

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