

Review of Wayne Franits, *Godefridus Schalcken: A late 17th-century Dutch painter in pursuit of fame and fortune*, London [Lund Humphries] 2023



This beautifully illustrated monograph on Godefridus Schalcken (1643-1706) provides a convincing answer to the question of how an aspiring young artist from Dordrecht was able to achieve tremendous success as an internationally renowned painter in the ever-changing artistic environment around the turn of the eighteenth century – a period of great artistic transition. The key, which is at the core of Wayne Franits' discussion in his current book, is Schalcken's talent and his restless ambition as a painter. Franits argues that this enabled the artist to create a niche market for himself. He attracted a distinguished clientele, both domestic and international, and eclipsed the achievements of rival artists wherever he located himself, even outside his native country.

Over the last few decades, Schalcken has been the object of renewed scholarly attention. Since Thierry Beberman's catalogue raisonné of the painter, published in 1988, there have been a number of articles, books, and exhibition catalogues which examine Schalcken's life and work from various points of view.<sup>1</sup> This trend has been accelerated by a growing interest in artists who were active in the Netherlands at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, such as Eglon van der Neer (1635/36-1703), Caspar Netscher (1639-1684), Gerard de Lairesse (1641-1711), and Jan van Mieris (1660-1690).<sup>2</sup> Two epochal events in the reexamination of Schalcken were the traveling solo exhibitions of his work at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum and the Dordrechts Museum in 2015 and 2016, and the accompanying symposium, papers from which appeared in the *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*.<sup>3</sup>

Franits, who was one of the contributors to the 2015 exhibition catalogue, its symposium, and the journal, published an illuminating book about Schalcken's London period in 2018, reconstructing his activity and network in the city based on newly discovered archival documents.<sup>4</sup> Franits has now devoted a

monograph to the artist's entire life and body of work. This highly anticipated publication is the first of its kind in English, offering a comprehensive study built on the new findings provided by recent scholarship about the painter and the artistic circumstances of this period, including Franits' own publications.<sup>5</sup>

Instead of arranging his chapters by theme, Franits organizes them chronologically. He divides Schalcken's life and career into five periods, which enables the reader to follow, step by step, the entire process of how the artist established himself as an internationally renowned master: his early years in Dordrecht and Leiden; his development into a versatile painter during the 1670s; his years as a leading artist in the Netherlands before his departure for London; his four-year stay in London between 1692 and 1696; and his final years in The Hague before his death in 1706, as a master painter with an international reputation.

Franits provides an in-depth analysis of a selection of 55 works, including one drawing and two etchings, out of approximately three hundred attributed works in Schalcken's oeuvre. These works, which are representative of Schalcken's production from each of the above-mentioned periods, include history paintings, portraits, genre paintings, and even still lifes. They are carefully chosen by the author to highlight Schalcken's challenges and his responses to changing artistic environments.

In the first two chapters, Franits introduces Schalcken as a fledgling and aspiring artist, embarking upon a professional career with the help of his first teacher, Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678), who taught him not only the rudiments of painting but also how to behave and function as a modern gentleman-painter.<sup>6</sup> Van Hoogstraten's translated and modified version of the French book of manners *Den eerlyken jongeling* (1657) must have inspired the young painter to cultivate ongoing relationships with the upper strata of society, members of which would later finance him generously.<sup>7</sup>

Franits also notes that Schalcken mastered early in his career one of his most innovative skills, which garnered him praise for the rest of his life: the depiction of nocturnal scenes. Schalcken was undoubtedly inspired by his second teacher, Gerrit Dou (1613-1675), who also produced meticulously painted nocturnal scenes from the late 1650s, and especially the early 1660s, onward.<sup>8</sup> Compare Schalcken's first, slightly awkward, nocturnal scene, *Two maids by candlelight* (c. 1665), illustrated in Franits' first chapter, with the small but exquisite nocturnal image on copper, *Man offering coins to a girl* (c. 1672-1676), illustrated at the end of the second chapter: it is astonishing to see how quickly the artist was able to master the technique of rendering subtle reflections of glimmering candlelight on the surface of different materials and the reduced color and nuanced tone of objects illuminated by candlelight in a dark room.<sup>9</sup> Franits presents Schalcken's nocturnal scenes, which continued to enchant his prominent clientele throughout his career, as the hallmark of the artist's virtuosity.

An important element in Schalcken's career, which is highlighted in every chapter and serves as a key to understanding the painter's artistic choices discussed in the book as a whole, is his

unfettered ambition to pursue commissions from distinguished clients. During the 1670s, as the art market in the Netherlands began to shrink because of its oversupply of paintings and the economic depression, the number of new painters decreased, and around that time many of the leading seventeenth-century masters also passed away.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, this unfavorable situation seems to have worked in favor of Schalcken, at least occasionally. When his prominent native colleague, Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693), departed from Dordrecht, Franits points out that “there is little question that Maes’s relocation to Amsterdam enabled Schalcken to fill the lacuna it created.”<sup>11</sup> Schalcken’s portraits of the 1670s depicting members of the upper echelons of society, from Dordrecht as well as from other cities, such as Pieter Teding van Berkhout (1643-1713) and members of the De la Courte and Van der Voort families, attest to the artist’s success in taking advantage of the situation of Dutch cities in which a limited number of dedicated portraitists were active. His talent for finding an opening in the market and filling it in the most efficient manner is underlined throughout this book. Franits correctly stresses that this became Schalcken’s usual means of creating a social and financial foundation for competing with his contemporaries as well as the reason for his departure for London: “the pursuit of commissions from different locales rapidly became a constant in our ambitious artist’s career, which would eventually take him to London and Düsseldorf.”<sup>12</sup>

The city of London, whose economy was flourishing when compared to that of the Netherlands, undoubtedly became an attractive alternative for Schalcken to pursue more – and more lucrative – commissions. Franits’ elaborate examination of Schalcken’s activities preceding his departure for London in the third chapter enables us to understand his motives for relocating in a more nuanced way. Franits notes that by 1691-1692, Schalcken “had carefully and purposefully positioned himself as one of the Dutch Republic’s leading painters”, and that his genre paintings were already available at London auction houses before his departure for the city.<sup>13</sup> The artist thus did not feel forced by the economic downturn to leave his own country but rather made a rational decision to cross the sea, based on a clever calculation that this relocation would bring him a chance to expand his field of activities and artistic possibilities.

Schalcken’s ambition and self-confidence in fact became clearer as Franits elucidates how the artist was able to flexibly adapt to different situations before and after his move to London. He deliberately continued working in a variety of genres by sensing the demands of wealthy collectors. Besides history paintings and portraits, he produced an impressive number of finely executed genre paintings throughout the 1680s, such as *Young woman before a mirror* (c. 1684-1686), with the goal of filling the void in this category of art in the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, during his first year to year and a half in London, Schalcken continued to devote himself to the creation of genre paintings, as Franits argues, “for which he was already justly acclaimed” and also handsomely rewarded.<sup>15</sup> The artist clearly anticipated that the

sale of his genre paintings opened the door to new connections with affluent art devotees, who would eagerly commission him to portray their lives.

The ability to adjust to a variety of demands from clients was in fact considered to be one of the most important qualities required of a late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Dutch painter, although Franits does not specifically define it as such. Since wealthy collectors were still eager to have a wide variety of paintings from which to choose, painters increasingly met their demands by producing works in traditional genres and with diverse themes.<sup>16</sup> The eighteenth-century biographer and painter Johannes van Gool (1685-1763), for instance, also praised an artist who could be “an excellent master, not in one, but in various spheres of art” and who “undertakes everything that constitutes art, painting histories, portraits, and antique and modern companies.”<sup>17</sup>

Schalcken’s great adaptability, combined with his virtuosic technique, is undoubtedly exemplified in his nocturnal scenes, which he depicted in genre, history, and portrait paintings. He rendered artificial light in a most refined manner with various connotations. For example, in the genre painting *Man offering coins to a girl* (c. 1672-1676) the painter illuminated a couple in an ill-defined, dark interior by using flickering candlelight, which was charged with erotic overtones to seduce his viewers. On the other hand, in *The parable of the wise and foolish virgins* (1700), one of his few history paintings with a biblical theme, he depicted the wise virgins holding lamps, in which shining flames symbolize Christian faith and virtue.<sup>18</sup>

Schalcken’s depiction of the same motifs or themes, irrespective of genres, was not confined to his depiction of nocturnal scenes. His magnificent history painting, *Ceres, Venus, Cupid, and Bacchus* (fig. 1), produced around 1685-1690, is a good example. The extraordinarily sensual depiction of Ceres biting into a peach, the juice of which drips from her lips and runs down her chin onto her breast, could, as Franits notes, have been inspired by a late sixteenth-century engraving of an allegory of taste.<sup>19</sup> Yet, I believe that it must also be related to Schalcken’s acute interest in depicting a single figure drinking or eating, savoring, in particular, the sweetness of foods, as seen in genre paintings such as *A girl eating an apple by candlelight* (c. 1675-1679) and *Everyone his fancy* (c. 1670-1675).<sup>20</sup> Schalcken, who continuously depicted unaffected images of ordinary people eating and enjoying their food, ultimately created this sensual pose of Ceres tasting ripe fruit to enhance the effect of stimulating viewers’ senses of taste, sight, and even touch. His presentation of Ceres was surely considered an innovative approach to a mythological subject.

Franits also praises the artist’s ability to adjust his style to the taste of his clients whenever it was required, demonstrated, for example, in portraits made during his London period. In the magnificent, full-length *Portrait of Mary Wentworth née Lowther* (c. 1693-1694), Schalcken employed broad brushstrokes to create a more airy and pleasant style, which recalls works by contemporary portraitists active in London,



Fig. 1. Godefridus Schalcken, *Ceres, Venus, Cupid, and Bacchus*, c. 1685-1690, oil on canvas, 129 x 112 cm, Prague, National Gallery.

such as Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723) and Michael Dahl (1659-1743).<sup>21</sup> In so doing, he attempted to compete with his London colleagues in cultivating patrons. Yet, one or two years later, when painting his *Self-portrait* (1695) (fig. 2) for Cosimo de' Medici III (1642-1723), Grand Duke of Tuscany, Schalcken chose a style he knew his patron preferred: minutely detailed with a more finely executed surface, suitable for depicting a candlelight scene and reminiscent of the style of his earlier years as well as that of his prominent teacher, Dou.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly enough, he adopted the same approach in the portraits he made during his final years back in The Hague. A case in point is his portrait of Mary Stanhope (1702).<sup>23</sup> The artist again chose a loose, painterly style to portray the daughter of an English envoy in a casual and elegant pose, features which were clearly designed to please his English client.<sup>24</sup> As Franits convincingly argues, this "reflects Schalcken's continued versatility in adjusting his style to meet the needs of his patrons."<sup>25</sup> This versatility, grounded in his adaptability and flexibility together with his sheer talent and boundless ambition, is one of the principal qualities that defines the art of Schalcken, a painter in the midst of a dynamic and transitional period.

Finally, the author's beautiful descriptions and inspiring analyses of each of the pictures increase our appreciation of Schalcken's art, particularly his refined chiaroscuro, nuanced colors, brushstrokes both meticulous and loose, and his innovative approach to themes and subjects. But Franits also raises intriguing questions that open new avenues for further exploration and discussion. One example is his adaptation of De Lairesse's theory



Fig. 2. Godefridus Schalcken, *Self-portrait*, 1695, oil on canvas, 92 x 81 cm, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

on genre painting to interpret a pair of genre paintings by Schalcken entitled *Useless lesson* and *Doctor's visit* (both c. 1690-1692) (figs. 3-4). *Useless lesson*, featuring two figures in antique-styled clothing, one of which is releasing a bird from a box, is generally considered to be a metaphor of lost virginity. This is an allegory-like scene, in which the figures are located in a semi-outdoor setting, behind the balustrade of a porch and an antique statue, with a view of an Italianate landscape. On the other hand, the *Doctor's visit*, a scene of a crying woman diagnosed as pregnant by a pseudo-physician, can be interpreted as the consequence of her apparent lost virginity.<sup>26</sup> The figures, dressed in ordinary clothes, likely gather in the doctor's consultation room.

The two scenes are thus related to each other in terms of content, but more conspicuous is the inconsistency in the figures' clothing and the settings. Franits convincingly explains the reason for this by elaborating on De Lairesse's instructions for how to ennoble the "modern mode" (changing and momentary manner) of genre painting in order to simulate the "antique mode" (limitless and superior manner) of history painting.<sup>27</sup> Franits concludes that the allegory-like *Useless lesson* is depicted "in the antique-infused modern mode", while the more worldly *Doctor's visit* is rendered "in a purely modern mode." As a result, Schalcken seems to have combined two different modes of genre painting in order to tell a single didactic story that comes close to the narrative quality of history painting. This interpretation thus beautifully resolves the contradiction between the two pendant images that nevertheless depict figures in unrelated settings and wearing completely different types of clothing.<sup>28</sup>

Franits' intriguing analysis makes the reader wonder about the theoretical principles or tendencies that Schalcken and his contemporaries could have shared, a subject that deserves to be fully explored. Other points one would like to learn more about are Schalcken's working methods and his artistic legacy.



Fig. 3. Godefridus Schalcken, *Useless lesson*, c. 1690-1692, oil on panel, 34.8 x 28.1 cm, The Hague, Mauritshuis.

His impact on the artists of his own and later generations, especially his pupils, such as Arnold Boonen (1669-1729) and Carel de Moor (1655-1738), could be a way to consider Schalcken's studio practice.<sup>29</sup> Some of these questions will surely be answered in the near future, in particular since the catalogue raisonné on De Moor was recently published.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 T. Beherman, *Godfried Schalcken*, Paris 1988. See also N.E. Cook, *Godfridus Schalcken (1643-1706): Desire and intimate display*, PhD dissertation University of Delaware 2016; and 11 entries by G. Jansen in A.K. Wheelock Jr. and E. Nogrady (eds.), *The Leiden Collection catalogue*, New York 2023. Both authors contributed to the 2016 exhibition catalogue (note 3).
- 2 E. Schavemaker, *Eglon van der Neer (1635/36-1703): His life and his work*, Doornspijk 2010; M.E. Wieseman, *Casper Netscher and late seventeenth-century Dutch painting*, Doornspijk 2002; J. Beltman et al. (eds.), *Eindelijk! De Lairesse: Klassieke schoonheid in de gouden eeuw*, Zwolle 2016; M. van der Hut, *Jan van Mieris (1660-1690): His life and work*, Zaandijk 2021. See also J. Aono, 'Review of: Jan van Mieris (1660-1690): His life and work', *Oud Holland Reviews*, May 2022.
- 3 A.K. Sevcik (ed.), *Schalcken: Gemalte Verführung*, Cologne 2015; A.K. Sevcik (ed.), *Schalcken: Kunstenaar van het verleiden*, Dordrecht 2016; R. Krischel and A.K. Sevcik (eds.), *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch: Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 77 (2016).
- 4 W. Franits, *Godefridus Schalcken: A Dutch painter in late seventeenth-century London*, Amsterdam 2018.
- 5 See notes 1, 3, and 4. See also S. Karst, 'Off to a new Cockaigne: Dutch migrant artists in London, 1660-1715', *Siniolus* 37 (2013), no. 1, pp. 25-60.
- 6 W. Franits, *Godefridus Schalcken: A late 17th-century Dutch painter in pursuit of fame and fortune*, London 2023, p. 12.
- 7 S. van Hoogstraten, *Den eerlyken jongeling, of de edele kunst, van zich by groote en kleyne te doen eeren en beminnen*, Dordrecht 1657.
- 8 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 14.
- 9 *Two maids by candlelight*, c. 1665, private collection; *Man offering coins to a girl*, c. 1672-1676, London, National Gallery, see Franits 2023 (note 6), pp. 16 (fig. 4), 48 (fig. 25).
- 10 J. Aono, *Confronting the golden age: Imitation and innovation in Dutch genre painting 1680-1750*, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 19-26.
- 11 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 32.
- 12 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 33.
- 13 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 84.
- 14 *Young woman before a mirror*, c. 1684-1686, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, see Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 65 (fig. 35).
- 15 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 88.



Fig. 4. Godefridus Schalcken, *Doctor's visit*, c. 1690-1692, oil on panel, 35 x 28.6 cm, The Hague, Mauritshuis.

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16 J. Aono, 'Out of the shadow of the golden age: Recent scholarly developments concerning Dutch painting of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', in W. Franits (ed.), *The Ashgate research companion to Dutch art of the seventeenth century*, London/New York 2016, pp. 286-301.

17 J. van Gool, *De nieuwe schouburg der Nederlandsche kunstschilders en schilderessen*, The Hague 1750-1751, vol. 2, pp. 242-243.

18 *Parable of the wise and foolish virgins*, 1700, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, see Franits 2023 (note 6), pp. 122-124 (fig. 64).

19 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 62. Franits refers to the print by Raphaël Sadeler after Maerten de Vos' *The taste* (1581), which was mentioned first by Sevcik 2016 (note 3), p. 89, fig. 7.

20 *A girl eating an apple by candlelight*, c. 1675-1679, Schwerin, Staatliches Museum Schwerin; *'Everyone his fancy'*, 1670-1675, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. Other genre paintings by Schalcken with similar subjects are: *Young woman with lemon*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; *Man eating a piece of meat*, Prague, National Gallery; *Young girl eating sweets*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

21 *Portrait of Mary Wentworth née Lowther*, c. 1693-1694, Bridlington, Sewerby Hall Museum and Art Gallery, see Franits 2023 (note 6), pp. 94-101 (fig. 53).

22 Franits 2023 (note 6), pp. 101-104.

23 *Portrait of Mary Stanhope*, 1702, Kent, Chevening House, Sevenoaks, see Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 117 (fig. 62).

24 Franits 2023 (note 6), pp. 122-124. Two years earlier, when Schalcken worked for the Catholic collector Elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm II, he also deployed a meticulous style, and chose the biblical subject *Parable of the wise and foolish virgins* (1700) to appeal to both the Elector's affinity for the equally meticulous style of Adriaen van der Werff and the Elector's Catholic faith.

25 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 116.

26 Franits 2023 (note 6), pp. 66-71; A. van Suchtelen and Q. Buvelot, *Genre paintings in the Mauritshuis*, Zwolle 2016, pp. 217-224; Sevcik 2015 (note 3), pp. 129-131.

27 G. de Lairesse, *Het groot schilderboek*, 2 vols., Amsterdam 1707. On De Lairesse's discussion of the 'modern' and 'antique' modes and early eighteenth-century Dutch genre painting, see Aono 2015 (note 10), pp. 97-118; J. Aono, 'Ennobling daily life: A question of refinement in early eighteenth-century Dutch genre painting', *Simiolus* 33 (2007), no. 4, pp. 237-257.

28 Franits 2023 (note 6), p. 71.

29 On Arnold Boonen, see G. M. C. Jansen, 'De carrière van een kunstenaar', in Sevcik 2016 (note 3), pp. 25-26; J. Six and E. Schavemaker, 'Arnold Boonen: Pupil of Godefridus Schalcken', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 77 (2016), pp. 237-250. On Nicolaas Verkolje, who drew inspiration from Schalcken's paintings, see J. Aono, 'In the glow of candlelight: A study of Nicolaas Verkolje's approach to the art of Godefridus Schalcken', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 77 (2016), pp. 251-264.

30 P. Fowler and P. Bakker, *Carel de Moor 1655-1738: His life and work: A catalogue raisonné*, Leiden 2024.

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