

Pieter Aertsen, Rhyparographer

Abstract

This article focuses on the rhetorical figure of the ‘paradoxical *encomium*’ (the paradoxical eulogy) as the generic principle for the still life paintings by the Dutch painter Pieter Aertsen (1507-1575), the inventor of the genre. It is shown how Aertsen used the idiom of contemporary art with an artistically and socially high status for his own experiments in ‘rhyparography’, a mode of pictorial expression associated with the ‘paradoxical *encomium*’.

Introduction

In this article I would like to take a look at the origins of the still life as an independent category in Netherlandish art of the 16th century. Between 1550 and 1560, Pieter Aertsen (1507-1575), a painter working in Antwerp and Amsterdam, produced a number of large panels — some 1½ metres high and 2 metres across — which are generally considered to be the first examples of still lifes as an independent genre. The word ‘independent’ has a double meaning in this context. In the first place, the principal subject of the picture is made up of objects taken from ordinary, everyday life. Secondly, the term indicates that these scenes were painted on panel (later on canvas), not as part of a some larger decorative scheme, but to be hung on the wall free of any particular context, to be bought and sold and to retain their own, independent identity in any environment in which they were placed. Looking at 17th-century paintings by artists such as Pieter Claesz and Jan Davidsz de Heem, we recognize these immediately as examples of the genre. Despite the differences in style and composition of the objects shown and the way in which these are presented, we have little difficulty in defining them as belonging to a homogeneous group. Later still lifes by artists such as Chardin, Van Gogh and Cézanne fit quite easily into the same category, which is hardly surprising since it is perfectly natural that these painters knew precisely ‘what a still life was’ and it was precisely ‘this sort of work’ that they intended to produce. Despite the differences between the various types, on the face of it, the still lifes produced by these artists all have a similar character.

It is quite a different story when we come to examine the paintings of Pieter Aertsen. Not only do his still lifes look quite different from those of his later

colleagues — to such a degree in fact, that one might even begin to doubt that they are of the same genre — but each of his still lifes are in fact quite distinct from one another. Some feature objects which one would expect to find in the home of a wealthy burgher, other paintings set objects in a rich kitchen interior or place a composition, such as a display of food, in a market scene and suggest a distinctly country environment (fig. 1 and 2). Some paintings have a religious theme, others are clearly secular. In some paintings the human figures take such a prominent place, even though the picture centres around a still life, that the work is more like a genre painting (fig. 3). In another painting, the still life motif is so dominant that the human figure comes across as quite secondary, even though the work is a portrayal of a Biblical story, as in the *Meat stall with the Flight into Egypt*, in Uppsala (fig. 4). The only constant in all these paintings is that they all show an arrangement of food and tableware and that these objects all have a prominent position in the composition, directly in the foreground. Their immediacy and the attention the artist has obviously paid to the outward appearance of each individual object makes Aertsen a painter of (proto-) still lifes.

The fact that Aertsen's still lifes reveal such pronounced differences should not surprise us, considering that there was in his day no clearly outlined genre-definition of a still life. Not only was the term not yet invented (it dates from the

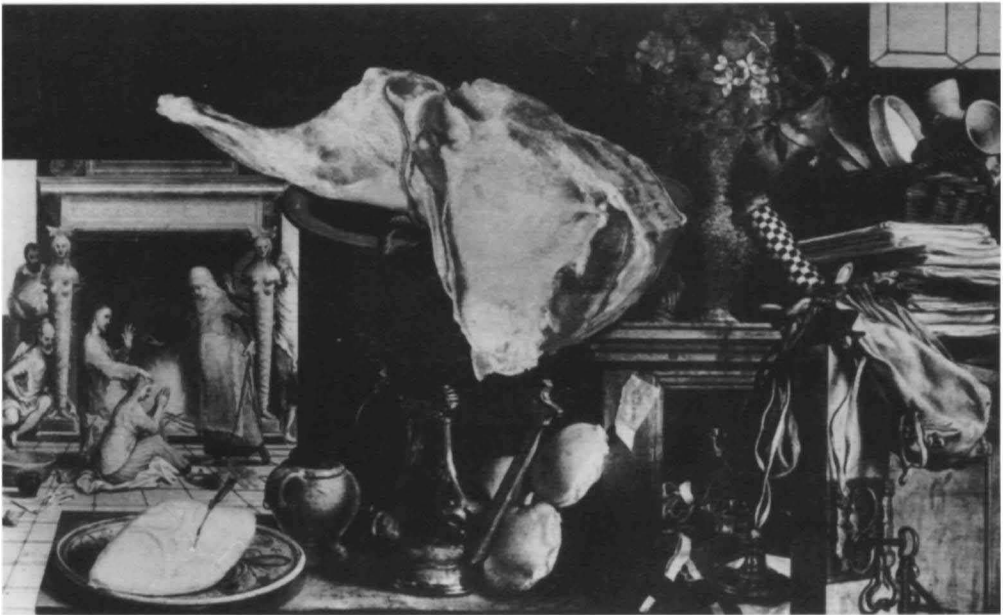


Fig. 1. Pieter Aertsen, *Still life with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1552). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



Fig. 2. Pieter Aertsen, *Preparation for the market*. Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen.



Fig. 3. Pieter Aertsen, *Peasant feast* (1550). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

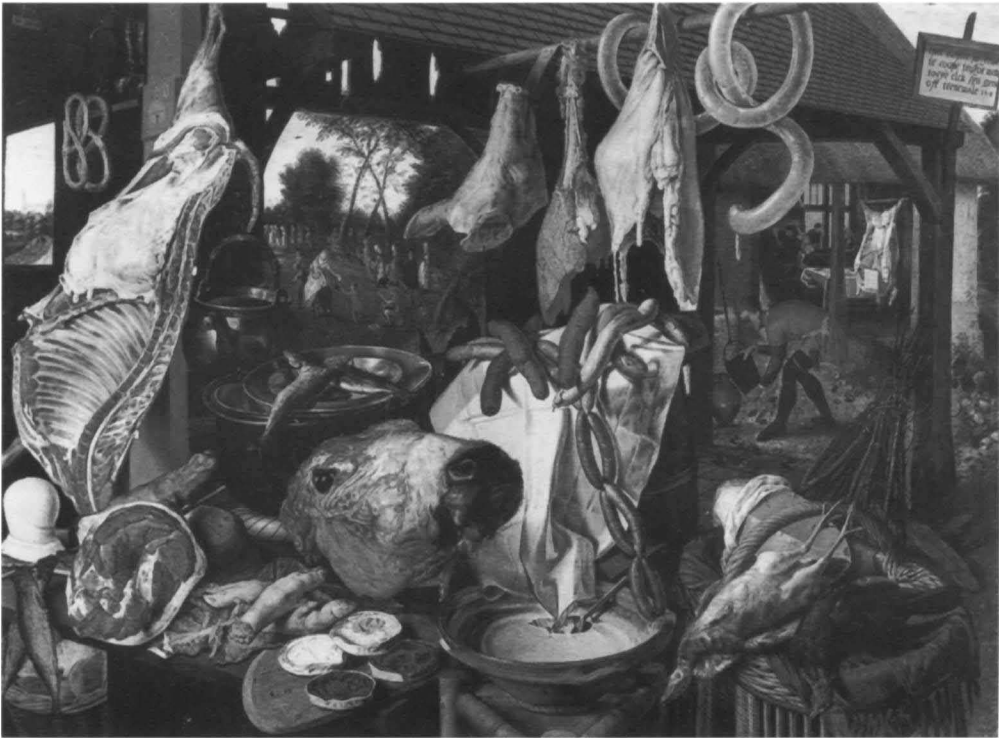


Fig. 4. Pieter Aertsen, *Meat stall with the Flight into Egypt* (1551). Uppsala, Collection of the University of Uppsala.

17th century), there was no codified tradition, no continuous line of ‘similar paintings’ which he only needed to continue. Aertsen invented such a line; in fact he was perhaps the inventor of the genre for the whole post-medieval European art world. The diversity of his still-life pictures seems to indicate that he was already experimenting with the genre around the middle of the 16th century, apparently quite spontaneously creating an entirely new art form. This impression is strengthened when one considers his attempts at making peasants the independent subject of a painting (e.g. the *Peasant in a niche*, in Budapest; fig. 5). He was far from being the only artist to attempt this: another prominent artist working in this genre was Pieter Bruegel, whose paintings of peasants show a similar attempt at innovation and reveal a marked refusal to fall back on stereotype solutions. Apparently, in Aertsen’s day, this type of art was so new that the boundaries of the genre were still completely fluid. I would like, here, to discuss what kind of ideas lay behind the rise of this new form of painting. The question is certainly not a new one; the art-historical discussion of the history of still lifes has long been concerned with this issue. The reason why I propose to tackle the subject in this forum is that a particular rhetorical



Fig. 5. Pieter Aertsen, *Peasant in a niche* (1561). Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.

figure — the ‘paradoxical *encomium*’ or paradoxical praise — seems to have played a role in Pieter Aertsen’s experiments. This theory is one which I have aired on a previous occasion;¹ however, new visual material has enabled me to strengthen the basis of my argument and to present it afresh in a somewhat altered shape.

¹ Falkenburg 1989.

Rhyparography and Rhopography

In art-historical surveys that attempt to show how the still life genre emerged in the 16th century, one of the principal theses is that the genre did not really come to fruition *ex nihilo*, but that there was a rejuvenation, a reanimation of a genre that existed in the ancient world. According to this thesis, first suggested by Sterling in 1952, during the Renaissance, a period when artists were struggling to revive the ancient art forms, certain painters hit on the idea of breathing new life into what the ancient author Pliny described as *rhyparography*, the painting of humble objects.² Pliny had called this a 'less elevated genre' in which the Greek painter Piraeicus had achieved great fame with his paintings of 'barbers and shoemakers shops, donkeys, food and similar things'.³ These paintings afforded the viewer 'endless delight and fetched higher prices than the greatest works of many other painters'. Sterling had no proof that 16th-century artists were fired by the idea of reanimating ancient rhyparography, but it is surely far from coincidence that in his *Batavia*, which appeared in 1588, the Dutch humanist Hadrianus Junius described the art produced by Pieter Aertsen in these very terms:

We cannot pass over Pieter, nicknamed 'the Tall', in silence. In my opinion one can compare him with justice to Piraeicus, whom Pliny mentions, in fact he may even be preferred to [this ancient painter].

He apparently set himself to paint humble things and he has, in everyone's view, reached the heights of fame with these humble objects. Therefore, I am of the opinion that he, like the other [i.e. Piraeicus] should be awarded the epithet *rhyparographer*, because of the grace that shines in all his works when he depicts, in a most tasteful way [*elegantissime*] the bodies and dress of peasant girls, food, vegetables, slaughtered chickens, ducks, cod and other fish sorts, and all manner of kitchen utensils. Besides the perfect daylight, the endless variety of his paintings never tires the eyes [of the beholder].⁴

It is not known whether, or to what extent there were any contacts between Junius and Aertsen. However natural it may have been for a humanist scholar of the 16th century to view the art of his contemporaries through the perspective of rhetorical concepts of ancient and modern writings on art — not only those of Pliny and Vitruvius, but of Alberti and Leonardo too — there is nothing to suggest that Aertsen saw his own art in these terms.

According to Norman Bryson, who supports a structural-semiotic view of art history and has recently described this in a book on still life art, such indications are quite unnecessary: the still life genre is by its very nature 'rhopography', as he prefers to call it.⁵ It is worthwhile pausing for a moment to consider Bryson's views, since, however generally, they do open our eyes to a number of interesting aspects of Pieter Aertsen's paintings.

² Sterling 1952.

³ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, xxxv. 112 (Ed. Ian and Mayhoff 1986, vol. v: 270-271).

⁴ Cf. Junius 1588: 239-240.

⁵ Bryson 1990.

Bryson adopts the distinction between 'rhyparography' and 'rhopography' made by Sterling. According to Sterling, 'rhopography' is a term used in the ancient world to describe portrayals of small, unimportant things ('trifles'). 'Rhyparography' is a pejorative term and refers to low, despicable ('sordid') matters. Sterling prefers the term 'rhopography' since this fits in better in the contrasting pair 'rhopography' and 'megalography' ('simple art' - 'great art'), a distinction similar to that between *genre mineur* and *grande peinture*.⁶ Based on this juxtaposition, representing a distinction that existed in the ancient world between 'low art' and 'high art', Bryson developed a number of criteria for the category 'low art' which have been associated with still lifes through the centuries. Bryson's interest in the basic, practically unchanging qualities of 'still life as a response to [the] lowest, most entropic level of material existence', is clearly of a Braudel-like nature.⁷ The characteristics of still life as 'low art' ('rhopography') have a 'longue durée', and an 'almost geographical rhythm that is all their own',⁸ and is also found in the art of Pieter Aertsen. 'Rhopography (...) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that "importance" constantly overlooks.' While 'megalography' paints the 'legends of the gods, the battles of heroes, the crises of history', concentrating on the 'centrality, value and prestige of the human subject' and so on 'narrative', 'discontinuity' and 'change', still life takes place at the level of the 'continuous' and 'homeostatic', at the 'level of routine existence'. 'Still life is unimpressed by the categories of achievement, grandeur or the unique. The human subject that it proposes and assumes, is anonymous and creatural, cut off from splendour and from singularity.'⁹

In Bryson's view, it is a question of ideology and specific historical circumstances whether 'rhopography' becomes 'rhyparography' and is seen in a negative perspective. According to Bryson, it is therefore interesting that Pliny should refer to the painter of humble subjects as a *rhyparographos*. 'It is an insult: "rhyparographer" means a painter of *rhyparos*, literally waste or filth; the association is with things that are physically and morally unclean.'¹⁰ The ambiguity caused by the clearly negative associations of 'filth' that are sometimes attached to still lifes also play a role with Pieter Aertsen, according to Bryson. His *Meat stall* is a clear example of 'filth' in Piraeicus' tradition: 'animal matter in its lowest and least redeemable aspect'.¹¹ Here, this filth operates within an internal contradiction between 'high' and 'low', a contrast between 'the sacred object' and the scene with the Flight to Egypt in the background, where Mary performs her 'spiritual work of charity, giving alms to a beggar', and the profanity of 'commerce and sensual indulgence embodied in the foreground in the succulent display of meat for sale'.¹² The still life in the

⁶ Sterling 1952: 11.

⁷ Cf. Holly 1991: 340.

⁸ Bryson 1990: 13.

⁹ Ibid.: 60-61.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 136.

¹¹ Ibid.: 146.

¹² Ibid.: 146-147.

foreground is 'low' in more than a moral sense, since it also exemplifies the material, the profane and 'vice' in the light of the holy and the 'virtue' in the background, as well as in the social sense since selling market produce is an activity confined to persons of low social standing. Similarly, the 'lower social status' of the 'rural urban poor' is 'associated with the lower functions of the body (consumption, ingestion), and with the bodies of animals'.¹³ At the same time, the unequivocal presentation of the still life in the foreground and the minor role of the religious motif in the background presents a reversal of the 'high' and the 'low' in terms of pictorial significance. This reversal stems from the 'fundamental semiotic structure' of Northern Netherlandish art: from its inability to present the transcendental immediately, only through the indirect route of the *vanitas* theme, 'through the medium of a fallen world'.¹⁴

If I understand correctly Bryson's argument as it is based on semiotic ideas, Pieter Aertsen's paintings are both examples of 'rhopography' and of 'rhyparography'. They are the first because of their very nature, and the second within the specific ideology of the prosperous urban elite for whom Aertsen painted his works. In the context of this semiotic definition, these qualifications are complementary; however, in attempting to discover which concept Aertsen used in his pictorial experiments, one is soon forced to conclude that, despite the usefulness and clarity of these qualifications, they cannot be employed side by side without creating a problem. An interpretation incorporating both 'rhopography' and 'rhyparography' is unsatisfactory because it dispels the tension, the shock-effect, even, that appears to be contained in Aertsen's paintings. If one considers his still lifes to be 'rhyparographic experiments' in the context of the perhaps less than dignified, yet, according to the ancient tradition, quite acceptable genre of 'rhopography', one ignores the possibility that Aertsen was doing something that was completely *outside* the genre convention, and *against* all existing genre conventions. What Aertsen in fact did, in my view, to stick to Bryson's terminology, was create a paradox: 'rhyparography' not as 'rhopography' but as 'megalography'.

The visual material

To our eyes, the traditional way of showing peasants in the 16th century is rather caricatural: a stocky physique, sometimes to the point of being misformed; clumsy, unwieldy posture; dazed, stupid facial expressions; and careless, abject behaviour, often with sexual license — (almost) always the same story.¹⁵ Aertsen also portrayed peasants in this way in a number of paintings (fig. 3 and 6). The peasant in the painting in Budapest follows the same conventions (fig. 5). The physique — the bony legs far too long in proportion to the short,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 150.

¹⁵ Cf. Raupp 1986.



Fig. 6. Pieter Aertsen, *Market scene with Christ and the Adulterous Woman*. Frankfurt a/M, Städelsches Kunstinstitut.

rather heavysset, and sagging body — is similar to that of the peasant in the right foreground of Aertsen's *Market scene* in Frankfurt. The red, glowing nose and the wooden pose is a characteristic that he shares with the drunken, dazed and staring old peasant in the foreground of Aertsen's *Peasant feast* in Vienna. Nevertheless, this peasant still has a certain rough elegance, since, despite the strange twists of his club feet — a peasant *contrapposto* — he manages with just a couple of fingers to keep a large tub of milk balanced on his head. However, to claim that the figure is 'dignified', as some art historians do¹⁶ — a dignity far removed from the satirical and comical scenes of peasants of Dürer and other 16th-century artists — would seem to be rather crass. And yet there are elements in this scene which, in retrospect, make this association with 'dignity' somewhat acceptable.

Some historians have suggested that the composition of a full-length portrait of a peasant shown in front of a rustic arcade, reflects the contemporary prints of Italian and Netherlandish artists such as Rosso Fiorentino, Marcantonio Raimondi and Frans Floris in whose work gods and personifications of the virtues are represented as figures positioned in a niche (fig. 7).¹⁷ Perhaps the

¹⁶ E.g. Moxey 1977: 59.

¹⁷ Sievers 1908: 91-92; Buchan 1981: 157.

parallel Sievers saw between the motif of the tub-bearer and the water-carrier in Raphael's fresco of the Borgo fire in the Vatican should be taken with a pinch of salt; just as the parallel drawn between the torso of the peasant's body and the figure composition based on Michelangelo of a frontal upper body and the legs in profile should be considered arbitrary. In Aertsen's time, however, Raphael's and Michelangelo's inventions were, like those of Rosso and Raimondi, quite well-known in the Netherlands and were avidly studied and followed here. But even if the similarity between Aertsen's *Peasant in a niche* and the niche sculptures is purely a coincidence — which I do not believe — the formula of the niche figure as such is certainly an expression of a Renaissance idiom and suggests associations with the art of the ancient world and so with the dignity of that art.



Fig. 7. Marcantonio Raimondi, *Woman carrying a vase on her head* (1528). Print, after Raphael (Ill. Bartsch 27; 470), Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet.



Fig. 8. Pieter Aertsen, *Kitchen maid* (1559). Brussels, Musées des Beaux-Arts.

That Aertsen was indeed aiming to evoke such associations can also be seen from his borrowing from engravings in Pieter Coecke van Aelst's 1546 edition of Serlio's architectural treatises. In various paintings, such as in his *Kitchen maid* in Brussels (fig. 8), Aertsen has followed Serlio's designs for a fireplace in the Ionic, Doric and composite orders right down to the details.¹⁸ As Serlio's books were intended to communicate the classic architectural canon to his contemporaries in a convenient and responsible manner, it is likely that through the deliberate quotation from this canon Aertsen tries to give his own art the authority of classical art. However, what is most striking is that in the *Kitchen*

¹⁸ Lunsingh Scheurleer 1947.



Fig. 9. Antonius Mor, *Portrait of the Duke of Alva* (1549). New York, The Hispanic Society of America. (By courtesy of The Hisp. Soc. of America).

maid he does this for the benefit of a subject which must be considered as belonging to the thematic realm of 'rhyparography'. In contemporary literature and art, *maerten*, scullery maids, function as personifications of the senses and, in particular, lust. Their traditional typology has sinful, even devilish connotations, especially when they are shown handling a roasting-spit with meat.¹⁹ In Aertsen's *Kitchen maid*, in other words, a pejorative figure is surrounded with an aura of authority and dignity created by the location of the kitchen maid in an 'antique' ambience. (If the ambience proposed here chimed with a 16th century reality, then it must have been a particularly genteel kitchen.)

¹⁹ Cf. Emmens 1973; Bax 1979: 117, 125, 309; and Wuyts 1987.

This association of authority and honour is also underlined in another way. Around 1520, Titian introduced a type of portrait in Italy which has been called the 'three-quarter state portrait'.²⁰ It was a portrait of Emperor Charles v in which the emperor was depicted from the knees up, in full armour with drawn sword, against the background of a table on which was placed his helmet. In the Netherlands this type was immediately imitated, as can be seen in the work of Anthonie Mor and other portrait painters — and Pieter Aertsen, it may be added. If we compare Mor's portrait of the Duke of Alva from 1549 (fig. 9) with Aertsen's *Kitchen maid* of 1559 (fig. 8), the similarities are enough to imagine them as pendants. Just as Alva holds a staff of office in one hand and rests his other hand on the table, close to the sword hanging on his hip, the kitchen maid is also depicted in 'full armour', with one hand on the spit and the other on a skimmer beside a basket of vegetables. As far as the entourage of the kitchen maid in Aertsen's painting is concerned, there is a striking resemblance to another painting by Mor, which shows a portrait of Mary of Austria (fig. 10) and which is also in the tradition of the state portrait. The classicist column, rolled hangings and the table are repeated in the antique fireplace, the rolled hanging and table with the pitcher in Aertsen's painting. I do not hesitate to use the word 'repeat' here, because to my mind Aertsen has here unmistakably used the visual formula of the state portrait for the depiction of a kitchen maid as the main subject of the painting, a depiction for which, to emphasise it once more, there existed absolutely no precedent in contemporary panel painting. Whether we are dealing here with a portrait of an existing kitchen queen cannot be discerned; I suspect that this is not the case, for the woman's features are perhaps not quite individual enough. More important is that a 'rhyparographic' subject is here realised in the style of 'megalography'.

A third, and on the surface quite different type of painting, which can be seen from the same perspective is Pieter Aertsen's *Pancake eaters* (1560) in Rotterdam (fig. 11). There are absolutely no precedents for this painting in the pictorial traditions of 15th and 16th century art, and in iconographic terms too, Pieter Aertsen breaks completely new ground with this picture. Nevertheless, there exists a type of painting in the 16th century which thematically and compositionally shows clear resemblances to the *Pancake eaters*: the bourgeois family portrait, particularly the family sitting at table. A few family portraits dating from the beginning of the 1560s are good examples of this genre; they depict prosperous families whose members, belonging to various generations, are ranged around a covered table. Frans Floris' *Family portrait* of 1561, for example, shows such a scene (fig. 12). The fruit still life on the table forms the middle of the composition and is probably a symbolic reference to the fertility of the family,²¹ as the music being made at the table expresses family harmony and

²⁰ Kusche 1991: 22.

²¹ Bedaux 1987.



Fig. 10. Antonius Mor, *Portrait of Mary of Austria*. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

unanimity.²² Contemporary family portraits by Cornelis de Zeeuw and Maerten van Heemskerck show the same motifs, even if far more space is made here for the festive dishes.²³

In the 16th century, the portrait, insofar as it did not portray monarchs or aristocrats and clerics, was the prerogative of the bourgeois patricians; the lower classes did not yet appear.²⁴ Nevertheless, Aertsen's painting makes a strong impression of following the idiom of the contemporary bourgeois family portrait at the table: on the left an old man and his wife frying pancakes, on the

²² De Jongh 1986: 45.

²³ Cornelis de Zeeuw, *Family Portrait*, dated 1563. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. A 1537; Maerten van Heemskerck, *Family Portrait*. Kassel, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, inv. no. GK 33.

²⁴ De Jongh 1986: 14ff.



Fig. 11. Pieter Aertsen, *Pancake eaters* (1560). Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen.



Fig. 12. Frans Floris, *Portrait of the Van Berchem Family* (1561). Lier, Museum Wuyts-Van Campen.

right a younger couple with their child. On a table beside the old man waffles, bread and a cheese are set out, but even more prominent are the pancakes on a big dish in the centre of the foreground and the freshly-made samples which father and son are holding up. The adults in particular have such an individual physiognomy and are painted with such meticulousness that it seems we are dealing with portraits of existing people. In other words we see here exactly those characteristics which Bryson ascribes to ‘megalography’ — but then adapted for ‘rhyparography’: even the pancakes have an individual, portrait-like appearance.

Can the *Meat stall* (fig. 4) now also be described in terms of a ‘high form’ which serves to depict a ‘low content’? With regard to the composition of this painting as a whole I have not been able to find in the art of the time any examples of a visual formula which could have served Aertsen as a point of departure for his invention, with the exception of a few paintings by Jan van Hemessen. The *Meat stall* shares a strong close-up of ‘pieces of meat’ in the foreground with Jan van Hemessen’s *Brothel scene with the Parable of the Prodigal Son* of 1536, in Brussels (fig. 13): there it is prostitutes in a brothel, here an animal meat stall, disposed in an angle towards the background along a slanting structure — a



Fig. 13. Jan van Hemessen, *Brothel scene with the Parable of the Prodigal Son* (1536). Brussels, Musées des Beaux-Arts.



Fig. 14. Jan van Hemessen, *Brothel scene*. Karlsruhe, Kunsthalle.

classicist loggia in the one painting, a wooden stall in the other — which offers a view through to a landscape showing a small religious scene. Jan van Hemessen's *Brothel scene* in Karlsruhe of around 1540 (fig. 14) offers a precedent for the enlargement in the foreground of the animal vulgarity of the brothel scene in the right of the background. Van Hemessen's paintings help us to see that the innards on sale in the *Meat stall* do not differ fundamentally from the merchandise that is being auctioned to the right in the background. However, we cannot say that the composition passed on by Van Hemessen bears the association of a worthy, 'high' visual formula. Otherwise, the ancient Laocoon, which was clearly the model for the stranglehold of the entwined arms of the prostitutes in Van Hemessen's paintings, would have been the classical ideal of composition which Aertsen also had in mind for his arrangement of the naked flesh. In fact, Van Hemessen's *Brothel scene with the Parable of the Prodigal Son* is itself a fine example of a 'megalographic rhyparography': the classical loggia gives the brothel the status of a Renaissance palace.²⁵

²⁵ Cf. Van den Boogert and Kerkhoff 1993: 225ff.

I draw two deductions from the preceding observations. The first is that when I look at the *Kitchen maid*, the *Peasant in a niche*, the *Pancake eaters* and the *Meat stall* together, I get the impression that a single generic principle is at the basis of these apparently diverse paintings. The second is that this principle as such was probably not Aertsen's own invention, but was already used, by Van Hemessen for example, but perhaps also by other artists. What could this generic principle have been?²⁶

The 'paradoxical *encomium*'

In 1966 the literary historian Colie, referring to Sterling, suggested that the ancient genre of the still life 'was mockingly baptized rhyparography (i.e. painting of the sordid) in recognition that the genre deliberately flaunted high classical ideals of art' and that in this respect there was a striking parallel with the rhetorical figure of the 'paradoxical *encomium*'.²⁷ This rhetorical figure was a eulogy of things without any status, 'things without honour', such as illness, baldness, dirt, smoke and salt. Themes of such paradoxical or ironic *encomia* could also be people and animals of a low kind, such as tyrants, beggars, mice and flies. These *encomia* were in general constructed according to the same pattern used in serious *encomia*, those referring to gods, heroes, important people and matters. Central to these *encomia* were the capacities and qualities of the person or thing to be praised. *Encomia* on things, for example, might feature their age, dignity and usefulness; paradoxical eulogies of low matters also focused on these qualities. The function of such a eulogy was to parade the technical-rhetorical abilities of the speaker or writer and evoke the admiration of the spectators/readers for these abilities and of the bizarre subject itself.

In the Renaissance, this rhetorical figure flourished enormously among humanists and developed into an entire genre of its own.²⁸ Rabelais' stories about Gargantua and Pantagruel and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* are among the best known examples of this genre in the 16th century. Both writers are also worth mentioning in our context. Rabelais' books contain various paradoxical *encomia* with long lists of foods and other 'low' matters — such as the 'codpiece' which is recommended to the reader in the language of market traders — with all the necessary scatological and sexual connotations.²⁹ In the prologue of the fifth book, Rabelais compared himself as author of such ironic eulogies to the ancient 'rhyparographer' Piraeicus. Striking for our context is not only that the writer compares himself to this painter, but also that food figures so prominently in Rabelais' paradoxical *encomia*. Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, whose foreword

²⁶ See for a more extended version of the argument presented in the following, Falkenburg 1989: esp. 55ff.

²⁷ Colie 1966: 273-299; 276 for quote.

²⁸ See Malloch 1956; Kaiser 1963; Colie 1966; and Watson 1979.

²⁹ Cf. Bakhtin 1968: 145-195; Losse 1980.

mentions the *Moretum* (the ‘Peasant’s meal’), ascribed to Virgil as one of the models of paradoxical eulogies from antiquity, is worth mentioning because, unlike Rabelais’ work, it is a piece of writing with which Aertsen may well have been familiar. The humanist Petrus Opmeer relates in his history *Opus chronographicum* which appeared posthumously in 1611 that his friend Pieter Aertsen had once highly praised a painting by a painter unknown to us, Johannes Einout, which, stimulated by the example of Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, poked fun at art itself.³⁰ From this anecdote of Opmeer’s it would appear that Aertsen must have been familiar with the phenomenon of a pictorial analogue to a literary paradoxical eulogy — though we do not know, of course, whether Aertsen was familiar with this rhetorical figure as such. However, no matter how the lines of communication went, in Aertsen’s time too — who for that matter was also compared by Opmeer to the ancient painter Piraeicus³¹ — there was an awareness that ‘rhyparography’ and the paradoxical *encomium* are related.

Conclusion

I therefore conclude that the generic principle which Aertsen followed in a series of paintings between 1550 and 1560 shows a great affinity with the rhetorical figure of the paradoxical *encomium*. This affinity is in the first place expressed in the basic structure of literary paradoxical *encomia* and Aertsen’s paintings: in all cases a ‘high’ and ‘worthy’ form is used for the portrayal of ‘low’ contents. The element of eulogising, or recommending (and ‘vending’), is not only characteristic of the rhetorical figure, but also of Aertsen’s paintings — especially the *Meat stall* and his other market portraits make this immediately apparent. Both the paradoxical eulogy and these paintings depend on *existing* formulae for ‘high’ form; in both cases they imitate an elevated modus. In both cases too, the emphasis is on the display of the technical abilities of the artist or writer and on the surprising, unpredictable choice of a bizarre subject. The shock effect of the transgression of traditional decorum means, within the trope of the ‘low in elevated form’, time and again a choice for the new, ‘non-artistic’ subject.

It seems to me possible that Aertsen conceived of his paintings as pictorial paradoxical *encomia*, that is, not as direct pictorial translations of an ancient rhetorical figure, but as counterparts, as pictorial kin to literary paradoxical eulogies. This concept seems to be the generic principle underlying the still lifes as well as the peasant scenes discussed above. The diversity within this group as a whole, however, indicates that Aertsen did not follow any fixed rule or genre convention. His paintings are experiments in ‘rhyparography’, depending for their paradoxical identity on other types of art, portraiture in particular, which

³⁰ Opmeer 1611: 470; Opmeer 1625: 154, which briefly mentions the same story, calls the unknown painter ‘Joannes Cimontius’.

³¹ Opmeer 1625: 154.

offered a pictorial idiom associated with an elevated social status and the venerability of antique art.

With this hypothesis I do not pretend to give an explanation of the origin of the independent still life genre, because I have left out many social, financial, artistic and other factors in this discussion which necessarily played a role in the creation of the genre. But this hypothesis does, I believe, provide a clue to something of the intellectual ambitions and artistic impulses which inspired Aertsen to his creations in the midst of this amalgam of factors.

Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), The Hague

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