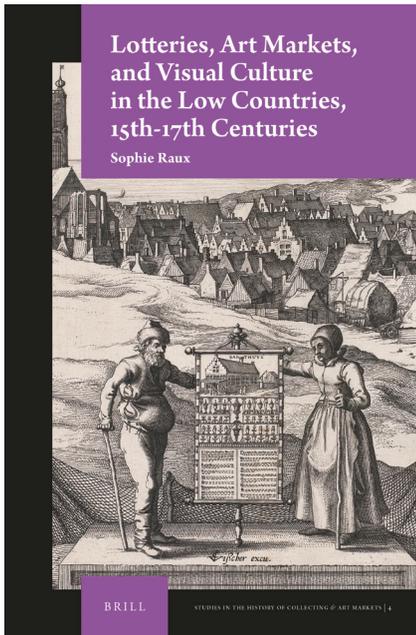


## Review

Sophie Raux, *Lotteries, Art Markets, and Visual Culture in the Low Countries, 15th-17th Centuries*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, 369 pp. ISBN 9789004353213.



The early modern public lottery is a fascinating phenomenon. Open to all walks of life, the lottery offered the financially strong an exciting gamble, and the poor a chance to win prestigious objects worth hundreds of times their initial bet. Commonly organised in the Low Countries, the monthlong, public exhibitions of prizes also promoted the arts and crafts and acted as a distribution channel of art and luxury objects, and as such the spectacular draws must have offered serious competition to the traditional outlets of luxury. Lotteries, then, clearly have a place in the history of the art market and the visual and material culture of the Low Countries, yet until now the subject has given rise only to isolated case studies. Sophie Raux aims to restore the position of the lotteries in the field; her book offers a welcome study into early modern lotteries of art objects.

Raux distinguishes between two major lottery models: public-utility lotteries organised by civil or religious institutions, and commercial lotteries held by private entrepreneurs. The institutional lotteries always followed the deferred-draw model: after a long subscription period, the final draw on a theatrical stage could last weeks; one box contained tickets with names and *prozen* (comical, poetic or sometimes obscene mottos) to identify the participant, and the second box held tickets revealing whether the participant had won or lost. Awareness of these lotteries was raised all over the country by *loterijkaarten*: public posters listing not only the terms and conditions of the lottery, but also the prizes to be won and their values. These posters are studied in chapter two as part

of the communication practices of the lottery organisers. A unique feature of Dutch and Flemish lottery posters is that they could contain illustrations of the prizes to be won. These images, designed to catch people's eye and inspire them to purchase tickets, are further explored in chapters three and four, although surprisingly Raux does not analyse the prizes and their estimated value as published on these *loterijkaarten*.

Commercial lotteries were officially banned by the authorities, but in return for a share of the profit several sixteenth-century dealers managed to secure permission or permanent licenses to organise them anyway. Chapters five and six focus on these dealers, their lottery practices, and their prize pools. In contrast to the institutional lotteries, the commercial variants used an immediate-draw model. Tickets were directly drawn one by one from a box containing blanks and winning numbers that matched a list with prizes. This short-term model stimulated the player to buy more tickets after unsuccessful draws, and required less investment and planning. One exception is the commercial deferred-draw lottery of paintings and sculptures organised by painter-dealer Claude Dorizi in Mechelen in 1559-1560, which clearly demonstrates how the dealer exploited the popularity of the public-utility lotteries to boost his own sales. Raux argues that it is difficult to precisely identify the works in Dorizi's lottery because the descriptions lack painter's names, but I wonder if their remarkably large dimensions could not offer possibilities for identification. The first prize, an oil painting depicting *Susanna and the Elders* with a fine-gold gilded frame, for example, measured approximately 167 × 236 cm (probably measured with its frame)<sup>1</sup>, and might have been identical to the painting with this subject by the Mechelen artist Michiel Coxie of 142.5 × 199 cm (now in the National Gallery of Canada, inv. no. 6974).<sup>2</sup>

The other dealers under study – Hans Goyvaerts, François Verbeelen, and Cornelis van Onderdonck – travelled with their lotteries to different towns, and were in direct competition with local dealers and workshops, triggering complaints and remonstrances from city magistrates. Raux provides a convincing explanation for these itinerant lotteries: they acted as channels to distribute dealer's stocks of art and artisanal goods over the entire country, cleverly circumventing guild bans on imports. Having predominantly 'foreign' goods as prizes was advantageous for the organisers of lotteries, not only because they introduced novel products to the local population stimulating participation, but also because their valuation was less easily verifiable.

Notions of value and price might also offer an explanation to the question of why paintings represented a quarter to half of the entire value of the prize pool. Whereas it was indisputable that silver objects were valued by their weight, criteria to value paintings – such as authorship and authenticity – were not yet well-defined in the

1 The source describes the painting as approximately six feet tall and eight and a half wide. On page 180, Raux calculates this as around 172 × 243 cm, and on the bottom of the page as 170 × 240 cm. However, I believe the Mechelse voet of 0,278 meter is more appropriate here.

2 The National Gallery of Canada dates this painting to 1550-1559. Coxie was registered in Mechelen in April 1559, when he bought two annuities and made a new will. A few months later he swapped his Brussels home for a house in Mechelen: Koenraad Jonckheere and Ruben Suykerbuyk, 'The life and times of Michiel Coxie 1499-1592', in Koenraad Jonckheere (ed.), *Michiel Coxie (1499-1592) and the Giants of His Age* (Turnhout 2013), 22-49, 38.

sixteenth century. The organisers were obliged to provide the authorities with lists of prizes, which were monitored by local professionals in the relevant fields. A comparison between the valuations in Verbeelen's lottery inventories and expert counter-assessments demonstrate the extent to which the valuations could vary (48-49). The booklets and catalogues of lottery prizes that started to appear in the seventeenth century, to be distributed amongst *liefhebbers* rather than the public, reflect a change in the assessment of value of paintings that is also known from inventories and literature: instead of size, material, and the inclusion of a frame we find the painter's name, quality, and an assessment of authenticity.

This book offers an intelligent account of the lotteries and their actors, strategies, and communication practices in the early modern Low Countries. As the fourth volume of the Brill series 'Studies in the History of Collecting and Art Markets', however, its emphasis on the lotteries' visual and material culture is rather unexpected. I especially missed an assessment of the importance of the lottery as a distribution channel of art and luxuries. The impressive number of 270 lotteries that Raux examined for this study (40, nt. 111), are not quantitatively analysed to estimate the size and scope of objects dispersed through the lotteries over time, their combined value, and their geographical distribution. Perhaps the sources are too fragmentary to provide such figures. An appendix with a chronological list of the lotteries, their details, and the available sources for further research would have been a welcome addition to the publication. While the current study does not fully explore the impact of the lotteries on the art market, it succeeds perfectly in demonstrating that the lottery was fully integrated in early modern life in the Low Countries.

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