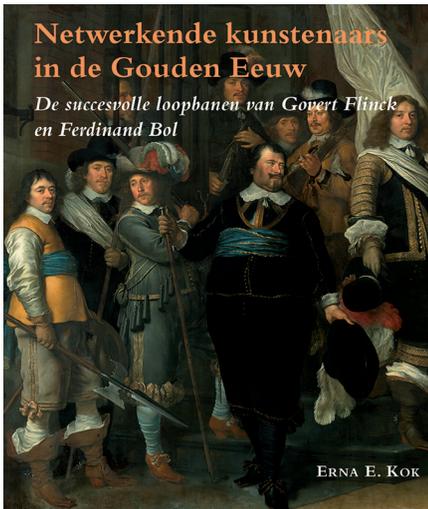


## Note

Erna E. Kok. *Netwerkende kunstenaars in de gouden eeuw. De succesvolle loopbanen van Govert Flinck en Ferdinand Bol*, Hilversum, Uitgeverij Verloren, 2016. 108 pp. ISBN 978-90-8704-542-5.



Art historians have recently embraced the potential of social network analysis as a tool to elucidate the dynamics of the art world and market. The networks that artists, their patrons and other stakeholders belong to are considered instrumental for the establishment of reputations and success in the art market. While social scientists rely on big data and sophisticated quantitative models to unravel these networks, art historian Erna Kok presents a welcome in-depth qualitative approach of the careers of Dutch artists Govert Flinck (1615-1660) and Ferdinand Bol (1616-1689) to underscore the importance of networks in securing commissions and social advancement. Both painters achieved artistic acclaim and a desirable social status in the competitive Amsterdam art market of the golden age.

Govert Flinck died relatively young but achieved considerable fame as an artist already during his lifetime. Kok points out that his career got a head start since he belonged to a family of reformed affluent merchants and the political establishment in his native city of Kleef. The exposure to the local elite and its mores, must have served Flinck well when he embarked on his artistic journey, first in Leeuwarden and subsequently as a pupil of Rembrandt in Amsterdam. When he established himself as an independent artist in 1638-39, his reformist friends and relatives doted him commissions which launched his career. Among them was a prestigious invitation to paint group portraits of the Arquebusiers Guilds in the early 1640s. By representing his patrons in a manner which highlighted their individuality he did not miss his mark. These masterpieces made his name and, after modeling his technique after Anthony Van Dyck, Flinck was never in want of commissions from the Amsterdam upper classes.

Ferdinand Bol could not capitalize on such a privileged background, but that didn't stop him from becoming a celebrated painter. He started as an apprentice in Dordrecht,

but was able to land an appointment in Rembrandt's workshop around 1636. He excelled in portraiture and, once a master in his own right, built a career in this genre. Interestingly, he used self-portraits in the manner of Rembrandt to project an image of an accomplished and skillful painter, a daring strategy for a beginning artist which paid off. But it was Bol's marriage to Elysabeth Dell, whose family had close ties to the Dutch admiralty, that ensured a stream of commissioned portraits from that milieu. In the 1650s, Bol made a stylistic switch by adopting a Flemish manner in portraiture and history painting which had become the fashion among the elite. He retired in 1669 as a rich and respected artist.

Kok attributes the rise to fame of both artists in no small measure to their ability to converse and interact appropriately with the political and commercial elites. The trust they instilled gave the artists an edge in the art market, and afforded them to procure the most prestigious commissions. This stands contrast with their mentor Rembrandt, who eventually fell out of grace when he refused to conform to the social norms and etiquette, and antagonized his patrons. The author further drives home the point that belonging to the right network in early modern societies was essential, and the art world was no exception. These networks consisted of relatives, friends and associates who tended to share a similar social-economic background and religion. Most importantly, a favor or service extended to a member of the network was expected to somehow be returned in due course. This economy of reciprocity goes a long way in explaining the upward social mobility of select artists in the competitive Amsterdam art market. Art patronage was guided by a system of unwritten rules and conventions whereby artists of honorable reputation and connections were given the most desirable commissions. While Flinck and Bol undoubtedly boasted exceptional artistic talent and the perseverance to make it as an artist, their fame and economic success would have been unthinkable without the elitist networks of which they had become an integral part.

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