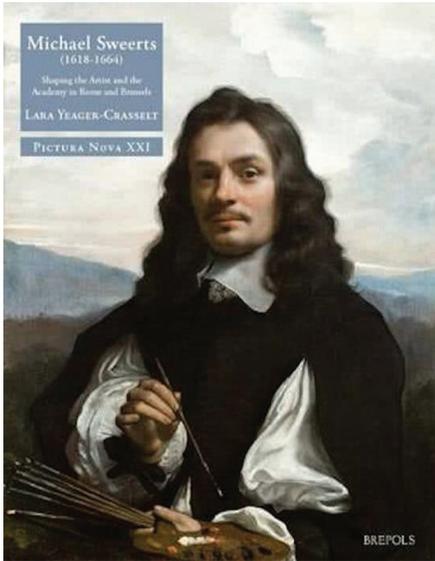


Review

Lara Yeager-Crasselt, *Michael Sweerts (1618-1664). Shaping the Artist and the Academy in Rome and Brussels* (Pictura Nova XXI), Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, 340 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-55530-0.



Quite a lot has been written on the enigmatic painter Michael Sweerts (1618-1664). There are a few monographs and numerous essays, on specific aspects of his art or on different paintings. His work has been the subject of several exhibitions; the last one in 2002 in Amsterdam, San Francisco and Hartford, was accompanied by an exemplary scholarly catalogue. Yet, his life and his work are still full of mysteries. One of the contributing reasons is the dearth of documentary evidence, another is the exceptional subjects of his paintings. Sweerts painted his creations in very different artistic milieus in Rome as well as in Brussels. That he almost never dated his paintings, does not help either. Yeager-Crasselt's new book on Sweerts focuses on 'addressing the artist fully within the artistic, intellectual, and cultural context

of Brussels and Rome in the seventeenth century' (p. 14). This context is discussed in four chapters: *Sweerts and a Brussels artistic tradition*; *Roman beginnings*; *François Duquesnoy, Nicholas Poussin and the patronage of the Pamphilj* and *Sweerts' drawing academy, tapestry and Brussels in the 1650s*. A wealth of material has been reviewed, and new insights presented, although not all of the extensive descriptions seem relevant.

The documents we have, tell us that Michael Sweerts was baptised in the church of St. Nicholas in Brussels on 29 September 1618. His father was a merchant. The next document has the artist in Rome, living on the Via Margutta in 1646, the neighbourhood where most of the Northern artists lived. Nothing is known about his life in between: his childhood, schooling, teacher(s) etc. are unknown and no early drawings or paintings seem to have survived. According to later documents, he is said to have travelled much and learned seven languages. He may have been in Rome for some time before 1646, because in October of that year he was asked to collect the contributions from the Northern artists

to the *Accademia di San Luca* - together with his compatriot and colleague Louis Cousin (1606-1667), who had been living in Rome since 1626. No record has been found of Sweerts' membership of the *Accademia di San Luca* or of the *Bentvueghels*, but he must have had ties with both.

That he was a successful painter in his years in Rome is evident from the paintings he made and the patronage he enjoyed. Three of the Dutch Deutz brothers visited Rome between 1646 and 1650. Sweerts painted their portraits, and their inventories and wills mention many of his paintings. Apart from that, he worked as an agent on behalf of their art collection, occasionally operating for their textile business as well. Of even more importance for his career in Rome, however, was the patronage of Camillo Pamphilj (1622-1666), a nephew of Pope Innocent X (1574-1655). Several sculptures by François Duquesnoy (1597-1643), owned by Pamphilj, figure in Sweerts' paintings of studio interiors. Yeager-Crasselt's book concentrates on these paintings. Pamphilj probably was the intermediary for the knighthood that Sweerts received from Pope Innocent X before he left Rome. About other patrons, only circumstantial evidence exists.

Back in Brussels, at the latest on 19th July 1655, he continued to be successful in many different ways. Numerous portraits and tronies from this period are known, as well as genre scenes, including his famous painting *The Drawing School* (Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum). Sweerts' most remarkable achievement was the establishment of the drawing academy in relation to which, in February 1656, he had submitted a petition to the city magistrate requesting privileges. He stated that the academy of life drawing (*naer het leven*) had functioned 'for a long time' and was frequented daily by many boys and young men. He added some remarks to gratify the city governors and emphasized the importance of his academy for the tapestry industry which the city just at that moment sought to stimulate by the opening of the *Tapissierspand* (tapestry market hall). The privileges were granted within two months. Except for the terms in which Sweerts described his academy, little is known of its purpose and practice. Additional information is to be found in his 1656 etched series of different tronies. By 1660, when Sweerts left Brussels, the academy did not exist anymore. In memory of himself Sweerts donated a self-portrait to the painters guild. So far it has not been possible to establish whether this is the famous painting now in Oberlin (Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College) or not.

In October 1660, we find the artist in Amsterdam in a very different role, in connection with the French missionaries of the *Société des Missions Etrangères*. He was probably assisting them when preparing a trip to the Orient, living a sober life of fasting, devotion and charity. He painted some portraits during the relatively short time he spent in Amsterdam and also while traveling to Palestina and Persia. The journey was arduous and Sweerts seems to have become such a difficult person, that in the end he was dismissed from the mission. Apparently he travelled on to Goa, India where he died in 1664. This is all we know about his life by documentary evidence.

As mentioned above, Lara Yeager-Crasselt tries to fill in the gaps in Sweerts' early biography by comprehensively describing the artistic environment in Brussels. The court of Archduke Albert and his wife Isabella employed mostly artists from Antwerp: Rubens (1577-1640), Van Dyck (1599-1641), Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625) and Joos de Momper (1564-1635). In Brussels we find Wenzel Coebergher (1560-1634), Theodoor van

Loon (1581-1649), Gaspar de Crayer (1584-1669) and in Brugge Jacob van Oost (1603-1671). Antoon Sallaert (1580-1650) was an important artist who designed many tapestry sets; in 1646 he was granted the same privilege from taxes as Sweerts requested ten years later. According to the author these artists may have influenced the young Sweerts. However, she has not been able to establish firm link with any of these artists. She does signal a possible connection between the monumental works of Van Loon, who was familiar with the Italian pictorial tradition, and 'the solidity of form and clarity of shape and contour of Sweerts' figures' (p. 40).

Concerning Sweerts' years in Rome, the author intends to argue that the works from this period 'demonstrate a close familiarity with the Accademia and the pedagogical model it advocated' (p. 16). This can be observed in both his paintings peopled with typical *Bamboccianti* figures as those with artists at work, whether in the open air or in a studio. All his figures have classical proportions and a dignity which point to his knowledge of art theory and drawing after classical models. It is therefore surprising that Sweerts was not a member of the *Accademia di San Luca*, but he certainly was aware of their principles.

Before describing the founding and the pedagogical program – teaching being its main purpose – of this Roman academy, Yeager-Crasselt recounts the history of all the earlier academies in Italy and the drawing books that were published in the early seventeenth century. Sweerts may even have known, before he went to Italy, the one by Odoardo Fialetti (1608) or one of its successors which were soon circulated in Europe. One of the means for learning to be a painter was drawing after antique sculptures, a practice that Sweerts often depicted. Contemporary sculptures, recognizably by François Duquesnoy but almost never in their original state, were a prominent motif in his studio or outdoor scenes too. These features show, as Yeager-Crasselt argues, how close Sweerts was to Duquesnoy's classicist ideas.

Of more direct importance for Sweerts will have been his contacts with the private art academy in the palace of Camillo Pamphilj, one of his main sponsors. This avid collector of antique and contemporary art owned at least three paintings by Sweerts. A 1652 entry in Pamphilj's account-book of payments to Sweerts for pigments, canvas and oil relates to stage sets painted by him. One entry for 'various oils used since 17 February in the academy of his Excellency' (p. 81) is of special interest. It can be connected to three other payments to two men who had served as models in the '*Accademia de Pittori*' in the same years. Together these sources confirm the existence of the Pamphilj academy, the drawing sessions after living models and Sweerts' involvement in it. Sweerts also had connections with sculptors who worked for Pamphilj's palaces and thus he would have known the sculptor Matteo Bonarelli (1604-1654), who enjoyed Camillo Pamphilj's patronage too and owned himself a collection of art and antiquities. In this collection were several paintings by Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), among others the famous *Plague at Ashdod* (1630). Some twenty years later Sweerts painted his version *Plague in an Ancient City* with numerous resemblances to Poussin's picture while also using many sculptural models according to his own working method. By weaving all these threads together Yeager-Crasselt constructs an image of Sweerts' position in the artistic climate in Rome.

Sweert's working method had its roots in the sophisticated academic model he had found in Rome as well as in the tradition of Netherlandish drawing academies. The author

argues convincingly that both had their impact on his Brussels academy for drawing after life ('een academie van die teeckeninge naer het leven'). In the last chapter the earlier 'academies' in Haarlem, Utrecht, Amsterdam are discussed and their influence on the practices in the Brussels academy, especially of the drawing after a live model. The same attention is paid to the Netherlandish drawing books Sweerts could have known and used, and the etchings (*Diversae facies*) he himself published – not in the shape of a book but nevertheless with a didactic function, as Yeager-Crasselt justly writes. Sweerts' paintings during his Brussels years clearly display his academic attitude in the idealized figures derived from classical sculptures, well balanced but somewhat rigid.

In the middle of the century the Brussels tapestry industry still attracted artists, but none of them were very inspiring or innovative. A stimulus like the drawing academy was therefore eagerly welcomed, though it is not clear how effective it was. The author states that '... Sweerts' academic endeavours constituted an important step in the evolution of the Netherlandish academy over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries' (p. 106); a claim that, in my opinion, is not based on sufficient arguments.

The merit of this book is that it elaborates on various aspects of Michael Sweerts' painting - the influence of the Brussels milieu in his youth, his use of classic and contemporary sculpture when in Rome, the importance of drawing after life as in the Netherlands and his depictions of artists at work in particular - that have been less explicitly commented upon in previous studies. Some of the digressions though, such as the description of the Brussels art milieu and the history of drawing academies and drawing books in Italy and the Netherlands, are unnecessarily extensive. The book would have profited from more rigorous editing.

Nicolette Sluijter-Seijffert, Independent scholar