Ama te ipsum timelessly: portraiture of the golden age in theory and practice

Tijana Žakula

utrecht university
t.zakula1@uu.nl

Abstract

Using the unprecedented popularity of portrait painting in seventeenth-century Dutch Republic as a point of departure, this article will discuss creatively classicising measures Gerard de Lairesse proposed to combat two archenemies of portraiture — naturalism and the fickly moods of fashion, as elucidated in his *Groot Schilderboek* (Art of painting), the first published art theoretical writings that treated of portraiture.

Keywords: Dutch Classicism, Naturalism, Ennoblement, Timelessness, Fashion

The Dutch Golden Age (1583-1722) marked the apogee of portrait painting. The extraordinary economic success of the republic of the United Netherlands improved financial situation of many of its citizens and boosted their self-esteem. This newly found confidence of the moneyed bourgeoisie led to the unprecedented flourishing of portraiture. Everyone who had the means to have their likeness made would sit for a local portraitist, who was to be found in every city. Portrait specialisation

provided the surest bread and butter for the artist not only due to the great demand, but also because portraiture was the only lower-genre that was made on commission. Depending on the speed and method, it was possible even for a moderately successful specialist to earn a decent income. Little wonder thus, that, by even the most conservative estimates, the number of portraits produced in the Dutch Golden Age ran to hundreds of thousands (Ekkart, 2007, p. 17; Žakula, 2015, p. 88).

This was certainly more than enough to pave the way for portraiture to be discussed in Gerard de Lairesse's *Groot Schilderboek* (1707). Even though vehemently opposed to the lifelike nature of portraiture, de Lairesse, who was evidently aware of its popularity, went beyond mere mention of this artistic genre nonetheless, and proposed a coherent programme for its reform. In spite of being absolutely appalled by his colleagues who preferred slavery to liberty, and who, out of their love of money, chose to immortalise commoners, de Lairesse discussed this specialisation in great detail and suggested "*mixing the Fashion with what is Painter-like*" as the obvious way to steer safely between the Scylla of naturalism and the Charybdis of over-idealisation of the sitter (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 5; Žakula, 2015, p. 88).

Gerard de Lairesse and Dutch portrait painting: a chronicle of a love-hate relationship

Gerard de Lairesse dictated his thoughts to his sons after he had gone blind and was forced to lay down his brushes and burins in 1690 (Lammertse, 2016, pp. 16-17). His ideas first materialised in the *Grondlegginge ter teekenkonst* (Foundation of drawing) of 1701, and ultimately in the *Groot Schilderboek* (The art of painting, 1707), which was his greatest achievement. In this truly encyclopaedic treatise, de Lairesse devoted a lot of space to the so-called 'lower genres' that predominated in the output of Dutch art. The immense popularity of genre scenes, landscape, portraiture, and still life had

Figure 1. van der Helst, B. (1660). *Portrait of Admiral Egbert Meussen Cortenaer* [Painting]. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rijksmuseum.

led painters to specialise and de Lairesse was sufficiently practical to take them seriously. In all likelihood the order of appearance of the genres in the treatise stood for his idea of their hierarchy, which differed from that of André Felibien. For de Lairesse, portraits were only one step above still-life painting. Aping nature, be it in representing the sitters for their likeness, or inanimate object in a still life was reserved for *zwakke geesten* (feeble minds), and was given a place at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder (Žakula, 2015, pp. 7-9).

Regardless of its modest ranking, slavishly following life in portraiture was nevertheless not an option for a painter and art theoretician of the classicist bent. Suffice it to say, brutal honesty of Dutch portraiture, in which no wrinkle was left unrecorded, did not bode well with Gerard de Lairesse. He firmly believed that literal representations of the sitter should be avoided at all costs, for, in the worst case scenario, it could easily lead to "monstrous" images. Such was a portrait of Admiral Egbert Meussen Cortenaer (fig. 1), in which the sitter was proudly sporting his missing eye (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 13; Dickey, 1989, pp. 227-245). Since eyes were crucial to the impression of personality and were considered the windows to the soul, the loss of an eye presented more of a problem to the portrait than any other flaw. As Pliny recorded in his anecdote of Apelles painting the portrait of King Antigonos, and Alberti reiterated in his story alluding to Piero della Francesca and Federigo da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino, the only decorous way of representing an one-eyed sitter was in profile or three-quarter view (Pliny, bk. XXXV, pp. 327 and 329; Alberti, 2011, p. 61). This was probably one of the reasons why Rembrandt's *Claudius Civilis,* which was painted for the Town Hall in 1662, was so swiftly removed, and replaced by Jürgen Ovens's interpretation of the martial Batavian in profile view. Increasingly classicising taste of Amsterdam wealthy patrons is likely to have made their eyes too sensitive to Rembrandt's aesthetic indiscretion of showing the empty eye-socket. Or, as the preferred painter of the city's elite Gerard de Lairesse preached, 'deformities and defects of a face' were archenemies of grace, which, as one of the most important components of a well-handled decorum, could only be obtained through a careful selection. This process, which was the first step towards idealisation, called for the obliteration of particularly unseemly flaws (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 13; Žakula, 2015, p. 95).

In this respect De Lairesse distinguished three types of imper-

fections: natural, accidental, and usual. While the natural and usual ones — "a wry Face, squint Eyes, low Fore-head, Thinness and Fatness", were commendable for their aided the likeness, the accidental flaws were to be hidden. "A blind eye, a Wound, Wen, Mole, Pits of Small-Pox, too many Pimples, &c." would look even worse in a picture, and, to prevent such a disaster, it was the painter's holy duty to manipulate reality and represent life from handsome side. This kind of flattery was agreeable to art: by instructing the sitter to strike a pose revealing only the best parts of his or her physical appearance, the painter's moral conduct and reputation were to remain immaculate. Although the portraitist was not telling the entire truth, neither was he lying (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 11-14; Žakula, 2015, p. 97). That De Lairesse practiced what he preached is clearly discernible in his *Self-portrait* (fig. 2), which was made for Cosimo III de Medici, who is likely to have commissioned this picture for the prestigious *Galleria degli Autoritratti* in the Uffizi during his stay in Amsterdam in 1669. For this flattering occasion, De Lairesse obscured all the blemishes caused by congenital syphilis he suffered from, and prettified his infamously disfigured features to the extent that still ensured the likeness (Larsen, 2016, p. 90).

The next step was capturing the right demeanour that would suit the sitter's personality and reveal its essence to the viewer. Enticing sitters into a casual conversation that would betray their true nature and inner world required skills of a seasoned therapist. Especially because the gist of one's personality should ideally surface in a more or less same guise during ten sitting sessions (De Lairesse, vol. 2, p. 12). To achieve this, the artist was supposed to have quite a few topics up his sleeve that were neither boring, nor potentially disturbing to the sitter. In respect to the latter, it was also mandatory to purge the studio of smutty pictures, for a glimpse of sexually tinted images would inevitably alter the sitter's demeanour, especially if the model were a chaste maiden.
The subjects that were allowed were fine landscapes and flower-pieces that would calm the mind and were conducive to serenity of the sitter (De Lairesse, vol. 2, p. 12; Žakula, 2015, pp. 98-99).

Notwithstanding his potential therapist skills, or pictures hung in his studio, it is safe to say that Rembrandt remained the undisputed master of exposing the ever elusive inner world of his sitters. In his late period (1648-1669) Rembrandt focused on bringing forth what lies behind one's exterior and emphasised the world of spirit (Slive, 1995, pp.

78-79). In his writings, however, de Lairesse disapproved of Rembrandt's life-long commitment to colours and his neglect of "real art," i.e. perfecting flaws of nature, even though de Lairesse himself had sat for the great Dutch master some forty years earlier (fig. 3, De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 1, pp. 41-42).

Photoshopping avant la lettre: how to idealise the sitter without being a complete liar?

The idealisation was all-important indeed, and before embarking on glamorising the sitter, De Lairesse advised the painter to take into account the sex of his model. Self-conceit and self-love pertained to all, but were a tad more present in the fairer sex, who, both as commissioners, or sitting for a portrait requested by someone else, often had special requirements. Capturing ladies' natural beauty was frequently insufficient to please, and De Lairesse proposed a number of pictorial devices that would help the painter flatter one's looks without being a total liar. Our author knew all too well that scathing criticism of a dissatisfied female client could be fatal for a portraitist's career (De Lairesse, vol. 2, 15, Žakula, 2015, 99).

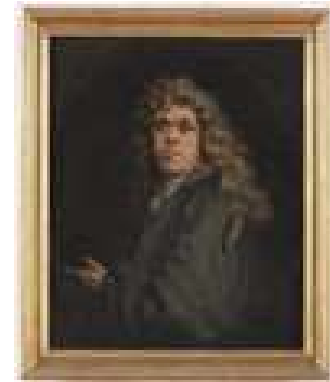

Figure 2. de Lairesse, G. [ca. 1670]. *Self-portrait* [Painting]. Florence, Italy: Galleria degli Uffizi.

The right use of light was of immense help in accentuating one's beauty. Light coming from the front was by far the safest choice, for it kept colours natural and beautiful. It also emphasised a relief and volume of one's features, and was thus most suitable for frontal representations of the sitter. If the face was represented in a three-quarter or profile view, however, the light had to be adapted accordingly, so as to remain focused on the forehead, nose, and cheeks. In this way they would not be broken by ground shades, but united through volume. Low light was advised if the sitter had a long or sharp nose, or hollow eyes, while a source of light placed above the model was suitable for those whose eyes were bulging, or sitters who preferred to see their nose seem ever so slightly elongated. Glowing shades and reflections had to be avoided at all costs, because they would create an unnatural light, as though a lit candle stood behind the sitter. This would adversely affect the complexion of the sitter, es-

pecially if she was of a tender age (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 15-21; Žakula, 99). The choice of colours was of crucial importance here, especially those of the backdrop. A fair and beautiful face of a woman should be placed against a warm ground, for this would soften the shades, and make lit parts more agreeable. If the sitter was male, however, the "glowing and strong" shades were compulsory, and they were best obtained though placing dark sections against the light ones (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 21-22; Žakula, 2015, pp. 99-100).

The next step in painting an infallible portrait was a very important one, for it entailed finding the right, by which De Lairesse meant most elegant posture. He proposed that the body had to be disposed in the most natural and becoming pose so as to look "agreeable". In his view, if the portraitist was skilled enough, he was capable of hitting the right curve of neck, shoulders or breast, and, by doing so, on the right path to ennobling his sitters, regardless of how vulgar or even clownish they may have looked like in real life. However, not all the sitters were patient enough to pose for the portrait on countless occasions. Once the facial features were captured to their satisfaction, they would choose a posture from drawings or prints, without ever considering whether the posture or the dress suited their personality and social or professional status (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 18-19; Žakula, 2015, p. 100).

This practice was not uncommon in the Northern Netherlands, especially from the 1670s onwards, when many specialists were facing time constraints as a number of clients steadily increased. Acclaimed portraitist Caspar Netscher and his son Constantijn frequently resorted to a working method known as the 'insert portrait' by using the same composition more than once to portray different people (Blankert, 2004, pp. 11-14). Even more infamous perhaps was the story of Godfried Schalken, who refused to flatter the immaculate, snow-white hands of a young lady who was sitting for him. The lady in question was very proud of her hands and wanted to have them shown prominently so as to overshadow her face blemished by pockmarks. The painter blatantly refused to follow her instructions, for he had a ready-made pair of hands for all his sitters. And not just any hands, but those of his sturdy servant, a coarse, thickset English peasant lad with "hands like mutton" (Weyerman, pp. 11-17; Hecht, 1980, pp. 23-38).Hands were a particularly sore spot for De Lairesse, who noticed that they had frequently been neglected and "copy-pasted" from earlier paintings with no regard to life (De

Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 19; Žakula, 2015, p. 101). Little wonder though that many painters turned to cheating, for hands were the most difficult part to do after the likeness of the sitter. Apart from betraying the class and refinement of the subject they also bore witness to the mastery of the portraitist. Being of almost the same bright tone as the face, the hands could distract the viewer's attention from the head (Campbell, 1990, p. 96). This is why some painters introduced gloves, that not only occupied the idle hands of sitters, but also served as costly accessories that testified to the impeccable fashion taste of the sitter (Campbell, 1990, p. 134).

Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi: finding the right garbs

Fashionable garbs were of immense importance to many sitters, for they flaunted one's social status and affluence. To brandish their wealth and reputation some would spend a small fortune on the *dernier cri* garments, even though this did not mean that the costume was appropriate, let alone capable of standing the test of time (Campbell, 1990, p. 124).

Contrary to this practice, De Lairesse deemed that what sitters usually wore would be a great addition to their likeness. He pleaded that they should not sport an unconventional or fancy outfit for the portrait, for it would alter their appearance (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 11; Žakula, 2015, p. 102). The choice of colours was also important, because not all hues were suitable for all models. The wrong decision could be detrimental to the overall decorum, and would endanger all the previous endeavours to capture the likeness and the correct posture. De Lairesse warned against an apparently popular believe that deep red would suit a person of reddish complexion, deep yellow a fallow one, and all colours pale an individual with pale skin, and warned that the painter, who followed this path was on the surest way to committing a fatal error: a red person in red would look like a red painted statue, while a pale individual in a light or yellow dress would look unwell, or even dead. Sober choice dictated exactly the opposite: colours completely different from the sitter's complexion would set them off in the best possible way. In terms of hair-colour, deep-red, deep-yellow, and deep-blue would best fit dark-haired person, whereas half or weak colours, such as purple, light-blue, violet, and rose, would become people with light coiffure (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 35-36; Žakula, 2015, pp. 102-103).

Fashion, which was fickle and prone to constant changes, was another archenemy of the sitter's attire. Today's hottest buy could look downright ridiculous the next morning, and this problem was seemingly impossible to solve. Even though advocating usual and common dress as the most suitable outfit for portraits, De Lairesse was acutely aware of ever-changing style. He implied this under the notion of "altering dresses," and tried to solve the problem in very few portraits he painted himself. This is apparent in De Lairesse's presumed *Portrait of Philips de Flines,* which was executed (1682, fig. 4), and in his *Self-portrait* (Roy, 1992, pp. 311-312; Larsen, 2016, p. 90). The sitters in both paintings are wearing Japanese gowns. These pricey garments were brought back to the Netherlands by officers of the East India Company, who made their first trip to the Japanese court in 1609. As a confirmation of the commercial treaty they were given kimonos, which were soon to become veritable status symbols at home. In time the demand for kimonos became so great as to spur tailors in other countries, such as India and England, to start making similar robes (Gordenker, 2001, p. 73; Žakula, 2015, p. 104).

Figure 3. van Rijn, R. [ca. 1666]. *Portrait of Gerard de Lairesse* [Painting]. New York, NY: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Japanese gown made its appearance in Dutch portraiture in the 1670s, above all in the works of Caspar Netscher and Nicolaes Maes, and it was an immediate and great success. Not only because the garment was costly and fashionable, but also for its shapeless qualities. Its loose folds evoked the simplicity and fluidity of the Roman toga and lent the sitters a supremely sophisticated look with an air of timelessness. These properties were perfectly in line with De Lairesse's concept of the painter-like manner, that demanded a loose and airy dress, which was "somewhat savouring of the mode" (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p 8; Gordenker, 2001, p. 73; Žakula, 2015, p. 104).

Figure 4. de Lairesse, G. (1682). *Presumed Portrait of Philips de Flines* [Painting], Kassel, Germany: Museumslandschaft Hessen Kasse, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

According to our author these qualities were to be found in the portraits of Sir Peter Lely, who excelled in bestowing grace upon his

sitters, both in terms of their looks as well as their attire. De Lairesse did not fail to mention either that Lely was heavily indebted to Anthony van Dyck, who was praised to the skies not only for his unparalleled design and elegance, but also for inventing a new style of representing dress in portraiture (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 17-18; Gordenker, 2001, p. 10). Van Dyck forged this partially fictional, loosely draped costume, during his stay in England. This garment was understood to be a classicising gown that was fully equipped to defeat the robes of ever-elusive fashion (Gordenker, 2001, p. 23).

Van Dyckian vogue was introduced to the Dutch scene for the first time around 1643, when Adriaen Hanneman (c. 1604-1671) came to The Hague from London, where he had worked in van Dyck's circle (Gordenker, 2001, p. 70). Hanneman was to become court painter to Stadholder Frederik Hendrik and Amalia van Solms, who were eager to have their likenesses painted in van Dyckian style so as to parallel the elegance of the English court. This nonchalant noblesse took the country by storm, and was soon adopted by specialists all over the northern Netherlands.

Several of Rembrandt's pupils, notably Govert Flinck, Ferdinand Bol, and Nicolaes Maes, were to depart from their master's style and venture into the more fashionable van Dyckian manner. Nicolaes Meas, who painted dozens of portraits a year, was by far the most prolific of them (Ekkart, 2007, p. 42). He is likely to have undergone a transformation of style sometime around 1660 during his stay in Antwerp, where he got acquainted with the work of Rubens and van Dyck, and met Jacob Jordaens (Houbraken, 1718-1725, vol. 2, p. 275). From then on Maes's paintings showed an almost courtly elegance and dash (fig. 5). This fashion was furthered by the *fijnshilders* (fine painters), Caspar Netscher (1635/6-1684) and Godfried Schalken (1643-1706). De Lairesse praised Netsher for his artful portraits, in which "he has judiciously handled the *darkest Shades, and Main-light-touches, according to the natural Force of the Colour*" (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 21; Hecht, 1989, pp. 186-189).

This change in taste of Dutch sitters, who once embraced Rembrandt's naturalistic portraits, did not occur overnight. Their endorsement of decidedly more elegant and idealised images of themselves was the result of a gradual process that coincided with the so-called "stadholderless" period which lasted from 1650 until 1672 (Wieseman, 2002,

p. 94). The absence of centralised power increased the importance of the urban patriciate and fostered the 'aristocratisation' of their lifestyle. The clear preference for van Dyckian portraits was part of this, as was the wish for burghers to be portrayed in stone. The anti-Orangeist moneyed elite from Amsterdam compared the city to the Roman republic, regarded themselves as its consuls, and wanted to see themselves immortalised in marble (Scholten, 2006, p. 94; Žakula, 2015, p. 107).

Accessorise, accessorise, accessorise! Make yourself noticeable and known

The quest for sporting one's importance in a preferably timeless fashion often entailed the addition of appropriate props that alluded to the sitter. In de Lairesse's words, they would enrich the portrait and make it look more noble. Hence, he presented two ways of introducing suitable accessories into the picture. One consisted of adding accompanying items to the background, while the other would result in a complete makeover with the historicised sitter as well as the setting. Both were equally suitable to make known the sitter's "virtues, natures, manners and particular inclinations (De Lairesse, vol. 2, p. 30; Žakula, 2015, p. 107)."

De Lairesse listed an entire array of different suggestions in terms of the emblematic accessories that were appropriate for use in likenesses. Some novelties were introduced alongside such long-standing iconographic formulae as depicting a philosopher with a celestial globe, or an orator with a statue of Mercury. These were especially customised to suit the needs of Amsterdam elite. For instance, de Lairesse suggested that a governor of the East-India Company should be set in a bespoke, "Indian" landscape decked out with palm and cocoa-trees, figures of dark-skinned people, and elephant tusks. The sitter was also supposed to be accompanied by a personification of the Company. De Lairesse pictured her as a heroine holding a trident in her hand, wearing a long mantle adorned with two large shells as epaulettes, a breast-ornament made of scales, a neckless with pearls and corals, and sporting a pair of buskins decorated with two dolphins conjoined head to head. By communicating sitters' virtues and occupations to the audience through emblematised accessories, and showing them at their best, portrait painting could exceed the mere display of vanity and pride and become more akin

to history painting (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, pp. 33-34; Žakula, 2015, pp. 108-109).

In this respect, a complete makeover of the sitter, the so-called *portrait historié*, was even more suitable, for it also encompassed the concept of timelessness (De Lairesse, 1712, vol. 2, p. 30-32; Žakula, 2015, p. 107). In all likelihood, this was the reason why the majority of a handful of portraits that de Lairesse ever painted were executed in this vein (Larsen, 2016, pp. 93-98; Wenley, 2020, p. 1). In 1668 de Lairesse represented Margrieta, Pieter, and Adam van Rijn in the guise of the *Allegory of Five Senses* (Wenley, 2020, p. 10), while three years later he opted for an allegorical composition of *Apollo and Aurora* when he was commissioned by a wealthy burgomaster of Amsterdam, Nicolas Pancras, to paint his children Gerbrandt and Maria (Liedtke, 2008, pp. 415-421). This practice was perfectly in tune with de Lairesse's wish to invest portraiture with the allure of history painting, albeit frequently at the expense of recognising the true nature of these images. The extend to which the boundary between the two artistic genres has been obscured makes it impossible for the modern-day viewer to determine whether an image is a *portrait historié* or a full-blown history piece. Especially it there is no archival evidence, or an existing undisputed portrait to support an identification of a putative sitter (Wenley, 2020, p. 2). The sitter for the *Praise on the Peace* (1671) now in Amiens, still awaits definitive identification, and so does the lady represented in the guise of *Minerva* (ca. 1670), from the museum Brukhental in Sibiu (Larsen, 2016, pp. 92-97).

This obvious drawback of the *portrait historié* was evidently nothing but advantage for de Lairesse (Wenley, 2020, p. 2). Mere imitation, after all, was only the beginning of art, that could no longer satisfy aesthetic demands of Dutch sophisticated lovers and patrons of art. This is why de Lairesse's amalgamate of classical subjects and idealisation, in combination with the most fashionable pictorial style, ensured his indisputable popularity with the Amsterdam moneyed elite. Through the adoption of classicising formulae de Lairesse's patrons wanted to show how civilised people distinguished themselves from the lower classes, and perhaps even from their more modest ancestors too. What de Lairesse and his commissioners could not predict though, is that in the the long run these elegant images would defy the primary function of portraiture, which is making sitters recognisable. Notwithstanding its benefits to those who followed his advice in the eighteenth century, the significance

of de Lairesse's treatise is now limited to the most extensive art-theoretical reflection on the flourishing of portraiture in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Until the next come-back of staunch classicism, perhaps.

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