

THE POWER OF READING: TWO PORTRAITS BY CORNELIS DUSART (1660-1704)

Paul Hoftijzer

Paul Hoftijzer (1954) is P.A. Tiele-Professor in the history of the early-modern Dutch book at Leiden University. He has published widely on all aspects of the history of the Dutch book in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with an emphasis on international book trade relations and the book in Leiden.

There is perhaps no better way to grasp the power of the book than by looking at images of the act of reading. They exist in large numbers in museums and other collections all over the world, from practically all periods and in a great variety of art forms – painting, drawing, printmaking, photography, and sculpture. In the past, such works of art followed strict iconological conventions: For instance, in many late medieval and renaissance depictions of the Annunciation, the virgin Mary is presented reading the Bible, because of the typological belief that the life of Christ was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Another symbolic meaning of the visualization of a reader and a book is that of devotion and contemplation. Particularly women up to the modern era were often portrayed as being totally immersed in the reading of a religious text, although the intensity with which later artists such as the American impressionist Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) or the Danish symbolist Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916) painted reading women is no less impressive. Up to this very day, anyone in the sphere of scholarship and writing – academics, physicians, lawyers, ministers of the church, literary authors – as a rule is depicted with a book in his or her hands, as the most obvious token of the sitter's knowledge or creative genius.



1. Watercolour by Cornelis Dusart (1660-1704) from the end of the seventeenth century of a man reading a book. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-T-1899-A-4247.

One of the great attractions of Dutch seventeenth-century art is that what is represented, although it may well have been intended to convey a moral or symbolical message, is taken directly from contemporary life. This is also true for works of art that display the act of reading. In 1631, shortly before his move from Leiden to Amsterdam, Rembrandt painted his famous portrait of the biblical prophetess Hannah reading the Bible (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). For this portrait he used a real model, traditionally believed to be his own elderly mother, and a real book, a seventeenth-century bible. Other artists, such as Pieter de Hoogh or Gerard ter Borch, painted similar scenes of ardent reading – devotional, reflective or other – situated in the

homely environment of a seventeenth-century Dutch interior.

This tendency towards an immediate recognizability is also visible in the numerous depictions by Dutch artists of poor people reading a text, mostly cheap print such as newspapers, pamphlets, chapbooks and ballads. Very little is known about literacy rates, book ownership, and reading among the lower classes of Dutch society in the early modern period – they hardly have a presence in the annals of history –, but in Dutch art scenes of reading the poor and underprivileged in early-modern society are surprisingly well represented, as can be demonstrated by the work of the Haarlem artist Cornelis Dusart (1660-1704).



2. Watercolour by Cornelis Dusart (1660-1704) from the end of the seventeenth century of a man reading a book. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-T-1899-A-103.

Cornelis Dusart is best known for his paintings, drawings, and etchings of Dutch labourers and peasants. Usually, there is an element of satire in these works. Dusart had been a pupil in Haarlem of Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685), the undisputed master of this highly popular genre, who caricatured the rugged, yet uncomplicated everyday life of poor city and country folk. In the work of Dusart, however, there sometimes is a more still, aesthetic element, particularly in some of the highly refined watercolours that he made. Two striking examples of these are preserved in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Dating from the end of the seventeenth century, they show – from different angles – two men, both dressed in untidy, worn clothes with an old cap on their heads. Seated on a wooden stool they are reading a small book, the content of which cannot be established, with such concentration and attachment that they appear to have lost all awareness of the world around them.

One can dispute whether these two watercolours, which in view of their physical characteristics (watercolour and crayon) and equal dimensions (approx. 27 x 19 cm) may originally have formed a set, were drawn after life or if Dusart used two models to sit for him. The latter seems more likely. But does it really matter? The artist has succeeded at capturing the essence of what is at the same time a most intimate and a very public human activity. And although the pictures were made more than three hundred years ago, we can easily relate to them, for they show what we all experience every day in our lives: The power of reading.