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Le meilleur métier: kamerbehangers en de aankleding van interieurs in de periode 1680-1810

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Summary

This thesis researches the profession of the upholsterer – or ‘kamerbehangen’ in Dutch – and the role they played in the creation of interiors in the Dutch Republic, in the long eighteenth century (1680-1810). Its research centers on the cities of Amsterdam, The Hague and Haarlem. A total of 234 shops or individual upholsterers working there in this period were found. Hopefully, the index of their names included in this thesis will advance future research. The first chapter describes the way the profession developed, as well as how upholsterers learned the trade, worked, kept their shops and advertised. In the subsequent four chapters, the relation between upholsterer and client is explored in-depth through case studies.

Eighteenth century upholsterers were both craftsmen and merchants. They made textile furniture such as bed hangings – often seen as the most prestigious of their activities – window curtains, upholstered seat furniture and carpets, and sold ready-made furniture created by others. At the beginning of the period, not all these tasks were done by the same craftsmen. It seems this changed around 1700, due to the arrival of French/Huguenot tapissiers settling in the northern provinces. These had been dealing in a wider range of goods than their northern colleagues. The more successful ones sold the textiles for their wares themselves. Upholsterers belonged to the guild of merchants and as such did not have to create a masterpiece to finish their education; they did, however, have to become members of other guilds to be able to sell their wares. Only in the case of the woodworking guilds does this seem to have led to conflict, as upholsterers sometimes employed woodworkers in their own shops or imported ready-made furniture from other countries.

Upholsterers were a relatively small group working in the luxury industries, compared to for example woodworkers, with the former running about 10 shops at any one time in Amsterdam and in The Hague, and about 1-5 shops in Haarlem. They were a diverse group, however. Some upholsterers did not have a shop but worked their trade from a single room, or worked for others. Most kept a small shop. For some, this was indeed the best profession (‘le meilleur métier’). Upholsterers such as a Pierre Courtonne or Johannes Deel, working for the Stadholders and the elite of their day, were able to amass fortunes of 20,000-50,000 guilders. Success was dependent on factors such as seed money, an up-to-date knowledge of current fashions, and maintaining good relations with clients. Most shops were passed along from father to son, and most of the upholsterers working in the Republic were locals. It seems upholsterers actively guarded entrance to their profession. Only a small percentage were foreign-born, and even though France exercised a large influence on the luxury market in the eighteenth century, this is not reflected in the number of French upholsterers settling in the Republic. Only at the end of the century can an increase in their number be seen, and a handful of ‘French upholsterers’ settle in Holland. They seem to have had an advantage over their Dutch colleagues in that they were able to purchase the latest French wares directly through their connections.

The role women played in this profession is difficult to quantify, but it is clear they played an important role in the upholsterer's daily business. There must have been equal numbers of women working as seamstresses in the upholsterer's shops to men working as servants. Although more is known about these women's training than about the men's and it seems a good number of them went into business together, opening so-called 'beddenwinkels' (bedding stores), it is harder to find precise information and examples of their work. In addition, the term 'kamerbehangster' (female upholsterer) was not in use, suggesting that women were less active in the trade as such.

Regarding the relationship with their clients, it was assumed in literature that just like their colleagues in France and England, Dutch upholsterers were actively involved in the creation of interiors. It is harder to find evidence for this for Holland, and it seems only the top echelons of upholsterers working for the Stadholders carried out this role. The upholsterers mostly took on the role of advisor. They advised their clientèle about current fashion – as exhibited in their shops and portfolios –, what colors, patterns and type of textiles were in vogue, and what type of wall hanging would be suitable to a certain room, for example. This is demonstrated clearly in two unique series of letters: one from the 1720-1730s between Philippe Androuin and his client Daniel van Eys, the other from 1808 between Joseph Cuel and his client Pieter Cats.

The upholsterer was also a facilitator, who increasingly assisted his clients in the search for new furniture: he collected and sent out samples, drawings and prints, and even furniture and tapestries for viewing, and he gathered information from other suppliers. The extent to which the upholsterers acted as designers themselves is another matter that is hard to pinpoint – we miss the evidence provided by their 'books' or portfolios, which have not survived. A few single examples of drawings by an upholsterer show they would closely follow existing furniture prints. Another service the upholsterer provided for his clients was selling and buying secondhand furniture and tapestries, an aspect of his work which has generally been overlooked until now.

Only a few families of upholsterers catered to the Stadholders, who preferred to consistently work with the same suppliers. The role of court supplier often was inherited from father to son. Whereas Stadholder-King William I engaged several tapissiers at court, his successors did not have the financial means to do so; they worked with preferred suppliers who signed a contract, detailing the relation. Only under Stadholder Willem V was an upholsterer in employment at the court again – if only for several years. Subsequently, Louis Bonaparte created a garde-meuble [furniture service] as King of Holland (1806-1810), employing several upholsterers for the upkeep of his palaces.

However, for most upholsterers, the regent and middle classes formed the most important group of clients. A new interior was a massive spending post few people could afford, and those who could, mostly did so only once in their lives. Afterwards, clients usually only spent money on upkeep or repairs. Repair work, cleaning and sometimes storing and renting out furniture formed a large part of the upholsterer's annual work for his clients.

All-in-all, the case studies show how upholsterers would balance their clients' quest for the newest and most fashionable furniture and interiors within their budget and given the goods available.