ART LOVERS, PICTURA, AND MASCULINE VIRTUE IN THE KONSTKAMER

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Depictions of rooms full of art constitute a distinct genre that arose and flourished in Antwerp in the early decades of the seventeenth century. These pictures idealize art collecting as an interlocking structure of social, political, intellectual, and spiritual ideals—qualities that inform the ideal citizen—while they also mobilize sexual and economic discourses that indicate the difficulties of controlling potentially destructive desires. Focusing on works from the studio of Frans Francken the Younger, this essay investigates the gendered force of these discourses and proposes that the masculine virtue constructed in gallery pictures relies upon the mastery of dangers coded as feminine.

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Depictions of rooms full of art, or konstkamer images, constitute a distinct genre that arose and flourished in Antwerp in early decades of the seventeenth century. A growing body of scholarship has delineated multiple frameworks for understanding these paintings’ appeal and efficacy for their audiences. They have been seen in relation to the rapid growth of art collecting in Antwerp, and the new forms of status associated with it, and to the rise of global as well as local art marketplaces. Additionally, the genre has been understood as intersecting with the hermeneutics of the cabinet of curiosity as a theater of universal knowledge and as promoting the formation of Neostoic, Catholic, and burgerlijke virtues among Antwerp’s elites. Konstkamer pictures ally the nobility of the arts with viewers’ elevated capacity for discernment by depicting the enactment of connoisseurship as a new and valued skill for men of learning. Yet, even as these pictures idealize art collecting as an interlocking structure of social, political, and spiritual ideals—qualities that inform the ideal male citizen—they also mobilize sexual and economic discourses that intimate the difficulties of controlling potentially destructive desires. Focusing on works produced by the studio of Frans Francken the Younger, this essay investigates the gendered force of these discourses and proposes that the masculine virtue constructed in gallery pictures relies upon the mastery of dangers coded as feminine. Most prominent among these are the threats of sensory pleasures and appetites.

Pictura’s Delights and Dangers

The Archdukes Albert and Isabella in a Collector’s Cabinet, ca. 1621–32 (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) is an especially sumptuous example of this genre (fig. 1). It is a collaborative work in which the hands of at least two artists have been discerned, Jan Brueghel the Elder and one or more of the artists who worked in the studio of Frans Francken the Younger, where many such konstkamer pictures were produced between 1600 and 1625. At its center we see Isabella of Spain seated on a chair, while beside her stands her husband, Albert, with whom she jointly ruled the Habsburg Spanish Netherlands. Paintings crowd the walls. Works of sculpture, antiquities, and musical instruments share the space with a globe, maps, and exotic warm-water shells. The table by the windows at left displays an early version of the barometer, a device renowned in the seventeenth century as a perpetual motion machine. This fictional assemblage conveys a set of themes and allegorical motifs promoting the virtues of the arts and the legitimacy of knowledge gained through the sensory apprehension of the world.
In keeping with the genre’s conventions, elegantly dressed figures admire and appear to discuss the objects on view, enacting the important social dimension of art collecting that allowed discerning viewers to share their knowledge and good taste. In the early 1600s, art lovers—liefhebbers der schilderijen—occupied a newly established category in the Antwerp painters’ St. Luke’s Guild. In konstkamer pictures, art lovers execute the forms of civility that were becoming increasingly important across the Netherlands as greater wealth necessitated finer representations of social distinction. These figures enact the humanistic values of the pan-European Republic of Letters, while also displaying a specifically local civic identity: many of the gallery pictures produced in Antwerp feature locally produced artwork.

In the Walters painting, this civic theme is conveyed with special force. The sculpted figures over the doorway represent Mercury and Minerva, who were often invoked together in the seventeenth-century defense of painting as a liberal art that can persuade and instruct its viewers. Here the two gods flank the personification of Antwerp’s river, the Scheldt, asserting the city’s fame as a flourishing center of the arts. The works of art filling the space recall the styles and genres practiced by a broad range of local artists.

The largest of the depicted paintings, centrally placed above the back sideboard, is an allegory in the style of Otto van Veen, the Antwerp humanist painter and publisher of learned emblems, praised in his own time as pictor doctus (fig. 2). It represents Pictura Rescued by Wisdom and Fame from Ignorance. Pictura, recognizable by the mask of imitatio on her right shoulder, is gently supported by the winged Fame on the right. Behind her, a helmeted Minerva decisively subdues the sprawling figure of Ignorance whose attribute is his long ass’s ears. Ignorance’s counterparts can be found in another image displayed in this painted collection. Propped diagonally against a chair, this painting commands our special attention as the only one that interrupts the otherwise strict rectilinearity of the composition (fig. 3). Here, an ass-eared figure and his animal-headed companions destroy paintings and musical instruments. This scene of violent iconoclasm stands in opposition to the liefhebbers’ discerning appreciation of painting as a noble and virtuous instrument of knowledge and Catholic piety.
But even as the virtues of art and art lovers can be rendered as mutually supportive, paintings of art collections also betray anxieties about art as a desirable object of commerce and a source of sensory delight, against which its virtues must be continually asserted. Ignorance and iconoclasm are the enemies of art, but those who defend art’s values need also be wary of its allure. In the Walters picture, these dangers are alluded to in the three paintings at the left of the back wall, noteworthy as the only works representing historia, or narrative pictures (fig. 4). Their inclusion here ascribes to konstkamer pictures the elevating intellectual functions associated with historia in Renaissance academic art theory. This group begins on the far left with a night scene depicting Judith and Holofernes. In the seventeenth century Judith was a multivalent figure, well represented in literary and visual traditions. Her image could incline toward that of a masculine virago who abandoned her femininity when she wielded a sword and murdered a man, or she could be portrayed as a beautiful seductress who vanquished Holofernes not so much with her strength and cunning, as with her womanly wiles. That Judith’s triumph over the leader of the Assyrian army was an effect of her beauty is underscored here by the placement of the Judith image next to one of Diana and Acteon in the style of the Antwerp artist Hendrick van Balen. Both Holofernes and Acteon fatally succumbed to feminine beauty, thereby demonstrating the weakness of men made subject to the disordering power of sensory appetites.

In the world of the educated humanists who were the audience for such pictures, the most familiar defense against the dangers of indulging the senses and allowing oneself to be ruled by the passions was the notion of self-mastery developed by Justus Lipsius, the preeminent Neostoic scholar who had strong connections to Antwerp’s elites. It is in this light that we might understand the resonance of the third historia, an image of Abraham and Isaac. Here both father and son are exemplars of male adherence to divine and paternal law and the requirements of duty: the son who obeys his father, and the father who obeys the command of God. Abraham’s self-command, his ability to quell his passion in order to fulfill his duty, is what spares him in the end from the need to enact the awful deed. If the Judith and Diana pictures denote the dangers to men of sensory indulgence, then the Abraham and Isaac image asserts that
overcoming the emotions has enduring necessity as a condition of masculine authority.

Taken together, as the composition encourages the viewer to do, these three subjects elaborate upon the specific conditions under which the rescue of Pictura can be secured. The love of art must not be fed by an unfettered lust for beauty. Instead, the desirable body of Pictura, must remain allied with the armored body of Wisdom, as depicted in the painting above the sideboard. In rendering Pictura as a partially undraped figure, these artists mobilize the well-established Renaissance trope of female beauty as a sign for Art, while also implicitly positing the ideal liefheber as a desirous male. Art's powers, both pleasurable and dangerous, are coded as feminine, while the viewer's necessary self-mastery is promoted as an inherently masculine virtue.

Delilah and the Lure of Lucre

Over the course of the seventeenth century the allure of Pictura was increasingly understood to include not only the dangers of beauty as a spur to destructive sensory appetites but also the morally fraught enticements of the marketplace. Antwerp saw the emergence of an increasingly moneyed and politically powerful “commercial elite,” who contributed crucially to the booming sale of artworks, especially from around 1600 to 1650. Owning a fine house and adorning it with an art collection were among the means by which men like the spice merchant Cornelis van der Geest and the city burgomaster Nicolaas Rockox established their civic stature. Both of these men’s celebrated art collections were in turn commemorated in konstkamer pictures: Willem van Haecht’s Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest, ca. 1628 (Antwerp, Rubenshuis), and Frans Francken II’s Large Salon in the House of Nicolaas Rockox, ca. 1630–35 (Munich, Alte Pinakothek).

Francken’s Rockox picture (fig. 5) depicts a banquet in a room that includes several works known to have been in the Rockox collection. The view through the doorway on the left offers a glimpse of the Doubting Thomas triptych (ca. 1614) that Rockox commissioned from Rubens, which in fact was displayed not in the patron’s home, but in the family chapel in the Church of the Minorites. The largest, centrally placed image is another Rubens picture that Rockox owned, the Samson and Delilah (ca. 1609–10, London, National Gallery of Art), which we know was positioned as a chimneypiece in Rockox’s home. On the right of the chimney is a variant by Marinus van Reymerswaele of The Moneylender and His Wife by the preeminent sixteenth-century Antwerp artist Quentin Metsys. The Virgin and Christ diptych directly below represents a Metsys that was in the Rockox collection. This grouping invites us to see Rubens, Antwerp’s most celebrated artist of the seventeenth century, as the inheritor of Metsys’s renown in the sixteenth century.

Figure 5. Frans Francken II, Large Salon in the House of Nicolaas Rockox, ca. 1630–35, oil on panel, 62.3 x 96.5 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 858 (Photo: Bildarchiv PreussicherKulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York) (artwork in the public domain)
This diachronic scheme coexists with the allegory of the senses that is enacted by the fashionable couples as they drink, dine, and make music and is further developed by the paintings arrayed behind them. The *Doubting Thomas* affirms vision and touch as the means of apprehending spiritual truths, in contrast to the *Moneylender* that shows these senses directed to material rather than spiritual aims. The *Samson and Delilah* would also have resonated richly with the theme of the senses and sensory appetites, while recalling Lipsius's formulation of lust as a “womanish vice.” Samson’s desires unman him and lead to his defeat, while Delilah, figured as a prostitute accompanied by her elderly procuress, is ruled by her combined appetite for sex and money. The central Old Testament scene of greed and veniality functions as an antitype to the scene of civil sociability enacted before it, legitimating by contrast the licit enjoyment of food, drink, music, and works of art in the sanctified space of the home. Antithesis, like that exemplified by the *liebhebbers* who view the depiction of iconoclasm, is one organizing rhetorical structure in this image.

But Francken’s scene of feasting also stands in dialogue with a broader array of contemporary images engaging the theme of the five senses. On one hand, works like David Teniers the Younger’s *Prodigal Son*, ca. 1640 (Minneapolis Institute of Arts) (fig. 6), combine the allegory of the senses with the biblical narrative of riotous living for which the wayward youth will later repent. On the other hand, Francken’s picture also alludes to the representation of the five senses in the celebrated series of paintings made for Albert and Isabella by Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel. Francken’s painting specifically domesticates this theme and lodges it within theburger class. The *Sense of Sight* in this series depicts a richly appointed art cabinet in which vision is celebrated as the instrument of knowledge, faith, and learned forms of delight. Viewing the Francken Rockox painting in relation to the Teniers *Prodigal Son* and the Rubens/Brueghel *Sight* shows how its antithetical structure, proposing civility and veniality as opposites, intersects with a structure of difference by degree. The work posits its scene of merrymaking in an unstable position along a continuum that extends from “low” (tavern and bordello) to “high” (courtly) spaces of sensual delight and material consumption.

This rhetorically fluid representation of the senses effectively assisted the construction of masculinity among the Antwerp elite. The “aristocratization” of Antwerp’s merchant elite over the course of the seventeenth century is a phenomenon well noted by historians. Men whose wealth had allowed them to retire from commercial enterprise increasingly sought patents of nobility, and those still in the marketplace sought the trappings of an aristocratic way of life. Conspicuous consumption was an instrument of social distinction: living like a noble could be a first step toward obtaining the patent (Rockox, who came from an affluent, though not noble family, was knighted one year after he married Adriana Perez, the daughter of a wealthy merchant). Second, it could function as an index of credit-worthiness. As the historian Peter Mathias has stated, “if access to credit was the first rule for success in business, then credit-worthiness was the means to this essential end.” Credit-worthiness was built upon personal trust and personal reputation in a context of high business risk where institutional procedures and safeguards were weak. In a society in which status was founded increasingly upon mercantile wealth, living well could serve as an indication of fiscal solvency and acumen. Flemish painting had functioned to promote both social standing and entrepreneurial trustworthiness in a tradition extending back to the fifteenth century. Jan van Eyck’s portrait of the textile merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, for example, affiliates the businessman with the judicious display of luxury in order
to help establish and uphold his reputation.20

The Francken painting’s theme of appetite and material consumption hence overlaps with strategies for the display and performance of credit-worthiness. The ideal of masculinity that it proposes is of an upright man who will not be laid low by his lust and who will balance his pursuit of profit with the aims of faith. His position within a world of sociability demonstrates the trust accorded him by others—a quality essential to conducting trade—while his sensory enjoyment of fine food, drink, and music, as well as works of art emulates the forms of noble, gracious living. The Rockox picture, in this reading, proposes that masculine virtue is not a state of absolute difference from veniality and vice but is achieved as a matter of degree, requiring balance and discernment in acts of cultural and sensory consumption.

Fortuna: Mastering Risk

Balance is also at stake in another Francken konstkamer picture, one that stresses both the production and consumption of works of art. Francken’s Painter’s Cabinet (Getxo, Spain, private collection) depicts an artist at work at his easel painting an image of Fortuna, who poses before him, fully nude, improbably balancing on a ball (fig. 7).21 The figure of Fortuna and her close correlate, Opportunity, attracted particular interest in Antwerp in the early seventeenth century, as painters, including Rubens, associated the struggle to contain and “fix” these allegorical figures with the power of art. The artist who masters Fortuna by transforming her into an image performs constancy, a key Neostoic virtue, described by Lipsius as the capacity to resist base desires and appetites so as to be ruled instead by reason and faith.22 In this Painter’s Cabinet, as in the Rockox picture, the overarching theme is elaborated in the pictures on display. The mantel picture on the left depicts Croesus and Solon, a story drawn from Herodotus and Plutarch, in which the wise man Solon rebuked King Croesus for mistaking his wealth for happiness. At the center of the back wall, flanked by images of the Crucifixion and the Adoration of the Magi, a large painting of the Death of Seneca invokes the guiding philosopher of Neostoicism. Taken together these depicted pictures contrast the value of wealth with spiritual and philosophical insight. More specifically, they invite us to see the artist positioned directly below them as guided in his labors not by greed but by faith and reason. However, signs of wealth reappear in the pile of gold and jewels displayed upon the table. This sumptuous display of goods stands in dynamic tension with those that Solon gestures toward: material luxury might designate vanitas, but here in the painter’s studio it also invokes our admiration, positively denoting art’s marketplace value as an indicator of its virtue. The picture praises the artist’s capacity to control Fortuna’s inconstancy by producing works of lasting worth. With the inclusion of the aristocratic couple who appear to be patrons or clients, Francken depicts the multiple productive activities of the studio: not only is it a workshop that trains the next generation of artists (indicated by the pupil studiously at work in the foreground) thus perpetuating the fertile system, it is also a site where laudable goods of value are made and sold. Francken draws here upon a well-established Renaissance tradition whereby the man of virtù strives to tame and
master Fortuna’s inconstancy. In an engraving attributed to the studio of Marcantonio Raimondi, *Fortuna*, again balancing upon balls and holding a rudder, another one of her attributes, is seized by a man who flogs her into submission (fig. 8). The image recalls Machiavelli’s assertion in *The Prince* (1513) that “Fortune is a woman and it is necessary in order to keep her under, to cuff and maul her.” In Francken’s painting *Fortuna* confirms that the burgerlijke ideal must be won against female forces, that men, including the artist and his client, need to control. *Fortuna* in this context resonates not only with Neostoic morals but also with mercantile desires to overcome the unpredictable elements of risky ventures.

**Conclusion**

![Figure 8. Marcantonio Raimondi, Heroic Man Combatting Fortuna, ca. 1500–1520, engraving, 1.43 x 1.33 cm (artwork in the public domain)](image)

The rise of a capital economy of surplus in the early modern Southern and Northern Netherlands necessitated new attitudes: expenditure on goods, even, or perhaps especially on luxury goods, kept the economy running. But all of this was fueled by the troublesome and difficult to control passion of desire. In Antwerp paintings had become a key commodity; pictures of art lovers consuming them thus performed a particularly complex kind of cultural work. On the one hand, gallery pictures could signify the robust health of Antwerp’s most lucrative kind of trade; on the other hand, such pictures needed to quell anxieties that their seductions could stoke unbridled and destructive appetites. In konstkamer paintings it is not only the sensory appetites that must be mastered, guarded against and brought into a careful and judicious balance but also the enticements of risky, heedless behaviors in the marketplace, itself conceived of in this period as a seductress.

Threatened by the lure of excess expenditure, or the sterility of miserly withholding, masculine virtue emerges in the works discussed here as a dynamic and unstable quality expressed through overlapping motifs of sexual and economic expenditure or restraint. Samson’s calamitous, lustful dissipation stands in contrast to the licit consumption of fine goods enacted by the couples in the Rockox painting; the intimation of sterile hoarding in the van Reymerswaele *Moneylender* contrasts with coin circulating in the marketplace as a sign of painting’s praiseworthy value in the *Painter’s Cabinet*. As *Pictura*’s value was increasingly linked to its place in a thriving local economy, its virtue, and the virtue of art lovers, required the support of an increasingly subtle and elastic set of arguments. While konstkamer pictures aim to smoothly match representation, possession, knowledge, and virtue, they do so not as a settled and triumphant claim but as a difficult and fraught ideal toward which the exemplary man—the Catholic, citizen, merchant, and lover of painting—must strive.
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Figure 2. Detail of fig. 1

Figure 3. Detail of fig. 1

Figure 4. Detail of fig. 1

Figure 5. Frans Francken II, Large Salon in the House of Nicolaas Rockox, ca. 1630–35, oil on panel, 62.3 x 96.5 cm. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 858 (Photo: Bildarchiv PreussischerKulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York) (artwork in the public domain)

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Figure 8. Marcantonio Raimondi, Heroic Man Combatting Fortuna, ca. 1500–1520, engraving, 1.43 x 1.33 cm (artwork in the public domain)

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12 This artist’s name has several variant spellings: Metsys, Massys, and Matsys. For an excellent account of his importance to the artistic culture of seventeenth-century Antwerp, see Maria-Isabel Pousão-Smith, “Quinten Matsys and Seventeenth-Century Antwerp: An Artist and His Uses,” *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp* (2001): 137–87 (on the *Moneychanger and His Wife*, 175ff).


18 See Díaz Padrón and Royo-Villanova, Gabinetes de Pinturas, 112–25, cat. no. 9.


20 See Margaret Carroll, “‘In the Name of God and Profit’: Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait,” Representations 44 (1993): 96–132.


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