Lawrence W. Nichols: *The Paintings of Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617). A Monograph and Catalogue Raisonné (= Aetas Aurea, vol. XXII)*, Doornspijk: Davaco Publishers 2013

ISBN-13: 978-90-70288-28-0, 466 pages, 207 plates, € 275

Reviewed by: Christian Tico Seifert, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

This book has been long awaited and, to say it straightaway, the wait has been worthwhile. Hot on the heels of Marjolein Leesberg's superb New Hollstein volumes on Hendrick Goltzius's prints, Lawrence Nichols has finally published his magisterial monograph on the painter Goltzius.[1] It is a hefty, clothbound volume, beautifully designed and printed.

The book opens with a chapter on the tantalising but crucial question why Goltzius in 1600, aged forty-two and famous across Europe as the most skilful engraver of his age, lay down the burin forever to take up brushes and oil paint. Nichols, rightly in my view, dismisses poor health and failing eyesight as the main reasons for Goltzius decision. However, it should be remembered that the one-year-old Goltzius had been severely burnt in an accident that left his right hand crippled for life. Decades of printmaking could have exhausted the strength of his hand. Certainly, holding pen and brush is physically easier than controlling the burin on a copper plate. Nichols carefully examines Goltzius's prints and drawings and detects a 'lifelong predilection for tonal gradation, if not actual color' (21). His portrait drawings in red and black chalks, heightened with white and subtly washed, show him as a sensitive colourist, and his chiaroscuro woodcuts demonstrate his interest as a printmaker in colour. Goltzius's grisaille in oil on paper 'Without Ceres and Bacchus Venus Would Freeze' (British Museum, London) of 1599, according to Nichols 'foreshadows his conversion to painting' (25). These valid arguments suggest painting as a logical last step of a progressive artistic career. Nichols also emphasises that Karel van Mander regarded history painting as the highest point of art and that this inspired his friend Goltzius 'to make the transition to the noble art of Apelles' (26). He claims that Goltzius's decision was a 'response to a theoretical standpoint' (77) – but this does not explain why he started painting so late in life. One misses a discussion of Eric Jan Sluijter's article on the subject which Nichols dismisses in a mere footnote (23, note 29).[2] Sluijter saw Goltzius's Italian sojourn (1590-91) as the crucial experience that led him to change from the refined linearity of his mannerist engravings to a more naturalistic, 'painterly' approach after his return. According to Sluijter, Goltzius ultimately recognised the limitations of printmaking to express his new ideals and started to paint. Moreover, he had already surpassed, certainly in Van Mander's opinion, Dürer and Lucas van Leyden as printmakers and only in painting he was able to challenge the great Italian masters such as Titian and Correggio. That Frans Badens introduced Goltzius to oil painting, as Sluijter suggested, is not unlikely but difficult to prove, not least because of the complete absence of signed paintings by Badens. Nichols's claim that Goltzius was able to paint straightaway without any training at all is hardly convincing. That Van Mander does not mention any training seems to be in line with him deliberately styling Goltzius's reputation as the 'Protean' artist who was able to effortlessly imitate any artist or style. Nichols undermines his own argument comparing Goltzius to Dürer and Lucas van Leyden, who

did not find ‘it difficult to take up oil painting when they decided to do so’ (23, note 29). Both of them had been trained as painters and practised as such since the early days of their careers. Goltzius admired Lucas’s paintings and in 1602 acquired his ‘Christ Healing of the Blind Man of Jericho’ (Hermitage, St. Petersburg) for a large sum of money. According to Van Mander, Lucas had painted it ‘to demonstrate his utmost ability in art in order to leave it to the world as an embellishment and to be admired for the immortality of his fame.’[3] Lucas and Dürer – different from Goltzius’s Italian heroes – had both excelled as printmakers, draughtsmen, and painters. By taking up painting, Goltzius set out to surpass them in this last domain as well, to ultimately shape his own immortality.

The second chapter describes Goltzius’s life from 1600 to his death in 1617 (complemented by a three-page biographical outline that covers his entire career). It is particularly informative, and one regrets that Nichols has limited it to Goltzius’s years as a painter. In 1603 Goltzius bought a large house close to the Grote Markt in Haarlem for the considerable sum of 9,600 guilders. The basis of his wealth at this point must still have been his print business which he had handed over to his stepson Jacob Matham. However, Nichols demonstrates that from the outset Goltzius did very well as a painter, too, and in 1613 he was paid the enormous amount of 2,700 guilders for the series of three paintings depicting ‘Mercury’, ‘Minerva’, and ‘Hercules and Cacus’ (Mauritshuis, The Hague, on loan to the Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem; A-35, A-39, A-40). Nichols carefully traces Goltzius’s life during those years, reconstructing his artistic, economic, social, and religious environment as well as his involvement in the local chamber of rhetoric (‘rederijkerskamer’) and his alchemical pursuits.

In the third chapter Nichols analyses the paintings. Goltzius started with small copper panels, a material he was utterly familiar with, but quickly moved on to large formats, using panel as well as canvas supports. Regrettably, information on Goltzius’s working methods and technique is still scarce and little has been published on the technical examination of his paintings. Nichols cannot be blamed for this and gathers all the evidence available. Clearly, drawings were of great importance for Goltzius developing his compositions. However, there is little evidence for underdrawings in his paintings and none at all for any sort of transfer processes. Given that ‘pentimenti’ are rare, he must have prepared his compositions carefully on their supports before starting to paint. Nichols describes the artistic references Goltzius made in his paintings to works by Dürer and Lucas van Leyden, Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian, and, particularly during his last years, to Rubens.[4] For Goltzius, prints after Rubens’s compositions must have been the main source of inspiration, although some paintings were already in the Northern Netherlands in the 1610s. He embraced Rubens’s subject-matter, compositions, figure types, and colouring. Like Rubens, Goltzius occasionally painted portraits, but was primarily a history painter, focussing on subjects that allowed for the depiction of life-size (female) nude figures. That the artistic exchange between Rubens and Goltzius was a reciprocal one has recently been highlighted by Filip Vermeylen and Karolien De Clippel.[5]

The last chapter traces Goltzius’s critical fortune from his own lifetime up to the present day. Goltzius seems to have had a slow start as painter. In 1603, he purportedly had finished only three paintings (67, 278). Van Mander, in his ‘Schilder-Boeck’ of 1604, described seven paintings, four of which are still in existence. Nichols demonstrates that, nevertheless, Goltzius’s fame as a painter spread rapidly and his paintings were much sought after almost immediately. Among the first collectors were Emperor Rudolf II in Prague (also an admirer of his prints and drawings), and Henry, Prince of Wales, the elder brother of the future Charles I. Throughout the seventeenth century,

Goltzius's paintings featured in prominent collections in the Netherlands and abroad, and were usually given high valuations in inventories. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, his fame rested almost exclusively on his prints, partly because of the rarity of his paintings, partly for reasons of taste. It was only in the twentieth century that scholars such as Otto Hirschmann and Wolfgang Stechow reconsidered the painter Goltzius, followed by Emil Reznicek and Nichols himself.

This last chapter, like the one on the artist's biography, is largely based on the immensely useful appendix of documents and printed references to Goltzius predating 1800. This appendix of more than one-hundred pages (the essays comprise sixty-six pages) is an updated and expanded version of Nichols's ground-breaking article of 1993.[6] A few additions may be considered: a remarkable piece of evidence for Goltzius's early international fame, albeit as a printmaker, is not mentioned by Nichols. In Gabriel Kaltemarckt's 'Bedencken, wie eine Kunst Cammer aufzurichten sein möchte', written in 1587 at the court of Prince Elector Christian I in Dresden, 'Heinrich Gholz' features in the list of famous printmakers, past and present, whose works are regarded as the cornerstone of the ideal print collection.[7] Kaltemarckt's reference came at a time when Goltzius had only just started to make engravings after designs by Bartholomäus Spranger. These prints made him famous across Europe almost immediately, so it seems. Nichols mentions that Jan van de Velde dedicated a page of his calligraphy book 'Spieghel der Schrijf-konste' (1605) to Goltzius (42) but did not include this text in his appendix.[8] He also briefly refers to Edward Norgate's 'Miniatura or the Art of Limning' (1627-28/1648) which contains a reference to a lost, life-size pen work on canvas depicting a 'Sleeping Diana' (135-36, note 8) that would have deserved an entry in Nichols's Catalogue B, covering paintings known only from description. Norgate had met Goltzius in Haarlem, perhaps in or after 1612: 'Henry Goltzius of Harlem shewed mee some of his doeing in dry colours upon writing Vellim after the life, the faces about the bignes of a Jacobus [a coin of about 35mm diameter], exceeding well and neatly done.'[9] Henry Peacham in the chapter on drawing, limning and painting of his 'Compleat Gentleman' (1622) recommended 'For a bold touch, variety of posture, curious and true shadow, imitate Goltzius, his prints are commonly to be had in Popes-head-alley [in London]', and continues 'Himselfe was living at my last being in the Low Countries [1613-14] at Harlen [Haarlem]: but by reason of the losse of one of his eyes, he hath given over etching in copper, and altogether exerciseth his pencil in oyle.'[10] Interestingly, Goltzius's purported loss of one eye is also mentioned by Constantijn Huygens in his autobiography of about 1630 (41, 71, 331). Could he and Peacham have met and discussed Goltzius's art whilst the latter was briefly serving in Prince Maurits of Orange's army in 1614?

At the heart of Nichols's book is the superb critical catalogue, embedded between two sets of magnificent plates. The first illustrates all paintings by Goltzius in colour plates, the second comprises comparative illustrations, mostly in colour and likewise of the highest quality. The first set is arranged chronologically and allows one to follow Goltzius's artistic development year by year, whereas the catalogue is arranged by subject. Nichols regards fifty-nine works as autograph (Catalogue A), all of which still in existence he has examined first-hand. This group includes the two 'pen-wercken' on canvas (A 31, A 32) and two drawings on panel (A 50, A 56), but not the above mentioned grisaille in oil on paper 'Without Ceres and Bacchus Venus Would Freeze'. Nichols lists 160 pictures only known from written sources such as inventories and sale catalogues (Catalogue B) and rejects thirty-eight paintings (Catalogue C).The entries are exemplary and completely up--to-date (A 59 was bought in at the sale Nichols noted when his book was going to press; Sotheby's, New York, 31 January 2013, lot 40). Provenances, exhibitions and the literature are document-

ed meticulously. Historical context (if known), subject-matter, pictorial tradition, iconography and interpretations are thoroughly discussed. The vast majority of the paintings are signed, forty-six are also dated, the earliest 1602; only six works bear no signature or date at all. Judging by the dated works, Goltzius's slow start as a painter continued until about 1612 with an annual production varying from one to five paintings. However, during the last four years of his life, Goltzius painted six or seven works per year.[11] Six of his panel paintings are square, turned forty-five degrees, and thus resting on one corner, similar to a lozenge (A 7, A 15, A 29, A 30, A 42, A 48, see particularly p. 130 and also B 66). This is an uncommon format, primarily used for funeral shields and blazons of chambers of rhetoric. Several of the subjects depicted are rare in Dutch painting (A 5, A 8, A 13, A 34) and a number feature unusual iconography (A 30, A 39, A 40, A 42). Even Nichols, in an exhaustive entry, has to admit that the 'Allegory' (Kunstmuseum, Basel, A 55) evades a conclusive interpretation and 'remains enigmatic'.(180) The greatest benefit of Nichols's monograph, beyond the wealth of information provided, is to show Goltzius's painted œuvre in its entirety. A number of the paintings are little known even among specialists, and many are in private collections and have rarely been exhibited publicly.

Nichols's magnificent and immensely useful monograph enriches our image of Goltzius's art and enhances our understanding of it substantially. His book complements Reznicek's catalogues of Goltzius's drawings and Leesberg's Hollstein volumes ideally, and will be frequently consulted for a long time to come.

[1] Marjolein Leesberg: Hendrick Goltzius (The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450-1700), ed. by H. Leeflang, 4 vols., Ouderkerk aan den Ijssel 2012.

[2] Eric Jan Sluijter: Goltzius, Painting and Flesh; or, Why Goltzius Began to Paint in 1600, in: M. van den Doel et al. (eds.), The Learned Eye. Regarding Art, Theory, and the Artist's Reputation. Essays for Ernst van de Wetering, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 158-177.

[3] Karel van Mander: The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters, from the first edition of the Schilder-boeck (1603-1604), ed. by H. Miedema, 6 vols., Doornspijk 1994-1999, vol. 1 (1994), p. 110 (fol. 213r.).

[4] For Goltzius and Michelangelo see also Andreas Gormans: Watching fingers. Michelangelo and Hendrick Goltzius, Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander, in: A. Ducci (ed.), Chirurgia della creazione. Mano e arti visivi (Predella 29), Ghezzano 2011, pp. 97-107 (http://predella.arte.unipi.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=173:watching-fingers-michelangelo-and-hendrick-goltzius-giorgio-vasari-and-karel-van-mander&catid=65:nd-29-titolo-del-numero&Itemid=94) [accessed 15 November 2013].

[5] Filip Vermeylen and Karolien De Clippel: Rubens and Goltzius in Dialogue. Artistic Exchanges between Antwerp and Haarlem during the Revolt, in: De Zeventiende Eeuw 28 (2012), pp. 138-160. (http://www.de-zeventiende-eeuw.nl/index.php/dze/article/view/URN%3ANBN%3ANL%3AUI%3A10-1-113922/8627) [accessed 15 November 2013]. This article was published after Nichols's book had gone to press.

[6] Lawrence W. Nichols: Hendrick Goltzius – Documents and Printed Literature Concerning his Life, in: Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 42-43 (1991-1992) [1993], pp. 77-120.

[7] Christien Melzer: Zur Theorie der Druckgraphik in Gabriel Kaltemarckts 'Bedencken, wie eine Kunst Cammer aufzurichten sein möchte' (1587), in: M. A. Castor et al. (eds.), Druckgraphik. Zwischen Reproduktion und Invention (Passagen – Passages, vol. 31), Berlin/Munich 2010, pp. 223-239, 229 (fig. 4), 230, 236 (quote).

[8] Amy Namowitz Worthen: Calligraphic Inscriptions on Dutch Mannerist Prints, in: Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 42-43 (1991-1992) [1993], pp. 261-306, 262 (fig. 165), a transcription and an English translation on p. 299, note 2. (With thanks to Huigen Leeflang.)

[9] Edward Norgate, Miniatura or the Art of Limning, ed. by J. M. Muller and J. Murrell, New Haven and London 1997, p. 102 (quote), cf. pp. 196-97, note 254 and pp. 230-31; the reference to the 'Sleeping Diana' on p. 107.

[10] [Henry] Peacham's Compleat Gentleman 1634, ed. by G. S. Gordon, Oxford 1906, p. 128.

[11] 1602 (1 painting), 1603 (2), 1606 (1), 1607 (5), 1608 (3), 1609 (4), 1610 (3), 1611 (1), 1612 (1), 1613 (6), 1614 (6), 1615 (7), 1616 (6).

Recommended Citation:
Christian Tico Seifert: [Review of:] Lawrence W. Nichols: *The Paintings of Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617). A Monograph and Catalogue Raisonné (= Aetas Aurea, vol. XXII)*, Doornspijk 2013. In: ArtHist.net, Dec 19, 2013 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/reviews/6661>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/