Hirschfelder, Dagmar: *Tronie und Porträt in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag 2008
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Some critics use the word 'tronie' as the name of a genre comparable to that of landscape or portrait but this a recent development, not justified by the way in which seventeenth-century sources apply the word. Hirschfelder rightly concludes that we don't have a useable definition for this class of paintings yet, and she tries to find it by studying the similarities and differences between tronies and related groups of paintings. Every single aspect of this limited subject is carefully analysed and this monolith of solidity and thoroughness could be considered a classic in the field of art history, if only an editor had been hired to reduce its text by 30%, reorganising it and making superfluous the many repetitions that seem to be unavoidable in the book's present structure. This is my main objection to an otherwise admirable book.
The author concludes that the makers of 'tronies' aimed for the depiction of highly interesting types of figures with characteristic physiognomies, and at the same time tried to demonstrate their virtuosity in all aspects of their craft. She states that the 'tronie' originated in Leiden and Haarlem in the third decade of the seventeenth century, where Jan Lievens, Rembrandt and Frans Hals were its inventors. This choice implies a definition: a painting is a 'tronie' when it has the characteristics these three artists gave to their 'tronies'. The author's criteria are mostly negative; a 'tronie' is a head or a half-figure without significant attributes or actions, not identified as a figure from history, literature, mythology or the Bible. The face is not stereotyped as the representative of one of the social or psychological groups we know from genre painting, such as the quick-tempered 'Capitano', the miser or the glutton. Although the model can be identified in some cases, the 'tronie' is no portrait.
Hirschfelder adds one more criterion: 'realism' (I will come back to the use of this term). For this reason she excludes all sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century heads, busts and half figures. They are not 'tronies', but works of precursors, the author states. Bloemaert and Van Honthorst are excluded also; from 1621 onwards, they elaborated caravaggesque examples in which lighting effects and facial expressions were studied, but the Utrecht masters characterised their protagonists by manipulating and intensifying well-known stereotypes, not working 'naer het leeven' (ad vivum). Neither did they experiment with a free and personally varied brush stroke as Hals, Lievens and Rembrandt did.
Pieter Bruegel and his son Pieter the younger are possible exceptions: some of their expressive heads may or may not have been done after life, and their example was imitated by specialists in low-life genre. Hirschfelder treats the 'tronies' of Adriaen van Ostade and others in a separate chapter as being outside her field of research. They certainly are 'tronies', but they are too easily recognised as such, whereas her special interest is the exploration of the terra incognita in between the 'tronie' and other genres such as the portrait (as the title of her book indicates). Giving Van Ostade and his predecessors from the Southern Netherlands their due would have upset

Hirschfelder’s chronology, because the Brueghels were evidently earlier than Lievens and Hals.

These introductory remarks are not meant to belittle Hirschfelder’s work. One might follow Hirschfelder in saying that Lievens and Rembrandt initiated a new form of art - the 'tronie' - that was to become very successful for half a century. One might decide also that the 'tronie' was nearly a century old when Lievens and Rembrandt successfully renewed or reinvented a venerable tradition. Earlier artists are seen as precursors in one case, and source of inspiration in the other; the difference is no more than a play on words. The author’s choice focuses attention on what was new and inspiring in the work of these two pioneers. A detailed analysis of the Leiden 'tronies' made by Lievens and Rembrandt forms the basis upon which the field is mapped out. Hirschfelder rightly concludes that Jan Lievens took the lead; he developed the tronie from the older tradition of half figures, such as Evangelists, Apostles et cetera, by concentrating on the heads and making them anonymous by eliminating their attributes. These heads are used to study special effects of lighting, to observe physiognomies and their expressions, and to develop a greater freedom in handling the brush than other subjects allowed. The word ‘study’ should not be taken literally; a 'tronie' is a demonstration of artistic prowess and there is not always a direct relation to a more elaborate composition in which the ‘study’ is reused. Rembrandt frequently depicted his own countenance instead of hiring someone else as a model, but both artists worked 'naer het leeven' (after life), depicting aspects of reality .
This approach, Hirschfelder believes, was quintessential because it gave Lievens and Rembrandt the freedom to break away from iconographic traditions and the associated facial stereotypes. Hirschfelder wants tronies to have the effect of being true to life (‘lebensnahe Wirkung’), thanks to an uncompromising rendering of reality (‘Naturnähe im Sinne ungeschönter Darstellung’). Indeed, this is what elevates the Leiden 'tronies' above all earlier attempts, but one could ask if it was wise to make the definition of a new category of paintings hinge on the combination of style and quality, indicated until recently as ‘realism’. This is especially problematic in the case of Frans Floris. For stylistic reasons Floris cannot be considered a forerunner of Lievens and Rembrandt, Hirschfelder says, but he became a pioneer when his head studies reached Dutch seventeenth-century collectors. His 'non-tronies' showed interesting foreshortenings, original effect of lighting, strongly emotional facial expressions, very loose brushstrokes in some cases, and they had no meaningful attributes. They differed in nothing from the new Leiden 'tronies', in other words, apart from their style and their origin. Floris’ head studies were not meant to circulate outside his studio, the author says, but I am not convinced that this is entirely true. Moreover, in Rembrandt’s workshop there was no hard dividing line between marketable 'tronies' and head studies made for studio use.
Most of Frans Hals’ busts and half figures are recognisable as figures from the world of genre: they play musical instruments, smoke a pipe or celebrate their addiction to alcohol. Some have attributes or costumes associating them with the itinerant theatre. Some figures represent social groups such as the fisher boys and girls placed before a landscape of beach and dunes. I prefer to see the 'Malle Babbe' and the so-called 'Gipsy Girl' as genre figures too, but Hirschfelder tends to be lenient, labelling some of Hals’s half figures as 'tronies'. What remains, I think, is a small number of roundels with laughing children. One could wonder why Hals was given such a prominent place in the introductory chapters, when he plays no role of importance in the rest of this book. Hirschfelder’s criterion was Hals’s exceptional combination of a free brush stroke and ‘realism’. After 1631, when Lievens left for England and Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam, the 'tronie'

was determined by and large by what had been initiated in Leiden prior to that; it would live on mostly in narrower and wider circles around the last mentioned. There was no ‘school of Hals’ among the makers of tronies.

Hirschfelder took the trouble to demarcate the difference between 'tronies' and portraits as precisely as possible. There are great similarities when only heads or busts are depicted and in both kinds of painting the rendering of faces tends to be true to nature (‘naturgetreue Wiedergabe’). But, due to their function, portraits document the appearance of their sitters as precisely as possible and in this context Hirschfelder speaks of ‘verism’, a kind of super-realism. The freedom of brushstroke on the one hand, the attention to fashionable details of clothing on the other may make it easier to decide what is what, but the difference between a 'portrait historié' and a 'tronie' is not always clear at first sight. The narrative portrait was introduced in the Northern Netherlands in the sixteen-twenties by Gerard van Honthorst. But soon after 1630 portraits appeared in which the sitters were dressed up as the protagonists of a history painting without being identifiable as actors in any biblical, historical or mythological story. Hirschfelder calls this the 'costume portrait' and she is right in stressing the difference between it and the historiated portrait. The first experiments in this direction were not too different from conventional portraits but, thanks to the popularity of the 'tronie', an increasing degree of freedom was noticeable in this new variety of portraits.

The librarian acquiring this book may be tempted to shelve it with the Rembrandt literature, especially after reading the chapter on 'Selbstdarstellungen': paintings in which the artist depicted his own features. The romantic idea that a painter used his art to determine his own identity, as a way to fathom the depths of his soul amazingly survived, or was resuscitated by American authors on Rembrandt’s ‘self portraits’ such as Perry Chapman [1]. Dagmar Hirschfelder rightly counters these antiquated ideas, choosing to side with Ernst van de Wetering [2]. The central idea is that art in the seventeenth century had become liberated enough to be appreciated and collected as art, which stimulated interest in form and style as opposed to content. This tendency is to be observed during the seventeenth century in other genres as well; architectural painting for instance or the townscape in which iconographic traditions and ‘hidden’ moral messages seem to have evaporated almost completely. The 'tronie', with its anonymous models doing and meaning next to nothing, was perfect for collectors who wanted an affordable proof of the mastery of a given painter. This master made himself recognisable by his personal style, his signature and sometimes also by depicting his own features. Van de Wetering explains that the production of personalised ‘collector’s items’ was a new function of the 'tronie' that did not replace its earlier functions.

The place of the 'tronie' among the other genres is unclear. Hirschfelder speaks of the hierarchy of genres as if it were a closed and unalterable system, but I cannot see why we would not be free to change or expand it. For practical reasons I would prefer to call the 'tronie' a genre by itself, but Hirschfelder sees it as a theme (Bildaufgabe) within the wider field of figural painting, i.e. genre and history painting combined. She argues that the 'tronie' was created by figure painters, that there are many borderline cases and that the new genre had no specialists, but I don’t see this as serious problems and one could ask if Rembrandt was not a specialist in 'tronies' in later phases of his development.

In her last chapter, Hirschfelder confronts the distinguishing features of the 'tronie' as she sees it with the art theory of the seventeenth century. She rightly concludes that all these qualities were highly regarded and thus corroborates her earlier statement that a good 'tronie' was a convincing proof of a painter’s mastery. Among the points discussed in these pages is one quality that the

author did not mention before: 'painterliness'. Hirschfelder uses the Dutch word 'schilderachtigheid' in parentheses without proposing a German or English alternative and she rightly borrows the definition given by Boudewijn Bakker as "richly varied, colourful and diverse, but also as remarkable, peculiar, distinctive and unusual" [3]. Indeed, there seems to be no better way to characterise the 'tronie' in general than by applying the adjective ‘painterly’ ('malerisch' in German). The author rightly says that the preference for work in a painterly style diminished in the last quarter of the seventeenth century as a result of the increasing vogue for classicism. The 'tronie' thus lost its popularity together with the style it was so closely associated with.

Hirschfelder is also correct in stating that painterliness as defined by Bakker presupposes a close observation of the imperfections of reality. When a painter wanted to record the traits of a drunken peasant, an itinerant musician or a maid scouring kettles, he had to accentuate what was 'remarkable', 'peculiar' and 'distinctive' about his model and the group he or she belonged to. The artist did not create a document on the biography of this one person; he brought the stereotypes and prejudices to life that determined his own perception and that of his buyers. Philips Angel, whose 'Lof der Schilder-Konst' of 1642 Hirschfelder quotes extensively, had his own terminology. What Bakker calls 'remarkable', 'peculiar', and 'distinctive' is 'eyghen' or 'eygentlick' is the language of Angel’s and Rembrandt’s time. An alternative translations of 'eyghen' would be ‘characteristic’ [4]. This makes it superfluous to speak about ‘realism’ as the faithful imitation of reality, openly or masked with words as 'naturgetreue', 'lebensnahe', or 'ungeschönte Darstellung'. But Hirschfelder is right in stressing the fact that many 'tronies' rise above the level of genre-like stereotypes, thanks to the artistic freedom inherent in this new genre.

In conclusion we can say that the genre tronie, its subject matter and its preferred style were so closely intertwined that it is extremely hard to separate them. Hirschfelder is to be applauded for managing to do this all the same. Others may make different choices or reach alternative conclusions to hers, but this will be possible thanks to the exemplary way in which Dagmar Hirschfelder analysed the subject, not omitting a single aspect or ignoring any possible problem. The 'tronie' was one of the few genres in Dutch painting that did not have its own complete survey. Since Hirschfelder’s book, though, we realise what we have been missing.

Anmerkungen:

[1] H. Perry Chapman, Rembrandt’s Self-Portraits. A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity, Princeton (Princeton University Press), 1990.

[2] E. van de Wetering, ‘De meervoudige functie van Rembrandts zelfportretten’, in: Chr. White a.o., (catalogue of the exhibition) Rembrandt zelf, London, The Hague, Zwolle (Waanders), 1999, 8-37.
N.B. Hirschfelder quotes this title in German, which seems to be incorrect. I quote it here in Dutch, which is not much better.

[3] B. Bakker, 'Schilderachtig: discussions of a seventeenth-century term and concept', Simiolus, 1995 (23), 147-162.

[4] L. de Vries, 'Gerard de Lairesse: The critical vocabulary of an art theorist', Oud Holland, 117 (2004), 79-98. L. de Vries, Verhalen uit kamer, keuken en kroeg, Het Hollandse genre van de 17fr eeuw als vertellende schilderkunst, Amsterdam (A.U.P.), 2005, 180-181.

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