

Marguerite Droz-Emmert: Catharina van Hemessen. Malerin der Renaissance, Basel: Schwabe 2004, 196 S., ISBN 3-7965-2095-2, EUR 26,50

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During the sixteenth century, Antwerp became not only the commercial metropolis of Western Europe, but it also manifested itself as the artistic capital of the Netherlands. The local art scene was characterized by the creative assimilation of the Italianate style and the increasing commercialisation of art production and trade. In recent years, the flourishing Antwerp art market enjoyed vivid attention in the form of socio-economic publications (such as F. Vermeulen's *Painting for the Market. Commercialization of Art in Antwerp's Golden Age*; 2003), studies of workshop practices (such as M. Martens's and M. Faries's research project *Antwerp painting before Iconoclasm: a social-economic interpretation*, University of Groningen), and in comprehensive monographs on individual artists (such as J. O. Hand's book on Joos van Cleve; 2004 and J. Woodall's on Anthonis Mor; in print). So far, a noteworthy lacuna was the female activity on the Antwerp artistic scene. Therefore, the nearly simultaneous publication of two monographs on Catharina van Hemessen (1528-after 1567), the first female painter in the Southern Netherlands with a signed and dated oeuvre, comes as a welcome eye-opener. One of these is Marguerite Droz-Emmert's book. [1]

The book is divided into five chapters embellished with black and white illustrations and, as a bonus, a separate quire with eight colour plates. Between the introductory and the closing chapters the author develops a discourse in which Catharina's small, but pioneering self-portrait is at the forefront. The self-portrait functions on the one hand as source of information about the young woman herself and her culture (chapter I and II), and on the other hand as basis for the interpretation of her further artistic achievements (chapters IV and V).

The book begins with a three-page summary of the biographical research conducted on Catharina van Hemessen to date. To set off the lacunae in Catharina's biography and to reconstruct the circumstances in which she could develop her talents, the author in a subsequent chapter sketches the intellectual and cultural context in which Catharina operated. Aspects which are treated here are successively: the training possibilities for female artists in the Early Modern period, the terms of employment for artists in Antwerp's Golden Age and the interaction between the Southern Netherlands and Italy; finally, the author tries to analyse the position of a female painter at the Habsburg court in general in order to find out more

about Catharina's situation in particular. Droz-Emmert emphasizes Catharina's stay at the Spanish court. However, since the artist only spent two years in the service of Mary of Hungary, one should be cautious to overestimate Van Hemessen's status as a court lady. In this inspiring historical-cultural chapter which is displaying an in-depth knowledge of the specialist literature, the author deals with some carefully selected topics such as Western women's culture and the status of the female artist within it, as well as current workshop practices in Europe. This results in a clear and convincing assessment of the contemporary female artistic culture, which proves to be crucial for the understanding of Catharina's persona and her creative inventions. Here, as in the next chapter where Droz-Emmert moves into a chronological examination of Catharina van Hemessen's works, she seizes the opportunity to consider Catharina's position within a broader context than the Antwerp one only.

Droz-Emmert with good reason devotes ample attention to Van Hemessen's self-portrait upon whose surprisingly innovative character earlier publications commented already. By a comparison of Catharina with her female predecessors from Antiquity such as Marcia (1st century BC), from the Italian Renaissance such as Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625), and by an assessment of her self-portrait in relation to German, Dutch and Italian equivalents, she seeks to determine its originality, function and significance. All this convincingly shows that Van Hemessen made the first independent self-portrait of a painter during his/her activities at the easel within the Western painting tradition. According to the author, this extraordinary piece of art possibly served as a promotional gift by means of which the artist ventilated two things: 1) her self-understanding as a female artist, which was inconsistent with the current humanistic idea of the 'bella pittrice' and 2) her wish to be fully recognized and to be accepted as she really was, without idealization.

The book is supplemented by a concise and, as stated by Marguerite Droz-Emmert herself, provisional catalogue. This list of works is arranged chronologically and thematically and, furthermore, divided in signed works and those which have been attributed to Catharina van Hemessen or her environment. By following this method, the author chooses to abstain from judgements on the authenticity of the unsigned corpus of paintings. The catalogue entries are succinct since the author opts to treat the works and earlier discussion at length in the main body of the text. In this extensive comment she starts from the signed and dated works. Unfortunately, the reader is left behind with a bit of a blurred image of Catharina's artistic achievements, because Droz-Emmert on the one hand underscores her argument with a number of works which, in my opinion, cannot be by Catharina (e.g. figs. 18, 19, 24) [2], while, on the other, she questions the authorship of some of the main autograph works and omits others - the most important of which being the *Portrait of a Man* (124, note 39) and the *Portrait of a Lady* from the collection of lieutenant-colonel Barton [3].

The author could have improved her portrait of Catharina van Hemessen

if she had handled the original source material, visual as well as written, with more caution. Admittedly, the core of signed works is exceptionally small, but stylistic and technical research of the paintings does allow to define the oeuvre more sharply and correctly. The author shows a lot of good will also regarding the biographical part where she tries to adduce new archival material. Unfortunately, her suggestion of 1583 as *terminus post quem* for Catharina's dying day (16) is based on an erroneous interpretation of the nineteenth-century notes by the archivist F. J. Van den Branden (City Archives Antwerp), and thus due to a lack of consultation of the original documents. Nevertheless, the best vehicle for these sorts of inquiries is still the traditional monograph format, which this book does not take. All the same, this smoothly-written and beautifully produced book with excellent reproductions will do much to help scholars and other interested readers better understand female artistry in the sixteenth-century Netherlands and the role Catharina van Hemessen has played in it.

Notes:

[1] Van Hemessen's life and work is also discussed in: Karolien De Clippel: Catharina van Hemessen (1528-na 1567). Een monografische studie over een 'uytnemende wel geschickte vrouwe in de conste der schilderyen' (= Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Nieuwe reeks, nr. 11), Brussels, 2004.

[2] Cfr. De Clippel 2004 (see note 1), nos. A23, A26.

[3] Cfr. De Clippel 2004 (see note 1), nos A8, A11.

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