

The Meaning of the Portrait of Verdonck by Frans Hals

The Iconography of the Jawbone

The figure in the portrait of a man with a jawbone by Frans Hals (Fig. 1) is identified as a certain Verdonck by the text on the print after the painting by Jan van de Velde (Fig. 2). Slive interprets the text to mean that Verdonck got into trouble by wielding a jawbone and by implication suggests that he was the same kind of person as Pieter van der Morsch, the fool of the Leiden rhetoricians (Notes 1, 2). In fact, however, it is clear that the jawbone appears in the portrait as a symbol of Samson and in the verse as one for talking.

An unusual feature of the portrait is the tight placing of the figure in the picture plane, whereby the knuckles fall outside it (Note 3). Hals will have borrowed this kind of composition from his immediate predecessors the Mannerists, cf. Jan van Ravesteyn's portrait of Hugo de Groot (1599) and those by Cornelis Ketel of Hendrick Goltzius (1601) and Paulus van Vianen (Fig. 3, Note 4). Such abruptly cut-off portraits are usually close-ups and close-up portraits are often self-portraits or likenesses of relatives or friends of the artist, so it may be inferred that Verdonck was probably known to Hals. The portrait certainly cannot have been made to commission, for neither the composition nor the attribute suit the decorum of an official portrait. The jawbone was, of course, well known as the attribute of Samson in the 17th century and most Dutch people will also have been familiar with its use as a symbol of talking. The luxuriant hair and open mouth further support this symbolism, whereas there are no elements to indicate an emblematical significance.

The verse on the print describes Verdonck as a brazen wag who set about everyone with his 'jawbone', i.e. his mouth or tongue (numerous colloquial uses of the word *jaw* support this), making no difference between rich or poor, powerful or weak, high-placed or humble, and adds that he ended up in the penitentiary as a result. This last remark may be meant literally, or it may be a warning based on an allusion to Samson's imprisonment, or it may combine both meanings.

The painting is generally dated around 1626-7, while Jan van de Velde the Younger (1593-1641) made prints after Hals' work between 1626 and 1632. There is no reason to assume a long time lay between the two works, so the print is probably one of Van de Velde's earlier ones after Hals. Slive thinks the painting may have been done as a modello for the print (Note 15), but it displays none of the usual characteristics of such modelli (Note 16), i.e. virtually identical measurements, a grisaille aspect and clear indications for the printmaker as regards form, volume and play of light. Some of Hals' works can actually be regarded as modelli for prints, e.g. the portraits of Scriverius, Acronius and Ampzing, of which Van de Velde made prints, but others, such as the Zaffius and Middelhovius, were certainly not modelli and the same applies to the Verdonck, of which the print must be seen as a reproduction.

A survival of Verdonck's reputation or a continued interest in the remarkable portrait is evinced by an anonymous copy of the print in reverse published by Claes Jansz. Visscher (1587-1652) and later by Johannes Ram (1648-93; Fig. 4, Note 19) and a painted copy, probably of the portrait (Fig. 5, Note 20). Another painting, regarded by Slive as an original portrait of Verdonck by an unknown artist (Fig. 6, Note 21), does show differences from Hals and has an even wilder and more Samson-like aspect.

The story of Samson's conquest of the Philistines (Judges 15:15-19), on which the iconography of the jawbone is based, is found in North Netherlandish painting only in the work of the Haarlem Mannerists Maarten van Heemskerck (Fig. 7, Note 24), Hendrick Goltzius (Figs. 8, 9, Notes 25, 26), Jacob Matham (Fig. 10, Note 27), Carel van Mander (Fig. 11, Note 28) and Gerrit Pietersz. (Fig. 12, Note 29). The jawbone as an emblem is found in Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco's *Emblemas morales* of 1610 (Note 30) and Picinelli's *Mundus Symbolicus* of 1653 (Note 31),

where among the nine emblems concerning Samson there are two related to the conquest of the Philistines, No. 284 standing for Patience, No. 285 for Prayer. The latter was evidently used by Salomon de Bray in 1636 for his Samson (Fig. 14), which has a David as a pendant, symbolizing Humility (Fig. 15, Notes 33, 34). A drawing, also of 1636, by Salomon de Bray (Fig. 16) bears at the top the first two lines of the verse on the Verdonck print, but the style of writing and spelling show this inscription to have been added by a later hand, while the drawing is clearly a study for De Bray's own painting of Samson (Note 36) and not a portrait of Verdonck as Slive suggests. Two other aspects of the iconography of the jawbone are its significance as a typical weapon of primitive, uncivilized cultures (Note 37) and in the saying (lit.) 'to play on the jawbone', i.e. to steal, which is depicted three times on an engraving from the school of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Fig. 17, Note 39).

Just as there is only one portrait in all Dutch painting with a jawbone, so there is only one book with the title 'Jawbone' (Kakebeen) and, whether by coincidence or not, the name Verdonck also occurs in it. It was published in 1636 by Laurens Willemsz. van Alkmaar, who was deacon of the Mennonite Old Flemish congregation in Rotterdam since 1631 or 1633 (Note 40), and it was directed against Tobias Govertsz. van den Wijngaert of the Mennonite Flemish congregation in Amsterdam. The Mennonites had split into factions at the end of the 16th century over doctrinal issues (Note 41), but, beginning with the publication of Carel van Mander's *De gulden harpe* in 1605, attempts were made to achieve reunification and in the 1620's these proved successful in part. The Old Flemings in Rotterdam, Leiden and a few other places, however, remained adamant and Laurens Willemsz.' book was a counterblast to Tobias Govertsz.' *Olyf-tacxken* of 1629, which pleaded for unity. The Verdon(c)k mentioned in *Kakebeen* was Balten Verdonk, deacon of the Flemish congregation in Rotterdam. He is not likely to be the subject of our portrait, but he did have relations in Haarlem and may well have known the Haarlem Verdonck and even have been related to him.

The Mennonites seldom used symbolical titles for their polemical writings, but Laurens Willemsz., one of the fiercest supporters of his own sect as the only repository of the truth, had given two of his earlier works titles relating to (Biblical) asses and he chose *Kakebeen* as the title of his 1636 book in defiance of the ridicule the earlier titles had provoked (Fig. 18). His explanation of the title, with reference to Judges 15:16, suggests that he saw himself as a new Samson and a sympathizer even donated a frontispiece with an engraving of Samson by Crispin van de Passe the Younger (Fig. 19, Note 46). The obvious assumption to make is that our Verdonck also saw himself as a new Samson and it can be taken that his spoken words, like Laurens Willemsz.' written ones, made abundant use of Biblical texts.

As for documentary evidence, in 1623, a few years before the presumed date of the portrait, the burgomasters of Haarlem ordered a Pieter Verdonck to cease molesting Joost Lybaert, on pain of imprisonment, accompanying this by a reprimand (Note 49). All that can be discovered about Pieter Verdonck is that he came from Ghent and was married in Haarlem in 1597. If he was about 20 at that time, he would have been about 46 in 1623. It is tempting to assume that he is the Verdonck of the portrait. The age is right, but there is no direct evidence that he was a Mennonite of the Old Flemish persuasion. A strong piece of indirect evidence, however, is that Joost Lybaert, a yarn merchant from Flanders (Note 51), was indeed a Mennonite and belonged to the opposing faction. Balten Verdonk of Rotterdam, who was a cloth merchant, married the daughter of a Haarlem Mennonite couple in 1616 (Note 52) and kept in constant touch with his in-laws (Note 54). He died in Rotterdam in 1636. He did have a brother Pieter, but the only records of him are those of his two marriages and his death in Rotterdam 1632. These facts neither confirm nor exclude the possibility that he was the same Pieter who was reprimanded in Haarlem in 1623.

The precise situation of the Mennonites in Haarlem is not known, but the Old Flemings were certainly active there and it may be that the conflict there was conducted mainly by word of mouth, and that primarily by Pieter Verdonck. There is, in fact, a real possibility that Verdonck may actually have been sent to the penitentiary for his pains. The Mennonites themselves only had recourse to the law in extremis, but the authorities would step in if their quarrels threatened to disturb public order. The envoys of Laurens Willemsz. had experience of this in Arnhem and it nearly came to it in

Dordrecht, while the leader of the Old Flemings in Groningen was actually put in prison. The Haarlem legal records of the 1620's do not survive, however, so it is impossible to verify whether Pieter Verdonck suffered a similar fate.

The portrait of Verdonck, then, is a likeness of a man who destroyed his enemies with his words as Samson did his with a jawbone and the comparison may perhaps go even further, in view of the indications that Verdonck, like Laurens Willemsz. was a Mennonite of the Old Fleming sect (his sober garb suggests the Puritan), which damned all apostates like the Chosen People damned the Philistines. He may also, like Samson, have ended up in prison, for there is no reason to suppose that the verse is based purely on imagination. If this interpretation is correct, it defines the milieu of the portrait and the circumstances for the making of it and the print. The milieu of the Old Flemings constituted a little world of its own, a troubled world in which Verdonck was evidently a type to make a mark. His unusual personality may perhaps explain the unique character of the portrait, not only in Hals' oeuvre but in Dutch portraiture as a whole, where there is no other portrait of a man with the attribute of a Biblical figure. It can only be compared from the formal angle to the genre portraits which use an attribute to indicate the occupation of the sitter and it bears no relation to the portraits with an emblematical motif or to the portrait historié, for Verdonck is not represented as Samson. Even the comparison with Samson seems rather a relative one, for the amused expression on Verdonck's face and the fact that he is wielding the jawbone of a cow (Note 5) instead of an ass suggest an element of mild self-mockery.
