

Abraham Hondius: his life and background.*

A fresh look at Dutch and British genealogical and archival material and a study of the available literature have resulted in finding new information relating to Abraham Hondius' family background, his religious convictions and his life and work in England. Unlike his illustrious colleagues, Sir Peter Lely and Sir Geoffrey Kneller, who pursued very successful careers at the Royal Court, Hondius did not become famous. And yet, as we shall see below, opportunities arose in England that would have possibly changed the course of his career. Through his contacts Hondius could have even come to the notice of King Charles II.

The oldest known member of the Rotterdam De Hont family, Abraham Danielsz. de Hont, the painter's grandfather, originated from Zierikzee. He was a mason and lived in 'de Oppert', a street situated in the old part of Rotterdam. On 31 December 1603 he married Aeltjen Fransdr.¹ Three sons and two daughters were born from this union.² Although the second son, Daniel Abrahamsz., the father of the painter, became a mason in Rotterdam, nothing is presently known about his work or career.³ It is possible that his career ended badly, as he is described as a hodcarrier ('sackedrager') at the time of his death.⁴ Daniel Abrahamsz. took out a marriage licence on 17 November 1630 to marry Crijntgen Alewijnsdr.⁵ Abraham Danielsz., the painter, must have been their first son, as it was customary to name the first male child after the father's father. In view of this date and taking into account the earliest date on Abraham's signed paintings – 1651 – it is more than probable that the artist was born around 1631. There was a brother named Isaac, born around 1646, who also became a painter.⁶ Isaac went to London presumably to visit his brother Abraham and stayed long enough in the British capital to become a member of Austin Friars, the Dutch Reformed Church, in 1684.⁷ In the context of Isaac's visit it is interesting to note that where Abraham Hondius seems to have abandoned using panel as a support around 1671, he again painted on panel at the time of Isaac's stay in London.⁸ Although Abraham was already a skilled master by the age of about twenty – his *Sportsman outside an Italianate Inn*, signed and dated 1651, has quite rightly been described as a 'volleerd werk' (a work of consummate skill) – no facts have become available as to how or with whom Hondius learned his trade (fig. 1).

On 27 April 1653 Abraham married Geertruyd Willemsdr. van der Eijck from Rotterdam.¹⁰ It was a civil wedding, which implies that Hondius did not belong to the Dutch Reformed Church. The date of birth of Abraham and Geertruyd's only child, a daughter also named Geertruyd, is not known.¹¹ At her death in 1681 Hondius' wife Geertruyd did not include Abraham in her will.¹² It is Weyerman who tells us that Hondius took another man's wife with him to England, where they lived like husband and wife. When this lady died, again according to Weyerman,



he married a woman who was a 'slons' (frump).¹³ Abraham Hondius died in London and was buried in the Parish of St. Bride, Fleet Street, on 17 September 1691.¹⁴ Shortly before his death he made his will: to his wife Sarah, as far as we know the one he married in London, he bequeathed 'two peeces of Landskipp half Lengths, And eight of [his] best small peeces, with [his] owne picture'. His son Abraham, also a painter, inherited his prints, books and drawings 'for his owne proper use'.¹⁵ Although only four Dutch notarial deeds have been found so far in which the painter is mentioned by name, their contents add considerably to our knowledge of Hondius' life. In the first document, signed in the presence of a notary on 8 October 1658, Hondius was acting as a witness; it proves that he was living at the time in Rotterdam.¹⁶ The second deed concerns the contract which the artist signed in Rotterdam on 15 January 1665 for the rental of a house and a yard in that town.¹⁷ The third deed is the power of attorney which Hondius gave his wife Geertruyd on 25 February 1666 in Amsterdam so that she would be able to deal with her parents' estate.¹⁸ Finally, there is the deed which registered the sale of property, dated 15 December 1672.¹⁹

The documents from 1665 and 1666 are particularly interesting. First I shall briefly discuss the deed of 1666. This document, in which Hondius gives his wife power of attorney, has encouraged art historians to think that Hondius, after having settled his affairs with his wife, departed for England from Amsterdam in 1666 where they thought he had been living since 1659 (in October 1658 he was still in Rotterdam).²⁰ The first few words of the 1666 document – 'compareerde S[enor] Abraham Hondius schilder wonen[de] jegenwoordich binnen Amsterdam' – have been possibly interpreted too literally; 'jegenwoordich' only indicates, in my opinion, that Hondius was in Amsterdam at the time.²¹

The most relevant document to our discussion is the contract which Hondius signed on 15 January 1665 for the rental of a house and a yard on the east side of 'de

Oppert' in Rotterdam, named 'het Ossenhoofd'. The contract ran for a period of six years from 1 May 1665 until 30 April 1671 and contained a clause which would allow the tenant to discontinue the contract after four years. The annual rent was two hundred and eighty carolus guilders. It is not only interesting to know where Hondius planned to live, but it indeed becomes fascinating when we realise that 'het Ossenhoofd' also had a special function. The chapel of 'de Oppert', the church where Catholics clandestinely gathered to worship, was in 'het Ossenhoofd'. In 1634 the buildings were owned by Huybert Barentszn. Hoogewerff. He allowed the previous owner, Pieter Jacobsz. Fiool, to sublet part of the rear section of the house on condition that Hoogewerff would be given the names of the tenants who should be 'agrecable to him'.²² There can be no doubt that Hoogewerff was only interested in reliable Catholic tenants whose presence would not endanger the services. From the above we may conclude, first of all, that Abraham Hondius was a good Catholic. Secondly, it is also very likely that he stayed the full six years, as a premature end or break of contract has not been recorded. Thirdly, Hondius must have been earning well at the time when he signed the contract. Two hundred and eighty carolus guilders was a large sum, and it indicates comfortable circumstances. That Hondius was earning good money is borne out by the catalogue of his works as well: for the years 1665 and 1666 there are no fewer than 22 signed and dated paintings.²³

Hondius' *Adoration of the Shepherds* (fully signed and dated 1664) in the Museum Catharijne Convent in Utrecht, takes on a special significance in view of the artist's residence in 'de Oppert' (fig. 2). The very large size, 306 x 195 cm., and the type of image indicate that this canvas was probably made as an altarpiece for a clandestine Catholic church. In view of the date, 1664, it is very tempting to associate this canvas with the St. Lawrence and Mary Magdalene church in Rotterdam, also known as 'de Oppert' church. Towards the end of the seventeenth century this Rotterdam congregation grew significantly and plans were made to expand and refurbish the church.²⁴ François Marot, painter to the Court of Louis XIV, was commissioned to paint an altarpiece representing St. Lawrence about to be martyred on the grid.²⁵ Although it is known which alterations were made in the church, information about the altarpiece which was replaced by Marot's canvas is unfortunately lacking.²⁶ Therefore we do not know whether this was perhaps Hondius' *Adoration of the Shepherds*.²⁷

In my introduction I alluded to the possibility that Hondius could have been introduced at the English Royal Court. In fact this is not at all unlikely, for Hondius was a successful artist in the mid 1670s and for some time was closely acquainted with the scientist/architect Robert Hooke, who himself had access to the highest circles, including King Charles II.²⁸ That Hondius lived in London at the time and was furthering his career, we know thanks to *the diary of Robert Hooke*.²⁹ Hooke's *Diary*, which covers the period 1672-1680, is particularly interesting, as the author tells us about the activities of the intelligentsia during those exciting years of the Restoration. Hooke's role in the Royal Society and his position as City Surveyor made him a key figure of the intellectual life of his time.³⁰

After the Great Fire of London, which started on 2 September 1666 and destroyed the entire centre of the City from London Bridge to Temple Church, King Charles II commissioned Christopher Wren, Hugh May and Roger Pratt to rebuild London.³¹ In this gigantic task they were to be assisted by Robert Hooke, Peter Mills and Edward Jarman, who had been appointed by the City as Surveyors. Gradually Hooke began to obtain architectural commissions outside his activities as surveyor. The earliest project seems to have been to design a building for the Royal Society. Shortly afterwards Hooke was commissioned to design the new Royal College of Physicians.³²

In his *Diary* Hooke noted his scientific, architectural and everyday activities. We thus learn that the painter Abraham Hondius was involved in two projects through Hooke, namely ‘hangings’ for the Guildhall and chimney pieces for the Royal College of Physicians.³³ The first time Hondius is mentioned in the *Diary* is on 29 January 1674: ‘Spoke with H.W. Ward, Avery and Gravener about Hangings. Hondius to be consulted’.³⁴ Between 21 February 1673, the first time that Hooke mentions ‘hangings for Guildhall’, and 25 June 1679, the entry in which he states that all business matters relating to the construction of the Royal College of Physicians are finished, Abraham Hondius and his wife occur some twenty-five times in the *Diary*. The idea to consult Hondius about ‘hangings for Guildhall’ must have taken a more concrete form, as the Court of Aldermen gives the following instructions to Mr. Ward on 25 June 1674: ‘This Court doth refer it to the care of Mr. Alderman Ward to provide such new hanging for the Council Chamber as he shall think convenient’.³⁵ Hooke’s involvement shows in his entry of 22 July 1674: ‘At Boyes view with Alderman Ward. He gave directions about Hanging of which I spoke to Hondius’.³⁶ I have not been able to trace whether Hondius was given the commission or executed the commission and, if so, whether the artist ever received payment. It is not quite clear either what these ‘hangings’ looked like. Could they have been paintings or tapestries? However, ‘hangings’ were used in the Council Chamber of Guildhall and there are indications that well known artists designed such decorations for this building.³⁷

In the same year, 1674, Hondius worked on a commission for Robert Hooke in the Royal College of Physicians. According to the *Diary*, it involved two chimney pieces, one of which Hooke designed himself.³⁹ Hooke’s entry of 30 July 1674 reads: ‘To Hondius with Designe of chimney-piece’.³⁹ Further entries in the *Diary* seem to indicate that there was a major disagreement about money between the two men. On 1 August Hooke went to see Hondius: ‘At Hondius, a cheat’.⁴⁰ On 13 and 24 August and 9 September Hooke again visited Hondius.⁴¹ Hooke’s entry of 14 September reads as follows: ‘At the colledge about the painter. Sir G. Bnt [President of the Royal College of Physicians] gave me order to agree with Hondius as cheap as I could for picture. Spoke with Hondius’.

On 30 September 1674 Hooke wrote: ‘Hondius orderd 20 (pounds) and an order to proceed’.⁴³ On 23 December 1674 the entry is as follows: ‘Mrs. Hondius Demands money for Pictures. Twenty pounds account for Chimney Dining [room] and fifty pounds for the other chimney unreasonable’.⁴⁴ On 6 October 1674 the Cashbook of the Royal College of Physicians, 1664-1726, shows a payment was made to the artist: ‘To Abr: Hondius painter 020 00 00’.⁴⁵ On 30 July 1675 Hondius received a second payment: ‘To Mr. Hondius in full for his three pictures at ye colledge 006 00 00’.⁴⁶ It is unfortunately not clear to which work(s) this second payment corresponds.

We do not possess any further information about Hooke’s commission to Hondius. The chimney pieces and other possible works have disappeared without leaving trace. It is, however, certain that after Hondius received 6 pounds on 30 July 1675, the relationship which he had had with Robert Hooke had come to an end. It is fairly obvious from reading the *Diary* entries that money must have played an important part. Hooke seems to have been quite a modest person who got on well with the artisans who worked for him. He had a close and friendly relationship with many of them and their wives, dining with them frequently.⁴⁷ It was Weyerman again who remarked, at some length, on Hondius’ scratchy personality.⁴⁸ He was most probably right and may well have received his information from colleagues who had known Hondius personally in his London years.

Abraham Hondius, *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Altar Piece), signed and dated 1664, oil on canvas (shaped top), 306 × 195 cm. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht. Photo Museum.



NOTES

* This article is based on part of my doctoral thesis *Abraham Hondius (Rotterdam 1631 - London 1691)* of July 1997, which was completed under the supervision of Peter Hecht and Xander van Eick, University of Utrecht.

¹ Gemeente Archief Rotterdam (GAR), Doop-Trouw- en Begraafboeken (DTB) 56, p. 86 (fol. 295vo), *Index op het ondertrouwregister der Gereformeerde Kerk te Rotterdam, 2e deel, 1600-1632*, 2 November 1603: aantekening van ondertrouw [Posting of the banns] van 'Abraham Daniels, j (ong) g(esel) Siericxee metselaer w(onende) inden Oppert (en) Aeltjen Frans j(ong) d(ochter) van Gorchum w(onende) inden Santstraat, getrouwt den 31 Decemb. 1603'.

² GAR, Oude Rechterlijke Archieven Rotterdam (ORAR) 519, (Gifteboeken), fol. 58, 11 February 1636. In this deed, which concerns a real-estate transaction, the five children of Abraham Danielsz. de Hont i.e. Frans Abrahamsz. de Hont, Daniel Abrahamsz. de Hond (Hondius),

Dingenom Abrahamsdr. de Hont, Jannerje Abrahamsdr. de Hont, Andries Abrahamsz. de Hont are named.

³ GAR, Oud Notarieel Archief Rotterdam (ONAR) 437 (Notary Balthasar Bazius), fol. 200, 26 December 1645, refers to Daniel Abrahamsz. as a mason.

⁴ GAR, Archief Weeskamer Rotterdam, 272 (Memoriaal der Overledenen), 27 January 1664, p. 212: 'Daniel de Hont, sakedrager, de vrou Crijntgen Alewijns in Groote Wijnbreggesteech over sr. Van Naerssen'.

⁵ GAR, DTB 56, p. 86 (fol. 580vo), 17 November 1630.

⁶ GAR, ONAR 1686, (Notary Abraham Coxius van den Abeele), fol. 160, 16 August 1706. In this deed Isaac Hondius declares to be sixty years old. Very little work is known by his hand, see exh. cat. *Rotterdamse Meesters uit de Gouden Eeuw*, Rotterdam, Historisch Museum Rotterdam, 1994/5, pp. 283 and 284.

⁷ W. J. C. Moens, *The Marriage, Baptismal and Burial Register, 1571-1874, of the Dutch Reformed Church. Austin Friars, London*, Lymington 1884, p. 216.

⁸ The present writer's doctoral thesis includes a tabulation of dated paintings by Abraham Hondius based on support and size. This tabulation served as one of the bases for the writer's argument that Abraham Hondius went to England after 1671. It indicates that Hondius used panel regularly up to 1671. After 1671 he painted on canvas with two exceptions, both in the year 1683: *Hounds attacking a bull*, signed and dated: 'Abraham Hondius 1683' (bottom left), panel 41 × 49 cm., sale Christie's, London, 2 April 1976, lot 61, with illustration, and *Bear Hunt*, signed and dated: 'Abraham/Hondius/1683' (bottom right), panel 36 × 49 cm., sale Sotheby's, Amsterdam, 22 May 1989, lot 63.

- ⁹ *Sportsman outside an Italianate Inn*, signed and dated 'A. D. 11ont f 1651' (right above door), panel 87 x 108,5 cm., Richard Green Gallery, London. Verbal commentary (22 November 1996) by Mr. A. M. Meyerman, former Director of the Historisch Museum Rotterdam, Rotterdam.
- ¹⁰ GAR, DTB 18.
- ¹¹ GAR, DTB 19: Geertruyd Hondius, Abraham's daughter, married (in a civil wedding) on 8 July 1675 Gerrit de Elleger. At the time of her death she lived in 'de Orgel', on the Oppert, Rotterdam. She was buried on 15 March 1678 (GAR, DTB 250).
- ¹² See GAR, ONAR 973, (Notary Govert van Gesel), fol. 499, 20 March 1681 for Geertruyd's will. Her heirs were her sisters Anna and Catharina van der Eijck.
- ¹³ Jacob Campo Weyerman, *De levensbeschrijvingen der Nederlandsche konst-schilders en kunstschilderessen*, The Hague 1729-1769, v. III, p. 157.
- ¹⁴ London, Guildhall Library Ms 6540/2.
- ¹⁵ For Abraham's will, see Christopher White, *List of foreign artists' drawings connected with Great Britain*, as supplement of the *Catalogue of British Drawings*, v. I, by E. Croft-Murray and Paul Hulton, London 1960, p. 370. White's bibliography does not specify the source of this information. No work is known by Abraham Hondius jr.
- ¹⁶ GAR, ONAR 690, (Notary Bartholomeus Roose), p. 114, 8 October 1658.
- ¹⁷ GAR, ONAR 1010, (Notary Cornelis van Rosendael), fol. 169, 15 January 1665.
- ¹⁸ Gemeente Archief Amsterdam, Notarieel Archief 1476 (notary G. Borsselaer), 25 February 1666.
- ¹⁹ GAR, ORAR 537 (Gifteboeken), fol. 144, 15 December 1672.
- ²⁰ See, typically, B. Rapp, 'Abraham Hondius, een vooraanstaand dieren- en jachtschilder van de 17de eeuw', *Oud Holland* 64, 1949, pp. 65 and 69. Alfred Hentzen, 'Abraham Hondius', *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*, Band 8, Hamburg 1963, p. 34. L. Bol, *Hollandische Maler des 17. Jahrhunderts nahe den grossen Meistern. Landschaften und Stilleben*, Braunschweig 1969, pp. 254-255.
- ²¹ I have found no further evidence of Hondius' residence in Amsterdam in the municipal archives of Amsterdam.
- ²² H. J. W. Verhey, *Soli Deo Gloria*, De Bilt 1950, p. 23.
- ²³ The writer extended Hentzen's list of Abraham Hondius' dated works, *op. cit.* (note 20) from 74 to 113.
- ²⁴ Verhey 1950, *op. cit.* (note 22), p. 52.
- ²⁵ Verhey 1950, *op. cit.* (note 22), p. 220 and *De Voorlopige lijst der Nederlandsche Monumenten van geschiedenis en kunst*, v. III, *De Provincie Zuid Holland*, 1915, p. 328.
- ²⁶ Verhey 1950, *op. cit.* (note 22), pp. 219-229.
- ²⁷ Although the early baptismal records of 'de Oppert' have been preserved in the Gemeente Archief Rotterdam, all archival material relating to the Church was lost in the bombardment of 14 May 1940.
- ²⁸ King Charles II was deeply interested in what later became the chronometer. Among Hooke's inventions were clockwork mechanisms about which he had frequent contact with the King. See also Margaret Espinasse, *Robert Hooke*, London 1956, in particular pp. 64, 65, 69, 70, 132, 135 and 136 about the meetings which Hooke had with King Charles II.
- ²⁹ H. W. Robinson and W. Adams, *The Diary of Robert Hooke (1672-1680)*, London 1935. The Diaries of Dr. Robert Hooke, cover the periods from March 1672 to the end of December 1680 (in the manuscript entries continue intermittently to May 1683), from November 1688 to March 1690, and again from December 1692 to August 1693. The first section, the original of which is in the Guildhall Library, has been edited by H. W. Robinson and W. Adams (published 1935), and the remaining sections, both of which are in the Department of Manuscripts of the British Museum, have been edited and published by Dr. R. T. Gunther as volume x of *Early Science in Oxford* (1935). These are all that are known to exist.
- ³⁰ The Royal Society was founded in 1661 and received Royal Charters in 1662 and 1663. In 1662 Hooke was appointed Curator of Experiments. It was his task 'to furnish the society every day they meete with three or four considerable experiments'. The sessions of the Royal Society were attended by members such as Prince
- Rupert, Christopher Wren, Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle. Hooke became a fellow of the R.S. in 1663 and became responsible for the collection of naturalia of the Society.
- ³¹ Sir Roger Pratt, *The architecture of Sir Roger Pratt, Charles II's commissioner for the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire: now printed for the first time from his Note-Books*, ed. by R. T. Gunther, Oxford 1928.
- ³² For his commission to design the new Royal College of Physicians, see A. Johnston's unpublished doctoral thesis *Robert Hooke and Holland: Dutch influence on Hooke's architecture* (Univ. of Utrecht 1997), p. 17 and notes 101, 102 and 103. For Hooke's architecture see also M. I. Batten, 'The architecture of Dr. Robert Hooke', *F.R.S., Walpole Society*, v. 25 (1936-1937), pp. 83-113.
- ³³ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 83, entry of 29 January 1674 and p. 115, entry of 30 July 1674. See also Margaret Whinney and Oliver Millar, *English Art 1625-1714*, Oxford 1957, p. 279, note 4 and the exh. cat. *Drawing in England. From Hilliard to Hogarth*, British Museum, London 1987, p. 140, where the relationship between Hondius and Hooke is mentioned.
- ³⁴ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 83, entry of 29 January 1674.
- ³⁵ London, Guildhall Library, Index to Repertories of the Court of Aldermen 1672-1692, Rep. 79, fol. 272, 25 June 1674.
- ³⁶ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 113, entry of 22 July 1674.
- ³⁷ The Corporation of London Records Office sent me the following letter, dated 25 September 1996: 'By good luck, Professor Michael Cooper of the City University happened to be visiting this office today. He has been researching Robert Hooke in great depth this year, and has spent a great deal of time studying the Corporation's official municipal archives here for references to Hooke and his work. He was kind enough to give me what seems to be the only relevant reference he has found in the records here to hangings, although it does not mention Hondius by name. Our City Cash Account Book contains an entry, in the year ending 29 September 1672, as follows: 'Paid unto Master Hooke for Master Streator by note from Master Comptroler pds 3 in part for the designe of making hangings for the Councill Chamber (at Guildhall)'.
- ³⁸ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 115, entry of 29 July 1674. For Hooke's apprenticeship with the painter Sir Peter Lely, see Robinson and Adams 1935, p. XV.
- ³⁹ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 115.
- ⁴⁰ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 115.
- ⁴¹ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), pp. 117, 118 and 120.
- ⁴² Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 121.
- ⁴³ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 124.
- ⁴⁴ Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), pp. 137-138. In 1671 Lely charged pds 20 for a head and pds 30 for a half-length (E. Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, New Haven and London 1994, p. 98).
- ⁴⁵ London, Royal College of Physicians of London, Cashbook Ms 2041, 1664-1726, entry of 6 October 1674. See also Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 124, entry of 30 September 1674.
- ⁴⁶ London, Royal College of Physicians of London, Cashbook Ms 2041, 1664-1726, entry of 30 July 1675.
- ⁴⁷ Robert Hooke thought highly of his co-workers and saw them socially. An example is Abraham Story, master mason, whom he often met and with whom he dined (see Robinson and Adams 1935, *op. cit.* (note 29), for instance, entries of 22 February 1673 and 28 March 1674, resp. pp. 30 and 93).
- ⁴⁸ Weyerman v. III, *op. cit.* (note 13), p. 157.