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Nicolaas Verkolje: some new results and suggestions for future research

In this brief talk I would like to address the actual state of research on Nicolaas Verkolje's life and work. Apart from some new results I will mention several aspects that deserve more attention. We hope the exhibition and its catalogue will stimulate further research (P. Knolle & E. Korthals Altes (eds), *Nicolaas Verkolje (1673-1746), de fluwelen hand*, Enschede (Museum Twenthe), Zwolle 2011; authors: Junko Aono, Rudi Ekkart, Paul Knolle, Everhard Korthals Altes, Noor van Leeuwen, Robert-Jan te Rijdt, Marringje Rikken, Winnie Verbeek).



Nicolaas Verkolje, *Christ blessing the children*, oil on panel, 36 x 42 cm. Troyes, Musée d'art et d'histoire (acquired in 2008)

During the preparations for the exhibition quite a number of new archival documents have been found. An important document for our research has been the sale catalogue of Nicolaas Verkolje's possessions. Only one copy is known to us today, which can be found in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. The auction took place in the inn 'De Keizerskroon' in the Kalverstraat in Amsterdam on 18 April 1746. It was set up by Verkolje's brother, Johannes, an art broker and connoisseur, who arranged many auctions in Amsterdam at the time.

The importance of this catalogue lies in the fact that it gives us a glimpse of an eighteenth-century artist who extensively used his collection as a source of inspiration for his own art. The auction catalogue presents Verkolje's possessions just after his death. We do not know when he acquired the objects. Nor do we know exactly what he inherited from his father, the Delft painter Johannes Verkolje. However, it is obvious that Nicolaas used French and Italian prints and French illustrated books from his own collection for his history paintings. Good examples are the prints after three paintings of the *Finding of Moses* by Nicolas Poussin. These were of great importance to the three paintings with the same theme Verkolje made in the course of his life (cat.nrs 1-3). Other examples are the drawings he probably made after statues from his own collection, one of which can be seen in the exhibition (cat.nr. 41).

The auction catalogue is interesting for yet another reason. Among the paintings owned by Nicolaas Verkolje in 1746, a number of works from his own hand are mentioned that are no longer known. This aspect may lead to interesting discoveries in the future. Possibly some of these paintings are presently ascribed to other masters. In the auction catalogue we find, for example, a painting of *Hercules and Omphale, with Faunus deceived, and many Cupids, a night scene*. The catalogue says this work on copper is painted in great detail and the story represented with great wit. It names this painting as one of the best and most famous works by Nicolaas Verkolje. A second painting of which we cannot find a single trace is *The Sunamite woman feeds the prophet Elisha*. Nor do we know anything about the existence of a *Venus and Adonis* and a *Pan and Syrinx*, two pendants on copper, or of a *Jupiter and Callisto*.

In the catalogue we also find a number of paintings which Nicolaas Verkolje copied after works by Gerard de Lairesse. We do not know of the existence of a painted copy of *Pompeius has Perperna's letters burned*, one of the paintings in the so-called Lairessezaal in The Hague. We also find intriguing titles of copies such as *Hercules closes the temple of Janus* (see A. Roy, *Gérard de Lairesse (1640-1711)*, Parijs 1992, pp. 380-381, D.35. London (Sotheby's), 3 July 1985, nr. 89: 67 x 52 cm, oil on canvas), *A Jewish service in a temple*, and a *Mercurius and Herse* (Roy, p. 496, P.R. 15).

This brings us to another question. Ascribing works to Verkolje can be quite difficult at times due to the fact that he regularly copied paintings by other artists, such as de Lairese. Some paintings attributed to de Lairese in the past are generally regarded as works by Nicolaas Verkolje today. Others have been attributed to his father Johannes Verkolje. A good example is *Amnon en Thamar*, a painting from Stuttgart, shown in this exhibition (cat.nr. 5), which in the past has been ascribed to all three masters. In my view an attribution to Nicolaas is justified because of the similarity with a signed painting of *Amnon and Thamar* in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, in which Nicolaas also limits himself to the representation of two large figures only. *Aeneas and Dido* from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and *Perseus and Andromeda* from the Historisches Museum in Frankfurt were attributed to both Gerard de Lairese and Johannes Verkolje in the past, while today the attribution to Nicolaas seems to be the most favored. By comparing these paintings to the signed works by Nicolaas and the works attributed to him, we may be able to come a bit closer to the solution of these problems. The exhibition is a unique opportunity to see so many of his works together.

When it comes to the chronology of the works by Nicolaas Verkolje, there is still quite a lot to find out. Therefore I have chosen to limit myself to his history paintings. Relatively few have been dated. The ones that are dated were made in various periods. They provide the framework for any further consideration of the chronology. Unfortunately we do not have good photos of all these paintings as we do not know the present whereabouts of some of them.

Hagar and the angel in the desert belongs to his earliest works (1695) when he was 22 years old. This painting is followed by a *Nymph with satyrs* (1707). In his beautiful *Bathseba* (1716) Verkolje shows his capabilities as a mature artist. We have quite a lot of testimonies from his late years: *Orestes and Pylades in Tauris* (1732; cat.nr. 11), *Cleopatra's Feast* (1732), *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1735), *Moses found by the Pharaoh's daughter* (1740; cat.nr. 3), *The presentation in the temple* (1743; cat.nr. 7) and finally *Ruth and Naomi* (1744), made two years before his death.

Looking at these paintings I cannot discover a clear linear development. Although it is tempting to assume that Verkolje's work becomes brighter towards the end of his career

and shows more features which can be associated with a rococo style, I think such a hypothesis is too simple. It is striking that at the end of his life he sometimes avoided the use of bright colors but used a great variety of brown and grays instead. *The presentation in the temple* from 1743 is such a painting (cat.nr. 7). In my view it presents a large contrast with paintings such as *Moses found by the Pharaoh's daughter* (cat.nr. 3), which he had painted a couple of years earlier. Possibly the choice for particular kinds of colors or a particular style was influenced by the person commissioning the painting or by potential clients. Some may have liked Verkolje's conservative work, while others preferred a more progressive style.

With these remarks I have tried to stimulate a further discussion on attribution and chronology of Verkolje's work. Tomorrow afternoon Paul Knolle and I will try to further encourage it during an in-depth visit to the exhibition.