How to create beauty

De Lairesse on the theory and practice

Lyckle de Vries

Gerard de Lairesse (1641-1711) was the most successful Dutch painter of his time, admired by the patricians of Amsterdam and the court of William III of Orange. An eighteenth-century critic called him ‘undoubtedly the greatest genius there ever was in painting’. After a century of neglect his rehabilitation began in 1970 when the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum acquired a series of his monumental grisaille paintings. In an international exhibition (Cologne, Cassel, Dordrecht 2007) he was presented as the leading artist of his time, the last quarter of the seventeenth century. As part of this rehabilitation process, interest in his writings also increased. De Lairesse wrote a booklet on the art of drawing (1701) and a manual on painting (1707). The latter, the Groot Schilderboek, is the subject of this fine new study by art historian Lyckle de Vries. Among De Vries’s earlier publications are a monograph and a number of articles on De Lairesse, his paintings, his work for the theatre and his writings.

De Vries found that Gerard de Lairesse’s treatise (‘offering thorough instruction in the art of painting in all its aspects’) is not primarily a discourse on the theory of art, but a practical manual for young painters. It probably was meant as a course for self study. In view of the fact that the author was highly critical of the training methods of his contemporaries, it is not so surprising that he put pen to paper to explain how the mind and hand of a young painter should cooperate in order to turn a mental image into a beautiful picture. This book may change our appreciation of Dutch seventeenth-century painting since it shifts the reader’s attention from art theory and iconology to practical studio work: designing and making paintings in an attempt to create beauty and quality. With his fascinating re-evaluation of De Lairesse’s book and a helpful translation, De Vries offers a treasure-trove of information not easily found elsewhere. This book is indispensable for art historians, for students and teachers of art schools, and those with an interest in technical research and restoration.

224 pages, ca. 100 ill. in b/w,
NB: the English translation of the first volume of the Schilderboek is included on a CD-rom
€ 34,50
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36. Diana and Endymion, see 1:128–131, 310, etching by G. de Lairesse.
- moral interpretation of a mythological story

37. Two cinerary sarcophagi, see 1:132, etching by A. Bloteling from J. Oudaan's Roomscie Mogentheid, 1664.
- Bloteling surpasses most printmakers by suggesting light and colour
Bank III — The difference between the Antique and the Modern manner

This Book has no title, but its subject is introduced in chapter 1 as ‘the difference between Antique and Modern’, that is, differences in style. This short Book urges painters to choose the Antique style and to apply it correctly to a wide range of subjects. De Lairesse’s problem clearly was that both styles had become associated with different categories of subject matter: the Antique manner with biblical and mythological stories, and the Modern manner with what nowadays is labelled ‘genre’: scenes from everyday life in various contemporary social settings. Needless to say, De Lairesse preferred the Antique manner and felt nothing but loathing for the Modern style.

Identifying the styles under discussion, the author contrasts two ways of imitating reality. The Antique manner selects the most perfect manifestations of reality, whereas the Modern manner copies reality as it happens to be, with all its imperfections; allusions to the shortcomings of mannerism, a third stylistic option, are rare in Book III. The Antique manner that avoids all references to the real world and takes its staffage and accessories from ancient history, art and literature is, however, not completely identical with de Lairesse’s ideal, a style that I labelled ‘classicism’ or ‘baroque’ or something in between in my Introduction. Nevertheless, in De Lairesse’s opinion, the Antique manner was a necessary condition for success.

With one exception, sc. landscapes (1:349), the word ‘Modern’ is used to indicate the work of genre and history painters who did not use timeless antique accessories but details from their daily surroundings, such as fashionable clothing. The term ‘Modern manner’ is more limited than the idea of painterliness, but both imply the imitation of the imperfect reality. I believe that in de Schilderboek ‘Modern’ relates to painterliness as ‘Antique’ does to classicism: it is a necessary condition but does not define all aspects of the style under discussion such as composition, space, colouring, and light.

I am under the impression that Book III intends to detach style from subject, so that the all-round master will not be forced to use an inferior style when treating ‘modern’ subjects. In fact, De Lairesse does not make the dividing line between style and subject perfectly clear, since he sees the choice of clothing and other paraphernalia as a symptom of a stylistic preference, not as an elaboration of the chosen subject matter. Moreover, the author was not concerned with dictionary-proof definitions. He wanted to find a way to suppress the Modern manner without pronouncing a ban on ‘modern’ subjects. Events from daily life set in
38. Venus mourning at Adonis’ tomb, see 1:133-134, illustration from the Schilderboek, opp. 1:133.
- comparison between compositions with large- and small-scale figures
the painter’s own surroundings offered a wealth of fully acceptable subject matter. When not used as moral examples, such paintings belong to the category of ‘historical scenes’, the lowest in De Lairesse’s hierarchy of narrative scenes (taferelen). The expression of emotions as the cause and result of interaction between human figures – essential to de Lairesse – is the same in scenes from family life as in paintings with biblical or mythological themes. Both categories offer ample opportunity for elevating a seemingly simple subject to the level of ‘moral scenes’ (moraal taferelen) or allegories (hieroglifische taferelen, literally ‘hieroglyphic scenes’). The main difference lies in the fact that the invention of scenes from antiquity and biblical times requires a certain erudition that the painter of contemporary subjects, who limits himself to the observation of his own environment, does not need.

Chapter 1 — The difference between Antique and Modern

De Lairesse distinguishes two manners of painting, good and bad, that both take their starting point in the imitation of reality. The right choice is to look for beauty and grace and to select the most perfect manifestations of natural phenomena, instead of copying them at random. This method will produce art that exerts a strong effect on the mind of the spectator. It is based on knowledge, understanding, power of judgement, and natural gifts. The alternative manner copies reality as it happens to be, without shrinking back from imperfection and ugliness. In De Lairesse’s opinion, this approach requires no intellectual effort whatsoever and when it is combined with a high degree of specialisation, the painter deserves no better than to be called a craftsman.

The attempt to recreate the beauty and virtue of ancient Rome is characteristic of the Antique manner; hopefully it will repair the decline of the intermediate centuries. De Lairesse speaks about decline only once (i:171), indicating the introduction of lowlife genre scenes (so-called bambootsiades) as its cause. An alarming symptom of this decline is the disrespect for the architecture of beautiful interiors, apparent from its defilement by vulgar and disgusting paintings. Modern artists cannot clear themselves by saying that their works are merely paintings: any depiction should be judged as if it was a real situation. Moreover, high-ranking people should surround themselves with art that reflects their high moral standards.

The imitation of reality as it manifests itself in daily life, implies the depiction of fashionable clothing. De Lairesse points out that this fixes the painting in its time and location. Using contemporary dress for literary or historical subjects produces blatant anachronisms and, De Lairesse says, the mixture of antique and modern elements is even worse. However, this is precisely what was customary in Dutch narrative painting. The author uses chapter 5 to rail against this tenacious tradition.

Apart from such violations of the principle of the unities of time and place, De Lairesse mentions other defects associated with or resulting from the Modern manner. Painters of peasant scenes are condemned for their infatuation with ugliness and the way in which they exaggerate the deformities of their models (i:174). Others are censured because they depict their wife, their maid or some schoolboy
39. Heliodorus expelled from the temple, see 1:144, painting by G. de Lairesse.  
- example of a story that can be told effectively from beginning to end in one image

40. Pompeius has Perperna’s letters burned, see 1:144, painting by G. de Lairesse.  
- this story can be told in one image; it may also be divided over two consecutive scenes
with all their shortcomings, using a free and broad handling of the brush (een lekkere penceel) (1:173). This is probably a dig directed at Rembrandt and his followers. When De Lairesse compares the Antique manner with a noble horse and the Modern manner with a ‘Midas donkey ... decked out with Tyrian purple, soft velvet, silk, gold, silver and jewels’ (1:173), he most likely aims at the predilection of the Leiden fine painters for the silk, brocade, lace, and costly jewellery of contemporary dress.

Chapter 2 — Instructions for the right depiction of urbane or elegant Modern
After this declaration of principles, De Lairesse turns to practice. He asserts that contemporary subjects as such are fully acceptable, provided they are executed in the Antique manner. In the chapters 2 to 4 he demonstrates how this should be done. As the title of this chapter indicates, lowlife scenes with peasants and beggars are inacceptable. De Lairesse’s first example is an imaginary painting of a couple allowing their children to bathe in an indoor pool, a rather improbable situation for seventeenth-century Amsterdam. He stresses that all figures in the composition, with the exception of the maid, should have the beauty and virtue of ancient art. Painters unfamiliar with this ideal should study plaster casts and books on bodily proportions. The colouring of the figures should be as close to reality as possible.

As long as the advice to use the Antique style is ignored, scenes from everyday life will only rarely be worthy of the name of art. To remedy this situation, De Lairesse says, painters should follow the example of Anthony van Dyck. Although this court painter never made genre scenes, De Lairesse classifies him as a ‘Modern’, probably because, as a portraitist, Van Dyck had to record the imperfections of human beings at a given time and place. De Lairesse extols this master ‘who is beyond praise [and] excelled both in the Antique and the Modern manner’ (1:178), because he found a solution for the rapidly changing fashions that would have made his portraits look antiquated after a couple of years. He replaced contemporary costume with timeless draperies, enhancing female beauty by revealing more naked skin than fashion permitted.11 Moreover, he idealised his sitters as far as the trade of portraiture would allow. It is clear that, in this context, ‘antique’ means ‘not subject to fashion’, rather than ‘archeologically correct’. The implication is, of course, that genre painters should use Van Dyck’s invention to create timeless beauty.

De Lairesse wanted to believe that ‘Modern’ painters refused to follow his advice, because, like most people, they were tied by their natural inclinations. In his view, however, it was possible to rise above the limitations of birth and social circumstances: hard work and strong determination would overcome any obstacle.

Chapter 3 — The properties of the urbane that is constantly providing Modern painters with an abundance of subject matter.
Book II of De Lairesse’s Groot Schilderboek was, in principle, meant for painters aspiring to emulate Rubens and Van Dyck, artists who worked for the court and the nobility to which they themselves belonged. Book III addresses townsmen such

41. Atlas minor, see 1:144-149, title page by G. de Lairesse for N. Visscher’s atlas, 1668.
- De Lairesse’s title prints do not always follow the rules laid down in the Schilderboek

42. Q. Horatius Flaccus Dichtkunst, see 1:144-149, title page by G. de Lairesse for Pels’ poem, 1677.
- De Lairesse’s title prints do not always follow the rules laid down in the Schilderboek
as Rembrandt and Jordaens, who belonged to and catered for the citizenry of the thriving Dutch and Flemish cities. De Lairesse observes 'It is easier for a townsman to play an urbane role than another one, and in the same way it is easier for a painter to depict the things he is confronted with from day to day ... Jordaens and Rembrandt ... concentrated on the urbane aspects of art ...' (1:185). If only Modern painters would conform to De Lairesse’s ideals, their genre scenes would deserve an honourable place next to good biblical and mythological compositions. Their compositions would be far removed from those of Adriaen Brouwer and his ilk who painted the places of ill repute, pothouses, brothels and guardrooms that apparently formed their daily surroundings.

Most of Book iii consists of practical examples meant to stimulate genre painters to improve their manner. Here De Lairesse returns to his contention that the creation of biblical or mythological scenes requires serious study and intellectual effort, whereas the production of a genre scene does not. He explains that every detail of a history painting has to be in full accordance with the intricacies of the biblical, historical or literary text from which the subject was taken; accessories and scenery had to be archeologically correct, or at least free from anachronisms. A genre painter, on the other hand, is free in his choice of scenery and accessories. Therefore, a history painter might consider making genre scenes as a kind of recreation. Nonetheless, De Lairesse admits that a genre scene is not necessarily a trifle. As an illustration, he presents a scene depicting a painter’s son who breaks a plaster cast. In his view, this tafereel has as much meaning as any ‘poetic scene’. Although an event as might happen any day, it has the same character as a story by Homer or Virgil and its depiction is no less demanding. The implication is that events from daily life can be as captivating as mythological fiction if rendered in the right way.

This imaginary scene is based on daily life and not on a printed source, which is probably the reason why De Lairesse states that this scene is not history (histoire) (1:185). It is unmistakably a story, however, and as such a narrative work of art. What really unites history paintings and genre scenes is their narrative character, the fact that they represent actions that are caused by and result in emotions. In order to illustrate the fact that these emotions do not have to be violent or dramatic, De Lairesse presents and imaginary painting depicting a tea party. Here a lady offers her friend a cup of tea which the latter refuses. The emotions accompanying request and refusal should be made visible through gestures, attitudes and facial expressions. The main purpose of a, likewise imaginary, scene in which a small boy does not recognise his own mirror image, is to show the emotions of every figure in accordance with his or her character: the innocence of the child, the modesty of his mother and the ill-breeding of a maid. As I said in my Introduction, according to De Lairesse, movements should express what is going on in a person’s mind: emotions, moods and thoughts and even the unpleasantness of being cold.

Chapter 4 — Continuation of the previous chapter

The five pages of this chapter are fully expended on the description and discussion of one imaginary painting: a contemporary interior with six figures in which
43. Grondlegginge ter Teekenkonst, see p.147, title page by C. Huyberts after Ph. Tideman, 1701.

- the light should come from the left where the book opens but this is not the case here
a man studies a celestial globe, a woman and her maid are fulfilling household duties, a young woman is making her toilet in front of a mirror, and two children are blowing bubbles at the open window. I think De Lairesse’s purpose was threefold: to create a Modern scene of great beauty, to show how the Antique manner should be applied in a contemporary subject, and to convince his readers that subjects from daily life could and should be used as moral examples. The importance the author attaches to this chapter is evident from the print accompanying it, one of the Schilderboek’s best [ill. 49]. De Lairesse explicitly states that this example is meant to demonstrate that, despite his blindness, he is perfectly able to design a perfect composition. The author ascribes this remarkable feat to his reliance on rational thinking, or wiskunde as he calls it. In this particular context, the word does not carry its usual meaning of ‘mathematics’, but should be interpreted as ‘the science of certainty’ which is the literal translation of this Dutch neologism.

To prove that this scene from daily life is no trifle, De Lairesse discusses every detail of its meaning. A good painting has a clue, indicating what holds the composition together. The children blowing bubbles make it clear that here Vanity is the central issue. Without their presence there would be no coherence, because each separate figure can be regarded in a number of different ways. This painting can be interpreted on three levels of the fourfold hierarchy De Lairesse developed for tafereelen (1:116-119). Although it has no basis in literature, it is very much like a true story. The same compositional idea (concept) could be used for a family portrait. Long before the Schilderboek was printed, Gabriel Metsu, Pieter de Hooch and others reused the concept of one of their genre scenes for a group portrait, replacing anonymous figures with identifiable individuals. As De Lairesse’s lesson in iconology makes clear, the written painting of this chapter can be seen as a moral tafereel. If all figures, the maid included, are interpreted as personifications, it may even pass as an allegory.

**Chapter 5 — On clothing and costumes**

What particularly upsets De Lairesse is the use of seventeenth-century clothing for biblical and Roman personages. An amusing story about a quarrel between the rivals Antiko and Modo illustrates that the habit of using contemporary accessories in paintings with literary subjects was very common. In fact, De Lairesse’s sharp distinction between the Antique and the Modern manner was rather exceptional. Traditionally, figures in narrative scenes were regarded as literary or fictitious creatures, not as people one could meet in reality. To make this clear, figures were decked out in fancy costumes in which fashionable details, outmoded pieces of clothing and fantastic gear were freely combined. This way of putting outfits together was the rule in the sixteenth century; during the seventeenth century it gradually disappeared but De Lairesse was right in calling it tenacious (1:173).

The imaginary examples derided in this chapter evoke two different types of paintings. De Lairesse’s caricature of Esther, Ahasueros and Haman brings to mind the biblical paintings of Jan Steen, in which the figures are decked out in fantastic combinations of old-fashioned and fashionable articles of dress. Countless examples from the earlier decades of the seventeenth century could have been chosen in its place. In the other example, Sophonisba, a heroine of ancient times finds her-
44. Lucretia’s ghost appearing before Tarquinius, see 1:153-154, illustration from the Schilderboek, opp. 1:153. A painter can devise and illustrate stories like this one for relaxation.

45. Philinion and Machates, see 1:155-156, painting by J. Jordaens. De Lairesse censures Jordaens for not convincingly depicting a dream or phantasm.
self deposited in a perfect seventeenth-century conversation piece, that otherwise shows no anachronisms whatsoever [compare ill. 50].

Interestingly, De Lairesse hints in passing at the reason why painters kept this tradition alive. As the prints of Lucas van Leyden and others demonstrate, the habit to update biblical stories by giving them a contemporary setting had become popular in the early decades of the sixteenth century. The method was subsequently used by the Jesuits and other religious groups, because it helped the devout spectator to identify with the protagonists of the stories. De Lairesse, however, refuses to believe that this approach will help anyone to retain a story in his memory.

To conclude his discussion of the Antique and the Modern manner, De Lairesse once more associates style with social and moral qualities: ‘When reason helps you to discriminate between good and evil, it will make you happy to prefer the best and most useful to the worst and most harmful, arranging all your activities in accordance with this choice. Whoever contracted a bad manner, will find it difficult to shake it off; more probably, he will stick to it for the rest of his life. But whoever is guided by good, will shun and reject evil because it conflicts with his desire’ (1:199).
Indices

Indices with translation and explanation of Dutch term

Names
Places
Subject matter
  1. Bible and Christianity
  2. Mythology, History and Literature
  3. Allegory and Personifications
  4. Contemporary Subjects
  5. Genre
Vocabulary

> means: translated, completed or corrected into
< means: translated, deduced from

The pages 1-6, 165-166, 202-204, 244-246, 337-342 and the poem on page 43 were not indexed.
The Voorreden aan de Konstbeminende Lezers (Prologue for the Art-Loving Readers),
pages ix-xv, were not indexed.
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Allard > Carel Allard, print dealer 1:197
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Antonin > Marcus Aurelius Antoninus 1:265
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