



Pieter Verelst

(Dordrecht 1616/18 – ca. 1678 Hulst?)

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Pieter Verelst was born in Dordrecht in 1616 or 1618. His parents were Herman Verelst and his second wife Marieke Backx, the daughter of a cloth merchant.^[1] Some confusion surrounds Herman's occupation. In 1630 (around twelve years after Pieter's birth), Herman joined the painters' guild, but "in den 2den eed" (in the 2nd oath), which implies that he had sworn a first oath at another (unknown) guild.^[2] For the time being we are groping in the dark about Herman Verelst's primary profession, as well as his reasons for joining the Guild of Saint Luke.

Pieter probably grew up in comfortable circumstances. He lived in the Voorstraat, close to the Vismarkt, at which address his father was taxed for a capital of 4,000 guilders in 1626.^[3] A certain prosperity is also evident in the sale of Groenewolt, a house that was part of his parents' estate, which Pieter and his siblings sold for a substantial 2,500 guilders in 1639.^[4] This house, also on the Voorstraat but on the opposite side of the Vismarkt, had belonged to the family of Pieter's mother. Marieke Backx was living there when she married Pieter's father in 1612.^[5]

It is unknown who taught Verelst to paint. His *oeuvre*, consisting of portraits, *tronies*, genre and history scenes, and a few still lifes of fruit and game, displays a variety of artistic influences. His scenes of inns and of peasants recall the work of Isaac (1621–49) and Adriaen van Ostade (1610–85) of Haarlem, and Cornelis Saftleven (1607–81) and Hendrick Sorgh (1610–70) of Rotterdam. His eclectic style is also manifest in his history paintings, which suggest familiarity with the work of painters from the Rembrandt School, particularly that of Govaert Flinck (1615–60), Jan Victors (1619–1676), and Salomon Koninck (1609–56). The influence of the "Leiden" Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), and of Jan Lievens (1607–73) and Gerrit Dou (1613–75) is also apparent. All three have been thought to be the maker of the fine *Return of Tobias and the Angel*, which, however, was recently convincingly attributed to Verelst.^[vi] An affinity with Rembrandt, Lievens, and Dou is



also evident in a few works by Verelst's fellow-townsmen Paulus Lesire (1612–ca. 1655).^[7] Lesire's *Penitent Saint Peter* displays so many compositional and stylistic similarities with Verelst's *Saint Paul* and his *Scholar at Work* that they almost seem to have come from the same workshop.^[8] While the two artists surely knew one another, there is no evidence that Verelst studied under Lesire, or of an apprenticeship with Lesire's putative master Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp (1594–1652). This notwithstanding, Cuyp—the leading Dordrecht painter at the time—is the most likely candidate.

In Dordrecht on 11 June 1638 Verelst became engaged to Adriana van Gesel, whose father was the cooper Simon van Gesel, who sat on the town council in 1608.^[9] The next day Verelst registered with the Guild of Saint Luke as “noch jonck gesel sijnde” (still unmarried), which, strictly speaking, was true, for the couple wed on 3 August. He also took on a pupil in that year.^[10] His daughter Maria was born in May 1639. Verelst is generally assumed to have left a few years later for The Hague, where around 1643 he was living in the neighborhood of Jan van Goyen. Before settling in The Hague definitively, he seems to have stayed regularly in Rotterdam. His son Herman (1641–1702), who became a still-life painter, was baptized there on 5 December 1640.^[11] The only two portraits with identified sitters also indicate a sojourn in Rotterdam. Agatha van Hartigsveld (1627–97) and Elizabeth Kievit (d. 1700), both of whom sat for Verelst in 1642, came from leading Rotterdam regent families.^[12]

Verelst only officially left Dordrecht on 20 March 1644. Mention is made in a document bearing this date that he was settling in The Hague, of which he became a citizen on 10 July.^[13] At a sale of paintings held there in 1674 he sold 81 works, most of them by his hand, for prices varying from ten stuivers to ten guilders.^[14] Moreover, the four Verelst pictures that Jan van Goyen sold on this occasion fetched only a few guilders each.^[15] Seen in this light, Verelst seems to have been active primarily in the lower range of the market. Yet in 1657 he painted “a picture of a few people smoking and drinking . . . which he priced at 50 guilders” for the Hague Guild Chamber.^[16]

Earlier, in 1656, he had been one of the founders of the painters' confraternity *Pictura*, the painters' confraternity, and he was elected its dean in 1659 and 1660. Before that, on 30 September 1657, he married Elisabeth Scholts, about whom no other information is known. She died not long thereafter, possibly already in 1659, shortly after drawing up her will. Verelst still paid his contribution to the *Confrerie* on 30 January 1662 and he may have served as its dean again in 1665. In 1667 he visited Amsterdam to witness his son Herman's marriage to Cecilia Fendt (b. ca. 1642) of Venice.^[17] He may not have been doing well at that time. In fact, his financial problems became so acute that he beat a hasty retreat from The Hague, leaving his property behind to his creditors, which fetched 410 guilders at auction. Little is known about his subsequent movements. The next record dates from 1671, at which time he was in Hulst in Brabant.^[18] He seems to have given up painting in the meantime, and was training to be a brewer, a trade he practiced in Hulst until 1678. Nothing more about him is heard after that year, and whether he died there is unknown.

Endnotes

1. On 2 March 1610 Herman Verelst married Marieke van Bernagie, who died soon thereafter. In 1612 he married Marieke Backx, whose father was the silk merchant Jacques Backx. Between 1611 and 1624 Herman fathered a total of six children with these two women. Only three of them are recorded with a name in the baptism register: Jacques (1614) who later became a silk merchant like his grandfather, Adriaan (1621), and Anneke (1624). One of the three nameless children registered in April 1611, June 1616, and November 1618 must thus be Pieter. The year 1611 can be eliminated, because in the protocol of a few official documents he is always mentioned after his brother Jacques, indicating that he was younger. Whether he was born in 1616 or 1618 cannot be determined. The most suitable year of birth is 1616. There are two extant signed and dated paintings by him from 1633. Should he have been born in 1618 he would have been only fifteen years old when he signed them. A date of birth of 1616 is thus more probable, even if seventeen is also very young for an artist to produce independent paintings. Moreover, 1616 corresponds better with the date of his marriage: 3 August 1638. Should he have been born in 1618, he would have married as a nineteen-year old. This would have been young, although marriages were not infrequently entered into at a young age. It cannot be definitely excluded that he was born in 1618. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information on Pieter Verelst is taken from G.H. Veth, "Aanteekeningen omtrent eenige Dordrechtsche schilders, XXXIX Pieter Hermansz. Verelst en zijne zonen," *Oud Holland* 14 (1896): 99–112.
2. On 2 December 1630 "Herme Janse Verelst" entered "in't schildersgilt" (the painters' guild). F.D.O. Obreen, *Archief voor Nederlandsche Kunstgeschiedenis* (Rotterdam 1877) 1: 207.
3. Gemeentearchief Dordrecht, Stadsarchief III, Register van de 1000ste Penning, inv. 3975, fol. 106v.
4. The name and location of the house is given in the deed of sale. Gemeentearchief Dordrecht, Archief van de Weeskamer, Stukken betreffende boedelinventarissen en scheidings, rekeningen en testamenten, inv. 1185.
5. Gemeentearchief Dordrecht, Ondertrouwregisters, 2 September 1612.
6. Fred G. Meijer, "A New Attribution Proposed for an Enigmatic Painting: The Return of Tobias and the Angel by Pieter Verelst," in *Rembrandt 2006: Essays*, ed. Michiel Roscam Abbing (Leiden, 2006), 96–101.
7. See the biography of Paulus Lesire in this catalogue.
8. For Lesire's *Penitent Saint Peter*, see Werner Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. Vol. 3, *B. Keil – J. Ovens* (Landau, 1983), 3: 1715, no. 1148, and 1729. For Verelst's *Saint*

Paul and Scholar at Work, see Sumowski, *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*. Vol. 5, *Nachträge, Ortsregister, Ikonographisches Register, Bibliographie* (Landau, 1994), 5: 3117, nos. 2169–70.

9. Matthys Balen, *Beschryvinge der stad Dordrecht*, (Dordrecht, 1677), 1: 330.
10. Gemeentearchief Dordrecht, Gildenarchief, inv. 890, Het boek van knechts en jongens, fol. 4v. The pupil's name was W. Van Nispe. This is the only time that Van Nispe's name appears in the records; nothing is known about him.
11. See Stadsarchief Rotterdam, Doop-, trouw- en begraafregisters. This baptism certificate was not noticed previously.
12. *Portrait of Agatha van Hartigsvelt (1627–1697)*, 1642 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon); *Portrait of a Young Woman, Probably Elizabeth Kievit gez.? Bisschop*, 1642 (Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency, Amsterdam); E.A. Engelbrecht, *De Vroedschap van Rotterdam 1572–1795* (Rotterdam, 1973), passim.
13. Gemeentearchief Dordrecht, Archief Hervormde Gemeente, Uitgegane attestaties. G.H. Veth, "Aanteekeningen omtrent eenige Dordrechtsche schilders, XXXIX Pieter Hermansz. Verelst en zijne zonen," *Oud Holland* 14 (1896): 101.
14. The entire proceeds amounted to 286 guilders and 4 stuivers. Abraham Bredius, *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts* (The Hague, 1915), 1: 456–520.
15. Verelst himself buys from Van Goyen two original works by Van Beijeren and Lievens, the former for 36 guilders and the latter for an unknown amount.
16. "Een stuckie schilderije inhoudende eenige Tabak drinkers (...) bij hem geset op 50 gulden." G.H. Veth, "Aanteekeningen omtrent eenige Dordrechtsche schilders, XXXIX Pieter Hermansz. Verelst en zijne zonen," *Oud Holland* 14 (1896): 103.
17. Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Doop-, trouw- en begraafregisters, 491/122.
18. Hans Vollmer, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenen Künstler* (Leipzig, 1940), 34: 237.

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