



Michael Sweerts

(Brussels 1618 – 1664 Goa)

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Michael Sweerts was baptized in the Catholic St. Nicholas Church in Brussels on 29 September 1618. His parents were the merchant David Sweerts and Martynken Balliel. Little else is known about his family background other than that he had two, presumably older, sisters.

His name subsequently surfaces for the first time in 1646 in Rome, where it recurs annually until 1651 in the *stati delle anime* (“family registry”) of the parish of Santa Maria del Popolo. Like so many other Northern painters, he lived on the Via Margutto, the heart of the artists’ community in Rome. In 1646 the Accademia di San Luca charged him with collecting the annual contributions of its Dutch members.^[1] He may have also joined the *Schildersbent*, a renowned artists’ fraternity whose members were called *Bentvueghels* (“Birds of a Feather”), but to date not a shred of evidence to this effect has been found. How his life transpired in the years prior to 1646 is unknown, but a later source credits him with speaking no less than seven languages, suggesting that he was well-educated.^[2]

It is difficult to ascertain with whom he kept company in the Eternal City, but Johannes Lingelbach (1622–74) was certainly one of his friends. Lingelbach’s style during his Rome years was strongly influenced by Sweerts. Moreover, Sweerts later portrayed Lingelbach in Amsterdam.^[3] Sweerts’s Roman clientele included Dutchmen on a Grand Tour and Dutch merchants conducting trade in Italy. Among those making a Grand Tour was the Dordrecht poet Matthijs van de Merwede (ca. 1625–77), who sat for him several times in Rome before 1648. While in the Eternal City, Sweerts also painted the portrait of the Amsterdam cloth merchant Anthonij de Bordes (1615–78), who was in Italy in 1648 and 1649.^[4] More important patrons during this period were the Deutz brothers, for whom he painted portraits and other works. In addition, between 1648 and 1650 he acted as their agent in a variety of art purchases, and in 1651 the brothers authorized him to negotiate with the Roman customs officials regarding a shipment of silk from Leiden.^[5]

By far his most important Italian patron was Prince Camillo Pamphili (1622–66), a nephew of Pope Innocent X (1574–1655), who began assembling a splendid collection in the 1640s. When the prince’s possessions were inventoried from 1648 to 1652, it emerged that he owned three works by Sweerts; a fourth picture is listed in a later inventory of 1666. There are also indications that Sweerts served as an agent for the prince. Around 1652, the latter paid Sweerts for a large history painting by the Tuscan painter Cristoforo Roncalli (1552–1626). He also received more than three *scudi* for oil paint used in “Zijne Exelentie’s Academie” (His Excellency’s Academy). This seems to indicate the existence of an academy in the Palazzo Pamphili—it was not uncommon at the time for wealthy art lovers to maintain painting academies in their palaces—which may well be represented in the décor of various paintings of studio interiors. Cardinal Flavio Chigi (1631–93), too, owned work by Sweerts, perhaps through the mediation of Niccolò Simonelli (d. 1671), who was the keeper of Camillo’s collection of pictures when Sweerts was working for the prince and later master of the *guardaroba* (“wardrobe”) of Cardinal Chigi (1631–93).

It is unknown when exactly Sweerts left Rome, but he was back in his native Brussels in 1655, where he witnessed the baptism of his nephew on 19 July. Little is known about his years in Brussels. What is certain is that he founded a drawing academy. This is evidenced by a petition to the city council, in which he requests privileges on the grounds of his great service to the city, including the establishment of an “academy for



drawing after life . . . at great cost . . . out of love for his fatherland,” primarily for the training of tapestry designers.^[6] Sweerts painted many portraits in Brussels, but of all of his patrons only the notary public and playwright Willem van der Borch (1621–68) can be identified, for whom he once served as a witness in a lawsuit.

Sweerts moved to Amsterdam several years later. It was long thought that he left for Amsterdam in 1658, but that assumption has proven to be incorrect; at the beginning of 1659 Sweerts presented a self-portrait to the Brussels Guild of Saint Luke, which the members hung in the meeting room “tot zijn gedenkenis” (in remembrance of him).^[7] This portrait must be understood as a farewell gift. His departure has been generally explained in connection with the presumed failure of his academy, yet there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. It is more logical to link his change of venue with his religious convictions, which led him to become a lay member of the *Société des Missions Etrangères*. Moving to Amsterdam was most likely occasioned by the Society’s request that he assist another member in supervising the construction of a ship intended for a mission to China. In Amsterdam he may have resumed contact with the Deutz family. A 1692 inventory includes Sweerts’s likeness of Balthasar Deutz (1626–61), who (unlike his three brothers) never visited Italy and whose portrait therefore must have been painted in Amsterdam.

Sweerts left Amsterdam in late 1661; a letter from the *Société* reveals that he was in Marseille in December of that year. In January 1662 Sweerts and other missionaries set sail to Palestine. During the journey the artist suffered fits of anger and his behavior was so disturbing that the group parted ways upon arrival. We are in the dark as to the final two years of Sweerts’s life. The last record regards his death in Goa, India, in 1664, but the entry in the Society’s administration contains no further details about the circumstances under which he died.

- Piet Bakker, 2017

Endnotes

1. Whether Michael Sweerts was actually a member of the Academia is unknown. On this, see Jonathan Bikker, "Een miraculeus leven," *Kunstschrift* 45 (2001): 26.
2. He may have been in Rome long before 1646. This is suggested by the task the Accademia charged him with, namely collecting membership fees, which was not easily or quickly given to a newcomer. A 1640 annotation in the parish records points to a longer presence in Rome: "Gherardo, Flemish, painter, with his companion Michele" (Ghirardo, fiamengho, pittore. Michele suo companion) living in the Via Margutto. In 1648 the records list this registration in exactly the same wording. Arguing against a longer sojourn in Rome is the mention of a "Michael Swerts" as a witness at the baptism of the child of a certain Johannes Hackaert in Brussels; see Jonathan Bikker, "Sweerts's Life and Career—A Documentary View," in *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)*, ed. Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 25.
3. Thomas Kren, "Jan Lingelbach in Rome," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 10 (1982): 54. The portrait of Johannes Lingelbach is known only as a mezzotint by Bernard Vaillant (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).
4. *Anhony de Bordes and His Valet*, ca. 1648 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.); Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton, ed., *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 77–79, no. 4.
5. They are Jean (1618–73), Jeronimus (1622–70), and Joseph Deutz (1624–84). The three brothers visited Italy on their Grand Tour from 1646 to 1650. Later inventories of their possessions mention various paintings attributed to Sweerts. For the Deutz family and their relationship with the painter, see Jonathan Bikker, "The Deutz Brothers, Italian Paintings and Michiel Sweerts: New Information from Elisabeth Coymans's *Journael*," *Simiolus* 26 (1998): 277–311.
6. "Academie van die teeckeninge naer het leven . . . met grooten kost . . . uyt liefde tot zijn vaderlandt." For a transcription of this letter, see Jonathan Bikker, "Sweerts's Life and Career—A Documentary View," in *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)*, ed. Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) (Zwolle, 2001), 34.
7. Jonathan Bikker, "Sweerts's Life and Career—A Documentary View," in *Michael Sweerts (1618–1664)*, ed. Guido Jansen and Peter C. Sutton (Exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum



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