



Pieter van Laer

(Haarlem 1599 – 1642 Italy?)

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Pieter van Laer—or Pieter Boddigh, as he was originally called^[1]—was baptized in Haarlem on 15 December 1599. His parents were the schoolmaster Jacob Boddigh (b. ca. 1571) of Haarlem and Magdalena Heyns (b. ca. 1573), whose father was a respected literary scholar and a schoolmaster in Antwerp, Pieter Heyns (1537–98).^[2] Van Laer's older brother Roeland (1598–ca. 1635) also became a painter and later accompanied Pieter to Italy where, according to Theodorus Schrevelius (1572–1649), he suffered a tragic fall with his mule from a bridge in Genoa. Pieter's younger brother Nicolaes followed in his father's footsteps and became a schoolmaster and later a minister. He also enjoyed a modicum of fame as a writing master, in which capacity he published two books.

According to the Italian biographer Giovanni Battista Passeri (1610–79), Van Laer learned to paint in Holland.^[3] His teacher was not recorded, but judging from a drawing signed “P. Boddink inventor” from before 1625, the most plausible candidate is Esaias van de Velde (1587–1630), who was active in Haarlem between 1611 and 1618.^[4] No paintings from Van Laer's first Haarlem period have been identified; however, in addition to the drawing just mentioned, there are another dozen sheets in a songbook, the provenance of which is not known.^[5]

Van Laer's stay in Haarlem was brief. Following a trip through France, in 1625 he settled in Rome, on the Via Margutta, the very heart of the Roman painters' community, which was close to the Piazza del Popolo.^[6] Van Laer joined the Schildersbent, the famous artists' fraternity in Rome whose members called themselves the *Bentvueghels* (“birds of a feather”), and was nicknamed “de Snuffelaar,” or the sniffer, doubtless on account of his oversize nose.^[7]

Disproportion characterized Van Laer's entire body. According to Arnold Houbraken, who relied on Joachim von Sandrart's (1606–88) *Teutsche Academie*, Van Laer's “lower body was three times larger than his torso, [and he] had a short chest, with a head that sunk into his shoulders and no neck.”^[8] This odd physique led the Italians to dub him “il Bamboccio,” a name, according to Houbraken, “they use to call such people, which in the manner of Italian jest means a strange way of bending or twisting of the body, and striking amusing poses.”^[9] This sobriquet would come to stand for an entirely new type of painting “patented” by Van Laer, which earned him great fame both in Rome and in the Netherlands. These bamboccianti—Roman street scenes with genre figures such as beggars, peddlers, vendors, and artisans—are generally painted in dark tones and with a Caravaggesque chiaroscuro. Van Laer attracted many followers in Italy, known as the Bamboccianti. The association of his nickname with this genre is not without irony. In the 1960s a serious attempt was made to chart his oeuvre, from which it emerged that this definition applies only to a small part of it. The subjects are mostly taken from life in the Campagna: Italian landscapes populated with men on horseback, farmers, and herdsmen. Thus Albert Blankert's observation that, in addition to being a genre painter, Van Laer was an important landscape painter is entirely apt.^[10]

Van Laer met with great success in Rome; buyers were eager to purchase his work, which allowed him to charge substantial prices.^[11] He also shipped part of what he produced to the Netherlands, where it fetched even higher prices.^[12] Van Laer regularly kept company with fellow countrymen, including Herman van Swanevelt (1603–55), Leonard Bramer (1596–1674), and Andries Both (1612/13–42), and also had contact with the French painters Claude Lorrain (1604/05–82) and Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), with whom he ventured into the countryside around Rome to paint or draw landscapes from life.^[13] Another good friend was Sandrart who lived in Rome between 1629 and 1635. Sandrart drew a portrait of Van Laer in his workshop, which he later included in his *Teutsche Academie*.

Finally submitting to Sandrart's repeated insistence that he return to his fatherland because there he “could live more



comfortably than in Italy,” Van Laer left Rome in 1639. After a brief stop in Amsterdam, where he “was well received and duly shown all honor, affection and good wishes,” he arrived in Haarlem and moved in with his brother Nicolaes.^[14] He met Sandrart again, with whom, according to Houbraken, he “once visited Gerrit Dou [in Leiden], who received them and showed them some of his works which he had partly or entirely finished, and which they praised.”^[15]

Little else is known about Van Laer’s second sojourn in Haarlem. What is certain is that he did not stay there long. According to Schrevelius, he left the city again shortly after he had arrived “and where he went and where in the world he may be, following the example of Empedocles, is not known to this day.”^[16] This is confirmed by Van Laer’s sister who, in her will of 1654, noted that he had already been abroad for twelve years and that she had not heard from him in all that time.^[17] Van Laer must have left in or shortly after 1641, for a drawing by him from that year occurs in the same songbook to which he contributed before his first departure from Haarlem.^[18]

Van Laer’s work exerted a powerful influence on other Haarlem landscape painters, such as the celebrated Philips Wouwerman (1619–68). The latter responded to Van Laer’s bambocciatas, or depictions of ambushes and scenes of travelers at rest, to such an extent that one wonders if Houbraken’s comment that Wouwerman had appropriated Van Laer’s drawings contains a kernel of truth.^[19] The veracity of Houbraken’s information is doubtful, however. At the time of his death in 1667, the Haarlem painter Frederick Vroom (ca. 1600–67), whose father was the famous marine painter Hendrick Vroom (ca. 1563–1640), possessed two little books with sketches, twenty-one loose sheets with primarily studies of animals, and a few paintings including a tronie by Van Laer and “een groor paert” (a large horse) by his brother Roeland.^[20] Before leaving Haarlem, Van Laer evidently either sold or gave the contents of his workshop to Vroom.

- Piet Bakker, 2017

Endnotes

1. Albertus Welcker, "P. Boddink alias Pieter van Laer, Orlando Boddling alias Roeland of Orlando van Laer, Nicolaes Boddling alias N. Boddigh van Laer of Ds. Nicolaes Boddighius," *Oud Holland* 59 (1942): 80–89.
2. Heyns opened a school in Antwerp in 1555 and was also dean of the education guild, lieutenant in the civic guard, a district supervisor, and a member of the Berchem chamber of rhetoric De bloeyende Wyngaert. He fled his native city in 1585 and subsequently, certainly as of 1594, was working in Haarlem, once again as a schoolmaster. Heyns provided French and Dutch translations of geographical works, and also wrote books for educational purposes.
3. On Giovanni Battista Passeri as a biographer, see Ernst Wilhelm Moes, "Een te weinig opgemerkte bron voor het leven van Pieter van Laer," *Oud Holland* 12 (1894): 95–106.
4. Albertus Welcker, "P. Boddink alias Pieter van Laer, Orlando Boddling alias Roeland of Orlando van Laer, Nicolaes Boddling alias N. Boddigh van Laer of Ds. Nicolaes Boddighius," *Oud Holland* 59 (1942): 89; Albertus Welcker, "P. Boddink alias Pieter van Laer," *Oud Holland* 62 (1947): 207. That the drawing was made before 1625 can be inferred from the copy that his brother Roeland made dating from that year.
5. D.P. Snoep, "Een 17de eeuws Liedboek met tekeningen van Gerard ter Borch de Oude en Pieter van Laer," *Simiolus* 3 (1968–69): 77–134. See also the biography of Gerard ter Borch the Elder in this catalogue.
6. G.J. Hoogewerff, "Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 1]," *Oud Holland* 49 (1932): 3–4.
7. For example, see his *Self-Portrait* in Galleria Pallavicini, Rome, illustrated in Ludovica Trezzani, "Pieter Boddigh van Laer," in *I Bamboccianti: Pittori della vita quotidiana a Roma nel Seicento*, ed. Giuliano Briganti, et al. (Rome, 1983), 77.
8. "[Was] zyn onderlyf driemaal grooter dan zyn bovenlyf, [en] had [hy] een gans korte borst daar't hooft tusschen de schouders inzonk, en over zulks geen hals." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 1: 360; Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Nuremberg, 1675–79; reprint, Munich, 1925), 184.
9. "Daar [mee] zy zulke luiden [benoemen], die zig op 't maken der Italiaansche grappen, vremden aart van buigingen of vervringingen der lichamen, en geestige figuurmakeryen verstaan." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 1: 360.



10. Albert Blankert, "Over Pieter van Laer als dier- en landschapschilder," *Oud Holland* 83 (1968): 117–34; Ludovico Trezzani, "Pieter Boddigh van Laer," in *I Bamboccianti: Pittori della vita quotidiana a Roma nel Seicento*, ed. Giuliano Briganti, et al. (Rome, 1983), 41–42.
11. G.J. Hoogewerff, "Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 1]," *Oud Holland* 49 (1932): 219; G.J. Hoogewerff, "Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 2]," *Oud Holland* 50 (1933): 250.
12. G.J. Hoogewerff, "Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 1]," *Oud Holland* 49 (1932): 17.
13. Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Nuremberg, 1675–79; reprint, Munich, 1925), 184.
14. "Mehr vergnügt leben könnte als in Italien"; "wol empfangen und ihm alle Ehr, Liebs und Guts [wurde] erweisen." Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Nuremberg, 1675–79; reprint Munich, 1925), 184; Albertus Welcker, "P. Boddink alias Pieter van Laer, Orlando Boddigh alias Roeland of Orlando van Laer, Nicolaes Boddigh alias N. Boddigh van Laer of Ds. Nicolaes Boddighius," *Oud Holland* 59 (1942): 80.
15. "Gerard Dou eens ging bezoeken [in Leiden], die hen wel ontving, en vertoonde, 't gene hy van zyne konstwerken zoo ten halven als ten vollen voltooit had, 't welk zy presen." Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 3.
16. "En waarheen hij gegaen is en waar ter wereld hij vertoeft, weet men, naar het voorbeeld van Empedocles op de huidige dag nog niet." This is taken from Welcker's Dutch translation of Schrevelius's text about Pieter van Laer in his 1647 city chronicle of Haarlem, which he wrote in Latin. See Albertus Welcker, "P. Boddink alias Pieter van Laer, Orlando Boddigh alias Roeland of Orlando van Laer, Nicolaes Boddigh alias N. Boddigh van Laer of Ds. Nicolaes Boddighius," *Oud Holland* 59 (1942): 84. According to Passeri, without mention of a year, Van Laer died of syphilis in Haarlem. See Ernst Wilhelm Moes, "Een te weinig opgemerkte bron voor het leven van Pieter van Laer," *Oud Holland* 12 (1894): 96; G.J. Hoogewerff, "Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 1]," *Oud Holland* 49 (1932): 8. Sandrart reported that Van Laer died a natural death, but had been diminished by melancholy. See Joachim von Sandrart, *Joachim von Sandrarts Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675: Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. Arthur R. Peltzer (Nuremberg, 1675–79; reprint, Munich, 1925), 184. Houbraken believed that the artist had returned to Italy, where suffering from melancholy, he took his own life between 1670 and 1675. See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 1: 363. In his biography of Philips Wouwerman, Houbraken mentions Van Laer's death again, this time placing his suicide in Haarlem. The melancholy underlying this act was thought to have been reinforced in his second Haarlem period by the following conditions: "1. Dat hy niet spaarzaam was wanneer hy geld had, 2. Dat hy syn geld niet tot lager prys geven wilde, dan hy gewoon was te Rome daar voor t'ontfangen, 3. Dat hy weinig voorkruyers

- had, 4. Dat hy voor keelbeulen (konsthandelaren wilde ik zeggen) niet wilde schilderen of hun eenig voordeel geven, die hem dan ook gevolgelyk lieten driven” (1. That he was not thrifty when he had money, 2. That he did not want to lower his price below what he had been accustomed to receiving in Rome, 3. That he had very few people to promote his interests, 4. That he did not want to paint for cutthroats [I meant to say art dealers] or give them any special treatment, and who as a consequence turned their backs on him). For instance, Van Laer refused the art dealer Jan de Wet’s offer of 200 guilders for one of his paintings. See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 74–75. Van Hoogstraten, to whom Houbraken refers, also suggests that Van Laer took his own life out of “mistroosticheyt” (dejection). See Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst. Anders de Zichtbaere Werelt* (Rotterdam, 1678), 311; Hoogerwerff, “Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 1],” *Oud Holland* 49 (1932): 9.
17. G.H. Kurtz, “Archiefsprokkeling. Nog eens: Bodding (van Laer),” *Oud Holland* 73 (1958): 232.
18. He may have spent some time in Utrecht in 1640. There, on 18 August of that year, a deed was drawn up by notary Hendrick Ruysch concerning a debt that a certain Steven Huyberts of Culemborg owed Van Laer. He stated that he was “woonachtich tot Haerlem” (living in Haarlem) at the time. Paul Huys Janssen, “Pieter van Laer, Benjamin Cuyp, Gerard Douffet, and Karel Dujardin in Utrecht,” *The Hoogsteder Mercury* 11 (1990): 53.
19. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (Amsterdam, 1718–21; rev. ed., The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1980), 2: 75. Houbraken suggests in this passage that Wouwerman had unjustly appropriated these drawings after Van Laer’s “schandige dood” (scandalous death), which, following the reasoning of the text, must have taken place after 1640. This date differs greatly from that in Van Laer’s biography (see note 16) and also contradicts the testimony of Van Laer’s sister (see note 17). For Van Laer’s influence on Wouwerman, see Frederick J. Duparc, “Leven en werk van Philips Wouwerman (1619–1668),” in *Philips Wouwerman 1619–1668*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. Kassel, Gemäldegalerie; The Hague, Mauritshuis) (Zwolle, 2009), 23.
20. G.J. Hoogerwerff, “Pieter van Laer en zijn vrienden [Part 1],” *Oud Holland* 49 (1932): 17. On Van Laer’s paintings and drawings, and other studio equipment, in Vroom’s estate, see Pieter Biesboer, *Collections of Paintings in Haarlem 1572–1745*, ed. Carol Togneri (Los Angeles, 2001), 196–204.

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