Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp: Problems of Collaboration

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Looking at art in the company of Wouter Kloek, a keen and insightful observer, has proven immensely rewarding for me as we worked together on the exhibition of Netherlandish still lifes shown at the Rijksmuseum and the Cleveland Museum of Art, and again on shows dedicated to Aelbert Cuyp and Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp.

The exhibition at the Dordrechts Museum in 2002 provided a welcome opportunity to survey the work of Jacob Cuyp, the Dordrecht polymath. Many of the views advanced in the exhibition can now be revised with the added insight yielded by paintings that have recently surfaced. Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp (1594-1652), competent but not exceptionally gifted, probably painted a wider range of subjects than any other seventeenth-century Dutch artist – from portraits and history pictures to market and kitchen scenes. Ironically, he was least adept at landscape, the great strength of his son and sometime collaborator Aelbert. Indeed scholars have tended to be interested in Jacob Cuyp because of his connections with Aelbert, and we have frequently been lured into detecting collaborations between the two.

To Jacob Cuyp’s long list of specializations, we may be able to add that of Vanitas still life, since a striking canvas in this genre has recently come to light (fig. 1). Arranged on a table covered with green cloth are a vase of flowers, a gilded tazza and double-cup, a horse’s skull, a breast-plate, a viola da gamba with printed music, money bags and coins, a human skull, an hour glass and several books. On the front edge of the table, beside the open account book, is a slate tablet inscribed, ‘Bereyt u selven / want ghy sult / sterven / Eert te laet is’ (Prepare yourself for you shall die, before it is too late). The objects are almost stereotypically symbolic of worldly pursuits, the passing of time and ultimately of the transience of human life.

But the most remarkable component of the painting – and indeed a unique feature in Dutch still-life painting – is the winged child holding a shell with soapy water and a straw through which he has blown bubbles. This putto is far more reminiscent of seventeenth-century Spanish still lifes by, for example, Antonio de Pereda, as seen in a work of around 1634 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and later examples. Putti can be found in Flemish paintings – in the allegories of Jan Breughel the Elder and in a Vanitas still life by Pieter Boel (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels), and there is a Cupid who presides over a still life sometimes titled Amor Vincit
ATTRIBUTED TO
JACOB CUYP,
Allegory of
Transience.
Oil on canvas,
102.5 x 178 cm.
Rob Smeets, Milan

Omnia (Love Conquers All) by
Cornelis de Vos (Vienna) – but the
specific combination of a winged
child blowing bubbles together with
a still life can only be found in Jacob
Marrell’s Vanitas of 1637 (Städelisches
Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt), where the
figure, paired with a putto holding an
hourglass, is part of the painted
decoration of an arch. On the other
hand, Jacob Cuyp portrays his putto
as a flesh-and-blood child, with
abundantly curly hair and tangible
wings. Otherwise, many of the still-
life elements are identical in both
paintings.

Jacob Cuyp’s angelic figure depends
in only a very general sense on
Hendrik Goltzius’s print dated 1594
showing a boy leaning casually on a
skull as he blows bubbles. The poem
below compares bubbles to ephemeral
smoke and floral fragrance, while the
title, Quis Evadet, asks who can evade
death. Goltzius’s boy, however, does
not have wings, and thus seems to be
associated with ‘disguised realism’.

Jacob Cuyp’s putto more closely
resembles the Cupids blowing bubbles
depicted by Rembrandt in 1634
(Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna) and
Bartholomeus van der Helst in 1641
(private collection). Jan Baptist
Bedaux has advanced the suggestion
that these Cupids are actually portraits
of dead children, the bubbles referring
to the shortness of their lives, rather
than more obviously to the transience
of erotic love, as had been a tradition
for centuries. However, both
Rembrandt and Van der Helst clearly
accouther subjects as Cupid,
with multi-coloured wings and quivers
of arrows. Moreover, their impish
grins and the light-hearted manner
of their deportment, like Jacob Cuyp’s
naughty youngster, argue against
identifying them as the sombre
cherubs sometimes found in Dutch
group portraits. Is it possible that
Jacob Cuyp’s putto was inspired in
some way by Rembrandt’s Cupid?

The winged child in Jacob Cuyp’s
painting may not be a specific repre-
sentation of Cupid since he lacks the
god’s quiver, although in the context
of the painting the ephemerality of
erotic love accords well with the theme
of human vanity. If the boy is a more generic allegorical putto, he plays a supporting role like the boys and maids seen in Jacob Cuyp’s kitchen scenes. In any case, the painting is a unique conflation of Vanitas still life with figural allegory.

That this remarkable painting is by Jacob Cuyp is perhaps not immediately evident, since it is not signed nor is the artist known to have painted other still lifes of this type. The paint surface is also flattened and worn in places. However, the flowers in the vase can be recognized in two of Jacob Cuyp’s signed paintings of shepherdesses from 1627 and 1628: the same rose, for example, occurs in the Rijksmuseum’s canvas (fig. 2). The impish putto strikes a pose familiar from many of Cuyp’s portraits of children, while the thick fabric bunched at his waist is also handled in the artist’s typical fashion. Although the Allegory of Transience can be compared with paintings of the late 1620s, the smoother and more elegant handling of the child’s face is closer to works from a decade later, such as the portrait of two children dated 1638 (Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne) where similar costumes can be found, as well as analogous objects in the foreground, such as jewels, coins and shells. One might imagine that while Jacob Cuyp painted the flowers and the figure, another artist might have been responsible for the objects on the table. However, the technique seems uniform throughout the canvas, while the awkward perspective of the viola da gamba and the uncertain positioning of objects at the back of the table indicate that the artist was not at home in this genre. Taking these factors together, the painting appears to be the work of Jacob Cuyp (or at minimum an early workshop replica of an original).

Jacob Cuyp painted other types of still lifes, especially kitchens and market scenes, and even made one attempt at depicting a laid table, in a
genre scene showing two men smoking and drinking (State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg). More important, inventories suggest that Jacob Cuyp painted other paintings of this type. Aert Teggers’s inventory of 1688 lists two still lifes by Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp, one depicting poultry and game while the other is described as ‘Een fanetassie’ (A Vanitas). Johan van Beverwijk (1594-1647), the doctor who wrote Van de Wijnemethydt van vrouwelicken geslachts (for which Jacob Cuyp provided four illustrations) and his wife, Elisabeth de Backere, owned ‘Een schilderije van drie Cupidoon van Mr. Jacob Kuyp f. 30’ (A painting of three Cupids by Jacob Cuyp, 30 guilders).

Scholars have scoured Jacob Cuyp’s paintings for evidence of Aelbert Cuyp’s more desirable participation. As early as 1888, Abraham Bredius detected Aelbert’s hand in the landscape background of a portrait of children dated 1638 (Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne). Although this theory was unfounded, two group portraits by Jacob Cuyp dated 1641 (Jerusalem and Buenos Aires) do possess extensive landscapes by Aelbert. I was also lured into believing that two paintings by Jacob Cuyp contained early landscapes by Aelbert. It was only when a painting of shepherds in Montauban (fig. 3) could be examined closely and in good light during the Dordrecht exhibition of 2002 that it became obvious that the painting was by Jacob Cuyp alone.

The broad horizontal strokes used to render the distant view is typical of Jacob, who did not attempt to capture subtle reflections and variegated colours in extensive landscapes as Aelbert Cuyp always did. Thus the motif of the panorama, usually punctuated with a view over a cliff, as backdrop for figures appears to have been adopted by Jacob Cuyp on his own in the period between 1635 and 1638. His paintings of figures in landscapes dating from 1630 to 1635 typically use a city skyline or a screen of trees to fence in the foreground figures. By 1638, a sweeping landscape (often with cattle) forms the open setting for figures.

A long-lost painting, which I thought might have been another early collaboration between Jacob and Aelbert...
Cuyp, recently came to light (fig. 4). Once again, the distant panorama is not by the younger Cuyp. Moreover the painting has been heavily reworked and can only be tentatively assigned to Jacob Cuyp or to his workshop. The supposed signature with a date of 1659 or 1639 is probably a transcription of a signature by Jacob Cuyp. A related portrait of children in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 34.83.1) has recently been implausibly catalogued as attributed to Aelbert Cuyp.

Several other paintings exhibited in Dordrecht as by Jacob Cuyp have proven in the context of signed works to be by other artists. Among these is a boy in a straw hat in Frankfurt which Mirjam Neumeister has recently tentatively assigned to Pieter Soutman. An iconographically fascinating portrait of a four-year-old girl holding a fish and a cat has little in common with works by Jacob Cuyp. Görel Cavalli-Björkman has recently discovered that two paintings long considered to be by Jacob Cuyp are probably by Willem van Vliet and were detached from a single painting. A painting of the Annunciation to the Shepherds is also not by Jacob Cuyp.

An impressive portrait of two children, formerly attributed to Aelbert Cuyp, has recently passed through several auctions and was given a careful conservation treatment, which revealed a genuine signature by Jacob Cuyp (fig. 5). The painting has a peculiar history as it was recorded in a Paris auction in 1864 but by 1875 had been cut into two pendant portraits; they were rejoined in the twentieth century. The work reveals a number of pentimenti. The girl’s head was at some point changed from a near profile to the present three-quarters view. This change is undoubtedly by Jacob Cuyp, but recent retouching has
left her face with a somewhat flattened appearance. In addition, like many of Jacob Cuyp’s portraits of children, two large cows were originally positioned behind the figures, one which filled the sky over the ruins and another at the upper right. It is uncertain when the cattle were painted out, and these various changes make it difficult to identify the artist responsible for the landscape. The sky, ruins, and cattle in the distance are related to Aelbert Cuyp’s work of the early 1650s, but they do not appear to have been entirely painted by him since the brushwork in the sky and ruins is more brittle and opaque than is typical of him. Moreover, were the cattle painted out in the process of preparing the first version of the painting, that is, with Jacob Cuyp’s full collaboration, or were they eliminated after his death in 1652? Both Jacob and Aelbert Cuyp often repeated motifs over the course of their careers, and their followers also freely borrowed these elements. The shepherd and cattle occur in numerous other works, both by Aelbert Cuyp and his workshop. The ruined church, which resembles that at Egmond aan Zee, does not occur in any painting by Aelbert, but a similar view can be found in a drawing by a later follower of the artist (Lugt Collection, Fondation Custodia, Paris).  

In sum, the portraits and animals of this painting are certainly by Jacob Cuyp, but it remains an open question whether his landscape collaborator was Aelbert or a member of his workshop. It is clear from the variations in the quality and handling of paint in works dating from the 1630s on that Jacob Cuyp had assistants who would participate in paintings and produce replicas of paintings. Aelbert Cuyp began as one of Jacob’s workshop assistants and continued to collaborate with his father even after becoming an independent artist, and it is very likely that they shared a workshop or a set of assistants. In any case, the painting demonstrates the variety of Jacob Cuyp’s
work in the later 1640s and early 1650s, especially his taste for exotic costumes which may have originated in Rembrandt's circle. The portrait of two children, considered together with the masterly portrait of the young Michiel Pompe van Meerdervoort of 1649 (Dordrechts Museum), can help identify a group of vigorously painted works by Jacob Cuyp, many of which were previously assigned to Aelbert. During this period, it is very likely that Jacob Cuyp created several other portraits of children (for example in the Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, and formerly belonging to Stephen Reiss), as well as a painting of sheep and a goat in a barn (fig. 6, where two of the sheep are identical to those in fig. 5) – yet another genre of painting attempted by this versatile artist.

NOTES

2 Although not signed, the painting was attributed to Jacob Cuyp by Alfons Nauw and Paul Smeets. I am grateful for the help provided by Rob Smeets, Milan. The somewhat flattened paint surface and the lack of Jacob Cuyp's signature make the attribution not entirely secure, but in my opinion that painting certainly records a composition by Jacob Cuyp, and it seems on balance to be by the artist.
4 Signed, 'Jacob Marel fecit Anno in Franco-furth 1637'. The artist divided his time between Frankfurt and Utrecht, where he married in 1641.

6 Jan Baptist Bedaux, entry in Haarlem and Antwerp 2001, no. 42.

7 Bedaux suggested there is some doubt, as he can point to only one example of an identifiable portrait of a child in the guise of Cupid, a much later work by Gerard Hoet from the 1670s (Slot Zuylen). Bedaux adduces a single example of Cupid representing love between children and parents (Johan van Neck, *Richtsoer der levens, Hoorn*, 1649, pp. 46-47; see Haarlem and Antwerp 2001, p. 184, note 4), which seems insufficient to refute a centuries-long tradition, dominant even in the northern Netherlands, of Cupid as representing the fleeting instability of erotic love.


9 Dordrecht 2002, no. 6 (acquired by the Dordrechts Museum).

10 Dordrecht 2002, no. 18.


12 With the inscription, 'ne quid nimis' (not too much of anything), which warns against one supposes, overindulgence in smoking and eating. Dordrecht 2002, p. 52, fig. 52.


16 Chong 2002, nos. 56, 57.

17 Chong 2002, no. 54 [figures by Jacob Cuyp, landscape by Aelbert Cuyp].

18 Dordrecht 2002, nos. 12, 13, 14.

19 Chong 2002, no. 47 [as Jacob Cuyp, possibly with the assistance of Aelbert Cuyp].


23 Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings II: Dutch Paintings, c. 1600-c. 1800* (Stockholm, 2005), nos. 504, 505 [as attributed to Willem van Vliet]. Chong 2002, nos. 17, 18 [as Jacob Cuyp].


25 Signed lower right: [G. cuyp […] / A […] Under the boy: “AEtatis. 9”. Under the girl: “AEtatis 7”. Technical and conservation information and photographs were kindly provided by Fergus Hall.


27 After examining the painting in March 1992, I stated that it was not by Aelbert Cuyp: Chong 1992, pp. 484-85, no. C. 107. I later suggested that it was connected with Jacob Cuyp: Chong 2002, p. 186. The early sales are partially cited by Hofstede de Groot, nos. 132 and 152. Stephen Reiss (letter to Colnaghi, 1992) attributed the painting entirely to Aelbert. Fergus Hall (2008) believes that the landscape is by Aelbert Cuyp.

