

# ***The Role of the Guild and the Academy in the Position of Artists in Society (1500-1800)***

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## ***Introduction***

My study deals with artists, art lovers and art production in early modern Flanders and Brabant. The aim of the research is to achieve a better insight in the art producing world in the *ancien régime* and to map the social position of the artisans and artists who produced art. The starting points of the study are the different artistic craft guilds and art academies in the cities of Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels and Ghent. I have chosen these cities for different reasons: I made my master thesis on the guild of Saint Luke in Ghent, the archives in Bruges are not that comprehensive, the court resided in Brussels and Antwerp was the place to be in the early modern period for everyone who took an interest in the world of art. During the early modern period, thousands of artists were active in the county of Flanders and the duchy of Brabant. These men, and occasionally women, had the opportunity to master their art in two different institutions: the guild and the academy. The latter emerged alongside the former and the first academy in Flanders and Brabant was established in Antwerp in 1663. In the literature, we often find the statement that the emergence of the academy meant the end of the guild. Hauser for example, states that the original goal and meaning of the academies were liberal; they provided for the masters of the guild a way to free themselves from the guild (Hauser, 1975). But it is not necessary to make such a strong distinction between the guild and the academy. We can see that most artists participated in either the guild of Saint Luke or the academy. However, an analysis of the members' lists of both institutions reveals that a select number of them participated in both. Because of this, is it not possible to establish clear boundaries between both, and consequently, comparisons between the guild and the academy become an interesting research topic. Both institutions can be seen as a possible solution to problems which art producers in the early modern period were confronted with. Problems such as quality control, selling as much as possible, social recognition and control of conflicts. Here we could have the inclination to refer to the different kinds of capital the French social scholar Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes in his studies about the universities. He juggles with concepts such as cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital. These notions are very strong but their meanings are, to say the least, quite ponderous. It is always dangerous to extrapolate

terms to other settings, notwithstanding the usefulness of these concepts. Nevertheless, handling these concepts in a well defined form does not need to pose problems. The cultural capital of an early modern artist can be seen as his education, as his intellectual or learned qualifications, in other words: his distinction in the field of art. The economic capital could be defined as his revenues and his financial position in general. The artist's social capital could entail his family and his networks that could have an impact on the career. And his symbolic capital finally, could be viewed as his reputation, his honor. Now it becomes possible to couple these *definitions* with the problems every early modern artist had to solve and by which defined his position in the early modern society. There is no doubt that a select talented few could find their way on their own, but the majority benefitted from the support of an institution, the guild and/or the academy.

### ***The Guild***

The guild can be seen as an organization of people with the same professional profile, which, with the permission of the local authority, principally guaranteed the advancement of the economic interests of the group. The guild of St. Luke goes back to the late middle ages and was a corporation of artists and artisans. The first traces of such an institution in the cities date from the fourteenth century, more specifically from 1306 (Brussels), 1356 (Ghent), 1362 (Bruges) and 1382 (Antwerp). This does not mean that prior to these dates, there were no painters or sculptors active in our regions. It is possible to distinguish within every guild four social-judicial levels, each with own rights and duties. These are in ascending order the pupil, the journeyman, the master and the member of the board (Dambryne, 1994). Membership of the guild of Saint Luke was not available to just anyone, but it became a *conditio sine qua non* for artists who wanted to earn a living by producing art. Full membership meant reaching the level of master and meant admission to the group; and the social position of an individual during the preindustrial period principally depended on being part of specific groups. But as I already said, admission to the group of art producers was not available to just anyone. All (full) guild-members needed to meet some requirements. Besides the necessary funds and citizenship, aspirants needed to serve an apprenticeship on the shop floor under the same roof of a master and were required to show their artistic skill by producing a masterpiece. These regulations provided protection against out-of-town competition and the entry examination

ensured that the master met a certain quality standard. This meant security for the consumer. Furthermore, an artist could distinguish himself in the guild by, for example, good earnings and/or by holding office on the guild board (both usually went hand in hand). Which positions on the board of the guild individuals held and how often they did this, are indications of their social position (Van Quathem, 1997). Most artists were not able to achieve this promotion. I have for example the numbers of the city of Ghent. Only 16 per cent of the masters could reach a position on the board of the guild. During the period 1574-1681, every year two *gezworenen* were active. Table 1 shows the length of their term of office. Table 2 mentions their professional profile.

**Table 1: Office Term Length of gezworenen (1574-1681)**

<i>Office Term Length</i>	<i>Gezworenen</i>
1	36
2	24
3	14
4	6
5	5
6	3

**Table 2: Professions of the gezworenen (1574-1681)**

<i>Profession</i>	<i>Number of years gezworenen</i>	<i>Amount (%)</i>
Painters	64	33,16
Sculptors and Stonecutters	42	21,76
Glaziers	33	17,10
Unknown	23	11,92
Goldbeaters	9	4,66
Artist painters	8	4,15
Landscape painters	6	3,11
Upholsterers	6	3,11

House painters	2	1,04
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The board regulations changed in 1657. From now on, 3 gezworenen became the rule, but it was only since 1682 that we see 3 gezworenen inscribed in the guild registers. Table 3 shows the length of their term of office. Table 4 mentions their professional profile.

**Table 3: Office Term Length of gezworenen (1682-1773)**

<i>Office Term Length</i>	<i>Gezworenen</i>
1	1
2	1
3	14
4	11
5	4
6	6
7	7
8	5
9	2
10	0
11	1
12	1

**Table 4: Profession profile of the gezworenen (1682-1773)**

<i>Profession</i>	<i>Number of years gezworenen</i>	<i>Amount (%)</i>
Glaziers	20	37,74
Sculptors	15	28,30
Artist painters	15	28,30
House painters	2	3,77
Unknown	1	1,89

I already mentioned that not even one fifth of the masters of the guild of Saint-Luke in Ghent could reach a position on the board of the guild. Furthermore, people had no chance to obtain holding office on the guild if they were not active as painters, sculptors and glaziers. So, the professional profile of an individual also played a role, even within one and the same guild.

### *The Academy*

The academy also provided artists with the opportunity to improve their skills. The concept of the “academy” was first introduced by humanists in fifteenth-century Italy to define an informal discussion group around a person. Later on, it has been used to designate a school. Vasari’s “Accademia del Disegno” in Florence can be seen as the start of the modern art academies. In 1562, he united artists and court members for drawing lessons. This school obtained a good reputation. Soon, new academies emerged, first in Italy, later on in other European cities (Pevsner, 1940). The academy of Antwerp was founded in 1663, Brussels followed in 1711, Bruges in 1717 and Ghent in 1751. The discourse used in the requests to establish these academies was similar. The petitioners stressed the decay of Art and demonstrated that only the founding of an academy could revive the prestige of Art and of the city. The youth would be better educated by lessons in geometry, architecture, perspective, the basic principles of painting, engraving and sculpture, and model drawing. Their point seems clear. The guild was not adopted enough during the changing times and circumstances. The roots of the guild lay in the fourteenth century. There was a need for something new.

Theoretically, anyone could attend the lessons, because they could be free of charge for certain pupils. Every individual who supported the academy with a fixed contribution had the opportunity to inscribe a pupil as desired. As a consequence, less-wealthy or very poor students could attend the lessons, if they possessed the “right” social capital. Moreover, the city government supported the academy by paying the bills for light and fire. These expenses could vary greatly, because originally, the lessons were only scheduled in the winter. The magistrate also provided a building where the courses took place. So, academies could survive

without the fees of a part of the students. Not only poor students could be granted admission to the academy. In opposition to the guilds of St. Luke, people who did not possess citizenship, strangers, were admitted to the academy. The conditions for admission became more strict over time. The academy in Ghent stipulated that new students be at least twelve years old and that they possess a certificate of good character. The certificate could be delivered by their master or by their parish priest, suggesting principally that many students were guild apprentices. But these rules were not always enforced as strictly. In comparison to the guild, the academy possessed other means for distinction and social recognition. Of course, social prestige could also be achieved by holding office on the academy, as well as being a director or a professor. Only a few could take advantage of this possibility, because academies did not have an annual change of power, like guilds had in general. For example in the case of the academy of Ghent, we see that the board of directors and the teaching staff is appointed for a period of six years. What's more, people could be appointed for several periods.

But more important and more crucial is the fact that every two years, the students of the different classes of the academy needed to draw for prizes. The academy was convinced that the students would make much more progress in a climate of competition. The idea of competition was most likely borrowed from the Jesuits, who also used it in their educational system. The students had one week's time to make their drawing, but they could only work during the lessons. The first day of the week, they received their papers. These papers displayed the seal of the academy, along with some signatures. These measures were installed to reduce the risk of fraud. Every day, at the end of the lesson, the students handed in their drawing and these were locked in a closet with 3 locks, and the keys were kept by different persons, effectively eliminating the chance of fraud even further. Yet, sometimes there were problems and occasionally students were accused of fraud. During that week, experts, masters or artists were not allowed to attend the lessons, because the students were obliged to make the drawings only by themselves, without advice from specialists. By this, the jury had also not seen the drawings prior to the moment of judging them, preventing any bias prior to the evaluation. After the jury judged the drawings, they made a ranking. Every student received a rank in comparison with the other pupils. The result concerned everyone at the academy, because there were not only consequences for the winners. Students who did not make enough progress and who were not that talented, in other words: pupils who ended in the last places, were refused admittance in the future, because they took the place of more gifted people and

because they wasted time. When students had to leave the academy, they received a document. With this paper, they could apply again within two years. When they did this, they had to make a drawing again, and this was compared to the drawing for prizes. If the student had made enough progress in the meantime, he was allowed to attend the lessons again. If he had not, his academic adventure came to an end. Membership of the academy could also come to an end if the student was absent for three successive days without a valid reason, because the presence of the students was a big concern for the academy. Certainly, the degree of attendance sometimes plummeted after the students had been drawing for prizes. For this reason, the staff decided that the drawings of students who no longer participated in the lessons after the competition, would be worthless. In addition, the government of the academy introduced a penny. With this, parents, masters and the academy could easily control the attendance of their child, their pupil or their student. At the academy, as in every competition, there was a winner. There was even more than one, because the academy consisted of different classes. Students who attended the architecture classes did not have to take the same “exam” as pupils who attended the model drawing course. The professors of the academy decided which drawing the students had to make. When the results of the competition were known, a big celebration occurred, paid by the city government. The celebration started with a laudation. This speech was often delivered by a well-known person, like the subprior of the abbey of Drongen or a city councilor from the city of Aalst, in the case of the academy of Ghent. The winners received a gold or silver medal, sometimes with a chain. The academies of Antwerp and Bruges, as well as those of Brussels and Ghent received three medals from the central government. This was a fixed contribution. The other required medals, had to be produced by an artist and the academy had to meet these expenses. After the prize-awarding ceremony, the winners were bestowed a tour through the city in an elaborately ornamented wagon. These coaches were put at the academy’s disposal by wealthy people from the city, like counts, prelates and canons. The other coaches were rented. In Ghent, the procession first drove around the tower of the Belfort, and continued by bringing the winners to their home. In Bruges, first the medal-winners in the model drawing and architecture category, were brought home. Moreover, the other winners were taken home following a fixed route. These displays entailed a considerable amount of social prestige. Additionally, the model drawing prizewinner received another advantage. It was forbidden for students of the academy to disturb the model during the lessons. Only the directors or professors were allowed to change the position of the model. In their absence, it was permitted to the student who was ranked first in the model drawing category or to the student chosen by the director to determine the

position of the model. Furthermore, the whole celebration was cheered up by drumrolls and the flourish of trumpets. Also the carillonneur was present, so the city folks were well informed that something special occurred. A flood of people followed the parade and often excesses happened. Besides the obliged drawing for prizes, the academy also organized other contests. Artists from all over the Southern Netherlands (or later the Austrian Netherlands) could participate. The individual who could best reproduce a certain expression, like for example “The despise of the hatred”, also received a medal or a money-prize, together with a lot of symbolic capital.

### ***Conclusion***

During the early modern period, artists of the cities of Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels and Ghent had to face the same problems. They wanted to build up as much economic and symbolic capital as possible, by using their cultural and social capital. But becoming a respected and successful artist was not an easy job. The road was long and difficult. However, the individual did not have to conquer these difficulties on his own. He gained support from the guild and the academy. Both institutions can be seen as a possible solution to problems art producers are confronted with. Based upon the same educational system, the training of pupils by more or less perfect masters, the guild and the academy both tried to achieve the same, each in their own way: the schooling of skilled art producers and making them credible for the art consumers. The guild did this in a more closed environment compared to the academy.

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