



Bièvre, Elisabeth de, *Dutch Art and Urban Cultures, 1200-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, 492 pp., ISBN 9780300205626).

Dutch Art and Urban Cultures, 1200-1700 takes on a fascinating and complex topic: the relationship between places and their cultures. Cultural artifacts are as much defined by where they were made as when or by whom. The relationship between locality and art, then, has been subject to continuous historical study since ancient times but also fell out of favour after the Second World War. In recent years it has regained traction, not in the least because renowned scholars such as Thomas DaCosta Kauffman put geographical considerations back on the art-historical agenda.¹ Elisabeth de Bièvre applied a cultural geographical approach by tracing patterns of local artistic specialization back to medieval urban origins and natural environments. Favouring the local over the national and continuity over change, she challenges the notion of a homogeneous Dutch visual culture and the impact of the tumultuous decades of the Dutch Revolt on Golden Age arts and culture.

The book's five hundred beautifully illustrated pages detail some five hundred years of local geographies and histories. It is organized in seven chapters, each on a single city: 'The Hague, the Village with Court and Government'; 'Dordrecht, the Privileged City'; 'Haarlem, the Frontier City of Sand and Wood'; 'Leiden, the Old Textile City with a New University'; 'Amsterdam, the City of Wise Merchants' and 'Utrecht, the Bishop's City'. In rich reconstructions of urban development, civic identities, and artistic imagery de Bièvre draws on an array of historical and art-historical sources, including town histories, travellers' accounts, maps, municipal seals, public buildings and of course numerous paintings and prints. Such a long-term and comprehensive treatment of visual culture is engaging and, although this is not explicitly stated, underscores the importance of crucial yet elusive notions such as local taste and preferences for explaining patterns of cultural production and consumption.

Few historians would take issue with the main hypothesis that geography and geology shaped Dutch urban economic and political specializations and that these in turn informed variation in local social fabric and cultural expressions. Just how strong and persistent local artistic specializations were remains unclear because De Bièvre treats the art, architecture, and history of each town in isolation and does not offer a conclusion in which levels of local specialization are systematically compared.

Where there are conflicting sources and interpretations, she favours the ones that corroborate her assumption of ‘completely different visual cultures’ (XI). This confirmation bias leads her to assume homogeneity within cities and to overstate differences between cities. In doing so, she fails to acknowledge a longstanding and ongoing debate among art-historians about how persistent artistic traditions were and to what extent they were tied to distinct urban characteristics.² How to account, for instance, for their observations that patterns of specialization were often short-lived and that they developed within the context of inter-urban exchange and local market diversity?

This brings us to the question of the explanatory value of geography of De Bièvre’s approach. The author aims to provide ‘a radical new account’, and ‘a new art-historical model for the study of the art of any type of community from any period and any area of the globe’ (XIII). At the heart of this model is the concept of the ‘urban subconscious’ which serves to explain the relationship between local natural environments and artistic traditions. Coined by the author in previous publications it is defined here as ‘a sense of priorities shared by a majority of the inhabitants in one community and built up over a long period of time’ (XII).³ The Hague, for instance, was close to the sea and its court was close to a lake and this was translated in a ‘specific subconscious awareness’ that predisposed artists and consumers to positively associate with images of fish (59). Leiden’s visual culture was characterized by preferences for paintings that contained symbols of death (because of local outbreaks of the plague) and for paintings that were crowded and dark because the city was busy and industrialized (chapter 5). Delft, on the other hand, she associates with cleanliness, politeness, and religiosity: ‘the peaceful image created by Vermeer is an ideal that the Delft community owed ultimately to the security offered to them by the moat-like water, the town walls, and the ancient city gates’ (189).

Whether one is convinced by this logic or in general partial to such psychological explanations or not, the notion of the subconscious creates a conceptual quagmire. By definition, it is vague about choice, and strategy, notions relevant to people producing in competitive art markets and consuming in distinct social contexts. The argument also suggests little capacity for change, even though the individual chapters detail critical historical events as well as inter-urban and international mobility. When de Bièvre tries to account for these phenomena, she stretches the

1 Thomas DaCosta Kauffman, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago 2004).

2 John Loughman, ‘Urban Identity and the Validity of City Schools in Dutch Art’, in: W. Franits (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century* (London and New York) 372-389.

3 Elisabeth de Bièvre, ‘Green Art Studies and the Local Subconscious’, in: Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (eds.), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam 2008), 303-334; Elisabeth de Bièvre, ‘The Urban Subconscious: the Art of Delft and Leiden’, *Art History* 18 (1995) 222-252.

analytical concept: ‘the manifestations of the urban subconscious are so widely distributed in the urban environment that they easily come to affect the newcomer, especially someone with strong visual sensibilities, such as artists. At the same time, their impact is sufficiently indirect that they do not necessarily limit the expression of the individual artist, whether resident or visiting, especially one with strong personal urges and conspicuous talents’ (XIII). The uncritical treatment of key concepts is particularly problematic because they are rooted in a tradition called *Kunstgeographie*, which stresses not only the physical circumstances of place in shaping artistic expressions, but also ethnicity. Given that extreme views in this field of research have resonated in Nazi ‘blood and soil’ ideology, the paragraph on neuroscience and genetics that precedes the introduction of the urban subconscious is ingenuous at best (XII).

Hard covered, oversized, and lavishly illustrated, *Dutch Art and Urban Cultures, 1200-1700* looks like a beautiful coffee table book, more so than an academic study. The lack of critical discussion of key concepts, methodology, and historiography would not be such an issue if the book really were meant for the presentation of all this rich historical material to a wider audience. But in her attempt to provide a radical new art historical model that can be applied to all periods and places, de Bièvre condemns herself to reducing phenomena that are fascinating because they are complex, to the kind of one-sided accounts she set out to disprove. This study confirms that examining early modern artistic production in the context of medieval urban development and the construction of civic identities is a promising research avenue, but that a more careful approach is needed to avoid cultural and in this case even environmental determinism.

Claartje Rasterhoff, University of Amsterdam