

SINGULAR VISION

HABOLDT & CO.'S
OLD MASTER PAINTINGS
AND DRAWINGS
SINCE 1983

AMSTERDAM NEW YORK PARIS

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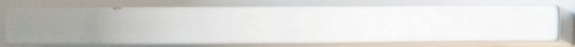
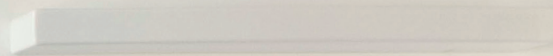
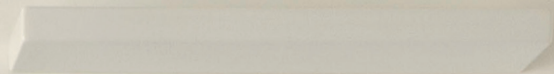
Portrait of an Art Business, Age Thirty

When the young, aspiring Dutch artist Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–78) sat down in front of a mirror to draw his own likeness in 1643, he could not possibly have imagined that the work he sketched would some three and a half centuries later grace the cover of a book celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of an Old Masters art dealership based in Amsterdam, the very city where he carried out that day's exercise—and also in Paris and New York (still unknown in Van Hoogstraten's day). That is the case, however, and the image on the cover, a previously unpublished drawing, relates directly to the theme of this book: “singular vision.” Van Hoogstraten drew this self-portrait when he was about sixteen years old; not only does it show his precocious talent, but it also records his training in one of the most remarkable studios of all time, that of Rembrandt van Rijn. Wearing a large hat and well-tailored jacket, the fresh-faced van Hoogstraten sits drawing at a window, raising his eyes to meet the viewer's, while no doubt at the same time studying his image in the mirror. Rembrandt, probably the greatest and most tenacious painter of self-portraits ever, and also a notoriously demanding teacher, might well have stood behind him as he worked, watching and correcting. The deft strokes changing the outline of the sitter's right arm are undoubtedly by Rembrandt's own hand—demonstrating to his young pupil how it might be better placed. The window, too, shows re-workings, either by the master or his student, the strong strokes and deep shading creating a more interesting composition and framing our view into the young artist's inner world.

Some years later, having left Amsterdam for his native Dordrecht, van Hoogstraten evidently made use of this drawing to paint in oils his *Self-Portrait at a Window* (c. 1647, now in the Hermitage, St Petersburg). Rembrandt had corrected van Hoogstraten's sense of observation during his Amsterdam years and the former student had not forgotten this lesson. He went on to develop a career not only as a much sought-after portrait painter and creator of perspectival illusions (*trompe-l'œil*), but also as a theoretician and writer on art. Here, at a tender age he is developing what might be termed his own singular vision—both his eye for art and his way of seeing, which would shape his practice and his theoretical work.

The title *Singular Vision*, we hope, says something about Haboldt & Co.'s thirty years of dealing in Old Masters—over which time more than 2,000 works of art, both paintings and drawings, have passed through our hands. In homage to these artworks, close to 500 examples are illustrated on these pages. *Singular Vision* expresses that special perception artists, scholars, connoisseurs and those in the business of art develop over time. It is related to taste, style, and expertise, but goes beyond these. It is, perhaps, the culmination of how individuals interpret the physical world around them and where they recognize beauty. This book is in a way a record of Haboldt & Co.'s Old Masters business, but it is also an expression of what we find important or interesting in works we have handled. These particular works were chosen to convey to some extent the identity of this art dealership, and they also portray our passions in art.

The visual impact of a work of art has usually formed the starting point for us in considering its purchase, not necessarily what has been written about it (if published at all), or its previous ownership. We always try to apply three selection criteria. The first is quality, both the quality of the work itself and its state of preservation. The second is authenticity: it must be what it purports to be; this is absolutely essential for Old Masters and part of the expertise we have developed is in establishing



this authenticity. Thirdly, it must have an appealing subject matter—a subject that makes you want to look at it over and over again.

One of the great thrills of our business is recognizing a previously unidentified or mis-cataloged work. Paintings often come to us obscured by decades if not centuries of discolored varnish and grime. During cleaning the work slowly surrenders its beauty as it is returned to the state in which the artist intended it to be seen. It is an intoxicating experience to witness this transformation, and we have on a number of occasions experienced the added reward of finding a signature.

In the years after he left Rembrandt's studio and set up on his own, van Hoogstraten visited Vienna, Rome, and London, still very unusual at this time, and his exposure to different cultures and styles influenced his art and scholarship, and evidently helped develop his entrepreneurial acumen. His seeking after knowledge about art, nowadays perhaps better known as connoisseurship (or even expertise), is something a dealer in this field can readily identify with. Having both a good 'eye' and business sense heighten the chances of success considerably in the current competitive climate. We have been fortunate in establishing a network of experts and clients on both sides of the Atlantic, and across many parts of Europe. A small but growing number of scholars and connoisseurs in the Middle East and South America, and a few further afield in China and India, may signal new art markets for Old Masters in the coming years. The business of aesthetics is about both identifying enduring quality in art and being able to judge the moment when economics and taste create new audiences.

The combination of art connoisseurship and the business of handling works by Old Masters has fascinated me from my early days as an art history student in the US and the Netherlands. For me it is the Old Masters in particular that demand pause for thought—that can suspend the rhythm of time and gently oblige us to stop in rapt respect for the culture of the past that nurtured them and for the skills of individual artists. It has been an intellectual challenge to take on generations of artists working across Europe, each with their own vision expressed in their art, and contributing to the whole rich cultural tradition that we have inherited. I have pursued an interest not only in Dutch and Flemish art, but also Italian, French, Spanish, and German art, interests that continue to this day and are well represented in these pages.

My own vision developed gradually while learning about art, the art business, and the art world from people who knew much more than I did. After working at Christie's and Colnaghi in New York, I decided to set up Haboldt & Co., which opened its doors in that city in 1983. I initially focused on the American marketplace and the first picture we sold was Domenichino's *The Way to Calvary* (p. 91), which belonged to the legendary art historian Sir John Pope-Hennessy, at that time Chairman of the Department of European Painting at the Metropolitan Museum. The work was bought by the Getty Museum, then still housed in Malibu. It was an auspicious way to begin, and like so many transactions, this one has its own story, for while the Getty was keen to acquire the painting, what Pope-Hennessy wanted at this point in his life was a pied-à-terre in Florence, and the successful sale of the painting helped him to fulfill his wish to retire there. As the business grew, we expanded Haboldt & Co., first in 1990 with a gallery in Paris, and later with offices there and in Amsterdam. It has never been a business with large gallery spaces, but rather less formal showrooms to meet with clients and to look at paintings.

Haboldt & Co.'s offices reflect to a certain extent my taste for simple, sparse interiors, but also the environment in which art is likely to be viewed today. (The illustration on p. 8 shows our New York premises with the seventeenth-century *vanitas* still life discussed on p. 182.) It was once thought that art should be shown in suitably opulent galleries with dark wood and red velvet, the walls crammed with paintings. Many clients now have modern homes with a minimalist aesthetic; the new generation

of buyers tends to relate more easily to the power of these works when they are presented in a neutral setting with correct lighting and framing, and Old Masters have an ability to reassert their importance within a modern context.

Much of our work these days is done at art fairs, such as The European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht, which we have attended for 25 years, along with others in New York, Paris, and Florence. Looking at art—even scrutinizing it—is a large part of our work and art fairs offer an opportunity to share discoveries and information with experts, clients, and friends. There is a certain satisfaction, or even joy, in walking through a museum, gallery, or art fair, seeing again great works of art that we know well, encountering previously unknown works by artists that we are familiar with and admire, and discovering works by more obscure artists not known to us.

Our clients include private collectors with highly developed connoisseurship who share our ideas on quality and refinement as well as knowledgeable museum curators who have developed their own singular vision. Some new clients are just starting out or may be looking for only one or two outstanding works. It is often important to have lengthy conversations with clients to help them to develop their vision and understanding of what might ultimately give them the satisfaction they anticipate.

The selective process of acquiring masterpieces and selling them relies on visual instincts, but may not always go as expected. When I purchased a mis-attributed charcoal drawing of a male nude (see p. 199) in Amsterdam in 1985, I was aware that there was something special about it, but it was only when I unwrapped it in the New York office that I realized it was a study for Bartholomeus Breenbergh's *Venus Mourning the Death of Adonis*, which was hanging right in front of me above our stairway. This caused some amusement to my assistant at the time, Larry Steigrad, but I was pleased to reunite the two, and sold the pair to a private collector. To my astonishment, some years later he decided to part with the painting only, which was acquired by the Fogg Art Museum. A number of years after that, when the Fogg had the opportunity, we assisted it in acquiring the drawing as well, so we reunited these two for a second time.

Some discoveries cannot be anticipated—this is the case with two splendid works by Adam Elsheimer, his *Flight into Egypt* (see p. 82), which we purchased in Monte Carlo and placed first with the collector Peter Sharp in New York (starting a friendship which was sadly cut short by his premature death) and subsequently with the Kimbell Art Museum in Texas. A *Pietà* by this exceedingly rare artist (see p. 86) was purchased by us from the widow of the renowned German art historian Kurt Bauch and sold to the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig in the same country. Small masterpieces by Elsheimer such as these arrive on the market so rarely we feel privileged to have handled two. We have also been fortunate to sell a number of works by enigmatic and sought-after artists such as Johann Liss (see p. 89) and Michael Sweerts (pp. 374, 375, 379, 384). Similarly, the discovery of the majestic *Still Life with Aloe Vera* by Sebastian Stoskopff (p. 117), the seventeenth-century still-life painter from Strasbourg, in the kitchen of its previous owner in Maisons-Laffitte, led to my fascination with this rare artist's work and the purchase of a number of others (see pp. 118, 166, 180). The Stoclet *Annunciation* by Lorenzo Monaco (p. 31) and one of two panels from François I's collection by Fra Bartolomeo (p. 36), as well as the extraordinary *Self-Portrait* by Ludger Tom Ring from the Krupp von Bohlen collection (pp. 398–9) passed through our hands. Dutch architectural paintings, such as Emanuel de Witte's church interiors (see pp. 224–8), are astonishingly modern in their sense of light and space, and a large number of these paintings have made their way to Haboldt & Co.

Most of the works illustrated in these pages have been placed with private collectors or museums over the years, while some fifty were with Haboldt & Co. when we began the creation of this book; for

this latter group eminent scholars were invited to write essays to accompany their publication. (In the meantime several works have been sold, though we have decided to retain these illuminating essays in any case.) We have begun the book with the earliest works, the glowing gold-ground paintings, and ended with the most modern. In between, we wanted these works to converse with each other and for their juxtapositions to draw out contrasts and meanings that say something about the vision of the artists who made them, as well as our own in selecting them. While meandering through these pages, we hope readers will make their own discoveries. The design and rather extravagant format of the book make it a sort of art object in itself and express to a certain extent something about our respect for the art that is in it. The volume provides a chance to see these works together as well as to illustrate a number of them actual size, and as it represents thirty years of enjoyable effort, it may claim a right to take up some space on the bookshelves of those interested in this business.

Putting these works together has brought to mind many people that we have worked with and learned from over the years. I personally take pride in my “singular vision” and hope this book is testimony to it, but I know very well how many people have contributed to what has become “singular” but actually reflects many voices and insights. I am greatly indebted to all those listed in the following pages, to the many others whose efforts and goodwill are reflected in this book (and also those I may have inadvertently forgotten) and to the many good clients whose names I would have liked to mention here but did not, for one reason or another.

My beloved departed parents, and Spinella and my children have always been a source of support and inspiration to me, and I have been particularly fortunate to have worked with the finest colleagues an art dealer could wish for: Larry Steigrad, Jill Capobianco, Willem van Aalst, Thaddée Prate, Pierre Mizzi, Reid Masselink, Carlo van Oosterhout, Duco Wildeboer, Cassandra Tai-Marcellini, Hélène Sécherre, and most importantly, Goedele Wuyts. Without them this would have been a very slim book indeed.

About thirty years ago, when we were just starting out, Chet Baker, the jazz musician and singer, movingly re-interpreted the classic love song “Time After Time”, and its lyrics sum up much about this book for me: “I only know what I know; the passing years will show...” I offer it humbly to present and future readers.

Bob Habeldt