

**The Ghent Guild of Saint Luke.
Making Art in an Early Modern Town**

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Tim De Doncker (born 3 July 1985) studied history at the University of Ghent. He earned his master's degree in 2007 with a master thesis on the socio-economic position of the members of the Ghent Guild of Saint Luke in the period 1574-1773. This research resulted in a contribution to the "Handelingen van de Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent" (LXI, 2007, pp. 213-264). He is currently a research assistant at the Department of History in Ghent. He just submitted his doctoral thesis on the relationship between the guilds and the Academy of Arts in Ghent in the second half of the eighteenth century. The first results of this PhD are already published. Other articles are in preparation.

Summary:

The lecture focuses on the social and economic position of the artists in Ghent in the period 1574-1773. Ghent was during the early modern period a typical provincial town with a regional appearance. The city had a relative importance. In this way, this case forms a good addition to the literature on the major European art production centres. The local guild of Saint Luke was the starting point of the study.

The Saint Luke's guild in Ghent united various professions and was therefore a composite corporation. Within the corporation, the painters were the largest group. Within this category, it is necessary to introduce a distinction between the house painters, who performed indoor and outdoor painting, and the fine or art painters. The latter possessed the exclusive right to manufacture and sell paintings. The second largest occupational group within the artist's craft was formed by the glaziers, the third group by the sculptors. Moreover, also the upholsterers and the embroiderers were united in the craft.

The guild had a strong hierarchical character. It was possible to distinguish four socio-legal levels with specific rights and duties, namely, in ascending order: the apprentice, the journeyman, the master, and the board member. The duration of the training in the guild, a corporation with a high artistic level, was probably only two years. This is quite short, and shows that the guild of Saint Luke had no ambition to close the doors to the labour market.

Journeymen were skilled workers, because they had gone through a learning period. They were able to perform the same work as a master. The only difference was that they were not allowed to work for their own account. This stage in the career was useful for people who didn't want the responsibility over a studio or for persons who didn't have the required capital to set up their own shop.

Acquiring the master title was seen as the last phase of the corporate training. Masters were allowed to set up their own business. Individuals had to meet four conditions in order to become a master. Firstly, one must have completed the apprenticeship term of two years. However, this training period did not necessarily had to take place in Ghent. Secondly, one had to be a citizen of the city of Ghent. Only 6.8 % of the masters were not born within the walls of the city. Most of them registered as a citizen of the city in the same year they acquired the master title. Thirdly, access to the rank of master was a financial issue. However, after the riots in 1540, emperor Charles the Fifth decided that a future master had to deliver a proof of his technical skills, rather than to have a well-filled purse. The entrance fee was drastically reduced. One had only to pay a daily wage of a labourer in the construction industry. This was barely a tenth of the former amount. The low entrance fees are further evidence

of the openness of the craft. Blocking membership of the guild was never a goal. Finally, aspirant-masters had to supply a proof of their technical skill. They had to produce a masterpiece. The guild itself suggested the idea of a masterpiece, because it was very important to have such a test. Facing hard competition from other art production centres, they could now emphasize their own quality. Through the masterpiece, and by extension through the apprenticeship, the guild of Saint Luke created quality. In the eyes of the guild, people who had gone through the apprenticeship and who had brought the masterpiece to a successful end, were more skilled. Moreover, they were more confident. The work of masters must meet a certain minimum quality. This quality, however, was merely judged on the quality of the raw material and not, for example, on the inventiveness of the artist.

Research on the art market or the market for luxury products shows that there was a market for art in Ghent. The demand for art in Ghent was huge. Major buyers were royal courts; central, regional and local administrations; the nobility; the urban patriciate; guilds, crafts and confraternities and religious and charitable institutions. In addition, artists sometimes earned money as art appraiser or art dealer, because they had the necessary expertise. All these sources of income were sufficient for the artist to maintain himself and eventually his family. Little or no traces of crisis emerged. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that almost no individual appeared in professional contexts outside the art world, except for some sculptors who were also active as a stonemason, the so-called multiple guild membership. The question for art in Ghent, a regional town, seemed more than sufficient to set the whole group of artists to work (approximately 900 masters).

A function in the craft board and the number of times one holds that position gives an indication of the social position of a member of the guild. A comparison between the appointment of board members in the period 1574-1681 (every year two sworn men were active) and in the period 1682-1773 (every year three sworn men were active) shows that the board in the first period had a more democratic and more open character than in the second period. In the first period, the composition of the board changed a lot. Multiple masters could participate in the board and the period was characterized by shorter terms. Moreover, in comparison with the second period, one should have less patience to be a board member. In the second period, sworn men remained longer member of the board and there were less changes in the composition of the board. Within the craft, the power came in the hands of an elite. The idea of the corporate fraternity shifted to the background.