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Book review of Natasha T. Seaman: "The Religious Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen. Reinventing Christian Painting after the Reformation in Utrecht." Ashgate, Farnham, 2012.

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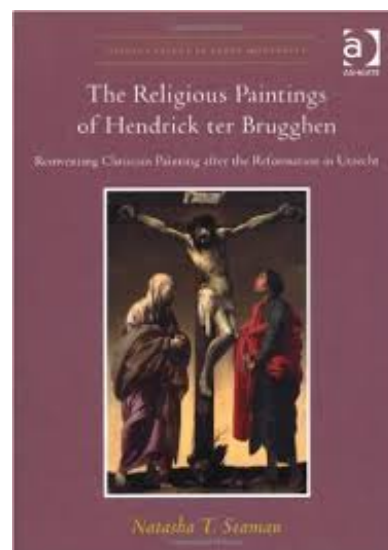
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Natasha T. Seaman, *The Religious Paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen. Reinventing Christian Painting after the Reformation in Utrecht* (Ashgate, Farnham, 2012). ISBN: 9781409434955 (h/bk.), 180 pp., incl. 4 colour + 71 b & w ill., £55.

Reviewed by John Gash

[1] Natasha Seaman's is the first book devoted exclusively to the religious paintings of Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588-1629), once described by Michael Kitson as one of the six finest Dutch painters of the seventeenth century. Ter Brugghen (or Terbrugghen), though probably born in the Hague, trained with Abraham Bloemaert in Utrecht and after a lengthy period in Italy (either 1607-14 or, slightly less likely, 1604-14) returned to spend the rest of his career in Utrecht, a predominantly Catholic city within the Protestant-ruled United Provinces, dividing his highly productive activity there between religious and genre paintings.



[2] Seaman's readable text provides a useful introduction to the religious paintings and the issues attendant on them. These latter include the vexed question of who exactly they were produced for in a city where Catholic worship was necessarily in 'secret' (though usually known) private chapels, and in which Calvinists, though they may occasionally have commissioned or owned religious artworks for private use, did not favour the deployment of 'idolatrous' images in the house of God. Secondly, having been to Italy and obviously, from his subsequent output, having been bowled over by the revolutionary, dramatic naturalism of Caravaggio, how did Ter Brugghen develop his own art on his return to Utrecht and his re-acquaintance with traditional Netherlandish conventions of religious narrative? Seaman has some interesting if somewhat programmatic answers, for her book tends to betray its roots in a Ph.D. thesis and is also not untouched by a tendency towards recent academic jargon, deploying words like 'materiality' and 'iconicity'. It is also delimiting that she concentrates her discussion on only four Ter Brugghen religious paintings, the only colour plates in the book, and that some of the black and white details, or full replicas, of these four, seemingly taken from the colour plates, are of such poor quality as to be almost illegible.

[3] Much of the material on which Seaman bases her analysis is not new, derived as it is from the two outstanding monographs on the artist by Benedict Nicolson (1958) and Leonard Slatkes & Wayne Franits (2007), as well as a series of more recent, contextual articles by the likes of Xander van Eck and Marten Jan Bok. But she does bring a sharp analytic intelligence to bear on her whole discussion in a way that might prove stimulating fodder for post-graduate seminars, and also introduces a number of new illustrations of paintings, prints and sculptures that help to fill in the visual pre-history of some of the more *retardataire* elements in Ter Brugghen's pictures. She is also good at elucidating, through quotations from theologians, the religious climate of the period, including the pivotal issue of whether religious images were only symbols of the 'prototype' real religious figure whom they invoke (the Counter-Reformation, Catholic position) or whether they frequently ran the risk of being worshipped in and of themselves (a prevalent Calvinist perspective). Locating these broader debates within the narrower confines of the see of Utrecht, Seaman

examines Ter Brugghen's paintings and the city's social and political framework, concluding that there is no evidence that the majority of his religious paintings were done for secret Catholic chapels, though they might have been. Ter Brugghen's own religious denomination is unclear, and Seaman discerns in his interpretations of religious imagery a 'protestant' ethos, implying to her that many of his works were done for an upper-class clientele of 'Libertine' patrons, sophisticated Deists for whom the confessional frictions of this age of religious strife were relatively unimportant. So works of universal human insight inspired by the innovative Caravaggio, such as Ter Brugghen's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and *Calling of Saint Matthew* in the Centraal Museum, Utrecht, were likely to appeal.

[4] However, in honing her interpretation of Ter Brugghen as a crypto-Protestant (Caravaggio was designated the same by Roberto Longhi!), Seaman invokes (and bends to her own uses) a modern art-historical construct, that of 'materiality'. Recognizing, as many others have done before, that some of Ter Brugghen's pictures, like the Metropolitan Museum's *Crucifixion*, with its late-medieval, un-Caravaggesque, Northern style, were probably commissioned by nostalgic, conservative patrons (perhaps Catholic, perhaps also Libertine) she then proceeds to argue that because the depiction of the dripping blood in this painting is, for her, very obviously paint, and not an illusion of reality, Ter Brugghen and/or his patron were wanting to stress the 'materiality' of the image so as to subvert any attempt to view it as a convincing illusion of reality, as with Caravaggio, which might bamboozle the worshipper into thinking it was a real scene occurring in front of them. This seems far too contrived, and is even contradicted by several of Seaman's own observations about how the shifting frontier between the illusion of space and the integrity of the paint surface was negotiated –something that all artists, including Caravaggio, had to deal with. Ter Brugghen is clearly aiming at an illusion of reality, only in a more modulated fashion than Caravaggio. It is a-historical to assume that the Dutchman was seeking to invest his imagery with an ethos rooted in reductive modern art-historical terminology.

[5] Seaman follows a recent tendency to view the Metropolitan Museum's *Crucifixion* as an original invention in an old style, which then in turn served as the model for a copy, with the addition of some named sixteenth-century donors underneath (Centraal Museum, Utrecht), used by its owners to spuriously promote their lineage as a claim to nobility. However, it is not impossible in my opinion that both works replicate a possibly damaged mid-sixteenth century epitaph altarpiece, as propounded by Robert Schillemans. Arguments that opponents of this view induce, regarding the 'modern' appearance of Saint John's garb in the Ter Brugghen painting, are unconvincing.

[6] As said, the book is engaging and thought-provoking. But, like many books on the Dutch Golden Age that deal with Netherlandish artists who had travelled to Italy, it is relatively weaker on the Italian context. Seaman, for instance, does not mention De Bie and Houbraken's references to an altarpiece that Ter Brugghen is meant to have done for the 'Groote Kerk' in Naples. This latter might even have been the large *Denial of Saint Peter* in the Spier Collection that only became public knowledge after the publication of Seaman's book, but which is in my view autograph, the first identifiable Italian-period Ter Brugghen – and itself obviously done for a Catholic patron.

[7] Seaman's ground-breaking volume will now need to be consulted in tandem with a more recent, German book on Ter Brugghen's religious paintings by Valeska von Rosen: *Verhandlungen in Utrecht. Ter Brugghen und die religiöse Bildsprache in den Niederlanden* (Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2015).

The University of Aberdeen, February 2016.