

Catherine Powell-Warren, *Gender and Self-Fashioning at the Intersection of Art and Science: Agnes Block, Botany, and Networks in the Dutch 17th Century* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023, 302 pp., ISBN 9789463725491).

Agnes Block was written into early modern (botanical) history as the first person, not just woman, to cultivate a pineapple to maturity in Europe in 1687. It was ‘golden yellow,’ with the ‘taste of a peach’ and ‘juice like muscatel wine’ as described in the poem *Vyver-hof* by her cousin Gualtherus Block (154). This accomplishment, lauded and admired across international botanical networks, was to be expected from a passionate and diligent botanist like Block.

Catherine Powell-Warren’s first monograph *Gender and Self-Fashioning at the Intersection of Art and Science: Agnes Block, Botany and Networks in the Dutch 17th Century* is based on the PhD research she concluded in 2021. Her research shows that even though Agnes Block’s accomplishments were exceptional, she was not unique or one of a kind. This argument might seem to diminish Block’s accomplishments at first, but on the contrary, it forms the core of the strong case Powell-Warren builds to write women, starting with Block and her contributions, into the art and cultural history of the seventeenth century.

Studies of Agnes Block have rarely ventured further than her most well-known accomplishment of growing ‘The King of Fruits’. This oversight was caused on the one hand by a historiographical tunnel vision focused on “‘the lone male genius” narrative of art history’ (18). On the other, it can be attributed to the almost absolute absence of archival material about Block as a person. Powell-Warren was unperturbed, if not inspired, by the first, and overcame the second by creating an interdisciplinary and multi-faceted analysis of Block.

Powell-Warren bypasses the absence of source material by approaching the botanist through innovatively combined methodologies of (art) history and material culture. Block’s estate Vijverhof, located along the river Vecht at the centre of the Dutch Republic, is the starting point of the research, even though the estate itself does no longer exist and no plans of it remain. To analyse Block and her estate, Powell-Warren dissects the poem *Vyver-hof*, the estate’s auction catalogue, Block’s testament and letters, a memorial medal, her collection of watercolours and artworks, and her *Bloemenboek*, a surviving volume of watercolours.

Block’s proficiency at self-fashioning and legacy is directly represented in these sources, as a large share of them was commissioned by Block herself. Powell-Warren’s meticulous dissection of these sources, both for content and

visually, is at times long-winded, but demonstrates admirable meticulousness and historical knowledge. The author provides context and provenance for each source, including a summary of academic debate if applicable, providing scholars with a comprehensive foundation and framework that invites to apply her methods to other subjects. It is this invitation that echoes throughout the publication.

Powell-Warren's seven chapters can be divided into three consecutive sections. The focus of the first three chapters is Block's estate. The author reconstructs a comprehensive image of it and then places this description in context by comparing it to other estates, as she does for the person of Block in regard to other botanists later on. Chapters 4 and 5 cover Block's personification as Flora Batava, the Dutch Goddess of botany, exploring how she constructed this persona for herself and what it meant in the seventeenth-century Dutch republic. The last section of the book dives into Block's *Bloemenboek*, a volume of watercolours that she commissioned, composed, edited, annotated, and most importantly depended on as an inventory, a piece of her legacy and a work of art that was meant to be displayed to others.

The innovation of Powell-Warren's work lies in part in the fact that although her book is on Agnes Block, she does not focus on her alone. The chapters include multiple case studies of varying depths, such as a comparison of Block's agency in creating Vijverhof to the estate of fellow botanist and neighbour Magdalene du Pouille. The author also compares Agnes to other female contemporaries such as her sister Ida Block, and Petronella de la Court, who was a renowned collector of her own accord.

These explorations of women reinforce one of Powell-Warren's strongest arguments: 'Block's achievements and attendant self-fashioning would not have been possible without her use of and reliance upon informal social networks' (17). Block's early modern female agency did not entail asserting herself as someone who broke down gender barriers, but as a woman who presented herself as an intelligent and autonomous individual, taking as her motto: 'art and labour succeed where nature falls short' (60). Having agency, knowledge and influence, Block surrounded herself with individuals with whom she shared affinities, and with whom she could engage on a level playing field. Simultaneously, her financial standing allowed her to be a patroness to many female artists. It is this perspective on early modern women and their actions that could and should add onto current waves in early modern (art) history. It follows in the footsteps of publications by Martha Moffitt Peacock and the volume *Women Artists and Patrons in the Netherlands, 1500-1700*, edited by Elizabeth Sutton. In those, Powell-Warren sees reflected Linda Nochlin's call to include women into (art) history by focussing on the collective or institutional as a perspective, not merely the individual and their supposed rare excellence. This approach is not only taken in research on the Dutch Republic but is also reflected in Anna K. Sagal's work on female botanists in eighteenth-century England.

The net Powell-Warren casts is wide and impressive, tapping into multiple historiographies and demonstrating how interconnected art, science, botany, networks, and patronage were. Throughout her seven chapters she covers histories and theories on Dutch country estates, developments in botanical practice, country house poetry, early modern theories on gender and gender roles, material culture, guilds, symbolism in art, memorial coins, public discourse, botanical treatises and more. It is in these elaborate discussions of historiography and context that the author somewhat loses sight of her own research and findings. Leading with the research and theories of others, she pushes her own findings to the background, even sometimes into the footnotes. In this way, Powell-Warren leaves questions about Block unanswered that would have given the reader a more elaborate and clear view of who she was and might have strengthened the author's argument further. The most pressing example of this is the practice of gifting and exchanging plants within the garden circuit, noted throughout the book but barely considered for its social importance in networks, and the agency Block showed in doing so.

Powell-Warren's *Gender and Self-Fashioning* is a publication that shows the merit of the developing turn in (art) history that is shifting the attention to early modern women who were pioneers and/or patronesses at the intersection of art and science, through bridging the history of an individual with feminist historical writing and the history of (Dutch) seventeenth-century garden culture. Moreover, her impressive last chapters show the importance of collaboration in where art and science met, and advocates for the attention that historians should pay to these networks, and to their entirety, not just the men in them. As Powell-Warren shows, history is, not unlike a garden, 'in constant evolution' (36). This publication will undoubtedly be complemented in the future by the publications that will stem from the work of Powell-Warren and her colleagues on the project *Hive Mind. Networks, collectivity, and mentorship amongst women artists and patrons of the Low Countries in early modernity* at Ghent University.

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