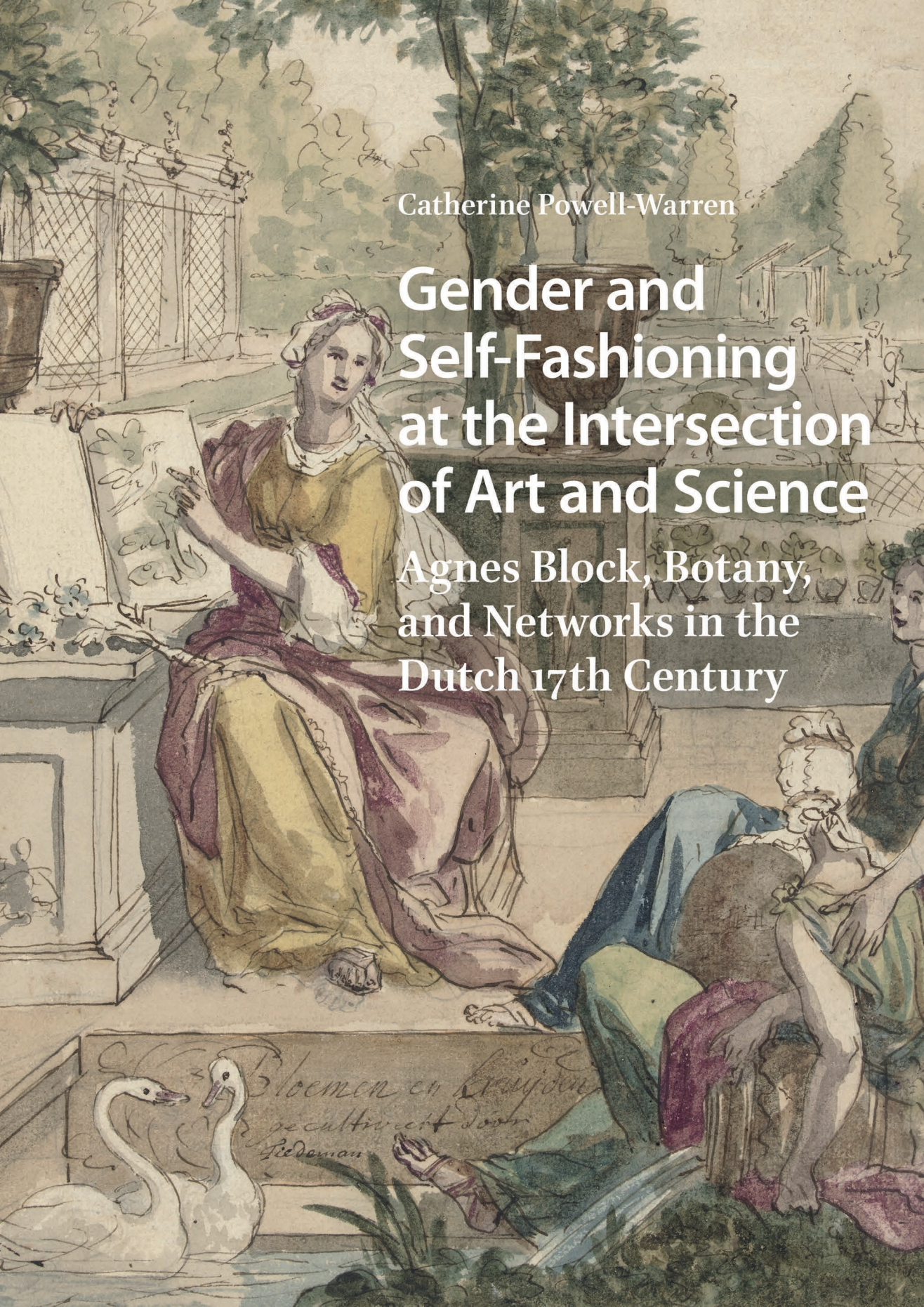

Catherine Powell-Warren

Gender and Self-Fashioning at the Intersection of Art and Science

Agnes Block, Botany, and Networks in the Dutch 17th Century

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To Robert, always.

This is a female text, written in the twenty-first century.
How late it is. How much has changed. How little.

(Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *A Ghost in the Throat*)

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Photographic Credits[1]

1 Editorial note: If information regarding the materials or dimensions of an artwork are not included, it is because these were not available at the time of writing.

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In memory of my beloved little dog, Tiny, who gave me unconditional love and comfort, and who sat next to me as I read every document and wrote every line.

Introduction

Abstract: This introduction offers a brief biography of Agnes Block as well as an overview of the book, the two chief aims of which are to write Block and her contributions into the art and cultural history of the Dutch seventeenth century, and to highlight both the need for and the potential of an updated and multi-faceted approach to the research of early modern women. Thus, this book approaches its subject by combining and adapting methodologies drawn from art history, cultural history, the history of science, feminist theory, material culture, and social network analysis.

Keywords: feminist perspective; women as cultural producers; institutional approach; multifaceted networks; female agency; Flora Batava

Agnes Block was an impressive individual, particularly as a woman of the seventeenth century: undaunted by the explicit and implicit limitations imposed upon her due to her gender, she taught herself botany; she bought and developed a country estate along the river Vecht, to which she gave the name Vijverhof (meaning Pond Court); she collected watercolours of flora and fauna by the most talented and popular artists of the time, paintings by celebrated masters, coins and medals, books, and *naturalia*.[1] In a portrait painted by Jan Weenix (fig. 1), she holds the centre of the composition. She was Flora Batava, the goddess of spring and flowers of ancient Batavia reincarnated as the Dutch Republic.

Yet, like so many of her contemporaries, Block has thus far mostly remained in the shadows. The socio-economic and political barriers faced by early modern women, together with the obstinately male-dominated history of the discipline of art history, have meant that relatively few of the stories by and about women's

1 As is frequently the case with seventeenth-century names, the spelling of Block's name is not consistent. In print and in notarial documents, she is variously referred to as Agnes, Agnita, or Agneta, and her surname rendered as Block, Blok, de Blok, and De Flines. Catharina van de Graft used the name Agnes Block for the title of her book and I have chosen to adopt that version of her name, unless it is given in a quotation or title. Because Gualtherus surname, on the other hand, is consistently printed as Blok, I have maintained that spelling throughout.

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roles in the creation, production, and consumption of art have reached us.[2] C. Catharina van de Graft wrote the only comprehensive study of Block, and that during World War II. The book's dust jacket notes that in those dark hours, reading about the stars of the seventeenth century provided a measure of comfort. Implicit in the text was the notion that Block was not considered one of the stars. She was merely a "remarkable woman" who occupied "a prominent place" amongst the people and friends who influenced Joost van den Vondel (who *was* one of the brightest stars of the period), which made it worthwhile to tell her story.

Van de Graft's research is meticulous and thorough. Her monograph on Block, however, reflects the limitations of her time: she did not have access to the *Bloemenboek*, the sole volume of Block's watercolours that survives intact; the letters that Block wrote to the botanical expert Lelio Trionfetti remained hidden at the University of Bologna; and the catalogue prepared for the 1704 auction of Block's collection of plant specimens had disappeared from view. Van de Graft's work was also the product of a methodological approach that preferred the individual to the collective and was built upon long-held assumptions about the secondary role of women in the early modern period. As Lewis H. Lapham noted, "stories change with circumstance and the sight lines available to the tellers of the tale. Every generation rearranges the furniture of the past to suit the comfort and convenience of its anxious present."[3] Our anxious present calls for the writing of a more inclusive art history.

Thus, the purpose of this book is two-fold: in the first place, it seeks to provide a more complete and more nuanced version of Block's story, and to place that story in context. Put simply, it seeks to write this particular woman and her contributions into the art and cultural history of the Dutch seventeenth century. In the second place, the book aims to highlight both the need for and the potential of an updated and multi-faceted approach to the research of early modern women, lest we simply end up with a revised canon dotted with the highest-profile, most exceptional women in history—what Merry Wiesner-Hanks refers to as the "add women and stir" approach to scholarship. The central argument of this book is that Block was an extraordinary woman who achieved tremendous success in being recognized as a serious, knowledgeable amateur botanist, and in her self-representation as

2 Of the sixteen books that are credited with shaping art history between 1898 and 1990, only two were written by women: Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, from 1983, and Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, from 1985; Shone and Stonard, *The Books that Shaped Art History*. See also Wood, *A History of Art History*, in which the number of women art historians, patrons, and artists mentioned represents a very small fraction of the actors involved in the author's account of the history of the discipline.

3 Lapham, "The Remembered Past," 15.

Flora Batava, which was largely accomplished through her patronage of important artists and by collecting. In doing so, however, she was not *unique*: the socio-economic, political, and religious expectations of her time and place were such that a woman with her intellectual acumen, wealth, and determination could become an influential cultural producer, and a number of them did. A corollary argument underlying this work is that Block's achievements and attendant self-fashioning would not have been possible without her use of and reliance upon informal social networks.

Cross-Pollination

The term "cross-pollination" is an apt description not only for the multifaceted methodological and analytical approaches that the book deploys in recovering Block's contributions, but also in reference to Block's participation in various networks that represented artistic and knowledge communities in her self-fashioning.

When the research for this book began, keying in the name "Agnes Block" (and variations thereon) into the database of the municipal archives in Amsterdam produced scant information. It directed one to the archive of the De Flines Family, which holds a copy of the poem *Vyver-Hof*, but nothing else attributed to Block or obviously about her. Further digging led to testaments and to the sparsely detailed Block inventory—a poor beginning for a standard monograph. Accordingly, my re-examination of Block's contributions proceeds from the perspective of the individuals and institutions in Block's world or, in some instances, firmly outside of it. This examination is multidisciplinary in its perspective but grounded in art history. Using Block's country estate of Vijverhof as a point of departure, the investigation has been guided by objects: Block's sole surviving intact book of illustrations of plants and flowers (*Bloemenboek*) and her collection of watercolours, drawings, paintings, portrait medal, letters, a poem printed as a pamphlet, and seventeenth-century botanical treatises.

Through these objects, the book attempts to reconstruct the manner in which and the conditions under which a woman could become an influential patron of the arts and contributor to the production of botanical knowledge in the early modern Dutch Republic. In this case, the examination of these objects solely in relation to Block and from her perspective is not the most productive approach.[4] Accordingly, the analytical framework that underlies the reconstruction of Block's contributions derives from methodologies drawn from material culture—meaning

4 I echo here the observation made by Tine Luk Meganck in the context of her research on Abraham Ortelius. Meganck, *Erudite Eyes*, 3.

by looking into questions of creation and production, use, and reception—as well as from the concepts and methodologies associated with social networks.

A Feminist Work of Art History

The year 2021 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Linda Nochlin's seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Nochlin insisted that a better analytical framework when delineating research questions regarding the role of women in the arts should "[stress] the institutional—that is the public—rather than the individual, or private, preconditions for achievement or the lack of it in the arts."[5] Despite Nochlin's appeal, bringing the collective or institutional perspective to bear in feminist art history has proven elusive. Indeed, notwithstanding the laudable attention that has been given in the past two decades or so to early modern Netherlandish women artists, the methodologies that underlay the "lone male genius" narrative of art history have tended to dominate the scholarship. The result has been to create the impression that there were only a few, highly exceptional women artists who succeeded.

Two recent works on the inclusion of women into the art history of the Netherlands buck this trend and have been highly relevant to this research project. The first is *Women Artists and Patrons in the Netherlands, 1500–1700*, edited by Elizabeth Sutton. Sutton's quietly polemical introduction is a manifesto in support of the deployment of feminist theory in art history, which I have tried to follow in researching and writing this book.[6] A central message by Sutton is worth quoting in full:

> In order to combat assumed foundational structures, perhaps more important than the content are the methods for how we produce knowledge, acknowledge the bounds in which we operate, and attempt to permeate and dissolve those boundaries to broaden our knowledge and share in knowledge-making.[7]

The second work is Martha Moffitt Peacock's *Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives: Imaging Women of Consequence in the Dutch Golden Age*.[8] Peacock challenges common assumptions about early modern Dutch women and domesticity and, in

5 The original essay and the updated "'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' Thirty Years after," has now been published as a stand-alone book: Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* 50th-Anniversary edition, with an introduction by Catherine Grant.

6 This discussion draws upon my review of the book: Powell, review of *Women Artists and Patrons*.

7 Sutton, *Women Artists and Patrons*, 20.

8 This section draws upon my review of Peacock's book: Powell, review of *Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives*.

particular, the notion that the women were deprived of agency and were generally considered to be lesser than men, when not altogether troublesome. Key to this book is Peacock's reliance on socio-economic and legal history. Early modern women had power and agency and the legal and economic rights to exercise them, even though they were far more constrained than early modern men, particularly in the middle and lower classes. Thus, the present book makes a point of including the perspective of early modern women with respect to gender expectations and experience, which has enabled the framing of Agnes Block's participation in influential networks in art and in the production of botanical knowledge in a more nuanced and contextualized way.

With the exception of this section and the conclusion, the words "feminist" or "feminism" do not appear in this book. Nevertheless, it is undeniably a feminist work. It explores the ways in which Block and her contemporaries were aware of the limitations imposed upon them by their gender and the steps they took to overcome or at least compensate for these limitations.[9] In other words, it examines the exercise of agency by Block and her female contemporaries, as highlighted by the close examination of the artworks they produced and/or consumed and the networks in which they participated to facilitate this creation and consumption.

This is very different from arguing that Block and her cohort took to the metaphorical barricades to demand a change to patriarchy or fought publicly to be considered as men's equals (the modern liberal feminism with which most of us are familiar), although their actions reveal that they *knew* that they were as capable as the men around them. To focus on this particular "activist" aspect of feminist theory would be counterproductive and obscure the true genius of the women, which was to find a way to function and succeed in a male-dominated world without marginalizing themselves for engaging in activities that might easily have been condemned as unsuitable or even improper for women of good reputations. In fact, like today, most women fell somewhere along the spectrum between "beyond her sex" and oppressed into subjugation to men in power.[10] This dichotomy is unhelpful as it produces a history that is necessarily incomplete, as illustrated by Agnes Block, who was neither a battling pathfinder, determined to publicly upend patriarchal traditions and expectations, nor oppressed. She did, however, possess agency (a concept that permeates this book), and she found a way to accomplish her objectives, namely to build a country estate that would cement her reputation as a knowledgeable amateur botanist, and become known as Flora

9 This section borrows heavily from and expands upon Kemp, Link, and Powell, "Accounting for Early Modern Women in the Arts."

10 Pal, *Republic of Women*, 9.

Batava.[11] This may seem a low bar for qualification as a proto-feminist but, when considering the barriers some early modern women faced, becoming part of the system or finding a voice within that system was a significant achievement.

Who Was Agnes Block?

Agnes Block was born in 1629 in an affluent Mennonite family. She was orphaned at a relatively young age. The second of four siblings, it is unclear when her parents died, although it would have been after 1632, the year her youngest sister was born.[12] Most of what we know about Block post-dates her arrival in the household of her maternal uncle David Rutgers and his wife Susanna de Flines. It was a rich environment, literally and metaphorically. From her uncle's home in Amsterdam, Block would have been introduced to the wealthiest and best-regarded Mennonite families of the city. She was exposed to art and literature. The poet and her uncle through marriage Joost van den Vondel tells us that she devoured books with uncommon enthusiasm, engaging in silent conversations with them secluded in her room, her focus on praise and virtue.[13]

After she married the textile merchant Hans de Wolff in 1649, she moved to the wealthy and bustling Warmoesstraat, into a house bearing the name *De Vergulde Wolff* (The Gilded Wolf).[14] Cheek-by-jowl with shops displaying luxuries in their

11 A threshold that is somewhat higher than Lynn M. Thomas's "getting by," but is very much consistent with it in terms of the exercise of agency in the fulfilment of a particular objective. Thomas, "Historicising Agency," 335.

12 Catharina van de Graft, in writing the only existing biography of Agnes Block, relied upon primary sources, which I have independently verified, with the exception of the records lost or destroyed in the interceding period. She helpfully set out the details of Block's family tree, her marriages, and her relationships with her relatives, in particular with the poet Joost van den Vondel. I have relied heavily on Van de Graft's work in rendering this succinct introduction to Block: Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*.

13 The comment appears in a poem Van den Vondel wrote on the occasion of Block's marriage to Hans de Wolff: Joost van den Vondel, "Mayboom voor Joan de Wolf en Agnes Block, 2 May 1649," in Van den Vondel, *De werken*, Part 5, 458.

Zonder wulpsch vermaeck te zoecken,
Sloegh ze 't oogh op lof, en deught,
Hielt gespreck met stomme boecken.
Stichters van haer stille jeught:
Van de weerelt afgescheiden,
In haer kamer en vertreck,
Schuwdeze al die stricken leiden
Voor een stilte, zonder vleck.

14 Marriage contract dated 24 March 1649 transcribed and reproduced in Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*, 37. For information regarding Block and De Wolff's movements in Amsterdam, see Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*, 21–22, 25, 27, and 45.

windows and only a few doors from Van den Vondel's, the property backed onto Damrak, where Block would have seen ships unloading the treasures they brought from overseas. In or about 1668, Block and her husband moved to Herengracht, the most exclusive of Amsterdam's canals, where they joined the city's merchant elite.[15] De Wolff passed away in February 1670.[16]

In 1674, Block married Sybrand de Flines, who was also involved in the textile trade.[17] The two of them lived in the house on Herengracht, which Block had retained after the death of De Wolff. There, they were near family. Uncle Philips de Flines and his wife Susanna Rutgers occupied the house next door, known as *Huis Messina*.[18] Nephew Jacob de Flines (son of Block's sister and Sybrand's brother) and his wife Anna de Flines (Sybrand's daughter from a first marriage), lived a few houses away, on the same side of the canal as Block.[19] Philips and Jacob were financially successful and decorated their houses lavishly, including by commissioning artworks from Gerard de Lairesse, Johannes Glauber, and Frederick de Moucheron.[20]

Block's domestic life was full. Both of her husbands were important figures in the Mennonite religious community, Amsterdam's most important Protestant sect at the time apart from the Calvinists.[21] Mennonites were precluded from taking civic office or bearing arms and, as such, could not belong to civilian militias, which were influential organizations. They were, however, frequently active in trade and wealthy.[22] As a community, Mennonites tended to be close-knit, and the wealthiest families—which included Van Lennep, De Neufville, De Flines, and De Wolff—belonged to the same circles and often inter-married, as Block did.[23] As a stepmother to three children, godmother to three young women who bore her name, and stepgrandmother to at least twelve grandchildren, Block would have reflected the best gendered ideals of her religious community.

Arguably, however, the most significant event in Block's life took place between her two marriages. In June 1670, only a few months after the death of De Wolff,

15 Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*, 56. Van de Graft mentions the existence of two *pronkkamers*, or showrooms. While the existence of these rooms seems probable, I have not been able to verify this assertion. The house would also most likely have featured a garden, as lots on the portion of the Herengracht excavated after 1613 featured deep backyards intended for gardens. For a detailed urban planning history of the Herengracht and of Amsterdam generally, see Abrahamse, *Metropolis in the Making*, 78, 244–245.

16 Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*, 56.

17 Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsarchief (hereafter SA), Marriage Register, arch. no. 5001, inv. no. 689, fol. 123r.

18 Kleijn and Duyster, *De grachten van Amsterdam*, 148–150.

19 Kleijn and Duyster, 146–147.

20 As expanded upon in chapter 4, in the context of the discussion about the Weenix portrait.

21 Goldgar, *Tulipmania*, 132.

22 Goldgar, 132.

23 Goldgar, 132; Schroeder, "'Heerlijck beplantte boomgaerden als paradijsen,'" 10.

Block purchased a country estate in the community of Loenen aan de Vecht, near Utrecht.[24] She named the estate Vijverhof, after the large ponds she had dug. Although no ground plans or representation of the grounds of the estate from Block's time survive, we know from the poem *Vyver-Hof*, written in 1702 by Block's cousin Gualtherus Blok, that the estate included an orchard, a vegetable garden, ornamental gardens, hedges, an aviary filled with exotic birds, and an orangery. It is against that background that Block chose to fashion her persona as Flora Batava.

Organization of This Book

As the reader will quickly become aware, this book is replete with the names of characters who played a role in Block's story. So as not burden the text unnecessarily, I have striven to provide only as much detail as needed in order to understand the significance of various individuals in Block's networks and circumstances. For example, I have only provided dates for individuals where these are relevant and/or there is an extended discussion regarding that individual. In a similar editorial vein, the reader should be aware of the following choices: the dimensions of works on canvas or panel are given in cm, while those of works on paper, books, and small objects are in mm. Titles in English are capitalized, but titles in other languages follow the conventions of those languages. Plant names in Latin are italicized throughout this book, and capitalization follows Latin conventions. Plant names in English are not italicized and not capitalized, unless containing a word that requires capitalization.

Vijverhof was an integral part of Block's identity and self-fashioning as Flora Batava. It was inarguably *her* estate. The cultivation there of rare plants, trees, and flowers was possible because she belonged to an important network of botanical experts and amateurs. It was thanks to that same network that her reputation as a knowledgeable amateur botanist was cemented and publicized. The plant specimens, in turn, served as models to the artists whom Block commissioned to produce hundreds of watercolours, thereby establishing her reputation as a patron of art. Thus, Vijverhof is as significant a protagonist of this book as Block herself, and this is where the book begins.

Chapter 1 provides the history of the development of the estate and contains a hypothetical reconstruction based on the visual and literary evidence that survives. A key literary source for the reconstruction of the estate and for our understanding of Block's public persona is the poem *Vyver-Hof*, mentioned above. The poem, couched like most poems of the genre in the guise of a walking tour of Vijverhof,

24 Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*, 64.

introduces a version of Agnes Block that is at once intimate in the detailing of her tastes in art and devotion to Vijverhof and public in its display of the public persona that Block wished to present.

The objective of chapter 2 is to then place Vijverhof in context. First, it situates the estate amongst others of the period by setting out the environmental context in which a culture of gardening and botany developed in the Dutch Republic, and by providing an abridged comparative analysis of Block's garden and that of other well-known and well-connected *liefhebbers* (defined in chapter 1), namely Hendrik d'Acquet, Simon van Beaumont, and Gaspar Fagel. It confirms that Block's garden would have contained one of the most important collections of rare and exotic plants and flowers in the Dutch Republic of the time. The second part of the contextual analysis concerns gender: was Block's devotion to Vijverhof and passion for botany unique amongst women? A short case study of Gunterstein, the country estate of Magdalena Poulle, a contemporary and neighbour of Block along the river Vecht, is offered for comparison. Women like Block and Poulle were few, but they did participate in a cultural phenomenon that had a significant impact on Dutch national identity.

The third chapter explores the context in which early modern natural history developed, and locates Block's place in that relatively small world. As the seventeenth century progressed, the field of natural history became increasingly professionalized and institutionalized, resulting in the marginalization of women, amongst others.[25] A close reading of the major botanical treatises of the period, however, reveals that Block was a significant participant in a network of important botanical actors and contributed to the creation and dissemination of botanical knowledge. This exercise of agency on Block's part is an example of how she "found a way," notwithstanding her exclusion from the most important formal institutions of the period. A case study of Maria Sibylla Merian and her daughters and an examination of the gendered language of natural history show that Block's participation in the public sphere of botany, if not unique, was nevertheless remarkable.

The fourth and fifth chapters, respectively, examine Block's self-fashioning through art and place this exercise in context. Chapter 4 examines the evolution of Block's self-fashioning from an amateur botanist, patron, and collector who was also a stepmother and wife, as evidenced in portraits by Jan Weenix, Adriaen van der Werff, and Johannes Thopas, to the quasi-mythological figure of Flora Batava, standing alone over her domain, as shown in the portrait medal designed by Jan

25 The concept of "professionalism" is admittedly anachronistic, although its foundation, namely the exercise of an occupation in an exclusionary field for profit, is not. Accordingly, the words professional and professionalization are used in this book as short-hand to denote the pursuit of occupations in fields with high barriers to entry, usually for profit.

Boskam in 1700. Chapter 5, in turn, sets the self Block presented to the public against the background of gender expectations and opportunities available to women in the time and place in which she lived. Was Block alone in her self-fashioning? Would she have been considered subversive? Answering these questions requires an understanding of the role of gender expectations and institutions in shaping the lives of seventeenth-century Dutch women. The chapter argues that women in the Dutch Republic at the end of the seventeenth century possessed rights and agency from which flowed power and the ability to engage in self-fashioning. The chapter concludes with short case studies of Petronella de la Court, a collector and contemporary of Block in Amsterdam, and of Block's younger sister, Ida, who was interested in mathematics and astronomy. Both women engaged in self-fashioning through collecting and the commissioning of art, thereby establishing that while Block was remarkable, she was not unique nor a transgressor of established gender norms insofar as she engaged in self-fashioning as Flora Batava.

The book closes with two chapters focused on Block's collection of watercolours which, like Vijverhof, was an inextricable part of Block's identity and self-fashioning. The purpose of these chapters is not to try and reconstruct Block's entire collection, nor to attempt the attribution of the watercolours, the majority of which are unsigned. Rather, this collection allows us to learn more about Agnes Block—about the kind of person she wanted to show to the outside world, about her artistic preferences and collecting habits, and about the way in which she used her collection as a means to self-fashion. Chapter 7 relies on the watercolours to chart a network of artists to which Block belonged by virtue of her patronage. Block's artistic network extended to include other *liefhebbers* and botanists. By examining the watercolours and the conditions of their production, we can establish that Block's patronage and support likely weighed favourably in the artists she retained receiving other commissions. The watercolours and the network they delineate provide us with a vision of Block as a source of influence for several of the late seventeenth century's most fashionable artists. They also demonstrate with surprising clarity that Block's self-fashioning was not accidental: she was aware of the impressions she created, of the importance of the relationships she forged, and of her legacy.

This multifaceted examination of Block's achievements, friends and acquaintances, and objects, reveal a woman who was independent, knowledgeable, self-aware, and not above engaging in self-promotion. At once a collector, amateur botanist, avid reader, amateur artist, and patron, it might be more accurate to refer to her as a cultural producer to better capture the extent of her activities and place in Dutch society at the turn of the eighteenth century.[26] This research also confirms

26 It was Dr. Louis A. Waldman who suggested the terminology of cultural producer to me. The limitations imposed by the gendering of terms such as "amateur" have been noted by Honig, "The Art of Being

Figure 1 Jan Weenix, *Portrait of Agnes Block and her Family in Front of Vijverhof*, ca. 1687–1693, oil on canvas, 84 × 111 cm. Amsterdam Museum, SA 20359.

Figure 1a Pineapple detail, *Portrait of Agnes Block and her Family in Front of Vijverhof.*

Figure 1b Collection detail, *Portrait of Agnes Block and her Family in Front of Vijverhof.*

that early modern Dutch women did exercise agency and they engaged in self-fashioning. The extent to which this was possible was, of course, circumscribed by socio-economic circumstances. It is undeniable Block and her contemporaries had fewer opportunities than men and faced barriers due to their gender. This did not, however, keep Agnes Block from fashioning herself as Flora Batava, a *liefhebber* at the intersection of art and science.

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Note: archival records and auction catalogues are sorted by date, whereas books and articles are sorted alphabetically.

SA = Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsarchief

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'Artistic'," among other texts on the subject. A man in Block's circumstances would likely be referred to as a polymath, a term that is not readily applicable to Block as a result of her lack of formal education. In the circumstances, a different terminology would appear to be necessary. I agree with Dr. Waldman that the concept of "cultural producer" provides a better picture of the significance of the contributions by women like Agnes Block.

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1. Vijverhof and the Pursuit of Nature

Abstract: This chapter "reconstructs" Agnes Block's country estate Vijverhof based on literary and visual evidence, surviving documentation, visual clues offered by contemporary estates located along the Vecht, and principles of Dutch garden design. A literary analysis of Gualtherus Blok's poem *Vyver-Hof van Agneta Blok*, as well as a close examination of the iconographies contained in works commissioned by Block from Jan Weenix, Philip Tidemann, Jan Goeree, and Jan Boskam, establish the centrality of Vijverhof in Block's identity and self-representation. Although seemingly inconsistent with the modesty preached by Mennonites, Block's lavish spending on and devotion to Vijverhof was not uncommon amongst her peers in that community; it also accorded with the broad, generally accepted link between devotion to God and devotion to nature.

Keywords: garden culture; self-fashioning; country estates; *hofdichten*; Dutch garden design; Mennonites and nature

From the moment she acquired it in 1670, Vijverhof became an inextricable part of Block's identity. Without Vijverhof, there would have been no Flora Batava, no collection of watercolours. Vijverhof is where Block planted seeds and nurtured fragile bulbs, welcomed international botanical experts and amateurs, hosted artists who immortalized her vast collection of rare plants and flowers. Vijverhof was also the backdrop, whether realistic or idealized, of Block's portraits by Jan Weenix (fig. 1), Adriaen van der Werff (fig. 17), and Johannes Thopas (fig. 21), and of the portrait medal cast by Jan Boskam (fig. 7). Block's last act of self-fashioning and attempt at posterity was the commission of a poem in 1702 by her cousin Gualtherus Blok, entitled *Vyver-Hof van Agneta Blok*; she was, in every sense, the creator of the estate and of all it meant.

The aim of this chapter is to present and "recreate" Vijverhof and to understand the essential place the estate assumed in Block's self-fashioning and in her identity. This "reconstruction" of Vijverhof is hypothetical and proceeds based upon what little visual and literary evidence survives, combined with information about other country estates along the Vecht to provide important context and fill informational

Powell-Warren, C., *Gender and Self-Fashioning at the Intersection of Art and Science: Agnes Block, Botany, and Networks in the Dutch Seventeenth Century*. Taylor & Francis, 2024
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gaps. The objective is simply to provide a sense of what the estate might have looked like, and of what it might have constituted. Creating this mental image helps to put into perspective the level of devotion Vijverhof required on the part of Block, and to understand how intertwined the estate and her identity came to be.

A Literary Garden: *Vyver-Hof van Agneta Blok*

The jurist Gualtherus Blok authored the poem *Vyver-Hof van Agneta Blok* in 1702. Block arranged for the poem to be printed and published as a pamphlet, complete with a title page illustrated by Jan Goeree (fig. 2). That multiple copies of the poem survive suggests that Block arranged to have it distributed broadly.[1] The poem is remarkable not for the quality of its verses, but because it provides us with the most complete account of the country estate and offers intimate insight into Block as an artist, collector, host, botanist and horticulturist, and "queen of flowers."[2]

The translated poem is included as Appendix A. At 111 lines, it is not particularly lengthy. Constantijn Huygens's ode to his country estate Hofwijck, in comparison, runs to 2821 lines.[3] Petrus Hondius wrote a book-length poem in honour of his country house, De Moffenschans, in which he mentions more than 350 individual plants.[4] Gualtherus Blok, Hondius, and Huygens were not alone. Poets celebrated the beauty and freedom that could be found in the garden in hundreds of poems known under the rubric of *hofdichten* (literally, "country house poems"), a type of literature that proliferated in the Dutch Republic during the second half of the seventeenth century. This genre of poetry grew out of the pastoral literary tradition embraced by P.C. Hooft, Joost van den Vondel, and Huygens.[5] The popularity of *hofdichten* surpassed the Virgilian verses that inspired them and became "the most important pastoral poetry of seventeenth century Holland."[6] Thirty-eight country house poems were published between 1613 and 1710.[7] The phenomenon of country-house poetry was also known in England, but on a smaller scale than in the Dutch Republic.[8]

1 The Dutch Short-Title Catalogue (STCN) records two copies, at the University of Leiden and at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek. However, I am also aware of copies at the municipal archives of Amsterdam and at Utrecht University.

2 Van de Graft, *Agnes Block*, 109–110.

3 Huygens, *Hofwijck*.

4 Hondius, *Dapes inemptae of de Moufe-schans*; De Jong, "Earthly Stars: On the Worship of Flora," 81.

5 Ruff, *Arcadian Visions*, 57–58.

6 Ruff, 59.

7 De Vries, "Wandeling en verhandeling," 12.

8 Evett, review of *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry*, 327–330.