

Aelst, Willem van

Dutch, 1627 - 1683

BIOGRAPHY

Willem van Aelst grew up in Delft, where his father served as one of the city's notaries. He was a pupil of his uncle, Evert van Aelst (1602–1657), a still-life painter in Delft. Willem joined the town's Saint Luke's Guild on November 9, 1643. Little is known about his personal life, but we know that he lived in France between 1645/1646 and 1651, and subsequently in Italy until 1656. While in Florence, Van Aelst worked for the Medici family, specifically the brothers Cardinal Gian Carlo and Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici. Van Aelst created at least eleven paintings for them, as well as works for collectors in Bologna and Rome. Ferdinand II de' Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, supposedly gave Van Aelst a gold medal and gold chain for his service.[1] In 1656 Van Aelst returned to the north and, after a short period of time in Delft, moved to Amsterdam, where he remained for the rest of his life. At his death he left a wife and three children.

In 1672 Van Aelst was one of seven Dutch painters, including Otto van Schrieck (1619/1620–1678), who were asked to judge the merits of a collection of Italian paintings sold to the great elector of Brandenburg by the Amsterdam art dealer Gerrit Uylenburgh. They declared the paintings worthless.[2] The flower painter Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) was a student of Van Aelst, and he influenced a number of other artists, including William Gowe Ferguson (British, 1632/1633 - c. 1690), Elias van den Broeck (c. 1650–1708), and Simon Verelst (1644–1721).

Van Aelst specialized in still-life painting, but within this genre he was quite versatile, painting fruit and flower pieces, fish and forest-floor still lifes, and above all, hunting scenes with dead game and hunting gear. Van Aelst seems to have been particularly influential in the development of this last type of picture, which became very popular after midcentury, and his paintings were greatly praised and fetched high prices.

[1] Tanya Paul, "'Beschildert met een glans': Willem van Aelst and Artistic Self-Consciousness in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting," PhD diss.

(University of Virginia, 2008), 64–82.

[2] Abraham Bredius, *Catalogus van het Rijksmuseum van schilderijen*
(Amsterdam, 1886), 41–46.

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