

Transcript - HNA Podcast Episode 6

Angela Jager:

Welcome to the sixth episode of the Historians of Netherlandish Art Podcast. My name is Angela and I'm here with Marsely, and today we have a very interesting conversation in store for you on disability and art. With us today are Angelo Lo Conte and Barbara Kaminska. Perhaps it is a nice idea if you introduce yourselves for our listeners.

Angelo Lo Conte:

My name is Angelo Lo Conte, and I am assistant professor at the Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong, Baptist University. I'm an art historian. I am Italian. I completed my doctorate in Australia before moving to Hong Kong. I have mostly worked on sixteenth and seventeenth century Italian art, previously with an interest on the economic lives of artists and specifically painters. And now I'm mostly working on artists, art and disability with a specific focus on deafness.

Barbara Kaminska:

And I'm Barbara Kaminska. I'm Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. I'm originally from Poland, and I got my MA in art history at the University of Warsaw. My research is primarily focused on sixteenth century Netherlandish art. I used to work primarily on religious art, now I'm also shifting more towards disability studies.

Angelo:

Disability studies as an academic discipline has been growing dynamically for over 30 years. And yet it is still a fairly new direction of research for early modern art history. Why do you think in our field there's this kind of delayed interest in the history of disability?

Barbara:

Yeah, I think there are a couple of factors at play here. I think, first and foremost, Renaissance art history, Renaissance collecting practices, have always been very much linked to the abled-body paradigm. And early modern viewers, when they talked about depictions of disability, even though they didn't use this word, obviously, they would primarily focus on theoretical and philosophical interpretations of those depictions. And, also in the early modern period, the majority of images of disability, they come up in religious context and so there's been this long tradition of thinking about disability as a metaphor, and it's not something that we see in art history only. It's, in fact, a very common phenomenon. Disability has been called by many disability scholars the master metaphor of social ills. Even when it's not a metaphor, we tend to read it that way. But I think we should also look at this question from the perspective of disability studies. So, disability studies, when they first were formulated in the 1980s, they sought to replace the so-called medical model of disability in which disability is a defect, is something abnormal that needs to be removed, with the social model of disability, in which the problem lies not within the impaired body, but the society. And seen from this perspective, the concept of disability has been historically placed around the Industrial Revolution, which is also when art history as a discipline emerged. And I think because of that there's been a kind of natural inclination to look at visual arts and disability primarily in modern and contemporary art. But I wonder what are your thoughts on this issue?

Angelo:

Yeah, Barbara, I absolutely agree. I mean, the connection between the historical connotation of art history as a discipline and the development of the medical model at the beginnings in the mid-19th century, that is an extremely important point. And this basically has generated a couple of very evident outcomes: On the one hand, as you mentioned, there is this tendency of characterizing disability as a pictorial motif. And so, the image of the beggars and those ideas of, you know, [those related to] the piety, and so on. On the other hand—with regard to the lives of the artists themselves—completely disregarding disability and completely forgetting careers, forgetting histories. With regard to reasons, we could point out at least another one: in regard to disability and art history, most of the attention has been placed, especially in the last 25 years, to contemporary art. And that's the reality of the situation. In early modern studies there has been a tendency to overlook this type of analysis. On one hand there there's been a little reluctance to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach that would take into consideration modern theory on disability studies, but also, social history of medicine, socioeconomic history, and so on. And, on the other hand, quite frankly, with regard to the early modern period, also the absence of a historical and theoretical framework on which to work. So, for instance, in the last 20 years studies, especially in social history, have laid out for us in the field to understand a little bit more ways in which disability was understood in the medieval and early modern period. And so now we're a little bit facilitated by this. We have more structure, more framework to work on.

The last thing that I wanted to say is that perhaps we should also look at the ways in which different societies nowadays look at disability. And so, we are taking mostly into consideration scholarship published in English, of course. But you know, if we were to look at scholarship published in other languages... in my case early modern Italy the amount of publications dedicated to this topic is inferior and the field has actually not started yet.

Barbara:

Yeah I think that's a great point, and I think to some extent it's a point that's also valid in the American context. What we've seen in the US is academia being reactive rather than proactive. So—and don't get me wrong, I think there are a lot of really exciting things happening in our field in American scholarship—but this doesn't change the fact that it often takes some kind of dramatic events to change the direction of our scholarship, which of course it shouldn't be that way. Academia is really a place, maybe the place, where issues of diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility should be studied in a more intersectional framework. So I think, on the very basic level, there just needs to be more support in terms of jobs in themselves, funding for studying disability in the context of early modern art.

Angelo:

Absolutely. Okay. So now I am going to ask you how did you become interested in disability? I mean how basically did your research start? Was there a specific point, or was it a natural organic thing?

Barbara:

So my path to disability studies has been very, very traditional. Until recently I was focusing on images of miraculous healing in the early modern Netherlands. That's what my second book, which was published last fall, discussed. The book was really a study of social, medical,

theological approaches to Biblical stories of healing miracles, and how their representation in Flemish art shaped people's attitudes towards persons with disabilities, who deserves compassion, and so on, and so forth. But when I was doing research for that project I became interested in how we can think about impairment and disability in the early modern period, beyond this religious angle only. This brought me to my current project, which is focused on Dutch artists with deafness in historiography of art. I'm particularly interested in this idea of how the very old trope of painting as mute poetry, the trope first formulated in antiquity, intersects with this more modern idea of sensory compensation, which essentially would tell us that persons with deafness would have better vision, make better painters. And I'm fascinated by this concept, because already in antiquity, already in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, we read about a deaf painter who became a painter because everybody around him advised painting as the best career choice. And we see this trope repeatedly applied, literally rather than metaphorically, to painters with deafness. How about you? How did you come to disability studies?

Angelo:

It's so fascinating because we're actually looking at very similar things coming from two different geographic directions. And this is amazing. My first interaction with disability studies has been a little bit more fortuitous. My starting point was a document, that had already been seen, but mostly considered as a curiosity. I was doing research in Milan for my book which was on the Procaccini family, and I was mostly interested in their artistic practice and in their workshop. While in the archives in Milan, I found this document made by one of their pupils, Luca Riva, and the document is a testament made up of images. It is a set of twelve drawings, with which this painter made his last will. And I found this fascinating for many, many reasons. First, the setting in which the drawings were created. They were made to be shown to a judge. And then there was the presence of interpreters who were basically explaining the drawings to the judge, so that the judge could validate them. It is a very noticeable process, actually, because you know this kind of juridic interpretation of interpreting drawings as written word is something that has been accepted by Italian law only in the last 50 years, so Milan was very progressive at the time. And this discovery prompted me to think about artistic careers of non-hearing artists with specific focus to early modern Italy. Because at the end of the day, disability, and deafness specifically, is often mentioned in early modern biographies of Italian artists, as you know, as in the Netherlandish context. And so I started to look, and I was surprised by the sheer number of artists that that I found. And this has been the start of my current project, which analyzes the presence, the lives, the careers, of deaf artists in Italian history of art. I try to use their biographies, documents pertaining to their lives, sometimes their letters, sometimes poetry written about them, to describe how they used art practice as a profession, how they were able to build up careers, the way in which they trained, the way in which their work was received by the community. And this kind of analysis is also deeply connected with attempts of understanding a little bit more about how the conceptualization of deafness changed in the sixteenth century. Specifically with the writings of physicians, like Girolamo Cardano and Fabrici d'Aquapendente who was a professor in Padua.

I have a question in regard to your current research. Can I ask you to elaborate a little bit more about how Netherlandish artists are investigated in early modern sources? You mentioned the trope of painting as mute poetry. But is this a recurring kind of trope that you found? It's very fascinating, so if you can elaborate a little more about that.

Barbara:

So we definitely find this trope of painting as mute poetry applied literally to their biographies in major sources in Karel van Mander, *Het Schilderboek*, in Samuel van Hoogstraten's treatise, also in some shorter and lesser known sources. But I think what's in a way more troubling to me but also what drew me to this project is the fact that we see those artists described exactly along the same lines in modern art historical writing. So this idea that this or that artist was a good artist because he was deaf continues to be perpetuated well into the twenty-first century.

And I find this problematic because there are a couple of levels to this so-called sensory compensation theory, which in the context of art history, I see definitely being enabled by the trope of painting being mute poetry. We know that the so-called cross modal plasticity is a valid and extremely exciting branch of neurological research. But it's way more subtle than it's usually presented. And are we talking about peripheral vision? Are we talking about depth perception in people with hearing impairments? But then there is a whole psychological level of this theory as well, and there are many people with deafness who would say that they don't experience any kind of enhancement of their vision. On the other hand, there are also psychological studies that indicate that some persons with deafness internalize this idea of sensory compensation. So, even when they don't experience any sensory compensation that could be measured and proved by tests, they believe themselves to have better vision. It's sometimes explained as a sort of psychological mechanism that is meant to preserve and improve their self-esteem. So I'm trying to interrogate in what ways painters in the early modern Netherlands could have used it to their advantage. And to some extent, the believe they are good painters because they are deaf is ableist.

Angelo:

Yeah, and on that actually, that is true also for the context of Italian art specifically, in relation to how the careers of those artists have been analyzed, really until the middle of the twentieth century. But there is an interesting distinction in early modern sources, because I have found, at least in the Italian context, that there is a very strong difference between the biographical accounts written of artists, those regional stories of art that developed after Vasari and then started to touch every corner of Italy and works of Renaissance poetry dedicated to the work of those artists. In the biographical accounts, the trope is basically non-existent. Disability, and deafness, is mentioned not as an enhancing factor, or in any way as a factor in the analysis of the artists' career. On the other hand, the trope is very, very relevant within poetic description of their works. And also one other thing in relation to this trope, which might be interesting: Many have written, of course, about this, and you know it starts with Pliny, and the story of Quintus Pedius, and then goes on. Leonardo da Vinci writes about it, a few years after arriving in Milan. And it is very interesting to me, regardless of this trope: Leonardo da Vinci had a very strong interest in deafness and muteness, as well as you know, for medical studies and anatomy. And when he was in Milan, he had two interesting encounters. One: He met Fazio Cardano, who was the father of Girolamo Cardano, who's basically the first Italian scholar who advocated deaf education. And, on the other hand—even though this is yet to be proved—Leonardo arrives in Milan and he works with Ambrogio de Predis, who's a local artist. Ambrogio de Predis has an older brother, Cristoforo, who is the first deaf artist recorded in Italian art history. He was a miniaturist and illuminator. So there is a very interesting kind of connection in there, and in this

case I don't know if the trope of painting as mute poetry should still be considered as the main motivation for Leonardo's writings on deafness and muteness. Sorry that this has taken a very different direction, but you know I just wanted to point out these couple of things.

Barbara:

No, I think that's great. Thank you for pointing out all these other possible venues and ways of thinking about this trope. I think one of the extreme values that disability studies brings to art history is this opportunity to look at our discipline from a completely different angle. And maybe let's continue with that for a second. How do you see disability studies being relevant to our discipline, and maybe beyond it as well?

Angelo:

Oh, well, very, very relevant. I think it is an interconnection and a relation that works both ways. We've mentioned how slow especially early modern art history has been to adopt a disability studies approach, and through this approach, you know, we can certainly provide a new perspective, giving voice to overlooked points of view and perhaps tackling or challenging some of the stereotypes related to disabilities, representation of disabilities that have been part of art historical discourse for a long time. Also tackle this negation of the presence of artists with disability in the history of art. I mean, there has been this very strange way of analyzing careers of artists with disabilities by art historians which has been either neglecting completely the disability or, considering artists like Goya, being able to produce, despite of the fact that they had a disability. This a stereotyped view that this new approach can actually challenge.

But, as I was mentioning before, this goes really both ways as advancing early modern studies on art and disability is also very important for contemporary art and for the discipline of disability studies, because the art historical discourse has mostly focused on contemporary art, especially in the last 20-30 years. Early modern examples have been considered sporadically, and, I must say, not always completely understood, or placed properly in a kind of historical or art historical context. And so, this type of research can really provide a more accurate understanding. [The] problem is that sometimes, we tend to analyze [the] historical connotations of disabilities with our contemporary eyes and that doesn't work, quite often. Also the use of language is for instance, another major issue. One last thing that I want to say is that this is also relevant also in order to foster more cross-disciplinary research. We have seen how art historians have been reluctant—especially in the field of Renaissance art and Italian Renaissance art—to adopt contemporary disability studies theory. But vice versa, also quite often there has been a lack of historical depth in contemporary writing about early modern disabilities. So it is kind of a relation that goes both ways.

Barbara:

Yeah, I think it's a great point. And I've seen this happening quite often in studies of modern and contemporary art that lack this historical background and the first example that comes to mind is the way the miraculous tradition is often talked about as something that is, just as I don't know, a fact, without really any deeper analysis. And what we actually see across cultures is this extreme investment in the idea of miraculous healing. So it's not something that is exclusive only to Western art. And that's how I usually see it being discussed in in the context of modern and contemporary art. I guess, one thing I would like to add to what you said is the importance of representation. In my classroom, every year I see more and more students with disabilities, and

more and more students who are open about their disabilities, and showing them that there is Renaissance art created by artists with disabilities, or that there is Renaissance art depicting persons with disabilities not in a negative discriminatory light, I think it's extremely important, also.

Angelo:

Yeah one thing, that I wanted to add concerns the kind of geographic focus that we have: hopefully, the relevance of those type of studies will also result in a more global or interconnected understanding of aspects of disability. So, for instance, in the context of the Arab court, the use of sign language was widespread. There have been wonderful studies about this, and we know that Europeans were aware of this. There is tradition. And so many interconnections still need to be found.

And then I would like to ask, Barbara, what do you think is the most difficult aspect of research on early modern art and disability?

Barbara:

So I would point to two things and you addressed one of them already. It's very difficult, but I also believe it's the most important aspect of this research: locating what historians call egodocuments. So historical documents in which the author talks about him or herself, in the first person, so like you were talking about biographies, letters, journals, and so on, and so forth. And some of those sources have been recovered for Northern Europe. I can't claim credit for any of those discoveries but it's definitely an under-researched aspect, and something that is very difficult, and something that obviously was impossible to do in the past two years, because of the pandemic.

But another issue which I see here, and which may sound very banal, is actually the language itself. So vocabulary changes very rapidly and it's diverse even within the English-speaking world. And all it takes to see this is to read an essay on disability published in the UK and then an essay published in the US. So vocabulary is rapidly changing. There is no agreement even within the disabled community [of] what terms are preferred. Of course, individuals have their individual preferences, so I would like to encourage our listeners to be very understanding when they read anything on disability, because some of the terms that were accepted maybe five years ago, are now considered to be discriminatory. So it's something that we need to be mindful of.

Angelo:

Yeah, I totally agree. I have exactly your same point. Vocabulary is extremely challenging. For both me and you, English is a second language and the kind of connotation that specific words have in our first language is completely different from the connotation they have in English. So that is the first kind of mind trick that we have to do. And also, as you mentioned, within the English-speaking community, things change very rapidly and for us, we also have the challenge that, as historians, we have to use the language that is part of the world we're studying. And so that means using specific words, providing an early modern understanding of them, which can also be very challenging.

For the documentation, as you as you mentioned, it is very difficult to find documents. It has been very difficult in the last two years, because it's very difficult to access archives. But also those [documents] that have been found sometimes have been analyzed in a very superficial way. It is also good to go back to stuff that has already been published, and see how actually those documents have been read. With regard to my personal research, again, it is a little bit more contingent. I am working on artists that are basically unknown. And they worked on a very, very local level. Beautiful little parish churches in the countryside both in the north and in the south of Italy. And so, while it has been fairly easy for me to access documentation, visual documentation has been very problematic. Even finding local people that were aware of the existence of those artworks, of those artists, and that were willing to go there, and take a picture of a given altarpiece, for instance it has been difficult. And this says a lot, because even locally the memory of those artists has been completely forgotten.

Barbara:

That's fascinating. Can you share with us your favorite, or maybe most surprising discovery that you made in your research so far?

Angelo:

Okay, well, a couple of things. First of all: the sheer number of artists that I've been able to locate, and I think that I've missed several probably. There are at least 15 non-hearing artists working in Italy between the 1550s and the 1650s. It's a number that I was not expecting, honestly. With regard to the single discovery, again, it's not truly my discovery, but I've been the first to analyze this testament, this document by an artist from Milan, and that is still to me the most fascinating moment of my work. Just because not only is it completely unexpected, but it is also basically the only document of that kind, the only testament, that we know of, that is made exclusively of visual elements. It's a very interesting object because it is supplemented by a 27-page manuscript description of the events of the day. Aside from the visual aspect of the work, understanding how actually, practically, the events developed during that day: the arrival of the notary, of the interpreters, who was saying what, which kind of decisions were made. Also the drawings themselves are very funny sometimes. The artist is trying to punish his nephew, because he gambles too much, and so he gives him really little money. So this is the single most fascinating discovery.

But with regard to practice, also, understanding that the training was mostly happening through use of sign language. Of course, different variations of sign language. This is something that I think has to be acknowledged. You know, there's been a lot of recent research that has pointed out how the gestures made by priests during the Sunday mass had created some sort of bridge between the hearing and not hearing community, kind of creating a shared language. The use of sign language, of different variations of sign language, is actually documented in early modern sources. Some interesting specific cases: there is an artist from Ferrara— Ercole Sarti—and he studied with a local master: Scarsellino. And the practice in this workshop was basically to study composition and shadows by using little models, clay figures of limbs, of heads, of objects, animals, and so on. This was actually a technique that was already used in Venice by Tintoretto, it was fascinating to see how in this case the sign language was supplemented by all those studies done with the with models. And yeah, so basically, two things that I want to point out.

Barbara:

No, that's fantastic and speaking of painters using sign language: I think my favorite painter whom I discovered so far, and he's actually one of the painters who has been mentioned in art historical writing before, is a painter active in Friesland and Groningen, Jan Jansz. de Stomme. So, we have a family chronicle, which was written approximately 60 years after his death. Jan is described as someone who established an independent professional practice, and he most likely trained in Friesland with Wybrand de Geest, and it's possible that through this connection Jan also studied with Rembrandt for a little bit of time, although chronology is a bit tight there, so this is something I will be looking more into.

But anyway, I trailed off. Those early sources also mentioned that Jan was able to have complex theological conversations with his wife and his servant, which I think is a fascinating remark, because, in the case of the Netherlands, it's all a bit tricky, if there was a nuanced enough sign language at that point, and we are talking like 1640s, to make such conversations possible. But this remark is fascinating to me, because Jan was a member of the Reformed Church. So really for him as the head of a family, as the head of a household, it was his duty to ensure religious instruction of his household. But also, I think this remark is very important in telling us how closely, throughout the early modern period, speech and hearing were linked to salvation. So it seems, like all the other accomplishments, in the view of the author of this family chronicle, were really, maybe not meaningless, but were less important than Jan's ability to engage with religion.

Angelo:

Yeah, and one last thing, actually. I'm very fascinated by—and this is connected to my previous research—the business professional aspect of this. I have a similar case of an artist who's the head of his own workshop, Giuseppe Baldaracco, working in Genoa. Actually he trains his own son, who continues the family business.

And one question that I wanted to ask: Have you seen any kind of pattern related to the type of art, paintings, produced by the artists that you are investigating? That can tell us a little bit about the ways in which they were placing themselves, their own production, on the art market of the time?

Barbara:

That's a fascinating question, and I have not seen such a pattern. Jan de Stomme was a portrait painter, so was another painter active in the same area, Martin Boelema de Stomme. And then we have Johannes Thopas who I would say that most of what he does are portraits, although he never really developed an independent workshop. So I said that there is no pattern, but maybe to some extent there is. So there is definitely some kind of interest in portraiture.

On the other hand, I guess by far the most famous painter with deafness, Hendrick Avercamp, is the master of ice scenes. So that's probably something that would need to be investigated and researched a bit more. But we have these three painters, who do primarily portraits, and Jan de Stomme becomes the most sought-after portrait painter in Groningen and in the 1640s, but beyond that there doesn't seem to be any pattern. How about you? How about the examples that you are working on?

Angelo:

All the Italians work quite a lot as portrait painters. So there is a connection there. Not only, of course. Each of them basically tackle the art market that there are facing. So, generally all of them work as portrait painters. Some of them have more opportunities to work on major, or medium, religious public commissions. That, of course, depends on where they are. For instance, you know, an artist in Genoa: Baldaracco, he is mostly excluded from big commissions because Genoa is a big market, and there are Strozzi and Ansaldo competing for the same commissions. But, on the other hand, there are other artists working in smaller centers that are able to supplement their work as portrait painters, and painters for private collections, with big religious, ecclesiastical commissions. So yeah, there is this kind of portrait pattern that is very interesting.

And there is a letter—I don't remember the date—but [it] concerns one of those artists, the one that works in Ferrara, Ercole Sarti. It's a letter documenting the fact that he's a very successful portrait painter, that he earns a lot from his portrait paintings. But, on the other hand, the author of the letter mentions that these portraits are actually awful.

Barbara:

I think it's really interesting to look at what we can read between the lines in those early documents. One of the early sources on Jan de Stomme discusses how he was married twice, and the author feels compelled to tell us that both of his wives were quite pretty. As if this was something very bizarre in the context of the man's impairment.

So, coming back to the challenges of our research that we were discussing earlier, I think, you're absolutely right, that many of those documents, even when they were published and analyzed, they have been analyzed in a rather superficial manner in some cases.

Angelo:

All right. I'm going to ask you another question which is mostly related to how the research translates into the teaching that we do. I wanted to know if you include your research, and your work on iconography of disability in your teaching? Which are the main challenges that you see, and also how students are reacting to this material?

Barbara:

I include in my classes both iconography of disability and authors with disabilities. And it is definitely a topic that captures a lot of interest. And I think some of this interest is motivated by this more general curiosity of my students in things that have traditionally been outside the canon. But it is also a topic that I can sense there is a lot of discomfort around it. I think, for many of my students, this is the first moment in their lives when the topic of disability came up in their classroom, and I think a lot of this discomfort comes from also not knowing what language to use. So we are coming back to this difficulty with vocabulary, but again, I think for many of them it's a question of representation. And along those lines, disability scholars, as we know, tend to point out that in contrast to other marginalizing and marginalized identities, disability is something that each of us will experience at some point in our lives. So I think it's extremely important to discuss those issues with our students, and to give them the opportunity

to learn to learn the vocabulary, to learn the ways we can think about disability in our own lives. How about you?

Angelo:

Yeah, again, vocabulary—it's also for me and for my students actually something that has to be explained, and tackled. For my students, also English is second language, so there is that additional barrier. I've started to incorporate my research in my teaching, mostly in one of my first-year subjects. There are many challenges, of course. And aside from the one of languages, is how to frame the discussion historically and help students to understand how ideas, conceptualization, understandings of disabilities have changed throughout times. And this is part of the entire discussion. The entire problem that sometimes we have, as art historians, of helping students to connect with images that are not made in the twentieth century, not made in the twenty-first century, and so provide context to those images.

The response has been very, very good—I must stress that here the Academy of Visual Arts students will eventually aspire to be practicing artists, and so they also have their own practice. And what I'm trying to do is basically to try to bridge these types of discussions, understanding, and bring them eventually in their own practice. I am currently collaborating with the painting studio in order to organize an exhibition next year, that will discuss students' perspectives about disability. Luckily, there has been a very good response, and also a lot of collaboration from colleagues, so that that is always very appreciated. And with regard to this, I'm also trying to establish some collaborations with local associations active in the field. Basically, allowing students to engage outside academia with associations that work in the field, especially those that promote the work of contemporary artists with disabilities. And so, I was talking about this exhibition that hopefully will take place next year. This should basically incorporate our own students and also already established artists. And hopefully, it's going to be interesting. But it is for me just the start of a process. I think I still have a lot of work to do in trying to frame my research more appropriately for teaching, especially for first-year students.

Barbara:

Absolutely. Yeah, I think the conclusion here is that we individually and as a field, have still a long way to go. But there is a lot of exciting things happening, so I hope that, you know, soon enough we will be having more scholarship and didactic tools and pedagogical resources available to us, as well.

Marsely Kehoe:

Thank you both for a fascinating discussion—you've certainly given us a lot to think about! Listeners: if you've enjoyed this podcast series, and you have suggestions for future episodes, or you or someone you know has a new project you'd like to share, please contact us at administrator@hnanews.org. We'll see you in the new year!