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Review:

Rob Ruurs, *Saenredam, The Art of Perspective*, (Amsterdam, Benjamins 1987)

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Pieter Saenredam (1597-1655) is famous for perspectival spatial effects in his paintings of church interiors. Dr. Ruurs has made a valuable contribution through a first detailed study of Saenredam's practical procedures and methods to achieve these effects. An opening chapter deals with basic concepts of perspective. A detailed analysis of Saenredam's first church interior follows. The author then defines four stages in the execution of a painting (pp. 49-50):

First, Saenredam made a preparatory study after nature. Then he recorded the actual measurements. Using the preparatory study of the measurements, he proceeded to construct a perspectively correct line drawing to be traced onto a panel. Finally he painted the picture, deviating at times from the traced under-drawing.

His main chapter concentrates on the role of Saenredam's 18 surviving preparatory drawings in producing the paintings. Dr. Ruurs argues convincingly that (p. 63): "the positions of the central vanishing point and the distance point (and also, therefore, of the horizon) in the construction were determined beforehand", which provides an interesting explanation why Saenredam resorted to preparatory studies and repudiates Liedtke's earlier claim that they were chosen arbitrarily. He adds that Saenredam used (83) "the simplest construction method: the distance point method", and that he was basically pragmatic in his approach.

The sources of this pragmatism are the subject of a final chapter. Dr. Ruurs begins with Frans de Grebber's studio and the three candidates who Swillens (1935) had suggested as possible teachers: Jacob van Campen, Salomon de Bray and Barthomeus van Bassen and gives reasons for preferring a fourth, the surveyor, Pieter Wils. An examination of 330 titles listed in the painter's personal library reveals only two authors concerned specifically with perspective (Serlio and Dürer); one (Wingate), dealing with the sector or proportional compass, frequently used for perspective, and a dozen others on mathematics. He concludes that the available literature on perspective "cannot have helped him gain much insight" and that Saenredam relied primarily on the surveyor Pieter Wils and possibly Jacob van Campen for instruction on perspective. There are useful notes (93-121), a detailed, valuable appendix (123-155), a glossary (165-180), 37 illustrations and a brief index. The English translation by Greta Kilburn is excellent. If one wished to quibble one could note that there is one "then" which should be a "than" (p. 118, line 20). Would that English and especially American books were normally so correct!

Minor problems of the book mainly involve his introductory comments on perspective. While it is now generally accepted that Brunelleschi's method was a combination of ground-plan and elevation, there is no clear evidence for this. Piero della Francesca's treatise nearly half a century later offers the first recorded example of this combination. The first published treatise on

perspective (29) was not Gauricus (1504), but Luca Pacioli (1494). Schüling's excellent list (1973) is not comprehensive so that the author's figures concerning number of treatises (30, 96) should be read as indicative rather than final. Dr. Ruurs believes that (8) "from the second half of the sixteenth century treatises on perspective were read primarily by mathematicians." This accounts for one strand of a tradition which includes Commandino, Dee, Stevin Monte, Aleaume and Desargues. But it overlooks another strand which includes Andronet Du Cerceau, Vredeman de Vries, (aspects of) Marolois, and Hondius.

Manetti reminds us of yet another important tradition when he reports how Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello: "made rough drawings of almost all the buildings in Rome and in many places beyond the walls, with measurements of the widths and heights as far as they were able to ascertain....They drew the elevations on strips of parchment graphs with numbers and symbols which Filippo alone understood.¹ The writings of Alberti (*Descriptio urbis Romae*), Serlio, Palladio and Scamozzi stand in this tradition. Saenredam owned Serlio. Did he see himself measuring modern buildings as Serlio had the old? Or was he perhaps fired by practical knowledge that came to the low countries through Maarten van Yeemskerk and Hieronymus Cock?

One wishes that Dr. Ruurs would have looked into the context of Saenredam's work a bit more. We are told (9) he was one of 15 artists who specialized in depicting church interiors in Holland in the 17th century. Brief allusion is made (100-101) to the 16th century examples which included Albrecht Altdorfer, Jan Vredeman de Vries and Hendrick van Steenwijk the Elder. He notes that the latter's painting of Antwerp cathedral contained a stone rib vault at a time when the building itself still had a wooden one. Such anachronisms have become extremely interesting since Gary Schwarz (Getty Scholar 1986-1987) in a lecture at Malibu on 12 March 1987 has drawn attention to the importance of anachronistic elements in Saenredam's paintings. Gary Schwarz will explore the significance thereof for interpreting the meaning of the paintings in his upcoming book. But perhaps Dr. Ruurs will, in future, study the connections between anachronism and perspective. Can this provide a clue concerning the "missing" preparatory drawings?

In terms of general method, two comments might be made. The author tends to use the metric system for actual measurements of objects while giving their scale value in yards and feet (e.g. 56-57, 129). It would have been less confusing to have fixed on one system, entering alternatives either in brackets or in an appendix. A second problem concerns the glossary which the author, no doubt, added to widen his audience. While potentially a noble idea, it is unlikely that persons who would need to look up such very elementary terms as aisle, apse, base and column would understand these careful distinctions anyway.

The author should be less abashed about his specialized knowledge. He should be commended for his precision; his intellectual honesty in listing exceptions to his presentation (e.g. notes 26, 68, 87, 113); his honesty in recording when he does not understand the reasons for a particular detail in Saenredam's work (eg. 81-82,126,131) and for the clarity and succinctness with which he presents his complex evidence and subtle distinctions. It is to be hoped that this young scholar will go further in a field where already he is not only a master, but truly doctus.

¹ Antonio Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, ed. Howard Saulman, University Park: Penn State University Press 1970, pp. 52-53.