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**THE DARKNESS OF THE  
NOCTURNAL CONSPIRACY  
OF CLAUDIUS CIVILIS BY  
GOVERT FLINCK AND  
JÜRGEN OVENS (1659  
AND 1662) IN THE ROYAL  
PALACE AMSTERDAM**

**Keywords:** Govert Flinck, Jürgen Ovens, *tüchlein*, Rembrandt, Claudius Civilis, Royal Palace Amsterdam, conservation history, darkening

**ABSTRACT**

The monumental canvas, *The nocturnal conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* in the former town hall of Amsterdam, was begun in 1659 by Govert Flinck and completed in 1662 by Jürgen Ovens. This paper presents the results of the technical research executed during the painting's conservation (2007–2008). This research, together with renewed analysis of the archival material, provided insight into the painting's atypical genesis. Flinck painted with water-based paint on unprimed canvas. His *tüchlein* was intended as a temporary festive decoration. Following Flinck's death, Ovens took over further work, this time with oil paint but again with a temporary aim in mind. The insight that the canvas is far from a regular oil painting helps us understand its extreme darkness. Moreover, this insight has not only been decisive in determining the best conservation strategy for the painting, it has also enhanced our understanding of its visual function within an historical ensemble, which is a highly significant emblem of Dutch cultural identity.

**RÉSUMÉ**

La toile monumentale *The nocturnal conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* accrochée dans l'ancien hôtel de ville d'Amsterdam a été commencée en 1659 par Govert Flinck et achevée en 1662 par Jürgen Ovens. Cet article présente les résultats des recherches techniques effectuées lors de la restauration du tableau (en 2007–2008). Ces recherches, ainsi qu'une nouvelle analyse des archives, ont permis d'éclairer la genèse atypique de ce tableau. Flinck a travaillé avec une peinture à l'eau sur une toile non préparée. Son *tüchlein* était envisagé comme un ornement festif temporaire. À la mort de Flinck, Ovens a poursuivi le travail, cette fois avec de la peinture

**INTRODUCTION**

The former Amsterdam town hall, currently the Royal Palace, is one of the most important monuments from the Dutch Golden Age. Designed by Jacob van Campen (1596–1657) in the middle of the 17th century, the classical edifice was intended to display the might and glory of the young Republic and the city of Amsterdam. A leading role in the building's programme is fulfilled by a series of six monumental arch-shaped paintings (550 × 550 cm) placed in three of the four corners of the marble galleries surrounding the Citizens' Hall. They depict the revolt of the Batavians (69–70 AD), the earliest inhabitants of Holland, against the Romans as described by Tacitus – a conflict which provided a very nice analogy for the earlier revolt of the Dutch against their Spanish overlords. The commission – originally consisting of 12 paintings – was first given to Govert Flinck (1615–1660). On the 28th November 1659 he agreed to deliver two paintings a year at a price of 1000 guilders each (Scheltema 1856, 129–143). Sadly, he died only two months later. The commission was then divided between Rembrandt (1606/07–1669), Jan Lievens (1607–1674), Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678) and Giovanni Antonio de Groot (1664–1712).

Yet Flinck is not absent from the galleries; his *Nocturnal conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* hangs in the south-eastern corner (Figures 1 and 2). The painting shows how, during a nocturnal meal in the sacred wood of Schakerbos, by means of a handshake the Batavians sealed an oath to rise up. From archival sources it is known that Flinck is not the sole author of this painting. A city account from 1663 records that Jürgen Ovens (1623–1678) was paid 48 gulden for 'finishing a sketch [i.e., *schets* in Dutch] by Govert Flinck to a complete ordonnance' (Scheltema 1856).

This canvas by Flinck and Ovens replaced Rembrandt's famous painting (1661–1662) of the same subject, only a fragment of which now survives in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (Figure 3). Why Rembrandt's painting was removed in 1662, only a year after it was installed, is a question that has occupied many art historians (van Eikema Hommes and Froment, in press).

So far, the debate has centred on Rembrandt's painting. Flinck and Ovens' canvas has rarely been discussed but does present many questions relating to its appearance and visual function in the ensemble. What immediately

à l'huile, mais toujours dans un but temporaire. Le fait de savoir que cette toile n'a rien d'une peinture à l'huile ordinaire nous aide à comprendre qu'elle soit si sombre. Par ailleurs, cette information a non seulement été décisive pour déterminer la meilleure stratégie de conservation pour la peinture, mais elle a aussi renforcé notre compréhension de sa fonction visuelle au sein d'un ensemble historique, qui est un emblème très important de l'identité culturelle hollandaise.

## RESUMEN

El enorme lienzo *The nocturnal conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* (*La conspiración de Claudius Civilis*), en el antiguo ayuntamiento de Ámsterdam, fue iniciada por Govert Flinck en 1659 y completada por Jürgen Ovens en 1662. Este artículo presenta los resultados de la investigación técnica llevada a cabo durante las labores de conservación del cuadro (2007–2008). Esta investigación, junto con otros análisis actualizados del material de archivo, aportó información de la atípica génesis de este cuadro. Flinck pintó con pintura al agua en lienzo preparación. Su *tüchlein* pretendía ser una decoración festiva temporal. A raíz de la muerte de Flinck, Ovens continuó con el trabajo, esta vez con pintura al óleo pero de nuevo con un objetivo temporal. Al saber que el lienzo no es una pintura típica al óleo se puede entender mejor su extrema oscuridad. Además, esta información no solo ha sido decisiva a la hora de determinar la mejor estrategia de conservación del cuadro, sino que también ha mejorado nuestros conocimientos sobre su función visual en un conjunto histórico, que es un emblema muy significativo de la identidad cultural holandesa.



**Figure 1**

Govert Flinck and Jürgen Ovens, *The nocturnal conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* (1659 and 1662), canvas 550 x 550 cm, Royal Palace Amsterdam



**Figure 2**

South gallery with the painting in context. Photographer: Jérôme Schlomoff

strikes one is its darkness. Of course it depicts a nocturnal scene, but the darkness in this painting dominates everything and seems out of keeping with the other decorations. The composition is equally remarkable: filled below with personages but almost totally empty above. Such an unbalanced composition is unknown to us in the work of either Flinck or Ovens. The same is true of the crude, sketchy execution.

The recent conservation of the painting by SRAL (Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg) offered the opportunity to carry out technical research and thus to shed light on the painting's remarkable characteristics. Correlation of the technical data with the archival material helped to reconstruct its unusual genesis, allowing a better understanding of the painting's appearance, visual function and socio-cultural context (Van Eikema Hommes and Froment, in press). This insight has been decisive for determining the conservation choices.

## HISTORICAL EVIDENCE AND DIVERGENT INTERPRETATIONS

Apart from the archival documents mentioned, there is further historical material on the painting's genesis. This material shows that Flinck had made decorations with the Batavians for the town hall prior to November 1659. According to the poet Joost van den Vondel, in August 1659, Flinck had produced four images for the ceremonial inauguration of the Stadholder's family 'With paints. On a surface of a little canvas' (in Dutch, *Met verwen. in het velt van luttel doeck*, Vondel 1660).

One also finds relevant information in Philip von Zesen's account of the city written in 1663 (Von Zesen 1664). Among the paintings present in the galleries at that time was *The nocturnal conspiracy* seen today, which had in the meantime replaced Rembrandt's painting. Von Zesen describes how Flinck had painted his canvas in great haste, in only two days, to meet



**Figure 3**

Rembrandt, *The conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis* (1661–1662), oil on canvas 196 x 309 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. Photo© Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

the date of the inauguration. It was a matter of no more than ‘a crude and hastily executed design (in German, *rauhem und eilfärtigem Entwurf*) in charcoal and a little water-based paint on a coarse linen canvas given a coat of glue’ (Von Zesen 1664). He also describes how Flinck died shortly after this *Entwurf* ‘and was therefore unable to finish it.’ Commissioned by the Amsterdam Burgomasters, Ovens ‘gave the final hand to the work and in four days’ he ‘not only covered the greater part of this *Entwurf* with a new ground layer and gave it a solid appearance with oil paints, but at the same time he also added another ten or twelve figures. Such that the entire work, as it now stands, was worked up to completion’ (Von Zesen 1664).

Despite the relevant details given, the precise genesis of the work is difficult to reconstruct from the sources. According to the city account of 1663 mentioned above, Ovens had to work up a *schets* already made by Flinck, but what kind of painting was that? On the basis of Vondel and Von Zesen, some art historians think that this refers to one of Flinck’s four temporary decorations from the summer of 1659 (Schneider 1925). They assume that it is after the decision to remove Rembrandt’s painting that Flinck’s decoration with *The nocturnal conspiracy* was retrieved from storage and was then worked up further by Ovens.

Others believe that the present gallery painting is the first exemplar of Flinck’s commission dating from November 1659 for the 12 permanent canvases (Van de Waal 1952). After all, Von Zesen spoke of an *Entwurf* that the master had not been able to complete on account of his sudden death.

The problems concerning the origin of the painting are often glossed over and the whole question dismissed with the remark that what Ovens completed was an unfinished canvas by Flinck. It is important, however, to get a definitive answer to the question of the precise genesis of the painting: to know which object forms the basis of Ovens’ picture and what its function was. After all, only when we know what type of painting we are dealing with, can we understand its unusual appearance.

## MATERIAL EVIDENCE FOR THE PAINTING’S DOUBLE ORIGIN

According to historical sources, two artists were responsible for the painting. This is confirmed by technical data. Particularly in the highlights, the twofold application is clearly visible: thinly applied subdued strokes are repeated by opaque and thick touches (Figure 4). The thick paint was the last to be applied, mostly juxtaposed with, but also frequently overlapping the subdued variant. Similarly recognizable is the double application in the coat of the man pouring wine. A beige underpaint is hidden under a tangle of red brushstrokes.

Analytical research seems to indicate two separate painting stages. Two different binding-media have been used: a water-based medium for the first painting stage and a drying oil for the touches on top.<sup>1</sup> In addition,



**Figure 4**

Detail of Figure 1 during conservation treatment. Right arm of a soldier

**Figure 5**

Cross-section from the red coat of the man pouring wine (microscopic examination 500x, bright-field)

5. Dark red oil paint layer by Ovens (red ochre, red lake and vermillion)
4. Red oil paint by Ovens (lead white, red ochre and vermillion)
3. Transparent glue isolation
2. Beige water-based paint layer by Flinck (lead white and yellow ochre)
1. Canvas fibers (the first brown paint layer is not present in this part of the sample)

cross-sections show that the water-based layer was isolated with a layer of protein glue before the oil paint was applied (Figure 5).<sup>2</sup> These data confirm Von Zesen's comments on this point, but does this also apply to the rest of his account? In order to understand what Flinck and Ovens actually had in mind, it is necessary to look more closely at their individual contributions.

### FLINCK'S PAINTING

Flinck used a plain hemp canvas that consists of three horizontal strips.<sup>3</sup> First, on the canvas there is a thin dark brown paint layer (Figure 5) consisting of umber, charcoal black and some chalk mixed with gum arabic. This thin layer reduced the absorptive capacity of the canvas while keeping its coarse structure visible (Figure 4). This is not a traditional method for priming canvasses.

This dark brown base is perfectly suited for a nocturnal scene. Using this base as an undertone, Flinck was able to realize a convincing illusion of volume with minimal means, just a few black contours and light beige highlights. The restricted colour range is achieved with a limited range of pigments (ochre, charcoal black, lead-white and chalk).<sup>4</sup> Flinck worked at top speed with remarkable accuracy. His rapid technique is evident from several traces of drips that he did not bother to remove. All in all, although differing in details, Von Zesen's account gives a remarkably precise characterization of Flinck's technique.

### A TÜCHLEIN IN THE TOWN HALL

Today water-based paintings on canvas are usually referred to as *tüchlein*, after the term used by Dürer. These canvases were produced in enormous quantities in the 15th to the 17th century, Flanders in particular being an important centre of production (Wolfthal 1989). The paintings had the advantage that they could be quickly produced, drying almost instantly and easily transported because of their flexibility. This made the technique highly suitable for inexpensive large format paintings, such as an imitation of the more expensive tapestries, but also temporary decorations, such as banners, stage scenery and festive decorations. Flinck's painting falls into this last category. No other water-based paintings on canvas by Flinck are known. Even though this technique was widespread, virtually nothing about these temporary decorations is known apart from what can be gleaned from archival documents, for hardly any of them have survived.

The technical research on the Flinck and Ovens painting now shows that there is still a monumental *tüchlein* present in the former Amsterdam Town Hall. It is this decoration which Von Zesen calls an *Entwurf* and the Amsterdam city's account a *schets*. The possibility that the present canvas is an unfinished part of the 1659 commission for 12 permanent paintings can be dismissed. The master would never have executed such prestigious paintings, each of which was to cost the capital sum of 1000 guilders, in such a non-durable manner.

It is therefore possible to conclude that this water-based painting is the sole surviving part of Flinck's decoration in honour of the earlier mentioned festivities relating to the visit of the Orange family in the summer of 1659.

### JÜRGEN OVENS' INTERVENTION

According to Von Zesen, through his intervention, Ovens gave Flinck's image 'a solid appearance', and in that aim applied a ground layer 'over the greater part of the canvas'. Technical investigation could not find a conventional ground layer on top of Flinck's painting but only a layer of glue (Figure 5). This would be the 'ground' mentioned by Von Zesen, which reduced the absorptive properties of Flinck's canvas so that Ovens' subsequent paint layers would run less. The master further minimized the risk of absorption by using thick oil paint.

In Ovens' contribution, there is a striking difference of approach between the lighter and the darker passages. To the dark passages he merely added touches of colour and a few contours, essentially leaving Flinck's work visible. In the lit passages Ovens reworked the painting appreciably. Sometimes he merely repeated Flinck's highlights, but often he overpainted them extensively, largely obscuring Flinck's passages. He also gave colour to the monochrome image. The emphasis was on pink (lead-white, vermillion and lead-tin-yellow), light blue, yellow and red (red ochre glazed with organic-red).<sup>5</sup>

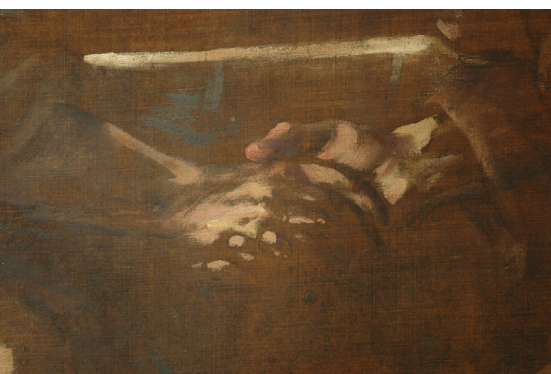
Ovens worked with firm brushstrokes without dispersing them. He did not bother with the details but only with the effect at a distance. In this, he followed Flinck's composition closely. The instance where he differed from Flinck's composition was in changing the right arm of Claudius Civilis. He also included several warriors in the background, again confirming Von Zesen's account.

Von Zesen's assertion that Ovens had only worked on the painting for four days can be discerned in Ovens' hasty execution. For only 48 guilders, the city governors could hardly have expected more than rapid modifications. The sum bears no relation to the 1200 guilders that Jordaens and Lievens got for their canvases. Once again, one is led to suspect that it was a temporary decoration. A version of *The nocturnal conspiracy* sketched by Ovens for the lunettes, indicates that there were other plans for a permanent decoration.<sup>6</sup>

Because of a lack of funds the city governors decided in 1664 to scrap plans for any new paintings for the town hall. Thus, the canvas of Flinck and Ovens has remained in its place to this day. Yet, no-one took any notice of its unique material properties. Archival documents relating to the conservation treatments the work has undergone over the centuries show that it was treated as a regular oil painting: an assumption that has had disastrous consequences for its appearance (for an overview of the paintings' treatment history: Van Eikema Hommes and Froment, in press).

## CHANGES IN APPEARANCE

Prior to the recent conservation treatment there was very little to indicate the nature and function of *The nocturnal conspiracy*. It was immediately apparent that its extreme darkness and emptiness was wholly incongruous with its busy and colourful pendant by Lievens. The expectation was that removing the grime and varnish would balance this perception and that a lighter, legible image would surface. However, after treatment the painting remained an anomaly. The technical investigation now shows that this is because the canvas differs fundamentally in material and technical regards from the other gallery paintings. Moreover, it was found that the image was originally intended to be dark, evidenced by the brown impregnation layer.



**Figure 6**  
Detail of Figure 1. Hands of Claudius Civilis  
and soldier

It is undeniable that the image seen today diverges from the painting that Ovens completed in 1662. The indication for this is found in the numerous paint strokes by Ovens that no longer serve any illusionistic purpose. One example is the hands of Claudius Civilis and the soldier (Figure 6). The fingers in the shadow can scarcely be recognized; we see only pink streaks in an empty brown surrounding. Ovens did not apply those streaks at random. They must have functioned as lighter accents on fingers already painted by Flinck that were still clearly visible to Ovens.

The effect of ageing is most dramatic at the top half of the painting. Here Ovens kept Flinck's painting virtually untouched, with the result that it now seems as though the enormous surface is overwhelmingly dark and empty. The vague forms that can still be discerned under strong illumination show that this part was originally filled with a lively canopy of foliage, balancing the composition.

A main reason for its present condition are the glue-linings that the painting was given in 1705 and again in 1757. Flinck's water-based paint would have been partially dissolved and as a result the painting now has a patchy appearance. Another problem is that the canvas has been varnished several times, destroying the contrast in saturation and gloss between Flinck's water-based paint and the oil paint of Ovens. A recent treatment carried out in 1963 was particularly disastrous. In that year, the painting was relined with wax-resin; an intervention totally unsuitable for a painting on an unprimed canvas, as the canvas would absorb the wax-resin mixture, resulting in immediate darkening. Due to natural ageing and saturation with wax-resin, the fabric is now dark orange-brown, very different from the original cool brown impregnated canvas.

Thus, the appearance of this painting has its origin in its unusual genesis, with two different masters both of whom, working at different times, envisaged only a temporary effect. This genesis also means that the canvas has suffered unusually from the ravages of time. Consequently, the original characteristics that the painting already had were magnified almost to the extent of caricature. The lightening of the tonal value of the architecture surrounding the painting over the years has only increased

the disequilibrium of the painting in its context (Van Eikema Hommes and Froment 2011).

### THE RECENT RESTORATION CAMPAIGN (2007–2008)

There is unfortunately nothing that can be done to remedy the misguided treatments of the past. The aim of the restoration therefore was to achieve a balance between the aspects of the painting that stem from its unusual production and the qualities that are the consequence of its conservation history.

The need for this approach was already evident during varnish removal. Because of the susceptibility of the fragile paint layers to mechanical action, this was performed with compresses. These were impregnated with gelled organic solvent, allowing the varnish layers to be absorbed by the tissue and thus preventing varnish from impregnating the canvas with subsequent further darkening.

The removal of the old varnish layers actually improved the appearance of the painting in the lower half of the composition. Above, however, it left nothing visible locally other than the naked canvas: here Flinck's paint, including the brown impregnation layer, had disappeared. Because these passages would stand out artificially as meaningless lighter forms, it was decided to leave the old varnish partly in place so that these passages would at least retain the necessary tonal value.

In dealing with old retouches too, the material history could not be ignored. The discoloured, crude and generously applied retouches of 1963 were removed. Those of earlier date were often found to contribute to the legibility of the image, and for this reason were allowed to remain.

Finally, the canvas was not given a new coat of varnish. Flinck's water-based decoration was after all not varnished, and because of its temporary function and the time constraints, Ovens was even less likely to have varnished it. A varnish may only have smeared his freshly applied oil paint. Now – since the last restoration – there is no varnish layer present and the differences in gloss and saturation between the painting of Flinck and Ovens are once again visible. It is a fortunate coincidence that these differences contribute considerably to the legibility of the image.

### CONCLUSION

It was hoped at the beginning of the restoration that the painting by Flinck and Ovens would as a result become more integrated with the other painted decorations in the galleries. In the event, it turned out to be the opposite: the discrepancy has become all the more obvious. Whereas the other paintings have lightened considerably, the one by Flinck and Ovens has retained its dark character. It is now obvious that this latter canvas belongs to a different commission. In fact, in the galleries of the town hall there never was a harmonious ensemble, in which the formal aspects of the different paintings were attuned to each other. There are examples of such series

from several 17th-century monuments and the Amsterdam governors must have originally had such a balanced ensemble in mind. However, Flinck's death and subsequent financial problems seem to have put a spoke in the wheel and resulted in a chaotic decoration project. Past treatments appear not to have taken this into account. The recent restoration project managed to do justice to the painting's unusual genesis, thus allowing a better appreciation of the galleries in the town hall, a monument whose history is so inextricably bound up with the Dutch cultural identity.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gum Arabic was identified using gas-chromatography-mass-spectrometry; a drying oil was identified using Fourier-transform-infrared-spectroscopic imaging.
- <sup>2</sup> Staining test for proteins (fuschin) on cross-section.
- <sup>3</sup> The lowest stripe is of 264 cm width; the middle of 242 cm and the top one of 27 cm. The hemp was identified with polarizing-light-microscopy. The canvas has 13-15 warp threads and 17-18 weave threads per cm.
- <sup>4</sup> Light-microscopy; Scanning-electron-microscopy–energy-dispersive-X-ray.
- <sup>5</sup> X-ray-fluorescence and light-microscopy.
- <sup>6</sup> Jürgen Ovens, *The nocturnal conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* (1662–1663), Pen and brush in brown 29.7 × 32.1 cm, Kupferstichkabinett Berlin.

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