

# Prelingual Deafness and the Manualist/Oralist Controversy in the Dutch Republic: The Case of the Groningen Painter Jan Jansz. de Stomme

BARBARA A. KAMINSKA

**Barbara A. Kaminska** is an Associate Professor of Art History at Sam Houston State University. She is the author of two books, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Religious Art for the Urban Community* (2019) and *Images of Miraculous Healing in the Early Modern Netherlands* (2021). She has also published on the history of hospitality and interconfessional networks in the sixteenth-century Netherlands. Barbara's current projects examine the early modern history of disability, with a particular focus on deaf and mute artists.

## Abstract

This essay discusses the life and career of the prelingually deaf painter Jan Jansz. de Stomme (1615-1658) in the context of early modern debates on deafness, oral speech, and gestural communication. A son of a Franeker burgomaster, Jan moved to Groningen in 1643, where he became known for his portraits of Frisian aristocracy, got married twice, and lived in wealth in a prestigious neighbourhood. The theologian Samuel Maresius and scholar Anton Deusing described Jan's devout attendance of services in the Reformed Church, which defended his right to participate in Holy Communion. A similar account was given in a family chronicle written by Jan's grand-nephew, who further specified that Jan joined the church as a communicant member expressing his understanding of the doctrine through gestures. By examining these various sources, I argue that church membership played an important role in bolstering Jan's social status and undermining the alleged intellectual and mental inferiority of prelingually deaf people. I further show that despite the belief that oral speech was a sign of intelligence necessary to perform functions deemed normative, Jan established a successful career communicating only through gestures.

*Keywords:* deafness, muteness, Reformed Church, oralism, manualism, Dutch painting

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Between 1724 and 1729, the Amsterdam draughtsman and jeweller Frans der Kinderen (1667-1737) wrote a family chronicle in which he mentioned his maternal grandmother's brother, 'Jan Voogeesang, best known under the name the Mute from Friesland, who was deaf and mute, but a very good painter'.<sup>1</sup> Der Kinderen briefly described Jan's career, marriages, and children. His particular interest, however, lay in Jan's membership as a communicant member in the Reformed Church, which he joined with the help of his sister Catrina, also mentioned in archival documents as Trijntje Jans or Trijn. Catrina served as an interpreter between him and the minister: 'The preacher asked my grandmother, and she signed [the questions] to Jan and Jan signed his answers to my grandmother, and she told them to the preacher.'<sup>2</sup> This remarkable passage contests the tradition of oralism while raising questions about disability, gender, and spiritual authority. In this essay, I use der Kinderen's chronicle and several other period sources, including the writings of the scholar Anton Deusing (1612-1666) and theologian Samuel Maresius (1599-1673) – who likewise underlined Jansz.'s spiritual maturity – to consider what a lived experience of prelingual deafness might have looked like in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. By juxtaposing religious and philosophical discourses on deafness and speechlessness with Jansz.'s career, I argue that communities were reluctant to exclude prelingually deaf people from their religious and social lives, and demonstrate that the Reformed Church and its theologians played an important role in bolstering their status.

This essay contributes to the growing field of Deaf studies and the social history of gestural communication in the early modern period. It argues that the history of the

<sup>1</sup> Van Eeghen, 'De familiechroniek', 124-125. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors at *EMLC* for their invaluable feedback on this essay; the archivists at Tresoar and Groninger Archieven for kindly sharing with me archival documents on J.J. de Stomme in digital form; and Suzanne van de Meerendonk for her help with Dutch palaeography. I presented a different version of this paper at the conference 'The Reformation and Family', organized by the Society of Reformation Studies in April 2023, and would like to thank the audience for their inquisitive questions and comments.

<sup>2</sup> Van Eeghen, 'De familiechroniek', 125: 'De predikant vroeg mijn grootmoeder en die wees het hem en dan wees hij het antwoordt aen mijn grootmoeder en die sij het weer aen de predikant.'

manualism versus oralism controversy, and the history of prelingually deaf people, is not a linear history of progress towards recognizing sign languages as a valid form of communication, but rather a fluctuation of often contradictory opinions in which philosophical arguments clashed with everyday customs. Jenni Kuuliala and Reima Välimäki have shown that by the Middle Ages, priests were striving to include prelingually deaf parishioners in religious practices and underlined the importance of those practices for social integration.<sup>3</sup> Their research focused on marriage and absolution; in the Protestant tradition, the former was no longer considered a sacrament, and confession was only practiced in the collective form. Kuuliala's and Välimäki's analysis has proven that despite a muddled understanding of deafness and mutism in Catholic theology, gestural communication was in general seen as an adequate substitute for verbal speech. The consequences of Protestantism's shift to aural/oral religious cultures for the lives of deaf and mute parishioners have been recently explored in the English context by Rosamund Oates. She has shown that the church's concerns about hearing congregants' understanding of sermons and deaf people's ability to assert their personhood, spirituality, and intelligence went hand in hand.<sup>4</sup> The usage of gestures in preaching and in communication with and among people lacking verbal speech became increasingly acceptable as the church recognized the insufficiency of hearing alone in its teaching. While several of the archival documents I rely on have been previously identified and cited by Jan Stratingh, Martin Engels, and Ben Broos to reconstruct the biography and the overall career trajectory of Jan Jansz., I use these sources to explore the personal and professional opportunities available to a prelingually deaf person outside the economic and cultural metropolises of early modern Europe, and juxtapose them with the philosophical and theological discourses on deafness.<sup>5</sup> My relatively brief overview of Jan's artistic oeuvre is meant to demonstrate that painting and even specialisation in portraiture was a viable choice of profession for a prelingually deaf person from a middle- and upper-class background. The same career pattern has been established for Italian painters by Angelo Lo Conte, whose research further confirms that, similar to the situation in the Dutch Republic, deaf and mute artists were also successful in smaller communities.<sup>6</sup>

My use of the terms 'disability' and 'oralism' requires some explanation. Deafness is increasingly seen as a cultural identity and sign language users as a linguistic minority, and many members of the Deaf community oppose the classification of d/Deafness as a disability. However, in the period discussed in this essay, deafness and verbal speechlessness were routinely described as a defect, a tragic misfortune in need of overcoming. Thus, while the early modern period had no term equivalent to the word 'disability', when 'disability' adequately describes the social, professional, and religious circumstances of Jan Jansz. and his deaf and mute contemporaries mentioned here, I will be referring to his deafness as such. Similarly, due to the period perception of inborn deafness as an impairment, I will also be occasionally using this term, despite its associations with the medical model of disability. To completely abandon this language is, I believe, to obliterate the nuanced reality of a lived experience of deafness and muteness in early modern Europe.

3 Kuuliala and Välimäki, 'Deafness and Pastoral Care'.

4 Oates, 'Speaking in Hands'.

5 Stratingh, *J.J. de Stomme*; Engels, 'Jan Janszoon de Stomme'; Broos 'Een vergeten leerling'.

6 Lo Conte, 'A Visual Testament'; Lo Conte, 'Talking Colors'.

Consistent with the perception of deafness, to cure a prelingually deaf person meant to teach them to speak. This ability would typically be described as a miracle allowing the ‘cured’ person to participate in the normative social functions while also inspiring morbid curiosity among hearing people. Because verbal speechlessness was often more disabling than deafness itself, and because it is impossible to determine its cause in individuals living in a period that struggled to explain the physiology of hearing, I will be using the term ‘prelingual deafness’ rather than ‘congenital deafness’ throughout this essay. In the seventeenth-century Netherlands, the term *stomme*, adopted by Jan Jansz., was used with the assumption that the person was born deaf and therefore also necessarily mute (or ‘mute by nature’). We do not know, however, how many of the people described as *stomme* lost their hearing in infancy, prior to the development of speech. Finally, since seventeenth-century Europe lacked any kind of deaf community that would have fostered deaf culture, I will be spelling ‘deaf’ and ‘deafness’ in lowercase, reserving the upper-case spelling for the instances when I refer to Deafness as an identity.<sup>7</sup> While considering these distinctions and developments, we ought to keep in mind that many premodern assumptions about prelingual deafness and especially the perception of sign languages as defective, limited, and inferior to spoken national languages have persisted well into the twenty-first century, resulting in the suppression of sign languages even in schools dedicated to the education of d/Deaf children.

### *The Life of Jan Jansz.: Sources and Documents*

Before we consider what period sources tell us about approaches to deafness and professional opportunities for prelingually deaf people in the seventeenth century, it will be helpful to briefly sketch out Jan’s family tree and his connection to Frans der Kinderen. Based on his self-portrait bearing the inscription ‘A<sup>o</sup>. 1634. 19’, we can conclude that he was born in 1615 (fig. 1). Jan’s father, Jan Jansz., was a baker who served as the burgomaster of Franeker in the years 1620-22 and 1627-28. In 1628, when Jan was thirteen, his father died, and he and his sister Catrina went to live with the lawyer Dirk Vogelsang, whose last name Catrina – but not Jan – eventually adopted.<sup>8</sup> The guardianship suggests that the siblings’ mother, Pytke Bouwkedr., had passed away before the father. In the summer of 1643, Jan moved to Groningen, where on 19 August 1648 he became engaged to Catharina Solingius; it is not known when the marriage took place.<sup>9</sup> Catharina died a little over a year later, in late 1649.

In January 1650, her brother and heir Daniël prepared a probate inventory of the couple’s possessions.<sup>10</sup> Most of the document lists household objects alongside jewellery

7 The distinction between deafness as an audiological condition and Deafness as the membership in the Deaf community was first introduced in 1972 by the linguist James Woodward: Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 11-12.

8 Broos, ‘Een vergeten leerling’, 129. Other variants of the name are Vooglesang and Fogelsangh. Frans der Kinderen erroneously concluded in his chronicle that Jan, too, took on his guardian’s last name.

9 Stratingh, *J.J. de Stomme*, 8.

10 Groninger Archieven (hereafter GA), Nedergerecht 166, Registers van inventarissen van gerechtelijke inbeslagname van goederen, 5 January 1650, fols. 31-34v.



Fig. 1 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Self-Portrait, 1634, oil on panel, 64 × 49 cm, Franeker, Museum Martena.

such as two golden rings and a string of corals and items for a baby, which suggests that Catharina probably died in childbirth or soon thereafter. The couple also owned a total of forty-eight paintings. Four of those paintings are identified as *tronies* and two as history paintings; the rest of the artworks are simply identified as ‘paintings’, and one entry mentions ‘twelve paintings small and large’.<sup>11</sup> Thus, nothing can be said about the quality, value, or authorship of these paintings. Stratingh has proposed that this large number of paintings might suggest that Jan doubled as an art dealer, which was a common practice among seventeenth-century artists.<sup>12</sup> While this is possible, it is also unlikely, as there are no documents of sales of paintings, which moreover were distributed across the house while art dealers typically stored them in one room. In addition, as some of these forty-eight paintings must have belonged to the couple, the number of works available for purchase would be fairly small. The inventory also lists seven books: ‘a small Bible in

<sup>11</sup> GA, Nedergerecht 166, Registers van inventarissen van gerechtelijke inbeslagname van goederen, 5 January 1650, fol. 33v. The term ‘history paintings’ (*historien*) refers to any narrative paintings whose subject could be derived from the Bible, mythology, or history.

<sup>12</sup> Stratingh, *J.J. de Stomme*, 10.

octavo' nested alongside devotional works such as Henricus Mollerus's *Hant boecxken vande voorbereydinghe ter doodt*, a book by the German theologian Otto Casmannus, and an anonymous *Spiegel der menschelijchte leven*. This combination of *ars moriendi* (manuals on the art of dying well) and *speculum* (moralistic tracts) with a Bible was standard in the period, while works by Casmannus and Mollerus had several printings in the 1600s. The books were likely the possession of Jan's late wife; none of the authors who wrote about Jan mention him as literate, which they would in all likelihood have done were it the case, since a deaf person who could read and write was, at this time, considered a curious novelty. Likewise, Frans der Kinderen stated that it was his grandmother who read a newspaper to Jan (surely using sign language); after his marriage to Catharina, it is likely that she would have taken over this duty.

It was not uncommon for Dutch widows and widowers to remarry soon after the passing of their spouse, and Jan was no exception. On 18 May 1650 he married his second wife, Aeltjen Stevens.<sup>13</sup> Their first daughter, Pijtien (Petertien), was born on 28 June 1653, and their second daughter, Jantjen, on 22 June 1655.<sup>14</sup> From the daughters' baptismal records, we learn that the family lived at the Herestraat, the most prestigious street in the city.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of Jan's and Aeltjen's probate inventories, this address is the only indication of the painter's continued prosperity in the last years of his life. Jantjen and both parents died either in late 1657 or early 1658.<sup>16</sup> The surviving daughter Petertien was assigned to the guardianship of a relative on her mother's side, Jan Stevens. Petertien got engaged to Menso Broeckhuijs on 14 August 1675, and married him on 16 September; the betrothal and marriage records list her name as 'Petertien Jansen de Stomme'.<sup>17</sup> This wording may simply be a patronymic or an indication that Petertien was also deaf and mute. She died childless in 1695. Jan's sister Catrina married Franciscus Raarda on an unknown date, and in 1641 gave birth to Pietertje (d. 1678). On 19 June 1666, Pietertje Raarda became the third wife of the Amsterdam goldsmith and jeweller Adam der Kinderen (1640-1720). Their son Frans, the author of the family chronicle, was born in 1667 and died around 1737.<sup>18</sup>

### 'A Mysterious Novelty and Such a Great Miracle': Discourses of Early Modern Oralism

The chronicle by Frans der Kinderen and other archival documents testify to the professional and personal success of Jan Jansz., and point to the ordinariness of interactions

<sup>13</sup> GA, Burgerlijke stand retroacta 165, Ondertrouwboek Groningen, 18 May 1650, fol. 13r.

<sup>14</sup> GA, Burgerlijke stand retroacta 146, Algemeen doopboek Groningen, 28 June 1653, fol. 24r, and 22 June 1655, fol. 123r.

<sup>15</sup> Probably because the inventory of Catharina Solingius was prepared by her brother, it does not give the address of the couple.

<sup>16</sup> Stratingh, *J.J. de Stomme*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> GA, Burgerlijke stand retroacta 170, Ondertrouwboek Groningen, 14 August 1675 and 16 September 1675, fol. 86v.

<sup>18</sup> On Catharina and her family, see <https://www.vondel.humanities.uva.nl/ecartico/persons/index.php> (Accessed on 1 July 2023).



between hearing and prelingually deaf members of a seventeenth-century community. All of these documents confirm that Jan used gestures and signs to communicate, and that close family members served as his interpreters. These assertions, paired with Jan's position in society, belie the early modern pattern of favouring oralism that we see in deaf education, including in the Dutch Republic. At the time, oralism was tied to the belief that verbal speech was synonymous with language, and thus the only definite proof of a person's intelligence. However, the practice of forcing prelingually d/Deaf children into the acquisition of verbal speech has had a remarkable longevity, and it is against this audist background that we need to place the sources chronicling Jansz.'s life, which I analyse in greater detail in the next section of this essay.

The most striking example of oralism in the Dutch Republic was the pamphlet *Surdus Loquens* written by the Swiss physician Johann Konrad Amman (1669-1724), which was published first in Amsterdam in 1692 and two years later in London under the title *Talking Deaf Man*.<sup>19</sup> This short book was based on Amman's experiences tutoring Esther Koolaart (c. 1684-1737), a prelingually deaf daughter of the Haarlem merchant Pieter Koolaart and a stepdaughter of the poet Elisabeth Hoofman (1664-1736). Having taught Esther vocal speech, Amman wished to make his method known and, undoubtedly, to boast about his achievement, which was considered no less than miraculous. According to Amman, the benefits of acquiring speech by Esther were twofold, encompassing both her social and religious integration:

This very way is that, by which I taught Esther Kolard, (a young Virgin of great Hopes, the only daughter of Mr. Peter Kolard, who was born deaf) not only to read, but also to speak readily, yea, and to hold Discourse with others and in a short time she profited so much, as to remember a many Questions and Answers in the Catechism, yea, and as far as her young Years were capable, she understood the Sense of them also.<sup>20</sup>

Esther's verbal speech was praised in direct contrast to the deficient gestural communication:

How miserable is the condition of the Deaf? How lame and defective is that Speech, which is performed by Signs and Gestures? How little are they capable to receive of those things which concern their eternal Salvation?<sup>21</sup>

Esther would become a tokenized symbol of 'overcoming' deafness: when in 1709-1711 Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach and his brother Johann Friedrich travelled through the Netherlands, they wished to meet Esther, as the claim that a person born deaf could speak seemed sensational. The Koolarts were enjoying their countryside retreat at the time, however, so the brothers did not get their wish.<sup>22</sup> But if the young Esther became a sensation, she was certainly not the first prelingually deaf person to acquire oral speech in early modern Europe. Pedro Ponce de León (ca. 1520-1584), a Benedictine monk at the monastery of San Salvador in Oña, Spain, taught brothers Pedro and Francisco de Velasco to speak and read. The monk never wrote down his method and thus it was not continued after his

<sup>19</sup> Amman, *Talking Deaf Man*. Amman's pamphlet was also translated into Dutch, German, French, Hungarian, and Italian.

<sup>20</sup> Amman, *Talking Dea Manf*, sig. a4.

<sup>21</sup> Amman, *Talking Deaf Man*, sig. a.

<sup>22</sup> Von Uffenbach, *Merkwürdige Reisen*, III, 533.

death, despite the great fame that he and his charges enjoyed. The monastery was visited by Emperor Charles v himself, his sisters Eleanor of France and Mary of Hungary, and his son Philip II.<sup>23</sup>

The early modern accounts of the acquisition of speech by prelingually deaf people show that the disability of congenital deafness was twofold: because hearing was considered the sense of learning, a deaf person must necessarily be intellectually deficient, while the lack of verbal speech was legally and socially disabling. The conviction that prelingually deaf people were ineducable stemmed from a misunderstanding of Aristotle, who wrote that 'hearing greatly contributes to wisdom' but it is 'accidental' rather than 'essential' to knowledge.<sup>24</sup> As we have seen, Amman, too, tied the acquisition of vocal speech to the acquisition of not only knowledge but also understanding. Even the English physician John Bulwer, who proposed sign language as a valid and valuable system of communication among prelingually deaf people, ultimately advocated in favour of schools for deaf children that would teach them to speak orally.<sup>25</sup> In the light of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, the preference for oralism over manualism was thus motivated by two factors: first, it was the way to demonstrate deaf people's mental and intellectual abilities and second, it enabled their social and religious integration.

In early modern Europe, teaching speech to a person 'mute from birth' was also deeply steeped in the discourse of the miraculous. Supernatural healing was no longer considered plausible by Reformed Christians, who read biblical stories of healing miracles as a call to charitable behaviour rather than a promise to the faithful sick. Although Catholics did not reject the possibility of miraculous deliverance from disease and disability, they increasingly embraced the same understanding of biblical stories as Protestants. Moved into the realm of the impossible, miracles became a rhetorical hyperbole crossing confessional boundaries. Esther Koolart's stepmother, Elisabeth Hoofman, celebrated Amman with a laudatory birthday poem, in which she described him as a worldwide wonder to whom all of the Netherlands will be forever grateful and praised his achievements as miraculous.<sup>26</sup> Hoofman even suggested in her poem that Amman, 'a mute saint,' ought to be celebrated by Rome. The peculiarity of this praise as coming from a Mennonite highlights that by the end of the seventeenth century, references to the miraculous had become no more than a figure of speech.<sup>27</sup> Catholic authors' praise of teachers of deaf and mute children was likewise not meant to be taken literally. While Licenciado Lasso, a jurist who visited the monastery at Oña, called the talking students of Ponce 'a mysterious novelty and such a great miracle', he emphasized that they acquired oral speech thanks to Ponce's 'industry, judgment, and curiosity'.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the chronicler of the Benedictine Order,

23 Plann, *Silent Minority*, 32.

24 Plann, *Silent Minority*, 17, 208. For the common early modern interpretation of Aristotle and ultimately its refutation, see: Deusing, *Dissertatio De Surdis*, and Sibscota, *Deaf and Dumb*. Oddly enough, one of the authors who read Aristotle as evidence that a prelingually deaf person was inherently ineducable was Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540), despite acknowledging that 'mute persons' communicate through gestures that 'can even replace words': Plann, *Silent Minority*, 18.

25 Oates, 'Speaking in Hands', 55.

26 Kops (ed.), *Naagelaatene Gedichten van Elisabeth Koolaart*, 81-82.

27 For a short biography of Hoofman and her confessional identity, see: Van Oostrum, 'Hoofman'.

28 Plann, *Silent Minority*, 25.



Antonio Yepes, described Ponce's talent to teach prelingually deaf children as 'a gift that heaven conceded to him [...] but it was not the grace to perform miracles that is called *gratis datas*, but rather, he really had such great inventiveness and such great talent, that he discovered a method to make the mutes talk'.<sup>29</sup>

However conventionalized, trivial, and rhetorical this discourse of the miraculous was, it was fuelled by the common premodern understanding of the physiology of hearing, according to which it was physically impossible for a person born deaf to learn to speak. Both Aristotle and Galen believed that hearing and speech were produced by the same region of the brain, hence any damage to that region must necessarily have led to the lack of both abilities.<sup>30</sup> What Ponce and Amman achieved was indeed miraculous in regard to the seventeenth-century understanding of anatomy. In line with the scepticism about miracles affected by divine intervention, medical curiosity and diligence became perceived as the means behind the miraculous 'overcoming' of congenital impairments. We see here the beginnings of the still-common conventional descriptions of medical and scientific progress as 'miraculous breakthroughs' promising to cure people living with untreatable diseases and disabilities.<sup>31</sup> Common to the understanding of the miraculous cure as described in both the New Testament stories, early modern Europe, and contemporary medicine, is the conviction that it is bestowed on the disabled person by a non-disabled individual. It was thanks to the industriousness of Ponce and Amman that their 'disadvantaged', literally and metaphorically mute charges became cured; none of the sources mention the dedication of the Velasco brothers and Esther Koolart showed in pursuing the gruelling task of acquiring oral speech. Of course, early modern sources never questioned whether they even wished to develop it, as a negative answer would have been unthinkable in the period.

Despite the limited period understanding of the physiology of hearing and speech, not everyone accepted the common wisdom of the day that congenital deafness necessarily led to mutism. What many considered a miracle, a few others saw as evidence that Aristotle was simply mistaken. The achievements of Pedro Ponce provided the German scholar Anton Deusing, who was active in Groningen, and his English translator George Sibscota with empirical proof against Aristotle's theory:

It is an absolute mistake to maintain that all that are born Deaf, are Dumb also: for the ineptitude of organs to the framing of Speech doth not immediately follow the want of Speech. For where deafness depends not so much upon the defect which is common to the Hearing and Speaking, (which we have allowed may sometimes happen) as upon the imperfection rather peculiar to the very adequate organ of Hearing (of which as there are many parts, so there may be many obstructions, that may destroy the Hearing) it doth not follow therefore that there is an immediate inability to speak.<sup>32</sup>

Other aspects of Aristotle's legacy began to be questioned as well, and many of the authors arguing against the alleged 'idiocy' of prelingually deaf people were Netherlandish scholars,

<sup>29</sup> Plann, *Silent Minority*, 213.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Oates, 'Speaking in Hands', 55. The first person to show that 'Nervus Facialis' and 'Nervus Acusticus' are separate was the English physician Thomas Willis (1621-1675).

<sup>31</sup> See for instance the essays in Wong (ed.), *Disability Visibility*.

<sup>32</sup> Sibscota, *Deaf and Dumb*, 16-17. For these passages in Deusing see: Deusing, *Dissertatio de Surdis*, 160-161.

including, besides Deusing, Rudolph Agricola (1443-1485), Franciscus Mercurius van Helmout (1614-1698), and Johannes Lavater (1741-1801). Outside the Netherlands, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576) in Italy; Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) in France; Salomon Alberti (1540-1600) and Philipp Camerarius (1537-1624) in Germany; and Helikiah Crooke (1576-1648) in England likewise rejected the notion that deafness and speechlessness were necessarily followed by mental and intellectual deficiencies.<sup>33</sup>

The nuanced discourse around oralism and manualism in early modern Europe is often obliterated in histories of d/Deaf communication that identify the establishment of the first school for deaf children in Paris in 1770 by Charles-Michel de l'Épée (1712-1789) as the beginning of d/Deaf education. But the coexistence of the two approaches helps explain why the modern history of the manualism/oralism controversy is not linear and why this controversy is far from settled. Manualism was briefly favoured in the late eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth century, thanks to l'Épée and his followers. The first Dutch school for deaf children was established in Groningen in 1790 by Henri Daniel Guyot.<sup>34</sup> In the United States, Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc opened the American Asylum for the Deaf at Hartford, Connecticut in 1817. But this victory of manualism over oralism was brief, as the former began to be rejected in the later 1800s. Oralism peaked after World War I, when in the United States alone nearly eighty percent of deaf children were taught without any use of sign language.<sup>35</sup> Examples of discrimination against manual communication in d/Deaf education have been plentiful even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Many schools for deaf children during this time were run by faculty and administrators who lacked knowledge of the sign language used by their students, and signing was banned to prevent the children from speaking a language teachers could not understand. This prohibition was often achieved by using physical violence, such as tying children's hands behind their chair and beating them with rulers.<sup>36</sup> Even in the absence of these abusive methods, schools have for decades considered their main mission to be the integration of deaf children into a hearing society, and the only way to achieve this was to make students like their hearing peers. Students who have learned to speak well verbally and read lips were considered 'success stories' and praised as 'rehabilitated'.<sup>37</sup> We see here thus the same language of near-miraculous cure that permeated seveneenth-century writings.

33 Cardano suggested that deaf people's sight would compensate for the absence of hearing, so they could master writing, form abstract thought, and, overall, were not beyond learning: Buyens, *De dove persoon*, 21. Cardano's oldest son was deaf in one ear and stuttered, so unlike many other philosophers he based his reflections on actual empirical observation. Alberti and Camerarius described prelingually deaf people who learned to read and count and worked as merchants: Büchli, *De zorg voor de doofstomme*, 18.

34 For an introductory overview of the Groningen institute, see: Rietveld-van Wingerden, 'Educating the Deaf', 406-408.

35 Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 5. On the controversy of manualism versus oralism see, for instance, Rietveld-van Wingerden, 'Educating the Deaf'.

36 For these testimonies, see: Buyens, *De dove persoon*; Goc, *Glusza*.

37 Goc, *Glusza*.

### *Spiritual Agency and Manualism in the Reformed Church*

The strong support for oralism in early modern Europe rendered the acquisition of vocal speech as one possible, if rare, path to social 'integration' and salvation. But Jan Jansz.'s path was different. For Frans der Kinderen, a crucial moment of Jan's life was his joining of the Reformed Church. The chronicler's emphasis on his access remains significant, even though it cannot be confirmed in church records. The membership books of the Reformed Church in Franeker for the years 1599-1640 are unfortunately missing; as one would join the church at eighteen at the earliest, this gap is of crucial significance.<sup>38</sup> However, in the records for April 1643, the membership book lists a new member, 'Ian Ians'.<sup>39</sup> While we cannot be sure that this is Jan de Stomme, such a possibility cannot be ruled out. Jan never adopted his guardian's last name, and the first time we see him identified through his nickname *stomme* is on 22 July 1643, when he became a citizen of Groningen. The artist first requested permission to live and work in this city on 17 June, two months after his possible joining of the Reformed Church.<sup>40</sup> As a communicant member in Franeker, he would have been entitled to an apostille that allowed him to join a new parish in Groningen and which would have also served as evidence of his faith and moral character.<sup>41</sup> In general, arriving in Groningen as a communicant member would have made his settling in the new place easier. The likelihood that the Ian Ians. mentioned as a new member in April 1643 was, in fact, de Stomme, is also bolstered by his family network. By 1643, his sister Catrina must have been married for at least over two years to the minister Franciscus Raarda, as the couple's daughter was born in 1641. It is possible that the minister who, with the help of Catrina, testified to Jan's knowledge of the catechism was his brother-in-law.

We do not know the date of Catrina's birth, but the siblings were likely very close in age. The average age of marriage for women in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was between twenty-two and twenty-four, which would suggest that Catrina was born at the earliest between 1616 and 1618, but she might, of course, have been older than Jan. As Bernard Capp has shown for early modern England, older sisters and brothers provided spiritual guidance to their siblings, and played an active role in their religious upbringing, especially if one or both parents were deceased.<sup>42</sup> Were Catrina the elder of the two, the duty she would have owed her younger sibling would have been amplified by Jan's impairment. By the time Dirk Vogelsang was appointed their guardian, Jan and Catrina would likely have developed a system of communication through gestures, which would have

38 Pollmann, 'Honor', 30.

39 Leeuwarden, Tresoar, Hervormde Gemeente Franeker 35, Lidmatenboeken, April 1643, fol. 17.

40 Stratingh, *J.J. de Stomme*, 8.

41 Confirmation of those qualities was a part of the usual ritual of joining of the Church, which consisted of reciting the confession of faith before the consistory, which in turn 'would also examine one's reputation and one's knowledge of faith': Pollmann, 'Honor', 30. The requirement to present a letter of attestation in order to receive communion in a new church was established by the Synod of Dordt in 1578 (chapter IV, article 13): 'Those who come from other churches with letters of attestation shall be admitted without making a new profession of faith; but those who have neither written nor oral testimony from trustworthy persons shall not be admitted to the table.' Cited in Rutgers, *Acta*, 250. For the English translation, see: Faber, 'Admission', 208.

42 Capp, *Ties*, 112-120.

strengthened the bond between them as Catrina must have initially served as an interpreter between Jan and their new family.

Frans der Kinderen's chronicle is not the only early modern source that mentions Jan's religious life. In 1656, Anton Deusing, a German mathematician, student of 'Oriental languages' in Leiden, and the first professor of medicine at the University of Groningen, published his *Dissertatio de Surdis ab Ortu Mutisque*.<sup>43</sup> Without mentioning Jan Jansz. by name, Deusing described 'the most talented' painter in the city of Groningen, deaf and mute 'from birth'. His observations on Jan and prelingually deaf people in general were translated by George Sibscota in his 1670 *Deaf and Dumb Man's Discourse*, with the passage on Jansz. (once again, not mentioned by name) cited verbatim:

And there is now at this very time in the City of Gronning, such a one who being born Deaf and Dumb, constantly frequents publike Sermons, and doth as it were contemplate upon the Words of the Preacher with his eyes fixt upon him, so that he seems to receive them in at his Mouth as others do by the Ear. This person when he earnestly desires to receive the Holy Sacrament, I do not at all question, but that he hath that knowledge of those Divine things, that concern his Salvation, insomuch that he cannot be debarr'd from it without some scruple of Conscience. Although I am of opinion that he ought to be examined as to this his knowledge and Confession, which may be done, by means of his Wife, or Servant, his Interpreters, whom he alwayes hath with him, and who discourse with him very nimbly by signs, of any thing whatsoever.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond emphasizing Jan's right to participation in the sacraments of the church and the adequacy of gestural language to assert his spiritual maturity, Deusing's *Dissertatio* offered a broader reconsideration of prelingually deaf people's intelligence and personhood. Around the same time, in 1673, the theologian Samuel Maresius published *Systema Theologicum*, which contained a short passage on one who must have been Jansz.: 'In this city of Groningen we see an example of such a man, a painter, who was able to give the account of his faith through signs, to the astonishment of all.'<sup>45</sup> In 1653, Jansz. made a portrait of Maresius, and although the original has been lost, it was reproduced as an engraving by Theodor Matham (fig. 2). It is a half-length portrait with the sitter in a three-quarter view, shown against a blank background. The true significance of this image lies in its very existence, as it testifies to a meeting between Maresius and Jansz. beyond a short chance encounter in Groningen. It required Maresius to spend a number of hours in the presence of the deaf and mute painter, confirming that at least some of his understanding of prelingual deafness was based on empirical observation rather than abstract conceptualization of the impairment. Maresius's acceptance of Jan's attestation of faith is especially significant in the context of the period manualism/oralism controversy, as Maresius had the reputation of being a conservative defender of the Reformed Church who disliked any deviations from its doctrine.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to Deusing, Maresius's interest in Jansz. was thus explicitly and exclusively tied to the question of the possibility of deaf people's salvation.

<sup>43</sup> Deusing, 'Dissertatio De Surdis'.

<sup>44</sup> Sibscota, *The Deaf and Dumb*, 44-45. For the same passage in Deusing see: Deusing, 'Dissertatio De Surdis', 184-185.

<sup>45</sup> Maresius, *Systema Theologicum*, 1041.

<sup>46</sup> Sokolova, 'Het Portret', 413-418.

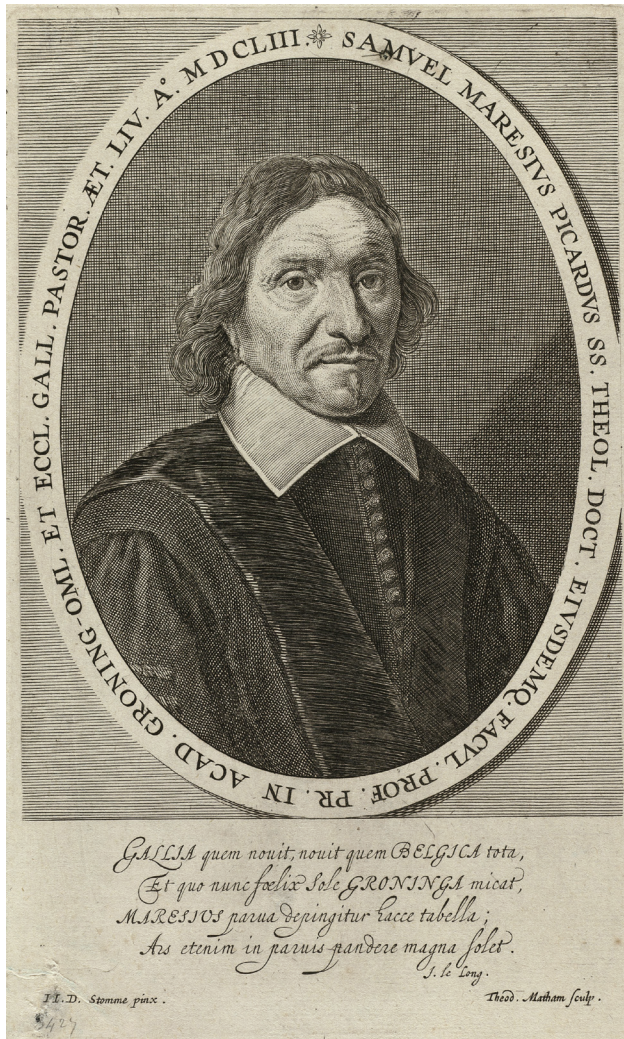


Fig. 2 Theodor Matham, after Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Portrait of Samuel Maresius, 1653, engraving, 21,5 × 13 cm, private collection.

Maresius, Deusing, and, citing the latter, Sibscota, spoke about Jansz. giving the account of his faith through gestures. They corroborate the later account of Frans der Kinderen that, with the help of a close relative, Jansz. was able to fully participate in the life of the Reformed Church. Deusing and Sibscota consider his wife and servant to be suitable interpreters of Jansz.'s sign language, which suggests that, first, the dynamics of spiritual authority and even authority in general were altered in a family with a relative with a disability, and, second, that seventeenth-century authors considered gestural communication complex enough for an interpreter to be necessary. While Amman mocked sign languages as a primitive form of communication, the texts of der Kinderen, Deusing, Maresius, and



Sibscota indicate that one would not be, in fact, able to understand what Jansz. was saying through gestures without the help of a household member with whom he had been talking for some years. The sign language in which Jan expressed his knowledge of the catechism was too complex to function as a kind of innate, inborn, and universally comprehensible set of 'natural' signs that anyone would instinctively understand. For Deusing and Sibscota, Jansz.'s case proved a larger point, namely that gestural communication was in fact a form of methodical, learned speech: 'Those very significations of things, which Mutes make use of, proceed not from nature, but from their own institution no more, than our speech; Therefore they attain them by Study and exercise.'<sup>47</sup>

Beyond nuancing the history of the manualism/oralism debate, Maresius's and der Kinderen's accounts of Jansz.'s life are also crucial to the understanding of the role of the church in shaping their members' status. The Reformed Church did not require anyone to be a communicant member and there was no social pressure to join a denominational church in the Dutch Republic. As Judith Pollmann has noted, 'around 1620 [...] in many cities members and their children made up no more than a fifth of the population' and 'even by the eighteenth century, it was quite common for about a third of adults in any one place not to be a member of a church'.<sup>48</sup> But Pollmann has also shown that there were two demographic groups more likely to join the church, namely young girls and widows. Church membership attested to their honour (*eerlijkheid*), the virtue that was essential in civic interactions among early modern Europeans.<sup>49</sup> The vulnerability of an unmarried woman would have found its parallel in the vulnerability of a prelingually deaf person, whose public persona was affected by the centuries-old perception that they were intellectually and mentally incapacitated. Jansz. likely joined the church in his youth, before he became a successful, twice-married painter living in affluence at a prestigious address in Groningen. Thus, in his case, too, the Reformed Church acted as an institution that officially legitimized him as an equal member of both the religious and social community of Franeker and Groningen. In the context of der Kinderen's chronicle, Jan's church membership extended this function to his family. While in the Dutch Republic congenitally deaf or otherwise impaired children were not hidden away from the public eye as they were in Spain, inborn disabilities could still have a stigmatizing effect on the family and be associated with sin and moral shortcomings of the ancestors.

Alongside Jan's civic and legal vulnerability lay the precarious nature of his salvation. While the Reformed Church 'allowed for the theoretical possibility that people might be saved outside the Church', the circumstances of prelingually deaf people were more complicated.<sup>50</sup> Even though by the 1600s neither Protestant nor Catholic theologians interpreted the Pauline maxim *fides ex auditu* (faith by hearing) literally, the philosophical and medical discourse that questioned the mental and intellectual abilities of mute people called into question their understanding of the doctrine, without which one could not be

<sup>47</sup> Sibscota, *Deaf and Dumb*, 43. For these passage in Deusing see: Deusing, 'Dissertatio', 183-184.

<sup>48</sup> Pollmann, 'Honor', 31.

<sup>49</sup> Pollmann, 'Honor'. Understood by Pollman as 'honour', *eerlijkheid* can also be translated as 'honesty'. Its meaning might best be captured in English as 'integrity'.

<sup>50</sup> Pollmann, 'Honor', 31.



redeemed.<sup>51</sup> This concern was only augmented by the Protestant churches' emphasis on preaching, which required active physical and spiritual listening. In contrast to Catholic devotional practices, which encouraged visual, olfactory, and tactile engagement through their usage of paintings, sculptures, incense, and paraphernalia such as rosaries, the Lutheran and the Reformed congregations relied on 'the little hour one had' for preaching for the salvation of the congregants.<sup>52</sup> Maresius's and Deusing's passages recounting Jansz.'s attendance at and ability to follow sermons actively countered the assumption that a prelingually deaf person was by default excluded from the aural/oral culture of a Reformed congregation.

In addition to their emphasis on Jan's orthodoxy, der Kinderen's family chronicle and the writings of Anton Deusing also create a dynamic gender picture of religious authority in the household of Jan Jansz. While Deusing's commentary reinforced the male authority of Jan and his ability to provide religious instruction to his wife and their servants, in der Kinderen's chronicle it is his sister who is in charge of Jan's religious life. Ultimately both Jan and Catrina were non-normative agents of spiritual authority, who, in addition to using it to perform honour and honesty, should be seen as an embodiment of the flexibility of religious rules as they pertained to womanhood and disability in the Reformed Church. Exegetical and confessional writings rarely grasp the nuances of the lived experiences of faith communities, and the example of Jan demonstrates that early modern congregations were reluctant to exclude disabled members from salvation. Jan was not the only deaf and mute person in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic who joined the church as a communicant member, and, as I suggested earlier, it may be concluded that for the deaf population, such membership was an important act of confirming one's social, mental, and intellectual integrity.<sup>53</sup> While attending, remembering, and contemplating sermons was crucial for one's salvation, it was only through the process of formal access that deaf and mute persons could prove that they performed those tasks adequately. The assistance with which Catrina provided Jan when he decided to join the church, provided her, in turn, with a form of religious authority acceptable for women. Judith Pollmann, Mirjam de Baar, and others have argued that women's activities in the seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed Church were generally accepted as long as women did not dispute the doctrine or engage in their own scriptural exegesis. And this is precisely what we see in our case study: Jan's sister acted as an interpreter in the presence of a minister, but it was the minister who would affirm Jan's orthodoxy.

### *Jan Jansz. and Patterns of Careers of Prelingually Deaf Painters*

Jan's participation in the spiritual life of his community and the 'legitimization' of his social status and personhood by the Reformed Church confirm that, despite the ongoing

51 Among the opponents of interpreting *fides ex auditu* as damning for the prelingually deaf people was Anton Deusing; Deusing, *Dissertatio De Surdis*, 177.

52 Roodenburg, 'The Body', 656.

53 On the membership of another deaf and mute painter, Johannes Thopas, see: Koene, 'Portrettist Johan Thopas', 65.

debates about the intelligence of prelingually deaf people and the many voices that favoured oralism, deafness and mutism did not necessarily force one into a life of discriminatory isolation. While the professional opportunities available to people without verbal speech were limited, several among the congenitally deaf men born into middle- and upper-class families of early modern Europe became successful painters. In contrast to many professions that relied on verbal speech, such as trade, law, and the church, visual arts could be pursued by well-born deaf men. Pliny the Elder, in book 35 of his *Natural History*, had already written about Quintus Pedius (d. ca. 13 CE) who, being born deaf, became a skilled painter.<sup>54</sup> Notable early modern prelingually deaf artists include Cristoforo de Predis (1440-1486) and Juan Fernández de Navarrete, called El Mudo (ca. 1526-1579), who became a painter to the Spanish King Philip II. In the Low Countries, Hans Verhagen de Stomme (ca. 1540/45-1600) was the first draughtsman and gouache painter to specialize in animal studies, studies which were later copied by the more famous Hans Bol and Joris Hoefnagel, while Hendrick Avercamp (1585-1634) introduced a new genre of landscape imagery – winter scenes with multiple ice-skating figures. Jansz.'s career as a portrait painter bears comparison with those of the Ferrarese Ercole Sarti (1593-1636) and the Dutch draughtsman Johannes Thopas (1627-1695).

There are three main conclusions that we can draw from studying the career paths of prelingually deaf artists in the early modern Netherlands. First, they all came from well-to-do, educated families. As Angelo Lo Conte has shown, we see the same pattern among prelingually deaf artists in Renaissance Italy.<sup>55</sup> Second, deaf artists typically studied with established masters and joined painters' guilds. For instance, another artist born in Friesland, Maerten Boelema de Stomme (1611-after 1644), is listed in 1642 as one of the three apprentices of the Haarlem still-life painter Willem Claesz. Heda, and, two years later, as a member of the local Guild of Saint Luke.<sup>56</sup> The above-mentioned Johannes Thopas is listed as a member of the same guild in 1668.<sup>57</sup> These archival mentions prove that the absence of verbal speech was no impediment to becoming a professional painter, thus undermining the vision of disabled artists as self-taught outsiders. Related to this is a third observation about deaf and mute artists. While Anton Deusing and Frans der Kinderen emphasized Jan's talent as a painter, there is no evidence that seventeenth-century clients would commission or buy pieces by such artists because of their disability, unlike in the case of modern audiences who cultivate a certain fetishizing fascination with painters, musicians, and athletes with disabilities. Jan Jansz. likely signed his works J.J. de Stomme not because he wanted to emphasize his prelingual deafness, but because this was the name he used in official documents and by which he was known in his community.

54 Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, 230-231. Pliny's short biography of Pedius was well known in early modern Europe and was cited by the seventeenth-century Dutch art theoreticians Franciscus Junius and Samuel van Hoogstraten. I analyse its role in the shaping of historiography of deaf and mute artists in Kaminska, 'Mute Painting'. See the same essay for a more thorough overview of art and careers of deaf and mute Netherlandish painters.

55 Lo Conte, 'A Visual Testament'; Lo Conte, 'Talking Colors'. Similarly, Emily Cockayne's analysis of the lives of prelingually deaf people in early modern England has demonstrated that their socioeconomic status was determined more by class than their impairment per se: Cockayne, 'Experiences of the Deaf'.

56 Miedema, 'De archiefbescheiden', 532, 1038.

57 Miedema, 'De archiefbescheiden', 946.



Fig. 3 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Portrait of Dirk Vogelsang, 1635, oil on panel, 72,5 × 57 cm, Veenklooster, Fogelsangh State.

Frans der Kinderen's account of Jan's career is truly impressive: der Kinderen claims that he was a painter to the princes of Friesland and East Friesland, and a student of Rembrandt, at whose house he lived, and who had so little trouble with Jan that he refused money for his apprenticeship. But there is little evidence to support these claims, which might have been made by der Kinderen to increase not only the family's prestige but also the value of any of Jan's paintings that were still in its possession.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to other major events of Jan's life that are relatively well documented, there is no hard evidence regarding his artistic training. Considering his style, the choice of portraiture as the genre in which Jan decided to specialize, and the relatively small art world of Friesland, scholars have proposed that he studied with Wybrand de Geest (1592-1661).<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Broos has argued in favour of Jan's training with Rembrandt, pointing out that the family of Rembrandt's wife, Saskia Uylenburgh, and Vogelsang's were old acquaintances, and that Saskia would have met Jan Jansz. See Broos, 'Een vergeten leerling', 129. However, this does not necessarily mean that Saskia would have recommended Jan to Rembrandt or, even if she did, that Jan indeed moved to Amsterdam.

<sup>59</sup> Stratingh, *J. J. de Stomme*, 7; Broos, 'Een vergeten leerling', 129. Engels has also suggested that the Franeker painter Willem Jansz. (Hansz.) might have been a brother of Jan's father: Engels, 'Jan Janszoon de Stomme'. However, given that Willem was active between 1611 and 1620, he would have not taught his nephew.



Fig. 4 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Portrait of Gertruda Alberta, 1653, oil on panel, 71,5 × 57,5 cm, Groningen, Groninger Museum, Photo Arjan Verschoor.

Jan's early works include two self-portraits, one full-length and another half-length, both of which show him with the tools of his trade at nineteen. Jan also painted his guardian, Dirk Vogelsang, twice, in 1635 (fig. 3) and again in 1646. Although the first portrait gives the sitter's age as thirty-four years and the second as forty-six, there are few traces of aging in the later portrait, and the composition remains the same. Jan is also the likely author of the portraits of Vogelsang's mother, Sjouk, and his second wife and their three children.<sup>60</sup> There are no known portraits of Jan's sister Catrina and her family or Jan's wives and children; perhaps they existed and were lost, but their absence may also indicate that Jan quickly established himself as a professional, independent master in Groningen, who did not need to rely on family members as readily available models to practice his skills.

While the connection to Frisian princes cannot be confirmed, Jansz. was certainly popular with the Frisian elite. Around forty-five paintings are currently attributed to him, thirty-five among them being signed. The presence of these signatures does not prove that Jansz. could write and read; what it does prove, however, was Jan's conscious efforts to establish his market presence. The dependability of Jan's painting style must have appealed

<sup>60</sup> Broos, 'Een vergeten leerling', 133.



*Fig. 5 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Portrait of Johan Lewe, 1653, oil on panel, 71,5 × 57,5 cm, Groningen, Groninger Museum, Photo Arjan Verschoor.*

to his upper-class clients, despite its certain flatness and occasional mistakes with perspective; his style did not evolve during his (relatively short) career. Jan's reproduction of delicate fabrics, such as the lace collar in the portrait of Gertruda Alberta, lacks the finesse and three-dimensionality that we know from Rembrandt and many other Dutch portraitists in the period (fig. 4). Better executed is the golden fabric in the pendant image, the portrait of Johan Lewe, in which Jan achieved shimmering reflections of light on the sitter's jacket and white silk sleeves (fig. 5). Among his clients was Titia, a daughter of Willem Staackmans who became burgomaster of Franeker after Jan's father died; the Tjarda van Starckenborgh family, including Ludolf, who was a deputy to the States-General; and Lewe van Middelstum, who was portrayed as a boy by Jan in 1657 and eventually became a deputy to the States-General, too (fig. 6). The lack of oral speech does not appear to have hindered Jan's interactions with his clients, even though portrait commissions typically entailed some discussion between the two parties. This suggests that the negative perception of deafness and dumbness present in medical and philosophical discourse did not necessarily permeate everyday interactions between hearing and deaf early modern Europeans. We can also easily imagine that, in cases when sign communication was insufficient, both Jan's sister and his wife could have served as interpreters between him and his clients, just as they did in his interactions with the clergy.





Fig. 6 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Double Portrait of Evert Lewe tot Middelstum and Reint Lewe, 1657, oil on panel, 143 × 171 cm, Groningen, Groninger Museum, Photo Marten de Leeuw.

Among the few works by Jan that are not portraits is a painting of an unknown dead child, created in 1654 but unfortunately not documented with a known contract (fig. 7). The letters 'IHS' on the funerary shroud suggest that the infant's family was Catholic. The colours and chiaroscuro modelling are masterfully executed here: the cool tones of the composition enhance the painting's bleak subject, while the subtle modelling of the child's round face gives it an aura of innocent calmness. Perhaps Jan's own experience with losing a child had influenced this remarkably sensitive and moving portrayal. Of notable exception in Jan's oeuvre is also the series of images of Four Evangelists completed in 1655 (fig. 8). While I previously observed that there was only limited evolution of Jan's style and skillset over the course of his short career, these four images belie this notion. Each of the Evangelists is shown seated by an open manuscript, writing the Gospels, with his customary attribute in the background. All the paintings have a clear sense of three-dimensionality to them, and the faces are detailed and engaging, as each of the writers looks directly at the viewer. Their hands – a famously difficult part of the human body to draw and paint – are likewise correctly painted, which is not always the case in Jan's portraits. Just as the painting





Fig. 7 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Portrait of an Unknown Dead Child, 1654, oil on panel, 84 × 68 cm, Groningen, Groninger Museum.

of the dead child made a year earlier exudes a sombre feeling of mortality, the images of the Evangelists carry a sense of lively diligence and spiritual inspiration. The origins of this remarkable series, which must have taken several months to complete, are unknown, and no contract for the paintings has been identified. It stands apart from the rest of Jansz.'s oeuvre, but, considering that he was the most famous painter at the time in Groningen, it is possible to imagine a client turning to him with this commission. Although these four paintings are not portraits per se, an artist specializing in portraits could have been trusted with a depiction of the Evangelists with their identifying symbols and conventional writing poses. While unlikely, it is also possible that Jan could have created the series without a commission, perhaps as a statement on his own religiosity or demonstration pieces and an advertisement proving that he could work beyond portraiture.

### *Conclusion*

Jan's artistic and financial success, his marriages, and church membership lead us to the conclusion that an ambitious and well-born deaf and mute person could achieve 'social



*Fig. 8 Jan Jansz. de Stomme, Luke the Evangelist, 1655, oil on panel, 73 × 58 cm, Groningen, Groninger Museum.*

integration' in a period that harboured a myriad of biases against speechless deaf people, and which lacked modern educational institutions for deaf children. But the history of disability would be better served if we flipped this supercrip narrative and instead consider Jan's life from the perspective of ordinary occurrences of life in a seventeenth-century society. Despite the philosophical, medical, and – in some parts of Europe – legal discrimination against prelingually deaf people, their hearing peers did not necessarily appear to have acted upon those prejudices when making decisions that would have determined crucial aspects of Jan's life. This is all the more remarkable in the case of Jan Jansz., given that none of the sources mention him ever developing oral speech, the skill allegedly considered proof of a deaf person's intelligence. It is, of course, impossible to reconstruct what the ordinary daily interactions between Jan and the hearing members of his community would have looked like, but there appears to be little evidence that they considered him unable to perform social functions deemed normative. Rosamund Oates has shown a similar discrepancy between the discourse on deafness and muteness and the daily lives of deaf and mute people in early modern England, where they likewise 'attended church, got married and had children' and 'were less different and less excluded than some

contemporary texts suggest'.<sup>61</sup> Since then, the situation seems to have reversed. Deafness is today no longer associated with intellectual inferiority in medical, religious, and pedagogical writings, but hearing people still cultivate many misconceptions about the reality of deafness, which they typically perceive as a stigmatizing disability. An excellent example of these often-fearful misconceptions are commonly searched questions about Deafness in search engines, such as 'Do Deaf people laugh?' and 'do Deaf people have an inner voice?' Those questions are now answered by members of the Deaf community itself, which in Jan Jansz.'s times did not yet exist.

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