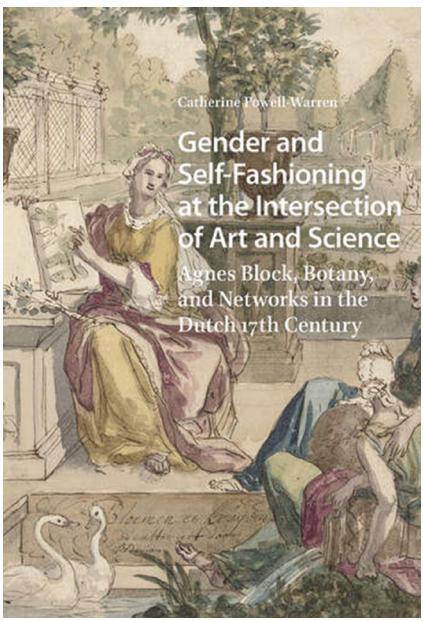
Review

Catherine Powell-Warren, *Gender and Self-Fashioning at the Intersection of Art and Science. Agnes Block, Botany, and Networks in the Dutch 17th Century*, originally published by Amsterdam University Press, 2024; reprint: New York, Routledge, 2025, 302 pp. ISBN 9781041180074.



Catherine Powell-Warren's *Gender and Self-Fashioning at the Intersection of Art and Science* centres on the Mennonite collector, patron, and amateur botanist Agnes Block (1629-1704). In June 1670, shortly after the death of her first husband, Block purchased a country estate near Utrecht, which she named Vijverhof. There, she amassed a renowned collection of rare plants and employed prominent artists to paint these in watercolour. Across seven chapters, Powell-Warren charts how Block crafted her persona as a knowledgeable amateur botanist by participating in scientific networks and commissioning depictions of herself, her estate, and her collection. The first two chapters focus on Vijverhof, reconstructing the estate and contextualising it within the enthusiasm for gardens and botany in the Dutch Republic. Chapter three turns to Block's participation in networks of natural history. In the fourth chapter, Powell-Warren examines the evolution of Block's self-fashioning across her life through an analysis of her surviving portraits, while in chapter five the author situates this self-fashioning against the backdrop of gender expectations in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Finally, chapters six and seven use Block's watercolours to explore her self-fashioning and trace the network of artists brought together by Block and Vijverhof.

Gender and Self-Fashioning intentionally eschews the form of a conventional biography: the book is organised thematically, not chronologically, and while Block is its subject, Powell-Warren stresses the importance of placing Block in her context. This emphasis on contextualisation – which is especially prominent in chapters two, three, and five – results in part from the limited archive which survives from Block. It also, however, forms part

DOI 10.51750/emlc.29178 - URL: http://www.emlc-journal.org
Publisher: Stichting EMLC
Copyright: The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

of the book's methodological intervention. Powell-Warren seeks to build upon and contribute to recent feminist work in art history, calling for 'an updated and multi-faceted approach to the research of early modern women, lest we simply end up with a revised canon dotted with the highest-profile, most exceptional women in history' (16). Accordingly, Powell-Warren does not begin from the assumption that Block was 'exceptional' but instead carefully examines whether Block's actions and interests violated normative expectations for women and to what extent they were shared by her female contemporaries. Comparative case studies play a central role in this endeavour, as Powell-Warren juxtaposes Block alongside other women with interests in collecting, horticulture, and the sciences (namely, Magdalena Poulle, Maria Sibylla Merian, Petronella de la Court, and Agnes's sister, Ida Block), as well as male collectors who likewise owned watercolours depicting their collections.

Powell-Warren persuasively demonstrates that, while Block was remarkable, she was not unique. In establishing a country estate, building a reputation as an amateur botanist, and amassing a collection of watercolours which depicted her collections, Block participated in broader cultural trends in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Other women also took part in these activities, and Block and her female peers were not seen as transgressing gender boundaries, even while their gender at times limited their participation in formal institutions or coloured the recognition of their accomplishments in public discourse. Nonetheless, Block 'stood out from the ordinary in her devotion to botany and in the intensity with which she collected, and in her interaction with the public discourse of botany' (237). Powell-Warren's balanced handling of the question of Block's exceptionalism provides a valuable example for future studies of early modern women in art and science.

Agency is central to this portrayal of Block as unusual, but not unique. Citing recent social and legal histories on women in the early modern Netherlands, Powell-Warren insists that Block and her female contemporaries possessed agency, although the exercise thereof was complicated by their gender and highly inflected by class. The recognition of such agency implicitly supports Powell-Warren's methodological resistance to exceptionalist portrayals of early modern women like Block, as it indicates that it was not only a few extraordinary women who were able to (and did) carve out paths for themselves. Given Powell-Warren's emphasis on agency in her depiction of Block and its significance for the book's methodological intervention, a more extended engagement with the concept, as well as with recent scholarship on its salience to histories of early modern women, would have further strengthened Powell-Warren's arguments, though her portrait of Block remains compelling.

Agency enabled Block and other early modern women to pursue self-fashioning. Drawing upon the work of Stephen Greenblatt and Laura York, Powell-Warren demonstrates how Block built her reputation as a knowledgeable amateur botanist and horticulturalist of rare plants (most famously the pineapple) through Vijverhof, her portraits, and the watercolours she commissioned of her collection. This persona was epitomised in Block's personification as Flora Batava (the goddess of flowers of the ancient Batavians) on the verso of a portrait medal by Jan Boskum, which Block likely commissioned. As Powell-Warren notes, such self-promotion appears somewhat at odds with

Block's Mennonite religion, which held modesty as a core tenet. Powell-Warren considers Block's faith to have had little influence on her self-fashioning, which, she asserts, 'was driven not by her identity as a Mennonite and religious precepts to which she felt bound, but rather by her curiosity for and interest in nature and art' (59). To achieve and publicise her horticultural accomplishments, Block relied on informal social networks. As Powell-Warren describes in chapter three, Block became part of the public sphere of botany through the botanical experts and amateurs who visited and later referenced Vijverhof in their publications. Similarly, Powell-Warren suggests in chapter seven that Block's *Bloemenboek* functioned akin to an *album amicorum*, describing how artists met both 'on the page, and in the garden' (246) at Vijverhof, and argues that 'Block, Vijverhof, and the artists were nodes in a network that influenced one another' (254).

Gender and Self-Fashioning builds a strong case for Block's contributions to seventeenth-century Dutch art and cultural history as a 'collector, amateur botanist, avid reader, amateur artist, and patron,' or, in sum, a 'cultural producer' (24). Block's multifaceted intellectual and artistic engagement mirrors the varied audiences to whom the book will be of interest. While the book's centre of gravity lies in art history, *Gender and Self-Fashioning* will also speak to scholars of early modern women, as well as historians of science, gardens, and collecting.

Stephanie Reitzig, Columbia University