

Guest blog for the CMS (Church Monuments Society) posted at <https://churchmonumentsociety.org/2020/04/04/a-curious-detail-in-a-painting-by-gerrit-adriaensz-berckheyde-haarlem-1638-1698>.

A CURIOUS DETAIL IN A PAINTING BY GERRIT ADRIAENSZ. BERCKHEYDE (HAARLEM, 1638–1698)

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Floors paved with ledger stones are an important feature of older Dutch churches to this day, and these floors also appear in paintings of the Golden Age. Several seventeenth-century Dutch artists specialised in paintings of church interiors, notably the Haarlem painter Pieter Saenredam (1597–1665), Gerard Houckgeest (c.1600–1661), Hendrick Cornelisz. van Vliet (1611/12–1675), and Emanuel de Witte (1617–1692). Their architectural paintings may show congregations listening to a sermon, but also include genre elements such as mothers breastfeeding, children at play, and dogs roaming or peeing against columns. Some architectural painters actually collaborated with contemporary artists more adept at depicting human figures, but such staffage, *i.e.* human figures painted by another artist, could also be added at a later date – especially in the eighteenth century – to enliven work that was perhaps regarded as too stark. The often diminutive size of the human figures indicates where the real interest lay (Fig. 1).

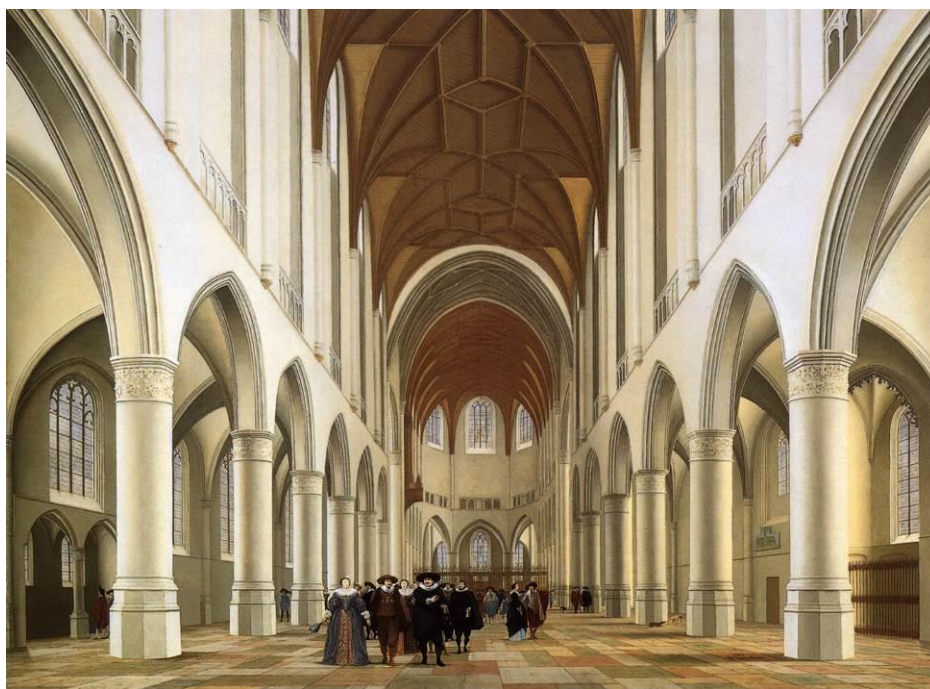


Fig. 1. Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, with figures attributed to Pieter Jansz. Post (1608–1669), *Interior of the church of St Bavo, Haarlem* (1631), oil on panel, 82.9 x 110.5 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/102395.html>.

Another common genre motif in painted church interiors is that of a gravedigger at work on a grave beneath the church floor, surrounded by a wheelbarrow with sand, a spade, a crowbar, and a round baulk of timber to help support and move the slab covering the grave. An example is a painting by De Witte of c.1680 in which the presence of the gravedigger is implied by his implements (Fig. 2a-b).



Fig. 2a-b. Emanuel de Witte, *Church Interior* (1680), oil on canvas, 67.6 x 56.6 cm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/collection/art-works/3250/church-interior>.



Further focus on the paved floor as an essential part of church architecture can be found in yet another popular motif of children rubbing a memorial brass or slab. It appears, for example, in a painting by Houckgeest dated 1650 (Fig. 3a-b).



Fig. 3a-b. Gerard Houckgeest, *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk, Delft, with the Tomb of William the Silent* (1650), oil on panel, 125.7 x 89 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gerard_Houckgeest_-_Interior_of_the_Nieuwe_Kerk,_Delft,_with_the_Tomb_of_William_the_Silent_-_WGA11749.jpg.



The motif was also to be used frequently by Van Vliet in his own work, e.g. in an interior view of the Pieterskerk in Leiden of 1652 in the Herzog-Anton-Ulrich Museum in Brunswick, in a 1658 painting of the Oude Kerk in Delft with the monument to Admiral Tromp now in The Toledo Museum of Art (Ohio), in a work auctioned in 2015 (Fig. 4), and in a painting in the Liechtenstein collection (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Hendrick Cornelisz. van Vliet, *Interior of the Oude Kerk in Delft* (1662), oil on canvas, 95 x 85 cm, auctioned at Sotheby's New York, 29 January 2015, <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/master-paintings-part-i-n09302/lot.30.html>.



Fig. 5. Hendrick Cornelisz. van Vliet, *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft with the monument to William the Silent* (1650–60), oil on canvas, 102 x 85 cm, Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hendrick_Cornelisz. van Vliet_001.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hendrick_Cornelisz._van_Vliet_001.jpg).



We also find it in two paintings in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, of which the second is attributed to the artist (Fig. 6 and 7). Together these different motifs offer a lively impression of apparently common activities in a Dutch church during the seventeenth century, including an interest in the ledger stones in the church floor.



Fig. 6. Hendrick Cornelisz. van Vliet, *View of the Oude Kerk in Delft* (1654), oil on panel, 74 x 60 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (SK-A-455): the group of boys is shown on the far left.

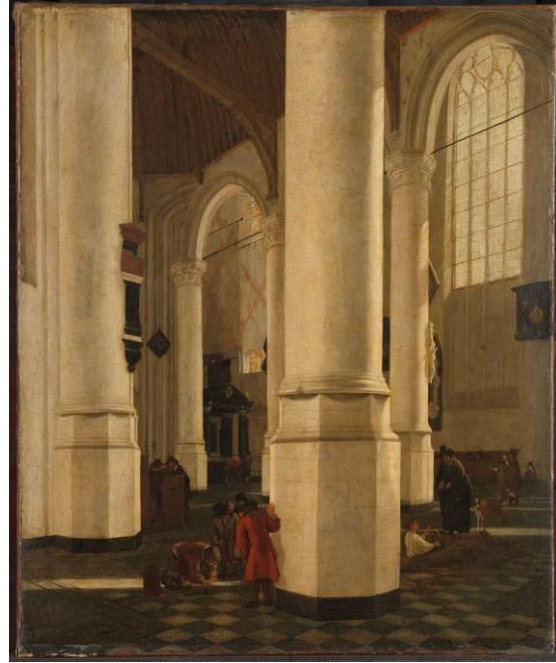


Fig. 7. Hendrick Cornelisz. van Vliet (attr.), *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam with the Mausoleum of Pieter Pietersz. Hein, Lieutenant-Admiral of Holland* (c. 1640-60), oil on canvas, 68 x 56 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (SK-A-1971): the artist's effective use of light guides the viewer's eye to the group of boys by the pier in the centre.

For the MeMO (Medieval Memoria Online) database project at Utrecht University, which was officially presented in January 2013, I helped compile a nationwide inventory of pre-Reformation ledger stones. Until intramural burial was officially banned in the Netherlands by royal decree in 1829 for reasons of hygiene, burial inside a church was highly sought after and it was not unusual to bury different generations within the same family grave over time.

The ledger stones covering these graves would customarily include a request to pray for the soul of the deceased, while also recording the name and date of death. For those of higher rank the slab was often significantly larger and feature heraldry as well as a mention of the status of the deceased. The practice continued after the Reformation, albeit that the request for prayers came to be omitted: any references to such 'popish superstition' on older ledger stones were sometimes even effaced.

Ledger stones were sometimes commissioned during the lifetime of a person or couple, or by the surviving spouse. Space was then deliberately left for the date of death to be added later or for the names and dates of the couple's descendants. With every new interment the new name was meant to be added to the ledger stone. Thus these graves could pass on to the next generation. Inscriptions on ledger stones can thus offer valuable information for genealogists.



Fig. 8. Ledger stone of Claes Claesz. Wolboocker (d. 1535) and Mechteldis (Met) Vos (d. 1518) with later inscriptions, church of St Martin, Zaltbommel (Guelders). In the centre immediately beneath the marginal inscription we still find the text 'bit voer de ziel' (pray for the soul).

Photo: Chris Booms, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (RCE), MeMO ID 3204.

Several ledger stones in the parish church of Zaltbommel (Guelders) show successively added inscriptions. These were often inserted wherever space could be found: even upside down or across the heraldic device in the centre. An example is the slab of Claes Claesz. Wolboocker (d. 1535) and Mechteldis (Met) Vos (d. 1518) (Fig. 8). The main inscription along the outer edge of the slab relates to Claes whereas the brief epitaph of Mechteldis was apparently added later in more shallowly carved letters, although she died first. Mechteldis was apparently married to Arnoldus Vos and her relationship to Claes is unclear. Later inscriptions were added in the centre across the heraldry in 1602, 1636 and 1638, the latter two upside down.

However, graves could also be sold on and the ledger stone recycled or reappropriated, as may have been the case with the slab in Zaltbommel. Famous is the

case of Rembrandt, who was constrained in 1662 to sell the grave of his late wife Saskia van Uylenburgh (1612–1642) in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam.¹ A ledger stone in the parish church of Kapelle (Zeeland) to Costiaen Jansz. (d. 1513) shows how it was subsequently reappropriated for re-use. However, this later epitaph to Maiken Marinus Steynsdochter (d. 1620) has been carefully inserted beneath the incised image of an angel with a candle (Fig. 9), unlike the later inscription on a ledger stone in the parish church of Brouwershaven (Zeeland) that has largely obliterated the original design (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. Ledger stone of Costiaen Jansz. (d. 1513) with a later inscription to Maiken Marinus Steynsdochter (d. 1620), church of Our Lady, Kapelle (Zeeland). The marginal inscription ends with 'godt heb de ziele' (God have the soul). Photo: Chris Booms, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (RCE), MeMO ID 3292.

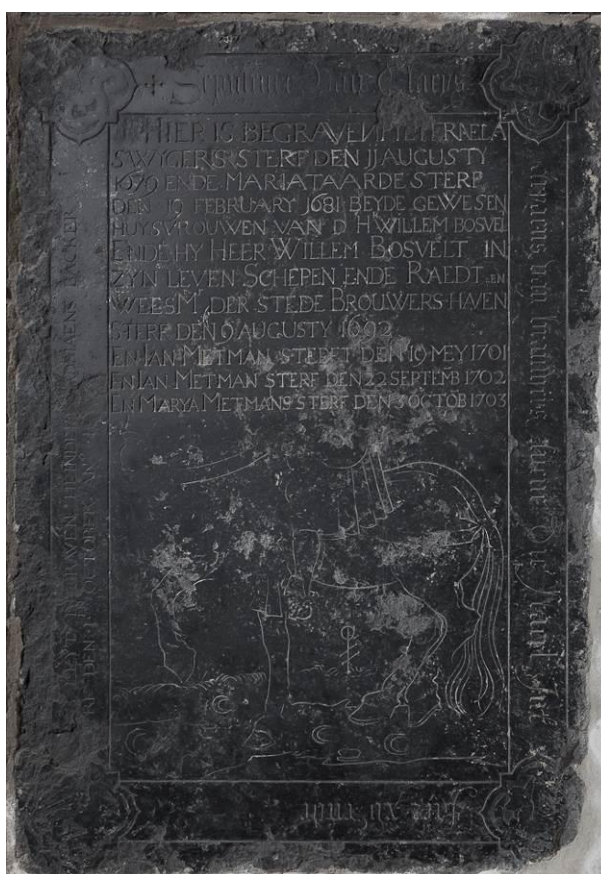


Fig. 10. Ledger stone of Claeys Aryaens van Brouwershaven (d. 15.. – the actual date of death has not been completed), with later inscriptions added in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, church of St Nicholas, Brouwershaven (Zeeland). Photo: Chris Booms, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (RCE), MeMO ID 2583.

Widely used for these ledger stones in Dutch churches were types of hardstone imported in large quantities by boat from modern-day Belgium, notably the blue limestone from Hainaut and the Meuse limestone from the Namur area. It is likely that these ledger stones were commissioned from local carvers' workshops in

¹ See <https://www.gravenopinternet.nl/nl/zoek/inforecord.php?ID=1575>.

Flanders and subsequently arrived ready-made with the inscription in place except for perhaps some final details. The repetition of the same designs – notably the evangelist symbols in the corners of many slabs – may perhaps one day be used to help identify certain workshops.² The patrons' dates of death and the details of any subsequent burials needed to be added later by local stonemasons: this was definitely not the job of the gravedigger. This is why we often see a clear difference in the style of lettering between the original inscription and later additions.

It would obviously have been impractical for the slab to be removed and taken to the workshop of a local craftsman to carry out this additional work. This means that such new inscriptions and other details had to be added while the slab remained *in situ*, which would have required the sculptor or stonemason to kneel down on the slab itself to carve the new text. It would be a very awkward position to work in with a difficult angle for carving, and this may help explain the often different quality and depth of such later additions.

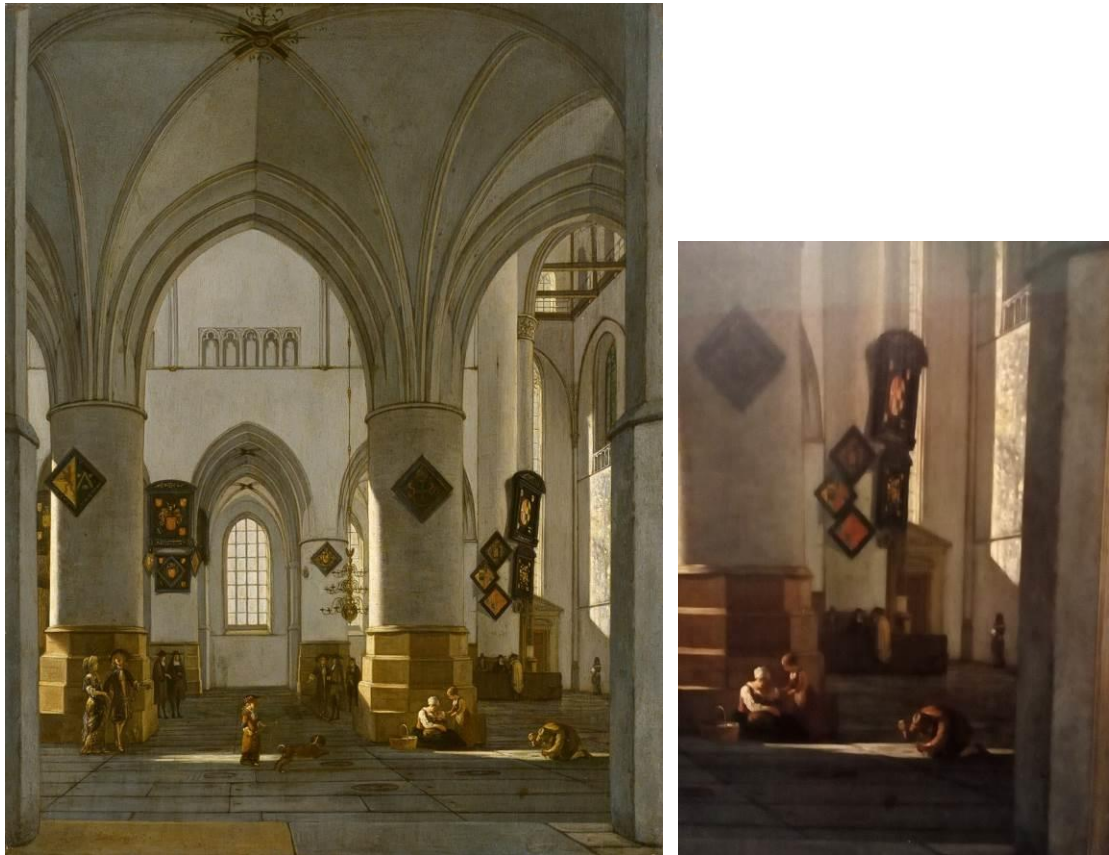


Fig. 11a-b. Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde, *Interior of the church of St Bavo in Haarlem*, oil on panel, 51.5 x 39.8 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg, <https://online-sammlung.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/de/objekt/HK-389>.

Photo detail (right): Sophie Oosterwijk (note colour difference).

² See Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Death or Resurrection? The iconography of two sixteenth-century incised slabs in Oudelande (Zeeland) and other Netherlandish shroud effigies', *Church Monuments*, 28 (2013), 52–77.

An undated painting by the Haarlem-born artist Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde (1638–1698), also in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, features an intriguing detail of a stonemason at work with a hammer and chisel in this way (Fig. 11a-b). It shows the interior of the Grote Kerk or St Bavo in Haarlem, viewed from the Christmas chapel on the north side. We see the choir, the Brewers' chapel to the south, and on the far left into the south transept. The contrast with Saenredam's much more straightforward view into the choir of the same church in his painting of 1631 (Fig. 1) is obvious. Berckheyde's view is more contrived and also more in line with the work of later architectural painters.

Also more in evidence are the genre elements in Berckheyde's painting. A young couple is shown strolling through the church on the left, the centre features a boy with a dog, while a mother is feeding her baby seated on the floor against the pier on the left with a young girl standing by her side. Yet the stonemason is the most intriguing element of the scene, and in real life his hammering would have disrupted the seeming tranquillity of the scene, but nobody pays him any attention.



Fig. 12. View from the Christmas chapel into the choir and south transept of the church of St Bavo in Haarlem. Photo: Sophie Oosterwijk.

A comparison with the current situation in the church (Fig. 12) shows marked differences with Berckheyde's painting. The funerary hatchments have all disappeared whereas the late-medieval painted tapestries on the piers were plastered over at the Reformation and thus invisible in Berckheyde's time, only to be rediscovered around 1825. Also very different is the vault of the south transept, which along with that of the north transept was reconstructed in 1891-92. Yet in other respects the painting is remarkably accurate.



Fig. 13. Job Adriaensz. Berckheyde, *Interior of the Grote or St Bavokerk in Haarlem* (1668), oil on canvas, 109.5 x 154.5 cm, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, <https://www.franshalsmuseum.nl/en/art/interior-of-the-grote-of-st-bavokerk-in-haarlem-seen-to-the-west/>.

Gerrit Berckheyde was trained by his older brother Job Berckheyde (1630–1693), who was also born in Haarlem. Job painted the nave of the church, viewed from the choir, with some diminutive human figures in his 1668 work *Interior of the Grote or St Bavokerk in Haarlem* (Fig. 13). Both brothers would thus also have known the church of St Bavo well, perhaps just like the buyer of the painting now in Hamburg.



Fig. 14. Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde, *Interior of the Grote Kerk, Haarlem* (1673), oil on panel, 60.8 x 84.9 cm, National Gallery, London, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/gerrit-berckheyde-the-interior-of-the-grote-kerk-haarlem>.

Gerrit Berckheyde specialised in townscapes and more rarely painted church interiors. Yet in 1673 he also painted the *Interior of the Grote Kerk, Haarlem* now in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 14). It shows a congregation listening to the preacher in the pulpit on the right in the nave of the same church, viewed from the west with the choir in the background. In the left foreground by the alms chest a man

is admonishing two small children, who may be orphans. Yet despite the large crowd the artist has still paid careful attention to the architectural details, including the ledger stones in the church floor.

A realistic detail in both paintings is that many of the ledger stones in the church floor show carved oval cartouches with heraldry: in fact, the painting in London is prominently signed and dated ‘Gerrit Berkheijde 1673’ above the cartouche on the slab in the central foreground (Fig. 15). Berckheyde’s painting in Hamburg bears no date or signature, but it does show the lewis holes in the floor for lifting the heavy stone slabs.³ To this day the stones also carry numbers that refer to the relevant entries in the ledger book which recorded burials, ownership and payments due for maintenance.



Fig. 15. Artist’s signature: detail of Gerrit Adriaensz. Berckheyde, *Interior of the Grote Kerk, Haarlem* (1673), oil on panel, 60.8 x 84.9 cm, National Gallery, London, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/gerrit-berckheyde-the-interior-of-the-grote-kerk-haarlem>.

Many Dutch church floors have been completely or at least partly rearranged over the centuries, and the church of St Bavo is no exception, but to judge by their sequential numbering many ledger stones here are still roughly in their original position. This raises the question: is the stonemason depicted in this painting perhaps working on a particular ledger stone, and could this grave have had a personal meaning for the artist or his unknown patron?

Several contemporary Dutch church interior paintings include recognisable tomb monuments, notably that of William the Silent in the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft, which is a frequently recurring motif in both accurate and imaginary church interiors (Fig. 3, 5

³ See Sophie Oosterwijk, ‘The story of Bianca Rubea: an emblem of wifely devotion, or death by tomb slab’, *Church Monuments*, 27 (2012), 66–74.

and 7).⁴ However, in Berckheyde's painting any reference to a specific memorial would be too subtle as we cannot really see the stone that the stonemason is working on. Only someone who really knew the church intimately would have been able to recognise the actual spot.

However, there is a curious narrow ledger stone marked '182' located in the church floor today not far from where Berckheyde painted his stonemason at work. It carries no name or date of death, which makes it difficult to date, but its lettering is clearly post-Reformation (Fig. 16). The rhyming inscription is a moralising truism: EEN DONKER GRAF / WANNEER MEN EYND / LYK STERFT / HOE VEEL MEN HAD / IS ALLES DAT MEN / ERFT. (A dark grave, when one dies at last, however much one had, [that] is all that one inherits). Yet there is no evidence to conclude that it must have been a private joke on Berckheyde's part to place his stonemason near this particular stone.



Fig. 16. Ledger stone 182 with a moralising inscription, situated in the north aisle of the choir of the church of St Bavo in Haarlem. Photo: Sophie Oosterwijk. The arrow below shows the location.



There is always the possibility of artistic licence and a desire to try a different genre element, and even staffage is not improbable. Berckheyde is known to have employed Johannes Lingelbach (1622–1674) and especially the much younger Haarlem-born artist Jan van Huchtenburg (1646–1733) to paint the human figures and horses in some of his paintings. In other words, the figures in this painting may not have been

⁴ Compare also Sophie Oosterwijk with Alice Zamboni, 'Painted remembrance. The drawings and paintings of the seventeenth-century Dutch Ter Borch family', *Church Monuments*, 31 (2016), 149–174.

by Berckheyde himself, although he would surely have given instructions to younger painters of the type of staffage he envisaged.

We shall probably never know the meaning – if any – of this particular detail in Berckheyde's painting in Hamburg. Nonetheless, the stonemason at work on a ledger stone remains an interesting and highly unusual motif.

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Further reading:

MeMO (Medieval Memoria Online) searchable database at <https://memodatabase.hum.uu.nl/memo-is/>.

Jeroen Giltaij and Guido Jansen, *Perspectives: Saenredam and the architectural painters of the 17th century*, exhib. catalogue (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1991).

Seymour Slive, *Dutch Painting 1600–1800*, Pelican History of Art (New Haven/London: Yale U.P., 1995), chapter 12, 'Architectural painting'.