

**de BELLANGE's HURDY-GURDY PLAYER:  
a CRITICAL DISCUSSION**

**Dr. Nicholas J. Blondeel\***

\*Lareon, Laboratory for Restoration and Conservation Research, Sint-Truiden, Belgium, [lareon@scarlet.be](mailto:lareon@scarlet.be).

All rights reserved, October 24<sup>th</sup> 2017.

**Abstract**

The 17th. c. French etching 'the blind Hurdy-gurdy Player' with the inscription 'Bellange.fecit.', was subjected to a critical analysis. We demonstrated by means of an anatomical analysis and by means of comparison with an unpublished anonymous 17<sup>th</sup> c. painting depicting the same subject, an abnormal stylistic achievement which is not readily visible. Previous art critic's already suggested flaws in this figure. We concluded, that the etching may not belong to the corpus of the works by this artist. We suggested it to be an ancient, i.e. contemporary, copy from – or inspired by- an earlier lost artwork. As for the source of inspiration, the Low-Countries seem to be plausible, as already suggested by others. The etching which is executed in a Bellange manner, may be of a slightly later date than commonly accepted. We suggested the need for further technical analysis of the print.

**Introduction**



Figure 1. *The blind Hurdy-gurdy player*

Jacques de BELLANGE is a French drawer and painter, from the school of Lorraine. He was born in Nancy around 1575, and died there in 1616. From his paintings little has remained. In the Karlsruhe (Germany) 'Staatliche Kunsthalle' is a diptych, allegedly signed. It is said to be his only for certainty known painting (Eisler, 1963). On the other hand, a series of drawings and etchings came to us, through which we know his artistic personality. Nicole Walch (1971) reviewed about fifty of his etchings, done in the Mannerist style, fashionable at the end of the sixteenth century in different places in Europe (Murray, 1977). The representation of elongated, elegant and refined human figures, under Italian influence, was very much admired at the courts of Nancy and Paris, where de Bellange was accredited. Also, the sale of etchings and engravings was commercially very rewarding at the time (Eisler, 1963, p. 34). Many an artist saw to it, that his work was printed, either by his own hand, or by others. So did de Bellange. On the other hand, the engravers and the merchants' ethical standards were different from now with regard to copyright. Copies and even imitations could readily be sold as authentic works.

Reviewing the Bellange-etchings, one can observe that two of them did not fit into his courtly style, namely, the 'blind hurdy- gurdy player' (Fig. 1), and the 'brawling beggars' (not illustr.). Walch (1971, p. 108) did so too and stated, that with these two pictures, Bellange '*became inclined to themata of popular*

*realism*', in contrast to the rest of his oeuvre, and that these single figure representations became *important for posterity*. We, to the contrary, believe that these two works do not belong to the corpus of Bellange's oeuvre. They rather have their roots in the 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century Low- Countries' pictorial tradition. We will discuss the first etching in extenso.

Anatomy in art.

It could be stated in general, that correct anatomical construction of a human (and animal) figure was a must for a first-

class painter, or drawer, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Italian art theorist Leone Battista Alberti first outlined the proper directives in the 15<sup>th</sup>. c. in his book *'de Pictura'* (Ames-Lewis, 1982). Others further perfected the technique, culminating in the High Renaissance and Baroque much admired representations. On the other hand, this knowledge was also used in early art criticism. Karel van Mander (°1548 Meulebeke +1604 Amsterdam), art critic, historian and painter, already criticised in his *'Schilder-Boeck'* (Painters-Book), the lack of anatomy knowledge of some of his colleagues (van Mander, 1604). He divided the pictorial art of human figures in an "outside work", for instance the clothing, and an "inside work", the bones and muscles. Leonardo da Vinci uttered similar criticism in his Notebooks. According to Van Mander, correct anatomical construction, the 'inside-work', can and should be used as a criterion for quality judgment. But "the inside work" (the nude) is most often covered up, and not readily visible. Reviewing the oeuvre of Jacques de Bellange, his mastery is without controversy, even after a mannerist and highly personal 'interpretation' of the reality. But in the etching the *'blind hurdy-gurdy player'*, attributed to him, the subject seems to have an abnormal anatomical 'inside-work', not properly visible under the heavy ragged overcoat<sup>1</sup>. Sudeck (1931, p. 61-62), in her book on beggar representations, already mentioned *the too short left upper leg and the oversized under leg*, losing all sense of proportions and laws of nature. Walch (1971, p. 116) reiterated, interpreting this as popular realism, due to - what we would call - 'artistic liberty'.

We analysed the "inside work" of the de Bellange hurdy-gurdy player in two ways: by means of an anatomical reconstruction and by means of a comparative study.

## Methods

Standard 'ideal' academic human proportions had been accepted and followed in the early European art workshops. So is the length of the under leg from the ankle to the patella (knee disc) twice a head length, and the length of the upper leg or thigh, from the knee to the spina iliaca anterior inferior (a protrusion of the human basin) is also twice a head length (with some tolerance for minor individual variations).

For our study we tried to stay as close as possible to the contemporary instructions and measurements. We used the studies published in 1620 in a book entitled: *"Eigentlyke Afbeeldinge van hondert der Allervermaerdste STATUEN. of ANTIQUE-BEELDEN, staande binnen Rome, afgetekent door de seer wytvermaerde en constryken Francisco PERRIER Burgund. Nu in Cooper gesneden door Cornelis van Dalen, de Oude ende de Jonge (°1620), Gedrukt t' Amsterdam, by Nicolaes Visscher -, followed by: PROPORCIEN des Menschelyken Levens, na de voortreffelykste, en alderschoonste ANTIKEN, met vlyt afgemeten door Mr. AUDRAN, Professor der Koninklyke Schilder Academie te Parys, t' Amsterdam, uitgegeven door Cornelis Danckerts"*.

We used plate 5 from this book, an engraving by Prof. Audran representing the 'Resting Hercules' by Glicon, from the villa Farnese, the so called 'Farnese Hercules', an antique sculpture of a naked male, used by Audran to demonstrate ideal human measurements. The Hercules' left leg showed about the same foreshortening as in the Bellange's hurdy-gurdy player. Only the pelvis was not so torsioned, the body being frontal and not in profile, his figure more athletic and well build. But these did not influence our demonstration (see A in Fig. 2).

Then we made an exact contour drawing of the Bellange's etching of the musician-beggar (see B in Fig. 2). We adjusted - without any distortion - the size of this contour drawing by means of a photoshop program, in such a way that the left under legs in both the Hercules and the beggar obtained the same size (see horizontal lines in Fig. 2, A and B). This was possible, because the left under leg of the beggar was the best visible part of his 'inside work', the rest being covered up with rags.

---

<sup>1</sup> We made the observations in this article independent from others, but we must credit Sudeck E. for the first published remarks on the subject known to us.

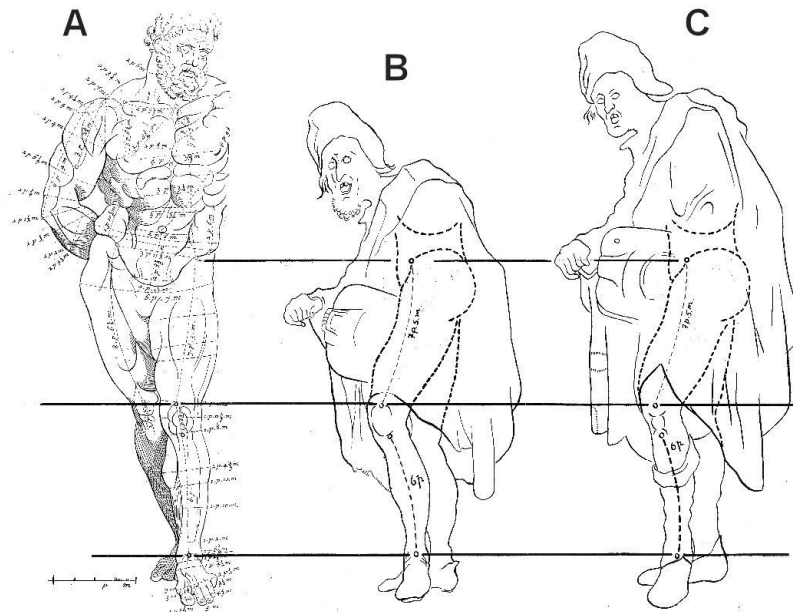


Figure 2. Comparative study ©

Extending proportionally the hidden contours of the left thigh and pelvis (interrupted line), we could demonstrate that the left thigh of the Bellange beggar would be much too short if visible. With a proportional correct thigh-length his pelvis would be situated so high, that no room would be left for a thorax, an impossible anatomical condition. The picture could perhaps be conceivable, if one admits an old badly healed femur (thigh bone) fracture with important bone shortening, or unilateral destruction of the growth disc during childhood with extreme shortening of the left upper leg, together with extreme deformity of the spine due to scoliosis and kyphosis caused by collapse of the vertebrae. But along with the blindness, this would represent too much of hypothetical deformity to be acceptable. Both Sudeck (1931, p. 61-62) and Walch (1971) admitted the 'unrealistic' representation. But to us, 'artistic liberty' in the form of an '*expressively enhanced realism and abstract stylisation*' (sic Walch), does not seem appropriate as an excuse or an explanation. Neither does the interpretation as a deliberate caricature, such as the J. Callot (Nancy °1592 - °1635) dwarfs and grotesques. In fact, a similar hurdy-gurdy player on a print published by Callot in 1632 seems to be 'normally build'.



Figure 3. Blind Hurdy-gurdy player with family. Private collection ©.

We concluded that this anatomical anomaly was the result of aberrant artistic achievement. No such anomalies are seen in Bellange's other etchings. For some the shortcomings may not be obvious. They may be fascinated by the overall pitiful aspect of the beggar, by his 'outside-work', as well as by the engraved name/signature and by the attribution of the work to this highly estimated artist.

In addition, we could compare now the Bellange etching with an unpublished anonymous oil painting<sup>2</sup>, depicting exactly the same subject (Fig. 3), now surrounded by his 'family': wife, little child and 'father/ grandfather', standing under a tree, in a landscape, with a low horizon, and with two human figures in a mountainous background. We used the same method as above: we made a contour drawing of this painted beggar and photoshopped it to the proportional size adjustment – without any distortion –, until the visible left under leg was equal

<sup>2</sup> Oil on wood, two vertical panels handmade, probably poplar, 54,3 x 46,8 cm. Datable around 1580-1600. Few restorations. Stylistically, it has nothing to do with the 'Lorraine school', as represented by its best-known protagonists, but then there are dozens of still unknown contemporary painters of the Nancy school, if this school has to be considered at all. Provenance: the French art commerce.

in length to the Hercules' and to the Bellange' under legs (see horizontal lines in Fig. 2, C). Outlining the hidden thigh and basin with interrupted lines we obtained no anatomical disproportion or anomaly in the painting! And comparing both beggars next to each other (B and C) our point must be dear. We concluded that the anatomical anomaly resulted from poor skill, rather than being the expression of a deliberate "expressionistic realistic style" by someone who possessed and worked correctly and in a totally different mannerist style.

Comparing the hurdy-gurdy player in the painting with the etching in detail, we noticed several discrepancies. The beggar's face in the painting is younger, without wrinkles, and without ragged beard. His prominent nose is well shaped unlike in the etching, where the nose bridge is awkward. He wears a cap reminiscent of the last-in-the-row blind from Breughel the Elder's (°1525/1530 - +1569) Naples picture 'the Blind leading the Blind', unlike the hats of the Bellange's 'brawling beggars' and other contemporary beggars. The heavy overcoat folds more naturally, especially over the shoulder, but more strikingly at knee height at his right side, and at the left, where the coat hangs straight down, unlike the etching, where the coat is ragged, and unrealistically pulled inwards. The overcoat repair-patches are absent in the etching. The stockings hanging half down the calves, because not well suspended by the straps, are well painted, but absent in the print. The right leg, partly hidden by the left, is oddly shaped in the etching, too short, with deformed knee, double calves and funny Achilles tendon, further confirming the poor anatomy knowledge of the drawer. In fact, he might have been misled by the folds of the right stocking, poorly visible in his original. In the print, the patella of the left leg is poorly outlined. Due to the distorted body, the hurdy-gurdy rests low upon the thigh. But this is not the way a hurdy-gurdy is played, nor represented in the many other contemporary pictures. Normally, standing up, the instrument hangs from a strap around the neck, or is strapped to the body and is pressed under the arm against the flank (Sadie, 1984). Therefore, we cannot agree with Walch's (1971, p. 116) description " .... whose accompanying instrument rests upon the for this reason a little elevated leg" (" ... dessen begleitendes Instrument auf dem dafür etwas hochgezogenen Bein aufruht"). It is obvious from the painting, that the beggar stands with his right leg on a sandy road, which leads in the depth to a sketchy rock party, and steps toward the onlooker, with his left leg resting on the somewhat more elevated grass verge, therefore bending and elevating the left knee. The instrument is held under the arm against the side, and does not rest upon the leg, for it is not supposed to. These details are being lost in the print. In addition, the painted road and grass verge have been replaced by an amorphous shadow, the horizon by an awkward straight line. The background with the horizontal lines, is sometimes applied by de Bellange, but embodies here an insufficient criterion to prove authenticity.

## Discussion

Some might advocate that the Bellange musician might have inspired an anonymous Lorraine or French painter<sup>3</sup>. If so, this painter would have invented and created a whole 'family scene'. He would have added a (grand-) 'father figure' who, in a very realistic way proper to the Low Countries or Northern artists, with a pain filled face, presses his right hand on his aching 'rheumatic' right hip, which is turned inward in a true antalgic (pain-avoiding) way, unless already permanently so deformed, while resting with his left hand on a cane (all suggesting his inability to procure an income). Incidentally, almost four hundred years later and thousands of miles away, a similar pose, somewhat more exaggerated, was printed on a Pakistan 65p. 1977 rheumatism stamp (Fig. 4). He would have painted the beggar younger, to make him acceptable as the son (same face, same nose!). He would have corrected his distorted 'Bellange' anatomy from under the clothes. The painter would also have invented the blind man's young wife weeping for misery in the background, as well as his humpbacked child, beggar's sac over the shoulder, hitting the triangle while staring at the



Figure 4. Rheumatic deformities.

<sup>3</sup> The use of poplar wooden panels, suggests a more Southern European origin, oak panels being used almost exclusively in the Low Countries. The two panels are held together with straps of paper with inscriptions 'Monseigneur t' and 'Monsigneur t' cut out from a paper listing, suggesting former French property.

earth with a wretched face<sup>4</sup>. None of them all actually begging. Prominently in the centre, almost monumentalized, standing out, is the musician. This whole composition set up under a large-leafed tree (elm?) in a landscape 'en coulisses' worthy of a Brueghel the Elder. Also added in the mountainous background is a couple, dressed in end-sixteenth century bourgeois clothing, telling some 'message' to the viewer (the man retains the fleeing woman, in front of a big fire). The entire scenery compelling a feeling of respect and profound compassion for the miserable young man (unfortunately) struck with blindness<sup>5</sup>, and for his pitiable companions. In our opinion also without any moralistic undertone. Maybe the painting tells us only that the man was a beggar against his will, a so called 'honest poor'. This still leans on to the Middle-Age's spiritual world, where the humanistic vision prevailed and contrasts with the many fake crippled beggars, slowly becoming a social plague at the time, hence all being treated alike as scum<sup>6</sup>. The repulsiveness of the etched figure would then be in line with this different social view. The composition in the painting is also in accordance with the early seventeenth c. poetry by Marc-Antoine de Saint-Amant (Livet, 1855), quoted by Hellerstedt, and for the purpose translated by us from the old French:

"Here, as instrument of dance  
 One hears the cymbal tingling;  
 The lively castanets clicking  
 Joining the cadence;  
 A blind, expert hurdy-gurdy player,  
 Joins his symphony (his instrument<sup>7</sup>) to theirs  
 Under the elm straight as a stake;  
 He grins in thousand ways,  
 He wears his funny face upon his shoulder  
 And scares the little lads."

With such an elaborate and truthful scenery, the painter would have been a greater artist than the maker of the etching. It seems therefore not plausible to consider the beggar in the painting as a copy from the Bellange print. To the contrary.

The study of the hurdy-gurdy itself as musical instrument is also an interesting subject. In the painting, it is simple and plain without much details. In the Bellange etching however it is elaborately sculptured, actually too chic, too aristocratic for a beggar (but flattering to print collectors). Worthen (1976, p. 48) also mentioned the contrast between the ugliness of the figure and the beauty of the instrument, without further comments. However, it would lead us too far to elaborate on this subject in this paper. We refer to the work of Panum (1971) and Hellerstedt (1983).

The discovery of the above described painting has largely changed our insight into the origin of the subject in the Bellange etching. Some scholars (Sudeck, Walch, Worthen) suggested an Italian source of inspiration, although Sudeck also

<sup>4</sup> In this apparent family setting, we do not wish to give a special connotation to the child's presence, as has been done in case of other beggar companions (see Hellerstedt: "the blind man and his guide in Netherlandish painting" in *Simiolus*, 13, 1983, 161 - 181).

<sup>5</sup> 'White stare', a form of acquired blindness which renders the cornea non-transparent, opaque, and of the same colour as the surrounding conjunctiva. Can be caused by different pathologies, more common at the time than nowadays. The look, with the open eyelids, is scary and almost hypnotic. At the present in Africa, where it is still very common, it is called 'the gaze of the lion'. This in contrast to the Brueghel blind beggars, with their closed eyelids and sunken eyeballs, elevating their heads whilst trying to search their way. Here, the blindness may have had other reasons. Because the blindness is so obvious, the hurdy-gurdy instrument loses its significance as an attribute to designate blindness.

<sup>6</sup> See the social studies on this subject by L. Reinold, "The representation of the beggar as rogue in Dutch seventeenth-century art", Diss. Univ. of California, 1981, and P. Vandenbroeck, "Beeld van de Andere. Vertoog over het Zelf", Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, K.M.S.K.A., 1987. The study by Reinold is almost entirely based on northern Netherlandish sources. There may be an even so large, but not necessarily identical material in the southern Netherlands (now Flanders), both countries being culturally somewhat divergent.

<sup>7</sup> In French 'symphonie', which could mean 'symphony', but which could also designate the instrument itself, it being called in old French 'vielle' as well as 'symphonie' (Mersenne, quoted in Panum)

suggested Northern influences (Sudeck, 1931, p. 63: "...*inder sie (die Gestalten) lebhaft an nordische Darstellungen gemahnen*"). She named Vinckboons (David Vinckboon °1576 - +1632) or Venne (Adriaen P. Van de Venne °1587/1589 - +1662). And indeed, considering the painting the whole composition could very well figure as the counterpart of the "beggar-woman-with children under a tree" (Vienna) dated 1604 by Vinckboon, or remind his "bagpiper" dated 1606 (Amsterdam), both etchings in circulation at the time. The Bellange "brawling beggars", on the other hand, are Van de Venne-like figures from his 'brunailles' about bums and scums. More extensive study thereof would not fit in this essay.

From the above discussed hurdy-gurdy player multiple etched versions were made. Le Blond in Paris made some, the prolific Merian the Elder etched some more in reverse.

## Conclusion

From an anatomical analysis, we demonstrated several shortcomings in the etching the 'blind hurdy-gurdy player', bearing the inscription 'Bellange fecit'. We further confirmed these shortcomings by comparison of the print with an unpublished contemporary oil painting depicting the same subject, which led us to discover many other flaws in the print.

We came to the conclusion, that the etching may not represent an original invention by de Bellange. We suggest, that it, eventually together with his other etching 'the brawling beggars', could have had a Northern source, of which original, if not, inspirational material was circulating and available at the time, Lorraine and Nancy being a transit road for Northern artists going to Italy. The original 'executor' (drawer/etcher/engraver) may as well not have been de Bellange himself.

Further technical analysis of the prints and related copies by specialists seems indicated. If it reveals to be necessary to reconsider the authenticity and qualities of these two discussed works now attributed to de Bellange, it then would leave the rest of his oeuvre as completely homogeneous and artistically even higher.

This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## References

- Ames-Lewis Frances, "Drawing in Early Renaissance Italy". Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2nd ed., 1982, 91-96. Quoting Alberti: " ... *just as for a clothed figure we first have to draw the naked body beneath and then cover it with clothes,*"
- Eisler Colin, A new Drawing by Jacques de Bellange at Yale, Master Drawings, 1963, 35-36.
- Hellerstedt Karen Jones, "Hurdy-gurdies from Hieronymus Bosch to Rembrandt", University of Pittsburgh. Faculty of arts and sciences 1983.
- Livet Charles-Louis, "Oeuvres complètes de Saint-Amant (Marc-Antoine de Gérard, sieur de -)", P. Jannet à Paris, 1855, II, 401.
- Murray Linda, "The High Renaissance and Mannerism", Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, 124.
- Panum Hortense, Pulver Jenny, "the Stringed Instruments of the Middle Ages", William Reeves, London, 1971, 304. "The lyre (= hurdy-gurdy) as an aristocratic instrument".
- Sadie Stanley, "the new Grove Dictionary of musical instruments", Macmillan Press Limited, 1984, 263.
- Sudeck Elisabeth, "Bettlerdarstellungen vom Ende des XV. Jahrhunderts bis zu Rembrandt", Heitz, Strassburg, 1931: (*Die Oberschenkel so kurz...und die Unterschenkel von mächtiger Länge...*)
- van Mander Karel. "Het Schilder-Boek. Het Leven der doorluchtige Nederlandsche en Hoogduitsche Schilders", 2nd. ed., reprint following the original editions of 1604 and 1618, A.F. Mirande and Prof. Or. G.S. Overdiep, Wereldbibliotheek, n.v., Amsterdam, 1943, 285: (quote, translated from Dutch) "*The life of Frans Floris, excellent painter of Antwerp. The Italian painters, especially some mediocre ones, whilst painting in a chubby manner, make little 'inside-work' (Dutch: binnewerck ) in their nudes, and appear to have chosen an easy way in order not to have to bother with the search and the study of musculature: in this way, they often degrade the quality of Arts, as do our Netherlanders, who regularly paint their things too slender and too plain, which nonetheless requires the knowledge of muscles, tendons and arteries. Now one sees the figures of the great Buonarotti (Michelangelo) full of an 'inside-work' of muscles yet enclosed or surrounded by a beautiful 'outside-work' (outline, in Dutch: lijvighen omtreck), something of great intelligence, what such an eminent master, who aspired the highest beauty, must have acquired after long experience*". For the purpose of this paper, we propose our own translation, very close to the old Dutch and close to the translation of Mirande and Overdiep, although a scholarly translation has been published (Karel Van Mander, The lives of the illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters, edited by Hessel Miedena, vol. I, Davaco, Doornspijk, 1994.).
- Walch Nicole, "Die Radierungen des Jacques Bellange", Chronologie und Kritischer Katalog", Robert Wölflé, München, 1971.
- Worthen Amy N., Reed Welsh Sue, The Etchings of Jacques Bellange, Exhibition Catalogue, the Metropolitan Museum of Art 1976.