THE EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF LIFE WRITING

VOLUME XIII (2024) 74-98

The Visual Life Story of a Self-made Economic Man: The Painting Series of Willem Albert Scholten (1819-1892) as an Autobiographical Practice

Marieke Dwarswaard
University of Groningen

Abstract

Between 1870 and 1880, Willem Albert Scholten (1819-1892) commissioned fifteen paintings by twelve different painters, portraying different formative episodes from his lifetime. During this decade, Scholten was on his way to becoming one of the wealthiest inhabitants of the city of Groningen, his hometown in the Netherlands. He acquired this wealth by exploiting factories throughout and outside the Netherlands, making his company one of the first Dutch multinationals. The events these paintings portray have been described in a small booklet and an autobiography written during Scholten's lifetime, both commissioned by him. This combination of paintings and text is crucial in understanding how Scholten presented himself. This article will describe how Scholten built his origin story, which follows a plot similar to that of Benjamin Franklin: the self-made economic man. The article will examine how the paintings and written records reinforce one another, creating a visual narrative.

Keywords: Visual life narrative, paintings, Groningen

https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.13.41022

Samenvatting

Tussen 1870 en 1880 gaf Willem Albert Scholten (1819-1892) twaalf verschillende schilders opdracht tot het schilderen van vijftien schilderijen die belangrijke gebeurtenissen uit zijn leven moesten voorstellen. Gedurende dit decennium was Scholten op weg een van de rijkste inwoners van Groningen te worden. Hij vergaarde zijn fortuin met het exploiteren van fabrieken binnen en buiten Nederland, als een van de eerste Nederlandse multinationals. De gebeurtenissen op de schilderijen zijn beschreven in een klein boekje en in de autobiografie die Scholten tijdens zijn leven liet opstellen. Deze combinatie van beeld en tekst is een cruciale bron in het begrijpen van de manier waarop Scholten zichzelf presenteerde. Dit artikel bespreekt hoe Scholten het verhaal van zijn herkomst construeerde, dat een plot volgt dat erg lijkt op dat van de autobiografie van Benjamin Franklin: de *self-made economic man*. Ik onderzoek hoe de schilderijen en de tekst elkaar versterken en een visueel narratief scheppen.

Keywords: Visueel levensverhaal, schilderijen, Groningen

Introduction

In 2024, The *Veenkoloniaal Museum* is on the brink of celebrating its centennial.[1] Nevertheless, only in the spring of 2020 could this museum in the Dutch hamlet of Veendam, located in the Northern Netherlands, expand its collection with its most expensive acquisition hitherto. With the financial support of several charitable trusts, the museum was able to purchase Charles Leickert's (1816-1907) painting entitled *Op het IJ* [On the River IJ].[1] After the museum re-opened its doors post-covid, visitors could admire the work and behold winter landscape it portrays. The central figure in the painting shows a man in a top hat and a brown coat. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that he is soaked. Behind him is a hole in the ice – out of which he has only just climbed out. Furthermore, from the viewers' perspective, a small ferry can be seen on his left. It only just makes its way through the ice. On the figure's right-hand side, there is a small unidentifiable box. This scene is painted against the backdrop of the Amsterdam quay bordering the river IJ.

[1] Veenkoloniaal Museum can be roughly translated to 'Museum on the history of Peat colonies'.

Figure 1: Charles Leickert, *Op het IJ*, 1870, Veenkoloniaal Museum, Veendam.

The Veenkoloniaal Museum was eager to add this painting to its collection because it is part of a series of paintings that tell the life story of one of the area's most important and influential citizens. His name is Willem Albert Scholten (1819-1892), the central figure in the painting portrayed on *Op het IJ*. In the series, there are fourteen other paintings. They were created by twelve artists and produced in a time span of approximately ten years, starting in 1869. When all the paintings were finished, a small booklet was published to accompany them. This booklet contains the written versions of the stories depicted in the paintings. Unfortunately, not much is known about this collection of texts since its year nor its reason for publication has been recorded. However, it is evident that the text consists of slightly modified excerpts from the book *Willem Albert Scholten. Herinneringen uit het leven van een industrieel. Gerangschikt en bewerkt door A. Winkler Prins* [Willem Albert Scholten. Memories from the life of an industrialist. Organised and edited by A. Winkler Prins]. This commissioned biography also contains a list of all the paintings and the page numbers where the depicted stories can be found as a guide for the reader/viewer.[2]

In this article, I will analyse the Scholten paintings and accompanying text as a life narrative constructed through two intertwined autobiographical acts. At first sight,

the word 'autobiographical' might appear incongruous as neither the paintings nor the text have been produced by Scholten himself. However, they were commissioned by him and, as will be shown below, both sources contain Scholten's perspective, not the painter's or author's. In this context, I prefer to use the term' autobiographical act' instead of 'biography by proxy' because the former is common parlance in the field of life writing and thus avoids ambiquity.

In the field of traditional historical biography, autobiographical acts like those commissioned by Scholten would not be considered valuable sources.[3] They are viewed as unreliable memories, possibly put forward by the subject to place themselves in a positive light.[4] However, they become very fruitful materials when looking at biographies from a different perspective. In the academic stream that has become known as 'new biography', according to Jo Burr Margadant, 'the subject of biography is no longer the coherent self but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence, or an individual whose different manifestations of self reflect the passage of time, the demands and options of different settings, or the varieties of ways that others seek to present that person.'[5] This performed self is therefore multiplicitous, subject to change and relational: 'we are who we are aided by and through the eyes of others.'[6] In this way, autobiographical acts become spaces where a self or an “I” is performed and, in extension thereof, the family biography of the Scholten family that is currently written by me follows this paradigm of 'new biography'. The project seeks to analyse the different selves put forward by members of the Scholten family in ego-documents, material objects and activities.

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have theorised, we can differentiate between several “I’s” in autobiographical acts. The authors propose a distinction between ‘the “real” or historical “I”, the narrating “I”, the narrated “I” and the ideological “I”, which, in the context of the present study, is worth reiterating.[7]

The real “I” can never be known. Although historical records show that there once existed a ‘flesh-and-blood person located in a particular time and place’, we must acknowledge that this person’s ‘life is far more diverse and dispersed than the story that is being told of it.’ This compliments Burr Margadant view, and it goes against the belief that writings and artwork can be perceived as ‘mirrors of the soul’ that reveal the entire personality of the author.

The narrating “I” is, in contrast to the historical “I”, available to the reader, as this is the storyteller. This storyteller ‘calls forth only that part of the experiential history linked to the story he is telling.’[8] The narrated “I” is the subject of the story, and the

ideological "I" is defined by Smith and Watson as 'the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story'. They elaborate:

> The ideological "I" is at once everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts, in the sense that the notion of personhood and the ideologies of identity constitutive of it are so internalised (personally and culturally) that they seem "natural" and "universal characters of persons". […] the ideological "I" is also multiple and thus potentially conflictual. At any historical moment, there are heterogeneous identities culturally available to the narrators. […] Some narrators emphasise their ideological complexity […], while others may bend aspects of the story to support a prevailing ideology.[9]

Splitting up the "I" when critically inquiring into autobiographical acts thereby allows us to perceive these as sources useful for biographers because they can, for instance, tell us something about how the subject perceived themselves and wanted to tell their life story. Moreover, we no longer need to look for the "real" subject or aim to write a "definitive biography". Instead, we can analyse the different narratives put forward by the subject. Taking not one but two autobiographical acts – the paintings and the explicative text – as 'parallel yet different sources of self-constitution', similar to Meritxell Simon-Martin's approach to Barbara Bodichon's letters and paintings, allows us to see whether the different autobiographical acts enforced or contradicted each other.[10] In other words, is there a sense of hybridity in this life writing? Before answering these questions, a short life description of Willem Albert Scholten will be provided after which six of the paintings and the accompanying will be described and analysed.

Willem Albert Scholten and his 'grand plan'

Willem Albert Scholten was born in 1819 in a hamlet named Loenen, located in the east of the Netherlands, near the IJssel River. His father was a reverend but died when Willem Albert was only two years old.[11] In 1837, aged eighteen, Willem Albert embarked on a journey through Germany to learn more about the paint production process. This is because, despite having worked in a paint factory for a short while, he was determined to start his own factory. To do so, he needed to gather knowledge and expertise on the various aspects of emulsion, tinting, colouring et cetera.[12] Satisfied with his findings Willem Albert purchased few acres of land in 1838 and opened a

factory close to the village where he was born. In this factory, he produced two materials needed for paint, and, in addition, also processed potatoes to turn these into potato starch.[13] Despite being only of secondary importance, it was the latter process that eventually would make him rich. In 1841, the factory in Warnsveld burned down. After this personal tragedy, Willem Albert moved to the Northern province of Groningen. An fellow entrepreneur pointed out to him that potatoes were grown there and relocating to Groningen would thus significantly reduce transportation costs.[14]

In the tiny village of Foxhol, approximately fifteen kilometres from the city of Groningen, he was able to purchase some land. After a few years, he decided to abandon the production of paint ingredients altogether and to focus entirely on potatoes – once again, afther having allegedly taken advice from another factory owner. In 1847 he married Klaassien Sluis (1821-1893). She was the daughter of a wheat merchant and his wife. Willem Albert later described his mother-in-law as 'one of the most hard-working and expeditious women in the entire province.'[15] She was responsible for the fact that Klaassien brought two very crucial things into the company: money and financial abilities. With the loans Willem Albert secured from Klaassien's parents, he made the necessary investments for his factories to become successful.[16] After Klaassien took up the task of bookkeeping, the company's financial situation improved significantly.[17] Willem Albert was able to open new factories, initially in Groningen; then in and Germany and later on even in Poland and Russia. When he died in 1892, Willem Albert possessed 24 factories that all industrially processed agricultural products.

In the 1860s, the family, now consisting of the couple and their only son Jan Evert (1849-1918), moved to the city of Groningen. Here, they rented a house in the city centre.[18] At the beginning of the 1870s, the Scholten family's reputation as elite members developed rapidly. This is simultaneously the period in which Willem Albert started commissioning a series of paintings that depicted formative moments of his life. With the advice of his trade agent and confidant – J.A. van Veen who was based in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam – Scholten reached out to various painters with the request to commission a number of paintings.

In one of Scholten's letters to Van Veen dating back to 1869, we find an initial list of five scenes he desired to have painted.[19] Van Veen then contacted the painters he considered most suitable for the different scenes and inquired how much they would charge for the respective works. He reported his findings to Scholten.[20] This initial list of five paintings indicates that Scholten had not yet imagined the complete series of fifteen paintings.

At the time of writing, nine paintings are still lost. The remaining five are in the Veenkoloniaal Museum in Veendam, and one is in a private collection. The museum does not own all five paintings in its collection; some are long-term loans. All six currently known paintings are relatively large, measuring approximately 1,5 meters wide by 1 meter high (60 x 40 inches. Considering this shared characteristic, it is assumed that all paintings in the series were of similar size.

As previously mentioned, Scholten and his family moved to the city of Groningen in the 1860s. In 1881, they moved into the so-called Scholtenhuis, a mansion explicitly built for them in the heart of the city. As we know, Scholten started commissioning paintings in 1869. This raises the question of whether the paintings were orderded specifically to decorate the walls of the grand house, which is known to have had two rooms dedicated solely to art.[21] The fact that there is almost a decade between the commissioning of the paintings and the building of the mansion can be explained by the fact that Scholten allegedly moved to Groningen with the plan for the Scholtenhuis already in mind. In the book by Winkler Prins, alluded to in the introduction of this paper, the story is told as follows: Scholten envisioned his ideal grand mansion being located across the town hall. When Scholten moved to Groningen, he found three separate buildings occupying this location. He therefore sent a carpenter to gather information on the willingness of the three respective property owners to sell their houses – in inquiry which came back negative in all three cases. However, Scholten could not part with his vision – 'the grand plan' as described in his autobiography – so he decided to wait for the owners to pass away and buy their properties. It took several years for this process to be completed, and only after the last one had died could he start constructing his sought-after home.

Figure 2: J.G. Kramer, *Grote Markt Oostzijde: Scholtenhuis, 1898-1903*, Groninger Archieven, Groningen.

The aforementioned letter of Scholten to Van Veen, interestingly enough, confirms that Scholten did indeed plan on decorating his ideal domicile with art. He writes to Van Veen that he has bought 'the second door of our home' and that 'such a house requires paintings of considerable size.'[22] However, considering there was almost a decade between the production of the first paintings in the series and the completion of the house, the artworks made before 1881 were likely stored at other locations. Examples of these locations could, conceivably, be offices of different factories owned by Scholten.[23] It is not unlikely they ended up remaining there, whereas the paintings later created were placed on the walls of the Scholtenhuis, which was utterly destroyed during the final days of the Second World War by the Allied forces. The German *Gestapo* occupied the Scholtenhuis in the Second World War, which is why it was targeted. Possibly some of the canvases were still on the walls. I have found one mention of the paintings being transported to Bremen, in which case the paintings that were in the Scholtenhuis did survive the Second World War but have never been returned to their original owners.[24] Earlier paintings might have remained in their original locations and thus have survived.[25]

While it is a shame that we only know what six of the total of fifteen paintings look like, it is nonetheless possible to imagine some of the other missing scenes since we do have their titles from both the Winkler Prins book and the smaller booklet. As Elise van Ditmars shows in her article on the paintings, a lithograph produced by Scholten in 1889 – in honour of his fiftieth anniversary of being an industrialist – contains four oval-shaped illustrations with titles similar to those found in the book. In addition, one of the images is of a painting that we do know: *De eerste fabriek* [The first factory], and the oval-shaped image on the lithography is almost identical to the painting. These two facts combined suggest that the small reproductions were all based on their true-size counterparts.[26] The lithography thus helps us envision three more paintings, giving us an idea of how nine of the paintings looked. For the others, a blank canvas remains – we only have the stories. For the sake of brevity and scope this article, only the six currently known paintings – together with their accompanying texts will be described. Before the article continues, more information will be provided on the text.

Figure 3: Maker unknown, *Gedenkplaat uitgegeven door W.A. Scholten*, 1889, Groninger Archieven, Groningen.

Autobiography or biography?

The text in the concise booklet describing the paintings contains excerpts from the autobiography commissioned by Willem Albert. Therefore, the latter serves as this paper's predominant textual source, but its complexity makes it difficult to categorise it since it does not conform to either genre of biography or autobiography. Around the same time when Willem Albert sought painters who could execute his vision, he asked his fellow resident of the province of Groningen – namely the teacher and reverend Anthony Winkler Prins (1817-1908) – to put his life story to paper. The main source material of this biography is a collection of notebooks that contain Willem Albert's memoirs, which he kept since the age of seventeen.[27] Hence, the book's full title translates to 'Memories of an Industrialist, organised and edited by A. Winkler Prins.' The use of the term 'memories' would make it an autobiography, according to popular definition.

On the other hand, the book is written in the third person, as is more common for a biography than for an autobiography. Furthermore, considering Winkler Prins has directly intervened in Willem Albert's notes there is, strictly speaking, no narrating "I" as described by Smith and Watson. However, as previously stated, the text will be categorised as an autobiographical act, as Willem Albert intended to present his life narrative to a wide-ranging audience.

The first iteration of the book, which was finished in 1871, seems to have only been published for a small audience of family and friends. Twenty years later, an updated version was published. After the death of Willem Albert in 1892, the book appears to have been revised and updated a final time, after which it was printed in large quantities and distributed across public libraries and schools, conforming to the will of Willem Albert.[28]

The 1892 edition contains 39 chapters divided across 326 pages, a portrait and an autograph of Willem Albert. Adding such a portrait and an autograph to an autobiography was customary in the nineteenth century. It showed that the contents of the book were reliable. Furthermore, autographs were seen as the mirror of people's souls.[29] The book was sold for 50 cents – a relatively low price considering the average price for books in this genre was 1,25 guilders in the late nineteenth century.[30] .

A liberal life narrative

That being said, how do image and text – repeating the article's undergirding impetus – relate to each other when tasked to narrate a life? In the case of Willem Albert Scholten, different images and texts form a particular hybrid autobiographical narrative of what is colloquially called 'the self-made man'. In her influential book on memory and autobiography, Jill Ker Conway describes this archetype as: 'The successful accumulator of wealth, who makes the journey from poverty to worldly success and triumphs through the economic disciplines of thrift, industry and deferred gratification'. According to Ker Conway Benjamin Franklin, one of the American Founding Fathers, was the first to utilise this template in his *Autobiography* from 1818.[31] He 'defined for the first time the archetypal figure of the capitalist hero, rebellious against inherited privilege, scornful of efficiency and waste, driven by economic motives.'[32] In doing so, Franklin juxtaposed himself with the 'new democratic man' put forward in the late eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Ker Conway states that he 'introduced the secular hero into European literature and recounted his own life in a form and style which influenced male life histories well into the twentieth century' – this includes the life story of Willem Albert Scholten.[33] Franklin's archetype could not have existed without Rousseau's work, but the crucial difference lies in the role they attribute to the concept of agency. Whereas Rousseau blames his youth and upbringing for aspects of his life and 'seems never to have been able to forget what might have been had the fates been kinder or he wiser, Franklin claims to have set about controlling himself and his destiny from very early youth.'[34] The life narrative of the self-made economic man, both for Franklin as well as Scholten, is an example of the ideological "I" described by Smith and Watson. Not only is it shaped by contemporary ideas on a particular interpretation of manhood but the the narrating "I" shapes his story to fit it in tandem. In extension of the ideological "I" lies the subjective perception of childhood.

Considering childhood is the life stage in which crucial skills and values are actively acquired it is perhaps unsurprising that this time period is also at the core of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. In their work on autobiography, Smith and Watson write about this category of literature, arguing that 'Perhaps the most influential genre of the nineteenth century was the bildungsroman, or novel of development. Writ large in such narratives as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Madame de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, its

structure of social formation unfolds through a narrative of apprenticeship, education in "life," renunciation, and civic integration into bourgeois society.' [35]

Autobiographies became increasingly influenced by the discursive structure of the *Bildungsroman* in the nineteenth century. Combining Franklin's template of the self-made economic man and the template of the bildungsroman resulted in what could best be described as 'exemplary lives'. In her dissertation on autobiographies on the Dutch book market in the late nineteenth century, Marijke Huisman states that critical reviewers highly appreciated autobiographies which described such exemplary lives. This enthusiasm was caused by a general feeling of decay and loss of the Dutch entrepreneurial spirit that had made the country's elite very wealthy in the seventeenth century. The author E.J. Potgieter articulated this feeling of economic and societal degradation in his short story *Jan, Jannetje en hun jongste kind* [Jan, Jannetje and their youngest child], which can be read as an allegory of Dutch history. Four of Jan and Jannetje's sons embody the glorious past, whereas their fifth son is lazy and weak. The name that Potgieter gave this youngest son, Jan Salie, was quickly taken up in the Dutch language as a term of derision in the expression 'de geest van Jan Salie' [the spirit of Jan Salie].[36]

According to liberal[2] intellectuals at the time, the only way to return to the so-called Golden Age and subsequently defeat the spirit of Jan Salie was by encouraging citizens to, once again, make an effort for the greater good.[37] People needed to realise that they themselves held their future in their own hands. Liberals thereby held an unshakeable belief in the malleability of life. However, despite their self-proclaimed progressivism, this sense of agency could only be applied to men. In fact, in his book on nineteenth-century Dutch liberalism, Henk te Velde states that 'there was no talk of women of character.'[38] The focus on character was a vital feature of liberal thought. It was viewed as the key to their wish to reform society by reforming individuals. To this end, Te Velde writes that 'The character was the essence of the individual human being. It was not a sum of qualities, but the structure that man gave to his existence.'[39]

Morality and sense of duty thereby constituted the foundation of a good character and the ability always to choose ratio over emotion.[40] Yet this valuing of mind over heart did not mean liberals were particularly fond of intellectualism. On the contrary, they were rather appreciative of anti-intellectualism. One's character, so it was said, could not be built in the safe environment of schools and universities, but had to be

[2] The word 'liberal' in this article refers to the nineteenth-century political ideology of classical liberalism.

formed in practice.[41] If knowledge had to be taken from books, it had to be the life lessons of great men who took matters into their own hands – exemplary lives. In this fashion, Dutch factory owner Jacques van Marken (1845-1906) wanted to spread the spirit of liberalism and thus handed out free copies of the Dutch edition of Samuel Smiles' *Self-help* (1859) amongst his employees.[42] Scholten envisioned something similar for his autobiography. In his last will and testament he noted that his book should likewise be distributed for free amongst schools and libraries. By doing so, hoped that the Dutch youth would profit from his life story.[43]

It is no coincidence that Scholten took Smiles' work as an chief example considering that he viewed self-help as the core value of his life narrative. In fact, it is the driving force in most of his painted accounts, which shall, in what follows, be discussed in further detail.

The paintings

The first painting in the series, entitled *De armenschool* [The school for the poor], was created by Jacob Taanman (1836-1923) in 1870. It is one of the scenes mentioned in the correspondence between Willem Albert and Van Veen discussed earlier. The original idea for this scene succinctly reads: 'J. Taanman in Amsterdam, including frame, etc., between f.1200 and f.1400.' Van Veen then lists estimated prices for the other paintings ranging from f.1500 to f.800. Price-wise, this would have placed Taanman in the middle category for such commissions. Van Veen predicted that Scholten would not be very pleased with these high prices but wrote in their defence that the painters would require several months to complete them, as they would be rather large works. Furthermore, he stated that someone would need to model for every individual human depiction, which would also be costly.[44] In the end, Taanman and Scholten were able to reach an agreement, as the painting was indeed produced.

Figure 4: J. Taanman, *De armenschool*, 1870, Veenkoloniaal Museum, Veendam.

The scene takes place in a simple classroom. It is filled with approximately thirty children, all around the age of five. Maps and posters decorate the otherwise bare walls, and daylight enters the room through the two tall windows. We see two figures in front of the class: an adult and a teenage boy. The latter points to a teaching tool used to familiarise children with the Latin alphabet. The children seated in the front seem to listen to their teacher and his assistant, but the children in the back can be seen talking to one another or daydreaming. The teenage boy in the front is the main subject of this artwork. Here, we see Willem Albert Scholten as a young pupil. The story accompanying this painting describes how Willem Albert's mother mother wished for her adolescent son to follow 'proper education' despite not having the financial means to to realise this, as she was a single parent. The teacher of the local school for the poor, Mr. Zemmeling, therefore offered to teach Willem Albert in return for his assistance during his classes. Zemmeling taught Willem Albert measuring, algebra, geography, and history - classes in which Willem Albert 'diligently' took part.[45] This arrangement continued for two years. In *De armenschool,* Scholten overcomes his poor education by investing his time in assisting the teacher and taking extra classes.

In *Op het IJ,* described in the introduction of this article, the young apprentice Scholten takes a solo trip to Amsterdam and saves himself from drowning after falling

through a hole in the ice. At the same time, the nearby ferrymen are seen preoccupied with discussing tactics to rescue him. The story behind this painting is as follows. At the age of sixteen, Willem Albert had found employment at a firm near Amsterdam that manufactured ingredients required for paint dyes. On a cold winter morning, he was asked to go to Amsterdam to collect orders, for which he brought a wooden box with paint samples. Because of the freezing conditions that day, the ferry crossing the river experienced great difficulty making its way through the ice. As a result, the boatsmen charged a higher fee than usual, which Willem Albert did not want to pay, 'as there was a possibility that he would not earn a single penny in Amsterdam'.[46] Instead, he decided to test the strength of the ice by throwing rocks on it, and when the results satisfied him, he crossed the IJ's 300 metre (900 yards) on foot. His decision angered the ferry operators, as they feared others would follow suit. Although nobody followed Willem Albert, the boatsmen offered him a free return trip, once again fearing that his action would cost them customers and thus money. He, however, declined. At this moment, Willem Albert was met with disaster, as is critically remarked in the book: 'The result of his first trip had not only made him courageous but overconfident.'[47] Willem Albert was not as cautious as the first time he crossed the ice, leading him to a weak spot where he fell through the ice. Surprisingly, he managed to save the wooden sample box by quickly throwing it on the ice as he fell. The ferrymen's first reaction was to laugh at the drowning young man but, after a while, decided to take action to save him nonetheless. However, it took them so long to deliberate how they would go about this that Scholten was back on the ice before they could help him.

This exact moment, i.e. right after Scholten managed to save himself, is illustrated in the painting by Leickert. At first glance, this may not appear to be a success story – after all, Willem Albert was punished for his carelessness with an unwanted submersion in the nearly frozen IJ river. Despite this misfortune, the book by Winkler Prins turns this into a positive story. It states: 'One should admit that Scholten's actions were also in this case not free of recklessness, but we also see his desire for independence, his trust in his own devices, his diligent execution of the tasks that were assigned to him, that remain the basic characteristics of this odd man.'[48]

The paintings *"Sta…!"* [Stand still!] and *"Sla dood!"* [Kill it!] both picture Scholten on the road by himself. The first one was made by Herman Willem van der Worp (1849-1941). Van der Worp was an inhabitant of Zutphen, where Scholten had lived during his youth. He or his family likely knew the Van der Worp family. Herman Willem's father, Willem van der Worp (1803-1878), was also active as a painter and

photographer and worked as a teacher at the local secondaty school. Willem Albert is known to have bought a painting from him, so father and son are both part of the Scholten painting series.

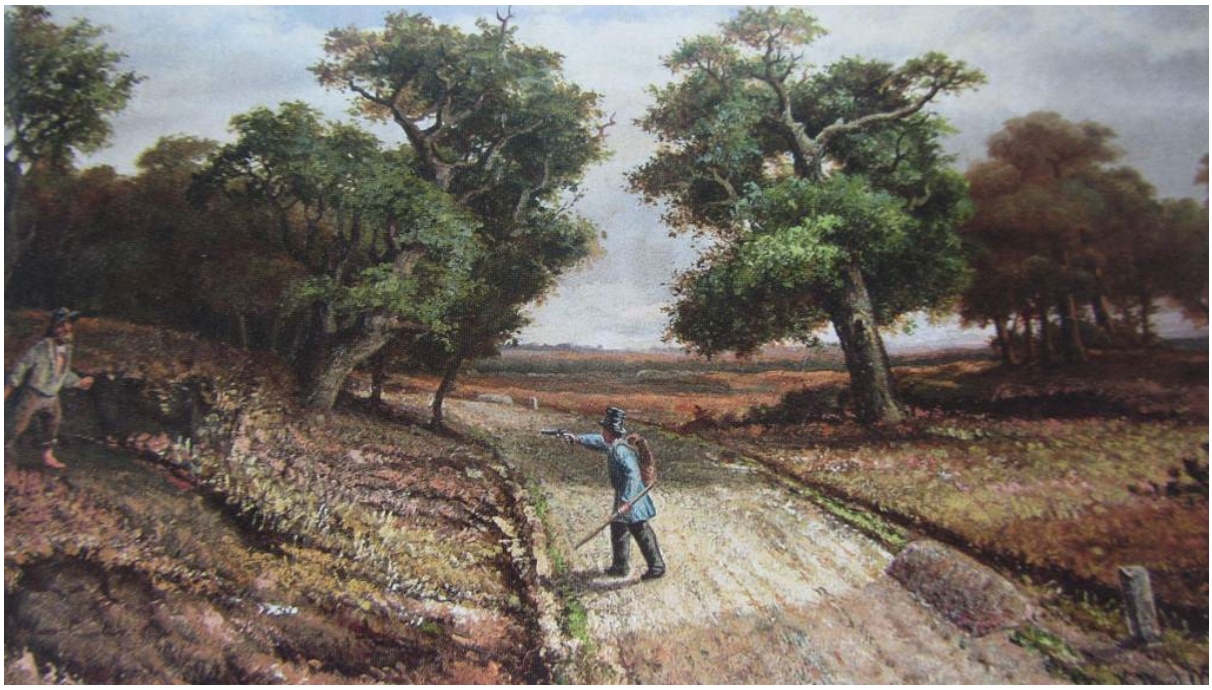

Figure 5: H.W. van der Worp, *"Sta…!"*, year unknown, long term loan from private collection to Veenkoloniaal Museum, Veendam.

The painting by Herman Willem shows a rather generic landscape: a dirt road with trees scattered on both sides and a grassy, slightly steep enbankment. Between the trees on both sides of the road, we see a vista of arable land. The painting contains two figures: one on the side of the road and another on the road itself. The latter attracts the eye of the viewer immediately; the former is less noticeable. The two figures face each other, which causes the central figure to turn away from the viewer. Despite its pastoral settings, the scene is surprisingly aggressive: the central figure points a gun at the figure on the side, who is holding an axe and is barefoot. The story accompanying the scene originates from Willem Albert's trip to Germany where he, as noted gathered information on the paint-making process, ultimately having the goal of starting his own factory. He was only eighteen years old when he took this trip, all by foot. Allegedly, somewhere on the road, he encountered a worker. He was curious what this man was doing, so he asked him: 'Friend, what are you doing there?'[49] The unknown man did not appreciate Scholten's curiosity and decided that it was unfair that Scholten was carrying two pairs of boots whilst he had none. After

Willem Albert refused to give him one of his pairs of shoes, the man responded, 'Then you must give me everything!' – after which he grabbed an axe and ran towards his victim.[50] Willem Albert did not doubt for a second, pulled out his gun, and is supposed to have said, 'Stand still, fellow!'[51] This exact scene is shown in the painting. Willem Albert's swift reply caused the robber to return to his work so Willem Albert could continue his journey. The incident is both a testament to Willem Albert's interest in others and his decisiveness in dangerous situations. Although he was a caring person, he always prioritised his safety. This fits the archetype of the self-made economic man: although empathy is considered a virtue for him, too much of it could lead to his downfall.

The second painting mentioned above, *"Sla dood!'*, was made by Amsterdam-based artist Georg Andries Roth (1809-1887). This painting shows a quiet winter landscape, lit only by a full moon. Similar to *Sta..!*, we see a dirt road that is bordered by grass-covered hills and slender, leafless trees. A group of four men around a horse cart can be seen in the foreground. On the left behind them, a man in a top hat and with a walking stick faces the group – he appears to have only just entered the scene. We recognise this character from *"Sta…!"* – he is wearing the same hat and blue coat. The accompanying story carries the same juvenile adventurism as some of the other texts.

Figure 6: G.A. Roth, "*Sla dood!"*, 1870, Veenkoloniaal Museum, Veendam.

Visualised in *"Sla dood!"* is another one of Scholten's walking trips, this time from Alkmaar to Amsterdam – a distance of approximately forty kilometres or eight hours of walking. Initially, he had planned to spend the night somewhere, but out of his sense of frugality, he decided against that and went directly to his destination. Around midnight, Willem Albert was walking on the otherwise empty road in the dark when he heard, 'Kill it! Just kill it!' This frightened him, and he debated returning to Alkmaar, but considering he had already walked for four hours, so that was not an option. Trying to go around the group of possible bandits was made very difficult by the harsh winter conditions, so there was no other course of action for Willem Albert but to walk straight ahead and hold his knife in his hand. As soon as he saw the group that produced the violent shouts, he felt relieved and had to suppress a burst of laughter. It turned out that the four men were involved in a loud drinking match. The 'Kill it!' referred to downing the glass as quickly as possible. Willem Albert could safely continue his journey without the group of men even noticing him. Similar to previous stories, this story shows that Willem Albert had courage – possibly too much in some situations, but the humorous twist provides this story with a happy ending.

The work *De eerste fabriek* [The first factory] by Willem van der Worp (1803-1878, father of the aforementioned Herman Willem) is situated in Tonden, a small village between Loenen – the birthplace of Willem Albert – and Zutphen, both in the province of Gelderland. The painting contains five figures and is situated in what looks like a private home, considering the decorated fireplace on the left hand-side. Two windows show a rural landscape surrounding the house. Three of the figures are working on two different, rather primitive-looking machines. The three of them are all adolescents. An older man, holding a pipe keeps watch over them and a woman looks at the scene from the doorstep. The older couple in the scene are Willem Albert's aunt and uncle Kleiboer. They owned a farm and were very fond of their cousin. When Willem Albert told his uncle of his plans to become a small-scale potato starch producer, the latter did not hesitate to offer him the anteroom of his farmhouse. Willem Albert was able to purchase the necessary equipment and subsequently hired two assistants. The three of them allegedly worked twelve hours a day to extract the starch from the potatoes, after which, as the book narrates in great detail, the machinery had to be cleaned. The text accompanying this painting emphasises that this first iteration of a factory is where 'the seed germinated that would later grow into a powerful tree, spreading its branches abroad.'[52] The added detail of the machinery cleaning, of which Willem Albert himself did the most challenging and filthiest part,

is used to showcase that '[d]ifficulties are a stimulus for perseverance for genius men.'[53] The scene emphasises that Scholten was in charge of his first small enterprise and worked incredibly diligently to make it successful.

Figure 7, W. van der Worp, *De eerste fabriek*, year unknown, Veenkoloniaal Museum, Veendam.

At first glance, it seems unclear which virtues the fifth painting, named *Het zeilen* [Going sailing] symbolises. This painting in the series caused some confusion for the *Veenkoloniaal Museum*. It was part of the private collection of one of the heirs of the Scholten family, who claimed it was part of the fifteen paintings and had been on display in the Scholtenhuis before it was destroyed in the war. However, the painting is signed by Riegen, whose name does not appear on the list in the book by Winkler Prins. An argument in favour of the painting being a constitutative part of the series is that the depicted scene of a sailing trip gone awry is mentioned in the book and that a painting titled *Het zeilen* is part of Winkler Prins' list. The small booklet dedicated to the paintings contains the clue needed to solve this mystery: in this text, *Het zeilen* is attributed to Riegen, not Van Prooijen.[54]

Riegen was, and still is, famous for his nautical pieces, so this scene would fit his expertise well. In the foreground of the painting, we see a simple sailing boat carrying four figures. In the background another boat can be observed, together with a church tower in the distance. The sea is restless, and waves rapidly enter the vessel. The

clouds are dark grey as if a thunderstorm is about to start. Three of the characters on the boat are trying to prevent the boat from sinking, and the fourth one seems to be calling out for help – perhaps to the boat that floats in the background. Elise van Ditmars assumes that this latter figure represents Willem Albert.[55]

Figure 8: N. Riegen, *Het zeilen*, year unknown, private collection.

This story takes place around the same time as *Op het IJ*, when Willem Albert worked for the paint production firm near Amsterdam. He resided with a host family, whose son was Willem Albert's senior by seven years. In the book by Winkler Prins, he is described as a 'very loose gentleman' and Willem Albert had been warned by one of his employers for this loose gentleman's immorality. The son, whose name was Frans, repeatedly asked Willem Albert to join him on his adventures, yet Willem Albert was not interested in such outings to fairs or brothels. However, one day, Frans asked Willem Albert to join him on a sailing trip, which he did not refuse since sailing was one of his long-cherised wishes. Soon after leaving Amsterdam, fell prey to a bout of seasickness but this – as would soon become apparent – was not the worst part of the endeavour. The painting shows, the weather, and thus the water, turning very rough. The painting's horizon has in fact wholly disappeared behind the waves. These

circumstances, combined with a very inconsiderate captain who wanted to keep sailing, resulted in an unpleasant adventure for Willem Albert. The book describes how he was forever cured of his wish to go sailing. Thereupon, he also cut all ties with Frans, especially after the latter told him that the people they were on the boat with were infamous brothel owners – the kind of people Willem Albert had wanted to avoid.

This, rather unpleasant, memory seems an outlier when compared to the other stories. However, when closely scrutinising the story, it becomes clear that it fits the overall narrative quite well. The text emphasizes how the corrupt (and Roman Catholic) Frans could not ruin the morale of the well-raised reverend'son. This could primarily be attributed to the efforts of the latter's mother, but it was, of course, also Willem Albert's merit. Frans, akin to biblical temptation, had tried to persuade him several times, but Willem Albert never conceded to such sinful ways. The text also comments on Frans' irresponsible financial behaviour. It is even mentioned that although he did not have to contribute to his parent's household, he was always short of money. This implicitly contrasts with the frugal and more responsible Willem Albert, who was much younger than him.

Frans, who shares several characteristics with Potgieter's Jan Salie, is thus portrayed as the antithesis of Willem Albert. Although he makes the mistake of engaging with him once (after repeatedly refusing his offers), he learns from this experience. He decides to stay away from this negative influence in the foreseeable future. It is also an example of a renunciation event typical to the *Bildungsroman*: the protagonist makes a mistake and experiences misfortune. However, he almost always gains valuable life lessons from these mistakes.

Several values important for the self-made economic man can be viewed to return in more than one painting. One of them is frugality. In *De armenschool*, this is a frugality forced upon the characters: Scholten's single mother did not have the funds to pay for expensive education, thus having to find other ways to finance it. She is praised for this, but she remains a solely supportive character and does not get her own life story, confirming Te Velde's comment that liberal virtues were only truly valued in men. The main event of *Op het IJ* – Scholten falling through the ice – would not have happened had Willem Albert paid the fare for the ferry. However, he was unwilling to do this as he was uncertain whether he could earn money that day. He did not wish for his employer to lose money because of his actions. In *De eerste fabriek*, it is emphasised that Scholten saved money by handling and cleaning the machinery

himself. The predicament that Scholten finds himself in shortly in *"Sla dood!"* is caused by his decision not to spend money on a place to sleep but to walk during the night.

Another important virtue is courage, although this sometimes turns into hubris, as is the case in *Op het IJ*. Here, Scholten suffers the consequences of his overconfidence in the strength of the ice. *"Sta…!"* and *"Sla dood!"* both display Scholten as making courageous decisions. He could have turned around or run away in both cases, but he chose to seek the confrontation. All such events described above fit the model of the *Bildungsroman*, starting in Scholten's childhood and ending with his first self-directed enterprise. His period of apprenticeship starts in his local school and continues as he works in Amsterdam and undertakes his journey through Germany. In this constellation, the first factory is the start of his career.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described six paintings and their accompanying explicative text that Willem Albert Scholten commissioned. I have analysed the paintings and texts with the goal of finding out what visual narrative they tell and if there was a sense of hybridity between the two autobiographical acts – how did they work together? This paper shows that the visual and textual sources under scrutiny tell the story of the self-made economic man, thereby also closely following the template of the *Bildungsroman*. The case of the Scholten paintings – commissioned works of art to depict a life story – seems unique in the Netherlands, so further research to discover similar cases is highly recommended. It would be interesting to see how widespread this practice was and if other paintings, if they exist, were used in similar fashion to spread the life narrative of the self made economic man.

Works Cited

Author unknown, 'Grootste aankoop ooit voor Veenkoloniaal Museum Veendam', in: *Parkstad Veendam*, https://www.parkstadveendam.nl/node/27598?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook, date accessed: 30 March 2023.

Bosch, Mineke, 'Persona en de performance van identiteit. Parallelle ontwikkelingen in de nieuwe biografische geschiedschrijving van gender en van wetenschap', in: *Tijdschrift voor Biografie* 1:3 (2012), 10-21.

Burr Margadant, Jo, 'Introduction. Constructing Selves in a Historical Perspective', in: Idem (ed.), *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth Century France,* Los Angeles/Londen: University of California Press, 2000, 1-32.

Ditmars van, Elise, 'De schilderijen van Willem Albert Scholten', in: *Veenkoloniale Volksalmanak* 31 (2019) 60-72.

Hamilton, Nigel and Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography,* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.

Huisman, Marijke, *Publieke levens. Autobiografieën op de Nederlandse boekenmarkt 1850-1918,* Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2008.

Ker Conway, Jill, *When memory speaks: reflections on autobiography*, New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

Mathijsen, Marita, *De gemaskerde eeuw*, Amsterdam: Em. Querido's Uitgeverij, 2002.

Simon-Martin, Meritxell, "More Beautiful than Words & Pencil Can Express': Barbara Bodichon's Artistic Career at the Interface of her Epistolary and Visual Self Projections', in: *Gender & History* 24:3 (2012), 581–599.

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, *Reading autobiography: a guide for interpreting life narratives,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Velde te, Henk, *Gemeenschapszin en Plichtsbesef. Liberalisme en Nationalisme in Nederland, 1870-1918*, Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, 1992.

Winkler Prins, Anthony, *Willem Albert Scholten. Herinneringen uit het leven van een industreel, gerangschikt en bewerkt door A. Winkler Prins*, Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1892.

About the Author

Marieke Dwarswaard, **MA** (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2617-7771) acquired her BA and MA in History at Leiden University and started her PhD project at the University of Groningen in October 2020. She is writing a family biography of the Groningen-based Scholten family, encompassing three generations and 100 years (1840-1940).

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Alexander Williams, Meggy Lennaerts and Owen Duijvendak for helping me improve this article. Their insight in the English language has been of great value.

Notes

[1] Author unknown, 'Grootste aankoop ooit voor Veenkoloniaal Museum Veendam', in: *Parkstad Veendam*, https://www.parkstadveendam.nl/node/27598?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook, date accessed: 30 March 2023.
[2] Winkler Prins, Anthony, *Willem Albert Scholten. Herinneringen uit het leven van een industreel, gerangschikt en bewerkt door A. Winkler Prins,* Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1892 (324).
[3] Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, *Reading autobiography: a guide for interpreting life narratives,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 (7).
[4] Hamilton, Nigel and Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography,* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018 (111).
[5] Burr Margadant, Jo, 'Introduction. Constructing Selves in a Historical Perspective', in: Idem (ed.), *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth Century France,* Los Angeles/Londen: University of California Press, 2000, 1-32, there 7.
[6] Bosch, Mineke, 'Persona en de performance van identiteit. Parallelle ontwikkelingen in de nieuwe biografische geschiedschrijving van gender en van wetenschap', in: *Tijdschrift voor Biografie* 1:3 (2012), 10-21, there 12. Original quote: 'We zijn wie we zijn in de ogen van anderen', translation by author.
[7] Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, 2010, page 72.
[8] Ibidem.
[9] Idem, page 76-77.
[10] Simon-Martin, Meritxell, "More Beautiful than Words & Pencil Can Express': Barbara Bodichon's Artistic Career at the Interface of her Epistolary and Visual Self Projections', in: *Gender & History* 24:3 (2012), 581–599, there 582.
[11] Winkler Prins, Anthony, *Willem Albert Scholten. Herinneringen uit het leven van een industreel, gerangschikt en bewerkt door A. Winkler Prins,* Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1892 (6).
[12] Idem, page 65
[13] Idem, page 90.
[14] Idem, page 119.
[15] Groninger Archieven, Huwelijksregister Groningen 1847, aktenummer 193; Groningen Archieven, 1100 W.A. Scholten N.V., inv. nr. 3140, Biografische aantekeningen van W.A. Scholten, year unknown.
[16] Winkler Prins, Anthony, 1892, page 176-177.
[17] Ibidem.
[18] Historisch Archief Midden-Groningen, Bevolkingsregister Hoogezand, archiefnummer HS01-001, inventarisnummer 1183, blad 66, aktenummer 1; Groninger Archieven, 1399 Gemeentebestuur van Groningen (1), 1816-1916, inv. nr. 6583, Wijk 5E, folio 1-210, folionr. 187.
[19] Groninger Archieven, 1100 W.A. Scholten N.V., inv. nr. 1995, letter from W.A Scholten to J.A. van Veen, date unknown, 1869.
[20] Groninger Archieven, 1100 W.A. Scholten N.V., inv. nr. 153, letter from J.A. van Veen to W.A. Scholten, 8 November 1869.
[21] Groninger Archieven, 1100, W.A. Scholten N.V., inv. Nr. 180, letter from J.H. de Vries to W.A. Scholten, 25 April 1882.
[22] Groninger Archieven, 1100 W.A. Scholten N.V., inv. nr. 1995, letter from W.A Scholten to J.A. van Veen, date unknown, 1869. Original quote: 'Zoo als Uld mogelijk gehoord zal hebben, heb eenige weken geleden een huis gekocht de 2e deur van onze woning (…) in zulk een huis behooren flinke schilderijen'. Translation by author.
[23] Ditmars van, Elise, 'De schilderijen van Willem Albert Scholten', in: *Veenkoloniale Volksalmanak* 31 (2019) 60–72, there 61-62.

[24] GA, 2465 Rijksarchivaris Groningen, inv. nr. 834, letter from W.A. Scholten to Rijksarchief Groningen, 28 October 1983.
[25] Ditmars van, Elise, 2019, page 61-62.
[26] Idem, page 68-69.
[27] Groninger Archieven, 1100 N.V. W.A. Scholten, inv nr. 3140, Biografische aantekeningen van W.A. Scholten, year unknown.
[28] Winkler Prins, Anthony, 1892, page vi.
[29] Huisman, Marijke, *Publieke levens. Autobiografieën op de Nederlandse boekenmarkt 1850-1918,* Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2008 (65).
[30] Ibidem.
[31] Ker Conway, Jill, *When memory speaks: reflections on autobiography*, New York: Vintage Books, 1998 (9).
[32] Idem, page 24.
[33] Ibidem.
[34] Ibidem.
[35] Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, 2010, page 119.
[36] Mathijsen, Marita, *De gemaskerde eeuw,* Amsterdam: Em. Querido's Uitgeverij, 2002 (52).
[37] Huisman, Marijke, 2008, page 161.
[38] Velde te, Henk, *Gemeenschapszin en Plichtsbesef. Liberalisme en Nationalisme in Nederland, 1870-1918*, Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, 1992 (106).
[39] Idem, page 105.
[40] Ibidem.
[41] Idem, page 101-102, 105.
[42] Huisman, Marijke, 2008, page 161.
[43] Winkler Prins, Anthony, 1892, page vi.
[44] Groninger Archieven, 1100 W.A. Scholten N.V., inv. nr. 153, letter from J.A. van Veen to Willem Albert Scholten, 8 November 1869.
[45] Winkler Prins, Anthony, 1892, page 13. Original quote: 'Met ijver maakte Willem Albert gebruik van die lessen.' Translation by author.
[46] Idem, page 42. Original quote: 'Hij had niet veel lust om op rekening van zijn Patroon twee gulden vracht te betalen en misschien één gulden bij zijn terugkeer, terwijl het zeer wel mogelijk was, dat er te Amsterdam geen dubbeltje te verdienen viel.' Translation by author.
[47] Idem, page 43. Original quote: 'De goede afloop van zijne eerste reis had hem niet alleen moedig, maar overmoedig gemaakt.' Translation by author.
[48] Idem, page 44. Original quote: 'Men moge zeggen, dat de handelwijze van Scholten ook bij deze gelegenheid niet van roekeloosheid is vrij te pleiten, wij zien daarin tevens die zucht naar onafhankelijkheid, dat vertrouwen op eigen hulpmiddelen, dat nauwgezet behartigen van aan hem opgedragene belangen, die de grondtrekken bleven van het karakter van dezen merkwaardigen man.' Translation by author.
[49] Idem, page 83. Original quote: 'Freund, was machts du da?' Translation by author.
[50] Ibidem. Original quote: 'So sollst du mir alles geben!' Translation by author.
[51] Ibidem. Original quote: 'Sta stil, bliksem!' Translation by author.
[52] Idem, page 90-91.
[53] Idem, page 91.
[54] Ditmars van, Elise, 2019, page 70-71.
[55] Ibidem.