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Between Art and Craft: the Ghent Art Academy during the second half of the 18th Century

From the second half of the 18thC on, the masters of the building trade denounced preferential rights. This right contained that masters were not allowed to employ unfree journeymen if free journeymen were available for the same job. The masters believed that these free journeymen took advantage of their privileged position. However, there was more to it than meets the eye. Behind the protests against preferential rights was actually a dispute about competence. The masters craftsmen determined that free journeymen showed less ability than their unfree colleagues.

When master masons and carpenters combined their efforts in their battle against preferential rights, painter Filips Karel Marissal and the Ghent aldermen found themselves standing united on the same side. At that time, Marissal operated his workshop as well as a humble art school. However, he was very limited in his possibilities. The aldermen on their side were confronted with an increasing poverty problem. From various angles, the employment of unfree labourers was put forward as the main cause of the problem. Under the impulse of some enlightened spirits, the local government advocated an educational approach to tackle the poverty challenges.

Marissal and the aldermen created a win-win. Marissal received the permission to open an art academy. Through this academical education, local labourers were able to extend their human capital, and were thus skilled to engage in a more competitive position on the labour market. This approach to the local knowledge problem would in turn lead to declining pauperism.

This contribution outlines the story of the establishment of the Ghent Academy. Traditionally, this establishment is too unilaterally linked to the cultural policy of the government and, in particular, the edict of Maria Theresia from 1773, which stipulated that artists were no longer bound by the obligation to enrol in the craft guild. By approaching this establishment from a wider socioeconomic perspective, the image of the strong increase of academies in the Southern Netherlands in the 18thC evolved.