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Leeuwenhoek's letters and the circulation of knowledge: Individual preferences

THE DUTCH MICROSCOPIST Antoni van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723) described his microscopical observations in more than 350 letters. The greater part, more than 190, were written to the Royal Society in London. The others were addressed to friends, scientists and politicians in the Dutch Republic and abroad. The letters were often accompanied with drawings, mostly in red chalk. Leeuwenhoek did not draw these illustrations himself but asked various draughtsmen, whose names we do not know, to depict his observations.

The secretaries of the Royal Society in London had 116 letters published in fragmentary or complete translation in the *Philosophical Transactions*. Since Leeuwenhoek only wrote in Dutch, more particular the Delft vernacular, his letters had to be translated by Fellows who were able to do so. Apart from these publications, 174 letters were published in Dutch and in Latin during Leeuwenhoek's lifetime, between 1684 and 1719. Only 49 letters have been published contemporary both in Dutch, Latin and English. Leeuwenhoek never wrote a book or monograph, so that his letters are the only key to his works and thoughts.

However, not every correspondent or reader received Leeuwenhoek's work enthusiastically. I will claim that individual preferences and personal commitments were an important factor with regard to the circulation of Leeuwenhoek's observations and ideas. I will discuss the attitudes of the various secretaries and editors of the Royal Society and some individual natural philosophers like Christiaan Huygens, Nicolaas Hartsoeker, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

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