

CURATOR'S INTERVIEW

Hanna Benesz, interviewed by Ruud Priem

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Hanna Benesz (1947) has been working in the Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw since her graduation in 1975. In 1991 she was appointed curator of Early Netherlandish and Flemish paintings. Since 1995 (in cooperation with Maria Kluk for Dutch translations), she was responsible for the *Complete summary catalogue* of the collection (ca. 1,000 pictures), which is awaiting publication. As a result of this research, many findings and new attributions have been published in such periodicals as *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* (1991,1998), *Oud Holland* (1997, 2001/2002), and *Kultura i Sztuka* (2002, 2004). She has curated, co-curated or cooperated on several exhibitions outside of Poland, including *Flemish XVII-century painting*, Legnica 1985; two exhibitions in Japan in 1992-93 and 1997-98; as well as various exhibitions in the Muzeum Narodowe, among them *Rubens's "Deposition" from the Hermitage* and *The iconography of Passion*, 2000; *Transalpinum*, 2004; *Rubens, van Dyck, Jordaens*, 2007. Hanna Benesz has been a CODART member since 1998 and helped host the CODART ZEVEN study trip to Poland in 2004.

Which major developments have you seen in the curatorial field in Poland (in particular since 1989) and internationally in the past 30 years? In what way have these developments and changes influenced your work in a positive and/or negative sense?

Much has changed in Poland since 1989, not only in the curatorial field of course. These developments, very much desired, have nevertheless had difficult economic consequences.

The country is undergoing a deep overall restructuring, and only 0.5% of the state's budget is for culture, which is a shame but not really astonishing when you look at other needs. This is the first negative aspect of the political system's transformation in the curatorial field: new acquisitions, publication of collection catalogues, and exhibition organization have become extremely difficult a lack of finances. Therefore, directors and curators have to seek other sources of funding. Foundations are helpful. We have one for the contemporary art collection, which enables the continuation of systematic purchases of works by contemporary Polish artists. It's much worse with acquisitions of Old Master paintings. Sponsors are mainly interested in temporary exhibitions, preferably with first-rate art objects from prestigious collections from abroad, displayed in a colorful survey and followed by a beautiful, well selling catalogue – guarantee of success under a distinct sponsor's logo. Exhibitions nowadays have therefore become more a kind of attractive merchandise than a product of scholarship. Such a situation creates an enormous challenge for a curator, who is forced to please the sponsor with a blockbuster show and at the same time wants to fit a more ambitious problem into the project. This was the case in our museum in 1996 with Caravaggio's *Deposition* from the Vatican, which was shown in the company of other Caravagesque paintings from various collections to illustrate the fascinating phenomenon of Caravaggism in the North and in the South. This presentation met the requirements for renown, beauty and scholarly elaboration of an important event in the history of art.

From CODART workshops I know that the blockbuster exhibition requirement is also very much an issue in other European and American museums. But when disposing of a comfortable budget one can combine concept with attractivity, as our CODART colleagues did in such marvelous exhibitions as *Jan van Eyck and the South* (Bruges 2002), *Extravag-Ant* (Antwerp 2005 - Maastricht 2006) or *Netherlandish Diptychs* (Washington 2006 - Antwerp 2007), which in my opinion are examples of the ideal show.

Of course I shouldn't complain too much. After all, loans from abroad are possible now that Poland has regained its independence. Previously it was only the authority of Jan Białostocki that helped to organize some (very good, in fact) exhibitions in cooperation with collections in the "brotherly" countries of the Soviet Union, GDR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

A more serious problem is the fundamental decline of interest in the publication of collection catalogues, connected also with the lack of money. The *Complete summary catalogue of Early Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish paintings* from our collection is a painful and a typical example.

What is the role of international cooperation in the museum world, and what role can CODART play in this respect?

International cooperation is crucial to exchange of information (especially concerning the provenances of problematic art objects), loans and publications. Many museums have separate departments dealing with loans on a bureaucratic level, but negotiating and final decisions always depend on curators and directors. The CODART network offers a great advantage in this respect. At the beginning of its activities, for example, CODART played an important role in helping the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu with documentation and conservation, which later bore fruit in the form of a generous loan of Jan van Eyck's amazing *Man in a blue chaperon* to the exhibition in Bruges. I can think of several ways of improving international cooperation with CODART as a mediating and coordinating factor in multilateral initiatives that are broader than the loans of single objects. I mean exhibitions organized by various museums under the auspices of CODART, or long-term loans and exchanges, to be presented consecutively in each of the participating institutions.

What do you consider the best way to train future curators? (study art history, university programs focused on educating curators, internships, junior curators)

All of these possibilities are important and valuable for curatorial training. I, myself have gone through each of them except the university program on curatorial education, which did not exist in my country before I became a curator. Now such a program functions as postgraduate training, complementing the study of art history or other faculty. However, graduating it does not equal receiving a curatorial job. Nowadays in Poland one has to have such a training and/or the PhD degree to apply for this job, but in each case it is the director who decides on employing.

Internships and junior curator jobs are fundamental for gaining experience and showing the potential of the young art historian. I consider this a more "natural" means of learning the ropes than curatorial training, but at present, as employment policy has become stricter, the majority of directors would see this as a "waste of time," preferring to throw the new curator into the deep from the very start.

Do you, as an experienced curator, have any advice for your younger colleagues?

The basic thing for a beginning curator is to win in-depth knowledge of the collection which has been entrusted to him or her. When I started to work in the Gallery of European Painting of the National Museum in Warsaw, my task was to complete the data in the files of paintings from various schools. These were usually objects from the storage, the gallery paintings having already been examined in a more advanced way. I had to deal both with artistic and historical aspects and also with the inventories, because many paintings had double or mistaken numbers. In doing so, I got to know literally dozens if not hundreds of pictures, and gained a general knowledge of the remaining depot paintings. This was a long process, especially because in the course of my career I had four long breaks, following the births of each of my children. When I became curator and was given Early Netherlandish and Flemish paintings as my field, compilation of the complete summary catalogue became a still more valuable learning experience.

Verifying each object led to some spectacular discoveries and attributions. Apart from a thorough knowledge of the collection, I think a young curator should have plenty of good ideas for exhibitions and good rhetorical skills to help persuade the director to support their realization.

What criteria do you use to select objects for the permanent display?

High artistic quality and representativeness for respective school, period and genre of painting. Sometimes, however, I choose to present a work of inferior quality, if the iconography is interesting and rare, just to illustrate a phenomenon.

Which ways of presenting works of art do you prefer and which ones do you dislike?

Hanging paintings far apart, with lots of space surrounding them and with high-quality spotlights is ideal, especially in temporary exhibitions. Permanent displays, however, are often constrained by space limitations, and one has to solve the sometimes dramatic dilemma between how and how much to show. I, myself have the tendency to crowd things together, to show as much as possible of what is worth seeing. Therefore, I never hesitate to hang the paintings in two rows, in thematic groups. In our Flemish Baroque room a system of screens was designed which created meandering spaces for various genres of painting, thus allowing the display of more objects ([see CODART *Courant* 10, June 2005](#)).

This system was criticized by museum aesthetes, but praised by visitors, who now have the chance to see a rich selection of landscape, still life, genre, portraits, mythological, biblical and religious subjects practiced in 17th-century Flanders. The present state of our galleries is transitory anyway – the space needs refurbishing and we have already elaborated a concept for a new, extremely modern design, which will feature a very purist way of displaying the objects. The main galleries will present only the high quality works, with due space given to each of them, while other interesting works will be shown in a sort of study room, hung densely and/or exchanged to show small thematic or problem-related exhibitions.

Is there an exhibition that you have always wanted to organize but have never been able to for whatever reason?

Our museum owns six paintings by a 16th-century Kortrijk artist, Bernaert de Rijckere. Ever since the discovery of five allegorical busts which could also be attributed to him (see *Oud Holland* 110 [1997], no 1, pp. 1-12) I have been thinking about a monographic exhibition; but what Polish sponsor would be interested in this lesser-known Flemish painter? On the other hand, if such an exhibition would be organized in one of the museums in the Low Countries – perhaps under the auspices of CODART – it would be a significant scholarly event. My biggest wish then would be to dispose of all the organizational and financial tasks I have to do and concentrate only on the content of the exhibition!

Like conservators, curators often stress the dangers of traveling of works of art when judging loan requests from other museums. However, when organizing their own shows they try to gather as much interesting works together as can be. What do you think of this?

Loans are always a fruit of compromise between borrowing and lending institutions and curators have to conform. When deciding on granting a loan, we always depend on the opinion of conservators and do not hesitate to reject the loan, when it is necessary. Of course the borrower is more interested in lending objects to an exhibition which is important from the scholarly point of view, so that the work may participate in a broader discussion.

Loans also demand a lot of bureaucratic procedures, which usually encumber persons accompanying the transport. These are disadvantages from the borrower's side, but I, myself have in mind a more attractive aspect for courier travels: during many years of the ancient regime they gave us a rare and valuable opportunity to go to the West, to get acquainted with collections abroad and to meet foreign colleagues. We all longed for that!

What would be the ideal relationship between curators and directors? And what is it like in reality?

Much depends on the size of the institution. In small museums, the director can (and ought to) approach his/her team on a more friendly basis, in such a big institution as ours (ca. 750,000 objects, 8 permanent galleries and collections which are not displayed) some sort of hierarchy is inevitable. In each case, cooperativeness is fundamental. An ideal model would be the following: the curator prepares a project, an exhibition conception, a publication or a conservation program and presents it to the director (or a committee) who in turn, if he/she decides to accept it, consequently gives his support, doing his best to guarantee money and to not change priorities. In reality, curators often have to conform to changing decisions and economic

priorities and see their project postponed or conquered by initiatives that seem to promise bigger financial success.

What role does CODART play for you in your work as a curator? Do you have any wishes or advice for our network?

Annual congresses and study trips fundamentally broaden our knowledge of Dutch and Flemish art; what we see with our eyes is then often backed by catalogues and other publications which participants receive as gifts on such occasions. This knowledge is especially valuable when writing a collection catalogue. CODART, as a network of specialists and friendly people, is of great value for the exchange of information. The number of times I've been able to count on knowledge and photocopied materials from [Yao-Fen You](#), [Júlia Tátrai](#), [Priscilla Valkeneers](#), [Jan Piet Filedt Kok](#), [Peter van den Brink](#) and many others is incalculable!

Wishes and advice for our network?

I would suggest establishing of a systematic collections database. The CODART website already hosts the Antwerp catalogue and the Brukental Museum checklist; the Amsterdam Museum has announced that they will be placing their recently published catalogue as well. This is a valuable initiative that ought to be continued and completed in due time, starting with museums that have members in CODART and later broadening out to other collections, especially private ones – such as those visited by CODART members on various occasions. Finally, Dutch and Flemish art in churches should also find its place in the database. Another wish concerns the scholarly articles in the CODART *Courant*: 850-900 words for an article is painfully little when one wants to present a full discussion of a problem.

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