

# EZINE 10 AUTUMN 2018

## WELCOME

**The Adventure of Looking****Gerdien Verschoor**

Paintings “are not fully ours,” writes T.J. Clark in *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. They live their own lives with their dark and light, their stillness and movement, their rough and smooth surfaces, their stories and inventions. Even so, we want to appropriate paintings, to make them “our own.” And that applies not only to us museum curators, but also to a wider us: the community of art-loving viewers. How can you present an artwork to the public in such a way that the viewer feels that it is also his or her own? How can you take a museum visitor with you on the adventure of looking?

T.J. Clark devised a brilliant method for doing this in his book *The Sight of Death*. Every morning for four months, he looked at two works by Poussin: *Landscape with a Calm* and *Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake*. Each time afresh he looked at the paintings as if he was going on walk through a landscape. He kept a journal in which he described what he saw every morning. In these entries, a very free form in which he jumps from one association to another and which resound with the sheer joy of writing, Clark searches, experiments, enters into a debate with himself. But most of all, he looks, and writes down what he sees. And we look with him: at the light and the countless shades of blue, at the reflections of the buildings and the animals in the water.

We look at some trees as “things,” and others as “meditation.” Clark also shows us what Poussin did not paint (the reflection of the bull in the water) and the mistakes he made (the perspective of a small roof is wrong). We look at the terror of a man who is running away, the dark rings under a woman’s eyes, and a “comma of light” on a big toe.

Where does all this take us? Everywhere. It transports us ever closer into the paintings, since with Clark’s eyes we walk along the zigzagging paths, look at the galloping horse, discover the tiny human figures that turn out to be dashes of paint. Clark takes us towards light and brushstrokes, to rhythm and color, to death and destruction. He takes us to the philosophers of the 18th century, to Poussin as a visual thinker, to the music of Bach. How to look attentively: that is what T.J. Clark teaches us masterfully in this book.

Five CODART members also show us different ways of looking in this issue of the eZine. *The Low Countries* (TLC), the English-language yearbook covering culture and society in Flanders and the Netherlands, produced an issue focusing on the Old Masters to mark CODART’s twentieth anniversary. The book gave five of our curators an opportunity to place one of the “gems” from their collection in the spotlight. Courtesy of TLC, we are able to reproduce their contributions in this issue of the eZine. Other articles from this CODART-special can be read on the website of the [TLC](#) – they are warmly recommended!

How you can look at artworks is something that the members of CODART have also taught me over the past thirteen years. I was fortunate enough to stand alongside the connoisseurs among you to study paintings from close by, I have been initiated into the mysteries of technical research on materials by scientific experts, and *aficionados* expressed their emotions when we gazed at altarpieces in Swedish churches or were allowed to enter the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg in the early morning, before any other visitors arrived. You have taken me along on your own personal adventures of looking. I have been inspired by your love of the Old Masters, and your enthusiasm has become my own. I will take all this with me, when I move on from CODART, in March of next year. Many, many thanks for all you have given me!

T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, Yale University Press, 2006

## CURATOR'S PROJECT

**The Watermark Identification in Rembrandt's Etchings (WIRE) Project****Andrew Weislogel**

The 350th anniversary of Rembrandt's death in 2019 will be plentifully marked by numerous exhibitions treating various aspects of the artist's training, production, and reception. The popularity of this multifaceted master seems only to increase, and there is clearly still more to learn and celebrate about Rembrandt's groundbreaking approach to art. In the sphere of printmaking, recent research on Rembrandt's printing papers has revealed a great deal about his creative process, influence on the print market, and even his role as teacher in a highly active studio. Still, much data remains to be collected from impressions on European papers whose mold-imparted traits—especially watermarks—not only assist in verifying authenticity but can shed light on Rembrandt's practice. And, in practical terms, identifying watermarks on Rembrandt impressions, and considering the implications together with indications of quality and chronology signaled by state, inking, and plate wear, remains a complex and often time-consuming task requiring specialist expertise. Some watermark types found on Rembrandt's prints occur in upwards of a hundred different variations, complicating confident matching and interpretation despite the significant strides in scholarship on this topic.

The Watermark Identification in Rembrandt's Etchings (WIRE) Project, based at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, is a collaborative undertaking offering a technical approach to expand our understanding of Rembrandt's papers. Directed by Andrew C. Weislogel, a curator at Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, and Cornell engineering professor C. Richard Johnson, Jr., its initial objective is the development of an interactive online interface enabling curators, academics, and collectors to quickly and confidently identify the many variations of watermarks within the fifty-odd visual categories currently known in Rembrandt's printed oeuvre. The project builds upon the wealth of watermark scholarship begun by Nancy Ash and Shelley Fletcher and magisterially expanded and interpreted in Erik Hinterding's 2006 study *Rembrandt as an Etcher: The Practice of Production and Distribution* and incorporated into the 2013 *New Hollstein* Rembrandt catalogue.

As Hinterding's research revealed, the identification of specific paper batch-mates in Rembrandt's prints through the matching of sheets with the exact same watermark (called moldmates) or sheets bearing the near-identical watermarks from pairs of molds used in the papermaking process (known as "twins") allows the dating of specific impressions, helps define the time-span of plate changes, reveals when Rembrandt reprinted older plates, and helps distinguish lifetime from posthumous impressions. Since the fall of 2015, the WIRE project has proceeded as a series of cross-disciplinary teams led by Weislogel and Johnson, in which students learn how these quantifiable paper characteristics contribute to an understanding of Rembrandt's printmaking and to the development of an online identification interface.

This interrogatory interface is based on the concept of the decision tree (fig. 2), a branching graph that leads the researcher through a sequence of yes or no questions about visual watermark descriptors to the correct watermark match. To build decision tree "branches" based on Hinterding's taxonomy, WIRE students under supervision from Weislogel and Johnson study all the variations

of a given watermark type, noting and describing visual features that conclusively differentiate each one from all the others. In this process, they leave aside questions of scale, which can vary depending on the image being compared, in favor of quantifiable differences of relative number (e.g., the number of bells on a fool's cap), relative size of features, orientation of the watermark, and especially its position with respect to its adjacent chain lines (lines imprinted on the paper by the row of vertical chain wires on the paper mold). Once developed and vetted, these decision tree branches are then coded into the online identification interface.

To work the interface (fig. 3), the outside user uploads a photograph of their sought watermark for comparison and is offered a short series of questions supported by watermark images visually annotated to clarify differentiating

features. These question-and-image pairings steer the researcher to a match and a listing of that watermark's unique visual characteristics, to enable final confirmation. Having identified the correct watermark subvariant, the researcher can then

refer to information in Hinterding's study about the particular features of their paper, including its approximate date, other impressions of the print found on this same paper, and other plates also printed on it. This interface, with its capability for side-by-side, magnified digital comparison of watermark images, is designed to streamline the identification process and reduce the potential for error that arises when comparing an original print to the watermark illustrations in the book. In addition to the efficiency of the decision tree feature, the WIRE project is developing additional enhancements, such as 1) a tool to compare chain line spacing and overlay watermark images as further proof of a match, and 2) an illustrated glossary of watermark terms and features to aid in visual differentiation.

The project developed in tandem with the organization of the 2017–18 traveling exhibition *Lines of Inquiry: Learning from Rembrandt's Etchings* organized by Weislogel and Andaleeb Badiee Banta, then curator of European art at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio. The holdings and the generous staff of partner museums and galleries, including those of Yale, Princeton, and Harvard Universities, and many others who also lent to the exhibition, are helping to drive the project's next goal, that of constructing a database of newly captured watermark images from American collections. As a first step towards this database, WIRE watermarks newly catalogued through the WIRE project appear as an appendix in the *Lines of Inquiry* exhibition catalogue. And, when the online interface is made available, individual user-uploaded watermark images will also be incorporated into the database.

In its efforts to continue enlarging the store of Rembrandt watermark images, the WIRE project has initiated the practice of generating reports for partner institutions, cataloguing new instances of watermarks on their prints and noting their dating significance as an aid to the staff of these museums where desired. In the process, the watermarks brought to light on these new impressions have continued to both confirm and expand the picture of Rembrandt's paper batches and edition sizes, and have augmented

the census of surviving impressions of individual prints. For example, the project has added several new examples to the already large batch of paper marked with a Basilisk watermark (figs. 1, 4) that Rembrandt seems to have used continually between 1641 and 1647, on which approximately seventy impressions including examples of *Self-Portrait Leaning on a Stone Sill* (1639; fig. 1), *The Hog* (1643), Ephraim Bonus, *Jewish Physician* (1647) were previously counted. This research has also yielded several watermarks not seen before on Rembrandt's papers, each likely

signaling a heretofore unknown print edition, such as the Johnson Museum's impression of *Self-Portrait with Plumed Cap and Lowered Saber* of 1634 (fig. 5). In selected cases, WIRE project research has identified a new twinmark for a given batch, assuring that future impressions found with those marks will be linked to helpful and accurate existing dating information. WIRE has also begun to reunite countermarks (subsidiary watermarks found on the other half of the paper) with their associated main

watermarks from sheets of paper cut in half prior to printing.

In addition, the situation of numerous as yet unexamined Rembrandt impressions in smaller museums, many of which do not own radiographic equipment or employ technical staff, has encouraged investigations by a related American consortium of conservators, conservation scientists, and engineers into safe and inexpensive imaging tools that could be shipped to these institutions along with instructions for the systematic capture of new paper data. Furthermore, initial evidence of potential matches between papers used for Rembrandt prints and those on which prints and drawings by Rembrandt pupils appear is opening avenues for new research on work from related contemporary artists, such as Ferdinand Bol, a successful Rembrandt student who was also an accomplished etcher. These developments presage further insights into the workshop practices of Rembrandt the teacher.

The WIRE project is supported by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH); with this assistance, the resulting online watermark interface will be made freely available once fully tested, and the code for the website will remain open source for adaptation by related applications requiring consistent visual differentiation of medium size datasets. In June 2018, with NEH support, Weislogel, Johnson, and Brittany R.R. Rubin, print room curatorial assistant at the Johnson Museum, along with guest presenters Stephanie Dickey, Bader Chair of Northern Baroque Art at Queen's University, and Michele Hamill, paper and photograph conservator, Cornell University Library, hosted a week-long

workshop on the WIRE project (fig. 6). The participants, ranging from undergraduate and graduate students to early-career prints and drawings curatorial staff and experienced paper conservators, studied historic papers, and learned the fine points of identifying watermarks and cataloguing prints according to the latest sources. Participants tested and refined existing WIRE decision tree branches for previously completed

types by cataloguing a fresh group of beta radiographs from Rembrandt prints in the Cleveland Museum of Art. They also developed a decision tree branch for the large Arms of Amsterdam watermark, that occurs on Rembrandt's prints of the mid-1650s and onward. For participants and organizers alike, among the key lessons of this workshop was the continued importance of dialogue among curators, academics, conservators, and technical staff to continually test the hypotheses underlying Rembrandt watermark study, crucially blending print connoisseurship, historical context, and paper knowledge. We hope that ongoing research will continue to enrich understanding of Rembrandt's printing chronology and relationships with his contemporaries. Finally, we welcome inquiries from CODART members interested in learning more about the project, or wishing to pose watermark questions on which we may be of assistance.

[Andrew C. Weislogel](#) is the Seymour R. Askin, Jr. '47 Curator of Earlier European and American Art at the [Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art](#), Cornell University. He has been a member of CODART since 1999.

The WIRE project is advised by:

- [Erik Hinterding](#), Curator of Prints at the [Rijksmuseum](#), Margaret Holben Ellis, Eugene Thaw Professor of Paper Conservation and Chair of the Conservation Center at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He has been a member of CODART since 2012.

- [Nadine Orenstein](#), Drue Heinz Curator in Charge, Department of Drawings and Prints, [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#). She has been a member of CODART since 1998.

Please see CODART's [Rembrandt Year 2019](#) page to see all special exhibitions and events that are organized to celebrate the life and works of this remarkable Golden Age painter and his contemporaries.

## CURATOR'S PROJECT

## Rubens Communicates: Tracing Rubens's Exchanges through Letters

Abigail D. Newman

The great Flemish artist and entrepreneur Peter Paul Rubens was famous for dictating letters in one language while having someone read literature to him in another, even as he stood at his easel to paint. This early multitasker foreshadows our own age, not only in the multiplicity of tasks that he was prepared to embrace at once, but also in the abundance of channels through which he communicated with a range of interlocutors. Rubens's visual communications are renowned.

Yet verbally, too, Rubens was an avid communicator. He exchanged letters with close friends and distant colleagues, princes and businessmen, and with many of the international leading lights of his time, such as the Dutch humanist and diplomat, Constantijn Huygens. Rubens's interlocutors hailed from a range of locations, and so any consideration of his correspondence is necessarily imbricated in both the local histories of numerous places and in the interconnected, international network these letter exchanges created. Just as Rubens's images communicate via a diversity of styles and approaches, so too do his letters. His linguistic choices themselves display a broad range: written at times in his native Dutch, his letters also communicated extensively in Italian and sometimes French, frequently with a smattering of Latin. Their verbal form also shows great breadth and diversity. Through Rubens's letters—letters he wrote, alongside those written to him and those that mention him—we can trace an international network of thinkers, weighing in on a wide array of topics of concern in their time.

Investigation of Rubens's correspondence intersects with numerous themes that have interested scholars in recent years. Issues related to artists' biographies, the early modern culture of friendship, the Republic of Letters, exchanges of knowledge, artistic theory, word-image relationships, and mobility, to mention just a few, have driven numerous scholarly studies. Questioning how individuals communicate has rarely seemed more topical than it does today, in our age of Tweeting world leaders, Instagramming teenagers, and myriad professionals corresponding digitally with colleagues across the globe.

Recent books assert that the culture of letter-writing and letter-reading was intimately bound to that of making and viewing images (Shira Brisman, *Albrecht Dürer & the Epistolary Mode of Address*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and that this culture of scholarly knowledge production and exchange was as visual as it was textual (Tine Meganck, *Erudite Eyes: Friendship, Art and Erudition in the Network of Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598)*, Leiden: Brill, 2017). This is all the more reason—in our own era of massive communication via both text and image—to

closely preserve and examine the letters of someone who was also a great visual communicator: investigations of how Rubens communicated so abundantly visually and verbally allow for an exploration of questions about communication itself, and about the varied ways and means used across time and space to transmit ideas.

Beyond Rubens's own correspondence, there are also the many letters of his contemporaries that shed light on his life and career. These, too, reveal the richly textured ways in which letters functioned in Rubens's circle. A timely example is the correspondence of Balthasar Moretus, Rubens's lifelong friend and colleague and head of the Plantin Press. Moretus kept a copybook of the letters he sent, which is preserved in the Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp. This example is timely not only given this museum's forthcoming exhibition, *Baroque Book Design: A Tale of Friendship and Collaboration*, opening September 28, 2018 and tracing Moretus's relationship with Rubens and other artists, but also given the evidence of several of these letters, which relate closely to Rubens's *Martyrdom of St. Andrew* (Madrid, Real Diputación de San Andrés de los Flamencos—Fundación Carlos de Amberes). This painting has recently been on loan in the Rubenshuis in Antwerp (through September 17, 2018) and I discuss it further in a publication accompanying the loan (Rubens's *St. Andrew "de los Flamencos": Altarpiece Enframed by a Spanish-Flemish Community / Altaarstuk omkaderd door een Spaans-Vlaamse gemeenschap*, Antwerp: Rubenshuis/BAI, 2018).

From Moretus's letters to Jan van Vucht, a Flemish merchant living in Madrid, we learn that in 1630 the merchant was

eager to commission a painting from Rubens. Although Van Vucht hoped to negotiate a lower price, Moretus was not encouraging. He informed Van Vucht that what the merchant was willing to pay would not get him much, perhaps a piece with one or two figures. Several months later, he mentioned having spoken with Rubens and that, for the amount Van Vucht was prepared to pay, Rubens could not possibly do any of the three desired subjects, which are not specified. At best Van Vucht might acquire a “Diana with two nymphs” or another subject with two or three figures.<sup>1</sup>

By the time Rubens painted *The Martyrdom of St. Andrew* for Van Vucht in 1638–39, Van Vucht had no doubt resigned himself to paying a far higher sum, since the composition is

richer, more complicated, and more densely peopled than Moretus’s proposals almost a decade earlier. Rubens’s compelling rendering of the apostle’s crucifixion at the orders of a Roman proconsul and against the wishes of the populace is a far cry from a blithe scene of Diana and her nymphs.

There is consensus among scholars that Rubens’s correspondence and others’ letters that intersect with his career are a critical yet rather inaccessible trove of primary material, scattered across numerous countries and institutions. While some sources are digitally available (e.g. the letter excerpted above), many are not. Fortunately, there is now a digital resource that enables scholars to apply more varied approaches when conducting research on Rubens’s letters: [\*Early Modern Letters Online\*](#), an initiative of Oxford University, its Bodleian Library, and the Oxford-based research project “Cultures of Knowledge.” This online catalogue—an ongoing project—has already produced an extensive online database of letters digitized from published and unpublished sources. The letters have been scanned and presented with metadata (transcription, writer and location, sender and location, date, language), rendering them easily searchable. In addition to presenting more than 900 letters to, from, or mentioning Rubens, EMLO includes short explanatory essays about Rubens’s life, correspondence, and its content, as well as a short list of relevant sources.

EMLO provides a repository and meeting point for data about Rubens’s correspondence with that of other early modern letter writers. Consequently, it brings scholars in fields normally somewhat removed from one another into closer contact, with searches based on names, places, and other keywords triggering surprising results and revealing little-known connections. Given Rubens’s broad range of activities and connections, his network intersected with some of the most remarkable, court, diplomatic, and

intellectual networks of his time.

The letters included in EMLO are principally those published in Rooses/Ruelens, without scans of the original archival documents. It is thus critically necessary to update and enrich the preliminary online catalogue of Rubens’s letters by fully documenting these letters via digital photographs of the original letters and investigation of their material properties. Attention to the material qualities of Rubens’s correspondence, thus far a little studied field, would allow his letters to be considered as both objects unto themselves and vehicles carrying ideas. Scholars have recently begun to attend more closely to the material qualities of letters: what kind of paper and ink they employ, their watermarks and dimensions, the writer’s folding techniques, visual flourishes or illustrations included in the letters, handwriting, seals and crossed-out words or phrases, among other characteristics. Investigating such qualities illuminates broad questions about social history—the sourcing, cost, and distribution of paper, for example—but can also reveal letter writers’ highly personal tendencies.

In the next few years, the Rubenianum hopes to initiate the fundamental on-the-ground research and documentation of Rubens’s correspondence in order to provide an important resource for scholars and the public. Archives are cultural repositories that are ripe for new exploration, documentation, dissemination, and interpretation in our digital age. Building on the “art history of the archive” that some scholars have begun to invoke, the Rubenianum aims to contribute to an even broader “cultural history of the archive,” whereby such archival materials as letters are viewed for their own material properties and as conveyers of information, with both the material and immaterial qualities pointing outward toward a range of questions of relevance in cultural history and modern society. By viewing the archive in this way, the Rubenianum would hope to achieve its goal of gathering, preserving, and making accessible the raw materials of Rubens’s correspondence, contextualized with documentation to facilitate study.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Met myn heer Rubbens hebbe gesproken, ende opentlijk geseht van hondert pattacons die U.L. soude willen besteden: waerop antwoorde dat geen van drye subjecten onder de twee hondert pattacons soude kunnen maecken midts te vol wercks zijn. Bij soo verre U.L. Diana met twee nymphen soude begheeren geschildert te hebben, ofte eenige andere materie van twee oft dry persoonen, soude U.L. seer geerne dienen voor dese voorschreven hondert pattacons.” Max Rooses and Charles Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens et documents épistolaires concernant sa vie et ses oeuvres*, 6 vols., Antwerp: De Backer/Buschmann, 1887–1909, vol. V, p. 333, no. DCLXXXV; MPM Arch. 142, pp. 152–53).

## CURATOR'S COLLECTION

## Collecting Netherlandish Prints for the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas

Stephen Goddard

The permanent collection of the Spencer Museum of Art was founded in 1917 when Kansas City art collector Sallie Casey Thayer offered her collection of nearly 7,500 art objects to the University of Kansas to form a museum "to encourage the study of fine arts in the Middle West." There were no significant prints from the Low Countries in this founding gift but a number of Netherlandish prints, whose source is unknown, were presumably already at the university and are now part of the museum's collection. These include, for example, Pieter Schenk's etched view of Panama and 37 undistinguished impressions of Anthony van Dyck's *Icones Principum Virorum*, including the title page but lacking the famous etching of Erasmus of Rotterdam.

The collection of prints began in earnest with two major donations from the Max Kade Foundation in 1969 and 1977. These included five of our six Lucas van Leyden engravings, two Israhel van Meckenem engravings, Rembrandt's renowned large drypoints (*The Three Crosses* and *Christ Presented to the People*, White and Boon iv/v and v/viii, respectively), and many Renaissance prints, most notably by Albrecht Dürer and Marcantonio Raimondi.<sup>1</sup>

The subsequent growth of the collection has been stimulated by additional gifts and many purchases to support specific pedagogical goals and thematic exhibitions. The pedagogical goals were initially driven by the courses in 17th-century Netherlandish art offered by Professor Linda Stone-Ferrier and my own classes in Print History and Print Connoisseurship, but our dedicated room for teaching from the collection of prints, drawings and photographs now hosts classes from nearly every discipline taught at the university.

One of our initial goals was to be able to tell the important story of print publishing in the Low Countries. For this purpose, focusing on Hieronymus Cock and his Antwerp publishing firm, In de *Vier Winden* / *Aux Quatre Vents*, was a clear place to start. We now have 19 works published by Cock, including three of his own etchings of Roman ruins, and a good representation of the range of subjects issued from the *Vier Winden* including secular subjects after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, a village feast after Hans Bol, architectural subjects after Hans Vredeman de Vries, landscapes after Lucas Gassel and the Master of the Small Landscapes, ornament sheets after Cornelis Floris II, a biblical series after Maerten van Heemskerck, and a low-life scene derived from Rederijker lore after Frans Verbeeck (fig. 1). Treatment of publishing houses is also represented by a portrait of Cock's widow, Volcxken Diercx (who continued the business), by Hieronymus Wierix, and a work published by Philip Galle, Karel van Mander's series treating

Aesop's fable of *The Man, the Son, and the Ass*.

The establishment of dynastic families of printer-publishers is an important outgrowth of mid-century publishing houses and is now represented in the Spencer Museum by works from the Sadeler, Wierix, and Van de Passe families. Two prime examples of these are the justifiably famous double portrait, *Bartholomaeus Spranger and his Wife Christina Müller*, by Aegidius Sadeler II; and Johan Wierix's deft copy after Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*.

The Spencer also aspires to represent the early story of printmaking in Antwerp prior to Hieronymus Cock's activity. While hardly adequate, three works have entered the collection that begin to address this need: *The Creation of Eve in a Mandala with God and the Four Winds* by The First Antwerp Woodcutter (c. 1487), Dirk Vellert's lovely

etching *Drummer with a Child Holding a Hoop* (1523, fig. 2), and an engraving by Cornelis Massys, *The Beggars' Repast* (1539).

Aside from the history of print publishing in the Low Countries, the Spencer Museum collections have

significantly grown through carefully-selected specific monuments in printmaking and works by individual artists. A bound

copy of Pieter Coecke van Aelst's series, *Les moeurs et fachons de faire de Turcs (Mores and Fashion of the Turk)* is a good example of the former. This work, given its considerable cultural valency and relevance, is heavily used in the museum's teaching mission for classes dealing with a large variety of issues, from religious studies to geography and history (fig. 3). Similarly, a print like Harmen Jansz. Muller's *The Henpecked Husband*, c. 1595, in which the husband's wife wears the pants in the family, offers points of connection with contemporary issues concerning gender roles.

The museum's longtime focus on collecting the work of individual artists particularly significant to the history and development of printmaking has also shaped the collection. Thirty-five years ago, the remarkable career of Hendrik Goltzius was represented at the Spencer by the 1596 engraving of the Pietà, two of the three engravings from the 1596 series of *Minerva, Venus and Juno*, and the masterful 1594 *Circumcision of Christ* in the manner of Albrecht Dürer from the *Life of the Virgin* series. While an excellent start,

we set as specific goals the acquisition of the remaining five engravings of the *Life of the Virgin*, given its importance in the history of printmaking and due to the towering achievement of producing a series of six large-format tour-de-force engravings each in the manner of another artist. This was achieved in 2004 and in 2011 we addressed the need of a Goltzius chiaroscuro woodcut with the acquisition of his *Demogorgon in the Cave of Eternity* (c. 1588). Similarly, while the Spencer's collection has long included several major works by Rembrandt, we did not until recently have one of the artist's important landscapes. We were lucky to be able to acquire his *Landscape with a Cottage and a Large Tree* (1641) in 2014. Other important printmakers who have entered the collection include Hendrik Goudt, Nicolaes de Bruyn, Gerard de Lairesse, Cornelis Dusart, Cornelis Bega, and Samuel van Hoogstraten (fig. 4).

The Spencer's collection has also grown significantly through the purchase of prints in support of exhibitions. While this takes us into the modern era, it may be of interest to CODART members. In 1993 we organized the exhibition *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde: Prints, Drawings, and Books*, c. 1890.<sup>2</sup> In preparation for this exhibition we not only arranged significant loans, but acquired works as well, building on our holdings by James Ensor and acquiring our first works by Frantz Charlet, Max Elskamp, Alfred William (Willy) Finch, Henry de Groux, Fernand Khnopff, Armand Rassenfosse, Féranand Rops, Jan Toorop, Théo van Rysselberghe, and Henry van de Velde as well as some loose gatherings of the albums of the late nineteenth-century

Antwerp etching society, *De Vereeniging der Antwerpsche Etsers*.

In 1996, when we organized the exhibition, *An Eye on Flanders: The Graphic Art of Jules De Bruycker*, we took the opportunity to add several works by this late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Antwerp-based artist.<sup>3</sup> Notable among these is the artist's own impression of *Ieperen de Slechte Maere* (Ypres—the Grim Reaper), a 1916 etching of the Grim Reaper striding before the burning tower of the cloth hall in Ypres during the First World War. The scene captures the moment that the bell falls from the burning bell tower.

While examining a German private collection we were offered the opportunity to purchase a group of fifty-seven prints by Henry de Groux, the great majority of which

were working proofs for the artist's 1916 First World War etching portfolio, *Le Visage de la Victoire* (fig. 5).<sup>4</sup> These, combined with the previous purchases for the *Les XX* exhibition and a large number of lithographs by the same artist concerning the First World War donated to the museum by the late Eric Gustav Carlson, have raised our De Groux holdings to 92.

Our current exhibition (which closes July 15, 2018), *Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World*, allowed us to add to our "Old Master" holdings several wonderful botanically-themed works by Salomon Savery (after François Lefebvre), *Livre de fleurs & de feuilles pour servir à l'art d'orfèvre*; Michiel Snyders's series of etchings of bouquets of flowers in ornate vases (fig. 6); and a lovely ornament print by Esaias van Hulsen, "Console of scrolling foliate forms with flowers and two birds, and a hunter shooting rabbits."<sup>5</sup>

This gives a rough impression of the contours of the Netherlandish print collection at the Spencer Museum of Art, although there are many others, as disparate as Pieter Dupont's *Portrait of Steinlen*<sup>6</sup> and Rainer Vinkeles's 1801 etching and

engraving (after Pieter Barbiers II), *The Felix Meritis Hall of Physics in Amsterdam*, in which J.H. van Swinden and his assistant demonstrate an electrical machine in front of a large audience.

All of these prints find broad application in our teaching mission, thanks to the multitude of subjects and concerns addressed by printmakers active in the Low Countries.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> With a few exceptions, the collection is online and illustrated on our website: <https://www.spencerart.ku.edu/collection>
- <sup>2</sup> Goddard, Stephen, ed., *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde: Prints, Drawings, and Books, c. 1890*. Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, 1993.
- <sup>3</sup> Goddard, Stephen, *An Eye on Flanders: The Graphic Art of Jules De Bruycker*. Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> Goddard, Stephen, “*Celestial Themes, Censorship and World War I in Henry de Groux’s The Face of Victory.*” *Print Quarterly* 31 no. 4 (December 2014): 406–16.
- <sup>5</sup> Goddard, Stephen, ed., *Big Botany: Conversations with the Plant World*. Lawrence, Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, 2018.
- <sup>6</sup> Goddard, Stephen, “*Pieter Dupont’s Engraved Portrait of Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen,*” in Jane Block and Claude Sorgeloos, eds., *Mélanges Adrienne Fontainas*. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2013: 271–79.

## CURATOR'S INTERVIEW

**Micha Leeftang Interviewed by Sarah van Ooteghem**

For this eZine issue, Micha Leeftang, curator of the recent *Magical Miniatures* exhibition at Museum Catharijneconvent, was interviewed by Sarah Van Ooteghem, Assistant Curator at the Print Room of the Royal Library of Belgium in Brussels.

Micha Leeftang has been working at the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht for twelve years now. As Curator of Medieval Art, she is responsible for the collection of manuscripts and paintings, sculptures, and liturgical textiles of the 15th and 16th centuries. She is also an authority on the technical examination of art objects. She studied art history at the University of Groningen, completing her PhD on the workshop practices of the Antwerp painter Joos van Cleve (c. 1485/90–1540/41) under the supervision of the professors Maximiliaan Martens and Molly Faries. She then worked as a research assistant as part of the Rijksmuseum's Early Netherlandish Paintings Project, which resulted in the first online publication in the museum's series of collection catalogues, *Early Netherlandish Paintings in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Volume I: Artists Born Before 1500*. For this project, she carried out much of the infrared reflectography (IRR) research and scientific examination.

Micha Leeftang produced her first exhibition at Museum Catharijneconvent in 2008 on the subject of 17th-century painting: *Painted with Passion: Masterpieces from the Golden Age*. Later she focused exclusively on the museum's medieval collections, including its manuscripts. In 2009 she delved into this material, which was for her then relatively new, as the curator of the exhibition *Masterly Manuscripts: The Middle Ages in Gold and Ink*, a wide-ranging survey of medieval book production in Utrecht in the Middle Ages, including over 100 manuscripts. *Masterly Manuscripts* focused on manuscripts and devotional books from Utrecht monasteries possessed by Utrecht University Library, and was prepared in close collaboration with the institution.

**What was the background underlying the recent exhibition *Magical Miniatures*?**

An opportunity for a new partnership between Museum Catharijneconvent and a research institute arose after

Anne Korteweg, former curator of mediaeval manuscripts at the Dutch [National Library](#) completed the A.W. Byvanck project (compiling an [inventory of illuminated manuscripts in Dutch public collections and Northern Netherlandish specimens in foreign collections](#), drawn up between 1987 and 2002). Korteweg then turned her attention to the publication of the most beautiful manuscripts that had been produced in the Southern Netherlands and are now present in the Netherlands. She was assisted in this project by Anne Margreet As-Vijvers, a specialist in Southern Netherlandish manuscript illumination, and thirteen other art historians who were prepared to contribute essays relating to their areas of expertise. The plan of "the two Annes," as the book's leading lights were soon being called, shifted into top gear when Museum Catharijneconvent and the National Library decided to support their work by linking the publication to plans for an exhibition and a technical research project.

**What was the biggest challenge for the museum in turning a publication into an exhibition?**

Together with Ed van der Vlist, the current curator of medieval manuscripts at the National Library, I was asked to flesh out an exhibition concept. It became an extremely interesting partnership, especially since Ed van der Vlist, as a book and manuscript scholar, focuses primarily on the textual aspects of manuscripts. The nature of this material also imposes a particular constraint: you have to choose where – at which specific miniature – to exhibit the opened manuscript.

While we were forging our first plans, and well into the preparations for the exhibition, we had only the book's table of contents to go by. It listed a total of ninety manuscripts to be presented in six thematic chapters, in more or less chronological order, which would illuminate the wider background of the works in terms of cultural history and book and manuscript history. For the exhibition, we ended up selecting 69 works dating from the 10th to the 16th century, over half of which came from the National Library. These were supplemented with manuscripts from the museum's own collection and those from other institutions, such as Museum Meermanno, the Rijksmuseum, and university libraries.

**How did you turn your concept into an actual exhibition?**

When developing the concept for the exhibition, we initially based ourselves to a large extent on the answers to a questionnaire asking potential visitors about their expectations. These revealed that people's greatest desire is to understand what they are looking at. They wanted answers to specific questions: Suppose you want to buy a book in the Middle Ages: How do you do it? What would it cost? And how long would it take to produce a book? What did a medieval bookcase look like? Why are miniatures in manuscripts so key to forming our image of the Middle Ages? We made an introductory film in which several experts addressed these and other questions. We also clarified such issues throughout the exhibition, partly with the aid of a booklet containing brief remarks on each object.

For the same reason, we set up the exhibition on the basis of three major themes: the books ("a medieval library"), clients ("for the elite") and makers ("magical masters").

The catalogue discusses other aspects of the miniatures, besides which there are a number of recurrent themes arising from the chosen structure, with chapters arranged in chronological order. For the exhibition we made the difficult decision of leaving out two interesting themes because they had already been addressed in earlier exhibitions. The collaboration between the Northern and Southern Netherlands is a marvelous subject, but it had already been covered in the exhibition *Masterly Manuscripts* (2009). For the same reason we decided to omit the subject of pilgrims' badges, which had been discussed in the exhibition *Pilgrims: The Road to Santiago de Compostela* (2011).

The museum's Research and Education Department argued strongly in favor of an exhibition that would be a "total experience." This meant involving the senses of touch and smell as well as sight, and getting visitors to participate actively, the underlying rationale being: doing helps you to see better. This introduced variety into the experience of

looking at the exhibits. After each theme, visitors found themselves at a workbench where they were given a practical assignment, such as composing or coloring in a miniature, that stimulated reflection on what they had seen in that gallery.

### **What was your most personal contribution to the exhibition?**

Besides developing and elaborating a concept for the exhibition, I also worked on the technical examination of the materials of the miniatures with the aid of infrared reflectography (IRR). That was an extremely enjoyable challenge for me because it's my own specialism and the analysis of miniatures using IRR is still in an experimental phase. Still, this was not exactly virgin territory for me, since for the exhibition *The Secret of the Middle Ages* we had even analyzed embroidery using this technique!

Only quite recently has it been possible to inspect the artist's underlying initial design, the underdrawing, using IRR in the case of illuminated manuscripts, because this technique generally requires the object to be placed in a vertical position. New cameras have now made it possible to image the objects horizontally. We achieved a first in this field, with our pioneering use of IRR to study a large number of manuscripts from the same region, in this case the Southern Netherlands.

Even so, while compiling an inventory, it remains difficult to formulate the questions we want to explore at this early stage of the IRR analysis of miniatures. Some discoveries were made almost by chance. For instance, it may be difficult to inspect the underdrawing because of the impenetrable, gold-containing paint layers above it. This can be remedied

by imaging the miniatures from the reverse side. Proceeding thus, we made the remarkable discovery of several trees in the underdrawing of Jacob van Maerlant's *Der Naturen Bloeme*. These little trees lay beneath the image of some sea

creatures, obscured by a gold background. They had evidently been prepared before the decision was made that their positioning there was illogical.

One thing that emerged very clearly from the research is that IRR applied to miniatures and manuscripts can generate new insights about the working methods of miniaturists. We demonstrated this in the exhibition in the form of short videos, which I myself thought very successful.

### **What aspect of the exhibition pleased you most?**

In 1989 Museum Catharijneconvent put on an exhibition, in collaboration with the [Pierpont Morgan Library](#) in New York,

entitled *The Golden Age of Dutch Manuscript Painting*. That event focused on medieval miniatures from the Northern Netherlands. It is still regarded as the most successful exhibition that was ever organized in the museum. I am therefore extremely pleased with the public's fantastic response to the exhibition *Magical Miniatures*. In fact, visitors gave us a score of 9 out of 10! The media coverage was also extremely positive, including a 5-star maximum in the daily newspaper *NRC-Handelsblad*. But what gave me most pleasure was seeing visitors who were moved to tears by the beauty of the objects on display. It was particularly the colorfastness of the miniatures that moved people, since they transport you directly back to the moment when they were made.

### **Are any similar exhibitions planned for the near future?**

At present we are involved in talks with [Museum Meermanno](#) with a view to producing an exhibition of Books of Hours from the Netherlands, with works from our two museums and obviously also from the National Library of the Netherlands.

### **What other plans do you have as a curator?**

For next year we are setting up a very exciting exhibition project. From 24 October 2019 to 26 January 2020, Museum Catharijneconvent will be showing *North & South: Medieval Art of Norway and Catalonia* in collaboration with the Museum of Cultural History of the University Museum of Oslo (Norway) and the Episcopal Museum of Vic (Catalonia, Spain). By bringing together two of the most beautiful and best-preserved collections of medieval art, we will demonstrate that there was a shared European culture throughout the Middle Ages. Borders were fluid and cultural objects and ideas enjoyed considerable mobility. Although there was practically no direct contact between artists from the outer edges of Europe – due to the thousands of kilometers dividing them – there are striking similarities between the objects from Catalonia and Scandinavia. The lack of comparable objects in Central Europe makes it hard to take on board that the entire western region of Europe once derived inspiration from a shared arsenal of representations, symbols, expressions of belief, and forms of expression. The underlying concept behind the project is the fact that the world-class medieval collections of Norway and Catalonia allow us to see and experience materials that were lost in the central region due to a variety of causes, such as wars, iconoclasm, the French Revolution, and “Baroquification.”

In addition, I'm particularly looking forward to getting back to projects involving 16th-century paintings, my original specialism. Right now we're working on two ideas related to this subject area. One is an exhibition with an overview of art from Utrecht from the Middle Ages to the present day, to include embroidery and other crafts as well as painting and sculpture. A second project relates to the transition from Catholic to Protestant painting, which I'm currently developing together with my colleague Tanja Kootte, J.G. van Oord Jzn. Curator for Dutch Protestantism. Watch this space!

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[Sarah Van Ooteghem](#) is Assistant Curator of Master Drawings, 1500-1800 at the Print Room, [Royal Library of Belgium](#). She has been a member of CODART since 2012.

## CODART ACTIVITIES

CODARTfocus in Mechelen, 22–23 May 2018

Júlia Tátrai

My participation in the CODARTfocus held in Mechelen in the spring of 2018 was important to me in many ways. Following an extensive, multi-year reconstruction of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, a historic building that first opened to the public in 1906, our permanent exhibitions will be cast in a substantially restructured form. We are reorganizing our collections within a fundamentally new conceptual framework. It was immensely valuable and instructive to see how a comparable transformation had been effected in the even older building of the [Museum Hof van Busleyden](#), in Mechelen, where a sixteenth-century city palace and its permanent exhibition had to be reshaped to meet the professional standards and visitor needs of the twenty-first century. At the time of our visit, we were fortunate enough to witness the finishing stages of the installation.

In the restoration workshop we had the opportunity to see the museum's unique sixteenth-century collection of retable cabinets, the [Enclosed Gardens](#) (Besloten Hofjes). The collection of Seven Enclosed Gardens belonged to the former convent of Mechelen's Hospital Sisters. Enclosed Gardens were mainly produced in the city of Mechelen.

Only a handful have survived. They are sublime examples of artistic skill, religious handicraft, and devotional tradition. For the Hospital Sisters, these retables provided a vehicle through which to express devotion and spirituality. In consequence, besides textiles, metals, glass, painted panels, and altarpieces with polychrome figures, they also contain relics. Today they help us to enter the conceptual world of religious communities. These art objects were created by the Mechelen sisters from precious materials with meticulous elaboration, primarily for private devotion. Yet they display striking similarities, in terms of spiritual content, to the Hungarian convent artworks of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of which the Christian Museum in Esztergom contains several fine examples. Though far apart in space and time, both sixteenth-century Flanders and Baroque-era Hungary were under the dominion of the Catholic Habsburgs.

Besides being treated to an inside view of the preparations for the new permanent exhibition of the Museum Hof van Busleyden and a visit to its restoration workshop with the Enclosed Gardens on display, the CODARTfocus program also included a visit to a temporary exhibition, organized by the Museum Hof van Busleyden in partnership with the [Royal Museum of Fine Arts](#), Antwerp. The special exhibition [Call for Justice: Art and Law in the Burgundian Low Countries](#) highlights the fascinating interaction between art, the practice of law, and the concept of justice in the geographical region under the jurisdiction of the Great Council of Mechelen during its heyday, from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. The exhibition is structured around three themes: "justice," "the judiciary," and "injustice." *Call for Justice* sets up comparisons between Netherlandish artworks on law and justice and

places them within their original juridical, historical, and cultural backgrounds. Besides showing how they interacted with this context, it also shows how they powerfully visualized one of the most fundamental and universal human aspirations: the longing for justice, and its complex confrontation with reality. *Call for Justice* shows masterpieces by numerous artists, including Quinten Metsys, Maarten van Heemskerck, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Maerten de Vos, Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, and Philippe de Champaigne. These works traveled to Mechelen from diverse museums and from national and international private collections.

The CODARTfocus agenda also included a tour of several churches, a highlight of which was a visit to the St. John's Parish Church (Sint-Janskerk). This parish had no shortage of funds in the seventeenth century, an affluence that is reflected in the church's many treasures. Built in above the altar is Peter Paul Rubens' famous triptych of *The Adoration of the Magi*. Behind the side panels is a mechanism for turning the paintings at regular intervals so that all the scenes can be admired. To me it was a particular pleasure to see this altarpiece *in situ*, because one of Rubens's studies for Caspar's head is preserved in our collection. The Budapest museum purchased this oak panel in 1908 from the Firm J. Goudstikker.

At the same time as working on the reconstruction of the Museum of Fine Arts building, the creation of a new storage space,

and the renewed design and installation of the permanent exhibition in the Old Masters' Gallery, we

have also been hard at work for over two years developing our upcoming special show *Rubens and His Age: The Century of Flemish Baroque Painting*, which will run from October 2019 to February 2020. Our most important partner is the [Liechtenstein Princely Collection](#), Vienna, which has agreed to provide on loan *inter alia* part of Rubens's grand *Decius Mus* cycle ("The Interpretation of the Victim"), beside which we plan to hang the special tapestry woven after the painting (Palacio Real, Madrid), enriched with gold and silver threads. This will be the first time that the canvas and the tapestry will be on display together. The Budapest Museum of Fine Arts collection also holds a large tapestry woven from wool and silk by Jan Frans van der Hecke in 1690 after Rubens's composition depicting the encounter of Abraham and Melchizedek. The oil sketch for the tapestry will be provided on loan for our exhibition by the [Fitzwilliam Museum](#), Cambridge. The program of the Mechelen CODART*focus* also included a visit to the De Wit Royal Manufacturers, where we had the opportunity to see both the collection and the weaving mill, and I concluded an agreement with the institution's staff on the restoration of the tapestry mentioned above. The generous funding offered in support of our *Rubens and His Age* show by Mr. David Maenaut, head of the Flemish Delegation to Hungary, will make it possible to accomplish the professional cleaning and restoration of the tapestry, which may therefore be one of the featured items of the show.

[Júlia Tátrai](#) is Head of the Department of Old Master Paintings at the [Szépművészeti Múzeum](#) in Budapest, Hungary. She has been a member of CODART since 2003.

## CURATOR'S OBJECT

**Hidden Gems by 5 Curators, part I**  
**An Explosive Struggle in the Prado****Alejandro Vergara**

Rubens's *Hercules and Cerberus* from 1636-37 is a small picture (28 x 31.6 cm) bursting with formal power. The sense of compressed energy is palpable – handling the painting at the Prado feels like holding an explosive.

We usually think of Rubens as an artist who favoured large-scale work, but approximately one third of his paintings are small. Most of them are sketches, as is the case here. This type of picture, made in preparation for a larger work, offers us visible traces of the creative process, and a sense of privileged access. In *Hercules and Cerberus*, the brown tone of the oak support glows through the overlapping translucent layers. Two lines drawn in black mark two axes of the composition: one runs through the head of Hercules, the other, to the left, through the head of one of the Furies and the hindquarters of the three-headed dog. Strokes of paint pile over each other as traces of the painter's evolving thoughts.

In spite of the dazzling show of craftsmanship, the painting is not boastful. The perfect fusion of content and form is characteristic of Rubens, and key to understanding his art. His goal is to activate empathy, to make us feel the emotions involved in the stories that he paints as if they were lived experience. Virginia Woolf, talking about her writing, once explained that words lead people to think and feel,

but 'to think and to feel not about them, but about something different' (in the BBC radio recording *Craftsmanship*, 1937). Rubens shares this approach to art-making. His painterly skills, the qualities and powers that he brings to bear in his art, are never self-serving.

*Hercules and Cerberus* illustrates an episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VII, 409-419): 'There is a dark cavern with a gaping mouth, and a path into the depths, up which Hercules, hero of Tiryns, dragged the dog, tied with steel chains, resisting and twisting its eyes away from the daylight and the shining rays'. Rubens's telling of the story in this sketch exemplifies how he translates meaning into form. The impressions left by the vigorous strokes of the brush over the surface animate the scene. Dynamic forms and lines create an impression of ebb and flow, pulling us into the contest of strength taking place before the gates of Hell. Because of how they are characterised, the figures appear as if engaged in an exalted moment, yet they also seem close and real, as if directly witnessed. Rubens makes the struggle between the youthful hero and the forces of the underworld feel as an event where great things are at stake.

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**Double Dutch in Dublin****Adriaan Waiboer**

'Oh ... I thought they were by Vermeer!' This comment is frequently expressed by visitors to the National Gallery of Ireland upon seeing the wall text next to Gabriel Metsu's *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter*. Personally, I do not blame people for misidentifying the artist of these pendants, as they look more Vermeer-like than any other work by contemporary artists. In fact, I have sometimes wondered myself whether Metsu deliberately painted works that might be mistaken for Vermeer's.

The celebrated companion pieces have fascinated me ever since I started my Ph.D. dissertation on Metsu's work in 1999. Five years later, I was fortunate to take up a curatorial position at the museum that owns these works. Seeing them on a daily basis gave me ample opportunity to ponder what Metsu tried to achieve. It became clear to me that he combined

several of what he considered to be signature elements of Vermeer's repertoire, including the division of the composition in geometrical shapes, the shallow interior, the checkered marble-tiled floor, and the natural daylight reflecting off a white plastered back wall. Metsu even painted some of Vermeer's typical *pointillés* on the lady's shoe in the foreground. Towards the end of the painting process, he made one change that encapsulates his strategy: he changed the colour of the lady's jacket from red (his favourite colour of such garments in the mid-1660s) to bright yellow. By doing so, Metsu replicated what he saw as a trademark of Vermeer's work.

As I kept looking at the pendants, I realised however that Metsu did not copy or imitate, but merely approached Vermeer's style: his colouring is brighter, his natural light has fewer tonal values and his spatial relations are poorly defined; moreover, Metsu's superb brushwork aimed at carefully describing textures and surfaces bears little

relationship to Vermeer's work. Furthermore, I should admit that after all these years I still cannot identify with certainty which of Vermeer's individual paintings served as direct sources of inspiration to Metsu. He certainly did not study Vermeer's *Astronomer*, now in the Louvre, in preparation of *Man Writing a Letter*, and *The Love Letter*, currently at the Rijksmuseum, to arrive at *Woman Reading a Letter*, as scholars have argued in the past. True, Metsu's and Vermeer's two pensive men seated at a carpeted table near a window and a globe look very much alike; and both other paintings depict ladies in fur-trimmed jackets, seated next to a sewing basket, having received letters from a maid standing in front of a marine painting. These similarities are hardly coincidental. Yet, Metsu completed the works two to four years before Vermeer finished his. It is far more likely that the Delft artist saw Metsu's pendants, which, although inspired by his own earlier works, provided him with ideas that he had not previously explored. Intriguing as this scenario may sound, I am afraid we are still a long time away from museum visitors in Paris and Amsterdam mistaking Vermeer's *Astronomer* and *Love-Letter* for works by Metsu...

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## **An Enigmatic Laugh in Cologne**

**Anja K. Sevcik**

Oh, that laugh! No less mysterious than the secretive smile of the Mona Lisa, it has preoccupied art historians for decades and never fails to fascinate the viewer. Rembrandt's self-portrait is one of the best-known paintings in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne. And at the same time it is one of the most enigmatic. I return to it again and again, wondering, marvelling, admiring.

Another Cologne icon, the contemporary artist Gerhard Richter, once said: 'To me, pictures which I understand, are bad.'<sup>1</sup> That explains, conversely, my fascination. In a masterly way, Rembrandt does not make it easy for us to understand his work.

How should we interpret the old man, portrayed with such humility, who stands out brightly against the darkness? Is the artist striving for that 'one' interpretation anyway? Is Rembrandt alluding to the philosopher Democritus laughing at the world? Is he depicting himself cynically scorning death? Or, mahlstick in hand, does he step into the role of the classical painter Zeuxis, who notoriously laughed himself to death painting the portrait of an ugly old woman? Could she be the grotesque profile on the left-hand edge of the picture?<sup>2</sup>

On closer inspection the comedy is also art historical drama, because that forthright laugh, like the raised eyebrows, was the result of overpainting.

Many comprehensive technological studies have been carried out, yielding numerous discoveries regarding the possible original state of the painting and its current precarious condition, which further lessens its readability.<sup>3</sup>

The indiscernibility, the 'great blackness' that dominates many of Rembrandt's works, 'because one must often do without three-quarters of a work for a stirring section gleaming with light,'<sup>4</sup> already irritated the connoisseur Gerhard Morell in 1767. No, Rembrandt was never easy to digest. His grasp of painting, the virtuoso mountain of layers that unite to form an ecstasy

of brown and gold tones, challenges the viewer. The comparison of his art, in a play in 1648,<sup>5</sup> with haptically gleaming gold embroidery is apposite. Nonetheless, in Rembrandt's work it is the grand gesture rather than painstaking handwork that dominates, that conceals his art – real dissimulatio artis. John Elsum describes it congenially in 1704 in his epigram to 'an Old Man's head, by Rembrandt': 'What a coarse rugged Way of Painting's here, / Stroake upon Stroake, Dabbs upon Dabbs appear. / The Work you'd think was huddled up in haste, / But mark how truly ev'ry Colour's plac'd, / With such Oeconomy in such a sort, / That they each other mutually support. / Rembrant! Thy Pencil plays a subtil Part / This Roughness is contriv'd to hide thy Art.'<sup>6</sup> With laughter in my eyes, I draw on this wonderful ekphrasis for the old man of Cologne.

Dr. Anja Sev?ik, Head of Department of Baroque Painting at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud in Cologne. She has been a member of CODART since 1999.

## Notes

1 Quoted by Christoph Menke in *Die Kraft der Kunst*, Berlin, 2013, p. 77.

2 See for further explanation: Jürgen Müller, *Der sokratische Künstler. Studien zu Rembrandts Nachtwache*, Leiden/Boston, 2015, pp. 102-109.

3 Iris Schaefer, Kathrin Pilz, Caroline von Saint-George, 'Rembrandts Selbstbildnis als Zeuxis. Neues zum Original, zur Erhaltung und zur Frage der Restaurierung', in: *Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung*, 25/2011, pp. 285-323.

4 Gerhard Morell, *Beurtheilendes Verzeichniß aller in der Neuen Gallerie befindlichen kostbahren Malereyen [...]*, Copenhagen 1767, cited in *Michael North, Gerhard Morell und die Entstehung einer Sammlungskultur im Ostseeraum des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Greifswald, 2012, p. 143.

5 Jan Zoet, *Zabynaja of vermomde loosheid*, cf. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Die Urkunden über Rembrandt*, The Hague, 1906, no. 112a.

6 John Elsum, *A Description of the Celebrated Pieces of Paintings of the most Eminent Masters, Ancient and Modern [...]*, London, 1704, p. 92, CXIX.

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## CURATOR'S OBJECT

**Hidden Gems by 5 Curators, part II**  
**A Miniature Netherlandish Treasure in Detroit****Yao-Fen You**

Among the many treasures in the encyclopaedic collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts is a miniature Netherlandish altarpiece deftly executed in boxwood – a hardwood favoured by carvers for its fine grain and remarkable density. Measuring no more than nine inches high, the altarpiece comprises three principal components: a triptych body, a circular winged predella, and an openwork tracery foot. The altarpiece's exterior is exceedingly plain. It hardly prepares the viewer for the hypertechanical virtuosity of a world rendered in miniature that waits inside.

When the triptych wings are open, one finds a central scene of the Nativity combined with the Annunciation to the Shepherds. The Nativity is prominently depicted in the lower half, in the foreground, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds in the upper half, but in the background and on a slightly smaller scale. The brick ruins help to separate as well as to connect the two chronologically distinct episodes. This spatial arrangement contributes to the remarkable illusion of pictorial depth in an otherwise shallow space that measures no more than an inch deep. The interior of the left wing bears the Annunciation and that of the right, the Presentation in the Temple. Both are carved in very low relief. In the predella below is an Adoration of the Magi that

displays many compositional similarities to the Nativity.

The first half of Matthew 2:6 is inscribed along the bottom edge of the triptych body: ET TV BETHLE[hem] / TERRA•IV[da] NEQVAQVAM MIN[im]A / ES I[n] PRI[n]CIPIB[u]S (But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah). The words appear cramped towards the end of the inscription, with some of the letters carved into the moulding. This suggests that the sculptor might not have planned accordingly. I find this endearing, for it is the plight of the sculptor to carry on, knowing that such oversights cannot be reversed in the art of the carving.

This altarpiece exemplifies the late medieval tradition of microscopic boxwood carving for which the Duchy of Brabant served as a major centre of production. Having written my dissertation on another popular Brabantine carved form, namely, that of large-scale carved oak retables with painted wings – many of which still adorn the high altars and side chapels of churches scattered throughout the Rhineland, Sweden, and Belgium – I cannot but marvel at this portable miniaturised version. It is small enough for me to cradle with my two hands. Not only can I open and close the wings with just the slightest touch, I can fully rotate the object to examine all sides. The triptych's backside is slightly chamfered, not flat – a feature that we sometimes encounter in large-scale winged retables – and on the reverse of the winged predella is a hinged circular door that reveals a relic cavity when opened. Such intimacy of handling is

almost impossible with larger altarpieces, making me cherish even more this miniature boxwood one in the DIA's collection.

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**The Bon Vivant Back in the Hermitage****Irina Sokolova**

The life of the painting *The Bon Vivant (De vrolijke drinker)*, by Louis de Moni (1698-1771), has been quite eventful. During the lifetime of the Dutch master, at the start of the 1760s this work in cabinet format was purchased for the collection of Catherine the Great along with its pendant *A Fish-Woman (Verkoopster van zeevis en garnalen)*. For a century and a half, these two paintings hung in the gallery at the Hermitage, an extension of the Winter Palace, which was not open to the public. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which brought radical change to the rule of the land and in all segments of society, however, saw their fate shift dramatically. In 1930, together with many other art objects, both paintings were moved from

the Hermitage into storage at the Antiquariat,<sup>1</sup> then sold in a Soviet-organised auction of museum pieces to art dealers mainly in Western Europe. For a long time, every trace of both paintings appeared to be lost. It seemed as if they had left Russia forever. But almost a hundred years later one of them was to return to the banks of the Neva. In 2015, *The Bon Vivant* emerged at the Rafael Valls art gallery and dealers in London. Not long after, the painting was bought by the State Hermitage Museum from a Russian art dealer.

Until the present day the panel has been mounted in the gilt frame, with characteristic scroll-type cartouche, with which all paintings in the Hermitage galleries were ‘uniformly’ displayed in the mid-nineteenth century, in the

preferred style of Tsar Nicholas I. This fact testifies that the work was once in the possession of the Imperial Hermitage Collection.<sup>2</sup>

Russian sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries name the panel differently: ‘The bon-vivant’, ‘Un homme faisant collation’, ‘The merry drinker’, ‘The enjoyer of life’, ‘The reveller’. A wax seal on the back of the painting and its old inventory number 40 on the front indicate a connection to the renowned collection of Johann Ernst Gotzkowsky in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> The acquisition of this collection by Russian Empress Catherine the Great in 1764 formed the basis of the picture gallery at the Hermitage. According to the archives, *The Bon Vivant* and its pendant *A Fish-Woman* did not go for a small sum: Gotzkowsky was paid 500 Reichstaler for them.<sup>4</sup> In the mid-eighteenth century, there was much demand for De Moni’s genre paintings.<sup>5</sup> At the auctions of the famous collections of Gerrit Braamcamp (1771) and Johan van der Marck (1773), for example, his paintings once fetched high prices: at the latter, two kitchen scenes sold for 825 guilders.<sup>6</sup>

‘The merry drinker’, a smiling man sitting at the window with a glass of wine in his hand, is painted in the tradition of the ‘fijnschilders’ from Leiden and at first glance brings to mind the work of Golden Age masters: many familiar elements appear in this scene. The still life painted with elegance and painstaking detail – herring on a tin plate, a carafe of wine and a piece of bread on a stone windowsill, on which the signature and the date are inscribed: L. de Moni, 174[3] – bears a striking resemblance to the oeuvre of Frans van Mieris, the elder (1635-1681) in particular. The light, refined colour palette and the nonchalant pose of the protagonist, however, belong more to the eighteenth century: the ‘galant era’. The arched window which gives the composition a trompe-l’oeil effect not only demonstrates the virtuosity of the rendition, but also draws the

viewer unwittingly into a dialogue with the painted figure, who merrily raises his goblet to the viewer of the panel.

That *The Bon Vivant* by De Moni was known in Russia is clear from the engraving made after the work by S.M. Vasilev,<sup>7</sup> which was part of a particularly popular series of prints about the paintings of the Flemish School published in St. Petersburg between 1826 and 1832.<sup>8</sup> In the State Hermitage Museum, photographs of both paintings by De Moni – taken by court photographer F. Nikolaevski in 1904 and 1917 – have been preserved in which we can see that they were excellently preserved.

As is well known, the year 2017 saw the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, which so dramatically determined the course of history in Russia, and with it that of Russia’s art treasures. How extraordinary the story of a painting can therefore be, is demonstrated by the singular fate of the small panel, *The Bon Vivant*, by Louis de Moni. We may still hope that at some point the whereabouts of its pendant, *A Fish-Woman*, will become known.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the deed of 27.06.1930, the Antiquariat agency of the USSR (1925-1937) was tasked with the sale of valuable artworks (paintings, drawings, sculptures, silverwork, porcelain, and so on), in order to finance accelerated agricultural and industrialisation plans.

<sup>2</sup> While no longer visible today, on the auction photograph from the Rafael Valls gallery, the name of the artist ‘De Moni’ is still legible on the cartouche of the frame, in Russian and in French.

<sup>3</sup> Out of the three wax seals on the back of the panel, one can be identified as the seal of Prince V.S. Dolgorokov, Russian

envoy in Prussia, who brokered the purchase of Gotzkowsky's collection, and another as the seal of Tsar Paul I, whose paintings were all numbered in the 1797 inventory of his collection. Of the inventory numbers on the front: number 40 at bottom right, painted white, is from the Gotzkowsky collection; on the bottom left are traces of the number from the Hermitage catalogue of 1797 (no. 2140).

<sup>4</sup> Malinovski, K. V., *Istoria kolleksionirovaniya zjivopisi v Sankt Peterburge v XVIII veke* (The History of Collecting Paintings in St. Petersburg in the Eighteenth Century), St. Petersburg, 2012, p. 440.

<sup>5</sup> See: P. Terwesten, *Catalogus, of Naamlyst van schilderyen, met derzelver prysen, zedert den 22. Augusti 1752 tot den 21. November 1768, zo in Holland, als Braband en andere plaatsen, in het openbaar verkogt, dienende tot een vervolg of derde deel op de twee deelen der uitgegeve cataloguen door wylen de ... Gerard Hoet ; zynde hier agter gevoegt: Catalogus van een gedeelte van 't vorstelyk kabinet schilderyen van ... den ... prince van Orange en Nassau*. The Hague, 1770, pp. 85, 267, 325, 531, 589-590, 599, 668, 679.

<sup>6</sup> A. J. van der Aa, *Biographisch woordenboek der Nederlanden*, Gorinchem 1852-1878, volume 12 out of 21. Part II. 1869, p. 982.

<sup>7</sup> Vasilev Sakerdon Mihaylovich (1793-?) was a painter and lithographer who started his studies at the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1803, graduating in 1818 with the title: 'Portrait painter, first class'.

<sup>8</sup> G. Mirolubova, *Ruskaya litografija 1810-e – 1890-e*. (Russian Lithography in the Years 1810-1890), Moscow, 2006, pp. 212-215.

These texts were published in [The Low Countries. Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands](#), Antwerp, 2018 and are reproduced by the courtesy of TLC.

## FRIENDS

**Floris van Wanroij Interviewed by Gerdien Verschoor**

Floris van Wanroij (1981) studied arts and culture at the University of Maastricht and art history at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY (US). Following a brief career at an auction house, he set up his own art dealership, Floris van Wanroij Fine Art exactly 10 years ago, in 2008. He specializes in Dutch and Flemish Old Master Paintings, Early European Sculpture and artworks from the Haute Époque. Van Wanroij became a CODART Patron in 2016.

**Your own favorite: this portrait, made in 1654 by Cornelis Jonson van Ceulen. What is it about this painting, do you think, that makes it hard to sell?**

It's not for nothing that I've got this painting on the wall of my living room: I consider it an extremely good work by a very interesting artist who deserves a *catalogue raisonné*. It was painted with a liquid touch that Jonson van Ceulen copied from Van Dyck. The rendering of her hands, the raking light on the little collar, the gradations of color in the satin, her big eyes with that dreamy expression: to me this is a phenomenal, poignant portrait. But is this a beautiful woman? Would anyone except me want her hanging on the wall? Probably not...

**This is a painting that you consider hard to sell. But are there any works in your home that you would actually not want to sell?**

One painting that I actually don't want to sell is this early portrait by Pieter Hermansz. Verelst, dated 1642, still very much in the style of his teacher Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp. It comes from a British collection and has a long provenance. Verelst came from Dordrecht and the panel has the maker's mark of a Dordrecht panel maker. It was probably a wedding portrait of a girl from Dordrecht, but her identity is impossible to trace. It still has the original ebony frame. I'm a great lover of portraits, even though they are often viewed in the art trade as the least commercial part of the market. Art is material culture, and Old Masters in particular connects you quite directly to

our history and the world in which our ancestors lived. I have that sense very strongly with portraits: you're literally looking someone in the eyes who lived almost 400 years ago. And besides, it's just an astonishingly beautiful painting.

**That tension between "art" and "trade," when did that begin?**

My love of art and cultural heritage dates from early childhood. There's a family tale that I bought my first "artwork" before my fourth birthday. As a young boy I often accompanied my parents to the Museum Van Gerwen-Lemmens in Valkenswaard, a museum of religious art that sadly no longer exists. That is where my love of mediaeval sculpture was born. The museum's owner, Wim van Gerwen, who had built up the collection, was my first teacher. He communicated his knowledge to me with great passion and inspired me to buy my first pieces. For some people it's an enormous step to purchase their first work of art, but for me that was never an issue. Encouraged by Van Gerwen and my parents, I started collecting at a very young age. The first painting I bought was a work from 1862 by the Utrecht artist Hendricus J.P. Hanau. I was twelve years old and I would never buy it now, but it's still hanging in my bedroom. My taste has naturally developed over the years: I have bought things at various times and then sold them again.

**And from the medieval sculpture you saw in Valkenswaard it was only a short step to studying art and culture in Maastricht.**

Yes, although I thought they placed too little emphasis on art history there. Still, I got my Bachelor's with distinction there and then gained a scholarship enabling me to do a research master at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York State.

While I was there I learned a tremendous amount from visiting the collections at the Metropolitan Museum, the Frick Collection, and The Cloisters. Also, I was surrounded by so much expertise; Cornell University has a fantastic art history library. After that I was offered a scholarship for a PhD, but a career in academia did not appeal to me. I thought it too detached from earthly concerns; I missed the hands-on experience with objects. Eventually I returned to the Netherlands and ended up at Glerum auction house.

### **That must have been ...**

Yes, it was an enormous culture shock! Having spent years studying art from an academic viewpoint, I was suddenly inundated with real art, and that was a really great education. But Glerum was too small to have a specialist department for Old Masters. I spent much of my time there working with modern art, for which I have little affinity. Another drawback is that when you're working for an auction house you have little control over what happens and hardly any time for in-depth research. I also missed having the opportunity to build up my own collection. So eventually I burned my bridges and started up for myself.

### **But you did not open an art gallery in Amsterdam's canal ring.**

No, that was a very conscious decision. If you have a gallery at a permanent location, you have to spend most of your time there. But I'm often travelling, attending art fairs, or doing research at the RKD – the Netherlands

Institute for Art History – or the Rubenianum. I eventually decided to launch my art dealership from my home in Dommelen, and that's how it stayed. In spite of the downside of not having a dynamic "showroom" and a place where potential clients can drop by spontaneously, this model suits me very well. When clients come to visit me here, I can give them really personal attention. It might not suit everyone: you don't feel so free to just wander around looking at art here, perhaps, and my mother is sitting there waiting to pour you some tea. But I have a personal relationship with many of my clients: they are almost family by now, and that makes it very pleasant to receive them here.

### **What do you like most about the art trade?**

As I said, the art itself takes precedence, and what I enjoy most is the whole process that goes before a sale. Searching, purchasing, researching provenance, describing, studying the iconography, restoration, having a good frame made: I spend a lot of time on all those things. For instance, in January I sold an Antwerp cabinet decorated with little paintings based on Ovid's Metamorphoses that I was able to attribute to Michiel Coignet (Antwerp, 1618 – c. 1663) and the Forchondt workshop. I researched its entire iconography. When that process was finally completed, it was easy for me to let the artwork go. If I'm able to find a good home for it, it has all come full circle.

### **Do you have any preference for selling to a museum or a private individual?**

No, although I do think it's a pity if a museum sends it straight off to the storage facility. But the most important thing is that you can add something to a collection and that the work ends up with a person or institution that will handle it with love.

### **During the CODART Congress in Bruges, which you attended, one of the topics was the trans-historical museum, which combines Old Masters with modern art.**

I'm very fond of combining different disciplines: painting, sculpture, decorative arts. Wilhelm von Bode did that in his day, and you see it now at the Rijksmuseum and the Rockox House in Antwerp, for instance. The Rockox House has created a fantastic collector's cabinet, complete with small sculptures as well as shells and other specimens of natural history. But combining Old Masters with modern art – that's a very different story. It's becoming more and more common in the art trade or at art fairs like Masterpiece in London,

which I see more as a luxury & lifestyle event rather than an art fair. I remember the Rijksmuseum's TEFAF stand a few years ago, where a work by Jan Schoonhoven was exhibited along with the recently-acquired, early 16th-century terracotta Bust of the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa, attributed to Pietro Torrigiani. That did not strike me as a wonderful combination. It may be what the public wants to see, but it pains me, as if you can only sell Old Masters by combining them with modern art. Yet now you constantly see long lines of people waiting to get into the Rijksmuseum, and in Antwerp, too, the Old Masters are attracting enormous interest with the "Baroque Year" celebrations. I also don't believe that such combinations attract new sections of the public. On the contrary, many young people are particularly interested in seeing the Old Masters, and those works should be valued in their own right.

### **Do you have many young clients?**

No, but I've noticed that young people at museums and at art fairs do take an interest in the Old Masters. It often doesn't occur to them that you could actually buy a work of art. Moreover, if you want to buy an Old Master, you need money, and that is something you generally don't have until you've got a job, then bought your own home, and then finished sending

your children through college. By then, you're not "young" any more. Young people often think of Old Masters as works of art that belong in museums; they have no idea that you could actually buy one yourself. Yet a substantial proportion of art belongs to private collections. And Old Masters are not unattainable: for a sum that many people have no trouble spending on a car you could buy a really serious Old Master and a piece of historical cultural heritage. I see it as a task for our art dealers to convey to people when they are young that it is possible to collect works by Old Masters. You can plant that idea in their mind early on, and you also see more and more art fairs like BRAFA – and the Royal Association of Fine Art Dealers in the Netherlands, for instance – helping to raise that awareness. Later on, when today's young people are older and have more money to spend, their interest has been kindled, they have had time to develop their tastes, and they will be in a position to actually purchase artworks.

**This fall your dealership marks its tenth anniversary. Have you observed specific trends over the past decade?**

Yes, you naturally see tastes changing, that has always been the case. There is one constant, of course: quality always sells. But the market appears to have become more capricious – it is the traditional segment of the market, above all, that seems to be having a hard time. What you see today, more than ten years ago, is a demand for unusual, distinctive pieces, whereas for years it was mainly recognizable works that "everyone" possessed that were in demand. Every notary wanted a Jan van Goyen hanging in his office, and inn scenes like those by Adriaan van Ostade were popular. Now, there's a far greater demand for less conservative and more striking or exciting works by Old Masters. Take *Lot and His Daughters*, for instance, the spectacular and magisterial masterpiece by Rubens that set a new record at Christie's Old Masters sale in London two years ago. Leaving aside its hefty dimensions and its equally high price – over £44 million – it's not the sort of work that our notary of ten years ago would have been likely to buy.

*Floris van Wanroij has been a Patron of CODART since 2016.*