

CODART NEGEN congress: Workshop 3

Rembrandt content: what makes a good Rembrandt exhibition?

Chair: Edwin Buijsen, Curator research and technical documentation, Rijksbureau voor
Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague

Secretary: Silke Gatenbröcker, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig

WORKSHOP THEME

In addition to exhibitions based on museums' own collections, there is a tendency in Rembrandt 400 events to organise an increasing number of thematic exhibitions based on Rembrandt. In the past, much more emphasis was placed on monographic exhibitions, often focusing on the difficulties of attribution and the influence of Rembrandt on his students.

Points for discussion

- Monographic versus thematic Rembrandt exhibitions; the blockbuster exhibition (Rembrandt-Caravaggio) versus the art-historical exhibition.
- Are there any interesting subjects left?
- Does Rembrandt help us to increase our knowledge of the selected themes? Does the huge amount of literature on Rembrandt mean that exhibitions can go into greater depth?
- What has been the influence of the Rembrandt Research Project on the nature and the composition of current Rembrandt exhibitions? Are these exhibitions important for research into Rembrandt (and attribution)? Should the exhibition deal with problems of attribution?
- Is a Rembrandt exhibition different from any other sort of exhibition?
- Is Rembrandt's biography receiving more attention during Rembrandt 400 than in 1956 and 1969? Does the competition for important loans stand in the way of good Rembrandt exhibitions in a year celebrating the anniversary of his birth?

Report on the discussion

The Rembrandt year exemplifies the more general problems involved in organizing monographic or thematic exhibitions designed to attract the general public, especially those celebrating anniversaries. In view of the universality of the question addressed by the workshop, no one expected any definitive answers, although some of the more delicate issues were touched on very frankly. This may have been a result of the fact that aside from the chair and the two introductory speakers (Edwin Buijsen, Volker Manuth and Adriaen Waiboer), the other participants came armed only with their personal opinions and experiences and not with prepared papers. The discussion revealed that we are all currently and critically preoccupied with the question of the future of the so-called "blockbuster" exhibition. Many difficulties were mentioned, for example: the risks of shipments of large numbers of masterpieces; the problem of getting loans of those precious artworks that are most in demand (during

jubilees requested repeatedly and sometimes even at the same time); and the growing competition between institutions for the same group of visitors. It was generally agreed that smaller presentations, clearly focused on items from one's own collections and if possible not shown on the occasion of an anniversary, circumvent many of these obstacles. Concerning the contents, it was agreed that all types of exhibitions – monographic, thematic, or specifically dealing with questions of attribution – will continue to have their own justification in the future, addressing new generations of scholars and visitors.

Unfortunately, due to lack of time we were unable to engage in a deeper discussion about the reasons and mechanisms that have led to the enormous growth in the number of blockbuster exhibitions we see today. Under the pressure of complex structures – external financial supporters, political demands, media interests, and evolving leisure-time activities – museums have been forced to produce more and more “successful” shows, and this successfulness needs to be easily measured (e.g. in the number of visitors). Any institution given the opportunity to organize a blockbuster exhibition will take its chances in the hopes of achieving a favorable outcome – even to the point of skimping on content. If we want our smaller, more focused exhibitions to be better appreciated by the public at large, we need to more carefully analyze the aforementioned socio-economic process in order to design presentations that can withstand the competition of the blockbuster. Issues like public relations, exhibition design, and the quality of the exhibited artworks should have been discussed; this would have led to more specific results related to the headline question. Only one crucial point – the type and quality of catalogues – was touched upon briefly, and most of us agreed that this should be an item for the next CODART meeting. Catalogue costs have a tendency to dominate the exhibition budget, but are at the same time undoubtedly one of the most important media (apart from other educational texts) for explaining the content of an exhibition and disseminating it in a way the exhibition itself could not. Should we not try and invent types of publications that are neither too extensive to be read, nor too expensive to be bought by the average visitor or art lover? Is an exhibition catalogue the proper place for detailed scholarly discussions, or should we use other kinds of publications for this?

Silke Gatenbröcker, 4 April 2006

Participants in this workshop were:

1. Ronni Baer, Curator of European painting, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
2. Katharina Bechler, Director, Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha, Gotha
3. Edwin Buijsen, Curator research and technical documentation, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
4. Eric Domela Nieuwenhuis, Curator, Instituut Collectie Nederland, Rijswijk
5. Albert J. Elen, Senior curator of prints and drawings, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
6. Thera Folmer-von Oven, Curator, Private collection, Aerdenhout
7. Michiel Franken, Curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
8. Silke Gatenbröcker, Curator, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig

9. Liesbeth Helmus, Curator of Old Master paintings and drawings, Centraal Museum, Utrecht
10. Dariusz Kacprzak, Curator of Old Masters, Łódz Museum of Fine Arts, Łódz
11. Catalina Macovei, Head of department of prints and drawings, Library of the Romanian Academy, Bucharest
12. Natalja Markova, Head of department of prints and drawings, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
13. Maciej Monkiewicz, Curator, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw
14. Jan Nicolaisen, Curator, Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig
15. Louisa Wood Ruby, Photoarchivist, The Frick Collection, New York
16. Ivan Rusina, Curator, Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava
17. Gero Seelig, Curator of Netherlandish paintings, Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Schwerin
18. Hana Seifertová, Curator, National Gallery in Prague, Revnice
19. Marina Senenko, Curator of European and American art, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
20. Martina Sitt, Head of department of paintings, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg
21. Irina Sokolova, Head of department of Dutch paintings, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
22. Shlomit Steinberg, Hans Dichand curator of European art, Israel Museum, Jerusalem
23. Thea Vignau-Wilberg, Curator, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, Munich
24. Adriaan E. Waiboer, Curator of Northern European art, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin
25. David de Witt, Bader curator of European art, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston