

# CODART ELF congress: Workshop 1

## Conservation-restoration projects

Chair: Edwin Buijsen, Curator research and technical documentation, RKD, The Hague

Secretary: Sander Paarlberg, Curator of Old Master paintings, Dordrechts Museum

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### Introduction

Edwin Buijsen introduces the workshop theme, the speakers and several participants that have been invited to join. Apart from curators from many museums in different countries, three conservators participate in the discussions: Caroline van der Elst (private restorer), H el ene Dubois (KIK-IRPA, Brussels) and Petria Noble (Mauritshuis, The Hague).

Nowadays major restoration projects are often conducted in public view. Advisory committees are formed, in many cases sponsors must be attracted and museum curators have to closely collaborate with conservators and the educational staff. This workshop addresses the various issues involved with major restoration projects, such as the coordination of art historical and technical research, dealing with publicity, providing educational and scholarly publications and organizing special museum presentations both during and after restoration.

### **Speakers I & II: Micha Leeflang, Curator of medieval art, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht & Caroline van der Elst, Private conservator, Bussum**

Micha Leeflang, first time Codart member, tells about her situation as Curator of medieval art in the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht. She is also doing research in the Rijksmuseum with its own conservation department. The collaboration between a curator and conservator is very important. She has been closely working together with Caroline van der Elst, private conservator from Bussum on the Jan van Scorel Triptych in Utrecht. Caroline van der Elst tells about her background, education and preferences. The curator and conservator should complement each other. She gives the example of a working method, found during technical research, that might be explained by a passage in Van Mander's Schilder-boeck.

### **Speaker III: H el ene Dubois, Conservator-researcher , KIK-IRPA, Brussels**

H el ene Dubois was scientific collaborator on the Rubens project in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels and is now Conservator-researcher. KIK-IRPA: The Royal Institute for the Study and Conservation of Belgium's Artistic Heritage. There is no conservation department in the RMFA of Belgium, but there is a conservation workshop with all the facilities for conservators attracted from outside the museum to work in. H el ene Dubois shows images on a laptop of the Crowning of Maria altarpiece by Rubens that had to be restored within the exhibition room due to its size. It was too large to move the altarpiece and a special scaffold had to be made to reach the upper parts of the canvas. The same scaffold could be used to do research on the other large altarpieces in the same room. Allowing visitors to witness the restoration work was a learning process: gallery guards had to be instructed and a sign with "do not disturb the conservator" proved to be useful. Visitors should be warned not only for the chemical vapors that might be used (mostly when the museum is closed for public), but also for the ruined outlook of the paintings. The cleaned and bare state (after removing discolored retouchings) of the Rubens paintings need explanation. A video was made to both explain

what the restorer is doing and to relieve him/her from questions from visitors. Furthermore, working up high on a scaffold is not always visible for visitors from below. H  l  ne Dubois concluded that it is very interesting for visitors to get a behind the scenes look, but it also raises several issues that you have to take into account.

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## Report on the discussion

Petria Noble and Peter van der Ploeg explain the situation in the Mauritshuis. Restoration and technical research are really integrated in the Mauritshuis. An important question is: what happens with all the technical information gathered? Many times the information isn't suitable or too complex for the public. For this reason it isn't included in exhibition catalogues. But the results are important. Should it be published on the museum websites? H  l  ne Dubois feels that you should never underestimate the public. Peter van der Ploeg remarks that only the results are of interest to the public, it is of no use to publish all technical information in catalogues or on the website. There are specialized magazines for restorers to publish their findings. Petria Noble suggests that in most cases the research goes on during the exhibition, when the catalogue is already finished. And when technical information is included in the catalogue, should the articles be written separately by the conservator and the curator, or both together? Many workshop participants stress the fact that the public is extremely interested in technical and conservation related information. Hanna Benesz recalls the first time the public in Warsaw was confronted with aspects of conservation and the results of technical research. It was an exhibition of 38 restored and researched paintings, which proved to be very appealing to the public. However, not everything is suitable for an exhibition and time pressure makes it impossible to research everything thoroughly. Several other workshop participants tell about their experiences. The collaboration between conservators and curators should be mutual. Getting sponsor funding can be difficult. For many museums it is important to collaborate with other institutions, also to stress the importance of the restoration project. Sponsors sometimes want favors in return. In Brussels (Rubens project) the sponsors had to be mentioned in the exhibition and all publications, but there were no other obligations.

The discussion focuses on the type of information given to the public. During public restoration a lot of material is gathered, but the information given to the public is by force limited. Results are often found or described after the restoration is completed. Tight budgets and deadlines can be the reason to prefer continuing the restoration itself, to presenting it properly to the public. In Brussels only general information was given and not too detailed information; the technical research and the restoration occurred hand in hand. Another means of informing the public could be organizing lectures during the restoration. Short video films in the restoration exhibition can be very instructive. In many cases these video's have to be made before the restoration work starts, but preferably the whole process is filmed to get an overview of the total restoration (which can only be showed when all work is finished). The Jan van Scorel restoration in Utrecht was also filmed (part of the sponsor deal).

It is important to know early on whether a restoration is of interest and whether technical research will lead to interesting results. Jenny Gaschke with regard to a marine by Abraham Storck: in the exhibition catalogue the photo during restoration had to be used, but in the exhibition itself a separate room will be devoted to the results. Caroline van der Elst tells that she was already doing restoration work in the Catharijneconvent, when she was able to persuade the museum staff that this was the ultimate opportunity to do technical research as well and present the results to the public.

Although practically hard to realize, a preferable situation would be to not make ad hoc decisions, but to have a continuous contact between conservators and curators. Ivan Gaskell stresses the importance of making a distinction between 'expedient projects' (i.e. restorations for exhibition purposes) and 'purposive projects' (i.e. restoration really needed for the preservation of the objects). The former can be harmful for the works of art, also in the case of esthetic restorations - it might be better to touch the paintings as little as possible. Technical research beforehand of a group of paintings is essential to then be able to decide whether restoration is really necessary or not ('research should precede restoration'). Only then should you search for sponsors to finance the project. Of course technical research, such as Infra Red Reflectography, could also be done independently from restoration projects.

At the end of the workshop Monique Tahon-Vanroose of the Museum voor Schone Kunsten takes the participants to the Maarten van Heemskerck Triptych in the next room to explain the situation of this altarpiece and the Coxie altar piece, both from the city of Ghent, that had to be restored when the museum was closed. A four year project was started together with the Sral in Maastricht and with money from the Vlaamse Gemeenschap.

### **In conclusion**

Conservation-restoration projects are popular and the general consensus is that the public is very much interested in them. There are several ways of presenting restorations to the general public, but possibilities are often limited by the available budget. These projects are often dependent on sponsorship and it is not always possible for the museum to give priority to what they consider to be important. Also, not every painting being restored can be examined thoroughly. However, the personal engagement and enthusiasm of the museum curator can play an important role in the eventual success of these projects. Collaboration between art historians and conservators is important, but in discussions on this subject carries often a lot of debate. However in practice collaborations between art historians and conservators usually works out well.

### **Participants in this workshop were:**

- 1 Hanna Benesz, Keeper of Early Netherlandish paintings, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw
- 2 Tatjana Bosnjak, Curator, Narodni Muzej (National Museum), Belgrade
- 3 Edwin Buijsen, Curator Research and technical documentation, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
- 4 Véronique van Caloen, Curator, Kasteel van Loppem, Brussels
- 5 Ingrid Ciulisová, Researcher, Slovak Academy of Sciences: Institute of Art History, Bratislava
- 6 Henri L.M. Defoer
- 7 Wietske Donkersloot, Manager of the website project, CODART, The Hague
- 8 Hélène Dubois, Conservator-researcher , KIK-IRPA, Brussels
- 9 Caroline van der Elst, Private conservator, Bussum
- 10 Jenny Gaschke, Curator of prints and drawings, National Maritime Museum, London
- 11 Ivan Gaskell, Curator, Harvard University Art Museums - Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge
- 12 Sandra Janssens, Musea Brugge – Groeningemuseum, Brugge (Bruges)
- 13 Marijke de Kinkelder, Curator of Dutch and Flemish 17th century landscape and architecture, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
- 14 Fritz Koreny, Senior Researcher, Institut für Kunstgeschichte der Universität Wien, Vienna
- 15 Micha Leeflang, Curator of medieval art, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht

- 16 Ewoud Mijndieff, Curator of arts and decorative arts before 1800, museumgoudA / Het Catharina Gasthuis, Gouda
- 17 Maciej Monkiewicz, Curator, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw
- 18 Petria Noble, Conservator, Mauritshuis, The Hague
- 19 Anne van Oosterwijk, Research curator, Musea Brugge – Groeningemuseum, Bruges
- 20 Sander Paarlberg, Curator of old master paintings, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht
- 21 Peter van der Ploeg, Curator, Mauritshuis, The Hague
- 22 Marringje Rikken, Assistent curator 17th-century Dutch painting, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
- 23 Gero Seelig, Curator of Netherlandish paintings, Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Schwerin
- 24 Johan De Smet, Curator, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent
- 25 Monique Tahon-Vanroose, Curator, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent