**In the Balance: Finding Time for Collection and Exhibition Catalogues**

I have been asked to speak today about the conflicting demands of cataloguing a museum’s permanent collection and organizing temporary exhibitions (fig. – *Dutch syscat and a couple of exhibition cats on one slide*). It is a fascinating topic, one facing virtually every museum curator as we try to balance the enormous demands on our limited time and energy. Of course, the specifics of each individual’s experience inevitably differ depending on the size, history, and character of our respective museums. I recognize that I have a rather singular perspective on the challenges since I have only worked in one institution during the course of my career, and a large, national art museum at that. Nevertheless, the changes in the character of museums and art education since I first entered the profession 40 years ago do provide some historical perspective on the question before us, and I hope that my experiences can suggest a framework for dealing with such scholarly initiatives in the future.

Forty years ago museum life was much quieter then than it is now. Deadlines did not seem to dictate our lives. Exhibitions were not as frequently scheduled, and museum publications were fewer and less ambitious in scope. Color reproductions, whether in catalogues focused on permanent collections or on temporary exhibitions, were rare; in fact, it was even unusual for all of the works discussed to be illustrated. The most important museum catalogue during my student years in the 1960s and early 1970s, Neil Maclaren’s 1960 catalogue of the Dutch paintings at the National Gallery, London, had no illustrations at all (fig. *Maclaren*).

Other than for Maclaren, texts of most museum catalogues were cursory, often containing little more than the basic tombstone information, as was the case at the National Gallery of Art in Washington (fig. *scan cats. with Ann Halpern*). In the 1970s, however, museums began to change. They became more dynamic institutions, and started vying with universities as a place for research and scholarly inquiry. Young curators were brought aboard to study the works in the permanent collections, and to create exhibitions that would expand our knowledge of the past. Indeed, it is remarkable how many of our colleagues began their museum careers at about the same time, among them Peter Schatborn, Wouter Kloek, Jan Piet Filedt Kok, Frits Duparc, Pieter Biesboer, Jeroen Giltaij, Christopher Brown, Konrad Renger, Jan Kelch, Walter Liedtke.

Those of us who became curators in the early 1970s were encouraged to spend time researching the collection, in part because (with the exception of the National Gallery in London), most museums catalogues were badly out of date (fig. *Mauritshuis cat.*). We could spend hours and days, even weeks, in print rooms, painting galleries and libraries on research and writing (fig. *old pictures of NGA offices and* ). We transcribed documents by hand, and then produced final copies on a typewriter, of all things .Xerox machines were our life-blood for bringing home texts from out-of-print or difficult to reach publications. It was an exciting time of discovery and realization that we could make a difference.

We also relied on each other. Long distance communication was done primarily through hand-written letters and phone call, but the most rewarding form of communication was personal contact. Whenever I was able to come to Europe and visit one of the great museums that held artistic treasures that I knew only by reputation, I was inevitably welcomed by colleagues who would wander through their collections with me. Through their eyes I learned much about their great masterpieces, as well as any secondary works in storage. I always left with an enhanced understanding of familiar paintings and discoveries about artists who were totally new to me. Such revelations never ceased, as over the years these personal relationships would continue to grow and deepen. I also had an interest in artists’ painting techniques and issues of conservation, and I often visited conservation laboratories to see paintings undergoing technical examinations, which always added new dimensions to my experiences. These opportunities to look, discuss, and reflect provided the foundation for the connoisseurship that would be an essential component of my curatorial life.

The character of the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Art when I arrived in Washington in 1973 as a Finley Fellow is informative when considering differences in museum life then and now, which I think are not totally unique to that institution. The National Gallery of Art was, and still is, a rather new National museum, having only been established in 1941 (fig. *exterior of West Building*). Thus, it was only 32 years old when I got there! It had a great collection of Dutch and Flemish paintings, with a heavy concentration of works by Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Aelbert Cuyp, and Anthony van Dyck, (fig. *old shots of Dutch and/or Flemish galleries, archives?*) thanks primarily to the generosity of Andrew Mellon and the Widener family(fig. *Mellon and/or Widener?*), with a few masterpieces donated by the Kress Collection. Only a handful of Dutch and Flemish paintings had been acquired since the museum had opened its doors, for example, this work by Gerrit Dou, which was donated in 1960. *(fig. Gerrit Dou,*). As a consequence, the Dutch and Flemish collection, while significant in quality, was not particularly large, numbering 72 Dutch and 35 Flemish paintings.

When I was named Curator in 1975 virtually no research had been done on the Dutch and Flemish paintings, since there had never been a curator at the Gallery responsible for these works. Curatorial files existed for all of the paintings, but most were empty, or at best, filled with old correspondence or discolored typescripts from the dealers who had once handled these works (fig. ). Moreover, since the National Gallery’s conservation department had only been formed around 1970, none of these paintings had been examined, let alone treated, and virtually all of them were covered by thick layers of discolored varnish. Thus, much of my early career at the National Gallery of Art was devoted to discovering what, in fact, was on the walls of the museum, which was actually a challenge because of the dirty state of the paintings (fig. ) (fig. of paintings cleaned). The poor lighting in the galleries complicated the situation. Natural light entered through skylights above, but because of the height of the galleries, light hit the upper register of the walls while the paintings were left in relative darkness (fig. Rembrandt gallery).

I was very fortunate that during my year as a Finley Fellow in 1973, the Gallery had invited Bob de Vries, former director of the Mauritshuis, to be in residence as a so-called “Kress Professor.” (fig. *photo of Bob de Vries*) The early 1970s was a time of scholarly ferment in the study of Dutch and Flemish paintings, and with De Vries as my mentor, we decided to carefully examine the Rembrandt and Vermeer paintings in the collection since the attributions of a number of them had recently been called into question. Together with Kay Silberfeld, a member of the newly formed conservation department, we took the Vermeer paintings, one by one, to the laboratory to study them under the microscope, in infra-red light, take x-radiographs, and, in general, find out as much as we could about the master’s painting techniques (fig. *of Vermeer study, technical photo?*). One of my first responsibilities, thus, was to write about the Gallery’s Vermeers, which, for someone who wrote his dissertation on the optics of Vermeer’s work, was an exciting way to be introduced to the collection!

We studied the National Gallery’s much larger Rembrandt collection by closing the galleries one at a time so that we could examine the paintings with strong lights, infra-red light, and step ladders. Occasionally, we were joined by other scholars, among them Jakob Rosenberg, Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, or my professor at Harvard, Seymour Slive (fig. ), and our discussions would become even more involved. We also travelled to other museums in the United States and abroad to do careful assessments of related works by Rembrandt and Vermeer

The fortuitous situation I encountered when I arrived at the Gallery, that here was a major collection that had never been researched, allowed me to delve immediately into fascinating issues for historically important paintings. I began to fill the curatorial files with research materials on attribution and conservation issues, as well as on provenance, which tell so much about earlier reactions to specific works of art.

After I became curator, it soon became clear that we would not be able to come to terms with the attribution issues of the Gallery’s Rembrandt paintings without removing the many layers of discolored varnish and old over-paint that had so affected their appearance. Kay Silberfeld and I began with *Saskia,* which Kay restored in 1976 (fig. Saskia). For this work, and for all other Rembrandt paintings in the collection, we did thorough technical examinations similar to those we did with the Vermeers and, as well, assessed their canvases and panels (fig. *me working with Bauch*?).

It was not until the early 1980s that the Gallery decided that it should embark on a series of systematic catalogues of its paintings,and we curators were charged with producing written entries on the works in our collections. The plan to produce a collection catalogue further stimulated the conservation program we had begun with *Saskia*, as it seemed crucial for this undertaking to thoroughly examine all of the 24 Rembrandt paintings in the collection in a comparable way. As a consequence of these endeavors, most of the Rembrandt paintings were cleaned and many of Rembrandt attributions were changed before the National Gallery of Art’s Dutch catalogue was published in 1995 (fig. ). The most controversial restoration project, of course, was *The Mill*, (fig. ), which was loved by many because of its brown tones and deeply brooding character. Many of you may remember that removing the discolored varnish that obscured the blue sky underneath embroiled the National Gallery in a conservation controversy in the late 1970s and early 1980s that threatened to close down the conservation program, but that is another story.

Initially the the Dutch and Flemish paintings were planned to be one volume, but it soon became clear that two separate volumes would be necessary. Because the Dutch collection was more comprehensive than the Flemish, and the issues surrounding the Rembrandt paintings so topical, I decided to place my energies there. Interestingly, the decision to focus on the Dutch catalogue was also partly due to an exhibition project: *Anthony van Dyck*, which the Gallery organized in 1990-1991 to celebrated the 350th anniversary of the artist’s death as well as the 50th anniversary of the National Gallery of Art. Since so many of the Gallery’s great Van Dyck paintings were to be discussed in that catalogue (fig. cover *Van Dyck cat.* ), I felt that that publication would temporarily provide a scholarly framework for an important aspect of the Gallery’s Flemish collection. The Flemish catalogue would eventually appear in 2005.

So, all in all, these collection catalogues took over 20 years to complete from the time that they were first conceived. In one important respect this prolonged period of gestation was beneficial since I gained enormously from the multiple experiences I had learning about the collection, whether in the galleries, in the conservation laboratories, or filling curatorial files. The institutional knowledge I developed was irreplaceable, and, I believe, essential for a curatorial assessment of a museum’s collection. Nevertheless, this 20 year statistic is really striking when one considers the fact that producing these catalogues was a Gallery priority, and that, beyond my own efforts,I benefitted from the energy and insights of a large number of wonderful interns and graduate assistants, many of whom were from the University of Maryland where I continue to teach. I have also been blessed with devoted assistants, among them Anna Tummers and Adriaan Waiboer who are here today, who worked long hours imputing information as well as providing me with other eyes and thoughts about the paintings.

Why, then the extended period before the catalogues were completed? A simple answer is the conflicting demands on a curator’s time, much of it spent organizing temporary exhibitions. When push comes to shove for a curator’s time, exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues always win since they **have** to be completed by a specific date. In Washington the deadline for exhibition catalogue texts is one year in advance of the opening of the show so that the team of editors, designers, and printers can be certain that the catalogue will be available for the public by opening day.

The beginning of the exhibition era at the National Gallery of Art coincided with my arrival at that institution. In fact, to get to my office in 1976 I had to walk through the installation of one of the first blockbuster exhibitions, *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (affectionately known as the *King Tut* exhibition)*.* (fig. *cat.* ). The enormous public response to this show demonstrated to directors, trustees, and corporate sponsors the potential of exhibitions to greatly expand museum visitation. Indeed, by the early 1980s, when the Gallery decided that curators should focus their energies on collection catalogues, it had already developed its very active exhibition program. Virtually none of the shows from the 1970s, however, were conceived by in-house curators, and few of them featured works that were part of the Gallery’s collection. Like *King Tut* most were canned shows that had been put together by outside curators and exhibition organizations. Many of these exhibitions, in fact, were politically motivated because of the National Gallery’s unique proximity to Capitol Hill.

During the 1980s, however, the Gallery’s exhibition program became more focused on elucidating works in its collection, as, for example, *Gods Saints and Heroes* from 1980.. At the same time, expectations of exhibition publications radically changed: they became much more ambitious in scope. Color images became the norm as did scholarly essays and extended commentaries on the works displayed. Consequently, exhibitions have become incredibly important vehicles for bringing new ideas about art and specific artists to scholars and the general public alike. They have the potential to be more thought-provoking and intellectually challenging than even the finest permanent collection catalogues.

This potential arises from the fact that exhibitions are often collaborative efforts, where the resources and expertise of colleagues from different museums are joined in a common endeavor. Unlike most museum catalogues, essays and entries are generally written by a diverse team of scholars, thereby enriching the range of issues being discussed and displayed (fig. *table of contents of the Hals exhibiton*). The advent of new technologies like fax machines, personal computers, and above all the Internet, that speeded up communications between scholars and partnering institutions facilitated such collaborations. Advancements in conservation and packing technologies, moreover, have allowed the transport of works of art previously impossible to borrow (fig. photos of un-crating Group Portraits & Cityscape Van Goyen ; for others: *Michael Pierce is looking into this*). Finally, the introduction of government indemnity programs helped alleviate costs that had previously hindered exhibition programs. Exhibitions have become a larger part of our lives, and, for good reason, however. As we all know, they take a great deal of energy and time, not to mention expense.

Over the last 35 years the exhibition program for Dutch and Flemish paintings at the National Gallery of Art has been very robust, averaging about one show a year . Exhibitions, of course, come in all shapes and sizes, and are mounted for a wide variety of reasons, but I have tried very hard over the years to develop exhibitions that enhanced our understanding of the permanent collection. Thus, the Gallery has mounted large monographic shows of paintings by artists well represented in the permanent collection, such as the Frans Hals and Anthony van Dyck, and more restricted monographic shows, such as the series of genre exhibitions that focused on, among others, Jan Steen, Gerrit Dou, Frans van Mieris, Gerard Terborch, and Gabriel Metsu, and, of course, Johannes Vermeer, (fig. ). It has organized monographic shows that include both paintings and drawings, such as Aelbert Cuyp, Jan Lievens, and Hendrick Avercamp (fig. *case with paintings, drawings and skates-*)*;* thematic exhibitions such as *Gods, Saints and Heroes*; the still life exhibition, *From Botany to Bouquet* or the *Dutch Cityscapes* show of 2007; small focus exhibitions such as *Rembrandt’s Lucretia’s*, which paired the Washington and Minneapolis paintings, the Ter Brugghen show, which consisted of our *Bagpipe Player* and Oberlin’s *St. Sebastian (*fig. *installation shot*). The Gallery has mounted small exhibitions that celebrate new acquisitions, such as those devoted to Jan de Bray (fig. ) and Adriaan Coorte. Other exhibitions, on the other hand, expand the character of the collection, such as the current *Civic Pride* exhibition, which also contains but two works, wonderful group portrait paintings from Govaert Flinck and Balthasar van der Helst from the Rijksmuseum and Amsterdam Museum respectively.

These exhibitions have certainly taken time and energy away from the production of collection catalogues, yet there have been many ways in which they have enriched the collection and my ability to interpret it. Hence, rather than seeing these two realms as competing with each other, I feel as though they generally work in tandem in a kind of fascinating symbiosis. Temporary exhibitions have a public face that a collection catalogue will never be able to generate, however good the scholarship or well produced the publication.. The publicity surrounding the rich series of exhibitions described above has, without question, created a great deal of public interest in Washington, and has helped raise the profile of Dutch and Flemish cultures among art lovers in much of the United States. (fig. *exhibition brochures*).

A very tangible consequence of this interest is the fact that the Gallery’s active focus on Dutch and Flemish art has attracted collectors who have made serious commitments to help support these programs. Gifts of paintings and donations of financial support have often accompanied these shows. For example, Lievens’ *Bearded Man with a Beret* came into the National Gallery collection because of the Jan Lievens show (fig. ). Exhibitions also introduce new artist to the general public, and that enhanced awareness has also translated into gifts of paintings by masters previously unrepresented in the Gallery’s collection, such as Godefridus (Godfried) Schalcken’s *Woman Weaving a Crown of Flowers* (fig. )*.* Thus, in part, the collections of both the Dutch and Flemish paintings have grown due to exhibitions. As a result the collection catalogues are now able to provide a more comprehensive view of Netherlandish seventeenth-century art and culture than they would have had these shows not been held.

Exhibitions are great teaching experiences because whatever their size or character, they have to be thoughtfully conceived and express new ideas and concepts. (fig.  *AKW & colleagues examining loan objects)*.Writing for exhibition catalogues is thus beneficial for curators in two important dimensions. Such texts stretch the mind because they inevitably encompass broader concepts than those necessarily dealt with in individual entries for a collection catalogue (such as provenance history, biographical information, iconographic analyses, and issues of condition and technique). Secondly, they force the curator to write with clarity and in an engaging way that informs both the scholarly community and those who have a general interest in the arts but are not professionals in the field. These issues have particular consequence for curators when the exhibition and its catalogue include paintings in the museum’s own collection.

In this last regard, preparations for exhibitions can have a huge impact on the scholarly content of a collection catalogue. For example, paintings scheduled to be in an exhibition are often treated in conservation laboratories before a show is mounted. Prior to the Van Dyck exhibition, for example, we undertook a systematic conservation program, similar to that done with our Rembrandts in anticipation of the Dutch systematic catalogue (fig. Elena Grimalde). We did technical studies and restored eight of our Van Dyck paintings, and the catalogue contained an important essay by a group of our restorers on their findings. These conservation efforts subsequently informed texts written for the Flemish catalogue. Similar conservation projects involving paintings in the permanent collection were also undertaken prior to the Vermeer and Cuyp exhibitions (fig. Vermeer).

For all the reasons mentioned above, museum collections are rarely static; hence collection catalogues can quickly become out of date. Recognizing that fact, that Gallery has sought to rethink the existing paradigm by creating an on-line catalogue of the Dutch collection. This decision to do so was made shortly after the 1995 Dutch catalogue went out of print in 2003. At that time we decided that it did not make any sense to reprint it since the Gallery had made many new acquisitions, had conserved a number of paintings, and important scholarly discoveries had occurred in the interim. Fortunately, a few years later the Getty Foundation announced an initiative to encourage museums to create on-line catalogues for their permanent collections. The National Gallery of Art became one of nine museums in the United States and Europe that were chosen to participate in this initiative, called the On-Line Scholarly Catalogue Initiative, or OSCI. Our particular category was the transformation of a printed publication into an on-line catalogue. (fig. Draft of Dutch OSCI home page)

This process, which has engaged us for the last five years, has been very exciting, but complex and demanding as well. It has meant revising all of the 90 entries in the 1995 catalogue and writing new entries on the over 30 acquisitions that we have made since then. These new entries were peer-reviewed by a third-party scholar to insure their art historical integrity. We have had to think carefully about the implications of this new vehicle for conveying information. For example, one of the consequences of the on-line format is that the reading audience for such a museum catalogue will expand exponentially, particularly among members of the general public; hence summaries of catalogue texts have been written for those who do not want to read the full scholarly entries.

To ensure that all aspects of the project were properly coordinated, we assembled a group of about 15 colleagues within the museum, including photographers, conservators, registrars, editors, and, of course, “the tech-boys” who know about advanced technologies. We also engaged a number of younger art historians to see what questions they might ask when coming to this web site.

One of our early challenges was to re-photograph paintings, as well as technical photos such as x-radiographs, because we needed digital images for all of the illustrations, including comparative figures. We wanted to take advantage of web features that enhance the research possibilities for users, including the opportunity to superimpose technical images onto paintings. We also wanted to provide the ability to do keyword searches; the capability to cite content and to trust that it will persist; and to make lists of favorites. To assist in this endeavor the Kress Foundation funded two academic-year fellowships to help with research and content description. The Gallery also hired two external organizations, one to help us devise the most efficient way to implement our desired scholarly goals, and the other to create a visually appealing website with clear functionality (fig. ). We also hired a firm to make a number of introductory films about the collection for the site . We hope that these films will encourage viewers, particularly the non-scholarly audience that comes to the website, to realize that these paintings have fascinating stories that will enrich their viewing experiences in the galleries. (fig. screen shots of Rembrandt video (2 into 1)

We expect the new on-line Dutch catalogue to go live this winter. It will be coordinated to work within the Gallery’s newly designed website, but will have functionality beyond that which is available for other parts of the Gallery’s collection. Over time the expectation is that all of the Gallery’s collection catalogues, both new and old, will become part of the on-line catalogue project. It is also expected that the Dutch on-line catalogue shall be a prototype for other museums as they develop comparable projects.

This on-line catalogue of the National Gallery’s Dutch paintings is an exciting new approach to museum collection catalogues. Aside from allowing scholarly updates, it will provide research opportunities to a worldwide audience currently unavailable in book format. We are sure that we will learn much from this initial effort and find ways to refine and improve it in the future. We are also trying to figure out how frequently the web-content needs to be revised to take advantage of its on-line capabilities but without becoming a curatorial slave to it. Our current thinking is that reviews will occur every 5 years, although ad hoc additions could be made to incorporate acquisitions or scholarly discoveries.

Each catalogue entry will have a permanent URL (or PURL) that will always be retrievable- and point to the specific version of the content cited. Moreover, old catalogue texts will be archived so that changes in texts and the character of the collection can be readily assessed by the reader (fig. reader mode of the new catalogue- ter brugghen large image) I look forward to the official launch this winter, and invite each and every one of you to send us your feedback once you try it out.

I honestly do not think that this new paradigm of on-line catalogues will help provide more time for curators to create both collection and exhibition catalogues, though I wish I could conclude otherwise. Nevertheless, I do think that this new technology will greatly enhance our efforts to fuse the scholarly benefits gained from collection and exhibition catalogues. The scholarly process of assimilating and conveying information will become stronger and richer. I am also excited about the greatly expanded opportunities this on-line catalogue will provide for educating a broad public about the fascinating character of Netherlandish art. I am convinced that this new mode of publication will create opportunities for students and scholars to engage with the material in exciting ways that will inevitably bring new insights to the remarkable artistic traditions that have stimulated all of us here today.