

## CODART ELF congress: Workshop 5

### Scholarly research of the museum collection: A task for the curator?

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#### Introduction

Scholarly research is more and more pushed outside the museum's core business and no longer seems to be of first interest to today's museum management – at least in The Netherlands. Looking for 'scholarly research' on the websites of the largest Dutch museums – especially of the art museums – offers disappointing results. Whereas only a few years ago research still was considered a basic condition for all museum activities: for acquisition, conservation, restoration and publication it is now often lacking in museum mission statements. Museum websites only reluctantly- if at all- give attention to the newest scholarly publications of its own museum staff – unless a profit for the museum shop is to be expected.

Looking at our neighbors in Germany, a very different situation comes to the fore. On the website of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin or of the Germanisches National Museum in Nürnberg, for instance, many informative pages are devoted to different aspects of research: the projects, the people involved, the results as well as of the most important sponsors.

To understand the changing issues in research in museums a large international meeting was held in Berlin (December 2007) under the title „Was heißt und zu welchem Ende betreibt man Forschung in Museen?“ The conference was organized by the Institute für Museumsforschung, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in collaboration with the VolkswagenStiftung.<sup>1</sup>

More and more, we, the curators should realize that museums are no islands and that we need to develop networks in order to master collectively certain research tasks and to promote and share the results with the public at large as well as with specialists. In this network the role of universities is of great importance.

To this workshop, in which 25 participants enlisted, three speakers contributed:

#### **Speaker I: Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm**

Görel Cavalli-Björkman until her recent retirement was director of research of the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. She has been an active member of CODART and participated in all of our conferences. She also hosted the CODART ACHT Study trip in 2005. Görel is the author of numerous publications and is a specialist in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch and Flemish Art. She will continue to be attached to her

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<sup>1</sup>Berlin, 17.-19. December 2007; see:

<http://www.smb.spk-berlin.de/smb/forschung/details.php?objID=16377&lang=de&typeld=211&n=1>  
Forschung bei den Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (als ausführliche Publikation im PDF-Format: 145 Seiten) and Forschung bei den Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (kurze Version: 38 Seiten)

museum working on the catalogue of Flemish paintings and preparing the exhibition *Rubens in dialogue with older masters* in collaboration with the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

Görel Cavalli-Björkman shared the results of a meeting on “Research and musea”, recently held in Sweden. She discussed her experiences in setting up a research department in her own museum more than ten years ago, that, in the mean time, became a model for other institutions. The department started a major reorganization of the museum in 1997. The need of a special department for research was expressed by the younger curators. Nowadays the National Museum’s research department has become a radiating institution, building networks, stimulating colleagues and offering many, well attended seminars. Görel’s main objectives as head of the research institute were: educating young scholars, functioning as ambassador, collaborating with conservators and communicating to the public. She is convinced that questioning setting up a research department is a mistake “as if we would question Manchester United setting up a football team”.

Ten years ago there was a large gap in Sweden between universities and museums, a gap, which now has been filled. Whereas the study of the humanities in universities is dwindling, museums can offer meaningful post-doc traineeships. As new conditions in society lead to new questions, the dialogue between society and museums should also to be rejuvenated. In Görel’s institute seminars play a prominent and successful role. For more information about research at the National Museum in Stockholm, see: [http://www.nationalmuseum.se/NMTemplates/NMCollection\\_\\_\\_\\_2556.aspx](http://www.nationalmuseum.se/NMTemplates/NMCollection____2556.aspx)

**Speaker II: John Oliver Hand, Curator, National Gallery of Art, Washington**

John Oliver Hand is Curator of Northern Renaissance Paintings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Already in 1986 he published the still praised *Early Netherlandish painting: the collections of the National Gallery of Art*. Other well known publications are his Hans Holbein book of 2001 bringing together leading scholars from Europe and the United States, considering the art of Holbein the Younger (1497/98–1543) from a variety of perspectives and disciplines based on the most up-to-date research. In 2004 the National Gallery celebrated the *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*, with a lavish overview of the Gallery’s masterpieces authored by John Hand. Also in 2004 his book on *Joos van Cleve. The complete Paintings* was published by Yale University Press. More recently he collaborated on the *Prayers and Portraits*, a book that accompanied the exhibitions in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, in association with the Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge. The book won the George Wittenborn Memorial Award sponsored by the Art Libraries Society of North America. That book covers a wide variety of topics, it is an excellent study and is considered an example of collaboration between museums, universities and scholars and restorers.

Based on his tremendous scholarly activities, John Hand was introduced as a ‘research curator’. However, he strongly objected to this as the work of a curator implies much more than research only. Hand considers himself a ‘curator’ per se, cf. the statements he listed for this workshop (we quote: “the work of a curator is an all-encompassing process. Ideally the curator knows his/her collection as well as or better than anybody else. He/she knows his/her colleagues and works of art in other museums and private collections as well as his/her academic counterparts and through them, those who are writing interesting/useful dissertations. Last but not least he/she should know the art market, dealers and auction houses. One of the most important responsibilities that a curator has, is to produce scholarly catalogues of the works in his or her museum.” ) In preparing catalogues the curator learns a lot about his/her collection. In this process it is very important to collaborate with all colleagues in the museum. As everyone needs to contribute, the Institution has to support the making of a catalogue. The support of the director is a first condition, but a talented design department is

most helpful too! It is the chief curators' task to provide for the basics for research. He/she has to find the necessary support and the funding (money is always critical: for traveling, photography etc.). Projects should be well structured with well-set deadlines. And he should stimulate to publish research results in museum bulletins.

Exhibitions should always be built upon a good catalogue and labels should always contain the correct information (however, it was remarked, that in the USA, an important attribution cannot be changed without the approval of the Board of Trustees!). The education department should use curatorial research, as one should be very careful in offering the right message. No opportunities for misinterpretation are to be allowed. All curators should be aware of the ICOM ethical code.

### **Speaker III: Maximiliaan P.J. Martens, Universiteit Gent - Afdeling Beeldende Kunst, Ghent**

Maximiliaan Martens is not a museum curator but a professor in Art History at University of Ghent (vak-groep Kunst, Muziek en Theaterwetenschappen). He is publishing since 1984 and collaborated with a variety of curators and museums on numerous occasions. His bibliography consists of more than 73 publications. It is not only impressive in numbers but also in contents. His first research was on mural paintings in Ghent, next he worked on Bruges, among others on Petrus Christus and Hans Memling. In more recent years his attention moved to Antwerp painters, their markets and networks, and most recently to Joachim Patinir. Max performs much archival research, often in collaboration with his students.

Agreeing with the previous speakers Max Martens considers collaboration between universities and museums extremely important and necessary, especially in technical conservation issues. There are fine results of such collaboration, as, for example, shown in the recent exhibition on diptychs mentioned above. The gap between both institutions is not too large although better integration is needed. Martens much regrets now that at the time when the universities' art history education was reformed, museums were not involved and he expresses his admiration for the Dutch system of collaboration between universities and the larger museums. Internships for young art historians are very important, but in their way students can also be helpful to museums (in keeping up documentation etc., or tasks for which time often lacks. The Master's degree in curatorial studies in Holland, a joint University and Museum project, is a very good start. Max also sees profit in mutual collaboration in raising money. Universities have more money to spend on research and have departments with expertise how to raise funds (especially on the European level). Max Martens explicitly mentions that he would like to support cataloguing projects of Eastern European collections. During our workshop he called for international projects in which he would be eager to participate!

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## **Report on the discussion**

In the plenary discussion Stephan Hartog (ICN) asked how small museums could do research and how research could be done in countries with minimal funding? Max Martens compared it with University professors, who do not do all the research themselves but often guide the process. To perform good research, it is important to know the right channels, to find funding, the right collaborators, as well as graduate students and assistants. Altogether they can help to make a good catalogue.

According to John Hand cataloguing is the official work of a museum and it is the curator's task to check the accuracy of all information. Adriaan Waiboer (National Gallery of Ireland) pointed out that exchange of information is an important issue. And one should admit that it is impossible to know everything yourselves and the expertise of other people should be most welcome. Görel Cavalli-Björkman explained how, in her museum, an expert from outside was asked to make the catalogue of

the Spanish collection and, although the person did not continue working in the museum, the catalogue and the knowledge did in fact remain. On this however, there was no consensus. But generally speaking it was agreed that as young curators still need to learn, it is good to ask for outside help and collaboration.

Adriaan Waiboer pointed out that cataloguing projects need to be supported by the museum management, be well described and planned, with firm deadlines. Marieke Spliethoff (Museum Het Loo) explained that in her daily work there was no room for research – but she has to lock up herself in order to be able to prepare publications. Fortunately, publications are still considered important for the museum's standing.

How can curators find more time to do research? Fred Meijer pointed out that the RKD is sometimes hired to help museums. After sufficient funding was found, he made a catalogue on still lives with Christopher White. Max Martens emphasized that universities also can help - especially in projects where more countries are involved.

Karin Hearn (London, Tate Britain) asked about the format of catalogues, should these still be books or should we publish online on the internet (as Tate Britain will do)? John Hand has mixed feelings: although one can easily up to date texts, the question of authorship and the usage of technical images put serious questions marks at internet catalogues. Adriaan Waiboer wondered what would happen with research when a curator leaves the museum? Can a successor change what you have written? Do you yourselves become anonymous? Karin Hearn explained that her museum leaves her no choice, and although her name will be credited in the internet catalogue, the research results are not hers but belong to the museum. George Keys warned to be aware of this when you sign a contract, as there is a difference between institutional and personal copyright.

Last but not least, the relation between exhibitions and research can be problematic, but ideally both work hand in hand. The curator should always ask him/herself what is the added value of an exhibition catalogue? - for the public at large or for the scholarly world? Also, we should be careful to express whether an exhibition shows the vision of the curator or that of the museum.

### **In conclusion**

On the whole we can conclude: research in museums is a necessity: it is a source for knowledge and inspiration. Research is something to be proud of and its results should be offered to the public at large. Senior people should create the right environment for research and the chief curator should provide for the funding for well-structured projects.

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

- 1 Marc de Beyer, Deputy keeper of the Royal Collection, Royal Collections, The Hague
- 2 Rhea Sylvia Blok, Curator, Fondation Custodia (Collection Frits Lugt), Paris
- 3 Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Chief curator and director of research, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
- 4 Daniel Christiaens, Curator, Maagdenhuismuseum, Antwerp
- 5 Dana Crişan, Curator of prints and drawings, National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest
- 6 Osvaldas Daugelis, Director, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas
- 7 Godelieve Denhaene, Head of the department of prints and drawings, Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels

- 8 Alexis Donetzkoff, Curator at the Services des Bibliothèques, des Archives et de la documentation générale, Direction des musées de France, Paris
- 9 John Oliver Hand, Curator, National Gallery of Art, Washington
- 10 Drs. Stephen Hartog, Advisor, Instituut Collectie Nederland, Amsterdam
- 11 Karen Hearn, Curator of the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century arts, Tate Britain, London
- 12 Lars Hendrikman, Curator of Old Master paintings and applied Arts, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht
- 13 George S. Keyes, Curator of European paintings, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
- 14 Karin van Lieverloo, Curator, Museum de Fundatie - Kasteel Het Nijenhuis, Heino
- 15 Jan De Maere, Director, Documentatiecentrum voor het Vlaamse Kunstpatrimonium Brussel, Brussels
- 16 Natalja Markova, Head of department of prints and drawings, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
- 17 Maximiliaan P.J. Martens, Professor of art history, Universiteit Gent - Afdeling Beeldende Kunst, Ghent
- 18 Fred G. Meijer, Curator of Dutch and Flemish still lifes and genre paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries and Dutch 17th-century portraits, RKD, The Hague
- 19 Brenda Schooneveld, Intern, CODART, The Hague
- 20 Marieke Spliethoff, Curator of paintings, Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn
- 21 Dominique Nicole Surh, Curator, Leiden Gallery, New York
- 22 Christoph Martin Vogtherr, Curator of pictures pre-1800, Wallace Collection, London
- 23 Adriaan E. Waiboer, Curator of northern European art, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin
- 24 Helen Wüstefeld, Curator, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica (J.R. Ritman Library), Amsterdam
- 25 Olena Zhivkova, Head of department of European art, Bogdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Art, Kiev