

Dutch art in the 18th century

Paul Knolle, Curator of Old Master paintings, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede

Anyone looking for 18th-century fine and applied arts in Dutch museums more than ten or fifteen years ago would have had a hard time of it. It was only in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam that it was possible, having left the showcase rooms of stunning 17th-century pieces and after some searching, to find a number of rooms with important art from the time of the Enlightenment. Once in a while an exhibition would offer a rare opportunity for those curious about Dutch art in the Regency period. But apart from a few presentations, often with stuffy titles which only served to reinforce the powdered image of the period, there was only one interesting project, in the winter of 1971-2, which was sadly only to be seen in North America. I refer to *Dutch Masterpieces from the Eighteenth Century: Paintings & Drawings 1700 – 1800*, the extensive exhibition which could be seen in Minneapolis, Toledo and Philadelphia. The very informative catalogue was compiled by Earl Roger Mandle and included an essay by J.W. Niemeijer. Oddly enough this exhibition, described by Niemeijer in his introduction as “a triumph of eighteenth-century paintings and drawings that cannot fail to enhance their prestige mightily” appeared neither in Amsterdam nor in any other European city.

The situation has become somewhat rosier since the mid nineties. Many newly independent state museums chose one or two specialist areas in which to distinguish themselves and become better known. Thanks to this development the Rijksmuseum Twenthe in Enschede is able to extend a cordial invitation to the weary in their search for a Rembrandt-free oasis this year.

But just in case we can also cater for the real Rembrandt addict as we have two etchings by the master in storage: *Blind Tobias* and the minuscule *Mountebank*. But these etchings do not form part of the permanent exhibition. We have, after due consideration, decided to forgo an exhibition on the fascinating topic of *Rembrandt in the East Netherlands*. Instead, the visitor will find himself amongst medieval statues and manuscripts, with 16th and 17th-century paintings (including works by Van Cleve, Verspronck, Van Goyen, Steen, Avercamp and Van Ruisdael and Van Ruysdael), with 17th-century silver, works from Monet, Sisley, Redon and Mondriaan, and international contemporary art. What particularly concerns us here are the two rooms devoted to 18th-century fine and applied arts. Since the newly independent museum reopened in 1996, following extensive renovation, the art and culture of the 18th century has been a particular specialization. This area was chosen because the board felt that the art of this period, hitherto rather neglected by museums, was both exciting and progressive. In this way the Rijksmuseum Twenthe has more or less become the ‘Museum of the 18th Century’ for the Netherlands. In addition to the permanent collection there have been special exhibitions which time and again drew attention to the 18th century. In the last ten years the museum has organized exhibitions on such wide ranging themes as: celebrations in the 18th century, the painters Wouter Johannes van Troostwijk and Abraham and Jacob van Strij, book illustrations by the writer Willem Bilderdijk, satirical prints, Wedgwood, 18th-century graphic work from its own collection and 18th-century Dutch architecture. In 2004 the museum was entrusted with the care of the most important 18th-century paintings and a splendid collection of Meissen from the Rijksmuseum, for the duration of its renovation work. This formed the basis for the exhibition *De 18de eeuw in volle schoonheid* (*The*

18th century in all its splendour). At the moment an exhibition is running of the portrait artist Tibout Regters and the Dutch conversation piece. If the signs are to be believed, Dutch art of the 18th century is at last, slowly, receiving the recognition it deserves. But there is always some *terra incognita* to be explored.

In this short introduction I will try to summarize the developments in Dutch art up to 1765 and thereafter from 1765 to 1820 and to illustrate them with the use of some well known and less well known examples.

1680-1765

Around 1700 and for the first half of the 18th century painting in the Northern Netherlands was characterized by many different genres, although, as is well known, the influence of French art and artistic interpretations had been growing in importance since 1670. *Fijnschilderkunst*, already practiced in The Netherlands, became increasingly valued, the number of history painters increased and landscapes in the Italian manner became particularly favored. Rooms were decorated with large paintings on ceilings, wall and mantelpieces. Smaller easel-paintings were displayed in dedicated rooms, so-called *kunstkamers*. So the Dutch art world of the day was peopled not only by painters of decorative pieces, but also by topographical artists, portrait painters and painters of still-life flower pieces.

Some artists, such as Adriaen van der Werff, were employed by foreign royalty. The artists who remained in The Netherlands tended to form local schools, each with their own recognizable style and subject matter. A good example of this is the Leyden school (which I am naturally very happy to mention here), in which followers of Frans van Mieris the Elder and Gerard Dou, such as the artists Matthys Naiveu en Willem van Mieris, were the driving force. All in all classicism with a Dutch accent (wall-sized *grand goût*) and a more traditional pseudo-realism managed a reasonably peaceful coexistence.

Obviously it isn't possible to give a comprehensive summary of the art of a complete century in 25 minutes, but I hope that the examples which follow will whet your appetite and arouse your curiosity. I shall show you a number of paintings which are currently to be seen in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe. Many of them come from the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), others are from the museum's own collection.

Let us begin with - alongside Gerard Lairesse en Adriaen van der Werff – one of the best known Dutch painters from this time.

- You see here an attractive composition for room decorations by Jacob de Wit, depicting the apotheosis of Aeneas (circa 1723).

Jacob de Wit, apart from being a painter of ceilings, also constructed a number of altarpieces for private catholic chapels. His name is also often associated with so-called 'witjes' or grisailles which served as room decoration. In this sketch a meeting of the ancient gods is depicted in luminous, light colors. The apotheosis, or deification of Aeneas is a seldom painted subject from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This was possibly the design for a ceiling painting intended for the house of the Amsterdam merchant Pieter Pels.

From the hand of Willem van Mieris I should like to show you an example of *fijnschilderkunst*, a painting from the Rijksmuseum Twenthe.

- *Diana with nymphs* (1702) purchased in 1998 by the Rijksmuseum Twenthe.

- Here is an interesting painting by the less well-known artist, Isaac Walraven: *The Deathbed of Epaminondas* (1726).

This painting is exceptional for its subject, which was seldom chosen by Dutch artists. Epaminondas (circa 420-362 AD) was the Greek governor of Thebes. His altruistic character and simple and self-sacrificing love of his fatherland made a great impression on his contemporaries. He fell in a battle against Sparta in which his army was victorious.

Little is known of Isaac Walraven. He trained as a jeweller and goldsmith, but as an adult he became a competent painter. He was from a wealthy family and did not need to paint to earn a living, but kept most of his paintings himself. In this painting we see the dying Epaminondas after he is brought back to his tent, speaking to his friends and those under his command, who are overcome with hopelessness and grief.

By Nicolaas Verkolje, son of the famous portrait painter Jan Verkolje we have

- *Moses found by Pharaoh's daughter* (1740) from the Rijksmuseum Twenthe.

Nicolaas Verkolje worked in Amsterdam from 1700, painting portraits, mythological scenes, genre pieces and ceiling decorations. Of particular interest here is the beautiful variegation of the colors to be seen where the light falls under the parasol.

I find it difficult to simply dismiss painters of floral still-lives or topographical subjects as merely that. To conclude this first section of my story I have chosen two paintings by Cornelis Troost, long regarded as the figurehead of Dutch 18th-century art. First an example from his paintings of theatrical scenes, namely:

- *The Spendthrift* (1741)

This painting shows a scene from *De spilpenning of de verkwistende vrouw* (*The spendthrift or the wasteful woman*) written by Thomas Asselijn. This popular farce was first published in 1693 and again in 1726. We see the extravagant Johanna, selling the expensive clothes she had made for her not two months ago for more than a hundred guilders to two dealers for thirty one guilders and ten pennies, a mere pittance. In fact the two men are her father Augustijn and her husband Gerardus who have disguised themselves as Polish traders. By means of this cunning plan they hope to catch shopaholic Johanna trying to sell her expensive clothes. Troost hasn't remained strictly faithful to Asselijn; the secretary who we see behind Johanna (with his quill and visitors' book) does not actually appear in the play. At the time this painting was reckoned as one of Troost's best works and was to be found in the collection of the Dutch connoisseur Jeronimus Tonneman, a contemporary of Troost's.

- Of a completely different character is *An Amsterdam Town Garden* from around 1743.

Because of its subject this is a unique work in the oeuvre of Cornelis Troost, a 'snapshot' of a summer's day in a walled Amsterdam garden, situated at the rear of a gentleman's residence on one of the canals. Because such gardens were visible from the reception rooms of the house they were carefully tended. An arbor or summerhouse was seldom lacking, where people could enjoy each other's company for leisurely hours in the summertime. In this case the summerhouse is richly decorated, with a bust and two statues of cherubs on the roof. These last two, with a pen and brush in their hands, possibly represent the arts of poetry and painting, and the heads on either side of the sundial Tragedy and Comedy. The gilded figure on the pedestal represents the goddess Fortuna and

on either side of the arbor stand imitations of antique statuary. The garden itself is geometrically formal. The man on the ladder, probably the master of the house, is handing a bunch of grapes to the girl below. The kitchen maid is cleaning cabbage, watched by a parrot. Whether this was a painting of a real garden is not known, but various symbolic messages have been attributed to the scene, though without any unanimous conclusion being reached. Later in the 18th century the painting was in the possession of one of the best known collectors of the day, the timber merchant Cornelis Ploos van Amstel (1726-1798). Ploos van Amstel married Elisabeth, one of Troost's daughters.

1765-1820

In the second half of the 18th century many Dutch artists found work in studios making wall coverings. Painted wall coverings featured prominently in the decor of important rooms in the 18th century. Mostly the painting was on linen which was then fitted to a wooden framework. In order to meet the increased demand from mid century onwards, so called 'factories' were set up to produce wall coverings in Amsterdam, Den Haag, Haarlem, Hoorn en Leeuwarden. One painter would paint the landscape, another the details. This was a way in which many artists received their training. At the end of the century these wall coverings largely went out of fashion.

After 1765 there was a considerable change in the nature of the Dutch art world. A discussion began about the standards and the status of the 'Dutch School', which according to some were declining. Some artists, theoreticians and art lovers were of the opinion that the only way to remedy this was to follow the international trend towards (neo)classicism, that is to say, produce more history paintings in a classical style. But an exclusively neoclassical style of painting was never widely practiced in the Netherlands. On the other hand the classical ideal was the guideline in the drawing academies, and after 1770 artists began to visit Italy once more. In short, attitudes were rather ambivalent towards foreign influences.

There were other artists who, in keeping with a growing sense of nationalism, preferred to promote the more traditional Dutch themes of landscape and genre painting. A sort of 17th-century revival occurred, whereby, besides idealism, the hope that such paintings would find a ready market both at home and abroad undoubtedly played a part. Artists referred back to the styles of 17th-century artists such as Hobbema, De Hoogh, Van Ruisdael, Cuyp, Potter and many others. Art academies or societies were set up in many cities with the aim of improving the standard of Dutch art. It is interesting that while once artists preferred to distance themselves from their guilds, or attempted to do so, now artisans and ordinary citizens were welcomed into these academies. In this way craftsmen were encouraged to learn to draw better and design better products, which would be good for exports. Ordinary citizens would likewise develop better taste through learning to draw and being better informed. The more citizens, who were included in this revival and promotion of the arts, the better. The opinion was generally held that art was beneficial in the development of the personality of the individual and for society as a whole. This moral also manifests itself in the paintings of the time. Some genre pieces were clearly intended to promote domesticity, a virtue which led to a better, more balanced personality. The same tendency can be seen in the family portraits of the later 18th century, where the patron is portrayed as a real *family man*. Landscapes celebrated the proud achievements of a nation whose citizens had captured their lands from the sea. Anyone studying the development of landscape painting from 1765 to 1820 will see how artists initially imitated their 17th-century predecessors, then looked, as it were, with 17th-century eyes at the landscape around them and eventually, through personal observation, arrived at a new type of painting, in which a more individual experience of nature can be seen.

To describe all the political developments of the late 18th and early 19th century here would be excessive. Obviously in the Northern part of the Netherlands there was some strife between pro- and anti-French factions. Eventually the Netherlands were annexed by France.

When Louis Bonaparte became king of Holland in 1806, he initiated the management of art at a national level with great enthusiasm. This made the period from 1806 – 1810 one of great importance for the official organization of the arts and sciences. Talented young artists (such as Abraham Teerlink, Anthonie Sminck Pitloo, Josefus Augustus Knip and Pieter Rudolph Kleijn) were given bursaries to make study trips to Paris and Rome – this was the Dutch version of the *Prix de Rome*. The first plans were made for a national academy of the visual arts, which in fact did not open its doors until 1822 under King Willem I. In 1808 the collection from the Nationale Konst-Gallerij which had been set up in 1800 in Huis ten Bosch, The Hague, was moved to Amsterdam where it opened as the forerunner of the present Rijksmuseum. The so-called 'Tentoonstellingen van levende meesters' ('Exhibitions of Living Masters'), which were held from 1808, attracted a huge audience. In the same year the Koninklijk Instituut van Wetenschappen - or Royal Academy - was set up, an organization which also embraced the arts.

Many of the activities initiated by Louis Bonaparte were continued after the accession of Willem I in 1815. So it was that in 1817 the organization of art education was revised by Royal Decree, and thereafter came under the direction of the national government. Artists, craftsmen and dilettanti could all follow appropriate courses of education. Meanwhile the guilds were disbanded. In this way the organization of the visual arts became a national rather than a local matter.

I should also like to show you some examples from this period, particularly of art from just before 1800.

- First the small panel *A writer sharpening his pen* (1784) by Jan Ekels de Jonge. This scene of a young man sharpening his goose-feather quill in an informal setting, although small, represents a highpoint in the art of painting in Holland during the late 18th century. Jan Ekels studied with his father (also called Jan), who was known for his cityscapes. He attended the City Drawing Academy in Amsterdam and from 1776 – 1778 he studied in Paris. During the 1780s he specialized in domestic interiors with one or two figures. He only lived to the age of 34.
- From the last decade of the 18th century comes this painting of *The art gallery of Josephus Augustinus Brentano in his house on the Herengracht in Amsterdam*. Josephus A. Brentano, who came from an Austro-Italian merchant family, was one of the most prominent collectors of his day. He viewed the newly arrived Italian landscapes with his guests in the art gallery, decorated 'à l'antique', at his house on the Herengracht. It is worth noting that about a quarter of his collection of more than 400 paintings consisted of works by living artists from the Netherlands. He further advanced the cause of Dutch art by making his collection available for study by young artists.

I'd like to show you two examples of work, from about 1800, by artists who visited France and Italy.

- This *Italian landscape with parasol pines* painted by Hendrik Voogd in 1807. Hendrik Voogd set off for Rome in 1788, with financial support from the dilettante Dirk Versteegh. He never returned to the Netherlands. He took up with German artists there (such as Joseph Anton Koch and Johann Christian Reinhart). He regularly sent back paintings to his homeland where he enjoyed success, as he also did in Rome.

- Pieter Rudolph Kleyn painted *The entrance to the park at St Cloud in Paris* in 1809.

Pieter Rudolph Kleyn, the son of a well known couple of the time who were both poets, was a pupil in Dordrecht of the brothers Abraham and Jacob van Strij and of the drawing society Pictura. In 1807 he was given a stipend by the king, Louis Bonaparte. In Paris Kleyn studied with Jacques-Louis David and with the landscape painter Jean-Joseph Xavier Bidault. In 1809 he left for Rome. After a further two years study he returned to the Netherlands. This painting is proof of his progress and was exhibited in the 'Exhibition of living masters'.

Now a Dutch landscape:

- *Milking time* by the Dordrecht painter Jacob van Strij, painted in the first decade of the 19th century. Jacob van Strij painted scenes, reminiscent of the work of Aelbert Cuyp, Paulus Potter and other celebrated exponents of 17th-century landscape painting: river and meadow landscapes with cattle peacefully resting in mellow golden light. Sometimes Van Strij can actually be seen 'quoting' Cuyp. He still arrived, nevertheless, at his own style, in which the various elements of the composition were united in a harmonious whole by the diffuse sunlight.

- From Jacob's older brother Abraham van Strij comes *A cherry-seller at the door*, 1816. Abraham van Strij painted portraits, landscapes and principally scenes from daily life. In this he was undoubtedly influenced by the fashion at the time for 'domesticity'. The brothers van Strij were, along with many of their contemporaries, fired by love of their country ('vaderlandsgevoel'), and inspired by the work of their 17th-century predecessors to bring about a new flowering of Dutch art. The settings of Abraham van Strij's works were entirely contemporary. Above all his palette was much more colorful than that of his predecessors. In this painting a well-to-do lady is showing her daughter cherries from the basket of the cherry seller. The articles we see to the right indicate she has a husband who goes hunting.

- *Watercourse near 's-Graveland* by Pieter Gerardus van Os, from 1818 is almost revolutionary. Pieter Gerardus van Os arrived in Amsterdam around 1795, where he became close friends with Wouter Johannes van Troostwijk. From 1800 he busied himself with the painting of landscapes and scenes with livestock which were clearly influenced by Paulus Potter en Adriaen van de Velde. Around 1800 he moved to 's-Graveland, where he remained until 1819. It was there that he produced his most original work, *Watercourse near 's-Graveland*, for the Amsterdam merchant Herman Waller, from whose attic window the scene was probably painted. The almost photographic quality and cutting off of the views of orchard and canal give this masterpiece its modern appearance.

I would like to end with the work of a genius who, if he had not died at the age of 28, would undoubtedly have progressed even further than he already had: Wouter Johannes van Troostwijk.

- First: *The Raampoortje in Amsterdam* from 1809. Less than ten finished paintings by Van Troostwijk are known. He used to travel several times a year to het Gooi, Gelderland or Drenthe where he found the motifs for his scenes of the Dutch countryside. This cityscape is one of his best loved works. The winter scene depicts the Singelgracht in Amsterdam where it meets the end of the Bloemgracht. Looking across the ice we see the city wall with the Raampoortje, or gate, built in 1648 (demolished 1846). Throughout this time it served as access to the fields outside the ramparts, where cloth was dried on wooden frames – or 'ramen' – hence the name of the gate. In the background we can see the Westertoren. The composition demonstrates a strong

geometric structure – with just four small figures – combined with the subtle use of color. What is new here is that the painting is more concerned with the still, wintry atmosphere than with the depiction of impressive architecture. In this the painting seems to be looking forward to the art of the late 19th century.

- And finally: his *Self portrait*, also from 1809.

Van Troostwijk looks steadily at the viewer from this fluent self portrait, painted just a year before his death. In the background stands a cupboard on which a number of plaster casts can be seen. These are painted in an easy, loose manner, in contrast to the precise handling of the artist's face. The artist Jeronimo de Vries, a friend of van Troostwijk's, wrote that the painting was so realistic that, when he saw it in the house of Van Troostwijk's father, he took a step back in surprise.

We can safely say that the arts were flourishing in the Netherlands at the start of the 19th century. Art played a major role in society and had a greater audience than ever before. From 1800 people could visit public art galleries and could join societies where they could study drawing and art theory. Many noteworthy young artists could, after following a course of study in a studio or at one of the art academies, pursue their studies further abroad, exhibit their work in well attended public exhibitions and come into direct contact with important collectors by means of the artistic societies. There was an extremely lively cultural environment producing works which can satisfy even the critical eye of the 21st-century beholder.