

The sparkling light of Willem Kalf

Peter van den Brink, Director of the Aachen City Museums, Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen

The Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam and the Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum in Aachen have decided to stage the first monographic exhibition on Willem Kalf (Rotterdam 1619–1693 Amsterdam). The exhibition will open in Rotterdam in November this year, with the Aachen venue following at the beginning of March 2007, just before TEFAF. The idea for the exhibition came from Sylvia Böhmer, our curator of paintings, and it was not very difficult for her to convince me that this was a wonderful idea.

My first museum job, in 1988, was as an exhibition coordinator at the Delft Prinsenhof during the exhibition *A prosperous past*, a beautiful overview of the Dutch pronk still life in the 17th century. Many of you who remember that exhibition will confirm that the climax came at the end of the show with the one room containing five Willem Kalf still lifes: one from a private collection, the *Drinking horn from the Guild of St. Sebastian* from the National Gallery in London, two beautiful paintings from Indianapolis and Cleveland, and, of course, Willem Kalf's most famous painting, the *Still life with nautilus cup and Chinese cup* from the Thyssen collection, now in Madrid.

Both Jeroen Giltaij and Friso Lammertse reacted very enthusiastically to our proposal that we stage the show on Willem Kalf together. As well as the three museum curators, Fred Meijer was asked to help us make a final selection of paintings and also to act as author. Although he was very busy finishing his monograph on Jan Davidsz de Heem, Fred immediately reacted positively and they are already very busy writing.

From the outset we decided to limit ourselves to Willem Kalf and only to include European loans wherever possible. All in all, the exhibition will feature 35 paintings. Of these, 13 are early interiors that Willem Kalf painted in the years he was working in Paris, between 1642 and 1646. These interiors, quite often barns occupied by vegetable sellers, with strong light contrasts, remained extremely popular in France and many of Kalf's paintings were collected by fellow artists, like Jacques Linard, or, much later, Francois Boucher or Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, who actually reworked some of his early paintings. Willem Kalf remained in Paris for many years, but painted his early barn interiors on Antwerp panels, as Anna Koopstra, our assistant curator, was able to demonstrate in her research on panels by Kalf. And not only did Kalf paint exclusively on Antwerp panels, he only made use of panels by the Antwerp panel maker Melchior de Bout (ca. 1604-58). Of course, De Bout worked for Antwerp painters, like Pieter Gysels, but it is rather remarkable that his mark was found on the reverse of panels by French painters, like Philippe de Champaigne, or painters who were active in France, like Willem van Aelst and Strasbourg painter Sebastian Stosskopf. It therefore seems justified to state that De Bout was active on the French market.

In Paris, Willem Kalf already started to create spectacular still-life paintings, in which silverware was the dominant factor. Two of these paintings were the main focus of a small dossier exhibition in Cologne, one of them in the Dutch art trade, the other in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum. In fact, the Cologne painting was presented at this exhibition as a copy based on the Amsterdam painting. Both

paintings are now regarded by Fred Meijer as copies, the original being in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen. The most spectacular large early still life can be found at another French museum, in Le Mans. Recently, a second and a third version of this huge work (200 x 170 cm) came onto the market, this time, however, including a possible self-portrait. The Cologne and Rouen paintings, as well as the large Le Mans still life, will be on display at both museums.

Of course, the most spectacular paintings Willem Kalf is famous for are the still-life paintings he produced in Amsterdam. Making a choice from his vast oeuvre proved quite difficult. Willem Kalf's Amsterdam still lifes are most often painted with a vertical arrangement, showing exclusive objects in silver or glass, combined with Chinese porcelain and exotic fruits, like lemons, oranges or peaches. Some of these luxury objects, like the drinking horn from the Amsterdam Guild of St. Sebastian, or the so-called "Holbein Schale", were only portrayed once or twice, certainly as specific commissions; other objects, similarly exclusive, were used more often, and were probably part of Kalf's own inventory. In contrast to many of his fellow still-life painters, Kalf limited himself in the number of objects he portrayed in his paintings. Using fruit, porcelain and glass as basic ingredients, often combined with silver, enabled this remarkable painter to play with the texture of his objects, a game that others, like Willem van Aelst, loved to play as well. However, Kalf made use only of dark, almost black backgrounds, and installed his subtly combined objects before this darkness. And it is this facility, this aspect of Willem Kalf's still-life paintings, that enables us to enjoy his brilliance. Willem Kalf is able to paint the most difficult thing there is: transparent glass against a dark background. He can paint the invisible texture, just by a single reflection of light on glass, which is enough for us, the viewers, to produce a form in our minds. That is the absolute genius of Willem Kalf, the still-life painter.

You will understand that the physical condition of these still-life paintings is a crucial factor in making the right choice for both venues. Jeroen Giltaij, Sylvia Böhmer, Fred Meijer and I traveled to inspect as many paintings as possible, since it is no secret that all Willem Kalf canvases have been relined. In many cases the addition of a supporting canvas has led to pressed paint layers and, with paintings where thin layers of almost transparent paint are crucial for the magic illusion, this has sometimes led to disaster. In various cases, too, cleaning has been done too harshly, taking away the brilliance of Willem Kalf's magic brush. The final choice of paintings from this section, fifteen to be exact, was therefore the most difficult one. You will understand, therefore, that we are really extremely lucky to have had such a positive response from those museums that have the most beautiful and best Willem Kalf still-life paintings and I would especially like to mention the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Berlin Gemäldegalerie, and the National Gallery in London for being such gracious lenders.

Getting back to the Suermondt Ludwig Museum, one of the Aachen museums I have headed as director since one year ago, I can add that the monographic exhibition on Willem Kalf fits the profile of the museum very well. Primarily known in Aachen for its exhibitions on local artists and classic photography, in Germany for its amazing collection of late medieval wooden sculpture (indeed, one of the best in Germany), it is primarily unknown outside these borders. Of course this needs to be changed dramatically, which is not very easy in a city that is close to bankruptcy. Nevertheless, I have started to remodel the galleries, by having direct light installed for the paintings – the painting galleries did not have direct light before – and changing the scenery step by step. Key words are quality and taste, because fundamentally it is a very tasteful ambiance and a wonderful collection of paintings. Both, however, have suffered incredible neglect over the last 15 years. For that reason we started a

huge offensive in every possible way; a master plan for conservation has now been developed and in the coming six years no fewer than one hundred paintings will be restored. This project is supported by the Landschaftsverband Rheinland and the Kulturstiftung der Länder, and many, many individuals. This will enable us to present our collection in a way that will make us proud.

Another step is the fact that our first catalogue of the painting collection has just recently been published; it is, of course, devoted to the Dutch and Flemish paintings, and is written by Thomas Fusenig. Some of you were at the opening of our new galleries, last week on March 8. For me this was a crucial day, since I needed to provide a clear insight into the steps I have taken to put the museum on the map. I particularly have to thank two people for making sure it was a successful opening. Firstly, Bernd Lindemann, whom you all know, the director of the Berlin Gemäldegalerie, who immediately after my start in Aachen, proposed that we set up a partnership. Like the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Berlin Gemäldegalerie takes the mobility of collections very seriously. Twenty-one Dutch and Flemish paintings from the Berlin study collection are now presented in the Suermondt-Ludwig Museum in Aachen for four years. In 2010, 25 others will be welcomed, and the same will happen in 2014 and 2018. The second person I would like to thank is Professor Irene Ludwig, who has stood by me over the last twelve months and who has given me an important head start in Aachen, by handing over her 1632 Rembrandt portrait to the Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum. So, what can I say? We are well under way.