

*"Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?: CODART After Ten Years"*

## Introduction

With all due apologies to Paul Gauguin, I have borrowed for the title of my remarks today the name of his masterpiece, which hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* – *"Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, for it lends a tidy, trifold structure to what I want to say.

On behalf of CODART's program committee, CODART's director, Gerdien Verschoor, contacted me in writing this past October to inquire if I would speak to the membership at the CODART ELF conference. "As you know, in 2008, CODART celebrates its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary: a good moment for a critical reflection on our network-organization. We thought that it might be a good idea to invite you to speak...with the special request to prepare a critical reflection on the past of CODART, and of course some advice for the future...It would be nice if you could say something also about the possibilities or impossibilities on the American-European co-operation or 'mergings' within CODART, as well as CODART seen from the point of view of an American."

In a subsequent conversation with Gerdien I expressed what an honor it would be to make such an address, but I harangued her with the question, "Why me?!" Her reply was that I have been one of the very few Americans who has been active in the organization from the outset, and she felt that it could be of value were I to convey what CODART means to me; what thoughts I have on how it could or should change; and, particularly, how CODART could attract greater American involvement, given the great collections in the USA.

I accepted the charge, and with that explanation of why I am standing here, and with the caveat that the topic of American involvement is one I have been specifically requested to address, I would offer the following observations.

“Dear Dr. Nichols,” began the 15 January 1998 letter to me from the director general of the Instituut Collectie Nederland, Rik Vos. “As you will see from the attached list, this letter is going to a very particular group of recipients: curators of Dutch art. You are responsible for conserving, displaying, studying and augmenting major holdings of Dutch art in twenty countries....” Mr. Vos continued, “The name of our institution, Instituut Collectie Nederland, gives expression to the concept that all objects of cultural heritage in the Netherlands form part of a common patrimony. From there it is a small but logical step – initiated by Gary Schwartz, who came to us with this plan – to think of all the significant collections of Dutch art in the world as a single set. That is why we consider it appropriate that we take the initiative in giving organizational structure to that interesting group of collections and their curators. We call it Curators of Dutch Art (CODART).”

That posting was sent to 108 individuals from 76 institutions, representing 58 cities in 20 countries. Ten years ago, 68 of those persons, “founding members” – myself included and many of you as well – gathered at the Mauritshuis, the Haagsche Club, the Royal Library, the Palace Huis ten Bosch, and finally the Huygens Museum Hofwijck for CODART Een. There were the predictable opening remarks, followed by quite interesting presentations on the collections of the House of Orange.

At the working meeting of CODART Een I remember well some contentious, if constructive, discussions. I particularly remember lively debate about the emphasis that would or would not be placed on works of art on paper. Secondly, given Rik Vos’s explicit emphasis on all things only Dutch, it was gratifying to note how quickly the topic rose to the fore of what would or would not be the role of Flemish art in the fledgling organization. This matter was resolved in a very logical, inclusive manner, history being what it is. Nonetheless, rather gracefully it was decided to avoid a most infelicitous and unfortunate acronym in English, were the organization to have been re-named “Curators of Dutch and Flemish Art.”

But what I recollect most distinctly about those first the two days was the sensation that something vital was being born, a belief that a forum was being created to fill a void. I detected energy, excitement, and a sense of common purpose. In short, it was more than a little thrilling.

That said, THE low point for CODART that I have witnessed took place at that first gathering when we foreigners were permitted access to the Oranjezaal, while Dutch citizens were denied this opportunity, and just last week a Dutch colleague reminded me how “furious and disgusted” he felt about that experience.

Since that first conference there have been nine subsequent ones prior to the present one:

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| 2 | 1999 | Amsterdam      | Dutch and Flemish art in Russia           |
| 3 | 2000 | Antwerp        | The Spanish Habsburgs and the Netherlands |
| 4 | 2001 | Cologne        | Dutch and Flemish art in Romania          |
| 5 | 2002 | Bruges/Antwerp | Early Netherlandish art and its dispersal |

Do any of you remember that year the marvelous stuffed bear with the serving tray in the entrance hall of the neo-gothic Kasteel van Loppem, in the cellar of which lunch was served to the participants? Thereafter we continued on our travels from Bruges to Antwerp...for the Joint session of CODART and the Historians of Netherlandish Art, one of the landmark events of the past ten years from my vantage point.

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| 6 | 2003 | Amsterdam | Collecting Dutch and Flemish art in New England |
| 7 | 2004 | Utrecht   | Dutch and Flemish art in Poland                 |

One of the highlights of CODART's history for me was the reception after this congress at the home of Gary and Loeke Schwartz, 'De Boomgaard' in Maarsen. "It was a gathering not to be forgotten," I wrote in my thank-you note to them, and so let us not.

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| 8 | 2005 | Haarlem | Dutch and Flemish art in Sweden ---<br>at which Anna Somers Cocks, of The Art Newspaper, made a superlative presentation, "Making the Most of the permanent collection," echoes of which permeate sessions of the present CODART Elf. |
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| 9  | 2006 | Leiden | Dutch and Flemish art in the land of Rembrandt |
| 10 | 2007 | Paris  | Dutch and Flemish art in France                |

There have been 13 related study trips to many destinations, regularly conceived as follow-up journeys to the theme of the annual meeting.

The inaugural issue of the CODART Courant first appeared in December 1998, and with the CODART website, these two vehicles have provided superb communication about the organization, as have e-mail bulletins about the opening and closing dates of exhibitions, announcements about conferences, as well as notices regarding position openings.

On 1 April 2007 – CODART offices move from Amsterdam to The Hague, in the same building as the RKD. "Gone are the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Amsterdam canal houses," wrote Gerdien in last summer's Courant 14; "in their place are 20<sup>th</sup>-and even 21<sup>st</sup>-century buildings." If a certain charm has disappeared, she relates that "in short, we have entered an inspiring environment, one equipped with all the facilities to realize CODART's activities," and she voiced praise for the proximity of CODART's offices to the RKD.

2

*Que sommes-nous? - What Are We?*

We are an organization structured around a world patrimony of all the significant collections of Dutch AND Flemish art conceived as a single set.

Gary would write in Courant 2 in June 2001:

“For CODART to become a permanent feature of museum life its network will not only have to meet, socialize, communicate, and travel together, but also function in concretely improved ways which would not have been possible without CODART. “

Four years later, in Courant 10 of June 2005, Gary would pen in his last “Word from the Director” column:

“After seven and a half years, it seems safe to say that in CODART the worldwide network of curators of Dutch and Flemish art has found itself and become a self-aware institution.”

Gerdien, who became director of CODART on 1 July 2005, wrote in Courant 11:

“CODART’s mission, of course, remains the same and curators of Dutch and Flemish art are still our fixed core and target group. Without the continuing active involvement of its members, CODART has no impetus or reason to exist.”

And new to Courant 15, published just this winter, is an expanded description of CODART:

“CODART is an international council for curators of Dutch and Flemish art. Its aim is to further the study, the care, the accessibility, and the display of art from the Low Countries in museums all over the world, with different levels of experience and from different types and sizes of institutions. CODART stimulates international inter-museum cooperation through a variety of activities, including congresses, study trips, publications, and the website. By these means CODART strives to solidify the cultural ties between the Netherlands and Flanders, and to make the artistic heritage of these countries accessible to the international art-loving public at large.”

3

*Où allons-nous? - Where Are We Going?*

I wish to make six observations:

To begin with, I would assert that Gerdien has it right: “Without the continuing active involvement of its members, CODART has no impetus or reason to exist.” So realize both the

CODART staff and the various committees of our membership need our input. Communicate your contentment as well as your dissatisfaction with our organization. “Where we are going?” is in large measure up to ourselves.

**Two** - A pleasant problem is now rearing its head. The CODART website currently lists 570 CODART members and associate members, a figure that represents an eight-fold increase since that first conference ten years ago. The membership comes from over 260 institutions from no fewer than 39 countries.

But the CODART website also has communicated for a few weeks now that registration for CODART Elf was closed at 134 individuals, including CODART staff. Therein is a problem that absolutely must be addressed. We have convened in some spectacular locations, my favorite being the auditorium of the Teyler’s Museum in Haarlem, encircled with the names of the illustrious: Stevin / Van Swinden / De Vries / Schlegel / Rumphius / Lorentz / Van Hoft / Miquel / Fokker / ‘s Gravesande / Snelius / Van Marum / Boerhave / Brugmans / Mulder / Camper. But if the capacity of such impressive places limits how many of us can attend, then we risk becoming an exclusive club rather than remaining an organization whose events are open to as many of the membership that wishes to attend. More practical, larger spaces seemingly are in order for future gatherings so as to never have to limit participation.

**Three** – funding. CODART currently is still supported financially in large measure by the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. From 2000 to 2005 it also received significant support from the Ministry of the Flemish Community, funding that hopefully will resume in the near future. There are also one-off project grants from other external funding bodies such as those for improvements to the website, and in 2006 the Friends of CODART was established. As Gerdien has acknowledged to us in correspondence, “the unpredictable nature of these contributions puts our program under constant strain.” And so for the past two years we have all been solicited for voluntary annual contributions. I can foresee the day, perhaps not far in the future, when the word “voluntary” is dropped, and this in fact might ultimately be a good thing for CODART. In some social systems this is called “pay as you go.”

**Four** – I applaud the number of new initiatives of recent: one being CODART *Light* – smaller national or regional gatherings such as those of 2006 in Berlin and Warsaw and those in Vienna and New York last year. Another new initiative has been the CODART activities review section begun in Courant 12, Summer 2006. I strongly recommend that this outlet for necessary critical opinion be maintained and even expanded. A third new initiative is being inaugurated tomorrow afternoon – a special session on attributions brought about by the request of many of us members. Organized with the RKD, it will offer an opportunity to present our questions on attributions to our CODART colleagues.

I have a suggestion for another new initiative - CODART "discussion posts." I urge an on-line listserv be created, accessible only to the membership, which would afford each of us the chance to pose questions – specific ones or general ones. I participate in such a discussion post in a North American organization called The Association of Art Museum Curators, and it is really quite rewarding and useful. Questions about museum policy, exhibitions in planning stages, conservation matters, essentially whatever is on the mind of a member, ---questions get posted and then commentary begins to appear signed by the person replying.

**Five** – I suggest that CODART consider on occasion taking a more outward-focused stance. Yes, the website attracts on average 2,700 users daily. But what are we advocating to the to profession at large, what are we communicating to local and national governing bodies, when critical topics surface? To cite but a single, random example: in [Courant 10](#) Gary wrote to the membership about the need for sorely needed strengthening of security in museums: "How is it" he wrote, "how is it that museums are always willing to spend millions to put great art on their walls but are not willing to spend a few tens of thousands to keep it there?" In English we call this "preaching to the converted." The audience for such a message is not the CODART membership; rather, it is museum administrators and civic bodies. Funding issues, staff restructuring, de-accessioning: these and other matters are ones on which from time to time CODART may wish to release position papers to national and international press outlets. The moment has arrived, I believe, for us to metamorphose from being predominantly an inward looking organization. In a careful and judicious manner, we should make our voice heard not just amongst ourselves.

**Six** – some observations about issues pertaining to CODART membership participation at CODART annual congresses, with particular attention to the situation involving North American members, per my preamble.

To start with though, I find it rather sad that despite the grand event that was CODART 10 last year in Paris, only three curators from France are participants here at CODART 11, and not a one from the Louvre. Nonetheless, you three still represent 300% more than at each of CODART 9, 8, and 7, the first year of French participation at a CODART conference.

Some additional numbers: Of CODART's 570 members and associate members, approximately 166 work in the Netherlands and Belgium, a figure that represents about 30% of the total membership. Of the 166 curators from the Netherlands and Belgium, 57 of you, a figure that represents one-third of your contingent, are attending CODART Elf, which is 45% of the persons at this conference.

In contrast, of CODART's 570 members and associate members, 70 work in North America, a figure that represents 12% of the total membership. Of we 70 curators from North

America, 10 of us, a figure that represents 14% of our contingent, are attending CODART Elf, which is 8% of attendees here today.

Over the span of the eleven CODART congresses the attendance of North Americans has fluctuated from 4 to 11, with the average being 7. As we all know, however, numbers do not tell the entire story, and often in fact mask truths: From that first meeting in The Hague in 1998 to today only twenty-five individuals from North America have attended a CODART congress. And of those 25, twenty attended 4 times or fewer, with 13 of that 20 attending only once or twice. Which is to say that 5 of us have attended 5 times or more. What is the meaning and significance of all this? --- = A lot of North American curators who are members of CODART are not getting to CODART congresses at all, and a very few of us are doing so a lot.

I am not convinced that this matters whatsoever, but as Gerdien asked me to consider this, I have honored the commitment. To the degree that this should be regarded as a matter needing attention, I submit the place to begin is with reality: Our website states – [quote] “Although CODART is not restricted to ‘old’ art, in practice it focuses on art from the 14th to the 19th centuries. This follows the profile of most museum collections, which have galleries and specialized curators for Dutch and Flemish art of this period but not for later ones.” [unquote] In the context of North American museums, in a word – WRONG. By my reckoning, you can count on three fingers the number of curators in North America whose title designates them as specialists in Early Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish art. The rest of us have responsibilities running from trecento Italian gold ground pictures through to Monet’s death, or a like time frame in other media. Many of us might well be specialists in Dutch and / or Flemish art, but as curators we are not accountable only for Dutch and Flemish art. Were there to be organizations called curators of Italian art, of French art, ditto Spanish, German, English, Scandinavian, and Russian art, many of my American colleagues and I would likely join them as well. But would I choose to, or be able to, get to get to a corresponding congress? Most likely not. In comparable manner, for many CODART members in North America, CODART plain and simply is not a priority.

I sense that what is being sought from me, though, is to offer some suggestions on why it is that more of those for whom curating Dutch and Flemish art is a specialty do not regard it as a priority to attend CODART conferences. I took it upon myself to speak of recent with many of my American colleagues to learn why they were not headed to this fine city of Ghent. The replies always commenced, “Oh, I’d like to, but...” A précis of what came after the “BUT” is that there simply is no sense of “must attend.” Let’s be honest: if you work in this niche of the museum profession in Amsterdam, or Antwerp, or Brussels, or London, Paris, New York, and Washington, or perhaps a few other places, the profession not infrequently comes to you.

Beyond that core sentiment – the lack of an overarching imperative to attend due to a perceived absence of pressing art historical content – I heard about finances to get here simply

not existing. I heard more than once about recurring calendar problems, that is, the days right after the opening weekend of TEFAF routinely precludes the possibility of participation.

In my view it would be unwise to schedule a CODART congress in North America for the simple reason that more would be lost than gained – I hazard a guess that many here today, a large majority I suspect, simply would not get to New York or Chicago or San Francisco for a CODART congress. But I **would** urge the CODART staff and program committee to seriously consider experimenting some year with holding a CODART congress NOT immediately after the opening weekend of the fair in Maastricht. And I strongly recommend that we join forces again as was done in 2002 with the Historians of Netherlandish art when they next convene in Amsterdam in 2010.

To conclude – CODART is healthy and strong. One reads on the CODART website – “CODART is presently examining the potential for an organization of curators of modern Dutch and Flemish art.” We could therefore soon become, it seems, even healthier and stronger.

Over the past decade there have been professional achievements and there will be more. But as many before me have expressed about CODART during these past ten years, the bonds of friendship formed within the context of this organization are of genuine consequence and meaning to us as individuals. Who is to say that this aspect of our association is not one of our most significant and important accomplishments?

Thank you for your attention. Long flourish CODART!

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