

CODART TIEN congress: Workshop 1

Technical research and the museum curator: possibilities and limitations

Chair: Edwin Buijsen, RKD, The Hague

Secretary: Eric Domela Nieuwenhuis, ICN, Rijswijk

Introduction

In recent years technical research has become increasingly important within the museum practice as a means to provide information on the material aspects of paintings. The workshop will not focus on the research itself but on the application of its results by the museum curator, for instance in collection catalogues, exhibition catalogues and museum presentations. What are the possibilities and limitations? How accessible are the results of technical research for the museum curator and in what way should they be presented? How essential is collaboration between curators and conservators? How can museums which have no technical facilities still distinguish themselves in this field? To put this way of thinking to the test, the three introductory speakers and the 24 participants to the workshop (see the list below) were asked to respond to the following points for discussion:

Relevance

- How important are the results of technical research for the museum curator?

Accessibility

- How can the museum curator obtain the results of technical research, especially when the museum itself does not have a conservation and/or scientific department?
- How accessible are these results for the museum curator? Does he/she possess the necessary knowledge to interpret them? And if not, how can this knowledge be obtained?
- How essential is the collaboration of the museum curator with conservators and technical researchers?

Collaboration with conservators and technical researchers

- Restoration projects are often a good occasion for technical analysis of paintings from the museum collection. What is the current state of affairs with regard to the collaboration between museum curators and their own conservation/scientific departments? And what can be said of the collaboration with conservators from outside the museum?
- How can this collaboration be improved and or intensified?

Exchange of ideas and knowledge

- How can museums which do not possess the necessary staff and equipment (such as IRR, X-ray, stereo-microscope) obtain results of technical research (mobile laboratories; archives for technical documentation)?
- How can the collaboration between museums and institutions be improved (for instance through exchange of equipment and knowledge)?

- Which mediating role can be played by national institutions of (technical) research and documentation such as ICN, RKD, KIK/IRPA, Doerner Institut, Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France, etc.?

Practical use

- How should the results of technical research be presented in publications (esp. collection and exhibition catalogues) and exhibitions?

Speaker I: Ron Spronk, research curator, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge

Ron Spronk will share with us his experiences concerning the collaboration between art historians, conservation scientists, conservators, curators, and technical art historians for *Prayers and portraits: unfolding the Netherlandish diptych*. This research and exhibition project is a collaboration between the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, and the Harvard University Art Museums. In his view the broader field of art history, the single-authored book or article is still considered to be (far) more desirable than a co-authored publication. This notion is a serious hindrance for collaborative projects of art historians and conservation scientists, since the latter will need to be credited according to the customs in their own field, as co-authors.

Speaker II: Nico Van Hout, curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen

Nico van Hout has been asked to tell more about the practical application of the results of technical research in the museum practice, especially in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen.

Speaker III: Alice Taatgen, curatorial intern, Centraal Museum, Utrecht

Alice Taatgen will explain how the Centraal Museum, which does not possess a conservation or scientific department, succeeds in obtaining the results of technical research and using it in presentations and publications. She will focus on the series of small biannual exhibitions sponsored by the Stichting Victor, each featuring one or more old master paintings from the museum collection which have been restored and technically analysed.

Report on the discussion

Edwin Buijsen began the first workshop with a short introduction of the four speakers: Alice Taatgen, MA curatorial studies at the University of Amsterdam; Nico van Hout, curator of the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone kunsten in Antwerp; Ron Spronk, research curator at Harvard University Art Museums in Cambridge and Bruno Mottin, curator of the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France (CRRMF) in Paris. Buijsen then briefly discussed the workshop theme. He stated that technical research became increasingly important within the museum practice in the last ten years. He also pointed out that the workshop wouldn't focus on the technical research itself, but on the application of its results by the museum curator.

The first speaker, Alice Taatgen, who was a curatorial intern in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, explained that the Centraal Museum has no in house conservation of scientific department,

but none the less succeeds in obtaining results of technical analyses of paintings in their own collection. Already in the 1960s the Centraal Museum started doing research, first with Dr. Van Asperen de Boer from the University of Groningen and later with Dr. Molly Faries. In 2008 a new catalogue of the 15th and 16th century paintings of the Centraal Museum will be published. This catalogue will also include the results of the technical research of the paintings. These last five years technical research for the Centraal Museum was financial supported by the Stichting Victor. They sponsored five small exhibitions, each featuring one important old master painting that was technically analyzed. According to Alice Taatgen two factors are essential to make a success of the publication of the results of technical research: the support of the museum director and the motivation of the curator.

The second speaker, Nico van Hout, explained that the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten has only recently started to do technical research on their paintings. The conservation department opened just eight years ago and the research is mostly in function of restorations and exhibitions. Especially for important exhibitions it is also possible to organize larger technical research programs, for example for the *Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych* in Washington and Antwerp. This research and exhibition project was also the main subject of the third speaker, Ron Spronk. The project is a collaboration between the National Gallery of Washington, the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten and the Harvard University Art Museums. The research for this exhibition was only possible thanks to a Collaborative Research Grant of the Getty Foundation, which enabled a scientific team to make extensive technical examinations of the sixty-five panel paintings in the exhibition. Thirteen specialists from outside the three collaborating institutions were also involved. All research materials were published in a technical appendix in the catalogue. The catalogue brings together a wealth of art historical information and the results of extensive scientific documentation and analyses and hopes to make a substantial contribution to scholarship on Netherlandish painting.

Finally, Bruno Mottin, of the CRRMF in Paris, described the history of the conservation department of the Musée du Louvre. Before the 1960s collaboration between scientists and curators was difficult. Most of the results of technical research were practically useless for the curators. Later the conservation and scientific department became more important, sometimes even more important and influential than the curators themselves. Recently the collaboration between the departments improved considerably.

The lively discussion initiated by these four speakers focused on the importance of the collaboration and communication between curators and conservators and scientists. Curators should have a basic knowledge about restoration and technical research. But even then, there will always be some differences in the premises of the curators and scientists. Ron Spronk also mentioned the problem of superficial interpretation by curators of results of technical research ('scientism'). Peter van der Brink pointed out that the collaboration and communication problems between curators and conservators are different in each country.

At the end of the workshop one other subject came up for discussion. How important is it to publish systematically all the results of technical researches in publications, for example in collection catalogues? Most of the participants agreed that the public and the academic world now demands also technical information. But especially for the smaller museums extensive technical research is sometimes to expensive.

Eric Domela Nieuwenhuis, June 2007

Participants in this workshop were:

1. Oscar Antuña, Curator of Dutch and Flemish collection, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Havana
2. Peter van den Brink, Director, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum and other City Museums, Aachen
3. Edwin Buijsen, Curator research and technical documentation, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
4. Eric Domela Nieuwenhuis, Curator, Instituut Collectie Nederland, Rijswijk
5. Michiel Franken, Curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
6. Carina Fryklund, Curator, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
7. Silke Gatenbröcker, Curator, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig
8. Emilie Gordonker, Senior curator Dutch and Flemish Art, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh
9. Lia Gorter, Director, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam
10. Gerlinde Gruber, Curator of Dutch paintings of the 17th and 18th century, Kunsthistorisches Museum - Gemäldegalerie, Vienna
11. Lars Hendrikman, Curator of Old Master paintings and applied Arts, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht
12. Nico Van Hout, Curator, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
13. Anna Koopstra, Research associate, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen
14. Olga Kotková, Národní Galerie v Praze (National Gallery in Prague), Prague
15. Maciej Monkiewicz, Curator, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw
16. Bruno Mottin, Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France, Paris
17. Kadi Polli, Director and curator of paintings, The Art Museum of Estonia - The Kadriorg Art Museum, Tallinn
18. Louisa Wood Ruby, Photoarchivist, The Frick Collection, New York
19. Anja K. Ševčík, Curator Old Masters collection, National Gallery in Prague, Prague
20. Irina Sokolova, Head of department of Dutch paintings, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
21. Ron Spronk, Research curator, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge
22. Alice Taatgen, MA curatorial studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam
23. Adriaan E. Waiboer, Curator of Northern European art, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin
24. Zora Wörgötter, Curator of Baroque art, Moravská Galerie (Moravian Gallery), Brno