

CODART TIEN congress: Workshop 2

The exhibition catalogue: curse or blessing?

Chair: Axel Rüger, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

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Introduction

Everyone working as a curator is familiar with exhibition catalogues. Everyone has read them, used them, wrote them, enjoyed them or been annoyed by them. In this workshop the pros and cons of the exhibition catalogue and the current trends in museum publishing were discussed. Nowadays the exhibition catalogue is one of the few remaining possibilities for art historians to publish their findings. It has become a replacement for the traditional monograph or in-depth study on a group of artists or special topic. In the documentation handed out beforehand, the question was asked whether the exhibition catalogue is a suitable medium for the dispersion of scholarly research. Often the preparation time is limited and the choice of subject matter is governed by the exhibited works of art (which are not necessarily the best examples). Therefore, one could argue that the exhibition catalogue should be no more than a (beautifully illustrated) guide for the general public and not aim at being a standard work for a small group of scholars. To put this way of thinking to the test, the two introductory speakers and the 24 participants to the workshop (see the list below) were asked to respond to two opposing statements:

- 1 The exhibition catalogue is an important tool for the publication of art historical research and should therefore meet up to the highest scholarly demands.
- 2 The merits of the exhibition catalogue are overrated and it should be no more than a visitors guide to (and souvenir of) the exhibition.

Speaker I: Peter van der Ploeg, chief curator, Mauritshuis, The Hague

Exhibition catalogues: definitely a blessing

The Mauritshuis – with a staff of three curators and three conservators – organizes two or three exhibitions a year. Since ten years, the museum follows a schedule for exhibitions and accompanying publications, making sure that the public is offered a good mix of events with a different scope, level and for different target group. The exhibition catalogues are influenced by these choices: they all have a different size, a different amount of text, a different number of illustrations, etc. Following the schedule, every third catalogue has to be a more serious publication. Interestingly enough, for all kinds of catalogues (also the more scholarly ones), the Mauritshuis reaches the same selling figures (3.000 to 4.000 copies sold). Two years before an exhibition will be opened the museum staff makes a blueprint for the event and starts marketing the show. Curators also start their work two years in advance. “Having limited time” is therefore not an issue in the Mauritshuis in the sense that it influences the scholarly quality of a catalogue. Curators are used to plan well in advance and focus.

According to Peter van der Ploeg, the most important aspect of the museum profession is to present art and information to the audiences. These audiences can vary, but there is a huge group of visitors who are seriously interested in art. Exhibition catalogues are mainly made for this group of visitors, as well as the much smaller group of art historians. This means that every exhibition catalogue should give the reader serious and if possible new information. For that reason, it is unthinkable that in the Mauritshuis a “souvenir book” could ever replace – or be called – the exhibition catalogue. Statement two should therefore be skipped immediately: as a museum you present art works to the public and not souvenirs. The Mauritshuis does publish smaller books on popular topics that are of special interest to the audience at large (such as *Rembrandt in the Mauritshuis*), but these are not connected to an exhibition and they always try to present the subject in some depth.

In Van der Ploegs opinion, exhibition catalogues are definitely a blessing. They present a valuable platform for museum curators and conservators to publish the findings of their research. Of course this research can almost never have such a wide scope as the long-term scientific research for monographs and other publications. But exhibition catalogues do offer some specific advantages over other kinds of scientific art-historical publications:

1. They are often more focused, because time (and exhibition space) is limited;
2. The results of the exhibition research can be shared with colleagues after a relatively short period;
3. The authors of exhibition catalogues (the curators) always work eye to eye with the real objects;
4. During the exhibition period the information can be “checked” looking at the objects displayed.

The catalogue and exhibition thereby are more or less an ideal platform for research in progress. When organized properly (for instance in connection with a symposium, as the Mauritshuis did for the *Rubens & Brueghel* show together with the RKD) you can get a “high speed” research situation. When the results of such a symposium are published in a journal like *Oud Holland*, it can function as a catalyst to new directions in research. It is, however, problematic to say that the catalogue should meet “the highest scholarly demands” (like the first statement does). In a catalogue, it is impossible to publish “everything” on a subject and you can not always meet all the wishes you wanted to achieve. The Mauritshuis has therefore chosen to present only new insights on the subject (combined with the necessary information for a basic understanding).

It should be clear that the exhibition catalogue can never be a goal in itself or be regarded as more valuable than the show itself. In Van der Ploegs opinion the exhibition is the most essential part of the project. The form and contents of the catalogue follow automatically from the concept chosen for the exhibition.

Speaker II: Pauline Retèl, senior publications manager, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Rethinking exhibition catalogues at the Rijksmuseum

Pauline Retèl started working as senior publications manager for the Rijksmuseum five years ago. In these past five years, book publishing at the Rijksmuseum has changed. The museum took the period of reconstruction as a time for experiments and innovations. Together with its publishing partner Nieuw Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum started its own publishing house as a commercial enterprise. Having a background in a publishing house, Pauline Retèl was employed by the museum to make publishing more professional. With its publications, the Rijksmuseum intends to reach a more varied and broader audience than before. Because the museum is now a publisher itself, it also wants the publications to serve commercial goals. Publications in general, and especially exhibition catalogues, have therefore ceased to be the exclusive platform for historians and art historians only. Curators are still the main authors of the museums publications, but they are now guided by the publications department to make

sure that their publications reach the right public.

At the start of a publishing project, strategic choices are made regarding various aspects of the publication: for whom is it intended (for a local or an international public), what will be its content, how will this content be discussed and, most importantly, by which means will the publication be publicized, marketed and eventually sold to the intended public. All these decisions influence the content, the size, the design, the number of illustrations and the price of a volume. As a general rule, the museum intends to keep publications in store for a longer time than before. Exhibition catalogues should therefore give the impression of a stand alone publication – without of course losing the connection with the show.

The current publication and marketing practices at the Rijksmuseum publishing department, can best be illustrated by a short introduction to some recent publications. Last year (2006), the museum has published ten titles, of which five examples were shown during the workshop. The exhibition catalogue *Rembrandt – Carravagio* was designed as a stand-alone publication and as a consequence, the word “exhibition” was erased from the book. Published in five language editions, it was intended for the general public. It did however contain two scholarly essays and it therefore turned out longer and more expensive than planned. However, 60.000 copies were sold.

The exhibition *Fashion DNA* in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam was accompanied by a more experimental publication. It was called a “magalogue”: a cross-over of a glossy magazine and an exhibition catalogue. It contains short essays by the curator, abstracts in English, but also selling pages. Unintended, the publication ended up in the magazine counter of several book shops and not in the history or art section. Of the 15.000 copies, 11.000 were sold.

In cooperation with the Dutch monthly business magazine *Quote*, that annually announces a list of the 500 richest people in the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum published a special supplement on the 250 richest people in the Golden Age. Alongside with this magazine, a book on the same subject was published, written by the chief curator of the history department of the museum. By way of target-group marketing, this lavishly illustrated book had the size and design of a TEFAF-catalogue. As yet, there is no English translation available. There is no exhibition connected to this publication, but it benefited hugely from the cooperation with *Quote*. In March, already 5.000 copies were sold.

In the “Rijksmuseum Dossier” series (small, lavishly illustrated publications without footnotes focusing on one artist, one object or one theme or period in history), the museum published a new volume on The House of Orange. It is for sale at Paleis Soestdijk, that was recently opened to the public.

Report on the discussion

When thinking about the theme of this workshop, people will no doubt have had some kind of archetypical exhibition catalogue in mind. For most curators, what they had in mind was probably a rather large book, containing richly illustrated essays, entries for each object with full-color and sometimes full-page photographs, footnotes and a long bibliography at the end. From the introductions by the two speakers and the subsequent reactions by the workshop participants, it became clear, however, that exhibition catalogues are produced in a variety of types and sizes today. Not only do museums organize very different kinds of exhibitions – and therefore publish very different catalogues – they also attract very different audiences (even through the year), and they do so in a very different number. This fact, together with other basic conditions (the size of the museum, its location, the available budget, etc.) determine the content and shape of the exhibition catalogues for a large part.

Whereas the Metropolitan Museum in New York (not represented at this workshop, but referred to many times) can afford itself to publish very large volumes with endless footnotes and is even successful in selling these publications, colleagues from most of the other museums can only dream of doing so. Even a large institution such as the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam – though very successful in terms of attracting a large number of visitors – would not think of producing a full blown exhibition catalogue for a Summer exhibition. The tourists who form the large majority of visitors are much more likely to buy a smaller book with running texts than a heavy-weight catalogue with essays and entries. Other museums have a large store of unsold catalogues and have therefore begun searching for alternatives: summary catalogues, catalogues in the shape of a pocket book, online presentations, DVD's...

Even though the possibilities and the limitations of museums are very different from one another and therefore make it hard to make comparisons between exhibition catalogues, it turned out that some issues touched upon during this workshop, are of importance to everyone.

The debate in the workshop focused on the following questions:

For whom do we publish exhibition catalogues?

The two introductions provided rather opposing views regarding this question. Following Peter van der Ploegs introduction, one would say that the Mauritshuis aims first at the researchers. In Van der Ploegs words, catalogues “are a valuable platform for museum curators and conservators to publish the findings of their research”, “offer specific advantages over other kinds of scientific art-historical publications” and “are an ideal platform for research in progress.” However, the Mauritshuis does sell most of its catalogues to its visitors, so may be it is blessed with a more than average interested audience. The Rijksmuseum, on the other hand, has expressed the wish to attract new and younger audiences and has adjusted its publishing practices accordingly. Even though not many people in the workshop were utterly charmed by the glossy “magalogue” published with the *Fashion DNA* exhibition, they did agree that their main audience was the “public at large.”

Many museums who receive more mixed visitors simply can not afford to write for fellow curators and researchers only. And it is hard to satisfy both the more professionally interested visitors *and* the people who are simply on a day out. In a survey that was held under visitors of the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm for instance, it turned out that the answers given by respondents who were art historians were in every aspect different from the answers given by other visitors. Of course there is a chance to make an exhibition catalogue that is valuable to both learned and tourist audiences. The solution they came up with in Sweden for the *Golden age of Dutch art* exhibition, was to publish a traditional and serious catalogue with essays and entries following the exhibition, but in an innovative format: in the shape of a pocket book. This turned out to be so successful (the catalogue was soon sold out and reactions were positive), that the concept was repeated for other exhibitions. Another solution that many museums nowadays turn to, is to publish several types of more permanent publications alongside with exhibition catalogues, so that their bookshops have something to offer for all types of visitors in every time of the year. The workshop offered many examples of this.

The image that chairman Axel Rüger presented of the exhibition catalogue becoming a “vanity publication” for a market that is far (too) small, produced under such high pressure that entries are being rewritten over and over again, was not met by the workshop participants. No doubt, some works of art do appear in more than one exhibition, but since not many (“ordinary”) visitors go to all these exhibitions, it was not felt as a problem that catalogues sometimes offer information that was published before. In the end, the consensus on this topic was rather unanimous: we publish exhibition catalogues for the public – not for ourselves or for fellow curators. But the public has many faces. Finding out who

your audience is – and what audience you would like to attract in the future – is a first step to decide what your exhibition catalogue should best look like.

Why do we publish exhibition catalogues? And what should be their function?

Following the above, it was felt by most participants that the exhibition catalogue is there to teach and not to entertain – just like the exhibitions themselves. As a museum publisher, you distinguish yourself from other publishers, because you do not make popularized publications, claimed Pauline Retèl. Seen from the point of view of the curator, you also publish exhibition catalogues because it is a good medium to publish (part) of your research into your collection (one of the most important tasks of the curator) and because they are more appropriate to reach a large audience than does a collection catalogue. As a matter of fact, the exhibition catalogue is one of the remaining ways of publishing research results because it is really difficult nowadays to publish them otherwise.

A slightly different question concerns the function(s) of the exhibition catalogue. Here the opinions differed very much – mostly dependent on the point of view that one takes. If you look at it from the point of view of the publisher, you would want the exhibition catalogue to be a stand alone publication, that can be in your bookshop for years to come. Some participants in the workshop however, felt very strongly that the exhibition catalogue must follow the exhibition and therefore should not be separate. Apart from this fundamental difference, all agreed that the catalogue in practice serves different functions (a souvenir for the tourist, a reference work for the specialist, etc.). For visitors to the exhibition and for the curators themselves, it also functions as a supplement to things you could not see. Curators can present their “ideal” exhibition, with illustrations of loans they could not get. And sometimes exhibition catalogues function as proof that you treat an important loan seriously. This might even force you to do a larger catalogue – and everyone knew some examples of this. Lenders are not happy if their works do not feature in a publication.

Should the exhibition catalogue serve commercial goals? Can a museum afford to say “no”?

If you say that the exhibition catalogue is there to teach and not to entertain and that it is there because it's such a good (or the only surviving) medium to publish research results, you do not like to hear that this publication should “serve commercial goals”. But you can not afford to lose money with it – in fact, it is one of the generally accepted ways of trying to make some money as a museum. But it can prove to be very difficult to have the costs outweigh the benefits. Publishing a catalogue involves big financial risks. In the Netherlands for instance, everything needs to be in more than one languages (and when your public is international, as it is in the Van Gogh Museum, you should be prepared to publish in sometimes even five or six languages). And if your public is really differentiated – in what it has to spend and what kind of information it would like to have – you should think of offering hardcover and paperback or a souvenir- and a scholarly publication. And you have to think about the price. A lower price could actually give you more benefit. The National Gallery in London for instance priced the Titian catalogue at £ 9,95 and it sold exceptionally. But is it all about the money then?

No, of course not! It is not per definition so that a more popular designed and marketed publication has less quality in its content. And it is not per definition so that a more scientific publication sells bad. The “general audience” is more interested than you think (although not all museums will be so lucky as the Mauritshuis that 1 in 20 visitors buys the catalogue. Axel Rüger at the Van Gogh Museum for instance has very different experiences). As a general rule, the spreading of knowledge is your prime objective as a curator. But it is not a bad thing to think about the financial implications; to spread knowledge as attractive as possible and to think about whom you want to reach and how. At the

Louvre, if a subject appeals, experience shows that the catalogue will sell. If the subject does not appeal, the museum will not do the exhibition and not publish a catalogue.

And of course you can also try to lower a part of the financial risks by interesting other parties for your project. When an exhibition is touring, museums can share the work and costs involved with producing a catalogue among the partners. The Van Gogh Museum was for instance lucky that its Munich partner for the *Max Beckman* show already brought out a publication of some 500 pages in English and German, that can be sold during the exhibition in Amsterdam as well. Fortunately for the museums that do not have that much money to spend, the workshop provided some positive examples of the use of sponsoring for exhibition catalogues and funding, as it is for instance offered by the Getty.

If we do not publish an exhibition catalogue, what are the alternatives?

The experiences of the workshop participants showed that there are many other ways of presenting information about exhibitions, such as: a checklist catalogue, a DVD, a presentation on-line or combinations of the above. Though it's unmistakable that a printed book invites to other ways of gaining knowledge and insights than something online, many museums are already experimenting with these relatively new media. The DVD that was mentioned earlier that was produced by the Israel Museum offered users – mainly younger visitors to the museum – a complete view of the show. It was really cheap to produce. According to its curator, Shlomit Steinberg, it works very well to attract new audiences, unfortunately for the “good, old, fat exhibition catalogue.” The National Maritime Museum in London receives very mixed audiences, that change over the seasons. They experimented with publishing the catalogue entries on the web and essays in a book. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is also doing a catalogue on-line, but finds out that it's much more complicated with the reproduction rights. Although many museums still rely on this for their income, others such as the Getty, the Metropolitan and the V&A do not charge any more. It is to be expected that within a few years no one will pay for these rights any more, since images will be more and more distributed digitally. However, as the chair Axel Rüger rightly pointed out, digital images are not yet good enough for publishing. The use of them decreases the quality of the publications. As a museum director, he also wonders how to invest in digitizing, when it will become impossible to make money from it. By the time we reached this issue, it was decided that this should be a topic for another workshop.

In conclusion

Proponents of the maintenance of the traditional exhibition catalogue brought some convincing arguments to the fore. The opponents, or rather those who started looking for alternatives, indicated that they lacked the necessary funds and that they must look for other, more commercially successful alternatives. The discussion could have ended there. But, luckily, the experiences of the workshop participants showed that even academic catalogues can still be commercially successful, as the museum has a hand in a large part of the catalogue's commercial success by considering the appeal of the subject, the target group, the design, the price, the timing and the degree of connection to the exhibition and other related products. Sponsors, subsidy funds and co-operative efforts with other museums can help to lower a part of the financial risks. Also, “new” forms of publishing are often not only trendy, but can also add something of substance and appeal to a new public. And that is something that all participants could agree on – that you publish a catalogue for the public, not only for your colleagues!

Wietske Donkersloot, May 2007

[See also the condensed and edited version of this report in *CODART Courant* 14 (Summer 2007), pp. 16-17, <http://www.codart.nl/Images/Courants/courant14.pdf>]

Participants in this workshop were:

- 1 Dr. Ronni Baer, Curator of European painting, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- 2 Ms. Hanna Benesz, Keeper of early Netherlandish paintings, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, Warsaw
- 3 Dr. Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Chief curator and director of research, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
- 4 Ms. Dana Crisan, Curator of prints and drawings National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest
- 5 Ms. Mariana Dragu, Curator of foreign paintings, National Museum of Art of Romania, Bucharest
- 6 Drs. Charles Dumas, Chief curator, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, The Hague
- 7 Dr. Jenny Gaschke, Curator of prints and drawings, National Maritime Museum, London
- 8 Drs. Saskia van Haaren, Chief curator, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
- 9 Ms. Dagmar Hirschfelder, Project researcher, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg
- 10 Mr. Dariusz Kacprzak, Curator of Old Masters, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łodz
- 11 Ms. Willemijn Lindenhovius, Straus curatorial intern of the drawings department, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge
- 12 Drs. Carl Nix, Curator, Atlas Van Stolk, Rotterdam
- 13 Drs. Peter van der Ploeg, Curator, Mauritshuis, The Hague
- 14 Ms. Paulien Retèl, Senior publications manager, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
- 15 Mr. Pieter Roelofs, Curator of 17th-century Dutch painting, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
- 16 Mr. Axel Rüger, Director, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
- 17 Dr. Hana Seifertová, Curator, Národní Galerie v Praze, Revnice
- 18 Ms. Shlomit Steinberg, Hans Dichand curator of European art, Israel Museum, Jerusalem
- 19 Ms. Svitlana Stets, Curator of European art of 14th-18th centuries, Lviv Art Gallery, Lviv
- 20 Drs. Carel van Tuyl van Serooskerken, Chief curator of the department of prints and drawings, Musée du Louvre, Paris
- 21 Drs. Bernard Vermet, Associate, Foundation for Cultural Inventory, Amsterdam
- 22 Dr. Thea Vignau-Wilberg, Former curator Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich
- 23 Ms. Amy Walsh, Curator of European paintings and sculpture, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
- 24 Ms. Marjorie E. Wieseman, Curator of Dutch painting, National Gallery, London