

Highlights, twilights, or opportunities for shedding new light on unknown art historical territory

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-----full text lecture-----

Dear colleagues,

First of all, it is with the greatest pleasure that I welcome you all to Enschede this year. The CODART congress is absolutely a *highlight* for Rijksmuseum Twenthe.

I don't know about you, but for me there is nothing more inspiring in our profession than to make new finds or discover work that visually surprises or creates new perspectives – whether that is in sources such as literature or, as is so often the case, in the museum itself. Most of you probably have a notebook to make quick notes, so that you can easily find an interesting artist, a beautiful painting, an unfamiliar theme or motif, references to other art, or when you have had an idea or brainwave. And then it's back home to look it up on the internet or in the literature to see what there is on the subject...

For this reason alone it may be more interesting for art historians and keen art lovers to visit a museum whose collection is less top of mind than a mega-institute with its Rembrandts, Titians and Goyas. Clearly, there is much to be enjoyed in the latter museums, but the works of art are sometimes over-familiar, either through exhibitions or the many illustrations and reproductions. These works of art have been the object of thorough study and research. So much so that despite our admiration for the mastery of the artist, there is often little to be discovered from an art-historical perspective. In museums collections with less known artwork, it is more likely that you will chance upon a real gem.

Moreover, having masterpieces in the museum collection can hamper the creativity of museum staff. You are assured of a public whatever you do, so there is no urge to be creative in your presentation of the permanent collection or real need to organise exciting exhibitions.

Rijksmuseum Twenthe is not one of the really large museums and does not own paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals or Rubens. The museum does have a fine Monet, Sisley and Redon, but these of course belong to another period. However, we are able to show a Rembrandt for the first time in our eighty-year history, and that's because of the quality of the work in our fine art collection.

The museum has a collection which gives a clear overview of art and applied art from the Middle Ages to the present day and sees its broad scope as an advantage for visitors to the museum. The attentive visitor can stroll through the permanent exhibition rooms and follow almost step-by-step a storyline about the history of art, and in particular Dutch art. Naturally, there are gaps in the collection, but these were and have been filled by selective acquisitions and loans from museums like the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Gradually we are seeing that the combination of *overall* quality, the

visitor-friendly size of the collection, and its variety as a strong point of the museum which can attract a large public.

Also the fact that the collection has some important works enables us to make attractive exchanges. When Peter van den Brink called to ask if both Joos van Cleve portraits from Rijksmuseum Twenthe could be made available for the Van Cleve exhibition in Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle), we had a serious discussion about the request. The Van Cleves are in a sense *our* Rembrandts, and we would not gladly keep them from our public. Because the relationship between both museums is a pleasant and constructive one, we indicated that a loan would be possible if the Rijksmuseum Twenthe received a high quality loan in return. In close consultation with Peter, we now have on loan the Rembrandt portrait from the Ludwig collection which hangs behind you. The portrait, as you can see, is the centrepiece in a presentation of fine portraits, most of which come from the museum collection. This exchange, which was a win-win situation for the two museums, created considerable publicity. A Dutch newspaper and the German TV station WDR followed the transport from Aachen, and the newspaper with photographer, 3 German and Dutch TV stations, and 2 radio journalists were there for its arrival in Enschede.

This is just to show that a somewhat smaller museum like ours, which has to work hard to achieve a reputation nationwide, can seek collaboration with other museums because it really has something to offer. Through exchanges the exhibition policy is enhanced, the museum collection is regularly shown in a new perspective and the museum gets considerable attention from the press. And let's not forget all the twitters that this generates! Earlier examples of exchanges were a fine Matisse portrait from San Francisco which replaced the Monet which was then touring the States, or the wonderful Cézanne which Edinburgh loaned some years ago, once again as a replacement for the Monet. Thanks to these new works on loan, parts of the museum collection are visually and artistically renewed or refreshed.

But now that we are discussing *highlights* and *twilights* ... I would really like to talk about the attention that the Rijksmuseum Twenthe has been giving over the past fifteen years or so to art from the 18th century. The choice for this period was made when the museum became independent in the mid-1990s. Hardly any attention was paid to art from the 1680-1820 period in other Dutch museums *and* there was much to discover in this area. There had been no exhibition or publication for many good, interesting Dutch artists from this period. Since then the Rijksmuseum Twenthe has considerably enhanced its collection of 18th-century art through acquisitions and generous loans. Paintings were given on loan by the Instituut Collectie Nederland, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (which from 2004 and for the duration of its renovation has loaned its most important paintings from the 18th century), the Frans Hals Museum, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and Amsterdams Historisch Museum. In the past fifteen years we have indeed regularly shown 18th century art in the permanent exhibition and organised many exhibitions on this period, from monographic presentations on artists such as Cornelis Troost (whose drawings are in the collection of the KOG or Royal Antiquarian Society), Tibout Regters, Abraham and Jacob van Strij, and Wouter Johannes van Troostwijk to presentations on architecture, satirical cartoons, and ceramics from the period. A highlight was *The year of the 18th*

century held in 2007, when more than 130 paintings from the museum collection and the collections of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Frans Hals Museum and Dordrechts Museum were exhibited. This exhibition gave art connoisseurs and lovers the opportunity to become acquainted with stylistic and iconographic developments in Dutch art from this period. Now that our public has had ample time to become acquainted with 18th century art, we have decided for the time being to only show some top pieces in the permanent collection. These are regularly replaced by others, which is once again a way of increasing the attractiveness of the collection for visitors. Art from the 18th century is in the museum an integral part of the ongoing presentation through the centuries.

A new development is the introduction of art from outside the Netherlands. Recently the Rijksmuseum Twenthe has been striving through gradual acquisitions of a few high-quality and affordable works by foreign artists to give a broader view of art from the 1680-1820 period and put 18th century Dutch art in an international perspective. So I would like to tell you more about this today.

The first acquisition was in 2008 of two wonderful portraits from 1781 by the Swedish artist Alexander Roslin (1718-1793), who as a portraitist travelling through Europe is typical of the time. The acquisition was made with support from funds such as the Mondrian Foundation and the Rembrandt Association. These are portraits of the couple Marie Romain Hamelin (1734-1798), *commis aux finances du Roy*, and Marie Jeanne Puissant (1745-1828), who came from a wealthy family in Rouen. Important French 18th century portraits are thin on the ground in Dutch public collections, and this type – and yet again of this quality – are just not to be found. It is true that the Rijksmuseum owns two fine paintings by Louis Tocqué, but these are from the 1730s. The portraits of Hamelin and his wife are therefore an important acquisition for the 'Collectie Nederland'.

At the very moment that the museum acquired the *pendants*, the major exhibition *Alexandre Roslin (1718-1793): un portraitiste pour l'Europe* was being held in the Château de Versailles. So probably the museum made the acquisition just in time. The exhibition was held earlier in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, which has a fantastic collection of Roslins. I would not want to withhold this portrait from 1768 of his wife, the artist Marie-Suzanne Giroust (1734-1772). Perhaps you will be interested to hear that in 1774, when he was *en route* from Paris to Stockholm, Roslin visited Amsterdam where he was fascinated by the paintings of Bartholomeus van der Helst. As Roslin wrote in one of his rare statements on art, he could not get van der Helst's work out of his head and wanted to imitate it. We can see from the publicity around this acquisition and the many reactions we have received that the reputation of this artist, who was highly successful as *le peintre suédois* in the royal courts of his time, is growing in the Netherlands.

Given their quality and attractiveness, the Roslin portraits are for the Rijksmuseum Twenthe a wonderful addition to the series of portraits through the centuries, which includes the pendants by Joos van Cleve, Johannes Verspronck and Cornelius Jonson van Ceulen, the portrait of a girl by Jan Claesz, the portrait of a man which has been attributed to Jan de Bray, and the portrait of a wealthy lady by Tibout Regters.

Besides Roslin we have another valuable addition to the collection. It's the highly anticipated acquisition of an early landscape painting by Thomas Gainsborough, *Wooded landscape with a shepherd resting by a sunlit track and scattered sheep* from about 1745-1746, when Gainsborough was about 18 or 19 years old. It breathes the atmosphere of the landscape of his youth, the rolling Suffolk countryside with its sandy cart tracks, old oaks and broad sky-scapes with scurrying clouds. The painting is part of a series of eight early landscapes by Gainsborough which were originally owned by his friend Joshua Kirby, who was an architect and topographical draughtsman. The other seven paintings are now in other collections including the collection in the Cincinnati Art Museum in Ohio. All these landscapes show the powerful influence that Jacob van Ruisdael and other Dutch landscape painters from the 17th century had on Gainsborough. The presence in our museum collection of 16th and 17th century North and South Netherlandish landscapes, which include a Jacob van Ruisdael, enables us to demonstrate this form of – and here I'm thinking of Gerson's book – *Ausbreitung und Nachwirkung* of Dutch art by using a wonderful, charming work by one of the prominent European artists of his time.

Although Gainsborough's landscapes are rooted in the Dutch tradition of the 17th century, there are no Gainsboroughs in the Dutch public collections.

The Verkolje exhibition

Apart from the permanent exhibition, the Rijksmuseum Twenthe is also striving through its exhibitions to entice visitors and stimulate them to undertake a voyage of discovery. A fine example of what we see as an attractive exhibition is *Nicolaas Verkolje. De fluwelen hand* (*Nicolaas Verkolje. The velvet touch*), which is currently being held. The exhibition spotlights a not generally known artist – even some art professionals do not seem to know his work – of whom the museum has a key work in its collection. Many of Verkolje's paintings, drawings and prints have a wonderful quality and are pleasing to the eye. We can compare different works grouped around one theme and the images are attractive for a broad public. The selected detail from *Mozes door farao's dochter gevonden or Moses found by Phorah's daughter* is a striking and warm image, also when it's set in the large format of a poster or banner. An exhibition like this one can be a voyage of discovery for art historians *and* for many art lovers. I won't spoil it for Everhard Korthals Altes by saying too much about different interesting aspects, but would nevertheless like to tell you something about the general set-up by way of introduction.

The basis for the exhibition is Verkolje's history painting, the genre in which he in our view most excelled. We agreed that the exhibition would only go ahead if we could put together several paintings around one theme. These were three versions of *Het vinden van Mozes* or *The finding of Moses* (from Mainz, the Thyssen Bornemisza Collection *and* the Rijksmuseum Twenthe) and *De presentatie in de tempel* or *The presentation in the temple* (from Münster and the art gallery Rafael Valls). We knew from informal email correspondence before the exhibition that we could present these ensembles. Then a list of desiderata was drawn up of the history pieces. Meanwhile the decision was also made to have an exhibition catalogue. The publisher, Waanders, was asked to collaborate with the museum on the publication. A working group of nine experts on art from the first half of 18th

century was set up: it would advise on the exhibition and write the book. The working group consisted of an interesting mix of experienced and less experienced art historians, and perhaps because of the relative unfamiliarity with Verkolje's work, this generated really good discussions. Some of this will be discussed in Everhard's talk, and also during the excursion tomorrow. Some members of the working group contributed to the further selection of works for the exhibition. For example, in close consultation with Rudi Ekkart, a selection was made from the portraits, and with Robert-Jan te Rijdt from the drawings and mezzotints. By the way, it was already decided at an early stage that the exhibition would focus on Nicolaas Verkolje. Giving attention to his father Johannes Verkolje would have made the exhibition unclear and its focus too diffuse. The design of the exhibition and the book was done by Studio Berry Slok in Amsterdam.

The exhibition has now been open for more than six weeks, and it has created considerable interest and appreciation from the public. The press has so far been extremely positive. Some days after the opening there was a review by Bram de Klerck in the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, under the heading 'Alles is prikkelend bij de oude Verkolje' (Everything in old Verkolje's work prickles the senses). He sees Verkolje as a painter who undeservedly has been forgotten. The review ends with : 'De expositie in Enschede van een betrekkelijk klein maar uitgelezen deel van zijn oeuvre is een eerste hoogtepunt in de rehabilitatie van Nicolaas Verkolje' (The exhibition in Enschede of a relatively small, but outstanding part of his oeuvre is a first highlight in the rehabilitation of Nicolaas Verkolje).

If public interest is maintained, then we can speak of an unqualified success. It *is* therefore possible to draw public with unknown but really good and attractive artworks, although you need to have some luck with that too. Naturally, we hope that Verkolje will now be added to the canon of Dutch art history, and deservedly so.

There is one aspect I don't want to keep from you. The museum is very public-oriented and strives, whenever the opportunity arises, to involve the public in its activities. A great example of how interactive this can be is an initiative from the public itself. I will say something more about this now. This was a reaction on the painting from Carcassonne that for a long time has been called *Venus en de slapende Amor* or *Venus and sleeping Cupid*. Respecting the tradition we had adopted perhaps somewhat too frivolously its title and interpretation. On 27 February George van Hoof, a Classics teacher at the Stedelijk Gymnasium in Nijmegen, sent a message to the museum. He said that in a bookshop in Nijmegen he had looked in the Verkolje catalogue, found the painting *Venus and sleeping Cupid* and realised that it was actually about a different theme: *Amor neemt de gedaante aan van Ascanius* or *Cupid assumes the form of Ascanius*. He consulted his students in two 2nd year classes. Van Hoof often tests their knowledge by using mythological themes in works of art from different periods. The students, who have read numerous sections from Virgil's *Aeneid*, looked at the projected painting, after which two students put up their hand and said: 'But that is Cupid who has dressed as Ascanius'. Van Hoof developed this interpretation in a comprehensive document, including a translation of the relevant verses from book 1 of the *Aeneid*. As you undoubtedly know, Aeneas in this story finds himself with his son Ascanius after his flight from Rome in Carthage and is received with his fellow Trojans by queen Dido. Aeneas' mother, the goddess Venus, for various reasons finds it handy

if Dido falls in love with her son Aeneas. So she conceives a trick. She is going to sneak Aeneas' young son Ascanius away from Carthage and lay him to sleep among the flowers on a remote mountain top. She asks her son Cupid to assume the form of Ascanius. In this disguise he can – without raising suspicion – pierce queen Dido with his love arrow. As Van Hoof indicated, Nicolaas Verkolje knew his Virgil. So it is not all that far-fetched if we consult the Aeneid for the interpretation of this painting.

I will not elaborate here on Van Hoof's detailed explanation, but the sleeping boy in the painting is not Cupid after all, but Ascanius. The standing child is Cupid who is being groomed by the Graces. His wings have been taken off so that Cupid can substitute Ascanius as a mortal.

Van Hoof and his students have pointed out the contrast between the left and right part of the painting. A very alert student said that there seems to be a contrast between what is represented to the left and right of Venus. On the left, we have what is real, natural, and innocent (unspoiled nature, children). On the right, we have what is artificial, fabricated, and deceptive (architecture, the mirror, adults). Naturally Venus is looking to the right: she is after all conceiving a devious trick.

Here are a couple of comments from Van Hoof's 2nd year students after his so-called 'look-and-think lesson':

"Are we going to be famous?"

"Sir, you said that the painter wasn't all that famous. How's that? It's a dead good painting, isn't it?"

"I told the family, and in Carnival week we're all going to the museum in Enschede!"

The story sounded really good. I consulted co-editor Everhard, who also was very positive about it, so I then sent the email to Eric Jan Sluijter. There was already a reply in my mailbox the next morning. Sluijter wrote: 'Mr Van Hoof and his students are 100 % right! Their interpretation is spot-on. I can add a couple of things to that: Nicolaas Verkolje is not the first one to paint this scene. Gerard Hoet had done this some forty years before Verkolje in his series of paintings with the love story of Dido and Aeneas in the Slangenburgh [a castle in Doetinchem; unfortunately we don't have any good images of Hoet's work available]. The scene is as far as I know so exceptional that Verkolje must have known Hoet's work – whether that is a drawing or a painting based on that. In one of Hoet's large wall sections in this hall painting we see, in a landscape, a sitting Venus with the sleeping Ascanius on her lap, while Cupid is being 'dressed' by some little Amors. Hoet is therefore in all likelihood the 'inventor' of this scene; he painted this as one of the scenes in a series of 11 episodes from book I and IV of the Aeneid.

The only other representation of this scene which I know is a print by Gerard Lairesse (from a slightly earlier date than Hoet's paintings). Lairesse chose however a completely different solution in which he stayed much closer to Virgil's story: we see how Venus takes Ascanius from his bed, while Cupid strides away.'

Sluijter wrote further that Hoet had perhaps the famous translation by Vondel at hand (Dutch painters seldom read Latin), in which some details were added to the original story. He thinks that most probably Hoet had the Vondel's book lying next to him during the creation of the series, and that

Verkolje further elaborated on Hoet's scene. This would have lead to a composition which – with all the attributes - has been exceptionally well described by Van Hoof and his students (extremely well observed: the left half natural and innocent, the right half artificial and deceptive; the little Amor top left that admonishes the spectator to be silent; bottom left, a torch lying on the ground etc.). I would appreciate it if you could forward this to Mr Van Hoof and his students.'

Well, I only need to say: *this* is for us what it's all about! For the students from Nijmegen and their inspirational teacher, the exhibition had been a voyage of discovery even before they saw it. Van Hoof and his sixty students will be invited by the Rijksmuseum Twenthe to come to Enschede by bus, where they will be welcomed in the museum and get a guided tour of the exhibition. I'm all too afraid that this smart group of kids will catch us out again and find even more facile interpretations!

I will now conclude. Rijksmuseum Twenthe has a unique character within the museum world in the Netherlands: the attractive, comprehensive and visitor-friendly collection, which is full of known and less known names of artists – and these may indeed include new discoveries – serves as a basis for a wide-ranging, diverse series of exhibitions, in which art from the 18th century has an integral part. We hope that, given the exhibition plans that the museum is working on, lovers of the 18th century, but also lovers of the surprising quality of the art from other periods, will in coming years keep on enjoying their visits to the Rijksmuseum Twenthe, and that the museum will keep on contributing to the exploration of new and unknown art-historical terrain.