

## ***On Public Demand: Staging Temporary Exhibitions of Artworks from Storage***

Edwin Buijsen, Head of Collections at the Mauritshuis, The Hague

Full text

According to a leading Dutch newspaper (*De Volkskrant*) more than 90% of the country's artworks in public collections is kept in storage. The museum storage is a place where visitors are normally not allowed. This fuels the imagination: what kind of artworks are kept there and why are they not visible to the public. Are there indeed hidden treasures to be found in storage or is it just junk which could best be thrown away?

Museums are under a lot of pressure to open up their depots. This can be done in various ways: by giving limited access to groups or on special occasions, or by building a new storage facility which functions as a museum at the same time, like the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum is doing. An alternative route, followed by an increasing number of museums, is staging temporary exhibitions featuring objects selected from storage. Here I would like to mention a few recent examples from Dutch museums, but the same kind of exhibitions are of course made in other countries as well.

Some years ago, the Museum Gouda moved almost their entire storage collection to the museum rooms. This display actually functions as exhibition and storage at the same time. Artworks are removed and rehung under the watchful eyes of the visitors. The Kröller Müller Museum in Otterlo organized a series of exhibitions consisting of artworks chosen by the public from a larger selection on the museums website and exhibited with the personal comments of some of the respondents. Another formula, which has become rather popular, is to invite national celebrities to pick their favorites from storage and present them in a personal way, as was done by a successful Dutch television program with their Pop Up Museum.

Perhaps less sexy is to have the museum curators themselves select the artworks. Nevertheless, that is the way we did it at the Mauritshuis with our exhibition *In and Out of Storage*, which took place in the Spring of 2016. It was a deliberate choice, because we wanted to explain to the visitors what kind of decisions a curator has to make. As you can see on the slides, we intended it to be a real exhibition with a reference to the storage itself, but not an imitation of it. Some paintings were hung closely together as on picture racks, but others were given ample space in order to receive more attention.

Before I proceed, first a little bit more about the volume of the Mauritshuis collection, which is rather small compared to other museums and mainly consists of paintings. Of the 850 objects, 250 are always on view in the Mauritshuis itself and another 150 in our annex the Prince William V Gallery, also in The Hague. About 150 objects are on permanent loan to other museums and institutions, leaving about 300 pieces in storage. This is a little bit more than one third of the entire collection and therefore much less than the average number of 90% quoted for Dutch museums in general.

In the exhibition we focused on three questions, which we often get from our visitors:

- What kind of artworks are kept in storage?
- How did they get there?
- And why are they not on view?

We selected about fifty paintings which could help us to answer these questions and divided them into groups according to the reasons why they are not on permanent display. Some of these reasons may seem quite obvious, but it enabled us to give more insight into the reasoning of the curator who has to decide which painting goes on show and which one is kept in storage.

### **Not good enough [*Anonymous (Northern Netherlands), Simeon and the Christ Child, c. 1700*]**

This painting speaks for itself. It was found on the attic of the museum in the nineteenth century and no one knows how it got there or who has painted it. Every curator has works paintings like this in his or her collection. And for those among you who might think “Is it really that bad”, here is a detail to convince you.

### **Does not fit in the collection**

In comparison this painting by the German artist Friedrich Bury is of a very high quality. However, as a textbook example of early nineteenth-century classicism it does not fit in the Mauritshuis collection which is focused on Netherlandish painting from the 15<sup>th</sup> till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. How did it end up in the Mauritshuis? We can still read this from the label on the frame. It was given by the wife of King William I. Bury had been her drawing and painting teacher and she had a taste for his work. In the early nineteenth century, paintings by contemporary artists were indeed displayed in the Mauritshuis. Most of these modern masters were later transferred to other museums, but this one stayed behind, most likely because it was a royal gift.

### **Too big**

This magnificent hunting still life by Jan Weenix was purchased in 1821 as a pendant to the famous *Bull* by Paulus Potter. At that time paintings in the museum were hung very close together, but these days we prefer a more spacious hanging and now there is no room anymore for this huge painting. Fortunately, as a result of this exhibition it could be given in permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Twenthe in Enschede, where it is now on display in combination with an installation by a contemporary artist (Sylvia B).

### **Too many**

Sometimes we simply have too many paintings by one artist, such as the highly productive Jan van Goyen. Only one of these paintings is on show. In the exhibition we presented five Van Goyen paintings on the same wall, including the one from the permanent collection, and asked the public to pick their favorite. Then we revealed the choice of the curator and explained the reasons behind it.

An important issue in the preparation of the exhibition was whether artworks from storage should undergo restoration before being put on display, or whether they should be exhibited quite deliberately in their present state, even if they are in poor condition. We decided to do both.

### **In bad condition**

This portrait by Karel Slabbaert once hung in a government building in the former Netherlands-Indies (present-day Indonesia) and the impact of the tropical climate is clearly visible. Because this painting is considered not important enough for a time-consuming restoration, we had decided only to conserve it – at least for the time being.

### **Underestimated**

On the other hand this *Merry Company in a Park* by Esaias van de Velde is one of the earliest examples of an ‘Outdoor Garden Party’ in Dutch painting and therefore of great art-historical importance. Because of the yellowed layer of varnish, messy retouches and later overpaintings it remained in storage during the last decades. After treatment in our conservation studio the painting turned out to be far more beautiful than we had ever imagined and now we are thinking of including it in the permanent collection.

There were also other surprises. I selected this particular painting for the exhibition as a clear example of ‘not good enough’. It was acquired in 1821 by King William I as a work by Raphael, but soon afterwards this attribution proved to be too optimistic and it remained in storage ever since. However, shortly before the exhibition this painting was technically examined. The X-radiograph revealed it to be very special: it is painted on gilt leather and it is the only surviving fragment of an early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian wall covering in this technique. According to contemporary sources these must have been popular at the time, but none of it was thought to have survived until this discovery, which was greeted with enthusiasm by gold leather experts. So it’s not a Rafael, but a very special artwork indeed and our conservators have now lovingly baptized her the “Leather Lady”.

And in the end, with some pressure from our marketing department, we also invited the public to choose their favorite from storage and display it in the exhibition and later in the permanent collection.

If you plan to make a storage exhibition I can strongly advise you to do so: it is great fun, you learn much more about your collection and the public loves it. Here are a few tips:

- Choose an original line of approach
- Explain your choices to the public
- Reflect on your own collection
- Take the opportunity to reevaluate what you have in store

Thank you for your attention.