Dutch art in 19th-century European perspective (E. Deneer)

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Inspiration across the border: Dutch art in a nineteenth-century European perspective

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Conference organized by Manon van der Mullen, Sara Tas and Eveline Deneer in cooperation with the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD).
2 December 2011 at the Royal Library (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) at The Hague, The Netherlands.

While in countries like France and Germany transnationality and the notions of transnational exchanges and transfers have grown into an established field of research within the disciplines of art history and museology, the same cannot quite be said of the current state of affairs in the Netherlands. Although certain Dutch art historians and museologists have taken interest in transnational questions and subject-matter over the past decades, these initiatives rather express the scholar's personal interest than an actual commonly shared conscience within art historical discourse in the Netherlands. Whereas the artistic exchanges between France and Germany in the nineteenth century have been subject of extensive research, ever more executed in the scope of large, ambitious research projects aiming at a better understanding of the complex network of exchanges and transfers through which art, artists and artistic ideas crossed the border between the two countries, very few comparable initiatives have occurred so far in the Netherlands. That this transnational approach germinated in the breeding ground between France and Germany is hardly surprising: the relation between the two heavyweights on the European mainland was always one of mutual admiration and aversion, and this was particularly true during the nineteenth century when the image of the other played an essential part in the definition of the self, in a positive as well as a negative sense. By now this kind of transnational research has become an ever more prominent element in art historical research in many other countries as well. By means of this conference the organizers aim to show that also in the Netherlands the scholarly art historical discourse would benefit from a wider interest in transnational issues and they therefore whished to create a platform for such an approach in relation to the art history of the Netherlands.

Annemieke Hoogenboom (Utrecht University) opened the conference with an introduction to the theme of the day. She started by stating that the Dutch art historical debate has for a long time been dominated by the idea that art had to reflect the national character of its country of origin. Art that lived up to the general image of this national character, was usually regarded in a much more positive light than art that showed references to foreign artistic traditions. Over the past decades however, we have become more and more conscious of the fact that the 'national character'that served as a paradigm in art history for so long, is in fact itself a historical - mostly nine-

teenth-century - construction and the result of continuous processes of adoptation and rejection with regards to the developments in other European countires. Just like in other European countries, continuous transnational contacts and transfers have played a decisive role in the conceptualisation of ‘national character’ in the Netherlands. By pointing out that in 1860 about 30 percent of the works of art exhibited at the exhibition of living masters in Amsterdam were of foreign origin, and that at least one third of the Dutch nineteenth-century artists travelled abroad, Hoogenboom underlined that transnational issues are inherent to the Dutch art world in the nineteenth century and therefore need to be granted more attention than has been the case so far.

The lectures that followed upon this introduction were subdivided in two more or less chronologically ordered sessions. The first session, which roughly covered the first half of the nineteenth century with the exception of Mayken Jonkman’s contribution, was presided by Frans Grijzenhout (University of Amsterdam). After a short introduction Mayken Jonkman (Netherlands Institute for Art History, RKD) started with the presentation of the research project ‘Retour de Paris. Artistic exchanges between the Netherlands and France in the nineteenth century’, of which she is one of the initiators and organizers. As the research project, a cooperation between the RKD and the Van Gogh Museum, is still in a very early stage, Jonkman’s contribution did not so much present results, but it rather raised questions, ideas and promising pistes that could bring the current scholarly state of affairs closer to the level of the international discourse led by France and Germany. The focus will be on the interaction between the Dutch and the French artistic worlds, following the hypothesis that Dutch nineteenth century artists were much more concerned with foreign artistic developments than has so far been suspected. The scope of this project will be to draw an image of these transnational concerns and of the complex network of contacts and interactions that allowed for Dutch artists to familiarize with French art and vice versa.

The next lecture, by Eveline Deneer, took the participants all the way back to the very beginning of the nineteenth century. With a lecture on the importance of Dutch seventeenth-century painting to ‘troubadour’ painting in France during the first decades of the century, she drew the attention to a small and relatively unknown movement in French art whose leading artists, or at least those who stood at its cradle like Fleury Richard (1777 – 1852) and Pierre Révoil (1776 - 1843), created a new variety of painting somewhat between genre and history painting, by combining painting techniques of the Dutch seventeenth-century masters, especially those of the Leidse fijnschilders, with a classicist aim for nobility and anecdotal subject matter derived from (French) medieval or early modern history. This case is one of many examples of how Dutch art was received by foreign artists, and dissected and modelled into something new according to their own needs and wishes.

However, although many art historical studies from the nineteenth century onwards tend to tell us the opposite, France was in fact not the only country of artistic interest in Europe at that time. With her study on the Dutch cosmopolite artists’ family Haanen and their contacts with artists and art dealers in the German speaking regions, Manon van der Mullen showed convincingly that Germany is another important factor to be taken into account when one considers the transnational exchanges between the Netherlands and Europe. Whereas Paris attracted Dutch artists particularly for its culture, Germany attracted them to great extend for its nature: study trips to the Rhineland were considerably popular among Dutch artists. Although most artists confined themselves to rather short trips, the brothers Remigius and George van Haanen continued to travel extensively

in Central and Eastern Europe, and even settled there. Remigius in particular built up around him a network of German and Austrian contacts –art dealers, patrons, colleague artists – through which he ensured the international diffusion of his own work and that of his brother George and other compatriots.

The second part of the lectures covered, as has been said, the second half of the nineteenth century. What appears most strikingly from this second session, presided by Wessel Krul (University of Groningen), is the impact the Hague School had on the international reputation and spread of Dutch contemporary art. Taking the international collecting policy of the Musée de Luxembourg, from 1818 onwards the French national museum of contemporary art, as a starting point, Sara Tas studied the reception of Dutch contemporary art in France within the larger scope of the appreciation for foreign contemporary art. She concluded that the relatively disappointing number of Dutch contemporary paintings in the Musée de Luxembourg was not so much due to a lack of interest in these works: artists like Josef Israëls and Hendrik Willem Mesdag enjoyed great admiration in France during the second half of the nineteenth century, not least from the museum's chief curator Léonce Bénédite himself. That one painting by Mesdag was the only Dutch contemporary work Bénédicte acquired for the museum between 1870 - the moment foreign art was officially accepted in the museum - and the turn of the century, was more due to the fact that conservative board members opposed the acquisition of foreign art for the museum. Although Bénédite aimed to establish an intenational collection for his museum, by the time he actually disposed of a special budget for foreign art in 1900 the prices of top works by Hague school artists like Mesdag and Israëls had already risen to levels beyond his reach.

The appreciation for the art of the Dutch school in nineteenth-century France owed much to the writings of Thoré-Bürger, who celebrated Dutch art for its authenticity and its glorification of contemporary everyday life. The very 'dutchness' of Dutch art, the supposed embedment of artists in their own culture and society, was considered its highest virtue. The international focus on this aspect of the art of the Dutch school which has dominated art historical discourse in Europe from the nineteenth century onwards, tends to make us forget that even a 'truly Dutch' artist like Josef Israëls did not limit himself to the Netherlands for his sources of inspiration. In her lecture on the travels of Dutch artists to Spain during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Renske Suijver (Van Gogh Museum) explained how and why artists like Josef Israëls, Jacobus van Looy and Marius Bauer turned their attention to Spain, Spanish art and popular culture. As she demonstrated, this fascination with Spain was inherently connected to the flourishing international phenomenon of orientalism. This proofs that the scope of some Dutch nineteenth-century artists, notwithstanding the international appreciation for 'authentic' Dutch scenes, reached well beyond the national borders and testifies of their consciousness of, and familiarity with significant international artistic developments.

Taking the nineteenth-century international appreciation of the Dutch Hague School painting one step further, Alba Campo Rosillo argued in the last lecture of the day that the collecting of art of the Hague School was used by Scottish bourgeois art collectors as a means to distinct themselves socially and nationally from respectively the Scottish aristocracy and the English domination. Scottish collectors were among the most fervent collectors of the art of the Hague school and the paintings in question seem to have appealed to these collectors for various reasons: the resemblances to Dutch seventeenth-century art, a popular collectable of the aristocracy, lent the

art of the Hague School a certain status, but at the same time did the affinities with contemporary French art – the Barbizon school in particular – give it a more cosmopolitan flair. Moreover, the sober realist themes and contemporary rural subject-matter were easy to grip and thus appealed to a public that whished to appear cultivated but lacked the artistic education common in aristocratic circles. Lastly, the deliberate choice to collect Dutch and not English art set the Scottish bourgeoisie apart from its English counterpart.

Altogether one could say that these lectures made clear that much is still to be gained from transnational approaches on Dutch art and artists in the nineteenth century. Further research in this direction could not only increase our understanding of Dutch artistic production of this century, it could also, as the lectures by Eveline Deneer, Manon van der Mullen, Sara Tas, Renske Suijver and Alba Campo Rosillo put forward, give us better insights in essential aspects of artistic production and art collecting in other countries.

The conference ended with a panel discussion between one Flemish and several Dutch established scholars and museum professionals, during which the participants were invited to reflect upon the lectures and to give their opinion on the current state of affairs as well as on the desirability and possibility of ascribing the transnational approach a more prominent position art historical and museological research on nineteenth century art in the Netherlands. Chaired by Rachel Esner (University of Amsterdam) and occasionally complemented by the audience, Elinoor Bergvelt (UvA), Chris Stolwijk (Van Gogh Museum), Ad de Jong (UvA) and Tom Verschaffel (University of Leuven) entered into discussion with one another. As it is impossible to repeat every argument that made the discussion, I will proceed by mentioning those which seemed to summarize best the ideas behind the conference and those which invite to further reflections in the future. The essential starting point of the discussion was the notion that national and international concerns can only exist in dialectic relation to each other - the very existence of national rhetoric in the nineteenth century implies a simultaneous international reality and that the first could only take shape in face of the latter. Rhetoric discourse however has a way of eclipsing its counterpart: the discrepancy between theory and practice that results from this process, the discrepancy between the ‘official’ discourse and the artists’ reality, lies at the heart of what makes transnational approaches in art history not only interesting but even vital to the comprehension of the nature of artistic production in the nineteenth century.

Art historical scholarly literature, the exhibiting policy at world exhibitions or the preconceived taste of art collectors all allow for a theoretic discourse to be propagated which does not necessarily – and most of the times does not – reflect the reality in which artists lived and worked, nor the opportunistic attitude of many artists in respect to this official discourse. As the lectures have shown, also in Dutch-orientated art historical research these kinds of considerations ask for an approach that looks beyond this national rhetoric into the clearly more international reality. An interesting reflection here, is the idea that our current interest in transnational questions and issues could quite possibly come from a modern-day incarnation of nineteenth-century nationalism, namely the pursuit not of a strong and united nation, but of a strong an united Europe. Moreover, transnationalism could also be approached within a broader perspective of various kinds of transfers: transemotional, transsentimental etc. The very act of investigating transfers - hybrid situations - instead of traditional paradigms as such is a promising field of research in art history.

As for the future of transnational approaches in art history in the Netherlands it is clear much is still left to do compared to the leading countries France and Germany. However, if there is one thing this conference has shown it must be that the willingness to advance is there, enough and to spare.

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