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## ***The New Rijksmuseum: interview with Wouter Kloek***

Micaela Nardi

### **You are the Chief Curator in the Development of the New Rijksmuseum and Secretary of the Coordination Taskforce for Museological design.**

*Yes, that is correct. There is a team working on the New Rijksmuseum, of which I am a sort of coordinator. I am in a way the memory of the system. When we decided to renovate the museum, we selected a system for designing it. So my main task is to control that the project is carried out in accordance with our system. The former director Ronald de Leeuw designed the plan for the new museum and I was the secretary, so I check that everything is consistent and I orientate the ideas of the curators to the same direction. This has been my task in the last five years.*

### **The New Rijksmuseum will give visitors an overview of Dutch art and history from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, but also it will give account of aspects of European and Asiatic Art. On the contrary, how was the layout of the former Rijksmuseum ?**

*The former museum was divided into five departments: three departments were exhibiting selection of paintings, of sculpture and applied art and of Dutch history; the prints and drawings department was presenting itself with temporary exhibitions and there was a small but exquisite Asian department. These first three departments started in the Middle Ages and ended around 1900. Therefore, in the previous layout of the museum, the visitor had to ask himself whether he was interested in paintings or history and so on. Furthermore, the three departments were not very consistent internally: both the history department and the section on painting were mainly about the Netherlands, but included some more or less random international additions; whereas the sculptures and applied arts had a more international approach. The applied arts department had, for example, three rooms with Meissen porcelain, a German top-quality porcelain from the 18th century, for which a visitor would not expect to see in the Rijksmuseum.*

*In the old museum, we suffered a continuous lack of space as a consequence of the constant broadening of the collection. One of the purposes of the new museum is to arrange a clear display, this was the first requirement for the architects when we asked about their ideas. First, the building itself had to be stripped of all the additions that had been built throughout the years, most notably those which closed the two inner yards in order to create more exhibition space. As a next step, we also gave a public function to all of the spaces that in the old design were closed to the public, such as studios, offices, storage rooms and so on.*

## **What is the policy behind the New Rijksmuseum ?**

*The policy is simply to achieve a better museum, which is not necessarily a bigger museum. For us, a better museum is the one having a good layout and clear display for the visitor.*

## **By what means did you attempt to achieve this aim ?**

*The solution was to mix three departments. The mixture of the picture, applied arts and sculpture is a rather natural one, and you also could use history as a sort of backbone to account for the general circumstances of a given period. Anyway, we will mix the three areas but we will be flexible. For instance, we have a lot of 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings, a very beautiful part of the collection. People with a particular interest in these paintings should be able to see without being bothered by too many aspects of the history of the Dutch Republic.*

## **In the new presentation the exhibition will be displayed in a chronological order. Why did you prefer this kind of arrangement over, for instance, a thematic order ?**

*We decided at first to organize a chronological display, starting from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, but we reconsidered this decision. So that in the latest version of the layout there will be the 17th century on the top floor, then the 18th and 19th century on the intermediate floor and then a separate room for the 20th century. This disposal avoids the serpentine layout, derived by a chronological order, which would give to the visitors the sense of obligation to see it all and in the end a feeling of disappointment for not being able to complete the visit as one should. Instead in the new formula, the elevator is the backbone of the layout, so that you step out of the lift and walk through the rooms and select the periods of art and history of your preference.*

## **You mentioned a sort of inconsistency between the three departments, due to the fact that some focus on the Netherlands, whereas others are more international.**

*Well, internationalism is an important part of Dutch society; the country has been a sort of crossroad, where different cultures meet. In addition, we ourselves have always looked over the borders, and hence we think it is necessary to integrate national and international art and history. If you go to the Louvre, it proclaims France, but the Rijksmuseum does not proclaim Netherlands.*

*Naturally, the art section is mainly Dutch art in the 17th and 19th centuries, but we intend to create a sort of rhythm with Dutch and international art in order to avoid being too nationalistic. So, at suitable points in the collection, there will be international intermezzos.*

## **Marcel Duchamp once said that he didn't like museums, because he had doubts about the value of the judgments which decided that some pictures should be displayed in a museum, instead of others which weren't considered, and which might have been there <sup>1</sup>. What do you think about his statement ?**

*It is honestly a complicated question. I will reply by making an example. I had once a double interview about that issue with the curator of Dutch art at the Louvre in Paris. At the*

*Rijksmuseum we have 5000 paintings, but we always had to select some of them and display only 600 paintings. So, as a curator, it is your task to make a selection for the public and I still consider 600 paintings too much for an average visitor. On the contrary, the curator of the Louvre asserted that their complete collection was on view and he considered this being democratic. I really wonder why it should be democratic to overload the public with objects. I find it more interesting to present a clear display, one that allows visitors to make combinations and to compare.*

**Furthermore, a certain selection is already made when the museum acquires a piece of artwork.**

*Exactly. In fact, I have been the curator of the painting department for years and I had one golden rule: in acquiring an artwork, you always have to consider which piece goes out of display. At all times, the number of the painting displayed was 600, it never went to 601.*

**In spite of the many international references you mentioned, the Rijksmuseum is mainly the museum for Dutch cultural heritage. What were the reasons to put Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God* (2007) on display ?**

*First of all, we really want to enlarge our collection as regards the present, and Damien Hirst was interested in the Rijksmuseum. The artist also selected about 20 paintings from the Rijksmuseum to accompany his skull, which really raised some essential issue about modern art, and the relation between money and art.*

**Has it ever occurred that a private collector helped in selecting acquisitions for the the Rijksmuseum ?**

*This is a typical American tendency. In the USA, a lot of collectors are helping museums, but the number of great Dutch collectors is rather small, and also the taxation system in the Netherlands is completely different from the American one. Americans have the feeling that they have to contribute to society, in doing so they bestow a grant to a hospital or a museum. Dutch pay already taxes for that, therefore it occurs very occasionally that museums receive donations from private collectors. In addition, we are extremely selective, we want to improve our collection only on the highest level.*

**Does the Rijksmuseum receive funding ?**

*This moment the south wing is named after the Dutch electronics company Philips, which gave us an enormous sum of money while we were planning to rebuild the museum. This helped us very much, but is nevertheless an exception.*

**Does it happen frequently that the museum lends artworks ?**

*At this particular moment, with the museum is being renovated and the resulting partial closure,*

*it is necessary and very important for us to maintain our visibility. There is not only a permanent exhibition in Maastricht, but we also have at this very moment an exhibition in Vancouver, and still another one will take place in Japan. When we started to renovate the Rijksmuseum, we agreed to display in the Philips Wing the "Masterpieces", a beautiful selection of important holdings from 17th century, and this decision was a great success. We currently have 800.000 visitors per year, when the Rijksmuseum was completely open we had 1 million. In the future, we would invite visitors to come more often and not to watch only the 17th century collection. There is a remarkable saying that the Dutch go only once in their life to the Rijksmuseum to see the Nightwatch (1642) by Rembrandt and not because they enjoy it but they feel it as an obligation.*

### **When purchasing an object, do you take the expectations of public into account ?**

*As a curator you always try to fill in the lacunae, to improve certain areas where the museum is weak. However, I always consider the acquisition from the economic point of view: it is better to spend a considerable sum of money than to purchase an inexpensive art work. The public likes to know you bought the most important piece of art for the museum. You have certainly the opportunity to do discoveries, but it happens very seldom, as the curator usually follows the fashion. For instance, Goltzius is currently considered to be an important master for Dutch Mannerism, but about forty years ago Goltzius was not even considered a good painter. When the opinion changed, we realised that we had a lacuna so we bought a quite expensive painting, which forty years ago would have been cheap. On one hand, the curator has to be ahead of the crowd, but on the other you have to follow it. There is no sense in making decisions that are completely misunderstood to the public. We do take into account the public; in fact we are also developing a new system to let visitors know what is available in the museum by organising their route on the website. In former times, people entered in the Rijksmuseum and started looking for the Nightwatch by Rembrandt and all the rest of the museum was a surprise. In our new policy, instead, we would like to sharpen the awareness of our visitors that we not only have an important section of 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings, but also interesting 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries departments, and a valuable and international applied arts department. Furthermore, our strength is that we only display the real object. We would never include copies that would help the visitor to understand the collection.*

### **And finally, when will the New Rijksmuseum open its doors ?**

*We are planning to reopen in 2013. It is a disconcerting thought that there is a young generation which has never seen and experienced the whole collection.*

### **What inspired you to pull together the exhibition *Fiamminghi e Olandesi a Firenze. Disegni dalle collezioni degli Uffizi* (25 June-2 September 2008, Uffizi, Florence), more precisely what was your aim ?**

*Honestly, I had no definite purpose. The first time I went to the Uffizi, I was young and had great expectations of finding drawings by Jan van Goyen and Rembrandt. Instead I discovered that the Uffizi had an impressive collection of 16<sup>th</sup> century drawings by rather unknown artists. Anyway, they helped me to develop a new taste, particularly in Mannerist art. I am now a great admirer of Goltzius.*

*I pretty much enjoyed going back to the Uffizi in Florence in order to select drawings about*

*some masters, and to give account of an unfamiliar taste in Dutch art, witnessed in the Uffizi collection.*

**When did you go, in the first place, in Florence ?**

*I was in Florence from 1970 to 1971, because a Dutch professor thought that there was much to be catalogued about Flemish and Dutch drawings in the Uffizi. The catalogue was then published, and it was an opportunity to present to the public drawings that are a hidden treasure in the Uffizi. Nobody knows that some of the most beautiful drawings by Van Dyck are in Florence.*

**I have read an article on the Dutch newspaper “Trouw” (25 July 2008) that asserted the exhibitions in Palazzo Pitti and the Uffizi had demonstrated that the influence of Flemish art was of crucial importance to the development of Renaissance.**

*That article referred to the exhibition Firenze e gli antichi Paesi Bassi. Dialoghi artistici, 1430-1530 held in Palazzo Pitti in Florence (20 June - 26 October 2008). Roger van der Weyden for instance has been extremely important for the development of Italian art, and above all the formula of detailed portraits with a landscape at the background was invented in Flanders. To name one example, the portrait of Federico da Montefeltro by Piero della Francesca was inspired by Flemish artists. On the contrary, during 15<sup>th</sup> century there is no influence of the Italian painter on Northern art. However, that was not the intention of the exhibition I curated. Infact quite a number of drawings in the Uffizi exhibition are by Dutch artists working in Italy.*

**Since 1998 you are a member of Codart, an international platform for curators of art from the Low Countries. Would you tell me more about it ?**

*It is a network, a group of curators of international museums who are interested in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art. They are networking in a modern way; they have a good website and a very useful mailing list. It is also meant to be a place dedicated to discuss about shared problems. Internet modified completely our way of carrying out research and organizing exhibitions. I remember being involved in an exhibition about Albert Cuyp, there was a missing painting and a colleague found it on the internet, just by typing into a searching machine the name of the artist. It turned out to be in storage in Buenos Aires and nobody had the faintest idea of what sort of painting were available in Buenos Aires. So we were lucky that it was published on the internet website of the museum.*

Information over the Rijksmuseum available on the website <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl>

**NOTES**

1 P. Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, New York, Da Capo Press, 1988, p. 71.