

## Visual Arts

### The 'Commedia dell'Arte' of Peter Vos

Dutch artist Peter Vos (1935-2010) was 'one of the best draughtsmen the Netherlands ever knew', as the obituaries unanimously proclaimed a few years ago. He was, as he stated most resolutely, an illustrator. He produced thousands of drawings, tens of books, as well as work for magazines (he worked for student newspaper *Propria Cures*, and weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland*). Vos's passion was drawing, but it also became his way of evading life, combating his shyness and healing his wounds - the deaths of his father and brother. Although he was exuberant in life, a heavy drinker even, it was only in drawing that he found a way of "disguising" himself. He would have liked to dress up as a bird and like other great artists such as Grandville, Doré or Le Brun, he adorned the people in his drawings with feathers and beaks.

Peter Vos was the son of Cornelis Vos, an alcoholic journalist, well known at the time, who had been paralysed by meningitis. A bohemian, he liked to sit in the cafés of Utrecht, but passed his final years 'lonely at home, one leg amputated, cared for by his sons'.

One of the two sons, Peter Vos, emerged as a bird-loving illustrator, gifted at depicting sparrows, in the words of one of his fans, head cocked to one side, picking at an invisible crumb, or dejected, head hunched between shoulders. That was what he loved doing, illustrating 'animal books', fairy tales and stories which express human nature through animal characters. He drew not only sparrows, but also owls, frogs and herons, even shrews, grasshoppers and horned frogs. Vos had natural talent, designing covers and beautifully illustrating many stories by Jules Renard, fairytales by Perrault and fables by La Fontaine. He went drawing in *Artis* zoo in Amsterdam, where he reproduced what he saw in



Peter Vos, *The Metamorphosis of Pierus's Daughters into Magpies*, 2003

the animal kingdom as faithfully as possible. His many animal character studies really portrayed humans: the animal fable as mirror image. Vos was a sharp observer, always carrying a sketch-book. "We're here to watch," was his artistic creed, "not to be watched."

Vos learnt Italian at the academy and was introduced by his teacher to the drama of Carlo Goldoni, master of masquerade and *commedia dell'arte*, where characters creep into all sorts of skins, sometimes even becoming animals. Vos did the same in his drawings. Critic Carel Peeters described him as 'the Dutch version of *commedia dell'arte*', a melancholy clown.

Vos dressed humans as animals, as so often happens in theatre. People could be characterised by wings and feathers. Personally he was very shy, withdrawing into his alcoholism. He did not enjoy attention, avoiding holding exhibitions of his own work and preferring to exhibit with others, particularly writers, such as Renate Rubinstein (with whom he lived for a while), Rudy Kousbroek (1929-2010) and of course Anton Koolhaas (1912-1992), who often wrote about animals with human characteristics.

Since his youth Vos had been intrigued by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, especially the stories in which people changed into birds. That was his last big project: with Ovid in mind he set out to explore how people could change and transform. Effectively this was the way he had sought to protect himself from the beginning, as a timid boy, against the world he found so difficult. He drew his figures in graphite and pen, rarely in colour, because he wanted camouflage. Vos's *Metamorphoses* were exhibited in the Rembrandt House in Amsterdam until the beginning of October 2013 and previously in the *Institut Néerlandais* in Paris, which has since closed.

According to Giorgio Vasari's famous biographies of the greatest painters, sculptors and architects, the 10-year-old Giotto was quick on the uptake for his age. As he tended the flocks and wandered his father's estate with the animals,

his natural aptitude drove him towards drawing. Wherever he went, on stones, soil or sand, he drew what he saw in nature or whatever popped into his head. That must have been Peter Vos's experience. His art has led many people to greater enjoyment of the animal kingdom.

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*Translated by Anna Asbury*