Charley Toorop

A Deeper Longing

Anyone looking at a list of contributors to Dutch art exhibitions during the early decades of the last century might be surprised at how many female artists were active at the time. However, it was only the rare exception whose name would enter the annals of art history. Art, after all, was a male activity, as the art critic Jan Engelman observed, and very few women were ever allowed to enter that particular citadel.

Charley Toorop (b. 1891 Katwijk; d. 1955 Bergen, N. Holland) succeeded in doing so with flying colours, in spite of regular splutterings of protest from the critics who simply could not get their heads around her work. On the occasion of her first solo exhibition at the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum in 1927, the same Jan Engelman wrote: 'Charley Toorop does many things badly and sloppily, but she has a core of such masculine fearlessness that revelations emerge that do more than merely charm, they move'[1] One of the first to be won over by her work was the influential older critic Albert Plasschaert. He had been hugely irritated by an exhibition put on by a group of painters in 1926 and wrote indignantly: 'What kind of creatures are they? What is Charley Toorop doing among people who only want to stay out of the wind in a quiet corner [... Compared with them] Charley Toorop speaks another language, expresses a deeper longing, and I ask myself: 'Charley, how could you leave *your* Rotterdam and get together with this elderly, prim and proper lot?'[2]

Charley Toorop was neither elderly nor prim and proper. She dared to create paintings that many people thought ugly and even distasteful – and still do today. She did not try to charm; she sought soul, and that involved more than the careful imitation of reality. Eight years after her debut in a group exhibition of 1909, she had decided where she was going and described her ambition in rather cryptic and high-flown words: 'Being a part of the cosmos involves recognising the natural element that leads to inspired vision'[3]. By this she meant that, unlike Mondriaan and the De Stijl group, she would continue to depict reality, but for her the challenge was to penetrate more deeply into it so as to express its *soul*, which was, in the end, to find a way of expressing how she herself saw and experienced reality.

There was no ready-made recipe for this. She had to discover it herself through trial and error, by falling over and picking herself up again. Conse-

Charley Toorop,
Farming Family in Zeeland,
1927. Oil on canvas,
120 x 150 cm.
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

quently Charley Toorop's work is not uniform; hers was a compulsive quest for a form of expression, a style, that she could make her own. Looking back on her body of work, one can distinguish three periods: a period of orientation from 1909 to 1926; a crystallisation phase from 1927 to 1945; and a final period of maturity from 1946 to 1955.

Orientation, 1909-1926

Charley Toorop was eager to try out the new styles which avant-garde artists introduced in the early 20th century. First of all, luminism, the Dutch variant of post-impressionism of which her father Jan Toorop was a leading light; then cubism, in which Jacoba van Heemskerck and Piet Mondriaan were her exemplars; and finally expressionism, which as it turned out appealed to her most of all. It was not so much the French Fauves who inspired her as the symbolically-laden semi-abstract expressionism developed by Van Heemskerck and the Utrecht artist Janus de Winter on the basis of Kandinsky's art and ideas. For four years, from 1914 to 1918, Toorop painted works in which she tried to depict the 'aura' of objects, landscapes and people, as for instance in the painting to which she gave the abstract title of *Composition* (1917). In that

Charley Toorop,
Three Generations, 1950.
Oil on canvas, 200 x 121 cm.
Museum Boijmans
Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

work, which shows flowers, a man's head, a bent figure and a bottle, she was probably expressing her feelings about her alcoholic husband.

Her marriage to Henk Fernhout did not last long. She was already pregnant with her first child when she married him in 1912. Her parents were dead set against the union and had forbidden any contact between them. But in vain. Charley was extremely strong-willed and stubborn. She went her own way and would continue to do so throughout her life, self-willed and certainly not afraid of making mistakes. The marriage with Fernhout undoubtedly had its happy moments. Three children were born: two sons, Edgar who took up painting at a young age, and John who thanks to Joris Ivens became a cinematographer, together with a daughter, Annetje, who was emotionally neglected by her alcoholic and largely absent father and her egocentric mother. The marriage held together for five years. Fernhout proved unable to accept that his wife's primary concern was for her art and not for him. In his outbursts of rage he cut her paintings to shreds – which only had the effect of driving Toorop even more into herself and her work. In 1917 it was over; Toorop walked out. Until the 1940s she had a number of affaires but none developed into a firm commitment; her painting always came first. For a man like Arthur Lehning with whom Toorop had a passionate affaire between 1928 and 1932, it was not enough: he demanded a level of obedient devotion that Toorop was quite unable to give him.[4]

In 1919 Toorop went to live in North Holland, where she knew a number of artists. Her contact with them influenced her style, and she began to use dark glowing colours and heavy contours. In 1920-21 she took six months off to go to Paris to paint and catch up with the latest developments in the art world. The Belgian art critic André de Ridder, an acquaintance of her father, and the writer and poet Paul-Gustave van Hecke visited her there and promptly invited her to

exhibit in Brussels. They also organised an exhibition for her in a Paris gallery. During the next few years Toorop would visit Brussels regularly; she was an enthusiastic networker.

In Brussels she met old acquaintances and made new ones, one of whom was Edouard Mesens, a poet, musician and organiser of exhibitions. She revived her contacts with the painter Gustave De Smet whom she had met when he was living in the Netherlands during the First World War. De Smet was an important influence on her. In the 1920s, after a dark expressionist phase, he adopted a style similar to the French constructivists, combining it with 'naïve' figurative work. After Picasso's discovery of Henri Rousseau, artists were showing a great interest in so-called naïve art.

De Smet's new work provided a fresh stimulus to Toorop's stylistic development. In 1926-27 she painted a series of views of Amsterdam, the Rotterdam docks and the Middelburg fairground which in their visual language, composition, brushwork and use of colour are naïve in conception. She also employed constructivist simplification and stylisation of form in a number of still lifes.

In this way she gradually developed a style of her own and freed herself from the masters who had once served as her exemplars. Jan Toorop, Jacoba van Heemskerck, Janus de Winter and Gustave De Smet were the most important of the artists who had influenced her. But her interests had always

Charley Toorop, *Medusa puts to sea*, 1941. Oil on panel, 60 x 70 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

been wide-ranging: she had explored the world of the avant-garde with an open mind. For a long time, her knowledge of it remained limited, coloured by what was being exhibited in the Netherlands. Symbolism was a basic undercurrent in Dutch avant-garde art, and like other artists Charley Toorop was convinced that art should reveal what was hidden from the eye. Expressionism seemed appropriate for the task.

So in Paris in 1920-21 it was an eye-opener for her to discover that it was not necessary to twist oneself into all kinds of contortions to achieve expression.

The instant she saw Picasso's new neoclassicist work in the Rosenberg Gallery it became blindingly obvious to her that it was simply a question of clear insight. What you must express is *your own* view of reality, your personal understanding of what you see. In a letter written to a friend from Paris: 'one thing I know, that I am shocked by the paintings which are sent to me from Holland [...], it's very distressing! I want everything to become steadily clearer. And I want, whatever the cost, to create things that are happy and radiant. I mean inwardly radiant, yet austere and quiet.[5]

Crystallisation, 1927-1945

Solutions are found where they always seem to lurk, surprisingly close at hand. It is just a matter of seeing them and being aware; but developing that awareness can take time, sometimes years. So although on her return from Paris and Brussels Toorop may have had her insights, she had not yet progressed so far that she had her own language, her own painterly style. So for the time being she fell back on points of reference. When she was still in Paris, she had seen the Fayoum portraits in the Guimet Museum, realistic late-Egyptian portraits of the dead. She wanted to achieve in her own work the same magical power that radiated from them. That realism, together with the clear simplicity of Picasso's current work led to another point of reference: the painting of Vincent van Gogh.

Charley Toorop, *Self-Portrait with pallet*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 119.5 x 90 cm. Gemeentelijk Museum, Den Haag.

Through her father she had long been familiar with van Gogh's work, but only now did his painting come alive for her. Was he not also searching the depths of human existence? Van Gogh, like her, had fumbled and enquired his way through life – Vincent was a soul-mate.

In 1927 Charley Toorop painted her first masterpiece, a version of Van Gogh's Potato Eaters: *Farming Family in Zeeland [Boerengezin]*. For its style and inner symbolism Toorop seems to have drawn heavily on her father's monumental chalk drawing *Faith and Earnings* [Geloof en Loon] of 1902. It is a remarkable coincidence that in both works the space is restricted and the heads intersect powerfully, while the father's head is placed precisely in front of the cross formed by the bars in the window beyond which one can see the land from which he scrapes a living. The composition sets the farmer on the far left and his wife and children in the right half of the picture. It is striking how the children appear to be almost riveted to the mother to form a single unit. The oldest daughter is on the far right, forming the antipode of the father on the left. She is combing her hair and gazing sullenly out of the picture. Behind her hangs a mirror. Thus Toorop creates a certain psychological tension between the hard-working farmer ground down by his labours and the daughter who is growing up with very different interests.

The work is not 'inwardly radiant, austere and quiet'; but it is certainly powerful and full of expression. In the years that followed Charley Toorop would produce many more such paintings. They are the works that one immediately recognises as hers and with which she established her reputation.

The years between 1927 and 1933 were extremely productive, when Toorop not only produced her best work but was also actively involved in the art world. In 1926 she went to live in Amsterdam where she took the initiative in setting up a new artists' association, a progressive society for architects, painters and

Charley Toorop,
Self Portrait with Edgar in Paris, 1921.
Oil on canvas,
73.2 x 60.2 cm.
Stedelijk Museum, Alkmaar.

sculptors. She was also actively involved in the setting up of a Film Society in 1927, a club for writers and artists who disliked the commercial films coming out of America, for whom evenings were organised to view French and Russian 'cinema', which was considered to be avant-garde. In 1929 she moved to Paris. She also lived for a time in Berlin. In both cities she met various avant-garde artists such as Sophie Täuber-Arp and Hans Arp, Amedée Ozenfant, Naum Gabo and László Moholy-Nagy. In Paris she spent a lot of time with her old friend Piet Mondriaan and regularly helped him out. Before finally returning to the Netherlands in 1931 she spent time in Brussels where she visited the international exhibition *L'Art vivant en Belgique* in the Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR). A year later she was back in Brussels taking part in a major exhibition of a century of Dutch painting. Edouard Mesens had meanwhile become the Exhibitions Officer for the Centre for Fine Arts and invited her to put on a solo exhibition which took place at the end of 1933. André de Ridder wrote in his introduction to the catalogue: 'As an artist Madame Charley Toorop is more virile than many of her male colleagues, and she will astonish many critics and visitors with her objective and realistic vision, her unflinching composition and the austerity of her palette.' [6]

In retrospect, the exhibition proved to be an end-point. Not a single painting was sold and the reception was lukewarm[7]. De Ridder had probably accurately anticipated what the reaction of the public and the critics would be: as the work of a woman, Toorop's muscular language was at the very least unsettling. But it was also becoming clear that a new age was dawning. Europe was experiencing the painful effects of the 1929 financial crash. In Germany, the consequences were catastrophic – the disastrous economic situation brought Hitler to power. In other countries too, reactionary conservatism was on the move. For the arts this meant that modernism almost disappeared; it virtually went into hiding and just barely survived in very restricted circles.

Charley Toorop also felt the effects of the financial crisis and the shift of society to the right. There was no longer a market for her paintings of muscular farmers. To earn money she turned to other genres: still lifes, bouquets,

paintings of fruit trees and portraits. She pressed her friends and acquaintances to sell her work and obtain portrait commissions. Incidentally, she not only looked after herself but also helped other artists when they turned to her – her son Edgar most of all.

Toorop did not close her eyes to political developments. In 1938 she started on a small work, a head of Medusa. As soon it was completed in 1939 she started work on another version, *Medusa puts to sea* [Medusa kiest zee]. They are two remarkable paintings. Whereas Toorop in her portraits and paintings of people had always placed the emphasis on wide-open staring eyes, the eyes of her Medusas are left blank. They emanate a blind menace.

When the Second World War sucked the Netherlands into its maelstrom of destruction, she initially cherished a hope that something good might come from the 'upheavals', because 'Dutch life and its fossilised forms had run to seed'[8] That hope gradually gave way, not to a lazy acceptance of the situation, but to an unyielding resistance to the new regime that the Occupier had imposed. She refused to register with the Kultuurkamer and was ready to help others, including Jewish friends and needy artists. Life became difficult for her when she had to leave her house in Bergen in February 1943. Until the Liberation in May 1945 she drifted from one address to another : in Amsterdam, in Blaricum with Bart van der Leck, and with farmers and acquaintances in North Holland. In spite of the circumstances she continued to paint – painting again became, as it had been during her marriage, a form of escape, this time an escape from having to socialise constantly with her hosts.

Maturity, 1946-1955

For Charley Toorop the Liberation in May 1945 meant regaining her own space, her 'privacy' as she described it in a letter. Her existence as a continual 'lodger' had brought her to the end of her tether and she was overjoyed to be able to return to her own home. Artistic life gradually got going again. Amongst other things, in 1946 Toorop was invited to take part in a London exhibition of *Dutch Art During the Occupation*. Three of her paintings relating to the war, including *Medusa puts to sea*, were selected. Toorop visited the exhibition and also took the opportunity to visit her aunt, the sister of her dead mother, who lived in London. But while there she fell downstairs and suffered a brain haemorrhage. That marked the start of her physical decline. The war years had taken too much out of her.

In the years that followed she had a series of strokes; these were so serious that it was only with a great effort that she eventually made a partial recovery. Her speech was affected, she walked with difficulty and her left arm was paralysed. She must have considered herself extremely fortunate that she was right-handed, because she was still able to paint. And paint she did. In 1941 she had decided to paint a large canvas on which she would immortalise her father, herself and her son Edgar. It had been difficult enough to make a start on it during the war, but her physical condition did not make it any easier afterwards. Nevertheless, she did manage to work on it and in the autumn of 1950 she completed the massive painting. She called it *Three Generations* [Drie generaties]; it was her last major work.

The composition of *Three Generations* is again significant. Toorop painted herself, her father and her painter son as if they 'were nailed to the cross' – as she has been quoted as saying. Her father Jan, to the left of the painting, is represented by the bronze bust of him made by the sculptor John Rädecker whom she greatly admired because of his ability to capture the *soul* of reality. On the right stands Edgar, palette in hand, and below, between the two of them, sits Charley herself with a paintbrush in her hand as if applying paint to the canvas. A significant detail is that she painted Edgar as he posed for her, but she portrays herself in mirror image, so that in the painting she looks left-handed. The composition of the Father on the left and the Son on the right leads one almost naturally to complete the Trinity: the *Spirit* is in the midst.

Toorop was certainly spiritual in the sense that she was enormously motivated. Towards the end of her life she came upon the writings of the philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, in which she must have recognised herself completely. Berdyaev believed that man could only become truly free when he had freed himself from materialism and discovered the spiritual power within himself. For Charley Toorop that was precisely the motivation that had driven her to paint. Throughout her life, painting had helped her to break free and not only develop a personal vision of reality, but also achieve self-realization. ■

Translated by Chris Emery

NOTE

1 Jan Engelman in *De Nieuwe Eeuw*, 18 June 1927.

2 Albert Plasschaert, 'Schilderkunst. De Brug', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 25 September 1926.

3 Charley Toorop, 'Iets over nieuwe schilderkunst' [Something about the new painting], *De Forens*, 1 December 1917.

4 Arthur Lehning was an anarchist, writer and founder of the intellectual journal for art, literature and politics, *i*10. For his affaire with Toorop see T. van Helmond-Lehning, *Zelfportret van een liefde. Charley Toorop en Arthur Lehning,* Amsterdam 2008. See also M. Bosma, Charley Toorop. Dessins – Lettres, Fondation Custodia, Paris 2010.

5 Charley Toorop, letter to A. Roland Holst, Paris 30 January 1921.

6 'Artiste plus virile que beaucoup de peintres masculin, Madame Charley Toorop surprendra bien des critiques, bien des spectateurs par le coté objectif et réaliste de sa vision, la fermeté de son dessin et l'austérité de sa palette.' André de Ridder, in *Charley Toorop*, cat. Brussels (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten) 1933.

7 Exhibitions were always selling exhibitions; artists were contractually obliged to pay the exhibition organisers a percentage of any sale. In addition they paid room hire. As for its reception, I have been unable to find any reviews in the press of the time.

8 Interview 'Charley Toorop: 'I am not a pessimist', *De Telegraaf*, 31 July 1940.