

Visual Arts

The Rijksmuseum Finally Opens Its Doors Again

In 1999 the Dutch government decided it was time for a complete renovation and remodelling of the Rijksmuseum, the national museum of the Netherlands in Amsterdam. A royal millennium gift of 100 million Dutch guilders (approximately 45 million euros) provided the initial impetus for an operation which would ultimately cost some 375 million euros. Ronald de Leeuw, the museum's General Director at the time, was very conscious of the escalating costs, but also knew that total restoration was the only way to breathe life and air back into a museum that had become clogged and torpid. The doors of the museum opened again on 13 April 2013, after a renovation lasting more than ten years. Both the building and its collection of the Dutch state's art treasures are now fit for the 21st century.

In 1885, the Dutch architect Pierre Cuypers (1827 - 1921) designed a stately, stylistically varied work of art, which on its completion was not only the largest building in the Netherlands but, strikingly enough, also a city gate: a public thoroughfare linking the heart of Amsterdam to the outlying districts runs straight through the middle of the museum. From its creation the museum has been a hybrid, an architectural icon and without doubt the most photographed building in the Netherlands. At the same time, for many the silhouette of the building stands as a symbol for the art treasures kept within.

During the 20th century, dozens of ambitious attempts at remodelling and renovation caused untold damage to the museum's original design. The biggest disruption to the building came in the 1960s, when two large inner courtyards were built over to meet the need for more space in the museum. The effect was to turn the building into a labyrinth, an unfathomable maze of rooms through which it was almost impossible for visitors to find their way. The biggest challenge facing the renovation architects was therefore to restore the building's open character.



The completely renovated entrance hall.

Photo by Pedro Pegenaute

The Spanish architectural duo Antonio Cruz and Antonio Ortiz came up with an obvious but skilfully implemented plan to restore the building to its former glory. The two inner courtyards were opened up again as if it was the most natural thing in the world. However, this required an architectural *tour de force*, in which all the earlier modifications had to be reversed and hundreds of thousands of kilos of concrete had to be removed from the building. As a result - so the story goes - the entire building became so much lighter that it rose several centimetres from the marshy Amsterdam soil on which it is built. Cruz and Ortiz went further, however, and lowered the floor level of both inner courtyards far enough to allow them to be connected via a passage that runs beneath the road running through the heart of the museum. The city gate and cycle path were left intact, but the two inner courtyards beneath are now linked together to form a single, central courtyard. The briefest of glances confirms that this new public space in Amsterdam can compare with the public spaces in and around other great national museums in Europe: the inner court of the *Louvre* in Paris, the entrance to the *Prado* in Madrid and the covered Courtyard of the British Museum in London have all been created in recent

decades. Just as in those capital cities, the choice in Amsterdam was for light and space and timeless architecture. The architects opted to use sand-lime brick in contrast to the original, dark building materials, and created huge staircases, large enough to cope with large numbers of visitors, but plainly fashioned, so that from the moment they enter, visitors imagine themselves in another world. After passing through the imposing Atrium and going through the ticket checkpoint, visitors climb the original staircase leading to the completely renovated *Voorhal* (entrance hall), the *Eregalerij* (hall of fame) and the other rooms of the museum.

One of the most challenging tasks for the architects was to bring a late 19th-century building up to the requirements of the present day, but without damaging its status as a historic monument. The temperature regulation and security arrangements were brought up to date, partly through the use of a ring main running round the entire building and housing all the necessary technical apparatus. This enabled the rooms of the museum to retain their original proportions and allowed the unique sequence of rooms arranged around the central Atrium to be restored to their former glory. Under the leadership of restoration architect Gijsbert van Hoogevest, and using the knowledge and expertise of restoration specialist Anne van Grevenstein, the decorations hidden beneath the many layers of whitewash were studied. These have been selectively restored at key points throughout the building, enabling visitors to picture themselves back in the eclectic dream that Pierre Cuypers created in 1885.

For the first time in history, it was possible to review the entire museum concept of the Rijksmuseum. The former General Director Ronald de Leeuw developed a plan in 2004 for a chronological design, in which all parts of the collection would be staged in a mixed presentation. A transparent, easily navigable building would make it possible to lay out a clear circuit in which paintings, sculptures, crafts and historical objects would be displayed, arranged in chronological order. The new General

Director, Wim Pijbes, continued this process when he took over in 2008, partly in response to the public debate that was going on in the Netherlands at that time about the ignorance of history and the arts among the younger generation. The French interior architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte built on this concept to create a restrained design for the building's monumental rooms. His intense grey, deep wall colours are in stark contrast to the bright, historical decorative scheme created by Cuypers. The display cabinets are now minimalist and with very restrained detailing, so that the works of art within are presented to visitors in an uncluttered way which enables all attention to be focused on the objects themselves.

The revamped Rijksmuseum aims to convey to art lovers a sense of beauty and an awareness of time. The inviting inner courtyards created by Cruz and Ortiz set visitor expectations high. Cuypers' rich decorations on the staircases and in the *Voorhal* and *Eregalerij* bring past times back to life, and the clean, restrained lines of Wilmotte's display cabinets show off the art treasures in the museum's collection at their very best.

After a decade of rebuilding work and an investment of hundreds of millions of euros, one work of art has finally been returned to its former place: Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch* has been rehung in precisely the same place as before, as if nothing had changed. And there the canvas hangs, awaiting new admirers - whose number is expected to exceed two million in the first year after the reopening.

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www.rijksmuseum.nl