

## Representing the Netherlands

### The Rijksmuseum and the History of the Fatherland



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[ J O T O L L E B E E K ]

The contrast could not be greater: on the one hand, the debacle of the Netherlands National History Museum, on the other, the triumphant reopening – in April 2013 – of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Yet initially the National History Museum had a lot of support too. Politicians from very diverse persuasions had come to the conclusion, in 2006, that the Dutch did not know their history and had therefore become ‘rootless’. A ‘house of history’ would reverse the crisis – that was the idea in the dark years after the murder of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, just as the compilation of a canon of the history of the fatherland was expected to provide solidity. But five years of quarrelling ensued concerning the location of the museum and what was considered to be the directors’ overly postmodern concept of history. Then in 2011 the Government cut off the subsidies – an ignominious end.

In the meantime the Rijksmuseum’s major renovation campaign was underway. In 1885 Pierre Cuypers had erected a building on the Stadhouderskade which was both city gate and museum, a richly decorated *Gesamtkunstwerk* – not an ‘ossuary’ full of dead art, he wrote, but a living institution showing society the heritage of their fathers. One renovation after the other subsequently turned the colossal building into an impenetrable labyrinth. The great clean-up began in 2003. The Spanish architect-duo Cruz y Ortiz restored the transparent structure of the museum and opened up the inner courtyards, which had been completely built over, to create a proper entrance. A specialised architect restored – at least partly – Cuypers’s original decorations. The interior architect painted the museum halls grey (*noir de vigne*) and made the decision to present the artworks in an extremely discreet manner. It was an absolute success.

Moreover the mood of anxiety and turmoil that had accompanied the plans for the National History Museum subsided. In the reborn Netherlands, the renovated Rijksmuseum was presented unabashedly as an institution with ambition. Indeed, it was a national museum, without the universal reach of the Louvre, for example, but it was nonetheless the ‘Museum of the Netherlands’. What that meant could be seen from the motto it proudly bore: ‘The Rijksmuseum gives visitors a sense of beauty and a realisation of time.’ In other words, the eight thousand objects exhibited not only allow visitors – a million in the

Left

Pieter de Hooch,

*A company in the courtyard behind a house*

(ca. 1663-1665)

Right

Jan Asselijn,

*The threatened swan*

(ca. 1650)



first four months after the reopening – to enjoy Dutch art, they also reveal the history of the nation, its life in time.

The remarkable dispute that developed in 2010 around the pistol with which Fortuyn was murdered illustrates the historical ambitions of the Rijksmuseum. Director Wim Pijbes was clear: he wanted the *corpus delicti* in his museum. Critics were astonished – that banal object between the Rembrandts and the Vermeers? – and accused the director of poaching on the preserve of the National History Museum, which was under construction at the time. Pijbes was not impressed. Was a new ‘house of history’ really necessary? After all, the Rijksmuseum was already the museum of Dutch history, the place where the historic evolution of the Netherlands was presented? That was in the statutes too, was it not?

Well then, let us visit the museum and examine whether and how the Rijksmuseum has realised its ambition. To what extent is it, as a ‘Museum of the Netherlands’ a history museum as well as a place of art? What is the relationship between art and history there? And how is the nation represented? The answer is anyone’s guess, the balance between art and history varies considerably.

## Enhanced enjoyment of art

Those who decide to take the shortcut from the new entrance hall to the heart of the museum, with the groups of international tourists, will pass the majestic Front Hall first. Cuypers’ creation has been restored in all its glory here, from the terrazzo floor with its mosaics to the wall hangings made by the Austrian historical artist Georg Sturm. Next the visitor enters the Gallery of Honour where, in successive rooms, the great painters of the seventeenth century are exhibited: Saenredam and Frans Hals, Vermeer and Jan Steen, Ruisdael and Pieter de Hooch, with bare churches and Dutch interiors, portraits of merchants and apparently simple still lifes, landscapes with cattle and seascapes. Finally, at the end of the gallery, a room opens up to reveal the greatest masterpiece of all: the *Night Watch*, by Rembrandt. The draft there feels almost sacred because of it.

History is there in Cuypers's decor. The wall hangings in the Front Hall, on which great episodes from the Netherlands' past are depicted, and the pantheons of legators of the fatherland's (art) history in both the Front Hall and the Gallery of Honour make it clear how much the Rijksmuseum is also a monument to nineteenth-century cultural nationalism. Apart from that, though, history is absent. In the heart of the museum, art dominates completely. Here it is about pure enjoyment of art, an aesthetic experience that is not disrupted by any reference to turbulent history. Pijbes knows that many visitors to the Rijksmuseum would not want it otherwise, he is happy to give them what they ask for: 'You should do what you're good at.'

It is different in the rooms devoted to the Middle Ages, the seventeenth century – apart from the Gallery of Honour and the room with the *Night Watch* – and the eighteenth century. This is where history makes its entrance, not only – or not so much – in the didactic, guidebook-type room texts, but particularly in the often magnificent groups of exhibits that form the core of these rooms. Pictures are combined with all sorts of historic objects. In the basement room in

17<sup>th</sup> century gallery

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18<sup>th</sup> century gallery  
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which medieval Christian art is displayed, for example, *The Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1480-1485) by Geertgen tot Sint-Jans is accompanied by ivory reliquaries. In the room devoted to the birth of the Republic, paintings like Dirck van Delen's *Iconoclasm in a Church* (1630) are displayed together with items such as monumental cupboards, bronze figures and salt cellars.

The Netherlands that emerges from these rooms is one of power and independence. The Middle Ages (which begin only in the twelfth century) are not dark here, they are the precursor to the wonder of the Republic. The freedom, the economic vitality and the artistic blossoming of the Republic are unashamedly synthesised with the term that the early - nineteenth-century poets gave it, the 'Golden Age'. And with that the old realisation dawns again, seventeenth-century Dutch society owed its elevated state to the simplicity and sobriety of its bourgeois leaders, whom we can admire in Karel Dujardin's group portrait of the governors of the Amsterdam Spinhuis (1669). Fearlessness was a major factor too; Dutch power at sea was defended against its jealous neighbours with great military courage.

These traditional Dutch virtues and a high level of prosperity are also linked at the Rijksmuseum. The mercantile spirit and wealth are shown: in one room the luxury of the mansion houses, in another the large dolls' houses so beloved by the public, and in a third extravagant objects (a mechanical table decoration in the form of Diana on a stag for example). This image is reinforced in the eighteenth-century rooms: the importance of trade and industry, the great prosperity and its equal distribution. The global nature of these economic activities is emphasised in the room devoted to 'the Netherlands overseas'. It points ahead to the spirit of enterprise in the modern Netherlands later on. It is an historical image that inspires pride and contains a joyful message.

In other words, the presentation of the fatherland in this renovated museum has remained traditional. The history it contains is a recognisable story (the greatness of the herring fishing industry, for example), with equally

well-known protagonists (Tromp and De Ruyter and so on). It is not without a moral either. Entering the eighteenth century one is warned against a life of 'outward show'. But visitors will forget that lesson fast, impressed as they are by the virtuoso art that is on display here too. The magnificent display case with animals in Meissen porcelain is so attractive. Likewise, further on, in the nineteenth-century rooms, criticism of colonial violence and slavery subsides among the dazzling, exotic art: the 'Lombok treasure' from 1894 does not fail to affect visitors.

It is telling, the halls devoted to the Middle Ages, the seventeenth-century halls – with the exception of the Gallery of Honour and the *Night Watch* room – and the eighteenth-century rooms are also primarily about art. History does not appear here for its own sake. It is there to explain the blossoming of art: the exceptional culture of the Republic resulted in the timeless beauty of Rembrandt and all those other artists. History adds lustre to artistic enjoyment. Its omnipresence in these rooms does not prevent it being, as a critic in *De Groene Amsterdammer* remarked, 'verse two'.

The Mauthausen  
concentration camp jacket  
of Isabel Wachenheimer

### Tangible past



The history is instrumental then, at least in general, because sometimes it does break through and even take the foreground. That happens even in the Gallery of Honour. In one of the rooms visitors can admire *The Threatened Swan* (ca. 1650) by Jan Asselijn. This is an unusual painting, but not only as an animal picture. It is also noteworthy for the three inscriptions added in the eighteenth century: 'the Grand Pensionary', 'Holland' and 'the enemy of the state'. They turned the painting into a political pamphlet. In the context of the struggle between patriots and Orangists, the white swan portrayed Johan de Witt, who was murdered in 1672 having defended the country against its enemies. Suddenly visitors realise that this magnificent seventeenth century art, this sovereign beauty, could also be used historically as political propaganda.

And then history takes the upper hand, most explicitly in the nineteenth-century rooms. In the last of these rooms hang artists of the Hague School, who gave the Netherlands its 'national landscapes'. In the first of these rooms, though, the focus is on historical art. Once again the history of the fatherland forces itself on visitors as a recognisable entity – in and through the art itself – in a spectacular way. For who can fail to be impressed by the three great royal portraits with which the room opens? Who can fail to see the splendour of our contemporary monarchy, of Beatrix, Willem Alexander and Maxima, in Napoleon, Louis Napoleon and William I? And who has not heard of the Battle of Waterloo, which Jan Willem Pieneman painted on such a large scale in 1824? History reigns here like a picture book full of drama and heroism.

But even more than in and through this nineteenth-century historical art, history takes the upper hand sometimes in the Republic rooms. It is not the paintings, but the objects that are history's instruments there: objects that bring the past suddenly and unexpectedly close, making history so tangible that it doesn't feel as if it is past. It was Johan Huizinga who was the first to label this feeling with the term 'historic sensation', appropriately enough in an article published in *De Gids*, in 1920, about the major changes in the air in the museum



### 19<sup>th</sup> century gallery

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world. Historic details in a print or in a notarial act, he wrote, can 'suddenly give me the feeling of being in immediate contact with the past, a sensation as deep as the purest enjoyment of art, an almost (don't laugh) ecstatic sensation of no longer being myself'.

So let us retrace our steps. Which objects in the Republic rooms might evoke this historical sensation? First of all, there are objects that have acquired almost mythical status because of their origin. They come one after the other in the room devoted to the power struggle in the young Republic: the executioner's sword with which Oldenbarnevelt was beheaded in 1619 (Fortuyn's pistol ...), two sticks, one of which he (perhaps) used to climb onto the scaffold, the chest in which Hugo de Groot (possibly) escaped from prison. They are relics of the history of the fatherland, objects that represent and make the drama of this history tangible for both old and new Dutch citizens. A few rooms further on, the cup that Michiel de Ruyter got from the States of Holland, in 1667, plays a similar role. It gives the Admiral and the grand history that he embodies a powerful immediacy.

But even more than these mythical objects associated with the heroes of the fatherland, simple, often anonymous objects can also conjure up the historical sensation. In a showcase in the room dedicated to the overseas history of the Republic, four separate shoes are shown that were found on Nova Zembla. A little further on, a series of woolly hats is displayed; they were discovered by archaeologists in the graves of Dutch whalers on or near Spitsbergen. These shoes and hats show the fearlessness of the Dutch seamen, their expeditions and the winter hardships in an exceptionally direct way.

Like this, then, the Rijksmuseum offers visitors the chance to practically touch the 'great men' of their fatherland's past. They can see the bullet hole and traces of blood in the hat of Ernst Casimir, the loyal companion of stadholder Frederik Hendrik, who died in 1632. These anonymous objects show the workings of time itself too: the fabric, the grooves, the disintegration. All of these objects bear witness to the same, pride-inspiring history as the groups of exhibits, but they add something more. They turn the museum into a place of historic enjoyment, an almost sensual enjoyment that can sometimes be more powerful than the aesthetic sensation evoked by the Rembrandts and the Vermeers.





President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Mark Rutte at a Press Conference in the Rijksmuseum (24/3/2014)





20<sup>th</sup> century gallery  
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### Meagre representation

Does this make the Rijksmuseum a history museum too (like the National History Museum should have been in the opinion of those who conceived it)? The poverty of the representation of the fatherland's past is too obvious for that. Those who return to the eighteenth century rooms, for example, will be entranced by the magnificent portrait that Pierre Proud'hon painted of Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck and his family (1801-1802). But it will tell him very little of the genesis of the modern Dutch state, in the decades round 1800, in which this patriotic citizen played such a prominent role. And the revolution, the Batavian Republic, the discussions on the new constitution, the reforms in education and finance? You can see a twig from a freedom tree and a member of parliament's ribbon, but that is about it.

The sparsity of the historical representation is most obvious in the twentieth century rooms, on the top floor of the museum. Attempts have been made in recent projects to synthesize the past century. On *The Dutch Floor*, the collective presentation of top pieces from the collections of the National Library of the Netherlands and the National Archives in The Hague, some thank-you letters written to Prime Minister Drees in 1947, the document with which Wilhelmina abdicated in 1948, and a treaty dating from 1949, in which the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia is set out, illustrate the birth of the welfare state, the continuity of the monarchy and the difficult decolonisation. In the collection that the programme *The Memory of the Netherlands* published, in 2006, there are photos of a Limburg mine from 1909, the upper floor of the Albert Heijn in the Kalverstraat from 1934 and a poster from the Farmers' Party dating from 1968; they represent the process of industrialisation, the changing consumption culture and the success of populism. There is none of that in the Rijksmuseum; the twentieth century is nothing more than 'modernisation' and 'freedom'.

All the more painful is the presentation of what is shown: the Second World War and the Holocaust. In one of the small rooms dedicated to the first half of the twentieth century three objects are assembled. In the centre, the visitor

can admire the chess set that the German SS leader Heinrich Himmler gave to Anton Mussert, the leader of the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands, in 1941. In a showcase against the rear wall there is a photo album of the Wachenheimer family, German Jews who fled to the Netherlands. Above it hangs the concentration camp jacket of Isabel Wachenheimer. She wore it in Mauthausen, after having first been deported to Auschwitz, where her parents were murdered right after their arrival.

The camp jacket does not evoke the feeling of having immediate contact with this gruesome history, it merely evokes embarrassment. Amidst delFTWARE from the Rozenburg factory in The Hague and the Mondriaans, the nostalgia of furniture from the Amsterdam School and the equally nostalgia-evoking documentary by Bert Haanstra about the damming of the Veerse Gat (1962), the peculiar double-decker built by Frans Koolhoven in 1918 and Rietveld chairs, the jacket is at risk of itself becoming an object of aesthetics and amusement. This shabby bit of cloth from Mauthausen, presented in isolation and without context, cannot convey the history of the war and the persecution of the Jews. Its presentation shows how the integration of art and history can fail completely.

For a foreign public the 'Museum of the Netherlands' shows the best of Dutch art: Rembrandt and Vermeer in a magnificent, contemporary museum – and Van Gogh too, at the end of the nineteenth century rooms, pointing the way to the next attraction on the programme. For the Dutch themselves the Rijksmuseum is certainly not a history museum either. Rather, it is a place where whiffs of memories of the (former) greatness of the fatherland waft towards them. A national community can be formed around these memories or be strengthened by them. The 'Museum of the Netherlands' disseminates consensus round a joyful representation of the Republic and the modern Netherlands. Who but a handful of conscientious historians will deplore the fact that this representation is a fiction? ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards

#### FURTHER READING

The album *Honderd jaar Rijksmuseum 1885-1985* (Weesp: Van Holkema & Warendorf, 1985) commemorates the history of 'the old Rijksmuseum' in photos and illustrations. For the formation of the nineteenth century collection see ELLINOOR BERGVELT's *Pantheon der Gouden Eeuw. Van Nationale Konst-Gallerij tot Rijksmuseum van Schilderijen (1798-1896)* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1998); for a biographical study of the architect see: A.J.C. VAN LEEUWEN, *Pierre Cuypers, architect (1827-1921)* (Zwolle / Amersfoort / Zeist: Waanders Uitgevers / Rijksdienst voor Archeologie, Cultuurlandschap en Monumenten, 2007).

The conversion to 'the new Rijksmuseum' is well documented and discussed in JENNY REY-NAERTS's *Rijksmuseum. The Building as Work of Art* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2013); JAAP HUISMAN, *The New Rijksmuseum. Cruz y Ortiz Architects* (Rotterdam: nai010 uitgevers, 2013) and CEES W. DE JONG and PATRICK SPIJKERMAN (ed.), *The New Rijksmuseum. Pierre Cuypers and Georg Sturm Exonerated* (Amsterdam: Pallas Publications, 2013).

For Huizinga: W.E. KRUL, 'Huizinga versus Schmidt-Degener. Twee meningen over het Historisch Museum', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 43 (1995), 308-316.

There is extensive international literature about museal representation of the nation; see amongst others DAVID BOSWELL and JESSICA EVANS (ed.), *Representing the Nation: a Reader. Histories, Heritage and Museums* (London / New York: Routledge, 1999).