

Farewell to Wouter Kloek

• TACO DIBBITS AND TIM ZEEDIJK •

Anyone rummaging through a shoebox full of old educational material from the Rijksmuseum on a dull Sunday afternoon is soon enthralled by the quality of the subjects and the easy, relaxed tone of the accompanying texts. The brochure in the second of a small series of exhibitions in the late 1970s begins with this powerful paragraph. 'When there is no wind, the water is as smooth as a mirror. In the reflection the whole world stands on its head: the dykes, houses by the water, boats, a mill, trees by the water's edge and the tall trees further along, the sky and the clouds.'¹ There is nothing dry about this language – it is pure poetry. What follows, a few hundred words, leads the visitor past paintings in the Rijksmuseum collection where such reflections can be discovered. In an intelligent way – 'dumbing down' probably did not exist then, even as an expression – you find out about aspects of art and history and you learn something about the techniques artists use to deceive our eyes and give us so much pleasure. After *Reflections* there was the exhibition called *Just Looking at Boys or Girls*. And many, many others followed. That was thirty years ago and Wouter wrote those brochures with a joy that flies off the pages and would still appeal to a wide audience. In the not too distant future, Wim Pijbes



will be creating a visual journey through the works in the Philips Wing with *Men and Women* as the subject. He will be following the tradition begun by Wouter, who was largely instrumental in throwing the doors of the Rijksmuseum wide open. Art from the past is there for the people of the present and it is the curator's privilege to make this possible – not by standing between the work and the viewer, but at a little distance, ready to explain when needed and wanted.

Opening up the collection – the paintings to start with – was central to the very first work he did for the museum during an internship in 1966-67. Aside from the chores that a trainee was asked to do, Wouter, fresh from college in Leiden, wrote an outline for a catalogue that took shape in the Rijksmuseum in the years that followed. After this initial introduction to the museum Wouter went to Florence, where he worked for a number of years at the Nederlands Instituut and compiled the catalogue of Dutch drawings in the Uffizi. In these years away he learned Italian, got to know the Italian way of life and broadened his knowledge of Dutch drawings. He was also a healthy distance away from his homeland and he immersed himself in Italian painting. No church remained unstudied; Wouter's approach is unmistakably

that of the studious academic, when a stay in Rome is seized upon as an opportunity to visit every chapel in the city. Anyone who has been to Rome knows that this is a hopeless task. But if you get up early and take a rucksack with you, you can certainly do fifteen a day, and after a month you've seen most of them. You have to be able to handle a degree of loneliness, but above all you have to have stamina and system. It was in exactly the same way that Wouter approached the collection of Dutch drawings in the Uffizi, a collection that in those days contained some forty-seven thousand sheets with an unreliable inventory. The little pink-covered catalogue that Wouter modestly published at the end of his research describes no fewer than nine hundred and six works. In it he had furnished one important group of drawings with basic information, opening them up to future researchers. After this Herculean task, his quality and expertise had been sufficiently tried and tested and he returned to Amsterdam.

He was appointed a curator at the Rijksmuseum in 1973 and worked with the staff of the Paintings Department on the comprehensive catalogue of paintings, which was to become one of the most-used Rijksmuseum catalogues. *All the Paintings*, with its accessible layout and clear design, became the textbook example of a comprehensive catalogue and, the Internet notwithstanding, is still the simplest way for most researchers to find out about the paintings collection today. The book's extensive concordances and indexes, which were Wouter's first job when he joined the museum, make it an indispensable tool. Anyone wanting to know whether a certain person, country or subject is depicted in a painting in the Rijksmuseum collection has only to open the bulky volume to find what they are looking for. The mini-exhibitions, the imaginative routes around

the exhibits and the stimulating brochures must have been a direct consequence of the intensive study and cataloguing of the collection. This balance between knowledge and education is the theme that runs through Wouter's work. He worked on such prominent exhibitions as *Art before the Iconoclasm*, *The Dawn of the Golden Age*, *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller* and *The Dutch Still Life*, to name just a few. Wouter's particular focus was on Dutch drawings, and he wrote numerous articles on the subject, among them his contribution to a book on Pieter Aertsen and his discoveries about Hans Speckaert and Roelant Roghman. For years, too, he was the editor of the *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, responsible for editing countless articles. But he always alternated this art-historical work with writing gallery texts, brochures, wall boards and viewing guides, with a wide audience in mind and in close association with the Education Department.

Wouter worked as a curator for more than twenty-five years, for a long time as head of the Department of Paintings, but he has spent the last ten years focusing on the preparations for the new Rijksmuseum. This extensive rebuilding, with the accompanying reorganization of the layout, was something that suited him down to the ground. Although the administrative changes in the museum were the reason for his departure from the Paintings Department – evidently a difficult period in his career – his transfer to the Exhibitions Department was crucial to the development of the new Rijksmuseum and hence to the future of the entire Rijksmuseum. His wide knowledge of the collection and his public-focused attitude, combined with sound scholarship and a thoroughly systematic approach, made him ideally suited to this difficult task. What's more Wouter had great experience of mixed displays gained while organizing exhibitions like *Art*

before the *Iconoclasm* and *The Dawn*.

The steadfastness and occasional sphinx-like immobility with which he guided this complex process of change as secretary of the various steering committees and teams that have been set up in the last ten years unarguably contributed to the museum's steady move in that direction. Amidst all the commotion Wouter remained the stabilizing factor. A major upheaval like this needs a captain who charts the course, but it must also have a skipper who knows when to put on more sail and when to tweak the tiller. Wouter did that with a feeling for what the organization needed, but not without continuing to chart his own course. He continued to publish – books on Jan Steen and marine art and reviews in specialist journals – and he gave lectures on his specialism in the Netherlands and abroad. Two years ago he repeated his very first art-historical work and staged an exhibition on Dutch drawings in the Uffizi in Florence. The circle was almost complete.

On the occasion of his retirement he organized a mini-exhibition like those staged regularly thirty years ago – a small display of works by Pieter Aertsen and Joachim Beuckelaer in the Philips Wing between 2 February and 2 April 2010. These pieces had not been seen in Amsterdam for years because of the rebuilding, which is taking so much longer than any of us could have imagined. Wouter organized the exhibition and wrote the gallery texts that led visitors through the strange world of sixteenth-century genre painting. He called the brochure that he wrote for this occasion *Pieter Aertsen and the World on its Head*. And there, remarkably, is that reflection again – a leitmotiv for this singular art historian and veteran museum man. We, meanwhile, continue to work on the building of the new Rijksmuseum which, thanks in no small part to Wouter, is now finally taking shape.

NOTE

¹ 'Bij windstil weer is het water zo glad als een spiegel. In de spiegeling staat de hele wereld op zijn kop: de wallekant, huizen aan het water, schepen, een molen, bomen langs de waterkant en ook de hoge bomen verderop, de lucht en de wolken.'