



## For Wouter Kloek When the Titans Fell

• HENK VAN OS •

In the not too distant future, the work of the photographer Vincent Mentzel will be housed in the Rijksmuseum. An unbelievable wealth of images touching on the history of the Netherlands will then be accessible to the public. There are also quite a number of photographs that relate to the history of the Rijksmuseum. One of them is a spectacular photograph taken in December 1993 in which Wim Crowel and the author of this article can be seen standing in front of the *Fall of the Titans* by Cornelis van Haarlem, which dates from around 1588. This enormous canvas (239 x 307 cm) was one of the highlights of the major winter exhibition *The Dawn of the Golden Age. Northern Netherlandish Art 1580-1620*. For the staff of the Rijksmuseum – and certainly for Wouter, who had been working on it for years – this exhibition was a high point in their time at the museum. With *The Dawn* he saw a long-cherished dream come true.

Of the many conversations about the exhibition, the very first one I had with Wouter in the summer of 1989 is etched on my memory. When I first took up my post and was getting to know the job, from January to September 1989, I spoke to each curator about their work individually

Photograph:  
Vincent Mentzel.

and in depth. Wouter was one of the last because I already knew him well and so I thought I was reasonably well-informed about who he was and what he did. And yet it was he who made the remark that surprised me more than anything any of the others had said. He told me that he was working on a large exhibition about Dutch art from 1580 to 1620. I knew that. The aim of the exhibition was to put this period on the map of art history at a stroke. I knew that, too. The exhibition was to be a sequel to *Art before the Iconoclasm, Northern Netherlandish Art 1525-1580* in 1986, which had been put together with the same intention.

But at that point he interrupted his argument and in a different tone said something like this: 'But you have to tell me if I should carry on with it because *Art before the Iconoclasm* was a failure as a crowd-puller. Fewer than 50,000 visitors came to it. That wasn't nearly enough. An exhibition like that costs a huge amount of money and you have to decide if you want to run a big risk like that again.' I was touched, shocked and stunned. I had never experienced such a conscientious attitude on the part of a curator before. In the last few months they had all tried to get the new director to dance to their tune. And in fairness I couldn't

blame them for that. But of all of them, it was the one I was most friendly with who specifically refrained from deriving any advantage from the 'curator's conversation'. I am still impressed by that ethical conduct today. When I got home and told my wife, she replied, 'Well, that's what you get with vicars' children.' And she should know.

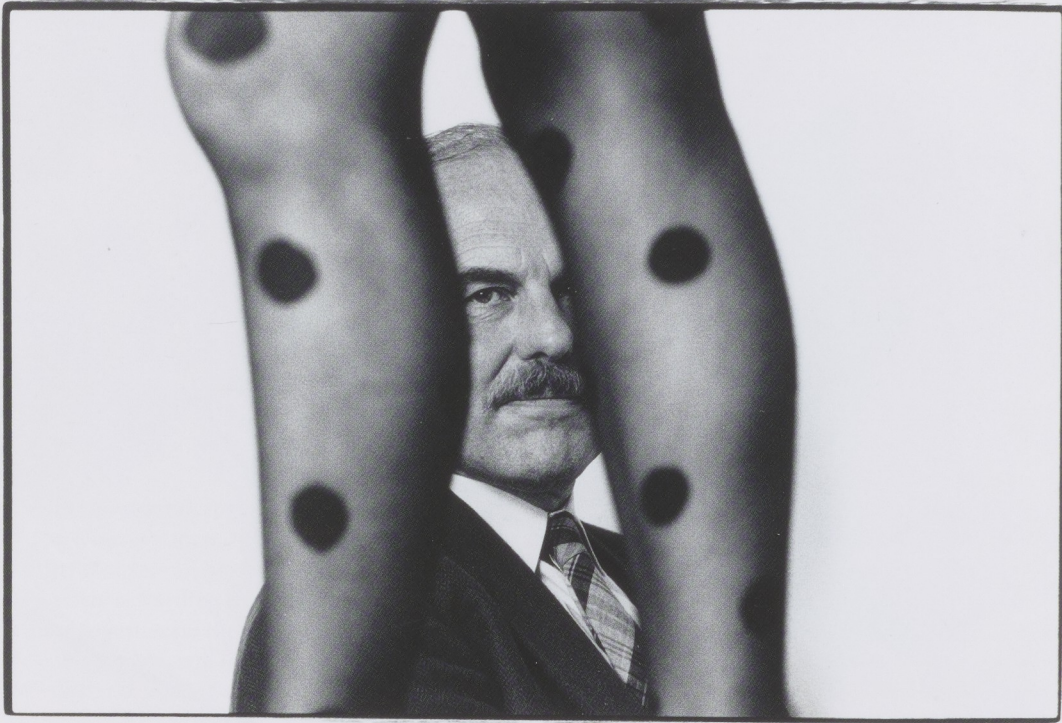
I didn't know straight away how I should answer Wouter and I told him that I would think about it over the weekend. In the reorganization plan for the Rijksmuseum at the time there was provision for a separate director of exhibitions. The idea was that the large exhibitions would be organized as projects. It was perfectly obvious that Wouter would act as project manager and I already knew that Annemarie Vels Heyn would shortly be director of exhibitions. I discussed with her what I ought to say to Wouter. Obviously the exhibition had to go ahead. If the Rijksmuseum had one job to do, it was to stage ambitious exhibitions like this that could offer both experts and the general public a new outlook on Dutch art.

The Iconoclasm exhibition had been a trifle dry and dusty, though, mainly because some art historians had stooped from their lofty academic heights and interfered with aspects of the exhibition they knew nothing about. That had to change. After the weekend I told Wouter that his exhibition definitely had to go ahead, but that there were a number of subjects that he and the project team would not be dealing with. The choice of the designer and the title of the exhibition were two of them. There was an odd mixture of gratitude and disappointment in his reaction.

It was my job to come up with a title as quickly as possible. I had set up a 'support group', dubbed 'The Syndics', to help me with the issues in my directorship that I knew nothing about. One of its members was Martin

Veltman, the guru of the Dutch advertising world. I called him the 'headline specialist'. When we had to come up with a title, at his request I thought up ten or so and then he and I chose the best. For this kind of discussion Martin invited me to come to a café in Oud-Zuid, where at eleven o'clock in the morning the cognac arrived with the coffee to boost our inspiration. Two hours later, we had a title for Wouter's exhibition: *Dawn of the Golden Age*. After Annemarie had given her approval, I told Wouter what the title of his exhibition would be. 'That's not academically sound,' he proclaimed indignantly. The best answer I could come up with was that 'people won't notice that until they're actually in the exhibition'.

Fortunately there was more of a consensus in the choice of the designer. In his own museum Wim Crowwel, the director of Museum Boymans van Beuningen, had proved 'able to create unusually atmospheric exhibitions in which the objects were shown to their best advantage'. (Annemarie Vels Heyn, in *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 44 [1996] p. 329). I travelled to Rotterdam to invite my colleague to design *The Dawn*. Although it meant that Wim would have to take leave from 'his' museum for the duration, with all that that entailed, he agreed without hesitation. This is how we came to be together in Vincent's photograph standing in front of the Titans. This double portrait accompanied an article by Max van Rooy about Wim as an exhibition designer, published in the *NRC* newspaper on 10 December 1993. The article was entitled 'Every gallery is a little theatre'. Max could not have described the experience of the exhibition better. Working with Wim forged a friendship which led to the joint production of six exhibitions; one of them, *The Road to Heaven* in the Nieuwe Kerk and the Museum Catharijneconvent, proved to be an unforgettable experience for both of us.



Photograph:  
Vincent Mentzel.

A year later, Vincent provided a really singular postscript. An occasion arose when he came to take another photograph of me. He was working on a series of photographs of big shots in unusual settings for the back page of the *NRC*. When he came into my office on the appointed morning I was talking to the board secretary, Marcelle Verberne. I had just expressed my surprise about what I felt were her rather loud new stockings. Inevitably, Vincent also became involved in our giggling conversation about the advisability of such an outfit for an official of the Rijksmuseum whose duties involved meeting the public. This glimpse of the director through the secretary's legs came about because of the hilarious mood the three of us were in at the time. What a setting! When the photograph was published, the image experts in the Rijksmuseum – and that was almost all the staff – said that it was inappropriate. Col-

leagues at museums elsewhere, whose reactions were published on the back page of the *NRC* in question, were also predominantly of the opinion that it was 'too frivolous'. After all these years I agree with them. All the same, I'm delighted it happened. Now the photograph is soon going to be in the Rijksmuseum collection, it's very important to me that the story of this portrait is documented accurately. When I phoned Vincent on 27 November 2009 to ask him if I could publish both photos in the *Bulletin*, he exclaimed, 'Wonderful, at least we could do things like that back then!' Ah well, Vincent, that was the time when Wouter's Titans were still falling from heaven.

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