



Editorial

Art History, Conservation and Science

In addition to its magnificent collection, the Rijksmuseum has other treasures that are often hidden from view: staff members from all sorts of backgrounds who have extraordinary knowledge of the objects in the collection. This varies from specialist art-historical knowledge among curators and detailed knowledge of materials and impressive skills among conservators, to the in-depth understanding of the deterioration of materials among natural scientists who use analysis to try to fathom the objects. The last two groups of staff members work in the Conservation & Science Department in the Atelier Building across from the museum, which is a world unto itself.

This department houses many disciplines and considerable expertise in materials: the conservation of glass, ceramics and stone; the metal department, which treats both archaeological and historical metal; furniture conservation with a focus on wood, but also on lacquerware and ship models; paper conservation with expertise in the field of books, photographic materials and works on paper; the paintings department, where in addition to all the work related to paint on various supports, picture frames are also dealt with; and the textiles department, where knowledge ranges from tapestry to costume and everything in between. The conservators thus cover an impressive range of materials and periods. With their range of professional knowledge and expertise, they can recognize, comprehend and treat virtually all objects and techniques used in the arts in the past. Gradually, the conservator has thus also become a historian of material, analogous to technical art historians who study and contextualize the history of the making of a work of art from adjacent fields in the humanities.

From 2006 to 2019, the name Conservation & Restoration covered the work traditionally done by the department. At the same time, since the beginning of this century, many within the Rijksmuseum also recognized that the natural sciences are indispensable for a full understanding of the material aspects of objects. After all, this expertise makes it possible, using advanced analytical equipment, to characterize and interpret the materials incorporated in the objects. For example, elements in metal objects can be recognized or the binder in paint can be analyzed. It is possible to examine whether an object contains materials that are anachronistic or specifically point to a certain period or location. This can be used to determine the authenticity of objects. Furthermore, every object is subject to decay of the material it is made of; understanding those processes has taken on an increasingly important role in the field.

This led to the creation of a science subdepartment in 2019, after which the umbrella department was named Conservation & Science. This means that, when it comes to substantive research on objects, three 'blood groups' now work together in the Rijksmuseum as a matter of course: the curator, the conservator and the natural scientist. These collaborations are also reflected in this Bulletin, in which findings on the various subjects are recorded. They range from an analysis of past interventions by tapestry workers to new insights into exactly what two apothecary jars may have contained. The function of several metres-long long landscapes painted on paper has been investigated through material and archival research. Of course, traditional art-historical research – in this case linked to questions of provenance – also continues to play a central role in the Rijksmuseum Bulletin, as the article on the return of Meissen porcelain illustrates. It shows how monodisciplinary and multidisciplinary research flourish side by side at the Rijksmuseum and what kinds of questions this research can answer. It shows the potential of the closer connection of collection and researchers, of which we will only reap more benefits in the future.

Robert van Langh
Head of Conservation & Science