

Editorial

ON THE DEPARTURE OF GREGOR WEBER

I first met Gregor J.M. Weber in 2006, when he was giving a lecture, peppered with jokes, about the painter Adriaen van der Werff. It may come as a surprise, but when the position of Head of the Department of Fine Arts fell vacant two years later, Gregor did not initially apply for it. It is typical of his modesty that he thought the Rijksmuseum was a step too far for him. It was only after some insistence that he swapped Kassel for Amsterdam in 2008. He was perfect for the job: erudite, a born researcher and a connoisseur rolled into one, with a boundless passion for Dutch paintings of the Golden Age. A German who had mastered Dutch perfectly – the grammar did not trouble him at all, nor did the use of all kinds of typical Dutch expressions. The seventeenth-century language of Vondel and Rembrandt also held few secrets for him. Through his work as the Leiter der Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Kassel and Kustos für Italienische Malerei in Dresden and his university chair in Bamberg, Gregor had already built up an extraordinary track record and his arrival introduced a valuable German network to Amsterdam. But more importantly, he brought something of the intellectual tradition of the *Bildungs* ideal to the Rijksmuseum. Every day his colleagues still benefit from that German erudition and above all from his encyclopaedic knowledge of even the most obscure artists and artworks.

Gregor's weakness for the Netherlands, above all for its glorious past, was evident in his fervent desire to live in a seventeenth-century house on a canal in Amsterdam that still exuded the atmosphere of the interiors of his favourite paintings. Initially he found somewhere on Oudeschans in the eastern part of Amsterdam's old centre, in an apartment he jokingly dubbed the 'Bonbonnière', because of the sumptuous eighteenth-century stucco work that did not quite mirror his more robust image of the Golden Age. After a long search he did find that real, genuinely seventeenth-century house in Leiden, in the shadow of the Hooglandsekerk.

Gregor obtained his doctorate in 1987 from the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule in Aachen in a subject that lies at the interface between fine art and literature. In *Der Lobtopos des 'lebenden' Bildes: Jan Vos und sein 'Zeege der Schilderkunst' von 1654* which he had published three years later, he focuses on the repeated praise that has been at the heart of art literature since the sixteenth century to the effect that artwork has imitated nature so perfectly that it almost seems to come to life. This theme perfectly illustrates Gregor's unorthodox approach to Dutch art and set the tone for much of his later work, which constantly moves back and forth between art literature and theory and technical and iconological issues on the one hand, and the connoisseur's astute eye on the other.

The interest he devotes to art in the margins of the canon is striking – the 'Dutch classicism' of De Lairese, Van der Werff and kindred spirits so long despised, is a good example. Gregor had an important role in the exhibition about this late seventeenth-century style of painting staged in Cologne, Kassel and Dordrecht in 2006 – *Vom Adel der Malerei: Holland um 1700/De kroon op het werk: Hollandse schilderkunst 1670-1750* – and likewise in the more recent exhibition about Gerard de Lairese in Enschede (2017). But let it be clear, his sympathy for such neglected moments in Dutch art history is never at the expense of canonical art and artists.

On the contrary, the two complement one another and co-exist. In his own words: ‘Gerard de Lairese was the most important painter of our Golden Age, not after Rembrandt but *alongside* Rembrandt.’

In Amsterdam, Gregor found a Rijksmuseum in the throes of a total renovation. As the chair of the working group that had to come up with the layout of the trajectory for the seventeenth century, he was immediately involved in helping to design the concept for the new Rijksmuseum. After the reopening in 2013, he devoted himself fully to three major and very successful exhibitions: *The Late Rembrandt* (2015); *Rembrandt & Velázquez* (2019), seventeenth-century Spanish and Dutch painting in dialogue form, together with the Prado; and then this year the largest monographic exhibition ever about Johannes Vermeer, the painter who has long kept Gregor engrossed.

Despite these great names, Gregor’s fascination with ‘forgotten’ and non-canonical art was reflected in a number of acquisitions made during his Rijksmuseum period, for which he made a particularly strong case: Caesar van Everdingen’s magnificent, allegorical *Girl in a Large Hat* which was purchased in 2009, a painting about which he wrote a thoughtful article for the *Rijksmuseum Bulletin* two years later; Barend Graat’s sensual *Pandora* (1674), acquired in 2014, which features the extraordinary auricular ewer Adam van Vianen made in 1614; Melchior d’Hondecoeter’s captivating oil sketch (purchased in 2013) of seven chicks, four of which reappear in five paintings by the artist in the Rijksmuseum’s collection, the sketch providing a rare insight into his workshop practice; and the group portrait by ‘Monogrammist GF’ of a company of four artists from the Low Countries in London, dating from around 1680, which was acquired some five years ago. A purchase of a *trompe l’oeil* of a small pile of books by Hendrick van Heemskerck (1682), which he also fervently advocated, did not find its way to the Rijksmuseum but went to Dordrecht in 2010. These may not be the greatest names in Dutch art history, but they are unusual artists and idiosyncratic works of art that constantly readjust and accentuate the accepted image of seventeenth-century painting. For Gregor, in spite of his huge knowledge, the guiding principle was and is an authentic and almost childlike wonder at the enchanting power of ‘living’ artworks. Because without wonder art has no right to exist.¹

Taco Dibbits
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¹ Gregor J.M. Weber, ‘Verwondering: Anmerkungen zu einem Affekt der Kunstbetrachtung’, in Claudia Fritzsche, Karin Leonhard and Gregor J.M. Weber (eds.), *Ad Fontes! Niederländische Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts in Quellen*, Petersberg 2013, pp. 331-47.