

# Editorial

## WOMEN OF THE RIJKSMUSEUM AND THE OTHER HALF

What do Grietgen Gerrits van Almesick, Sara de Bari, Geertruida den Dubbelde, Ida Peelen and Ada Hondius-Crone have in common? Thanks to the project *Women of the Rijksmuseum*, all shine in the new spotlights on women in art and history. With this project, the Rijksmuseum has become part of a major global movement – never before have so many women artists been presented to the museum-going public as at this moment. Yet the art world is by no means solely composed of those who make art: the *Women of the Rijksmuseum* project also studies other roles of women in the art world, from seventeenth-century print publishers to twentieth-century museum donors, and examines the contribution of women to the museum's own institutional history. Therefore, this issue of *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* pays homage to women in these roles, rather than just makers.

In doing so, *Women of the Rijksmuseum* aligns itself with the area of interest embraced by the inter-museum platform *The Other Half (De Andere Helft)*. This platform for heritage institutions in the Netherlands endeavours to make women's participation in the world of art and design more visible. Here too, historiography has been shaped by the gender-based exclusion of a whole group that comprises women donors, collectors, critics, dealers, curators and directors of museums and archives.

To signal and restore this disparity, and to stimulate further research into these women, Mayken Jonkman, Beatrice von Bormann (the then curators of the RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague, and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam respectively), Rachel Esner of the University of Amsterdam, and the undersigned on behalf of the Rijksmuseum, joined forces to found *The Other Half* in 2021. Since then, representatives from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam) and the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts) have joined the steering committee. The initiative has been met with great enthusiasm. Currently, the platform facilitates an exchange of the latest research data concerning women curators, donors and critics, with approximately ninety researchers and other interested parties from affiliated museums, archives and universities taking part. The steering committee organizes frequent gatherings of experts, offering lectures on women active in the art world in the various roles described above and on highly relevant topics such as women's legal standing on property ownership over time. While the focus lies largely on Dutch institutional history in the period circa 1780 to 1980, *The Other Half* also maintains contacts with museums and archives outside the Netherlands through lectures and the sharing of knowledge and expertise.

Examples of larger research projects that would not have gotten off the ground without the activities of *The Other Half* include a PhD research titled 'Female Patronage in Dutch Art Foundations, 1870-1940' at the Amsterdam School of Historical Studies (ASH), and 'Nagelaten: Vrouwelijke schenkers en legatoren aan Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (1849-heden)', a project initially financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). Since the beginning of 2024, *The Other Half* is included in the networks of the National Research School for Art History (OSK).

As mentioned above, the project *Women of the Rijksmuseum* is also exploring the role of female workers in the museum's own history. For instance, the activities of Marjorie Bottenheim have been examined: as the museum's librarian and academic researcher of the Print Room, she was directly involved in the evacuation of the collection of books and works on paper on the eve of World War II. Our provenance researchers have also investigated the role of various female donors and dealers for the period 1933-1945. With the support of the Women of the Rijksmuseum Fund, a researcher has been appointed to study women donors and legators of objects throughout the museum's history, many of whom were artists themselves. Featured in the present *Bulletin*, and representing the first

of these enquiries into the museum's history, are Marion Anker's article on the Rijksmuseum's donor Ada Hondius-Crone and Rachel Esner's article on museum curator and director Ida Peelen.

Debating research results within *The Other Half* has already led to the discovery that women often gave their possessions to more than just one museum. Publications on Marie Tak van Poortvliet, Mathilde Cohen Tervaert-Israëls and Betsy Westendorp-Osieck affirm that these women chose the most suitable setting, where an object could be ideally represented. So too Ada Hondius-Crone, who distributed her large collection among a variety of institutions. But when such a collection is broken up, it possibly undermines a collector's visibility and thus increases the chances of long-lasting anonymity. Present-day research seeks to address this dearth of information.

Dispersion has also obscured our appreciation for the career of Ida Peelen: after starting out as an unpaid volunteer at the Rijksmuseum, she went on to hold successive directorial positions at the Hague Municipal Museum and the Rijksmuseum Huis Lambert van Meerten. In these functions, she would come to play an active role in national museum innovations occurring at the onset of the twentieth century. Although a constant factor in the museum world of her day, Peelen's name was never affiliated with any one institution. Consequently, her memory and contribution were soon forgotten, in part due to the traditionally modest attitude that was expected of her as a working woman.

Besides seeking out women of institutional significance and bringing their contribution to the public's attention, *Women of the Rijksmuseum* aims to correct the male-oriented narrative of art history. Women's role has, for instance, been largely neglected in art historical publications on print publishing in the early modern period. Judging by publishers' names found on prints, this profession appears to have been dominated by men. As Laurien van der Werff argues in her article, however, these names can in fact be seen as brands, in many cases representing family businesses that had existed for multiple generations. Drawing on numerous examples, Van der Werff convincingly shows that women contributed to these companies, as a significant link in the production process, without necessarily being involved in the printmaking itself.

In various other industries, past evaluations of women's work carried a similar blind spot, as amply demonstrated by Femke Valkhoff's article on Frans Hals's portrait of Maritge Claesdr Vooght, a woman actively involved in her family's brewery, published in the 2023-1 issue of *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*. A comparable case can be found in the present issue, with Anne-Linde Ruiter's article on Bartholomeus van der Helst's portrait of Geertruida den Dubbelde, an admiral's wife whose responsibilities were far greater in scope than has always been believed.

These outcomes in the context of *Women of the Rijksmuseum* confirm that our record of history remains full of disparities and assumptions meriting further investigation and, where necessary, rectification. This occasionally produces a surprise transformation, as in Lucien Midavaine's article on a portrait in the museum's collection, long alleged to be a *portrait historié* of the Comtesse de Pagès, an exceptionally versatile and enlightened French aristocrat. On closer inspection, the painting turns out to be a nineteenth-century interpretation of the thirteenth-century St Clare, likewise a shining light in her day.

This is the second theme issue of *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* exclusively devoted to objects in the collection associated with women. It may seem surprising, but my wish is that this be the last *Bulletin* exclusively dedicated to women's themes. As with International Women's Day, which ought to be celebrated not just on 8 March but every day, the *Bulletin* should always present (art) historical narratives told from a variety of gender perspectives. This requires a manifest, enduring approach, so that we may achieve a written historical record that reflects the multiplicity the past deserves.

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chair *Women of the Rijksmuseum*