



Editorial

One of the fundamental aims of art history is to identify and understand what we are seeing when we look at an artwork. In this sense, what applies for art produced many centuries ago also applies for art produced only a few decades ago: the art historian's perspective is always conditioned by the here and now. In this Rijksmuseum Bulletin, two articles examine works of art in terms of their iconographic interpretation. Both demonstrate how the passage of time can obscure the understanding of images that made perfect sense at the time of a work's creation.

Medieval art is subject to convention upon convention, especially when it comes to the narratives, figures and motifs in religious imagery. When an artist clearly chose to diverge from said conventions, the first question that arises is why he did so, and secondly, in what manner we are to understand this deviation from the norm. When considering that many medieval written sources have been lost, to reconstruct the society in which these images functioned, let alone reconstruct a specific context, is no easy feat. Undaunted, Rens Tienstra has come to new insights regarding two long-elusive paintings, both created circa 1500, in the collection of the Rijksmuseum. Drawing from chant books and liturgical documents, in Bulletin 2025-3 Tienstra identified the memorial function of a medieval panel within a specific monastic context by delving into the unique iconographic combination of a Visitation of Mary and an open grave. In the present Bulletin, a comparable investigation likewise involving devotional sources sheds light on the unusual iconography of a panel featuring an image of the Tree of Jesse that contains indisputable references to Rosary prayers, as well leading to the tenable identification of a rather enigmatic male figure in contemporary attire. These findings are all the more profound, given that, in the many years since the acquisition of both panels, art historical discussions have failed to produce a satisfactory explanation for what is depicted.

Modern art, one would think, is less subject to the passage of time in a changing society. But even when an artist is still alive, works can fall prey to interpretations that diverge from the original intention. Modern works of varying abstraction are especially prone to the tides of time, as art that speaks to each beholder in a different way is inevitably open to broad interpretation. Artists living long enough to witness first-hand in what new ways their work – or entire oeuvre – is understood by succeeding generations are likely to find themselves in a curious, if not unsettling position. This was indeed the fate of artist Lou Loeber (1894-1983), who entered the spotlight in the nineteen seventies, working with curators, art dealers and journalists whose presentation of her semi-abstract, constructivist works largely produced before the Second World War – meant to be both comprehensible to and affordable for all – was not always in synch with her own intentions. Iconographic details were also occasionally misunderstood. Ceri-Anne van der Geer highlights how, towards the end of her life, Loeber sought to define the future perception of her person and artistry on her own terms by various means. Besides writing her own memoirs and transferring her professional archive to the RKD, Loeber also donated over 200 drawings and prints to the Rijksmuseum. To ensure and preserve her own socialist interpretation, she took on the task of making detailed annotations for a significant number of these works, actively shaping how her art was interpreted by others. With the mentioned medieval panels we see the art historian's role is to rectify the misinterpretation of a work by returning to the context of the day, whereas in this latter case, an artist takes on this very task herself, looking ahead to essentially shape how her work will be seen in the future.