



Editorial

‘One of the six best restorers in the world.’ So wrote David Roëll, director of the Rijksmuseum, in 1957, in a letter to the minister asking for a higher salary for Henricus Mertens, then ‘Painting Restorer A’. It took ten months before Mertens was promoted to head restorer – with better pay. Mertens’s career was closely intertwined with that of Arthur van Schendel, curator and later director of the Rijksmuseum, and expert in the field of conservation and research: a technical art historian *avant la lettre*. With ‘Operation Night Watch’ at present in full swing, Esther van Duijn’s outstanding account of the involvement of both men in the restoration of *The Night Watch* in 1946-47 is timely. It is part of her well researched history of how the painting conservation studio at the Rijksmuseum developed, and the crucial role both Mertens and Van Schendel played. A riveting story that starts in the nineteen-thirties, addresses the personal accomplishments of both protagonists, and takes the reader through the evacuation of 3,500 paintings to bunkers in the dunes and shelters in Maastricht and Paasloo in 1939. *The Night Watch* returned to the museum in June 1945; infrared photographs and X-ray details taken then are still crucial in understanding the painting’s present condition. The treatment brought Mertens fame, making him the specialist in restoring Rembrandts and establishing the studio as an international centre of expertise, which it remains.

These early technical examinations of *The Night Watch* were just the beginning of the huge developments in scientific analytical and imaging techniques that opened up new ways of identifying and interpreting historical materials and techniques. Jan de Hond, Amélie Couvrat-Desvergnès, Leila Sauvage, Forough Sajadi and Paolo d’Imporzano use such methods in their study of a curious Persian miniature in the scrapbook of the Dutch painter Gesina ter Borch, (1631-1690). Combining their expertise, the authors arrived at a new interpretation of this Iranian youth in his sumptuous golden garments. It had been thought to be a copy painted by Gesina after a Persian miniature of the Isfahan School, possibly by its most famous artist Riza Abbasi or his close circle, but technical examination revealed unexpected features, invisible to the naked eye, showing that the miniature is truly Iranian but quite badly damaged. Gesina carefully restored and retouched it. The presence of the Iranian youth, inserted as a rather exotic addition between the Dutch family scenes in Gesina’s scrapbook, also sheds light on the connections between the Middle East and the Dutch Republic, and reveals an interest in Iranian miniatures unexpected in Gesina’s home town, Zwolle, far from more international urban centres such as Amsterdam. According to a poem accompanying her self-portrait, Gesina’s ‘virtues, honour and art were never praised enough’. She may have been quite well connected after all.

The devil is often in the detail, as we also see in Erik Odegard’s investigation of a ship model, one of four rare seventeenth-century examples in one of the world’s largest ship model collections, held by the Rijksmuseum. The deconstruction of the model, a two-decked three-masted ship with forty-four cannon mounted on two decks, and a detailed comparison to seventeenth-century drawings and paintings of various types of vessels, from merchantmen to warships, offer readers fascinating insights into Dutch maritime history. Odegard investigates whether our model was a frigate built for the admiralty or, as has been suggested, a convoy vessel employed to protect the Dutch East India Company’s fleet, a service procured by the urban directorates appointed by the municipalities of the ports from which the Company’s ships sailed. Odegard dives deep into the archives to uncover many stories hidden in this unique model. One detail, the forty-four guns, remains unresolved, however, as we know of no specific ships either for the admiralty in 1848 or for the directorates that mounted more than thirty-eight cannon, so the research journey continues.

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