



# Editorial

## From the Margin to the Centre

**M**arginal things. This is how you could describe the objects in this Bulletin – not art designed to overwhelm the public by its beauty, but unremarkable objects that only reveal their special qualities on closer study. Objects, too, that are not immediately recognized as great works of art because they are everyday items, small scale or their subjects are outside the traditional frameworks of art. This does not mean, however, that they have no aesthetic value, no unique visual idiom or cannot convey a particular message. This is precisely what the authors of the articles in this Bulletin contend. They demonstrate that the marginal aspect is relative and highly time-dependent. Something we think is marginal today was not regarded as such at the time it was made. And conversely, what we now see as a unique artwork may once have been an everyday object.

The first article examines a little wooden figure of a monk in a pulpit. At less than ten centimetres high, it is easily overlooked. Besides, it is not a piece of art as such, but an inkwell with the empty sleeves of the monk's habit giving access to the ink. Medieval inkwells have received virtually no attention, but in his contribution Frits Scholten shows that this miniature sculpture, recently acquired by the Rijksmuseum, is not just an amusing conceit. Behind the funny little man with no hands lies a complicated religious message quite probably linked to the Carthusian Order. The piece was not an everyday item, it was specifically commissioned from a prominent sculptor by a well-to-do monk.

The jetons Rachel Wise describes have been equally neglected. The Rijksmuseum has one of the largest collections in this field – 1,600 or so, more than half from the Eighty Years' War. They have only been discussed by numismatists and economic historians. The jetons were aids for adding and calculating and were used by officials, bookkeepers and tax collectors. Wise, the first to have looked at these from the angle of art history, has reconstructed their iconographic programme. It reveals that they were important conveyors of propaganda during the Eighty Years' War. Through sometimes very erudite biblical analogies, the users were given a specific interpretation of the war situation at the time. The designs on the jetons called for solidarity and steadfastness in the struggle against the Spanish troops.

The sculpture that is the subject of the article by Margreet Boomkamp appears at first glance to be anything but marginal: it is a substantial work in marble, a prestigious material. Nonetheless, the subject places it at the edge of the official art history of the nineteenth century. This is not a figure from the Bible, a great statesman or a historic hero, it is Sleeping Beauty, the fairy-tale princess. The Dutch critics dismissed genre sculpture like this as insubstantial and shallow. That may be why this statue was soon forgotten and was mouldering away under the moss in a private garden. It was only rediscovered a few years ago and ultimately found its way to the Rijksmuseum.

This issue's acquisitions section is entirely devoted to photography – a medium that for many years was not considered to be a serious field of art collection. This only changed in the last decades of the previous century. When Anna Atkins made her photograms of seaweed in the eighteenth-forties and fifties her objective was chiefly scientific. Now her work is highly sought-after and praised for its aesthetic qualities. *Photographs of British Algae* ranks as a major acquisition and was one of the highlights of the recent photographic exhibition *New Realities*. At last Atkins has moved from her position in the margins of art history to a modest place in its centre.