



Short notice

Symbolism and Early Abstract Art from the Gerard van Wezel Collection

• ALIED OTTEVANGER •

In 2018 the Rijksmuseum acquired an unusual group of fifty-one early twentieth-century artworks: forty drawings, seven prints and four paintings from the collection of Gerard van Wezel (1951-2018). Self-taught and with a talent for drawing and a fascination with monuments, Gerard van Wezel rose from his position as a draughtsman at a building firm to become a specialist in building history and building fragments at the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), formerly the Rijksdienst voor Monumentenzorg (Historic Buildings Conservation Agency, RDMZ). While Van Wezel was studying at the Junior Technical School, his teacher Anton Sipman (1906-1985) asked him to assist him in completing *Molenbouw: Het staande werk van de bovenkruiers* (1975), a book that became the standard work on mills.¹ In 1999, during Van Wezel's time at the RDMZ, he published the monograph *Het paleis van Hendrik III, graaf van Nassau te Breda*, which was awarded the Karel van Mander Prize in 2001.² He wrote and edited the monograph *De Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk en de grafkapel voor Oranje-Nassau te Breda*, which was published two years later.³ As the trustee of the RCE's collection of building fragments, Gerard van Wezel produced a five-part series on architectural sculpture in the

< Fig. 1
KAREL DE NERÉE
TOT BABBERICH,
*Van Booven as
a Young Priest*,
c. 1900-01.
Pastel on canvas,
81.5 x 57 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-5063.

Netherlands, published by Wbooks. He also initiated the in-depth research into Dutch monumental painting in the years between the wars that was carried out by Bernadette van Hellenberg Hubar; this research culminated in the publication of *De genade van de steiger: Monumentale kerkelijke schilderkunst in het interbellum* (2013).⁴ In his spare time he became an expert on Jan Toorop and organized a major retrospective of the artist's works, which was staged in the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in 2016 and then travelled on to Germany. He also wrote the first part of the long-awaited monograph on Toorop.⁵

The purchase of a drawing by Willem van Konijnenburg in 1973 was the beginning of Van Wezel's collection of Symbolist art. *Kunstenaren der idee*, an exhibition staged in venues including the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague in 1978-79, reinforced his interest in that type of art. This exhibition was the first to present a broad overview of Symbolist trends that could be identified in Dutch art from the eighteen-eighties to around 1930. The abstract form in which that phenomenon manifested itself had earlier served as the point of departure for *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld: Het begin van de abstrakte kunst in Nederland 1910-1925*, an exhibition that had been staged in the Centraal Museum in

Utrecht and elsewhere in 1973.⁶ It was the catalogue for *Kunstenaren der Idee* that most intrigued Van Wezel: who were these artists, what else did they make and who was missing? He sought answers in the literature and began his search for this art in the art market, because it was – and still is – poorly represented in museums.

For forty years or so, alongside his RCE job, Van Wezel kept a close eye on what was on offer in exhibitions, at sales and in the art trade in the Netherlands and acquired works for his collection through these channels. He bought work that appealed to him intuitively. Van Wezel's preferences are clearly recognizable in his collection: the symbolic and early abstract art he had seen at the two exhibitions and art that could have been shown there, as his keen eye also attracted him to related art that had yet to be discovered.

During the nineteen-nineties it became clear to him that in the run-up to the new millennium a similar leaning towards Symbolism and Neo-Romanticism in the visual arts had begun to become apparent.⁷ Van Wezel also decided to acquire works for his collection from this contemporary domain. His two preferences, art from around 1900 and from around 2000, and the mutual relationships between them, were shown to the general public in 2014 when he exhibited his collection in the Singer Museum in Laren under the title *Droomkunst*. He combined art from the *fin-de-siècle* and the first decades of the twentieth century with art from the end of the nineteen-nineties, not on the basis of time, but on the basis of an affinity of image and spiritual content Van Wezel had detected.⁸

Early Twentieth-Century Art

The fifty-one works added to the Rijksmuseum's collection were chosen from the first section of Gerard van Wezel's collection: art from around 1900. Among the works selected is a

painting made in 1889 and one from 1900-01. Most of the other works date from the first decades of the twentieth century. The decision to choose this period was prompted by the desire to bring together works in the Rijksmuseum which offer a keen and nuanced view of the development of art in the Netherlands around 1900. Symbolism can use reinforcement at that pivotal point. The importance and effect of Symbolism in the twentieth century can be highlighted through the addition of a variety of examples of abstract art. These examples were chosen so that they illustrate the pursuit of a deliberate, rational and non-representational form of art, as well as intuitive abstract art that expresses personal feelings. There was also a focus on the rise of counter movements such as Neo-Romanticism. The acquisition of works from this collection provided a splendid opportunity to enrich the museum's collection with early twentieth-century art that is distinct from the well-known modern art that features in the usual canon.

Symbolist Trends

Symbolism, an international movement embraced by artists who were opposed to realism in the arts and materialism in general, made its presence felt in the Netherlands in the eighteen-eighties. The blue-green pastel on canvas *Henri van Booven as a Young Priest*, which is dated to around 1900-01 (fig. 1), is a pinnacle in this idealistic drive to express ideas and imagination. Originally influenced by Jan Toorop (1858-1928), Karel de Nerée tot Babberich (1880-1909) found an entirely individual form of dreamy symbolism in this idealized portrait of his friend, the writer Henri van Booven, which was highly praised at that time. During his diplomatic career – first in The Hague and later in Madrid – De Nerée tot Babberich soon emerged as a draughts-man with a talent for sophisticated images of the decadent life that was becoming increasingly popular in literature.⁹

The early work of the English illustrator Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) was another important source of inspiration for him.

Toorop was in contact with many artists who strove for innovation, in the Netherlands and beyond. He was the only Dutchman invited to join the group of Belgian symbolists and art-nouveau painters who exhibited under the name *Les xx* (Les Vingt). From 1885 Toorop took part in their exhibitions along with artists such as Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) and Xavier Mellery

(1854-1921). All three are considered to be members of the first generation of symbolists. Mellery exhibited work there that he based on drawings he had made in the fishing village of Marken in the late eighteen-seventies. Despite his realistic portraits of the inhabitants he wanted to express more than their likenesses, and the result was a stylized, almost Byzantine effect. His intention is also apparent from the titles he gave them, such as *La Sainte Famille, Marken* (the Holy Family) for the family he painted there around 1889 (fig. 2).



Fig. 2

XAVIER MELLERY,
La Sainte Famille,
Marken, c. 1889.
Black and coloured
chalk on panel,
75.5 x 53 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-5064.



Fig. 3

ALBERT
PLASSCHAERT,
*Opus 862: Christ
Risen from the
Dead Wanders Sadly
in the Caverns of
Consciousness*,
c. 1916-27.
Black chalk and oil
on cardboard,
70 x 42 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-89.

Albert Plasschaert (1866-1941) can also be regarded as a Symbolist. Trained as an engineer, he began his career as a draughtsman in a stained-glass factory. In the early nineteenthens he spent some time managing the Oldenzeel Gallery in Rotterdam, which staged the first exhibition of work by Italian Futurists at the end of 1912, closely followed by the abstract art of the Russian Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). Plasschaert incorporated their expressive visual language in his stained-glass works and

drawings, but his art sprung primarily from his personal experiences and mystical religious beliefs. Plasschaert passed on his visions and revelations in his art. He spun a web of figures, portraits and other motifs using a network of tiny dashes and long lines to produce almost non-representational images. He called all his works *Opus*, followed by successive numbers (see fig. 3). His drawings seem to want to arouse devotion like exalted images of saints or relics.

Elisabeth Stoffers (1881-1971), was one of the few women who produced abstract art remarkably early. Van Wezel was among those who rediscovered her as an artist.¹⁰ Her work seems to derive from sympathy for the astral world as outlined in the books by the English theosophists Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, which were translated into Dutch.¹¹ They saw man linked to a spiritual astral body in which emotions could be recognized. An individual's state of mind and spiritual mood can be identified from their aura, the energy field surrounding them. Abstract, colourful illustrations of auras were published on separate plates with their books and Stoffers's pastel drawings are strongly reminiscent of these (see fig. 4). Her long, mysterious titles appear to be associated with the same esoteric, secret art drawn from the imagination as Plasschaert's.

Frans Stamkart (1874-1947) had a wide interest in mysticism and theosophy as well as art dating from the Middle Ages and from the Dutch East Indies. His choice of subject clearly places his work in the domain of symbolist trends as do the manifestations of his motifs, for which he developed an entirely individual technique. Instead of using watercolours or pastel, materials with which images can easily be blurred, he rubbed out areas in pencil and chalk in his drawings, causing a soft and mysterious light to break through from behind his figures, at the same time creating



Fig. 4
ELISABETH
STOFFERS,
*The Intention of
the Father is to
Surround His Child
with Love and
to Protect and
Overshadow Him
with His Fidelity
and Justice*, 1917.
Pastel on paper,
315 x 247 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-94.

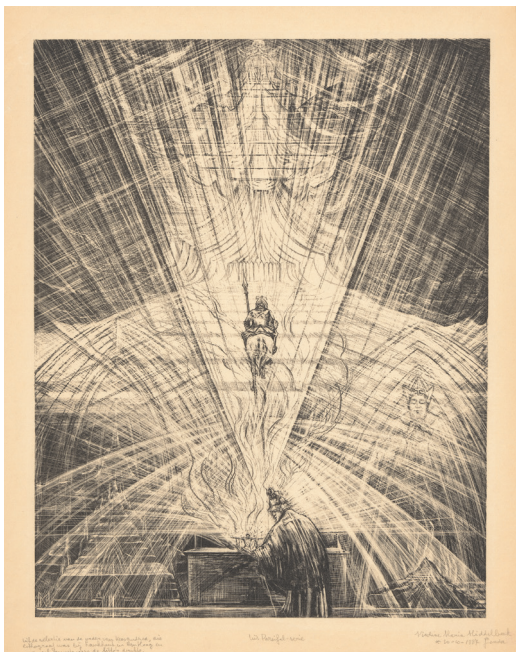


Fig. 5
FRANS STAMKART,
Salome, c. 1910-15.
Chalk on paper,
956 x 766 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-75.

Fig. 6
NICOLINE
MIDDELBEEK,
*Unknown Title
(Parsifal's Victory
over Himself)*,
c. 1933-35, from
the Parsifal series.
Lithograph,
540 x 440 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
RP-P-2018-3323.

a glistening outline to the swirling clouds, dresses and veils of the dancers, as in his dancing *Salome* (fig. 5).

A late example of the development of Symbolism can be found in the work of another female artist, Nicoline Middelbeek (1887-1980). Until well into the nineteen-thirties she was still making use of symbolist imagery where lines serve as bearers of sound and light and were used to reproduce moments from Wagner's opera *Parsifal* (see fig. 6).



Early Abstract Art

If symbolist art is still often related to the visible world, abstract art from the beginning of the twentieth century – and certainly ultimately – is entirely non-representational. The viewer is confronted with areas of colour and lines that represent nothing of the reality that surrounds us. What linked these abstract artists to the Symbolists was their assumption that there was another, more spiritual world hidden behind the physical appearance of things. This conviction fuelled their desire to base their art on ideas concealed behind reality. For the Symbolists those ideas could still be transferred through existing images and symbols – even if part was meant only for connoisseurs. The abstract artists, though, sought radically new ways to create internalized and etherealized images as purely as possible, according to their intuition, or with the aid of supposed laws of nature.

Of the Dutch artists who chose an abstract repertoire, only a small group gained a reputation – most of them connected with *De Stijl* magazine. However there were many others who were active, artists who contributed equally to the development of abstract art in the Netherlands and are now

far less known, or even forgotten.

The Expressionist artist Janus de Winter (1882-1951), for example, has long been ignored, although at the time he was a close friend of and great influence on Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931), the modernist, who as leader of *De Stijl* became co-founder of the geometric-abstract 'Stijl' art. Between 1915 and 1917, in the run-up to the foundation of *De Stijl*, Van Doesburg was very impressed by De Winter's approach of depicting individual inner feelings in art – 'sensations' – as abstraction. De Winter was one of the first artists in the Netherlands who, like Kandinsky, showed visions and modes of thought in abstract colour forms (see fig. 7).

Herman Hana (1874-1952), now likewise unknown, had the same kind of friendship with Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) at that time. They shared ideas about each other's work and about their ideals. Like Mondrian, Hana believed in theosophy and was one of the first to understand Mondrian's intentions. Hana himself also turned away from the depiction of visible things and quite early on, around 1914, worked on a system of making abstract geometric compositions with the aid of stamps, and later even with a complicated machine. Afterwards he



Fig. 7

JANUS DE WINTER, *Fighting Orchids*, c. 1917. Watercolour and gouache on paper, 481 x 622 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-T-2019-70.



Fig. 8

HERMAN HANA,
Unknown Title
(*Fantasy in RED*),
c. 1915.
Ink on paper
and cardboard,
495 x 324 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-67.



Fig. 9

BERNARD CANTER,
Unknown Title
(*'rhythmic pointillism'*),
c. 1914-15.
Pastel on paper,
692 x 974 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-85.

experimented with 'crystallizations', whereby the reactions of different substances that he mixed – sometimes chemical – determined the final image, to a large extent unaided by the artist (see fig. 8).

Symbolists like Toorop had already convincingly demonstrated in their work that invisible forces like sound and speed could be expressed not only by way of atmospheric impressions of turbulence, but above all with lines as a picturesque sentiment. Bernard Canter (1871-1956) showed in his compositions of wavy dots of colour that this could be made sharper and tauter by only using line and colour (see fig. 9). Although his works were always based on a landscape or a seascape, contemporaries like Van Doesburg recognized the dynamic of modern life in his art.

The artists Jan van Deene (1886-1977) and Jacob Bendien (1890-1933) took the most radical approach, although it did not make them famous. In Paris around 1913, Van Deene and Bendien, along with a small group of Dutch artists, developed an individual form of completely abstract art. In the autumn of that year they presented it as 'absolute art' at the exhibition staged

by *De Onafhankelijken* (The Independents) artists' society in Amsterdam. Their description was a reference to the modern 'absolute music' and as such avoided the term 'abstract'. Over the course of the nineteenth century that had acquired a negative connotation when it was used to describe the cold, chilling effect that had taken root in Neo-Classical art. Afterwards abstract was again understood as a term for the invisible and was strongly rejected by Realist painters because they maintained that it was simply impossible for the invisible to be a subject for painting. Discoveries around the turn of the century including X-rays (which won Wilhelm Röntgen the first Nobel Prize for Physics in 1901) began to weaken this argument, but it was some years before the term 'abstract' – abstraction in the literal meaning of abstracted from reality – came into use.

Like Bendien, Van Deene strove to express uninterrupted, higher thoughts or feelings with his non-representational canvas *Peinture VII* of 1913 (fig. 10). Their joint intentions are perhaps best understood from the objectives that Van Deene described in the explanation handed out at the



Fig. 10
JAN VAN DEENE,
Peinture VII, 1913.
Oil on canvas,
39.5 x 32.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-5065.

Fig. 11
JACOB BENDIEN,
Meditistic Arabesque,
c. 1910-30.
Pencil on paper
and cardboard,
910 x 419 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-72.

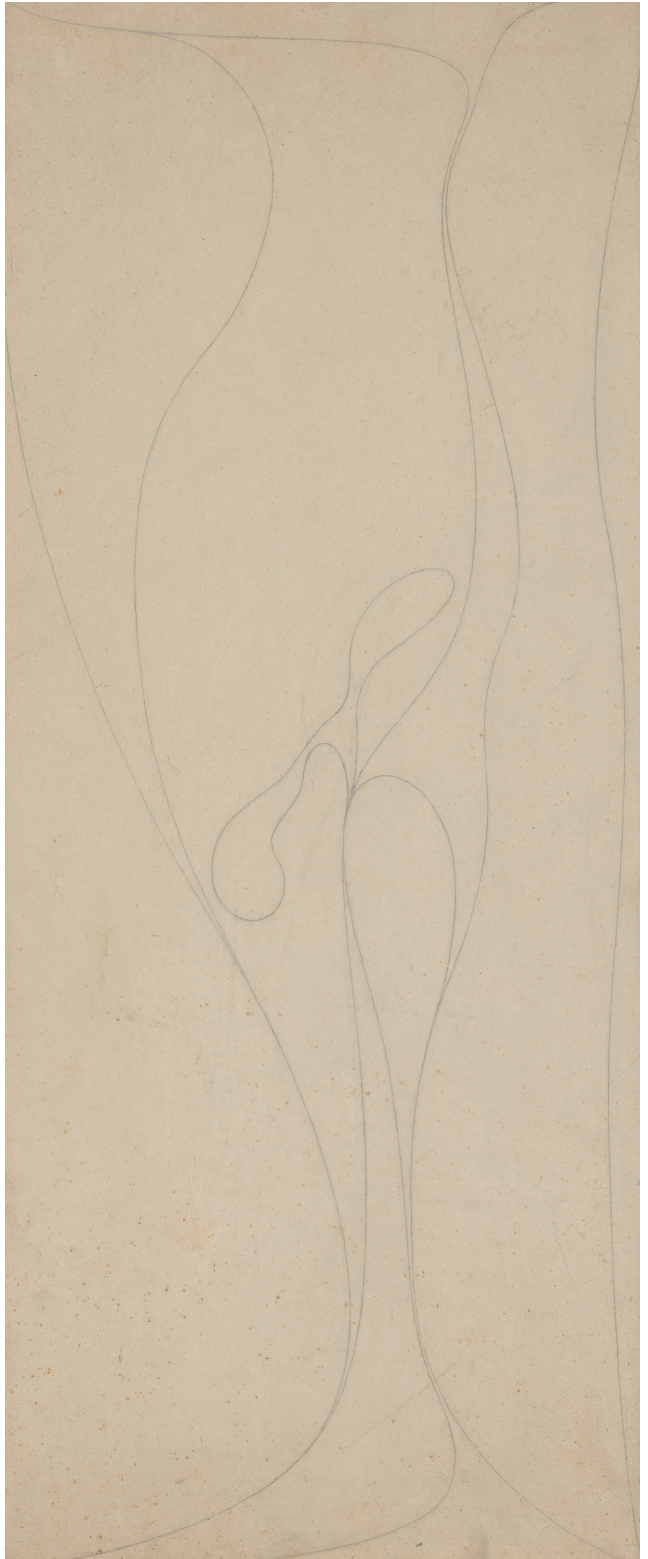




Fig. 12

HERMAN BIELING,
The Thinker
(*'The Seer'*), 1917.
Pastel on paper,
476 x 340 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-68.



Fig. 13

GER (GERLWH)
LADAGE, *Longing*,
1917.
Watercolour and
pastel on paper,
699 x 468 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-87.

exhibition, as well as the theory that Bendien noted later.¹² Van Deene stated that their paintings did represent something '...only inner things. They are: emotional lives expressed in line and colour'. And from the titles that Bendien gave to his work, such as *Meditistic Arabesque*, we can understand his more specific intention (fig. 11). With 'Mediticism', a term he coined for his own art, Bendien was striving for an expression of emotions controlled by the mind. The wavy lines – which like Van Deene's approach had probably stemmed from the styling of a portrait or landscape – depicted movement. This movement ascends towards the higher, to the spiritual.

De Branding was the name of a progressive group of modern artists in Rotterdam who made themselves heard in the nineteen-tens and twenties. Herman Bieling (1887-1964) was the pioneer of this club. He was open to the foreign avant-garde – artists like

the Italian Futurists, to Kandinsky, and to the French Cubists whose works were also exhibited in the Netherlands. The Cubists' influence can be seen in Bieling's broken-up motifs; shattered fragments of which he used to build up a new abstract image (see fig. 12). However his art was never completely abstract like that of some other members of *De Branding*. Ger Ladage (1878-1932) – or Gerlwh as he was known – did abandon the image. Aside from being an active member of *De Branding* (he designed the posters, catalogues and notepaper), he was also an adherent of theosophy, had mystical interests and was convinced of the existence of paranormal phenomena like the presence of an astral body. Unlike some other kindred spirits in *De Branding*, he never wrote about it, but his expressionist use of jerky, scratched lines and bright, contrasting colours can certainly be linked to it (see fig. 13), although that could also



Fig. 14

Attributed to
CHRIS LANOOPY,
*Abstract Futuristic
Composition*, c. 1912.
Oil on canvas,
56.5 x 66.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-5066.

have stemmed from his job as a decorator and stained-glass designer. In that respect it is not entirely surprising that there are stylistic similarities between his work and Plasschaert's.

The decorative arts have in any case had an influence on the development of abstract art that should not be underestimated. I have already referred to stained-glass art in regard to stimuli and discoveries derived from the

decorative arts. The same can be said of ceramics, which is demonstrated in the work of Chris Lanooy (1881-1948). Although he is now known solely from his pottery and innovative use of glazes, he was a versatile artist who also painted and was adept at applying the results of one discipline to the other. To what extent this contributed to an open attitude in which it was possible to incorporate expressive and futuristic imagery in a very free way can be seen in his painting now known by the title *Abstract Futuristic Composition* (fig. 14).

Romanticism

The presence of another world, however, can and could also be suggested by allowing the world of fantasy and magic to filter through reality. It takes little effort, for example, to see a dream world in the mushroom-populated, *sous-bois* scenes of Jan de Boer (1877-1946) and Theo Goedvriend (1879-1969) which – as befits fairy tales – is a world founded on secrecy and on deeper wisdoms (see fig. 15). Romantic feelings of melancholy, of loneliness and finiteness are evoked by desolate landscapes and

Fig. 15

JAN DE BOER,
Under the Old Tree,
c. 1910-29.
Pastel on paper,
258 x 340 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-64.



Fig. 16
DIRK BEREND
NANNINGA,
*Courtyard with Pond
in the Snow*, c. 1920-39.
Pastel on paper,
487 x 407 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2019-101.



twilight such as the wintery gardens of Victor de Budt (1866-1965) and Dirk Berend Nanninga (1868-1954). After the advent of abstract art, these romantic images could be built up more like flat compositions with the aid of coloured forms. The continuity of symbolism also made it possible to project and express great human moods and emotions in something mundane like a garden – even a backyard (see fig. 16).

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NOTES

- Anton Sipman, *Molenbouw: Het staande werk van de bovenkruiers*, Zutphen 1975.
- Gerard W.C. van Wezel, *Het paleis van Hendrik III, graaf van Nassau te Breda*, Zeist 1999, see www.dbnl.org/tekst/weze009pale01 (consulted 1 May 2019).
- Gerard W.C. van Wezel, *De Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk en de grafkapel voor Oranje-Nassau te Breda*, Zwolle 2003, see www.dbnl.org/tekst/weze009onze01 (consulted 1 May 2019).
- Bernadette C.M. van Hellenberg Hubar, *De genade van de steiger: Monumentale kerkelijke schilderkunst in het interbellum* (Gerard W.C. van Wezel, ed.), Zutphen 2013.
- Gerard van Wezel, *Jan Toorop: Zang der Tijden* (Paul B.M. van den Akker, ed.), exh. cat. The Hague (Gemeentemuseum) 2016.
- Kunstenaren der idee: Symbolistische tendenzen in Nederland ca 1880-1930*, exh. cat. The Hague (Gemeentemuseum)/ Groningen (Groninger Museum) 1978; *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld: Het begin van abstracte kunst in Nederland, 1910-1925*, exh. cat. Utrecht (Centraal Museum)/ Groningen (Groninger Museum)/ Schiedam (Stedelijk Museum) 1973, for the introductory texts for the exhibition, see *Museumjournaal* 17 (December 1972) no. 6. The exhibitions were the result of research carried out by art history students at the University of Utrecht, accompanied by their tutors Carel Blotkamp and Evert van Uitert.
- For the first indications of it, see 'Nieuwe' *Schilderkunst*, Akademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Arnhem, 1982 (A.A.P. textbook no. 6), and for the rise of a Neo-Romantic trend, see *Rijksaankopen Nederlandse Kunst 1990*, Zwolle (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst) 1991.
- Droomkunst 1900 & 2000: De kunst van twee fin de siècles*, exh. cat. Laren (Singer Museum) 2014.
- See E. Derksen, 'En wie, die midden tussen de paardebloemen zit, beschouwt niet gaarne een exotische orchidee?' 75 tekeningen van Christoph Karel Henri de Nerée tot Babberich (1880-1909), exh. cat. Arnhem (Gemeentemuseum Arnhem) 1986, pp. 8-12.
- In 2000 the Centraal Museum in Utrecht bought three pastel drawings Stoffers made in 1916-18, towards the end of her short artistic career, which lasted from around 1903 to around 1920.
- See the books by A. Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, translated by Johan van Manen, *De zichtbare en onzichtbare mensch: voorbeelden van verschillende soorten van menschen zooals zij gezien worden met behulp van geofende helderziendheid* (Amsterdam 1903) and *Gedachtevormen* (Amsterdam 1905).
- Museumjournaal* 17 (1972) no. 6, pp. 252-53 (appendix to Van Deene's text in *Het Leven*, no. 48 (25 December 1913)) and J. Bendien with A. Harrenstein-Schröder, *Richtingen in de hedendaagsche schilderkunst*, Rotterdam 1935.