



Short Notice

Mariënbosch Plantation, formerly Meerzorg

• EVELINE SINT NICOLAAS •

Suddenly I recognized it. The brick structure of the lock still stands on the far side of the canal near Mariënbosch. Three years ago, I leant my bike against it when I was visiting a number of plantations in Suriname, but then I had no idea that I was ‘walking around’ in a painting by Willem de Klerk (figs. 1, 2). When this work was acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 1962, it was given the title *View of the ‘Meerzorg’ Coffee Plantation on the Taparoepi Canal in Suriname?* – with a question mark, as nobody was very confident about this attribution. The Surinamese architect Philip Dikland recently suggested that the canvas depicted the Mariënbosch plantation, and with that a number of pieces of the puzzle from previous research fell into place.¹

Earlier attempts to discover the identity of the plantation focused predominantly on the identity of its owner, and hence the person who probably commissioned the work. Willem de Klerk (1800-1876), a landscape painter from Dordrecht, had never been to Suriname. The fact that he nonetheless depicted a plantation in Suriname makes it likely that his client was a local acquaintance who had asked him to paint the property he owned abroad. In its efforts to establish the identity of this person,

Fig. 1
WILLEM DE KLERK
after a drawing by
ALEXANDER LUDWIG
BROCKMANN, *View
of the Mariënbosch
Coffee Plantation in
Suriname, Dordrecht/
Suriname, 1829-50/76.*
Oil on canvas,
75 × 97.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. SK-A-4087.

the museum consequently focused on plantations owned by families or trading companies from Dordrecht.

Overseas Properties

From around 1750 more and more plantations were managed by absentee owners rather than by people who lived on their plantations. The change came about when a large group of Dutch investors saw that huge profits were being made in Suriname, in the main from coffee plantations. Merchant bankers issued ‘business funds’, which provided them with an annual interest payment.² The money raised was lent to Dutch planters in Suriname, who only had to start

Fig. 2
Lock at the
Mariënbosch
plantation, May 2014.
Photo:
Eveline Sint Nicolaas.



repaying it after a period of ten years. The sum they could borrow depended on the value of the plantation.

The funds immediately filled a need: in the Netherlands people were delighted to get a chance to share in the success of the plantations in Suriname, and in their turn the planters hoped to become wealthy even more quickly with the extra investments. The money was raised so easily that it gave the impression that everything in Suriname could be turned into gold. Everyone wanted to profit from it and the eagerness to buy the business funds was so great that the desire to invest almost exceeded the planters' demand.

At the end of the seventeen-seventies the system collapsed. Many of the planters had lived beyond their means and were unable to start repaying their debts when the ten years had elapsed. Penniless, they returned to the Netherlands, while the plantations passed into the hands of the fund holders or trading companies. The new owners left the running of their properties to administrators, who often managed several estates from Paramaribo. In their turn, they sub-contracted the work to directors who actually lived on the plantations most of the time and who reported to them regularly. At the end of the eighteenth century only a third of all plantations were owned by someone who was resident in Suriname – two thirds had owners who lived abroad.

Mariënbosch

The history of Mariënbosch follows this pattern. German-born Isaac Godeffroy (1716-1779) started the coffee plantation in 1747. He may have called it after his wife, Anna Maria Thomas. Ten years later, the property was mortgaged to the fund floated by Willem Gideon Deutz in Amsterdam. Godeffroy spent the last years of his life as a wealthy man in Europe and did not live to see the crisis at the end of the seventeen-seventies.

In the late eighteenth century, the Mariënbosch plantation came into the possession of the merchant and shipowner Frank van der Schoor (1730-1804) of Dordrecht, who until that time had had no commercial interests in the Caribbean. He owned four merchantmen that he hired out to the Dutch East India Company and sometimes also operated himself. In 1788, he, Gerrit van Hoogstraten and Jacob Staats van Hoogstraten – likewise of Dordrecht – also owned the ship *Mariënbos*, which sailed to the Caribbean, and he had an interest in the slaver *Vrouwe Elisabeth*. As the first vessel was in all probability named after the plantation, Van der Schoor most likely acquired the property before 1788. It is unclear whether Gerrit van Hoogstraten was the joint proprietor from the start, but in the *Surinaamsche Almanak* of 1821 he and his son, Leendert van der Schoor, are recorded as co-owners of Mariënbosch. The plantation remained in the hands of the trading company until the end of the nineteenth century. As these owners were from Dordrecht, Dikland's suggestion that the painting is of Mariënbosch became far more interesting. A comparison with the location and the buildings of the present Mariënbosch confirms that this identification is indeed correct (fig. 3).

Painting at a Distance

Van der Schoor and Van Hoogstraten, who had never been to Suriname, must have commissioned De Klerk to paint the picture so they could get an impression of their plantation and also, no doubt, because they were proud of their possession and wanted to show it off.³ But how would De Klerk have been able to paint a true-to-life picture of the property if he had never been to Suriname either? The painter himself supplied the answer on the canvas lower right: 'W. de Klerk na de Teekening van



Fig. 3
Mariënbosch
plantation, May 2014.
Photo:
Eveline Sint Nicolaas.

A.L. Broekmann' (W. de Klerk after the drawing by A.L. Broekmann).

Alexander Ludwig Brockmann (?-1866), as he was known officially, was a German artist who went to Suriname from Amsterdam in 1828 and set himself up in Paramaribo with a certain A.P. Muller.⁴ The partners placed an advertisement in the *Surinaamsche Courant* from which it can be concluded that they were all-rounders: portraits and landscapes, house painting and decorating, and maintaining the lacquer-work of coaches, all would be done with 'prompt and accurate service' (fig. 4).⁵ Almost ten years later Brockmann placed an advert in the paper for his *Optical Panorama* – a set of drawings of European capitals.⁶ Brockmann's versatility is also evident from the

Fig. 4
Advertisement by
Alexander Ludwig
Brockmann and
his partner in
the *Surinaamsche
Courant*, 28 Novem-
ber 1828.



inventory of his estate drawn up after his death.⁷

Brockmann must have travelled to Mariënbosch at De Klerk's request; we also know of a number of drawings of Suriname plantations he made for other clients.⁸ He depicted Mariënbosch from the opposite side of the canal and in so doing was able to provide a good view of the estate as well as the Suriname landscape.

A Coffee and Cocoa Plantation

Mariënbosch was a coffee and cocoa plantation, where cotton had also been grown in the past. Around 1829, the earliest that Brockmann's drawing could have been made, there were 142 enslaved men and women working there. If you look closely you will see them at work between the buildings on the left, where they are spreading coffee beans out on a stone floor (the drying house) to dry in the sun.

The tall dwelling with the green shutters and the small roof at the front, immediately to the left of the tall palm trees, dates from the time of the first owner, Isaac Godeffroy; nowadays it has an extra storey, which was added around 1850.⁹ The house is surrounded by a large number of buildings or sheds in which coffee and cocoa (and, in times gone by, cotton) were processed. A map of the plantation



made by the surveyor J.G.R. Böhm in 1792 identifies the functions of the various buildings.¹⁰ On the extreme left is the shed where the coffee beans were stripped of their shells, and to its right is the cotton shed. Set a little further back is the director's house with the store and the kitchen. On the right of the owner's house is the coffee shed and the cotton pounding shed; the latter was the furthest from the house because of the noise that accompanied the processing of the cotton. Finally, on the side of the canal where the artist stood, was the carpentry shed. On every plantation, a number of enslaved men were responsible for making wooden crates or barrels in which the products from the estate were packed and transported. They also maintained all the plantation's woodwork, including the lock gates.

The lock, which regulated the water supply from the Commewijne River, occupies a prominent place in the painting. The wooden cog wheels that operated it have not withstood the ravages of time, but the brick sections are still standing after almost three

hundred years. What we do not see are the long rows of slave dwellings which stood right behind the spot on which Brockmann stood. Undoubtedly they were of no interest to the owners in Dordrecht. The conspicuous absence of the slave quarters says much about the position of enslaved people on Mariënbosch.

Dating

De Klerk rarely dated his work and style characteristics are of little help.¹¹ The painting must have been created in or after 1829 – the year after Brockmann arrived in Suriname, and before the rebuilding of the owner's house around 1850. The drawing De Klerk worked from has not survived. We do, though, know of two large watercolours of the Catharina Sophia sugar plantation situated on the Saramacca River by Brockmann (figs. 5, 6). De Klerk must have received a similar drawing of Mariënbosch in his studio in Dordrecht, which would have enabled him to make a painting of the plantation in Suriname as if he had seen it for himself.

Fig. 5

ALEXANDER LUDWIG BROCKMANN, *View of the Catharina Sophia Sugar Plantation from the Water*, Suriname, c. 1860. Watercolour, 350 x 625 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-T-1994-166.

Fig. 6

ALEXANDER LUDWIG BROCKMANN, *View of the Catharina Sophia Sugar Plantation*, Suriname, c. 1860. Watercolour, 355 x 633 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-T-1994-167.



NOTES

- 1 With thanks to Philip Dikland, KDV Architects in Paramaribo, and his file on the history of Mariënbosch; <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0b88mzFiv8emcjvfcG5hwFJ0dws> (consulted 6 January 2017).
- 2 Around 1750 substantial debt repayments by the government meant that a great deal of money became available in the Netherlands. At that time, there were few investment opportunities in the Netherlands. Alex van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast. Roofbouw en overleven in een Caraïbische plantagekolonie 1750-1863*, Leiden 1993, p. 206.
- 3 The records of the trading company are in the Regional Archives in Dordrecht, but have not been made accessible. This is why we cannot be certain whether the archives contain information about granting the commission to De Klerk. With thanks to Mrs R. van Blokland-Visser, Papendrecht.
- 4 Both arrived on 31 July 1828 on board the ship *Maria*. See *Surinaamsche Courant*, 3 August 1828; <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010938558>. No further information is known about Muller.
- 5 *Surinaamsche Courant*, 28 November 1828; <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010938423> (see last page).
- 6 *Surinaamsche Courant*, 1 December 1837; <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=ddd:010666260>.
- 7 The Hague, National Archives, inv. no. 1.05.11.13-1005. He also, for example, painted straw hats and a signboard for the barber. His inventory also listed a considerable number of books – including the *Groot Schilderboek* by Gerard de Lairese of 1712 – brushes, watercolours and remnants of dry paint, an easel, a compass case and a supply of paper.
- 8 There is no good overview of Brockmann's oeuvre. The Rijksmuseum has two watercolours of the Catharina Sophia plantation, inv. nos. RP-T-1994-166, 167 (see figs. 5, 6 in this article). In the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam there is a watercolour of the Nieuw Clarenbeek plantation dated 1860, and there is a watercolour of the Roosenburg plantation in a private collection.
- 9 Information kindly provided by Philip Dikland.
- 10 Paramaribo, Stichting Surinaams Museum Collection, inv. nos. 183 A, B.
- 11 Email exchange with Sander Paarlberg, Curator of Old Art at the Dordrechts Museum, 10 January 2017.