

# Simon Hijman Levie

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It was September 1958. At the Institute for Art History in Groningen they were planning a coach trip to spend a few days looking at art, as there was not much of it in Groningen. The distinguished gentlemen studying art history there at that time had devised a well-thought-out itinerary, but there was one problem: none of them knew how you went about hiring a coach. Fortunately our tutor, Professor Schulte Nordholt, knew somebody in the institute in Utrecht who was very competent when it came to practical matters. His name was Simon Levie. As a first year student who looked vaguely streetwise, I was told to take the train to Utrecht and ask Mr Levie how to go about hiring a respectable coach. More than fifty years later, Simon and I still remembered what fun this first meeting was. Fun, because we were cheerful people and we joked about the world of art history – a world in which, once Simon had initiated me into the secret, we would be the only ones who would be able to advance because we would be the only ones who knew how to hire a coach.

This story is typical of what I learned to admire most about Simon – his ability to get things done. The museums Simon ran benefited hugely from his competence. To Simon, the ability to cope was not just a useful quality, it was an essential part of life. He could start a new day in good spirits, even if the day before had been difficult and dark.

In the six months in 1989 when we shared the Rijksmuseum director's office, I witnessed many of those successive days. Simon knew all too well how the museum worked and what went on. For someone as capable as he was, he found two parts of his job difficult – politics and publicity. Politicians and civil servants interfered in things they didn't understand and journalists never wrote what you had actually said. Employee participation forums were also often difficult. Sometimes I

thought that, under the supreme calm with which he chaired debates, Simon was thinking: 'Just leave it to me and it will be fine.' Simon's youth, in which he developed that essential competence, was an area 'where angels fear to tread', to quote E.M. Foster.

Whenever during those six months Simon and I talked about Italy we chuckled about the fact that with my arrival at the Rijksmuseum it would again get a director who had specialized in Italian art. The director of the Netherlands' 'national treasury' had been an Italianist since 1959. Sjeu van Schendel, Simon and I had all written our theses on Italian subjects. When I asked Simon whether he had an explanation for our exotic threesome, he said, 'perhaps it's because we had taken more of a look at the outside world.' All three of us had also lived in Italy for a good while, but the circumstances in which we found ourselves there were totally different. Sjeu was at high school in Florence, while his father Arthur was writing proto-Dutch novels on the beach at Forte dei Marmi. As a student I enjoyed my work in Rome, Florence and Siena, not least because of the distance from the parental home in Groningen. When Simon came back from Bergen-Belsen he had no parents. A friend of his late parents took pity on him and made it possible for him to go to Rome to study art history. He thought that the Netherlands did not offer the right climate for a young man in his circumstances at that time. Fortunately Simon found somebody in Italy who meant a great deal to him. This was the director of the Pinacoteca in Siena, Enzo Carli. Remarkably, he was also the one who later guided me in my research. There was plenty to talk about from Simon's time as a student. For example, why he then went to Basel where he wrote his dissertation about Michelangelo's famous pupil Daniele da Volterra.

When Levie returned to the Netherlands in 1953 he became the curator of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. In 1955 Simon met Mary Lion. They immediately fell for each other and married 'overnight'. In no time at all Simon changed from someone with 'sad eyes', as a contemporary observed, into a cheerful human being. Many years later, when I came out of an awful meeting in the Rijksmuseum with him, I asked him how he'd managed to stand it for so many years. He said, 'I can take it because I'm happy.'

In 1963 he left Utrecht with Mary and their three children and went to Amsterdam to start a new museum there. The city council had bought the former orphanage, the Burgerweeshuis, to turn it into the Amsterdams Historisch Museum. He was also appointed head of Museum Willet-Holthuysen and the Waag, which then housed the Joods Historisch Museum. He was the project manager and gained much pleasure from his contacts with architects and builders. In 1975, much to his surprise, he was asked to become director of the Rijksmuseum. Overnight he became the head of the Netherlands' largest museum.

These days publicity focuses on Simon's capable piloting of the Rijksmuseum through the cutbacks of the 1980s. The Rijksmuseum is now by far the Netherlands' most important centre of art-historical knowledge because Simon kept the museum's scholarly potential intact at that time. What has received little attention so far, however, is that during Simon's directorship, the Gallery of Honour was re-opened by Wim Quist in 1984 to provide a view of the Night Watch as the national high altar, just as Cuypers had originally intended. After the reopening in 2014, Simon and I sometimes professed our love for this austere, white, majestic room – Wim Quist's Calvinist cathedral.