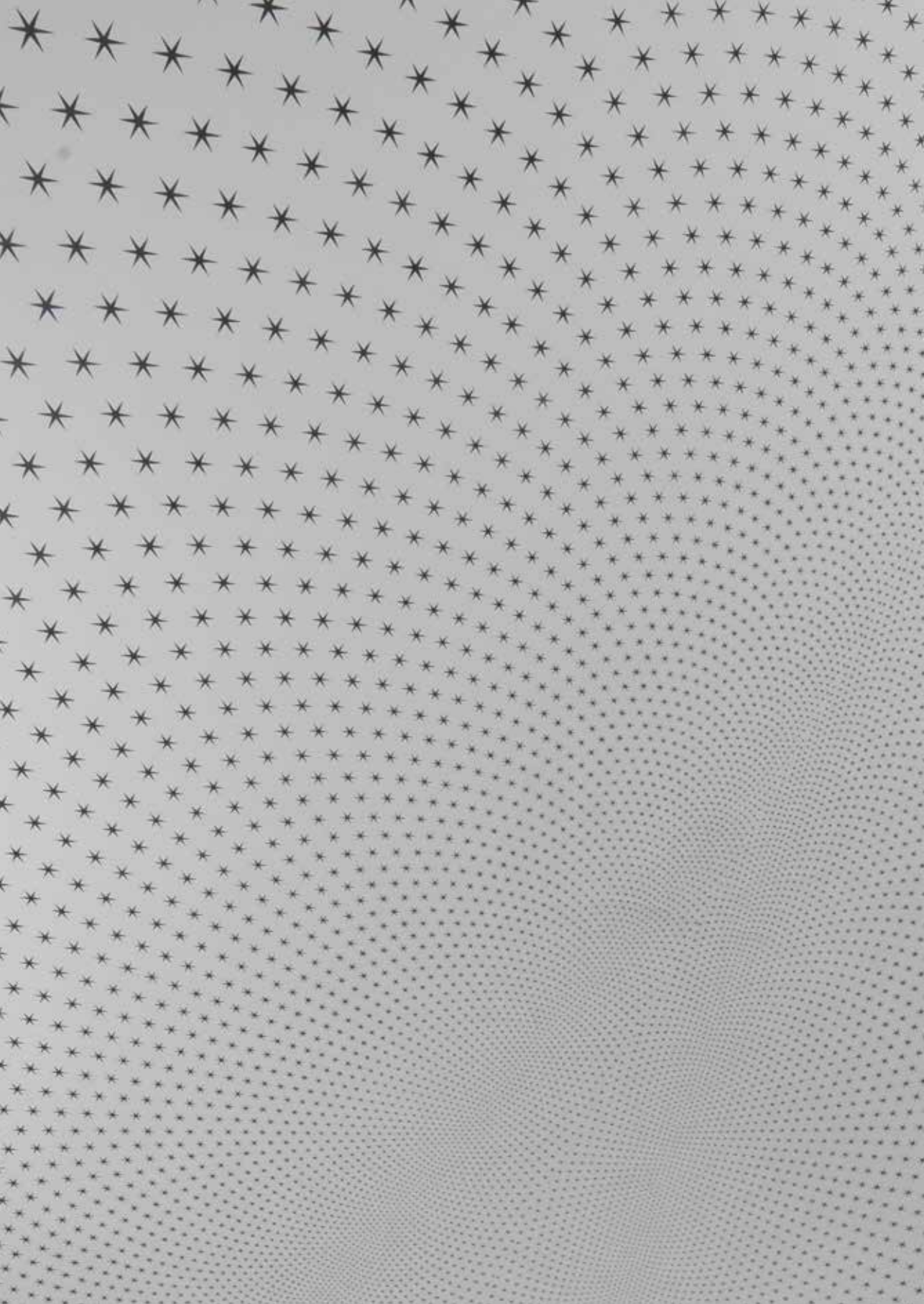

Richard Wright and the Cuypers Star New Ceiling Paintings in the Renovated Rijksmuseum

• LAURA ROSCAM ABBING •

When the Rijksmuseum reopens in 2013 it will have two brand new ceiling paintings by Richard Wright (fig. 1). This British artist is famed for taking the space in which he makes his paintings as his inspiration for their design. He is also fascinated by traditional techniques and painting methods. The question is, just how will his new, untitled interventions relate to the nineteenth-century decorations of the historic Rijksmuseum building in which they are housed?

Detail of fig. 1

The Art of Richard Wright: Respectful Additions to a Space

Richard Wright (born in 1960 in London, now living in Glasgow) won the 2009 Turner Prize, the highly prestigious prize awarded annually to a British artist under the age of fifty. This award, launched in 1984, is organized by the Tate in London. Wright's winning work, a gold-leaf fresco he made in Tate Britain, was praised for its beauty, the relation to the space and its roots in the tradition of decorative crafts (fig. 2). Wright used the ancient fresco technique and the traditional material, gold leaf. The judges described the work as a respectful, considered intervention in the building.[1] Visitors experienced it as a work that set them thinking and summoned up memories.[2]

This evocation of memories is not surprising. Relating a work to time is an important element in Wright's paintings. He establishes a relationship between the past and present by striving for the same goals and intentions as the artists of previous centuries.[3] Sometimes, for instance, he uses traditional materials or the perspective exercises of Renaissance artists like Piero della Francesca (1415-1492). This painter and mathematician wrote various essays on mathematics, including *De Prospectiva Pingendi*, devoted to the correct use of perspective in art.[4]

To Wright, the working process, its duration and its exhibition are as much a part of the work of art as the use of historical sources, techniques and materials. Most of Wright's murals are temporary, and are painted over when the exhibition comes to an end. Their subtlety and their unemphatic presence in the space also mean that the works are very difficult to record in photographs or on film. Wright thus compels viewers to see his art in situ. The ceiling paintings in the Rijksmuseum differ from the great majority of his oeuvre, however, in that they are permanent. Here again, though, the experience of the creation and contemplation are central.

The site of a work is of the utmost importance to Wright in creating his art. The work can change the way the space is viewed or perceived, and can reveal a new aspect of it.[5] Wright uses

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Fig. 1
Ceiling painting by Richard Wright in the Rijksmuseum, 2012.

Fig. 2
RICHARD WRIGHT,
no title, 2009.
Gold-leaf fresco.
London, Tate Britain.

the different rooms or galleries and the architectural and decorative style of a building to create a dialogue between the painting and the architecture.[6] He often paints in places that are usually easily overlooked. In 2005, for instance, he made a small black painting at the top of a corner in a gallery in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in 2009 he painted part of the floor in the BQ gallery in Kleine Alexanderstrasse in Berlin with a subtle pattern of gold stripes (figs. 3 and 4). These are an allusion to the former resident, who had lived there for fifty years. The marks left by her bed could still be seen on the floor, and Wright chose this spot to make a pattern of gold dashes that was to evoke associations with sleeping, dreaming and death.[7]

Wright's successful and carefully considered interventions in existing buildings led to the commission for the ceiling paintings in the Rijksmuseum.[8] The fact that his paintings are unique, often temporary and non-commercial carried weight in the decision to award him the commission. Wright's pictorial vocabulary, with its roots in the past, was seen as highly suited to a historic building like the Rijksmuseum. Wright had previously revealed an interest in the Gothic architectural style that influenced the design of the Rijksmuseum building.

The Commission and the Creation of the Starry Skies

The commission was awarded to Wright in 2004 under the terms of the percentage scheme for art in government buildings. The artist was asked to make ceiling paintings in two rooms either side of the Night Watch Gallery once the Rijksmuseum building had been renovated. These spaces are two of the very few in the building to have flat ceilings. Wright designed two optically black 'starry skies'.

The Rijksmuseum commission differed significantly from Wright's previous work in the large area that had to be painted and the length of the preparations: the original intention was that he would start to paint four years after the commission was awarded (at that time the Rijksmuseum was scheduled to reopen in 2008). This preparatory period was very long compared with his usual practice, which generally involves creating the decoration on the spot and in a limited time. The delays in the renovation work meant that the preparation time was extended by several more years.

Fig. 3
RICHARD WRIGHT,
no title, 2005.
Gouache on wall.
New York,
The Museum of
Modern Art,
Fund for the Twenty-
First Century,
acc. no. 645.2005.
Photo: 2012,
New York, MoMA/
Florence, Scala.

The commissions had far-reaching implications for his oeuvre. The drawings Wright made for the Rijksmuseum during this period influenced his other work and had an impact on his personality as an artist: an interaction developed between him and the work of art. Instead of developing an oeuvre in 'moments', this was now a 'longue durée'.

Wright is usually assisted in the execution of his works by two or three other artists. In the Rijksmuseum he needed a team of five, because these were two large paintings that combine to form a single work of art. The approach to the

Fig. 4
RICHARD WRIGHT,
no title, 2009.
Gouache and gold
leaf on flooring
and wall. Courtesy
of BQ, Berlin.
Photo: Lothar
Schnepf, Cologne.

Fig. 5
Richard Wright.

Fig. 6
Team at work in the Rijksmuseum.

project was also different: he had never had to show anyone other works beforehand – something that would in fact have been impossible because they were created in situ and often temporary. In the case of the Rijksmuseum piece, the design was conceived after lengthy preparations and, given its permanent character, it had to be approved in advance.

The working method was deliberately based on traditional techniques and consequently time-consuming. To start with, the design had to be transferred to the ceilings with the aid of a perforated cartoon which was dusted with powdered charcoal, a technique known as pouncing. The charcoal is blown through the tiny holes on to the ceiling so that the 'ghost' of the pattern can be seen. This traditional method was already in use centuries ago. The architect of the museum, Pierre Cuypers (1827-1921), also referred to it in the Rijksmuseum's atrium, in the relief above the doorway to the old Ceramics Department.

The pouncing complete, Wright's pattern of black stars was painted on to the ceiling by hand. The artists lay on their backs on scaffolding that reached within a couple of feet of the ceiling (figs. 5 and 6). This, too, is the traditional way. Because they are lying down, the artists can carry on painting for longer. Wright hopes that visitors will unconsciously know or sense (because of subtle anomalies in the painting) that the works – like all the decorations in the Rijksmuseum – were made by hand, and will be aware of the time and effort that went into them. They will experience the human scale.

Pierre Cuypers's Views on Ornament

In 1875 the clients formulated their requirements for the design of the Rijksmuseum: 'The forms of the building should express its purpose, which is to hold Dutch paintings, primarily from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.'[9] The idea was that the architectural style that was chosen should hark back to these two bygone centuries: the style of the Dutch Neo-Renaissance was considered to be highly appropriate. The Rijksmuseum building that Pierre Cuypers eventually built, however, has a Neo-Renaissance exterior with

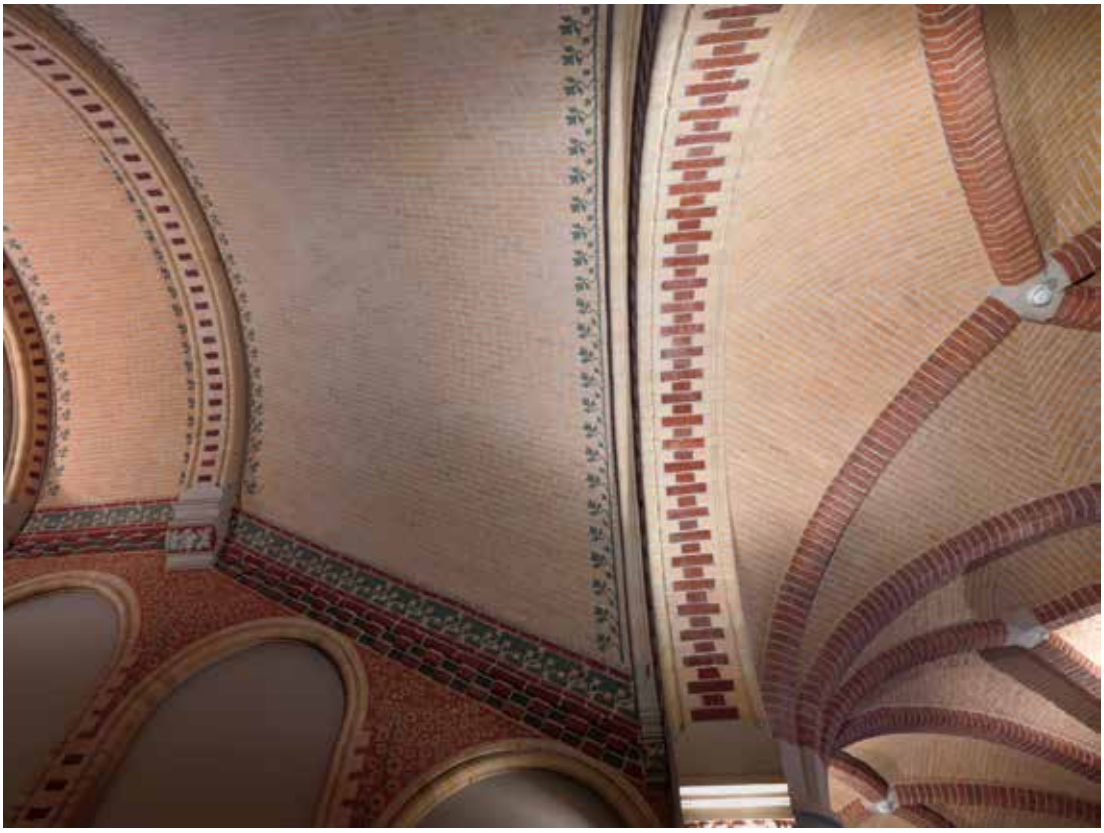

Fig. 7
Nineteenth-century decorations in the Rijksmuseum, after the 2012 restoration.

Neo-Gothic elements and an interior with decorations from different periods and different cultures.

Most of the buildings Cuypers designed before the commission for the Rijksmuseum were built in Neo-Gothic style. Increasingly, however, influenced by the ideas of his French contemporary Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), Cuypers came to the conclusion that the design of a building should depend on its location and the use to which it would be put.[10] Elements of different styles could be combined in a single design. This idea was very much in line with the new developments in European architecture at that time: many countries were seeking a new national style and the prevailing view that a particular type of building called for a particular style was being questioned.[11] These old beliefs were clung to more tenaciously where monumental national buildings were concerned. The Rijksmuseum (1876-85) was consequently an innovative building for the Netherlands, and one that has an evident place in the style debate then raging. Above all, the building is a total concept in which the surroundings, the exterior and the interior come together. Under Viollet-le-Duc's influence, Cuypers wanted to lead visitors through the building to the highlight of the Rijksmuseum, the Night Watch Gallery, by way of a route marked out by painted decorations.[12] The paintings in the galleries and their orientations were geared to their specific use.

Cuypers's wall paintings in the Rijksmuseum are colourful and flat: they emphasize the surface and do not create any illusion of depth. They were predominantly placed in borders and fields along the architectural tran-

Fig. 8
Nineteenth-century decorations in the Rijksmuseum, after the 2012 restoration.

sitions and structural elements of the building, such as the ribs of the vaulted ceilings (figs. 7 and 8). The decoration is abundant and very dense – almost reflecting a *horror vacuï* – with a great variety of forms. The most widely used colours were those very popular nineteenth-century shades of terracotta, sage green and maize yellow. Cuypers used many ornaments derived from nature in the Rijksmuseum building. His choice of colour and ornament is typical of the late nineteenth century and related to the decorations favoured by William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, among them foliar and floral motifs (fig. 9).

The Rijksmuseum also featured patterns derived from the past. Cuypers made considerable use of models from the Renaissance period in order to meet his clients' requirements (fig. 10). Others of his ornaments, like the

Fig. 9
Tiles, a design by William Morris and William Frend De Morgan, 1876. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Fig. 10
Renaissance ornament in Cuypers's wall paintings in the Rijksmuseum.

painted antique urns and vases and decorative elements borrowed from Greek temple architecture, were drawn from Classical Antiquity. There are also a number of small designs that are reminiscent of old Celtic ornaments.

Cuypers used this ornamentation of the past very deliberately. He had the admonition 'study the ancients so that you will remember and gain strength to begin anew' painted on one of the walls.[13] This motto is typical of the age in which the Rijksmuseum was built. Starting around the middle of the century, there was a growing desire for a new, nineteenth-century style that specifically incorporated the knowledge and design idioms of the past.[14] Artists and architects studied old ornamentation to get inspiration, understand the development of style and deduce general rules for the proper use of decorations.[15] By way of Germany, France and England, the integration of historical ornaments into a contemporary style also gained ground in the Netherlands, albeit slowly.

The writings of the influential English critic and philosopher John Ruskin (1819-1900) are very important in this context. He believed that ornaments were a natural part of an object because

Fig. 11
Renaissance ornaments in O. Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London 1856.

they were applied out of a general human need to decorate. The value Ruskin placed on the ornament was grounded in this human aspect, the hand of the craftsman still visible centuries later.[16] In the introduction to his book *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* he warns his readers above all not to be too rational and calculating in their dealings with beauty and ornamentation, because this simply distracts from the true values of beauty.[17]

Ruskin's spiritual, social approach differed markedly from the rational attitude of his compatriot Owen Jones (1809-1874), who wanted to distil universal rules for determining beauty from an analysis of the ornament. In 1856 he published his source book *The Grammar of Ornament*, which he wrote with an educational goal in mind – the explicit intention of distributing this study material as widely as possible.[18] He divided ornaments according to their different origins and described them at length, accompanied by colour illustrations (fig. 11). The book was translated into several languages and became enormously influential. Jones's ideas were further disseminated by his faithful disciple, the decorative designer Christopher Dresser (1834-1904).[19]

Fig. 12
Page from E.E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Compositions et dessins de Viollet-le-Duc*, Paris 1884.

Fig. 13
Byzantine ornaments in O. Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London 1856.

The Frenchman Viollet-le-Duc shared Jones's rational approach to ornament. Both saw the study of historical ornament as the only way to discover universal laws for good design.[20] They both also believed in a rational basis for architecture, in which the decoration should spring from the structure, not be imposed upon it.[21]

Pierre Cuypers adhered to these principles and thought that the actual material and the construction should not be hidden (in other words brickwork should not be concealed behind a layer of plaster, for instance) and that it was wrong to create false impressions of space. For the interior of the Rijksmuseum, Cuypers chose flat ornaments rather than those that suggested imaginary depth.[22] He also used ornament to emphasize the structure of the Rijksmuseum building. He used the decorations – particularly decorative bands – chiefly on the edges and intersections of the structure, giving them additional emphasis. Owen Jones's influence is very evident here; he advocated the use of two-dimensional decoration that arose out of the structure of the architecture.[23] Cuypers could draw for the design of these ornaments on such sources as Viollet-le-Duc's sketches and model ornaments and *The Grammar of Ornament* (figs. 12 and 13). These ideas caught on and the Dutch gradually came to accept flat, non-spatial ornaments in the 1870s and 1880s.[24]

The Rijksmuseum Building and Cuypers's Decorations as Inspirations for Wright

In an interview with the author, Richard Wright said that the Rijksmuseum building itself was his main source of inspiration for making the decorations and explained what it was that so inspired him.[25] Wright knew the building from earlier visits to see the museum's collection of paintings. He was fascinated by it even then, and thinks that the architecture is much improved after the renovation. The museum has become more open and lighter, and is no longer the dark labyrinth it once was. Wright believes that it probably now looks more as it was originally intended to look.

It comes as no surprise that he is enthusiastic about the nineteenth-century decorative scheme. Total works of art like this, he says, are very few and far between in this day and age. One reason is that in the past materials were expensive and labour was cheap; now the situation is reversed. Today the production costs would be so high that it would not be feasible to decorate the whole interior of a large building in this profuse manner. Wright feels that the countless hours that all this handwork must have taken are tangible in the Rijks-

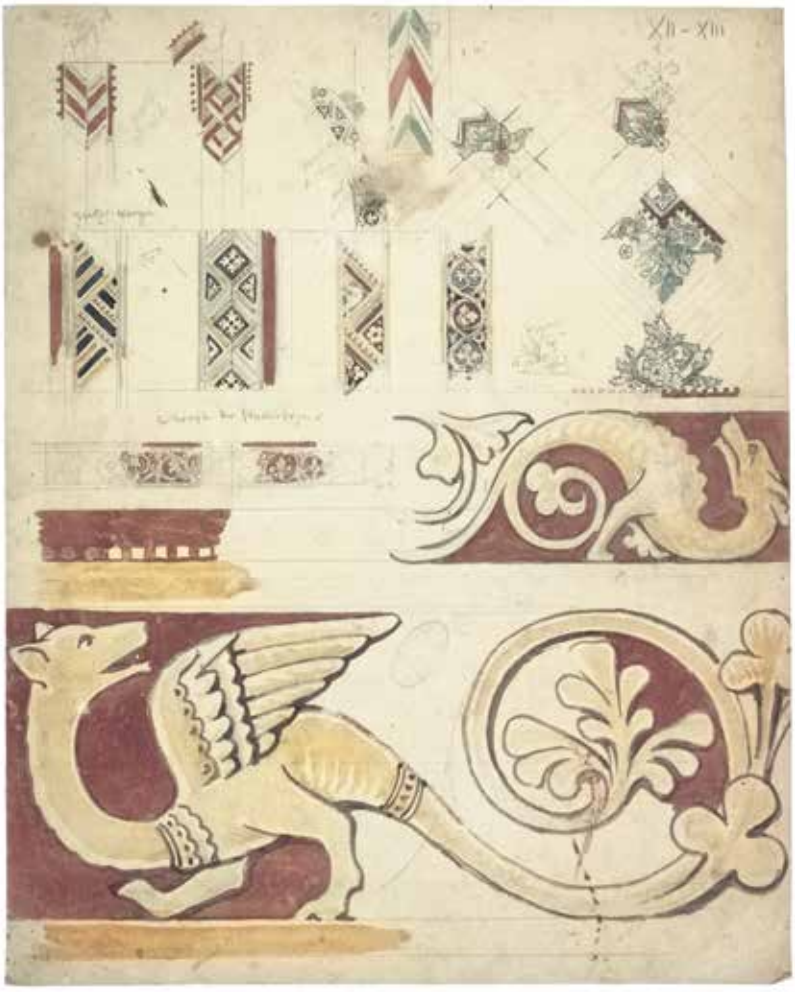

Fig. 14
Cuypers's design for nineteenth-century decorations in the Rijksmuseum.

museum. To his mind, this makes it a unique and special building.

The building itself was Wright's principal touchstone for his ceiling paintings. He came to look over it many times during his preparations and also gained inspiration from discussions with the architects. Wright describes the exuberant, almost obsessive way Cuypers decorated the building as 'ecstatic'. In his view it makes the Rijksmuseum a spiritual place, like a church. He is intrigued by the religious air emanating from it. He argues that faith is a sort of obsession and an obsession with beauty is actually also a faith. This circular reasoning led him to conceive of the Rijksmuseum building as a place of contemplation and meditation – a place where the visitor can get closer to the world and try to give the world human forms. This process, according to Wright, is what beauty really is.

The artist made a thorough study of Cuypers's decorations and designs. What really struck him – more, even, than the colour, form or ornament – was the rhythmical organization and structuring of the decorations. In his proposal to the Rijksmuseum he wrote, 'It seems to me that this extraordinary building of Pierre Cuypers emerges from two interlinked trajectories: the first of which is an action – the art of building. The second, which perhaps manifests itself more in the surface treatments, concerns itself with something more overt and conscious – a revival which perhaps turned this house of art into a temple. My proposal is to make a work, which perhaps comes more from the first trajectory but which also addresses the manners of the second. The work responds to the way in which Pierre Cuypers layered accent and ornamentation within the making of the building. Style often emerges as solution to a problem: a resolution to the disruption of one surface's meeting with another. … I want [the painting] to belong as much to the past as it does to the future – to refer to and disperse into the language which Cuypers used in surface treatment and the built structure of his original building.'[26]

The 'language' of Cuypers's decorations inspired Wright to make a spatial, geometric pattern of black stars. The painting has an optical effect and creates the illusion of a vaulted ceiling. Wright is alluding here to the structure of the vaulting in the arcade arches in the underpass. The painting should not be seen, though, as a direct reference to that part of the museum, but rather as an association with the repetition of the architectural structure and the traditional way it was made. Wright is thus referring not literally, but on a meta-level to structures and regularities in both the building and the designs of Cuypers's decorations. He was inspired, for instance, by the abstraction, system and repetition of the bricks in the exterior, and he worked these characteristics into the repeating lines of the stars in the ceiling painting. The symmetrical, almost geometric structure of Cuypers's designs for the decorations is also reflected in Wright's work. What struck him particularly were the almost abstract figures: circles, triangles (fig. 14). He brings all these elements together – the ornament, the vaulting, the structures of the geometric patterns – in his ceiling paintings.

A comparison with Wright's earlier paintings reveals that the decorations in the Rijksmuseum are a natural fit in his oeuvre. A 2007 ceiling painting for The Common Guild on the occasion of the Edinburgh International Festival, for instance, is an optical pattern of black triangles (fig. 15). There, however, he did not confine himself to the ceiling, instead carrying over on to the top of the wall. In 2006 he painted another black optical pattern, this time dots, under a skylight in the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (fig. 16). The paintings in the

Fig. 15
RICHARD WRIGHT,
no title, 2007.
Acrylic on wall.
Commissioned for
'Jardins Publics',
Edinburgh Inter-
national Festival,
2007. Courtesy
the Artist and
The Modern
Institute/Toby
Webster Ltd.,
Glasgow.
Photo: Ruth Clark.

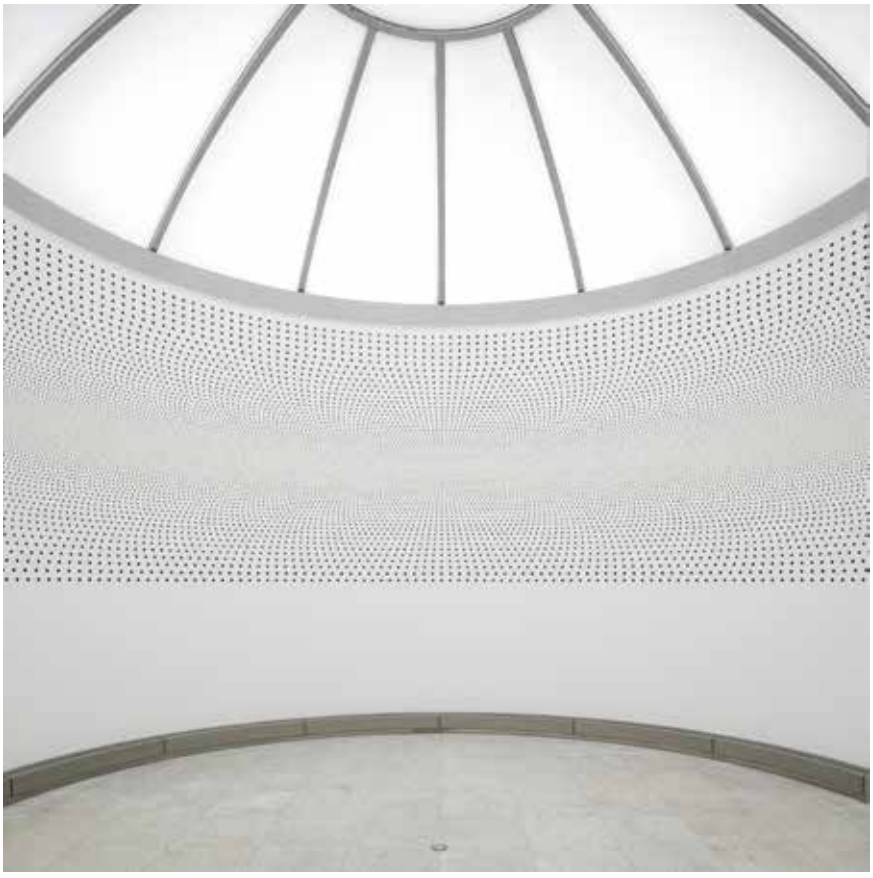

Fig. 16
RICHARD WRIGHT,
no title, 2006.
Mönchengladbach
(Germany),
Städtisches Museum
Abteiberg.
Photo:
Achim Kukulies.

Rijksmuseum differ from the rest of his oeuvre in scale and preparation time, but the final result is entirely at home in it. Wright himself says that his earlier decorations with geometric forms were purely abstract in execution, and that the choice of a figurative ornament – the star – in the painting in the Rijksmuseum is exceptional. This star is an element that Cuypers often used in his decorations for the Rijksmuseum, for instance in the painted vault in the Aduard Chapel (fig. 17). Wright finds it a mysterious ornament and used it here as a deliberate reference to Cuypers's decorations (figs. 18a and b).

Interestingly, Wright chose black for his 'Cuypers star' rather than a 'Cuypers colour' such as the sage green or terracotta so typical of the nineteenth century. Colour is less important to him than form and structure, and in choosing the colour he was influenced by modern artists with a limited palette. Here, the work of Piet Mondrian was his example. Around 1908 Mondrian (1872-1944) began to experiment with the intensification of colour and the simplification of form. He was striving for a form of painting with autonomous powers of expression and for the expressive capture of light and space.[27] This process eventually resulted in the famous paintings featuring compositions of black lines and coloured planes. Wright also feels

Fig. 17
Restored nineteenth-century decorations in the Aduard Chapel in the Rijksmuseum after the 2012 restoration.

an affinity with Mondrian in another respect. Like Mondrian, in 1990 Wright began to make art for the sake of the process and not for the work of art itself.[28]

A more limited palette is also important in the creation of the painting. Wright sees this as comparable to working with a machine: the colours are standardized and the process of painting is almost mechanical, but the eventual result is human. It is like playing the piano: the sound created by pressing the keys is mechanical and hence always the same, but the succession of notes and the way they are played project emotions, ideas and concentration; that is the human factor. Making a painting requires complete concentration and active thought: while he is painting the artist is like a machine, but concentration creates the design. By looking at the design the artist forms his ideas about it and the result emerges. Wright hopes that there will be the same interaction between the work of art and the viewer: by looking at and thinking about a work of art, one sees oneself. If a work of art does not show us ourselves, argues Wright, it is not (good) art.

Fig. 18a and b
The 'Cuypers star'; details of ceiling painting by Richard Wright. Photo below: author.

Although Wright takes his inspiration from the Middle Ages, like Pierre Cuypers, and from the spirituality of the East, he nevertheless finds a certain degree of topicality essential in understanding the work. If *The Night Watch* were not still topical, he contends, we would no longer look at it and be touched by it. The emotional relationship is now at an abstract level. Wright is concerned about the humanity of painting, feeling the presence of the artist. This brings him close to the spiritual,

emotional approach to ornament, architecture and beauty championed by John Ruskin.

Light plays an important role in Wright's design. The idea is that the painting does something to the space in a subtle way. The light changes because of it, so that the effect of the painting remains hanging in the air, like an echo. This change in the light and the space is tangible rather than literally visible. It consequently does not matter to Wright whether visitors notice his painting late or not at all. His aim, after all, has been to make the painting one with the building and its decorations.

Wright and Cuypers Side by Side

In his design proposal Wright wrote that he would concentrate above all on the structures of Cuypers's decorations, and certainly a great many geometric structures were used in the decoration of the vaulting in the Rijksmuseum. The star Wright chose as the ornament in his painting occurs there repeatedly. In this sense there are literal visual parallels in the two artists' paintings. Cuypers's aesthetic surface treatment in the Rijksmuseum, the harking back to old traditions and materials in a contemporary idiom and the striving for unity in the design likewise correspond with Wright's approach. Nonetheless, the differences between the two artists are more evident.

In the first place, Cuypers and Wright both made their paintings by hand, but whereas in Wright's case this was a conscious choice in order to get closer to the past – as are the traditional techniques he often uses – for Cuypers it was more of a necessity. The stencils that Cuypers frequently chose to use in the Rijksmuseum even testify to a need for uniformity and mechanization. The 'human' aspect of painting seems to have been irrelevant to Cuypers.

The second obvious difference lies in the use of colour. Cuypers's extraordinarily bright and colourful decorations dictate the appearance of the interior and demand one's full attention. Wright's paintings, in contrast, are relatively inconspicuous and seem literally to be part of the building. The use of monochrome contributes to the unobtrusiveness of Wright's work.

The most striking difference of all, though, is the totally different approach to the building. Where Cuypers used rational ornamentation of the surface – in line with Owen Jones's views – Wright adopts a spiritual, emotional approach to the building, more akin to the ideas of John Ruskin. The various painted forms give Wright's paintings a kinetic effect. Influenced by the changing light and the viewer's position, different parts of the star pattern become more clearly visible so that the effect of the painting changes. Cuypers's decorations, on the other hand, are static and rational and serve the architecture. He used the ornamentation to bring about an extensive, hierarchical structure and a route through the museum. This is diametrically opposed to the three-dimensionality, kinesis and adaptation to the space that characterize Wright's work. And yet Wright's three-dimensionality is a conscious reference to the vaulting in the Rijksmuseum building. He achieved this indirectly, without following Cuypers's decorations literally.

In so doing, Wright also augmented the spaces, as Cuypers did in many buildings in his capacity as a restoration architect. The rooms beside the Night Watch Gallery are almost the only ones in the museum without vaulted ceilings. One could argue that Wright has actually rectified this 'omission', although this was not his intention. Cuypers would probably have done the same. His practice, after all, was to restore buildings to the ideal form in which they had originally been conceived (rather than adhering to the historical form).

Wright's paintings should not be seen as literal references to Cuypers's ornamentation, but – in their unobtrusiveness – they allude to and show respect for the building. It was the appearance of the building rather than Cuypers's ideas that formed the basis for Wright's work. Where Cuypers's paintings are static, flat and rational and perfectly reflect the spirit of the times, Wright's painting is mobile, three-dimensional, emotional and timeless. In his terms: human. It is an organic painting that lives and changes with the building. And so the Rijksmuseum remains topical – like good art, as Wright would say.

NOTES

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7 S. Lowndes, 'Learned by Heart: The Paintings of Richard Wright', in R. Ferguson et al., *Richard Wright*, cat. New York (Gagosian Gallery) 2009, p. 58.
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9 A.W. Weissman, *Het Rijks-Museum te Amsterdam*, Arnhem 1885, p. 31.
10 A. Oxenaar, *P.J.H. Cuypers en het gotisch rationalisme. Architectonisch denken, ontwerpen en uitgevoerde gebouwen 1845-1878*, Rotterdam 2009, pp. 207-15.
11 Ibid., pp. 246-52.
12 Ibid., pp. 412-13 and pp. 425-38.
13 Bestudeer de ouden opdat ge 't onthoude en krachten zult winnen om opnieuw te beginnen.' B.W. Wierink, *I. Het ornament zijn opbouw en zijn betekenis II. C.A. Lion Cachet*, Groningen 1931, p. 31, in M. Simon Thomas, *De leer van het ornament. Versiering volgens voorschrift 1850-1930*, Amsterdam 1996, p. 24.
14 Simon Thomas, op. cit. (note 13), p. 24.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 23.
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20 Ibid., p. 243.
21 Ibid., p. 242.
22 Very occasionally he created the illusion that the edges of a painted cartouche with lettering curl towards or away from the viewer.
23 Hrvol Flores, op. cit. (note 19), p. 239.
24 Simon Thomas op. cit. (note 13), p. 54.
25 Interview with Richard Wright, 12 September 2012. Additional conversation on 24 September 2012.
26 R. Wright, *Rijksmuseum Proposed Wall Painting, Shots from the Big Screen: Mentioned Scales are Obsolete*, 2012.
27 J.L. Locher, *Piet Mondriaan: Kleur, structuur en symboliek*, Berlin 1994, pp. 37-38.
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