Paintings in the laboratory: scientific examination for art history and conservation

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Foreword and acknowledgements

This doctoral dissertation should be seen as the result of some forty years of experience in the examination of paintings acquired at different institutes and museums. First and foremost I am indebted to Prof. J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer, who has repeatedly urged me to make my publications more accessible to colleagues and, especially, to students. The articles have appeared in various journals, exhibition catalogues, books and conference preprints in different languages and countries. Although the sheer diversity of the different sites of publication may illustrate the interdisciplinary and international character of the scientific examination of art objects, it can sometimes frustrate access to the material. The idea of submitting a PhD thesis arose while listening in the back row of the Agnietenkapel of the University of Amsterdam, one and a half year ago, to Jorgen Wadum defending his dissertation. A doctoral thesis ‘on articles’ seemed one way to make the written material more readily available. Jan Piet Filedt Kok, who became one of my promoters, saw my own development as running parallel to that of the discipline of science in the service of art, and suggested that I was therefore in a good position to look back and reflect on this latter development.

I am grateful to the art historian Filedt Kok and the scientist Norman Tennent, my second promoter, for the enthusiastic and pleasant way in which they have supported me in writing this dissertation and for their confidence in me. I am also most grateful to co-authors Ella Hendriks, Inez van der Werf, Klaas Jan van den Berg and Jaap Boon for their permission to use articles (on Frans Hals, Judith Leyster, Johannes Vermeer). Their generosity is greatly appreciated.

I began my career in the world of culture at the beginning of 1969, as a scientist with a love of art, at the Central Research Laboratory for [the examination of] Objects of Art and Science in Amsterdam. Founded in 1963, the Central Laboratory was still in its early stages when I arrived there. It was occupied by scientists and by restorers who used the information provided by the scientists for the study and treatment of artifacts which had deteriorated and which they were required to treat. Only the most problematic restorations were carried out at the Central Laboratory. The first thing to discover was how the art objects were made, and subsequently how time had changed them. We were all in a learning phase. Already in 1968 the Director Ir. J. Lodewijks had decided that the laboratory, a self-supporting government service, had to have a large measure of flexibility. Therefore time was granted for study, discussions and consultations with art historians and restorers in Holland and abroad. I am extremely indebted to the Central Laboratory for the chance it gave me to spend a lifetime surrounded by beautiful paintings and among pleasant colleagues. I have never regretted this and still enjoy being part of that community. I have been fortunate to work with great specialists in the field. The examination of Rembrandt’s early work with Ernst van de Wetering in the 1970s and all the involvement with the Rembrandt Research Project since has shaped a large part of my life. I am very grateful to Ernst for his never-ending encouragement. It was he, for instance, who recommended me for the project on autoradiography at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, giving me a chance to spend five fantastic months in New York in 1980.

I am also very much obliged to former and present directors, staff and students at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge, U.K., where I worked in the 1980s. The Institute was situated ten miles from Cambridge in the idyllic setting of a former mill. I have fond memories of working with Herbert Lank, its first director, Norman Brommelle who succeeded him and Ian McClure. From my base in England, Ian allowed me to examine paintings for exhibitions held in Holland. I am glad that, in this respect, I could be a link between England and Holland. A small
laboratory with basic equipment was close to the large studios of the institute, overlooking the garden which, in spring, was covered with daffodils. There was, in principle, access to all the equipment of all the laboratories in Cambridge University. Many hours were spent at the electron microprobe at Earth Science, reading the Guardian while waiting for the spectra to be printed one by one by the dot-matrix printer. This was the time when a single computer occupied the greater part of a room, quite daunting at first.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Anne van Grevenstein, having taken the initiative of starting a school for painting conservators hitherto lacking in The Netherlands, lured me back to Holland. I am extremely grateful to Anne for the faith she had in me, giving me the chance of being a partner in her enthusiastic pioneering work at the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg (SRAL) in Maastricht. The training of painting restorers is now incorporated in the prospectus of the University of Amsterdam. Anne, together with Ernst van de Wetering, also secured sponsoring by the nearby DSM in Heerlen for the analytical work for the Rembrandt Research Project, a sponsorship that lasted eight years. This sponsorship included the use of the extensive analytical facilities at DSM Research. In 1994, collaboration over content won for us the Kunstsponsorprijs. It was a very interesting experience. In return, for instance, I was asked to attract visitors to a huge industrial fair to the DSM stand. That was easy, both in St. Louis USA and in Hong Kong: a (early copy of a) Rembrandt Self-portrait on an easel drew large crowds to the stand. In St. Louis the DSM secured additional publicity for the firm when their stand was selected the best in the whole industrial fair.

After five years in Maastricht, as most of the SRAL students moved north-west in The Netherlands to begin their internships in the museums, I spent most of my time on the train. Luckily, the analytical work needed for the interesting students’ museum projects interested Agnes Ballestrem, the then director of the Central Laboratory, and it prompted her to first offer me a little den at the Central Laboratory and later a job. I accepted both gratefully. My workplace had come full circle. Rik Vos became the Director when the Central Laboratory merged with the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst and the School for Restoration (objects other than paintings) to form the ICN. I am very grateful to him for providing the degree of flexibility necessary in this kind of work.

Over the years the list of colleagues, teachers, students, institutions and museums to whom I am indebted has grown enormously, but most of the publications that make up this dissertation start with acknowledgments, which do not need to be repeated here. In particular my article in ‘A Corpus of Rembrandt Paintings’ Volume IV p. 321 shows a long list. I make an exception for the Getty Conservation Institute, for granting me a four month scholarship in 2002. The time spent there and in the extensive Getty Research Institute library have been extremely useful for reading and writing on, and examining grounds in paintings.

I thank dr. J.J. Ottens for facilitating the photocopying of my thesis at RCE and for her interest in the work. Georgiana Languri and Muriel Geldof were wonderful seconds at my promotie. I am very grateful to students Conservation Science Andreas Bilo and Guus Verhaar for their help in further digitalizing the material and shaping it into a presentable form. Without their help I would not be here now. In return I hope I shall be able to be of help to them in their careers. Lastly I want to thank my family and friends for their interest in the way I have spent my time as a pensioner and in making sure there was time left for gezelligheid and for attention to other interests.

Karin Groen, 24 January 2011