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Technical art history : painters' supports and studio practices of Rembrandt, Dou and Vermeer

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Foreword

There are two main groups of articles in my written production dealing with various aspects of technical art history: the history of materials, especially the rigid supports chosen by artists in the early seventeenth century including conservation reports and guidelines for the safekeeping of paintings, and observations of studio practices of important Dutch artists such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Gerrit Dou and Johannes Vermeer. All considerations spring from the same wish to understand the material and cultural aspects of the objects – documenting these findings for professionals and a broader public – prior to setting up a strategy for the care or treatment of our cultural heritage objects.

Immediately after obtaining my master thesis diploma on the examination of seventy-five Flemish panel paintings situated in the wainscoting of the Winter Room (ca. 1620) at Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen, I was asked by the external examiner, Prof. Dr. Bo Ossian Lindberg, University of Lund, to continue my work on the project and present it to him as a dissertation. This was in 1987 and although I continued collecting and documenting evidence of the genesis of the ensemble as well as of the single paintings – and still am doing so up until this day – and although also Prof. Dr. Ernst van de Wetering in the nineteen-nineties suggested to me to present my dissertation at the Amsterdam University, the inclination to find time and the impetus to carry it through were still not ripe.

It was at a break during a meeting of the ICOM Committee for Conservation at the sunny and fertile grounds of The Getty Villa, Malibu in 2006, during the always stimulating talks with Anne van Grevenstein-Kruse, director of the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg and since 2008 professor in the *Praktijk van conservering en restauratie* at the University of Amsterdam that the idea was finally matured. Shortly after, I met with Professor Dr. Jan Piet Filedt Kok during a visit to Amsterdam, and he stimulated me to present the current volume of articles. I am thus extremely grateful to first Ernst and later Anne and Jan Piet for encouraging me to prepare a selection of articles and an all embracing introduction, *Discoursing Artworks - The Multiple Faces of Conservation Documentation*, on the importance of conservation documentation, all presented together as my dissertation. The writing was undertaken concurrently with a highly demanding job which I fulfill

since 2005 as the manager of the Conservation Department, Art Handlers, Photographical Service and Registrar's Office at Statens Museum for Kunst.

The awakening of my interest in documentation and technical art history goes back to my training in the late nineteen-seventies and early eighties under Steen Bjarnhof, conservator and head of the paintings department, and Ulla Haastrup, art historian, both at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, the School of Conservation, Copenhagen, as well as discussions with Mogens Bencard, former director of The Royal Collections at Rosenborg Castle. The Novo Foundation supported my initial research into the 'making & meaning' of the *Winter Room* (c. 1620), the *studiolo* of the Danish King Christian 4, and continued doing so almost a decade later, which I am most grateful to them for. Further studies in art history, combined with a critical scrutiny of the artworks themselves in search of their inherent values, were inspired by Dr. Thomas Bullinger, Svein Wiik and Ernst van de Wetering, all versatile individuals with an energizing degree of passion, curiosity and with a holistic approach in their view on artistic creativity.

I have been privileged in my working environments, and especially so at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, where I worked from 1990 through 2004, under the directorship of Frits J. Duparc and his deputy director Rik van Koetsveld, with the head of communication Lieke Vervoorn and a variety of colleagues at the Conservation Department, Carol Pottasch, Luuk Struick van der Loeff, Sabrina Meloni, Petria Noble, and numerous temporary employees and interns, and the Curatorial Department with colleagues such as Ariane van Suchtelen, Peter van der Ploeg, Epco Runia, Quentin Buvelot, Ben Broos. Here I was offered ample opportunities for collaborative work with professionals seeking to advance the understanding and keeping of old master paintings in - and related to - the exquisite collection of Dutch and Flemish 17th century artists in the custody of the Mauritshuis.

The combinations of the documentation of the restoration history of the works with an intimate account of Vermeer's considerations during the painting of the images prompted public interest and naturally lead to a thorough examination of all the other works in the artist's oeuvre. This resulted in a number of new discoveries about Vermeer's painting techniques which were published alongside the catalogue

of the Vermeer exhibition.¹ During the preparation of the catalogue, interdisciplinary research between art historians, conservators and conservation scientists was intense, something that strongly supported my preparation of a technical essay on Vermeer's technique for creating the spatial illusions in his paintings.

The thorough research of an artist's entire production was only possible thanks to the limited extent of the oeuvre and the continued support of the Mauritshuis staff. The research led to a series of spin-off articles in different media, geared towards a variety of audiences from scholars to the general public and colleagues within the field. My final contribution to the Vermeer literature was an essay based on a paper given at a scholarly symposium at the University of Maryland in 1995.

In 1994 I had the privilege to be invited to contribute with two papers, one on the making of panel paintings and the other on the history of microclimate boxes for panel paintings, for The J. Paul Getty Museum symposium on *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings*. The papers, which were later published in the proceedings of the meeting, built on research gathered during my work with unravelling the problems of the Winter Room at Rosenborg Castle in Copenhagen, as well as new research on microclimates and microclimate boxes as an environmental protection for sensitive panel paintings in transit. This latter research was carried out in a fruitful multidisciplinary collaboration between the Centraal Laboratorium voor Kunst en Voorwerpen (currently the Dutch Institute for Cultural Heritage/Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN)) and the Mauritshuis. The research results from laboratory tests as well as data gathered while monitoring artworks on travelling exhibitions were later shared with a larger professional audience. The keeping of our cultural heritage has remained a strong backbone in all the technical art history studies and also today, in my capacity of Keeper of Conservation at Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, I am participating in an inter-institutional research consortium, PROPAINT, funded within the 6th EU Framework programme.

My cooperation as a practising conservator with Petria Noble, current Head Conservator of the Mauritshuis, on the treatment of Rembrandt's large *Anatomy lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* from 1632 not only offered the revelation of new and fresh insights into the splendour of the painting

and the artist's technique, but also meant the start to an intense and later formalised scientific collaboration with Dr. Jaap Boon and his research team at the FOM-Amolf Institute in Amsterdam.

As with the phenomenological documentation of paint defects, which saw its first beginnings in the publications mentioned above, also the issue of observations of the reverse of panel paintings and copper plates used as rigid support for paintings continued to gain momentum within my research area. From the initial articles on panel makers' marks, this grew into becoming an expertise that was drawn upon by numerous art historians and conservators in museums around the world as well as by auction houses and art dealers. Nuances in the interpretation of the Antwerp Brand and individual panel makers' house marks, as first published in Dresden in 1990, continued to appear, and resulted in a larger essay on the phenomena presented in *Looking through Paintings* from 1998.

Simultaneously the preparation for the interdisciplinary exhibition *Copper as Canvas. Two centuries of Masterpiece Paintings on Copper 1525-1775*, initiated by the then chief curator of western art Michael Komanecky at the Phoenix Art Museum (AZ), resulted in a durable friendship with my research colleague Isabelle Horovicz. Already then, our interest in painting on copper linked us, and the Mauritshuis was convinced to take on the show after the second venue, The Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City (MO). At conferences and in the catalogue our essays complement each other, a collaboration that has continued until today, where we in tandem write and edit multi-author contributions on paintings on rigid supports for a forthcoming 600-page Butterworth-Heinemann book on *The Conservation of Easel Paintings*, edited by Joyce Hill Stoner and Rebecca Rushfield, to be published in 2011.

In 1995 the Mauritshuis in collaboration with the National Gallery in London started preparing a large exhibition on *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits*. Prior to this and during the writing of the essays an underdrawing alien to Rembrandt's technique materialised itself on the monitor during a routine IRR-examination of the *Young Self-Portrait*. This prompted a thorough re-examination of the painting and the so-called copy in Nuremberg. In the catalogue Ernst van de Wetering and Edwin Buijsen, in understanding with the Mauritshuis, questioned the authenticity of the painting. This further led to travelling to examine *tronies* by

¹ See separate bibliography, p. 233

Rembrandt and his contemporaries in the USA, Europe and Japan, and at a symposium organised by the RKD in The Hague I had the opportunity to present my observations, later published in *Oud Holland* together with articles of other observations. Apart from the continued examination of the collection of old masters with the aid of IRR, the results of which were presented in catalogues and at colloquia, this led to extensive examinations with IIR and CCD-imaging of Dutch and Flemish 17th century paintings which revealed a huge amount of new information on the continued use of underdrawing, but also undermodelling in carbon containing paint recordable with infrared imaging. As a direct result of the IR-imaging of the early Rembrandt pupil Gerrit Dou, characteristics of his technique were presented in a new periodical, *ARTMATTERS - Netherlands Technical Studies in Art*, in the launching of which in 2002 I was instrumental as well as being one of the founding editors.

In connection with a new collaboration between Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, and the Mauritshuis, eight majestic Albert Eckhout (1610-1666) paintings and 12 still lifes, which in 1654 were offered by Maurits to the Danish King Frederik III, could be shown to the Dutch public. Prior to this, research into the genesis of the paintings – to answer the question whether Eckhout painted the images in Brazil during his stay there or after his return to The Netherlands - was conducted in Copenhagen. The same question was brought up regarding Frans Post (1612-1680), who resided in Brazil during the same period as Eckhout, and the results, documented with the aid of IR-imaging, were presented at an *International Experts Symposium* in Recife. The findings on Eckhout were likewise presented in Recife, and again one week later in Rio de Janeiro at the *ICOM Committee for Conservation (ICOM CC) Triennial Meeting, 2002*.

It is my hope that the following introduction, *Discoursing Artworks or Professional Conciliation. The Multiple Faces of Conservation Documentation*, together with the fourteen subsequent articles, will provide the reader with some understanding of how critical observations, documentation and the study of art works and related archives can assist in reaching new and significant insights into a multitude of aspects of past and present art works and the considerations and choices –deliberate or random – that were made by their makers and subsequent keepers.

Countless are the people that must be acknowledged for having supported me – knowingly or not – in reaching the insights and conclusions presented in this compilation of articles. Many have encouraged me during the many other publications and achievements in my professional life as a conservator, art historian, manager of departments and during external assignments and in international professional bodies such as the ICOM Committee for Conservation. I am extremely grateful to them all and especially to the late Caroline Villers, with whom I had close professional and private conversations, and to Mikkel Scharff for his continued enthusiasm, collaboration and friendship.