

On the genesis of the show *Rembrandt and the Dutch Golden Age* in Budapest

This exhibition is part of a series of special shows at the Museum of Fine Arts which aim to give a comprehensive overview of a great period in European painting or a distinct regional school. The series began in 2006 with *Five Centuries of Spanish Painting*, continued three years later with the Italian Renaissance *Botticelli to Titian*, and last year presented the Italian Baroque *Caravaggio to Canaletto*. All were immensely successful – and all were presentations of some fantastic works of art, linked with some great ideas.

We may ask what is the justification for organising survey exhibitions like this in Budapest in the twenty-first century. First of all, we are in Budapest, which has an Old Masters' Gallery containing close to three thousand works, which cover almost the entire history of European painting, and which are on display to the public in a permanent exhibition. But people in Budapest never go to permanent exhibitions. When they've seen it once, that's enough for them. Our museum is a collection of treasures by foreign artists, and what Hungarians can find here is not the national art they perhaps learned about in school. If we want to raise their interest, we must attract a few well-known masterpieces here, and place the works from the Budapest collection in a context that shows how important they are. Our aim, therefore, is twofold: to present an attractive and understandable picture of a great period of art – this time, seventeenth-century Dutch painting – and to shine fresh light on the works in our own collection from this great period.

The Museum of Fine Arts has a wonderfully rich collection of seventeenth-century Dutch art, totalling some five hundred works. Though there is no Vermeer, and all the Rembrandts have now been refused by the RRP, we still have many important pieces. The Summary Catalogue of Dutch and Flemish pictures was published in the year 2000, and the first two volumes of the scholarly catalogue published by Primavera Press in Leiden in 2011, were for this segment of the Old Masters' Gallery. 2004 saw the opening of the new permanent exhibition of our Dutch collection in a renovated, air-conditioned part of the building, in six rooms on the top floor, containing 240 pictures, which have since become a favourite among museum educators. Therefore, we can hope that several well-informed members of the public are looking forward to our special show on *Rembrandt and his time*.

The Museum of Fine Arts hosted a temporary exhibition of Dutch paintings in 1967, organised by Ágnes Czobor, with 33 paintings borrowed from Warsaw, thanks to Jan

Białostoczki. This fine little exhibition of some 70 pictures filled the Marble Hall, and was accompanied by a catalogue in Hungarian, about as thick as my little finger. It was a landmark exhibition, the first brought together by “international collaboration”, and it was followed by others, larger ones, on a range of subjects. We also sent two complete special exhibitions from our Dutch paintings abroad in the following years: with fifty pieces from Budapest, presented in Cologne and Utrecht in 1987, selected together with Ekkehard Mai and Joos de Meyere. And then in 1989-90, our exhibition of Dutch and Flemish still-lives, *Delights for the Senses*, toured the USA. Here in Hungary the impact of these shows was very small, for although the pictures were hung in the museum’s Marble Hall for a few weeks, there was no Hungarian-language publication, and only very modest promotion.

We marked the year of Rembrandt in 2006 with a remarkable exhibition of drawings, organised by Teréz Gerszi, accompanied by a beautiful catalogue. The museum also announced a competition that year for today’s Hungarian artists to produce works inspired by Rembrandt. One of those works, a video montage by Péter Forgács, is on show again, at the end of the present exhibition.

Since that time, the name Rembrandt has appeared once more on the facade of the Museum of Fine Arts: in the spring of 2009 I had the pleasure to organise a focus exhibition, lasting a few weeks, as part of the Dutch Festival in Budapest. The Rijksmuseum – with the support of the Dutch ambassador to Budapest – kindly loaned us Rembrandt’s *Denial of Saint Peter*, around which I selected some etchings, from our Collection of Prints and Drawings, of Rembrandt’s scenes from the Passion and some Caravaggist interpretations of the denial of Saint Peter. The funds were not available for a catalogue, but a couple of articles were published, and the public enjoyed the exhibition.

Those were the historical precedents, but now let us turn to how the present exhibition came about! It was probably in the fall of 2010, at a meeting of the Bizot Commission, that our director general, László Baán, first learnt that the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm would close for a few years for renovation work. I have no idea what was discussed with Solfrid Söderlind, the director at the time, but I was soon informed that we would be organising an exhibition, on Rembrandt and the Dutch art in cooperation with the Stockholm museum. In the spring of 2011 Karin Sidén arrived in Budapest, and we launched the project. The three of us, Karin, Júlia and I, sat down and looked at the possibilities, finding our common ground. We drew up a wish list, and when Karin got home, she began her consultations with restorers and so on. A few months went by, and we exchanged a lot of letters, and after a few changes we finalised the list: we would get thirty-one pictures from Stockholm, but only one of them a

Rembrandt. – That meant we had to “look for more Rembrandts”. This was not easy. When you come up with a so-called “concept”, you put together one or two – or ten or twenty – sets of pictures, but when one of the pictures proves to be unavailable, you have to think about what could replace it, and what this change would imply. Do you know this kind of excitement? – There are a few interesting challenges, but when the third version won’t work either, it’s quite frustrating. But the possibilities are endless, because Dutch painting is so varied – and there are so many wonderful Dutch pictures everywhere. But what we needed were Rembrandts and Vermeers!

From the start we knew that we couldn’t do an exhibition on the Dutch Golden Age without help from the Rijksmuseum. The only problem was, they were also working hard on their “New Rijksmuseum” project. The works intended for exhibition there – were under a moratorium. When I first told Gregor Weber about the planned exhibition in Budapest, well, he wasn’t exactly over the moon. He helped by telling us what we definitely could NOT have, and then he handed the matter to Pieter Roelofs. Pieter was very kind, and made time to help with our loans even though he was very busy. Together we selected eighteen pictures, and they added another piece, one very important to us: the enormous portrait of *Admiral Michiel de Ruyter and his Family* by Jurriaen Jacobson, which they restored specially for this event.

But we still didn’t have a Vermeer, and we weren’t too strong on the Rembrandt side either. – I won’t bore you with the details of all our attempts, (for the people involved already know it anyway, and) you are all curators, so you know exactly what I mean. I have to say, though, that colleagues at the Dutch museums were especially cooperative, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them here and now. For many years, the Museum of Fine Arts has been happy to lend works of art for important international exhibitions – and this is not just about Holland, but all the great museums too – and now, when we made our first requests to borrow Dutch paintings, our colleagues abroad have been very generous, in Paris, London, Madrid, Vienna, Frankfurt, Florence, New York, Los Angeles, and the list goes on. In some cases, this was helped by a cooperation that stretches back decades, while in others it was our Codart contacts that made the difference. The same can be said when it came to asking for contributions from the authors of the catalogue, and I am personally extremely grateful to everybody for this.

So, with the participation of more than forty lending institutions and several private collectors, we managed to put together an exhibition comprising 178 paintings, including three Vermeers and twenty Rembrandts. And what about the other 155, you may ask. Well, the other pictures were made by no less than 110 painters. And this leads us to the concept.

Many types of exhibition, big or small, can be arranged from the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. We have seen quite a few examples over the years. László Baán, our general director, had his interest awakened by the Rijksmuseum's travelling exhibition, *Vermeer, Rembrandt and the Golden Age of Dutch Art*, which was shown in Vancouver in 2009 and then transferred to the Pinacothèque de Paris. This gave the initial impulse. For me personally – staying with the Vancouver Art Gallery – I found it very enjoyable, and very useful, to look through the pages of the 1986 catalogue by Gary Schwartz for *The Dutch World of Painting*. I was convinced, me too, that the miracle of the Dutch Golden Age of painting could not be understood without a certain amount of information about the changes taking place in society at that time. Yet our exhibition was to be about art, and not about history, and was built around the paintings in the collections in Budapest and Stockholm. I was considering a thematic structure, aware that I would not come up with anything very original, because neither history nor the current views on the painting of the Dutch Golden Age will be changed by my hand. I tried to bear in mind as many viewpoints as I could, and to present, where possible, the current research trends and “evaluations”. But I also had to remember that the exhibition is being put on, first and foremost, for the Hungarian general public – and of course the options for loans of paintings can also clip the wings of imagination. Thus, my objective was to assemble a varied and high quality selection following a few key guiding principles, involving works that I could arrange in the rooms in a balanced and clear format. Strict chronology is not possible in this case, and local schools are only grouped together in a few places. We had to ensure that certain subjects would not become limited to a single genre in any section, for that would be boring. Yet it would also be wrong to have a cavalcade of confusion. So Júlia and I ruminated, as she feverishly searched for pictures and investigated the possibilities. And slowly but surely, we stumbled ahead.

I never intended to have 178 pictures! The original idea was for 100-120 paintings, but somehow that number grew, and now I can say that I don't regret it at all, because there is hardly a single painting that doesn't have its proper place in the “ensemble”, and none of the works is bad or weak. I can tell you exactly why each work is here, and why I like it. After all, one of the main characteristics of Dutch painting that we are emphasising is its richness and variety. From this point of view, 110 artists are too few, not too many. I could list another 110 important painters who we had to leave out! I won't go that far, but I will name just ten, in alphabetical order, who I would have liked to include: Willem van Aelst, Jan Asselyn, Abraham Bloemaert, Jan Both, Cesar van Everdingen, Thomas de Keyser, Philips Koninck, Pieter Molyn, Aert van der Neer, Cornelis van Poelenburgh – the list could go on and on. By

way of excuse, a work or two by almost all of them can be seen in our own permanent exhibition on the second floor. After all, one aim of this show, which we are putting on with loud fanfare and at great expense, is – as I have already mentioned – to raise interest in the works that can be seen in the museum at other times. This is why we always include thirty or forty important works from the Budapest collection in each of these exhibitions, and we ourselves have often experienced the surprising fresh light that this new context shines on the works. – What, then, is this context I refer to?

As an introduction, historic events are illustrated with pictures: a portrait of William of Orange, two images of his tomb, a painting of a sea battle and one cavalry battle, the Dutch navy in the form of a *penschilderij* and a *paradestuk*, and portraits of Maurice and Frederick Henry. – We long hoped that we would get Rembrandt's portrait of Amalia van Solms, but in the end our request was turned down. We also included three allegories: two well-known pieces about the *Twelve Years' Truce* and about the victory brought by the *Peace of Münster*, and one that was published a few years ago by Júlia Tátrai: Willem de Poorter's allegory of colonial conquest. A couple of maps are also on show, illustrating the rise of the science of cartography. Some portraits of ships' captains lead us into the second section, where visitors can form an impression about the people who were present in the new society. Several types of portrait are included: group portraits, such as the first anatomy lesson (which also underlines the growing interest in the natural sciences), civic guards at a banquet, a large family portrait set in a landscape, pictures of married couples and self-portraits by the painters themselves. Some of the sitters are known, while others are unknown, their portraits are exhibited for their quality and because they represent some great masters. Surrounded by these pictures, the visitor can begin to feel the wealth, the sense of well-being, the importance of family, and other typical features of Dutch civic life.

The next section deals with the enjoyment of life's pleasures. Still-lives show the wealth of the material culture, genre pieces record feasts and "garden parties", and we are enchanted by figures making music, smoking or drinking –embodiments of the senses. But there are also warnings about having too much pleasure, with the key work being Jan Steen's "In luxury beware" from Vienna, alongside several versions of the idea of *Vanitas*. Strict Protestant morals can now be detected.

Moving forward, we examine the link between Protestantism and religious painting: we try to give an idea of what religious pluralism meant, by contrasting some magnificent Catholic altarpieces with the white-walled interiors of Reformed churches. Monumental works from Stockholm by the Mennonites Lambert Jacobsz. and Jacob Backer are placed here, which I

am extremely happy about, because we have nothing like them in the Budapest collection. The portrait of Johannes Wtenbogaert allows us to mention the Remonstrant movement. Among the scenes from the Old and New Testaments, intended for the walls of people's homes, the *Samson and Delilah* by Jan Lievens leads us into the section on Rembrandt.

It goes without saying that this was the most difficult part, and we could hardly have believed that eventually we would be blessed with 20 Rembrandts. This is not a “representative” selection, of course, and we are not reviewing his life's work, but a few wonderful paintings leave us in no doubt about how great Rembrandt was. We arrived here after a lot of asking, negotiating and making compromises, and we were not sure about getting some of the works until the very last minute. We faced the challenge of the *Late Rembrandt* exhibition, organised by London and Amsterdam, which has recently opened. On the other hand, we have here, as a lucky consequence, the enigmatic *Self-Portrait* from 1640, which we immediately turned into our “banner”, as it were. We received a generous helping of Rembrandt's earlier works, and there are paintings by Gerrit Dou and a couple of other more distant followers linked with his Leiden period. – I am overjoyed that the Leiden Collection have so kindly loaned us their *Minerva* (which was once owned by Marcell Nemes), and even the *Young Girl Wearing a Gold-Trimmed Cloak* has come to Budapest, which I personally find absolutely captivating – together with our young girl by Lievens. The other young Rembrandt-girl is the *Kitchen Maid*, from Stockholm, and we also have the *Titus* from Vienna, which we can compare with the tronie from Dulwich. As a biblical subject, *The Entombment Sketch* has arrived from Glasgow, evoking the Passion series. *Saint Peter Repentant* is on loan from Jerusalem and *The Incredulity of Thomas* from Moscow. The Rijksmuseum have contributed the grisaille of *Joseph Telling his Dreams* and their *Samson and Delilah*. – I'd better stop now before I list all 20 Rembrandts and leave no surprises in the exhibition. Let me add, though, that the influence of the great master can be felt in a number of quite spectacular pieces, by Carel Fabritius, Gerbrandt van den Eeckhout, Govaert Flinck, Christoph Paudiss and Jan van Noordt. And to present the influence of Rembrandt's late pictures we have two fine works by Aert de Gelder.

We suddenly find ourselves in a different world in the section titled *Cities and Citizens*, which offers an ensemble of bourgeois genre scenes and cityscapes, providing a frame for three works by Vermeer. If seeing 20 Rembrandts in Budapest is a great event, then seeing 3 Vermeers is sensational, because no painting by him has ever appeared here before. We can regard it as a great success that *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer* are back together again, at least for a little while.

The last room allows us to “unwind” with a selection of landscapes, but they are all varied and of a high standard, with Jacob van Ruisdael and Aelbert Cuyp featuring strongly.

There are many well-known works, which may help visitors to digest the exhibition (self-evident experience), but we have also attempted to obtain some “interesting” pictures. Our visitors are always fascinated to see a painting that was once owned by a Hungarian. Apart from the Rembrandt already mentioned, Gabriel Metsu’s remarkable *Dismissal of Hagar* from Leiden is one such picture. Five works have been included which are presently owned by Hungarian collectors, of which two are completely unknown, while the other three, though published, have rarely or never been seen before.

When selecting the subjects and the works, we focused on the Hungarian public, as this exhibition will only be shown here. What are our potential visitors interested in? What do they know about Holland? And how can we expand their knowledge? In brief, how can we make them fall in love with Dutch painting? And in the background there were some other questions: What can be learned from what happened in the Northern Provinces in those times (and what can be taught by showing it)? And what is our connection with all that? Why are there so many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings in Hungary? – That is the task of the catalogue, and this determined the subjects of the introductory essays. We asked Professor István Bitskey of the University of Debrecen to outline the historical connections between Holland and Hungary: he has written a very clear and instructive summary, starting with the impact in Hungary of the *Humanitas Erasmi*, passing through the Dutch links with Hungarian Protestantism and the peregrination of Hungarian students to Dutch universities, and also uncovering the Dutch connections of Hungarian scholars and writers. The second study, representing something new for foreign scholars of Dutch art, as well, is Júlia Tátrai’s essay on the history of collecting. It is the first summary of everything we know today about the presence and influence of Netherlandish art in Hungary, and of how it has been collected over the years. It contains numerous new observations and data. – Related to this research – and not only here, I’m afraid – we were a little overambitious with our catalogue. In the hope that we would be able to publish a host of new information, right at the beginning we decided to include the full provenance of the exhibited works in the entries. We regretted this extra work – Axel Vécsey, for example, sometimes spent days finalising the provenance of just a single work – and we couldn’t complete the work properly, while in most cases it is not even relevant. – We beg your forgiveness! Still, we came up with a few interesting results.

Two more studies deal with Rembrandt: Gary Schwartz was kind enough to put his thoughts on the relationship between Rembrandt and posterity into an interesting, personal

and informative essay, which offers much, that is new to Hungarian readers. In the other study, András Rényi, aesthete and head of the faculty of art history at Budapest University, examines the dramaturgy of Rembrandt's early works through hermeneutics – this study demonstrates that the latest methods of art history writing are alive and well in Hungary too. However, one thing that was so far unalable in Hungarian was Eddy de Jongh's iconological method. (Svetlana Alpers's book was translated in the year 2000). I therefore asked Professor De Jongh to help rectify this, and he wrote a beautiful and thoughtful summary of the debates surrounding this method of research, highlighting its opportunities.

After the essays, my brief section-introductions, (four to six pages in length), were addressed specifically to the general public. I tried to express in words the message that can be “read” from pictures that have been placed next to each other. We then give a detailed analysis of all the exhibited works, in the standard (customary) format, with contributions from an international team of authors. The catalogue is 608 (six hundred and eight) pages long.

But let us take a look at the works themselves now! Some are familiar, while others are new, but I hope they will all bring us fresh experiences, and inspire new ideas in all of us, because this particular combination of works will never be on show anywhere else again.