

Going Dutch in New York

THE MET'S WALTER LIEDTKE TALKS TO DARRELYN GUNZBURG

Walter Liedtke is curator of European Painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and curated the Museum's exhibition, 'The Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art', 18 September 2007–6 January 2008, held to coincide with the release of his accompanying two-volume set of books (see *The Art Book* vol. 15 issue 2). During the exhibition, Darrelyn Gunzburg spoke with Walter Liedtke about curating, and the exhibition.

DG: At the Association of Art Historians' Careers Day at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (November 2007), Mark Evans, Senior Curator of Painting, defined curating as 'the capacity to persuade others' (Walter laughs). He went on to say that 'to curate a collection is to make sure that it continues to exist'. He added that someone had once said that curators were there to serve, and if this made him sound like a waiter, then he was glad he was one. He also thought that what curators know comes from working with the collections. How do you respond to those definitions in the light of what you do?

WL: Well, the V&A draw distinctions between research people and people who manage the collections, and there is no such thing in most American museums. However, I would agree that the primary mission of a curator is to ensure the preservation of the collection, although conservators do that, too. The average curator is an art historian and in this building, where there are about 105 curators in 17 different departments, we are almost all specialised in particular historical fields.

I am primarily a scholar of Dutch seventeenth-century painting and, secondarily, Flemish. I was born in New Jersey and 'Liedtke' is a German name. My grandparents on my father's side and my great grandparents on my mother's side came over from Germany, so I didn't hear any German around the house and certainly no Dutch. I taught myself to read Dutch when I lived in Florence, some 35 years ago, as I knew I was going on to the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, UK, to do my PhD. I had completed my undergraduate work at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, as an economics major

but I converted to art history just before my senior year and then I went to Brown University for a Masters in art history.

The Dutch angle began initially not in any connection with the country but with issues of realism in Western art. I was fascinated with questions of perception as opposed to representation, and that occurred to me first in relation to nineteenth-century painters like Degas and Manet. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* also made a big impression on me. Dutch painting really presses this issue, especially artists like Vermeer. Many members of the general public don't appreciate the fact that Dutch painting has style, perhaps not as conspicuously as, say, High Renaissance Italian art, but it certainly does and it's regional and personal and chronological.

I'm fascinated by the stylistic evolution of Vermeer. Like the early Rembrandt, Vermeer is looking at a broad spectrum of artistic possibilities. He brings them together synthetically and then, because he's fascinated by visual observation, he tests them constantly against what he actually sees in the environment. So that's how I got pulled into Dutch painting, on the ground floor of my art historical experience. The title of my PhD dissertation was 'Architectural Painting in Delft' and it became my first book, published in 1982.

DG: How did you make the step to museum curating?

WL: I thought I would always teach, and I never considered a museum career because I really was a conventional historian in that I worked with books, so I went straight to Ohio State University and taught there for four years. I came here as a Mellon Research Fellow for one year and whilst I was here, the major figure in my field who was the curator before me, resigned, somewhat in disagreement with the chairman of the day,



Walter Liedtke, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

who was Sir John Pope-Hennessy, and I was offered the job of curator of Dutch and Flemish paintings. So although I hadn't planned museum work, I recognised this as a bolt from the blue that I should accept.

I love the constant working with real objects and the Met is such a big place that you can be the specialist you wanted to be, so there was no sacrifice of serious historical work. On the contrary, suddenly at least two-thirds of my time was devoted to reading and writing the 'Flemish Paintings in The Met' catalogue (published in 1984 in two volumes). All the burdens that a University teacher has were no longer there. I've always felt great good fortune to be in a place with such resources and expertise and therefore I have an obligation to really work hard and produce the best products I can or, put in a more selfish way, to capitalise on it.

DG: When this exhibition opened, the Dutch consul-general in New York commented that you had helped Americans discover Dutch art.

WL: Hmm? [Thinks] No. [Laughs] It was the primary form of European art



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Man in Oriental Costume* ('The Noble Slav') 1632. Bequest of William K. Vanderbilt, 1920. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

appreciated in America from 1800 onward. What he was trying to say is that in this exhibition I've laid out a history of taste for Dutch art and now I've explained that to contemporaries who may not know the historical background. A lot of Americans like Rembrandt and Vermeer, and maybe some of the landscapes, without knowing much about the original historical context, so the exhibition addresses that to some extent, but it's also a history of their own taste, too, and answers the question 'Why is this great collection here?'

DG: Why is it here?

WL: Because trustees of this museum, who were mostly cultivated and wealthy businessmen in the 1870s, deliberately

made it happen, feeling that the mark of a great city was its great institutions, libraries, concert halls, museums, education systems and everything else. This is a completely different way of doing things to, say, the Louvre or Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, or Berlin, which are princely or ducal. Except for the National Gallery, which is one of the youngest museums in this country, the vast majority of cultural institutions in America are private foundations.

DG: Why do people give their collections to a museum?

WL: I think it's many things but mostly altruistic, as they had more than enough money to live on and there was no income tax until the First World War. There is this so-called 'American Dream' where the average individual born with nothing can rise to be President or the captain of

industry or a great scholar. What was harder to come by was a great and lasting reputation. The way to make a great name for your family or for yourself in history was to do good works for the public benefit. There was no 'Duke of Sutherland'. You were the 'Duke of Standard Oil' but so what? That was too commercial. You could, however, be the Prince of the Metropolitan Museum, or at least one of the wings of it.

This exhibition occurred because the catalogue was finished. The pictures are not all famous or that accessible, but presenting it as I did made it work for everybody. Happily this is a collection that goes back to the very beginning of the museum, so there was a side story to tell that made it work as an installation. Rembrandt's four-hundredth birthday was a happy accident. His birthday was in 2006, when we could not have done this exhibition because we had lent quite a few things to major Rembrandt shows around the world, but for the quick orientation of the average visitor, you call it 'The Age of Rembrandt'.

We've done only one before that's really comparable, a show in 1996 called 'Van Eyck to Breugel', and that was the entire early-Netherlandish collection. If you've got great depth and breadth in storage, then you can do such an exhibition but it's not at all like a loan exhibition.

Exhibitions happen in different ways. Some are a collaborative project with a team of people. Other exhibitions are the proposals of curators who just get interested in something. 'Vermeer and the Delft School' was one of our biggest exhibitions of all time and it was just something I gradually evolved as an interest – for 35 years. [Laughs]

DG: Walter, thank you so much for your time.

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Walter Liedtke's catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection, which inspired the 'Age of Rembrandt' exhibition, has won the Association of Art Museum Curators' award for Outstanding Catalogue Based on a Permanent Collection.