

SUMMARY

This foresight study was undertaken because many involved in the art history world have expressed concerns about the position of art historical research in the Netherlands. A preliminary study had revealed that the field of art historical research is growing increasingly fragmented and that art history was having trouble maintaining its position amidst such emerging fields as media studies, cultural studies and art sociology. The government's key economic sectors policy – which emphasises economic valorisation – and austerity measures at Dutch universities have not made the prospects for art historical research any rosier in recent years. All the more reason to conduct a foresight study of art historical research in a broader context. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has expressed an interest in such a study with a view to its museum policies.

The Academy Board has asked the foresight committee headed by Prof. Maarten Prak questions concerning: 1. the current status of art historical research; 2. the position of art historical research in the broader academic and societal context; 3. opportunities for and barriers to achieving more synergy nation-wide; 4. participation of art historical research in society.

Current status of art historical research

Art historical research is a fertile and varied field of study that draws on many different sources. For a start, there is the university world: humanities faculties at the 'traditional' universities, architecture faculties at the technical universities (history of architecture) and interdisciplinary groups, for example in technical art historical research, collection-building, industrial design or design cultures. Since 2001, universities of applied sciences and art academies have also carried out applied art historical research, focusing on current artistic practice and specific themes. Beyond the world

of academia, art historical research is mainly the province of the museums. In their research museums focus primarily on maintaining, studying, providing access to, and presenting their collections and the relevant context. Only large museums (such as Rijksmuseum, Van Gogh Museum and Stedelijk Museum) have their own research staff and facilities; strikingly, however, small museums and large museums that do not receive research funding sometimes also manage to make a vital contribution to the international research discourse. Art historical research is also carried out at such institutions as the Cultural Heritage Agency [*Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed*], the Netherlands Institute for Art History [*Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie*] and The New Institute. Finally, art critics, art dealers and individual researchers not associated with any institution also conduct art historical research in the Netherlands. The foresight committee agrees with the findings of a review of humanities faculties and museums in 2012 that describe art historical research in the Netherlands as varied and of good and even excellent quality. One of its strengths is its international orientation. That is in part owing to what is undoubtedly the trump card of Dutch art historical research: the outstanding status of the object of research. No one disputes that Dutch visual art, architecture and design are of world-class quality.

One of the challenges facing Dutch art historians is to absorb new developments in their field, for example interdisciplinary collaboration with the natural sciences, social sciences and other areas in the humanities, digital access to data, utilisation of digital research strategies, and the rise of research by practising artists (artistic research).

Position of art historical research

Despite this favourable starting position, the committee has observed that art historical research at Dutch universities is under pressure. Austerity measures and economies of scale are affecting staff numbers, and art history seems to be a lost element in university branding plans. As a result, chairs in art history are being merged or cancelled, and vacancies are sometimes left unfilled. Research time is concentrated at the top and bottom of the academic hierarchy. There are art history professors and a few graduate appointments are still being made, but senior lecturers are scarce. The situation at the universities is worrisome and could worsen as a result of the looming retirement of a large number of art history professors. Paradoxically, the erosion is most serious in Early Modern Art from the Low Countries – one of the most valued areas of specialisation in Dutch art history, both in the Netherlands and internationally. Another troublesome development is the absence of an ordinary chair in Modern Architecture, one of the other areas in which the Netherlands enjoys international fame.

Art history researchers are slightly under achieving when it comes to indirect funding (through the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research or NWO), and there are other problems looming. Because NWO has been forced to reserve part of its budget for the ‘key economic sectors’ designated by government, there is less money available in the ‘non-earmarked budget’, the source of the individual research grants

that have always been so important for art historians. Art historians, moreover, seem reluctant to connect to the Creative Industry, one of the key economic sectors, and therefore a beneficiary of financial support.

Art historians must sort out where they stand in relation to adjoining disciplines and emerging areas of research. The boundaries between art history and intellectual history, the history of science, technical art history, media studies, museology, and so on are becoming increasingly blurred. In addition, new areas of research are emerging, for example related to the new media. It is at the interface between disciplines that fascinating research questions often arise, but few Dutch art historians have so far embraced these.

Museum-based art historical research is also facing major changes. The government is economising on research at museums. In fact, only two museums with art historical collections – the Rijksmuseum and Museum Catharijneconvent – will be receiving specific funding for this purpose. The Council for Culture wants museums to collaborate more and conduct research in collaboration with the universities. The committee firmly believes that Dutch art historians have it in them to meet the challenges that they are facing. However, it also finds that the field of art history is not organised to offer adequate incentives for a forward-looking attitude.

Barriers to and opportunities for synergy

With a view to synergies, it is regrettable that the role of the national research schools – which used to provide focus and mass for art historical research – has been undermined. Since 2010, the research schools are no longer responsible for supervising graduate students; instead, graduate programmes and Research Master's degree programmes have been made part of faculty-based, multidisciplinary graduate schools. While this can be enriching, it also contributes to the fragmentation of art historical research. There is a further barrier to synergy beyond the world of academia. While museums advise on NWO research applications, researchers working in the museum sector are scarcely permitted to compete for this type of research funding.

Increasingly, art historians are working together, either in academia or across the boundaries of the academic and museum worlds. Nevertheless, the research culture is still overwhelmingly solitary in nature. Professional relationships between art historians are not evolving into effective collective action. As a result, professionals are unable, as a group, to turn their research into a 'strong brand' on a par with their most important object of research. In the committee's view, the profession is not making the most of existing relationships and incentives (for example the Art History Research School). When art historians do work together, it is usually on individual projects. There is no common research agenda. Academic and museum research could be more mutually enhancing. That would involve bridging the content gap between theoretical investigation on the one hand and researching objects from collections on the other. More sharing and more synergy between art historians at differing types of institutions or in differing capacities are not only desirable, but also inevitable.

Participation in society

Art historical researchers build exhibitions, publish catalogues, give lectures, organise and supervise cultural trips, write popular-science books and publish about art in the popular media. They make art accessible to a wider audience. In that sense, social engagement has always been one of the cornerstones of art historical research. Art history also compares favourably to the other humanities when it comes to economic usefulness. Bear in mind that the most important object of its research – Dutch art through the centuries – draws millions of tourists, students, researchers and dealers to this country every year.

The challenge facing art historians today is to play a more active role in the changing political and social context, based on an intrinsic engagement with public affairs. The political context is dominated by the key economic sectors; of these, the Creative Industry offers art historians the best prospects. So far, however, they have done very little to explore opportunities for collaboration with the business sector. In terms of social engagement, the committee has noted that even leading art historians have contributed very little to art historical debates, let alone to more general discussions of the role of art and culture in society. They remained largely in the background during public debates about high-profile issues, for example concerning the founding of a National History Museum, the Canon of Dutch History, and the lengthy closure of the Rijksmuseum.

Overall conclusions

Based on its findings, the committee's three main conclusions are as follows.

1. The quality of art historical research in the Netherlands is satisfactory and in some cases even excellent, but art historians make too little use of the quality and reputation of Dutch art and are insufficiently visible both in the Netherlands and internationally.
2. The Dutch art history world lacks institutional collaboration and individual leadership. It does not speak with a clear voice, leaving universities, museums and other institutions and relevant parties without anyone to lobby on their behalf. Art history is therefore vulnerable to austerity measures and an unfavourable political and social climate. The signs are already clear both in the museum sector and at the universities.
3. University and museum art historical research are inextricably linked in the Netherlands. Both sides would benefit from close cooperation. Academic art historical research would offer museums a perspective that goes beyond their own collections; art historical research at museums would offer academic research a national and international audience. The two sides are not making adequate use of opportunities for mutual enhancement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It appears that art historical research in the Netherlands must seek salvation within its own field. The present social and academic climate is especially conducive to disciplines that are well organised internally and that have come up with a joint response to today's challenges. Dutch art and art history are too valuable to surrender to the 'free play' of social forces. The foresight committee therefore calls on all those involved to take the initiative. It has a number of specific recommendations in that regard.

1. CREATE NEW ORGANISATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FIELD.

Researchers at the various universities, museums and government services can generate a new dynamic if they establish closer relationships with one another rather than working separately as they now do. The committee expects that these relationships will generate intellectual energy with which to make better use of the available potential. Het Nieuwe Instituut', a collaboration between Nederlands Architectuur instituut (NAi), PremSela, Nederlands Instituut voor Design en Mode, and Virtueel Platform – kennisinstituut voor e-cultuur, may serve as an example here.

2. TRY TO COORDINATE A RESEARCH AGENDA, WITH THE ART HISTORY RESEARCH SCHOOL AS THE ORGANISATIONAL LINCHPIN.

The Art History Research School is the leading national platform for art historical researchers. It should play a key role in boosting synergy between art historians and other researchers (at museums, but also applied researchers elsewhere). The Research School OSK should initiate a research agenda, which must also build bridges between the worlds of research and those of non-research stakeholders. Through its graduate study programme, the Research School offers an ideal environment for implementing new practices.

3. ORGANISE A NATIONAL CONFERENCE WHERE RECENT REVIEWS CAN BE DISCUSSED IN RELATION TO ONE ANOTHER.

Recent reviews provide a positive impression of the quality and relevance of art historical research at Dutch universities. Reviews of the museum sector have also been published, albeit somewhat longer ago. The problem is that the reviews concern individual institutions, and therefore do not immediately offer a nationwide overview. A national comparison would provide a good starting point for closer coordination and agenda-setting.

4. PROVIDE INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES THAT DO JUSTICE TO THE NATURE OF ART HISTORICAL RESEARCH.

Art historical researchers deal with different funding bodies and authorities, for example faculty boards, NWO and government or quasi-government institutions. Each of these can help promote art historical research in its own way. In addition to local branding, university faculty boards should develop a policy that actively supports national collaboration, in particular for disciplines that do not play a major role in local

branding. Alongside the universities, NWO should allow art museums with demonstrable research capacity to apply for research funding. The Minister of Education, Culture and Science should ensure that funding that goes to the Creative Industry (as a key economic sector) is also used to support partnerships between different types of knowledge institutions, and that it focuses less exclusively on the business market. After all, it is precisely in this particular sector that public institutions play a crucial role.

5. ENCOURAGE RESEARCHERS TO TAKE ACTION BY SETTING UP A NEW TYPE OF ORGANISATION WITH GLOBAL APPEAL.

Efforts to boost the discipline's image as a whole (and transcend the boundaries between university departments on the one hand and between universities and museums on the other) will only succeed if the impetus comes from the researchers themselves. What art historical research primarily needs is a place where art historians from different backgrounds are inspired to work together and develop a shared vision of their field of study in an international context.

A world-class institute for Dutch art history

Inspiring examples from the Netherlands and abroad have led the committee to recommend setting up a national centre for Dutch art historical research. Like the Dutch government in its plans for the Karel van Mander Institute, it envisages a new, world-class institute with an international reputation. However, it believes that a more ambitious plan is needed to effectively address the problems facing art historical research in the Netherlands.

Location

The location of the new institute is clear: in or near Museum Square in Amsterdam, the site of three museums with world-class collections of Dutch and international art. This is also the location of the Ateliergebouw, home to the Movable Heritage Expertise Centre of the Cultural Heritage Agency, the University of Amsterdam's conservation and restoration programme, and the Rijksmuseum's Department of Conservation and Restoration. Dutch and foreign researchers will have an excellent opportunity to view and study world-class collections at this location.

Function

At the heart of the institute will be the world-class library and image collection of the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD). The institute will also become the home of the national Art History Research School, making it an educational centre for the entire field. The Research School is expected to contribute to methodological innovation, generating synergy between museum research and university research. The institute will accommodate researchers and guest researchers from the Netherlands and elsewhere and run a fellowship programme to bolster its 'own' core research capacity. It will organise an annual series of seminars at which researchers share their

thoughts and ideas. The institute will run an international MA programme in Dutch art history taught by researchers working at museums and all art history programmes in the Netherlands. It will also run a programme of public activities in cooperation with the museums.

Set-up

The institute's building blocks are already available: there have been recent reviews in both the academic and museum sectors, and there is a research school representing both sectors. To take full advantage of the scale and quality of art historical research being carried out all over the Netherlands, the field as a whole will produce an initial agenda this year setting out agreements on research priorities, an internationally appealing educational programme, and public activities. Museum exhibition plans and the funding applications submitted to NWO will be coordinated as much as possible. These topics will be discussed and explored in-depth during seminars organised by the institute.

Funding

The committee is not arguing for a sizeable additional investment in art historical research in the Netherlands. It is, however, calling for more effective use to be made of the funding that is available. The institute's basic budget will consist of the funding currently received by the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) and the funds that conditionally have been reserved in the budget of the Rijksmuseum for the Karel van Mander Institute. Part of these funds will be earmarked for the staff and offices required to allow the Netherlands Institute for Art History to do its work. Other parts of the budget will be conditional, with availability depending on qualitatively sound plans as described in the foregoing.