

ART DEALER

WILLEM JAN HOOGSTEDER

“You have to see the painting, not think about who made it”

One of the world’s leading experts on seventeenth-century Dutch masters, the flamboyant **Willem Jan Hoogsteder**, runs a gallery on Lange Vijverberg in The Hague. He explains some of the subtle nuances of the art trade to Liesbeth Wytzes. “A copyist paints part of the cuff and then the coat beside it, because a copyist copies; but that’s not how a real painter paints.”

“No, this one’s no good. Strange hand. That isn’t right. Looks odd. Painted over. There’s no hair left. And what’s with the background?” Willem Jan Hoogsteder (55) - big, dark-blue suit - leafs deftly through the catalogue of an auction at Palais Dorotheum on 10 December in Vienna. On the right, a photo of the painting; left, text with description, name of artist, all that’s known about the painting. Words deleted, exclamation marks and question marks. Hoogsteder points, explains, opines. Some people may feel a little intimidated by the chic, stylish descriptions accompanying the pictures, citing experts and telling the history of the painting. Not Hoogsteder. Behind his air of light, studenty nonchalance, charm and easy patter lies a dedicated expert. He sees everything. If the restorer was too aggressive, for example, so that only a thin layer of paint remains, showing the structure of the canvas underneath. Awkward postures, details painted over. “Look, this painting has

been cropped; that leg just stops. And here, these figures are listless. Muddy. A pathetic painting really. This bit is broken. Here it’s far too dark. What’s the point? It’s not attractive.”

In the trade, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder rank among the best art dealers in the world for mostly seventeenth-century art. That was Holland’s heyday, the rise of the Dutch Republic and an age of unprecedented wealth – not just in financial terms. Jop Ubbens (54), director of Christie’s Amsterdam, calls Hoogsteder “Flamboyant and colourful, while most art dealers are more reserved. Which he combines with tremendous knowledge. He has a firm opinion of his own and knows how to combine the commercial and the academic. He doesn’t let himself be led by others; he follows his own instinct. That’s

what being an entrepreneur is about.” The gallery moved into its splendid premises on Lange Vijverberg in 1991, opposite the city’s central Hofvijver pond, with a view of the prime minister’s office, the Torentje. The furnishings are, as might be expected, classical. Paintings line the golden-yellow walls, almost all from the seventeenth century. For those who want a closer look there are magnifying glasses available. Two safes in the basement are also full of paintings.

Hoogsteder grew up surrounded by art; his parental home was full of paintings. His grandfather, a carpenter, set up a furniture factory; his father, a self-made collector, expanded the factory, sold it in the 1970s and went into the art business. The gallery now belongs to his son, who studied art history at Utrecht. Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder occupy a unique position in the art world. The firm sets its own course and has avoided the major art fairs where most art dealers feel obliged to put up a stall. They have never participated in TEFAF, the world famous annual art fair at Maastricht, or indeed Amsterdam’s PAN. On the other hand, they

appear as experts on AVRO's television programme *Tussen Kunst & Kitsch* (Between Art and Kitsch – the Dutch version of BBC's *Antique Road Show*) and organise their own exhibitions, transforming their gallery into a museum. Above all, they are never mysterious about what they sell, however appealing to the imagination. At Hoogsteder either you buy a painting, or you don't. It's a shop. Albeit a magnificent shop.

Quality

This business is not just about aesthetics, it is also about quality. Sometimes Hoogsteder goes to a saleroom to view a painting, if it seems promising. "Is it a good painting? Perhaps it's ugly. You often end up going to an auction for nothing, but that's not a problem. At least you know you haven't missed anything." What makes a good painting? How does an art dealer look at a painting, or judge it? "On the one hand you look at a painting like everyone else looks: what do you like about it, what makes it exciting? But I also look at the quality. And then I look for what's wrong with it."

And Hoogsteder sees things that most people never notice. "Some of those paintings are three or four hundred years old. In that case there has to be enough of the original left to be able to say the quality is good. If you leaf through a catalogue, 90 percent is negligible because of the condition alone. They are damaged, or tampered with. Many of the paintings have areas that have been painted over, which is not always a bad thing. You can remove that and expose the original underneath. Then you find out how good the condition is. **There are different kinds of damage; a scratch is not that terrible.** But then an eighteenth-century restorer may have found the scratch too awkward to fill and may have decided to paint over

the whole sky. To remove that paint is always a risk, because you never know what you'll find underneath."

Even so, the later layer of paint has to be removed. "That is a major gamble, and the results can be dramatic."

One painting on the wall is especially intriguing: a small portrait of a girl, so bright and fresh that it might have been painted yesterday. It draws you immediately towards it, almost unconsciously. Hoogsteder finds it charming too, he points out the folds of the light-green silk lining of the collar, the precision with which it is rendered.

That is not what it looked like when he first saw it at a Christie's sale in Paris. Hoogsteder often buys at auction, as well as from private sellers. "It was grimy and dirty, with a thick layer of varnish. But you could see the quality: that the hair was beautifully soft, that all the layers were still there. The entire background had been painted over. Which raises the question: why only the background? Everything is pristine and as perfect as you could ever hope to see. Did someone spoil the background? So that's worth a gamble. The background had been painted blue, which was in vogue at one time. Our restorer removed the blue and fortunately, underneath lay the original green."

The painting was offered at a sale in Paris as an anonymous work by an unknown sixteenth-century master. "I spotted it in the catalogue and inserted a sticker: don't forget to look. You can't base your decision on a catalogue picture, you have to see the real thing. So I went, walked past it and thought: this is superb. I want that painting. It had a low starting price, under 10,000 euros. You try not to stand in front of the painting for too long at a sale, you don't want everyone to know how wonderful you think it is. You have to exercise a little self-control. In this case

the bidding went to ten times the estimate, because others had seen that it was special too. But you can't allow that to influence your own strategy. **You have to stick to your plan and ignore the catalogue text or what some person tells you, or the erratic behaviour of the bidders.** You have to stick to your strategy: to what you're prepared to pay. You can often sense it: one more bid and it's yours. So that's what I did and here it is. Of course the truth comes out at the restorer's, that's when it really gets interesting."

While Hoogsteder works with several restorers, he has a favourite. He keeps the name to himself. "I'd rather not say. He's busy enough as it is."

Together with the restorer they inspect the work closely. In this case, the background was the problem. It had not been painted over recently; the damage could well have been done in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Despite the age of the overpainting, for Hoogsteder it was all wrong: "I wanted it to be authentic."

The overpainting was removed and a magnificent green background emerged – which was fortunate. "This is a well painted work, in excellent condition and extremely attractive. Which is what one wants." Then came the next problem: who painted it? "Anonymous school, the catalogue stated, with a rough date. That was all. It's possible to estimate a date from the subject's clothing, but if it's a copy that tells you nothing. First you have to find out if the paint is from that same period. You can often tell if it's a copy from the way it is painted. A painter paints in layers. For example, first the shirt with its lace cuff, and then the coat that covers it. A copyist paints part of the cuff and then the coat beside it, because a copyist copies; but that's not how a real painter paints. Then it's time to do your art historical research: who could it be? We have a big library downstairs. So you find the books. In this case Max Jakob Friedländer; he categorised sixteenth-century art in the early twentieth century. It's a standard work. There are monographs too."

What is he looking for in those books with their hundreds of pictures? "Above all other portraits: whatever looks similar, especially the style. The next place to go is Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, the art-history institute here in The Hague. They have a vast store of illustrations catalogued by name. And they have their expertise too. For example, at such-and-such auction this work was attributed to X, but we think it must be Y. Very few artists signed their work in the sixteenth century. Art history is an ongoing process and research continues; different people are constantly reexamining particular artists." Hoogsteder narrowed it down to one of two artists: Pieter Pourbus (1523-1584) or Willem Key (1515-1568), until he met an art historian working on Key who was sure he could recognise the style. "He's pretty definite about it, and so are we. So in our opinion the painting is a Key. Although it may well be that in thirty years time everything changes. That's how it goes. New insights."

Is that a bad thing? You buy a Key and years later it turns out - or appears to turn out to be by someone else. "No, not really. Buyers want to be sure, but in the end it's not essential. Because it's the object that matters, the art. Who painted it doesn't change its aesthetic quality. When I view a painting, the authorship is completely irrelevant. You have to look at the painting itself and not think about who painted it. As open-minded as possible."

Three Names

To be able to sell a painting, the quality has to be good. And it has to look good to, however subjective that may be. Take the sea view on the wall - a marine, as it's known in the trade - by Jacob Bellevois (1621-1676). At least that's one of the three names on the canvas. It shows a series of ships on the water, manned by small figures busy climbing the rigging and adjusting the sails. "Bellevois signed his name

in full, but on one of the ships there's the name De Vlieger, and there's a barrel in the water with the monogram of the greatest of them all: Willem van de Velde. Someone added those names, and they remain however much you clean the work. For example, you can remove nineteenth-century additions by dabbing detergent diluted to a certain strength, and the varnish too. Since the names remain even then, they must have been added much earlier. I think they date from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. It might have raised the price. Yet this is such a typical Bellevois. Those figures are so characteristic, with their unusual shape. Once you've seen a few, you know: that's obviously a Bellevois figure."

Hoogsteder is full of admiration and wonder for the Dutch Golden Age, a period he has made his own. It was in seventeenth-century Holland, for the first time in history, that artists began painting everyday subjects. "Before then art was reverential. It was for the Church and the aristocracy. Until townspeople started to accumulate wealth. These burghers didn't live in castles; they lived in ordinary houses and they wanted art that fitted in with their lifestyle. Down-to-earth." **It was in the seventeenth century that still life emerged as a subject. It was unprecedented, and so ordinary.** Marines, landscapes with everyday scenes, still lifes: these were genres that had not existed before. Never. Nowhere. It resulted from the rise of new money.

"We formed the first true democracy in Europe, after the Greeks. Never had so many ordinary people acquired so much money before. A man like Piet Hein, he was a nobody, until he became a kind of super hero – like today's top footballers. New lands were being discovered. A simple country boy could make a fortune, or die trying. Exciting! Amsterdam, which had been dredged out of the water. New inventions, telescopes, microscopes... Our nation led the way. Everyone was doing their best, and it was working!"

There were painters everywhere too; too many for all of them to be equally good. Just because a painting is old, doesn't mean it is good or beautiful, however romantic the idea that an object has existed for four hundred years. Which is why art dealers play such an important role for this period. "For me it's the most exciting period with the finest paintings. In the nineteenth century, for example, it's quite different. A huge amount of art came onto the market, and those paintings are signed. It's not difficult to assess their condition. There is not much that an art dealer can add. Basically, what I sell is information. It's quite a risk to buy a seventeenth-century painting at auction without advice, in my opinion. For someone starting a collection, the knowledge we provide is essential."

Having bought a painting such as the work by Key, or by Bellevois, the next step is to find a buyer. It's harder to find a good painting than the right buyer. Hoogsteder's paintings range from 25,000 euros, which he offers to encourage people just starting their collection. Considerably less expensive than other galleries. "The margin at that price is minimal, but we offer them to enable collectors to start. It brings that period to life for them. The best way to understand that world is through paintings. Insight into the seventeenth century has to start from somewhere. If there's too much information, it becomes inaccessible. I see it as part of my mission to offer these relatively inexpensive paintings. We try to do more than just sell; we really love the period. Art from this period is like a language which has become obscured by time. To teach people that language, you have to create the opportunity. And if you want to nurture collectors, you have to give them a helping hand."

Hoogsteder is always searching for paintings and buyers. One of the reasons he organises exhibitions, sometimes with loans from museums, is to encourage customer loyalty. No other gallery does that. Sometimes he opens on a

Sunday to the general public, because the way to develop knowledge is to view more. “It can be hard to figure out what people like; sometimes they don’t even know themselves.”

Nevertheless, it is increasingly difficult to find good paintings. “I wouldn’t be able to fill this room with winter landscapes or marines; there are so few paintings on offer.”

Cindy Sherman

In fact the dearth of paintings predates the recession and prices of old masters have remained constant at today’s levels for many years. “It’s not like modern art, where a photo by Cindy Sherman fetches four million dollars. Prices of old masters are nowhere near that. If prices were to rise then the supply would naturally increase too. Nevertheless, there is movement in the upper flight. In China, Russia, Saudi Arabia they’ve woken up to the fact that, hold on... that’s quite cheap. At Christie’s in London two paintings by Adriaan Coorte recently went to a buyer who I understand to be Chinese. He paid 3.5 million euros for each, and quite right, because they are superb paintings and extremely rare.”

It’s not just Chinese and Russians who are discovering old masters. Contemporary artists and collectors view this period as the most authentic form of art - and the earlier the better. **“Sixteenth century art is a particular favourite of modern artists. Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Wim Delvoye collect old masters.** I also sell to contemporary artists and they tell me that, to them everything between then and now is like white noise. Impressionists, for example: too sickly sweet. They want to get back to the roots.” More and more paintings from the seventeenth century and thereabouts are now locked into museum collections. They have disappeared from the market. Permanently. Collectors often donate everything they

have *en bloc* to a museum; so none of that is ever sold again. One of the most famous and largest collections of seventeenth-century art is that of Rose-Marie and Eijk de Mol van Otterloo. They live in the United States and have already announced that they intend to donate their collection to an American museum. Nothing wrong with that, says Hoogsteder. “People travel so much these days. It’s a good thing that Dutch art is on display around the world. It shows how great it is.” So what will the trade look like in twenty years time? “Good question. It’ll carry on, and there’ll be plenty of paintings for collectors to buy. But you can’t buy a Vermeer these days, and collectors know that.”

Key’s portrait will find a home somewhere, it’s a beautiful piece. And the naval battle by Bellevois too - the Dutch love these sea pictures. Sometimes Hoogsteder wonders if he could ever have been anything other than an art dealer. What would life have looked like? He followed in his father’s footsteps almost automatically. “I never thought of doing anything else. When I was at school, most of my friends went into their father’s business. We never used to discuss it much, we never asked why. Now I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had decided to do something different? Nonsense, of course. Every time a new catalogue comes in, I feel the adrenalin and the excitement.”

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