

fig. 1
Jacques de Gheyn II
 Two Studies of a Nude Woman
 Black and white chalk, pen and brown ink
 228 x 364 mm
 circa 1603
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (purchase with support from the Rembrandt Society (the Daan Cevat fund among others), the SNS Reaal Fund, the VSBfonds, money from the BankGiro Loterij and a generous donation from the owner).



The Rembrandt Association and TEFAF

Collective Enjoyment

Robert-Jan te Rijdt Curator of Drawings, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In the year of its 125th anniversary, the Rembrandt Society again enabled museums to make a number of exceptional purchases. One of them was a drawing, *Two Studies of a Nude Woman* of c. 1603 by Jacques de Gheyn II (Antwerp 1565–1629 The Hague) (fig. 1), which can be seen in the Rijksmuseum until 20 April. But the drawing itself is not all that is special. With its financial contribution—drawn mainly from the Daan Cevat Fund and the Hendrik de Jong Fund—in its jubilee year the Rembrandt Society returned to the reason for its formation: the preservation of old drawings of exceptional calibre for the Netherlands.

The Rembrandt Society and the ‘Arte et Amicitia’ art society

The Rembrandt Society stemmed from a group of Amsterdam collectors of drawings. It was far easier for them to maintain friendships in a group, centred on their collections, than it was for collectors of paintings or antiques. They would get together to for ‘art reviews’ (fig. 2), where the company would sit round a table in one of their members’ homes. Drawings and prints would be passed around for examination and discussion.

A private collection of art on paper could be extremely voluminous. The works, sometimes thousands of them, were kept in albums—folios of plain sheets between which the drawings or prints were laid—or in portfolios. For a long time collecting drawings was the preserve of a few enthusiasts, particularly artists, but around 1680–1700 it gained wider popularity. We find countless portraits dating from this time onwards in which the subject is pictured with an album of drawings, and numerous illustrations of groups of art lovers looking at prints and drawings together.

One of the founders of the Rembrandt Society, the stockbroker Rudolph J. Kyzer, wrote a brochure about its origins. The immediate cause was the sale of Jacob de Vos’s drawings, which was to take place in May 1883. It was the last great Dutch collection in the tradition of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collections of drawings, built up by successive generations of the same family at a time when these works were still in abundant supply. In previous years a number of major collections of paintings had already been sold to collectors and art dealers abroad.



fig.2
Christiaan Andriessen
 Art Review at Johan Goll van Franckenstein's
 Pen and black ink, grey, red and brown wash over black chalk
 187 x 259 mm
 1808
 Amsterdams Historisch Museum (gift from P. van Eeghen)

fig.3
Rembrandt
 Reclining Female Nude
 Pen and brush and brown ink, brush in white ink
 (oxidized)
 136 x 283 mm
 circa 1658
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (acquired from the
 Rembrandt Society)

And at drawing sales too, such as that of the Rotterdam collector Dirk Vis Blokhuyzen in 1871, many of the best pieces went to England, Germany or France.

In February 1883 the members of the 'Arte et Amicitia' (for Art and Friendship) art society—popularly known as the Art Circle—met to discuss how to preserve as many of De Vos's drawings as possible for the Netherlands. They knew the works well, as the collector had been chairman of Arte for more than forty years and on many occasions had shown selections from his collection at the art reviews and recounted what he knew about each sheet. Even though the majority of the members of Arte were wealthy, they foresaw that they would not be able to purchase much for their own collections. The only way that a significant part of the collection could be preserved for the Netherlands would be with the support and cooperation of the government.

Meanwhile in The Hague, Victor de Stuers, Head of the Arts and Sciences Department of the Ministry of the Interior, had been waiting for just such an opportunity. He regarded putting a stop to the exodus of important paintings and objects of historical and artistic value as his major task in life. However he feared that a one-off act of financial support at the sale would not have any long term effect. He saw far more value in an enduring society that could manage a large sum of money borrowed from private individuals for the purchase of important works of art. The money required would be advanced interest-free until the State or a museum could pay it back to the Rembrandt Society. Its funds could then actually act as a kind of bank for art.

Within a few months the Rembrandt Society managed to get together 67,000 guilders in cash for

interest-free advances. Of the 161,100 guilders that the De Vos collection raised, 45,000 guilders was spent by the Society: 201 of the 749 lots were bought for the national collection of prints and drawings, the Rijksprentenkabinet.

In the first decades of its existence the Rembrandt Society operated very much in the spirit of its founders. As early as 1887 it acquired the bulk of the Ter Borch family's studio estate, while in 1895 it spent almost 14,500 guilders on prints and drawings for the Rijksprentenkabinet at the William Pitcairn Knowles sale in Amsterdam. For many, many years the Rembrandt Society's annual reports would contain statements like this one from 1906: 'Thanks to our help the Rijksprentenkabinet can also enjoy an increase in many of its collections. This was accomplished by means of important purchases in Amsterdam, The Hague, Cologne, Berlin and Stuttgart.'

Early art reviews at 'Arte'

Kyzer knew from the archives that the 'Arte et Amicitia' society was already 'more than a hundred years old' in 1883. There were never more than twelve members. In the winter months they took it in turns to meet at each other's houses every other Friday evening. No minutes were kept of the meetings and there was no kitty. The host passed round drawings from his collection, perhaps chosen to represent a particular theme or period: 'The issues of the day, more particularly those concerning art, were discussed over a glass of wine and a cigar, and the evening ended with a convivial little supper.'

Kyzer's information can be linked to what Christiaan Josi wrote in 1821 about art reviews in Amsterdam. Josi was a prominent dealer in prints and drawings there until he moved to London in 1819. When he was a member there were three societies in Amsterdam

fig. 4
Jan Cossiers
Portrait of his Son Cornelis Cossiers
 Black, red and yellow chalk, pen and brown ink
 26.7 x 18.5 cm
 1658
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (gift from the heirs
 of I.Q. van Regteren Altena)



with the motto Art and Friendship: one in which only drawings were passed round, one for prints, and one in which people could show drawings or prints as they wished. Again, people gathered at a member's house once a fortnight from November to May, and each society had a maximum of twelve members, who were elected. This notwithstanding, the fact that someone who was not universally popular sometimes slipped through the net is revealed by the words of one of the members in a letter of 1813: 'Mr Brongdeest, newly elected member of the Thursday Club, spoils it all with his pedantry and ill-informed criticism'. The art reviews were a typically Dutch custom, and Josi heard from various collectors in other countries that they wished that they had societies like them.

We do not know quite when the 'Arte et Amicitia' art circle was set up. In the nineteenth century it was taken for granted that Cornelis Troost had depicted the society around 1745. This seems highly likely. There are surviving printed rules dated 1736 for a St Luke Brotherhood in Dordrecht, where there was far less of a tradition of collecting drawings. They reveal that it had been a society of collectors of both drawings and paintings very similar to Arte.

During the winter months in Dordrecht people likewise gathered every other Friday evening at the home of one of the twelve members. They were only allowed to talk about paintings, drawings and prints. The most notable condition was that the host also had to sell some art. A fine was imposed if not enough was sold. Other members' art could be sold as well.

We do not know whether it was also obligatory for art to change hands in Amsterdam in Josi's time, although we do know for certain that the assembled enthusiasts from 'Arte' did deal with each other. Once in a while a collection of drawings did not come up in a public auction but was bought from the family by a group of members

from the Art Circle and then sold among themselves. Members also bought and sold during the meetings. In 1813, for instance, the young art dealer Jeronimo de Vries was given a Ruysdael and two Ludolf Bakhuyzens to sell for one of his contacts. He had to report, however, that, 'I have circulated them among the Gentlemen of the Sunday Club (one of the two societies where drawings were passed round) and I have presented them to the English (at that time the big buyers of antique art), but apart from De Vos and Josi there was no one interested in the Ruysdael, and none who thought that the two Bakhuyzens were not too expensive. Anyway, I made out that it was for myself, and I even had to be on the receiving end of an unfriendly admonition from certain people.'

An exceptional drawing by Jacques de Gheyn II

The recently acquired masterpiece by Jacques de Gheyn II comes from a Dutch private collection where it has been through inheritance, probably since around 1800. The buyer then was not a collector but the Rotterdam artist Cornelis Bakker (1771–1849). Bakker must have been part of the tradition of art reviews—his estate included a drawn title page for the portfolio of drawings of the Rotterdam society of artists 'Hierdoor tot Hooger'. He did not pay much for this drawing by De Gheyn, whose work was not popular at the time as it was considered unattractively 'gothic'. The price of one and a half guilders written on the mount around 1800 is in stark contrast to the three hundred guilders or so that was paid then for a large coloured drawing by Adriaen van Ostade.

When the present owner of the De Gheyn showed it to the Rijksprentenkabinet, however, it caused a sensation. Only rarely in the Netherlands does a really important sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century drawing appear from nowhere. This was all the more amazing as I.Q. van Regteren Altena, the former director of the Rijksprentenkabinet, had been collecting material about



fig.5
Nicolas Lagneau
Portrait of an Old Woman
 Black and red chalk, lightly washed
 37.4 x 24 cm
 circa 1630-1645
 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (bequest of J. Nienhuis, via the Rembrandt Society)

Custodia in Paris. Like the other studies, this ‘newly discovered’ drawing was executed in black and white chalk on rough beige-grey paper, and then partially worked up in pen and brown ink, a combination of techniques that makes the sheets unusually attractive. Furthermore, this sixth study is in unbelievably fine condition. The not inconsiderable white highlights are still completely intact. The juxtaposition of two figures so antithetical in character lends the drawing added tension.

Jacques de Gheyn II

Jacques de Gheyn II came from Antwerp and was apprenticed to Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617) in Haarlem in 1585. He lived in The Hague from around 1603 until his death. Constantijn Huygens was a family friend of the ambitious artist and described his drawings as gracious, elegant and subtle. Initially De Gheyn concentrated on making drawings and prints that were very evidently modelled on Goltzius’s work. After around 1600 he went his own way and developed a drawing style with even more fluid pen lines and detailed freehand hatching. His drawings reveal a real penchant for naturalism and direct observation. His studies of posing models and his numerous little scenes from his own home life are particularly telling evidence of this.

De Gheyn’s nude studies are extremely important in the overview of Dutch drawing. We know that around 1590-1600 Goltzius set up an academy with two other artists to draw from life. Three of his female nudes that can be

linked to this have survived; all three of them are owned outside the Netherlands. We do not know of any studies of nude models from life by the other two artists—Karel van Mander and Cornelis van Haarlem. Apart from Goltzius’s drawings, those by De Gheyn are the oldest surviving Dutch study sheets of female nudes drawn from life—and they are in no sense borrowings or reproductions! As splendid as Goltzius’s studies of the female nude are, De Gheyn’s are truly astounding in the directness of the observation and spontaneity of style.

In the omission of adornment and stylization, De Gheyn’s nudes heralded the start of a long seventeenth-century tradition, which is dominated by the very personal drawings by Rembrandt (fig. 3). These two artists’ desire for naturalism leads J.R. Judson to look upon De Gheyn as a direct forerunner of Rembrandt. After all, as well as portraying the female nude in the same penetrating way, they both produced drawn oeuvres full of domestic scenes sketched from life. It has rightly been emphasized that De Gheyn was the first artist to be so productive in this field.

The concern of collectors for the national art collection

In view of the aesthetic and historical importance of this drawing and because it had been in the family for so long, the owner wanted the sheet to remain in the Netherlands. He therefore generously decided to give the Rijksmuseum the chance to buy the drawing directly from him *and* to donate a not insignificant part of the purchase price.

It is a marvellous coincidence that this drawing by De Gheyn, thanks to the cooperation between the Rijksmuseum, the owner and support from the Rembrandt Society among others, can be added to the national art collection in the same year as a part of the collection of Van Regteren Altena, the pre-eminent connoisseur of the same De Gheyn. More than forty-five drawings have been gifted to the State by the heirs *en lieu de succession* for placement in the Rijksprentenkabinet. The De Gheyn that has been purchased is an incomparable fit with this donation, which includes important drawings by Karel van Mander, Jacques de Gheyn II, Roeland Saverij and Jan Cossiers (fig. 4).

The circle is almost complete. Altena was a prominent member of the ‘Amsterdam Print Circle’, founded in 1947 and still active, which meets every month in the winter for an art review of drawings and prints. Various members have made gifts or made bequests to museums through their descendants.

The Rembrandt Society can also be instrumental in the

choice of the right destination for works of art, as J. Nienhuis demonstrated in 2005. This scion of a family of collectors bequeathed a number of important paintings and drawings to the Rembrandt Society, which then had to determine the most appropriate museum for each work. For example, the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht received a painting by Pieter Breughel the Younger. The Rijksprentenkabinet was taken by surprise with a splendid portrait by Nicolas Lagneau (fig. 5) that had been in the great exhibition of portraits in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 1907.

Collectors were the pioneers of the Rembrandt Society and now—125 years later—it is still collectors, united in ‘the Rembrandt’, who help to continue collecting art for the national collection and for us all.

Drawings were fastened to a mount so that while they were being handled it was not necessary to touch the drawing itself; most prints had margins by which they could be held, otherwise they, too, were stuck on a mount.

Purchased at the time when Altena was still working for his art dealer uncle Nicolaas Beets and in his years at university.



For more information:

Rembrandt Association

Lange Voorhout 15

2514 EA The Hague

T +31 70 427 17 20

E bureau@verenigingrembrandt.nl

I www.verenigingrembrandt.nl