

# *Re-drawing* Amsterdam's arts





For too long Amsterdam's most iconic artworks have been off-limits as renovations of their planned hanging spaces snowballed beyond intention. Now, with an opening date confirmed, **Jo Caird** investigates the buzz surrounding the reinvigorated Rijksmuseum

AMSTERDAM'S MOST FAMOUS museum has been closed for ten years. During this period the public's only access to the Rijksmuseum's outstanding collection of nearly one million artworks and objects has been via Rijksmuseum, The Masterpieces, an exhibition of highlights displayed in the museum's Philips Wing. Now, finally, after years of delays, the museum is due to reopen again on April 13, revealing the full glory of Dutch architect Pierre Cuypers's 1885 building and providing a fitting context for the 8,000 objects to be installed there.

### Built for art

The Rijksmuseum was founded in The Hague in 1800 as the Nationale Kunstgalerij (National Art Gallery), before being relocated to Amsterdam in 1808 when that city became the capital of the Kingdom of Holland. It wasn't until 1876, however, that work began on a building worthy of the collection, and a further nine years before the official opening of the grand neo-Renaissance and neo-Gothic structure that is recognised around the world today.

As the years passed, bringing increasing numbers of visitors (reaching over one million annually before the closure in 2003) and the steady expansion of the collection, adjustments were made to the building. From modern visitor facilities to atmospheric control systems, by the end of the 1990s, the building's original integrity had been seriously compromised, including the loss of many of Cuypers' elaborately decorated walls and ceilings. So in December 2003, following the appointment of Spanish architects Cruz y Ortiz, who opened an Amsterdam studio



Gallery of Honour (Credit: Jannes Linders)

in 2002, the Rijksmuseum closed for the first major renovation in its history.

When it reopens in April, visitors will find it's not just the building itself that has been transformed. Director-general Wim Pijbes, director of collections Taco Dibbits and their team have used the project as an opportunity to totally rethink the way the Rijksmuseum's collection is presented.

### Journey through history

The visitor is taken on a journey through 800 years of Dutch history, starting in the Middle Ages and continuing through to modern times. Paintings, drawings and photographs will be set in an international context alongside delftware, silver, porcelain, costumes, jewellery and curated period rooms. Works and objects from the Golden Age alone fill more than 30 galleries.

Gregor Weber, head of the museum's fine arts department, is excited about the new concept. "In former times we were like all the other museums in the world, separating

decorative art and paintings and the history. But now, we've mixed it. This is something new." The curator gives an example of a gallery focusing on the naval adventures of the Dutch in the 17th century. The room includes fine paintings of seascapes, model ships from the period, items associated with famous admirals of the era and the *pièce de résistance*, the stern of the HMS Royal Charles, an English ship captured in the Raid on the Medway during the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

This new approach has several advantages over the previous one. Not only are visitors given a lively introduction to Dutch history, they're helped in their understanding of the art itself. Weber explains that, while other European cultures have a strong legacy of religious art, Dutch art history has been informed by the nation's commercial, republican past: "Of course all the paintings have a cultural background. The history of the culture of the Netherlands is also the history of the economy."



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### Inspiring a generation

A further benefit of the rehang is the hoped-for impact it will have on younger visitors. "This kind of presentation is much more exciting for children than just seeing paintings next to each other... in every room you have something that a child can explore." The HMS Royal Charles, Weber believes, will be a particular delight.

Weber describes being impressed by the provision for youngsters at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum on a recent research visit to the UK. Part of the redesign at the Rijksmuseum is the creation of a multi-disciplinary education centre in the restored Teekenschool (Drawing School), a Cuypers building that opened in 1892. According to the marketing material, it will be "the most comprehensive museum education centre in the Netherlands". When it comes to arts education, the team at the Rijksmuseum have form: director-general Pim Wijbes has written two books for children on viewing art.

### Historic highlights

As part of the process that has been implemented to revolutionise the presentation of the collection, significant changes have been made to the way that both aspects from the 20th century and Asian art are to be displayed. Weber and his team were aware, he says, of the need to continue the historical narrative of the older works from the collection into the twenty-first century.

Rather than seek to 'tell the whole story' however, choices have been made as to which moments of the century's art historical development to highlight. "You can only point to some of the most exciting changes," the curator says. He describes how he and his team will be using carefully chosen items from their relatively limited 20th century collection: whether to show the development between art movements, such as the journey from Bauhaus to CoBrA; or to illustrate the influence of a non-art object like a First World War aeroplane on furniture design.

The museum's collection of Asian art, previously displayed alongside other works, now has a new home in the Asian Pavilion. This freestanding addition, designed by Cruz y Ortiz, is surrounded by water in a garden to the south of the Rijksmuseum. Many objects in the Asian collection have ties to the history of the Netherlands – the spoils of centuries of Dutch colonialism have exerted a strong influence on various aspects of Dutch culture – but a decision was taken that the collection is significant enough in its own right to warrant isolating it from the main museum building. There will be 365 objects on display, dating from between 2000 BC and 2000 AD and hailing from countries including India, China, Japan and Thailand. "It shall be a different kind of exhibition there," says Weber. "Very calm, very meditative."

Another innovation is the so-called 'outdoor museum', which sees 14,500sqm of historic

garden opened to the public for the first time. The space, which is based on a 1901 design by Cuypers, will be home to an annual programme of international sculpture exhibitions. The first in the series, a show of works by the great twentieth century British modernist Henry Moore, begins on June 21. Like the Asian Pavilion, this area will also enrich the museum, Weber believes, by offering visitors a "sort of holiday feeling" as they take time out from perusing the 80 internal galleries to explore the outdoor space.

### The Golden Age

When Cuypers – who is also known for the 1889 Amsterdam Centraal railway station – designed the Rijksmuseum, the Gallery of Honour was built specifically to hold the most treasured works in the collection including, of course, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. This 1642 painting is the only work that will be returned to its pre-renovation position when the museum reopens in April.

Weber acknowledges that while some visitors may spend many hours exploring the museum, others may have to content themselves with a shorter visit; for them, *The Night Watch*, along with a selection of the most famous paintings of the Dutch Golden Age by the likes of Frans Hals, Jan Steen and Johannes Vermeer, are essential viewing. Over the last decade, visitors have been able to see these works in the Rijksmuseum, *The Masterpieces*



Far left: Vincent Van Gogh, *Self Portrait*

Left: Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*

Right: Berckheyde, *De bocht van de Herengracht te Amsterdam*

(All images courtesy of Rijksmuseum)



exhibition. Now they are displayed in the far grander surroundings of the Gallery of Honour. For those with more time at their disposal, an 80-minute Highlights Tour also picks up where *The Masterpieces* left off.

### A bumpy ride

The reopening of the Rijksmuseum is certainly a cause for celebration in the Dutch capital, but the project has not exactly run smoothly. Renovations should have been completed by 2008, but problems relating to tenders for the work, the unlucky discovery of asbestos and disagreements over the reinstatement of the cycle path that runs through the middle of the building, caused delay after delay.

The costs have also ballooned, from around €200m at the start of the project, to a total cost of €375m. The museum refused this publication's request for a funding breakdown for the capital campaign, but funders have included the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; corporate sponsors Philips, ING, and Bankgiro Lottery; and a network of smaller corporate sponsors, foundations and private donors. Admission to the reopened Rijksmuseum will cost €15 for adults, but will be free for children and young people up to the age of 18.

The delay to the project was particularly unfortunate because of an overlap with another major multi-year museum refurbishment: that of the Stedelijk Museum, Holland's most important modern art collection. The

Netherlands Board of Tourism and Conventions estimates that of the three million or so foreign visitors Amsterdam receives each year, around 85 percent visit one or more of the city's museums during their stay. The fact that for a significant period the doors were locked on two of Amsterdam's most important cultural institutions cannot have been good for business.

The slow progress has alienated some residents too. Theatre director Teunkie Van Der Sluijs, who divides his time between London and Amsterdam, sums up the feelings of much of the populace when he says that, "after a decade of bounteous botching, Amsterdammers may have forgotten that the Rijksmuseum is more than just a giant red brick symbol of collective cluster-failure, and that it actually has some neat bits of art too".

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### A year to remember

That acknowledged, there is tangible excitement in the air about the reopening, as well as for various other special anniversaries taking place this year. This year marks 400 years of canals in Amsterdam, 175 years of the Artis Royal Zoo and 150 years since the abolition of slavery by the Netherlands. In addition, the last few years have seen the opening of Hermitage Amsterdam, a new outpost of the St. Petersburg institution, a refurbished Maritime Museum and a new waterfront home for the EYE Film Institute. Despite the setbacks to the Rijksmuseum project, it feels as if Amsterdam is in the midst of something very exciting.

The building work at the Rijksmuseum was completed in July 2012, meaning that the final nine months of this epic project have been devoted to the painstaking installation of the museum's displays. At the time of our interview, in late January, Weber and his team are about to begin on the seventeenth century galleries, having just finished putting the eighteenth-century works in place.

This would be a thrilling stage in the process for any curator, but it has even greater significance for Weber because he only joined the team in 2009; the Rijksmuseum has been closed for the entire duration of his role there. "It's like Christmas and birthday all at once to come back to these objects," he says. "You get them out of their packages and it feels like opening a huge pile of presents." □