



Hanna Klarenbeek, ***Penseelprinsessen & broodschilderessen. Vrouwen in de beeldende kunst 1808-1913*** (Dissertatie Utrecht 2012; Bussum: Thoth, 2012, 238 pp., ISBN 978 90 6868 588 6).

Women artists only became the subject of systematic international research since the 1970s. Art historians (originally mainly female and Anglo-Saxon) then started looking for forgotten female artists, while at the same time questioning the art-historical canon and exclusion mechanisms in the art world. Attention was primarily focused on American, British and French painters, and on the nineteenth century because of important institutional changes during that period. More ‘peripheral’ regions remained understudied for long. *Penseelprinsessen & broodschilderessen* [Paint brush princesses and professional women painters] is the first full in-depth study about nineteenth-century women artists in the Netherlands – this geographical focus, strangely, stays unmentioned in the title.

It concerns the published PhD thesis of Hanna Klarenbeek who, in the same four years – quite a feat, realized the double exhibition *Penseelprinsessen* (I and II), running in the spring and summer of 2012 in Apeldoorn and The Hague. Serving both as an academic text and as the accompanying publication to the exhibition, is difficult to pull off, but the author has managed to create a balanced and beautifully illustrated work, that does justice to the artists and their work. The text is clear and succinct – an achievement considering the extensive and largely unpublished sources that the author discovered. She could store, however, much of the factual material in the digital counterpart of this book. Biographical and bibliographical data of the 1107 female artists traced were entered into the on-line artists’ database (RKDartists&) of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History), and reproductions were included in the digital image database RKDimages. As such, Klarenbeek released much of her material for further research, which allowed her to focus, in the book, on the overview and the most remarkable artists, artworks and cases.

The underlying impressive research was mainly (art)historical in nature. The author focussed justly on the still rich nineteenth-century archival sources, ego documents, art criticism, etcetera. As such, the text not only reads as a faithful reconstruction of the facts, which were meticulously collected for the first time, but also as a lively evocation –

thanks to aptly chosen quotes – of the actual problems, opportunities, and working conditions of women artists in the nineteenth-century Netherlands.

The table of contents reflects this type of research and the questions leading up to it, which are clearly formulated in the introduction, presenting the *status quaestionis* and methodology. Primarily, attention is paid to the institutional and social context of the women artists. The two key chapters (2 and 3), treat all types of art education for women in the Netherlands, and their professional practice, concentrating mainly on their contribution to exhibitions, but also covering the discussion of professionalism versus dilettantism, membership of artists' societies and the art market. Both chapters focus on Amsterdam and The Hague, as those were the leading art cities at the time, and for obvious reasons of feasibility. Nevertheless, remarkable initiatives elsewhere are also included, such as the drawing society 'Vlijt en Oordeel' [diligence and judgement] in Deventer, which could boast two female 'active members' at its foundation in 1810, or the *Academie Minerva* in Groningen, where early on, girls were allowed to follow drawing classes, albeit separated from the boys.

The first chapter interestingly deals with the knowledge and image of 'old mistresses' in the Netherlands during the nineteenth century. Also the fourth chapter treats image creation and pays attention to the place nineteenth-century Dutch women artists were given in arts criticism at the time, the tone used and the gendered language. The findings here largely confirm what may be found in international literature. An appendix mentioning the professions of fathers and possible husbands, and the number of children of a reasoned, representative selection of 100 artists, matches the focuses mentioned and provides an insight into the social class of the women, and the exceptionally high number of them remaining single and/or without offspring. The following claim that those women 'who did not have to choose between art and children' (97) had a better chance of being a professional artist, seems somewhat strange: did not many of those women deliberately chose for art, and as such consciously not for a husband and/or child(ren)?

It is within the lines of that contextual story that the works of art are presented. A separate chapter on the artworks themselves, their iconography, style and technique might have been preferable, yet most of those aspects are touched upon in the text. For instance, the practiced disciplines and genres are mentioned under the heading 'Exhibitions of Living Masters in Amsterdam and The Hague'. The international finding that women artists were mostly active in (aquarelle) painting and drawing and in the so-called 'lesser' genres, is confirmed there. Nineteenth-century Dutch women artists excelled especially in (floral) still lives, genre works, and after 1850 also the landscape genre. The majority of the artworks traced only surfaced during this investigation, even when in royal and museum collections. This recovery quest is a major merit of this work, and an ideal starting point for further research.

The author aims to let the sources speak for themselves, and to restrict interpretation to a minimum. However, her distancing from gender studies in order to

‘approach the subject from a value-free angle’ (13), seems to be an impossible and questionable aim. The choice for this subject in itself implies the perspective of gender studies, and the research questions and treatment of the subject firmly place this research within gender studies too. One could also ask whether Klarenbeek can actually realise her goal to disprove the ‘existing view’, i.e. that the nineteenth-century art world was fairly unsympathetic to women; that they mainly practiced the *métier* as ‘amateurs’; that for a long time there were no training opportunities for them, etcetera.

Eventually her research confirms that Dutch women artists were mostly treated and reviewed differently than their male colleagues; that a great many bourgeois girls only attended drawing classes as *art d’agrément*; that women only began to be more or less substantially represented (about twenty per cent) at exhibitions from the 1880s onwards, even though they were accepted from the beginning; that they tended to practice the lesser genres; and that they gained access to equal education later than men. Telling in this respect is a quotation by Wally Moes, in which – as late as 1917 – she still mentions ‘the entirely unknown luxury for girls to be a student at the academy’ (34). Even if in The Hague women were allowed to draw from the nude model from 1881, as one of the first places in Europe, it was much later than men could. Klarenbeek’s remark that they were just ‘less interested’ in nude studies ignores the fact that such ‘interest’ was also manipulated by a society that frowned upon it, and that women actually missed opportunities for prizes and commissions because of this.

Nevertheless, the author is able to prove that a far greater number of female artists than hitherto assumed were professionally active in the Netherlands, creating work of great quality. Moreover, she succeeds in substantially updating the previously existing knowledge about those women artists and their working conditions, and can point out the similarities and differences with other countries. If only for that reason, this is an important publication, one which hopefully will have an impact both on future publications on nineteenth-century women artists, and on nineteenth-century art in the Netherlands. Indeed, the book is also worth reading for anyone with an interest in the nineteenth-century art world.

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