

Portrait of a Bird Painter

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Essay review of: Emile Havers e.a. (eds.), *Een koninklijk paradijs: Aert Schouman en de verbeelding van de natuur* (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2017) 360 pp., ill., ISBN 9789462581852, € 29,95; 'Een koninklijk paradijs: Aert Schouman en de verbeelding van de natuur' at Dordrechts Museum, 19 February–17 September 2017.

This year, Dordrechts Museum is celebrating its 175th jubilee with an extensive exhibition on one of the city's most illustrious artists: the painter Aert Schouman (1710–1792). Drawing on both national and international, public and private art collections, the museum has brought together an unprecedentedly rich ensemble of his material.¹ Schouman's versatile oeuvre encompasses portraits, panoramic landscapes and topographical drawings, although he is especially acclaimed for his bird paintings. This review discusses both the exhibition at Dordrechts Museum, which is entitled 'Een koninklijk paradijs: Aert Schouman en de verbeelding van de natuur' (A Royal Paradise: Aert Schouman and the Depiction of Nature), and the exhibition catalogue that has been published for this occasion.

As its title asserts, Schouman's paintings and aquarelles of flora and fauna are the focus of this exposition. This emphasis is what makes the exhibition of interest to historians of science, as over the last decades the field has seen a continuous effort to explore the interplay of 'art' and 'science' in the early modern period.² Many of the articles, chapters and edited volumes that have appeared during these years favor the idea that art and science were not antagonistic but both branches of knowledge and culture. Rather than departing from this anachronistic dichotomy, then, historians who venture into a study of the early modern period are aware that 'both activities inhabit the same, much wider territory of culture'.³

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1 Earlier, albeit smaller exhibitions of Schouman's work have been displayed in Dordrecht and Paris: Meile D. Haga, *La volière imaginaire: aquarelles d'oiseaux par Aert Schouman (1710–1792)* (Paris 1982); Laurens J. Bol, *Herdenkingstentoonstelling Aert Schouman 1710–1792* (Amsterdam 1961).

2 Eric Jorink and Bart Ramakers (eds.), *Art and Science in the Early Modern Netherlands. Art Historical Year Book* (Leiden 2011); Pamela Smith, 'Art, Science, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe', *Isis* 97 (2006) 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.1086/501102>.

3 Sachiko Kusakawa, review of Eric Jorink and Bart Ramakers, *Art and Science* (n. 2) in: *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128:3 (2013) 61. <http://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8597>.



Cover of the exhibition catalogue *Een koninklijk paradijs* (Royal Paradise) (Source: WBOOKS).

This interest in the juncture of art and science has resulted in engaging research into painters who depicted nature, such as Jan Brueghel the Elder, Adriaan Collaert, Joris Hoefnagel, Otto Marseus van Schrieck, Melchior d'Hondecoeter, Albert Eckhout, and Frans Post (and this is not an exhaustive list).⁴ These artists operated mainly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The eighteenth century, the period in which Schouman worked, is often wrongly considered as a period of artistic decline (p. 7). Schouman was inspired by earlier nature painters – especially by d'Hondecoeter, of whom he owned some four paintings – but developed a distinct style that accorded with the tastes of his time. He was also quite productive, as can be inferred from the hundreds of aquarelles that have come down to us today. Schouman has received relatively little attention from historians of science, who have focused only on parts of his work, for instance his role as drawer of the natural collection of stadtholder William V.⁵

The exhibition does much to show that Schouman was embedded in a broad group of connoisseurs and *amateurs* of nature, encompassing regents, physicians, apothecaries, merchants and artists like himself. Besides depicting nature, Schouman portrayed these collectors of nature, such as the sugar refiner and collector of art and shells Jan Snellen in Rotterdam⁶ or Arnold Marcel, a mathematician and maker of lenses. These portraits are included in the exhibition. Beneath Marcel's portrait his home-made lenses (on loan from the Boerhaave Museum in Leiden) are displayed. Another portrait depicts Johannes Eusebius Voet, a physician, poet and entomologist, holding a leaflet with illustrations of beetles: his main research interest. The frames hang shoulder to shoulder in an exhibition room that also includes a pop-up cabinet of curiosities; arranged around a wooden table with shells and some books, stands a desk with a microscope, an easel and a wooden cabinet with drawers. The mantelpiece is furnished with specimens preserved in spirits, or dried and stuffed – including the customary crocodile dangling from the ceiling.

Especially exotic specimens were coveted by collectors; this explains why Schouman, whose most adventurous travels appeared to be the commute between Dordrecht, Middelburg and The Hague, painted many birds and other animals that were not common stock in the Low Countries. In some cases, he was the first European to depict a particular species, like the noble parrot and the great jacamar (p. 260). Schouman did not need to spend all his time between stuffed specimens inside dusty cabinets: he also painted at estates, where living specimens flew and trawled about in aviaries and menageries. The largest such collection of exotic flora and fauna could be found at the illustrious menagerie of stadtholder William V, directed by Aarnout Vosmaer. Schouman made hundreds of studies of the specimens in the cabinet as well as of the living creatures in the menagerie. Many of these illustrations were published in short monographs by Vosmaer between 1766 in 1787, which were subsequently bound together in *Regnum animale* (Amsterdam 1804).

4 For example: Marrigje Rikken, 'Exotic Animal Paintings by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Roelant Savery', in: Paul J. Smith and Karl Enenkel (eds.), *Zoology in Early Modern Culture: Intersections of Science, Theology, Philology, and Political and Religious Education* (Leiden 2014); Marrigje Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter, Vogelschilder* (Amsterdam 2008).

5 Florence Pieters, 'Het schatrijke naturaliënkabinet van Stadhouder Willem V onder directoraat van topverzamelaar Arnout Vosmaer', in: Bert Sliggers (ed.), *Het verdwenen museum: Natuurhistorische verzamelingen 1750–1850* (Blaricum 2002) 19–45.

6 This portrait is discussed in R.J.A. te Rijdt, 'Een "nieuw" portret van een "nieuwe" verzamelaar van kunst en naturaliën: Jan Snellen geportretteerd door Aert Schouman in 1746', *Oud Holland* 111 (1997) 22–53. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187501796X00321>.

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The artist thus painted dead specimens from collectors' cabinets, as well as living ones that dwelled outside on estates in menageries. He also ingeniously brought these outside creatures inside the home, linking the exterior of an estate with its interior. In 1786, stadtholder William V commissioned Schouman to create painted wall hangings with 'all kinds and sorts of birds' for one of the reception rooms (named 'bird cabinet') in his *Stadhouders-lijk Kwartier* in The Hague. Together, these wall-filling hangings formed a 'kamer in 't ront' (literally translated, 'room in the round'). This decorative fashion gave the spectators the idea that they were enveloped by nature. The royal menagerie's whole set of inhabitants was portrayed on seven wall hangings. For this *chef-d'oeuvre*, Schouman could draw on the plethora of studies, sketches, aquarelles and paintings he had made of the birds and other animals. The resulting wallpaper, which belongs to the private palace Huis ten Bosch, is the crownpiece of this exhibition. This unique opportunity for display is due to the restoration procedure that the palace is undergoing for the duration of this exhibition. Afterwards, the wallpaper will once again return to this secluded home. The history of this wallpaper, from its creation to its later whereabouts, is described in chapter IV of the catalogue.

Whether depicting flora or fauna from far or nearby, from a stuffed specimen or a living creature, outside or inside, Schouman's painting is conspicuous and precise. Both the exhibition and the catalogue offer insight into some of his working practices. For example, Schouman generated his color palette by mixing his own paints, which were praised for their liveliness and naturalness as well as their durability. He also had a special technique for applying paint, which was of special use to depict the feathers in airy manner, and gave his paintings a sense of lightness. Some of his drawings contain notes on the backside of the paper, indicating that he observed the animal's behavior while painting. Lastly, the catalogue mentions that he himself probably had a specimen collection, and gave instructions to taxidermists to preserve birds in the way most suitable for a lively representation (p. 250). Combining these techniques, Schouman depicted nature in a vivid manner, a quality for which he was often praised by his contemporaries and is still admired today.

The curators of the exhibition have added a nice touch with the inclusion of several stuffed specimens, on loan from the Natuurhistorisch Museum in Rotterdam and Rijksmuseum Twenthe in Enschede. The specimens are placed alongside their counterparts on canvas so that the visitor can compare, among others, a stuffed Chinese pheasant, a silver pheasant or a hooded crow to their drawn representations. This strategy has been used on other occasions, like the exhibition 'Frans Post. Animals in Brazil' on display at the Rijksmuseum in 2016. In this exposition, newly discovered drawings of Brazilian animals ascribed to Post were presented alongside their counterparts in landscape paintings as well as stuffed specimens.⁷ Besides making the exhibition more dynamic, this juxtaposition invites reflection on the relationship between images (in sketched, painted or watercolor form) and mounted objects. What is lost in the pictorial translation from object to image, and what is gained? How do each of these representations – both mediated by human hands – convey some kind of 'naturalness'? In the case of Aert Schouman, who, as has been mentioned, often drew and painted from stuffed specimens, one could think about how he transformed these dead objects into vivid birds in his paintings.

Even though the exhibition largely focusses on Schouman's depictions of nature, the catalogue does not mirror this preoccupation; of the fourteen chapters, only chapter IV and X specifically cover this genre. Chapter I and II contain the artist's biography and a

⁷ Alexander de Bruin, *Frans Post. Animals in Brazil* (Amsterdam 2016) 63.

chronologic overview. These are followed by a chapter which discusses his decorative paintings and relates these to the fashions of the time. Other chapters detail his genre paintings (V), portraits (VI), drawings (VII), topographical etches (VIII and IX), copies of old masters (XI), prints and book illustrations (XII), engravings on glass (XIII), and the decoration of objects (XIV). Together, these chapters give a coherent, detailed overview of Schouman's rich artistic production while also offering a glimpse of the aesthetic tastes in the cultural context in which he worked. Schouman's oeuvre is discussed in great detail and is printed with beautiful, high-quality reproductions. Each piece of art displayed in the exhibition is included in the catalogue and grouped together according to the type of work (for example wallpaper, painting). Given the considerable length of the catalogue, an index would have been a handy feature.

The tenth chapter, written by Paul Knolle and Ruud Vlek, is dedicated to the nature paintings that form the leading narrative of the exhibition and studies Schouman's paintings from a natural historical perspective. In a monograph on the painter written some decades ago, Laurens Bol outlined that 'a complete catalogue of Aert Schouman's oeuvre, and the scientific naming of his many animal depictions' was still missing.⁸ This chapter fills this lacuna. The authors have identified the species on paintings and aquarelles (among them circa 340 bird species), have listed in what collection Schouman may have seen the specimens (they discern some 20 collections), and have recorded whether the species had been described or depicted before. In addition to this, the chapter cites some interesting testimonies which give new insights into some of Schouman's practices, for example how he himself owned stuffed birds and was preoccupied with mounting practices. It also sheds light on the diverse crowd of collectors he frequented, and the collectors who visited him to purchase some of his drawings – like the Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant. This thorough research into the source material concerning Schouman is a commendable feat.

It is on the conceptual level, however, that the chapter falls a bit flat. The authors use certain terms without qualifying them, like when they speak of a 'bio-historical framework'.⁹ Some of the terms employed are fairly anachronistic, like 'analytical-biological', 'biodiversity' or 'microbiology'. This further widens the perceived gap between art and science. The authors, furthermore, submit that Schouman was 'an artistic scientific drawer, or a scientifically inspired artist' (p. 269) without exploring what these connotations meant at the time. One could wonder if, rather than posing a contrast, it is perhaps more helpful to look at the myriad of functions that Schouman's images fulfilled, and study the terms in which people expressed their appreciation of them. The many instances of contemporaries praising the images' 'liveliness', for example, might be teased out some more, and related to recent literature on *ad vivum* – which remains a concept in need of further unpacking.

Altogether, the curatorial team at Dordrechts Museum has succeeded in creating a visually appealing exhibition that speaks to a broad audience that is interested in fine arts as well as nature's colorful creations. The pop-up cabinet of curiosities, the pettable bird specimens, and the replicated country estate garden (including some elegant cast iron benches) make for an energetic museum experience. Likewise, the extensive catalogue has been put together well and discusses the wide spectrum of arts in which Schouman was skilled. The

8 Laurens J. Bol, *Aert Schouman: Ingenious Painter and Draughtsman* (Ghent 1991) 84.

9 The term 'biohistorie' was introduced by Verdoorn, but has not become current. Bert Theunissen, 'Frans Verdoorn (1906–1984) – Biohistorie', *Studium* 6 (2013) 293–295, <http://doi.org/10.18352/studium.9294>.

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chapter that goes into more depth regarding Schouman's place in natural history contains a precise study of his paintings of flora and fauna, although the authors' terminology enforces the gap that those well versed in the history of the early modern period have sought to disavow over the last decades. The portrait of Schouman painted by the catalogue and the exhibition is nonetheless compelling. The rich variety of material pertains to topical questions regarding cultures of collecting and visualization practices in the eighteenth century, and as such deserves a closer look by historians of science.