This book accompanies
Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age
Unity in Diversity

Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age. Paintings of the Gallery of Honour will make you wonder and see why these old masters are still significant today. Shown from different and unusual perspectives both in image and words the paintings come to life. You can be eye to eye with the Night Watch, you can read what food on a plate and in a painting have in common and you can admire all the artworks up close. Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age is more than a book; it's an art project in itself. It shows that the past is still relevant today. Marcel Wanders explains how this book came into being:

‘When I stroll through Amsterdam, pause at a canal and take in the view, I’m often overwhelmed by the beauty and vibrant energy of the city. In the Rijksmuseum’s Gallery of Honour this emotion manifests itself even more strongly. I connect to the painters in the Gallery of Honour on an altogether different level. Through them, I feel the drive to create. I feel the struggle and the dedication of fellow creative people. Visiting the gallery is like visiting family, it is an emotionally intense experience that I’d very much like to share.’

Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age is a labour of love. Awe, gratitude and the enthusiastic drive to pass on the beauty of the Gallery of Honour, formed the motivations for designer Marcel Wanders to undertake this book project. The time for it seems right after the museum reopened its doors in 2013 following a ten-year renovation. His first visit reiterated his appreciation for the paintings, though Wanders does not necessarily have favourites in the focal point of the Rijksmuseum: ‘I love Rembrandt for the majestic quality of his work. But to me, Vermeer represents a wild serenity that makes me long for far more than the few paintings he has made. The interiors he painted look like they could be in use today and are absolutely magical. The way he plays with light, the same light you can still see in Dutch homes, creates a great sense of space and texture. Rembrandt’s use of light is different, his paintings heralded impressionism. Without the language to define it, he had already discovered its essence.’

With a professed love for both Rembrandt and Vermeer, Wanders places himself outside the dichotomy often acutely felt by art historians who pledge allegiance to either Rembrandt’s deeply felt emotion or Vermeer’s technical perfection. ‘I’m no fundamentalist’, he states.

‘Today’s design world is fundamentalist’, Wanders continues. ‘And the dominant ideology is modernism. One of the most important dogmas of modernism is that the past is irrelevant to the future. Only the new, the rational and the functional are recognised and celebrated. However, this

‘If modernism considers the past irrelevant, what does that mean tomorrow for the things we create today?’
creates a disposable culture. Nothing ages as quickly as the new. If modernism considers the past irrelevant, what does that mean tomorrow for the things we create today?'

'The idea that man is much more than just a rational being took root in art, theatre and dance again. But not in design. Making the history of design start from the Industrial Revolution creates the illusion that design does not need to relate to anything before modernism. And that's truly sad. It negates the past, it treats everything old as negative. Visually this leads to minimalism. Although, I must say that things seem to be changing, slowly. The new Fondazione Prada in Milan conceived by Rem Koolhaas is positively classicist – it's like walking through a De Chirico painting. That wouldn't have been possible twenty years ago.'

Wanders respects history, acknowledges the giants on whose shoulders he stands and celebrates the past by dipping into a myriad of styles. His self-styled brand of eclecticism has earned him the nickname 'the Lady Gaga of the design world'. 'But what to combine and to what extent always depends on what I'm designing', he says. 'The interior of a hotel in Doha, a very specific place with a specific context, is very different from a mass produced chair intended for use all around the world. The great thing about creating books is that your scope can be as broad as you like. For Amsterdam Creative Capital, in which I tried to unravel Amsterdam's creative history, I didn't limit myself to design. The book also dealt with art, philosophy, politics, financial innovations and even football. Creativity includes more than making products.'

That same polyphonic framework underlies Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age. A variety of voices wafts off almost every single page: the old master paintings of course, but also quotes and accompanying works of art from a wide range of professionals, set in different styles of calligraphy. 'Objects only have meaning in relation to their surroundings', is Wanders' belief. 'And the same is true of artworks. By non-hierarchically combining the old masters with other entities I'm trying to add a different perspective to the works. We do not use a stylistically rigid and coherent system; instead every page offers a surprise and can be seen as a separate work. So we find diversity in unity and unity in diversity.'

'I'm trying to redefine or at least twist, the design industry's logic', says Wanders. 'That's why every painting is placed against a different textured wall and we opted for calligraphy instead of an industrial typeface. Does a bland and anonymous, machine-produced font say more in terms of respect towards the painting it's next to than individually-made hand-written letters? And as a designer, why would one stop at choosing one particular font and stick to it? I often get the feeling it's laziness disguised as functionality.'

Both the Rijksmuseum's Gallery of Honour and this book are pedestals for the old masters. The latter facilitates the perception of these paintings and does so in a specific way: it leads the eye. One of the most fundamental choices made was that next to showing the full image we included 100% life-size details from works and exact scaled reproductions, that enable a physical relationship between viewer and work.

'I realise that projecting things through many different lenses may not present every single aspect in the best way. But that would definitely have been the case if I'd limited myself to a single lens. More importantly, though, in this setting the Gallery of Honour is alive connecting directly with our eyes and hearts.'
Star Power and Soul-searching at the National Hall of Fame

After completion in 1885, the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam was the largest building in the Netherlands. ‘What other nation would construct a museum as its biggest, most prominent building?’ Rijksmuseum director Wim Pijbes asks rhetorically. ‘At the time, Dutch nationalism was at its peak and Pierre Cuypers’ architecture reflects this. The museum is a cathedral dedicated to national pride and identity. The Gallery of Honour comprises the nave and on its high altar hangs the ultimate national icon: Rembrandt’s the Night Watch.

The Rijksmuseum collection consists of an astounding 1.1 million items. They move in and out of storage, get transferred to other rooms or go on loan. Only one work has always occupied the same spot and will never move: the Night Watch. In fact, it dictates the entire museum’s layout. ‘I know of no other museum in the world of which the architecture is as extremely determined by a single work as the Rijksmuseum’, says Pijbes. ‘The Night Watch can only hang where it is and nowhere else. The entire Gallery of Honour was built around it; it’s like a symphony moving to a crescendo. When you enter the, almost processional, gallery you can see your final destination in the distance. The Night Watch catches the eye from every room, it’s inescapable. Fortunately our national icon is large, especially in comparison to, for example, the Mona Lisa. Even with ten other people in front of it, you can still easily take it in.’

Although the Night Watch is the unequivocal highlight of the Gallery of Honour, Pijbes insists that the sixty-something works surrounding it are of the same calibre. ‘They represent the very best in Dutch painting from the latter’s heyday. The Gallery of Honour is a national hall of fame. As such it’s the museum’s focal point, but also the epicentre of the museum landscape in general. It has a sacrosanct aura about it. This is the place to receive and entertain important international dignitaries such as President Obama or Queen Beatrix who had her farewell dinner here after her abdication.’

‘I believe the power of these works goes beyond their presentation. They have an inherent quality that catches your eye and pulls you in. They have star power.’

Its grandiose architecture stresses the gallery’s status as national hallowed ground. Cuypers’ original decorations were restored during the large-scale reconstruction that took place between 2003 and 2013. These include the coats of arms of all the Dutch provinces with the exception of Flevoland, which had not yet been reclaimed at the time, and the cartouches bear the names of 17th-century painters, the famous sons of a proud nation. But the paintings best
it’s ‘a bit too passive’, rendering the Gallery of Honour little more than a collection of aesthetic highlights. ‘Beauty in itself is rather meaningless’, he thinks. ‘That’s also why we try to reactivate the gallery by introducing works by contemporary artists such as Auerbach and Kiefer for example. They establish a dialogue with the past and make the old masters meaningful to modern audiences.’

In that same spirit of updating the classics, Pijbes invited British philosopher Alain de Botton to compose captions approaching the works from a psychological, emotional angle rather than an art-historical one. He also had Irma Boom design new wallpaper for his office based on paintings from the Gallery of Honour. Boom abstracted them, presenting their colour schemes in vertical swaths. ‘Here’s Vermeer’s *The Milkmaid*’, says Pijbes pointing to a section of the wall dominated by lemony yellow and intense blue. ‘And over there, represented by those warm reds, is Rembrandt’s *The Jewish Bride*.’

Pijbes is not the first to put a spin on the Gallery of Honour. Over the decades the interior has undergone quite dramatic changes, from being fitted with draperies to having its walls whitewashed. Even now, after careful reconstruction, it’s not exactly the same as Cuypers conceived it – the original mosaic floor has been replaced by parquet. ‘The Gallery of Honour is not a static phenomenon’, Pijbes admits. ‘And that is also true of its contents as the selection of works changes constantly. Sometimes due to recent acquisitions, such as the superb Hobbema that was donated to the museum by Willem Baron van Dedem or because a work is on loan to a foreign museum. Though the Gallery of Honour included works by foreign painters up until the 1960s, it has now become an exclusively Dutch affair. Still, I could imagine adding works from the Italian and Spanish baroque – if they are of comparable quality.’
What is and isn’t part of the painterly canon and thus worthy of a spot in the Gallery of Honour, is a matter of opinion according to Pijbes. Choices are made by curators and directors who are informed by the tastes and preferences of their era. ‘Someone like Coorte, who has been rediscovered over the past twenty years, could be in the gallery in five to ten-year’s time. The same is true of De Jardin or Van Everdingen, who was deemed un-Dutch in the 1980s because of his classicist style.’

‘A certain degree of arbitrariness is inherent to the Gallery of Honour. If we were to base the selection on the sales of postcards for example, the result would be very different. *Children of the Sea* by Jozef Israëls – our fifth bestselling postcard – would then be awarded a prime location.’

All paintings in the Gallery of Honour have one thing in common, Pijbes says, and that’s their iconic status. ‘In part resulting from being included in the Gallery of Honour in the first place. It’s a self-fuelling system comparable to supermarkets: the most popular item is presented at eye level, on the best shelf, which makes it even more popular. But I believe the power of these works goes beyond their presentation. They have an inherent quality that catches your eye and pulls you in. They have star power.’
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Interviews

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When I look at this painting in the morning light, I dream. I lose myself in it. I lose track of time. Thoughts spring up of ‘then’ and ‘now’. In the ‘now’ mode, I feel a confluence in it, a merging of my work and my family. They seem inseparable from it. Of course, I am a sucker for gorgeous images. I have spent my life helping to create them. With every photographer I work with, I see their singular obsession to get it exactly the way they want it. The struggle with their individual vision. This is something that we, on the periphery, can never pretend to know for them.

I am fascinated by this and translate it to Vermeer – in the extreme. Vermeer epitomises perfection. And I know how maddening it is to seek perfection. I don't think Vermeer experienced the joy of accidental perfection. The details of this painting are so refined and coherent, they create a world that is almost superhuman to me.

Yet Vermeer was not flashy. He showed restraint. There is a modesty and simplicity in his subtle use of colour and scale. And there is an air of mystery. The scenes he depicted were possibly decisive domestic moments in time. But he leaves us guessing. I look at the subject, the woman in that lapis lazuli blue jacket, her skin pale grey, and wonder what drove him to
choose this subject. What sparked him? It’s a private intimate moment. Was she pregnant? Was it his wife? He did have eleven children after all. Is it a love letter? Her expression is ambiguous and Vermeer doesn’t tell. He doesn’t have to.

The dedication to create such a moving and immaculate image intrigues me. Working day after day, unsure when the moment of perfection will be reached; when will it be done? Today we also do this, but in high-speed mode. We make images on a conveyor belt. Yet we apply to each project a dose of creative anxiety to get it right. Then we let it go and move on to the next. Vermeer took a long time over each work. The extended creative process that he endured is hard to imagine for us today. The will to not lose faith on the way. To steadily zoom in towards finality and then to decide it has been reached, and to let it go. Baffling!

And all this is going on while family life and the day and night realities of everyday living interrupt. Remember Vermeer and his wife ran an inn in Delft and had eleven children. His wife gave birth to fifteen. It feels painful to me just to think about it. It takes courage and confidence in your art and craft, especially when you have many mouths to feed. When I gaze at the woman reading the letter, I see my wife Marianne in Holland reading the letter I sent to her in the late ‘60s from New York to take my call at noon the following Saturday from a phone booth in the Chelsea Hotel where I asked her to marry me. In the painting, the map on the wall hints that the writer of the letter is most likely a traveller far away. The serenity of her pose does not lie. Something important is happening.

I’ve been based in New York for many years but as a certified Dutchophile, I’m filled with pride that great painters like Vermeer had the guts to start a new genre. They created art rooted in realism. Vermeer captured moments in everyday life. He was not about elevating status or religious idealism.
I identify with this. When I went out into the world I took a similar stand to root my hairwork in its natural form. I guess that’s what the expression ‘tone Dutch’ is all about.

Christiaan Houtenbos (Bovenkarspel, the Netherlands, 1945) is the most influential cutting-edge hairdresser in today’s fashion world. From his home base in New York City he flies weekly to the world’s fashion capitals where he styles the stars for photo and film sessions. Since he arrived on the scene he has styled hundreds of Vogue covers and has been involved at the inception of pop culture’s image moves from Daria Werbowy’s swingy bob and Freja Beha Erichsen’s bangs to Grace Jones’ flat top, Nancy Kissinger’s feathery layers, Debbie Harry’s choppy top, Mick Jagger’s mop and Iggy Pop. Christiaan was born Piet Houtenbos, the oldest of twelve children in the North Holland village of Bovenkarspel. He helped his father who was the barber there until Christiaan was called to duty for the Dutch marines for a two-year stint in Aruba. At the end of those two years, by an infamous fluke of faith, he was invited by Glamour magazine to New York and was ushered to the city’s best salons. His talent with blow-drier and brush attracted Bergdorf Goodman’s society clientele who flocked to him for the freer, loser looks he favoured over the era’s stiff styles. He changed his name to Christiaan to avoid confusion with Bergdorf Goodman’s Mr. Peter. Christiaan’s daring approach and freewheeling technique attracted Vogue and Harpers Bazaar and he found himself at the heart of a group of editors and photographers like Arthur Elgort with whom he worked intensively.

Free haircuts have become a Christiaan signature and in collaboration with Interview magazine and Vogue, he holds occasional free haircut sessions in New York’s Central Park which has become a legendary cult fashion event. The idea was inspired, in the early computer days, by his young son’s hair which he trimmed in a pixelated-style pattern he called ‘the digithead’. Christiaan changes his own hair all the time. Hair, he says, is the flag of the soul. But his passions extend to ceramics, architecture and poetry and he carries a camera with him every day. Christiaan and his wife Marianne have two children, Piet and Henk. Working around the world on assignments for top magazines and fashion houses, Christiaan still makes time to hop off at Schiphol and visit his 97-year-old mother in Bovenkarspel where he cuts her hair using his father’s scissors.
Path of Life

That sandy road is the kind of place I would love to be. In my life I have walked a lot in places like that. Places that have both distance and direction. Look at the flow of the track winding up to the treetops and the sky. A lot of the 17th-century landscapes I have seen were more like still life landscapes. But I was pulled like a magnet into the flow of this Van Ruisdael.

The Zen-like minimal space appeals to me. The idea of having clear space with the freedom to range and reflect. The relaxing feeling I get from this painting relates to that. On that sandy road I would follow my spontaneous hunches. Before I came to live in Amsterdam last year – yes, that was a spontaneous hunch too, I thought that Van Ruisdael clouds couldn’t possibly look like that. But they actually do. I marvel now at the sky from my rooftop in Amsterdam, particularly in the winter. The expansive Dutch sky is a painter’s sky. Van Ruisdael showed that. His skies are so essentially Dutch. He brings that watery Dutch light to life. A sky that humbles us. Puts us in perspective.

But I have to admit that there is a part of me that doesn’t really know why I am attracted to Sandy Track in the Dunes. It moves me certainly. It captures me. Makes me think. I can put
I've had very many jobs and hobbies in my life. But I moved on to study lives of philosophers, forms of meditation and the martial arts. Martial arts help you navigate threats that can come your way in life. And they surely do. I learned how to access energy. I studied cognitive psychology and found that there are unseen things you can't gain control of. But you can learn to manage things – not by being smarter – but by managing your thinking process. In some ways, it is more mechanical than spiritual.

Getting Things Done, which is the title of one of my books, is really about engaging with yourself. Appropriate engagement.

In my books I refer to the strategic value of having clarity. I think you are most productive when you have the freedom to make a mess. When you are in a mess, you don't have the freedom to make a mess. So it's about keeping your life concepts on it. I was into bonsai for three or four years and there is something essentially bonsai-like in Van Ruisdael's trees. The proportions, the simplicity. It's a small painting but with amazing detail. When you look at the way the details are painted, I feel it could be hanging in the Impressionists' gallery.

I planted my garden in California with Japanese maples, which I sculpted myself. There was nothing more fulfilling than pruning my trees, creating natural shapes in nature. Time truly dissolved when I did that. I was amazed to learn that 17th-century Golden Age landscape artists like Van Ruisdael did not in fact paint outside. Portable paint tubes were not developed until the 1800s. Van Ruisdael had to make sketches and paint his landscapes in the studio later. It's hard to believe as this painting feels as if it was done in the mood of the moment.

And I love the elegance of the ordinary, which is so stunning here. I majored in history in the United States but did not know so much about the Golden Age of art in Holland, a time when the individual had precedence over the church and the monarchy.

Sandy Track in the Dunes is a stunning artwork. It has poetry, balance and a simple aesthetic. But I do feel it is not helped by the ornate frame that detracts from the simple beauty of the painting in my opinion.

What also drew me into this painting I guess is the underlying feeling that life itself is a journey. I recall a very intense time in my life when I was in my twenties and at that difficult time I actually drew a picture a bit like this. I was on a winding highway, the sun was setting, my thumb was out and I was hitch-hiking through life. That's how I felt. Walking around the Rijksmuseum, I couldn't see any other paintings there that had that kind of directionality for me. This one did.

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A Moment

A moment is coming toward you

When all things of this world

Shall reveal themselves

As but shimmering shadows

On a mighty rolling ocean of ecstasy,

As echoes of a divine symphony,

Pulsing, streaming forth into eternity,

…and your Being will dance the heartbeat of God.

David Allen
That’s what overwhelms people. There are ways to deal with that.

Looking at that painting again, I see that sandy path as a metaphor for life. There is beauty in the movement of the clouds. The dead tree. The dark areas. The light. The ripple in the pool of water. The dog on the road. The people. It’s all very soothing to the psyche. I’d so love to go there. In essence, it is all about exploring the relationship between the inner life and outer life. Of course a lot of people who tap into the inner spiritual world want to leave the outside world behind and become a monk. Not me, I like to enjoy life too much and look for a balance. And the freedom to explore. I’ll be walking in the Dutch dunes very soon.

David Allen (Jonesboro, Louisiana, USA, 1945) is an American author, consultant and lecturer widely recognised as one of the world’s leading authorities on personal and organisational productivity. Allen’s three decades of pioneering research, coaching and education of leading professionals, corporations and institutions has earned him Forbes’ recognition as one of the top five executive coaches in the United States, and as one of the ‘Top 100 thought leaders’ by Leadership Magazine. His groundbreaking methodologies in management and his power of aligned focus and vision were reasons Fast Company hailed him as ‘One of the world’s most influential thinkers’. Time Magazine labelled Allen’s best-selling book Getting Things Done as ‘the defining self-help business book of the decade’. It is now published in 28 languages. His original philosophy has spawned a wide range of followers from many walks of life beyond business. He is a multi-talented person who has worked in over thirty professions in 35 years. Allen moved from California to Amsterdam with his wife in 2014.
Jop Ubbens talks about

*Portrait of a Couple, Probably Isaac Abrahamszoon Massa and Beatrix van der Laen*

c. 1622 | oil on canvas | 140 x 166.5 cm.

by Frans Hals
(c. 1582 Antwerp – 1666 Haarlem)

A 17th-century Version of Sex, Drugs & Rock ‘n’ Roll

As an intern at Christie’s Jop Ubbens was taken to a viewing to inspect a specific work of art. On the way back his manager asked for his opinion on the piece, which Ubbens provided. He was then asked what he thought of the rest of the art on display. Ubbens had to admit he’d only paid attention to the work they’d come to see – his boss did not have to labour the point and the lesson struck home. Since then Ubbens has adopted a 360 degree viewing method: upon entering a room he walks to the centre, scans all the works on the walls and then zooms in on the ones that take his fancy.

In the Rijksmuseum’s Gallery of Honour, it’s not the Rembrandts or Vermeers that exert a magnetic attraction on Ubbens, but the works by Frans Hals. His fascination with the old master from Haarlem started while he studied art history. ‘It has to do with his personality and lifestyle’, says the chairman of Christie’s Amsterdam. ‘Frans Hals is sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll in a 17th-century guise. He drank a lot, slept around and fathered fifteen children. He led a life of debauchery, yet – in the meantime – managed to produce some wonderful paintings. They never fail to touch me with their bravado and upbeat sense of enjoyment.’
‘It seems as if Hals was always in a hurry, smearing paint directly onto the canvas as if he were painting a wall, with broad strokes. There’s boldness to his work that is comparable to the Neue Wilde from the 1980s. Maybe it has something to do with his Flemish Catholic roots, but his work really has swing. He was an innovative rebel and artists in later centuries recognised this. The impressionists in particular took after him, especially Manet.’

According to Ubbens, Portrait of a Couple, Probably Isaac Abrahamszoon Massa and Beatrix van der Laen displays the master’s signature at its best. ‘Despite the loose style it’s also very elegant. It’s evidence of how good a painter Hals was. The textural expression of the man’s clothing and his almost transparent collar are magnificent.’

Hals’ style was revolutionary at the time, but the way he portrayed his subjects, the newlyweds Massa and Van der Laen, was also out of the ordinary. 17th-century wedding portraits were serious affairs with unsmiling couples posing stiffly. These two, who were close friends of Hals, look relaxed and show affection. At the time it must have come across as shameless, even frivolous. ‘You can see they’re having a lot of fun together – the way the woman casually puts her hand on her husband’s shoulder, the big smiles, the blushing. This man is very content with himself and his beautiful new wife, and he is not afraid to show it. The unconcealed pride is almost American. Massa was an influential man in his time. He was a diplomat and merchant who had travelled to Russia half a dozen times – he can be considered Holland’s first expert on that country. To boot he had scooped up the mayor’s daughter; I guess the erotic appeal of power worked its magic. To his left, an eringium thistle has been depicted. This plant was known in Dutch as “mannentrouw” or male fidelity. It’s a fitting symbol in this depiction of love and devotion, but a sensual man of the world like Massa being chaste – I don’t buy it at all.’

Although Hals’ paintings are present in museums around the world and often considered the jewels in the crown of the respective collections, Ubbens feels he is the most underrated of all the old masters. ‘Why is there no equivalent of the Rembrandt Research Project for Frans Hals?’, he wonders. ‘There is no institute or group of experts that systematically studies Hals’ oeuvre. The fact that his works are rarely on the market probably has something to do with this. I recently had the privilege of holding a small portrait that was up for auction at our London branch, but that’s a very rare occurrence. Large works like this one are all securely ensconced in private and public collections. I can’t imagine estimating the price if one of this nature were to be auctioned, the price would probably skyrocket.’

‘I would love to see a large-scale overview of Hals’ work – there have been none so far. The Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem or the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam would be the right venue; both museums own key pieces. The Merry Drinker should be included, but probably also his later portraits of strict regents. They are not his best work – Hals became sloppy towards the end of his career – but they are interesting from an art historical point of view. Portrait of a Couple, Probably Isaac Abrahamszoon Massa and Beatrix van der Laen should be granted a separate room. It’s a stand-alone masterpiece.’
Jop Ubbens (De Bilt, the Netherlands, 1959) studied Dutch and art history at the University of Utrecht, where he specialised in Mannerism. He was briefly employed by the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem and the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam before joining Christie’s Amsterdam in 1987. In 2001 he became the latter’s chairman and general manager. Between 1994 and 2000 he set up the market for Eastern Asian paintings in Singapore and Hong Kong. Ubbens is a certified appraiser of 17th- to 20th-century paintings and an auctioneer. He is also member of the board of the Frans Hals Museum.
Erwin Olaf talks about

*Interior of the Sint-Odulphuskerk in Assendelft*

1649 / oil on panel / 49.6 x 75 cm.

by Pieter Janszoon Saenredam
(1597 Assendelft – 1665 Haarlem)

...
religious atmosphere, but without the statues of Jesus and Mother Mary. One can imagine daily life having been like this.'

Olaf was introduced to Saenredam’s work by his first partner, who came from a strict Protestant background. Personally he was more into the exuberance of baroque masters like Rubens or contemporaries like Robert Mapplethorpe and Helmut Newton. ‘A child of my time’ is what Olaf likes to label his younger self. ‘As a teenager I really liked soul music. This was followed by glam rock: David Bowie, Gary Glitter and that crowd. Punk and the squatter scene had that same sense of theatrics – the outrageous clothing, the props, the drama. And it all ended with the ‘90s rave-scene of the iT and Roxy nightclubs which stood for hedonism at its most extreme.’

Olaf’s work from that era reflects the lifestyle he had at the time and the issues fuelling his prolific output: race, sexual preference, belief, social class, perceptions of beauty and grace. His photographs had an in-your-face quality and were packed with detail. Voluptuous naked women in bondage, evil midgets, middle-aged fashion victims in skimpy club gear and toddlers in full-body latex inhabited his universe. The more outspoken works, like his depiction of Lady Di as a fairy-tale princess with a bloody Mercedes star lodged in her upper arm, kicked up quite a storm. But since the Sepération series from 2002/2003, his style has undergone a profound transformation. Solitary figures now pose in sets reminiscent of Hollywood movies from the fifties; the atmosphere is more brooding than explosive.

‘As I grew older I started developing a quieter sense of emotion’, Olaf observes. ‘Instead of cramming pictures full of ideas, I started leaving things out. And my eyes have adapted to recognizing multiple layers in relatively simple scenes. This has resulted in a new kind of clarity in both my photographs and videos.’

Studying old masters has helped him to reinvent himself. ‘The way Rembrandt, for example, portrayed his son Titus, with that wonderful backlight, is an everlasting source of inspiration. He says so much with so little information. Trying to arrive at a new, uniquely personal mode of expression in my portraits, I study those old paintings. It’s amazing to see how subjects are framed, leaving a lot of open space overhead and how hands and details of clothing are deployed to tell us about the model’s social status and occupation.’

Saenredam is even further removed from Olaf’s practice because of his subject matter. ‘That’s why I think his work is even more interesting’, he says. ‘I feed on it artistically and intellectually, it challenges me. When, for example, I focus on the light falling onto those pillars in the church, I recognize a “ton-sur-ton” theme, which is also present in my work. It’s a little story in colour and I could use it as a background for one of my portraits.’

Personality-wise, Saenredam and Olaf couldn’t be more different. ‘I read once that Saenredam was a painfully shy man, a real loner’, the extravert photographer reminisces. ‘That probably explains why he chose to depict architecture. You don’t have to communicate with a model if you paint church interiors, you can quite easily keep your distance from people and work in solitude.’

‘But I do recognize something of myself in his methods. He was always manipulating reality ever so slightly, tweaking it a bit. He used sketches made on site, but when transferring the image to canvas the structures would become too perfectly geometrical and balanced. Subsequently, he would
add little details to enliven the scene. When I’m composing a
group portrait I do the same: I rub a little dirt on a doorjamb
or add a socket somewhere in a corner. Sometimes you need
banal, everyday elements to make an image less cold, distant
and unreal. In Saenredam’s case it’s those little figures under
the overwhelming vaulted ceilings who make his paintings so
much more than just an architectural registration.

After graduating from the School of Journalism in Utrecht,
Erwin Olaf (Hilversum, the Netherlands, 1959) specialized in
documentary photography, only to switch to staged photography
soon after. The Chessmen series (1988) won him first prize in the
Young European Photographer competition, which was followed
by an exhibition at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne in the same
year. His work has since been presented at museums worldwide and
documented in numerous books, the most recent being an overview
published in 2014 by Aperture.

In 1987 Olaf started working with film, which has since then
continued to be an important medium for his art. In the past years
Olaf’s films have been screened at leading museums and film
festivals such as Centre Pompidou, Reina Sofia, the International
Film Festival Turkey and the International Film Festival
Rotterdam. In 2010 Louis Vuitton commissioned Olaf for a portrait
series in collaboration with the Rijksmuseum. Olaf has received
many awards, for both his commercial and autonomous work. In
2011, he received the prestigious Johannes Vermeer Award for his
entire body of work.
Jan Dibbets (b. 1941) is a devoted admirer of Pieter Saenredam (1597-1665). He has named at least three series of works after his 17th-century predecessor: \textit{Saenredam-Hamburg} (1978), \textit{Saenredam-Sénanque} (1980-81) and \textit{Saenredam-Zadkine} (2003). Each of these projects had an outspoken personal meaning to the artist. \textit{Saenredam-Hamburg} and \textit{Saenredam-Zadkine} referred to the studios of sculptors whose work was important to Dibbets, Ulrich Rückriem (b. 1938) and Ossip Zadkine (1890-1967). In \textit{Saenredam-Sénanque} Dibbets employed strategies he associated with Saenredam in order to immortalize his stay as a guest artist in the abbey of Sénanque in Provence.

Dibbets does not like to talk in public about his art. When he was awarded the Rembrandt Prize by the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Foundation in 1979, he reluctantly made a statement in which he placed Saenredam in his own art-historical context.

‘It’s a great honour for me to be forced, more or less against my free will, to speak a few words this afternoon. Abstract art has a long history.’
to the inside of the painting begins with the way Saenredam conveys the means by which he created his picture and the very dates on which he did so. On July 31, 1634, in his birthplace Assendelft, Saenredam sat down in the choir of the church of St Odulphus and made a drawing on blue paper, 24.4 x 41.8 cm large, now preserved, probably cut off at the bottom, in the Amsterdam Museum. We know all these dates from inscriptions that the artist dutifully penned and brushed onto his works. On the drawing made in the church: ‘Assendelft, the church’ and ‘July 31, 1634.’

The construction drawing has the longest text: ‘This composition is to be seen in the church of Assendelft, a village in Holland. It was completed in the form of this drawing on December 9, in the year 1643. It was painted in the same size as this drawing, on a panel of one plank, and the painting was finished on the second day of the month October in the year 1649 by me, Pieter Saenredam.’

The date is corroborated on the painting, which is inscribed on the pew in the choir (not upside down): ‘This is the church of Assendelft, a village in Holland, by Pieter Saenredam. It was painted in the year 1649, on October 2.’

These may be dry remarks, but I find it deeply moving that an artist would account for himself and his work so transparently and straightforwardly. The language of the true artist, they tell us, sometimes can be heard as well as seen. Saenredam addresses an anonymous audience of people who may not know that Assendelft is a village in Holland, but whom he thinks should know. In all their particularity, these inscriptions establish a basis for the lasting remembrance of what the artist observed in the church in 1634 and how in 1643 and 1649 he transformed his impression into a visual monument to a church that was built about 1420 and demolished in 1852.

‘Giotto, Jan van Eyck, Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, Domenico Veneziano, Antonello da Messina, Paolo Uccello, Van Ruisdael, Vermeer, Saenredam, Ingres, Caspar David Friedrich, Cézanne, Picasso, Léger, Matisse, Brancusi, Mondriaan.’

‘The language of the true artist is never heard, but always seen.’

‘Thank you very much for being here.’

Dibbets’ unquestioning assertion that Saenredam was a creator of abstract art makes us look at his interior of the church of Sint-Odulphus in a particular way. The perspective looks less like an illusion of space and more like a grid on the picture surface. The colours are no longer a description of local tones but an autonomous chromatic composition in greys, browns and broken white. Squinting, I can see what he means. But as an historian of art, I quickly revert to a more 17th-century take on the painting. Dibbets once entrusted me with a deeply personal memory of Saenredam that is closer to the way I look at pictures. The first time he saw the painting of the church of Sint-Odulphus was when his parents took him as a little boy from Weert on a visit to the Rijksmuseum. ‘I wanted to read the upside-down letters on the floor. So I turned my head in an attempt to find out what the text says. My parents had to hold me back to keep me from climbing into the painting.’

Climbing into the painting – that is what I too would most like to do. To follow Saenredam, not across the six-century span from Giotto to Mondriaan, but into his own world, his own history. This painting offers an opportunity to do exactly that, an opportunity unequalled in the work of the other masters on Dibbets’ transhistorical list. Our access to the inside of the painting begins with the way Saenredam conveys the means by which he created his picture and the very dates on which he did so. On July 31, 1634, in his birthplace Assendelft, Saenredam sat down in the choir of the church of St Odulphus and made a drawing on blue paper, 24.4 x 41.8 cm large, now preserved, probably cut off at the bottom, in the Amsterdam Museum. We know all these dates from inscriptions that the artist dutifully penned and brushed onto his works. On the drawing made in the church: ‘Assendelft, the church’ and ‘July 31, 1634.’

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And not only to the church. Saenredam’s painting – and this cannot fail to move any viewer – is also a visual monument to the artist’s deceased father, to the guardian who cared for him after his father’s death and to an older foster-brother of the artist. That is the meaning of the lettering that the young Jan Dibbets wanted so much to see. ‘Here lie the remains of Jan Saenredam, celebrated engraver, Pieter de Jonge, sheriff of Assendelft for 44 years, [and] his son Gerard de Jonge, doctor of jurisprudence and attorney.’

The celebrated engraver Jan Saenredam (1565-1607) is the artist’s father, who died when Pieter was nine years old. Pieter de Jonge (ca. 1550-after 1620) was Jan’s older half-brother. In a coincidence that could only happen in real life, Pieter de Jonge was guardian and second father not only to Pieter Saenredam. He had earlier fulfilled the same family function for Jan Saenredam as well, whose parents died when he was nine years old. Gerard was one of Pieter de Jonge’s sons and thus a foster-brother to Pieter Saenredam. That Jan Saenredam and Pieter de Jonge were buried in the church of St. Odulphus was not a coincidence. In their lifetimes, both had been elders of that Calvinist congregation.

We have only arrived at the threshold of the picture space. In the depths beyond are more surprises, more sentiment. The ministers who stood on the chancel of that church and other churches in the area were as likely as not close relatives of the painter. So were the town sheriffs. The men who served in those offices were all appointed by the lords of Assendelft, who were also patrons of Jan Saenredam and whose castle was engraved by Pieter. Saenredam reserved a place of honour for them in his composition. The stone structure on the right bears the inscription ‘This is the tomb or burial place of the lords of Assendelft.’

One day in 1988 I visited Assendelft with Marten Jan Bok, with whom I was writing a book on Saenredam. We were
pleased to find the stone with the name of the artist’s father and guardian in the local antiquities collection.

Comparing it to Saenredam’s constructed and painted versions, we see that the artist made a few changes in the placing and size of the letters, introducing a hierarchy from IOHANNIS SAENREDAM to the somewhat smaller PETRI DE IONGE and the still smaller GERARDI DE IONGE, while filling in parts of the inscription is now illegible.

While we were looking around the 19th-century church that replaces Saenredam’s, we were approached by a local who wanted to know what interested us. When we told him, a shadow fell over his face. ‘A while ago something weird happened,’ he said. ‘Something terrible. We were working out here when a delivery truck pulled up. We heard an enormous boom, as if the Last Judgment had come. A wheel of the truck had gone straight through the ground. That was the tomb of the Assendelfts, which was covered with earth but intact until that moment.’

The meaning of this painting to its maker acquired a new dimension in December 2011. At the beginning of the month, the London auction house Christie’s South Kensington auctioned a painting by Saenredam of the same church seen from the outside.

The little square is called the Kerkbuurt, the Church Neighbourhood. The painting shows the town hall where Pieter de Jonge was sheriff, the church of which he and Jan Saenredam were elders and on the left the very house where Pieter Saenredam was born, from which he moved with his widowed mother at the age of eleven to Haarlem, to become an artist whose work carries powerful appeal for its charm and lifelikeness; its value as a testimony to Dutch cultural patrimony; the historical and spiritual sensations it offers; its importance for the development of architectural painting in the Netherlands; its seemingly strict but actually supple geometry; its perceived ties to Piero della Francesca, Cézanne and Dibbets; and, in the interior and exterior of the St Odulphuskerk in Assendelft in particular, for its sheer lovability.

Gary Schwartz was born in Brooklyn, New York, USA, in 1940. He studied art history at New York University and Johns Hopkins University between 1956 and 1965. In 1965 he was granted a Kress Fellowship to the Netherlands, where he stayed. He has been active as a translator, editor and publisher, scholar, teacher, lecturer and writer and as the founder of CODART, an international network organization for curators of Dutch and Flemish art. Among his publications are standard works on Rembrandt and Pieter Saenredam, as well as more than 500 articles in the press, in scholarly journals and on his Internet column, the Schwartzlist.

Schwartz is a fellow of the Getty Center and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies and the bearer of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Award for the Humanities.
Jan de Bont talks about

(Commemorating The Battle of Scheveningen on 10 August 1653 during the First Anglo-Dutch War)

The Battle of Terheide

1657 / black chalk, oil and brown ink on canvas / 170 x 289 cm.

by Willem van de Velde the Elder (I)
(c. 1611 Leiden – 1693 London)

A Ship on the High Seas Caught by a Squall, known as

The Gust

c. 1680 / oil on canvas / 77 x 63.5 cm.

by Willem van de Velde the Younger (II)
(1633 Leiden – 1707 London)

Action!

For me, the works of Willem van de Velde the Elder and Willem van de Velde the Younger represent two of the most interesting expressions of Dutch character and culture. Unswerving realism on the one hand and emotive drama on the other. For these reasons, they both had a distinct impact on my creative life as a filmmaker.

The father, Van de Velde the Elder, reveals his Calvinistic dedication to state the truth by precisely depicting the bare facts as he saw them. No added drama. No diversion. Although the same cannot be said for his personal life, which was stormy and far from ordered. As a painter he wished only to reproduce reality. This can be seen in Van de Velde the Elder's The Battle of Terheide, which recounts a precise moment during a large naval battle. He made sure that every ship present was placed in exactly the right position at that particular moment.

Van de Velde the Elder was concerned with precision and accuracy. He added nothing, which could confuse his intentions. He would often prove the authenticity of his work by declaring his presence at the battles within the images, like a selfie, sitting in a small boat in the middle of the action, sketching the battle before him. Due to this daring need to
wit
ness such events to produce his artwork, we could compare Van de Velde the Elder to the seasoned war photographers of today.

Like many contemporary photojournalists, this artist chose a decisive moment in the battle to record for posterity an image from an unbiased perspective. Because of this neutrality, fuelled by his acute powers of observation, one court called Van de Velde the Elder to be a witness in a dispute concerning the roles of the different commanders. Perhaps it was his exceptional neutrality that enabled him to paint both the Dutch and English so admirably during the Anglo-Dutch wars. This was extremely unusual. Some would even have regarded it as artistic high treason! But in reality, Van de Velde the Elder simply sought to educate us by showing how each battle was fought and how it was won or lost. To do so, he had to visually make sense of what appeared to be at first glance a chaotic array of ships.

In the same way as admirals choreographed naval battles and Van de Velde the Elder choreographed their representations, I use wide high-angle shots in action scenes to create understanding and clarity within the chaos of the scene. Van de Velde’s chaos and my chaos are similar in that they are both carefully composed. Everything happens for a reason at each particular moment. A special feature of Van de Velde the Elder’s work is the perspective from which he paints. After having daringly witnessed the action at sea level, the artist paints the scene from a very high angle, as if he had stepped into the air to see the battle as a whole. In film terms, we call this the ‘God’s eye view.’

Standing back and taking this perspective relates to how I work on high-energy film sequences that are packed with action and where many things happen simultaneously. To prevent chaos and confusion amongst the actors, stunt men and crew, you have to explain to everyone involved what exactly is expected of them at any given point in the scene. To make it clear, I use miniature cars, helicopters, emergency vehicles, buildings and figurines. As I move them around on a large table, I explain the actions frame by frame. This way, everyone will understand where the cameras are to be positioned, where the special effects, explosions or car crashes are to occur and where each actor has to be at each precise moment. This is all to ensure that the action will work as planned, as well as insuring each participant’s safety.

This is why Willem van de Velde the Elder’s The Battle of Terheide is so exciting to me. He understood that you have to see the entire picture to understand the battle. In my mind, I can see him placing all his individual sketches on a table, moving them around to make sure all ships of each army end up in the right position. Then, standing back from these sketches, he starts to paint.

In producing such ordered and faithfully rendered works, we can regard Van de Velde the Elder as an educator. Born to a Flemish skipper, he was bred to the sea. Such an upbringing taught him much about the nuances of sailing, providing him with knowledge he would later share through his medium of painting. He taught the viewer how sea battles were fought, how the war ships moved and how the ships’ captains used the wind to get their vessels into combat positions, tricking their opponents.

Van de Velde the Elder often invited his son Willem van de Velde the Younger on his small boat to sketch these ships in action. At the age of twenty, young Willem was instructed in the art of illustration during the heat of battle, a hard way for a boy to learn a profession! Despite his father’s example of depicting strict reality, Van de Velde the Younger had an affinity for amplifying the drama of a given moment. He did not focus on the big picture. He preferred human drama and frequently used what we in the film world call...
to atmosphere within majestic compositions. But, like his father, he perfectly depicts the large vessel as it would be buffeted on a stormy sea. I really love this intimate yet supremely powerful painting. Perhaps it is inherited from our Dutch seafaring fathers, that I find myself drawn to this drama, the urge to battle the elements.

As a cinematographer, paintings like *The Gust* were a major inspiration to me. I love this work’s spirit, its visual strength, and its perfect composition, along with the effect of that magical Dutch light which enhances the scene’s drama. As a director, I was inspired by the dramatic story that Van de Velde the Younger tells us. It is a story of survival and uncertainty. I marvel at how much narrative he could compress into such a small canvas.

While different, the artistry of father and son complement each other in a remarkable way. Viewed together, they produced some of the best Dutch painting of their time. Their success spread beyond their native land. Van de Velde the Younger's influence was particularly great in England, where he inspired a whole tradition of marine painting.

I address my films in much the same way as these artists approached their subjects. For instance, I felt I had to do *Twister* because I am so drawn to the power of nature. There is nothing more challenging, unbelievable and exciting than nature itself. You cannot compete with it. This sentiment is particularly visible in Van de Velde the Younger's paintings. And in concert with his father's work of choreographed chaos, the Van de Velde paintings show us how small we are in this sky-dominated country of Holland.

We are all insignificant, though necessary to produce the bigger picture.
As cameraman, director and producer, Jan de Bont (Eindhoven, the Netherlands, 1943) is the maker of spectacular and visually overwhelming films. De Bont is an acknowledged master of the action film, which he raised to a new level as director of the hits Speed and Twister. He studied at the Amsterdam Film Academy and his success as Holland’s leading cinematographer on films like Turkish Delight, led him to Hollywood where he has been based as a filmmaker since the 1980s. De Bont is said to go to extreme lengths to get the dramatic effects he wants. But points out that he would never let an actor do what he himself would not do. In recent years, de Bont is increasingly focused on still photography and chairs the Photo Council of the Getty Museum. ‘The power of that single moment in time is all important’, he says.
My story relating to this painting has its origins in history. It involves accidental events on the east coast of Kyushu that date back to the 19th April 1600 when the Dutch trading ship De Liefde was stranded off the coast of the small island of Kuroshima in the bay of Usuki. This was the first Dutch ship to have ever reached Japan. The sailors and merchants were helped by the local people of what is now Oita prefecture. De Liefde, in English, means ‘Love’.

Among the crew were the Dutch officer and merchant Jan Joosten van Lodensteyn and the ship’s pilot William Adams. They were summoned by the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu who consulted them for their knowledge. Joosten was granted a sealed certificate to be an active trader. The area he lived in Edo, Yaesu, was named after him. Adams served the Shogun as foreign affairs advisor.

For the opening of the Oita Prefectural Art Museum in 2015, I wanted to revitalise history and have it interpreted in a contemporary form with spiritual relevance. I wanted an artwork that would be a gift for the people. I discussed this concept with the Dutch artist and designer Marcel Wanders and he created the unique artwork Eurasian Garden Spirits for the museum. Seven four-metre-high interactive balloons fill...
the foyer. They are colourful, playful, touchable and inspired by 17th-century Dutch art.

Among the floral motives in the balloons you will see faces and a skull present among the gaiety. This is a historical reference to what was called *vanitas*, a medieval tradition of *memento mori* associated with the Roman Catholic Church. It implied that, in celebration, one had also to think of death. It comes from the Latin word meaning ‘vanity’. *Vanitas* references were made as reminders of the transient and fleeting nature of earthly life. Marcel Wanders told me that *vanitas* symbols were used in still life painting, particularly in the Netherlands of the 16th and 17th centuries, as if to provide a moral justification for painting attractive objects.

Seventeenth-century painters like the still life master Jan Davidszoon de Heem are outstanding examples of this. If not actually painting a skull, De Heem sometimes symbolised *vanitas* by painting an intense black background, as in *Festoon of Fruit and Flowers*. And, looking closely, you see minute insects about to devour the fruit. De Heem masterly integrates everyday objects like fruit and flowers with the spiritual life.

The presence of light and darkness symbolised life and death and in Japanese culture, references to death being very much a part of life. The recycling of life and death lies at the heart of many seasonal festivals in Japan. The spirit of death revitalises us. And this tradition is also rooted in other lands. In traditional Celtic culture, for instance, life and death are closely linked. You will find echoes of it in many European and Asian cultures. The confluence of life and death is universal and timeless. And this you can see in contemporary context in Eurasian Garden Spirits and its timeless relation to *Festoon of Fruit and Flowers*.
Professor Ryu Niimi (Hiroshima, Japan, 1958) is the innovative director of the Oita Prefectural Art Museum, in Japan’s southern island of Kyushu, which opened in April 2015. Designed by the renowned Pritzker Award-winning architect Shigeru Ban, Professor Niimi’s museum will have ‘surprise encounters and be enjoyed by the five senses. It is meaningless to build an art museum if you are going to imitate others’ he says. In line with the history of Oita, Professor Niimi is making the museum a meeting point of cultures, with works of art from Japan and around the world to give birth to new values. A scholar of modern and contemporary art, design and museology, Ryu Niimi has footprints in the Sezon Museum of Art, Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, as well as Keio University and Musashino Art University. He has been instrumental in putting together many major innovative exhibitions including Bauhaus, Isamu Noguchi, Rosanjin Kitaoji and Le Corbusier. He was awarded The Western Art Foundation’s Scholar Award for his curatorial work at the Panasonic Shiodome Museum’s Wiener Werkstätte 1903-1932 exhibition. Ryu Niimi’s visionary work has won him international acclaim.
I was drawn to the central figure of the baker because I think he is quite handsome. I feel I could meet him tomorrow in the streets of Amsterdam or New York or wherever. He is a very contemporary type. And I like the pace and energy that he radiates. This is what immediately appeals to me.

And it’s cool that he is a baker. For it gives me the chance to focus on the significance of bread today and the revival of the craft. So many paintings of still lifes from the Golden Age are about formal arrangements of flowers, fish, birds and opulent accessories. But here is a revealing still life simply of bread, which is very unusual. Jan Steen is always about the normality and humility of life. He chooses bread displayed with a portrait of its maker outside the shop, which is very attractive to me.

We are now living in a frugal period where many people have to do with much less money. At the same time, society is becoming less materialistic. People like to share. So in these times, the simple luxury of things like well-made bread and salted butter and a glass of wine have become very important. They are simple signs of wellbeing. So in that sense as well it seems like a picture of our time. It is not exactly a Golden Age today. If anything we are living in a pewter age.

Our daily Bread

Lidewij Edelkoort talks about

The Baker Arent Oostwaard and his Wife, Catharina Keizerswaard

1658 / oil on panel / 37.7 x 31.5 cm.

by Jan Havickszoon Steen

(1626 Leiden – 1679 Leiden)
I believe that bread is an endangered species. At a time when people are getting forms of allergies and illnesses from genetically modified ingredients, there is fortunately an increase in the baking of exclusive breads, often forgotten breads and new hybrids. This is one aspect that makes the painting very contemporary. Inspiring in fact. Wherever I go in the world I see bakeries reinventing and rekindling themselves. Food in general has become a healthy obsession in this age.

Then, take a closer look at the portrait of that attractive baker. His clothes are very much of the here and now. The flowing white shirt with rolled-up sleeves showing his muscular arms. The rough, yet sensitive hand. His posture is totally positive. Let's go for it, he seems to say. The loose-fitting working trousers, with a little opening in the front folds, are a bit inviting I think. In fact, the painting as a whole is rather sensual. I seem to sense the aroma of warm bread when I look at the painting. We don't actually see the baking oven but the smell of fresh bread does drift into mind. You can imagine the kind of erotic images of the baker kneading the dough and thrusting the long wooden peel into the oven.

Seductive smell is very much a part of baking bread. It creates the feeling of bliss and bonding with the home. Today, supermarkets use the smell of bread to sell loaves that are wrapped in plastic. And if you're selling a house, and want to seduce potential buyers, it helps to have an aroma of fresh bread in the air. Therefore one could argue that this whole picture relates to seduction in different ways. It is inventive and tactile. Very hands-on. Like eating bread itself.

There is also an international flavour in this painting. I see pretzels hanging up on a special hanger, a detail which could indicate German influence. And there is a long loaf of bread that looks like a French baguette, but with carvings on its crust. There are buns on a bread rack and other breads like manchet resting on the wooden peel. We still use these and indeed eat more and more from wooden planks today. How modern can you get in a 17th-century painting?

The woman in the painting is holding, very delicately, what looks like a pastry for a flan or possibly a Belgian tart. Patisseries are very much in vogue at this moment. Yes, there is certainly a contemporary European flavour here.

I know the painting's title states that the woman in the picture is the baker's wife. But I really wonder. I see her more as a seductive shop assistant in love with her baker. I feel there's an illicit romance in the air. She certainly looks smitten with him. Once the little boy goes to bed, who knows what would go on in the bakery. In fact, apart from the woman's cap, there is almost nothing historical in this painting at all.

The little boy in the painting looks up at his father with wondrous, yet playful eyes. He's like a little cherub, blowing a horn, maybe celebrating the harmony and jollity of the scene. His father looks positive, proud and strong. He brings in the money by working long hours in the very early morning. But the boy is there, close to his father. I see this as relevant to the role of today’s fathers who are involved for the first time with their offspring by fathering their children.

Somehow in this painting I can see the future depicted in the past. I see the revival of frugal values and simple joys that are very relevant today. Almost biblical you could say in the sense of giving us our daily bread. People are becoming less materialistic. There is a new quest for less, which brings with it more freedom. A nomadic approach to life. And bread is mobile food. You can take it with you.

So there are many reasons to interpret this painting as forward-looking. It also expresses the concept of compassion and the idea of counting your blessings. The blessings of the harvest. The harvest of healthy produce and the harvest for a new generation. The blessing of adulation and love. The joy of making.
Lidewij (Li) Edelkoort (Wageningen, the Netherlands, 1950) is one of the world’s most famous trend forecasters. Born in the Netherlands, she is an intuitive thinker who travels the world studying the evolution of socio-cultural trends. She shares the information she gathers with clients in industries as diverse as fashion, textiles, interiors, cars, cosmetics, and food. At her Paris-based company Trend Union, she creates trend books that look two or three years ahead and are tools used by strategists and designers of international brands. She founded the consultancy Studio Edelkoort and opened offices in New York and Tokyo. Her clients have included Coca-Cola, Nissan, Camper, Cerruti, Siemens, Moooi, and Douwe Egberts. In the beauty industry, she has developed concepts and products for, among others, Estée Lauder, Lancôme, L’Oréal, Shiseido, Dim and Gucci. As well as department stores, hotels, restaurants and food retailers.

Time Magazine named her as one of the most influential fashion experts of our day. She has received many awards, including the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in recognition of her artistic and literary creative contribution to France and international culture and in 2012 the prestigious Prins Bernhard Cultuurprijs. In 2014, the Royal Society of Arts in Britain named her Honorary Royal Designer for Industry in recognition of her pioneering career. Edelkoort’s innovative trend publications like View on Colour and Interior View address the future of colour, beauty, pattern, wellbeing, architecture and lifestyle. The humanitarian foundation she co-created through Heartwear promotes the survival of artisans in developing economies around the world. As a curator of international exhibitions, in 2011 she launched an interactive online trend forum called Trend Tablet and at Milan’s Salone del Mobile, launched Talking Textiles, a touring exhibition that is part of an on-going initiative to promote the survival of textiles and young creative talent. Edelkoort is currently working on trend forecasts for 2017 and beyond.
Anton Corbijn talks about

*Winter Landscape*

by Jacob Isaackszoon van Ruisdael
(c. 1628 Haarlem – 1682 Amsterdam)

This winter scene in the Netherlands in the 1660s evokes memories from my childhood in the ‘50s and ‘60s. I have an almost sentimental attachment to it. The painter captures the brooding mood of a bleak winter day, darkened by threatening clouds. I love the way the dramatic light falls onto the landscape. It reminds me of another winter drama from my youth.

My father was a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church and we lived in the municipality of Strijen which is located on the Hollandsche Waard island, near the Hollands Diep estuary in South Holland. As you can expect in a family where religion was pretty much ingrained in life, I had to attend church every other Sunday in Strijen or different villages in the municipality as my father also serviced a few of these communities.

I enjoyed these trips to the nearby villages with my father. I saw them as adventures; it took away the boredom I associated with attending church. I recall one Sunday, during a heavy winter, our car got stranded in the snow. We had to abandon it and, under one of these dark metal Van Ruisdael winter skies, trek across the frozen fields in the direction of the Strijen’s church spire spiking the horizon. We could hear
the church bell tolling in the distance and we still seemed to have a way to go. I visualised a congregation with no preacher. I remember my father saying, optimistically: ‘Don’t worry, they won’t start without me’. And they didn’t of course.

At first glance, Van Ruisdael’s Winter Landscape appears sombre. Melancholic even. Certainly another world from Avercamp’s colourful Ice View of skaters having fun and games. But it’s Van Ruisdael who creates the deeper layers. He is direct, realistic, has a skilled technique and applies it with a poetic interpretive touch. The clouds are dark, leaden and ominous. But through them you see strips of clear blue light settling on the snow and highlighting the horizon. It’s all about the subtle play of light in that painting. Is it a foreboding of a new Ice Age to come or just the opposite, judging by the lighter horizon? Pessimism and optimism are both in it.

Am I a sombre person? I have dark moments and light ones. I certainly don’t thrive on negativity. Although I do think the world is heading in a dark direction: the way we abuse the planet, are confronted with fanatic dehumanization, mistrust, and polarization. It was a theme addressed in my film A Most Wanted Man. But in spite of that realization, I remain an optimist. You have to be. It gives you the most energy.

I have deep respect for painters in general, though that only came later in life in my late twenties. Before that I was just focused on photography and was possibly threatened by other art forms, as I didn’t know how to judge them. My first and only museum experience as a teenager was when I was fourteen. My father took me to see the Rembrandt exhibition in the Rijksmuseum marking the 300th anniversary of his death in 1669. He liked Rembrandt’s early Biblical subjects as that was the only way he could understand a painting, by knowing what was painted.

Generally a photographer has the luxury of having an actual subject, or part of life, in front of him or her. A painter starts with a blank canvas. That requires incredible discipline and courage. I have more painter friends than photographer friends I think. Painters are autonomous and have an air of solitude. That attracts me. Van Ruisdael is also said to have been so.

On the walls of my home I hang paintings, not photographs. Why? Partly because paintings are less absolute. It started a good twenty years ago when I was constantly travelling in connection with my own photography. Returning home from trips, I enjoyed being surrounded by my friends on the walls!
also photograph people from other disciplines such as directors, actors, writers and models; among them, Clint Eastwood, Steven Spielberg, Robert DeNiro, Naomi Campbell, Martin Scorsese, Isabella Rossellini, Kate Moss and Allen Ginsberg.

Corbijn started directing music videos in the early ’80s and they quickly made their mark through their look, attitude and weird little stories. Among his most well-known videos are Depeche Mode’s Enjoy the Silence, U2’s One, Nirvana’s Heart-shaped Box and Coldplay’s Talk. In 2006 he directed his first feature film Control which was released in 2007 to incredible critical acclaim. He has since made three other highly praised films (The American in 2010, A Most Wanted Man in 2014 and LIFE in 2015). Film is where his focus currently lies. Corbijn’s photography over the years has extended to include conceptual works like his fake-paparazzi 33 Still Lives and the self-portrait series called a.somebody. In collaboration with the painter Marlene Dumas, he worked in the late ‘90s on a project called strippinggirls, which took strippers as subject matter. His current photography subjects tend to be visual artists: among them, Gerhard Richter, Ai Weiwei, Christopher Wool, Richard Prince and Lucian Freud. Corbijn’s output is well documented by his 15+ books, 100+ album sleeves, 80+ music videos and 4 feature films.
In 2007, Ferran Adrià was invited to participate in Documenta, the world's most prestigious art event held every five years in Kassel, Germany. For the first time ever the list of participants was to include a chef. Still, Adrià needed some convincing. He felt like an intruder, taking up space that belonged to artists who had worked their entire lives to shine on this stage. He sidestepped the direct equalisation of gastronomy and the visual arts by setting up a pavilion at his own restaurant, El Bulli in the Costa Brava town of Roses and hosting two Documenta visitors every day. To a Wall Street Journal reporter he justified his move by describing his practice as ‘ephemeral, it’s not moveable, it can’t be in a museum’.

Even though Adrià resists being called an artist – he prefers to compare restaurant going to a visit to the theatre – he does take inspiration from art. ‘On a plate, as in a painting, there are colours, textures, feelings, volumes, intentions, interactions, dialogues and things left unsaid, composition, thinking, style, influences, intellectual games, stories, trends, interpretations, tastes and memories. The plate and the painting share almost everything, except for smell and taste.’

Ferran Adrià talks about

*Still Life with Cheese*

c. 1615 / oil on panel / 82.2 x 111.2 cm.

by Floris Claeszoon Van Dijck

(1575 Delft – 1651 Haarlem)
The most interesting aspect of still lifes is their staging. The display of glassware, china, silver, textiles, utensils and table decoration was as important, if not more so, than the food. Actually, the food represented in most 17th-century still lifes is rather casual. It usually consists of dishes that can be prepared quickly such as seafood, cakes and bread, cheese, fruit and sweets.

Surely this must be a bit dull for a high-tech chef like Adrià, who approaches his culinary practice with scientific zest, employing liquid nitrogen to flash freeze foodstuffs and turning solids into foam. But no, he doesn’t consider the old-fashioned techniques beneath him. ‘Culinary techniques appear and reappear, even if they are transformed. The pressure cooker is back in fashion at the moment, bakers boast of using wood-fired ovens and grilling always seems in vogue. Cooking techniques can only advance if they maintain a constant dialogue with the future and the past.’

However, that dialogue with the past requires some creativity, Adrià admits. ‘Ancient recipes don’t state temperatures, cooking times, weights or measures. We can enter into a fascinating game of interpreting a plate by mentally merging painting and literature. But it’s not just about wanting to recreate the dish, it’s also about reproducing the dining experience’s atmosphere: how to eat, serve, perhaps even how to talk – everything that brings us closer to that Dutch diner from four centuries ago.’

The diner himself is not depicted, but the evidence of his presence is telling. Adrià rates the invisible diner as ‘a bit of a sloppy eater. He’s probably less aware of his food than of other things, a woman perhaps or a conversation. But he has taken great care to peel an apple and let the curling skin hang from the edge of the table. Of course, this was Van Dijck’s way of showcasing his skills as a brush virtuoso.’
that influence the gastronomic experience and this is where a sixth sense comes into play. It’s this sense that brings the diner’s skills, experience and creativity to the table; this is how the former does their part in the cooking. As such we can think of the diner’s experience as a performative act, where flavours, aromas and textures collide. At the moment of eating the diner is engaged in cutting, spicing, flavouring with oil, vinegar and salt, making decisions not only about the products on his plate, but about the experience as a whole.’

Ferran Adrià (L’Hopitalet de Llobregat, Spain, 1962) started his culinary career in 1980 as a dishwasher at the Hotel Playafels in Castelldefels, where the chef taught him about traditional Spanish cuisine. In 1984 he started working at El Bulli in the Catalan coastal city of Roses and a mere eighteen months later he became head chef. His unique and innovative brand of deconstructivist cuisine has won him three Michelin stars since 1997.

Adrià is considered one of the world’s best chefs and El Bulli topped the Restaurant Top 50 a record five times. His recipes have been collected in five volumes, he has provided lectures and workshops around the world, and in 2010 taught a culinary physics course at Harvard University. El Bulli closed to the public in July 2011 and since then Adrià has focused on his foundation, a mixture of museum and laboratory where he develops and tests new dishes and techniques.
Marlies Dekkers talks about

The Love Letter
c. 1669 – c. 1670 / oil on canvas / 44 x 38.5 cm.

by Johannes Vermeer
(1632 Delft – 1675 Delft)

S sometime around the Millennium, way before Tinder and Parship, etc. burst onto the scene, Marlies Dekkers started an unorthodox online dating site. Pictures were prohibited, singles had to use words to woo possible mates. ‘When getting to know someone, the visual aspect is too dominant and distracts from what that person is actually saying’, the fashion designer thinks. ‘Disembodied words are magical. Reading them is an intense experience.’ This is why Dekkers loves Cyrano de Bergerac, the protagonist of Edmond Rostand’s most famous play who is ashamed of his overly large nose and tries to win his cousin Roxane’s heart by writing her love poems. It also explains her attraction to Johannes Vermeer’s The Love Letter: the mere title does it.

The painting itself, however, is all about the visual and the physical. ‘It’s almost photographic, the way Vermeer depicts the scene’, admits Dekkers. ‘He is really close to the imperfections and coincidences of the moment: the woman’s slightly unflattering pose with her legs apart, the way she’s holding her lute as if she just stopped playing. Nowadays we can capture these fleeting moments by pressing a button on our iPhone. We are used to looking at natural images like these, but in the 17th century it must have been quite a shock.’
Dekkers reads a lot of sexual innuendo in Vermeer’s domestic scene. ‘The slippers, ready to be penetrated by the foot, have strong connotations. And the shafts of light punctuating the room from the left are positively phallic. As a whole, the composition is extremely daring; Vermeer filled more than half the painting with dark cupboards and posts – it’s almost like a triptych. It lends the picture an intensely voyeuristic perspective. It’s as if we are hiding behind the door looking in, together with the man who wrote the letter and is secretly awaiting its impact. In a way it’s the letter’s author, the absent lover, who is the painting’s true subject.’

Although she looks slightly startled, as if caught doing or thinking something inappropriate, Dekkers identifies the woman’s look as ‘ecstatic’, ‘Especially if you compare her way of looking to the maid’s expression, which is much softer and at peace. But ecstasy can go both ways: pleasure or pain. Considering the fact that until 1970 the painting was simply entitled The Letter, one could argue that the woman is receiving a farewell note. If so, her eyes reflect dreadful anticipation. The letter’s author – her husband or lover – has left her and sailed off, a scenario mirrored in the seascape hanging on the wall behind her. Or worse: he’s dead.’

‘But I prefer the more positive interpretation. The letter has to be a declaration of love’, Dekkers states. ‘Just look at the sweltering way the scene, and especially the woman, has been painted! I feel the urge to lick her glossy lips, full and ripe. Vermeer also showcased this type of sensuality in The Milkmaid with her low-cut dress and the insinuations implicit in pouring milk. Vermeer really longed for these women. He is licentious to a certain degree but he keeps it clean, does not trespass into lust. His stylishness is the result of his fabulous technique but also of his restraint. The letter in this painting has not been opened, the climax has yet to come. Vermeer does not consume the moment, but anticipates it.’

The term ‘gaze’, coined by the French philosopher Jacques Lacan, might very well be applied to Vermeer’s The Love Letter. In feminist theory this state of anxiety stemming from the awareness of being watched, has been transformed into ‘the male gaze’, the objectifying sexualized way heterosexual men look at women. Dekkers acknowledges the existence of this ‘male way of looking at women as if they are a collection of body parts, objects’, but argues that the woman in Vermeer’s painting is not reduced to the status of object. ‘Of course, she is entangled in a power relationship with a man, possibly even more than one. But she enjoys the game. She calls the shots, you can tell by the twinkle in her eye. She’s no victim. Rather, she’s the linchpin. Vermeer underlines this with his mysterious composition and sense of suspense.’

Dekkers aims for the same effect when creating an advertising campaign for a new lingerie line, compiling a catalogue or posing for a portrait series. ‘Because these projects are commercial, you always need to show the product. But I want the photography to tell a story, to be classy. In 90% of all lingerie ads the models are presented as objects. “I am yours, you can own me” is what they communicate with their pose, their eyes, their mouths, everything. In my images I want women to be stunning, but also in charge.’

It’s a pioneering undertaking, this search for an empowering female perspective. ‘All the great artists who depicted women were men, there are no female role models’, according to Dekkers. ‘Only now are we getting to the point of finding out a new visual language that does justice to the way women look at women. Painters do this on canvas, for me the body is the canvas. It’s an exciting time to be alive as a female artist, entering this virgin territory. And who knows, maybe in the end women depict women just like men do. But I sincerely hope there’s a female Vermeer out there, just as ingenious, but with a gaze all of her own.’
Marlies Dekkers is a ‘Reus van Rotterdam’, a multi-time winner of the Businesswoman of the Year Award and above all, the first fashion designer to explicitly link underwear and feminism. Born in Oosterhout, the Netherlands, in 1965 she attended art school in Breda. She launched her first lingerie collection in 1993, a mere two years after graduating with honours. What started out as a cottage industry soon grew into the MD Group, which employs 150 staff in the Netherlands and Hong Kong. Dekkers’ designs are sold at over 600 retail outlets around the world, including six marlies|dekkers stores in the Netherlands and Belgium. The Dutch Bodyfashion Award (1994), the ELLE Innovator of the Year Award (2004) and the NIBC Turnaround Finance Group Prize (2010) are just some of the many prizes Dekkers has been awarded. She has published four books and exhibited at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam twice. Her Bare Bottom Dress has been part of the Rijksmuseum collection since 2008.
Peter Guidi talks about

The Love Letter
c. 1669 – c. 1670 / oil on canvas / 44 x 38.5 cm.

by Johannes Vermeer
(1632 Delft – 1675 Delft)

I can’t say this painting influenced my life but it has certainly been a part of it. Art and music have played a key role in my life from a very early age.

My mother was born in Tuscany, Italy and had a passion for Opera. Like the great Pavarotti, her favourite singer was the tenor Giuseppe di Stefano who she often listened to on an old wind-up record player. My father was also born of Tuscan parents but they had emigrated to Scotland before the Second World War. He shared my mother’s love of opera and was also a fan of the American big bands and Italian-American singers, particularly Frank Sinatra.

As well as opera my mother loved art, especially the Italian Renaissance painters. One of her favourites was fellow Tuscan Piero della Francesca, an early master of perspective. When we visited Italy she took me to the house in Lucca where operatic composer Giacomo Puccini was born, to art galleries in Florence, and to the church of San Francesco in Arezzo to see the Legend of the True Cross, a magnificent fresco by Piero della Francesca considered a milestone in the use of perspective. By the way, my given names are Piero Francesco. Peter is my stage name.
Leonardo da Vinci who was renowned for his improvised singing while accompanying himself on the lyre.

While Vermeer paints other objects in *The Love Letter* in detail, the cittern is not quite right. The upper frets on the fret-board are misplaced, which would cause the instrument to play out of tune, and the pegs, which hold the strings are not positioned correctly.

When music is played a profound connection occurs between the musician and the instrument. An intimate relationship is formed. Therefore if Vermeer had also been a musician I believe he would have wanted to be accurate about depicting something with which he felt a close connection.

The book of music resting on the chair in the foreground gives us another insight into the extent of Vermeer's musical knowledge. If you inspect it, you see a jumble of hastily drawn matchstick-like notes that are musically meaningless. Misshapen notes, uneven bars, some notes placed above the staff but without ledger lines. Of course, this is a small painting where Vermeer's space was limited. But still... if there was adequate space to add the minute lyrics below the staff then there was enough space to draw the notes more precisely. The conclusion is that though Vermeer very likely appreciated music in a social sense, he was not proficient in playing or writing it.

One can't help wondering why the uppermost music sheet is crumpled up in such a careless way. Therein lies perhaps a clue to the character of the lady. In Vermeer's time even hand-written sheet music penned by a professional copyist was expensive, while printed music was a luxury only the wealthy could afford. Music was even more expensive to print than books, as it required a complex process involving four separate printing stages for each page. But for those who
It appears as if something clandestine is taking place. It could be that in order to smuggle the letter unobserved to her mistress the clever housemaid hid it in the laundry basket lying at her feet. The lady’s expression betrays the fact that this is a covert transaction. She bears an apprehensive and questioning look, as if to say: ‘Did anybody see you bring this?’ Her expression is not one of: ‘Oh, how marvellous!’ It’s more like an anguished: ‘For Heaven’s sake don’t tell anybody about this’. She looks shocked, worried, even afraid.

Vermeer keeps the viewer guessing. He offers some clues in the paintings hanging on the wall depicting a ship on rough seas and a solitary journeyman, perhaps metaphors relating to a tempestuous love affair involving a distant lover. *The Love Letter* is certainly not a straightforward domestic narrative as depicted in the Delft interior paintings of Pieter de Hooch. There is more here than meets the eye. More complexity and psychological depth. *The Love Letter* is ambiguous, which is what makes it so fascinating. There are so many possible scenarios. There is undoubtedly passion in the air. There is a palpable sense of danger. There could be betrayal involved. The lady could be in need of reassurance. She may be betrothed to someone she does not love and the letter comes from an illicit suitor. She may have been forced into an arranged marriage and the message is from her true love in a distant land.

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Whatever, the letter is clearly not an ordinary one. The unusual manner in which the letter is brought reinforces that interpretation. Had it been a normal letter delivered in the conventional way it would have been handed to the lady at the front door, as in Pieter de Hooch’s *Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House*, or brought to her on a tray by a servant.

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The expression and confident posture of the servant, with hand on hip and a wry smile, would suggest that she was aware of the contents of the letter, or at least knew from whom the letter came. In spite of the huge economic and social gap between them, the women appear to be bonded by their sex and by the secret they share. ‘Did anybody see you bring it in?’ the lady could be asking. ‘No, I hid it in the washing basket. Only you and I know’, the maid could be replying with a reassuring smile.
A wax seal is visible on the letter but it is not clear if it is broken or unbroken. Once again Vermeer keeps us guessing. There could even be an internal family scandal. The lady does not appear to be married. There is no wedding ring visible. But if she was married it could be a letter from a mistress to the lady’s husband. A letter that she, or more likely her maidservant, has intercepted. Maybe the husband is in the next room and the letter is from his lover! Perhaps the maid’s smile means ‘Here’s the proof you wanted.’

Whatever the true meaning is behind the mysterious letter, by drawing aside the curtain in the foreground Vermeer allows us a voyeuristic peek on a moment of evident conspiracy. There is an undertone in the painting that we are privy to something sordid, something we should not be witnessing, made all the more compelling by the fact that neither the lady nor the maid are aware they are being watched.

_The Love Letter_ begs many questions and, like the _Girl with a Pearl Earring_, lends itself to interpretation and speculation. We know so little that we are left free to use our imagination and to create our own scenarios, be they romantic or scandalous. Perhaps due to my Italian Renaissance roots I prefer the dramatic hypothesis of scandal and intrigue rather than the more conventional idea of a straightforward love letter.

In 2003 an excellent period drama was made starring Scarlett Johansson as the _Girl with a Pearl Earring_. In this fictional movie there is much free speculation concerning the relationship between Vermeer and the girl in the painting. If a movie were made of _The Love Letter_ I would suggest a story line involving a secret letter connecting a lonely, wealthy lady with a distant, forbidden love. It would provide an intriguing scenario with many possible consequences, and it would assuredly make fascinating viewing.'
Natasja Kensmil talks about

Landscape with Waterfall

c. 1668 / oil on canvas / 142.5 x 196 cm.

by Jacob Isaackszoon van Ruisdael
(c. 1628 Haarlem – 1682 Amsterdam)

A lone Rambler conversing with Enthusiasm and Melancholy

Natasja Kensmil’s studio is a whirlwind of pictures. Pages torn from books and magazines are scattered across the floor or pinned to the wall, museum catalogues with cracked spines are stacked on a table, the bookcase whispers the promise of full oeuvres disclosed on glossy paper. The past and its art hold a strong attraction for Kensmil who is known for often painting and drawing historical figures. In her opinion: ‘The past is in constant negotiation with the present, informing and shaping it. Old images, at least those strong enough to survive the ravages of time are living progenitors consisting of many layers. Some of these are hidden; they haven’t been noticed or translated into the present yet. I’m intrigued by the mystery of it; it enables me to fill in the blanks. I guess that’s partly why I’m fascinated with Jacob van Ruisdael: very little is known about his life, not even his date of birth has been confirmed.’

But Kensmil’s fascination goes beyond the artist’s sketchy biography. During her time at the Rietveld Academy postcards and photographs of Van Ruisdael’s work found their way into her studio, to mix with rest of the inspirational images. ‘His work has energy and an intense warmth. He is..."
easily the best landscape painter of his era, and probably of all time’, she says. ‘The 17th century saw the emancipation of the landscape in a painterly sense and it’s largely due to Van Ruisdael. Before then, landscape was part of, e.g., a portrait, seen through a window in the background. But at some point the landscape freed itself from this position and became the protagonist, it became an entity unto itself. The paradox is that landscape painting is still the product of human hands and the maker is bound to infuse the image with his own identity and ideas. I see Van Ruisdael trying to depict God or the idea of the divine in nature. I recognise this from Surinamese culture: in my parents’ homeland nature is also considered divine. As children we were taught to pay respect to it. We were, for example, told not to climb trees at night because the trees would be sleeping then.’

Kensmil only paints a landscape once every two or three years. Portraits and human figures are her main themes. ‘But Van Ruisdael’s landscapes are portraits’, she argues. ‘His landscapes are always dominated by trees and these trees are like characters one could have a conversation with. When you look at the painting for some time, preferably alone and in silence, you attain a certain concentration that makes you see things in more detail: the eccentric roots, the subtle changes in colour, the mixture of green, healthy leaves and wilted brown ones. But it also opens up a proverbial inner eye that makes you see things that aren’t literally there, the stuff underneath the paint. In this case: the constant battle between life and death, beauty and decay, creation and destruction – a recurrent theme in Van Ruisdael’s work, but also in my own.’

Living and working before the introduction of paint in tubes which enabled artists to work in plain air, Van Ruisdael worked from sketches and recreated reality in his studio, often combining elements from various locations. He did so more liberally than his predecessors, tweaking the image in a dramatic way. Kensmil: ‘Of course, Van Ruisdael was bound by a code of realism, it was the 17th century after all. But his trees can hardly be called realistic, they are almost hyperbolic. He knew that sometimes exaggeration was necessary in order to be convincing, to bring the invisible to the surface. You have to stop short of caricature though. It all comes down to composition and in composition every square millimetre counts. I’ve seen other waterfalls by Van Ruisdael that are just a tad too much over the top, explosions of triumphant exuberance set in dark landscapes. But Landscape with Waterfall is subtle. It shows that Van Ruisdael wasn’t so much concerned with depicting reality but rather with capturing its essence. In this painting there’s a wonderfully constructed friction between fiction and non-fiction, the irate power of nature on the one hand and the peace and quiet of the everyday on the other.’

Attempting to further describe the nature of that tension Kensmil says she feels like ‘a lone rambler conversing with enthusiasm and melancholy’ when looking at the painting. ‘In this landscape you experience the human condition, the constant struggle to belong to a world in which you are essentially alone. The way Van Ruisdael combines close-up and panorama in one image – it’s a moment of bliss. Looking at it makes me aware of my good fortune as an inhabitant of this world; I feel a certain lust for life. But there is a dark side to all of this. The abundance of space the world offers can also lead to disorientation; feeling lost in the universe. As a human you feel very small amidst the natural forces who nurture you, but could just as easily crush you with a tsunami or earthquake.’

It’s that existential fear that makes Kensmil always long for the horizon. ‘The horizon is like a railing to hold on to. It’s a point of reference. And in Van Ruisdael’s work it’s also a reflection of man’s presence in the world. In View of Haarlem (1682) the horizon is dominated by church spires.
and windmills – a man-made environment. Nevertheless, the clouds in the sky that take up seventy per cent of that painting are grey and menacing. In *Landscape with Waterfall* the contrast is even more dramatic. In that painting only a small church sits in the background, a very meagre counterpoint to the savage and erratic wildlife in the foreground. Here the unexpected rules, the abyss is nearby.’

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*Born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 1973 Natasja Kensmil subsequently attended the Rietveld Academy and De Ateliers. Immediately after graduation, in 1998, she landed her first solo exhibition at Rush Art Gallery in New York. The same year she won the Buning Brongersprijs and the Koninklijke Prijs voor Vrije Schilderkunst. In 2002 she received the Wolvecamp Prize and a year later the Philip Morris Art Prize. Kensmil has also had group and solo shows outside the Netherlands in France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the US. Her work is represented in numerous international museums, corporate and private collections.*
I remember vividly my encounter with Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* in Amsterdam. It was an experience I often talk about as an example of dramatic structure and how it can be applied to business. The event took place a number of years ago on an autumn afternoon, the day of my first teaching session at the University of Amsterdam after I became a visiting professor there. This was held in the Trippenhuis, a majestic 17th-century canal house on Kloveniersburgwal.

I noticed before my session that morning that a large part of one of the undecorated walls was a different colour from the rest, indicating that something big had once hung there. When I asked about it, my host told me that Rembrandt’s most famous painting *The Night Watch* had once graced the room there, until it was moved to the newly built Rijksmuseum in 1885. What I hadn’t realised at the time was that this Trippenhuis mansion had been built for the wealthy 17th-century merchant Jacob Trip and his wife Margaretha de Geer who had both been painted by Rembrandt in 1661. Unwittingly, I was being touched by history.

Following my morning lecture, I immediately made plans to view the *Night Watch* that afternoon. On entering the foyer
of the Rijksmuseum, I picked up a few brochures to learn more about the museum and its exhibits. I paid my admission fee and was off. I headed up a large staircase and found myself surrounded by the Golden Age of Holland. There was a great lesson here: During the Agrarian Economy, the Dutch East India Company were extracting and shipping an abundance of commodities, like spices from Indonesia, to Amsterdam. It was a time when the Dutch ruled the economic world by trading around the globe. When goods and then services came to dominate, the Netherlands slowly lost its prime place. After soaking in the implications of this for today’s Experience Economy, I travelled through the museum seeing exhibits ranging from natural artefacts to naval artillery and of course great Dutch painting.

Something began to gnaw at me, however. Where was the *Night Watch*? At every turn from one hall to another, or hiking up and down staircases, I wondered: ‘Could the *Night Watch* be in the next room?’ I was disappointed time and time again. I began to pay less attention to the artefacts before me than to the glimpses of what might be through the next doorway, seeking with increasing intensity the very reason for my visit. Where was the *Night Watch*? Finally, after what seemed like hours, I stepped through one more doorway to a room unlike any other I had seen. The ceiling was higher, the tones more hushed… And there, stretched out across an entire wall, hung Rembrandt’s most famous painting the *Night Watch*. Its presentation was every bit a match for my anticipation. I, like so many other guests, stood transfixed in the presence of the crown jewel of the Rijksmuseum, indeed of the Netherlands.

After what seemed like an hour, but was probably no more than twenty minutes, I released the *Night Watch* from my gaze and slowly eased my way out of the room. I had the energy for only one more exhibit of Oriental artefacts but it was the painting that still filled my mind and I resolved to find out more about it and its creator. So I made one final stop: the gift shop where I bought a book about – what else? – Rembrandt van Rijn’s masterpiece. Only then did I step out into the cool early evening air of Amsterdam and walk back to my hotel along a canal once traversed by the master himself.

I have grown to love the *Night Watch*, the chiaroscuro use of light and shadow, Rembrandt’s use of space and perception of motion, so unlike other traditionally static military group portraits. But for me the most significant thing was the experience of reaching it. The anticipation. That short trip had all the dramatic structural elements that my co-author, Jim Gilmore, and I talk about in *The Experience Economy*. I often refer to dramatic structure in my talks and work with companies, with this very Rijksmuseum experience my favourite example.

The journey I made through the museum was not planned by it to heighten my anticipation and create dramatic structure – but, it could have been, for instance by using online technology. My visit had effective drama and such dramatic structures can be designed. For us today, the computer and its various applications are the stage, providing the platforms from which we enact our own scenarios and activities.

Dramatic structure is a way of embracing theatre that creates a higher level of engagement. It’s about designing time. You look at the flow of an experience. Our discussion of this in *The Experience Economy* had its origins when I discovered the Freytag Diagram, a concept of the 19th-century German novelist Gustav Freytag. The diagram is a means of graphing the plot of a story, showing the rising action as an up-sloping line, the crisis forming the peak, and the resolution or falling action forming the down-slope.
The diagram forms a rough pyramid. From the opening exposition, the story evolves through an exciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or dénouement. That is what businesses should be doing to maximise engagement with their employees and customers. Create and stimulate involvement, suspense, excitement and enthusiasm. If you enter the space where the Night Watch now hangs in the Rijksmuseum’s Gallery of Honour, you will notice it has its own Freytag diagram right there. The rise in action involves you getting closer and closer and gradually finding your way to the front line of viewing. That’s the climax of the experience.

And you just don’t turn your back on it and leave. You slowly retreat, observe how people are reacting to the painting, and look at it from different angles. Then you have the dénouement of leaving the gallery and moving on to other exhibits or again reliving it in the museum shop.

One of the other great things I learned during my time at the University of Amsterdam was the importance of authenticity in today’s Experience Economy. Like the provenance of a painting, people want to know and feel that the offerings they buy are authentic, produced by companies they perceive as real. To manage their perceptions of authenticity, companies must follow Shakespeare’s advice ‘To thine own self be true’ and, following as night the day, ‘Thou canst not then be false to any man’. Here are the two key standards of authenticity: being true to self, and being what you say you are to others. Meet these standards to be perceived as real-real.

Starbucks is one company that recognises this. Witness its new cafés, such as the one (not coincidentally) on Rembrandtplein where the Night Watch sculpture shows off the painting’s three-dimensional power. The Starbucks experience is also one of great dramatic structure, where you order your personal custom cup of coffee (or tea – my standard order is a venti non-fat 6-pump no-water chai tea latte extra hot for Joe), and then experience the theatre of it being made just for you, with the heightened anticipation and sometimes the crisis of not being sure someone else didn’t take your order. But then they call out your name and present your cup – climax!

There is a phrase being used by some companies lately called the ‘golden ticket’. It comes from the film Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory where a golden ticket created anticipation for the actual experience. So while everyone cannot go to the Trippenhuis and experience what I did, there can be other ways to give people that sense of anticipation through a golden ticket. This could be, for instance, a special admission pass focused on the Night Watch, or an online experience that would be the equivalent of a movie trailer giving a taste of what’s in store in the physical place.

The great advantage of a museum like the Rijksmuseum and its collection is that you know you are encountering the real. Not only its objects but the museum itself is real-real. There is a high level of authenticity emanating from the age and rich heritage of the museum and the city of Amsterdam where so many of the masterworks were actually painted, only a walk away from where they now hang. It’s a unique experience everyone should have.

Joe Pine (Kansas City, USA, 1958) is an internationally acclaimed author, speaker and management advisor to Fortune 500 companies and entrepreneurial start-ups alike. He is co-founder of Strategic Horizons LLP, a thinking studio dedicated to helping
businesses conceive and design new ways of adding value to their economic offerings. In 1999 Pine and his partner James H. Gilmore wrote the best-selling book *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*, which demonstrates how goods and services are no longer enough; what companies must offer today are experiences – memorable events that engage each customer in an inherently personal way. In 2011 *The Experience Economy* came out for the first time in paperback as an Updated Edition with new ideas, new frameworks, and many new exemplars.

See myself, and so poignantly, in the Portrait of a Girl Dressed in Blue by Johannes Corneliszoon Verspronck, at that point of puberty looking towards adulthood, but with no idea how to make the journey. No sense of self to act as a reliable guide. I can see her expression on my own face, as I looked in the mirror hoping for a miraculous transformation into the kind of young women I saw around me, apparently blissfully self-assured, so effortlessly elegant, sure-footed enough to know how to flirt and have fun but also to make their way in careers and pursuits that had long been the preserve of men. But no, just as the Girl in Blue, I looked at the world with a wondering, slightly puzzled look, begging for approval.

Clearly this girl moves in more refined circles than I did with her silk and lace finery, the soft feather in her hand, her hair done with care so that she will be a credit to the family. By contrast I, growing through puberty into adolescence in the 1960s, was given the freedom to dress and present myself as I wished which meant a great many mistakes – too short mini skirts on chubby legs, V-neck mohair sweaters that dipped embarrassingly low, hair like a shaggy dog’s mane over my eyes. I looked at best messily weird and at worst
well as demonstrations, questioning what right men had to all sorts of privileges to which disadvantaged women were denied. In my case it has meant a passionate involvement with women's liberation, a determination to have laws changed (as has happened), and equally important attitudes that diminish and oppress women, challenged.

It was finding feminism that gave me the strongest sense of my identity, my entitlement to use the abilities I have to their full capacity, in competition as well as in co-operation with men. And a three-year stay in Amsterdam was an important part of that. In the Netherlands I found men and women far more advanced in their way of being equals in work and play, of arguing the toss over ideas. There was a level of sexual liberation I had certainly not encountered before and so I learned that I did not need to settle with a man, any man who wanted me, in order to have sex. I could choose.

These growing experiences gave me the sense of self-sufficiency that meant I did not see finding a husband as a key to my place in society, my survival indeed. Yet that is presumably what the Girl in Blue could look forward to and so her life would have to be lived in a way that would make her a desirable prize but one that was not expected to speak up if she had other ideas.

So my reaction to this painting, as I look into that plump young face, my doppelganger, was that I wanted to take her with me on the journey through life that I have had. I have been given a wonderful opportunity to be the person I wish to be, to explore my intellect and abilities according to my wishes, to make hideous mistakes because there was nobody to shackle my movements, but to achieve great satisfactions on my own merit. And while I don't believe the way we women do everything, and the way things have panned out for men and for women in the 21st century, are perfect by a
long way, I do feel that I was supremely fortunate to be a part of this contemporary history. To know, when I took a partner and had children, that I could live my life the way I wished and that meant a career in journalism, a life in which I have my say.

And yet, we can look at depictions from centuries past as much as we like, but we will never actually know whether we have read them right, interpreted their expectations as they would have done. So it just could be that Miss Blue would have turned to me with a look of compassion at what my trajectory to adulthood and beyond would be, and feel blessedly grateful for her lot.

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Angela Neustatter (Buckinghamshire, England, 1943) is a widely published writer and influential social commentator. She lives in London and writes for quality newspapers and magazines in the UK. Angela has written 14 non-fiction books dealing with a wide range of subjects. They include Hyenas in Petticoats, a look at the years of feminism in the UK between 1968 and 1988; This is Our Time, dealing with the psychology of mid-life; A Home for the Heart (2013), exploring the importance of home in our lives; and in 2015, with her son Cato, published The Lifestyle Entrepreneur on how to turn enterprise into a money-making way of living. Angela has edited magazines for UNICEF and Young Minds, a magazine concerned with young people’s mental health, and has written two books on that subject, which are used as reference for teenagers in schools.
Alain de Botton talks about

View of Houses in Delft, known as

The Little Street

c. 1658 / oil on canvas / 54.3 x 44 cm.

by Johannes Vermeer
(1632 Delft – 1675 Delft)

Propaganda for an unheroic, ordinary good Life

A merica has its Declaration of Independence and Constitution, the United Nations its Charter. If the Netherlands would have a Founding Document, according to Alain de Botton it would not be a text on paper, but Johannes Vermeer’s The Little Street. ‘It is the Dutch contribution to the world’s understanding of happiness’, he thinks. ‘The Dutch are very alive to the charm of everyday bourgeois life. In this they are unusual. They were the first nation to turn away from aristocratic grandeur and religious fanaticism and to make the reverence for family, commerce and nation the centrepiece of the meaning of life. Dutch values have now spread across the world – even to South Korea, for example. And that’s why this work is so popular.’

De Botton saw Vermeer’s painting for the first time when preparing Art is Therapy at the Rijksmuseum. For this show the British philosopher, together with art historian John Armstrong, commented on some 150 works from the collection from a therapeutic instead of an art-historical point of view. Roaming the museum halls at eleven o’clock at night, he came across The Little Street. ‘I remember being
In that sense *The Little Street* rightly belongs in the Gallery of Honour, De Botton agrees. But although it is widely regarded as a masterpiece he is ill at ease with that label. According to him *The Little Street* should ideally have no iconic status. ‘I am suspicious of words like “masterpiece” because they are so unhelpful to the enjoyment of art, which for me is about finding a connection between what I need and what the art work can provide. It is very hard to feel natural around something called a masterpiece, just as it is hard to relax and draw pleasure from a very famous person. One feels intimidated. The extreme fame of a work of art is almost always unhelpful because, to touch us, art has to elicit a personal response – and that is hard when a painting is said to be so distinguished. *The Little Street* is quite out of synch with its status in any case because, above all else, it wants to show us that the ordinary can be very special.’

When contemplating *The Little Street* in the larger context of the Gallery of Honour, De Botton acknowledges it having a lot in common with other works. He points out Adriaen Coorte's *A Bowl of Strawberries on a Stone Plinth* (1696) as a monument to something as ordinary as fruit – ‘Coorte wants to re-sensitize us to their extraordinary beauty’. But closest to Vermeer comes Pieter de Hooch's *Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard* (1663). ‘De Hooch articulates the same kind of Dutch love of bourgeois order and modesty. Both artists are aware that it can be hard to see beauty and interest in the things we have to do every day and in the environments we live in. We have jobs to go to, bills to pay, homes to clean, and we deeply resent the demands they make on us. The linen cupboard itself is an embodiment of what could, in unfavourable circumstances, be seen as boring, banal, repetitive – even unsexy. But the picture moves us because we recognize the truth of the message. It gives voice to the right attitude: the big themes in life – the search

delighted to be alone with it. It was so modest, so ordinary, so loveable. And as time passes by I like it more and more, because its message of “ordinary life can be good” becomes more important as my life becomes simultaneously more filled with disappointment and more filled with success.’

*The Little Street* depicts everyday life in 17th-century Delft. With great eye for detail Vermeer painted a woman embroidering and another cleaning the alley, two children absorbed in a game played on the pavement in front of the house. The scene looks very casual, but the artist took great pains bringing it to life. ‘I like the patient brushstroke of the endless bricks’, says De Botton. ‘To spend so much time delineating something so ordinary, that is kindness, that is modesty.’

The author of books such as *Religion for Atheists* and *Status Anxiety* is not particularly fond of Vermeer’s early work, which mostly deals with religious and mythological themes. ‘Those works are very uninteresting to people today. We like Vermeer as the poet of the everyday. We like the fact he is making propaganda for an unheroic, ordinary good life. *The Little Street* is an utterly anti-heroic picture, it’s a weapon against false images of glamour.’

This message matches De Botton’s personal preference. ‘I love this unheroic streak in all art. I love Proust – very unheroic. I like the films of Eric Rohmer, the music of Natalie Merchant, the architecture of the Bauhaus. I like these because I have been scared both by extreme poverty and extreme wealth – both seem to me differently appalling. The middle way seems eminently sane and desirable. *The Little Street* is where I would like to live, not practically but spiritually. Still, the value of this painting is not merely contained in its moral message. It is a work of art, an idea made concrete, made sensory – with true genius.’
for prosperity, happiness, good relationships – are always grounded in the way we approach the little things.’
Jan Six talks about

The Milkmaid
c. 1660 / oil on canvas / 45.5 x 41 cm.

by Johannes Vermeer
(1632 Delft – 1675 Delft)

Few people can claim such a personal connection with the old masters as Jan Six. His 17th-century forefather Jan Six, the first in a line of what are now twelve generations of patriarchs bearing the same name, was an avid art collector and a close friend of Rembrandt van Rijn. The artist portrayed him several times, resulting in the stylistically daring portrait that is considered one of Rembrandt’s very best. Through intermarriage with other aristocratic families, the Six family built up an impressive art collection. The Dutch state, however, confiscated part of this in 1907 because the family was unable to pay inheritance tax. The first time Jan Six XI saw the paintings in the Rijksmuseum was when he was eleven and his father showed him around. ‘He pointed them out: that one and the one next to it, the one on the opposite wall, and that one, and that one. It was kind of sad.’

Johannes Vermeer’s The Milkmaid is one of the pieces from the Six Family collection. ‘Ever since I was little, my father and grandfather told me about it. It was our family’s Mona Lisa. Nestlé’s use of the milkmaid on their yoghurts made the painting as internationally famous as Leonardo’s portrait; everybody in the world knows it.’
Six, a self-confessed ‘Rembrandt lover’, is particularly fond of Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul and Rembrandt’s Son Titus in a Monk’s Habit. To be honest, he doesn’t care very much for Vermeer. Vermeer is too artificial; his work is about skilfully executed optical illusion. It’s a quest for precision, mathematical and calculating, but that doesn’t necessarily make him a great artist with a distinct style. His brand of hyperrealism resonates well with Americans, who have more or less kidnapped him, especially after Tracy Chevalier wrote Girl with the Pearl Earring and Peter Webber turned the novel into a film. Of course, his short life and small body of work have fuelled the myth surrounding him. But I think even if he had lived longer, he wouldn’t have evolved. His last known works are mostly stiff, somewhat dead and clinical. The Milkmaid is Vermeer at his best.

‘Timeless’ is the first qualification that comes to Six’s mind when thinking about Vermeer’s masterpiece. Woman Reading a Letter is stylistically interesting but it’s dated. It’s an image from the past; nobody writes letters anymore. Pouring milk into a bowl will always be the same, there is no contemporary, technologically advanced way of doing it. The rolled up sleeves, the red, working-class hands – the scene exudes physical immediacy. The Milkmaid is an iconic image of normalcy. Here, Vermeer depicts an everyday woman in a monumental way: she is the true pillar of 17th-century society; not the elite who had itself portrayed with great pomp and ceremony. I realise this may sound a bit odd coming from me, considering my background, but I think it’s an important, almost socialist statement.

One detail in the painting has fascinated Six ever since he was an art history student: the nail at the upper centre. ‘Other artists like Fabritius have painted nails, but this is by far the most beautiful nail ever painted’, he declares. ‘There used to be another nail at the right, but x-ray photographs have brought to light that Vermeer originally painted a picture frame there, which he subsequently painted over. As a visual reference though he painted a solitary nail-hole. You can imagine the frame just having been taken down, the hole is at the right height for a picture. The nail on the left, however, is not. It’s situated way too high, it serves no purpose. For years I’ve wrecked my brain trying to figure out what it was for. It made me come back to the painting over and over again. The nail was Vermeer’s trick to make me look.’

When – after a ten-year reconstruction – the Rijksmuseum reopened in 2013, Six rushed over to the Gallery of Honour to check on his favourite nail, and couldn’t find it. The combination of frame and lighting from above shed a shadow across the top of the painting, obscuring the nail. For Six this ‘artistic amputation’ illustrates what he thinks is a fundamental shortcoming of museums. ‘These works of art have been conceived by an individual for consumption in an intimate setting by another individual, a select group of people at most. They were never meant to hang on a wall next to ten similar works. But a living room setting is unrealistic if we want to accommodate a mass audience, so a room in a museum – a truly surreal phenomenon – is the only option. These brilliant highlights are redefined for the masses, but that has little to do with the work’s initial intentions. The Milkmaid symbolizes the masses but as a work of art it’s elitist yet has fallen victim to mass culture.’

The same is true for the Gallery of Honour, Six feels, which was initiated as a showroom for the painterly canon. ‘Two-thirds of the names above the pilasters, referring to the original layout, have been banished from the gallery. Simplification has set in. A militia group portrait by Bartholomeus van der Helst that used to hang next to Rembrandt’s Night Watch has been relegated to a backroom. Adriaen Coorte, a 17th-century equivalent of Warhol, has, over the past decade, moved up in the hierarchy and in ten-years’ time will probably have five works in the Gallery of
Honour. The paintings are thought of as icons. They are not seen for what they are, placed in an historical and art historical context, but for what they’ve been labelled as.

Six’ method of calibrating his own eye and mind is labour intensive. Standing in front of a painting he writes down all his observations. When done he flips the page and does so again. He repeats this process at least ten times, then removes attempts two to nine, and checks what has remained the same and what has changed. He says it grants him a completely different understanding of a work, which is essential for him as an art dealer. He tries to instil the same sensitivity in his clients. ‘People who buy old masters are in it for the long haul. Building a collection is like composing a symphony; it requires discipline and concentration, the ability to focus and truly see. In that sense art is elitist – not socially, but intellectually.’

Jan Six (Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 1978) studied art history under Rembrandt-expert Ernst van de Wetering and graduated on Baroque painting. Whilst studying, he worked at the Amsterdam Historical Museum. After having been employed by Sotheby’s for five years he started Jan Six Fine Art, which has offices in Amsterdam and London. Six specialises in old master paintings with a strong focus on Dutch and Flemish work from between 1400 and 1800. Jan Six is the 11th-generation descendent of writer and regent Jan Six (1618-1700). Since 2000 he has curated the Six Collection that manages the family’s heritage.
Pierre Audi talks about

*Still Life with a Silver Jug and a Porcelain Bowl*

C. 1655 – 1660 / oil on canvas / 73.8 x 65.2 cm.

by Willem Kalf

(1619 Rotterdam – 1693 Amsterdam)

Although his mother collected still lifes, Pierre Audi admits he did not understand these paintings for a long time and considered the genre rather dull. That is, until he encountered Willem Kalf’s painting with the silver ewer, gilt glass holder and four lemons in a Chinese porcelain bowl. Suddenly he could relate. ‘Kalf made me realise that a still life is a form of theatre’, the famous opera director says. ‘The scene was intentionally created by the painter. He chose these objects, placed them in a setting and made sure the light hit them in a specific way. He’s a director of dead objects and the objects become characters.’

In this scene the drama plays out in many different ways, often as an interaction between opposites. ‘The not particularly luxurious citrus fruits are combined with a Dutch jug, which is so ornate and complicated it’s almost Jugendstil. There’s a strong contrast between rich and poor, but also between the natural, the organic on the one hand and man-made artefacts on the other. Moreover, the Chinese bowl and the Dutch pitcher enter into a cultural dialogue, probably with colonial undertones. And, like almost all 17th-century paintings, this work is about death. The entire scene fades into the dark background, slipping into the endless perspective of time. The fruits will eventually perish, just as

*The Drama is in the Abstraction*
we humans do. It’s a very Calvinist and Dutch way of dealing with death; rather matter of fact-like: dying is tough, but life is short and we have to deal with death as part of life.’

As full of stories and messages as Audi perceives the painting to be, he also qualifies the scene as ‘utterly useless’. ‘Why would you drink from a vessel this complicated if you can also drink from a simple glass? Why display four lemons no one is likely to eat like that? And why is the bowl positioned in such a peculiar way? There is no good reason for any of it. You’ll find this combination of objects nowhere else; it’s so artificial it’s almost absurd. The composition was solely conceived as an excuse to paint and that demonstrates the painter’s absolute sense of freedom and authority.’

Audi loves zooming in on the work’s details, slowly disassembling them and seeking deeper layers. He is particularly fascinated by the lemons. ‘What Kalf is doing is showing us four different versions of the same object as well as their slight reflection in both the silver ewer and the glass candlestick, an almost demonic interplay of light and dark. Every form has its own colour, a variation on yellow, but every nuance has to be pure in itself and in combination with the others. In that sense the painting is comparable to Baroque opera’s “da capo arias”. These arias repeat text and music over and over, but every time they signify something different, intend a different impact. It’s a bit of a riddle, both at a spiritual and an intellectual level.’

According to Audi, Kalf’s intentions for doing all of this were clear: to create abstraction. A long time before the cubists started deconstructing fruit bowls and Mondriaan reduced the world to primary colours, planes and lines, 17th-century geniuses like Kalf were already painting what Audi calls ‘a festival of forms’. He considers it an essentially Dutch phenomenon, characteristic of the national soul even. ‘It’s the poetry of the abstract, the mystery and alchemy of form, colour and light. In still lifes, like this one by Kalf, the interaction between these elements is much more sophisticated than in portraits or other realist works. Those works are too direct, too much one on one. Here the viewer is challenged to make his own theatre.’

The drama is in the abstraction, something Audi also likes to say about his own work. It’s exactly because of the Dutch tradition of abstraction that he feels at home in Amsterdam, where he has lived and worked since 1989. ‘In other countries people always demand a precise story. They need to know why things are happening and because of whom. But this striving for completeness, this asking of too many concrete questions is fatal to art. I need the freedom of abstraction and in the Netherlands I never have to answer those questions. Dutch audiences accept a certain amount of mystery and understand that the theatrical experience is in the interaction between things seen and unseen.’

‘That said, it’s not always easy to impress a contemporary audience. I sometimes have to surprise them. I have to push my abstraction further than the 17th-century painters who were revolutionary in defining, translating and depicting a new dimension and were recognised as such. The world has changed and a noncommittal attitude looms large as today’s biggest danger. We have everything at the tip of our fingers, but in the end we have nothing because we’ve lost the ability to focus. It’s more interesting to look at the world around us with concentration. Paintings like Kalf’s can help us to develop or redevelop that skill. It’s what the old masters can teach the rich yet poor 21st century: the poetry of limited inventiveness.’
Pierre Audi’s (Beirut, Lebanon, 1957) life has been steeped in art and culture from the start. As a student of the French Lycée he initiated a cinema club inviting speakers such as Jacques Tati and Pier Paolo Pasolini. As a teenager he moved to Great Britain via Paris and studied history at Exeter College, Oxford. Here he directed Timon of Athens by Shakespeare at the Oxford Playhouse. In 1979 he founded the experimental Almeida Theatre in London, where he directed numerous productions during the 1980s. In 1988 he moved to Amsterdam, where he became the artistic director of the Dutch National Opera. His globally renowned productions include Wagner’s Ring Cycle, a Monteverdi cycle and a Mozart cycle. He directs all over the world from the Metropolitan Opera New York to the Salzburger Festspiele. Between 2004 and 2014 he was also the artistic director of the Holland Festival. As of October 2015 Audi will combine his work as artistic director of the Dutch National Opera with the artistic leadership of the Park Avenue Armory in New York. Audi has received many awards, the Leslie Boosey Award (1990) and the Johannes Vermeerpris (2009) among them. He has been knighted and has received honorary medals in Sweden and France.
My choice may seem extraordinary. I chose a painting that I did not necessarily know anything about. I had never seen it before. But it stirred a variety of emotions in me. And I think that is the essence of all true art. There may be more refined and aesthetic paintings in the Gallery of Honour than The Merry Family but in my opinion, none of them match the originality and self-mockery displayed in the work of Jan Steen. His paintings had social relevance. You see that he was not concerned with portraying status. Instead, he questioned human behaviour and he used humour, which, in my experience, is the ultimate way to communicate.

Looking at The Merry Family you can almost hear the cacophony of this wild party. Three generations are there, singing, making music, indulging in food and drink and smoking pipes. Plates and pans are strewn over the floor. No classical Golden Age still life here! Anarchy, excess and domestic chaos reign. Steen turned iconography on its head in the 1600s. And he had a lasting impact. The Dutch expression ‘a Jan Steen household’ is still used today to describe a messy home. Steen touched a nerve in the traditionally neat-and-tidy Netherlands.
The Merry Family is a staged scene, almost theatrical, where he used some of his own family members and animals as models. Children copy the lifestyle of the adults. A note hanging from the mantelpiece suggests the moral of the story: ‘As the old sing, so shall the young twitter’. Steen also painted himself into the picture playing the bagpipes. He often placed himself in scenes, possibly mocking himself as well as others in his work. And of course he is confronting us, the viewers. He was a master of ambiguity. This is pure visual satire. A departure from anything other 17th-century artists were doing. There were no stand-up comedians in the 1600s. Steen used art as a medium for satire and went off at a tangent. That’s why I admire him. For his daring.

Looking at The Merry Family makes me reflect on my own life. How to find a balance in life and work. If you knew in the beginning how difficult it would be, would you still undertake the journey? There’s a physical and mental price to it. My photographs of disappearing cultures in the book Before They Pass Away are not satirical however. In fact I have elevated my subjects. Some of the tribes had been portrayed in a disrespectful way in the past and I tried to invert this. So I photographed them in a classic iconographic way that told their own stories.
This is not Steen-like of course. But Jan Steen is more where my soul lies. I do feel that my life echoes his life. I have documented my family life too. It’s a major photographic project I have been busy with for over twenty years and have not yet completed. It is a documentation of my own family chaos. It forms one of the largest bodies of work I have taken on. None of it has been shown yet. I have a dream that one day I will make a book and an exhibition from it. The images have all been made with one camera, one lens and analogue film.

My wife Ashakine and I have children of eighteen, fifteen and thirteen. We have three dogs, two budgerigars, five rats, and two gerbils. On every family trip we have rescued an animal and brought it home. At one stage we had seventeen animals in the house. Ours is a Jan Steen household indeed. And we’re going on holiday soon with six teenagers and three dogs. The more the merrier. No doubt anarchy will ensue. But it is agreed I will hold one family photo session every day. Like Steen, I have always had an element of theatrical presentation in my life and work. With indigenous tribes in far corners of the world I have found that the best way to communicate with them is to present yourself in a vulnerable and profound way. Similarly if I am talking to an audience about my work, you capture their attention by being humble and humorous in a self-mocking manner. In presentations, if I take myself too seriously or describe everything too literally, everyone falls asleep. But if I set myself up in a self-deprecating way, everyone’s ears prick up. So I often begin talks describing in a graphic way how I fail. It always works.

This applies also to my family project where there is an element of theatre, an element of romance and an enormous amount of humour and mockery in the images I have made with my family. I remember I was having difficulty communicating with my sixteen-year-old son. I can take life too seriously and that doesn’t help! He refused to talk or respond to me. My smart young daughter said: ‘Let’s take him to Ikea and get some stuff for his room.’ But that didn’t work. He grumbled that everything was too colourful. Finally, in desperation, I sat down on the floor. Then my daughter came up with a brush that had a sucker on the end of the handle. ‘Dad, remember when we were small we stuck things on your bald head? Can I stick this brush on your head?’ she asked. In a short time, she and other kids had stuck a bunch of brushes on my head. My son appeared from under his hood, took off his headphones and took a picture of me with his iPhone. He put the image online with the tagline ‘The Perks of Being Bald and Bored in Ikea’.

Two days later, my son came running into my studio. ‘Dad! Dad!’ he shouted, ‘I’ve had one-and-a-half-million Likes! Can my friends come round tomorrow and discuss with you how they can get Likes?’ This is an example of how, through imagery, humour bonds.

If you are departing from the norm, as Steen did, and as I aspire to do in my work, you are open to criticism from all directions. So I really admire him as someone who didn’t play it safe. More than the aesthetics of The Merry Family, it’s Steen’s out-of-the-box concept that gives him, for me, a unique place in the Gallery of Honour.

Jimmy Nelson (Sevenoaks, England, 1967) looks upon his life as a ‘never-ending journey’. Literally, the world is his stage. The celebrated photographer has sought out some of our most elusive indigenous tribes whose ways of life are slipping out of existence. His iconic book Before They Pass Away is an odyssey to people whose existence and heritage are at risk. By bonding with his subjects in the
most extreme conditions, Nelson portrays them with reverence in a way that is highly aesthetic and ethnographically profound. The urge to travel and the quest for belonging play a central role in Nelson’s life. As an ‘expat kid’, he lived in several developing countries until he was eight and was sent for ten years to a Jesuit boarding school in England. At sixteen, Jimmy contracted malaria, which resulted in alopecia totalis, a condition in which he lost all of his hair overnight. It was a radical change in which Nelson experienced the gap between his internal self and how he was perceived. In 1987, aged twenty, he departed on a year-long expedition of self-discovery in Tibet, on foot (‘the one place on the planet where other people are totally bald’). The acclaimed images Nelson captured on that trip launched a photographic career that took him through the war zones of Yugoslavia, South America, Afghanistan, Kashmir and the Middle East.

In 1994, he and his Dutch wife Ashkaine produced Literary Portraits of China, a forty-month project that took them to remote corners of the People’s Republic. The resulting images were exhibited in the People’s Palace on Tiananmen Square in Beijing and followed by a world tour. Nelson finally settled in Amsterdam with his wife and family and combines commercial photography with adventure and discovery. ‘In essence,’ he says, ‘I’m about distilling the most basic elements of our human-ness, the thread that connects us all’.
The year Jan Asselijn painted *The Threatened Swan* – c. 1650 according to art historians – Johan de Witt was still more than two decades away from being murdered and becoming an anti-royalist martyr. He hadn’t even been elected to the office of ‘raadpensionaris’ (grand pensionary) yet, the most important political post during the time of the United Provinces (1581-1795). His adversary Willem III, the later stadtholder and presumably the person who ordered De Witt’s assassination, was a baby at the time. Still, until this very day both men’s names are inextricably linked to Asselijn’s painting. Its later owners had the word ‘raadpensionaris’ painted underneath the swan. Above the dog in the bottom left-hand corner it reads ‘de viand van de staat’ (the enemy of the state). And one of the eggs in the nest has ‘Holland’ written on it. These seven words turn a nature scene into a political allegory.

‘This addition of words limits the picture, it takes away from any other interpretation,’ says Zakeria Yacoob. The former South African Constitutional Court judge is adamant about his rejection of the political narrative that has become commonplace. He has never seen the painting, though. He can’t since he’s blind. Instead, he had the painting described to him by three different people. ‘The swan is the terrorist’,
is his preliminary verdict. ‘Like all terrorists it is essentially good, but when threatened it turns violent. It goes into attack mode in order to protect itself and its loved ones.’

Yacoob’s interpreters overlooked the dog at first or didn’t see it at all. ‘The cause of all this aggression not being clear, really adds to the idea of the swan as a terrorist’, he says. ‘The dog is in the dark, seen from the back, almost abstract. If this painting makes one thing clear it’s that important things are often not very apparent.’

Although he ‘feels neutral’ about the dog – ‘it’s just there, it hasn’t done anything morally wrong, history has painted the dog as bad, not the painting’ – Yacoob definitely feels sympathy for the swan. ‘It’s relatively powerless and my sympathies always lie with minorities. Taking into account the critical moment it’s in, right before the fight, the interpretation might shift from terrorist to freedom fighter or statesman. It depends on one’s mindset and perspective what the swan stands for. Yesterday’s terrorist can be tomorrow’s leader. It happened to Nelson Mandela. He was locked up in prison, yet later on, this so-called terrorist became president.’

Having a painting described to him for his sake feels artificial, Yacoob thinks. Audio tours can be helpful, but they often focus on contextualisation rather than plain description and tend to impose a strict order – not something the judge likes to be subjected to. When in a museum, he prefers to hover about and feed on other people’s spontaneous reactions: their oohs and ahs. Still, for Yacoob, experiencing a painting is very much an intellectual exercise of drawing up a mental structure using words. ‘It’s different from music, which appeals directly to my emotions. With paintings, the thinking comes before the feeling. A play or a movie is somewhere in between, depending on the dialogue and soundtrack of course.’

Unlike appreciating smaller sculptures, which he can touch and put together in his head, ‘looking at a painting’ is inherently mediated for Yacoob. The limitations involved concern the quality of the description, but also the usefulness of the vocabulary. Yacoob lost his eyesight when he was sixteen months old and has no conscious recollection of seeing. ‘The colour thing I don’t understand – if someone describes the clouds on the upper right as rosy pink it doesn’t mean anything to me. Light and dark is something else; it has to do with contrast. One could say these are limitations, but in a way they also grant me great freedom. My mind can have its way with the picture without being limited by the actual painting.’

This intellectual freedom leads to hypotheses. ‘What if the dog were in full attack mode? Or the swan was protecting not eggs, but a nest of chicks? Would we feel different about both parties?’, Yacoob muses. ‘I guess a lot of people would dub the dog the true evildoer. But then again, it could be really hungry having not eaten for days. The animal should not be blamed for its natural instincts. But I’d definitely be more moved if the eggs were baby swans, living things. On the other hand, as it is, the swan can be viewed as the protector of unborn life. Seen in such light, this painting could play a role in the abortion debate.’

Getting the full picture takes more than a few hours, Yacoob admits. ‘I have to think about the swan in various contexts and there’s no final version. But that’s what artists do: they raise questions rather than create certainty. And this painting definitely does the latter. It asks how the world works, how the balance of forces operates and which is the weaker and which the stronger force.’

Still, Yacoob would be very hesitant to use Asselijn’s The Threatened Swan – or any other artwork, for that matter – in his judgements, a practice not unknown amongst his peers.
‘I’m very workmanlike’, he states. ‘I stay away from flowery language and always use smaller, more simple words rather than difficult, longer ones. A judgement should be accessible to ordinary people and not be a literary or art critical feat. But as in art, the meaning of words in judgements depends on the context. In some cases where it reads may, it means must, and shall can be may. In that sense a judgement is a narrative of one sort or another too. And writing it, shaping and fashioning it to make it say what it needs to say can be just as taxing as making a painting.’

Durban-born Zakeria Mohammed Yacoob (Durban, South Africa, 1948) was blinded by meningitis aged sixteen months. After attending the Arthur Blaxall School for the Blind, he went on to study English and private law at University College, Durban. As an advocate since 1973, he fought apartheid laws and emergency measures, and represented high-ranking members of the ANC, the ‘Durban Six’ and United Democratic Front officials. As a member of the Natal Indian Congress executive from 1981 to 1991 Yacoob fulfilled an active role in the anti-apartheid struggle. In 1998 he was appointed judge to the Constitutional Court of South Africa by the president, which he served until 2013.
Paul Bennett talks about

*A Mother Delousing her Child's Hair*, known as

*A Mother’s Duty*

c. 1658 – 1660 / oil on canvas / 52.5 x 61 cm.

by Pieter de Hooch
(1629 Rotterdam – 1684 Amsterdam)

This painting was an immediate choice for me. Pieter de Hooch captured a snapshot of normal everyday life, a pure moment of empathy from a dutiful mother. A mother tenderly inspecting her little daughter’s hair for lice evokes the earliest memory I have in Singapore where I grew up. I must have been about three years old and I had burnt my back on the beach in the sun. My mother gently stroked soothing Calamine lotion onto my back and I stopped crying.

I look at this painting and I see a mother’s unconditional love to give comfort to her child, without judgement or fear. I received that from my mother and this painting brings it strongly back to me. Her hand was both firm and gentle. It was done with love. I can still smell the Calamine lotion. Art, so realistically depicted, is like a fragrance. The memory it conjures up of that intimate moment in my childhood makes me smile and feel sad at the same time.

*A Mother’s Duty* is also layered with rich colours and has details that bring it to life. I see nuances like the wooden potty chair, with De Hooch’s signature on it, in the foreground. Being trained in graphic design, I see how Pieter de Hooch’s composition works. Everything radiates around the mother. The copper warmer for the box-bed, the Delft Blue tiles, and the play of light. And that bottle on the window ledge is it
The kind of things we look at are the obvious things. You enter the everyday life of people. When IKEA wanted a design for a storage facility for children, a colleague of mine crawled around under tables to get a child’s-eye-view of life and came up with a storage system that could be easily attached to the underside of tables. People also create their own design solutions. They store pencils in their hair and wrap tea-bag strings around cup handles. Small human gestures and observances can result in new products and ideas.

Sesame Street was conceived by a mother who saw her daughter blankly watching a test card on television. The idea for luminous cats’ eyes marking road division in the UK was conceived when Percy Shaw saw his own cat’s eyes shine in torchlight one night.

Design is all about using your eyes and seeing afresh. Like the astute unpretentious observation of Pieter de Hooch in *A Mother’s Duty*, to look closely at people, put yourself in their shoes, reframe the ordinary and be alert to the possible significance of the smallest detail from everyday life. Small is The New Big.

A few years ago I was asked to speak in the UK parliament. Everyone invited was asked to introduce themselves. ‘And what do you do?’ I was asked. ‘I’m a designer’, I replied. ‘Oh, why are you here?’ the questioner asked. ‘We go out into everyday life, observe the details and try to create things that change people’s lives for the better’, I said. Silence.

Then, from the balcony, came a shout from an MP: ‘I think that’s what we are supposed to do as well!’ Laughter in the house. But it was true. I do feel that design can make the world a better place.
Paul Bennett (Gloucester, England, 1963) is IDEO’s Chief Creative Officer. As a partner and one of five senior executives, Paul works with clients, partners and colleagues to bring to market human-centric, commercially successful, and socially significant new businesses, products, services and experiences. He is responsible for content excellence across IDEO and is active in developing and publishing new thinking in the field of human-centred and design-led innovation. A Brit who spent his early years in Singapore, Paul has an outstanding international career. He created IDEO’s largest global practice, Consumer Experience Design; ran its San Francisco office, setting a robust and creative direction; extended IDEO’s international reach in founding its presence in China; established and led its New York office, increasing IDEO’s share of influence in the US market; and delivered impact to clients and new growth to IDEO’s business in Europe. Today, Paul continues to provide creative leadership and cross-pollination of insights and ideas to clients and colleagues on an extended scale by travelling, learning and working across the globe.

As a sought-after speaker, he has addressed The World Economic Forum; Boao Forum for Asia; TED Global; TEDx Toboku, Dubai and Amazonia; The Economist Redesigning Business Summit; the AOL CEO Conference; the American Express Luxury Summit; and Tokyo Midtown Opening. Paul’s thought leadership is published in a range of influential media including The Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg Businessweek, Harvard Business Review, The Independent, The Guardian, China Entrepreneur Magazine, The Straits Times in Singapore and ABC TV in Australia. He featured recently in the prime-time BBC documentary Genius of Design. An inspiring educator, Paul has taught and coached students from colleges like Stanford University, the Royal College of Art (UK), Columbia Business School and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.
Postles were usually painted as idealised figures in the 17th century. Rembrandt was unique in that he painted himself as an apostle who looks like a normal person. There is nothing holy or remote about this St Paul. Shoulders shrugged, eyebrows arched and brow crumpled, he is a human being we can all relate to. You feel you could actually meet him in the street. It’s the look of a confessional sinner perhaps. Certainly no gods are blowing wind from the clouds here.

I would rather have a reproduction of a Rembrandt self-portrait in my hotel room than an original portrait by anyone else. Unlike most other portrait painters, Rembrandt did not idealise his subjects: he hinted at their frailties as well as strengths; he had human insight and showed it.

Rembrandt made over eighty self-portraits, like an honest visual diary from youth to old age. You could say he was naturally self-conscious and certainly did not hide his pain. Apart perhaps from the insightful self-portraits made today by the Dutch artist Philip Akkerman, no Dutch artist I can think of has focused on the genre to that extent. You would also never find this realistic approach in Italian art. And not

Wim Delvoye talks about

*Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*

1661 / oil on canvas / 91 x 77 cm.

by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn
(1606 Leiden – 1669 Amsterdam)

*A Saint for everyday Sinners*
in the paintings of Rubens either, except in one profound portrait he made of his daughters.

Rembrandt epitomises for me what Dutch painting is all about. It is essentially unpretentious and deals with realities of life. Although I’m Belgian, I relate to this tradition that’s imbedded in the Lowlands. Sharing the land taken from the sea led to egalitarianism. When you look at the work of Rembrandt and Van Gogh they were not dealing at all with subjects that were status enhancing – on the contrary. They were about reality. And artists like Jan Steen and Vermeer, who were both innkeepers with large families as well as being painters, drew inspiration from everyday scenes in life. Pieter de Hooch was another, while Van Ruisdael focused simply on the sky.

In his time, Rembrandt was regarded as provocative. In my time, I have been regarded as provocative. But the way I provoke is self-effacing. I am a sympathetic prankster who simply tells the truth. My *Cloaca* project for example arose out of my fascination with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, which were controversial at the time and dealt very much with down-to-earth scientific realities.

*Cloaca* deals with things below the belt, literally, with the digestive process. You can equate it with the drawings Rembrandt made in the streets of a dog shitting and people urinating and the monk he sketched fornicking in the bushes. The message is: we all share basic bodily functions. We are all animals. Grandness is an illusion. Rembrandt shows this humility and I feel humble too. I deal with basic things... like buckets, spades and a concrete mixer. My art is meant to appeal to ordinary people, not to elite groups.

Also humour can be a great equaliser. Some people compare elements of my work with the creativity of Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin had no pretentions at all and captured your imagination using the simplest of means. Children understand this and Picasso understood this. Rembrandt would have certainly understood it.

There is something uncool about art these days. The bland acceptance of trends and branding has little to do any more with craftsmanship and talent. There are exceptions in Holland like Dutch artist Mitsy Groenendijk who sculpts apes as metaphors for the human condition. But I feel creative craftsmanship in general has become undervalued.

*Wim Delvoye (Wervik, Belgium, 1965)*, is a Belgian neo-conceptual artist known for his inventive and often controversial projects. Much of his work is focused on the body and holds within it inherent contradictions. It can receive extreme reactions. Although he did not have a strict religious upbringing in his birthplace of Wervik, in West Flanders, Delvoye was nevertheless influenced by the Roman Catholic society in which he lived, in particular the religion’s reverence for symbols. His artistic career would later be marked by his ability to manipulate objects and to play seriousness against irony. Delvoye is an originator of concepts and received international recognition with the presentation of his *Mosaic* at Documenta IX, a symmetrical display of glazed tiles featuring photographs of his own excrement. The artist is perhaps best known for his digestive machine *Cloaca* which he unveiled after eight years of consultation with experts in fields ranging from plumbing to gastroenterology. It is a large installation that turns food into faeces.
Delvoye stated he was referring to the pointlessness of modern life and the most useless object he could create was a machine that serves no purpose at all, besides the reduction of food to waste.

Delvoye’s Art Farm project involved the tattooing of sedated pigs with patterns including skulls, crosses, Louis Vuitton designs and lines dictated by the pig’s anatomy. The artist said he was exploring the idea that ‘the pig would literally grow in value’. His ‘Gothic’ work involved friends painting themselves with small amounts of barium and performing explicit sexual acts in medical X-ray clinics. He then used the X-ray scans to fill Gothic window frames instead of classic stained glass. Delvoye also creates oversized laser-cut steel sculptures of construction objects like cement trucks which he customises in 17th-century Flemish Baroque style, bringing together the heavy brute force of contemporary machinery and the delicate craftsmanship associated with Gothic architecture.
Han Feng talks about

*Interior with a Woman Feeding a Parrot known as The Parrot Cage*

c. 1660 – 1670 / oil on canvas on panel / 50 x 40 cm.

by Jan Havickszoon Steen
(1626 Leiden – 1679 Leiden)

*Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House*

1670 / oil on canvas / 68 x 59 cm.

by Pieter de Hooch
(1629 Rotterdam – 1684 Amsterdam)

Bird Woman

I pick two paintings because I am drawn directly into the interiors. In both of them I am attracted by the balance of space, the subtle use of light, the rich colours and textures of the clothes, the sensual silks and satins. This whole period of 17th-century painting influences me in my design work. These paintings are so real and true to life. Artists like Jan Steen and Pieter de Hooch painted photographically. They give me insights into the way people lived in the 17th century. At the same time their work is layered and intriguing and makes us wonder about what is going on.

In *The Parrot Cage* you see the woman is feeding the bird, the maid cooking for the family and the child feeding the cat, while the men are playing a game. Jan Steen was certainly a social commentator. But as a viewer you are free as a bird to imagine the stories behind the domestic scenes being depicted. And on the subject of birds, I admit that my choice is strongly influenced by the birdcage in Jan Steen’s painting. The colour scheme of this painting is fairly neutral. Only the dress of the woman feeding the parrot is depicted in delicate shades. But it’s the cage that captured me right away. Like me, the birdcage originally came to the West from the Orient.
In my life, wherever I live, I always have a birdcage in my home. I love animals and particularly birds. They are a symbol of freedom for me. In my other home in Shanghai I have a dog, fish and birds. I use birdcages, for instance, for light fittings and making beautiful things.

Birdcages also bring back memories of my childhood. I was a child of the Cultural Revolution, you know. We had nothing. No toys. Led a very simple life. Apart from clothes, the only possessions I could have were a bird and a goldfish. That was all.

Everywhere in China today, in parks in the early morning, you see older men carrying birds in bamboo cages. Birds like thrushes, larks, sparrows, parrots, mynas. The men often hang the cages up in trees so that the birds can sing to each other. It's an ancient ritual that dates back centuries to the Qing dynasty. The men also drink tea and talk in bird teahouses while the birds sing. When I'm in Shanghai I always go to the bird market. The older men look at me as if I am an oddity as I'm usually the only woman there.

The bird motive comes into a lot of the things I create. For me, it communicates freedom. I feel like I want to be a bird. A free spirit. To fly in my mind and create. So you will find the bird as a metaphor in a lot of my work. The use of colour attracted me in both the Jan Steen and the Pieter de Hooch paintings. Colour combinations play an essential role in my designs for operas like Madama Butterfly which I worked on with the director Anthony Minghella. That was the first opera I designed for and the one dearest to me.

The interior of Pieter de Hooch's Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House is so essentially modern and contemporary. The canal house setting, probably the home of a wealthy spice merchant, is elegant and formal and the scene is set in the soft light of a summer evening, enriching the deep reds in the painting. You see how space is used and maximised. Something that both the Dutch and the Chinese are very good at. If you took the people out of the painting, it could almost be an interior design of today. In fact, the floor in the painting reminds me of the floor in my Shanghai home. And, yes, I have a little dog as well.

I feel familiar with painters like Pieter de Hooch. I identify with the intimacy in his work. You are also free to imagine the stories behind the scenes he depicted. A man is handing a letter to a woman. Light falls on the young woman who is receiving a letter. She holds another letter and points with her other hand to the doorway where a little child is standing. There is a puppy on the woman's lap and another dog in the painting that looks surprised by something.

The artist cleverly linked the interior with the exterior. Our eyes are directed past the dog to the canal where two men are talking at the other side of the water. And the gateway seen through another window leads to an even more distant view. It is an ambiguous situation. The woman could be saying many different things to the man holding the letter: …This is my daughter... Watch my daughter doesn't fall into the canal… Get your priorities right, man!... You've come at the wrong time. Look, my daughter's here... All right, it's from that man but we're just friends… I don't want to discuss personal things now…. You can imagine many different scenarios.

The bird motive comes into a lot of the things I create. For me, it communicates freedom. I feel like I want to be a bird. A free spirit. To fly in my mind and create. So you will find the bird as a metaphor in a lot of my work. The use of colour attracted me in both the Jan Steen and the Pieter de Hooch paintings. Colour combinations play an essential role in my designs for operas like Madama Butterfly which I worked on with the director Anthony Minghella. That was the first opera I designed for and the one dearest to me.

Like his contemporary Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch believed in leaving a lot of room for interpretation in his paintings. Who knows what is actually going on? Whatever, his themes, like those of Jan Steen, remain contemporary and these artists still have an influence on our lives in fashion, design, interiors and architecture. That's why I love them.
Han Feng (Nanjing, China, 1962) is one of the most sought-after designers in the world, not only for her signature clothing and accessories but also for her costume and exhibition designs. With homes in Shanghai and New York, she is one of the few designers bridging contemporary Chinese style and culture with a global perspective in an original free-flowing way. She was lauded for her costume designs in the award-winning theatrical opera production of *Madama Butterfly*, directed by Anthony Minghella, which premiered at the ENO in London and The Met in New York. Following this major success, Han Feng's costumes were selected by Amy Tan and director Chen Shi-Zheng for *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, which premiered at the San Francisco Opera in 2008. This was followed in 2009 by Handel's *Semele*, premiered in Brussels, and the Italian opera *Misfortune* which opened at London's Covent Garden in 2012.

Han Feng’s natural talent for designing stage costumes spread to the screen, as she became costume consultant for *The Karate Kid* starring Jackie Chan and Jaden Smith. Han Feng graduated from the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and moved to New York City where she first began a career in fashion. Following the demand for her trademark scarves and accessories, she launched her first ready-to-wear line in 1993 at Bryant Park fashion show in New York. After receiving several awards as an American designer in the US, Han Feng opened a showroom in Shanghai. Designing clothes that accommodate one’s natural movement, Han Feng has expanded her portfolio to embrace contemporary installations, culinary arts and interior design. Her silk and iron wire bird-inspired lighting installations were exhibited with critical acclaim at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.
Jérôme Sans talks about

The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers’ Guild, known as

The Syndics
1662 | oil on canvas | 191.5 x 279 cm.

by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn
(1606 Leiden – 1669 Amsterdam)

**The Cutting Edge**

This painting is an outstanding example of how an artist can transform a run-of-the-mill commission into something unique. Rembrandt shows how a conventional 17th-century group portrait of city dignitaries can be turned into a cutting-edge work of art.

The officials depicted were called syndics. The syndics in Amsterdam had a one-year term of office and controlled the quality of the blue and black cloth manufactured in the city and approved samples were certified with lead seals. The group who commissioned Rembrandt to portray them were an extraordinary cross-section of Amsterdam’s merchant elite: two Catholics, a Remonstrant patrician, a Calvinist and a Mennonite. Business interests overruled religion in Amsterdam's Golden Age. This was unique in Europe.

These men were the heroes of a major economic power and could have been portrayed flatterly as simply grand. But the fastidious discernment of the men is matched by Rembrandt’s insight and perfectionism, which took the genre to another level. The ethos of the group was collective judgement. But Rembrandt gave the men their own identity, captured their different moods and characters.
You see how he styles the older man seated on the left, the Catholic cloth merchant Jacob van Loon, in a characteristic way as a gentle patriarch. The chairman Willem van Doeyenburg holds his hand out towards the swatch book, subtly suggesting his position of authority. At his side is Aernout van der Mye holding the sample book, while his neighbour Jochem de Neve is grasping a moneybag. The standing figure, leaning towards the chairman, is Volckert Jansz a sharp-eyed Mennonite collector whose cabinet of curiosities in Amsterdam Rembrandt was surely familiar with.

You are drawn into the painting through the insights Rembrandt gives you. The gaze of the men could suggest they are addressing us. Were they interrupted? We are not sure. The painting captures what appears to be a photographic moment in time. But in the same breath, it is a startlingly modern composition, forming a pictorial pattern that Mondriaan would have recognised, a contrapuntal arrangement of lines and colours.

The painting is fresh, innovative and totally contemporary. It also has a dynamic cinematic quality. The eyes look in different directions. The figures project, recede, stand, sit, lean, hold and grasp. Instead of having the table running parallel to the picture plane in the monotonous conventional way, Rembrandt used the corner of the table, covered with a colour-rich Persian rug, creating an added dynamic. As a group of human beings, the syndics also exude an aura of mystery. There is an enigmatic quality in the painting that still remains 350 years after it was made.

*The Syndics* is unique in that it is signed twice. It suggests Rembrandt gave special care to this work. X-rays have revealed that he worked on it for a long time to perfect his vision. He moved his subjects around like he was creating a storyboard, adjusting positions and stances. And *The Syndics* is the only Rembrandt group portrait for which a series of drawings survives.

I see *The Syndics* as a metaphor of today’s cutting edge in art and design. There is never one simple solution in life. You cannot take life at face value. I believe, like Rembrandt did, in the complexity of the human condition where the ethos of collective judgement meets the complexity of human nature. I believe in the multi-dimensional personalities who catalyse expansion and creative multi-faceted art practice. Designers, for instance, who cast rules aside, push the boundaries, counter the conventions, ignore the rules and bridge different forms of art. That is creation. And you never know what tomorrow will bring. That is the enigma of life.
projects in Europe, the Lyon Rives de Saône–River Movie, and co-founder of Perfect Crossovers Ltd., a Beijing-based consultancy for specific cultural projects between China and the rest of the world.

Sans has contributed to various art publications and is the author of several books, including Au Sujet de/ About Daniel Buren (Flammarion, 1998); Araki (Taschen, 2001); China Talks (Timezone 8, 2009) and China: The New Generation (Skira, 2014), both compilations of interviews with leading young Chinese contemporary artists. He authored a series of pocket books with Blue Kingfisher including Ma Yansong, Bright City (2012), Jannis Kounellis, Smoke Shadows (2012), and Kendell Geers, Hand Grenade from my Heart (2012).
Angela Missoni talks about

_The Feast of Saint Nicholas_

1665 – 1668 / oil on canvas / 82 x 70.5 cm.

by Jan Havickszoon Steen
(1626 Leiden – 1679 Leiden)

Angela Missoni has never celebrated the holiday of Saint Nicholas. The fashion designer is from Lombardy in Northern Italy, the area where La Befana rules instead. According to folklore this good witch comes to homes on Epiphany Eve, the night of 5th January, to reward good children with candy and punish the naughty ones with a lump of coal. The comparable holiday of Saint Nicholas is a more southern tradition (and a Dutch one) based on the veneration of a saint originally from Asia Minor, but who was later buried in Bari. The holiday has been celebrated since the 15th century withstanding attempts by the Protestants to ban it. It persists to this day in pretty much the same form as depicted by Jan Steen in his late 17th-century painting: a family occasion with a special focus on the children.

That’s exactly what attracts Missoni to _The Feast of Saint Nicholas_. ‘The image oozes domestic warmth and familial love’, she observes. ‘The woman in the middle is obviously the pivot of the family and of the story playing out in the picture. The kids are grouped around their loving mother, the husband is placed in the background, as is the old woman who is probably the grandmother. The doll held by the cute
Alongside nature, art is another major source of inspiration for Missoni's multi-coloured clothes with their distinctive zigzag-patterned knits. 'Not so much the old masters, though', the designer admits. 'Their palette, like Jan Steen's, is too dark for our bright, summery look. The colour combinations and visual language of some contemporary artists are more suitable. I for example based one of our winter collections of body stockings on a photograph of a Vanessa Beecroft performance.'

Missoni likes to surround herself with art and design; her family home is stuffed to the rafters. As a collector she is admittedly eclectic. She combines installation art by Korean sculptor Do Ho Suh with embroidered paintings by Ghada Amer and work by YBA bad girl Tracey Emin. 'I like figurative art, especially paintings depicting people, their faces and behaviour. They are a reflection of life.' That's also true for this Jan Steen to a degree. 'This is life as it was back then. I doubt whether modern families still operate this way. The mother with her rolled-up sleeves looks like she's been slaving over the stove until the very last minute. The fact that all the men in the picture are wearing their hats inside the house strikes me as peculiar. But the coming together of different generations, with the matriarch at the centre of the scene, is timeless.'

This is also what Missoni aims for when entertaining, one of her great hobbies. 'I love all festive occasions, but I especially like preparing birthday parties. The best is my daughter Theresa's on 30 July, a summer party we celebrate on Sardinia. I usually invite 60 to 80 people, mostly family. I like to prove that I can pull it off myself, all the cooking, decorating, seating arrangements, food and drink. As in Steen's painting there are then three generations in a room: happy and at ease.'
Angela Missoni (Lombardy, Italy, 1958) started working at her parents’ fashion house at the age of eighteen, assisting her mother Rosita in designing the women’s wear collection. In 1997 she took over as creative director of Missoni, increasing the brand’s popularity and expanding the company internationally. Missoni currently has outlets in twenty countries and has diversified into fragrances and hotels. In 2011 Missoni received the Rodeo Drive Walk of Style Award, which includes a plaque on Beverly Hills’ most famous shopping street. Three years later she accepted an honorary doctorate from the School of Fashion at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. Missoni’s iconic designs were included in the 2014 V&A exhibition The Glamour of Italian Fashion.
Philip Akkerman talks about

River Landscape with Ferry
1649 / oil on panel / 91 x 116.5 cm.

by Salomon van Ruysdael
(c. 1600 Naarden – 1670 Haarlem)

Kiss the Painting

I purposefully did not select a painting from the Gallery of Honour that is looked upon as a highlight. I chose River Landscape with Ferry because it inspires me as an example of the free spirit that characterised the millions of paintings that found their way into households in the 17th century.

Salomon van Ruysdael's painting is a product of his imagination. Most likely he had made a sketch of the ferryboat and sensed the atmosphere but, like his contemporaries, he conceived and painted the work completely in his studio. Just like Avercamp who painted Ice Scene with Hunter displaying an Otter to two Fishermen in his studio in the summer, based on his observations in winter.

The end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance marked the birth of individualism and the rise of studio painting. Servitude gave way to free citizenship. The world was being explored and scientific discoveries were made. A broader vision of life was taking place.

Painters in the 17th century were no longer paying homage to nobility or the church. They were thinking
for themselves and developed their own fantasy and interpretation of the world.

In their studios they made paintings in small formats that were sold in shops, markets and by lotteries to hang on the walls of small houses. They were affordable and from 1550 to 1650, millions of paintings were made in the Netherlands and Flanders. This enormous output is the reason why these Flemish and Dutch paintings are now found in museums in both major cities and small towns all over the world. When I’m abroad, I always visit the local museum to have a look at these beautiful paintings.

What fascinates me is the clash that took place between the strict technique and restrictions of the Middle Ages and the freedom of mind unleashed by the Renaissance. One without the other leads nowhere. Like notes without rhythm in music. It is when the opposites of strict technique and freedom of thought and expression clash that creation happens. That happened in the Golden Age. And it happens with me.

When I started to paint self-portraits 35 years ago, everyone was saying that painting was dead, because of the rise of photography, conceptual art and so on. But how could painting be dead when I was enjoying painting so much? Surely painting can only die when a regime bans it and freedom of expression is suppressed.

After years of experimentation and painting without technical knowledge, I found myself painting a self-portrait that struck me as being particularly beautiful. I wanted to do it again, but I couldn’t. I realised I was not a master of the paint, but a slave to it. The paint had to do what I wanted so I began to paint in one colour. In the Rijksmuseum I saw a painting that was half-finished; the unfinished part was visible in one colour, which was where I was with my own work at that moment.

I found that the work process of the old masters involved three stages. First a drawing, then application of light and dark and then the application of colour. I followed this method.

I find River Landscape with Ferry so beautiful. I love the transparent deep browns and the opaque whites, the grey city that disappears in the distance. It is so easy to imagine yourself sailing away in one of these boats. I have to control myself to not kiss these kinds of paintings.

Like Van Ruysdael and other 17th-century painters, my work also comes out of my imagination. I have painted almost 4,000 self-portraits and they exhibit great variation of styles. I don’t do this deliberately. I’m not eclectic. I don’t use mirrors. It’s too restrictive; like having a photograph or model in front of you. My self-portraits are in my head. I look inside my head, I think and I paint. Yes, I am strict with subject matter, format and technique but beyond that, everything should be possible.

Contrary to what some people may think, I do not psychoanalyse myself at all. I simply have the irrepressible urge to paint and what comes out I suppose is like a melody that springs up in the mind of a composer.

When I started painting self-portraits, I was drawn to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. I look at existence and come to the conclusion that, for me, the meaning of life is making a self-portrait.
Philip Akkerman (Vaassen, the Netherlands, 1957) is a painter of self-portraits. He studied at the Royal Academy of the Arts in The Hague and Ateliers ’63 in Haarlem. In 1981 he began to paint self-portraits. His oeuvre now nears 4,000 self-portraits and is unique in its multiformity. Every self-portrait is unusual and the extraordinary variations appear endless. Akkerman’s art has hung in major galleries throughout the Netherlands and in London, Paris, Cologne, Frankfurt, Dusseldorf, Hamburg, Vienna, Brussels, Zurich, Gitaad, Munich, Milan, Turin, Perugia, Lyon, Marseille, Lisbon, Madrid, Athens, Pittsburgh, Washington DC, Ridgefield, New York, Moscow, Seoul, Beijing, Shenzhen and Singapore. Akkerman is the recipient of the Sandberg Award, the Ouborg Award, the Joanne Oosting Award and the Sacha Tanja Penning Award. He lives and works in The Hague.
Nina Siegal talks about

The Old Town Hall of Amsterdam

1657 / oil on panel / 65.5 x 84.5 cm.

by Pieter Janszoon Saenredam
(1597 Assendelft – 1665 Haarlem)

At the Crossroads of the World

Nina Siegal has known Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp since she was a toddler without knowing what the picture represented or even its title. A reproduction of it hung in her father’s study. ‘He somehow must have felt related to Doctor Tulp and his fellow surgeons. In the late 1970s he was one of the first specialists to treat AIDS patients. Because he couldn’t treat the disease, just help people to die, he felt like a doctor in the Dark Ages. Doctor Tulp struggled in a similar way.’

Whilst attending an art history seminar, Siegal was once again confronted with Rembrandt’s masterpiece. An art history professor asked her to construct a narrative behind a painting and she chose The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp. The assignment blossomed into an idea for a novel and Siegal moved to Amsterdam on a fellowship to conduct research. ‘I wanted to write about the dead man in the painting, the petty thief Adriaen Adriaenszoon who is being dissected by Doctor Tulp’, she says. ‘He was nicknamed Aris ‘t Kint, which brings to mind Billy the Kid. He was a bit of a folk hero. He was whipped, branded and exiled for his crimes, but he always came back, even when sentenced to the galley. He was an adventurous outlaw.’
subsequently replaced by the current, much grander structure that has been known as the Royal Palace since 1808. This is where Siegal’s novel starts, with Aris locked in the dungeon.

‘The old town hall functioned as a place of justice’, she explains. ‘This is where criminals were sentenced. If the mayor entered the courtroom wearing a red blood band, it designated the death penalty. The execution would take place on the square in front of the building.’

‘The way Saenredam depicts the town hall and the surrounding Dam Square counterbalances what it must have looked like at the onset of the winter festival. I imagine it to have been like King’s Day is now with throngs of people from outside the city. By today’s standards Amsterdam was a small town in 1632, but back then it was considered a metropolis and Dam Square was its centre. In those days the Rokin and the Damrak, located just outside the frame of Saenredam’s painting, were canals that led to the square, transporting goods and people. There were women in French garments, fishmongers, foreigners in Asian silks, peasants selling bread and cheese. It was a busy and international place, with commerce of every kind. It really was the crossroads of the world.’

‘The less fortunate were also there: beggars and thieves like Aris ’t Kint. They lived marginal lives, often having to sleep outside the city gates and wander the fields. Even during this period of great prosperity a great many people were excluded from society. These worlds collided on Dam Square, on 31st January 1632.’

In Saenredam’s painting there is none of that hustle and bustle. A few civilians are sitting under the arches, small groups stroll down the alley alongside the town hall. The figures seem like extras to the city’s all-important infrastructure. Siegal: ‘The humans in the painting are almost symbolic. But Saenredam has the ability to make
architecture feel animated. The scene exudes great peace, perhaps even solace. Saenredam’s use of colour has a contemporary quality to it and pulls you in. Looking at this painting you feel like you want to enter the building, to actually be there.’

‘That’s what I like about 17th-century paintings and why, even as a child, I was drawn to the old masters. Unlike the religiously inspired works from the preceding centuries the old masters are imbued with life from the streets and canals, and as such are still relevant and readable. They enable you to see the city through the eyes of a 17th-century person.’

Nina Siegal grew up in New York City and Great Neck, Long Island, USA, but lives in Amsterdam these days. She studied English Literature at Cornell University and received an MFA in Fiction from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her journalistic writing on topics as diverse as women in US prisons, homelessness and graffiti has appeared in dozens of newspapers and magazines, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Art in America and W. Magazine. She was the launching editor of Time Out Amsterdam magazine, which she ran as editor-in-chief until 2012. Siegal debuted as a novelist in 2008 with A Little Trouble with the Facts, a neo noir situated in 1990s New York City. The Anatomy Lesson (2014) is her second novel.
Creativity is Bliss

The magic starts the moment you walk into the gallery. A broad walkway opens up like a book full of wonderful stories. Wide vaults form a weightless heaven above you, from where oculi cast a diffuse light. They are adorned with painted and plastered leaves and plants. Around you, light-coloured surfaces surround side rooms with dark walls. Like the nave of a cathedral, this space embraces you and commands your full attention. Here, the ordinariness of everyday life is shut out. You are taken into another world.

The rooms on either side of the walkway are like chapels, divided by pillars. In these rooms, the paintings of the greatest artists in the history of the Netherlands wait to be discovered by you. They cover a wide variety of genres: still lifes, portraits and landscapes. They are like windows, offering a view to a magnificent past. At the end of the gallery, in its very own room, hangs the country’s supreme painting. Here, located at the place where the altar would be in a church, is Rembrandt’s masterwork the Night Watch. It draws you into its sphere like a magnet.

The mastermind behind this theatrical arcade is the architect Pierre Cuypers (1827-1921). He leaves no doubt about what he wants to tell you: you are in the basilica of Dutch art, a place of splendour and inspiration. Here you find remnants of the nation’s history and examples of the highest achievements of the human spirit. Moreover, this is the place where Cuypers teaches you a valuable lesson: it is not just a temple for great artists; it is also a temple for you, the visitor. He wants you to feel that you are not just a passer-by. You have the same potential as the artists around you. Cuypers shows you that you have creativity and can use it too. The gallery is the place to get inspired.

The museum

The Gallery of Honour forms the heart of the Rijksmuseum. Built in 1885, it is the national museum of the Netherlands. This museum is not only a house for art and historic education; it is a place of national identity and pride. The history of its founding is a story of dedication and endurance.

In the year 1798, in an effort to educate its citizens about their ancestry, the Dutch government began gathering a collection of art works and objects thought to represent the true soul of the Dutch people. With this collection, an art gallery was opened in one of the Royal Palaces in The Hague in 1800 – this was the Rijksmuseum’s predecessor. The collection contained, amongst others, works by legendary painters such as Rembrandt, Van Ruysdael, Steen and Hals, each painter a representative of Dutch artistic greatness.

It also comprised historic objects going back to the 16th/17th-century Eighty Year War – a landmark war in Dutch history, for this had been a liberation struggle that had started the existence of the current Netherlands. In the Eighty Year War, the Dutch had rebelled against the King of Spain, who was also Lord of the Netherlands. To their surprise, they ended up founding their own independent Republic, kick-starting the illustrious Dutch Golden Age in the process.
The era
Throughout the 19th century, the collection was regularly expanded and exhibited in various venues around the country. It became a national treasure, cherished by the Dutch in a tumultuous age full of political upheaval. Napoleon made the country, occupied by the French since 1795, a part of his empire in 1810, but it was liberated by the Russians three years later. Subsequently, in 1814, it was transformed into a Kingdom with what is now Belgium. This union ended with the Belgians violently seceding from the Kingdom and founding their own country in 1830. Along with the burdens of war, religious disputes fragmented the Netherlands into socially isolated groups of different denominations. The European democratic revolutions of 1848 also influenced the Netherlands, ultimately forcing its King to give more power to the Dutch people and their Parliament.

When the country had more or less come to rest at the end of the century, it was time to give the – by now quite large – national art collection a permanent home. A building was needed that would function as a residence for art and at the same time as an exemplar of real Dutch-ness. It should be a house of national unity in a multi-faceted country. In its art collection the people of the Netherlands should recognize themselves and their lineage, as if looking into a gigantic magic mirror.

The architect
The Netherlands had changed in the 19th century, not just politically but also economically. Against the backdrop of the political turmoil, it had grown from a society of trade and agriculture into an industrialized country. Mechanization had spread over the nation, replacing the human role in the production process with machines. This stirred a wave of romantic conservatism among people who feared the loss of craftsmanship and humanity. One of those people was the architect Pierre Cuypers. He was the man chosen to perform the honourable and complex task of building the new national museum.

Cuypers came from Roermond, a small city in the south of the country. He was an ardent Catholic with a deep and undying love for the High Middle Ages. When he was commissioned to design the museum, he had already built up a reputation with an oeuvre of Catholic churches created in Neo-Gothic style. He constructed the Rijksmuseum in his trademark style, making it look very much like a cathedral. He gave the country the required Pantheon for its glorious history, in eclectic but predominantly Gothic style.

Not only did Cuypers build a museum to elevate the Dutch spirit, he took the idea of the function of a museum a step further. He made the building an illustration of how all people are creative and how we can better the world by making art. In Cuypers’ view, the universe is God’s masterwork, a divine construction filled with endless creative power. He believed that creativity is godlike, but not limited to God. It is present in every living person. We are created after His image and therefore filled with creative power ourselves. We can use this power to do good for the world.

This is not only a philosophical viewpoint; it also has a practical side. Cuypers was a religious but down-to-earth man. For him, inspiration must lead to action, and in this process there is no distinction between famous artists and everyday craftsmen.

He shows this by displaying not only the works of Dutch masters on the gallery walls – in lunettes over the rooms containing the paintings, we can see coats of arms of the provinces of the Netherlands. These coats of arms surround portraits of the common people using their creative talents: sculptors, etchers, glass crafters, textile processors and many more. By presenting portraits of these unknown but
Cuypers wants us to remember that making art is inherent to being human. He wants us to honour and follow the people who use their creativity in order to prevent us from losing our humanity. Cuypers wants spirit. He wants creative minds. He wants inventive people in studios, who design, draw and produce. He wants perfect balance between mind and matter. Within this balance, creativity and personal involvement in the production process form the key to happiness. Feeling connected to something we make with our own hands gives our lives the meaning we are all seeking.

The Gallery of Honour is not just a passageway constructed for you to look at beautiful paintings; it is a palace for all mankind. We, the visitors, can be like the artists and the craftsmen portrayed in this space: if we place our creativity at the centre of our lives, we can be a counterweight to the dehumanization of modern life. This message is timeless, since technical discoveries will always be changing our world, challenging us to make the right choices time and again with respect to maintaining our human essence.

Since the Rijksmuseum was constructed, 130 years have passed and the pace of life has accelerated beyond belief. Outside the museum walls, the world has become faster, sharper and louder. Most of all, life has become more impersonal. As Cuypers feared, mechanical production has overtaken craftsmanship. Modern society faces the same challenge as in the 19th century: the constant search for balance between man and machine, soul and soullessness. Cuypers feared the dehumanizing power of technology and conveyor belts. Nowadays, people fear the same, insofar as they see the digitalization of our lives as inducing the loss of our human touch.

The present

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Acknowledgements: How Rijks was made

Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age, is the realization of a single dream, the adaptations of many ideas, the incorporation of different points of view, the optimization of many digital files, the rendering of different designs, the absorption of litres of high pigmented ink, the challenge to use techniques to the max, and the synchronicity, creativity and technical knowledge of all the parties involved.

The book project was approached as a work of art; the order of the paintings in the book is the intuitive result of this approach. Our aim is to give a life-like experience of the paintings and to showcase them in a new perspective. Our gratitude goes out to the Rijksmuseum for helping us portray the Gallery of Honour in this manner. The titles of the paintings are the exact same as the Rijksmuseum has them listed.

The thought leaders and crafts masters interviewed for this book were personally approached and interviewed to accurately relate their stories. The best hand-calligraphy artists in Europe outdid themselves in their respective styles and helped achieve a sense of timelessness we want to portray in Rijks. This timelessness also comes together in the design of the cover and the techniques involved. While these crafts are mastered by hand, on the other end of the spectrum we used state-of-the-art printing techniques for the books using high-pigment ink on Fedrigoni Tatami Whitepaper.

Throughout the process we have made countless trips to the Rijksmuseum to check, double-check and triple-check the colour authenticity of the paintings. The Rijksmuseum generously gave us access to photograph paintings in the highest quality, and the best image processors in the land were instrumental in optimally digitizing, zooming and cropping the images to the world-class format for the reader to enjoy.

In the design we aimed for a perfect balance of text, image and calligraphy, while capturing the atmosphere of the Gallery of Honour. The Rijksmuseum changes the composition of the paintings in the Gallery of Honour periodically. Even though the top pieces are never moved, some paintings are rotated or moved to another room and replaced by another masterpiece. The paintings in this book were all hanging in the Gallery of Honour at a particular moment in time.

This is why we want to say a big thank you to everyone involved in different stages of this book.

And especially to the following people: the Rijksmuseum and especially Wim Pijbes, Cecile van der Harten, Maria Smit and all their colleagues including all the attendants who supported us. All the interviewees, the calligraphists Brody Neuenschwander and Massimo Polello, the main authors Edo Dijksterhuis, Ken Wilkie, the production team Jan Bol, Elise de Bres, Jaap van Bruggen, Gilberto Ceriani, Jan Geerling, Steven Hond, Ferhaan Kajee, Mauro Loce, Jim van Motman, Joris Oosterman and Carolien Smit. And last but not least, Robin Bevers, André Camilleri, Bas Leenstra, Liliana Rodrigues, Harm Sas en Coen Sligting.

Finally, this book would not have seen the light of day if Steven Hond had not offered the idea to Marcel Wanders, who embraced it, resulting in the exquisite book you are holding now.

Which leads us to the formal part of this publication. Even though this book has been compiled with the utmost care, the publisher disclaims liability for any imperfections, inaccuracies and consequences. The publisher will however take full responsibility for the level of awe the reader has struck and his or her horizons being broadened as a result of reading this book.
Colophon:

A Marcel Wanders publication by Uitgeverij Komma

Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age is a special initiative and project of Marcel Wanders in collaboration with Steven Hond, Uitgeverij Komma.

Rijks, Masters of the Golden Age consists of four books: the Limited Edition and the Behind the Scenes. The books are accompanied by a specially designed book stand, white gloves and a protective sleeve. The Unlimited Edition and Special Edition are both not numbered nor signed by the Marcel Wanders.

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Editor-in-Chief: Elise de Bres – Van Lindonk & de Bres
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The complete list in order of appearance can be found on pages 220, 221, 222 and 223.

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Ken Wilkie (interviews with David Allen, Jan de Bont, Ryu Niumi, Lidewij Edelkoort, Anton Corbijn, Peter Guidi, Joe Pine, Christian Houtenbos, Jimmy Nelson, Paul Bennett, Wim Delvoye, Han Feng, Jérôme Sans, Philip Akkerman, Angela Neustatter)
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Calligraphy by Brody Neuenschwander

in order of appearance

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Woman Reading a Letter
Christiaan Houtenbos quotes
Still Life with a Gilt Cup
Sandy Track in the Dunes
David Allen quotes
Jop Ubbens quotes
The Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede
Gary Schwartz quotes
‘The Meagre Company’
Festoon of Fruit and Flowers
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Paul Bennett quote
Wim Delvoye quote
Man Handing a Letter to a Woman in the Entrance Hall of a House
Interior with Women beside a Linen Cupboard
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Interior of the Church of St Bavo in Haarlem
The Feast of Saint Nicholas
Angela Missoni quote
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Woman with a Child in a Pantry
The Old Town Hall of Amsterdam
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