

| A Permanent Temporary Exhibition: A Discussion about Exhibiting Prints at the CODART ZESTIEN Congress

The 16th Congress of CODART (CODART ZESTIEN), an international association of curators of Dutch and Flemish art, took place on 21–23 April 2013 in Vienna.¹ Art historians from the National Museum in Warsaw have been members of CODART since the launch of this prestigious organization in 1998. Maria Kluk, for many years responsible for the collection of Netherlandish and Dutch painting, was our first representative to CODART and a founding member, who took part in formulating the association's founding principles.² CODART ACHT in 2004 focussed on Polish-Netherlandish relations, and the study trip traditionally held after every congress followed a trail through Poland that stopped at key exemplars of Netherlandish art. Maciej Monkiewicz, at the time responsible for the collection of Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish drawings, was the Polish coordinator of the study trip.³

Staff of the National Museum in Warsaw have taken part in many CODART activities, ranging from the preparation and co-organization of the 2004 programme and the congress as a whole, presenting papers on panels, participating in the expanding organizational structure (e.g., as members of the Website Committee) and being active in its “market of ideas.” In the market of ideas, members submit proposals to the “market table” on topics for discussion, most of which, but not all, touch on the main theme of the congress. The programme committee vets the submissions. The authors of the accepted projects provide a description of the main idea and a few anticipated issues for the discussion ahead of time. Members who are interested in the topic sign up for the discussion. At CODART VIJFTIEN (18–20 March 2012, Brussels), whose theme was “Conserving the arts: the task of the curator and the conservator?”, Hanna Benesz, responsible for Early Netherlandish and Flemish paintings at the National Museum in Warsaw, organized a panel on “A mixed or a national school presentation in the permanent galleries?”, while Piotr Borusowski, responsible for the collection of Netherlandish, Dutch and Flemish drawings, gave a presentation on “Defining priorities: cooperation between curator and conservator in the process of research and conservation of works on paper.”

¹ International Council for Curators of Dutch and Flemish art.

² See Gerdien Verschoor, “The Friendship between CODART and the National Museum in Warsaw,” *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Nowa Seria / Journal of the National Museum in Warsaw. New Series*, 1(37) (2012), pp. 281–83, also for the list of CODART members at the National Museum in Warsaw in 2012.

³ For the papers presented at this congress by its Polish participants, see *Codart Courant* [online], 8 June 2004, [retrieved: 13 March 2014], at: <http://www.codart.nl/17/codart_courant/>.

The theme of the 2013 ZESTIEN congress was “Old favorites or new perspectives? Dividing your time and attention between the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions.” This author organized a discussion adhering to this theme that would explore the specifics of exhibiting prints, “Permanent temporary exhibition. The print case.” It was applicable to both small and large European institutions, and the market table discussion created a platform for sharing experiences and observations of all pertinent content-related and organizational factors that staff of print rooms need to take into account as they formulate their exhibition policies.⁴

The specifics of putting prints on display, because of the sensitivity of their base, paper, impose unique limitations, absent in the exhibition of other types of art works. The accepted three-month limit on exhibiting old prints and drawings imposes frequent changes, unlike paintings or sculptures whose permanent galleries can remain basically unchanged, with only minor adjustments, for at least several years. Since permanent displays generally serve as surveys of art history, temporary exhibitions are able to address specialized issues. Permanent print galleries usually combine these two angles of presenting works of art, and also inform about graphic techniques on a basic educational level. Viewers tend to understand descriptions of techniques and materials used to create a painting (tempera, wood panel; oil, canvas) more readily than terms that require definitions, such as etching, mezzotint or lithograph.

The space used to exhibit a selection of works from a print room influences the type of permanent-gallery presentations in it. Thus, a small room or a series of small rooms makes it possible to organize small shows with a narrow focus on, for instance, the development of graphic techniques, or iconographic or stylistic questions. It is worth mentioning that exhibitions in spaces of this kind must play a similar role to shows in permanent galleries of painting, and at the same time should be enriched with examples that answer visitors' recurring questions about specific artistic techniques. It is helpful to devote some of the exhibition space to a permanent display of tools (styluses, needles, inks and so on) and types of plates (woodcut blocks, copperplates, lithographic stones etc.) and the images made with these techniques. Information on video tailored to a general public can supplement this exhibition, but should not replace the original works and tools. Organizers of exhibitions such as “Miłośnicy grafiki i ich kolekcje w zbiorach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie” [The admirers of prints and their collections in the National Museum in Warsaw] or “Rembrandt. Rysunki i ryciny w zbiorach polskich” [Rembrandt. Drawings and prints in Polish collections] (both 2006) realized that visitors were extremely interested in the demonstrations that accompanied the exhibition by printmakers on graphic presses, which the museum hired for the occasion. Events of this type, an additional attraction for visitors, could also be put on the calendar of events in print collections (for instance once a year, as happens in the Print Room of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts).

Print exhibitions are sometimes perceived as elitist, which is due in part to educational systems, which tend to offer no preparation for understanding the many dimensions of prints, artistic, iconographic or cultural. Museums that daily face such challenges – which include a declining knowledge of history among both secondary school pupils and university students

⁴ The panel discussed here included curators and/or managers from the following institutions: Amsterdam – Rijksprentenkabinet; Amsterdam – Van Gogh Museum; Amsterdam – Het Scheepvaartmuseum; Belgrade – National Museum; Buenos Aires – Universidad de Buenos Aires; Ekaterinburg – Museum of Fine Arts; London – British Museum; Moscow – Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; Paris – Musée du Louvre; Paris – Bibliothèque nationale de France; Prague – National Gallery; Saint Petersburg – The National Library of Russia; Rotterdam – Atlas van Stolk; Szczecin – National Museum; Stockholm – Nationalmuseum; and Vienna – Albertina.

– suddenly become the most active link in the learning process. As they educate viewers, museums are countering the trend of the shrinking visitor cohort to those who are most demanding and most interested in prints. It appears that the absence of programmes in the media that would propagate thinking about art sustains this trend. Fortunately, the educational offerings in museums begin with the most basic emotional perceptions to help the viewer to acquire more sophisticated, multifaceted insights into a work of art.

The practice of frequently changing exhibitions in the permanent gallery of the print room requires a long-term research plan as a foundation for all its activity, including conservation. It is also necessary to take into account the need to return cyclically to issues that have been brought up earlier, each time from a different perspective, and to present a new selection of prints to illustrate the same theme. The question that springs to mind is whether this may lead to an overly specialized perspective and presentations of “niche” subjects. Print room staffs in different countries have observed that the public has high expectations of the range of topics chosen for presentation. At times, an oversimplified treatment meets with a negative reaction from the public, who would rather be shown a more specialized interpretation. The practice of many European institutions show that audiences expect museum specialists to offer advanced exhibitions, with a commentary that would allow them to experience them on many different levels of sophistication.

It would be interesting to study the practices of Polish print rooms from this angle. Even though attendance seems to be the obvious measure of an event’s success (in this case, an exhibition), it is insufficient for a solid assessment. Several factors determine the number of people visiting both permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions; they include the price of entry, with some museums only charging for visits to temporary exhibitions and others also to their permanent galleries. A museum in a location that is visited by large numbers of tourists and has no entry fee (such as the British Museum, National Gallery or National Portrait Gallery in London) will receive an unsurpassed number of visitors. In a city such as London, tourists treat museums and galleries as a compulsory stop on the map of attractions; many, maybe even a majority, come in contact with them only once. The issue of attendance by locals is different, and is especially obvious in localities that are not tourist destinations or in very specialized museums. All institutions permanently face the vital issue of how to encourage visitors to return, hence the different offerings of programmes that promote regular visits (discount cards or free tickets, fan clubs, special lectures or curator-led tours). It is important not to allow attendance to be the decisive factor in financial questions or lower-than-expected number of visitors to influence decisions about future exhibitions negatively. As for prints, we need to remember that their exhibitions, with the exception of the works of a few prominent Old Masters or the “contemporary classics,” are never blockbusters. The questions raised in this part of the discussion made the participants reflect on the need, today and especially in large cities, to compete with the rich offerings targeting all age groups of other cultural events, as well as athletic and commercial ones. Therefore, making available a wide variety of activities from the museum’s educational department and creating a well-planned advertising strategy cannot be overestimated.

Our group then discussed budget planning. The projected level of financial resources determines a museum’s ability to organize large print exhibitions and, in the case of smaller shows within the permanent gallery of the print room, decides the publications that will accompany both types of shows (folder, scholarly catalogue). In many institutions, this involves acquiring sponsors for additional funding. This cooperation, which usually runs smoothly, allows the museum staff to take note of sponsors’ preferences, which sometimes lean towards the most famous artists. This can result in a “carousel” of names and shows, repeating presentations of masterpieces and omitting lesser-known artists and topics.

An important and increasingly controversial issue has continued to resurface over the years in museum discussions: curating exhibitions online. Even though this is an attractive idea for popularizing art, as it allows the viewer to examine a work in detail thanks to zooming, it should by no means replace an actual visit to an exhibition. The experiences of curators of numerous print rooms, including the largest European ones, show that today an online exhibition may be some viewers' only contact with a work of art, as it, paradoxically, does not encourage him or her to visit the bricks-and-mortar museum. The goal should therefore be to use this electronic format, which is certainly important, as an introduction, a trailer, to an exhibition.

In summarizing the various methods used by institutions exhibiting prints that came up in our discussion, it seems that the solutions found by the British Museum are currently the most applicable for large institutions with large collections. The British Museum has a system of two exhibition spaces available to its Department of Prints and Drawings. The staff use a long-term research plan to suggest what should be placed on exhibit, not only in terms of subject but also of range, choosing between "small" exhibitions in the permanent gallery, with a folder publication, or "large" ones in a space that is shared by all the institution's departments, with a scholarly catalogue.

Our discussion revealed the importance of the many aspects of presenting and researching old prints and drawings. The international platform for sharing experiences offered by CODART leads me to reflect on the planned expansion of the National Museum in Warsaw in light of the lessons learnt from the world's largest print rooms.

The growth of our building should take into account the demands of the space that is reserved for exhibiting those works that cannot be permanently on display for reasons of conservation, as well as space for larger exhibitions. Departments of works on paper, such as the Department of Prints and Drawings, Post-1914 Prints and Drawings Collection (former Department of Contemporary Prints and Drawings), Iconographic and Photographic Collection, and the Collection of Oriental Art would be able to take turns using this space for their shows. The status and size of Poland's largest Department of Prints and Drawings with its Collections of Polish and European Prints and Drawings, which span the fifteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries, predestine our museum to be Poland's largest educator with a broad intellectual and aesthetic range.⁵ The collection of Old Master prints together with the collections of Polish and European contemporary prints add up to a panorama of 600 years of human achievements in this genre. The expectation that our museum will be expanded, something for which we have been waiting for decades, thus opens the possibility of presenting collections which, because of their nature, have until now been shown to the public only occasionally. They are a valuable and sizeable part of the museum's collection, and they would also give visitors an opportunity to learn about the unique history of our institution, which has been created in large part thanks to the generosity of Poles who donate their art as unified collections, often of thousands of prints.⁶ Their trust imposes a special obligation on us.

Translated by Maja Łatyńska

⁵ The works in the Department of Prints and Drawings comprise about 20 per cent of the entire collection of the National Museum in Warsaw and, together with the Post-1914 Prints and Drawings Collection and the Iconographic and Photographic Collection, 45 per cent.

⁶ *Miłośnicy grafiki i ich kolekcje w zbiorach Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, exh. cat., Anna Grochala, ed., The National Museum in Warsaw, 2006 (Warsaw, 2006).