

II SIENTJE MESDAG-VAN HOUTEN (Groningen 1834-1909 The Hague)

Memory of Putten: Drawing on a Postcard to Johanna Croiset van der Kop, 1906

Pen and black ink, brush and black and grey ink on cardboard, 90 x 139 mm

Inscription, beneath the drawing: *Herinnering aan Putten. Gegroet | Laan van Meerdervoort 9 | S.M.vH*

On this small postcard, the artist Sientje Mesdag-Van Houten reminded her good friend Johanna Croiset van der Kop (1861-1943) of the trips they used to make together years earlier, from The Hague to the rural region of the Veluwe and the village of Putten. The two women studied the landscapes in search of artistic inspiration and motifs they would use later in their paintings and drawings. The postcard is part of an undocumented ensemble of correspondence, seven sketchbooks and various drawings by Sientje and her husband, the marine painter Hendrik Willem Mesdag (Groningen 1831-1915 The Hague), from between around 1870 and 1910, acquired recently by the Print Room from the estate of Johanna Croiset van der Kop. It mainly contains sketches of landscapes, seashores, trees, people and animals, which offer a fascinating and intimate perspective of the couple's life and work.

Both turned to art relatively late, but established a respectable reputation as artists, patrons and art collectors in their own time. Whereas Hendrik Willem went down in history as a famous marine painter and frontman of the Hague School, Sientje, like so many women artists, was reduced by posterity to a place in her husband's shadow – until recently. Today there is a growing interest not only in her art, but also in the exceptional position she occupied in the art world of her time.

Sientje did not devote herself fully to her art until 1871, after the death of her son and only child Klaas. She became known for her portraits and still lifes, but also made many paintings of the heath landscapes of Drenthe and Gelderland, with their sheep, shepherds and huts. Sometimes her husband accompanied her on her study trips to the countryside. Remarkable similarities between drawn accounts of an excursion to Gortel (Gelderland) in one of the acquired sketchbooks (inv. no. RP-T-2020-204) and in another sketchbook kept in the Panorama Mesdag (The Hague, inv. no. 14), suggest the couple actually worked side by side during this trip.

On other occasions, Sientje travelled in the company of female friends and fellow artists, like Johanna Croiset van der Kop (see no. 9). Sientje was very invested in the careers of her

female colleagues. As a teacher, patron and president of 'Onze Club' – a society of artistic and intellectual women – she actively supported many young female artists, Thérèse Schwartz, Suze Robertson, Anna Abrahams, Barbara van Houten and Johanna Croiset van der Kop among them. She encouraged these women in their artistic ambitions and, together with her husband, purchased their work before art dealers came to appreciate it.

As this small postcard beautifully illustrates, social networks and friendships were vital to the activity of women artists in the Dutch fin de siècle. In this realm, Sientje Mesdag-Van Houten appears to have occupied a pivotal position that we are only just beginning to realize. There is still much more to learn, and the present acquisition will no doubt prove valuable in the process.

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LITERATURE:

[Anne Gerritsen], 'Portret van een kunstenaarsvriendschap: Een verzameling werken van het echtpaar Mesdag uit de nalatenschap van Johanna Behrend-Croiset van der Kop', website Vendu Rotterdam, [vendurotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Collectie-Mesdag.pdf](https://www.vendurotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Collectie-Mesdag.pdf) (consulted 17 August 2022)

PROVENANCE:

Johanna Behrend-Croiset van der Kop and Max Behrend; to their son E.R. Behrend; ...; anonymous sale, Rotterdam (Vendu Notarishuis), 10 December 2020, nos. 181-85, 187-88, 191-92, to the museum, purchased with the support of the J.A.J. en M.A. Risseeuw Fonds/Rijksmuseum Fonds (inv. nos. RP-T-2020-201 to 207, RP-T-2020-213 to 217, RP-T-2020-228 to 232 and RP-D-2020-22 to 26).



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