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Oud Holland

Review of: 'Willem Bastiaan Tholen: A Dutch Impressionist' (2019-2020)

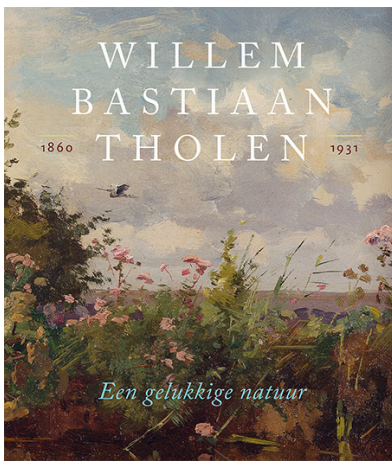
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Review of: 'Willem Bastiaan Tholen (1860-1931): A Dutch Impressionist', Fondation Custodia, Paris, 21 September-15 December 2019 | Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht, 9 February-31 May 2020

For a long time, it has been quite a challenge to rouse the enthusiasm of the French art-loving public towards nineteenth-century Dutch artists – that is, towards those who are not named Vincent van Gogh or Ary Scheffer. But times are changing. Two years ago, the exhibition 'Les Hollandais à Paris, 1789-1914', held subsequently at the Petit Palais in Paris and the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, made it evident that there is in fact an increasing interest in France for the careers and artistic merits of artists from the Netherlands, many of whom had fallen into profound oblivion since their death, and not only in France. Two closely connected dynamics that are gaining in significance in art historical practice today might help to explain this renewed appreciation: on the one hand, the increasing importance given to inter- and transnational phenomena and their underlying mechanisms of encounter, circulation and dissemination, and, on the other hand, the critical re-evaluation of the art historical canon. From the traditional modernist framework, focusing on the revolutionary efforts of a handful of game-changing geniuses, the gaze now shifts towards a more complex understanding of the artistic landscape of the nineteenth century as a whole, bringing to light its abundant diversity and the specific interest in individual artists who never fit comfortably in the modernist narrative. Willem Bastiaan Tholen is such an artist, now to be rediscovered thanks to the monographic exhibition that was on display at the Fondation Custodia in Paris this past autumn, before opening at the Dordrechts Museum in the Netherlands in February 2020.

As a technically skilled painter following his own path rather than what has since come to be seen as the global artistic conjuncture of his time, Tholen is illustrative of that large section of nineteenth-century artists who have long been difficult to situate within the dominant historiographical framework and therefore have received little attention. Tholen was one of those artists who 'draw their own path and care little for what other colleagues around them display', as directors of the Fondation Custodia and the Dordrechts Museum note in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue. And precisely this remarkable individuality and versatility are put forward to justify the 'renewed acquaintance' which the two institutions propose.



Left: Cover of Willem Bastiaan Tholen (1869-1931): *Een gelukkige natuur*.

Middle: fig. 1 Willem Bastiaan Tholen, *The Arntzenius sisters reading on a couch*, 1895, oil on canvas, 38.3 x 58.8 cm, Gouda, Museum Gouda, inv. 55498.

Right: fig. 2 Willem Bastiaan Tholen, *A garden at Barbizon*, 1887, oil on panel, 28 x 17 cm, Paris, Fondation Custodia, inv. no. 2018-S.41.

It definitely is a laudable and rather brave initiative to organise an exhibition on a long-forgotten artist like Tholen, even more so outside of the Netherlands. However, if the Parisian exhibition's subtitle, 'a Dutch impressionist', is intended to propose a referential paradigm for a new reading, then this proposition definitely required a better justification than it received. The choice of the term 'Impressionist' with regards to a Dutch artist active in the Netherlands until well into the twentieth century is by no means self-evident, and indeed raises questions about a range of methodological and historiographical problems that should have been accounted for, if the visitor were to have a chance of understanding this choice. For how exactly then did Tholen's work relate to the historiographic notion of Impressionism and its emblematic (mainly French) representatives of the 1870s and 1880s? Was there such a thing as Impressionism in the Netherlands? If yes, could this denomination still apply to the work of an artist who only just got started in the 1880s and died as late as 1931? Did the term 'Impressionism', have the same meaning in the Netherlands as it did in France and how did this evolve as the term passed from art criticism to art historiography? Lastly, does the etiquette 'Impressionist' not detract from the exhibition's objective as it tends to range the artists under a broad and traditional denominator rather than celebrate his individuality?

The Paris and Dordrecht exhibitions are accompanied by a generous and richly illustrated catalogue in Dutch, to which an introduction and biographical overview in French has been added. The catalogue enhances the exhibitions with valuable background information on each of the works on display, as well as reflections on the artist's personal life, his social and professional networks, his acclaim on the international art market and on various themes and techniques that are of importance to his oeuvre. Besides nine essays and a catalogue of the works exhibited, an extensive overview of exhibitions showcasing Tholen's work between 1881 and 2019 provides precious insights into the artist's public visibility and how this changed over time. Here, we learn for instance that most exhibitions on French soil took place in the early years of the artist's career, between 1884 and 1891, and that the last time his work was exhibited in Paris was at a group exhibition at the Institut Néerlandais in 1963, within the very walls that housed the first retrospective in France this autumn.

The 104 works presented in the exhibition reflected the variety of media in which the artist worked: from paintings and oil sketches, to drawings, etchings and lithographs. The sober presentation on white walls and display cases roughly followed a chronological order, concluding with a space dedicated to Tholen's oil sketches and drawings. Many of the works came from Dutch public collections, in particular the Dordrechts Museum, the Museum Gouda and the Groninger Museum – all still relatively unknown in France. Over the past several years, the Fondation Custodia has itself been anticipating the present retrospective with the acquisition of several works by Tholen, among which are oil sketches and a sketchbook. Finally, a remarkably large number of works from (mainly Dutch) private collections, most of which have been in private hands since the time of their creation, and have rarely been presented in public, made the exhibition an event not to be missed.

A small, frontal self-portrait painted on copper, displayed at the beginning of the exhibition, introduces the visitor to the young Tholen in his early-twenties. After short periods of training at the art academy of Amsterdam and the Technical University of Delft followed by an apprenticeship with Paul Joseph Constantin Gabriël (1828-1903), the artist set out to explore the Dutch countryside and to find his own artistic identity. The works presented in the first room illustrate this process. A *plein air* landscape by Gabriël (hors catalogue) and a small oil sketch by Tholen showing Gabriël sitting on the side of a country road (1879, private coll., cat. 1) stress the importance of Tholen's artistic as well as personal attachment to the painter of the Hague School, whom he considered to be his friend and master. Moving on from there, we see the young Tholen wandering out and discovering a new theme of predilection in the isolated village of Giethoorn, still largely unexplored at the time and characterised by its many canals. Already here the artist demonstrated not only his technical skills but also a keen sensibility for the rendering of evocative atmospheric settings (see for instance, *Windmills near Giethoorn*, ca. 1882-1885, private coll., cat. 7), a sensibility he would continue to develop throughout his career.

These were also the years that the artist actively strove to establish his reputation, in the Netherlands as well as abroad. To this purpose, he painted a number of large canvases, like *River landscape* (1882, Museum Gouda, cat., 8) or the previously mentioned *Windmills near Giethoorn*, intended to be presented at national and international exhibitions. Some of these works made proper 'tours' through Europe, the USA and Canada, and earned Tholen various awards.

Gradually, the grey-brownish hue and wide polder views that are reminiscent of the works of Gabriël and the Hague School made way for brighter, more contrasting tones, new types of scenery and more innovative compositions. This evolution was made visible to the visitor in the following three rooms of the exhibition. It found an important impetus from 1885 onwards in the artist's frequent sojourns at the house Ewijkshoeve, the property of the family of his friend and colleague, painter Willem Witsen (1860-1923), a gathering point for the cultural intelligentsia, and in his moving to The Hague in 1886 – where he eventually took up residence in the spacious Kanaalvilla with his wife and the Arntzenius family. The confidential atmosphere of these places found an expression in informal portraits and snapshot-like representations of people from the artist's closest entourage. Of these, the exhibition offered a few telling examples, from the black chalk drawings of the Arntzenius children (cats. 114, 115, 116) and the view of Tholen's wife *Coba Tholen-Muller writing in an interior at Ewijkshoeve* (1895, Museum Gouda, cat. 35) to the serene and poetic painting of the Arntzenius sisters reading on a couch (1895, Museum Gouda, cat. 34) (fig. 1), justly considered to be one of the artist's best works. Only the profile portrait of his friend and art critic Albert Plasschaert (1916, Haags Historisch Museum, cat. 79) hints at the artist's more formal and commercial activity as a portrait painter on commission, developed mainly in the later phase of his career. This aspect of the artist's production is largely absent from the present retrospective, a choice which might be regretted by those who seek a comprehensive overview of the variety of the artist's oeuvre, but which can be explained by fact that most of these works are not among the most personal creations of the artist, nor among his best.

In the intimacy of these mansions, the surroundings and the people who resided there with him, Tholen further develops his sense for what Richard van den Dool describes as the 'uncommon moment' (catalogue, p. 26-33): seemingly ordinary views and moments of daily life that strike the viewer's imagination thanks to an unusual choice of perspective and the empathy with which the painter manages to portray them. Works like the sun-drenched *Vegetable garden at Ewijkshoeve* (1895, private coll., cat. 33) and *Window of the studio at Ewijkshoeve* (1898, Fondation Custodia, cat. 48) let the spectator share in the artist's lyricism at the sight of apparently insignificant moments and views that many would probably pass by, indifferent. This specific quality is presented in the catalogue as a distinctive characteristic of Tholen's artistic production, to which the artist was faithful not only in his studies and oil sketches made in situ, but also in the final paintings destined for the art market. One recognises this quality not only in the works created in the intimate sphere of the Ewijkshoeve or Kanaalvilla, but also in the representations of urban life and rural pastimes (such as ice skating) executed in the same years. The city and surroundings of The Hague, where Tholen lived in the proximity and company of fellow artists, many associated with the Hague School, served as a backdrop for the exploration of themes of modern working life, like in *Houses under construction* (1895, Kröller-Müller Museum Otterlo, cat. 38), or of bourgeois leisure time *Ice-skating (pond in the Haagsche Bos)*, 1891, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, cat. 25).

Drawing and sketching were second nature to Tholen as he worked. The countless sketchbooks, loose drawings and oil sketches that have been preserved, of which the Dordrecht exhibition promises to show a slightly different selection than the one in Paris, reveal an artist – and former drawing teacher – with a remarkably solid and virtuous hand. This ability to evoke shapes and atmospheres with just a few accurate lines or brush strokes served him throughout his career as a means of observation and documentation, saving the memory of volatile perceptions and impressions for later use. Happy juxtapositions like the painted *Abattoir* (1890, private coll., cat. 22) and the drawing *Study for the abattoir* (ca. 1889, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, cat. 106) allowed to visitors of the Paris exhibition to appreciate the different stages of the artist's creative process as well as the seemingly natural way in which these interweave into a varied yet harmonious and coherent oeuvre.

Radical innovation may not have been something Tholen aspired to, but within the confines of his own aesthetic and artistic ambitions, there was space for experimentation, sometimes – if one really takes the time to look – with surprising results. His *Landscape with painter's parasol* (Dordrechts Museum, cat. 42) for instance, which shows a view of a rather conventional grass landscape boldly cut off on the upper right corner by a parasol, in the shadow of which the artist was painting, testify in a fascinating way to his search for new yet harmonious visual formulas and accompanying pictorial solutions. Works like *Church with belfry, Giethoorn* (1897, cat. 47) or *Dolphin* (1918/1919, Groninger Museum, cat. 85) strike the viewer as sober, carefully balanced compositions in which shape, rhythm and materiality each have their own vital part to play. This is also true of the enigmatic *Clouds and flowers* (private coll., cat. 96), in which a group of clouds above a wide, grey sea engage in a charming dialogue with a small bouquet of violet flowers that mysteriously pierces through the composition from the lower left corner.

As the years went by, the sea took an increasingly important place in Tholen's oeuvre. Especially between 1901 and 1918, when the artist possessed his own boat named 'Eudia', he frequently set out to work at the Zuiderzee and adjoining fishing towns like Enkhuizen. This search for calm, soberness and harmony – which seems to have accompanied the artist throughout his career and which he appears to

have found in these seaside settings in particular – culminates in the impressive greyish open space of *Zuiderzee* (1929, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, cat. 97). Painted two years before the artist's death, with the restrained tonalities and the thin, discreet brushstrokes that characterised his later work, it appears as a conclusion that is both radical and yet perfectly consistent with the artist's individual creativity.

Considering the Paris retrospective, it is clear that the idea of Tholen as an imperturbable master of the direct and honest individual 'impression', faithful above all to his own visual and emotional perception of the world around him, ran as a common thread throughout the entire exhibition. This, however, does not by itself justify the use of the term 'Impressionist' to qualify the artist's work, nor do the casual references in the catalogue to Monet or Caillebotte. The implications hidden behind such references and Tholen's actual relation to Impressionism still need further development. Perhaps a starting point for further inquiry can be found in the small painting depicting, *A garden at Barbizon* (1887) (fig. 2), which was acquired by the Fondation Custodia just months before the opening of the exhibition, and therefore could not be included in the catalogue. Although it was known that Tholen had travelled to Barbizon in 1887, this hitherto unknown work is the first in the artist's entire oeuvre to unequivocally confirm it. May this discovery serve as an encouragement for further investigations on Tholen's relation to impressionism, and, on a more general level, on his travels abroad, his confrontations with foreign art and artists and on his position within the European artistic landscape of his time. This is an aspect that the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue leave largely unaddressed.

During his lifetime, critics already stressed the traditional quality of Tholen's oeuvre. At the turn of the twentieth century, such a notion of traditionalism is by no means neutral or innocent – and still less so when combined with the idea of a traditional Dutch national identity and corresponding values. It responds to a broader cultural discourse that reverberated throughout Europe at the time, opposing modernity and internationalism on the one side, to tradition and national authenticity on the other. In reality, however, we now know that these very notions of national tradition and identity are themselves profoundly international constructions. And Tholen did travel (Belgium in 1879; Rome, Naples and Capri in 1883; Barbizon in 1887; London in 1890; Vienna in 1907; Paris in 1909, to name the journeys he undertook before the age of 50). He had considerable success on the international art market and saw the work of foreign modern artists abroad many of whom might now be as forgotten as Tholen was, until recently.¹ That being the case, what if the very traditionalism and 'Dutchness' that critics recognised in Tholen's works could be seen in the context of an artistic orientation that was perhaps less programmatically progressive and international than the modernist avant-garde, but no less interesting to consider from an international perspective? In order to be able to appreciate this dimension of Tholen's work, we need to take a critical look at the discipline of art history itself, and question not only the modernist but also the national frameworks on which the discipline was built.

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NOTES:

¹ A. de Jong, *Willem Bastiaan Tholen*, Gouda/Assen, 1993, p. 81.

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