

Rembrandt was here

The artist's house in the age of modernism

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In 1911 visitors to the Amsterdam house where Rembrandt lived between 1639 and 1658 were disappointed to find no working studio, bedroom or personal collections. In his design for the Rembrandthuis museum, the architect K.P.C. de Bazel had chosen not to create a period interior, but instead combined domestically scaled rooms with a museum displaying Rembrandt's prints. The project registered early twentieth-century perceptions of Rembrandt as a modern, and contemporary debates about the restoration of historic buildings. Unlike many nineteenth-century house museums, it was designed to focus attention on the work rather than the life of the occupant. However, in 1998, the museum was reconfigured as a simulacrum of a seventeenth-century house, with a new annex for displaying prints and drawings and for exhibitions. The history of the Rembrandthuis illuminates changing approaches to the artist over time and their implications for architecture and museology in the age of modernism.

1906 marked the tercentenary of Rembrandt's birth. The purchase that year by Amsterdam City Council of the house where Rembrandt lived at the height of his career confirmed the status of the artist as a national hero and key figure in the Dutch golden age. Probably prompted by the destruction by fire of Rembrandt's Leiden birthplace in 1907, a foundation – the Rembrandthuis Stichting – was established that year to acquire the Amsterdam house and turn it into a museum. Its first trustees decided not to reconstruct a vanished seventeenth-century interior, but instead to foreground the work and not the life of the occupant. This project coincided with a passionate debate in the Netherlands about the ethics of conserving and restoring the fabric of historic buildings. The Rembrandthuis museum, which displayed the artist's work in an interior manifestly of its own time, registered the early twentieth-century belief that architecture should continually renew itself, recent approaches to museum display, and a new appreciation of Rembrandt as print-maker. This article considers the convergence of these factors, and the radical reconfiguration of the museum that took place ninety years later. In so doing, it illuminates important shifts in approach to the visitor's experience and the historic-house museum.

Planning the museum

The house where Rembrandt lived and worked between 1639 and 1658 occupied a double plot on Sint Anthonisbreestraat, in an area inhabited by merchants and artists. Built in 1606–7, the house was remodelled in 1627–8, when its stepped gable was replaced by a fashionable classical pediment and another storey was added. Soon afterwards, the area was abandoned by the wealthy in favour of the Herengracht and Keizersgracht, and Rembrandt seems to have paid more than the house was worth in 1639.¹ Rembrandt lived there with his wife, Saskia, and their son, Titus, and after Saskia's death with Geertje Dirckx and then Hendrickje Stoffels until 1656. That year, unable or unwilling to pay off his mortgage, Rembrandt was declared bankrupt, and an inventory of his possessions was compiled. The house and its contents were sold at auction in 1658. The house was divided in two in 1661 and altered to accommodate successive occupants, and the street – now known as Jodenbreestraat – further declined in prestige.² Nineteenth-century topographical and genre painters depicted the house in what had become a densely populated neighbourhood (Fig. 1).³

The purchase of the house in 1906 was apparently instigated by an artist, Jozef Israëls, known as



Fig. 1. Léopold Flameng, *Rembrandt Distributing Alms to the Poor*, etching, reproduced from Charles Blanc, *L'œuvre complète de Rembrandt: catalogue raisonné de toutes les eaux-fortes du maître et de ses élèves*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1859–61). Amsterdam City Archives, 010097003746.

the ‘reincarnation of Rembrandt’, together with Jan Veth, painter, art critic and author of *Rembrandt's leven en kunst*, published that year.⁴ The stated aim of the Rembrandthuis Stichting was to restore the Amsterdam house to its condition when Rembrandt lived there.⁵ However, the trustees – who included Veth – were faced with ‘a heavily altered wreck’.⁶

Several families lived there and the left-hand part of the house was occupied by a shop selling clocks and haberdashery.⁷ Nothing remained of the original interior layout. Israëls, who clearly venerated the house, suggested that the interior might be arranged so that visitors could imagine ‘how it had been in former times’.⁸ However, Jan Six, professor of art history and aesthetics at Amsterdam University, a descendant and namesake of Rembrandt's celebrated patron, pointed out that any restoration would have to be based on

conjecture, and might deceive unwary visitors into believing that the house was a genuine seventeenth-century building. Leaving the house in its dilapidated state might, he suggested, be preferable to creating a ‘false show for innocent Americans who continue to believe in Dutch honesty and down-to-earth-ness’.⁹ Jan Veth, who shared Six's aversion to an inauthentic restoration, stressed the need for a dignified solution and one that did not encourage visitors to mistake new features for original ones.¹⁰

The appointment of the architect Karel de Bazel in 1908 was probably due to Veth, who occupied a house designed by de Bazel near the architect's own home in Bussum. De Bazel was co-founder in 1911 of the Bund Heemschut, a body dedicated to the conservation of historic monuments. Dutch architects were inspired by the ideas of William Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB).¹¹ De Bazel and his colleagues in the Bund followed the SPAB and the German architect Hermann Muthesius in differentiating between restoration, which involved the reinstatement of missing or damaged portions of buildings, and what they regarded as the more ethical practice of conservation. The latter preserved historic fabric, avoided additions based on conjecture and emphasized the role of the creative artist. Stressing that the duty of the architect was to innovate, they equated the imitation of historical styles with a lack of creativity.¹²

The trustees decided that the new museum would specialize in works on paper, especially etchings. ‘Rembrandt himself must speak to us here through his art’, they argued.¹³ This house, the ‘hallowed ground’ where Rembrandt had lived and where his career had flourished, was conceived as a quiet refuge from the noise and commerce of the area, where visitors could study his graphic work calmly and closely.¹⁴

A place to look

De Bazel's brief in 1908 was to restore the façade of the Rembrandthuis and arrange the interior as a museum of the artist's etchings. He stabilized the façade and replaced the two entrance doors with a single door and door-case (Fig. 2). Nineteenth-century sash windows containing large panes of glass were replaced by small-paned windows with wooden shutters. De Bazel characterized these additions, for which he apparently employed old materials, as inspired by pragmatism: ‘just as one fits an “old” leg to a chair if one



Fig. 2. Rembrandt's house before (c. 1910, *left*) and after (c. 1920, *right*) restoration. Collection Het Nieuw Instituut, Rotterdam / BAZE 1447-1.

is missing'.¹⁵ Using the room-by-room inventory of the contents compiled in 1656, de Bazel decided to evoke rather than mimic a seventeenth-century domestic interior in order to create a modern museum. He designed a series of rooms that corresponded to those mentioned in the inventory: an entrance hall, side rooms, a back living room and a first-floor studio and cabinet room, where Rembrandt's own collection was once housed. Where certain features were in doubt (as in the small studio for Rembrandt's apprentices, or a partition in the main studio), they were omitted. New requirements were also met: in place of the spiral staircase giving access to the upper floors, a wide stair was created by borrowing the space originally occupied by a small office on the ground floor and an anteroom to the cabinet on the floor above.¹⁶ The basement and the attic were used as offices for museum staff.

Veth, who like Six was keenly interested in issues of museum display, was a driving force in considering the experience of visitors. Here, the ideas of Wilhelm Bode, whose displays at the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin opened in 1904, were important. There, Renaissance paintings were displayed not in period room settings, but in arrangements designed

to appeal to modern visitors. Aesthetic experience was privileged over comprehensive historical coverage. Rooms varied in size and character, and the multi-tiered display characteristic of contemporary museums was avoided. Sculpture, furniture and applied art were selected to complement the paintings on display and to produce what Bode called 'an artistic arrangement' of space.¹⁷ This emphasis on providing opportunities for intimate, individual encounters with works of art was to be formative for the conception of the Rembrandthuis.

In the guide to the Rembrandthuis produced for its opening in 1911, Veth presented the museum in a way that suggests his own fascination with etching as a medium that provides unique insights into the creative process.¹⁸ The appreciation of Rembrandt as an experimental and highly inventive print-maker had been encouraged by the Etching Revival of the 1860s and 1870s.¹⁹ As a print-maker, Veth was an avid admirer and collector of Rembrandt's etchings. Also evident was his concern to optimize the visitor's aesthetic experience. The trustees' decision to focus on displaying works on paper was shaped by both factors. Their policy was influenced by the fact that they were unable to acquire paintings by Rembrandt, and as a

result the museum conveyed a slightly misleading impression of the artist.

The entry room of the house, the *voorhuys* (hall), with its beamed ceiling, monumental fireplace and black and white marble floor, conveyed the domestic character of the building. This and the room beside it, the *sydelcaemer* (parlour), were the only spaces arranged to suggest their original usage. The dark oak panelling used to clad the lower part of the walls in the parlour provided a background for displaying prints. The living room to the rear, known as the *agtercaemer offie sael* (the present-day *sael*), panelled and furnished with an antique table and chairs, functioned as a reference library (Fig. 3).²⁰ Elsewhere, priority was given to creating ideal viewing conditions for the examination of etchings and drawings. Veth wrote: 'In smaller apartments of a more intimate character, in a quiet setting, the etchings will appeal to every receptive mind.'²¹ The oak floors in these display rooms provided a warmer surface than the marble used to floor the rooms at the front of the house; photographs of 1911 show rugs laid to reduce the noise. In the upstairs *schildercaemer* (studio), prints were hung with their frames set flush with the panelling (Fig. 4). Specially designed cases for smaller etchings set into mounts were placed near the windows,

and a flat-topped display cabinet in the centre of the room allowed visitors to study prints in comfort, while seated.²² De Bazel's designs for the rest of the furniture in this room included elegant oak chairs inlaid with ebony, and an ingenious table-mounted vitrine with hinged panels that allowed prints to be studied at close quarters (Figs. 5–6).²³ The *kunstcaemer* (cabinet) to the rear was earmarked for the display of drawings.

The sparing hang and arrangement of the rooms was designed to leave space for future acquisitions.²⁴ The museum gradually accumulated more prints by Rembrandt, including sixty etchings lent from Veth's own collection and later purchased by the museum, eleven donated by the Rijksmuseum, and six by Israëls.²⁵ Four of Rembrandt's original etching plates were acquired in 1993. The collection of drawings was boosted by significant purchases in 1913 and 1919. Although the guide to the museum published in 1920 listed items of Rembrandtiana, including documents about the guild of painters to which the artist belonged and photographs of the house before its restoration, these played a supplementary role. Like de Bazel's interiors and furniture, they were not meant to distract visitors' attention from the works on display.²⁶ The desire of the trustees to allow Rembrandt's art to speak for itself reveals their wish to avoid over-emphasizing



Fig. 3. Rembrandthuis Museum, the living room (*agtercaemer offie sael*; now the *sael*), c.1912. Amsterdam City Archives, OSIM 00003000942.

the persona of the artist.²⁷ Veth's 1911 guide suggests that a sober environment provided a better stimulus for the imagination than 'a quasi-historical document which in reality was a fraud'.²⁸ Here, careful looking was to be privileged over false historicity.

Re-viewing Rembrandt

At the Rijksmuseum, opened in 1885, the presentation of Rembrandt and his work was very different. J. M. Cuypers designed a museum that was intended to commemorate the golden age of Dutch painting and the creation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815. Designed to honour and display the art of the seventeenth century in particular, it presented Rembrandt as its chief protagonist. Rembrandt's fame, which had gradually overtaken that of Frans Hals in the nineteenth century, was fed by the growing concern with realism on the part of painters in the Netherlands and beyond.²⁹ A complex iconographical scheme was devised by Cuypers, a devout Catholic, together with the civil servant Victor de Stuers and the art historian Alberdingk Thijm. Sculpted friezes on the façade of the neo-gothic museum featured the artists and scholars who had shaped the nation's art from antiquity up to the eighteenth century, together with personifications of Dutch towns, and

tile panels illustrating key episodes in Dutch art history.³⁰ Rembrandt featured here, and was represented in busts and in niche sculpture. A painted panel on the rear elevation showing Rembrandt painting *The Syndics* marked the position of the gallery containing Rembrandt's work.

The Hall of Honour – the central spine of the Rijksmuseum – provided a ceremonial approach to that gallery, accessed via an entrance hall decorated with images telling the history of the Dutch people. The *Night Watch* (which had been moved from the Trippenhuis to the Rijksmuseum in 1885) was visible through an arched opening at the end of the hall. Above the arch was a painting representing the Maid of Holland flanked by artists from the Republic. Heavy curtains framed the arch, as though the *Night Watch* gallery beyond was a theatrical stage. The didactic programme was continued in the gallery by a painted frieze inscribed with the key dates in Rembrandt's life, and the monograms of Rembrandt and Saskia.

Traditionally, light featured prominently in the discussion of Rembrandt and his legacy. The painting of the *Night Watch* was flanked by engaged columns topped with caryatids representing Morning and Afternoon. On the other side of the room, two more caryatids representing Day and Night (a homage to Michelangelo's Medici tombs) symbolized the



Fig. 4. Rembrandthuis Museum, the studio (*schildercaemer*), c.1912. Amsterdam City Archives, OSIM 00003000935.

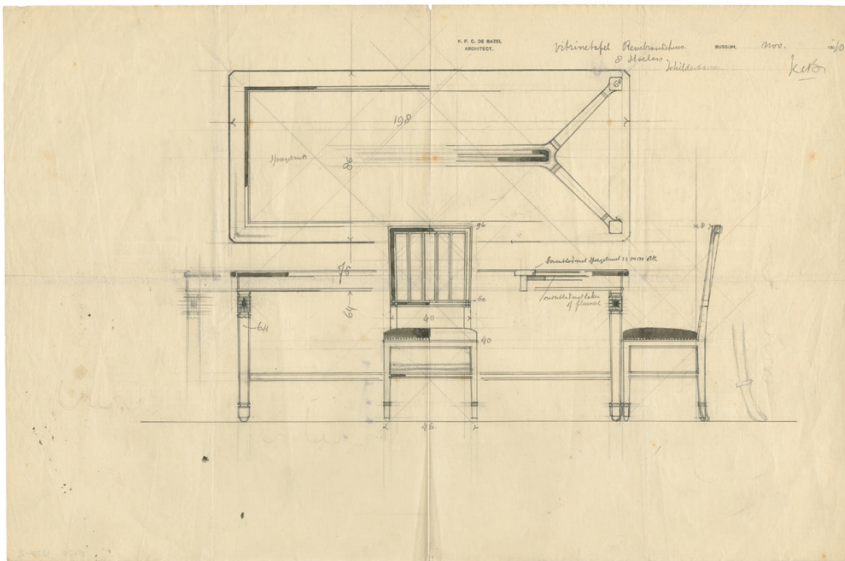


Fig. 5. K.P.C. de Bazel, design for furniture in the *schildercaemer*, Rembrandthuis Museum, November 1910. Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam / BAZE 1227-2.

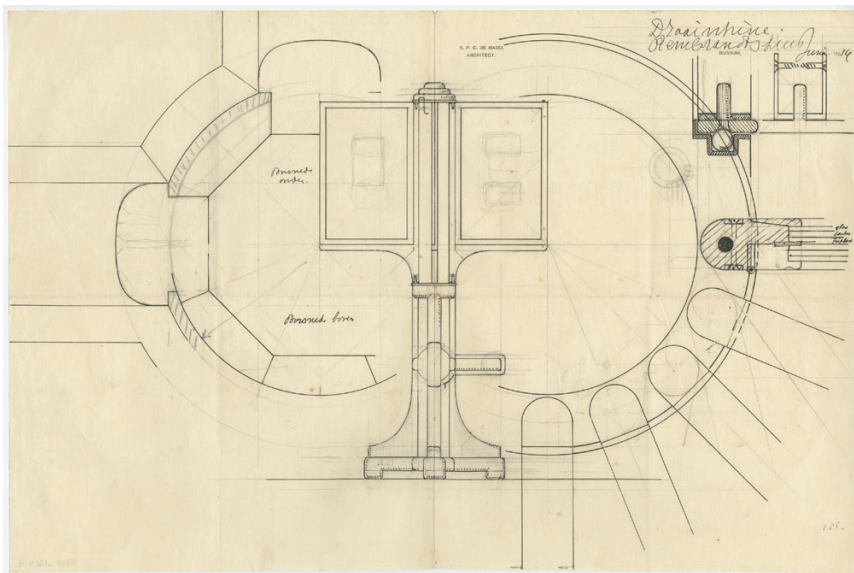


Fig. 6. K.P.C. de Bazel, design for a table-mounted vitrine in the *schildercaemer*, Rembrandthuis Museum, June 1914. Collection Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam / BAZE 1227-4.

artist's mastery of chiaroscuro. Becker suggests that Rembrandt – whose *Night Watch* occupied a position in the museum comparable to that of an altarpiece in a church – was presented in the Rijksmuseum as an ‘enlightening redeemer’.³¹ During the 1900s, writers and composers referred to Rembrandt as someone whose command of light aligned him with Christ, the Light of the World.³² New technologies of limelight and, later, electricity were deployed as a tribute to

Rembrandt's use of light. In 1906 a new *Night Watch* gallery was added to the Rijksmuseum to coincide with Rembrandt's tercentenary. Informed by early twentieth-century ideas about viewing conditions and by the spread of *plein-air* painting, it was lit by an enormous south-facing window. The *Night Watch* was relocated on the west wall of this new room, where it was illuminated from the side rather than from roof-lights (as it had been before), and was detached from

the symbolic programme of which it had once formed the climax.³³ This arrangement lasted until 1926.

The interior design of the Rembrandthuis

The creators of the museum at Rembrandt's house were similarly determined to innovate. Like the new *Night Watch* gallery created in the Rijksmuseum of 1906, the house signalled a new perception of Rembrandt's work. As in the gallery, the trustees of the Rembrandthuis were interested in making use of natural light.³⁴ But whereas the *Night Watch* gallery was framed by the architecture and iconography of the Rijksmuseum around it, the Rembrandthuis permitted a fresh approach.

The lack of evidence about the original layout of Rembrandt's house allowed de Bazel considerable creative licence. Faced with the difficulty of attempting to restore the interior, he employed a system of proportion based on a mathematical grid to organize the interior design of the museum. After the construction of the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij building on Amsterdam's historic Vijzelstraat in 1923, the architect was criticized for its failure to blend with its surroundings. De Bazel retorted: 'I haven't used any picturesque features as a motif, but have concentrated solely on essential architectural values and mathematical certainties such as measurements and proportions.'³⁵ A comparable reliance on 'certainties' underpinned de Bazel's approach to the Rembrandthuis.

De Bazel belonged to the generation of free-thinking designers whose anarchist sympathies drew them to study theosophy and the occult. A student of Cuypers from 1885 to 1895, but increasingly impatient with his historicist designs, de Bazel, together with J. M. Lauweriks, investigated ways of endowing architecture with 'the harmonic proportions of nature', often employing Egyptian triangles of 3:4:5 in order to achieve this.³⁶ After 1900 de Bazel began instead to rely on square grids to establish proportion and to control scale, as at Bussum, where in 1902 he designed a model dairy based on a cubic module. This system became his favoured means of unifying architecture, interiors and furnishings. Contemporary with the Rembrandthuis commission, de Bazel was engaged to renovate the Ogtrop house in Amsterdam. His approach was that of a 'pragmatic renovator', combining existing seventeenth- and

eighteenth-century elements with new reception rooms.³⁷ The establishment of De Ploeg, de Bazel's own furniture-making workshop, allowed him to exert control over important elements of the interiors he designed. In the Ogtrops' dining room, the panelling, fireplace, parquet flooring, carpet, coffered ceilings and furniture were designed according to a strict geometric grid, the squares containing rosettes of mahogany inlay or bronze.

At the Rembrandthuis, de Bazel also employed geometry to give harmony to the interior and to knit together the separate entities of house and museum. In the interior he made a series of inventive improvisations.³⁸ The four arched bays framed by pilasters on the façade of the house were echoed in the arched openings between the *voorhuys* and the staircase-hall, which – together with the balustraded mezzanine overlooking the *voorhuys* – gave this room a vaguely Renaissance character. However, that character derived not from the use of historical models corresponding to the period of the original building but from careful spacing and proportion. A square module was used to determine the design of panelling, bookcases, storage and display cabinets, chairs, door-frames and fireplace surrounds. Ornament was disciplined and strictly rationed. De Bazel designed a distinctive device – a fusion of classical motifs and ones of his own invention – for the furniture and roof corbels of the museum. It consisted of a stylized four-lobed flower, usually contained within a square or circle. This was combined with raised square knobs arranged in multiples of four on the legs of the study table in the *schildercaemer* (see Fig. 5). The same distinctive element was used for the square profiles of the balusters and newel posts of the staircase and the mezzanine balustrade in the *voorhuys*.

From the start, visitors to the museum were surprised to find no trace of the artist's workplace or his collections, but an austere interior that combined domestically scaled rooms with a museum devoted to the study of Rembrandt's prints. To a dismayed board of trustees, de Bazel defended his decision to restore the façade and to design new furniture and fittings for the museum. Responding to the motion that the board had 'chosen the wrong architect for the restoration', Veth resigned as chair.³⁹ However, he retained his interest in the museum and remained a member of the foundation until his death in 1925. Although the other artist-trustees – Jozef Israëls and Veth's pupil Cornelis Gerardus 't Hooft – held different views, their

involvement in policy-making reveals the important role that artists played in the direction of art museums in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as their lively interest in issues of conservation.⁴⁰

The visitable past

In the 1990s, the site adjacent to the Rembrandthuis was acquired, and a crisp new annex was designed by Moshé Zwarts and Rein Jansma, with interiors by Peter Sas, in order to create exhibition galleries, offices, an auditorium, a library and the Rembrandt

Information Centre (Fig. 7). At the same time, a complete remodelling of the interior of the house was proposed. Some changes had occurred since 1911, when only a few paintings were displayed in the *voorhuys* and *sydelcaemer*. Thanks to the purchase or loan of paintings by Rembrandt's contemporaries and pupils and the antique furniture gradually introduced into the main rooms, the house had been subtly modified and domesticated. What happened in 1998–9 was far more radical. It involved dismantling de Bazel's work and creating an interior that suggested what the house might have looked like in Rembrandt's day. In



Fig. 7. Rembrandthuis Museum with new annex, c.2000. Courtesy Architectural Studio ZJA, Amsterdam.

the summer of 1998, Wim Vroom of the Department of Dutch History at the Rijksmuseum mounted a legal challenge to the project. Vroom suggested that de Bazel's work itself constituted a historic interior, worthy of preservation, and called what was being proposed 'an historical masquerade, which belongs to Madame Tussaud'.⁴¹ Although delaying the project, Vroom's challenge failed and work began that autumn.

In the 1990s, just as ninety years earlier, authenticity was the watchword; the documents collated as part of the Rembrandt Project yielded fresh information and insights.⁴² All the oak panelling was removed from the walls of the *sydelcaemer* and the *sael* and replaced with painted plaster. Panelling, doors, architraves, the staircase and the mezzanine balustrade from the *voorhuys* were sold to a dealer specializing in creating 'nostalgic interiors' with fittings from old buildings. Ironically, de Bazel's fittings from the Rembrandthuis were used to give a period flavour to the décor of restaurants, bars and offices.⁴³ In the museum, carved fireplaces and marble door-cases, and new furniture, artfully aged, were made to complement genuine seventeenth-century pieces.⁴⁴ The *sael* was furnished as a living room containing a carved box-bed. The basement was rearranged as a kitchen, equipped with a sink, a cooking range and another box-bed. With a staircase in the modern annex providing access to all levels, a wooden spiral staircase was inserted behind the *voorhuys*, and the small office behind it was reinstated. According to the inventory of 1656, the room behind the *sydelcaemer* contained an oak press, but whether this was a linen press or a printing press was not clear. In 1998 the decision was

made to floor the room with seventeenth-century tiles and equip it with an etching press to suggest the workshop where Rembrandt produced his etchings. On the first floor, the *kunstcaemer* was emptied of the drawings previously displayed there, and filled with objects of the kind listed in the inventory of Rembrandt's possessions: shells, antique heads, coins, stuffed animals, weapons and armour. The *schildercaemer*, stripped of its display of etchings, was arranged to look like a working studio, with painting equipment, easel, canvases and paint-splashed floor (Fig. 8). Demonstrations of grinding and mixing pigments for artists' colours were envisaged here. Children's art workshops occupied the attic studio, where the director planned to hold classes in collaboration with the Rijksakademie.

The closure of the Rijksmuseum for refurbishment between 2003 and 2013 seems to have encouraged the concept of the Rembrandthuis museum as a place where visitors could encounter the look and feel of a seventeenth-century house. This did not stop with furnishings. A series of photographic postcards on sale in the museum in 2014 show the rooms with traces of habitation – half-eaten meals, abandoned letters, stretched canvases, a pile of sewing – as though the occupants have just slipped out (Fig. 9). The lighting is rich and warm. The linkage between this place and the life of the artist who once inhabited it was underlined in two posters advertising the Rembrandthuis, commissioned in the same year from the photographer Maarten Schets. In these, the romantic trope of artist and model came into play, with photographs of a young man perched beside an easel,



Fig. 8. Rembrandthuis Museum, the studio (*schildercaemer*) in its present state. Courtesy Rembrandthuis Museum.



Fig. 9. Rembrandthuis Museum, the parlour (*sydelcaemer*), postcard, 2014. Photograph Fotostudio Leeman. Courtesy Rembrandt Museum.

and of a young woman standing next to the box-bed in the *sydelcaemer*. Prospective visitors were invited to ‘Get close to Rembrandt’ and ‘Get close to Saskia’.⁴⁵

From object to subject

The history of the Rembrandthuis museum registers significant shifts in the approach to the artist’s

house museum. The first project, overseen by de Bazel, registered the new perception of Rembrandt as a modern, and a turn away from the biographical focus pioneered by Vasari. It rejected the approach taken at Albrecht Dürer’s house in Nuremberg, opened in 1871, where neo-Renaissance furniture and mural paintings depicted the artist’s life.⁴⁶ The trustees who planned the Rembrandthuis museum instead hoped to foreground the artist’s work.

However, their project was to be supplanted by very different ideas.

In a book about Rembrandt's house, Anthony Bailey – emphasizing the power of association – quoted the preface to the 1908 edition of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, a novella about a writer's pursuit of historical documents.⁴⁷ There, James had written: 'I delight in a palpable imaginable *visible* past . . . the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table.'⁴⁸ This preface was written just as de Bazel was in the process of transforming Rembrandt's house into an extended print room, using crisp, modern details instead of imitating those of the seventeenth century. Later writers were to complain that the museum's interior lacked atmosphere, and regretted the absence of the artist's own possessions.⁴⁹

The concept of the 'visible past' – the idea that objects and interiors could provide a material and emotional connection with the historical past – gained new traction in the course of the twentieth century. In *The Poetics of Space*, published in 1958, Gaston Bachelard wrote of the role played by memory and the senses in our perception of place.⁵⁰ In the wake of his book, curators were to become increasingly concerned with visitors' sensory response to historic sites.

In Britain, Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship* of 1841 had encouraged a belief in the edifying effect of seeing the relics of great men. Initially prompted by political ideals, it was bolstered by touristic-commercial values. As Miles Glendinning observes, 'historic heritage acted as a constructive counterbalance to the furious excesses of political and industrial change'.⁵¹ Henry James's short story *The Birthplace* (1903) took for its subject Shakespeare's house in Stratford-on-Avon, though Shakespeare is never named. It deals with the dilemma of a curator, who – painfully aware that the house bore no resemblance to its appearance in Shakespeare's time, and of the question mark hanging over the authorship of the work attributed to him – was torn between presenting visitors with the facts and providing a colourful account of the playwright's childhood.⁵²

James's discussion of authenticity, and of the choice between foregrounding the life of the former occupant or focusing on his or her work remains highly pertinent to the presentation of historic-house museums. In 1997 the DemHist Committee of the International

Council of Museums (ICOM) agreed a set of definitions that emphasized the integrity and historical accuracy of the interior.⁵³ Even were the Rembrandt house to be categorized as 'representative' ('documenting a style or epoch'), the fact that the interior has been reconstructed on the basis of slender evidence raises awkward questions about authenticity.⁵⁴

Artists' houses, with their problems of display and – usually – the presence of a studio or workspace, present particular curatorial challenges.⁵⁵ The newly appointed curator of the Rembrandthuis museum in 2014, Michael Huijser, decided to use the house as a springboard for telling stories about seventeenth-century Amsterdam and the art market of the period. He proposed to shift the emphasis from Rembrandt's etchings to the artist and to the sensory experience of the visitor: 'We will change from being an object-oriented museum to a subject-oriented museum.'⁵⁶ The poster campaign launched that year formed part of an attempt to encourage an imaginative engagement with the site; the experience envisaged in the house was to be an immersive one, not confined to a visual experience of artworks but also involving touch and smell.

Around 1900 the perception of Rembrandt as a modern in his realism and experimental approach to printmaking techniques had led the first trustees of the museum to embrace a novel approach to his house. They encouraged de Bazel to design an interior manifestly of the early twentieth century, allowing him a degree of creative improvisation. Today's museum suggests a different idea of creativity, focused on responses to Rembrandt's work by twenty-first-century artists and Rembrandt's activities as painter and teacher. The intimate engagement with the artist's etchings, which the house was initially designed to foster, has been displaced to the annex, where Rembrandt's etchings and work by his contemporaries are displayed together with temporary exhibitions. In the house, the attic evokes the space where Rembrandt's apprentices once worked.

In 2015 a study by Perry Chapman of the Rembrandthuis in terms of the 1656 inventory has provided a new perspective on the house. She suggests that the inventory's twenty pages (traditionally used as a guide to the objects and furniture the house once contained) convey Rembrandt's carefully crafted persona as savant, collector and connoisseur. Chapman views it as a highly personal

document, corresponding to a room-by-room tour of Rembrandt's extraordinary collections, conducted by the artist himself. The house and its contents, she writes, amount to 'a site of personal display and performative self-fashioning'.⁵⁷

Chapman's analysis of the inventory in terms of display, and her interpretation of the house as the hub of an ambitious artistic enterprise are highly illuminating. Although the inventory did not cover the contents of the studio, recent curators have chosen to furnish the *schildercaemer* with brushes, pots, and painting equipment, and a selection of things that Rembrandt and his pupils might have used as source material. Chapman points out that the objects that once filled the *kunstcaemer* – books, prints, sculpture, paintings, naturalia, curios, armour, textiles and old clothing – served not merely as pictorial props for Rembrandt's work, but signalled the range and depth of his artistic interests and intellectual range. She proposes that many of these things may actually have been used to ornament the walls of the studio, producing a highly original kind of studio décor. She also finds the present-day attempt to convey a sense of the house as a home unconvincing. How, visitors to the museum might wonder, did this house contain family life as well as Rembrandt's activities as collector, teacher and artist? The orderliness of the domestic arrangements here scarcely corresponds to what we know of the artist's way of life and the financial difficulties that culminated in his bankruptcy.⁵⁸

We might extend that criticism in order to question the use of Rembrandt's own drawings as the basis for furnishing and arranging the house. The 2014 guidebook illustrates drawings of interiors by Rembrandt as evidence for the design of the box-bed in the *saal*, the use of a cloth over the upper part of the window in the *schildercaemer* to filter the daylight coming through it, and the collection of antique heads in the *kunstcaemer*.⁵⁹ In an earlier essay, Chapman had underlined the imaginative and metaphorical status of Rembrandt's depictions of his studio.⁶⁰ Other scholars have warned of the dangers of using inventories (which are by their nature selective) or images of interiors as evidence of how seventeenth-century houses actually looked. Montias and Loughman suggest that paintings of tiled floors and richly patterned carpets often served as demonstrations of artistic skill rather than accurate depictions of domestic interiors.⁶¹

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, de Bazel designed a museum that amounted to a critique of the recent work of restorers who were busy turning 'old into new and new into pseudo-old'.⁶² The present-day Rembrandthuis museum – although appearing at times over-literal in its use of Rembrandt's drawings as a guide for curatorial decisions – represents a fresh alternative to the romantic presentation of the artist's house museum current in the nineteenth century. This twenty-first-century museum tries to open visitors' eyes to how this house functioned in Rembrandt's time, the range of the people who came there, and the entrepreneurial activities of the artist who owned it. Despite the rather idealized picture of Rembrandt's household suggested by the basement kitchen, the arrangement of the upper floors succeeds in conveying how visitors, dealers, collectors, models, pupils and the artist himself may have used these spaces. Here, historical reconstruction appears to serve a new purpose. It is not simply used to evoke the look and feel of an imposing seventeenth-century house, but rather to expose Rembrandt's self-image and the complexity and ambition of his enterprise.⁶³

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Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the help of Nora Gietz and Miles Glendinning in preparing this article. David de Witt kindly arranged access to the papers of the Rembrandthuis Stichting. I am indebted to Gordon Fyfe for stimulating suggestions and to Diana Tyson for her assistance in translating texts from the Dutch.

Notes and references

- 1 S.A.C. Dudok van Heel, 'Rembrandt gets a bad bargain in 1639: the history of Rembrandt's house', *Kroniek van het Rembrandthuis* 97 nos. 1–2 (1997), p. 13.
- 2 Despite the downward turn in the area's standing, the house apparently retained its value; F. Lugt, 'Rembrandt's Amsterdam', *Print Collector's Quarterly* 5 (1915), p. 139.
- 3 See Fig. 1, Léopold Flameng's mid-nineteenth-century etching of the artist distributing alms to the poor at the steps of his house, which conveys the contemporary perception of Rembrandt as a man of the people.

- 4 According to Jan Veth, 'Rembrandt's great pathos seems to be resurrected in Jozef Israëls'; quoted in E. van Wetering, *Rembrandt: The painter at work* (Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 133–4.
- 5 Newspaper account of a meeting between the board of trustees of the Rembrandthuis and Amsterdam City Council, 1907, 'Artikelen over het museum', uncatalogued papers, Rembrandthuis museum, Gemeentearchief, Stadsarchief Amsterdam (hereafter GSA).
- 6 Dudok van Heel, op. cit. (note 1), p. 13.
- 7 F. Tissing, *The Rembrandt House Museum* (Antwerp, 2014), pp. 22–3.
- 8 Letter to the editor, *Handelsblad*, 29 July 1907, 'Artikelen over het museum', op. cit. (note 5).
- 9 Quoted in the newspaper account of a meeting between the board of trustees of the Rembrandthuis museum and Amsterdam City Council, 1907, 'Artikelen over het museum', op. cit. (note 5).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 W. Denslagen, *Architectural Restoration in Western Europe: Controversy and continuity* (Amsterdam, 1994), p. 216.
- 12 A. W. Weissman, 'Restaureen', *Bouwkundig Werkblad* 37 (1902), pp. 118–21 [Dutch translation of H. Muthesius, 'Die "Wiederherstellung" von Baudenkmalern', *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* 13 (1902), pp. 156–68]. In 1918 de Bazel reorganized the Rijkscommissie voor de Monumentenzorg; Denslagen, op. cit. (note 11); W. Denslagen, *Romantic Modernism: Nostalgia in the world of conservation* (Amsterdam, 2006).
- 13 '... in a part of town where the descendants of Rembrandt's Jewish neighbours still busily ply their trade – a picturesque, noisy crowd – will stand this house'; 'Het Rembrandt-Huis. Aan allen die de kunst beoefenen en liefhebben' ['The Rembrandt House. To all who practise and love the arts'], letter from the board of trustees of the Rembrandthuis museum, August 1908, Rembrandthuis Stichting, GSA.
- 14 Ibid.
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- 17 Quoted in J. Sheehan, *Museums in the German Art World: From the end of the Old Regime to the rise of modernism* (Oxford, 2000), p. 172.
- 18 See P. Parshall, S. Sell and J. Brodie, *The Unfinished Print* (Washington, DC, 2001).
- 19 L. Campbell, 'Drawing attention: John Postle Heseltine, the Etching Revival and Dutch art of the age of Rembrandt', *Journal of the History of Collections* 26 (2014), pp. 103–15.
- 20 Newspaper cutting, 1911, 'Artikelen over het museum', op. cit. (note 5).
- 21 J. Veth, *Short Guide to the Rembrandt House* (Amsterdam, 1911), p. 3, Rembrandthuis Stichting, GSA.
- 22 Ibid., p. 7.
- 23 Laan, op. cit. (note 16), p. 76.
- 24 '... provisionally and somewhat sparingly arranged', Veth, op. cit. (note 21), p. 8.
- 25 Ornstein-Van Slooten *et al.*, op. cit. (note 16), pp. 9–10. The *Short Guide* of 1911 (Veth, op. cit. (note 21)) lists ninety-one prints; a later edition, J. Veth, *Short Guide to the Rembrandt House* (Amsterdam, 1920), lists many more, including one by Seymour Haden, a key figure in the Etching Revival of the 1860s and 1870s. By 2014 the Rembrandthuis owned 260 prints.
- 26 Veth, op. cit. [1920] (note 25).
- 27 Ibid., p. 3.
- 28 Veth, op. cit. (note 21), p. 2.
- 29 See P. ten Doesschate Chu, *French Realism and the Dutch Masters: The influence of Dutch seventeenth-century painting on the development of French painting between 1830 and 1870* (Utrecht, 1974), pp. 78–9.
- 30 J. Reynaerts, *Rijksmuseum: The building as work of art* (Amsterdam, 2014), p. 28.
- 31 J. Becker, "Our Rijksmuseum has become a temple": the iconography of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 35 (1984), English summary, pp. 235–6.
- 32 Light was mentioned in odes and poems of 1906, such as C. Scharren's 'Song of Light on Rembrandt's Anniversary' and J. B. Shepens's reference to Rembrandt as Redeemer; C. Blotkamp, 'A tercentenary for Rembrandt', *Delta: A Review of Art, Life and Thought in the Netherlands* (summer, 1969), pp. 96–101.
- 33 Reynaerts, op. cit. (note 30), p. 74.
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- 36 S. Frank, 'L. M. Lauweriks and the Dutch School of Proportion', *AA Files* no. 7 (1984), p. 61.
- 37 J. van den Biggelaar, 'Huis Van Ogtrop door K.P.C. de Bazel', Stichting Historische Interieurs in Amsterdam, online at <https://www.historischeinterieursamsterdam.nl/huizenportret/huis-van-ogtrop-door-k-p-c-de-bazel/> (accessed 5 June 2021).
- 38 K.P.C. de Bazel, letter, 5 May 1908, Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, inv. no. BAZE 0021:294.
- 39 De Bazel, op. cit. (note 15).
- 40 Campbell, op. cit. (note 19), pp. 104, 111–12. T. Hooft was curator of the Fodor Museum in Amsterdam.
- 41 'Reconstruction remains mistake', 7 May 1998, *Die Verdieping Trouw* <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5009/Archief/article/detail/2681559/1998/05/07/Reconstructie-blijft-vergissing.dhtml> (accessed 8 February 2015).
- 42 They were collected and published as *The Rembrandt Papers: Documents, drawings and prints*, ed. S.A.C. Dudok van Heel (Amsterdam, 1987).
- 43 The wall panelling, staircase and balustrades were acquired by Sijf & Dax van Zuilen of Oudevater. The panelling has now been used for the decor of bars and offices; Dax van Zuilen, personal communication to the author, 25 March 2020.
- 44 In the *sydelcaemer*, an antique bed from a house in Culemborg was installed; Tissing, op. cit. (note 7), p. 35.

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