

## Conference 'Rembrandt and his women' by Lidewij de Koekkoek

**On International Women's Day 2019, our Dutch group organized a lecture on Rembrandt and his relationship to women, in commemoration of Rembrandt's death 350 years ago.**

**In the wonderful, airy and sun-filled atrium of the Embassy of the Netherlands, which had been graciously offered, a joyful crowd gathered around tables filled with delicious sandwiches. If it had not been for the gentle reminders to enter the auditorium, I am sure that the discussions would still be ongoing!**

Dr. Lidewij de Koekkoek, Director of the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam, eminent art historian and expert on Rembrandt, had chosen NOT to talk about Rembrandt but about the women who surrounded him and shaped his life and artistic career.

Rembrandt's two great loves of his life, Saskia Uylenburgh and Hendrickje Stoffels, couldn't have been more different, especially when it came to their entrepreneurship.

Saskia Uylenburgh, Rembrandt's wife, was born into a family of Frisian regents, as the daughter of the mayor of Leeuwarden. Early orphaned, she met Rembrandt during a stay with family in Amsterdam. The couple got married and after a few years moved into their monumental new home on the Jodenbreestraat, now the Rembrandt House Museum. With Rembrandt being the number one portrait painter in Amsterdam and Saskia having received a substantial inheritance, they lived a large-scale life. It was a position of great privilege that Saskia did not have to work, nor did she have to do much work around the house, with household staff at her disposal. Usually, married women of social standing did not work outside the house but could be governors of charities. Lower social classes used to work as household helpers, labourers or market women.

Three of their children died shortly after birth and were buried in the nearby Zuiderkerk. The sole survivor was Titus, who was named after his mother's sister Titia (Tietje) van Uylenburgh. Saskia died 9 months after he was born, 1642, in Amsterdam, aged 29, from tuberculosis.

Saskia allowed Rembrandt to use their son's inheritance if he did not remarry. If Titus died without children, Rembrandt would be the heir of the moveable property. For Titus, Rembrandt hired Geertje Dircx as a wetnurse. In 1649 she assumed he would marry her and as he refused, took him to court for 'breach of promise to marry'. Following this, Rembrandt had her locked up in a house of correction when Hendrickje Stoffels, who had entered the Rembrandt household in 1647 as a housekeeper had gradually become his new love. The story of Geertje is not very well known and sheds an unfavourable light on Rembrandt's character!

Hendrickje became the long-term partner of the artist. As daughter of a sergeant, she was actually lower working-class with no social standing, whereas Saskia's origins were from a wealthy family, but what Hendrickje possessed was a robust business sense. The couple were unable to marry because of the financial settlement linked to Saskia's will, but remained together until Hendrickje's death.

Unfortunately, Rembrandt's finances slowly plummeted. In 1656, the artist went bankrupt and the house on the Jodenbreestraat had to be sold. Because of all items going on auction, a very detailed inventory had been made which is preserved and gives invaluable insights into the contents of the house, aiding reconstructing the interior as closely as possible to the original.

Rembrandt, Hendrickje and Titus had to move into rented property and herself and Titus employed Rembrandt to avoid problems with the debt collectors. Hendrickje was a great entrepreneur and opened also an art-shop with Titus's help where they sold Rembrandt's paintings. The increased productivity of Rembrandt in the early 1660's is believed to be the result of Hendrickje's organisation

talent and support, preventing him from a complete downfall after his bankruptcy. She as well as their daughter Cornelia, born 1654, also served as models for several of his paintings and portraits. When in 1663 the plague hit Amsterdam, killing 1000's, it is believed that Hendrickje also became a victim. Titus died in 1668, shortly followed by Rembrandt himself in 1669. To the contrary of what is said, Rembrandt did not die in total poverty but in much more modest circumstances than in his earlier life.

In Rembrandt's time, there were only very few female artists, e.g. Judith Leyster, who was a student of Frans Hals. Because of this fact, our enthusiastic speaker had to make a jump as far as the 20th century to show women in the Rembrandt circle. Only from the 1970's onwards, the hereto male-dominated domain became inhabited by women who play a very active role nowadays. To name but a few: Marieke de Winkel, Petria Nobel, Ilona van Tuin, An Van Camp and many others. These are technical and archival researchers, curators, who study and document Rembrandt's numerous works and discover amazing facts.

A lively discussion followed this eye-opening talk which showed us very different facets of such a multi-talented artist.

We warmly thank our friendly hosts, the Dutch Embassy in Brussels, our sponsor Mr. Robert Bosman of CMS Lawfirm and everyone who helped with the event, whose profits go to the humanitarian projects of the Association.

Renate Smith, Austrian group



Delicious sandwiches were served.





Our president Bernadette Ulens enjoyed lunch and lecture





With the valuable help of gentlemen on International Women's Day



Mrs Lidewij de Koekkoek during her inspiring lecture



The audience enjoyed an interesting conference



The organizing team with Dutch ambassador and speaker; f.l.t.r. Nelleke Thissen, Mrs Lidewij de Koekkoek, Ambassador Maryem van den Heuvel, Carien Italianer and Marjan Blok. Nora Hagemeijer is not in the picture.