



Preface

The wall paintings in the church of the Frisian village where I was born became my first experience of the concept of art. Still a long way off from foreseeing my future as an art historian, at an early age I became familiar with the strange, elongated figures of the angels and saints and the vivid scenes decorating the walls and vaults of the presbytery. Frankly, at the time I felt a greater affinity for the innocent but colorful gothic revival glasses in the windows than for the intricate, unrealistic imagery on the walls, darkened by the thick smoke of incense and candles. Only when I returned to the village many years later as a young professional did I realize that these murals were the true works of art: original compositions in a surprisingly varied stylistic spectrum between what I had learned to determine as “medieval,” “baroque,” and “expressionist.” The name of the artist was well remembered by my parents’ generation, who had seen him working, up on the scaffolding, before and in the early years of the Second World War: Jacob Ydema (1901–1990) from Blauwhuis in Friesland.

As I was planning to publish a small monograph on the church of my native village, Bakhuizen, I decided to contact the aging artist and was invited to visit him at his home in Miste. For me as an art historian specializing in much earlier periods, it was a revelation to interview a painter face-to-face about his spiritual and artistic tenets, his iconographic and compositional choices, and his operating procedures. I became an admirer of the man and the artist Jacob Ydema, and I have seized several opportunities to devote further studies to his many-sided work in churches. Necessarily, these were pioneering attempts, since accessible documentation on his life and career was fragmentary, quite a few of his works were lost, and any comprehensive study on the artist was missing.

With this impressive book by Onno Ydema on the life and work of his father Jacob, the gap has been filled in one go. More than that, it is an extraordinarily complete study of a

painter without equal among artists working in the field of monumental and sacred art in the Netherlands during the thirties, forties and fifties of the past century. It must be said that hardly any of these artists have managed to secure a prominent position in the canonical art history—and Jacob Ydema, with his reluctance to be in the spotlight, was certainly not the most likely candidate to achieve fame. Yet his work has not gone completely unnoticed, notwithstanding the general disregard of twentieth-century religious monumental art within the discipline of art history. In groundbreaking standard works on stained glass (Hoogveld 1989) and on monumental sacred art (Van Hellenberg Hubar 2013) due attention was paid to Jacob Ydema, with enthusiasm shown for his originality together with some amazement at his isolation from his contemporaries.

Now, a wide-ranging monograph is dedicated to this modest man, who worked in the silence of his studio and on the dusty scaffolding in rural churches, who was reluctant to put forward or explain his creations, whose uncommissioned work was never promoted in galleries or exhibitions and whose sacred wall paintings and stained glasses were about to lose their ecclesiastical relevance in times of desacralization and secularization. It is clearly thanks to the personal bond between father and son that this extraordinary book could come about, and thanks to the family ties and oral history much hidden and forgotten material has been recovered: letters, sketches, oil paintings. This is an art-historical study, given a special charm by a strong personal touch.

The narrative of this book concerns a man who dedicated his life to art, his family, and a few dear friends. Living in a quiet world of concentration he was not seriously distracted by the anxieties of the economic crisis in the 1930s and the brutal German occupation in the 1940s. Apart from a long stay in Louisiana, Ydema hardly travelled. His wide cultural and art-historical horizon came from study and erudition and from intense journeys in his inner



ill. 123. Jesus Falls for the Third Time, south wall, St. Ludger church, Balk (1941). Photo: Kerkfotografie.nl

in the large panel on the north wall. There is more movement, the postures are more tense and the facial expressions are clearer. The style of the southern panel evidently is closer to the Bakhuizen works, which indicates that the artist painted the southern panel first, in 1941, and that he created the northern panel in 1943. If we look at the scene of Jesus meeting the women of Jerusalem we find the group of women rendered as a closed block, while the bystanders witnessing the first fall of Jesus, or the people watching Veronica doing her work of mercy, for example, are all depicted side by side as a row of people.

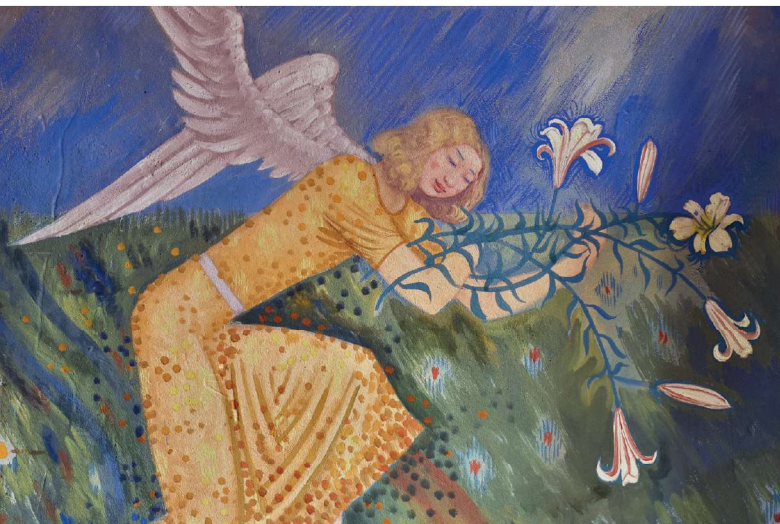
Whereas in art history the development towards more realistic depictions is generally considered as a progress, Ydema took the opposite course and increasingly favored abstraction over more naturalistic representations. If shown in isolation the style of the Women of Jerusalem already departs a good way from literal realism, but the artist was on a path towards more iconic representations, thereby seeking an optimization of the emotions in his work. If we

look at the landscape we can note another characteristic of the artist: the preference for heavily undulating shapes. We find this contortion already in the earliest of his canvases, dating from about a decade before the murals in Balk (see ills. 306 and 307) and we can also find it in his later canvases (e.g. ills. 382 and 383).

It is interesting to especially note other details, like the figure seen from the back at the right (ill. 122). It echoes the figure of Asa in the Tree of Jesse, St. Michael church, Schalkwijk (ill. 132); and the sharp-etched and striking representation of the head in Balk reminds us of the beautiful murals flanking the altar in Bakhuizen that Ydema painted two years earlier (ill. 57).

The extreme cruelty of the torture justifies all the emotions of the bystanders described in the Gospels and the mourning of the event in the Christian commemorative services on Good Friday. The Stations are used in the private devotion of the parishioners to participate in those emotions and spiritually take part in the suffering. Particularly moving is the image of, apparently, inhabitants of the village who

ill. 206. Angel Holding Lilies, St. Anthony of Padua church, Nieuw-Dijk (1949–51). Photo: Rein de Jong

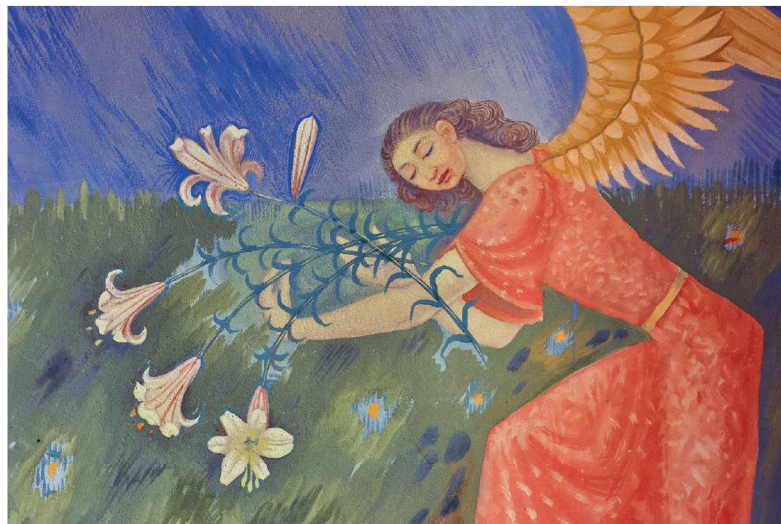


It is interesting to compare the faces of these angels with the canvases painted by the artist. These faces for example are closely akin to the face of the girl in *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* (ill. 333) and the *Mermaid with Winged Mythical Figure* (ill. 317), and even the *Self-Portrait with Palette* (ill. 345). These works show a related style, which could, but not necessarily should, mean that those two canvases are to be dated to the late forties or even early fifties.

The composition of the side chapel dedicated to Mary (ill. 208) mirrors the chapel with the altar honoring the patron of the church. The decorative richness of colors and forms supports the symbolic entourage of the crowned virgin on top of the altar, bearing the Savior on her arm in the body and guise of a child. Each of the painted figures expresses a deeply experienced joy and a profound longing for the promise personalized in the incarnated deity. The decoration expresses the *Roomse blijheid*, Roman [Catholic] joy.

The atmosphere in the Catholic communities in the late nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century is characterized by the happy notion that each creature is destined to eternal afterlife in the never-ending company of the creator. This awaits everyone longing for what Ydema himself described as the Great Meeting, the first and true meeting with the heavenly Father upon arrival in Heaven immediately after one's death. Fundamental to this notion

ill. 207. Angel Holding Lilies, St. Anthony of Padua church, Nieuw-Dijk (1949–51). Photo: Rein de Jong



is the letter to the Christians of Rome in which the apostle Paul wrote: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."⁵⁹¹

In the chapel the atmosphere of joy is manifestly present in the flowers presented to Mary by the two angels next to

589 See e.g. the churches in Nes (ill. 109), Dalfsen (ill. 135), and Doetinchem (ill. 179).

590 In ill. 204 the bishop Boniface († 754), a missionary from England who was killed in Dokkum (Friesland). Standing in front of him is the priest Leonard van Veghel (c. 1527–1572, one of the nineteen so-called Martyrs of Gorkum, hanged by militant Dutch Calvinists during the sixteenth-century religious troubles. In the foreground we find the priest Peter Donders (1809–1887), in the Netherlands particularly famous for his work among lepers in Batavia (present day Jakarta); and behind him Ludger (c. 743–809), missionary among the Frisians and Saxons—Nieuw-Dijk is a former Saxon territory. Behind Boniface we find Liduina of Schiedam (1380–1433), a mystic who suffered from, as far as can be reconstructed, multiple sclerosis. Just visible in the illustration behind her is Peter Canisius (1521–1597), a Jesuit priest and Doctor of the Church. On his shoulders he carries a copy of the catechism of the Catholic Church.

591 Rom. 8:17.

stripped of almost all details, and a vague indication of vegetation. The artist thereby successfully managed to translate the creative ambitions that he pursued in his canvases into a commissioned work.

It is interesting to compare the scene in this photo (ill. 226), taken for a publication in a local newspaper, with the final version (ill. 227). The preliminary version is inornate and elementary; the artist then decided to elaborate on the décor and add a brightly colored building. He also added some motifs to the dress of the woman at right and changed the location of the small girl.

The rectangular panel that the artist is working on in the photo was later made dentate so that it integrates with the brickwork. Also, the architecture added to the background is abstracted into cubes, to create a unity between the panel and the wall for its multi-angular contours. The colors are bright and strong, which makes them fit perfectly with the varying shades of the brickwork.

The subject of the nailing scene (ill. 229) calls for active movements from the principal agents — the execution squad hammering the big iron nails through the wrists and ankles of their victim. In the southern panel at Balk some of

the gruesome reality is visualized (e.g. ills. 123*f*), but in Jennings the artist distanced himself as much as possible from those horrible details. Here again the depiction is abstract, to the point that he even decided to show the nails penetrating the hands instead of the wrists, as is traditional but probably not historical. In several earlier depictions of the crucifixion, as in Apeldoorn (1946), Doetinchem (1947–48) or Breda (1949), or the small canvas in ill. 389 (c. 1950), we do find Jesus fixed to the cross by means of nails through his wrists. For Ydema the historical reality was not important here.

He shows us Jesus with the severe and bloody wounds from the nails, with the wounds from the flagellation and the crown of thorns employed by Pontius Pilate's soldiers both to cause him pain and to mock his claim of authority as celestial king. He even seems to show us Jesus with the trauma of the blows to the jaw inflicted by the henchmen of the Jewish priests.⁶⁰⁶ But at the same time he shows us a serene Jesus, the principal figure in a passion that can be contemplated not for its horrors but for the covenant between God and mankind, paid for by the blood spent in the crucifixion. In this panel again we find architecture in

ill. 226. Jacob Ydema working on
Jesus Meets the Women of
Jerusalem, Immaculate
Conception church,
Jennings, USA (1956–57)





ill. 269. View of farmhouses in Laaxum, Friesland (dated 1941)

for a tour of the surrounding countryside, and looking back at the village, dominated by its church, he made this drawing of the village's silhouette. It is not dated, but the ornate lettering that identifies the location is very similar to that used in the various depictions of farmhouses in Laaxum in the immediate vicinity of Bakhuizen, which are dated 1941. Above we have seen that in 1941 the artist was working in the St. Odulf church in Bakhuizen; he stayed in the village in June and July. The building at the edge of the village is the Mariahof.⁶⁴⁴

This minimalistic drawing of farmhouses in Laaxum (ill. 267) presents a magical vision that transcends the materials. The local scenery breathes an atmosphere of peace and tranquility, but — paradoxically — we observe curved, undulating lines that indicate movement and expose an underlying energy in the hilly foreground and the farmhouses behind. To the artist however the drawing

was a study of reality, not an expression of any internal emotion that he wanted to impose on an external medium. The artist actually saw the landscape in front of him as he was drawing it. The art of drawing — and of painting for that matter — in his mind was the art of truly looking at an object, of observing its principal characteristics. You cannot draw what you don't see, in the words of the artist himself. Each artistic creation for Jacob Ydema is an experiment with nature, and the principal enemy of the experimental artist in his view is the denial of the physical reality. Ultimately Jacob Ydema went into nature — in this case into the fields near Laaxum — to study the factual reality of the landscape, and render it as an abstraction with a few simple lines. It is difficult to image how this artwork could have been conceived without the prior works of Vincent van Gogh, for example, in his mature landscapes of about 1889.

643 Postcard to Piet and Gré Henneman-Witteveen, May 14, 1941.

644 See for the Mariahof p. 77.

In Romantic Scene (ill. 316), a sinuous landscape is the fantastical décor for a primitive struggle. A black or well-bronzed male overpowers a tender girl with frightening intensity. The blue bikini suit, quite modern for the 1940s, may indicate that the initial presence of the female in the scene was voluntary — but the waving red cloth on the man hints that the encounter with her brutal partner may not have been expected. His movements cost him great effort: apparently he needs all his strength to overpower her as his victim. She pulls his hair with one hand and his jaw with the other, and shouts as loudly as she can.

Understandably, the apparent rape in front of her eyes would cause great anxiety to the other girl, in the water. She acts surprised by the event, and appears helpless. She modestly covers herself, possibly realizing that her white clothes on the border of the pond lie out of reach, and she knows that perhaps this is not the best moment for her to be completely naked.

At the same time, a less grim and more idyllic interpretation seems possible. First of all, a glorification of rape would be out of character for the artist. He may have

been inspired by Cézanne's violent rape scene in the 1867 painting *The Abduction*,⁶⁹⁸ probably representing the abduction of Proserpine by Pluto in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*;⁶⁹⁹ Pluto is shown dark-bronzed, in strong contrast with the light shade of the goddess's skin. But the theme in Ydema's representation is different. Two swans in the background may clarify the narrative: this painting seems all about the eternal chase of males going after females, and about living beings attracting and at the same time opposing each other in the ever-repeating ceremony of procreation; the female swan with a male at its tail probably has emotions similar to those of the girl in the hands of her attacker. But then what are these emotions? Is the girl mere prey, resisting an aggressive predator? Or is she a talented actress, merely playing a role to excite a love-drunk companion?

Furthermore, the coloristic and rhythmic integration of the individual elements create an atmosphere that is in contrast with the interpretation of the composition as a menacing scenario. The prospect of a brutal violation of a young girl's physical and mental integrity is thereby difficult to reconcile with the positive dynamism of the



ill. 317. Mermaid with Winged Mythical Figure (1943–50). Photo: Kerkfotografie.nl



ill. 318. The Pacific lampas shell used as a model for Mermaid with Winged Mythical Figure.

696 In modern times having undamaged socks is normal, but until the 1950s people in the Netherlands wore knitted socks that were very vulnerable to wear and tear. In many letters Jacob thanks Hetty for her constant efforts to repair his damaged socks.

697 Letter to Anna Dellemijn and Hetty, January 27, 1941.

698 Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.

699 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.



ill. 354. Fisherman and Fish
(1945–56). Photo: Jan van
Esch

become independent features. The sense of depth has become subordinate. The physical build of the flattened main figure is manifestly distorted, transformed into a series of almost flat-color facets for that purpose. Only through contrasting hues do such facets become essentially distinguishable from planes composing the environment. Any three-dimensional illusion thus disappears, and the composition is nearly as two-dimensional as the surface of the canvas.

The accentuated mask of the angler's head and his staring gaze add to a sense of distancing — friendly but stern at the same time. Without the artist's explorations of tribal sculpture such presentation is difficult to imagine. This

work reaches a high level of abstraction, in forms and planes, in the intense and estranging colors and in the arrangement of the fisherman and his catch as a frieze across the picture plane. At the same time the artist did not abandon the concept of a pictorial structure built on linear and atmospheric perspective. The composition seems restful and calm, but the gleam of the hidden sun, held back by a thin haze of evaporating morning dew, creates a tension in the composition that is invigorated by the playful accents of light on the land, the sandy beach under the feet of the figure, and the glimmer of the fish.

The most obvious visual characteristic of A Painter and his Family (ill. 355) is the distortion of nature. This is a



ill. 414. ◀ Self-Portrait with Red Tie (c. 1980). Photo: Jan van Esch

paint diluted with the viscous resin with fluent and broad strokes of the brush, giving the face a soft and mellow tone. The expression of the face changed at the same time; the last version is much more emotional, contemplative, introspective than the unfinished version in the photo.

A regularly recurring theme in family discussions with the artist in the period 1978–88 was the issue of picture frames. As mentioned above, Ydema did not want his works framed as he liked to have as many of them on his walls as possible, so that he could view and review them constantly. After a long day of work on a certain canvas, he would put it in his living room so that he could have his eyes on it all evening and morning when he woke up. In fact, he had several of his unfinished paintings in his living room and, even if these had reached a stage where he was happy with the result (which happiness was often short-lived), he hung them on a wall amid other paintings and objects from his ethnographical collection. The artist said there simply was not enough room for frames.

The alternative view of course is that a painting should be isolated from its surroundings, which is the prime function of a picture frame. One could even argue that for some artworks a picture frame should have sufficient presence to create the impression that the viewer is looking into another world, the frame being the window. The artist acknowledged this function of the picture frame, but only appreciated it for those of his own paintings he deemed finished.

One day his younger son and daughter-in-law presented the artist with a traditional Louis XIV gilded picture frame that they had purchased at the auction house Drouot in Paris. They challenged him to paint a new work specifically for this picture frame. Ydema accepted the challenge and started another self-portrait for the frame. Actually the canvas (ill. 414) was finished in just a few months' time, which for Ydema was quite a short period to work on an oil painting. It is as if the artist enjoyed working on this portrait, not only because it came out well from the start, which led to its swift completion, but also because here we encounter a depiction of an artist in a relaxed mood, even with a vague smile. Also remarkable is that he is wearing his blue Alcantara vest, that fabric being expensive at the time. He never wore when he was working. Apparently he did not want to present himself wearing formal attire — when going out he wore a proper three-piece suit and traditional tie



ill. 415. Self-Portrait with Red Tie (c. 1980). Photo: Jan van Esch

— but for this luxurious frame he did not want a self-portrait in too informal dress either. The loosely tied strip of cloth nowadays appears hopelessly out of date, but around 1980 it was considered a fashionable and elegant informal alternative for the formal tie.

In Self-Portrait with Curtain (ill. 416) the face of the artist seems to stare out with searching eyes, as if the spectator is being subjected to intense scrutiny. Some accidental visitors to the house in Miste expressed their discomfort about the self-portraits that hung on the walls: they felt intimidated by these canvases that seemed to judge them when they walked through the rooms. It is impossible to ignore paintings that force interaction with people passing by. As such they qualify as “good works,” in the terminology of the artist.⁷⁴⁷

747 See p. 11.