



PROJECT MUSE®

4 The canon in revision: Periodical maintenance of the canon

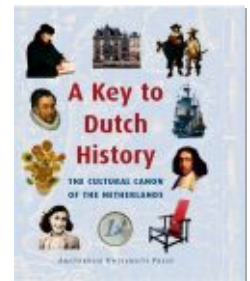
Published by

Slings, Hubert and Frits van Oostrom.

A Key to Dutch History: The Cultural Canon of the Netherlands.

Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76693>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76693>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-18 20:21 GMT)

The canon in revision

Periodical maintenance of the canon

I have seen Picasso and Mondrian, Bernini and Michelangelo, Hieronymus Bosch and Hans Holbein. I have seen art of unsettling beauty and deep significance. But none more unsettling or radical than that of Marianne Schuit.

MICK VAN SCHOONEVELD AT WWW.DELAATSTESTAP.NL

79

4.1 The ever-changing canon

“History is a never-ending debate” is a well-known quote by historian Pieter Geyl (1887-1966). This is doubly true where it comes to the historical canon. Both the contents and the function of the canon are the subject of endless debate. This debate is not a symptom of the canon’s demise, but rather of its vitality. After all, debate is one of the very purposes of the canon; topics can range from the significance of a Dutch canon to children of the MTV generation, to a concrete difference of opinion on the artistic superiority of either Rembrandt or Vermeer. Such debates are not entered into with the intention of ever finding a definitive answer; it is simply a good thing to keep discussing matters of beauty and importance. The fact that some reject or denounce the canon while others advocate extravagant choices simply serves to make that debate all the more intriguing.

If we examine the history of this ongoing debate, it becomes clear that the canon – both the Dutch and the international version – is of a great resilience and flexibility. Homer, Dante and Rembrandt have been an integral part of the canon for centuries now, and that is unlikely to change. However, our view of these great icons is, and will always remain, subject to change. While the prevalent eighteenth century view on Rembrandt was that of a misunderstood genius, we now regard him as a masterful strategist,

manoeuvring skilfully amongst his various pupils and clients. The portrait of William of Orange is also constantly being repainted, not to mention Napoleon. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the contents of the canon are actually subject to change in certain areas. Historical research has dismantled figureheads from the old Dutch canon such as the Muiderkring culture group and Nova Zembla to such an extent that they now no longer feature in the fifty windows.⁸⁹ Conversely, it is safe to say Aletta Jacobs would not have been given such a prominent position in the canon fifty years ago. Although Dutch history lessons prior to 1940 did focus on the colonies, there was much less awareness of the important role of immigration and emigration in Dutch history than is currently the case in our post-colonial society. The canon too, it would seem, is an ever-changing entity.

As we approach the present day, the canon becomes highly temporal. Madame Tussaud's in Amsterdam has Pim Fortuyn on display amongst world leaders; the likeness of TV presenter Hennie Huisman has now found new use in the chamber of horrors. The general public is not the only capricious voice, though. In 1920, when the Royal Dutch Academy of Science was asked to offer its views on the establishment of an archive for Dutch film, the institution made it clear it saw no value in such an endeavour. Historian Huizinga (1872-1945) regarded film as "deathly mechanisation" of life, describing cinemas as "mundane and monotonous", and the medium as "not worth preserving".⁹⁰ Although the heritage of Dutch cinema is currently not featured in any the fifty windows, this may well be the case in future editions of the canon. As spectators of our own times and recent past, we are simply too close to judge what will be of lasting influence and significance. After thorough deliberation, our committee has opted for the current windows. Future generations, however, might well choose Pim Fortuyn over Drees, or perhaps value rapper Ali B over Annie M.G. Schmidt. Our recent past may also be subject to reevaluation, with a window on the Golden Age ceding its place to Modern Devotion. And it would only take one spectacular archaeological finding to put the Vikings back in the centre of attention.

This is one of the reasons why the Minister's brief to the canon committee included the provision that we should develop a procedural recommendation for possible future adaptations of our design. The committee feels comfortable

89 Cf. Muiderkring: Spies 1984; Nova Zembla: Davids 2005.

90 See Klein 1998, p. 130-131.

with this request, as we do not regard the fifty windows presented here – or even the underlying concept – as being definitive. Despite the fact that we have invested great care in both the concept and selection procedure, and regard our proposal as robust, this is not a canon set in stone. Like the road network, the canon also requires constant maintenance. In response to the minister’s brief, the committee presents a concrete, tri-level proposal below. Each of the three levels is aimed at facilitating revision of our proposal.

First, though, we would like to take this opportunity to emphasize what we believe should be done if the current proposal were to be well-received: the completion of our efforts through the development of an *international canon*. This was in no way part of the committee’s brief, and would certainly have to be thought through by a new body. Harmonisation with our concept would offer obvious advantages, but it seems certain that even the most fervent devotees of Goethe’s teaching methods would not find fifty windows to be sufficient here. However, the immense value of the international canon requires – if there is sufficient support for this concept – that they flank and – in all honesty – overarch the Dutch canon: with Goethe, Shakespeare, the pyramids, Dante, Stradivarius, the atomic bomb, the Alhambra, the fall of the Berlin wall, Fellini, Madame Curie, impressionism, democracy, the Sistine Chapel, Martin Luther King and Dostoyevsky, the Vietnam war, Voltaire, Keynes, Columbus, Churchill, Jugendstil, Einstein, Gandhi, the Temple Mount, Bach, Hitler, Darwin, the Incas and the Aya Sofia and perhaps even the Bayeux Tapestry, the fall of Constantinople and the fountains of Bernini. As this list illustrates, such a canon would be a mind-boggling venture, and might even prove too much for the committee assigned with its completion. The committee for the Development of the Dutch Canon would like to emphasize that – although our perspective was a national one – the value of the canon in the Netherlands does not end at the borders of our nation. What is more, we regard the value of foreign canonical windows as being equally self-evident, perhaps even more so as the Dutch canon begins to take root. Naturally, the secondary education system would be the most appropriate arena for the implementation of such a canon.

RECOMMENDATION 27 Consider the initiation of a process aimed at developing an international canon for the Dutch education sector – Ministry of OCW

4.2 Concrete procedures

One factor that will ensure the revaluation of our design is the debate this report will spark. This discussion is expected to take place across a broad range of forums, at many instances. The committee is especially eager to see the educational sector study the report thoroughly in the short term. The report should be discussed at individual schools, both at management level as well as by the various relevant sections; naturally, the debate should also include teachers associations at both primary and secondary school level.

82

RECOMMENDATION 28 Discuss this report at individual schools, both at management level and in the relevant sections

RECOMMENDATION 29 Discuss this report in teachers associations for both primary and secondary education

The committee would like the opportunity to respond to the main points of criticism and debate in early 2007.

RECOMMENDATION 30 Respond to main points of criticism and debate sparked by this report – Canon Committee (Spring of 2007), under the supervision of the Ministry of OCW

The website – and especially the “wiki function” developed in parallel to our design will also offer a permanent open forum for every possible kind of comment with regard to the canon. This forum will serve as a demonstration of the “debate without end” referred to earlier. The wiki application will also allow for “regular maintenance” of the canon. Specifying details, adding new ideas for lessons and supplementary stories, pointing out new children’s books, websites and audiovisual sources – these are all excellent means to help perfect and update the canon. They will also help establish – more or less automatically – if certain windows are eligible for replacement in a few years time.

However, our proposal and design also require “major repairs”. To this end, the committee proposes the formation of a new committee in five years time – in line with the rhythmicity of the attainment targets – in order to reassess the entire canon. This could result in a broad range of modifications:

based on experience with the – by that time – tried and trusted design, based on new requirements with regard to education and/or a different view of the canon’s purpose and contents.

RECOMMENDATION 31 Reassess the Dutch Canon in five years time
– Ministry of OCW

At the other end of the spectrum, this canon design obviously requires maintenance via the *entoen.nu* website in the immediate term. The situation is actually rather delicate: the day the site goes online – along with the wiki function and necessary editorial staff – marks the *de facto* completion of the canon committee’s task. In order to prevent the site – which has great potential – from languishing in cyberspace, it is extremely important that the responsible officials – starting with the government that initiated this process – find a way of getting *entoen.nu* to work properly in the short term (cf. Recommendation 3).