

## Queen Wilhelmina, the artist

When studying the letters of career painter Jan Hendrik Scheltema (1861-1941), who kept painting for almost all his half century in Australia, I noticed twice a brief reference to the art of Queen Wilhelmina. “The exhibition of the paintings of the Queen is a good lesson for rich amateurs.”, so he wrote in his letter dated 11 July 1932; and “That Alpine landscape of the Queen works well”, he wrote in his next letter of 23 August 1932. These brief but positive judgements of her art were made after seeing just a few printed pictures of it in print media. The two letters, part of the massive collection of his letters, now in the State Library of Victoria (SLV), were written from Australia to his sister Anna, who at the time lived in Schiedam. Anna regularly sent him news clippings from Holland.

Wilhelmina was of course not a career artist in the sense that she painted to earn a living like Scheltema. Thus, he called her 1932 exhibition ‘a good lesson for rich amateurs’, meaning such people could learn something from it, because he considered it better than most of the work he had encountered from such painters. He had been teaching many well-off amateur painters in his Melbourne studio for many years, thus knew the kind of art they tended to produce.

During her adult life it may have been common knowledge in The Netherlands that Queen Wilhelmina (Den Haag 1880-1962 Apeldoorn) was an enthusiastic and active artist making worthwhile art. If I ever knew this, I had forgotten. Her contemporary critics gave her art the thumbs up as good paintings created by a talented and educated artist. Experts after her death continued to express such views. Wilhelmina long kept a painter’s studio at The Hague palace *Huis ten Bosch*, having lived as a toddler at *Noordeinde* Palace also in The Hague. She often stayed at Palace *Het Loo* in Apeldoorn, which was used as a summer palace. *Het Loo*, surrounded by rustling forests, had been built and first lived in by Wilhelmina’s Dutch relative Stadtholder ‘Willem’ of Orange III (1650-1702), whose mother and wife were both English princesses and who became King of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1688 to 1702 and is occasionally also known there as their King William III. Wilhelmina was effectively guided from the age of ten for her role as queen and much loved by her religious and astute mother, Emma. Emma too was known to competently hobby in art, at first mainly drawing. Wilhelmina was also much loved by Emma’s husband the Dutch King

William III, her father, who called her Paulientje, using one of her other names. He was not known to be artistically active himself yet encouraged the arts by granting a scholarship to many would-be artists who demonstrated sufficient talent. This included J.H. Scheltema, who received modest grants for five subsequent years study during the early 1880's.

Wilhelmina actively painted just landscapes, *en plein air*, during many periods of her life. At *Het Loo* she would later in life even have a 'mobile studio', which was pulled by a palace car to the spot where she intended to paint with the driver patiently waiting until it was time to return home.

Her autobiography "*Eenzaam maar niet alleen*", was written at Palace *Het Loo* after her retirement and was also published in English ('Lonely but not alone'). Wilhelmina indicated in it that she felt close to God's creation when she was painting out there. In her own words this was printed as: '*Mijn kunst staat geheel in het teken van mijn liefde voor de natuur en mijn innerlijke drang haar weer te geven, geheel zoals ik haar zie en aanvoel. In het teken van blijdschap bij het in mij opnemen van en verblijven in Gods schepping.*' She was a religious woman. A review about the book indicates it contains, details of her art studies and the locations where she painted, in addition to her life as a monarch. Queen Wilhelmina married her prince-consort Hendrik on 7 February 1901, known before he married her as Herzog Heinrich Wladimir Albrecht Ernst of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1876-1934). It promised to be one of those fairy tale marriages. Artist Otto Eerelman (1839-1926) from Groningen, whose paintings, like Scheltema's often showed animals in it, painted the interior scene of the packed church service of their wedding ceremony in Amsterdam. The painting features a few hundred festively if not lavishly dressed figures, indeed recognizable portraits, which reminds of the colourful *Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, which Tom Roberts (1856-1931) painted, after Charles Nuttall (1872-1934) had painted it earlier a little differently in black and white.

The commitments to public service of the Queen and of her prince had detectable differences and after the repeated disappointment of four miscarriages, which did not help her promising marriage, their long-awaited baby, Juliana, was finally born in 1909. The Royal marriage grew apart, and in addition Prince Hendrik died in 1934, leaving Wilhelmina without a husband

altogether for about 28 years, including her exiled period during the second world war. It will have contributed to the title of her autobiography.

Wilhelmina's first art teacher was Frits Jansen (1856-1928), deputy director of The Hague Academy of Fine Art, who began to teach her the basics of perspective and colour application when she was ten, the year her father died. She travelled much with her mother, Emma, who was Queen-Regent from 1890 until 1898, usually taking drawing and painting equipment with them. Other teachers included Albert Roelofs (1877-1920), who also taught Princess Juliana when she was still a girl, Willem Konijnenburg (1869-1943) and Arnold Gorter (1866-1933), who was a chairman of *Arti Armititiae*, the Amsterdam artists' society. Her being tutored by Louis van Soest (1867-1948) stopped with the beginning of World War 2. Gorter had taken her to Norway in 1922 to paint fjords and the Norwegian light. From him she learned composition. Wilhelmina also painted in France, England, Sweden, Switzerland, and of course many paintings in The Netherlands, including at least one townscape of Amsterdam from the roof of the 'Palace on the Dam', which had started its existence as the city hall. A black and white photo is known, allegedly showing her in action on that roof.

Palace *Het Loo* is in the Dutch 'Veluwe' district, which features many unspoiled rural landscapes, including ancient forests and heathlands. Several of these she will have eternalised further on canvas. Wilhelmina also painted in London when in exile during WW2 and is known to have discussed art with Winston Churchill, who was also known to paint.

Wilhelmina created some colourful paintings of bulb fields in Holland, which she reached from her country house '*Den Ruygenhoek*', located in the dunes near Scheveningen, close to the beach and the sea. Her 1932 exhibition, her first, was likely the one referred to in the above-mentioned letter by Scheltema. It was displayed in four Dutch towns, after she had been asked to contribute to the project 'Art in Need', which financially supported struggling Dutch artists. Its exhibitions also had work by well-known Dutch artists, including Isaac Israels, the famous Jozef Israëls' son, Charley Toorop, Jan Sluijters and her teachers Van Soest and Gorter. Wilhelmina's work was subsequently organised into a separate exhibition, shown in The Hague, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam. Another collection of her work travelled through the then Dutch colonies raising money for the poor of those areas. Her 1949 exhibition travelled for 2 years to several Dutch cities, also for

charity. She is known to have created art for picture postcards, sold for charity after WW2. Following her retirement as Queen in 1948, after she was known as the Queen Mother, she actively painted for almost the rest of her life. Her supportive memberships of artist's organisations were always the same as an ordinary artist member and she made it known she preferred her art to be judged by critics like any other member. And it was. Wilhemina had her own 'library' of books on art and art history. She could be quite critical of her own work and upon her death it became clear that she had specified in her will that all her art should be destroyed after her death. She wished to be remembered by her public role as a Queen, not for her art. It was not destroyed. More than one hundred of her paintings and drawings are apparently still locked in two rooms at Palace *Het Loo* at Apeldoorn where she retired to and died. Others hang with members of her family. Yet in 2006 an "overview exhibition" was held in *Het Loo* for which a book, '*Koningin Wilhelmina-Schilderijen en tekeningen*', was written and published. It deals with work she created between 1932 and 1951, some of her photography and the layout of her studio. I did not read it either. The catalogue part shows just over 100 pieces of her art. An art expert Mr A.J. Wildeboer was later given access to the stored work of Queen Wilhelmina at *Het Loo*, to try and verify that a work, said to have been gifted to a faithful palace employee, and which was later inherited and had turned up at an auction was from her brush. He found it was indeed painted by Wilhelmina. Having studied the whole collection there, Wildeboer formed the opinion that Wilhelmina's style had much in common with the landscape painters of the Barbizon and their followers. More recent styles like Art Nouveau, expressionism, etc. she did not go for. Broadly speaking her art can be classified as realism, like most of Scheltema's. Wilhelmina stuck with her realism, which especially under influence of Van Konijnenburg (whom she called *Knientje*, with a wink to the Veluwe dialect), had been strongly improved.

Thus, from time to time a piece of art from Wilhemina turned up at auction but it was rare. Another piece had been a charcoal drawing, made in 1933, again a landscape, which was offered by auction house Catawiki in 2006. The drawing came from the estate of the family of Frederika L.H. van de Poll, who had been a lady-in-waiting of Queen Regent Emma and had assisted with the raising of Wilhelmina until 1896. It was probably given by Wilhelmina herself to van der Poll, as at the back of the stretch frame it reads in Dutch: "A very happy New Year, from Wilhelmina." The same source

reported that the same auction also offered a painting by Beatrix, which she made when she was fourteen years old. Art by Beatrix, for reasons explained, was more often available than that by Wilhelmina and therefore popular with collectors and expensive, even though Wilhelmina apparently created more than one thousand paintings and drawings. Another painting by Wilhelmina was purchased and put back into the collection at Palace *Het Loo*, as recent as 2014. It was her 'Study of Violets', long ago given as a present to one of the gardeners of the palace. There are likely to be other families, who treasure an inherited piece of art by Wilhelmina, that long ago she had gifted to one of her former staff or friends. These will be passed on from generation to generation.

One may speculate with some confidence that Wilhelmina's focus on her own art came from her mother Emma, who had married the 62-year-old Dutch King 'Willem' III, who thus became Wilhelmina's father and who died in 1890. It was Willem III's second marriage. From his first, with Sophie of Württemberg, the three sons and his first Queen-consort Sophie had died. Emma too had a row of names: Adelheid Emma Wilhelmina Theresia of Waldeck and Pyrmont (1858-1934). Later during her life as the grandmother of Queen Juliana, she was widely known as 'the loveliest old lady of Europe'. Emma can be considered the rescuer of the House of Orange, which is another story. She, the youngest sister, had enjoyed drawing lessons at home i.e. at Arolsen Castle in Bad Arolsen in Germany, probably by the English artist Eleanor Bell, who painted the youth portraits of her and her siblings there. One art teacher of Jan Hendrik Scheltema at the Hague Academy, the painter H.F.C. ten Kate, also travelled to Arolsen in 1878 to paint the portrait of Emma. Her wedding ceremony took also place at Arolsen, before she permanently moved to The Netherlands. Scheltema mentioned this outing of his teacher ten Kate in a retained early letter, now also in the SLV in Melbourne. Another Scheltema letter mentioned secondary education head-teacher and author Dr. L.R. Beijnen (1811-1897), also of The Hague, who was sent from The Hague to Arolsen to teach Dutch history and the Dutch language to Emma. Dr. Beijnen also taught Dutch to Prince Hendrik. Some artwork by Emma was part of an exhibition called "Penseelprinsessen" (Brush Princesses) held at *Het Loo* Palace in 2012. It included Emma's whole collection of sketchbooks. When the ageing Emma engaged much in embroidery, she always made the designs herself. For her

granddaughter Juliana she embroidered two linen children's books with animal figures.

Thus came the traditional Waldeck-Pyrmont family focus on 'creating art oneself' into The Netherlands' Royal family. There is a myth that artistry is inherited. The truth is that every artist struggles to learn their craft, indeed over many years and that every artist copes with failure and self-doubt. Wilhelmina may have been wrong asking that her art creations be destroyed. If so, it was right it wasn't. Her artistic achievements add to her huge historical profile, rather than distract from it.

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