

The eye of Jan Veth

Painter and critic around 1900

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Summary by chapter

I] An Introduction to Jan Veth Fusien Bijl de Vroe

Jan Veth (1864-1925) grew up in Dordrecht in a family where art was highly valued. Via his maternal side, he was a descendant of the painting brothers Van Strij and his father was a metal merchant and alderman who published about 17th-century Dordrecht painting in his spare time. The young Veth took drawing classes and was a member of the Dordrecht drawing society *Pictura*. He was sixteen years old when he left for Amsterdam to study at the Rijksacademie in 1880. His generation of artists, dubbed the 'Movement of Eighty,' was marked by a desire to detach themselves from old academic and artistic values. They sought for a new direction and ideal in their work. Veth actively participated in these discussions and joined several artistic and intellectual societies which promoted artistic freedom. At the time, he also began his career as an art critic, debuting at 21 in the radical magazine *De Nieuwe Gids*. Veth championed the painters of the Hague School as well as the modern artists of his own generation, positioning himself against the traditional values of older critics. The period between 1885-1887 was marked by a search for his own artistic direction. He dreamed of being a landscape painter but was more talented at painting relatively traditional portraits; in 1888 he decided to become a professional portrait painter. After Veth married Anna Dirks, whom he had met at the academy in Amsterdam, the couple moved to Bussum and he began his artistic and journalistic career in earnest. He became a celebrated portrait artist and venerated art critic and also wrote several art historical texts. His publication on Rembrandt earned him an honorary doctorate at the University of Amsterdam. Veth described himself once as 'of a nature full of contradictions', whose talents were 'a multiplicity of sympathies' and 'the ability to immerse oneself in all sorts of things.' The versatility of his interests and his capacity for keen observation made him a central figure in the Dutch art world of his time.

II] Jan Veth at Home Quirine van der Meer Mohr

Veth started his career in Amsterdam, among The Eightiers ('De Tachtigers'), otherwise known as the Movement of Eighty. He lived with other young artists and writers until his marriage to Anna Dirks in 1888, after which the couple moved to Bussum in the then largely rural area near Amsterdam called 'Het Gooi', which developed rapidly in these years. Initially they lived in a small house in town, moving to a villa at the Parklaan a year later. Veth hoped that his surroundings would inspire him to paint landscapes and that his proximity to Amsterdam would keep him in touch with city life. More artists and friends moved to the Gooi area during these years. Veth's home became a hub of artistic and intellectual activity. The Veth family often hosted their friends there and he gave classes to as many as seven students at a time in his inhouse studio. As Jan's career as a portraitist furthered, he was increasingly required to spend longer stretches of time away from home in order to work on commissions, sometimes abroad. Anna stayed in Bussum during these periods but the couple kept in close contact while she took care of their three children and managed Veth's professional business in his absence. She took care of his correspondence, prepared his works for transport and sent his lithographs off to the printer's. Due to Jan's absences, Anna was also largely in charge of the grand-scale renovations to their house from 1902 onward. Architect Karel de Bazel had redesigned its façade and interior and the villa was decorated with artworks and ornaments by Veth's friends, including Richard Roland Holst. Veth had begun acquiring art and literature at an early age, forming an impressive collection of contemporary as well as older works. He owned a large collection of prints by Rembrandt. In 1924, the couple moved back to Amsterdam, to the Keizersgracht. Veth considered this move 'a new chapter.' This new phase did not last long, however. On the first day of July 1925, Jan Veth died after a short illness.

III] **Anna Dirks: ‘An Artistic Spirit’** **Quirine van der Meer Mohr**

Anna Dirks met Jan Veth in 1883, when they were both students at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam. She studied painting and sculpture and was considered a promising artist by her teachers and friends. In 1885, Dirks and her family moved to The Hague, where she had her studio near the beach at Scheveningen. She studied at the Academy in The Hague and took lessons from the renowned artist Constant Gabriël. Dirks eventually also taught at the Academy. After a secret courtship, Dirks and Veth announced their engagement in 1887. They were married the year after. Despite Veth’s support of Dirks’ artistic activities, she gave up painting after their wedding to fully dedicate herself to her family. Her love for art remained, however, and she occasionally assisted her husband with setting up compositions or the varnishing of his works. After Veth’s untimely death, she dedicated herself to the inventory of her husband’s correspondence and documents, also bequeathing many of his works to Dutch museums, thereby ensuring the sustainability of Veth’s legacy. Today, only one painting by Anna Veth-Dirks is known, a still life (p. 61).

IV] **Viscerality and Sense of Community.** **Jan Veth and the Avant-Garde** **Quirine van der Meer Mohr**

Jan Veth was a central figure within the Movement of Eighty, otherwise known as The Eightiers, which held radical ideas for what modern art should be in both painting and literature. As a writer and critic, Veth was of paramount importance to this group of revolutionaries, although he remained relatively conservative as an artist. Nonetheless, his own artwork displays traces of his avant-garde ideals. Veth studied at the Rijksacademie under August Allebé, a fairly traditional painter who nevertheless inspired his students to develop freely on their own accord. Veth connected with other young artists and writers through artistic societies such as St. Lukas and Flanor, gathering in bars in Amsterdam to discuss their ideas. The painters Willem Witsen, Antoon Derkinderen and Jan Toorop, as well as the writers Albert Verwey, Frederik van Eeden and Frank van der Goes were among his closest friends. He portrayed most of

them during this time (p. 75-79). They believed in an emotional type of art, which they called visceral art (‘stemmingskunst’). The poet Willem Kloos claimed that art should be ‘the most individual expression of the most individual emotion.’ In 1885, the writers launched their own magazine to advocate these ideals: *De Nieuwe Gids*. Veth contributed as an art critic and also published several sonnets. Inspired by his admiration for his predecessors of the Hague School, Veth originally hoped to create visceral art by painting landscapes. He went to Laren and other places to work in nature. However, it was his portrait of Albert Verwey that sparked his artistic breakthrough (p. 78). He also turned to etching, founding De Nederlandsche Etsclub in 1885 as a platform to exhibit graphic art. From 1890 onward, the influence of the symbolist movement increased the general interest in the decorative arts. Veth was elated by this turn toward ‘art for the community.’ For his free work during this period, he often selected models from lower social classes, depicting the men and women with a strong emphasis on simple lines, colours and decorative elements (p. 82-83 and 90-91). Veth felt less engaged with modern artistic developments after the turn of the twentieth century, although he did finally return to landscape painting in his final years.

V] **Between Tradition and Modernity.** **Jan Veth and Jozef and Isaac Israëls** **Nina Reid**

Father and son Jozef and Isaac Israëls were amongst the closest of Jan Veth’s many friends. Jozef Israëls was one of his most favourite artists within the Hague School; Veth greatly admired Jozef’s realistic depictions of rural life. He served as his biographer and painted his portrait multiple times. Veth considered Isaac Israëls one of the most dexterous artists of his own generation. They first met at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam and remained lifelong friends. Veth especially prized the vigour and vitality in Isaac’s urban scenes. He portrayed him in 1917 (p. 101) and Isaac also painted Veth several times. The friendship with the Israëls family illustrates Jan Veth as a portraitist, writer and idealist, but above all as a friend.

VI] **A Portrait Painter's Career** **Rudi Ekkart and Claire van den Donk**

Although Jan Veth had dabbled in portraiture from his earliest years, he did not make the definitive decision to pursue a career as a portrait painter until February of 1888. In his early years, Veth had mainly made – often unpaid – likenesses of family members or friends but portrait commissions now gained momentum. One of the earliest examples of a commission pivotal in his career was his portrait of the Amsterdam theologist and professor Allard Pierson in 1889 (p. 158). From 1890 onward, Veth furthered his reputation with the launch of the lithographic series ‘Famous Contemporaries,’ which initially appeared in the magazine *De Amsterdammer* and was later published in *De Kroniek* (p. 122-135). The series featured Veth’s portraits of prominent individuals from different societal circles, often scholars, writers or businessmen. He worked in Germany more often, at times residing there for months on end, painting portraits of the Kempner family. He also received portrait commissions in Italy, England and New York City, the latter proving to be especially lucrative. His network of clients within the Netherlands had shifted from the literary circles in which he initially moved during the 1880s, to the academic circles of scholars and professors and continued to broaden. However, while contemporaries such as Thérèse Schwartzé mainly portrayed Amsterdam’s high society, Veth does not appear to have targeted this market specifically. As his professional reputation grew, his base of Dutch clients diversified; he was commissioned to paint the Royal Family but also attracted clients from across the country. Jan Veth’s portraits vary in style, size and execution but are always characterised by a keenness of observation and a strong desire to capture the essence of his model.

VII] **Colleagues and Competitors.** **Jan Veth versus Thérèse Schwartzé** **Rudi Ekkart and Claire van den Donk**

Thérèse Schwartzé was one of the most significant Dutch portrait painters of her time and an imposing rival to Jan Veth. As early as the 1880s, Veth wrote both privately and publicly that he found Schwartzé’s portraits of the upper classes too ‘frivolous’, and a certain fear of comparison to Schwartzé’s swift

brushwork can also be detected in his writing. Veth’s critique of Schwartzé cannot solely be ascribed to general professional competition, as he wrote about their colleague portraitist Hendrik Johannes Haverman with great praise. Jan Veth eventually adopted a milder tone and, upon her death in 1919, celebrated Thérèse Schwartzé’s virtuosity in the *In Memoriam* published in magazine *De Gids*.

VIII] **The Portrait Painter's Process** **Rudi Ekkart and Claire van den Donk**

Jan Veth’s oeuvre is markedly diverse: he preferred not to adhere to a specific formula and his portraits vary in size, composition and stylistic execution. In each and every work, he found it a challenge to truly depict the ‘nature’ of his sitter. He often travelled to his clients’ residences, painting them in their home to later finish the portrait in Bussum. His detailed letters to his wife Anna Veth-Dirks serve as a wonderful source for his creation process; he often began by making compositional sketches and detail drawings and at times painted studies in oil before starting a painting. Veth’s early portraits already show a strong sense of originality and diversity. For his portrait of professor Allard Pierson from 1889 (p. 158), for example, he opted for a horizontal format, highly unusual for the genre. This diversity in approach is also visible in his lithographic portrait series of ‘Famous Contemporaries’, which is marked by a great variety in technical and compositional approaches. His experimental manner of working resulted in a broad range of portrait ‘variants’ in Veth’s oeuvre. He sometimes depicted his sitters in ‘en profil’ but also employed the direct approach of a frontal view of just the head and shoulders of his subject. A few of Veth’s portraits even feature a landscape in the background. At times, Veth was challenged compositionally by circumstance, such was the case for the likeness the bedridden Elizabeth Ragazzi-van den Wall Bake from 1897 (p. 156-157). He apparently found it more difficult to portray women than men, often returning to rework a portrait multiple times before he was satisfied. Jan Veth felt most free when not working on commission, as he was very sensitive to his sitter’s opinions and could be extremely self-critical during the painting process. Several of his favourite own works were portraits of people dear to him, such as

the those of his close friend Christine Boxman-Winkler and her daughter Wimpy Hacke (p. 152-153).

IX] **From Sketch to Painting. The Double Portrait of Moritz and Charlotte Warburg** **Rudi Ekkart and Claire van den Donk**

In 1901-1902, Veth painted the German couple Moritz and Charlotte Warburg for a double portrait in their home in Blankenese, near Hamburg (p. 170-171). He spent the entire summer of 1901 working on the piece at their residence and returned the next year. His letters to Anna at home well illustrate the process of this ambitious double portrait's creation. After deciding to depict the Warburgs by the window in their sitting room, he sketched their faces and poses and made several studies of the riverscape. Veth took the work home to Bussum, but returned to Blankenese nine months later to finish the portrait in August 1902. From an early stage, he had expressed his confidence that this painting would turn out quite well. Jan Veth considered the end result one of his greatest achievements in portraiture.

X] **Art for the Community. Jan Veth the Art Advocate** **Annemiek Rens**

Throughout his career, Veth combined his work as a portrait painter with a career as an art critic and advocate. At only 21 years old, he began writing for *De Nieuwe Gids*, a magazine started by his radically minded contemporaries. Veth condemned the established order of the previous generation's art critics and lauded the emotionality and artistic integrity he found in modern painters like George Hendrik Breitner and Jan Toorop. Within a few years he wrote for a variety of newspapers and magazines, championing *l'art pour l'art* and reinforcing the reputations of the artists he advocated for. During the 1890s, Veth's ideals shifted to 'art for the community': art and beauty accessible to everyone via public murals and the decorative arts. His ideals were also reflected in his Dutch translation of Walter Crane's *The Claims of Decorative Art*, to 'Kunst en Samenleving'. The cover of this publication and its illustrations were designed by Gerrit Willem Dijsselhof. Through his writing, he fuelled the theoretical framework of the Dutch Art Nouveau

movement. From 1900, Veth increasingly published art historical texts, focusing more on artists from previous generations. He earned an honorary doctorate at the University of Amsterdam with his biography of Rembrandt, written in 1906 to celebrate the master's 300th birthday. A German book concentrating on Albrecht Dürers journey through the Low Countries, was also published together with friend and historian Samuel Muller. Veth became involved with projects that supported the public interest in art and culture; he participated in the founding of the Rembrandthuis, published extensively on the design of the Rijksmuseum and advised in acquisitions for Dutch museums. He held positions at numerous committees, such as the The Grand Museum Committee ('Grote Museumcommissie'). He pleaded for the preservation of historical monuments and cities throughout the country, writing the successful pamphlet *Steden-schennis* ('Violation of the city') to put a halt to the filling of the Reguliersgracht, a canal in Amsterdam. He was also one of the founders of Vereniging Hendrick de Keyser. In all, Veth played a vital part in the Dutch art world of his time, using his writing to advocate for the artists and movements he valued so highly.

XI] **Jan Veth and the Dutch East Indies** **Nina Reid**

Veth's long time wish to visit the former Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, was fulfilled in 1921-1922 when he and his wife Anna Veth-Dirks visited their daughter Saskia, whose husband worked in the former Dutch colony. The trip lasted for over three months, visiting Java and Bali. At times they were accompanied by the artist Isaac Israëls. Veth was in awe of the Indonesian landscape and its people, drawing and painting them several times. Especially impressed by the Buddhist temple Borobudur (p. 196), Veth plead for the appreciation and preservation of Indonesian art and architecture in both Dutch and Indonesian magazines and held lectures in Java. Although their journey was meant as a holiday and family visit, the artist nevertheless continued to work during his stay.

Summary

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