

The past is the future: the Middle Ages as a model for social change in Dutch art and architecture around 1900

Van Gogh and the ethical impulse in art

Towards the end of the nineteenth century many a European artist felt deeply dissatisfied with the legacy of impressionism. The revolutionary pathos of impressionism had become obsolete – the *refusés* had become *arrivés*. What the new generation of artists was now looking for in art was content instead of what they had come to see as the merely optical effects of painting. This fundamental shift of focus in the visual arts is one of the main factors in Van Gogh's rising popularity, growing into a sort of sancthood, after his untimely death in 1890. Indeed, it were the artists of the 1890s who recognized and appreciated that Van Gogh's reservation towards impressionism was eventually rooted in his ambition to save art from virtual insignificance by making it socially relevant. Although Van Gogh never gave up the religious convictions he had been brought up with as a vicar's son, he lost interest in institutional religion once it had become clear to him that he would not be able to follow his father's footsteps and become a preacher. Now art became to him a means to fulfil his religious calling.¹ What makes him differ from the Dutch poets of the 1880s who had also renounced traditional religion to dedicate themselves to the cult of absolute beauty instead, is that he redefined religion rather in terms of compassion. This ethical impulse, as we may call it, was to become a major topic in Dutch art and art writing towards the turn of the century.

Modernization in the Netherlands

The constitutional reform of 1848 did away with the strongly restorative tendencies after the Napoleonic period which had turned out dramatic for Dutch self-esteem: the once proud and independent Republic had been incorporated into the French empire and found itself strongly impoverished after having regained its freedom and transformed itself into a kingdom. The unification with the Southern Netherlands, decided at the Vienna Conference of 1815, did not work out well and so another collective trauma arose from the independence of Belgium in 1830; not only King William I but the whole nation saw this insurgence as an insult, from which the country was slow to recover: it was not before 1839 that the Dutch government reluctantly recognized the new reality. Finally the reform of 1848 shaped the institutional conditions for the economic modernization of the country.²

Thanks to a more aggressive exploitation of the Dutch East-Indies since the 1830s but in particular due to the industrial boom of Germany after the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) that yielded a constantly increasing stream of transportation from which the Netherlands profited enormously, the last quarter of the nineteenth century is a period of prosperity and optimism for the country. This is also the period in which the dominance of the liberals, the ruling class since 1848, is contested in a process that sociologists have labelled as 'verzuiling' (pillarization): the vertical separation of society into 'pillars' according to the main religious and socio-

¹ On Van Gogh and religion: Kodera Tsukasa, *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity versus Nature* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990).

² On the constitutional reform: E. H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries 1780-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 192-196.

political divisions: Calvinism and Catholicism, liberalism and socialism, next to which in due course some secondary pillars evolved as well.³ It were the elites of each of these pillars that negotiated the administration of the country by means of often subtle compromises. This socio-political segregation was to remain typical of Dutch society until way after the Second World War and would have a profound impact on its cultural development as well.

The Catholic revival

One of the most conspicuous consequences of the constitution of 1848 was that the large minority of Dutch Catholics who had been treated as second-rate citizens during the Calvinist dominated Republic – they had not been eligible for any office, whereas their places of worship had to be hidden away on inner courtyards – seized the new opportunity to manifest themselves all over the country by erecting numerous churches, especially since in 1853 a series of dioceses was installed for the first time since the sixteenth century. In order to express their regained self-consciousness the awakened Catholics turned to the architecture of the Middle Ages. With enormous financial sacrifices in just a few decades they produced a wealth of ornate Neogothic churches with tall spires. As a consequence, Neogothic in the Netherlands was soon to be considered virtually identical with Catholic church building. Indeed, Protestant churches in Gothic style are rare, and if the Gothic is adopted, as in the Keizersgrachtkerk in Amsterdam (1888-1890, architects G. B. and A. Salm), we find a rather eclecticist version of it, easily to be distinguished from the more purely medieval Neogothic of Catholic churches.⁴

It did not last long before non-Catholics, both Calvinists and liberals, had developed some sort of allergy to what they believed to be a demonstration of ultramontane triumphalism. And thus became the Rijksmuseum (1876-1885), intended as the expression of self-assured cultural nationalism, a scandal, not so much because it was almost three times over budget when it opened, but rather because it was designed by that most Catholic of Dutch architects, Pierre Cuypers.⁵ In the eyes of his critics he had turned the national museum, this most precious shrine of Dutch art of the Golden Age, into a medieval monstrosity, although in reality he had carefully mixed late-medieval and early Renaissance elements to satisfy all, regardless their religious or political convictions. The rather anti-Catholic King William III – it is true, he was not particularly famous for his diplomatic skills – is reported to have

³ The term ‘pillarization’ was coined by the political scientist Arend Lijphart, *The politics of accommodation: pluralism and democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

⁴ Even in the beginning of the twentieth century, when the heyday of Neogothic was clearly over, Abraham Kuyper, the leader of the militant Neocalvinists, believed Gothic to be inappropriate for a Reformed church because of its Catholic connotations: A. Kuyper, *Onze Eeredienst* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1911), p. 78. Strangely enough, though, Kuyper had been much involved in the late 1880s project for the Keizersgrachtkerk. The vaguely Venetian appearance of its façade and the omission of a tower apparently created enough distance from the Catholic version of Neogothic.

⁵ Cf. Flanor [= Carel Vosmaer], ‘Vlugmaren’, *De Nederlandsche Spectator* (1877), pp. 414-415, one of the episodes in an ongoing dispute between Vosmaer, a champion of classicist taste, and Cuypers’ supporter Victor de Stuers on the appropriate style for government buildings, which had been caused by Cuypers’ Rijksmuseum design; cf. Auke van der Woud, *The Art of Building: from Classicism to Modernity. The Dutch Architectural Debate 1840-1900* (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate) 2001, pp. 87-92. For Cuypers’ caution as regards style during the preliminary stages of the Rijksmuseum competition see: Aart Oxenaar, *P. J. H. Cuypers en het gotisch rationalisme: architectonisch denken, ontwerpen en uitgevoerde gebouwen 1845-1878* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2009), pp. 286-296.

judged – in French, of course, for that was the language spoken at European courts those days – the museum a ‘monastère’. He therefore refused to attend its solemn opening in 1885.

Monumental art

During the Dutch Republic there had not been much room for monumental art celebrating princes and prelates: after the Reformation there were no prelates any more and the prince of Orange in his capacity of ‘stadholder’ had too awkward a position to foster something of a flourishing court art that would have much continuity. It was mainly under Catholic patronage in the second half of the nineteenth century that a new monumental art came into being. In its ideas borrowed from outspoken and devout medievalists such as Pugin in England and Reichensperger in the German Rhineland were combined with the Romantic idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as well as with the more archaeological approach of Frenchman Viollet-le-Duc, both an agnostic and a champion of Gothic architecture. Overwhelming interiors, in which gilded retables, statues, stained glass windows and colourful wall paintings competed for attention, were the result. Pierre Cuypers was by far the most prolific and most influential among Dutch church architects in the Neogothic manner.⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century the Dutch government started an ambitious series of large public buildings. The architectural style and decoration thereof should enhance the new national spirit that was sweeping through the country: indeed, the Netherlands had never before been so nationalistic. The profusion of decorations both at the outside and inside of the Rijksmuseum itself had set the example for this new style, together with the new Ministry of Justice in The Hague (1876-1883), designed by Cuypers’ former collaborator, Cornelis Peters, who, by the way, was not a Catholic. This equally richly decorated building – and equally over budget as the Rijksmuseum – was intended as the first step towards a complete upgrading of the government’s and parliament’s premises centred at the Binnenhof. At its centre was the great hall of the counts of Holland, dating from the end of the thirteenth century and between 1861 and 1905 the object of a series of restoration campaigns – both Cuypers and Peters contributed to the eventual painstaking reconstruction of its supposedly original shape.

Right from the beginning, even before it opened its doors to the public, a design school had been attached to the Rijksmuseum project. The museum was not only to be the treasure-house of Dutch art, mainly understood in those days as art of the Golden Age – the Rijksmuseum would never become a ‘universal’ museum such as the Louvre, the British Museum or the Metropolitan Museum. As far as the aspect of art education is concerned, the Rijksmuseum’s original concept strongly resembled that of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, likewise intended to foster contemporary artisans. It was at this school that a new generation of artists was trained in the decorative arts, for which during the first years foreign artists such as Georg Sturm and Ludwig Jünger were appointed.

However, aspiring artists from the Catholic southern provinces of Brabant and Limburg would rather attend art academies in Belgium, as Cuypers himself had done by training at the Antwerp Academy. In Belgium monumental decorative art had

⁶ Hetty Berens (ed.), *P. J. H. Cuypers (1827-1921). Het complete werk* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 2007).

remained more important than in the Netherlands. What many of the young artists of the late 1880s had in common, though, was that they tried to move away from the saints, angels and knights of Neogothic, who by then had become all too stereotypical. Two studios had flourished in this kind of art, the Cuypers-Stoltzenberg workshop in Roermond since 1853 and the Mengelberg studio in Utrecht from 1869 onwards.⁷ The case of Mengelberg is particularly interesting since before moving to Utrecht he had trained in the re-established *Dombauhütte* (building lodge) of his native Cologne.⁸ This organisation, responsible for the completion of the Cathedral left unfinished in 1560, was a conscious revival of medieval practice, although it did not eschew modern materials such as steel beams for the construction of the roof.

The Dutch version of Symbolism

Antoon Derkinderen who, after his initial studies at the Brussels Art Academy, in 1884 completed his training at the Royal Academy in Amsterdam, received that very same year two prestigious commissions for monumental art: one was a wall decoration in the Beguinage Church in Amsterdam, the other a wall decoration in the townhall of his native city of 's-Hertogenbosch.⁹ Both works announced a major change in the artistic climate, away from both history painting and Neogothic decorativeness. With its unmistakably symbolist overtones the final version (1889) of the church's decoration was considered so modern by the ecclesiastical authorities that it was refused.¹⁰

Critics, however, immediately recognized the new direction Derkinderen had taken with this huge painting. Jan Veth, both a painter and an influential writer on art, explained that Derkinderen had understood the specific demands of wall painting: whereas a picture is like a window through which we enter a different world, a wall painting is always part of a building and therefore this painting needs to be adjusted to its architectural context.¹¹ In his article Veth also dwells upon the social function of

⁷ On Cuypers-Stolzenberg: Lidwien Schiphorst, *'Een toevloed van werk, van wijd en zijd': de beginjaren van het Atelier Cuypers/Stoltzenberg, Roermond 1852 – ca. 1865*, Nijmeegse kunsthistorische publicaties, vol. 13 (Ede/Nijmegen: University Press Nijmegen, 2004). In Utrecht Mengelberg moved in an environment which was dominated by clergymen, first of all the priest Gerardus van Heukelum (1834-1910), a most energetic champion of Neogothic; see: A. J. Looyenga, *De Utrechtse School in de neogotiek: de voorgeschiedenis en het Sint Bernulphusgilde* (PhD University of Leiden, 1991). An interesting overview of regional production of church furniture is: *'naar gothieken kunstzin'. Kerkelijke Kunst en Cultuur in Noord-Brabant in de negentiende eeuw* (exhib. cat. Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch, 1979).

⁸ On Mengelberg: A. J. Looyenga, 'Eine unbekante Biographie des Bildhauers Friedrich Wilhelm Mengelberg', in: *Jahrbuch des Kölnischen Geschichtsvereins* 54 (1983), pp. 189-210.

⁹ *Antoon Derkinderen 1859-1925* (exhib. cat. Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch / Drents Museum, Assen, 1980). For the conflict with the rector of the Beguinage: A.M. Hammacher, *De levenstijd van Antoon der Kinderen* (Amsterdam: Paris, 1932), pp. 36-37. A thorough analysis of the 's-Hertogenbosch murals in: Bettina Spaanstra-Polak, *Het Symbolisme in de Nederlandse schilderkunst 1890-1900*, Utrechtse bijdragen tot de kunstgeschiedenis, vol. 4 ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955; 2nd ed. Bussum: Thoth, 2004), pp. 193-206. Derkinderen published a comment on the murals in order to explain the ideas behind the images: A. J. Derkinderen, *Toelichting bij de wandschildering ter herinnering aan den kathedraalbouw in de groote halle van het Bossche raadhuis* (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema, 1896).

¹⁰ Gerard Brom, 'Het treurspel van Der Kinderen's Processie', *Studia Catholica* 7 (1930-1931), pp. 102-120.

¹¹ J. Staphorst (= Jan Veth), 'Derkinderen's processie van het H. Sacrament van Mirakel', *De Nieuwe Gids* 4 (1889), pp. 461-467.

art, which he believes to have existed in the Middle Ages when there was a unity between the artist's belief and his work as a craftsman.

Derkinderen was more successful with the 's-Hertogenbosch paintings, the second and last set of which was completed in 1896. As with the Beguinage cycle, they are no proper murals, for they have been painted on canvas which was then mounted onto the wall. Critics immediately recognized them as something remarkable and truly innovative. Once again Veth was the first who, when the canvases were first shown in Amsterdam, in a brochure introduced Derkinderen's new approach to a wider public.¹² The response was such that a second printing was soon needed. It was also Veth who on this occasion coined the term *Gemeenschapskunst* (Community Art). Almost everyone who saw the paintings was struck by their atmosphere of a lofty sacredness. The somewhat vague shapes and subdued colours were considered a quality in itself, for in that manner any religious dogmatism was being avoided. Instead, a more general mood of mysticism was evoked and it was precisely this aspect that was positively commented upon.¹³

As such these paintings seemed to echo a new trend in the arts, Symbolism, with its different subcategories such as 'synthesism', which had recently developed in France in response to the legacy of Impressionism. One of the first theoretical manifestations of Symbolism was Albert Aurier's article: 'Le symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin', published in the March issue of the *Mercure de France* of 1891.¹⁴ In it he states: 'L'impressionisme, c'est et ce ne peut être qu'une variété du réalisme, un réalisme affiné, spiritualisé, dilettantisé, mais toujours le réalisme'. At the end Aurier arrived at a kind of check-list for those artists who wanted to express the Idea (written indeed with a capital I). In the fifth and last of these points Aurier postulated the necessarily decorative character of art, for only in this manner man would be able to add his thoughts and dreams to his built environment. Thus, right from the beginning theories of Symbolism considered the architectural context of visual art to be essential for conveying its proper meaning.

A deeply felt preference for exalted ideas, not just aesthetical but as much ethical, was one of the thriving forces behind the innovations in late nineteenth-century Dutch art. Interestingly, it was not so much an introspective and eroticist symbolism, as in France or Belgium, but rather a socially conscious version that these artists arrived at. The very essence of Community Art was the concept of a future society without social boundaries whatsoever that would be based on a highly idealized interpretation of the Middle Ages. Not being individualistic as most nineteenth-century art had been, Community Art would respond to the needs of modern society to foster social progress and the common good. Just as the Dutch Neogothic movement had borrowed from developments abroad, these younger artists too found their inspiration elsewhere, mainly in England this time. It was here that during the nineteenth century artistic innovation had gained a strong overtone of social criticism of capitalist reality. William Morris and John Ruskin not only wanted to change art itself, they aimed at social reform as well, for in their opinion genuine

¹² Jan Veth, *Derkinderens wandschildering in het Bossche stadhuis* (Amsterdam: Van Looij, 1892). In reality the booklet appeared only in the beginning of 1893.

¹³ On the first mural: R. N. Roland Holst, 'De betekenis van Derkinderen's nieuwe muurschildering in onze schilderkunst', *De Nieuwe Gids* 7 (1892), pp. 321-324. Roland Holst stressed the non-realistic qualities of the paintings.

¹⁴ Albert Aurier, *Œuvres posthumes* (Paris: Éditions du 'Mercure de France', 1893), pp. 205-220. On Aurier: H. R. Rookmaker, *Synthesist art theories. Genesis and nature of the ideas on art of Gauguin and his circle* (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1959), pp. 153-160.

art could only develop in socially righteous conditions. A highly idealized, largely Romantic interpretation of the Middle Ages provided them with a model of this new and truly socialist society they envisaged.

This ethical impulse strongly appealed to young Dutch artists. In 1894 Jan Veth published an adaptation rather than a mere translation of Walter Crane's book *The claims of decorative art*, which had appeared two years earlier. In his book, which he gave the programmatic title *Kunst en samenleving* (Art and society), Veth argued for the revival of 'the civic and monumental community arts'. The book's design by G. W. Dijsselhof who had taken classes at the Rijksmuseum school under Cuypers' guidance, was in itself a manifesto of the new direction in the arts. There is indeed a direct link between Neogothic practice and the interest in floral decoration in these years.¹⁵ Pugin's *The Floriated Ornament* of 1849 with its beautifully coloured plates is likely to be the origin of this interest. Veth's concept of Community Art may not have been religious but it certainly was highly spiritual.¹⁶ At the same time artists and intellectuals who were sympathizing with the new socialist movement in the Netherlands – the socialist party was founded in that very same year 1894 – welcomed Community Art as a means for the new ideological movement to express itself in the arts.

It is surprising to find how much socialism, as a high ideal rather than as a political strategy, took its inspiration from Christianity, especially during the first centuries of its existence when it accomplished a profound transformation of ancient society. Not only do we encounter this in the rather exclusivist Fabian Society but also with German marxist theorists such as Karl Kautsky, who in 1908 published a voluminous study on the origin of Christianity.¹⁷ His focus is, of course, not on the numerous theological subtleties of those centuries but on Christianity as a social force. Precisely at this point is the analogy with socialism, for which he postulates a similar role in the capitalist society of his own days. The Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage, about whom more hereafter, wrote: 'For every religion in its deepest essence is socialist, socialism in its deepest essence is religious, because it wants to realize a moral ideal'.¹⁸

Of course, the working classes themselves were not interested in such high-brow analogies but we should bear in mind that in all European countries the socialist movement was led by educated personalities who usually had a middle if not an upper class background. Therefore the historical culture of the nineteenth century vibrated in socialist leadership as much as in any other elite. According to Kautsky and his likes their historical construction of early Christianity as a predecessor of socialism would thus lend a certain respectability to the new socialist movement, considered by so

¹⁵ Ernst Braches, *Het boek als Nieuwe Kunst 1892-1903. Een studie in Art Nouveau* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1973), pp. 42-50.

¹⁶ Manfred Bock, *Anfänge einer neuen Architektur: Berlages Beitrag zur architektonischen Kultur der Niederlande im ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert* ('s-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij / Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983), p. 299, is incorrect in considering the artists of Community Art as 'originally Catholics'. Corporatist ideas, such as can be found in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), had hardly any bearing upon the conceptualization of *Gemeenschapskunst*, the less so since Jan Veth, who first came up with the term, was no Catholic at all. The painter Antoon Derkinderen and the composer Alphons Diepenbrock were the only Catholics among the artists involved.

¹⁷ Karl Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums: eine historisch Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1908).

¹⁸ H. P. Berlage, 'De bouwkunst als maatschappelijke kunst' [Architecture as a social art], in: *Schoonheid in samenleving* [Beauty in society], 2nd ed. (Rotterdam: W.L. & J. Brusse, 1924; [1st ed. 1919]), p. 109: 'Want elke godsdienst is in zijn diepste wezen socialistisch, het socialisme in zijn diepste wezen godsdienstig, omdat het een zedelijk ideaal wil verwezenlijken.'

many as dangerously revolutionary. Christianity thus served as the historical legitimation of socialism and as a roll-model as well. This particular interpretation of history was shared by many Dutch intellectuals and artists with a strong sympathy for socialism.

The practice of Community Art: the Amsterdam Exchange

Many of these elements came to the fore in the new Exchange building which after a long political and design history was finally constructed according to the plans of Hendrik Petrus Berlage between 1898 and 1903. Almost as a compensation for the embarrassing absence of the king at the inauguration of the Rijksmuseum in 1885, the solemn opening of the Exchange in the afternoon of May, 27, 1903, was attended by the young Queen Wilhelmina and the Prince-consort as well as the Queen-mother.

The design history started with a competition in 1884-1885. One of the winning designs was an eclectic project by Berlage and his temporary architectural associate Theo Sanders. The latter's patrician birth helped their joint office in acquiring commissions. Berlage's marriage with the equally patrician Marie Bienfait in 1887 would strengthen his link with the Amsterdam upper class even further.¹⁹ Only after heated debates and some manipulation of the results on the part of the municipality where a younger generation of liberals without an aversion for government regulation had come to the fore, Berlage was entrusted with the final design in 1896. The central figure in this go-between of art and politics was the city's alderman of Public Works, M. W. F. Treub, who was befriended to many of these young and ambitious artists. Instead of presenting an update of his earlier mixture of Renaissance and Baroque elements, Berlage's completely reworked design now radiated a kind of unprecedented neo-medieval austerity, which provoked a new and once again heated debate, but to no avail.²⁰ The fierce opposition could not prevent that this latest version of the project was voted by the city council to be carried out.

In the preceding years, by means of lectures and articles, Berlage had cleverly made himself the voice of a group of young and aspiring artists, though at closer inspection his Exchange design can hardly be called innovative, particularly from a technical point of view: no concrete is used in it, whereas the steel beams in the great hall had been preceded by the roofing of railway station platforms such as those in Amsterdam (1889, P.J.H. Cuypers and A.L. van Gendt) and The Hague (*Hollands Spoor* station, 1891, D.A.N. Margadant) and earlier on in the Corn Exchange in Groningen (1865, J.G. van Beusekom), to mention only a few Dutch examples. In this respect it is interesting to quote Nikolaus Pevsner's opinion on Berlage: 'Berlage, regarded in Holland as of greater European significance than appears convincing, is essentially a counterpart to Voysey rather than to Mackintosh, that is, essentially a believer in the possibilities of developing native traditions towards modern goals'.²¹

¹⁹ Marty Bax, *Het web der schepping; theosofie en kunst in Nederland van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2006), p. 438.

²⁰ A. W. Reinink, *Amsterdam en de Beurs van Berlage. Reacties van tijdgenoten* ('s-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1975).

²¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of modern design; from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2004 [1st ed. 1936]), p. 135. Pevsner considered Mackintosh as a much more modern architect than Voysey. His reservation is the more striking since he was a self-proclaimed champion of the architectural avant-garde of the twenties and thirties – for which he was mercilessly reproached after his death: David Watkin, *Morality and architecture: the development of a theme in architectural history and theory from the Gothic revival to the modern movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 71-111.

In Dutch historiography, on the contrary, right from the beginning there has been a strong tendency to exclusively stress the modern elements in Berlage's architecture.

Berlage had a very keen understanding of what was in the air: an organicist concept of state and society.²² This he sought to reflect in his final design for the Exchange. The most outstanding representative of this new socio-political ideal was Frank van der Goes, one of the leading intellectuals of Dutch socialism, who, inspired in his turn by the the British Fabian Society, had published an influential study on the organic development of society in 1894, the very same year in which also Jan Veth's book on the social aim of art had appeared.²³ It seems that Berlage had been acquainted with these social utopians already in 1889.²⁴ In his choice of inspirational ideas Berlage was rather eclectic, if not outright opportunistic, for he also borrowed concepts from theosophy.²⁵ This mystical world view, in which oriental and western traditions, both religious and philosophical, were amalgamated, was very popular among progressive intellectuals and artists in the Netherlands during these years – the best example probably being Piet Mondriaan, who, of Calvinist upbringing, became a formal member of the Theosophical Society in 1909.

With the help of his friend and relative by marriage, the learned poet Albert Verwey, who had been one of the angry young men of the literary movement of the 1880s, Berlage translated these ideas into an architectural and artistic programme for the new Exchange.²⁶ In doing so he transformed the new building, which according to its function was supposed to be a fortress of capitalism, into the symbol of a future society which, due to the inevitable historical forces which marxism had made fashionable, could be nothing else but socialist. Verwey's intention, seemingly only half understood by Berlage, was to avoid any direct historical references in the decoration of the building. Instead, he recommended symbols, from which a timeless and therefore everlasting meaning would transpire, though, of course, symbols always originate in a certain historical context – without such a context they would need ample explanation, as is the case with so much rather mannered Symbolist imagery. What Verwey had in mind was a *tour de force* that could hardly be successful in an architectural context. Typical is Verwey's criticism of the Mercurius relief in the passage to the hall for the Commodities Exchange: because it had been derived from Donatello's famous bronze sculpture of David in the Bargallo in Florence, he found it too historically specific to be appropriate for the Exchange.²⁷

Stylistically, there are no direct quotations from the past in the architecture of the Exchange. However, the dominant feeling is that of an austere Romanesque timelessness rather than of turn of the century modernity: straight and heavy brick walls prevail, the tower is square and the silhouettes are bold. All decoration is subordinate to the architectural lines. This architecture is very much conceived of as

²² On organicism in Dutch political thinking: J. A. A. van Doorn, 'Schets van de Nederlandse politieke traditie', in: *Nederlandse democratie. Historische en sociologische waarnemingen* (Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt, 2009), pp. 255-299, here pp. 289-292.

²³ Frank van der Goes, *Organische ontwikkeling der maatschappij. Socialistische studie* (Amsterdam: H.J. Poutsma, 1894).

²⁴ P. Singelenberg, *H. P. Berlage: idea and style, the quest for modern architecture* (Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert, 1972), p. 56.

²⁵ Bax, *Het web*, pp. 440-459.

²⁶ Albert Verwey, 'Bijdragen tot de versiering van de nieuwe Beurs', *Tweemaandelijksch tijdschrift voor letteren, kunst, wetenschap en politiek* 4 (1898), pp. 183-212; cf. Bock, *Anfänge*, pp. 347-350.

²⁷ Manfred Bock, 'De Beurs van Berlage', in: Manfred Bock *et al.*, *De inrichting van De Beurs van Berlage. Geschiedenis en behoud*, Waanders monumentenreeks, vol. 3 (Zwolle: Waanders, 1995), pp. 6-24, here p. 23.

the mother of all the arts, according to a highly idealistic interpretation of medieval architecture, starting with Pugin and Ruskin.²⁸

Whereas to Pugin, Viollet-le-Duc and Cuypers the Gothic cathedral had been the epitome of medieval art and architecture, it were rather medieval civic buildings in Italian towns that provided Berlage with models for his contemporary dream. After having completed his studies at the Technical University of Zürich, where Gottfried Semper had taught, in 1880-1881 he made an extended journey to Italy. From his diary we know that he admired the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, The Palazzo dei Priori in Volterra, the Palazzo dei Consoli in Gubbio, but also buildings in Northern Italy. The Exchange tower seems to have been derived almost immediately from the Torre del Popolo in Brescia or the Torre Communale in Bergamo.²⁹

Berlage's derivations from Viollet-le-Duc seem to be merely formal, but his references to Italian civic buildings from the Middle Ages have a more ideological motivation. These are the more remarkable, since Viollet-le-Duc himself did not have much appreciation for Italian medieval architecture.³⁰

Berlage's arthistorical companion during his own *Grand Tour* was Jacob Burckhardt, whose *Cicerone* helped him to understand these buildings as prototypes of the architecture of the Renaissance. Burckhardt described the relationship between Gothic and Renaissance architecture in Italy as follows:

Die ersten gothischen Baumeister in Italien waren Deutsche. Es ist auffallend und beinahe unerklärlich, dass sie das aus dem Norden Mitgebrachte so rasch und völlig nach den südlichen Grundsätzen umbilden konnten. Sie gaben gerade das Wesentliche, das Lebensprincip der nordischen Gothik Preis, nämlich die Ausbildung der Kirche zu einem Gerüst von lauter aufwärtsstrebenden, nach Entwicklung und Auflösung drängenden Kräften; dafür tauschten sie das Gefühl des Südens für Räume und Massen ein, welches die von ihnen gebildeten Italiener allerdings noch in weiterm Sinn an den Tag legten.³¹

To Burckhardt the art and architecture of the Renaissance were therefore the virtually inevitable evolutionary outcome of the Middle Ages. Berlage's own inclination to search for analogies made him perceive the stylistic pluriformity of the late nineteenth century as a promise of a modern architecture to come.³² That modern architecture, of course, was to be his, more precisely, the final design of the Amsterdam Exchange. At

²⁸ Lieske Tibbe goes as far to suppose that William Morris' utopian novel *News from Nowhere* was a direct source of inspiration for the medievalist outlook and decoration of the Exchange: Lieske Tibbe, 'Pictorial harmony and conceptual complexity. Neo-impressionist and Symbolist representations of a new Golden Age', in: Mary G. Kemperink and Willemien H.S. Roenhorst (eds.), *Visualizing Utopia*, Groningen Studies in Cultural Change, vol. 27 (Leuven etc.: Peeters, 2007), pp. 91-108, here 93.

²⁹ Berlage's admiration of Italian medieval architecture focussed indeed on civic buildings rather than on churches; cf. Bock, *Anfänge*, pp. 290-293. The diary of his Italian journey has recently been published: H. P. Berlage, *Italiaanse reis herinneringen*, ed. Herman van Bergeijk (Rotterdam: 010, 2010). In this report no mention is made of Bergamo or Brescia. It seems that these two cities were not part of his itinerary and therefore he is likely to have known these buildings from illustrated publications – which, in a way, makes his choice even more poignant.

³⁰ M. [=E.] Viollet-le-Duc, *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, 2 vols (Paris: A. Morel, 1863-1872), vol. 1, pp. 240-241.

³¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone. Eine Anleitung zum Genuß der Kunstwerke Italiens* (Basel: Schweighauser'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1855), p. 125. Berlage will, of course, have used one of the more recent editions.

³² Bock, *Anfänge*, p. 283.

the same time, this project was the synthesis of Community Art's theory and practice. With all its artistic and social pretense it gives us a flavour of turn of the century radical chic.

At closer scrutiny we find that the decoration of the Exchange was not of a purely medievalist nature, however. We have seen already that for the relief of Mercurius, the ancient god who protects merchants and who therefore has his rightful place in the Exchange, Lambertus Zijl, responsible for most of the sculpted decorations, based his design upon Donatello's bronze David in Florence. Also some of Zijl's other reliefs show idealized nude figures. Their stylishness comes close to the neoclassical taste that for instance permeates the work of the slightly older German sculptor Adolf Hildebrand or of the Dutch sculptor Pier Pander.³³

Zijl and the other sculptor of the Exchange, Joseph Mendes da Costa, wholeheartedly endorsed Berlage's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For sculptural decorations this meant that these had to be subordinate to the main architectural lines and volumes. Although this certainly is a medievalist concept, the style of their works did not betray much medievalism.³⁴ And indeed, different than Cuypers used to work at the Rijksmuseum or the Central Station in Amsterdam, in the case of the Exchange it was the idealistic programme rather than the scrupulous surveillance of the architect-in-chief that would integrate all the different designs into a coherent ensemble. The relative artistic freedom that Berlage granted his artists did, however, not prevail conflicts, as appears from the dispute over one of Derkinderen's planned contributions: differences of opinion as to both the iconography and the technique to be applied eventually prevented the execution of his murals, although the iconographic programme had initially been devised by Berlage, Verwey and Derkinderen himself.³⁵

There are strong indications, both in Berlage's design as in his writings of this period, that he wanted his Exchange project to become the counterpart of Cuypers' two recently finished public buildings in Amsterdam, the Rijksmuseum and the Central Station.³⁶ The latter was, moreover, located on the opposite end of the Damrak where the Exchange was to be built, and thus, urbanistically, competition between these two large buildings was almost inevitable. As far as its iconographic programme is concerned, though, the Rijksmuseum on the opposite end of the historical city centre was much more ambitious and innovative than the more conventional decorations of the Central Station. In the light of this emulation we might even wonder whether one of the decisive factors in Berlage's final design for the Exchange was his wish to equal if not outright surpass Cuypers on the latter's very own field, that of the revival of the Middle Ages. In the place of Cuypers' typical but hybrid eclecticism, combining late Gothic and early Renaissance elements, Berlage proposed his own more or less Romanesque based eclecticism.

³³ Ype Koopmans, *Muurvast & gebeiteld. Beeldhouwkunst in de bouw 1840-1940* (Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, 1997), pp. 76-77, goes as far to suppose that Zijl had read Hildebrand's 1893 publication *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*. On Zijl's sculptures for the Exchange: Madelon Broekhuis, 'Ideologie in steen. Het beeldhouwwerk van Lambertus Zijl aan het Beursgebouw te Amsterdam', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 35 (1984), pp. 195-226.

³⁴ The concept was also dear to William Morris, who, in a lecture of 1889, described it as 'a harmonious co-operative work of art'; William Morris, *Gothic Architecture. A Lecture for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society* (London: New Gallery, 1893), p. 24.

³⁵ Cat. *Derkinderen*, pp. 89-90.

³⁶ H. P. Berlage, 'Over architectuur', *Tweemaandelijksch tijdschrift voor letteren, kunst, wetenschap en politiek* 1 (1895), pp. 202-235.

In contemporary art writing the idea of the architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk* found its socio-historical legitimation in the medieval *Bauhütte* or building lodge. This vision is one of the factors that shaped William Morris' commercial enterprise, envisaged by him as a workers' community. The *Dombauhütte* in Cologne is the direct revival of its medieval predecessor. It too was immediately recognized as the model for the above-mentioned Cuypers-Stoltzenberg workshop.³⁷ This operated in Roermond as early as 1853, and thus well before Morris' initiatives, beginning with the Red House (1859). Cuypers himself, who, with much liberty, reconstructed the ruins of the medieval castle of De Haar near Utrecht between 1892 and 1912 presented this enormous project along similar lines:

Pour dire en peu de mots: une école entière d'artistes formées sous la direction d'un seul maître qui la fonda, il y a plus d'un demi-siècle, ont réuni leurs forces et leurs talents, pour montrer, qu'en travaillant d'après les solides systèmes du moyen-âge, on peut obtenir des résultats semblables, voir même supérieurs à cette glorieuse époque.³⁸

To Cuypers an artisan's collaborative, be it his own workshop in Roermond or the team responsible for De Haar, was rather an artistic enterprise inspired by basically Romantic ideas than an experiment for the improvement of social misery in the manner of the Fabians. This holds even more true for Berlage's artistic team at the Exchange project. Any direct social implication herein did concern an unspecified future situation but certainly not the *hic et nunc* of Amsterdam labour conditions around 1900. This obvious lack of political urgency and involvement on the part of Berlage was well served by the medieval mood that was staged throughout the Exchange's design: any allusion to social change would immediately eclipse into a realm of timeless dreams, at the same time nostalgic and visionary.

Even then, the programme of the Exchange could provoke a more political reading as well. An interesting case in point is the well-informed brochure by an author who only goes under the initials E. R., that appeared already in 1903, the year the building was completed. It was entitled *De Nieuwe Beurs te Amsterdam en de proletariërs* (The New Exchange in Amsterdam and the proletarians). Parts of it had previously been published in a labour periodical in the booming industrial city of Eindhoven.

Protagonists of the generation of the 1880s, such as the author Lodewijk van Deyssel – in daily life Karel Alberdingk Thijm, the son of Catholic leader and Cuypers' brother-in-law Jozef Alberdingk Thijm – as well as the composer – and Cuypers' nephew – Alphons Diepenbrock, projected the very origin of *Gemeenschapskunst* in Cuypers' activities and ideas. In a rather exalted letter of June, 14, 1894, Diepenbrock wrote to Antoon Derkinderen after having seen his wall paintings in the townhall of 's-Hertogenbosch and referring to the drawing lessons his uncle had given him as a child in the 1870s:

I now understand happy moments from the past. What I owe to Cuypers, even by going through his house and seeing him in his work. Then I was satisfied by it, now I find it again, the Unity of Life which was the Middle Ages, that grand bell-sound of Truth without grief and the solid building of ideas as though a dome over the earth.³⁹

³⁷ J. A. Alberdingk Thijm, 'Eene bouwlootse der XIXe eeuw', *De Dietsche Warande* 1 (1855), pp. 276-280.

³⁸ P. J. H. Cuypers and F. Luyten, *Le château De Haar à Haarzuilens* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1910), p. 59.

³⁹ *Alphons Diepenbrock: brieven en documenten*, ed. Eduard Reeser, vol. 2 (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), pp. 193-194 (quotation on p. 194): 'Ik begrijp nu gelukkige momenten van jaren

In 1895, during the preparation of his new Exchange plans on the basis of which the Amsterdam city council in the next year would officially commission him to go ahead with its construction, Berlage wrote similar though less exalted lines in praise of Cuypers: he had proven to be a true artist in whose work the greatness of medieval art was reflected.⁴⁰ At the same time, Berlage remarks, this was also his weakness: he was too much holding on to the Middle Ages. In this kind of observations we see Berlage astutely positioning himself: he intended to avoid Cuypers' mistakes. Nevertheless, Cuypers followed with critical interest recent developments in the arts, such as the rise of Symbolism; he himself owned a book with reproductions of the work of Puvis de Chavannes, published in 1895.⁴¹

Medievalism at the Diamond Workers' Union

Whereas in the Exchange the function of the building somehow seems to be contradicted by the tenor of its decorative programme, the message of the headquarters of the Diamond Workers' Association (Algemeene Nederlandsche Diamantbewerker Bond, hereafter ANDB), founded in Amsterdam in 1894, was unequivocal. It was built according to Berlage's plans in 1899-1900, and thus contemporaneously with the Exchange. Although a much smaller project than the Exchange, it nevertheless makes an interesting comparison. Built in a new middle class residential quarter, it was flanked on both sides by houses in the more traditional eclectic mixture of brick, stone and plaster decorations. In contrast, the façade of the ANDB was rather flat and austere, with no plaster but only Berlage's usual combination of brick for the surface and stone for lintels, arches and other compositional details. The entrance is asymmetrically situated on the left side, in accordance with Viollet-le-Duc's ideas on *pondération*. With this word the latter intended an asymmetrical distribution of volumes, reflecting the internal organisation of a building, and at the same time resulting in a picturesque appearance.⁴²

A monumental stair, boldly breaking through the alignment, leads up to the rounded door, above which the flat wall rises up continuously into a short tower. The rest of the façade has three rows of regular windows and a mezzanine above a flat strip of brick and is crowned with some sort of crenelation. No wonder the building was soon enough to be referred to as 'de burcht van Berlage' (Berlage's castle), for it does indeed radiate a sense of medieval solidity. Once again Italian civic architecture inspired Berlage, above all the Palazzo dei Priori in Volterra.⁴³ With this train of associations the trustees of the union wanted to express self-consciousness and pride. Indeed, the ANDB was not only one of the first trade unions in the Netherlands but

geleden. Wat ik aan Cuypers gehad heb, zelfs aan het gaan door zijn huis en het zien van hem in zijn werk. Toen bevredigde mij dat, nu vind ik hetzelfde terug, de Eenheid van Leven die de Middeleeuwen was, de grote klokkengalm der Waarheid die zonder smart is en den hechten ideeënbouw als een koepel boven de aarde.'

⁴⁰ Berlage, 'Over architectuur', pp. 218-220.

⁴¹ Oxenaar, *Cuypers*, p. 549, note 125.

⁴² Viollet-le-Duc, *Entretiens*, vol.1, pp. 479-482; cf. also Thierry Mandoul, *Entre raison et utopie: l'Histoire de l'architecture d'Auguste Choisy* (Wavre: Éditions Mardaga, 2008), pp. 242-243.

⁴³ Bock, *Anfänge*, pp. 364-372 on Berlage's identification of Amsterdam with the Tuscan city-states as a field of relevant associations for both the Exchange and the ANDB. Oxenaar has, however, shown that the superimposed galleries in the great hall of the Exchange owe much to Cuypers' scheme for the Posthoornkerk in Amsterdam (1859-1860), of which Berlage had made a sketch: Oxenaar, *Cuypers*, p. 562, note 58. The idea of superimposed galleries as a way of creating free circulation was once again applied by Cuypers in the monumental hall of the De Haar castle not far from Utrecht, which, together with his son Joseph, he rebuilt in 1892-1912.

also one of the most successful by quickly realizing concrete improvements of working conditions in the diamond industry.

Also the interior displays a careful design. Glazed bricks, stone columns and parapets, a relief by Zijl, polychromed walls as well as brass lamp fittings lend dignity to the stairhouse, conceived of as a narrow courtyard surrounded by arched galleries. This concept strongly reminds medieval courtyards such as the one in the Palazzo Davanzati, Florence. In 1892-1894, only a few years after his Italian journey, Berlage had applied a similar solution to the stairhouse in the office building of an insurance company, the *Algemeene Maatschappij van Levensverzekering en Lijfrente* in Amsterdam. In 1963 it burnt down and, as far as its interior is concerned, there are only a few photographs to document it.

As a decoration for the stairhouse Berlage designed a tiled tableau of an angel with wings widely spread. Bock rightfully connects the iconographic formula to the medieval devotional motive of the so-called *Schutzmantelmadonna*, popular in the West since the thirteenth century.⁴⁴ Berlage thus adapted a traditional religious image to new commercial purposes: just as the angel protects those who seek refuge under his wings, so does insurance against the ill fortunes of life. The non-religious meaning of the image may be the reason that Berlage did not choose the Virgin Mary as the main motive, for either this might easily have been interpreted as an intolerable profanization, or – the other way around – its dominant religious meaning might have neutralized the intentionally more specific commercial significance.

Elsewhere in the stairhouse Derkinderen painted a wheel of fortune, once again a motif with roots in the Middle Ages as well as – though rather as a literary theme – in Christian Antiquity.⁴⁵ Its function in the context of an insurance company is obvious: life insurance offers protection against unpredictable misfortunes.

In the same project another example of re-contextualizing traditional imagery was the sculpture of a pelican by Lambertus Zijl for the top of the gable. Legend, as told in the *Physiologus*, has it that the pelican cared for its young by picking itself in the chest and then feeding the chickens with its own blood. In the Middle Ages the pelican came to allude to Christ's sacrifice on the cross and hence it became a eucharistic symbol. Berlage, no doubt well aware of this origin, gave it a new, profane meaning as a symbol of 'caring love', and as such it would refer to the function of the insurance company.⁴⁶

The elegance of the ANDB's board room with its panelling and furniture would not yield to the board room of a bank or any other prestigious firm. In 1912 three paintings were inserted into the panelling of this room celebrating the eight hour working day, which the year before had been agreed upon with the diamond factory employers. In accordance with the doctrines of Community Art, Richard Roland Holst

⁴⁴ Bock, *Anfänge*, p. 178.

⁴⁵ Lieske Tibbe, 'Verzekerd geluk. Oude symboliek in een modern bedrijfsgebouw', in: Lotte Jensen and Lisa Kuitert (eds.), *Geluk in de negentiende eeuw. Eenentwintig auteurs op zoek naar geluk voor Marita Mathijssen, ter gelegenheid van haar afscheid als hoogleraar moderne Nederlandse letterkunde van de Universiteit van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), pp. 251-261, 294-296.

⁴⁶ The architect Alexander Kropholler used the pelican both as a profane symbol for insurance offices and, according to its original meaning, as a christological symbol for some of his Catholic churches – in these latter cases always in the shape of a relief in a roundel; these were done by either Joseph Mendes da Costa or Zijl.

designed a strongly symbolic iconography in a flat and linear style so that the continuity of the wall would not be broken.⁴⁷

In 1907 Roland Holst had already made a series of murals for the assembly hall, which, because of their deteriorating condition, were covered by a wood panelling with new decorations on board in 1937, once again by him. A painstaking restoration campaign in 1999-2002 has uncovered the original murals, whereas the paintings on panel of 1937 are now exhibited elsewhere in the building. Henri Polak, the first chairman of the ANDB, was strongly influenced by the Fabians: he translated two books by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (1894) and *Industrial Democracy* (1897) and he was an admirer of William Morris, of whom he also translated some writings.⁴⁸

Though he himself was not directly involved in the politics of the day, Roland Holst was certainly sympathetic to the cause of the labour movement. His wife, the poet Henriette van der Schalk, her upper class upbringing notwithstanding, became a leading socialist personality and was also a prolific writer on political matters. She assisted her husband in the design of the 1907 decorations by writing distychs that would go underneath the images in order to elucidate the abstract ideas expressed in the murals. One of these is especially intriguing, for it shows how a nascent movement such as socialism was struggling to find a visual language of its own. The mural is called 'Revolutionaire geestdrift' (Revolutionary enthusiasm), and Henriette's distych reads:

Geestdrift draagt 't jonge leven
door kolken van weerstand heen
(Enthusiasm carries young life
through swirls of resistance).

The image shows a young and strong labourer carrying his child on his shoulders through the waves. In fact it entails an adaptation of the popular image of St. Christopher that was widespread in the late Middle Ages. The procedure the artist adopted here is not unlike the manner in which Christian art itself in its early days had borrowed from the rich repository of ancient art to express its creed and doctrines.

A similar case can be observed in the Exchange. When Jan Toorop designed his triptych of tiled tableaus representing Past, Present and Future, he chose the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to symbolize a future in which solidarity would prevail and ethnic boundaries would not divide mankind any more.⁴⁹ Here once again we see the artistic counterpart of the more politically motivated interest in early Christianity, mentioned above, of some socialist leaders. At this point we have come full circle: the vision of a bright and beautiful future being projected into images and stories from a distant but inspirational past.

⁴⁷ The decorations of the ANDB are dealt with at length in: Lieske Tibbe, *R. N. Roland Holst – Arbeid in schoonheid vereend. Opvattingen over Gemeenschapskunst*, Nijmeegse kunsthistorische studies, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 1994), pp. 183-197.

⁴⁸ On Polak and his orientation on the British labour movement: Salvador Bloemgarten, *Henri Polak: sociaal democraat, 1868-1943* ('s-Gravenhage: Sdu Uitgeverij Koninginnegracht, 1993).

⁴⁹ A thorough analysis of the ideological and iconographic roots of this tiled tableau is: Tibbe, 'Pictorial harmony'.