Between Aesthetics and Local Knowledge: Aspects of the connoisseurship of Theo van Baaren: poet, visual artist, historian of religion, and collector of non-western art.

Organizers:

Prof. Dr Yme B. Kuiper (University of Groningen)
Dr Willem Hofstee (Leiden University)
Discussant: Dr Alexandra Grieser (University of Groningen)

Abstract:

Since the 1980’s the Geertzian approach of context, comparison and local knowledge has severely been attacked by a Foucauldian/Saidian perspective with its insistence on discourses and regimes of power and knowledge. However, applied in the study of art it looks as if such a perspective reduces issues of meaning and beliefs and values related to the art of the very ‘victims’ on whose behalf the regimes of power and knowledge are discovered and criticized.

In this panel special attention will be paid to the affinity between the ‘connoisseur’ and aesthetic appreciation. Do the perspectives of local knowledge and universal aesthetic forms of appreciation exclude one another? In how far is connoisseurship produced by dominant discourses and regimes of taste? Does the artistic and scholarly biography of Van Baaren throw light upon a privileged, aesthetic entry to the art of non-western peoples?

Outline:

Between Aesthetics and Local Knowledge

Aspects of the connoisseurship of Theo van Baaren – poet, visual artist, historian of religion, and collector of non-western art

Art is neither some transcendent phenomenon variously disguised in different cultures nor a notion so thoroughly culture-bound as to be useless beyond Europe, Clifford Geertz wrote in the Introduction to his 1983 Local knowledge. Rejecting aesthetic universalism and radical culturalism, Geertz argued for a third way in the study of art: can we talk about West African carving, New Guinea palm-leaf painting, Italian Renaissance quattrocento picture making, and Moroccan poetry in such a manner as to cause them to shed light on one another? “What enables us to talk about them usefully together is that they all inscribe a communal sensibility, present locally to locals a local turn of mind.” Since the 1980’s the Geertzian approach of context, comparison and local knowledge has severely been attacked by a Foucauldian/Saidian perspective with its insistence on discourses and regimes of power and knowledge. Production of art and art collecting, and even interpretation of art, both in western and non-western societies, are part and parcel of systems of domination and must be studied accordingly. However, applying such a power-centered approach in the field of the study
of art, it looks as if such a perspective has no interest in issues of meaning anymore, not even, paradoxically, in the beliefs and values related to the art of the very ‘victims’ on whose behalf the regimes of power and knowledge are discovered and criticized.

Against this theoretical background a session will be organized around the life and works of the eminent Dutch scholar Theo Van Baaren (1912-1989), who held a chair in History of Religion and Egyptology at the University of Groningen, from 1952 to 1980. Van Baaren was the successor of Gerardus van der Leeuw, who had built up a reputation as theologian and historian of religion in pre-war Europe. As a young man Van Baaren was already deeply fascinated by the arts, ranging from surrealism in modern western visual art and poetry to the art of non-western peoples. He did not only study the arts, but wrote also experimental poetry and created collages. He had a special interest in the occult and the subconscious and was a collector and connoisseur of the visual arts of non-western peoples. He was founder of the Anthropological Museum Gerardus van der Leeuw, that showed, since 1978, a rich collection of non-western art objects, that especially referred to religion, magic, and ritual.

In his 1962 *Spiritual Imaging. Introduction to the visual arts of primitive peoples* Van Baaren argued that “real artistic appreciation of primitive art is possible without scholarly knowledge”. Notwithstanding the necessity to know the background and function of this type of art, there still is the possibility to have a direct, personal connection between the object of art and its observer. Aesthetic appreciation seems to be a cornerstone in Van Baaren’s view on the understanding of non-western art. But many people do not have enough aesthetic taste to appreciate tribal art. Comparable with non-figurative art in western society, non-western art needs cultural brokers, who can teach the artistic qualities of objects of this type art, its geographical origin and the tribal context in which it is produced and used. As author of *Korwars and Korwar Style. Art and ancestor worship in North-West New Guinea* (1968), Van Baaren tried to be such a cultural broker, but also tried to give a comprehensible picture and reliable historical reconstruction of the practices of korwar worshipping.

In this session four papers will be presented about different aspects of the connoisseurship of Van Baaren. Special attention will be paid to the question of the affinity between the concept of connoisseurship and aesthetic appreciation. Do the perspectives of local knowledge and universal aesthetic forms of appreciation exclude one another? In how far is connoisseurship produced by dominant discourses and regimes of taste? Does the artistic and scholarly biography of Van Baaren throw light upon a privileged, aesthetic entry to the art of non-western peoples, comparable with the argument of some faithful (roman-catholic) anthropologists about understanding the religion of non-western believers?

**Making Knowledge Public. Theo van Baaren as a broker of religious and artistic knowledge**

*Wim Hofstee (Leiden University)*

In the ethnographic work of the Dutch historian of religion Theo van Baaren (1912-1980) one can find a keen sense for the artistic dimensions of religion and culture, as in Clifford Geertz’s. At the same time Van Baaren had a mission, which is linked with his idea of a ‘science of religion’. First of all the study of religion should be freed from theology, in order to concentrate on knowledge instead of
belief, and make room for rationality and relativism. Secondly, he considered it to be part of his academic work to inform the public about the meaning of the study of religion: only through more and better knowledge about the plurality of religious cultures the world might become a place without social inequality and racism.

From Dada to Korwar. The Riddles of Theo van Baaren’s Connoisseurship of ‘Primitive Art’

Yme Kuiper (University of Groningen)

Theo van Baaren, who held a chair in History of Religion and Egyptology at the University of Groningen in the years 1952-1980, was already as a student deeply fascinated by surrealism in poetry and visual arts. Since the early 1940’s Van Baaren collected religious and non-religious art objects of so-called primitive peoples, with a preference for African masks and New Guinean ancestor figures with skull. In his works on the visual arts of non-western artists it looks as if he could easily switch from a universal aesthetic approach to a more contextual, ethnographic approach (a sort of Geertzian light version: ‘the problems, being existential, are universal – their solutions, being human, are diverse’). As a historian of religion and connoisseur of primitive art Van Baaren wrote in a detached and educative style about religion, magic, and art. In his own opinion he had always practiced the art of separation by cherishing a strong opposition between his scientific projects and his artistic production in writing poetry and making collages. However, was there really such a big gap? How about the role of the subconscious, the imagination and the objets trouvés of the surreалиsts in his fascination for primitive art? And, last but not least – as a wink to Bourdieu: how did he become a connoisseur?

The Intangible Significance of the Collection Van Baaren

Victorine Arnoldus (former director of the Ethnological Museum Gerardus van der Leeuw)

After his appointment in 1952 as a professor in the History of Religion at the University of Groningen Theo van Baaren (1912-1989) focused on the religions of non-literate peoples and especially on their iconography. He saw both phenomena (art and religion) as an expression of culture and as two clearly distinct manifestations of the human mind, both dependent on the possibility of symbolic representation. So he founded the Institute of Religious Iconography in 1964. In the course of time his ethnographic collection had grown to about 2500 pieces, by buying at art galleries, from private collectors, and church missionaries. The drive behind this collecting of ethnographic objects was two sided: not only to satisfy his feeling for beauty, but also to satisfy his curiosity for the world-views reflected in these objects. In his exhibitions he placed significant images from different cultures next to each other, demonstrating in this way the equality of the products of human imagination.

In 1968 Van Baaren donated his collection to the University of Groningen and ten years later The Ethnological Museum Gerardus van der Leeuw opened, which had also a mission of serving the general public. The museum’s name honored Prof. Gerardus van der Leeuw, who had strongly inspired the study of the religions of non-literate peoples at the University of Groningen.
However, already twenty five years later this university closed down the museum. Nearly the total collection Van Baaren was placed in depot. At that time ethnological museums in the Netherlands were discussing their right in representing other cultures with objects collected in colonial times. At the same time an increasing interest for historical museum collections grew among anthropologists. In their view these collections had to be interpreted no longer as collections of authentic objects but as intercultural documents.

In my presentation about the collection Van Baaren I would like to argue that an object in a collection doesn’t have a meaning by itself. Every object has two basic dimensions: first, its physical aspects and, second, the meanings which derive from its history, from the interpretations it receives and from its capacity to link the past to the present. They are the vehicles of an intangible heritage.

**Collecting korwars and the problem of aesthetic appreciation**

*Karel Weener, Research Associate at the National Museum for Ethnology in Leiden*

Missionary Frans van Hasselt arrived in 1894 in New Guinea. Working for the Utrecht Missionary Society, he stayed here for almost four decades. Van Hasselt collected numerous objects that are now housed in Dutch museums and private collections. Unfortunately, much of Van Hasselt’s documentation became separated from the objects he collected. Especially korwars which were once collected by him are still being discussed - and used to illustrate – books and publications about tribal art. However, we could ask ourselves the following question: how can we evaluate these ancestor representations if we do not know who made them and why, and by whom and under what circumstances they were collected?

The Dutch collector Theo van Baaren once stated: “real artistic appreciation of primitive art is possible without scholarly knowledge.” Such a statement deserves critical evaluation. Is it really possible to dissociate aesthetic appreciation from knowledge about the entnographic origin, context and provenance of tribal art objects? In this paper I will try to answer this question by discussing letters and photographs from missionary Frans van Hasselt, which I was able to retrieve from several (family) archives. I will focus on Van Hasselt’s collecting of korwars in the field during the Koréri-movements in the Geelvinkbay area. By doing so these objects (including those depicted in Van Baaren’s 1968 *Korwars and Korwar Style*) acquire the rich historical patina they deserve.