



A LASTING IMPRESSION

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Abstract

In this research, the cultural context, personality and artistry of the Dutch artist Willem Witsen (1860-1923) are taken into account in order to gain a better understanding of his etchings. Witsen's own written expressions about (his) art encouraged this approach. His statements are found in the articles he wrote as an ambitious art critic for the periodical *De Nieuwe Gids* and in his comprehensive correspondence, which is used as main source for this thesis. Witsen artistically matured under the influence of the Movement of Eighty. The prevailing conviction of the movement was that a work of art was an 'explicitly accurate representation of what goes on in the innermost being of the artist'. Following the French writer Zola, words such as 'temperament' and 'mood' became keywords in their philosophy. Witsen's melancholic disposition is visible in his dark and dreary etchings. Many of his artistic choices, for instance the lack of people in his cityscapes, are influenced by his introversion. His restlessness and escapist attitude resulted in a variety of subjects. While his perfectionism frequently led to performance anxiety, Witsen was a very ambitious and intelligent artist with the aim to become a *peintre-graveur*, with a photographic eye.

Title: A lasting Impression. An analysis of the etchings of Willem Witsen (1860-1923) by means of his cultural context, character and artistry.

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Fig. i. Willem Witsen, *Different states of Farmhouse by night*, ca. 1882-1884, etching, 21,9 x 11,9 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

P R E F A C E

During my time as an art student at the university of Utrecht I have always had shared interests and pleasant contact with dr. Saskia de Bodt. After my internship at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, where I examined the prints of the American artist George Bellows (1882-1925, see for two publications: bellows.barber.org.uk), I contacted Saskia with the idea to write my research master thesis on Dutch print artists from the twentieth century. My goal was to further specialize in (early) modern works on paper. When Saskia suggested looking into the etchings of Willem Witsen, I trusted her guidance despite my very limited knowledge about Witsen and his work. It did not take long before I was captivated by his interesting etchings as they appealed to me for a mysterious reason. However, I was unsure how to approach them. When I started reading into Witsen I soon discovered his strong opinions about how art should be made and, more importantly, how art should be experienced. I decided to let him guide me in my approach towards his etchings. What made this research into Witsen very special was the digital publication of his complete correspondence. This *document humain* is endlessly fascinating and I something literally got lost in the letters. The experience was even uncomfortable at times, as it felt like invading some one's privacy. Saskia had to warn me not to get caught in the hypnotising circle of the Movement of Eighty and to maintain a critical distance.

I would like to thank all the contributors for their efforts in making the correspondence more accessible. I attempted to examine some letters in hand writing and realised that without the transcriptions, I would have been working on this thesis for years (see fig. ii). A special thanks to Ester Wouthuysen, who encouraged me to take on this subject and provided me with an anthology of Witsen's correspondence. As a practical point, I want to note that the translations of citations are executed by me and thus are subjective interpretations of the texts and personal choice of words. This was a particular difficult task to undertake, especially because some Dutch words changed their meaning in the course of time. However, I thought it important to make this information partly accessible for non-Dutch reading audience. The original Dutch citations can be found in the endnotes. With the abundant use of quotations, I hope to bring this remarkable individual back to life, as the underlying aim of this thesis was to provide Witsen with more recognition among a wider (international) audience.

I would like to sincerely thank Saskia for taking the time and making the effort to supervise me despite her personal circumstances. Furthermore, I am truly honoured to announce Dr. Jenny Reynaerts, senior curator of eighteenth and nineteenth century painting of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and expert on Witsen, as my second reader. Additionally, I am obligated to give credits to my fellow students Sara Armas and Marit Slob for critically reading my thesis and providing me with helpful feedback. Last but not least, I have to express my gratitude for the unconditional support of my parents no matter what decisions I make in life and for Friso Boer and Thalina den Haring, who gave me the confidence to continue in this laborious process.

There is one thing left to say: Welcome to the wondrous world of Willem Witsen.

Ewijkshoeve ¹²²⁷
8 Oct '84.

dubbel gefeliciteerd. Looy toe nu
't per slot van rekening nog aan je geluk
lijg eeterne is te danken dat je 't heeg.
ik heb niet goddent - en je waarschoffe
ook niet - dat er nog hand is geweest
van 'n vryblik dat je 't niet kreeg -
Enfin, 'tis 'n grote gerustelling.

Voor dat je weggaat, kom je zeker nog
wel eens 'n dagje? Groet de vriendin
Zeer

Je vriend

Wim Witsen

Je moet de groeten - gelukwensen
hebben van allen hier - ook van Verhulst
die hier 'n dag of wat is - erg amusant.
Maar want is hier Zondag - maandag of
weest, dat vertel 'k je wel is alst je
er op geteld bent. adieu

W
W.

Fig. ii. Letter from Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 8 October 1884, Ewijkshoeve (1227 Brief, Manuscript). Source: Brievencollectie Jacobus van Looy, Stichting Jacobus van Looy.

INTRODUCTION

‘Similar to all painters, whom at the start of their career defined themselves as ‘etcher’, it was difficult for Willem Witsen to translate his own personality, which brought him to the arts and more specifically to etching, into a painting. Any artist, who chooses etching as a form of self-expression, more or less characterizes himself by this choice. One that can resist the allure of the tubes to prefer the black-and-white presents himself as some one that wants to discard the more external for what the more internal can reveal.’ⁱ

This quote is sourced from a memorial of the Dutch artist Willem Arnoldus Witsen (1860-1923), written by novelist and art critic Albertine Draayer-de Haas (1876-1952) for the periodical *Onze Eeuw* (1923). Draayer-de Haas strongly captures the two essential elements of Witsen’s artistry in this opening paragraph. The first is his creative preoccupation with the practise of etching, clearly preferred over painting. The second is the suggestion that his personality plays a primary part in the creation of his artwork. This may be an explanation for Witsen’s choice for the medium of etching, as Draayer-de Haas stated that etching would be more suited to ‘reveal the innermost’. H.L. Berckenhoff (1850-1918), art critic for the Dutch national newspaper the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, for which Draayer-de Haas also worked, wrote revealingly about the attitude towards the practise of etching in that period:

‘The distance between the artist and his work is nowhere shorter, their involvement in no other discipline more direct. Only the length of the needle, striding over the copper, lays between them both. The spirit of artist expresses herself as sudden as she arises, in her clearest form, without the danger of becoming turbid by the tangible matter of paint. As the means, offered by the [form of] art, become scarcer and simpler, the artist is forced to have a deeper understanding and a more powerful ability to express.’ⁱⁱ

On Witsen’s etchings in particular, Berckenhoff states that the artist knew how ‘to infuse [his work] with own felt life’. Witsen’s enthusiasm for the medium becomes clear in a letter from January 1904 to the writer Arthur van Schendel (1874-1946):

‘About etching! Yes, it is a curious and interesting practise if you get into the *métier* and have a feel for it. What makes me so enthusiastic is that no matter how you work and struggle and bite and polish and beat, the copper will never fail you and your etching never has to lose its freshness, because of the wonderful resistance of the metal, as long as you don’t lose your own freshness!’ⁱⁱⁱ

This last sentence reveals that the spirit of Witsen influenced his process and the outcome of his work. And indeed, we can find this attitude repeated in other commentary made by the artist. In his role as an art critic for the periodical *De Nieuwe Gids*, Witsen stated about the function and meaning of art: ‘Art must be: rendering a part of life, real, but richer and more intense by means of the sense of the artist.’^{iv} On the role of the artist, he argued that ‘the greatest artist is someone who can understand the most substantial amount of moods, feels the strongest and depicts the most personal.’^v

The Dutch poet Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos (1859-1938), spokesman of the cultural spirit of that time and one of Witsen's closest friends, stated that poetry is 'the most individual expression of the most individual emotion' and that literature is the 'explicitly accurate representation of what goes on in the innermost being of the artist'.^{vi} These conceptions show the importance of the artist's individuality and emotion for the outcome of a work and were applied to other forms of art as well. This fluidity between the different disciplines is distinctive for the last two decades of nineteenth century.¹ Kloos provocatively stated about this interaction: 'I spend my life in orgies.'^{vii} In the post-mortem publication *Vervlogen Jaren* (which can be translated as 'bygone years'), critic and prose writer Frans Erens (1857-1935) recalled:

'In the years when we were all young, close connections between literati and painters prevailed. They were interested in each other's ideas and works, and the painters heavily participated in the long and busy conversations. The personality of Willem Witsen was a generally respected one. People were in awe of him.'^{viii}

The enormous importance that Witsen and his circle attributed to 'personality' or 'character' and 'mood' almost leaves no other option but to analyse Witsen's etchings, in which he could best express himself as an artist, with the help of the ego documents that display his personality and the many moods he experienced. Witsen himself wrote about this approach:

'One page of a psychological study based on the work of an artist is worth more than a book, in which one could find the complete history of his life. That life, determined by the degree of the power and greatness of his temperament, is only to be found in his work. For the remainder, only intimate correspondence without commentary (such as that of Millet with Senaier) has value, as a piece of life of which every person may get his own impression.'^{ix}

The goal of this research is to stay as true to Witsen's ideas about life and art as possible and to provide his work with a better understanding by means of his convictions. Therefore, this thesis is not so much a biographical approach towards Witsen's prints, but an attempt to analyse his character psychologically and his etchings with an art historical background. A methodological example for this research is the Getty publication *The Life and the Work* (2007), in which renowned art historians address this fundamental relationship between the lives and/or personalities of artists and their works.² This publication shows both the problems and the attraction of finding the relationship between art and artist.³ There is always the danger of generalizing and overdrawing conclusions. In the anti-intentionalist position, it is argued that the focus should be on the public evaluation, instead of the private psychology of the creation. Furthermore, critics warn against the subjectivity of this approach, resting on the Western pillars of individualism (heroization of the creator), science, and commercial culture.

¹ Anne Marie Musschoot, 'Noord en zuid en de nieuwe, geestelijke kunst van 1890: "Vermenging op voet van gelijkheid" (A. Verwey).' In: Anne Marie Musschoot, *Op voet van gelijkheid. Opstellen van Anne Marie Musschoot*, Gent 1994, pp. 13-38.

² See: Paul Smith and others, *The Life & the Work. Art and Biography*, Los Angeles 2007.

³ This approach is also visible in the scholarly interest in Segers' prints and artistic persona, which revived from the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1922, for instance, Wilhelm Fraenger (1890-1964) made particular efforts in his publication *Die Radierungen des Hercules Seghers. Ein physiognomischer Versuch* to define the psyche of the artist through an analysis of his prints.

- E. Havekamp Begemann, *Hercules Segers: The Complete Etchings*, Berlin 2013, p. 17.

Historiography

Interest in Witsen's work decreased even before the First World War.⁴ His strongly figurative work did not fit with the modernistic tendencies of the moment. Art dealer Nico van Harpen (1858-1931) blamed the exuberance of the new movements for this neglect.⁵ In her memorial of Witsen, Albertine Draayer-de Haas still praised Witsen as 'an uninfluenced [artist], who strongly trusted in his own pride-of-insight and to what extent he obtained a personality.'^x Timmerman stated that Witsen 'in a time like this, completely managed to remain free from all kinds of external influences. And this is no small achievement.'^{xi} However in the course of the century these praises disappear. Furthermore, one could find that Witsen's dark work required some careful study and longer attention to receive full appreciation.⁶ Yet in the last century two generations of scholars have been attentive to the art and artistic persona of Willem Witsen.⁷ The first generation, from about 1910 to circa 1950, was in greater or lesser extent still involved with 'the spirit of the age' in which Witsen created his art. Aegidius Timmerman and Witsen had several mutual friends and Frans Erens even became friends with Witsen from about 1890 onward.⁸ These authors were not completely detached and therefore it could be argued that they had subjective stance, or perhaps they might even have had ulterior motives. For instance, Nico van Harpen was an art dealer, so popularizing Witsen's work would have benefited him financially.⁹ Former director of the Kröller-Müller Museum A.M. Hammacher wrote a compelling piece about Witsen in his publication *Menschen in de Schaduw* (in English: *People in the Shadow*). Hammacher attempted, with Stendhal and Baudelaire as exemplars, to understand the aesthetic and psychological dimension of the work and his research involved cultural backgrounds.¹⁰ Peter de Ruiter argues that his friendship with artists inspired this approach.¹¹

The second generation, from about 1970 to 2003, was generally more interested in the social circle in which Witsen functioned as a key figure. Many titles from this period are along the lines of Witsen and his 'circle', 'friends' or 'contemporaries'. This trend coincided with the rising interest in exanimating the primary sources that Witsen left us. Witsen's correspondence shows the intensive network of the artistic circles in that time.

⁴ Irene de Groot and others (red.), *Willem Witsen 1860-1923. Schilderijen, tekeningen, prenten, foto's*, Bussum 2003, p. 12.

⁵ N. van Harpen, *Willem Witsen*, Amsterdam 1924, p. 13.

⁶ De Groot 2003 (see note 4), p. 9.

⁷ I have tried to distinguish these different generations in the biography.

⁸ Aegidius Timmerman was maintained a friendship with Kloos (since kindergarden), Perk, Van der Goes and Diepenbrock. Enno Endt, *Het festijn van tachtig. De vervulling van heel groote dingen scheen nabij*, Amsterdam 1990, p. 10.

⁹ Just like Berckenhoff and Draayer-de Haas, Hammacher also was an art critic for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*. He was also an editor of the *Portefeuille* and cofounder of the *Amsterdamsche Kunstenaarskring* (founded in 1892), of which the beaforementioned H.L. Berckenhoff was also a member. Ton van Kalmthout, *Muzentempels: multidisciplinaire kunstkringen in Nederland tussen 1880 en 1914*, Hilversum 1998, p. 36.

¹⁰ See: A.M. Hammacher, *Stromingen en persoonlijkheden. Schets van een halve eeuw schilderkunst in Nederland, 1900-1950*, Amsterdam 1955.

¹¹ Peter de Ruiter, *A. M. Hammacher. Kunst als levensessentie* (Proefschrift Vrije Universiteit), Amsterdam 2000, pp. 320-321.

The culmination of this second wave of scholarly interest resulted in two exhibitions in the autumn of 2003, 'the year of Witsen'. The Dutch periodical *Kunstschrift* devoted an entire edition to the artist. Het Dordrechts Museum displayed a varied overview of his oeuvre, titled *Willem Witsen (1860-1923) – Stemmingen* (which translates as 'Moods') and Het Gemeentearchief Amsterdam showed his works of Amsterdam in the exhibition *Witsen en Amsterdam – 1860-1923*. This was the first time that significant attention was paid to the art of Witsen so long after his death.¹² However, this upward trend did not continue and there has been a significant gap of about a decade within the research on Witsen. As a third generation scholar, I hope to approach this subject with a fresh perspective and stimulate the interest of other young scholars for complex and unjustifiably neglected area of research.

This research

Many scholars have suggested that Witsen's personality is visible in his artwork. However, they have rarely elaborated upon this. In the aforementioned publication *The Life and The Work*, Robert Williams remarked: 'The notion of art as an expression of temperament or personality is still widespread in our culture, but it has lost almost all of its critical edge.'¹³ The suggestion of the visibility of a personality in art is understandable for the first generation directly involved with this philosophy. Yet the second generation often just mentioned 'the fact' without further explanation. Perhaps it was still thought to be too obvious? Nonetheless, for current scholars to truly understand this statement, it is important to know the answers to the following questions: What were Witsen's specific characteristics and moods? How were they triggered by his surroundings and experiences? In what (technical and visual) way do they manifest in his artistic choices? And, to use the legendary words by Kloos once more, when did he reach his 'most individual expression'? These questions will be reflected in this thesis in the following structure. The first chapter discusses the cultural climate in which Witsen developed as an artist and person. It is assumed that this context strongly shaped him. In the second chapter, Witsen's personality and his varying moods will be constructed by means of biographical information and comments of his friends and family. His correspondence is essential in this part. The third chapter discusses various elements of Witsen's artistry, because they display his visions and ambitions. The final chapter presents a careful selection of etchings, which will be interpreted by means of the detected characteristics and moods.

Two sources have been essential for this research. In 2008, the complete correspondence of Willem Witsen was transcribed and digitalized by Stichting Willem Witsen and published on dnbl.org and geheugenvannederland.nl.¹⁴ This *document humain* is very interesting on its own, as writing was an important form of expression for these sensitive artists as well. Gerard Jan Hofker (1864-1945) decidedly wrote to Witsen: 'Writing has the advantage that people will write things they would not say [...] and the fact that you can feel again, you owe to your letter writing.'^{xii}

¹² Website of CODART, the international network of curators of Dutch and Flemish art. <<http://www.codart.nl/exhibitions/details/618/>> (retrieved March 2017).

¹³ Smith and others 2007 (see note 2), p. 35.

¹⁴ See: willemwitsen.nl and for the specific publications: <http://www.dnbl.org/tekst/wits009brie01_01/> and <<http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/nl/geheugen/pages/collectie/Willem%20Witsen:%20Tachtiger%20in%20brief%20en%20beeld>> (retrieved March 2017).

Due to the close contact with the literati, many artists had literary aspirations, which they practiced in their letters. This sometimes led to a tedious pretentiousness, as Jacobus van Looy (1855-1930) remarked: ‘Those gentlemen literati are fundamentally so horribly vain and think, I assume, that every letter they write will be subsequently published.’^{xiii} In this case, the letters were indeed published. In a review of the publication *G. H. Breitner in zijn Haagse tijd (1970)* by P.H. Hefting, it has been remarked that in the Netherlands, generally speaking, one still has to overcome a certain prudery to publish more intimate documents and letters.¹⁵ However, the importance of the publication and examination of the letters of an artist is visible in the reception of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). In his case, the correspondence largely contributed to the myth around his artistic persona. Dutch art historian Jan Hulsker, an authority on Van Gogh’s correspondence, stated about Van Gogh’s writing abilities:

‘Vincent was able to express himself splendidly, and it is this remarkable writing talent that has secured the letters their lasting place in world literature, quite apart from their importance for the study of his life and work. [...] In many letters his emotions and beliefs are expressed so strongly and convincingly that a “real” writer could hardly have improved upon them.’¹⁶

I believe that the same is true for Witsen, although he sometimes considered writing as a struggle: ‘What you are saying about writing by artists is true and I also think it is terribly dreadful, I always do it with sacrifice.’^{xiv} He also often apologised for his late or lacking response. Already in Witsen’s lifetime, the Van Gogh letters sparked interest. Hofker wrote to him in 1921: ‘Have you ever read the letters by v. Gogh? Marie [Hofker’s wife and mother of Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981), red.] reads them from a to z (3 parts). It is, however, no reading material for the mother of an upcoming artist. What a misery he has had. And how beautiful are some parts.’^{xv} Witsen did not seem to answer Hofker’s question in a letter, but it is plausible that he was familiar with these letters.

The second essential source for this research is the first publication on his oeuvre since 1959: *Willem Witsen 1860-1923. Schilderijen, tekeningen, prenten, foto's* from 2003. The book accompanied the aforementioned exhibition in Het Dordrechts Museum. This publication contains the first complete, chronologic and illustrated overview of Witsen’s etchings, composited by Irene M. de Groot. It is the first throughout examination since 1947, when K.G. Boon (1909-1996), former director of the Amsterdam Rijksprentenkabinet and a connoisseur of drawings and prints, published a preliminary overview of Witsen’s etchings. De Groot recognized that Witsen’s works on paper (etchings and watercolours) have always been more appreciated than his paintings and that his etchings show his individuality through his recognizable hand. She described the works as ‘introvert’, lacking in colour and as having a distinguished tonality.¹⁷ Besides the overview of etchings and by Irene de Groot, the publications contains a beautifully written biography by Jenny Reynaerts, providing a clear insight in his life and personality. Combining their research provided a steady basis for this thesis.

¹⁵ See: P.H. Hefting, *G. H. Breitner in zijn Haagse tijd*, Utrecht 1970.

¹⁶ The digital publication *Vincent van Gogh. The letters* <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letter_writer_1.html> (retrieved March 2017).

¹⁷ De Groot 2003 (see note 4), p. 56.

Original Dutch citations and sources

ⁱ ‘Gelijk alle schilders, die in den aanvang van hun loopbaan, als ‘etsers’, zich hebben uitgesproken, is het ook Willem Witsen moeilijk geweest zijn eigene geaardheid, die hem tot de kunst en meer bepaald tot de ets bracht, in het schilderij te vertolken. Reeds de kunstenaar, die de ets verkiest als vorm van wezenvertolking, laat zich door deze keuze min of meer kennen. Wie de verlokking van de tuben weerstaat om het zwart en wit te verkiezen, doet zich reeds voor als iemand, die het meer uiterlijke verwerpen wil voor wat het meer innerlijke openbaren mag.’ - Albertine Draayer-de Haas, ‘Willem Witsen’, in: *Onze Eeuw*. Jaargang 23 (1923), p. 343.

ⁱⁱ ‘De afstand tusschen den kunstenaar en zijn werk is nergens korter, hunne betrekking bij geen kunstvorm onmiddellijker. Slechts de lengte van de stift, die over het koper schrijdt, ligt tusschen beide. De bezieling des kunstenaars uit zich even plotseling als zij ontstaan is, in haar klaarsten vorm, zonder gevaar van troebel worden door de tastbare materie van de verf. Naarmate de middelen, die de kunst biedt, schaarscher en eenvoudiger zijn, wordt van den kunstenaar eene diepere opvatting en krachtiger uitdrukkingsvermogen gevorderd.’ - H.L. Berckenhoff, ‘De tentoonstelling der Nederlandsche etsclub’, in: *De Gids*, Jaargang 54, Amsterdam 1980, p. 159.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Over dat etsen! ja, dat is 'n curieus en interessant werk als je 'n beetje in 't métier doordringt en er voor voelt. Wat mij zoo enthousiasmeert is dat hoe je ook werkt en ploetert en bijt en schuurt en klopt, dat koper laat je nooit in den steek en je ets hoeft nooit z'n frischheid te verliezen door dien geweldigen weerstand van 't metaal, zoolang je zelf je frischheid niet verliest!’ - Willem Witsen to Arthur van Schendel, 13 January 1904, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{iv} ‘Kunst moet zijn: ’t weergeven van ’n stuk leven, reëel maar rijker en intenser door het gevoel van de kunstenaar.’ - W.J. v. W [W.A. en J.P. Veth], ‘Kunst. Een Kunscriticus’, *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, Amsterdam 1887, p. 50.

^v ‘Bijv. heb ik ergens gezegd dat voor mij de grootste kunstenaar hij is, die het grootste aantal stemmingen het best begrijpt, het sterkst gevoelt, het persoonlijkst weêrgeeft.’ - W.J. van Westervoorde, ‘Een Hollandsch Schilder in Spanje’, *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, Amsterdam 1887, p. 305.

^{vi} ‘in-preciese weergave van wat er omgaat in 's kunstenaars binnenste wezen’ - Jacques Perk (Bert Bakker), *Gedichten*, Amsterdam 1999, p. 210.

^{vii} ‘Ik ga mijn leven in orgieën door.’ - Bernt Luger, Rob Nieuwenhuys, Harry G.M. Prick and Kees Nieuwenhuijzen, *De beweging van Tachtig*, Den Haag 1982, p. 69.

^{viii} ‘In die jaren, toen wij allen jong waren, bestonden er nauwe betrekkingen tusschen de literatoren en de schilders. Zij interesseerden zich voor elkaars ideeën en werken en aan de lange en drukke gesprekken namen de schilders hevig deel. De persoonlijkheid van Willem Witsen was een algemeen gerespecteerde. Men had voor hem een zeker ontzag.’ - Frans Erens (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *Vervlogen jaren*, Amsterdam 1989² (Den Haag 1938), p. 157.

^{ix} ‘Eén bladzijde psychologiesche studie gebaseerd op het werk van den artiest is meer waard dan het boek, waarin men volledig de geschiedenis van zijn leven zou kunnen vinden. Dat leven, merkwaardig naar de mate der kracht en der grootheid van zijn temperament is uitsluitend te vinden in zijn werk. - Voor de rest heeft alleen waarde een intieme correspondentie (als van Millet met Senaier) zonder commentaar, als 'n stuk leven waarvan elk voor zich zijn impressie kan krijgen.’ - Willem Witsen [pseudonym W.J. v. W.], ‘Een Boek over Kunst’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, 1885-1886 Amsterdam, p. 464.

^x ‘hoezeer de laatste een onbeïnvloede was, hoezeer hij zich voelde in eigen trots-van-inzicht, in hoe hooge mate hij voor een: persoonlijkheid, gelden mag.’ - Albertine Draayer-de Haas, ‘Willem Witsen’, in: *Onze Eeuw*, Jaargang 23, 1923, p. 344.

^{xi} ‘[Witsen] heeft in de tijd als de tegenwoordige geheel weten vrij te blijven van allerlei invloeden van buiten af. En dit is geen geringe verdienste.’ - Aeg. W. Timmerman, *Hollandse Schilders van dezen Tijd. Willem Witsen*, Amsterdam 1912, p. 8.

^{xii} ‘t Schrijven heeft toch dit voor, dat men dingen schrijft die men niet zeggen zou [...] en dat je dat nu weer voelen kunt, heb je aan de briefschrijverij te danken.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, [September 1893?], location unknown, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xiii} ‘Die heeren litteratoren zijn au fond zoo gruwelijk ijdel en denken geloof ik dat elke brief die ze schrijven naderhand uitgegeven zal worden.’ - Jabocus van Looy to Willem Witsen, 6 April 1885, Rome], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xiv} ‘Wat je zegt over het schrijven door schilders is wel waar en ik heb er ook vreeselijk 't land aan, ik doe het ook altijd met opoffering.’ - Johann Eduard Karsen aan Willem Witsen, 3 February 1889, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xv} ‘Heb je wel eens de brieven van v. Gogh gelezen? Marie leest ze van a tot z (3 deelen). Het is anders geen lectuur voor een moeder van een aanstaand schilder. Wat heeft die een misere gehad. En wat zijn sommige gedeelten mooi.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker aan Willem Witsen, 16 January [1921], [Den Haag/The Hague], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

CHAPTER ONE

Witsen's cultural context

*'There is one eternal truth ... temperaments alone are alive and rule their age.'*¹

- Émile Zola

*

The following introductory chapter will sketch an idea about the cultural circle, in which Witsen artistically developed. This information is essential for understanding his approach to art and even to life. In the first forty years of Witsen's life, the last decades of the nineteenth century, Europe found herself in the aftermath of an extensive period of radical transformations and, at the same time, experienced the dawn of the modern era.² The political implications of the French Revolution (1789–1799) became more and more evident in society, as the bourgeoisie rose to power. The Industrial Revolution (starting in 1750 in England and about a century later in the Netherlands) was a boost to the economy, resulting in rapid urbanisation and increasing (public) transport possibilities. The (late) Enlightenment provided new intellectual challenges and philosophies, sparked by the fast progress of science. The worldview broadened due to the increasingly noticeable consequences of colonisation and 'interest in the exotic' was partially satisfied at world expositions. All these changes and modernisations have caused a new way of life and a different mentality. This alternative social situation compelled the artist to redefine his position within society. With the increasing loss of religious and secular commissions in the nineteenth century, the destiny of the artists' work was uncertain.³ He was now mainly driven by his own creative urges. Publicly accessible exhibitions in salons provided the opportunity to present their work to a thriving audience: the bourgeoisie. The practise of art criticism in the art periodical was initially developed to guide and refine the taste of this possible new buyer.⁴ However, artists increasingly started to condemn the commercial character of the bourgeois art market at the end of the nineteenth century. Distinctive for this period is the strong interaction between artists and litterateurs or literati.⁵ The generation of literati that had defined the character of the 'new' literature and art mostly originated from the bourgeoisie. However, they felt free and self-assured to such an extent that they thought themselves to be able to detach from their roots and from society in general. This presumption resulted in a *culte de moi* with a so-called 'decadent hyper individualism', which indicates the need for isolation and complete independency.⁶ Thus, the generation taking the cultural lead at the end of the nineteenth century originated from the bourgeoisie, but had turned against it.

¹ Kurt Badt, *The Art of Cézanne*, Berkeley 1965, p. 125.

² For context see: Jan Romein, *Op het breukvlak van twee eeuwen. De Westerse wereld rond 1900*, Amsterdam 1976² (1967) and Bettina Polak, *Het fin-de-siècle in de Nederlandse schilderkunst. De symbolistische beweging 1890-1900*, Den Haag 1955.

³ Polak 1955 (see note 2), p. 1.

⁴ Lieske Tibbe, *Verstrengeling van traditie en vernieuwing. Kunstkritiek in Nederland tijdens het fin de siècle, 1885-1905*, Rotterdam 2014, p. 14.

⁵ Musschoot 1994 (see note 1, *introduction*), pp. 13-38.

⁶ Musschoot 1994 (see note 1, *introduction*), pp. 13-38.

The Dutch writer Lodewijk van Deysel (pseudonym of Karel Alberdingk Thijm (1864-1952) explicitly stated that ‘the bourgeoisie is an ugly pustule in the beautiful body of humanity.’¹ As with every avant-garde movement, there was a strong opposition to and dissatisfaction with the current situation.⁷ Therefore, before looking further into the so-called ‘Movement of Eighty’, which represented this cultural phenomenon in the Netherlands and of which Witsen was a(n implied) prominent member, it is necessary to have a brief look at their predecessors: The Hague School.

The Hague School and the power of nature

In the mid nineteenth century, The Hague was the undisputed centre of the Dutch art world. The painters of The Hague School dominated the art market and had a key position within the various artist associations, such as *Pulchri Studio* (founded in 1847 in The Hague) and *De Haagse Kunstkring*.⁸ The term ‘The Hague School’ was introduced in 1875 by the art critic J. van Santen Kolff (1848-1896) and is based on the location most artists were active.⁹ The name is not very meaningful, but at least it was neutral, unlike the term ‘Grijze School’ (gray school), which could lead to a negative connotation. Van Santen Kolff actually was the first art critic to defend the painters of The Hague School, stating that the painters depicted down to earth subjects like the great masters of the past. The Hague School is considered to be the representative of the Dutch ‘national landscape’, a genre that arose in the Europe in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ A national landscape is a depiction of a landscape generating a sense of familiarity, trust and identification for the inhabitants of the depicted areas. Motivations for this genre were both practical and ideological. Practically, the development of the train, tram and road network made the countryside increasingly accessible. The agricultural environment of the cities could be easily traversed and explored, and therefore became more present in the consciousness of the cultural elite. Furthermore, this cultural elite felt the urge to escape the increasing chaos of the cities by spending their summers in country houses. They became the collectors of this genre and art began to take a place in the family circle.¹¹ Ideologically, the national landscape stems from an increasing nationalism within the countries of Europe. This is why The Hague School was, from the beginning of its existence, linked to the great tradition of the Dutch seventeenth century landscape paintings.¹² There were similarities in theme, style and also partially in mentality. The Hague School conveys the typical Dutch virtues of simplicity and truth.¹³

⁷ The term avant-garde originated in the 1820’s in the context of Saint-Simonism. The formation of brotherhoods, Cenacles and colonies with the aim of simultaneously changing art and society had since been an integral part of the artistic culture. Wessel Krul, *The Hague School and the national landscape*, pp. 620-648, ubiquitypress.com (retrieved March 2017).

⁸ John Sillevs, *Het Haagse Schoolboek*, Zwolle 2001, p. 24.

⁹ Carel Blotkamp, ‘Art Criticism in De Nieuwe Gids’, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 5, No. 1/2 (1971), pp. 116-136.

¹⁰ Anthony Smith, ‘The land and its people. Reflections on artistic identification in an age of nations and nationalism’, in: *Nations and Nationalism*, Volume 19, Issue 1, (2013), pp. 87–106.

¹¹ Saskia de Bodt and Michiel Plomp, *Anton Mauve. 1830-1888*, Bussum 2009, p. 8.

¹² Wessel Krul, *The Hague School and the national landscape*, digital publication, pp. 620-648, see: ubiquitypress.com (retrieved March 2017).

¹³ G.H. Marius, *De Hollandsche schilderkunst in de negentiende eeuw*, ’s-Gravenhage 1920² (1903), pp. 103-105 and 155.

In the series *Hollandsche schilders van dezen tijd*, published in 1912, Aegidius W. Timmerman (1858-1941) argues that in the second half of the nineteenth century, there is a revival of the 'oude Hollandsche school' ('old Dutch school').¹⁴ Interestingly, Timmerman states that Witsen has the most of typical characteristics of the Old Dutch painters: virtue, honesty, loyalty, patience and simplicity. Furthermore, he argues that Witsen possessed a sentimental kindness, reconciled melancholy and a healthy passion, features that have been contributed to the inhabitants of Amsterdam for centuries. It is remarkable that Timmerman placed Witsen in this framework of nationalism or patriotism, more suitable to The Hague School, while the Movement of Eighty preached for detachment and cosmopolitanism.

Particularly in the beginning of his career, starting at the academy, Witsen admired the masters of The Hague School, in particular Anton Mauve (1838-1888) and the Maris brothers.¹⁵ Mauve became a close friend and regular (long-term) guest at the Ewijkshoeve, the country estate of Witsen's father.¹⁶ In the first four years, Witsen was clearly inspired by Mauve in the choice of subject and the manner of depiction.¹⁷ Witsen's *Shepherd behind his flock of sheep on the heath* (1888) and Mauve's etching *Shepherd with flock of sheep* (1875-1877) shows striking similarities in the play of light and shadow (see fig. 1&2). Witsen and his fellow students at the academy praised Mauve. Tholen once wrote about him: 'The man knows too well how nature works and how a painting should be.'¹⁸ In 1896, however, Witsen tries to detach himself from Mauve: 'I had the opportunity to work with Mauve, especially to see him work and to talk to him. I have learned a lot from him, but his influence has been, I think in particular due to the considerable difference of temperament, of short duration.'¹⁹ The influence of the Movement of Eighty, putting an emphasis on temperament, clearly shines through in this statement as will become clear in the following paragraph.

The painters of The Hague School were inspired by the artist colony of Barbizon, a small village in France, on the outskirts of the forest of Fontainebleau, where a number of famous landscape painters settled between 1830 and 1860.²⁰ The School of Barbizon became known for their naturalistic painting style and Jean-François Millet (1814-1875) as their foreman. Millet was an important influence on the Dutch artists of the second half of the nineteenth century. Mauve is described as the 'apostle of the Millet cult'.²¹ Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother that Millet 'had opened our eyes for the man who lives in nature'.²² The universal motive of this period is the fascination with nature. Nature did not only evoke feelings of nostalgia, but it also stimulated the – almost religious – pursuit of utopia.²³ Saskia de Bodt uses the term 'romantic realism' to describe this sentimental attitude towards nature.²⁴

¹⁴ Aeg. W. Timmerman, *Hollandse Schilders van dezen Tijd. Willem Witsen*, Amsterdam 1912, p. 8.

¹⁵ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 19.

¹⁶ Rein van der Wiel, *Ewijkshoeve. Tuin van Tachtig*, Amsterdam 1988, p. 39.

¹⁷ Witsen's potato eating fellow of reminds of the early (drawing) work of Mauve's more famous student Vincent van Gogh (see De Groot 2003, p. 197). Although Van Gogh's brother was Witsen's art dealer from 1895, Witsen does not mention the work of Van Gogh as a source of admiration or inspiration.

¹⁸ Witsen has been in Barbizon at least twice in 1886 and 1909. The Barbizon of the Movement of Eighty was Bussum. See: Marcus van der Heide, 'Willem Kloos en Bussum', *Bussum Historisch Tijdschrift*, pp. 13-19.

¹⁹ Julian Bell, *Van Gogh. De complete en compacte biografie*, Amsterdam 2015, page number is missing.

²⁰ Bell 2015 (see note 19), page number is missing.

²¹ Wessel Krul, *Back to basics, simplicity and nature. The Golden Age of the artists' colonies, 1860- 1910*, digital publication, pp. 1-21, see: ubiquitypress.com (retrieved March 2017).

²² De Bodt and Plomp 2001 (see note 11), p. 8.



Fig. 1. Anton Mauve, *Shepherd with flock of sheep*, 1848-1888, etching, 13,2 x 19,1 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 2. Willem Witsen, *Shepherd behind his flock of sheep on the heath*, 1888, etching and vernis mou, 20 x 30 cm, Prentenkabinet Leiden. Source: Photograph by author.

Contact with nature and her elements brought one 'back to basics', living a pure and simple life, but moreover nature itself was considered a source of purification. A medical-psychiatric belief emerged, which sought a remedy in nature against all adverse influences, all the moral and physical tensions and weakening, which were the result of life in the city. The career of Frederik van Eeden (1860-1923) is representative of these ambitions in the Netherlands.²³ Van Eeden was, besides a poet, play writer and critic, qualified as a very competent doctor and psychiatrist, scientist and philosopher. He was one of the founders of the psychotherapy in the Netherlands and his various theories played a significant role in the lives of the members of the Movement of Eighty.

Zola's Temperament and the Movement of Eighty

As mentioned before, the 'Movement of Eighty' reacted to the rather peaceful, rural spirit of The Hague School and society in general with a 'passionate hostility'.²⁴ The term 'Movement of Eighty' summarizes the activities between circa 1875 and 1894 of a substantial group of Dutch literati who formulated, honoured and practiced certain conceptions about art and literature.²⁵ The movement had strong ties with the international developments and their conceptions were for the most part found in literature from abroad, in particular from France, England and Germany. Their aim, contrary to The Hague School, was to be individual, cosmopolitan, anti-provincial and anti-commercial. The movement was also known as *reactie der Amsterdammers*, meaning a response from Amsterdam and suggesting a competition of cities.²⁶

The French writer Émile Zola (1840-1902) was a great source of inspiration for the literati and artists of the Movement of Eighty in the formation of art theory and criticism. Especially his ideas on the importance of the personality and sensations of the artist in the creation of art appealed to them. In the periodical *De Nieuwe Gids*, Lodewijk van Deysse and Frederik van Eeden described Zola's novel *I'Oeuvre* as 'the epitome of a modern art formula'.^{iv} Lodewijk van Deysse (1864-1952) stated that he honours just one man in his literary career and that is Zola.²⁷ Jacobus van Looy wrote a poem, titled: *After reading Zola* (1884, published in *Gedichten* 1932). Witsen possessed books by Zola and cited the writer in his own art criticisms.²⁸ In addition to his novels, Zola's frequently published art criticisms. His conceptions have been a major influence on the ideas about art in Europe in the late nineteenth century.

²³ See: K. van Berkel, *Vóór Heimans en Thijssse. Frederik van Eeden sr. en de natuurbeleving in negentiende-eeuws Nederland*, Amsterdam 2006.

²⁴ J.A.N. Knuttel, 'Maatschappelijke grondslagen van de Nieuwe-Gidsbeweging', in: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, Jaargang 56, Leiden 1937, pp. 7-27.

In this article, dr. J.A.N. Knuttel (1878-1965), argues that the French-German War from 1870-71 strongly influence the mentality in the Netherlands. Netherlands again played a role of some significance on an international level; there was more daring and enterprise.

²⁵ G.P.M. Knuvelder, 'Beweging van Tachtig: voorbereiding, kenmerken', in: *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde (4)*, Den Bosch 1976, p. 86.

²⁶ A.M. Hammacher, *Amsterdamsche impressionisten en hun kring*, Amsterdam 1941, p. 5.

²⁷ Ton Anbeek, 'De ontvangst van Zola's 'L'Oeuvre' in Nederland', in: *Maatstaf*, Jaargang 33, Amsterdam 1985, p. 63.

²⁸ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 172.

In Zola's *Mon Salon*, a collection from his art reviews dating from 1866, the word 'temperament' played a significant role in his judgement of art.²⁹ In fact, Zola used the word temperament almost forty times in his reviews to determine the 'quality that made artist an artist' or something that 'gave art originality'.³⁰ Zola considered a work of art as a document of temperament and individuality. He believed that rendering an objective reality was impossible in art: 'We see Creation (i.e. nature) in a work of art through a man, through a temperament, through a personality.'³¹ For Zola as for the well-known French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) before him, the quality of temperament both distinguishes a work from the mechanical impersonality of a photograph and academism. They both speak of subjectivity as a natural gift and instinctively felt. Zola himself was influenced by the French writer Stendhal (pseudonym of Marie-Henri Beyle, 1783-1842).³² In his *Histoire de la peinture en Italie* (1817), Stendhal already explained the concept of temperament with the belief (deriving from ancient theories of character) that the painter's individual style is determined by the preponderance of one of the 'humours'.³³ Witsen also had literature by Stendhal on his bookshelves.³⁴ In chapter two, one the humours will be attributed to Witsen's character.

From Zola's discourses on temperament, often linked to the word 'strength', it is clear that the temperamental artistic self was also explicitly masculine.³⁵ In *Mon Salon*, Zola distinguished Claude Monet, who in his opinion had temperament, from the 'crowd of eunuchs' (castrated men). In an article from April 1866, he argued that more secondary artists were 'impotent'. The literati and artists of the Movement of Eighty seemingly agree with Zola's link between the conceptions of temperament and masculinity. Witsen's work was often described as 'manly'. The Dutch artist, poet and critic Jan Veth (1864-1925) wrote about Witsen's contribution to the spring exhibition of 1891 in *Arti* that 'all that he shows is the work of a bloke'.^v Berckenhoff wrote that Witsen has send in some 'remarkable' etchings that had 'strong colours and generally had a masculine conception. Some etchings turned out somewhat heavily massive, but in most of them clearly express what the artist had to say'.^{vi} In his first publication in *De Nieuwe Gids*, Witsen cited from Zola's *Mon Salon*: 'Jamais je n'ai vu un tel amas de médiocrités. Il y a là deux mille tableaux, et il n'y a pas dix hommes.'^{vii} Witsen thickens this thought by stating that the 'the leading art today in France is bloodless and nervous like a hysterical young girl, classy and elegant like a perfumed cocotte [...]'.^{viii} In a letter to Veth, Witsen wrote: 'That Zilcken writes just like he etches. His judgment is a flabby reproduction, weak whining, such as his etchings after our great [artists, red.]. He lacks the touch of a male artist.'^{ix} For all members of the Movement of Eighty, a certain degree of macho behaviour is detectable. Their masculine temperament was seen as a source for their creativity.

²⁹ Zola's use of the word temperament is often discussed in relation to the works of Paul Cezanne, with whom he had a close connection: 'His words reveal his fierce, passionate temperament (which he [Cezanne, red.] himself later explained as the source of his art).' - Badt 1965 (see note 1), p. 104.

³⁰ Smith and others 2003 (see note 2, *introduction*), p. 47.

³¹ Badt 1965 (see note 1), p. 235.

³² See for instance: Émile Zola (Preface by Henri Mitterand), *Du roman: sur Stendhal, Flaubert et les Goncourt*, Paris 1989.

³³ Smith and others 2003 (see note 2, *introduction*), p. 50.

³⁴ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 172.

³⁵ Smith and others 2003 (see note 2, *introduction*), p. 47.

Following Zola, the Movement of Eighty clearly acknowledged the significance of two components on which the arts supported in this period: the objective reality and the subjective response to it.³⁶ The artist aimed to depict a 'personal truth', in which sensory and/or spiritual experiences could be expressed. It was not so much about observing reality but experiencing it. Literary Albert Verwey (1865-1937) wrote about his sensations:

'For me, when I walk the streets, when I am in my room, every colour I see, every sound I hear, is enough to make me conscious of the hundreds and thousands filmy vibrations of my brains, the hundreds and thousands closely detectable tremors of my senses and of my whole body: I do not experience life as anything other than an endless feast of sensations.'^x

This highly personal experiencing can be traced back to the newly developed relationship between the individual and reality that emerged during the Romantic era: 'We know what we see, we know what we feel, but we do not know what is [the truth].'^{xi} Evidently, these sensations are differently received:

'A thought or feeling provokes a sensation in the poet, and only this sensation or a combination of multiple sensations, brings him into a certain mood. These moods arose in him like fog: they are free from material subject and shape the immaterial revelations of his temperament. It is the subjectivity in art carried to its climax: it is the canticles of individualism in poetry.'^{xii}

Zola's ideas manifested in naturalism, which is considered a literary style as well as a style in the visual arts. In the eighties of the nineteenth century, naturalism developed, as an international movement in Europe, guided by the French.³⁷ Their aim was to create work that could be appreciated by people who lacked artistic knowledge. This called for an understandable photorealistic style and everyday themes, which was never done before in art. In this way, some kind of democratization of art arose. This idea, however, seems to clash with the ideas of the Movement of Eighty. Witsen and his colleagues did not agree with this socialistic goal. The strong emphasize on the *l'art pour l'art* principle is a remarkable unique aspect of the cultural stance in the Netherlands. Unlike in England or France, art was not supposed to be ethical or socially engaged. In 1887, Witsen and Veth argued in *De Nieuwe Gids*: 'Moralize and philosophize as much as you desire, write books full social issues, discourses on all possible social maladies, but do not abuse art to make propaganda.'^{xiii} In his correspondence, Witsen neither showed interest in social or political issues. This subject of social engagement will later create a conflict between the contributors and resulted in the downfall of *De Nieuwe Gids*.

³⁶ G.P.M. Knuvelde, 'Algemene inleiding', in: *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde (4)*, Den Bosch 1976, p. 5.

³⁷ Gabriel P. Weisberg, e.a., *Illusie en Werkelijkheid. Naturalistische schilderijen, foto's, theater en film, 1875-1918*, tent. cat. Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 2010, pp. 13-16.

Willem Kloos and the associational life

A key figure within the Movement of Eighty is the Dutch poet Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos (1859-1938, see fig. 3). His introduction to the post mortem publication *Gedichten* (1882) by his intimate friend Jacques Perk (1859-1881) has been considered as the foundation of the poetical program of the Movement of Eighty.³⁸ Inspired by various English romantic poets, Kloos argues that poetry should 'arise from a rich and deep temper, of which its fluctuations should be noticeable in every word'.³⁹ Kloos also argues that only a few are capable of translating great feelings into words and are competent of understanding them and that poetry is thus a 'gift of the few to the few'.⁴⁰ Thus, when Kloos, as a poet, gave his opinion about etchings Witsen gave to him as a present, he covered for himself by writing: 'You know that I have never been so foolish as to pretend I am a critic of painting or print making.'^{xiv41} When Timmerman attempted to analyse Witsen's etchings, he wrote that 'one should be just as good an artist as him, in order not to fall short in the love for the subject and the choice of words.'^{xv}

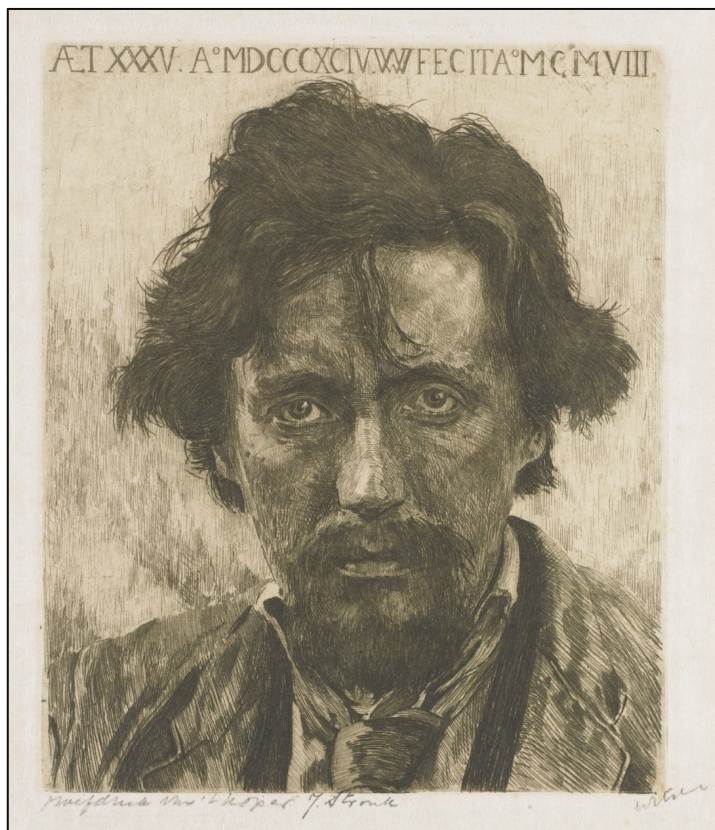


Fig. 3. Willem Witsen, *Portrait of Willem Kloos*, ca. 1908-1909, etching, 18 x 15 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

³⁸ Bert Bakker, Jacques Perk, *Gedichten*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 24-30.

³⁹ Including Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats, Leigh Hunt, Tennyson, Swinburne and Rossetti. Musschoot 1994 (see note 1, *introduction*), pp. 13-38.

⁴⁰ Musschoot 1994 (see note 1, *introduction*), pp. 13-38.

⁴¹ Verwey also included the disclaimer 'I am not an art critic' when he wrote his occasional pieces in *De Nieuwe Gids*. Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9), p. 128.

The artists of the end of the nineteenth century interpreted the incomprehension of their work by the masses as proof of their artistic greatness.⁴² Lack of engagement with the public was considered a confirmation of their artistry. In this persuasion the artist was not only a person with more sensitivity than a normal civilian, but also far ahead in his thinking, behaviour and lifestyle. With terms like ‘creative instinct’ and ‘imagination’ they created amazement for the ‘inspired genius’. The following statement by Witsen in *De Nieuwe Gids* about the artistry of Van Looy illustrates this attitude:

‘But the audience did not get an impression of the artistry of the work of v. Looy. And little wonder! The way v.L. says what he had to say is too personal, too powerful, too ... crude, I would almost dare to say, to impress an audience that, due to the lack of sentiment for true art, satisfied themselves with the work of art makers who preform wondrous tricks.’^{xvi}

This misunderstanding by the public caused the need among artists to find like-minded souls and unite. Relationships and connections between artists became very important and this resulted in a very active associational life. In the winter of 1880, Witsen founded the artist association Sint Lucas together with fellow students Antoon Derkinderen and Jacobus van Looy.⁴³ The founders aimed for artistic development of every member and of the enhancement of friendships. They organized weekly gatherings with lectures and discussions about art, music, literature and history. Witsen, a talented cello player, was also a member of various music associations. Witsen met Kloos when he joined the literary association *Flanor* (1881-ca.1886) in 1883, through his friend Van Looy. The aim of this association was similar of Sint Lucas, but more ambitious. Becoming a member indicated aspirations beyond art.⁴⁴ Within this society, Witsen has made many (lifelong) friends. The name ‘Flanor’ illustrates the self-consciousness of the literati of this group and the ideal appearance they wanted to emit: ‘He [the flanor, red.] was a clever man in soul and in body, but nobody understood how his knowledge came to him, as he was very rarely in his room and very often on a roll.’^{xvii} His admirable character had to seem effortless. This description recalls the bohemian lifestyle, which Zola encouraged in his novels. Just like Baudelaire, the members are also aiming to be a dandy; a confident, completely independent figure that is opposed to everything that tends toward mediocrity and uniformity.⁴⁵ In the Netherlands, Louis Couperus is seen as the figurehead of a dandy. The Louis Couperus Genootschap: stated that ‘the dandy sublimates his life with precision, elegance, irony and sophistication into a work of art’.⁴⁶ The artists did not only aspire to create art, but considered their life as a piece of art. Thus, they were very optimistic about themselves, yet had a very critical and pessimistic approach towards society. The photograph taken by the artist Joseph Jessurun de Mesquita (1865-1890) of Witsen (left) and his companions provides a clear image of their vanity (see fig. 4).

⁴² Musschoot 1994 (see note 1, *introduction*), pp. 13-38.

⁴³ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 19.

⁴⁴ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 24.

⁴⁵ Charles Vergeer, *Willem Witsen en zijn vriendenkring. De Amsterdamse bohème van de jaren negentig*, Amsterdam 1985, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Website of the Louis Couperus Genootschap: ‘De dandy sublimeert zijn leven met precisie, elegantie, ironie en raffinement tot een kunstwerk’ (retrieved March 2017).



Fig. 4. Joseph Jessurun de Mesquita, *The artists and poets Willem Witsen, Willem Kloos, Hein Boeken and Maurits van der Valk*, 1888, daylight gelatin silver print on photo paper on cardboard, 16,3 x 22,2 cm, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

Periodical *De Nieuwe Gids* and art criticism

Due to bad experiences and strong disagreements with existing periodicals, such as *De Nederlandsche Spectator* and *De Gids*, the ideas of an independent periodical developed amongst the members of Flanor. This resulted in *De Nieuwe Gids*, that appeared every two months from October 1885 and consists of about 160 pages.⁴⁷ *De Gids* already existed for fifty years and was a renowned magazine, which now only because of the name of the new periodical, was labelled as 'old' *Gids*.⁴⁸ This was evidently meant as an act against the established order. However, critics of the periodical argued that there was nothing in it that could not just as well have been published in one of the existing journals.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it is important to realise that *De Nieuwe Gids* had merely 274 subscriptions, while other periodicals could reach to ten thousands of subscriptions.⁵⁰ The audience of the group was thus very limited.

⁴⁷ Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9), pp. 116-136.

⁴⁸ Endt 1990 (see note 8), p. 9.

⁴⁹ Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9), pp. 116-136.

⁵⁰ Tibbe 2014 (see note 4), p. 10.

Besides sharing poems and other literary works, *De Nieuwe Gids* functioned as a many-sided platform for criticism, literary and artistic as well as political, social and several branches of science.⁵¹ The writers of the articles were often important figures in the discussed fields. Thus, *De Nieuwe Gids* provides many insights of the society of that period. It is evident that Dutch literary criticism was better represented and considered more important than art criticism. In the eyes of the contributors there were no good examples of art criticism in the Netherlands. Faithful to the belief that only artists were capable (enough) to judge works of art, various artists have written reviews and criticisms for *De Nieuwe Gids*, including Witsen. In his first publication in *De Nieuwe Gids*, Witsen wrote according to the ideas of Kloos: 'to be a good critic, one has to be an artist himself.'^{xviii} Kloos had clearly defined the role of the critic, which can be divided in two levels.⁵² With the higher level of subjective criticism, the beholder penetrates the work of art with the 'whole of his soul' to experience the creative process. His goal is to evoke a similar mood or sensation in his writings; impressions of an impression.⁵³ Due to this subjective stance, this art criticism is considered 'modernistic'.⁵⁴ Rein van der Wiel described it as 'la critique pour la critique', written for artists by artists.⁵⁵ With the lower level of 'serving' criticism, the beholder had to discover how the emotions of the artist have shaped his work. Jan Veth (1864-1925) was an advocate of the higher level of criticism. An example is the review he wrote about Witsen's contribution to the fourth annual exhibition of *De Nederlandsche Etsclub* (see fig. 5). The vivid and almost poetic description also shows the literary aspirations Veth, and in fact many artists, had:

'His print of the empty rained Trafalgar square, in which the regular silhouettes of the black shimmering buildings and monuments are like stately, iron decorative screens sliding before each other, is a captivating etching in its gloomy grandeur; but more intense I find the strength of Witsen's exceptional personality in his etching of Waterloo Bridge, where the heavy pillars of the bridge are like giant elephant feet, as solid lumps of coal darkness threatening to run into us with gnarled roughness, drawn with a sudden hell power by an energetic ferocious fist.'^{xix56}

The use of the word 'fist' again has a masculine undertone referring to Zola's ideas and was occasionally used to empower the artistry of the artist discussed. Albert Verwey also made this reference in *De Nieuwe Gids* when he criticized Witsen's etching *Dune Path*, which appeared in the *Portefeuille der Nederlandsche Etsclub* of 1887 (see fig. 6):

'[...] the heavy brown darkness of that hillside arises in front of an eventide horizon of hazy dunes and a pale sky, where the lights falls through the branches and where a hellish shadow hits the ground and is reflected in the trench water. This work is the powerful performance of exertion driven by a heavy fist, with nothing of the amiable kindness of Mauve, nothing of Tholen's vast heedlessness - This man is an artist with massive imaginations, heavy as lead to express.'^{xx}

⁵¹ Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9), pp. 116-136.

⁵² Musschoot 1994 (see note 1, *introduction*), pp. 13-38.

⁵³ Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9), pp. 116-136.

⁵⁴ Tibbe 2014 (see note 4), p. 9.

⁵⁵ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16), p. 33.

⁵⁶ This work resembles Bastien-Lepage's *Un Pont à Londres* from ca. 1884.



Fig. 5. Willem Witsen, *Waterloo Bridge in the fog, London*, ca. 1890, etching and aquatint, 22,5 x 30 cm, Prentenkabinet Leiden. Source: Author.



Fig. 6. Willem Witsen, *Dune Path*, 1887, etching, 13,9 x 19,9 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

The periodical did not aim to construct a thoroughly worked-out theory of criticism. It was all about the 'feelings and sensibilities' and the conviction that works should be judged only by their individual qualities. A few artists even used pseudonyms that carried the surname 'Stemming', which translates as 'Mood'.⁵⁷ They were - sometimes mockingly - considered as a family with the same point of view. Using this term as a pseudonym again hints to the priority of the most inner feelings of the artists. The use of the word *stemming* however is somewhat problematic, because it was already applied to describe the atmosphere of the landscapes from The Hague School.⁵⁸ The excessive use of pseudonyms in *De Nieuwe Gids* is interesting, because of its various meanings. Beside the surname Stemming for instance, writers often used the names of great Dutch artists and writers of seventeenth century, which they held in high esteem.

De Nieuwe Gids also provided room for science, especially in the field of scientific psychology, which originated in the end of the nineteenth century. Various doctors wrote articles on the biological functions of perception. The influence of this knowledge is, for instance, noticeable in the citation by Verwey (see p. 19). Readers were also interested in the emersion of thoughts of feelings. In *De Nieuwe Gids* of 1889, Van Eeden published new ideas about personality:

'In my last essay about hypnosis and suggestion I spoke of 'the unconsciousness', following the example of most French auteurs. This term is not correct, a personality that acts with care, answers logically, remembers everything that happened, both awake and asleep, thus even more than the normal awake personality, cannot be labelled 'unconscious'. One should call it a second personality, a double-I. From this, the probability follows that with every normal person, the personality is not one-fold, but a complex of two main groups, of which the second, the double-I, is probably the largest, yet barely known. The meaning of this double-I in our spiritual life must be extensive. It is, without a doubt, the custodian of all our memories.'^{xxi}

Witsen was very interested in this theory by Van Eeden, as he used this term a couple of times.⁵⁹ This will be elaborated in chapter two. The importance of psychological knowledge in creating and judging art is made clear in the first publication of *De Nieuwe Gids* (1886). Literary and reporter Frans Netscher (1864-1923) wrote: 'A prove of how far Justus van Mourik is removed from the demands of modern art appears from his terrible lack of psychological knowledge. None of his characters possess any form of temperament.'^{xxii} Witsen argued that 'one page of a psychological study based of the work of an artist is worth more than a book, in which one could find the complete history of his life.'^{xxiii}

⁵⁷ Jan Veth as G.H.C. Stemming, van der Valk as J. Stemming and Karsen as O.N.T. Stemming. Jeroen Giltay, 'De Nederlandsche Etsclub (1885-1896)', in: *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art*, Vol. 27 (1976), pp. 91-125.

⁵⁸ Furthermore, Blotkamp discusses the problem of the frequent and indiscriminate use of the word *stemming*, as well as for the word impressionism and expression. Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9), pp. 116-136.

⁵⁹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, introduction), p. 37.

The medium of etching in the Netherlands

The history of *De Nieuwe Gids* appears to coincide with De Nederlandsche Etsclub (1885-1896).⁶⁰ Both organisations were founded in the same year and disbanded one year after each other. Veth and Witsen, although using various pseudonyms, wrote multiple art criticisms for *De Nieuwe Gids* in response to the exhibitions of the Etsclub. Together with Antoon Derkinderen (1859-1925), they were the founders of De Nederlandsche Etsclub. Remarkably, the board members are the same as that of the artist association Sint Lucas.⁶¹

The idea for establishing the Etsclub arose at the Rijksacademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. The older generation at the academy considered the practise of etching as a mere pastime.⁶² One would think that, after Rembrandt and Segers, the medium of etching would be extensively practised and praised in the Netherlands.⁶³ Nevertheless, up until the end of the nineteenth century, intaglio printmaking had a secondary reputation and primarily functioned as a reproductive mean for paintings.⁶⁴ Also, from the second half of the nineteenth century the practical use was threatened by the arising medium of photography, which was much more efficient in reproduction.⁶⁵ However, the newcomers at the academy saw the value of printmaking as an independent and free form of art.⁶⁶ Their aim was to become *peintre-graveurs*, like the seventeenth-century Dutch Masters and to show that the breed of the Old Dutch *peintre-graveur* is not extinct. In his overview of five hundred years of graphic arts in the Netherlands, Ad van der Blom posed the question: Why return to etchings?⁶⁷ With lithography and steel engravings one could reach a much wider audience. Yet, as discussed before, that was exactly what the young graphic artists wanted to avoid. This medium satisfied their need for a certain degree of isolation. Veth wrote about the 'individual that characterizes etching'.^{xxiv}

Professor (and later director of the academy) August Allebé (1838-1927) was an important influence at the academy and one of the few teachers – perhaps the only one – the young artists admired as an artist.⁶⁸ Allebé encouraged his students for a critical approach towards art and pleaded for more attention to lines and shapes instead of the 'sentimental colour harmonies' of The Hague School.⁶⁹ He was relatively innovatory and his blessing and support for the Etsclub was important to the founders.⁷⁰ In January 1884, Witsen wrote to Veth that professor Peter Rudolf Stang (1831-1927) from Dusseldorf was appointed as the successor of professor J.W. Kaiser (1813-1900) for the graphic department.⁷¹

⁶⁰ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.

⁶¹ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.

⁶² Hammacher, A.M., *Witsen en zijn vriendenkring*, Amsterdam 1948, p. 18.

⁶³ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16), p. 28.

⁶⁴ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.

⁶⁵ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.

⁶⁶ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, introduction), p. 23.

⁶⁷ Ad van der Blom, *Tekenen dat het gedrukt staat. 500 jaar grafiek in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1978, p. 110.

⁶⁸ Wiepke Loos and Carel van Tuyl van Serooskerken, *'Waarde Heer Allebé'. Leven en werk van August Allebé (1838-1927)*, Zwolle 1988, p. 58.

⁶⁹ Irene M. de Groot, *Willem Witsen (1860-1923) als tekenaar en etsers*, tent. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1977, pp. 1-4.

⁷⁰ Loos and Van Tuyl van Serooskerken 1988 (see note 68), p. 60.

⁷¹ Kaiser taught engraving, which was meant for production purposes. De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *intro*), p. 23.

Witsen concluded: ‘Allebé did not know whether he (Stang) would like to engage himself with etching! So that there is chance that we must teach ourselves and perhaps that is for the best!’^{xxv} In the periodical *De Nederlandsche Spectator*, Stang expressed his opinion on the work of the young artists: ‘Yet in order to disguise their inferior ability, the new etchers avoid lines in general, and so the new etching is more a picture of scraping or black art, then an etching.’^{xxvi} This illustrates that their ideas were far apart. Witsen stated about this new technical approach of ‘scraping art’⁷²: ‘For tonal etchings this appeared more natural to me, yet I believe that line etchings, pure, without any means, are the only rational ones, but I have never made such.’^{xxvii}⁷³

Due to the lack of education at the academy, Witsen and his fellow students thought themselves with handbooks from abroad, such as *The Etcher's Handbook* (1871) by P.G. Hamerton and *Traité de la Gravure à l'eau-forte* (1866) by Maxime Lananne and by explicitly criticizing each other's works.⁷⁴ In 1885, Witsen's strongest exchange was with fellow student Willem Bastiaan Tholen (1860-1931). For example, Tholen commented on Witsen's *Cottage at the water, Giethoorn* (ca. 1885, see fig. 7):

‘It is regrettable that the boat on the foreground is not better, it seems worthwhile to me to scrape it away or sand it and put grass or shrubs there instead. If you make such a comprehensive plate again, would you use copper in the future? I intend to, for zinc has something rude I think.’^{xxviii}

Witsen's insecurity about this plate is visible in the left under corner, where a somewhat indefinable scene occurs. It is interesting to see that Tholen remained faithful to the pure line etchings, while Witsen – as stated in the aforementioned quote – felt the need to further explore the other technical possibilities of the medium, as will be discussed in chapter three.⁷⁵

At the Colonial Exhibition held in Amsterdam in 1883, the students at the academy were inspired by the original etchings of the Société des Aquafortistes, a group of artists from Antwerp.⁷⁶ After the examples of Paris and Antwerp, Veth, Witsen and Derkinderen founded De Nederlandsche Etsclub in 1885.⁷⁷ Their goal was to revive the medium as independent art form by means of exhibitions and annual publications of a portfolio with prints. Exhibitions were alternately held in The Hague and Amsterdam. The Etsclub can be considered successful. What was produced between 1885 and 1896 was even noticed abroad due to the unusual high quality.⁷⁸ However, the unity of the portfolios between and 1888 and 1891 began to crumble.

⁷² The term ‘black art’ (in Dutch: ‘zwarte kunst’) refers to the mezzotint technique.

⁷³ This expression is somewhat difficult to interpret. Presumably, Witsen hints here to the emotional subjectivity of his work rather than a rational approach, referring to the ideas of the Movement of Eighty.

⁷⁴ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, introduction), p. 182.

For a digital publication of *The Etcher's Handbook* (1871) by P.G. Hamerton see:

<<https://archive.org/stream/etchershandbook00hamegoog>> (retrieved March 2017).

For a digital publication of *Traité de la Gravure à l'eau-forte* (1866) by Maxime Lananne see:

<<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6548336n/f15.item.zoom>> (retrieved March 2017).

⁷⁵ A.M.Hammacher, *Witsen en zijn vriendenkring*, Amsterdam 1948, p. 18.

⁷⁶ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.

⁷⁷ De Nederlandsche Etsclub also had a Dutch predecessor in De Haagsche Etsclub.

⁷⁸ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.



Fig. 7. Willem Witsen, *Cottage at the water, Giethoorn*, ca. 1885, etching, 17,6 x 24 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

In January 1896, Veth announced the abolishment of the Etsclub in the periodical *De Kroniek* (see fig. 8). The original aim of the club, promoting etchings as an independent form of art by organizing exhibitions, was accomplished and the members went their own way. Of the founders of the Etsclub, only Witsen became an important print maker, who dedicated the rest of his life to this medium and produced circa 225 works. Derkinderen only occupied himself with etching between 1882 and 1887 and Veth was primly active between 1885 during 1888. He definitely stopped etching in 1893. From 1886 Veth himself was more interested in lithography and wrote to Allebé about his desire to make lithographs.⁷⁹ Witsen did not seem to have interest in this relatively new medium. Perhaps it did not provide him with enough technical challenges. Witsen's close friend G.H. Breitner (1857-1923) only made about twenty etchings, most of them with the help (and probably the strong encouragement) of Witsen. He seemingly did not have the patience for the medium.⁸⁰ Witsen states that the difficulty of technique is mostly the reason why 'usually an etching, precisely because of the quasi-intractability of the copper, is abandoned way too soon.'^{xxix} Only the Dutch etchers Marius Bauer (1867-1932), Philippe Zilcken (1857-1930) and Willem de Zwart (1862-1931) received a somewhat comparable recognition from their prints.⁸¹

⁷⁹ In 1917 Veth wrote an article about the lithographic oeuvre of Allebé.

Loos and Van Tyull van Serooskerken 1988 (see note 68), p. 142.

⁸⁰ R. W. A. Bionda, 'Breitner als etser', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, Jaargang 35, Nr. 4 (1987), pp. 283-307.

⁸¹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 182.



Fig. 8. Rusticus [pseudonym Marius Bauer], *The funeral of the Nederlandsche Etsclub*, published as an appendix of the periodical *De Kroniek* of 19 January 1896, lithography, 28,3 x 47,2 cm. Source: geheugenvannederland.nl.

A dead end

In his autobiographical novel *Lunatics (Gekken)* Van Looy wrote about the eighties: ‘It was a time of fermentation, in his intimate environment a young realm of thought began to stir, in a time of many ideas and discussions.’^{xxx} In 1888, Witsen wrote: ‘Looy wrote a piece on the Moods [see p. 25], about which they all angry and that no one has read yet.’^{xxxi} It was only a matter of time that the difficult, high-demanding and strongly outspoken characters of the Movement of Eighty got in an argument. The correspondence displays the extensive amount of gossip within the group, as Veth states: ‘There is nothing more poisonous than to find out about an unfavourable judgment from a third party.’^{xxxii} Witsen himself also was not afraid to express his unvarnished opinion, as he wrote about Van Eeden in 1892:

‘Yet he has much to hide. It is entertaining at times, to see how he deceives every one – most people are his victim – but [at the same time is] so ignorant in his smartness to not understand that not everyone will fall for his wicked tricks. – O what a dreadful fellow – what a bounder, what an ugly bourgeois vicious bloke!’^{xxxiii}

In the autumn of 1888, relationships within *De Nieuwe Gids* group began to crumble. The direct reason for escalation was the engagement between Albert Verwey engaged and Kitty van Vloten (1867-1945).⁸² His bosom friend Kloos, overcome with jealousy, could not forgive him. Kloos forced the members to pick a side.

⁸² Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16), p. 24.

The three sisters Van Vloten apparently had put a spell on the group of artists.⁸³ Eventually, Witsen married with Betsy van Vloten (1862-1946) in 1893 and their older sister Martha (1856-1943) was married with Van Eeden between 1886 and 1907. The wives, known as the ‘club sisters’, played a vital role in their artistic career as they regularly functioned as muses and/or critics. Witsen wrote to Betsy in 1890: ‘Please don’t say any more about my etchings – especially not about that bridge [presumably fig. 5, red.] – your judgement has occupied me more – and that’s no good – than all the criticism on my work of my whole life.’^{xxxiv} Betsy’s sister Kitty, wrote to her husband Verwey:

‘Do you want to know why I need a poem from you? I can’t tell you, I can’t tell myself, it is a mood in which I feel the need to forget my whole existence. It is that cold, grey, foggy, lifeless winter, it is the infinity, in which there is neither space nor time, and everything is one grey, lifeless, endless surface. Ach Albertje, I wish I was less melancholic; please make a poem for me, so that I have to cry.’^{xxxv}

This part again strongly displays the keywords of the cultural climate, namely ‘mood’, ‘melancholy’ and ‘soul’.⁸⁴ However, the artists of modern consciousness and individualism encountered social problems with the women in their life. As Arthur van Schendel has poetically phrased their attitude about a romantic relationship: ‘Not a soul fulfils like solitude’.⁸⁵ Lonely suffering was almost considered to be an artistic necessity. Furthermore, there was the assumption that women were jealous when they did not receive undivided attention. Veth wrote to his girlfriend: ‘Would it be true, I thought, that the women that we love cannot bear or love of art? And I was also thinking about what Coba Muller once said to Van Looy: “You will never find a woman who can stand that you are thinking about art more frequently than her.”’^{xxxvi} Besides having trouble with being in a romantic relationship, many members experienced problems with their sexuality and/or continence.⁸⁶ In their opinion, this ‘bestly’ sensuousness stood in the way of their pursuit of self-accomplishment. Vergeer analysed the ‘tense or overwrought expectations of a new kind of life and love’ in this period and concluded that self-consciousness leads to isolation and loneliness.⁸⁷ Already in 1888, Verwey wrote to Witsen about their friend Johann Eduard Karsen (1860-1941): ‘That boy is also addressed by the cosmopolitan spiritual life of Amsterdam; Fortunately for him, the worst of times have past.’^{xxxvii} A year later, in his role as psychiatrist, Frederik van Eeden wrote about Karsen: ‘The whole winter he has been in a miserable state of doubt and overstrain, that mentally and psychically gnawed him.’^{xxxviii} The same ought to be true about Witsen, as will appear in the following chapter.

⁸³ See: Cornelia van Uuden and Pieter Stokvis, *De gezusters Van Vloten en hun echtgenoten Frederik van Eeden, Willem Witsen en Albert Verwey. Drie kunstenaarshuwelijken rond 1900*, Amsterdam 2007.

⁸⁴ A possible response by Verwey could have been:

‘O, gij, mijn lief, die nu door ‘t lieven lijdt,
Klaag niet in stilte alleen, - maak poëzie
Van leed, - ach, laat gewezen en melodie
Tusschen ons zijn een zoete somberheid.’

* Not translated due to the specific rhyming words in Dutch.
Albert Verwey, *Oorspronkelijk dichtwerk I*, Amsterdam 1938, pp. 37-38.

⁸⁵ Vergeer 1985 (see note 45), p. 116.

⁸⁶ See: Charles Vergeer, *Toen werden schoot en boezem lekkernij. Erotiek van de Tachtigers*, Amsterdam 1990.

⁸⁷ Vergeer 1985 (see note 45), p. 115.

Frans Erens recalled that many, including Isaac Israëls, Witsen and himself, did not understand anything of this enduring quarrel.⁸⁸ In the last year and a half (1893-1894), not a single article on art was published in *De Nieuwe Gids*. In the course of 1893 most of the other contributors broke ties with the journal due to a more social stance. Van Eeden resigned from the editorial board in 1894 because he felt that 'ethical beauty should be maintained'.⁸⁹ In the same year, *De Nieuwe Gids* was definitely discontinued.

The disintegration of *De Nieuwe Gids* in 1894 is an outward sign of an end of the first phase of regeneration.⁹⁰ However, the legacy of the Movement of Eighty is bigger than one might suspect. One could argue that they invented or at least contributed to the cult status around an art object and the artist in the Netherlands. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) was one of the founders of modern cultural history. In his autobiographical sketches, Huizinga wrote that during his student years, he was a great admirer of the Movement of Eighty, especially of the poet Van Deysse. In his biography on Veth, Huizinga stated that he had inherited from the Poets of Eighty 'the mandate to paint with words'.⁹¹ Following the example of Huizinga as a supporter of the Movement of Eighty, Witsen's biographer Hammacher preserved their conceptions about art as life essence in his art theory.⁹²

This first chapter has sketched the complex cultural climate in which Witsen developed as an artist. The alternative social situation of the nineteenth century compelled the artists to redefine their position within society. The Movement of Eighty was very occupied with image building and tried to revive the traditional image of the alienated artist, so that they could grant themselves importance. Yet, the artists suffered – sometimes literally – from feelings of indefinability due to this alienation and lack of uniform ideas within the circle. They were torn between the past and the future and lost in a world where they are forced to constantly focus on their own thought and emotions. This emphasis on criticism was not helpful in this case. As has been stated in *De Nieuwe Gids*: 'We almost lost the habit of thinking, with all that feeling that we did.'^{xxxix} The following chapter will focus on Witsen's personality and explores the influence of his environment.

Original Dutch citations and sources

ⁱ 'Zoo als voor elk, die tegenwoordig een hoog gevoel heeft, de bourgeoisie een leelijke etterpuist is in het mooye lichaam der menschheid.' - L. van Deysse, 'Zolaas laatste werk: 'La Terre'', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 3, Amsterdam 1888, p. 437.

ⁱⁱ 'De man weet zelf te goed hoe de natuur is en hoe een schilderij wezen moet.' - Willem Bastiaan Tholen to Willem Witsen, 16 February 1885, Kampen, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

ⁱⁱⁱ 'ben later in de gelegenheid geweest om veel te werken met Mauve vooral ook om hem te zien werken en

⁸⁸ Frans Erens (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *Vervlogen jaren*, Amsterdam 1989² (Den Haag 1938), p. 208.

⁸⁹ Giltay 1976 (see note 57), pp. 91-125.

⁹⁰ G.P.M. Knuvelde, 'De Negentigers: voorbereiding, kenmerken', in: *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandse letterkunde (4)*, Den Bosch 1976, p. 262.

⁹¹ Johan Huizinga, *Leven en werk van Jan Veth*, Haarlem 1927, p. 130.

⁹² De Ruiter 2000 (see note 11, *introduction*), p. 37.

met hem te praten. Ik heb veel aan hem gehad maar zijn invloed is, 'k denk door het groote verschil van temperament vooral, van korten duur geweest.' - Willem Witsen to Philippe Charles Louis Zilcken, 10 January 1896, Ede, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{iv} 'de belichaming eener moderne kunstformule' - Lodewijk van Deyssel en Frederik van Eeden, 'Chronique Scandaleuse', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, Amsterdam 1885-1886, p. 497.

^v 'Al wat hij zien laat is het werk van een kerel.' - Jan Veth, 'Hollandsche teekenaars', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 6, Amsterdam 1891, pp. 270-275.

^{vi} '[...] sterk van kleur en over het algemeen mannelijk van opvatting. Sommige etsen zijn wat hard-massief geworden, maar met klaarheid is in de meeste uitgedrukt, wat de artist te zeggen had.' - H.L. Berckenhoff, 'De tentoonstelling der Nederlandsche etsclub', in: *De Gids*, Jaargang 54, Amsterdam 1980, p.162.

^{vii} 'Jamais je n'ai vu un tel amas de mediocretés. Il y a là deux mille tableaux, et il n'y a pas dix hommes.' - W.J. v. W., 'Een Boek over Kunst', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*. Jaargang 1, Amsterdam 1885-1886, p. 462.

^{viii} 'De toonaangevende kunst van heden in Frankrijk is bloedeloos en zenuwachtig als 'n hysteriek jong meisje, chique en elegant als 'n geparfumeerde cocotte [...]' - W.J. v. W., 'Een Boek over Kunst', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*. Jaargang 1, Amsterdam 1885-1886, p. 462.

^{ix} 'Die Zilcken schrijft net als-ie etst. Z'n oordeel is 'n slappe reproductie, zwak gezeid, net als z'n etsen naar onze grooten. Hij mist de toets van 'n mannetjes kunstenaar.' - Willem Witsen to Jan Piet Veth, Ewijkshoeve, 23 Augustus 1888, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^x 'Mij, als ik loop over straat, als ik zit in mijn kamer, is iedere kleur die ik zie, ieder geluid dat ik hoor, voldoende om me te doen bewust worden honderden en duizenden ragfijne rillingen mijner hersenen, honderden en duizenden nauw bespeurbare bevingen van mijn zintuigen en mijn heele organisme: het leven voel ik niet anders dan als een eindeloos feest van sensaties.' - Albert Verwey, *Toen De Gids werd opgericht*, Amsterdam 1897, p. 45.

^{xi} 'Wat wij zien weten wij, wat wij voelen weten wij, maar wat is [de werkelijkheid] weten wij niet.' - Albert Verwey, *Toen De Gids werd opgericht*, Amsterdam 1897, p. 44.

^{xii} 'Eene gedachte of een gevoel wekt bij den dichter eene sensatie op, en deze sensatie alleen, of in samenwerking met meerderen, brengt hem in eene stemming. De stemmingen stijgen in hem op als nevels; zij zijn vrij van een materieel onderwerp, en vormen de onstoffelijke openbaringen van zijn temperament. Het is de subjektiviteit in de kunst tot haar toppunt gevoerd; het is het Hooglied van het individualisme in de poëzie.' - Frans Netscher, 'Het daghet uyt den Oosten', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, Amsterdam 1885-1886, p. 339.

^{xiii} 'Moraliseer en filosofeer zooveel ge wilt, schrijf boeken vol sociale kwesties, houd redevoeringen over alle mogelijke maatschappelijke kwalen, maar misbruik de kunst niet om daar propaganda voor te maken.' - W.J. v. W. [Willem Witsen and Jan Veth], 'Een Kunscriticus', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, Amsterdam 1887.

^{xiv} 'je weet, dat ik nooit de dwaasheid heb gehad van mij als keurder van schilder- of etskunst voor te doen' - Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos to Willem Witsen, 15 May 1910, Den Haag, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xv} 'Men zou een even goede kunstenaar moeten zijn als hij, om niet te kort te schieten in de liefde voor het onderwerp en in keuze van woorden.' - Timmerman 1912 (see note), p. 12.

^{xvi} 'Maar 'n impressie van de artisticeit van 't werk van v. Looy heeft Publiek niet gekregen. En geen wonder! De manier waarop v.L. zegt wat hij zeggen wilde is te persoonlijk, te krachtig, te.... cru, zou 'k bijna durven zeggen, om indruk te maken op 'n Publiek dat, uit gebrek aan sentiment voor werkelijke kunst, zich heeft tevreden gesteld met 't werk van kunstmakers die wonderlijke toeren verrichten.' - Willem Witsen [pseudonym W.J. van Westervoerde], 'Een Hollandsch Schilder in Spanje', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, 1887 Amsterdam, p. 183.

^{xvii} ‘Flanor was de uitdrukking van die karakter-nuance welker naam men poogt te schilderen wanneer men, met hartelijkheid op het bijvoegelijke-naamwoord drukkende, iemand een goeden vent noemt. Hij [...] was een knappe jongen naar ziel en naar ligchaam, maar hoe hem de kennis was aangewaaid begreep niemand, want hij was zeer zelden op zijne kamer en zeer dikwijls aan de rol.’ - Annemarie Kets, Mariëlle Lenders and Olf Praamstra, *Klikspaan, Studentenschetsen*, deel 1, Den Haag 2002, p. 158.

^{xviii} ‘om goed criticus te wezen moet men zelf artiest zijn en van 't gehalte als de te beoordeelen kunstenaar’. - W.J.v.W. (pseud. Willem Witsen), ‘Een boek over kunst.’ In: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, Amsterdam 1886, p. 463.

^{xix} ‘Zijn plaat van het leeggeregende Trafalgarsquare, waar de regelmatige silouëtten van zwart glimmende gebouwen en monumenten koud en strak gezet zijn als statige ijzeren decoratieschermen die voor elkander schuiven, is in zijn sombere grootschheid een pakkende ets; maar heviger vind ik de kracht van Witsens bizondere persoonlijkheid in zijne ets van Waterloo-Bridge, waar de reusachtige olifantspooten der zware pijlers van de brug als massieve klonten kolendonkerte dreigend op ons aanvaren in knoestig gegoten ruigte, geteekend als met plotselinge hellekracht door een energiesch woeste vuist.’ - Jan Veth, ‘Seymour Haden, Whistler, Witsen en Bauer op de vierde jaarlijksche tentoonstelling van de Nederlandsche etsclub’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 6, Amsterdam 1891, p. 115.

^{xx} ‘[...] de zware bruine donkerte van dien heelen heuvelhoek staat op voor een avondlijken horizon van wazige duinen en bleekigen hemel, waar het licht van valt door de takken en een helsche slagschaduw slaat op den grond en spiegelt in het geulwater. Dit werk is het machtige doen van een voortgestuwde inspanning, als van een knuist zwaar, met niets van de beminnelijke vriendelijkheid van Mauve, niets van Tholens ruime achteloosheid. - Deze man is een artist met massieve verbeeldingen, loodzwaar om uit te spreken.’ - Albert Verwey, ‘Het Album van de Nederlandsche Etsclub’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, Amsterdam 1887, p. 471.

^{xxi} ‘In mijn vorig opstel over hypnose en suggestie heb ik, de meeste fransche schrijvers navolgend, gesproken van ‘het onbewuste.’ Deze term is onjuist, een persoonlijkheid die met overleg handelt, die logisch antwoordt, die zich alles herinnert wat er is voorgevallen, zoowel wakend als slapend, dus meer nog dan de gewone wakende persoonlijkheid, kan niet onbewust genoemd worden. Men moet het een tweede persoonlijkheid noemen, een dubbel-ik. Hieruit volgt de waarschijnlijkheid, dat bij elken normalen mensch de personaliteit niet enkelvoudig, maar een complex is van twee hoofdgroepen, waarvan de tweede, het bedoelde dubbel-ik, waarschijnlijk de grootste, nog maar zeer onvolledig is bekend. De beteekenis van dit dubbel-ik in ons zieleleven moet zeer uitgebreid zijn. Het is zonder twijfel de bewaarder van al onze herinneringen.’ - Dr. Frederik van Eeden, ‘Ons Dubbel-ik’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 4, Amsterdam 1889, pp. 54-62.

^{xxii} ‘Een bewijs te over hoever Justus van Maurik van de eischen der moderne kunst verwijderd staat, blijkt uit zijn schromelijk gebrek aan psychologische kennis. Niemand zijner personen bezit eenig temperament.’ - Frans Netscher, ‘Het daghet uyt den Oosten’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, 1885-1886 Amsterdam, p. 344.

^{xxiii} ‘Eén bladzijde psychologiesche studie gebaseerd op het werk van den artiest is meer waard dan het boek, waarin men volledig de geschiedenis van zijn leven zou kunnen vinden.’ - Willem Witsen [pseudonym W.J. v. W.], ‘Een Boek over Kunst’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, 1885-1886 Amsterdam, p. 464.

^{xxiv} ‘het individuele wat juist etsen zoo karakteriseert’ –Jan Veth, *Hollandsche teekenaars van dezen tijd*, Amsterdam 1905, p. .

^{xxv} Allebé wist niet of hij (Stang) zich wel met etsen zou willen inlaten! zoodat we kans hebben dat we 't ons zelf leeren moeten en dat is misschien nog maar 't allerbest!’ - Willem Witsen to Jan Piet Veth, 4 January 1884, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvi} ‘Doch om hunne mindere bekwaamheid te verbloemen zoeken de nieuwe etsers de lijnen in het algemeen te vermijden, en zo wordt de nieuwere ets meer een prent van schraap- of zwarte kunst, dan eene ets.’ - J. Stemming [pseudonym of M.W. van der Vlak, ‘Professor Stang en de etskunst’, *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, Amsterdam 1887, p. 47. Refers to: ‘Een brief van Prof. Rud. Stang’, *De Nederlandsche Spectator*, 1887, p. 111.

- xxvii 'Voor toon etsen leek mij dit natuurlijker, doch ik geloof dat lijnsetsen, zuiver, zonder bedoelde hulpmiddelen de eenige rationeele zijn; maar die heb ik nooit gemaakt.' - Willem Witsen to Philippe Charles Louis Zilcken, 10 January 1896, Ede, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxviii 'Jammer dat die halve schuit op de voorgrond niet beter is, 't is dunkt me de moeite waard om hem weg te krabben of te schuren en er ook gras of struiken voor in de plaats te zetten. Als je weer zoo'n uitvoerige maakt neem jij dan ook koper in 't vervolg? Ik ben 't van plan, want 't zink geeft iets grofs vind ik.' - Willem Bastiaan Tholen to Willem Witsen, [October 1885], [Giethoorn], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxix '[...] gewoonlijk wordt 'n ets, juist door de kwasi-onhandelbaarheid van 't koper, veel te gauw losgelaten.' - Willem Witsen to Arthur van Schendel, 13 January 1904, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxx 't Was in een tijd van gisting geweest, dat er om hem heen in zijn naaste omgeving een jong gedachteleven begon te bewegen, in een tijd van veel plannen en gepraat.' - Jac. van Looy, 'Gekken', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 5, Amsterdam 1890, p. 14.
- xxxi 'Looy heeft een stuk over de Stemmingen geschreven, waar ze allemaal boos over zijn en dat nog niemand gelezen heeft.' - Hendricus Johannes Boeken to Willem Witsen, 17 December 1888, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxxii 'Er is niets giftigers dan door een derde een ongunstig oordeel te vernemen.' - Jan Piet Veth aan Willem Witsen, 3 January 1896, Bussum, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxxiii 'Maar hij heeft dan ook veel te verbergen. 't Is vermakelijk, soms, om te zien hoe hij iedereen 'n radje voor de ogen draait - de meesten zijn dan ook z'n slachtoffers - maar zóo dom in al z'n slimheid om niet te begrijpen dat niet iedereen zich in de luren laat leggen. - O wat 'n nare kerel - wat 'n ploert, wat 'n leelijke burgerlijke valsche vent!' - Willem Witsen to Maria Joseph Franciscus Peter Hubertus Erens, 22 Augustus 1892, Oisterwijk, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxxiv 'Zeg nu asjeblijft niets meer van m'n etsen - vooral niet van dien brug [fig. , red.] - dat oordeel van jou heeft me al meer bezig gehouden - en dat deugt niet - dan al de kritiek over m'n werk van m'n heele leven.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [10 September 1890], [Haarlem], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxxv 'Wou je weten waarom ik een vers van je noodig heb? Ik kan het je niet zeggen, ik kan het mijzelf niet zeggen, het is een stemming waarin ik behoefte heb mijn geheele bestaan te vergeten. Het is die koude, grijze, mistige, levenlooze winter, het is de oneindigheid, waarin ruimte noch tijd is, alles één grauw, levenloos, eindeloos vlak. Ach Albertje, ik wenschte dat ik minder zwaarmoedig was; toe maak een vers voor mij, dat ik huilen moet. Ik wil je niet grieven, door je nog eens te zeggen, dat ik zulke brieven als deze, aan je ziel schrijf, je ziel, die verzen maakt en rytmen hoort en dat er daarom geen mensen van weten moeten.' - M. van Vloten to A. Verwey, 10 November 1885, [place unknown], in: Albert Verwey (ed. Margaretha H. Schenkeveld and Rein van der Wiel), *Briefwisseling 1 juli 1885 tot 15 december 1888*, Amsterdam 1995.
- xxxvi 'Zou 't waar zijn, dacht ik dat de vrouwen die we liefhebben onze liefde voor de kunst niet kunnen verdragen? En ik dacht ook wat Coba Muller eens zei tegen Van Looy: "Je zult nooit een vrouw vinden die kan dragen dat je meer aan de kunst denkt dan aan haar."' - Van der Wiel 1988 (see note), p. 99.
- xxxvii 'Die jongen wordt ook nog aangepakt door dat wereldstadsche van 't Amsterdamsche geestes leven; gelukkig voor hem is de ergste tijd voorbij.' - Albert Verwey aan Willem Witsen, 10 November 1888, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxxviii 'Hij is den ganschen winter in een ellendigen toestand van twijfel en overspanning geweest die hem geestelijk en lichamelijk geknauwd heeft.' - Frederik van Eeden aan Willem Witsen, 4 May 1889, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- xxxix 'Wij waren het denken al bijna afgewend, door het vele dat wij hebben gevoeld.' - A. de Graaf, 'Gemeenschapskunst. De wandschildering van Derkinderen', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 7, Amsterdam 1892, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

CHAPTER TWO

Witsen's character and conduct

*'Dear Wim, you have always been a martyr.'*ⁱ

- Gerrit Jan Hofker

*

The following chapter avoids being a biography, as Witsen stated that 'one page of a psychological study based on the work of an artist is worth more than a book, in which one could find the complete history of his life'. Yet, some information is necessary to understand certain thoughts, actions and whereabouts. Willem Arnold(us) Witsen was born in Amsterdam in a wealthy ruling-class household that, as Veth has put it, 'carries the name of an Amsterdam family from the time of Rembrandt'.ⁱⁱ Witsen was the youngest of six children. His father Jonas Jan Witsen (1819-1901) was active in the ironmongery and later in banking, both typical sectors that emerged during the industrialisation.¹ Father Witsen was also an art lover and print maker.² This might have sparked Witsen's initial curiosity for the medium of etching. His father would remain a substantial emotional and financial support for Witsen as long as he lived.³ Witsen was not afraid to ask for money for any cause, agreeing with Tholen that 'if a painter has to work for its existence, it is a miserable life'.ⁱⁱⁱ The young and ambitious Witsen was not completely aware of the luxury of his financial position, which sometimes caused friction with less fortunate artists. An illustrative example is when Witsen indirectly accused his close friend Jacobus van Looy (1855-1930) of 'commercial academism' and expressed his desire to see from his hand 'work in which you could completely give yourself, the expression of everything you have in you, everything you have felt and thought'.^{iv} In response, Van Looy provided him with a firm reality check in a letter of six pages, stating that circumstance was in his favour and permitted Witsen certain ways of thinking:

'But Wim, no one has the right to delude himself into thinking that it is not necessary to fight just to stay alive. [...] Where would you have painted Peter,⁴ if your Daddy did not own a country estate and you were a poor wretch, like me, who up until now lives from gifts of mercy, think about that, dear fellow, and do not resent others so much when they have to work with more improvise.'^v

The fact that Van Looy grew up in an orphanage, presumably made Witsen's allegations extra painful.⁵ This scar will never completely disappear. In the aforementioned novel *Lunatics*, Van Looy refers to Witsen's allegations by referring to 'a letter like a shelf, no more cordiality, laboured, chatter of oldish youth and wise arguing... what... this letter smelled hostile'.^{vi}

¹ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16, *chapter one*), p. 35.

² RKD biography of Jonas Jan Witsen (1819-1901), see: <<https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/356759>> (retrieved March 2017).

³ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 54.

⁴ Van Looy refers to the painting *Hei-ontginer* from 1885. De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 28.

⁵ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16, *chapter one*), p. 42.

With this description Van Looy implies Witsen got infected with the decadence of the Movement of Eighty. A letter from Witsen to Van Looy from April 1890 shows that Witsen was filled with terrible regret about his attitude:

‘I can’t help it but thinking about the past and the time when you were so present in my life, - and I wrote those overbearing letters, - and I saw you in the middle of a difficult time – full and rich and individual, mentally strong – and I saw myself - carefree in content triviality of my small existence and I couldn’t stop blaming myself.’^{vii}

Contrastingly, Witsen also got into trouble for saying too little. Lodewijk van Deysssel wrote to Verwey that Witsen was ‘inscrutable, he doesn’t say a word. Van Looy calls it “beautiful speechlessness”, but I find it inferior because it contains disdain or affectation.’^{viii} Arnold Ising defended Witsen towards Van Deysssel by arguing that he was shy.⁶ Erens stated that Witsen had something inexorable reserved.⁷ Yet he explained: ‘Due to his taciturnity, he did not long for idle chatter and one only spoke with him, when one truly had something to say.’^{ix} From both the incident with Van Looy and these statements above it is evident that Witsen managed to adapt the aforementioned ‘decadent hyper individualism’ of the anti-bourgeois generation led by the self-glorifying Kloos. However, from his letters it appears that Witsen struggled with this role. He often labelled himself as ‘selfish’ and feelings of existential insecurity, dissatisfaction and loneliness dominated his life. A.M. Hammacher stated that he ‘controlled his compassion’, as expected from a nobleman, while Jenny Reynaerts described him as a ‘tormented genius with a gloomy mood’, more suited to our general idea of an artist.⁸ They are both right; Witsen’s personality is difficult to grasp, as it seems to exist of many contradictions. The many self-portraits Witsen made show his alternation of his various characters (see for example fig. 9 & 10). Reynaerts remarked that his complex, detached and mysterious personality has led Witsen to be one of the most romanticized artists from the nineteenth century. Those in Witsen’s environment already noticed the inner conflicts he had with his two-sided character. Allebé, his teacher at the academy, described him in 1883 as ‘undetermined in his pursuit’.⁹ The poet Albert Verwey (1865-1937) wrote: ‘Of Witsen I occasionally thought, a difficult nature tamed by a civilisation. But nature is not civilized and civilisation not natural.’^x Here, the poet indirectly refers to Witsen’s aristocratic background. Verwey also recognized this struggle in Witsen’s etchings and criticized a painting by Witsen as ‘a denial of your own pure nature, one that is not satisfied with that nature, that stout, angular, almost offensive-sided nature – a not belonging desire to refine nature’.^{xi} Witsen was often despondent from the struggle to be a better person and better artist. This was a pressure under which many artists in his circle suffered, as became clear in the first chapter. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle (1830-1899), precursor to the poets of the Movement of Eighty, knew that his ambivalent nature made him quickly change from mood and conception; ‘he longs for summer in winter, in winter for summer, in loneliness for fellowship and in fellowship for loneliness etc. etc.’^{xii}

⁶ Lodewijk van Deysssel and Albert Verwey (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *De briefwisseling tussen Lodewijk van Deysssel en Albert Verwey*, 3 delen, Den Haag 1981-1986, p. 133.

⁷ Frans Erens (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *Vervlogen jaren*, Amsterdam 1989² (Den Haag 1938), p. 270.

⁸ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 28.

⁹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 19.



Fig. 9. Willem Witsen,
Self-portrait in Ede, ca. 1900,
Prentenkabinet, Universiteit
Leiden. Source:
geheugenvannederland.nl.



Fig. 10. Willem Witsen,
Self-portrait in Ede, 1893,
Prentenkabinet, Universiteit
Leiden. Source:
geheugenvannederland.nl.

Friends and furies

In the following paragraph, a particular selection of Witsen's relationships will be further discussed. The aim is not to map out their friendship, but to gain a deeper insight into the personality of Witsen. Despite his aristocratic background and incompatible 'difficult nature', Witsen had many friends and admirers within the cultural circle of his time. Due to his rather comfortable financial situation and unlimited generosity, he became the main facilitator of the Movement of Eighty, contributor to *De Nieuwe Gids* and for some artists even a patron. For his close friend George Breitner, Witsen set up a financial fund and even shared his grave with him.¹⁰ Isaac Israëls (1865-1934) once said: 'Do you know that the complete *Nieuwe Gids* movement has Witsen to thank for? He got them together. He let them drink.'^{xiii} Timmerman described him as 'the noble, loyal en royal in every way, grand and dark'.¹¹ In general, Witsen was good to his friends. Soon after Witsen left for London in 1888 to escape the intense circle of Eighty, the confused Kloos collapsed and attempted suicide.¹² The fact that Witsen offered him shelter at his new place of refuge for two months shows his unconditional friendship with Kloos. This can be confirmed by the fact that Witsen's named his first son Willem, born in 1894, after Kloos.¹³ In London, Witsen and Kloos were living 'a life of carelessness and fun, but for me [Witsen, red.] it is an affectation – because, as I said – I have felt so much I did not understand yet – I have seen the horrible gravity of the life around me – not the speak of myself.'^{xiv} In this state of mind, he referred to the theory Van Eeden published in *De Nieuwe Gids* (see p. 25): 'You have to control your double-I so terribly bad – and I am so weak – and it is like a wild animal. [...] – and I slowly remember all of the things that Alb.[ert Verwey, red.] told me and I never understood – and now I do. f.e. [statements as] I hate this life etcetera I always assumed were affection, without a thought behind it - but now I feel it.'^{xv}

Kloos was grateful to Witsen and regularly showed his admiration for him as a person and as an artist in his correspondence: 'your calm-temperate but yet felt insight in things was always so useful to me. You're the only man (don't laugh!) that I have ever met, who is able to unite feeling and thinking in a harmonious way.'^{xvi} When Witsen passed away, Kloos devoted many sonnets to his friend. He wrote that his most inner being was as fragile and motile as the wings of a butterfly, but that it was enclosed with a wall of metal.¹⁴ He concluded with the phrase: 'This made his Art and being seem cold.'^{xvii} This description shaped the image of Witsen as an aristocratic and detached artist. Van Harpen already was indignant with this perception. He wonders why Witsen's technical skill, respect for the history and civilization is perceived as a synonym for coldness.

¹⁰ This is evident from the correspondence. Witsen wrote to Veth in April 1917: 't Lijkt mij ook een mooier hulde aan hem als wij een fonds zouden kunnen stichten waaraan zijn naam blijvend verbonden bleef, na zijn dood. Een Breitner fonds, zooals er een Willink van Collen fonds is, een David fonds en zooveel anderen.'

- Willem Witsen to Jan Pieter Veth, 23 April 1917, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

¹¹ 'Wim Witsen, de nobele, loyal en royal in alles, groot en donker.' - Aegidius W. Timmerman (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *Tim's herinneringen*, Amsterdam 1983, p. 214.

¹² De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 30.

¹³ Van Uuden and Stokvis (see note 83, *chapter one*), p. 168.

¹⁴ N. van Harpen, *Willem Witsen*, Amsterdam 1924, p. 13.

As mentioned before, the relationships between the difficult characters were not always with ease. An emotional letter of seven pages by Veth contains an enumeration of their frictions and displays how difficult Witsen's personality was (to understand):

'From the beginning I noticed the whimsical rigidity that is your own. When I came to Amsterdam as a sixteen-years-old fellow, and when you, who was older, more handsome, more sophisticated, in every way more privileged than I was, found a friend in me, I did not mind your occasional teasing, that you sometimes secretly fooled me, frequently hurt me. I accepted it, as if it was supposed to be like that, because I was very attached to you.'^{xviii}

Veth and Witsen had a complicated relationship with many ups and downs. The first crack occurred in 1886, when Veth radically corrected Witsen's first piece for *De Nieuwe Gids* and published it without his permission.¹⁵ Reynaerts suggests a *jalousie de metier*, in which Veth envies Witsen for being a more successful colleague. This is indeed evident in the quote above and in other letters. Their rivalry was enhanced by the constant comparison of their work by friends and colleagues. Veth often draws the short straw. For instance, Gerard Jan Hofker (1864-1945) wrote: 'I always feel that Veth's work is nothing. C'est la Mort. Not sinister, lugubrious, macabre. Only the lifeless, not understanding how to express life.'^{xix}

From 1892, Witsen developed an interesting friendship with Hofker. He was a chief official at the Posterijen, Telegrafie en Telefonie (P.T.T) and between 1890 and 1900 contributor of *De Nieuwe Gids* and became friends with the (former) members of the Movement of Eighty (see fig. 11).¹⁶ Hofker's great admiration for Witsen as an artist as well as a person led him to name his son Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981) after Witsen and Willem Hofker even became Witsen's pupil.¹⁷ This education resulted in a versatile artist preoccupied with etching. Hofker was a very sensitive man and not afraid to express his emotions, perhaps for Witsen sometimes to an uncomfortable extent, as he wrote to Witsen: 'And now you will say Wim, that I am a sentimental nonentity and an idler and you are right about that.'^{xx} Within their relationship, Hofker tried to analyse Witsen's personality, which fascinated him tremendously: 'I am reading *physiologie du mariage* and thinking a lot about you. You have a lot of Balzac's sharpness of remark. It cannot come from your reading; you must have things in common with Balzac.'^{xxi} Around 1900, Hofker wrote a long and emotional letter to Witsen. It shows that Witsen suffered from depressive tendencies:

'Dear Wim, I honestly do not understand anything of your discouragement lately. How for God's sake is it possible that you, with so much money in your hands, are dispirited? And in this case it is not even a matter of money, but above all a matter of work. You (nothing against your existing work) have to get back to work. All these things, that you think of painting as *blague* and what you told me about line etchings and tone etchings, all fair and well. [...] I mean the whole world is at your feet. Take f.e. etching. The way you press, I certainly believe, that in London or maybe Paris

¹⁵ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 25.

¹⁶ K. ter Laan, *Letterkundig woordenboek voor Noord en Zuid*, Den Haag 1952, see: Hofker, Jan.

¹⁷ RKD biography of Willem Witsen (1860-1923), see: <<https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/85165>> (retrieved March 2017).

they would rub their hands for such a Dutchman and that you would enjoy it eventually. And I am not even talking about etching on itself. As an etcher, you can do whatever you want. [...] Now get everything out of your head, stay in Ede and stop comparing yourself with old colonels and suchlike.^{'xxii}

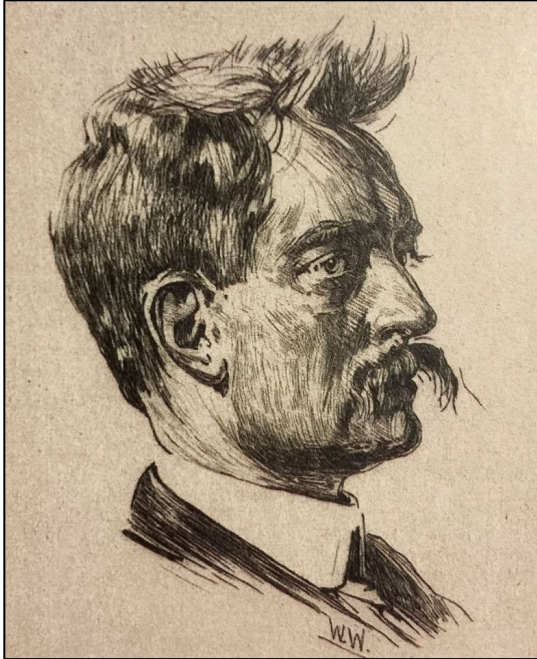


Fig. 11. Willem Witsen, *Portrait of Jan Hofker, looking to the right*, 1906, etching, 11,3 x 9,7 cm, published in *Thoughts and Imaginations*, Amsterdam 1906. Source: Scanned from De Groot (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 220.

This dreary doubtfulness was a result of his difficult nature and the more general obsessive need within the movement for 'self-perfecting thy inner man'. The soothing role of art in this matter appears from the portentous advice Witsen received in February 1900:

'That unsatisfied feeling with life is a difficult matter! It actually is a natural feeling [...], but you must be careful that you will not take a gloomy view on every aspect in life. You artists can find so much support and strength in your art, that we, deprived, have to miss. And so for us life is twice as hard. I am currently reading a great book from Carlyle, *Past and Present*, which you will probably know. The most important is: "to know the meaning of the day, to cease to be a hollow sounding shell of hearsays, egoisms, purblind dilettantisms and become, were it on an infinitely small scale, a faithful, discerning soul, to descend into thy inner man, and see if there be any traces of a soul!"^{'xxiii}

Family features

Witsen's difficult personality seems to be a family trait. This for instance appears from the letter he wrote to his sister and soul mate Jacoba Helena Elizabeth 'Cobi' Arntzenius-Witsen (1851-1930) on board of the S.S. Nieuw-Amsterdam on his way to New York on 31 December 1904:

'It is necessary that you know how much grief I have from your last letters in which you accuse me of rigidity and from them it appears so clearly that you actually don't know me that well! It amazes me, especially coming from you, because you are frankly the same.'^{'xxiv}

Arrived in New York, Witsen wrote to her: 'I'm just afraid that I will make a fool out of myself in front of Sir William [Van Horne (1843–1915), red.], with all the shortcomings of spirit, education and character!'^{xxv} This shows Witsen's insecurities about practically every aspect in his life. Witsen's family history is marked by tragedies. It is remarkable that he frankly does not mention these presumable traumatizing events in his correspondence. When Witsen was only thirteen years old, his mother passed away at a young age and his brother died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-three. In July 1883, Witsen's older sister Anna was assigned to *Het Geneeskundig Gesticht voor Krankzinnigen* (a psychiatric hospital) in Utrecht.¹⁸ According to her doctor, she showed 'signs of insanity, manifesting in melancholy'. About his visit to Anna with his younger sister Cobi at the psychiatric hospital, Witsen wrote:

'She was in bad shape. And yet, when she was talking with C in the windowsill, in a very large, gloomy stately room, with old Dutch furniture and heavy curtains, when the mood of the surroundings and the situation contributed to show the melancholy, I noticed how often she used to reason like this, impervious to contradiction; so familiar. But it didn't last long. She repeatedly broke down in tears and started accusing and confusing things [...] memories from her childhood etc.'^{xxvi}

Anna suffered from a severe depression.¹⁹ On the fifth of March in 1889, when Witsen was still in London, his older sister drowned herself in the pond of the family country estate.²⁰ She was only 34 years old. Witsen seems to conceal this event almost completely. Anna's death came as shock for the many artistic friends that met her at Ewijkshoeve and her tragic story inspired writers and painters.²¹ Witsen experience the same tendency towards melancholy: 'When I am writing about myself I become so melancholic, and that is tedious and I have nothing to say about other things; I am living in myself [...].'^{xxvii} Stendhal and Zola would presumably categorize Witsen under the melancholic temperament; he is serious, introvert, tranquil, analytical, downhearted, cautious, conscientiously and thoroughly. Many in his circle were described as melancholic as well.

The German art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg (1866-1929) brought melancholy, the mark of the creative spirit, to the attention of early-twentieth-century scholarship.²² The German-Jewish art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), following the example of Warburg, examined the meanings of melancholy in *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1943). The publication *Born under Saturn* (1963) by the Wittkowers discusses the tendency of artists towards melancholy from antiquity to the French Revolution.²³

¹⁸ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16, *chapter one*), p. 50.

¹⁹ Anna was not the only woman in Witsen's circle who suffered from depression and committed suicide. In November 1897, Rachel Mendes da Costa poisoned herself and in January 1917 Dientje Coorengel, the wife of Witsen's friend Hein Boeken, asked her husband to help her to end her unbearable suffering.

Vergeer 1985 (see note 45, *chapter one*), p. 32 and p. 51.

²⁰ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 34.

²¹ Amongst others Jan Toorop and Herman Gorter. See: Bettina Spaanstra-Polak, 'Jan Toorop's Tuin der weeën', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, Jaargang 25, Nr. 3 (1977), pp. 113-119.

²² Margot and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born under Saturn*, New York 2007² (1963), p. xix.

²³ See: Margot and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born under Saturn*, New York 2007² (1963).

The aim of the Wittkowers was to provide psychological insight grounded in biography and history, rehabilitating difficult and tormented artistic personalities. The case of Witsen and his circle shows that this phenomenon goes beyond this period.

Escapism

Especially in the first forty years of his life, Witsen could be defined as an escapist. Escapism is defined as the avoidance of unpleasant, boring, frightening, or banal aspects of daily life.²⁴ The term can also be used for the actions people take to help relieve persisting feelings of depression or general sadness. In the previous part, Witsen's predisposition to melancholy was established through information from his friends and family. His craftsmanship was a form of escapism, as he stated: 'I often have moments of great despondency, but I find satisfaction in my work.'^{xxviii} Apparently, creating had a therapeutic effect on him. However, Witsen sought further evasion in nature, traveling and (impossible) love, all typical forms of escapism. In the following part, these aspects in relation to Witsen's life will be explained. In the beginning of the eighties, the city of Amsterdam was restless. The capital and home to the Witsen family, who were situated at the Prinsengracht, expanded in every direction. The sight and sound of excavation and the pungent smell of the factories led father Witsen to look for a residence in the country.²⁵ In 1882 the family moved to the estate Ewijkshoeve in Zeist in the province of Utrecht, where Witsen lived a rural life, surrounded with animals, his family and occasional guests. Although he missed his like-minded civilized companions, Witsen loved spending time in nature:

'I do greatly miss the interaction with sympathetic, developed people who are more than I am – but I get a lot in return, from which I live, everything that is in the skies and beneath, that full and rough life, healthy and powerful as nature itself, of which I can say so little, but which I hope to paint the way I feel it one day.'^{xxix}

Somewhat later Witsen wrote: 'Our love for nature, our hate towards everything manufactured, posed or false, make us escape into our studios.'^{xxx} As already briefly discussed in chapter one, there was a ruling idea that it was morally and physically beneficial to reside in a rural setting and, moreover, that the depiction of nature in art also bears some of this wholesomeness. However, looking at nature (or 'the Creation') as an idealistic example for their work, also discussed in chapter one, was not easy or unreachable even. This experienced difficulty increased Witsen's flight behaviour:

'At the moment I am longing to fly out, I am working hard for Art and it does not succeed and I don't think it would be ready in time; I am so exhausted on a daily basis and I don't see it anymore and I cannot understand why I cannot make something that I nonetheless find so delightfully beautiful in nature.'^{xxxi}

²⁴ Definition of "Escapism", see: Merriam-Webster.com (retrieved March 2017).

²⁵ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16, *chapter one*), p. 39.

Throughout his life, Witsen did 'fly out' a lot; he has travelled extensively.²⁶ Evidently, the fact that this was financially possible for him as well as the social pressure to be 'cosmopolitan' played a significant part in this. He also had artistic motivations. New environments inspired his creativity and stimulated his eager to work. He, for instance, wrote:

'I would have loved to go to Hamburg for a while to make a series of etchings, like in the time of Dordrecht – it is such a beautiful city and my etchings are pretty successful there, nowadays.'^{xxxii}

However, his restlessness and dissatisfaction with his life are presumably the main reason for his many travels. In 1888, he wrote to his sister: 'I think I'm going to America to make my fortune - perhaps as a printer. God knows; that means, I don't. I've also thought about Petersburg but the Russian language is... well, enfin.'^{xxxiii} He eventually went to London. Witsen loved big cities, where he could wander around anonymously. Because of the residence of his first wife Elizabeth 'Betsy' or 'Beb' van Vloten (1862-1946), Witsen stayed in Haarlem for some time, but he did not like the small, picturesque city at all: '[...] my goodness, always the bright houses and clean streets and above all always the same people and all so small, crumbled - never large pure beautiful – it is unbearable.'^{xxxiv} Nevertheless, also in the metropolitan areas Witsen experienced his inevitable emotional process of rise and decline, resulting in a constant need of change: 'How is that life in London possible, Beb - Beb I've always felt in exile here - I've always thought that there was no other way.'^{xxxv} When in London, he nostalgically wrote to his wife about the desire to go back to Amsterdam and produce etchings:

'Beb, write me yet if you can understand how I long to live at the Parkstraat and to do all that work, of which I constantly think – first of all an etching, a very beautiful etching of that child – and the little etchings from the dunes, Beb – and drawings of the dunes and beautiful things from Amsterdam and then all the portrait etchings of friends.'^{xxxvi}

Witsen's most openhearted letters are written to Betsy, which brings us to the third form of escapism: unattainable love (see fig. 12). In the beginning of their relationship, starting in August 1890, Witsen suffered from the torturing feeling of missing her, as he was still in London, and often was in a deep emotional state of nostalgic or profound melancholic longing for Betsy. The early letters from Witsen to his Betsy were extremely amorous:

'When I came home, my own little darling, I found Bebpys letter and I took it to bed and blissfully read it there and fell asleep with the letter between by hands and chest. O Beb so delightful – thank you my dearest sweetheart – it is such a loving letter.'^{xxxvii}

Witsen and Betsy got married on the fourth of May 1893 and had three children.²⁷ However, their relationship was not uncomplicated and Witsen escape from this as well.

²⁶ M. Jonkman, 'Ik had behoefte om eens uit Holland te komen.' De schilders van Tachtig en hun internationale positie', RKD Bulletin 2013, nr. 2, pp. 21-30.

²⁷ Van Uuden and Stokvis 2007 (see note 83, *chapter one*), p. 171.



Fig. 12. Willem Witsen, *Self-portrait with Betsy in Ede*, 1893, contact print, 11,8 x 16,5 cm, Prentenkabinet, Universiteit Leiden. Source: Digital Special Collections.

A difficult period

Between 1898 and 1904, Witsen experienced a difficult period in his personal (and financial) life. His marriage with Betsy began to collapse. Witsen felt that he could not be himself within their relationship and that he estranged from his wife. In September 1902, they officially got divorced, but already from 1900 he did not live with her and their three sons in Ede anymore and permanently settled in Amsterdam in May 1901.²⁸ This downfall presumably started when Witsen was not present at the birth of his youngest son Odo in 1897.²⁹ A reproachful letter from Betsy, who also had literary ambitions, implies that Witsen has not been the ideal husband:

'How does this housekeepers job seem to you without any sympathy expressed in writing nor speech, with only a random roughness in front of you or a brief mood of love and then days of hateful contrariness if something goes wrong is in the eyes of the tyrant.'^{xxxviii}

Furthermore, Betsy accused him of being extremely narcissistic:

'It is not possible to satisfy your self-love – knowing one and taking is not loving, [...] each others happiness is the marital love that is real and solid and the only thing that could still your dissatisfaction, your thirst for something else.'^{xxxix}

²⁸ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 50.

²⁹ Van Uuden and Stokvis 2007 (see note 83, *chapter one*), p. 174.

Witsen's written apologies tell us about his self-image and his feelings of loneliness during and after the divorce:

'There is literally no one among the acquaintances who stands so alone, or feels so alone, which is yet really the same. [...] Furthermore, I am in bad shape, I am difficult, mostly for myself, and anything but artistic in the approach to life. There is so terribly much that scares me [...] when we got married I was faithful, I still believed in myself and the future, and I thought that through love all possible difficulties in life could be solved. Now, I know that I was way too coarse for you and that I could not mean anything to you, even though that was my greatest desire - but I am so terribly stupid and such an immense egoist.'^{xl}

The relationship between Witsen and Betsy is representative of the problems the hyper-individualistic Movement of Eighty artists had with women, briefly discussed in the first chapter. Many artist friends assisted Betsy in this difficult time; amongst others Jacobus van Looy, Arthur Van Schendel and Frans Erens.³⁰ About Witsen's proclaimed need to be free Betsy sneeringly wrote:

'O *your liberal circle?* – What is your liberal circle? Overlooking everything except for your self-satisfaction – my narrow circle that you fear so much, my large own-sunlit internal, that is supposed to be everything to [you ...], what are you doing in your liberal circle you poor misguided one, who now feels that life is somewhat tough.'^{xli}

In June 1901, Betsy discovered that Witsen had an affaire with a seventeen-year-old girl from 1897 onwards.³¹ This is presumably the reason why Witsen regularly apologizes for 'his nature' in the letters and why he took the blame for the divorce in front of friends and family. Around the same time, she found out about his relationship with his English mistress Blanche Ford, which he kept a secret from her. This made Betsy not wanting to cooperate with the divorce anymore. Witsen wrote to her in May 1901: 'You say that I am so persistent while I have been dealing with this for four years and was not able to work and got sick – you have seen for yourself that this is the only solution.'^{xlii}

The death of his father in October 1901 brought Witsen down again. In this period, Witsen, just like his older sister Anna, even had suicidal thoughts: 'It is bad for someone who loves life so much – that it seems a possibility to quit.'^{xliii} A few years later, completely unexpected, his close friend Arnold 'Nol' Ising Jr. (1857-1904) passed away from a heart condition.³² Witsen was devastated about his 'best friend whom I've lost; he has been the only one who always opposed me in my face – and dared to say exactly what he thought.'^{xliiv} Besides these great losses in his life, Witsen felt a lot more financial pressure from 1902 due to the alimentionation of f 4000,- a year he had to pay. Unfortunately, the selling of his work at Van Wisselingh stagnated and the reviews of his works by modern critics became less laudatory. In the winter of 1904, Witsen had to lend money because he was in debt.

³⁰ Van Uuden and Stokvis 2007 (see note 83, *chapter one*), pp. 186-188.

³¹ Van Uuden and Stokvis 2007 (see note 83, *chapter one*), p. 185.

³² De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 57.

Nostalgic memories

During the divorce with Betsy, Witsen wrote: 'I do not dare to look at an etching on the wall and to their portraits [of his children, red.] and nothing that reminds me of Zonneberg [the residence where they used to live as a family, red.]'.^{xlv} This citation shows that an important aspect of his work is capturing memories and indirectly refers to very personal note in his works and the personal motivation to make them. This would remain the same throughout his life, as Witsen wrote in 1922: 'Through all the plates I am now biting, I am constantly in Indonesian memories, but that only gives me the desire to work there again.'^{xlvi} In 1895, Witsen's teacher Allebé wrote to him: 'Every time I look at your etchings, I find them more beautiful. They fully bring me back to the region where I regularly strolled between '65 and '70. So thank you for precisely choosing these etchings for me.'^{xlvii} By means of his works, Witsen and his friends regularly lived in a melancholic nostalgia. Hofker once wrote to Witsen that 'you have to be far away to melancholically appreciate the *amsterdamsche, wimpiesche* memories'.^{xlviii} Hofker could be intensely moved by Witsen's work and the memories they contain:

'Today I had the greatest pleasure; without realising I strolled passed Wisselingh [Witsen's art dealer, red.] and suddenly saw your Parkstraat [see fig. 13, red.]. I was deeply touched, something I have never had before with a painting. I believe that it was the old one from your studio, [...] the houses so far away, where one would never come, would never pay attention to, the silence background houses that always stood so far from your life and now the field in the snow, the beautiful bushes and the farm, ... yet everything is far away, first you have your large, loyal window pane and the old studio is there. [...] It is such a shame that you do not keep it yourself, dear Wim, because it is much more than people think and a reminiscence of your life, as you so often stared, thinking about things, the eyes gazing over the expansive view. For me, who rarely turns his eye to his own beautiful surroundings, your painting is a revelation and the purity of your artistry is clearer to me than ever. But this is merely a reflection in pen or something... I started to love you more than I used to today.'^{xlix}

The fact that the painting is a reason for Hofker to love Witsen more is significant, because it shows that Witsen's work is a reflection of himself and says something about his being. The following citation is very interesting, because Witsen discusses how differently etchings and photographs serve in reviving moments of the past:

'Today I have lived in the blissful sunny summer days of the past my dearest sweetheart, – I have been etchings on the same bench from back then and I have made the first prints of the photographs – although, these two things are not comparable – the first is reminiscing in the same beauty felt before; going back in a beauty of which no body, except for my Beb who sat beside her man while he was working – and the other is a confrontation with almost forgotten details; – details that perhaps do harm, – at least – for the memory, but are sometimes very pleasant.'¹



Fig. 13. Photograph (presumably by Witsen himself) of the painting *Oosterpark in de winter* by Willem Witsen taken after 1892. Source: geheugenvannederland.nl.

The Ewijkshoeve was a nostalgic place for many artists and writers. However, after the death of his sister Anna, who drowned herself there in the pond, this was not the case for Witsen. He wrote: 'And then there is a big objection that is only true for me: all the memories. What this single word means in all its significance, I believe few people know. When I dig into it, it is never without tightness in the throat.'ⁱⁱ When he finally returned to the Ewijkshoeve in June 1910, he reported to his sister Cobi: 'There, I often think about how unaltered everything is and yet so terribly different. Yesterday with that persistent rain and puddles in the lanes: exactly the same, the tone, mood, colour, and smell, everything just like that day when we were painting in the rain.'ⁱⁱⁱ In *Lunatics* Van Looy wrote about his recollections of Ewijkshoeve: 'a familiar white house, now frosty and silent between its black benumbed trees... and a heath full of snow.... white wideness. And through all that mourned soft memories of a past togetherness.'ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

It can be stated that Witsen's art works function as custodian of his memories and in this way an immortalization of their memories. This recalls Shakespeare's famous sonnet 18 in which he clearly described the function of commemoration: 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, so long lives this, and this gives life to thee.' The literati of the Movement of Eighty were also occupied with creating memories, often by means of contemplating life. It is revealing that Arthur van Schendel's poems are bundled under the title *Commemorations* (1950). His poem *Mast* imaginatively recalls the Grand Hotel en Café-Restaurant Mille

Colonnes at the Rembrandtplein, a second home to many members of the Movement of Eighty. In *De Nieuwe Gids*, Hein Boeken (1861-1933) remembers this 'centre of civilisation' as a place where 'the silver-grey pending smoke of cigars, the dimmed, from white balloons descending electric light, helped the young artists to escape from the boundaries of their restricted everyday life to fantasize about the liberal, yes limitless realms of memory and imagination.'^{iv}

The nostalgia discussed above can also be seen as a form of escapism, not in place, but in time. This could be seen in the broader context of the spirit of the age. First, the rise of scientific psychology in the end of the nineteenth century could have to do with the fascination for the concept of 'memory'. Recalling Van Eeden's publication in *De Nieuwe Gids* on his theory of a double-me: 'The meaning of this double-me in our spiritual life must be extensive. It is, without a doubt, the custodian of all our memories'. Furthermore, due to the rapid changes people clung to the stability of their memories and the still existing parts of that memory. The film factory Orion, based in The Hague and active between 1925 and 1933, presented the silent newsreel *Orion-Revue* that reported on the impoverished neighbourhoods of Amsterdam: 'Fortunately, all these murky alleys are disappearing, where never a ray of sunlight could permeate into the houses! [...] Still enough remains between all these doomed quarters, to keep the memory of bygone ages alive.'^{iv} This is precisely what Witsen wanted to depict. A well-known example is 't Kolkje', a loved subject among artists (see fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Willem Witsen, *Ouderzijds Kolk*, ca. 1897, etching and aquatint, 27,9 x 30,7 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: geheugenvannederland.nl.

A second chance

In January 1904, Witsen met the fifteen year younger Maria Augusta Ingenohl-Schorr (1875-1943).³³ Witsen still had contact with Betsy, whom responded with suspicion towards their blooming relationship. In December 1904, the correspondence between Witsen and Betsy ends definitively. Betsy's suspicions seem to be justified, as Maria Augusta Ingenohl-Schorr became Witsen's second wife on 24 April 1906. They understood each other, as Witsen wrote to Kloos: 'In short I will answer your considerate question and tell you that my future lady just like myself has a most saddest marriage behind her. She divorced a man who did not understand her and did not love her.'^{vi} Their relationship again seems to come from Witsen's need to care. The marriage felt as a new beginning for Witsen. Marie brought the much-needed joy, stability and protection from the outside world. Their relationship was opposite of his hopelessly romantic and troubled relationship with Betsy. Marie clearly structured his life. Due to her interference, Witsen's generosity remarkably shrunk and he became more active in the organizational part of the art world. From 1913 until 1918 he was a member of the board of *Arti et Amicitiae* and a representative for numerous Dutch (graphic) art gatherings abroad, such as for the International Panama Exhibition in San Francisco in the department of graphic works, where Witsen was the only European.^{vii} Witsen and Marie rarely left each other's side, meaning that there is hardly any correspondence between them. The tone of his letters also became more business-like. In his melodramatic way, Hofker regretted this new situation:

'Instead of our old friendship, I don't see any more of you than an occasional swiftly passing shadow or with some companions or at a celebration. Moreover everything becomes more volatile; soon you're just passing me by in a car with Marie. Then we would have, for example, an appointment at the corner of the Java Street; me on the sidewalk and you in a vehicle. Where are the times that I had the time to talk to you in my house?'^{viii}

Witsen continued to travel with Marie. In 1914, they made a journey along European capitals and the following year they travelled through North America for eight months. In 1921, they remained in the Dutch East Indies for seven months. Witsen jokingly asked Van Looy: 'Don't you find that venturous at my old age?'^{lix} In the same letter, Witsen expressed his desire to work there. His impression of his stay in the Dutch East Indies shows to what aspects he was artistically drawn:

'The next day we were picked up by car to see the old city. [...] I found material for a complete series of etchings there. The narrow, dirty streets with the little open houses and the many natives half-naked or with colourful leaves are exceptionally picturesque and original (in reproduction I have never seen something like it) and the evening mood with here and there an oil lamp in the dark houses, even made it more peculiar and mysterious.'^{lx}

³³ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 57.

From the start of 1923, Marie received worried letters about Witsen's health situation from his lifelong faithful friends Kloos, Veth and Israëls. Witsen passed away on April 13 of that year at the age of 62. Veth speech at his funeral showed insight in the contradictory character of Witsen: 'It is the art of an aristocratic taciturn, of an internally lonesome one, who restlessly yearns to the sublime.'^{ix} This citation strongly captures the essence of the personality of Witsen, which has been attempted to sketch in this chapter. The contradictions that his character display, still makes him difficult to comprehend. However, it was evident that Witsen suffered from melancholy. His general dissatisfaction with life resulted in escapism both psychically and mentally. For his work, preserving a nostalgic memory, or creating an image to escape into, was the main goal.

Original Dutch citations and sources

ⁱ 'Beste Wim, je bent wèl altijd een martelaar geweest.' - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, [1899? 1900? 1901?], [place unknown], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

ⁱⁱ '[...] een schilder uit onze hoofdstad die den naam draagt van een Amsterdamsche familie uit Rembrandts tijd [...]' - Jan Veth, 'Kunst. Seymour Haden, Whistler, Witsen en Bauer op de vierde jaarlijksche tentoonstelling van de Nederlandsche etsclub', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*. Jaargang 6, Amsterdam 1891, p. 114.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Als een schilder moet werken voor zijn bestaan is het een ongelukkig leven.' - Willem Bastiaan Tholen aan Willem Witsen, 28 February 1885, Kampen, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{iv} 't werk waarin je je geheel kunt geven, de uiting van alles wat je in je hebt, gevoeld en gedacht hebt.' - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, [between 10 and 14] September 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^v 'Maar, Wim, niemand heeft het recht, zich zelve wijs te maken, dat het niet nodig is, te vechten ook alleen om te leven. [...] Waar zou jij je Peter geschilderd hebben, als je Papa geen buiten gekocht had, en je een arme slokker was, als ik, die tot nu toch nog, leefde van genadegiften, denk daar eens aan, beste vent, en neemt het anderen niet zoo dol kwalijk als ze wat meer te hooi en te gras werken moeten.' - Jacobus van Looy to Willem Witsen, 6 May 1886, Madrid, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{vi} 'een brief als een plank, maar geen hartelijkheid meer, en geen van zelve gaan; maar gepraat van ouwelijke jeugd en wijs geredeneer.... wat.... die brief rook vijandig.' - Jac. van Looy, 'Gekken', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 5, Amsterdam 1890, p. 14.

^{vii} 'Kan ik 't helpen dat ik vannacht zoo erg denken moest aan vroeger en terug leefde in dien tijd toen jij zooveel in mijn leven was, - en ik de bazige brieven schreef - en ik zag jou - midden in 'n moeilijken tijd allen - vol en rijk en individueel, sterk in jezelf - en ik zag mezelf - onbezorgd in de tevreden onbeduidendheid van m'n kleine zijn en ik kon niet ophouden me te verwijten. [...] je weet niet dat ik de laatste drie of vier jaar niets heb gehad dan verdriet, groot mooi warm verdriet - hoe ik niet weet dat te doen van gedruktheid en twijfel.' - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, [before the 10th of] April 1890, London, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{viii} 'Die Witsen is voor mij ondoorgrondelijk, die zegt geen woord. Van Looy noemt dat mooye sprakeloosheid. Maar ik vind het inferieur om dat er *dédain* of *affektatie* in is.' - Lodewijk van Deyssel to Albert Verwey, in: Lodewijk van Deyssel en Albert Verwey (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *De briefwisseling tussen Lodewijk van Deyssel en Albert Verwey*, 3 delen, Den Haag 1981-1986., p. 113.

^{ix} ‘Door zijn zwijgzaamheid verlangde hij geen druk gepraat en men sprak met hem, wanneer men werkelijk iets te zeggen had.’ - Frans Erens, *Vervlogen Jaren*, Den Haag 1938, p. 272.

^x ‘Van Witsen dacht ik wel eens: een moeilijke natuur bedwongen door een beschaving. Maar de natuur is niet beschaafd en de beschaving niet natuurlijk.’ - Albert Verwey to Lodewijk van Deyssel, 24 January 1891, Noordwijk aan Zee, in: Lodewijk van Deyssel en Albert Verwey (ed. Harry G.M. Prick), *De briefwisseling tussen Lodewijk van Deyssel en Albert Verwey*, 3 delen, Den Haag 1981-1986, p. 135.

^{xi} ‘Een miskennen van je eigen pure natuur, een niet tevreden zijn met die natuur, die forsche, hoekige, bijna kwetsend-kantige natuur - een ernietbijhoorend verlangen die natuur te beschaven, ja te civiliseeren, bedoel ik.’ - Albert Verwey to Willem Witsen, 27 February 1902, [Ede] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xii} ‘ambivalente natuur hem snel van stemming en opvatting doet veranderen; hij weet dat hij in de winter naar de zomer, in de zomer naar de winter, in de eenzaamheid naar gemeenschap, in gemeenschap naar eenzaamheid etc. etc. verlangt!’ - Knuvelder 1976 (see note 25, *chapter one*), p. 81. Knuvelder refers to Gezelle’s poem *Op Krukken* (1897), published in the bundle *Dichtwerken II*, p. 572.

^{xiii} ‘Weet je wel, dat de heele Nieuwe-Gidsbeweging voor een groot deel aan Witsen te danken is? ... Hij heeft ze bij elkaar laten komen ... hij heeft ze laten drinken.’ - Erens 1989² (see note 88, *chapter one*), p. 157.

^{xiv} ‘’n leventje van zorgeloosheid en pret, maar bij mij is dit wel affectatie - want, zooals 'k al zei - 'k heb zoo veel gevoeld wat 'k nog niet begrepen heb - de verschrikkelijke ernst gezien van 't leven om me heen - om van mezelf niet te spreken.’ - Willem Witsen to Albert Verwey, 29 October 1888, London, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xv} ‘Je moet je dubbel-ik zoo verschrikkelijk beheerschen – en ik ben zo zwak, - en ‘t is net ‘n wild beest. [...] – en ik herinner me langzamerhand allerlei dingen die Alb[ert Verwey, red.] me gezegd heeft en die ik nooit begrepen heb – en nu begrijp ik ze wel. bv. Ik haat het leven etc. heb ik altijd voor ‘n affectatie gehouden, zonder date r ‘n gedachte achter zat, - maar nu voel ik ‘t.’ - Willem Witsen, unaddressed and undated fragment, Witsen-collection, in: De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 252.

^{xvi} ‘Want ik heb altijd zooveel gehad aan je kalm-nuchtere maar toch gevoelde inzicht in de dingen. Jij bent de eenige man (lach nu niet!) dien ik ooit ontmoet heb, die voelen en denken kan op een harmonische wijze weet te vereenigen.’ - Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos to Willem Witsen, 11 December 1899, The Hague, , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xvii} ‘Dies heeft zijn Kunst en Wezen koel geleken!’ - Willem Kloos, in: Harpen 1924 (see note 14), p. 13.

^{xviii} ‘Van den beginne af aan heb ik oog gehad voor de grillige stroefheid die je eigen is. Toen ik als jongen van zestien in Amsterdam kwam, en jij die ouder, knapper, wereldwijzer, in alle opzichten meer bevoorrecht waart dan ik, mij in amitié naamt, vond ik het niet erg dat je me ook wel eens plaagde, me wel eens heimelijk donderde, me wel eens verdriet deed. Ik nam dat op den koop toe, alsof dat zoo hoorde, want ik was zeer aan je gehecht. [...] Van lieverlede echter werd je stroefheid wel eens onaangenamer, en nooit heb ik koeler weerwerk gevonden, dan toen ik op je afscheidsfuij een dronk op je spoedige terugkeer instelde. Het gezicht waarmee dit ontvangen werd kon moeilijk onplezieriger.’ - Jan Piet Veth to Willem Witsen, 3 and 11 January 1896, Bussum, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xix} ‘Ik voel altijd, dat het werk van Veth niets is. C'est la Mort. Niet sinistre, lugubre, macabre. Alleen maar het levenlooze, het niet begrijpen van de levens-uitdrukking [...].’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, [date unknown], [place unknown], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xx} ‘En nu zal je zeggen Wim, dat ik een sentimenteele nieteling ben en een nietsdoener en daarin heb je gelijk.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, [1 September 1893?], [place unknown], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxi} ‘Ik lees physiologie du mariage. Ik denk dan veel aan jou. Je hebt veel van Balzac's opmerkens-scherpte. 't Kan niet uit je lekturen komen; je hebt dingen met Balzac gemeen.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, 24

May 1893, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxii} ‘Beste Wim, ik begrijp eigenlijk niets van je mismoedigheid van den laatsten tijd. [...] Hoe is 't nu godsterwereld mogelijk, dat jij met zooveel geld in je handen er moedeloos bij zit. En 't is hier de geldkwestie eigenlijk niet eens, maar de werkkwestie vooral. Je moet (niettegenstaande je werken) weer aan 't werk. Al die dingen, dat je schilderen blague vindt en wat je me wel eens van lijn-etsen en van toon-etsen gezegd hebt, allemaal goed en wel [...] De heele wereld ligt toch voor je open. Neem nou b.v. eens 't etsen. Zooals jij afdrukt, geloof ik zeker, dat ze in Londen of misschien in Parijs in de handen zouden wrijven om zoo'n hollander en dat je daar wel aardigheid in zou hebben op den duur. Ik praat niet eens van 't etsen zelf. Jij kan als etser doen wat je wilt. [...] Beste Wim, je bent wèl altijd een martelaar geweest. Zet nu alles eens uit je hoofd, blijf in Ede en hou op je te vergelijken bij oude kolonels en dergelijken.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, [1899? 1900? 1901?], [place unknown], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxiii} ‘Dat onvoldane met het leven is een lastige questie! Eigenlijk is het natuurlijk [...], maar je moet voorzichtig zijn: dat je daardoor niet alle kanten van het leven te zwart gaat inzien. Jullie kunstenaars hebt zooveel steun en kracht in je kunst, dien wij, misdeelden, missen. En daarom is het voor ons dubbel moeielijk. Een heerlijk boek lees ik nu van Carlyle, Past and Present, dat zal je wel kennen. 't Hoogste is: “to know the meaning of the day, to cease to be a hollow sounding shell of hearsays, egoisms, purblind dilettantisms and become, were it on an infinitely small scale, a faithful, discerning soul, to descend into thy inner man, and see if there be any traces of a soul!”’ - H.J. (Johan, ‘Doris’) van 't Hoff to Willem Witsen, [28 February 1900], [place unknown], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxiv} ‘En dan is 't toch noodig dat je weet, hoeveel verdriet 'k heb van je laatste brieven waarin je mij stroefheid verwijt en waaruit zoó klaar blijkt dat je me toch eigenlijk weinig kent! Dan verwondert 't wel juist van jou omdat je óók zoo bent [...].’ - Willem Witsen to J.H.E. Arntzenius-Witsen, 31 December 1914, on board of the Nieuw-Amsterdam on his way to New York, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxv} ‘Ben alleen maar bang dat 'k 'n mal figuur maak bij Sir William, door al de tekortkomingen van geest, opvoeding en karakter!’ - Willem Witsen to J.H.E. Arntzenius-Witsen, 20 July 1915, [New York], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvi} ‘Zij viel me niet meê. Schrikkelijk treurig - - En toch, toen ze in den venster bank met C zat te praten, in een heel groote, sombere deftige kamer, met oudhollandsche meubelen en zware gordijnen, toen de stemming van de omgeving en de toestand zamenwerkte om 't melancolieke ervan te doen zien, viel 't me juist op hoe dikwijls ze vroeger zoo had zitten redeneeren, onvatbaar voor tegenspreken; zoo gewoon. Maar 't duurde niet lang. Telkens brak ze uit in een wanhopigen tranen vloed en begon zich weer te beschuldigen en alles door mekaar te halen [...] herinneringen uit haar jeugd etc.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 6 September 1883, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvii} ‘Als 'k over mezelf schrijf dan word 'k altijd zoo melancoliek, en dat is vervelend en over andere dingen heb 'k niets te zeggen; 'k leef zoo in mezelf [...].’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 1 September 1903, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxviii} ‘‘k heb dikwijls buien van groote moedeloosheid met mezelfen, maar 'k zoek tevredenheid in m'n werk.’ - Willem Witsen to Frederik van Eeden, 3 February 1889, Londen, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxix} ‘Omgang met sympathieke, ontwikkelde menschen die wat meer zijn dan ik, mis ik erg – maar daar staat veel tegenover waarvan 'k leef, alles wat in de luchten is en daaronder, dat volle ruwe leven, gezond en krachtig als de natuur zelf, waarvan 'k zoo weinig kan zeggen, maar dat 'k eens hoop te schilderen zooals 'k 't voel.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 16 November 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxx} ‘Onze liefde voor de natuur, onze haat aan alles wat gemaakt, geposeerd en valsch is, sluiten ons op in onze ateliers.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 23 April 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxi} ‘O ik zou voor 't oogenblik er zoo graag eens uitvliegen. Ik werk hard voor Arti en dat wil maar niet en 't zal ook wel niet klaar komen; ik ben dagelijksch heel moe en zie 't heelemaal niet meer en kan maar niet

begrijpen waarom ik iets zoo heelemaal niet maken kan wat 'k toch zoo heerlijk mooi vind in de natuur.'

- Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 14 September 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxii} 'Ik had anders ook zoo graag 'n poosje naar Hamburg gegaan om 'n serie etsjes te maken, zooals indertijd van Dordrecht - 't is zoo'n pracht van 'n stad en mijn etsen hebben daar nog al succes, tegenwoordig.' - Willem Witsen to Arthur van Schendel, 21 March 1903, [Amsterdam] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxiii} 'Ik denk dat 'k naar Amerika ga om daar m'n fortuin te maken - misschien wel als plaat drukker. God weet 't; dat wil zeggen: ik weet 't niet. Ik heb ook gedacht over Petersburg maar de russiesche taal is... nu ja, enfin.' - Willem Witsen to Jan Piet Veth, 23 August 1888, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxiv} 'm'n hemel, altijd die heldere huisjes en schoone straatjes en bovenal altijd diezelfde menschjes en alles zoo kleintjes, verbrokkeld - nooit groot zuiver mooi - 't is niet om uit te houden.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [13] September 1890, Haarlem, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxv} 'hoe kan dat leven in Londen Beb, - Beb 'k heb altijd gevoeld hier als in ballingschap - 'k heb altijd gedacht dat 't niet anders kòn.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [26 November 1890], [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxvi} 'Beb, schrijf me toch 's of je kunt begrijpen hoe 'k verlang om in de Parkstraat te wonen en al dat werk te doen, waaraan 'k aldoor denk - allereerst 'n ets, 'n heel mooie ets van 't kindje - en die etsjes uit de duinen, Beb - en teekeningen uit de duinen en mooie dingen uit Amsterdam en dan al die portret-etsen van de vrienden.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 7 December 1890, [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxvii} 'En toen 'k thuis kwam, mijn eigen kleine lieveling, toen vond 'k Bebpyp d'r brief en dien heb 'k meêgenomen naar bed en heb 'm heerlijk gelezen en ben met dien brief tusschen m'n handen en m'n borst, gaan slapen. O Beb zoo heerlijk - dank je wel mijn liefste lieveling, - 't is zoo'n liefhebbende brief.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 8 August 1891, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxviii} 'Hoe zou jou dan dit huis houdsters vak lijken met geen meê leven door brief noch sprake, met alleen een willekeurige stroefheid tegenover je of een stemming even van liefde en dagen van hatelijke dwarsheid als even iets misdaan wordt in de oogen van het tirannieke.' - Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten to Willem Witsen, [date unknown], [Ede], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxix} 'Je intense eigenliefde is niet te bevredigen - niet weten en nemen is liefhebben, maar wijden en te zamen genieten, elkaar's geluk dat is de huwelijks liefde die echt en hecht is en alleen je ontevredenheid, je dorst naar wat anders zou kunnen stillen.' - Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten to Willem Witsen, 27 February 1902, [Ede] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xl} 'Er is letterlijk niemand, onder de kennissen die zoo alleen staat, of zich zoo alleen voelt, dat is toch eigentlijk wel hetzelfde. [...] Bovendien heb ik een beroerd gestel, ben lastig 't meest voor mezelve, en, alles behalve artistiek van levensopvatting. Er is zoo gruwelijk veel dat me verschrikt. [...] toen we trouwden was 'k ter goeder trouw; 'k geloofde toen nog in mezelf en in de toekomst, en 'k dacht dat door liefde alle mogelijke moeilijkheden in 't leven werden opgelost. Nù weet 'k dat 'k veel te grof voor je was en dat 'k niets voor je kon zijn, al was 't toèn m'n beste verlangen - maar 'k ben zoo vreeselijk stom en zoo'n geweldige egoïst.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 31 July 1903, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xli} 'O *jouw ruime kring?* - Wat is jouw ruime kring? Een al geheel voorbij zien van alles behalve je zelfvoldoening - mijn enge kring die jij zoo vreest, mijn groote eigen-zonnige, innerlijk dat zoo geteisterd werd, dat toch alles moest zijn voor en moet zijn nu voor ons 3-tal [...], wat doe jij in je ruime kring arme verdoelde, dien nu dit leven wat zwaar valt.' - Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten to Willem Witsen, [26 February 1902], [Ede?] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlii} ‘Je zegt dat 'k zoo doorzettend ben terwijl 'k er al vier jaar meê rondloop en niet meer kon werken en ziek werd - je heb zelf ingezien dat 't de éénige uit komst is [...].’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 31 May 1901 , Amsterdam , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xliii} ‘dat is wel erg voor iemand die zoo van het leven houdt – dat ‘t ‘n uitkomst lijkt om er mee uit te scheiden.’ - Willem Witsen to Arnold Paul Constant Ising, 17 October 1902, The Hague, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xliv} ‘mijn besten vriend dien 'k verlies; hij is de éénige geweest die mij in mijn gezicht ongelijk gaf, altijd - en precies durfde zeggen wat hij er van vond.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 26 June 1904, [Amsterdam] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlv} ‘k durf geen ets meer aankijken die aan de muur hangt en hun portretjes niet en niets wat me aan de Zonneberg herinnert, je weet niet hoe 'k leef en hoe 'k mezelf vervloek om alles wat 'k je aangedaan heb. Maar 't is geen zwakte en toegeven - 't is die afschuwelijke natuur en 't gaat altijd door.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 3 December 1902, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlvi} ‘Door al die etsen die 'k nu aan 't bijten ben, ben 'k voortdurend in Indische herinneringen, maar dat geeft alleen maar 't verlangen om daar weer te werken.’ - Willem Witsen to Isaac Israëls, 23 and 24 January 1922, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlvii} ‘Telkens als ik Uwe etsen weer bekijk, vind ik ze weer mooier. Zij brengen mij geheel in de streek terug waar ik dikwijls heb gewandeld van '65 tot '70. Dank dus ook hiervoor dat Ge uit Uw etswerk juist dit voor mij uitzocht.’ - August Allebé to Willem Witsen, 30 November 1895, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlviii} ‘je moet ver weg zijn om die amsterdamsche, wimpiesche herinneringen melancholiek aangedaan te genieten.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, 4 August [1896], IJmuiden , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlix} ‘Vandaag heb ik een heel groot genot gehad; ik liep zonder erg langs Wisselingh en zag op-eens je Parkstraat. Ik ontroerde, wat ik nog nooit gehad heb met eenig schilderij. Ik geloof dat 't het oude van het atelier was, wat opkwam of liever opschoot... die huizen zoo ver weg, waar je nooit komt, waar je nooit op let, die stille achtergrondhuizen, die áltijd zoo ver gestaan hebben van je leven en nou het veld in sneeuw, het prachtige boschje en de boerderij, ... maar het ligt alles ver af, eerst heb je het groote, loyale ruit en het is hier het oue atelier. [...] Het is zoo jammer, dat je het niet zelf houdt, beste Wim, want het is toch veel méér dan de menschen denken en een remeniscens van je leven, zooals je getuurd hebt zoo dikwijls, denkende over de dingen, vèr weidend het oog over het uitgestrekt gezicht. Voor mij, die mijn oog zoo weinig heft naar mijn eigen mooie omgeving is je schilderij een revelatie en de puurheid van je artiste-leven komt mij klaarder dan ooit aan den dag. Maar dit laatste is maar een met de pen gemaakte reflexie of zoo iets...: ik ben méér dan vroeger van je gaan houen van daag.’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker aan Willem Witsen, [December 1893?], [Amsterdam] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^l ‘Ik heb van daag den heelen dag geleefd in de heerlijke zomersche zonnige dagen van verleden tijd mijn liefste lieveling, - 'k heb zitten etsen op diezelfde plankjes van toen en 'k heb de eerste afdrukken gemaakt van de fotografien - 't is wel niet te vergelijken die twee dingen - 't eerste is 't weer op leven in de zelfde mooiheid toèn al gevoeld; 't weer terug [xxxx] verder gaan in 'n mooiheid van mezelf waar niemand iets meê te maken heeft behalve mijn Beb die zoo trouw-rustig bij haar jongen zat als hij in z'n werk was - en 't andere is 't terug zien van bijna vergeten détails; - détails die misschien schade doen, - ten minste dikwijls hinderlijk zijn - aan de geheele herinnering van in jezelf, maar die soms toch ook heel prettig aan doen.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [September 1892?], [Amsterdam] , in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{li} ‘En dan is er nog een groot bezwaar dat alleen mij geldt: àl de herinneringen. Wat dat eene woord zeggen wil in al z'n beteekenis, 'k geloof dat weinig menschen dat weten. Als ik er mij in verdiep is 't nooit zonder dichtgeknepen keel.’ - Willem Witsen to J.H.E. Arntzenius-Witsen, 23 April 1910, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lii} ‘Daar denk 'k trouwens dikwijls aan hoe onveranderd 't allemaal is en tòch zoo vreeselijk anders. Gisteren met dien aanhoudenden regen en plassen in de lanen: precies 'tzelfde, de toon, de stemming, kleur, geur alles, als dien dag toen wij in dien regen zaten te schilderen.’ - Willem Witsen to J.H.E. Arntzenius-Witsen, 3 juni 1910, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{liii} ‘En hij had ongestoord kunnen lezen wat een goede vriend, een jong schilder als hij zelf, hem schreef. In langen tijd had hij niet zoo'n prettige boodschap van huis gekregen, van uit het Noord, waar 't nu winter was. De brief verhaalde van sneeuw en ijs.... koud.... over schaatsenrijden op een buitenplaatsvijver.... over een bekend wit huis [Ewijkshoeve, red.], nu kil en stil tusschen zijn zwarte verkleumde boomen.... en van een hei vol sneeuw.... wijd wit. En daardoor klaagden zachte herinneringen aan vroeger samenzijn.’ - Jac. van Looy, ‘Gekken’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 5, Amsterdam 1890, p. 14.

^{liv} ‘[...] de zilvergrijs hangende sigarenrook, het zoo gedempt, uit de witte ballonnen dalende electriche licht de jonge kunstenaars hielp om uit de enge grenzen van hun beperkt aldaags-leven in gedachte naar de ruimere, ja onbegrensde rijken van herinnering en verbeelding uit te vliegen.’ - Arthur van Schendel, ‘In memoriam G.W. Dijsselhof’, in: Harry G.M. Prick and Lodewijk van Deyssel, *De briefwisseling tussen Arij Prins en Lodewijk van Deyssel*, The Hague 1971, p. 13.

^{lv} ‘Gelukkig verdwijden al die trieste steegjes, waar nooit een zonnestraaltje in de woningen kon doordringen! [...] Toch blijft er tusschen al die ten doode opgeschreven wijken genoeg over, dat de herinnering levendig houdt aan vervlogen eeuwen.’ - N.V. ORION-FILMFABRIEK, The Hague, youtube.com/verdwenenstad (retrieved March 2017).

^{lvi} ‘In het kort zal ik je even op je belangstellende vraag antwoorden en je zeggen dat mijn aanstaande vrouwtje even als ik zelf een aller treurigst huwelijk achter den rug heeft. Zij is gescheiden van den man die niets van haar begreep en haar niet liefhad.’ - Willem Witsen to Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos, 7 April 1907, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lvii} ‘in de afd. grafische werken, waar 'k de eenige Europeaan ben.’ - Willem Witsen to J.H.E. Arntzenius-Witsen, 23 April 1915, San Francisco, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lviii} ‘In plaats van onze oude vrindschap, zie ik van jullie niets meer dan af en toe een snel voorbijgaande schim of je bent met den een of ander trawant of voor een feestviering. Overigens gaat alles hoe langer hoe haastiger; straks schiet je me nog alleen maar in een auto voorbij met Marie. Dan hebben we b.v. een afspraak op den hoek van de Javastraat; ik op 't trottoir en jij in een reis-wagen. Waar zijn de tijden, dat ik ook in mijn huis nog eens tijd had met je te praten?’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, [July 1909?], [Den Haag], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lix} ‘Vin je dat niet ondernemend op mijn ouden dag? Ik hoop er te kunnen werken, maar moet dat afwachten, 't kan meê en tegen vallen.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 27 September 1920, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lx} ‘Den volgenden dag werden wij met een auto gehaald om de oude stad te zien. Mr. & Mevr. Teillers (de secr. v.d. kunstkring) brachten ons in de oudste gedeelten. - Ik heb daar stof gevonden voor een heele serie etsen. Die nauwe, vuile straatjes met die open huisjes en de vele inlanders meest half naakt of met kleurige baadjes zijn buitengewoon schilderachtig en origineel (in reproductie heb 'k nooit zoo iets gezien) en de avond stemming met hier en daar 'n olielampje in de donkere huisjes, maakte 't nog vreemder en geheimzinniger.’ - Willem Witsen to Isaac Israëls, 27 November 1920, Buitenzorg [in the former Dutch East Indies], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lxi} ‘Het is de kunst van een aristocratisch zwijger, van een innerlijk eenzame, die rusteloos naar het statelijke haakt.’ - Jan Piet Veth, *De Groot* 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 66.

CHAPTER THREE

Witsen's artistry and artistic perceptions

'It is rare that someone says nothing more and nothing less than he has to say, in their own way.'ⁱ

- W. J. van Westervoorde

*

This chapter discusses the various aspects of Witsen's artistry and will form a more theoretical basis for the last chapter, which analyses a selection of etchings in depth. The following – rather poetical – letter Witsen wrote to Betsy from London in 1890 provides important information about his artistry:

'Dear Beb, London is so beautiful at the moment – it is covered with snow Beb, and not bright white snow, but a soft and warm kind of snow that continually falls from a dark but transparent sky, hanging low in the streets, between the houses, which vastly stand as colossal black-grey masses of stone in that foggy air. [...] Tomorrow I will start to work out the beautiful things I have seen today – because you understand how enriched I feel – it is curious that I always get drawn back to get my old familiar subjects – without thinking I felt: O how beautiful would it be at Waterloo bridge and then the Thames and Trafalgar Square [...]. But for the bourgeois it would only seem like the same subject and frankly I don't care. I do love the dark crowded mass at The Strand f.e. and Oxford Street, but I do not see in them what I see in other things. A unity of dark shades, of grey and lovely soft lights – a mood of serious, heavy beauty. Not dry, not gloomy, never dreary, but wonderfully rich and full and serious as black chrysanthemums and white, white flowers.'ⁱⁱ

The letter starts with Witsen's fascination with the atmospheric effect of the seasons and their weather conditions, especially snow (see fig. 15). Witsen wrote to Kloos: 'I once heard that one of my forefathers used to paint, he preferably made snow views and he loved to etch.'ⁱⁱⁱ The element of snow will be further discussed in chapter four. This interest in day part, season and weather condition creates an endless variety for one subject. The second aspect that can be detected from the letter, and can be linked to the first aspect, is that Witsen often returned to the same subject to experience them in different states (such as dawn and dusk, sun and rain) and moods. Witsen practically always worked with preliminary studies.¹ Early studies were mainly done in black chalk, occasionally supplemented with white chalk for highlights and later studies were mostly done with pencil (see fig. 16&17). Timmerman remarks that Witsen 'digested' his subjects slowly and affectionately.² Witsen sometimes played with an idea for years before he started executing it. For instance, he wrote: 'I am currently working on a large painting of the Waal and Binnenkant, that up to now occupied me for eight or ten years.'^{iv} Witsen often complained about 'that damned slow working - nothing gets finished'.^v Yet, gaining a profound and almost scientific understanding of his subject was necessary for him to make the most of his work.

¹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 183.

² Timmerman 1912 (see note 14, *chapter one*), p. 15.

This approach is inconsistent with the fleeting impressions of the Impressionists, as he is often labelled. Witsen was not too fond of these labels, as he wrote in November 1886:

'It is remarkable that everybody is an impressionist or academist nowadays. The first means that one tries to neglect drawing and shape as much as possible, has a very rough handling of paint and preferably speaks of 'the modern theory of mood colours'. The second hides much ignorance, misunderstanding and insignificance behind certain skills. Expression is for the few, something that is nothing for the most.'^{vi}

Many of Witsen's subjects are executed in etchings, paintings and watercolours, often with the exact same composition (see for example fig. 18&19). He wrote to Tholen: 'I completely agree with you that the right way to draw a subject in nature, like you said: is to process in oneself.'^{vii} The Rijksmuseum digitalized Witsen's sketchbooks, which provide a wonderful insight in the mind and the hand of the artist. Witsen's paintings and watercolours will further be left out of consideration in this research.



Fig. 15. Willem Witsen, *Snow in the forest, Ede*, ca. 1906, etching and aquatint, 31,8 x 39,3 cm, Prentenkabinet Leiden. Source: Author.

In the last part of the letter to Betsy, Witsen's fascination with working in black and white and the application tones in 'dark shades of grey and soft lights'. Draayer-de-Haas argues that his etchings show 'how much more comprehension and sense of beauty is needed to understand the black and white and how it is possible to express every affection in black and white.'^{viii}

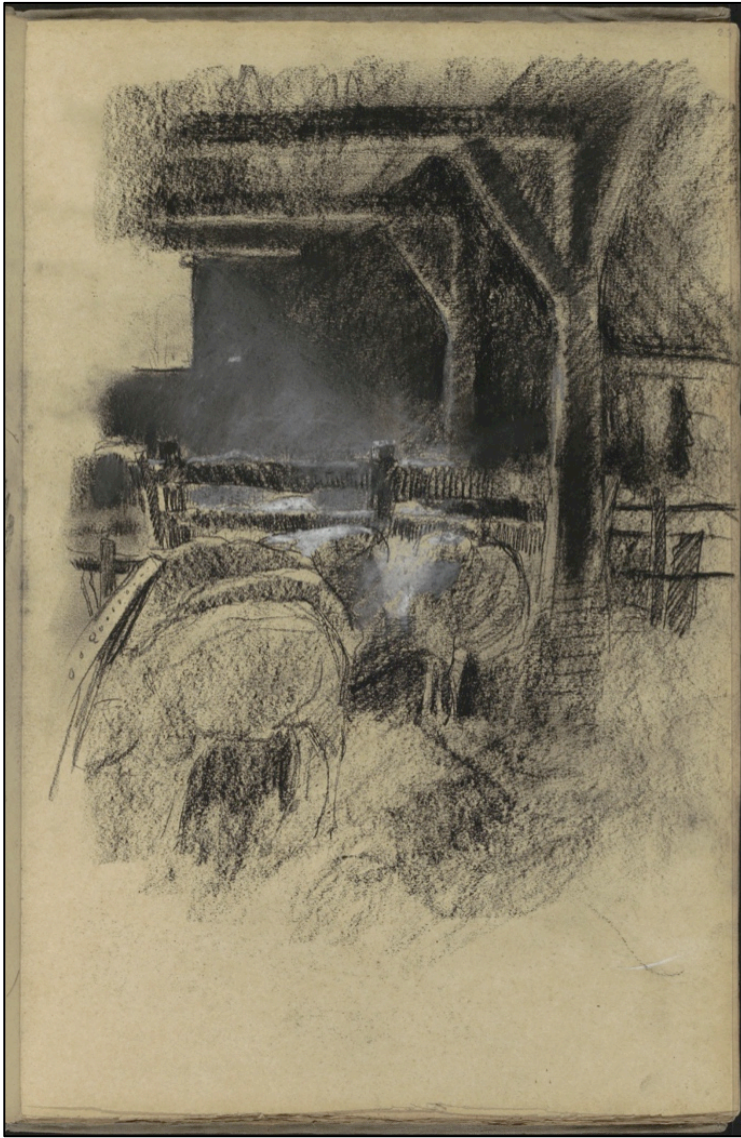


Fig. 16. Willem Witsen, *Interior of a sheepfold*, ca. 1884-1887, drawing in sketchbook, black and white chalk on paper, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 17. Willem Witsen, *The foot of the Montelbaanstoren*, ca. 1897, drawing in sketchbook, pencil on paper, 51 cm x b 58,5 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 18. Willem Witsen, *Storehouses at an Amsterdam canal on Uilenburg*, ca. 1911-1912, oil on canvas, 52 x 42 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 19. Willem Witsen, *Uilenburg II*, ca. 1911, oil on canvas, 46,9 x 35,7 cm, Prentenkabinet Leiden. Source: geheugenvannederland.nl

Furthermore, Witsen wrote in the aforementioned letter to Betsy that he prefers other things to the 'crowded mass'. What is most remarkable about Witsen's etchings is the absence of people in his cityscapes. Where his friends Breitner and Israëls depicted the volatile chaos of everyday life, where one could almost here the chattering and laughing of the figures, Witsen always managed to completely ignore the chaos of the cities in his work. His etchings, as well as his paintings, always depict the stillness of the city. Hammacher connects this aspect with his character: 'Witsen's nature is difficult to guess. His nature appears in the development of his motives. The figure disappears from his artistry, from his etchings.'³ Witsen's comfort with or even attraction to silence becomes clear in the following expression: 'that silence in such a village at night, it's just unbelievable; when I pay attention to it I always get the sensation of being alone on a deserted island or God knows where.'^{ix} Witsen would probably have agreed with the Flemish poet and novel writer Willem Elsschot (1882-1960) that 'silence cannot be improved'.⁴ Arjan Peters, currently literary critic and editor of the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, rightfully noticed that the figures in Witsen's cityscapes are just 'passers-by with a blank 'unfilled' face, negligible creatures'.^x The sketches of his cityscapes of Amsterdam suggest that Witsen very purposely left the faces blank. The tiny figures primary function seemingly is to display the imposing scale of their surroundings with their nothingness (see for example fig. 29). This could almost be interpreted as a romantic notion of the sublime. Peters suggested that this act – perhaps unconsciously – displays Witsen's personality:

'Just when his fellow man is reduced to an anonymous smudge, his inner self became visible. From his paintings we do not get to know 'the human being', whoever that may be; but we do get to know the one, who showed us considerably more of himself than he – and many connoisseurs after him – suspected.'^{xi}

It is remarkable that Witsen's aversion of the human did not lead him to focus on vast landscapes in, for example, the spirit of Hercules Segers.⁵ He occasionally made an attempt, but these results not necessarily do justice to his oeuvre (see fig. 20). About the landscapes in the Dutch East Indies Witsen wrote: 'Yes, the landscape in the Indies is extraordinarily beautiful -, often heavy and impressive but usually not attractive in colour and mood. I believe that it is more literary than picturesquely beautiful, isn't it?'^{xii} In his attempt to depict the vast landscape, Witsen often placed a mountain on the foreground seemingly to avoid distance (see fig. 21). This seems like an avoidance of the romantic notion of the sublime and has a more direct feel to it. Perhaps this is also why he prefers the high horizons for his land workers and the close ups of his cityscapes (see chapter four). His work is often much more intimate and attainable.

³ 'Witsen's natuur is moeilijk te raden. Ook in de ontwikkeling van zijn motieven roert zich zijn aard. De figuur verdwijnt uit zijn schilderschap, uit zijn etsen.' - Hammacher 1948 (see note 75, *chapter one*), p. 6.

⁴ Arjan Peters, 'Superbe zwijger', in: *De Volkskrant*, August 2003, see: <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/superbe-zwijger~a722539/>> (retrieved March 2017).

⁵ Presumably, Witsen was not familiar with the work of Segers, as he is not mentioned in *De Nieuwe Gids* or his correspondence. The Movement of Eighty circle would presumably have strongly admired his work, although he worked from fantasy.



Fig. 20. Willem Witsen, *Heath landscape*, ca. 1885, etching and aquatint, 16,1 x 24 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 21. Willem Witsen, *View from Hotel Bellevue at the houses at the Kali [river], drying laundry at the foreground, Buitenzorg*, ca. 1921, etchings and aquatint, 25 x 31,7 cm, Prentenkabinet Leiden, Source: Author.

Photography

Besides etching and painting, Witsen was interested in the medium of photography. It is interesting to have a brief look at his use of this medium, because it tells us more about his artistic eye or, to use Witsen's words, how he 'works with judgment and choice'.^{xiii} Important to consider is that photographing was a very expensive activity at that time and thus not an option for many artists.⁶ It is again due to the financial position of his family, that Witsen was able to explore this facet of art so thoroughly. Between 1891 until circa 1905, he made about thousand photographs.⁷ During his lifetime, the photographs were not considered as a part of his artistic oeuvre, as they were not meant for the art market and thus were not exhibited.⁸

Witsen's fascination for the medium contradicts Baudelaire's and Zola's opinion about 'the mechanical impersonality of a photograph', which, in their opinion, lacked the important ingredient of temperament (see p. 18). Initially, Witsen seems to agree with this, as he stated about Bastien-Lepage in 1885: 'What distinguishes a painting by him of photography to nature that was his sentiment or rather his temperament, was it not?'^{xiv9} However, Witsen's images indicate that this does not necessarily need to be the case and it appears that the circle of the Movement of Eighty did not agree with this assumption either, as J. Jessurun de Mesquita was called a '*stemmingsfotograaf*' in 1888 (literally translated as a mood photographer, see fig. 4).^{xv} Witsen owned a guide for the amateur photographer (*Gids voor den Amateur-Fotograaf*, 1889) by Jessurun de Mesquita, but it is unlikely that Witsen had studied directly with him. Jessurun de Mesquita started with photography in 1888 until his death in April 1890, while Witsen was overseas.¹⁰ Witsen also studied the publication *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (1889) by the English photographer Henry Emerson. As it appears from the correspondence, Witsen's interest in photography was first sparked in London:

'I am going to photograph with [engineer Albert] Kapteyn in the city and on the Thames and such. He is starting to feel something for the foggy weather in London. They used to make fun of me and thought it prove of gloom that I prefer to make such grey things, or black, as you know – and now he genuinely starts to realize that it has nothing to do with melancholy and dreariness etc. that it is not an anxiety issue as he thought and he even wants to try to make something out of London in foggy weather.'^{xvi}

However, Witsen truly started to exploit the medium of photography when he came back in Amsterdam. Similar to many other amateur photographers at the turn of the century, Witsen choose portraiture of family and friends as his primary subject. However, his very intimate depictions of the different moods and characters were unique. Looking at these photographs, just as reading his correspondence, can feel like invading his privacy because his attention

⁶ Vergeer 1985 (see note 45, *chapter one*), p. 16.

⁷ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 110.

⁸ Also, there are uncertainties regarding the attribution to Witsen the bequeathed photos in the Witsenhuis. De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), pp. 112-113.

⁹ It is interesting to realize that Bastien-Lepage already used photography for the development of his painted compositions, as well as the documentation of people and places he visited.

Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Against the Modern. Dagnan-Bouveret and the Transformation of the Academic Tradition*, New York 2002, p. 6.

¹⁰ See: J. Jessurun de Mesquita, *Gids voor den Amateur-Fotograaf*, Amsterdam 1889.

and affection for the captured individuals is clearly visible. Witsen was of the opinion that professional photographers ruined their photographs with staging, making adjustments to poses or unnatural effects like overexposure.¹¹ Indeed, in the above statement, his artistic preferences come forward: personal, honest (no retouches) and somewhat obscure (see for example fig. 22&23).

In contrast to fellow artists, such as Breitner (who photographed between 1889-1910) and Isaac Israëls, Witsen rarely used his photographs as a tool for his other work. He considered it a fully independent form of art. Witsen preferred a dark background for his portraits and to portray his sitters in an introvert state or lost in thought. The play of light and shadow was predominant and often determined the angle and/or pose. However, the images maintain certain ease. In his self-portraits from 1892, Witsen visibly experimented with light, composition, sharpness and blur (see fig. 9&10, chapter two). This approach results in the viewer's sense that Witsen was an artistic photographer and at the same time a photographic artist. As Van Deyssel wrote in his *Gedenkschriften* (1962): 'From these photographs appears that as photographer cannot always be an artist, thus the artist yet is the best photographer.'^{xvii} This concept will be discussed further in the following chapter.

The portraits Witsen made of his friends in both photographs and etchings could be seen as a compensation for the absence of people in his cityscapes. The French portrait photographer Nadar (pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820-1910) stated that he could make the finest portraits of people he knew best.¹² This was presumably also true for Witsen. Witsen found that the photographer should comprehend the portrayed and should be able to express his sitter's character. This medium again for Witsen involved thorough examination and deep understanding of his subject. Although Witsen was – to my knowledge – not familiar with the work of Nadar, he would probably have strongly agreed with the following statements of the photographer:

'The theory of photography can be learned in an hour and the elements of practicing it in a day. What cannot be learned ... is the sense of light, an artistic appreciation for the effects produced by different and combined sources of light, the application of this or that effect according to the physiognomy that, as an artist, you must reproduce. What can be learned even less is the moral understanding of the subject— that instant tact which puts you in communication with the model, helps you to sum him up, guides you to his habits, his ideas, according to his character, and enables you to give, not an indifferent reproduction, banal or accidental, such as any laboratory assistant could achieve, but the most convincing and sympathetic likeness, an intimate resemblance.'¹³

It is interesting to read that Witsen's experience in the end was the most important to him: 'It was so incredibly beautiful today throughout the city and even if those photos fail - I have all these things in my head.'^{xviii}

¹¹ Vergeer 1985 (see note 45, *chapter one*), p. 16.

Pia Amade and Ingeborg Th. Leijerzapf, 'Willem Witsen', in: *Fotolexicon*, Jaargang 5, Nr. 8 (1988).

¹² Félix Nadar (translated by Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou), *When I Was a Photographer*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2015, p. 21.

¹³ Nadar 2015 (see note 12), p. xix.



Fig. 22. Willem Witsen,
Portrait, c. 1892/93,
Prentenkabinet, Universiteit
Leiden. Source: Digital
Special Collections.



Fig. 23. Willem Witsen,
Portrait of Willem Kloos,
c. 1892/93, Prentenkabinet,
Universiteit Leiden. Source:
Digital Special Collections.

Technical curiosity

The following part is not so much to examine the precise effect of the techniques Witsen used for his etchings, but is intended to show what attracted him to the use of this medium and how he approached it. Berckenhoff described the practise of etching as ‘a difficult and treacherous art, even though she appears with supposed modesty! Etching is difficult due to its seemingly simplicity and naïve sincerity’.^{xix} As already quoted in the introduction to this study, Berckenhoff also stated that the distance between the artist and his work is nowhere shorter and their involvement in no other discipline more direct, meaning that with etching the actions of the artist is more definitive; unwanted movements are more difficult to hide. Moreover, Berckenhoff also stated that the means of etching are scarcer and simpler and therefore the artist requires a more powerful ability to express. For this reason of limitation, working in black and white was particularly appreciated. Printmaker Lodewijk Bosch (1893-1980) stated that working in black and white requires more thought and is thus deemed more abstract.¹⁴ It was considered to be a more intellectually challenging medium.

Already in January 1884, when still at the academy, Witsen realized the importance of having his own press to control this black and white rendering. He wrote to Veth: ‘I assume that you will find objections in pressing, but I believe that – although I am technically less capable than you – we can learn fast.’^{xx} The way of applying ink and pressing was essential for the visual outcome of the print and Witsen was often unsatisfied when others printed his work. For instance, he wrote to Zilcken about his contribution for the Etsclub in 1891:

‘From Mr. Mouton [publisher Mouton & Co in The Hague, red.] I received the samples of my etching for the album, which are printed with the most horrible iron-like black ink – I cannot have them in the portfolio like this; the prints are not that satisfying any way. I have asked him to send back the plate if there is no other possibility – or otherwise let Bouwens [J. Bouwens, printer from Brussels, red.] print them - see for yourself, this is not acceptable.’^{xxi}

Veth (and other print makers) acknowledged the fact that being able to use a press is beneficial for the artistic process, as he wrote to Witsen in 1885:

‘For a couple of days I just focused on etching and envy you with your press, because I am touching in the dark and still I have to create whatever is possible from nature, because when I send the plate to Brussels [where it would be printed by J. Bouwens, red.], it will be too late to correct when I get it back because I will be away by then.’^{xxii}

Just like his photographs, Witsen printed his etchings so that he could have complete control over the final result. Already from 1884, Witsen owned a press and had printed his early work.¹⁵ In London Witsen also had his own press, which Tholen had sent to him. After his return from London in 1891, Witsen started to treat his plates more precariously and work in different phases, as he described to his wife: ‘I am also finished with the aquatint on the plates and tomorrow I am going to print them again and finish them up with dry needle etcetera.’^{xxiii}

¹⁴ Lodewijk Bosch, *Nederlandsche prentkunst sedert 1900. Etsen en gravures*, Amsterdam 1927, p. 7.

¹⁵ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 184.

Van der Wiel described Witsen as ‘the master of combining’.¹⁶ Besides dry point, he experimented with vernis mou (soft ground etching), aquatint, sulphur tint and occasionally mezzotint.¹⁷ He often applied different techniques onto one plate. It is important to realize that this labour-intensive process requires patience and determination. Witsen wrote: ‘I have been busy all day with the photographs and etchings - it is enormously time-consuming all the printing, fixing, washing and pasting from the previous day.’^{xxxiv}

Printmaking is also a very physically demanding process, which takes up a lot of time and energy. Furthermore, the process was not completely without danger; Witsen shattered his left thumb under the printing press in 1897.¹⁸ When the art dealer Van Wisselingh contracted Witsen, they agreed that Witsen could produce ten or twelve *épreuves d’artiste*.¹⁹ In 1908, he had his own pressroom at the Oosterpark, which enabled him to revise and/or reprint some of his older plates. However, it was still his intention maintain exclusiveness and not to produce many prints. When his assistant made 24 prints of *Shepherd behind his flock of sheep on the heath*, Witsen labelled him as an ‘idiot’ in his documentation (see fig. 24).²⁰



Fig. 24. Willem Witsen (attributed), *Stronk [Witsen’s assistant] in the pressroom*, 1890-1900, daylight collodion silver print on photo paper on cardboard, 8,4 × 11 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

¹⁶ Van der Wiel 1988 (see note 16, *chapter one*), p. 32.

¹⁷ Timmerman 1912 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 9.

¹⁸ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 184.

¹⁹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 52.

²⁰ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 197.

Witsen mastered the practise of printing to an extent that fellow artists, among them Bauer and Breitner, trusted him to print their etchings.²¹ When Zilcken, his biggest concurrent for this medium, wanted to know his secret, Witsen openly replied:

'I don't have a secret from Bouwens – I used to get ink from him, but for the last two years I am using another make [...] - it's just miserable that printers always mess up everything [...] Of those oils I have no knowledge; I always messed with them, but I'm sure that you know more than I do. You probably also use roasted linseed oil: two kinds, one thin and one thick great variety; the latter they call strong burnt oil in London (I let it ship from London just as the different colour inks - separately). Mixing is obviously a matter of taste; Bouwens e.g. used cadmium and vermilion in his ink - I can not stand it and only use sienna's and black.'^{xxv}

Another remarkable aspect from Witsen's etchings was the relatively large sizes of the plates. Particularly between 1901 and 1905, he worked on a series of cityscapes in Amsterdam on plates with the enormous size of fifty by seventy centimetres.²² These considerable prints were highly valued and respected. When Witsen sent Tholen some etchings as a present, he received a thank you note that said:

'When I imagine how difficult it must be to make a good print of those giant plates and how something like this represents a livelihood for you, then we say: you make us bashful with your generosity! I constantly admire the painstaking labour and skill and beautiful qualities.'^{xxvi}

From November 1910 up until the New Year, Witsen briefly experimented with colour etchings. It is important to realise that by this time De Nederlandsche Etsclub was discontinued for almost fifteen years and that only few of Witsen's colleagues still concerned themselves with etching. The following letter shows his on going excitement about the material challenges:

'I am working on a series of colour etchings and you cannot imagine how great of a pleasure it is to work with a new and absolutely beautiful procedure. As far as you know me, you will understand that I do it my own way and the amount of work, not willing to leave anything to the printer, the case as usual, is extraordinarily hard. But I have results and that is so much. Not that I anticipate to have achieved something yet! But I see strong potential. The process is, as I conceive it, extremely complicated and difficult, but beautiful and something that completely stands on its own. I am very curious what you will say: soon the first samples will go to Het Spui. But even if it is practically a disappointment, for myself it remains, in terms of process, something very beautiful.'^{xxvii}

²¹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 187.

²² De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), pp. 212-214.



Fig. 25. Willem Witsen, *Barges at the IJ with the Lutheran church*, ca. 1910-1911, vernis mou, etching and aquatint in colour, 29,3 x 40 cm. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 227.

Judging from the few colour etchings he made and the fact that Witsen did not attempt to make colour etchings again, we might believe that the prints were eventually a rather disappointing result.²³ The prints lack the powerful expression of the strongly contrasted black and white etchings. Boon suggested that Witsen's more sober view on life made a return to his more impressionistic style impossible.²⁴

A variety of reasons might be suggested to explain Witsen's specific interest in the technical side of this medium.²⁵ Perhaps due to the importance of aesthetics implied by the 'Dutch' *l'art pour l'art* principle, Witsen was strongly focussed on the visual effects of a work of art. As an individualist, Witsen was constantly challenging himself as an artist. He was an intelligent man and found stimulation in the complex processes of etching that required focus and persistence. The physical interaction also appealed to him. Somewhat similar to playing the cello, etching was a fascinating collaboration between body and mind for Witsen.

²³ *Schuiten in het IJ I*, *Turfschepen in het IJ II* and *Miller, door closed*, all three from ca. 1910-1911.

²⁴ Hammacher 1948 (see note 75, *chapter one*), p. 20.

²⁵ See for example De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 187.

Witsen as art critic

The following part will examine Witsen's ideas about art in his criticisms, which display his artistic perceptions. Already in the early start of his career, Witsen seems to have clearly understood the principles of the Movement of Eighty. The early correspondence between Witsen and his close friend Van Looy shows Witsen's strong opinions and ideals.²⁶ When he visited Paris in May 1882, he wrote Van Looy: 'What is first of all noticeable is that there is something here that is completely missing with us [in the Netherlands, red.], namely spirit. *Enfin*, this is well known.'^{xxviii} In another letter to Van Looy, he stated about Millet, Delacroix and Rembrandt that 'their power is within their temperament, they have detached themselves from everything and gave themselves as they were, grand and delightful in their naivety.'^{xxix}²⁷ The reference to the artist's detachment immediately hints to the notion of the previously discussed hyper individualism that Witsen assumed every great artist had. With the use of the word 'temperament' the influence of Zola is evident. Witsen also applied the typical vocabulary of the Movement of Eighty in his early articles (1887), using words such as 'moods' and 'sensations':

'Or did not they all experienced moods, that is, the most intense sensations of everything that makes a painting into a work of art, of lines, shapes, colours. Were they not all men like giants, who, severally, painted what they felt, what they saw, that and nothing else.'^{xxx}

However, in his debut as art critic in *De Nieuwe Gids* in 1886, Witsen already expressed a strong individual opinion:

'An artist is some one higher than a regular human being, for the reason that his soul receives more frequent and more powerful impressions, for which he seeks individual expression in certain forms. He is the privileged that is posited by nature above his fellow creatures - who does not exist for their convenience, but should be considered by them as their superior, from whom they have a lot to learn, and who is able to give them pleasure and a richer life, if they are willing to understand him. To reach this proper understanding the sensible art critic can be very useful.'^{xxxi}

Unlike Witsen, who reached out to his fellow human beings who were 'willing to understand' the artist, Veth initially did not consider art criticism as a – somewhat dominant – form of public service. It can be stated that Witsen preferred the lower level of 'serving' criticism, in which the beholder had to discover in what way the emotions of the artist have shaped his work and how they can benefit from discovering these emotions (see chapter one, p. 22).

²⁶ For a throughout discussion (in Dutch) of their correspondence see: Linda Modderkolk, *Een zekere aanvechting tot vertrouwelijkheid. De briefwisseling tussen Willem Witsen en Jacobus van Looy*, published on textualscholarship.nl in April 2011 (last visited in March 2017). As Modderkolk noticed, the artists are both in completely opposite situations during this period. The fifteen-year-old Van Looy won the Prix de Rome and was travelling through Italy, Spain and Morocco, while Witsen was mainly working at the Ewijkshoeve. The physical distance presumably made it easier for Witsen to open up.

²⁷ Witsen was not only interested in Millet as an artist, but especially his reasons to paint. About his work he once stated that they were academic and had inharmonious colours. De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 75.

Veth insisted on the higher level of subjective criticism, with the goal to evoke a similar mood or sensation in his writings. Therefore, in January 1887, Veth requested not to publish articles under a joint pseudonym anymore, stating that ‘the articles from W. and me should be separated because (literally) “we are starting to differ from opinion”’.^{xxxii} Kloos stimulated this dissension, as he wrote to Witsen: ‘How few people understand that different judgements from two artists next to each other have value as an expression of each temperament and way of looking? See to move Veth that he does not enter into controversy against his fellow critics.’^{xxxiii}

Veth is seen as the most prominent Dutch art critic of the last decades of the nineteenth century. However, in his article ‘Art Criticism in *De Nieuwe Gids*’, art historian Carel Blotkamp argues that Witsen had at least a small share in building a theoretical foundation for the new art criticism.²⁸ The fact that his career as an art critic was of brief duration and that his oeuvre is not substantial (he wrote ten major articles in total) is, according to Blotkamp, probably the reason for his relative modest ascription in the history of Dutch art criticism. Furthermore, it seems that Witsen received considerable discouragement from his friends. In November 1886, Witsen to Van Looy: ‘I had to promise you not to produce reflections on art, and I was just getting there.’^{xxxiv} To Veth he precariously wrote: ‘I have a piece for the N.G. if it will be accepted, which is not likely – I am not sure whether I would send it.’^{xxxv}

In Witsen’s opinion, the two most important aspects of art criticism are basing on a sound judgement of its merits and approaching the artist through his work.²⁹ In the course of his career, he tended to lean more to the first aspect. In his article ‘An Art Critic’ from April 1887, Witsen pleads for analysis as a form of art criticism. Chemist and literary man Chap van Deventer (1860-1931) responded indignantly:

‘You wrote something in *De Nieuwe Gids* that you should not have. O please, if you start philosophizing again, let me read it first, otherwise you will ruin all the pieces I still have to write myself about the unity of form and content and about the meaning of modern art. You have sinned against Article 1 of healthy criticism: one should judge by impression. You are judging by analysis, and that is wrong.’^{xxxvi}

Witsen got increasingly fed up with philosophising in the cafes of Amsterdam. Already in March 1885, Witsen wrote to Van Looy: ‘I just came from Amsterdam where I saturated myself with potent theories and theoretical filth, bourgeois mindedness and stinking smoke.’^{xxxvii} Meanwhile at Ewijkshoeve, Witsen had the much needed time and space to ponder about life. In March 1886, Witsen wrote Van Looy about his ambitions:

‘Furthermore, I have the pretention to work more frequently and more serious than the gentlemen in the city who are happy with any distraction and grasp every opportunity to waste their valuable time, which they needed badly for their work, on dilettante hobbies in order to seem more than they are – but do not look at them too closely – then you will be scared by so much stupid conceit or quasi innocent vanity that deludes the public with much skill but in reality is o so little.’^{xxxviii}

²⁸ Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9, *chapter one*), pp. 116-136.

²⁹ Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9, *chapter one*), pp. 116-136.

In November of that year, he wrote that 'the years at Lucas, were a very complicated childish time for me, of which I do not like to think.'^{xxxix} In another letter from 1885 it becomes more clear that Witsen soon differed from opinion, laying emphasis on this visual elements:

'What a rareness when someone does not look at the representation! Verwey claimed the other day (at Kloos) that a painter as well as a poet started his work because of the subject (as representation) and that colour and lines, conception and everything was subordinate to it; I told him that last week I saw a guy shitting in the woods that struck me as something really beautiful, due to character, expression, lines and especially colour - damn, it was so real.'^{xl}

In 1894, Tideman wrote a piece with considerable criticism of artists.³⁰ It was dedicated to Witsen, with whom Tideman stayed for a long time.³¹ This suggests Witsen's negative stance towards modern art and again he received a lot of criticism. Reynaerts argues that it reflects Witsen's typical insistence that he still insisted on his own ideas about art. His emphasis on the dissection of an artwork and the analysis of compositional structures can be found in his balanced compositions and the study of his subject (see for example fig. 18&19). In his sketchbook it becomes clear that Witsen occupied himself with composition from an early stage of his artistic career (see fig. 26).



Fig. 26. Willem Witsen, *Cattle driver leaning on his baton (sketchbook sheet)*, ca. 1884-1887, black chalk on blue paper, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

³⁰ See: P. Tideman, 'Van Israëls tot Derkinderen. Voor Willem Witsen', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 9, Amsterdam 1894, pp. 286-296.

³¹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 46.

Performance anxiety

The previous chapter displayed Witsen's insecurity involving his personality, circle and first marriage. In this part, his insecurity considering his work will be further discussed. As a perfectionist, Witsen himself has always been his hardest critic. With the meaningful pseudonym Verberchem (a conflation of 'verberg hem', meaning 'hide him' in Dutch³²), Witsen reviewed his own contribution to the biannual exhibition of *De Nederlandsche Etsclub* in July 1888.³³

'Witsen has sent many black etchings; too heavy, too dingy, as prof. Thijm would say. His etchings are often reminiscent of crayon drawings that have fallen into oil: a personal view on etchings in 'weeken grond' [meaning in 'soft ground', red.] - it is the work of someone with a lazy mind, who does not or with great difficulty says what he wants.'^{xli}

The criticism in *De Nieuwe Gids* contributed to Witsen's insecurity. To Verwey he wrote in 1887:

'My work is nothing; I believe that I am on the wrong track; all naivety, all spontaneity is gone. I tamper just like when I came out of the academy: perhaps due to all the criticism. No, but seriously, I lost all faith in myself.'^{xlii}

This insecurity was already present when he was at the academy, to such an extent that he doubted the sincerity of his teacher: 'Allebé tells me all these kind things when I visit him; why does he say so many things of which he can mean so little?'^{xliii} This again shows Witsen's austere attitude towards his work and his personality. When Zilcken selected Witsen as for his overview of Dutch etchers in 1896, Witsen responded in a letter:

'I'm very honoured by your letter in which you count me among the Dutch etchers. It is true, I have been etching for quite some time, but considering correctly I'm not a good etcher. Ten years ago, I have tried to approach the art of etching and have made the same demands as for a drawing or painting; with the result that I have struggled greatly without getting any decent results. So I actually learned how not to etch and have thus finally understood that I would never make a good etching. Therefore, my best etchings are probably the 'Dordrecht' after Jacob Maris, but especially 'Regen en Wind' after Breitner, because they are reproductions. But the notion of etching as Jozef Israëls has shown, as the old masters had it, and under us Bauer, Karsen, and you, just to name a few, I have absolutely missed out. Therefore, it might be better if you leave me out of it: all my etchings were try-outs, approaches, where one of course is better than the other but remains at large beyond my power.'^{xliv}

Witsen made these reproductive prints between 1891 and 1893 for the art dealer C.M. van Gogh.³⁴ In 1898, they appeared in *Gedenkboek der Hollandsche Schilderkunst* by Jan Veth.

³² Blotkamp 1971 (see note 9, *chapter one*), pp. 116-136.

³³ Witsen first used this pseudonym in the article 'Expositie van Wisselingh in Arti', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 3, Amsterdam 1887-1888, pp. 424-434.

³⁴ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 202.



Fig. 27. Willem Witsen, *In rain and wind*, after G.H. Breitner, ca. 1892-1898, etching and aquatint, 14 x 21,8 cm, *Gedenkboek der Hollandsche Schilderkunst*. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 202.



Fig. 28. Willem Witsen, *Church in Dordrecht*, after Jacob Maris, ca. 1892-1898, etching and aquatint, 24,8 x 32,9 cm, *Gedenkboek der Hollandsche Schilderkunst*. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 202.

It is interesting to see that Witsen was able to adapt a completely different hand (see fig. 27&28). He tried to render the typical brushstrokes of the artists. This simultaneously confirms that he very consciously choose a different style.

Even in 1904, when he was rather successful, Witsen still is not convinced of his capabilities. After working on a series of six large etchings, he wrote to Arthur van Schendel: 'I still have the youthful belief that I will make a good etching some day, as long as I will get sufficient time to live; I'm afraid not.'^{xlv} To Betsy he wrote after their divorce: 'then you would see how difficult it is, for some one with a corrupt talent or little talent, to regularly earn money'.^{xlvi} From the Dutch East Indies, he wrote to Erens in 1921:

'For a long time I have the conviction that the place I occupy among the painters of my time is of little significance, - but the love for my work did not suffer from this belief - I give what I can and more cannot be expected.'^{xlvii}

The only aspect of which Witsen felt quite confident, were his printing skills. He wrote to Betsy in 1896:

'Magnificent prints, my Beb, as only Pim [Witsen's nickname, red.] seems to be able to print them. Why? I do not even understand it. Probably because those professional printers do not do it simple enough.'^{xlviii}

Dealing with the art world

In an early letter to Van Looy, Witsen complained: 'o god what a bêtise - as if that large, stupid bête public would even stop worshiping the golden calf!'^{xlix} However, to maintain a living and provide for his wife and three children, Witsen had to sell his works at some point. The alimention he had to pay after the divorce was especially a great financial burden. The art dealer Van Wisselingh from 1892 up until 1911 in Amsterdam located at Spui 23, with Klaas Groesbeek (1858-1936) as director, became very important element in his career.³⁵ Witsen spent a lot of time at Spui 23, often playing chess with Breitner and Bauer.³⁶ He also made his proofs of prints here. The collaboration between Witsen and Van Wisselingh however goes back to Witsen's time in London, where Van Wisselingh already had an affiliate. Witsen complimented Van Wisselingh on his selection and simultaneously grasped the opportunity to express his disgust for the public taste: 'He is sensible enough not to engage in the demands, which is preferred by the inveterate bad taste of the crowd.'³⁷ When Witsen had financial problems in November 1888, Van Wisselingh bought some of his prints and watercolours.³⁷ Van Wisselingh exhibited Witsen's watercolour *In the fields* in 1889 at the Fine Art society in London.

³⁵ See: J. F. Heijbroek and E.L. Wouthuysen, *Portret van een kunsthandel. De firma Van Wisselingh en zijn compagnons*, Zwolle 1999.

³⁶ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 140.

³⁷ J. F. Heijbroek, *Portret van een kunsthandel. De firma Van Wisselingh en zijn compagnons, 1838-heden*, Zwolle 1999, p. 60.

Van Wisselingh was an inventive art dealer. At Witsen's first solo exhibition in 1895, they decided to exhibit his snow paintings in black frames, a rather revolutionary decision in presentation. The organisation was very enthusiastic about 'all that snow in black frames' and Petrus Christiaan Eilers (jr., 1864-1936), at Van Wisselingh, hoped to 'evoke a complete revolution in art by exhibiting all paintings in black frames from now on and let the audience get used to it.'^{li} In 1896 and 1987, Van Wisselingh organized two other solo exhibitions for Witsen. Besides Van Wisselingh, Witsen also tried to collaborate with other dealers. He wrote to Betsy in 1892: 'I hope that the prints do not disappoint and that I can sell them soon. If they look decent I will write Goupil,³⁸ Wisselingh and V. Gogh if they want to have them.'^{lii} From 1890, Witsen also occasionally did business with Buffa, for instance when he was in desperate need of money in the days before his first solo exhibition at Van Wisselingh in 1891. In general, Buffa immediately paid off, contrary to Goupil and Van Wisselingh, who paid at the end of the month.³⁹

When Witsen wrote about the reception of his works at the art dealers, it was often something along the lines of 'always the old issue to the public - and too gloomy etc.' and 'my lion is undoubtedly too dark or too dreary for the people' (see fig. 29).^{liii} When Van Wisselingh settled in Amsterdam, they initially did not purchase his 'sad' London work. The company found the etchings technically good, but too insignificant to deal with.⁴⁰ About his art dealer in Paris he wrote: 'They do not want to buy my etchings but have them in commission, because, he says, that there is a good chance that the Americans want to buy them while the French amateurs will find them too dark.'^{liiv} However, Witsen refused to change his choice of subject and the way of depicting it in order to sell more work, as he wrote that 'for the bourgeois, however, it will seem like the same subject - and frankly I don't care.'^{liv}

This chapter examined Witsen's artistry and artistic perceptions. As an artist, Witsen was very interesting atmospheric effects. He examined his subjects in thorough, and almost scientific, matter. His photographic eye led him to attach value to composition and light. In his photographs, he mainly focussed on portraits, while in his etchings, specifically his cityscapes, he ignored the human figure and stillness prevails. Witsen was interested in the medium of etching, because it provided him with both intellectual and physical challenges. He was also very skilled as a printer, making him in control of the entire process. Yet due his perfectionism, Witsen suffered from performance anxiety, constantly doubting his work. As an art critic, Witsen seems more self-assured in his analytical approach to art. He was brave enough to express his own ideas - contradictory to the Movement of Eighty - in his articles for *De Nieuwe Gids*. Also, he did not want to change his work in order to sell more.

³⁸ The international art dealer Goupil was founded in Paris in 1827. At the end of the nineteenth century there were affiliates in London, New York, Berlin, The Hague, Vienna en Brussels, but in 1920 the firm was discontinued.

³⁹ Sylvia Alting van Geusau, *Kunsthandel Frans Buffa & Zonen, 1790-1951. Schoonheid te koop*, Den Haag 2016, p. 8.

⁴⁰ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 141.



Fig. 29. Willem Witsen, *Trafalgar Square with the Lion, London, 1890*, etching and aquatint, 27,8 × 36,6 cm. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 198.

Original Dutch citations and sources

ⁱ ‘Zelden zegt iemand niets meer en niets minder dan hij te zeggen heeft, op z'n eigen manier.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 16 November 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

ⁱⁱ ‘Lieve Bebe, Londen is nu zoo mooi - 't ligt in de sneeuw Bebe, en geen blinkend witte sneeuw maar 'n zachte warme sneeuw die gestadig valt uit 'n donkere, maar doorschijnende lucht, laag hangend in de straten, tusschen de huizen die als reusachtige zwart-grijze steenen-massaas, geweldig staan in die mistige lucht. [...] morgen begin 'k om één voor één die mooie dingen die 'k vandaag gezien heb er uit te werken - want je begrijpt hoe vol 'k me voel - 't is wel curieus dat 'k telkens weer getrokken word naar m'n ouwe bekenden - 'k heb zonder te denken gevoeld: o hoe mooi moet 't nu zijn aan Waterloo bridge en dan de Thames en Trafalgar Square en toen 'k er kwam trof 't me dadelijk, die zelfde dingen waarvan 'k nog nooit iets heb kunnen maken. Maar voor 'n bourgeois alleen zal 't 'tzelfde sujet lijken - en wat kan me dat ook schelen - 'k houd wel van de zwarte drukte massa in den Strand b.v. en Oxford street, maar 'k zie er lang dat niet in van wat 'k zie in die andere dingen: 'n éénheid van donkere grijzen en zacht mooi licht - 'n stemming van ernstige zware mooiheid. - Niet dor, niet somber, nooit akelig - maar heerlijk rijk en vol en ernstig als zwarte chrysanten en witte, witte bloemen.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 28 [November] 1890, [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Ik heb er wel eens van gehoord dat een van mijn voorvaders geschilderd heeft, bij voorkeur maakte hij sneeuw gezichten en hield veel van etsen.’ - Willem Witsen to Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos, 19 March 1918, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{iv} ‘En nu ben 'k aan 't groote schilderij van de Waal en Binnenkant waar 'k al 8 of 10 jaar aan bezig ben.’
- Willem Witsen to J.H.E. Arntzenius-Witsen, 16 November 1918, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^v ‘dat vervloekte langzame werken - er komt niets af.’ - Willem Witsen aan Jacobus van Looy, 26 October 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{vi} ‘t Is opmerkelijk dat iedereen tegenwoordig of impressionist of academist is. 't Eerste wil zeggen, iemand die zooveel mogelijk teekening en vorm verwaarloosd, zeer ruw omgaat met verw en gaarne spreekt van ‘de moderne leer der stemmings kleuren’. De tweede verbergt achter 'n zekere bekwaamheid veel onkunde, wanbegrip en onbeduidendheid. Expressie is voor weinigen, iets voor de meesten niets. Zelden zegt iemand niets meer en niets minder dan hij te zeggen heeft, op z'n eigen manier, zonder zich om anderen te bekommeren.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 16 November 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{vii} ‘Ik ben 't volkomen met je eens, dat het de beste weg is van één sujet veel te teekenen enz. in de natuur, zoals je zegt: in zich zelf verwerken.’ - Willem Bastiaan Tholen to Willem Witsen, 28 February 1885, Kampen, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{viii} ‘hoe veel meer bevattingsvermogen en schoonheidszin noodig zijn om het zwart en wit te verstaan, hoe véél, ja, alles, elke aandoening in zwart en wit te uiten is.’ - Albertine Draayer-de Haas, ‘Willem Witsen’, in: *Onze Eeuw*. Jaargang 23 (1923), pp. 343-346.

^{ix} ‘[...] die stilte op zoo'n dorp, 's nachts dat is gewoon ongelooflijk; 'k krijg als 'k er op let altijd de sensatie of 'k alleen op 'n onbewoond eiland ben of god weet waar! - Willem Witsen to Albert Verwey, 3 November 1887, Diepenheim, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^x ‘[...] want figureren doen ze zeker, al is het dikwijls als passanten met een blanco 'onineevuld' gezicht, verwaarloosbare wezentjes die het decor onder, achter en boven hen des te imposanter doen uitkomen. Juist als de medemens werd teruggebracht tot een anoniem veegje, kwam het zicht vrij op zijn eigen innerlijk. Uit zijn schilderijen leren we 'de mens' niet kennen, whoever that may be; maar wel die éne, die ons beduidend meer van zichzelf liet zien dan hijzelf - en vele kunstkeners na hem - bevroedde.’ - Arjan Peters, ‘Superbe zwijger’, in: *De Volkskrant*, August 2003, see: <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/superbe-zwijger~a722539/>> (retrieved March 2017).

^{xi} ‘Juist als de medemens werd teruggebracht tot een anoniem veegje, kwam het zicht vrij op zijn eigen innerlijk. Uit zijn schilderijen leren we 'de mens' niet kennen, whoever that may be; maar wel die éne, die ons beduidend meer van zichzelf liet zien dan hijzelf - en vele kunstkeners na hem - bevroedde.’ - Arjan Peters, ‘Superbe zwijger’, in: *De Volkskrant*, August 2003, see: <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/superbe-zwijger~a722539/>> (retrieved March 2017).

^{xii} ‘Ja, het landschap in Indië is wel buitengewoon mooi -, dikwijlsforsch en indrukwekkend maar gewoonlijk niet mooi van kleur en stemming. Ik geloof dat 't meer literair dan schilderachtig mooi is, zou 't niet?’
- Willem Witsen to Jan Pieter Veth, 27 December 1921, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xiii} ‘Met oordeel en keuze werken is toch iets anders dan willekeurig fantaseeren.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 17 March 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xiv} ‘En wat 'n schilderij van hem [Bastien-Lepage, red.] onderscheidde van 'n fotografie naar de natuur, dat was z'n sentiment of liever z'n temperament, was 't niet?’ - Willem Witsen aan Jacobus van Looy, 17 March 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xv} ‘Jessorun de Mesquita is de stemmings fotograaf. Hij zal m'n beeltenis maken, voor een serie. *Tegenwoordige Kunstenaars*.’ Jacobus van Looy to Willem Witsen, [December 1888], Nieuwer Amstel, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xvi} ‘k ga toch van de week met Kapteyn fotografeeren in de stad op den Thames en zoo. - Hij begint in eens te voelen voor 't mistige weer in Londen. Vroeger lachten ze me altijd uit en vonden 't zoo'n bewijs van somberheid dat 'k graag zulke grijze dingen maak, of zwarte, zoals je [weet?] - en nu begint hij wezenlijk in

te zien dat 't heelemaal niets te maken heeft met melancolie en somberheid enz. dat 't geen [zorge/zieke[?]]lijkheid is zooals hij dacht en wil hij zelf 's probeeren wat hij maken kan van Londen met mistig weer.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 7 December 1890, [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xvii} 'uit deze photographieën blijkt, dat zoo al een photograaph niet kunstenaar mocht kunnen zijn, een kunstenaar dan toch de beste photograaph is.' - Lodewijk van Deysse, *Gedenkschriften*, in: De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 110.

^{xviii} 't was zóo verschrikkelijk mooi van daag in de stad overal en, al mislukken die fotografiën nu ook - ik heb al die dingen in m'n hoofd.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 8 April 1891, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xix} 'Het etsen is eene moeilijke kunst, al wordt zij nog al druk beoefend, eene verraderlijke kunst, al treedt zij op met schuchtere bescheidenheid! Het etsen is moeilijk door zijne schijnbare gemakkelijke; het etsen is verraderlijk in zijn uiterlijken eenvoud en naïeve oprechtheid.' - H.L. Berckenhoff, 'De tentoonstelling der Nederlandsche etsclub', in: *De Gids*, Jaargang 54, Amsterdam 1980, pp. 158-159.

^{xx} 'Ik vermoed dat je bezwaar zult vinden in 't drukken, maar ik geloof - hoewel ik technisch minder goed dan jij op de hoogte ben - dat we dat gauw kunnen leeren.' - Willem Witsen to Jan Piet Veth, 4 January 1884, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxi} 'Ik heb van den Heer Mouton [publisher Mouton & Co in The Hague, red.] proeven gekregen van mijn ets voor 't album die gedrukt zijn met een allerafschuwelijkst ijzerachtig zwart - zóo kan 'k ze niet hebben in de portefeuille; de drukken zijn tòch ook al niet mooi - 'k heb hem gevraagd mij de plaat terug te zenden als 't anders niet mogelijk is, - of laat Bouwens ze anders drukken, - zie zelf, zóo kan 't niet.' - Willem Witsen to Philippe Charles Louis Zilcken, 28 June 1891, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxii} 'Ik ben nu een paar dagen enkel aan het etsen gegaan en benijd jou met je pers, want ik tast in het duister en moet er toch naar de natuur van maken wat er van te maken is, want als ik de plaat naar Brussel zend en hem dan terug zou krijgen, zal het te laat zijn te corrigeeren omdat ik dan hier van daan ben. Ik maak een oud kantwerkstertje binnenshuis met bloempotjes in het kozijn. Heel naïef!' - Jan Piet Veth aan Willem Witsen, 26 Augustus 1885, Dongen, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxiii} 'Ik ben ook klaar met de aquatint op de etsen en morgen ga 'k ze weer drukken en verder afmaken met drooge naald enz.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [September 1892?], [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxiv} 'En nu ben 'k den heelen dag weer heel druk bezig geweest met de foto's en de etsen - 't geeft zoo'n geweldige drukte 't afdrukken, fixeeren, afwaschen en opplakken van den vorigen dag.' - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 1 September 1892, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxv} 'Ik heb geen geheim van Bouwens - vroeger kreeg 'k inkt van hem maar de laatste twee jaar gebruik 'k ander fabricaat. [...] - 't is maar beroerd dat die drukkers altijd alles verknoeien en zelf kan je toch geen tirage gaan maken! - Van die oliën heb 'k geen verstand; 'k knoei er wel altijd meê, maar 'k ben zeker dat jij daar meer van weet dan ik. Je gebruikt toch waarschijnlijk ook gebrande lijnolie: twee soorten, 'n dun en 'n geweldig dik soort; 't laatste noemen ze in London strong burnt oil (ik laat 't uit London komen evenals de verschillende kleuren inkt - apart) 't mengen is natuurlijk 'n kwestie van smaak; Bouwens b.v. gebruikt cadmium en vermiljoen in z'n inkt - ik kan dat niet uitstaan en gebruik alleen sienna's en zwart.' - Willem Witsen to Philippe Charles Louis Zilcken, 20 September 1892, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvi} 'Als ik bedenk hoe moeilijk of het is om een goede druk van die reuzen platen te maken en hoe zooiets een stuk levensonderhoud voor je vertegenwoordigt, dan zeggen wij: 'je maakt ons verlegen met je mildheid!' Ik bewonder steeds de groote arbeid en kunde en mooie kwaliteiten.' - Willem Bastiaan Tholen to Willem Witsen, 14 December 1909, The Hague, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvii} 'Ik ben bezig aan een serie kleuretsen en je kunt je niet voorstellen hoe 'n groot genot 't is, je in te werken in 'n nieuw en absoluut mooi procédé. Zoover als je mij kent zul je wel begrijpen dat 'k 't doe op mijn eigen manier en 't werk wat 'k eraan heb, niets willende overlaten aan den drukker, zooals gewoonlijk 't geval is, is

buitengewoon zwaar. Maar 'k heb resultaten en dat is zóó veel. Niet dat 'k me verbeeld er vooralsnog iets in bereikt te hebben! Maar 'k zie er heel veel in. Het procédé is, zooals 'k 't opvat, buitengewoon ingewikkeld en moeielijk, maar prachtig en iets dat geheel op zichzelf staat. Ik ben erg benieuwd wat je er van zeggen zult: eerstdaags gaan de eerste proeven naar 't Spui. Maar ook al zou 't praktisch een teleurstelling zijn, blijft 't voor mezelf, qua procédé, iets heel moois.' - Willem Witsen to Félicien Bobeldijk, 5 January 1911, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxviii} 'Maar wat toch allereerst opvalt is dat er hier is wat bij ons totaal gemist wordt, nl. geest.' - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 28 May 1882, Paris, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxix} 'Hun macht is in hun temperament, ze hebben zich van alles los gemaakt en zich gegeven zooals ze waren, groot en heerlijk in hun naïveteit.' - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 26 November 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxx} 'Of hebben ze niet allen de stemmingen gekregen, dat is, de meest intense sensaties gehad van al wat eene schilderij maakt tot een kunstwerk, van lijn, van vorm, van kleur. Zijn het niet allen mannen geweest als reuzen, die, elk voor zich, schilderden wat ze voelden, wat ze zagen, zoo en niet anders.' - J. Stemming, 'Prof. Thijm en zijn 'Exkluzivisme'', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 2, Amsterdam 1887, p. 193.

^{xxxi} 'Een artiest is meer dan een gewoon mensch, om deze reden, dat zijn ziel meer en krachtiger indrukken ontvangt, voor welke hij de individuëele uitdrukking zoekt in bepaalde vormen. Hij is de bevoorrechte die door de natuur gesteld is boven zijn medeschepselen, – die niet bestaat te hunnen gerieve, maar door hen moet beschouwd worden als hun meerdere, van wien ze veel te leeren hebben, en die hun genot en een rijker leven geven kan, wanneer zij willen trachten hem te begrijpen. Tot dit juiste begrip nu kan de verstandige kunstcriticus van veel nut zijn.' - Willem Witsen [pseudonym W.J. v. W.], 'Een Boek over Kunst', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, 1885-1886 Amsterdam, pp. 463-464.

^{xxxii} 'Ik schreef hem: plaats onder Witsens Varium initialen uit welke blijkt dat het niet van Staphorst is, voor de half ingelichten is het goed dat de artikelen van W. en van mij uit elkaar worden gehouden want (letterlijk) "wij beginnen in onderdeelen van opinie te verschillen". - Jan Piet Veth to Willem Witsen, 26 January 1887, Dordrecht, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxiii} 'Want hoe weinig lieden zijn er niet, die begrijpen, dat het verschillende oordeel van twee artisten naast elkander waarde kan hebben, als uiting van elks temperament en manier van zien? Zie Veth te bewegen, dat hij niet te veel polemiseert tegen zijn medecritici.' - Willem Johannes Theodorus Kloos to Willem Witsen, 21 January 1887, Nieuwer Amstel [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxiv} 'k heb je moeten beloven geen beschouwingen over kunst te houden, en nu was 'k bijna op weg.' - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 16 November 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxv} 'k Heb 'n varia voor de N.G. als 't aangenomen wordt, waar niet veel kans op is. - 'k weet ook niet of 'k 't nog zend.' - Willem Witsen to Jan Piet Veth, 13 January 1887, The Hague, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxvi} 'Je hebt iets in de N.G. geschreven dat je niet schrijven mocht. Och toe, als je weer aan het filosofeeren gaat, laat het dan eerst aan mij lezen, anders bederf je al de stukken die ik zelf nog schrijven moet over de eenheid van vorm en inhoud en derzelve beteekenis voor de moderne kunst. Je hebt gezondigd tegen artikel 1 van de gezonde kritiek: men moet oordeelen bij impressie. Jij oordeelt bij analyse, en dat is verkeerd.' - Charles Marius van Deventer to Willem Witsen, 21 april 1887, Goes, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxvii} 'k kom pas uit Amsterdam waar 'k me verzadigd heb aan machtige theoriën en theoretiesche vuiligheid, burgerlijke bekrompenheid en stinkenden walm.' - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 17 March 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxviii} 'Verder heb 'k de pretentie van veel meer en ernstiger te werken dan die heeren in de stad die blij zijn met 'n afleiding en elke gelegenheid aangrijpen om hun kostbaren tijd die ze zoo noodig hadden voor hun werk, te gebruiken voor dillettantische liefhebberijen om zodoende meer te schijnen dan ze zijn - maar bekijk ze niet van te dichtbij - dan schrik je van zooveel domme verwaandheid of quasi onschuldige ijdelheid die met veel handigheid 't publiek 'n rad voor de oogen draait maar in werkelijkheid ô zoo weinig is.' - Willem Witsen

to Jacobus van Looy, 2 March 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxix} ‘de jaren op Lucas, voor mij 'n zeer oneenvoudigen jongensachtigen tijd, waar 'k niet graag aan denk.’

- Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 16 November 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xi} ‘Wat 'n zeldzaamheid is 't niet als iemand 's niet kijkt naar voorstelling! Verwey beweerde laatst (bij Kloos) dat 'n schilder even als 'n dichter z'n werk begon om 't sujet (als voorstelling) en dat kleur en lijnen, opvatting en alles daaraan ondergeschikt waren; waarop 'k hem vertelde dat 'k juist van de week in 't bosch 'n kakkende kerel had gezien die me als iets heel moois aan deed, door karakter, expressie, lijnen en vooral kleur - goddome, 't was zoo echt.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 17 March 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlii} ‘Witsen zond veel zwarte etsen; te zwaar, te groezelig, zooals prof. Thijm zegt. Zijn etsen doen dikwijls denken aan krijttekeningen, die in de olie zijn gevallen: een persoonlijke opvatting van het etsen in weeken grond; - 't is het werk van iemand met een luien geest, die niet dan met veel moeite zegt wat hij wil.’ - Verberchem (pseudonym of Willem Witsen and Jan Pieter Veth), ‘Tweede jaarlijksche Tentoonstelling van de Nederlandsche Etsclub’, *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 3, Amsterdam 1888, p. 433.

^{xliii} ‘M'n werk wil niets; 'k geloof dat 'k erg op den verkeerden weg ben; alle naïveteit, alle spontaneïteit is weg. Ik knoei nog net zoo als toen 'k van de academie kwam: misschien wel van al die critiek. Nee, maar in ernst, 'k heb alle geloof in mezelf verloren.’ - Willem Witsen to Albert Verwey, 25 October 1887, Diepenheim, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xliiii} ‘Allebé zegt me altijd lievigheden als 'k bij hem kom; waarom zegt hij zooveel wat hij niet meenen kan?’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 2 March 1886, Ewijkshoeve, Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xliv} ‘Ik ben enorm verëerd door je brief waaruit 'k zie dat je mij rekent onder de hollandsche etsers. 't Is waar 'k heb nog al veel geëst maar goed beschouwd ben ik geen etser. Ik heb getracht nu tien jaar geleden de etskunst te benaderen en heb aan een ets dezelfde eischen gesteld als aan een Teekening of schilderij; met dit gevolg dat ik geweldig getobd heb zonder goed resultaat te krijgen. Ik heb dus feitelijk geleerd hoe men niet etsen moet en heb dan ook ten slotte begrepen dat 'k nooit een goede ets zou maken. Daarom zijn mijn beste etsen waarschijnlijk de ‘Dordrecht’ van Jacob Maris maar vooral ‘Regen en wind’ van Breitner omdat het reproducties zijn die staan tot fotogravures gelijk oude gesneden meubelen tot modern fabriekswerk. Maar het begrip van een ets zooals Jozef Israëls dat getoond heeft te hebben, zooals de ouden dat hadden, en onder de onzen Bauer, Karsen en jij, om maar enkelen te noemen, heb ik absoluut gemist. Daarom zou het misschien beter wezen als je mij er maar buiten hield: al mijn etsen zijn probeersels geweest, benaderingen, waar van de eene natuurlijk beter is dan de andere maar dat als geheel boven mijn macht is gebleven.’ - Willem Witsen to Philippe Charles Louis Zilcken, 10 January 1896, Ede, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xliv} ‘k heb nog altijd het jeugdige geloof dat 'k nog wel 's 'n goeie ets zal maken, als 'k maar tijd van leven heb; 'k vrees van niet.’ - Willem Witsen to Arthur van Schendel, 13 January 1904, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlvi} ‘dan zou je 's zien hoe moeielijk 't is, voor iemand met 'n verknoeid talent of met weinig talent, om geregeld geld te verdienen’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 3 December 1904 [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlvi} ‘Ik heb al heél lang de overtuiging dat de plaats die 'k inneem onder de schilders van mijn tijd, van weinig beteekenis is, - maar de liefde voor mijn werk heeft door die overtuiging niet geleden - 'k geef wat 'k kàn geven en meer kan men niet verwachten.’ - Willem Witsen to Maria Joseph Franciscus Peter Hubertus Erens, 27 March 1921, Gambar, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xlvi} ‘Magnifieke drukken, mijn Beb zooals Pim ze alleen maar schijnt te kunnen drukken. Waarom? Dat begrijp 'k zelf niet. Waarschijnlijk om dat die vak drukkers niet eenvoudig genoeg doen.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 27 November 1896, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xliv} ‘O god wat 'n bêtise - als of dat groote, domme bête publiek ooit zou ophouden 't gouden Kalf te vereeren!’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, Ewijkshoeve, 26 November 1885, in: Volledige Briefwisseling

(dbnl.org).

ⁱ ‘hij is zo verstandig om zich niet in te laten met de eischen, welke de ingekankerde wansmaak van de menigte zoo gaarne stelt.’ - Verberchem, ‘Expositie Van Wisselingh in Arti’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids* 3 (1888), deel 2, p. 298.

ⁱⁱ ‘Hij [Eilers, red.] sprak er van om een heele evolutie te maken in den kunsthandel door alle schilderijen in ‘t vervolg in zwarte lijsten te laten zien en ‘t publiek eraan te wennen.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth Witsen-van Vloten, 15 May 1895, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘k hoop zoo dat m'n etsen in druk niet tegen vallen en dat 'k er gauw van verkoopen kan. Als ze mee vallen en er goed uit zien zal 'k schrijven aan Goupil, Wisselingh en v. Gogh of ze ze hebben willen.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [September? 1892], [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ ‘Altijd de oude kwestie voor 't publiek - en te somber enz.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 25 November 1890, [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

‘mijn leeuw is zeker te donker of te somber voor de menschen’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [2 November 1891], [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{liv} ‘Ze willen m'n etsen niet koopen maar graag in commissie hebben omdat, zegt hij, er veel káns is dat de Amerikanen ze koopen terwijl de fransche amateurs ze te zwart zullen vinden.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 28 [November] 1890, [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{lv} ‘Maar voor 'n bourgeois alleen zal 't 'tzelfde sujet lijken - en wat kan me dat ook schelen.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 28 [November] 1890, [London], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

CHAPTER FOUR

Witsen's etchings

*'The value is measured with the power with which the personal sentiment is expressed.'*ⁱ

- Willem Witsen

*

In the following part, a specific selection of etchings (from a total of about 225 works) will be analysed as expressions of Witsen's personal sentiments. This will be done with the help of the insights gained in the previous chapters.¹ The works are presented chronologically in order to connect his etchings to the different periods, and thus states of mind, in his life. The first period covers the years 1884 and 1891, from when Witsen resigned from the academy until his return from London to Amsterdam. Reynaerts described this period as his *rite du passage*, his maturation.² It is noticeable that Witsen was still in search of his own style and was strongly influenced by the ideals of the Movement of Eighty. Furthermore, the influence of The Hague School and his French heroes is clearly visible in this early work. The three following etchings cover the period of Witsen's marriage and divorce with Betsy (1892-1903). This was a turbulent time with many personal ups and downs, yet Witsen visibly experienced a technical and artistic growth during this period. He paid significantly more attention to composition and details, and slowly started to follow his own convictions, which he had already expressed as an art critic in *De Nieuwe Gids*. During this period he also photographed a lot, which clearly influenced his artistic eye. The last three etchings were made in the course of his second marriage with Marie (1904-1923). They clearly display the professionalization of his career, to which Marie contributed. Witsen and Marie travelled extensively, which made it particularly difficult to produce etchings. The etchings Witsen made from Venice and San Francisco were made back in the Netherlands, from drawings done on location.³ Thus, Witsen was no longer driven by the 'sensation of the moment' while creating these images, begging the question: What did remain of his 'most individual expression'? Or in other words: To what extent are his characteristics visible in his work during the different periods? ⁴

¹ For the discussion of Witsen's depictions of Damrak in Amsterdam (1905), see F.J. Heijbroek in:

² De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 24.

³ The etchings Witsen made in Dutch East Indies are not included in this selection, because both Boon and De Groot are uncertain whether these works were finished. Looking carefully at *View from Hotel Bellevue*, it indeed is difficult to imagine that the accurate and critical Witsen produced this to full satisfaction (see fig. 21). Hammcher 1948 (see note 57, *chapter one*), p. 21 and De Groot 1977 (see note 4, *introduction*), pp. 1-4.

⁴

The period of Witsen's *rite du passage* (1884-1891)

In the first four years of his career as a printmaker, Witsen mainly depicted the 'proletarians' in the area of his father's country estate Ewijkshoeve, a typical naturalistic theme.⁵ The influence of the French artists Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875) and Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884) during this period is detectable in both the choice of a 'lower' subject and the compositional way of placing large figures in a central position against a high horizon.⁶ Yet, unlike his exemplars, Witsen did not choose this subject for the purpose of social engagement. He purely admired the aesthetic qualities for farmers on their land.⁷ Nevertheless Witsen, like many other "realist" artists, developed an attitude of respect and familiarity to the simple rural population, described as characteristic and picturesque, but also admirable in their tough existence, because they conduct their daily routine without soul.⁸ Witsen wrote to Van Looy:

'Life between these *natuurmenschen* [best translated as naturals], who as you stated correctly are as intelligent as a piece of heath – this life weans from the longing for sentimentality; they are peculiar people of which I could tell you strange things, but maybe you would come around one day and see for yourself.'ⁱⁱ

Witsen ended up at the Ewijkshoeve, because he experienced a lot of restlessness and doubt about his work, his life and especially his circle in this period: 'in the city I always get irritated by my acquaintances etc. There is so much *bêtise* and I cannot stand that, perhaps because I am the greatest [fool, red.]'ⁱⁱⁱ A.R. Arntzenius, his brother in law, advised Witsen: 'Believe this one thing, which I know from experience: nature is a sweet consoler. She is, even when one does not paint her, a remedy.'^{iv} Van Looy preached: 'Health, Wim, powerful and simple, as great nature, the grand life.'^v These statements confirm the medical-psychiatric belief about the healing powers of nature described in chapter one and Witsen's honoured them in his work from this period.

Witsen's uncertainty about the style of his work is revealed in a letter to his teacher Allebé: 'I am afraid that you have found my old mistakes, not predominantly the sloppy drawing but also the rough manner [...], but the subject seemed healthy to me and not trite, and isn't that something?'^{vi} Witsen's apparent self-consciousness about his "rough manner" is remarkable, because this was actually in line with the generally preferred way of 'working in the open' and had become a sign of naturalism and spontaneity.⁹ In this way, the landscape developed in the most individualistic and most experimental genre in art in the nineteenth century.

⁵ The word 'proletarian' was used by Johann Eduard Karsen to describe Witsen's work (see endnote).

⁶ Witsen saw the work of Jules Bastien-Lepage for the first time at the Paris Salon in 1882.

De Groot 2003 (see note 4, introduction), p. 74.

Perhaps Witsen also recognized a familiar state of mind in the works of Bastien-Lepage, who died from a 'maladie malheureuse', as Van Looy wrote. Jacobus van Looy to Willem Witsen, 6 April 1885, Rome, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

⁷ See quote xiii, chapter one.

⁸ Wessel Krul, *Back to basics, simplicity and nature. The Golden Age of the artists' colonies, 1860- 1910*, digital publication, pp. 1-21, see: ubiquitypress.com (retrieved in March 2017).

⁹ Wessel Krul, *Back to basics, simplicity and nature. The Golden Age of the artists' colonies, 1860- 1910*, digital publication, pp. 1-21, see: ubiquitypress.com (retrieved in March 2017).

Two different stylistic approaches towards the proletarian subject are detectable during this period at the Ewijkshoeve; a traditional etching technique with very few nuances in tone and an exploration of the so-called 'verniss mou' technique. For his etching *Sitting Shepherd*, which appeared in the first portfolio of the Etsclub in 1886, Witsen only used the needle for the manipulation of the plate (see fig. 30).¹⁰ The image depicts a sitting shepherd with a hat, *en profil* to the right, covering the vertical axis of the plate. The ground is overgrown with heath rendered by a somewhat wild and restless scratching of the needle. The background is covered with a flock of sheep, cleverly represented by only depicting their shadow with diagonal lines. What is most noticeable about this etching is the unusual rectangular shape of the plate. This composition imbues the image with a remarkable modern sense and emphasizes the vastness of the landscape. The Dutch painter, poet and art critic Albert Plasschaert (1874-1941) wrote: 'A work is created by the need for satisfaction; lastly perhaps a need for rest. A fine unrest often precedes the realization.'^{vii} It can indeed be presumed that this need for rest was the reason Witsen created this work, admiring this calm and contemplating shepherd, who seems to be at one with nature.

Almost opposite from *Sitting Shepherd*, is the intense darkness and the lack of detail of the print *Potato Harvesters* (see fig. 31). Actually, a layman might not actually recognize this image as an etching, but more likely as a crayon drawing. With the verniss mou technique, the artist uses paper to draw on and leaves an impression on the plate, resulting in an effect similar to a crayon drawing. This was a familiarity for Witsen, as he often made his preparatory drawing with crayon in this period (see for instance fig. 16, chapter three). The technique fits the need of depicting a suddenly emerging mood, because it can be done with a certain speed. The image depicts three figures in typical Dutch wooden shoes. In the foreground, placed in the centre of the composition, is a man shovelling with a spade, with two baskets at his feet. The harvester on the right side is presumably inspecting a potato in his hand, while the one on the background almost dissolves into the field. Overhead, dramatic clouds predict another rainy day in the Netherlands. Another remarkable aspect is that there is no depth in this work. The placement of the figures is only suggested by their size. Eduard Karsen (1860-1941) wrote a report to Witsen about a review of Witsen's early work from *Het Vaderland*. The exclamation marks show his indignation about some of the remarks, although they bare a certain truth:

'W.W. is apparently an admirer of Millet and strives to serve our agricultural population just like Millet has done for the French!!!!!!!!!!!!!! W. is very artistic in the beautiful use of colour and the expression of atmosphere, yet the build of his people and his anatomical knowledge leave much to be desired. [...] The art of rendering the muscle underneath clothing, in which M. extraordinarily excelled, is a secret that W. absolutely does not comprehend. There are no people in his clothes yet.'^{viii}

Witsen would have probably have answered with a citation of Millet that he occasionally used: 'Il n'y a production qu'ou il y a expression.'¹¹ The circle of the Movement of Eighty meanwhile may have used words such as 'serious and felt' or 'grand and real' to describe this print. Weisberg also discussed the 'melancholy of rural life'.¹²

¹⁰ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 191.

¹¹ Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 23 April 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

¹² Weisberg 2010 (see note 37, *chapter one*), p. 49.



Fig. 30. Willem Witsen, *Sitting Shepherd, en profil to the right*, ca. 1885-1886, etching, 13,8 x 27,7 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 31. Willem Witsen, *Potato Harvesters*, ca. 1887, etching and vernis mou, 25,6 x 37,4 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

Over time, Witsen began to feel caged at the Ewijkshoeve. He grew weary of the drama of family members and the problems of their other guests. To escape from both the members and mentality of the Movement of Eighty, Witsen moved to London in October 1888. The choice for the United Kingdom probably had to do with the fact that he had an English girlfriend named Blanche Ford.¹³ Another reason might be his admiration for the English etchers, in particular James McNeil Whistler (1834) and Francis Seymour Haden (1818-1910).¹⁴ Witsen's favourite locations to depict in London were the Thames and its bridges, and Trafalgar Square. His fascination with water and ships begins to surface here. The enormous scale of the 'giant city', as Witsen called it, must have been overwhelming for him.^x London experienced an explosive growth in population, which began earlier than in Amsterdam, and by 1888 it was the foremost metropolis of the world. Witsen often mentioned the fog as an interesting visual element, covering everything in a mysterious haze (see quote p. 56, chapter three). Yet, it was not just fog, but also the strong (albeit less romantic) air pollution that London had to cope with during that time.

In London, Witsen started to experience with more different techniques. Already in 1886, Witsen seems to be acquainted with aquatint, which, as the name implies, was suitable for depicting the moist climate of London. This method would remain Witsen's preferred technique throughout his career. However, it took him quite some time and effort to master this technique of 'biting plates'.¹⁵ His struggle is still noticeable in some large etchings he made during his stay in London. Some of the plates he 'left in their bath for too long',^x which often resulted in an image that was too dark and in need of retouching. Some of these were presumably wanted, such as the stains in the water on the pavement in *Thames Embankment*, but most of them were coincidences, such as the 'damages' in the left upper corner (see fig. 32). This technique thus meant losing some control over the outcome of the image, something that Witsen actually was not particularly comfortable with. However, Witsen must have enjoyed the outcome, since *Thames Embankment* was one of the early prints of which Witsen himself printed a number in 1906.¹⁶

Many contemporary critics agree that it was in London where Witsen first reached his full technical potential as an artist and some even argue that it was actually his peak when it comes to his etchings. They recognized a 'mature' artist in the works from London.¹⁷ This assumption probably has caused *Thames Embankment* to be one of his most well-known etchings. It is evident that London felt like a new beginning for Witsen, where he could relinquish his former work and was able to concentrate on the cityscape as subject.

¹³ R. Bionda and C. Blotkamp (red.), *De schilders van Tachtig. Nederlandse schilderkunst 1880-1895*, Zwolle 1991, p. 329.

¹⁴ It is interesting to realize that the famous French impressionist Claude Monet (1840-1926) had been active in London around 1870. It is imaginable that his work appealed to Witsen, as they are rather similar in style. See for instance *The Thames at London* (1871). However, from his correspondence or articles in the *De Nieuwe Gids*, it does not seem that he was aware of these works.

¹⁵ Hammacher 1948 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 18.

¹⁶ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 198.

¹⁷ Jan Veth [with help of Willem Witsen and Marius Bauer], 'Seymour Haden, Whistler, Witsen en Bauer op de vierde jaarlijksche tentoonstelling van de Nederlandsche etsclub', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 6, Amsterdam 1891, pp. 114-121.



Fig. 32. Willem Witsen, *Thames Embankment, London*, ca. 1890, etching and aquatint, 22,7 x 30,3 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.



Fig. 33. Willem Witsen, *View on Trafalgar Square in London (sketchbook sheet)*, ca. 1888-1891, black chalk on paper, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

Yet while others see a period of refinement in the London prints, I believe that *Thames Embankment* can be seen as a transitional etching. The flat, dark silhouettes are still reminiscent of the figures from Ewijkshoeve, but the atmosphere in this work is different due to Witsen's openness to an urban environment and new techniques. In this work Witsen depicted the Victoria Embankment along the Thames on a rainy day. The puddle provides for an interesting visual effect of reflection, which Witsen will apply more often in the future. The elements in the background, the ship, the trees and buildings, are made lighter and fuzzier to create a sense of depth.¹⁸ Witsen had sent some proofs to Tholen, who wrote: 'I think some are beautiful, for example that rainy day where one man is leaning against the harbour wall with that other one with the umbrella [...] your search for tones is impressive.'^{xi}

Veth described Witsen's etchings from London as 'gloomily silent reticence'.¹⁹ In December 1890, Witsen wrote to Betsy that his preference for making such grey or black things 'has nothing to do with melancholy and dreariness', but in November 1888 he described that he was in a 'dreadful weak mood'.^{xii} Evidently, this mood was worsened after the death of Anna in 1889. After this terrible event, Witsen, to the sorrow of his father and sister, returned to London and resumed his hermit's life there. He was depressed and doubted his own ability. This state changed when he met Elizabeth van Vloten, probably in 1889 when he stayed in the Netherlands for a moment. His new infatuation stimulated Witsen to major productivity; in the first half of 1890 he made twelve etchings in London, including *Thames Embankment*. In the summer of 1890 Betsy responded to his love and Witsen returned to the Netherlands.²⁰ The following period discusses the etchings Witsen made during his marriage to Betsy and their painful and tedious divorce.

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The period of Witsen's marriage and divorce with Betsy (1892-1903)

In the first years back in the Netherlands, everything went quite well for Witsen's artistic career. An important reason was the support of the art dealer Van Wisselingh & Co.. The series of six etchings of farmhouses in Brabant, which he made near Oisterwijk in the south of the Netherlands in the summer of 1892, played a substantial part in his success. The Brabant series was the first acquisition of this firm.²¹ Furthermore, Witsen selected them for the Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte (precursor of the Biennial) in Venice for the *bianco e nero* department and exhibited them regularly between 1893 and 1897. It was evident that Witsen was very proud of these etchings. In September 1892, Witsen wrote enthusiastically to Philippe Zilcken: 'Yesterday I made the definite prints of a series that I etched this summer: prints that I find magnificent in ink.'^{xiii} He received recognition from his old teacher Allebé: 'It gave me great pleasure to see that my Brabant etchings mean something to you, although they were meant to be simple, but perhaps are not simple enough, yet in which you can detect some talent.'^{xiv}

¹⁸ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 198.

¹⁹ Jan Veth, *Hollandsche teekenaars van dezen tijd*, Amsterdam 1905, p. 37.

²⁰ Judging from the correspondence, Witsen was still together with Blanche until at least May 1890. Hendricus Johannes Boeken to Willem Witsen, 19 May 1890, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

²¹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 273.



Fig. 34. Willem Witsen, *Carriage on Farmyard or The Cart, Brabant*, 1892, etchings and aquatint, 17,8 x 23,4 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 205.

The additional financial security Witsen gained from his contract with Van Wisselingh also meant that he could marry Betsy. Witsen was staying with her family in Oisterwijk and his infatuation presumably encouraged him to great productivity. About his stay there Witsen wrote: 'It's so pleasant to be around and to live from one day to the other, often alone, without the chatter about art or literature; - that talking is so annoying because it merely shows one's petty ambition and vanity and many authoritarian display.'^{xv} His surroundings noticed a change in temperament. The married life seemed to bring up his a soft and gentle side that was already reflected in the series from Brabant:

'See how Witsen has changed, his etchings from Brabant, soft, pure, honest, open, see his affection for the sunset over a subtle background of fine orange shone-through farms and trees, a mill roof and pitched roofs.'^{xvi}

As mentioned in chapter three, Witsen has always been interested in the visual effects of the weather and the effects of natural light during the different hours of the day. About the habit of taking a stroll between five and six, he wrote: 'After the coffee I paint until about five o'clock and then I am going for a walk until six. That hour is the most beautiful of the day; then I always see delightful things, here in the village, a treasure of etchings and drawings.'^{xvii}

Light indeed plays the leading role in this series of Brabant. As in his cityscapes, Witsen showed the farms without figures or animals and focused entirely on the buildings themselves. This adds to the serenity of the scene Witsen tried to capture. It is not only due to the light, instead of the dark and rainy London moods, but also due to other technical developments that this series is considered as a transition in his print oeuvre. It is evident that Witsen was experimenting with perspective and the rendering of materials. He tried to suggest more depth in his work, for which he adapts the same trick as in London to create atmospheric perspective; making the elements in the background increasingly lighter and less detailed. He also studied shadows carefully, the cart for instance in this image, to give the objects more plasticity. For this series, Witsen examined the same yard from different angles and composition is playing an increasing role. The influence of photography is detectable, which he eagerly practised at this moment.

Reynaerts noticed that critics interpreted Witsen's work from this period after at their own discretion.²² Hofker, for example, recognized deeply felt emotion, while others tried to connect this work to the Dutch tradition by means of the rural subject and simple approach. In this case, one could argue that Witsen achieved his goal of becoming a *peintre-graveur* with this series.

From about 1896, Witsen became increasingly unsatisfied with his life in Ede. He got tired of the rural surroundings and his worsening relationship with Betsy made him want to escape again. Therefore, Witsen visited Dordrecht several times between 1896 and 1899, where he made a series of nine etchings of the facades of the Voorstraat (see fig. 35).²³ 'Dordt' was still a pristine and quiet city at the water, of which the 'skyline' was not smirked with heavy industries. It had the reputation of an intact Old Dutch city from the Golden Age.²⁴

The etchings mark a stylistic change in composition. The image is clearly divided in planes, creating a modern character. This composition can be partially traced back to the influence of Anglo-American artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), who produced a series of etchings of Amsterdam in similar style (see for example fig. 36).²⁵ Whistler mainly worked from a barge, which resulted in an interesting perspective from the water.²⁶

²² De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 51.

²³ Witsen presumably was curious about this subject, because he had seen it in the first portfolio of the Etsclub Carel Nicolaas van 's-Gravensande published a view on the Voorstraathaven in Dordrecht. Giltay (see note 57, *chapter one*), p. 96.

²⁴ See: *Dromen van Dordrecht. Buitenlandse kunstenaars schilderen Dordrecht 1850-1920*, tent. cat. Dordrecht (Dordrechts Museum) 2005.

²⁵ J. F. Heijbroek, 'Holland vanaf het water. De bezoeken van James Abbott McNeill Whistler aan Nederland', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, Jaargang 36, nr. 3 (1988), pp. 225-256.

²⁶ Whistler actually visited the Netherlands numerous times between 1863 and 1903. The main reason was that his work was exhibited here, but Whistler was particularly fond of Amsterdam. In his (unpublished) *Herinneringen van een Hollandschen Schilder der negentiende eeuw* (in English: *Memories of a Dutch Painter from the nineteenth Century*), Charles Louis Philippe Zilcken (1857-1930) wrote about the influence Whistler had among the young Dutch artists: 'I will never forget Whistler, the *exquisite causeur* that he was, surrounded with Jan Veth, Bauer, Witsen, listening to his words with the most intense attention. He obviously spoke about art; his paradoxes and sarcasm were enthralling and sharp like no other [...].'²⁶ (see note 22).

In that same year, on the Fourth Annual Exhibition, Witsen was represented with *London, Waterloo Bridge in the Fog* (see fig. 5). In *De Nieuwe Gids*, Veth remarked that it was interesting to see the artists exchanging locations and what this did for their art:

'Meanwhile a painter from our capital [...] sought, in gloomy London motives, satisfaction for his desire for vigorous power. And at the same time, by coincidence, came the great English painter to Holland to etch cityscapes of old Amsterdam, of which he rightfully wonders why the modern Dutch artists did not produce anything worthy in print.'^{xviii}



Fig. 35. Willem Witsen, *Voorstraathaven IV / Dordrecht V*, ca. 1900, etching and aquatint, 30,8 x 27,9 cm, Prentenkabinet Universiteit Leiden. Source: Author.

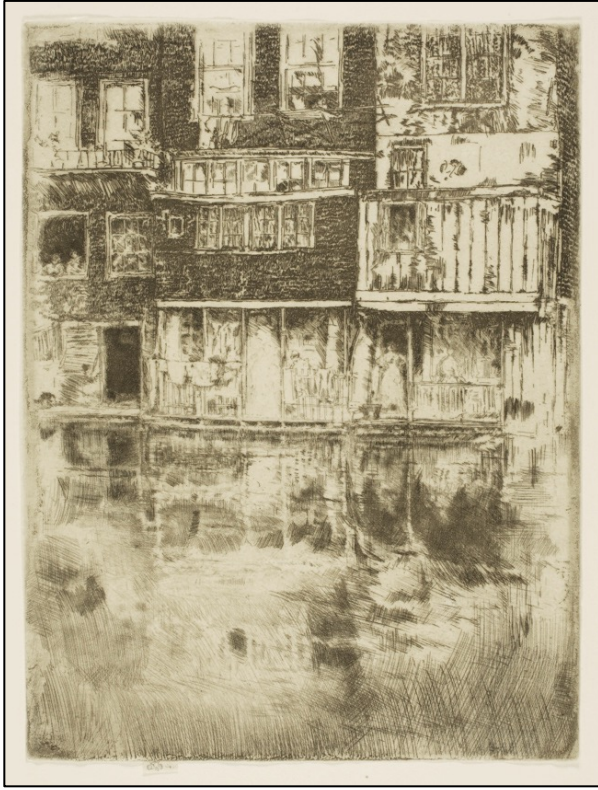


Fig. 36. James McNeill Whistler, *The Square House, Amsterdam*, 1889, etching, 23,5 x 17,5 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago. Source: University of Glasgow <etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk/catalogue> (retrieved April 2017).

In his overview of the development of graphic arts in the Netherlands, Ad van der Blom argues that when Witsen returned from London, his cityscapes became increasingly detached.²⁷ Van der Blom thinks of the 'close-ups' of canal buildings of Dordrecht, Amsterdam and Venice (and even some in the Dutch East Indies) as clinical 'dissections of those pieces of wall' instead of works that depict 'mood'. By avoiding distance, Van der Blom argues, the atmosphere and effect in Witsen's etchings are missing.^{xix} However, reading the following citation from Witsen to Frans Erens, it seems that he was aiming for a certain atmosphere and effect with these close-ups:

'There is a small neighbourhood, close to the Zeedijk, which I think you did not describe, but which would certainly have struck you as very beautiful in the past; a lump of houses and air and dirty water, water that could tell you so much, physiognomies of *Amsterdamsche* houses, to me much more interesting than their inhabitants although their history is so closely related to the humanity within, to life. How I would love to talk to you sometime, walking through these beautiful neighbourhoods, which just stand there so calmly and quietly surrounding everything. The people inside are like the rats in the water; you barely see them, they are indifferent to you, but they are a part of it. But rats are generally more real; for me, in my work, you may smell them but not see them.'^{xx}

From this citation, Witsen's fascination with water and the canal facades and their history is clear. Furthermore, the fragment touches upon his attitude towards the depiction of people in his cityscapes, as discussed in chapter three. In his opinion, the houses were more interesting than the people who lived there. Earlier, in November 1896, Hofker wrote to Witsen:

²⁷ Van der Blom 1978 (see note 67, *chapter one*), p. 122.

'I think you should work out this side of Amsterdam. I suspected behind these houses the Zeedijk and this suggestion was triggered by a lady from a window f.e. or a public urinal.²⁸ This advocates for your good choice of attributes, that leave their mark on a neighbourhood, that I am longing for more.'^{xxi}

Witsen took Hofker's advice and made prints of the Oudezijds Achterburgwal in 1897. Erens' reaction to this work by Witsen also shows that they indeed saw a particular mood in these works: '*Magnifico, magnifico!* Such a beautiful work. What a heavy reality. Facades as history books from which you can read the lives of generations, seemingly sunken in the shining depth. Beings full of "horrific simple things".'^{xxii}

In the first years of the twentieth century, Witsen experienced the darkest period of his life. His troubled marriage with Betsy came to an end and his father passed away. The etching *Binnenkant with Snow* was made just after these painful events (see fig. 37). The image is built up with a formula that Witsen developed for his cityscapes of Amsterdam between 1901 and 1905: detailed facades, seen from the water and often obstructed by bare trees and the masts of boats. This formula can further be recognized by strong contrasts and a wintry stillness, perfectly fitting Timmerman's description of Witsen: 'loyal en royal in every way, grand and dark.' This large-scale series of Amsterdam was described as his more serious and subdued work, occasionally criticized for a lack of variety.²⁹ Bosch described this series as follows: 'The etchings of W. Witsen strike due to the noble and distinguished depiction. [...] One finds frosty fallen dignity in his *Heerengracht*, a homely, cherished bold atmosphere in *Binnenkant*, a frightening gloominess and narrowness in *Kromboomsloot*.'³⁰ Van Harpen described Witsen as a lyricist. This is certainly true for this series, and in particular in *Binnenkant with Snow*, in which the element of snow is evident and specifically mentioned in the title. Witsen did not work from fantasy; he depicted his emotional reaction to a visual experience. However, the symbolic connotations of snow may have particularly appeal to him. Evidently, the seasons are exquisite elements to depict different moods. Witsen was especially fond of snow; he made many etchings in which a landscape or a city covered with this white blanket (see fig. 15). In his publication *Finally Snow*, Peters demonstrates that various artists were captivated by the mystery of snow and its 'chilly softness', to use the words by Emily Dickinson.³¹ This metaphor was also familiar for the literati of The Movement of Eighty.

²⁸ This area is now known as the Red Light District. During Witsen's lifetime, this neighbourhood with 'a lady from a window' was already marked by prostitution.

²⁹ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 56.

³⁰ 'De etsen van W. Witsen treffen door de edele, voorname weergave. [...] Kille gestorven deftigheid vindt men in zijn ets „Heerengracht”, een huiselijke, zich koesterende vette sfeer in „Binnenkant”, een beangstigende somberheid en benepenheid in „Kromboomsloot”. - Lodewijk Bosch, *Nederlandsche prentkunst sedert 1900: Etsen en gravures*, Amsterdam 1927, pp. 31-32.

³¹ Arjan Peters, 'Superbe zwijger', in: *De Volkskrant*, August 2003, see: <<http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/superbe-zwijger~a722539/>> (retrieved March 2017).

For example, Van Looy's debut in *De Nieuwe Gids* was titled *A day with Snow* and his famous poem *De Ar* (1920) deals with this element as well.³² Kloos' literary hero, the English poet Shelley, wrote: 'I love snow and all the forms of the radiant frost.'³³ Additionally, Shakespeare, whom Van der Goes strongly admired, wrote: 'Now is the winter of our discontent.' With this sentence, Shakespeare refers to the ending of a relationship. In this context, the snow in the etching *Binnenkant with Snow* could be interpreted as a reference to Witsen's painful divorce with Betsy. Because snow covers everything and changes a familiar landscape into something new, it can be associated with a transformation. For instance, snow is often used to depict a life-changing situation. The term 'cold comfort', which means to find a slight consolation or encouragement in the face of a reverse, could also be applicable for Witsen's failed relationship with Betsy. More generally, snow and winter are often used to represent sadness and it could thus represent Witsen's melancholic character. Furthermore, winter is a visual effect, because it creates the strong contrasts that he prefers. Van der Wiel argues that the heaviness, depth and darkness vanished from his work, but the cityscapes of Amsterdam from this period claim otherwise.

Arjan Peters went as far as suggesting that the etching can be seen as a self-portrait of the artist.³⁴ Not only because of the metaphorical aspect of the image, but especially because of the title, which Peters interpreted as a reference to Witsen's inner emotions. This seems rather unlikely, as 'Binnenkant', literally meaning 'inside', is the name of the actual location in Amsterdam that is depicted here. Yet, this does not exclude Peters' interpretation of this etching as a depiction of Witsen's innermost.

*

³² See: M.A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, 'De artistieke context van Jacobus van Looy's gedicht 'De ar'', *Nieuwe Taalgids*, Jaargang 88, Groningen 1995, pp. 507-512. In: Jac. van Looy, *De wonderlijke avonturen van Zebedeus*, Amsterdam 1925, p. 29:

Den ganschen nacht gesneeuwd het had,
En als mijn onbeschreven blad,
Lag 't land des morgens leêg en log,
Maar wonderlijk aantrekkelijk toch.

³³ J. Keunen, *P.B. Shelley. Bij de honderd vijftigste verjaring van zijn geboorte 1792-1942*, Leuven 1944, p. 167.

³⁴ Arjan Peters, 'Superbe zwijger', in: *De Volkskrant*, August 2003, see: <http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/superbe-zwijger~a722539/> (retrieved March 2017).



Fig. 37. Willem Witsen, *Binnenkant with snow*, ca. 1903-1904, etching (ink), 50 x 69,9 cm (including frame), Stadsarchief Amsterdam. Source: beeldbank.amsterdam.nl.

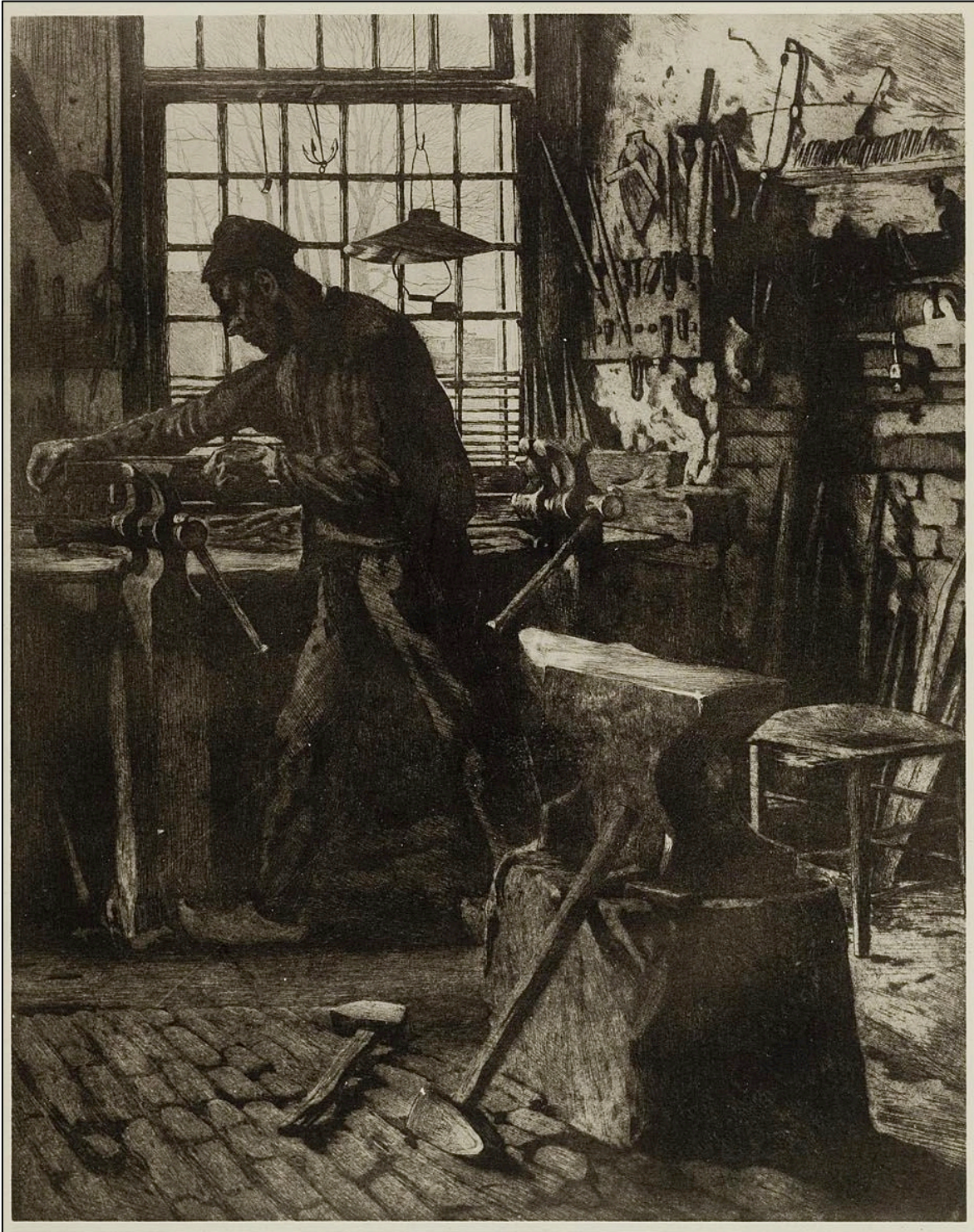


Fig. 38. Willem Witsen, *Village Blacksmith (Bram) in front of the Window*, ca. 1908, etching and aquatint, 62,7 x 50 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

The period of Witsen's marriage with Marie (1904-1923)

Together with Marie, Witsen visited Wijk bij Duurstede as a getaway before their wedding in October 1906 and returned after they got married from the end of April until June, Witsen was very enthusiastic about this village, writing to his art dealer Van Wisselingh:

'It is a curious little city regarding backwardness, it is completely seventeenth century considering the landscape, courtyards and workshops, even to some extent the people, are reminiscent of that age. I am working with great pleasure and I am hoping to surprise you with the results, even though it is only due to the wealth of beautiful cases. I think I should have gone here twenty years earlier!'^{xxiii}

The significance of the preparation of his etchings became of increasing importance in this period.³⁵ The first sketch was now quickly worked out in a detailed pencil drawing. Due to the increasing importance of the details, Witsen completely abandoned the previously frequently used crayon drawings. The highlight of Witsen's detailed preparatory studies and extensive operation of the plate are the series of large etchings of artisans, created in 1906 and 1907, during his two stays in Wijk bij Duurstede (see fig. 38). It seems that Witsen returned to the hard working men he admired for their tough existence during his stay at Ewijkshoeve.

However, comparing the series shows he experienced enormous growth in technical capabilities. The rendering of various materials, such as iron, wood, stone and cloth, recalls the *stofuitdrukking* of the seventeenth century.³⁶ The difference from the field workers Witsen made at Ewijkshoeve is not only evident in the details of the depicted scene, but also in the strong plasticity of the figures and the correct perspective of the space, something of which Witsen received criticism in his early series. The special attention to these visual elements and the fact that it image shows a 'snapshot' may also be an influence of the photography. Johan Gramm wrote that Witsen is 'so faithful in imitating reality that his plates remind one involuntarily of an artistic photograph'.³⁷ In *Village Blacksmith* Witsen works again with backlighting of the window, which is once again beautifully executed. However, this new technical precision is at the expense of the emotion that was still present in the previous etchings in the overview.

De Groot has described Witsen's etchings as faithful to Dutch traditional printmaking.³⁸ Dr. Manfred Sellink, currently general director and head curator of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, also argues that with his depictions of the city, Witsen fits in the tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch cityscapes.³⁹ During this stay in Wijk bij Duurstede, Witsen depicted a motif that had become an icon in Dutch art history, namely the windmill by Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/1629-1682).

³⁵ Hammacher 1948 (see note 75, *chapter one*), p. 17

³⁶ Literally translated as: Expression of substance. *Stofuitdrukking* is a Dutch art historical term that indicates how the surface of an object or texture of a material is depicted.

³⁷ Johan Gramm, 'Dutch Artists of the Last Twenty-Five Years', in: *The Collector and Art Critic*, Vol. 4, No. 7 (May 1906), pp. 210-212.

³⁸ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 187.

³⁹ Manfred Sellink, Willem Witsen (Amsterdam 1860-1923), exhibition catalogue Historisch Museum, Amsterdam 1992, 4 p.

In an imitation of Ruisdael's dramatic Dutch clouds, it is evident that Witsen mastered various techniques he developed to the fullest (see fig. 39). This work led T.W. Nieuwenhuis (18-19) to write: 'I am writing here on the porch of that little café on the embankment, at the left the windmill of Ruysdael (as the innkeeper said, but I corrected that in – Windmill of Witsen).'^{xxxiv}



Fig. 39. Willem Witsen, *Corn Mill, Wijk bij Duurstede*, ca. 1908, etching, 24,2 x 18 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Website Dordrechts Museum.

The Montelbaanstoren, with the nickname 'Malle Jan', was one of Witsen's favourite subjects, to which he often returned for inspiration throughout his career, and in every medium. In April 1887, Witsen took on the studio of Breitner at Oude Schans 5, opposite of the Montelbaanstoren.⁴⁰ From this moment on, he started to focus on cityscapes.

⁴⁰ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 195.

Witsen always took the immediate surroundings of his studio as subject. His fascination for this tower could also have come from the fact that, ever since the seventeenth century, it is a popular icon of Amsterdam for artists. Perhaps Witsen's repeated choice for this building is even more meaningful than suspected; he may have consciously depicted it to link his work to the past.

The particular etching *Oude Schans with Montelbaanstoren and Rowing Boat* is the result of a new edition to his floating studio that he started to use from 1911 (see fig. 40&41): 'I ordered a wooden hut in which I can light a fire and can be placed on a barge, that gives me the opportunity, as a floating studio, to make studies outside during the winter.'^{xxv}



Fig. 40. George Hendrik Breitner, *Willem Witsen in his boat*, ca. 1911, daylight gelatin silver print on photo paper, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

Hammacher described that travelling (on water) and being on the move is part of the artist's existence. He argued that this provided the artist with a new kind of freedom, to work where he wants. He furthermore wrote: 'the connection between a work of art and the place of existence than one thinks. It is also not contrary to the eternal value of an important piece of art.'⁴¹ Recognisability of the topographical element was important for Witsen. This image could be found on a postcard of Amsterdam. It testifies to the local appreciation of the picturesque, that is, the Old Dutch cityscape.

⁴¹ 'De band tusschen het schilderwerk en de plaats van ontstaan is grooter dan men vaak denkt. Het is ook niet in strijd met de eeuwigheidswaarde van een belangrijk kunstwerk.'
Hammacher 1941 (see note 75, *chapter one*), p. 2.

Despite the subject and the realistic, detailed depiction of *Oude Schans with Montelbaanstoren*, the composition again brings something very modern to the image by Witsen's use of negative space and mirroring. The horizon divides the image in two, while reflection of the water merges the planes and creates a triangular shape that directs the eye to the man in the rowing boat. The hard, dark shape of the tower and its reflection balance the expanse of negative space made by the river and sky dominating the other side of the print, which is cut diagonally into four opposing triangles of light and dark. The overall shapes of the cityscape and its reflection are punctuated by the corresponding shape of the man in his boat, floating gently in upon the white space of the unbitten plate.

The scene is set from a distance, seemingly to cover the length of the tower. Yet, the tip of the tower, and of its reflection, is purposely cut off. This is probably the influence of his photographic eye. Photographers also shot the Montelbaanstoren and they look strikingly similar to Witsen's etching, yet they seem to have made the effort to picture it completely (see fig. 42). Nevertheless, Witsen often used this strategy of remarkable cut outs for Montelbaanstoren in other prints and paintings.

In April 1914, Witsen and his wife Marie attended the International exhibition of *Boekkunst en Grafiek* in Leipzig. On their way back to Amsterdam they visited various cities in Italy, including Florence, Milan and Pisa. It is remarkable that Witsen only made drawings and studies in Venice.⁴² He probably loved Venice because of the water, which he sought out in every city and of course, in Venice water was abundant. Witsen artistically was very interested in depicting the reflection of rippling water. He often created this water with his distinctive long and somewhat restless lines (see fig. 43). The element of water provided a degree distance and serenity to his scenes. Van Looy described Venice to Witsen in 1885:

'Venice is such a (especially in the evening) noiseless city, that one hears everything, and even that even silence is a sound. You should have seen these people strolling with their calm, quiet faces, all more or less attractive through the week and drowsy tranquillity that is here. What will a carriage scare these folks!'^{xxvi}

Furthermore, its reflection was a great compositional tool as well as a technical challenge.

It is remarkable that Witsen did not depict the famous touristic attractions. Hammacher wrote: 'He is not a man of streets and squares, someone who does not appreciate the bustle, but one that always seeks the silent water of the city.'^{xxvii} Witsen made the etchings after these drawings back in the Netherlands. In 1918, they were not finished yet, but they were exhibited at the solo exhibitions in March 1920 at Van Wisselingh. A similar style is discernible as in the etchings he made of Dordrecht and Amsterdam (see for example fig. 35). The artists apparently saw comparisons between the cities. Boeken wrote to Witsen about Venice: 'It seems more like Amsterdam here than I thought.'^{xxviii}

⁴² Witsen was very charmed by Florence, as he wrote: 't is gewoon prachtig en voor die Uffici zou 'k wel eenige weken willen blijven. En dan die omstreken! 't Is heerlijk om hier te zijn en we hebben prachtig weer.' - Willem Witsen to Arnold Marc Gorter, [16 May 1914], [Florence], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).



Fig. 41. Willem Witsen, *Oude Schans with Montelbaanstoren and Rowing Boat*, ca. 1913-1914, etching and aquatint, 57,9 x 48,7 cm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Source: collectie.boijmans.nl.



Fig. 42. Anonymous, *Oude Schans with the horizon the Montelbaanstoren seen north from the bridge before the Korte Koningsstraat*, ca. 1900-1910, daylight gelatin silver print on photo paper, 8 cm x 11,1 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

The etching *Houses with six mooring posts* is divided by a dilapidated wall and reflective water, and has a strong horizontal composition with a sense of repetition (see fig. 43). However, the facades are not as detailed as the close-ups from Dordrecht and the cityscapes of Amsterdam. They have a more graphic, and somewhat unfinished, feel to them. Witsen, who had trouble finishing them, has clearly paid less time and attention to these works. He also does not maintain topographical accuracy here; all Venetian prints are in mirror image.⁴³

Meanwhile, the publisher Jean François van Royen (1878-1942), who became a collector of Witsen's work from around 1913, displayed a thoughtful understanding of Witsen's development, by writing:

'It is completely in line with your development: becoming ever lighter and cleaner, you will find fulfilment in the sunny Renaissance spirit of Venice, and so I can understand how this city is responding to what you prefer to illustrate.'^{xxix}



Fig. 43. Willem Witsen, *Houses with six mooring posts*, Venice, ca. 1914-1919, etching and aquatint, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 137.

⁴³ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 237.

In December that year, just after the outbreak of the First World War, Witsen travelled to North America with his wife Marie, of which they spend five months in San Francisco. Witsen was invited as Dutch representative of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, where he assisted curating the exhibition. The insecure Witsen did not really feel comfortable in this position: 'I noticed that I am absolutely unsuitable to fulfil an official role. I lack brutality and self-awareness.'^{xxx} The exhibition was a stressful enterprise:

'That catalogue was full of mistakes and omissions: Isaac Israëls is not mentioned, Mesdag was at the graphic section, of my etchings only one was attributed to me. etc. etc. You can understand how angry I was and my wife as well. We didn't sleep that night!'^{xxxi}

On his journey through the United States and Canada, Witsen made remarkably few etchings. It was probably not practical to bring the plates. He made the prints after drawings back in the Netherlands (see fig. 44&45).⁴⁴ Furthermore, he did not find San Francisco really attractive: 'The city itself does not appeal to me. Everything is new and ugly and exhausting due to the constant up and down. The city centre is very busy, the bustle of a metropolis.'^{xxxii} What did fascinate him were the ruins of the still visible results of the earthquake from 1906. This particular image recalls Veth's description of the heavy pillars 'like giant elephant feet' of Witsen's *Waterloo Bridge in the fog* (see fig. 5). This etching beautifully summarizes the important characteristics of Witsen's etchings. The sculptural character of the arches dominates the composition, wherein the trudging figure on the left again had to serve as an indication of scale. His posture makes a tired impression from the 'constant up and down'. Here too Witsen works a lot with strong contrasts and heavy shadows. Between the 'new and ugly' buildings, he yet again managed to find a subject that hints to past glories. The sign 'FOR SALE' adds to the sadness of a failed attempt and faded glory. This work could be seen as the emblem of monumental gloom. Yet, in a way, it feels less sincere than his work from London.

One could say that, for his etchings, the natural cause of growth, efflorescence and decline is detectable in the different periods. Witsen's rural subjects and cityscapes from London display his artistic development. During his marriage with Betsy, Witsen reached his peak with the Brabant series and the Dordrecht series and this was rewarded with a contract with the art dealer Van Wisselingh. His etchings from the period of his happy marriage with Marie are more restrained and lack a certain 'mood'. Interestingly, it seems that his artistic highlight corresponds with his most intense feelings (both high and low). This confirms the idea mentioned in chapter two; creating had a therapeutic effect on him.

⁴⁴ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 161.



Fig. 44. Willem Witsen, *View on the ruin of the firma Thos. Emery Sons, San Francisco*, 1915, etching, aquatint and vernis mou, 27,5 x 32 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Scanned from De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 160.



Fig. 45. Willem Witsen, *Ruin of the firma Thos. Emery Sons, San Francisco (sketchbook sheet)*, 1915, drawing, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Source: Digital Collection Rijksmuseum.

Original Dutch citations and sources

- ⁱ ‘De waarde wordt gemeten naar de kracht waarmede 't persoonlijk sentiment is uitgedrukt.’ - Willem Witsen [pseudonym W.J. v. W.], ‘Een Boek over Kunst’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1, 1885-1886 Amsterdam, p. 464.
- ⁱⁱ ‘t leven tusschen die natuurmenschen, die zoo als je heel juist zegt, intelligent zijn als 'n stuk hei - zoo 'n leven verleert de zucht naar sentimentaliteit; 't is 'n eigenaardig volkje waar 'k je gekke dingen van zou kunnen vertellen, maar misschien kom je wel eens en dan kun je zelf zien.’ - Willem Witsen Jacobus van Looy, 16 November 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Daarbij komt dat 'k me in de stad altijd erger aan m'n kennissen etc. Er is zoo veel bêtise en daar kan 'k niet goed tegen, misschien wel omdat 'k zelf de grootste ben.’ - Willem Witsen to Jacobus van Looy, 2 March 1886, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{iv} ‘Geloof daarbij dit eene, dat ik bij ondervinding weet: de natuur is een lieve troosteres. Ze is, al schildert men niet, een geneesmiddel.’ - A.R. Arntzenius to Willem Witsen, 14 April 1886, Den Haag, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^v ‘gezondheid, Wim, krachtig en eenvoudig, als de groote natuur, het groote leven [...]’ - Jacobus van Looy to Willem Witsen, 6 May 1886, Madrid, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{vi} ‘Ik ben wel bang dat u er mijn oude fouten in gevonden zult hebben, ik bedoel niet hoofdzakelijk slordige teekening maar ook de ruwe manier [...], maar 't sujet kwam mij nog al gezond voor en niet afgezaagd; en is dat niet al iets?’ - Willem Witsen to August Allebé, 6 April 1885, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{vii} ‘Een schilderij is de uiting van een persoonlijkheid. Een werk ontstaat door de behoefte aan bevrediging; ten laatste misschien wel door een behoefte aan rust. Een schoone on-rust gaat de verwerkelijking vooraf.’ - Albert Plasschaert, *XIXde Eeuwse Hollandsche Schilderkunst*, Amsterdam 1909, p. v.
- ^{viii} ‘W.W. is blijkbaar een bewonderaar van Millet en streeft er naar, voor onze landbouwende bevolking te doen wat M. voor de Fransche gedaan heeft!!!!!!! In schoonheid van kleur en het uitdrukken van atmosfeer is W. zeer artistiek, doch de bouw zijner menschen en zijn anatomische kennis, laten nogal te wenschen over. [...] De kunst van spieren onder kleeren uit te drukken, waarin M. zoo buitengewoon uitmuntte, is een geheim dat W. nog volstrekt niet doorgrondt. Er bevinden zich nog geen menschen in zijn kleëren!!!’ - Johann Eduard Karsen to Willem Witsen, 1 November 1888, [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{ix} ‘Dat heb 'k opgeloopen met 'n wandeling langs de Thames - 'n wandeling van vijf uur langs en over die bruggen en door die reuzestad.’ - Willem Witsen to Albert Verwey, 8 November 1888, London, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^x ‘Gisteren heb 'k geëst: 't is al klaar om gebeten te worden maar 'k heb nog geen bad.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, 13 April 1891, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
‘k moet Hein uit 't bad halen - die ligt te bijten, z'n ets.’ - Willem Witsen to Elizabeth van Vloten, [20 April 1891] [Amsterdam], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{xi} ‘ik vind er mooien bij zoo onder anderen die regen dag waar die man tegen de haven muur leunt bij die andere met paraplu, [...] je hebt mooi naar toon gezocht.’ - Willem Bastiaan Tholen to Willem Witsen, 14 May 1890, Ewijkshoeve, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{xii} ‘vervelende weeke stemming’ - Willem Witsen to Frederik van Eeden, 29 November 1888, London, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{xiii} ‘gister definitieve afdrukken gemaakt van een serietje dat 'k van de zomer geëst heb: drukken die gewoon magnifiek vind wat inkt betreft.’ - Willem Witsen to Philippe Charles Louis Zilcken, 20 September 1892, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).
- ^{xiv} ‘t Deed mij zooveel plezier te zien dat U iets heeft aan mijn brabantse etsjes die, hoewel eenvoudig bedoeld, misschien niet eenvoudig genoeg zijn, maar waar U dan toch eenig talent in ziet.’ - Willem Witsen to

August Allebé, 7 December 1895, Ede, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xv} ‘t is zoo genoeglijk overal uit te zijn en je te laten gaan van den eenen dag op den anderen, veel alleen, zonder geklets over kunst of literatuur; - 't is zoo ergerlijk dat gepraat waar ten slotte niets anders uit blijkt dan 'n kleingeestige ambitie en veel ijdelheid en autoritair vertoon.’ - Willem Witsen to Maria Joseph Franciscus Peter Hubertus Erens, 22 August 1892, Oisterwijk, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xvi} [...] ‘zie reeds Witsen veranderd zijn, zijne Brabantsche etsen, zacht, zuiver, eerlyk, open, zie zijne aandoening van een ondergaand zonnelicht boven een subtielen achtergrond van fijn oranje doorschenen boerderijtjes en boompjes, een molendakje en daakjes.’ - P. Tideman, ‘Van Israëls tot Derkinderen. Voor Willem Witsen’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 9, Amsterdam 1894, p. 293.

^{xvii} ‘Na de koffie schilder 'k tot 'n uur of vijf en ga dan wat wandelen tot zes uur. Dat uurtje is 't mooiste van den dag; dan zie 'k altijd heerlijke dingen, hier in 't dorp, 'n schat van etsen en teekeningen.’ - Willem Witsen to Albert Verwey, 25 October 1887, Diepenheim, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xviii} ‘Terwijl zocht een schilder uit onze hoofdstad [...], in sombere Londensche motieven voldoening voor zijn begeerte naar knokige kracht. En terzelfdertijd bij toeval komt de grootste Engelsche schilder naar Holland over om er de aanzichten te etsen van het oude Amsterdam, waarvan hij zich met reden verwondert, dat de moderne Hollandsche artiesten niets waardigs hebben in prent gebracht.’ - Jan Veth [with help of Willem Witsen and Marius Bauer], ‘Seymour Haden, Whistler, Witsen en Bauer op de vierde jaarlijksche tentoonstelling van de Nederlandsche etsclub’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 6, Amsterdam 1891, pp. 114-121.

^{xix} Terug in Amsterdam stort Witsen zich op het stadsgezicht, maar het resultaat wordt steeds: afstandelijker: de ‘close-ups’ van den Amsterdams grachtbebouwing krijgen de overhand, en dit zijn meer ontleding van die stukken muur dan stemmingsstukjes. Ook in zijn latere Venetiaanse en Indische werken schuwt hij de verte, de atmosfeer, kortom het effect.’ - Van der Blom 1978 (see note 67, *chapter one*), p. 122.

^{xx} ‘Er is 'n buurtje bij, dicht bij de Zeedijk dat je geloof ik niet beschreven hebt maar dat je zeker heel mooi zou gedaan hebben indertijd; een brok huizen en lucht en vuil water, dat water dat je zoo veel zou kunnen vertellen, fisionomiën van Amsterdamsche huizen, voor mij veel interessanter dan de menschen hoewel hun geschiedenis zoo nauw verwant is aan de menscheijkheid daarbinnen, aan 't leven. Wat zou ik graag eens met je praten, loopende door die mooie buurten die daar, maar zoo kalm en rustig blijven staan om alles heen. De menschen zijn daarin als de ratten in 't water; je ziet ze nauwelijks, ze zijn je onverschillig maar ze hooren erin. Maar ratten zijn over 't algemeen echter; ik voor mij, in mijn werk, mag ze wel ruiken maar niet zien.’ - Willem Witsen to Maria Joseph Franciscus Peter Hubertus Erens, [End of 18], [Amsterdam], in: *Ons Amsterdam*. Source: <<http://onsamsterdam.nl/tijdschrift/jaargang-2003/21-tijdschrift/tijdschrift-jaargang-2003/842-nummer-7-8-juli-augustus-2003?showall=&start=2>> (retrieved March 2017).

^{xxi} ‘Ik vind dat je dien heelen kant van Amsterdam eens uitwerken moet. Ik heb n.l. achter deze huizen de Zeedijk *vermoed* en vind deze suggestie op mij door een vrouwtje uit een raam b.v. of door een pieshokje zoo weergaasch pleiten voor je goeie keuze van attributen, die het cachet van een buurt geven, dat ik verlangend ben naar meer. Het sentiment in een teekening van een stadsdeel is bijna altijd afwezig [...].’ - Gerrit Jan Hofker to Willem Witsen, 4 November [1896], IJmuiden, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxii} ‘Magnifico, magnifico! wat is dat mooi werk. Wat een zware realiteit. Gevels als geschiedboeken waar je de levens van heele generaties uit kunt lezen die schijnen weg gezonken in de glanzende diepte. Wezens vol “gruwbaar simpele dingen”.’ - Maria Joseph Franciscus Peter Hubertus Erens to Willem Witsen, 29 April 1898, Oostburg, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxiii} ‘Het is hier 'n curieus stadje wat achterlijkheid betreft, 't is compleet 17e eeuwsch wat 't landschap betreft en de binnenplaatsjes en werkplaatsen, zelfs eenigermate de menschen, doen er sterk aan denken. Ik ben heerlijk aan 't werk en hoop je bij je terugkomst uit America te verrassen met de resultaten, al was 't alleen door de rijkdom van prachtige gevallen. Ik geloof dat 'k 20 jaar eerder hierheen had moeten gaan!’ - Willem Witsen to E.J. van Wisselingh & Co. [P.C. Eilers jr.], 19 September 1906, Wijk bij Duurstede, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxiv} ‘Ik zit hier te schijven op de warande van dat stukje café dat op de dijk staat, links de molen van Ruysdael (zooals de kastelein zei, maar ik verbeterde dat in - Molen van Witsen) - rechts de slingerpont.’ - Theodorus Wilhelmus Nieuwenhuis aan Willem Witsen en Augusta Maria Witsen-Schorr, [summer? 1919], [Wijk bij

Duurstede], in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxv} ‘Verder heb 'k laten maken een houten keet waarin gestookt kan worden, en die op 'n zolderschuit, me gelegenheid geeft, als drijvend atelier, om den heelen winter, studies buiten te schilderen.’ - Willem Witsen to Félicien Bobeldijk, 5 January 1911, Amsterdam, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvi} ‘Venetië is zulk een (vooral s'avonds) geruischlooze stad, dat men alles hoort, en zelfs de stilte een geluid is. Je moest de menschen hier zien flaneren met hun kalme, rustige gezichten, allen min of meer week en aantrekkelijk door de dommelige rust, die er is. Wat zou een rijtuig die luidjes op schrikken.’ - Jacobus van Looy to Willem Witsen, 23 November 1885, Venice, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxvii} ‘Hij is niet de man van de straten en pleinen, niet van het gewoel, maar een die altijd weer het stille water zoekt in de stad.’ - A.M. Hammacher, ‘De schilder Willem Witsen’, in: *Menschen in de schaduw*, ‘s Gravenhage 1943, p. 7.

^{xxviii} ‘Het lijk[t] hier meer op Amsterdam dan ik dacht.’ - Hendricus Johannes Boeken to Willem Witsen, 24 March [1893], Venice, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxix} ‘Het ligt geheel in de lijn van Uw ontwikkelingsgang: het steeds lichter en zuiverder worden, zal in de zonnige renaissance geest van Venetië zijn vervulling hebben gevonden en daarom kan ik me zoo goed begrijpen hoe deze stad beantwoordt aan wat U zich nu graag voorstelt. Dit natuurlijk verloop waarborgt juist nu, dat er groote en heuglijke resultaten van komen. Twintig jaren geleden zou, als ik mag onderstellen, Uw innerlijk niet zoo op dit nieuwe hebben aangeslagen.’ - J.F. van Royen aan Willem Witsen en Augusta Maria Witsen-Schorr, 1 June 1914, The Hague, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxx} ‘Ik heb wel bemerkt dat 'k absoluut ongeschikt ben om 'n officieelen rol te vervullen. Ik mis de brutaliteit en de zelfbewustheid.’ - Willem Witsen to Gerrit Jan Hofker, 4 April 1915, San Francisco, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxi} ‘Die catalogus was vol fouten en weglatingen: Isaac Israëls staat er heelemaal niet in, Mesdag stond bij de grafische afdeling, van mijn etsen stond er maar één onder mijn naam, enz., enz. Je begrijpt hoe 'k 't land had en mijn vrouw ook. We hebben er 'n nacht niet van geslapen!’ - Willem Witsen to Arnold Marc Gorter, [February? 1915], San Francisco, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

^{xxxii} ‘De stad zelf is me niet meê gevallen alles is nieuw en leelijk en ontzettend groot en zeer vermoeiend door 't voortdurend up & down. Het centrum is heel druk, de drukte van 'n wereldstad.’ - Willem Witsen to Arnold Marc Gorter, 14 February 1915, San Francisco, in: Volledige Briefwisseling (dbnl.org).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to approach a set of works, in this case etchings, as keys to the character of the artist. This was done because Witsen himself argued that a psychological study based on the work of an artist is worth more than a biography and that the life of an artist, determined by the power and greatness of his temperament, is only to be found in his work. This leads to the question: What is the interrelationship between his personality and his work? Or in other words: In what way do Witsen's etchings represent his character?

As appears from his correspondence, Witsen was struggling with his 'double-I', which he described as a wild animal that he tried to civilize. As demonstrated, his complex character indeed consisted of strong contradictions, for instance tranquillity versus restlessness; rigidity versus helpfulness; decadence versus insecurity; longing for love versus the need for freedom. This ambiguity could be seen as a melancholic tendency, yet his insecure attitude was partly caused by the 'all that criticism' and pressure from the need within the Movement of Eighty for continuous self-consciousness and self-improvement. This urge for perfection led to existential insecurity, dissatisfaction, performance anxiety and feelings of misunderstanding and loneliness for Witsen.

Witsen's melancholic disposition dominated his character. Possible traces of this 'saturnine' temperament can be detected in both the form and content of his etchings. Resigned from the academy, Witsen was insecure about his abilities as an artist, worsened by the critical pressure of his inexorable colleagues in the city. He found his escape in nature at the Ewijkshoeve. The proletarian subjects he studied testify for the general medical-psychiatric belief of nature as a source of rest and purification. On the one hand, he admired the content shepherds that idealistically seem to be at one with their surroundings. These etchings are characterized by naivety and spontaneity, resulting in rather light and sketchy images. On the other hand, Witsen was confronted with the tough existence of the land workers. He artistically expressed the severity of the situation with the dark and 'rough' crayon-like technique of vernis mou. Looking at Witsen's etchings from this period, he clearly captured the contradictions of the rural life; a penny always has two sides. Not able to find a satisfying situation in the Netherlands, Witsen migrated to London to find his fortune there. However, here he experienced an even more existential life crisis and, on top of that, his sister committed suicide. It is thus understandable that Veth described Witsen's etchings from London as 'gloomily silent reticence'. The rainy and foggy weather of London was (coincidentally?) the pre-eminent visual element to express Witsen's melancholic downheartedness of that time. Here, he also often depicted the scenes by night and the figures were still dark silhouettes. Witsen noted that his London work at the art dealers was 'too dark or too dreary for the people'.

When Witsen met Betsy he found another form of escapism: love. At the highlight of his infatuation, just before their marriage in 1893, he made the Brabant series. A more positive sentiment is noticeable with the soft light of the summer sunsets. The etchings were described as soft, pure and open. It is likely that this corresponds to Witsen's feelings at the moment.

Yet, simplicity and serenity – instead of bustle and frivolity – still dominates the scene, displaying Witsen's quiet character. In Brabant, Witsen found the calmness and comfort to focus on the precise rendering of materials and to explore composition. With this more timeless series, the often-made comparison with the seventeenth century Dutch *peintre-graveurs* is understandable.

Witsen's and Betsy's love for each other could not conquer their difficult characters and stubborn communication. Witsen fled to another city, Dordrecht, to make up his mind. Here, he lost himself in the exquisite detail and structured compositions of these etchings, which almost make it seem like he wanted to structure the image as much as he wanted to structure his life. Things took a turn for the worse. A year after the death of his father, Witsen even had suicidal thoughts. In this period he focused on large-scale and dark cityscapes of Amsterdam. The most characteristic feature of these etchings is the stillness of the scenes. The lack of people in his cityscapes could be interpreted as his need for rest and could symbolize his taciturnity. The element of snow, Witsen's favourite pictorial component, stresses the contrast of his work and simultaneously suggests a lyrical charge of melancholy.

When Witsen's married Marie, his life became less complicated and more restrained and isolated. It seems that he was genuinely happier during this period. The darkness disappeared from his work. His return to the worker theme at *Wijk bij Duurstede* reveals that he is a changed man. These well-prepared and extremely detailed prints lack the deeply felt moods of his time at the *Ewijkshoeve*. The work he made from his barge in Amsterdam show his strong analytical eye for composition and have a lighter, more peaceful atmosphere. The etchings he made from drawings during his travels to Venice and San Francisco are remarkable less detailed. Witsen was no longer driven by the 'sensation of the moment' while creating these images back home.

Due to his melancholy, Witsen experienced a strong array of emotions, both negative and positive, that appear to reveal themselves in his etchings. His etchings thus indeed display his moods in the different periods of his life. His introversion, implying a search for serenity, is the one constant objective that cuts across the others.

*

In his correspondence, Witsen expresses his temperaments and moods and, occasionally, the outcome of his work. Yet, the complicated question of visibility of the character of the artist in his work still requires a fair amount of speculation. Furthermore, it calls for certain psychological skills to truly understand his rationale. Therefore, I also want to discuss Witsen's artistry on a meta level, meaning that I will not focus on the visual elements of the etchings, but Witsen's – more evident – intentions and motivations behind the creation of his work.

Draayer-de Haas argued that Witsen's deliberate choice for this medium reveals his intentions as an artist. Etching was a particular intellectual exercise, because 'much more comprehension and sense of beauty is needed to understand the black and white'. It supposedly requires more thought and is thus deemed more abstract.

However, with the indirect process of etching there is more than meets the eye. Printmaking was a unique and challenging method for artists; it can be considered as a combination of sculpture, painting and drawing at once, needing all skills to achieve perfection. Witsen was constantly challenging himself as an artist. He was an intelligent man and found stimulation in the complex process of this medium that required focus, patience and determination. Furthermore, the intimate physical interaction with the 'quasi-intractable copper' also appealed to him. Perhaps similar to playing the cello, etching was a fascinating collaboration between body and mind for Witsen.

As a printmaker, Witsen did not only experience the fine motor movement, but also the gross motor movement of the medium. Witsen thought it important to also carry out this aspect of the process, as he wanted to be in complete control of the final outcome. This obsessive need of control emanates from Witsen's constant strive for perfection, which often led to performance anxiety. This anxiety is apparent in his meticulous study of his subject, his slow working and repeated corrections of the plate. Yet, this creative labour had a therapeutic effect on him, as he wrote: 'I often have moments of great despondency, but I find satisfaction in my work'.¹ Timmerman rightfully described Witsen as patient, with reconciled melancholy and a healthy passion for his work.

Witsen's many travels were initiated by his restlessness. This traveling, possible due to the new developments of public transport and his comfortable financial position, caused for an interesting topographical rendering of various cities in the Netherlands and abroad. Indirectly, this variety could thus be seen as a result on his character as well. Witsen's selection of his subjects is revealing, as he wrote that an artist should work with 'judgment and choice' and should 'only make something in which he finds a strong affection.'¹ Witsen's approach to his subject and art in general was analytical, for which he was criticized by colleagues from the Movement of Eighty. Yet, this analytical tendency was also one of his melancholic characteristics. This is probably why Witsen was attracted to the medium of photography, which required careful though trough compositions.

It could be argued that Witsen may have tried to shape his status as an artist by means of the comparison with the Dutch Old masters. This is evident in his realistic style, technical curiosity and his choice for subject. In his works of Brabant, for instance, Witsen eliminates all traces of modern society and focused traditional subjects, such as the farmhouses. In Amsterdam, he often revisited the sixteenth-century sculptural structure of the Montelbaanstoren and he probably went to Dordrecht because this city had international allure for its reference to the seventeenth century and its timelessness. He was drawn to Wijk bij Duurstede because it was – in his eyes – completely like the seventeenth century. The aim of becoming a *peintre-graveur* was more persistent in his choices than one might think. I developed the impression that Witsen eventually placed technical competence and precise reproduction above feeling. It could also be interesting to further examine Witsen's etchings within the tradition of (technical) etching practises from the seventeenth century.

¹ The fact that printmaking is particularly fruitful as a means of therapy is explained in: Lucy Mueller White, *Printmaking As Therapy. Frameworks for Freedom*, London 2002. The author gives a comprehensive and clear account of the impact that printmaking can have on clients' inner lives.

Nevertheless, Witsen's work undoubtedly is the product of its time. His etchings are balancing between two centuries, between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, between culture and nature, between water and land and between human and building. They satisfy a tendency that many people in that time had: A nostalgic denial of the rapid changes in the city (and society) that all happened so fast. Witsen's etchings were made to keep his memories, as those of others, of the picturesque places he visited alive. However, Witsen looked at these memorable places of past glories with an analytic and photographic eye, resulting in strong compositions that provided his sentimental depictions with a remarkably modern sensibility. The title *A Lasting Impression* thus refers to both the creation of an etching as well as Witsen's intention to make them: preserving his memories, as 'a piece of life of which every person may get his own impression.'

Further recommendations

Witsen's melancholy fits the general presumption that the 'saturnine temperament' is predominant for the artist, described in *Born Under Saturn*, in which Margot and Rudolf Wittkower attempted to determine the character and conduct of artists. Other general characteristics the Wittkowers have detected were eccentric behaviour and noble manners, genius and madness, creative idleness, preference for creation in solitude, distress of mind and temper, suicidal thoughts, problems with celibacy, love and licentiousness, professional suspicions and jealousies and the financial struggle to make a living and simultaneously being a wastrel. We have encountered all these elements within this research, which bears some similarities with that of Jacob Hirsch Reisel on Witsen's friend and colleague Isaac Israëls.² Both studies show that the sketch of the constitutional type of artist by the Wittkowers was still applicable in the nineteenth and twentieth century. It would be very interesting to examine the Movement of Eighty by means of the categories the Wittkowers created.

In her memorial for Witsen, Draayer-de Haas focussed on 'the beautiful etchings done prior to the painters age of thirty', which means even before Witsen came back from London. It seems that contemporaries generally agreed that Witsen's period at the Ewijkshoeve was the most fruitful. The emphasis on this first period of his life undoubtedly contributed to the image of Witsen as being an interpreter for the Movement of Eighty. However, during this research, I started to wonder to what extent this engagement is representative for Witsen as a person and an artist. From both his intellectual as well as his visual heritage, it appears that Witsen had some objections against the movement. In his letters, he started to complain about the 'theoretical filth, bourgeois mindedness and dilettante hobbies' of his Amsterdam circle as early as 1885. Furthermore, the articles he wrote for *De Nieuwe Gids* as critic was opposed by other dedicated members such as Veth and Van Deventer, who wrote that Witsen had 'sinned against Article 1 of healthy criticism'.

² Reisel examines biographical, art-historical and psychological aspects in order to examine Israëls' personality. Israëls also displays characteristics similar to Witsen, such as 'an intellectualistic attitude, behind which he hid timidity, and a sense of insecurity', 'strong urge for complete freedom' and 'escapist attitude'. See: Jacob Hirsch Reisel, *Isaac Israëls: Portret van een Hollandse Impressionist. Oeuvre en persoonlijkheidsstructuur*, Amsterdam 1966.

Rynaerts also remarked that Witsen, in this aspect, was more faithful to himself than to the convictions of the Movement of Eighty.³ Witsen later looked back at this period as his 'selfish', 'childish' and 'small' existence. Diving deeper into his correspondence with a neutral approach reveals that Witsen should not always be mentioned in the same breath with the Movement of Eighty. As mentioned before, Witsen's character was full of contradictions, which could explain his love-hate relationship with the Movement of Eighty. This observation could be an interesting starting point for further investigation.

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ⁱ 'Hij zal alleen dat maken waarbij hij 'n sterke aandoening heeft.' - W.J. van Westervoorde, 'Een Hollandsch schilder in Spanje', in: *De Nieuwe Gids*, Jaargang 1887, p. 183.

It would be wonderful to couple Witsen's etchings with the poems by Van Looy, both expressing their sensations. For instance, Jac. van Looy, *Gedichten*, Leiden 1932, p. 23:

Zacht valt de regen uit een hemel zonder pracht...
 Die zich stil heeft betrokken met 'n water-zware vracht
 Bij het komen van den nacht.
 Geen ziet hoe het daalt uit dat duistere wolk-gespan,
 Als de tranen stil geschreid van een hoogen sterken man,
 Die men voelen wel maar zien niet kan.

Langzaam zakt de stad in het duistren van den nacht.
 Langzaam valt de regen uit den duistren hemel, zacht
 Als een woordenlooze klacht.

³ De Groot 2003 (see note 4, *introduction*), p. 25.

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¹ I chose to use the Dutch title 'Volledige Briefwisseling' (meaning 'Complete Correspondence') in the endnotes for the sake of the traceability of the document.

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