"ART IS NOT ONLY BEAUTY": AN INTERVIEW WITH ART HISTORIAN KOENRAAD JONCKHEERE

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«Мистецтво – це не тільки краса»: інтерв'ю з істориком мистецтва Кунрадом Йонкере

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Кунрад Йонкере – професор, доцент факультету Мистецтва, Музики та Театру Гентського університету. Записала інтерв'ю Стефанія Демчук, к.і.н., асистент кафедри історії мистецтв Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка. У першій частині проф. Йонкере розповідає про становлення своєї кар'єри історика, вчителів і найвпливовіші книги. Він пояснює, як масштаби його інтересів перейшли з ринків мистецтва сімнадцятого-вісімнадцятого століття до іконоборства, його впливу та теоретичних дебатів про мистецтво XVI століття. Його кандидатська дисертація, присвячена художнім ринкам, була опублікована у 2008 році під назвою «Аукціон картин короля Вільгельма». Вона справедливо вважається новаторською, оскільки автор розробив новий підхід до дослідження ринків мистецтв, використовуючи аукціонний каталог. У 2012 році вийшла друком його монографія про експерименти з декорумом в мистецтві антверпенських майстрів після Іконоборського повстання. Наступного року він курував виставку про художників-романістів XVI століття Михаїл Коксі для Museum M (Лувен). З 2014 року професор Йонкере працює головним редактором видавництва Центру «Rubenianum» (Антверпен). Його власне дослідження про Рубенса привело до написання монографії під назвою «Корпус Рубіаніанум Людвіга Бурхарда: портрети за існуючими прототипами» (2016). Тепер професор Йонкере розробляє новий методологічний підхід до історичної інтерпретації творів мистецтва, який він назвав «ефектом Тіманта». Цей підхід використовує риторичне поняття "quaestio" як основу для аналізу та тлумачення. Про це професор Йонкере розповідає у другій частині інтерв'ю. Третя частина акцентує увагу на мистецтві Реформації та іконоборстві. Проф. Йонкере вказує на основні напрямки сучасних досліджень мистецтва Реформації та висвітлює питання, які ще потрібно вирішити. Інтерв'ю завершується порадами молодим історикам мистецтва.

Ключові слова: Кунрад Йонкере, історія мистецтв, декорум, quaestio, Іконоборчий рух.

I. Becoming Art Historian

Stefaniia Demchuk. When and how did your way as an art historian begin?

Koenraad Jonckheere. J. Well, I first studied history at the University of Leuven (The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven – *S.D.*). I had actually wanted to study Art History, but I thought that there was no future in Art History and it was too specific as a profession. Therefore, I decided to study History and that studying Art History was not the thing I really wanted. I finished my education with MA (Master of Arts – *S.D.*) in History and, at the same time, decided to study Art History after all. Thus, I also did MA in Art History in Leuven. When I graduated, I was asked to go to Amsterdam (University

of Amsterdam – *S.D.*) to write a PhD there. They had a job vacancy and asked if I want to apply. Hence I worked on my PhD. From that point onwards, everything ran smoothly. I must say – I was lucky, not all scholars are as lucky as I am. After completing my PhD, I had some Postdoc positions and ended up with my current appointment in Ghent University.

S.D. Why you have chosen Art History? Was there a specific painting you liked or something else?

K.J. My parents were interested in Contemporary art – I must admit. I had a great uncle, who was an art historian and could passionately talk about art. I myself produced some paintings and sculptures when I was in high school. So, I was always interested in the more creative aspects of life. I realised quite soon that I would not make great art myself and that I liked the theoretical approach too. What does art do and why do we find it interesting? How does it affect even our daily life?

S.D. How did you find your topic?

K.J. Well, as a student I had always planned to work on Contemporary art. I was interested in the works of art in the public space, but at that time, I was not keen on working with the professor who was teaching it at Leuven University. However, we had a very good professor of the Sixteenth and the Seventeenth century Flemish painting – Katlijne Van der Stighelen. I decided to work with her and contacted her to find a MA thesis topic. She asked me to work on Adrian Tomasz. Key. After completing the MA thesis, I published a book under the same title. A. Key is a Sixteenth century Calvinist working in Antwerp as a portrait and history painter.

In Amsterdam, they wanted me to work on the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth century Art markets. I wrote my PhD thesis on the Auction of King William's paintings. It was completely a different topic. When I finished the thesis, I was kind of fed up with art markets. I think there was a too dense circle of scholars working together, all knowing each other. I found it a bit suffocating

As a result, I decided to do something completely different. I picked up my Key research again. I asked why a Calvinist painter was so successful in Antwerp in this complex period, in the second half of the Sixteenth century, right after the Iconoclasm and everything that came with it. I came to know David Freedberg at that time on the conference and so I got even more interested. I wrote a new research project on the impact of Iconoclasm and the theoretical debates on the Sixteenth century art. From than onwards everything came naturally. Because people working on Iconoclasm all want to understand, what image does and why people react so intensely to it. What is image? What is art? What does it to us? How do we respond cognitively, emotionally? What has it to do with what artist decides, what has it to do with the context in which it is presented? The questions are endless. That is how I came to my topic.

S.D. During your research on Key for the MA, did you discover something really new about him or just sum up his life and work? Finally, did you answer the question why was he so successful?

K.J. What I found out and what still interests me is how he played with *decorum* – the set of the social expectations that can change suddenly in order to create new meaning. For instance, when I have to explain it to my students I give an example of the TV news. News anchors are always wearing a suit, a tie and a shirt – it is a very strict dress code. But imagine, a person appears at seven o'clock evening news wearing a Metallica T-shirt –everybody will be shocked and that's because the anchor has bridged *decorum*. Adriaen Tomasz. Key played with that phenomenon in a way that Caravaggio would do a little bit later in Italy.

The second thing I found out is that A. Key typically generated meaning by omitting certain things. He copied works of art by Floris, Coxie or Willem Key, his master, leaving things out instead of showing them. Therefore, people would respond on the basis of something is missing. For instance, he depicted three magi, omitting the black magus. There was a discussion on the black magus in the Sixteenth century, because Bible did not mention him. Key copied painting by his master, which people might have recognized, omitting this specific magus. His play with omission is one of the triggers of what I call "question syntax". It does not give you a straight answer; it makes you think about the problem at stake.

S.D. When did you feel yourself like a professional art historian for the first time?

K.J. I still don't (laughs). You know, it is fun to be art historian. You can do what you like and it does not feel like working. I have this feeling that I am working only when I have to do administrative tasks. But the rest of the time I'm feeling very privileged. You know: it certainly is stressful to give your first presentation and it is stressful to present a new book, and to read the first review. However, the rest of the time it is just great fun and does not feel like profession at all.

S.D. Who were your teachers?

K.J. You have teachers on the different levels, I think. Katlijne Van der Stighelen who taught at Leuven, was on a personal level my first and still most important teacher. Then at Amsterdam University, I had Marten Jan Bok and Eric Jan Sluijter, who supervised my PhD research. They trained me to become the art historian I am. I got acquainted with David Freedberg, who I appreciate very much because I think he is one of the smartest people around in our field and actually one of the few people who will face to face give an honest opnion. Also, I am really fascinated by the work of Michael Baxendall. Although he is very famous, I think he is still underestimated as an art historian. He has a very clear way of thinking. I do not always agree with him, but he can make you think about certain topics. The same goes for David Freedberg – I do not always agree with him, but he makes you think about certain topics in a very different way. There are not many art historians who can do that. Of course, there are famous ones like Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, but everybody knows them and finds them inspiring.

S.D. The next question is related to the previous one, what books you consider the most influential for you?

K.J. Well Baxendall of course (Baxendall 1988). Freedberg's "Power of Images" (Freedberg 1989) is important. Among the most recent ones Matt Kavaler's Renaissance Gothic (Kavaler 2012) is one of the books that completely changed my way of thinking. But when I start to work on the new topic I will always first read what was written in the Fifteenth or Sixteenth century. For instance, when I worked on the Sixteenth century Iconoclasm I read all the treatises that were published in that era over and over again. Sometimes ten to fifteen times and only afterwards I read what was published on it. Therefore, I start thinking on the basis what they wrote in the Sixteenth century and not with what was written it the 20th or 21st centuries. So, when people ask me what were the most influential books in my life I'd say that kind of works like treatises by Erasmus and his contemporaries, because these sources are always the basis on which I always build my cases.

S.D. So, ad fontes…

K.J. Yes. Most of people work the other way around, reading what others have written on certain topics and then turn back to the sources. But what happens then – and that's is neurology – is that you will start reading the sources based on what you have already read.

That is also why it is good to change topic now and then.

II. Current projects.

S.D. Could you tell more about your current projects?

K.J. Well, at the moment I have two personal projects. I am writing thematic history of art from Antiquity until now. What I do is to tell the history of art from ancient Rome to contemporary art, but in every chapter, I choose a thematic approach. The first chapter looks into the skills, techniques of artists: how they developed through the ages. The second chapter will focus on economics: how it functioned from the ancient Rome to the Middle Ages, and then from the early modern period to present days, and how it affected art. After I will do the same research on art theory, how it changed and functioned. I would like to have it finished at least as a manuscript by summer (summer 2018).

My second project focuses on this question of visual syntax, and how did works of art shape visual questions. This project is more theoretical. I believe that some works of art in early modern Europe were conceived as questions not as affirmative narratives. So you should not read them like "here we see this and this", summing up "what we see". But some images were deliberately made as open-ended narratives, as questions. I find all this so important because I am convinced, that in early modern Europe "the question" – "quaestio" in Latin – was quite essential for intellectual life. Erasmus, Agricola and others wrote a lot about all of this. A question ("*quaestio"*) was key to start thinking. So my thesis on this point (and that of my new book) is that certain important works of art by the likes of Brueghel, Aertsen and even Rubens can be read as open questions for people to think about rather than standards or very affirmative narratives on the topic.

S.D. For what kind of projects, that you would like to make, you do not have enough time?

K.J. There are many and that is sad. You know, when you are in the field a bit longer, you see things passing by: new finds, new works of art, which nobody knows yet and that are on art market, and are important … But you don't have time to publish them, because you focus on the other issues. For every article or every book you write there is always a dozen of articles you don't. I have a lot of primary sources on the Seventeenth – Eighteenth century art market, which I have never worked out for instance. They are still in my desk and they probably will never get published. There is little to do about it.

S.D. What you consider interesting or problematic in research of your colleagues?

K.J. I find that art history is extremely scattered sub-disciplines. We have people working on the technical art history, people working on iconography, iconology, and ones working on stylistic or art markets. All of them from the different subfields hardly know one another. They do not really mingle with one another. All have their own conferences or their own sessions at big conferences and so it got quite complicated. Meanwhile one of the beauties of Art, or what makes it valuable as a research topic is that it combines everything. The reason why I wanted to write this thematic history of art was to show that art at the end is a catalyst for very complex issues. Art is not only beauty. It is also economy, skill, theory; it is related to religion and politics. Infinite aspects, which all come altogether in that one piece of material: the work of art.

S.D. You have to be specialist in a bunch of things.

K.J. Yes, exactly. But this is important if you want to understand art fully. When saying something about the Sixteenth century painting if you talk about iconography or iconology you should never say "this means this". What you need to say is: "if you look at this from this perspective this would probably be the meaning people who were looking from this perspective would give". This makes it complicated, but makes a story a bit more historically correct and thus valuable. Let us take for example portraits of dictators like Stalin or Hitler. If I hang them in a museum where one can catch historical context nobody will bother about it. If I take the exact same portrait and hang it in my living room, I can assure you that many people in Western Europe when entered to my living room will be very annoyed and maybe aggressive, because of what they see. This is one exact same image, only the context changes here. I do not even talk about people looking at it! So, saying "this means that" is just crap.

S.D. I think people in academia mostly do not like open-ended researches…

K.J. They don't. It has to do with Postmodernism and I can understand why, but…

S.D. They mostly expect you to say "this means this"…

K.J. Exactly. You know Postmodernism has its own problems and I am not a postmodernist. Yet, it's completely false to think that people in the Sixteenth century thought exactly like people in the 21st century. They had other patterns of expectations; they had other kinds of training and education, based on different principles. Therefore, the way they looked of art differs substantially from the way we look at it.

To reconstruct it we should write down the hypothesis. The hypothesis has to be empirical and fact-based. But since we can't fully reconstruct it one always needs more than one hypothesis to find the most valuable solution. If you look at the exact sciences, you have exact same problems by the way.

This is what I believe we should do with art history. We have to build fact-based theories and keep on checking them.

S.D. I thought about next question while reading about latest David Freedberg's research. What do you think about uniting neuroscience and art history?

K.J. I think it will help us to better understand responses to art – neurological, emotional, and cognitive. Neurosciences works in a lab context where very specific responses are explored. I think that will not help us much. What I think will help us is the theories they are building like *predictive coding*. I find predictive coding one of the most interesting theories in neurosciences. It states that when we see something we already have expectations before we see it. There are so many imposes around all that we cannot cope with that. Everything we see, we hear – that is too much. What they are saying is that the brain always predicts the next second. Now you expect that I remain seated and you will be surprised if I start shouting for instance. They say that at that point when everything fits in prediction brain is very stable. Brain becomes very active if something does not fit into the prediction. So, if I would start shouting now you will be very surprised or even shocked because it is not what you are expecting.

This theory is very intriguing for art history, because that would mean that a work of art becomes interesting and activates our brain when it does not completely fit into what we are expecting. I will use here not an art historical term, but when painting or sculpture starts playing with *decorum* it does not really matches our expectations. It is one of the theories I am following and again even in exact sciences much of what I do is theoretical. It is not that they have ultimate evidences or everything they arguing is true. Based on what they know right now this one is one of the most plausible theories how does brain it actually work. Predictable coding may help to explain many art historical phenomena. This is why I am following it. I am not a neuroscientist but I try to read about it and to understand what they are doing.

S.D. In your opinion, is there still a place in European art history for traditional methods?

K.J. Surely. They have proved their value Panofsky is valuable, Warburg is valuable, Gombrich is valuable. Of course, they also did mistakes, and we have to filter out the things that have proven to be incorrect or false, but their ideas and methodologies are worth reconsidering time and again.

S.D. Because sometimes I have to suggest some topics for students, which are choosing by themselves. So, what to suggest now? Many art historians switch to technical art history, to restoration or digital stuff. This is why I ask if there is still a place for iconography, iconology. Of course, there is still a place for stylistic studies.

K.J. Well, stylistic research and iconography cannot be seen separately. The example I gave you moment ago of the TV news presenter's T-shirt. She chooses a different style, but it is the style, which generates the meaning. Iconography determines how you respond to it. You should not split up style and iconography – it is two sides of the same coin.

S.D. Yes, even Daniel Arasse used stylistic approach to reveal iconographical details. Another book related question. What would you suggest to read for the first place among your own papers or books?

K.J. There are two book, which stand out and there is one on "*The Auction of King William's paintings*" (Jonckheere 2008) if you want to know about art markets. I think it was innovative because I developed a new kind of method to look at the art market using auction catalogue, showing how you can use them to understand how works of art travelled between different collections. This is the first. The second will be *Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm* (Jonckheere 2012), where I tried to show that general societal discussions – things that everybody was talking about – had some impact on artist and how they implemented some of the societal discussions in their works of art. The societal discussions (not necessarily art historical ones), had impacted art of the second half of the Sixteenth century.

Most recently I have written "Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: portraits after existing prototypes" (Jonckheere 2016). I have published this book as a part of Corpus Rubenianum on his portraits after existing prototypes. Where I tried to show that Rubens (and it is true not only for him, but for all good painter of the 16th and the 17th century) did not look at portrait the way we do. For example, they were not portraying the exact copy, but they would like to play with physiognomic features of people to tell stories about their characters, lives etc. They used portraits as a basis to build on, subtly hanging morphology, physiognomy to tell a different story. You can see it very well in Rubens' portraits.

III. Reformation

S.D. What do you consider the most important things to do about Reformation art and what is still to discover?

K.J. Of course, much was researched by Freedberg, Koerner (Koerner 2009), by many others

That debate on the one hand was religious when you come to the Reformation. Karlstadt von Bodenstein published his treatises and after it a whole bunch of people followed him, arguing what images were and how they should be or should not be used in religious context etc. On the other hand, you have the Sixteenth century art theoretical discourse. What is interesting to see is that art theoretical discourse focused on intention of a painter, what he is supposed to do, how he is supposed to invent something? It is all about the intention of the painter. While the religious theoretical discourse focused on the perception.

What you see in the Sixteenth century is artists confronted with societal expectations, does not being preoccupied only with what they are supposed to do from a theoretical point of view as humanists or Renaissance scholars, but well aware of the effects generated by works of art. It is out of these blends of two discourses that baroque art flourished at the end of 16th – the early 17th centuries. This blending of two theoretical discourses has not been sufficiently researched.

S.D. Why was art despite all Iconoclasm for the Sixteenth century as for Catholics so for Reformers?

K.J. That the ultimate question of course (laughs). It is unanswerable why the visual culture in general is so overwhelming. If you look at history from certain perspective or non-historical perspective one argument you can make is that the visual becomes even more important. It grows constantly. Today, I do not know, five or six billion of images are uploaded into internet daily. It is huge, it is enormous and it is everywhere. Of course, neurologists would say it is because nearly 50% of brain is constantly processing images. The brain is made for processing images. And because to seeing is unavoidable, we cannot stop it. When you smell something, you should not necessarily taste it, when you start reading you can stop after several sentences. When you see an image you cannot stop it, there is no way back. In my opinion, that is one of the reasons why it is so influential, has always been, and will always be. But it is an incredibly complex story.

S.D. What authors or books will you suggest to read about Reformation art? Up to five most important.

K.J. David Freedberg's Power of images is one of the best, Joseph Lee Koerner's book Reformation of images. Yet, I would also suggest starting by reading Erasmus, Luther or Calvin – that is how you get a sense of what was going on.

S.D. Now it is the last, but not least question what will be your advice to early career art historians?

K.J. Write every day, try to enjoy writing, because writing is a fountain of ideas. Ideas come while you are working. Writing is a skill. It is how you communicate. You may have fabulous thoughts but they are useless unless you can get them on a sheet of paper. So, write half a page every day!

S.D. Thank you, that's a really good advice!

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"Art is not only beauty": An Interview with Art Historian Koenraad Jonckheere

Koenraad Jonckheere is associate professor in Northern Renaissance and Baroque Art at Ghent University. The interview was recorded in August 2017 by assistant professor Stefaniia Demchuk (Chair of Art History, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv). In the first part, Prof. Jonckheere talks about his career path of art historian, his teachers and the most influential books. He explains how the scope of his interests shifted from the Seventeenth-Eighteenth century art markets towards Iconoclasm, its impact and the theoretical debates on the Sixteenth century art. His Ph.D. research on art markets was summarized and published in 2008 under the title "The Auction of King William's paintings". It was innovative because the author developed a new approach to work on art markets using auction catalogue. In 2012 his monograph on experiments in decorum in the Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm appeared. The next year he curated the exhibition on the Sixteenth century Romanist artist Michiel Coxcie for Museum M (Leuven). Since 2014 Prof. Jonckheere has been working as an Editor-in-Chief at the Centrum Rubenianum (Antwerp). His own research on Rubens resulted in a monograph titled "Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: portraits after existing prototypes" (2016). Now Prof. Jonckheere is developing a new methodological approach towards historical interpretation of artworks, which he called the "Thimanthes effect". This approach uses the rhetorical concept of "quaestio" as a guiding principle for interpretation. Prof. Jonckheere discusses it in the second part of the interview. The third part focuses on the Reformation art and Iconoclasm. Prof. Jonckheere points out main directions in contemporary research on the Reformation art and highlights issues that are still to be solved. The interview concludes with advices to early-career art historians.

Key words: Koenraad Jonckheere, art history, decorum, quaestio, Iconoclasm.

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