The art of drawing

The artistic component of design theory at Delft University of Technology is based on a strong tradition, greatly enhanced by efforts of teachers such as Paul Tetar van Elven and Bram Gips. It hasn’t always been plain sailing, though.

Jos Hilkhuijsen

In the nineteenth century, training to become an architect at Delft Polytechnic Academy (the precursor of Delft University of Technology) included following courses in decorative art, draughtsmanship, and sculptural modelling. For almost fifty years these arts classes were taught using practically the same methods: drawing from nature using an educational collection of authentic building ornaments and utensils from various periods.

Plaster models

Between 1854 and 1894 the drawing classes were given by historic painter, Paul Tetar van Elven (1823-1896). He had started teaching out of necessity, being unable to get by on the sales of his paintings and so required an additional source of income. Having given drawing classes for some years at the academy of arts in his native The Hague, in 1854 he managed to improve his position by accepting the post of arts teacher at the Royal Academy in Delft. Tetar van Elven wasn’t happy as a teacher. A sensitive, romantic soul, he led a rather isolated existence in the provincial town that was Delft. In his opinion Delft was a cultural backwater, even though he faithfully attended the soirees of Musis, the local cultural society, which focused on music. He entered his paintings in national exhibitions, and achieved a certain fame as a copier of considerable skill. The years of teaching rather took their toll on him. Tetar dreamt of life on a superior aesthetic plane, but, as he once remarked, he saw it unfold amid mechanics and butter traders. His misery was compounded by lack of appreciation of his subject and a pittance for pay.

Draughtsmanship was considered an essential ingredient of technical training. Its purpose was to improve the powers of perception and imagination for structural compositions, and to develop observational skills for typical shapes and colours. Most of the classes took place during the evening, at the expense of study and leisure time, but the time had been expressly chosen so as to extend the opportunity to attend classes to non-students.

In his drawing classes, Tetar paid ample attention to the great masters of the Italian renaissance and the Dutch seventeenth century, who often provided him with subject matter and inspiration. His teaching method involved copying lithographs of landscapes, antique statues and heads, studies after old and new masters, and ornament studies. For drawing from nature he used plaster casts of classical heads, sculptures, and ornaments as models. These he obtained from the educational collection of building fragments and utensils of the department of fine arts. His sketching classes were considered rather dull. Just like the arts and crafts schools and art academies, the Royal Academy, or Polytechnic School, had its own model workshops, but many of the plaster casts, photographs, and lithographs came from abroad. In 1864 Tetar van Elven and his colleague, sculpture teacher Lacomblé, visited the Musée de la Sculpture Comparée in Paris and the Museum of Fine Arts In Brussels to order casts of freezes, leaf patterns, and decorative borders. They also placed orders with the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden.

Revolution under Gips

With the appointment in 1894 of Van Elven’s successor, A.F. Gips (1861-1943) the drawing classes underwent a fundamental change. Gips had been an arts teacher at a secondary school in Bergen op Zoom. He was to become known as an architect-decorator (interior designer), creating advertising posters, book covers, and silver dinner sets for which he received international awards. He was also familiar with the Polytechnic School, after training there, carrying out incidental decorative design work for it, and in 1886 designing and carrying out a ceiling decoration in the house of his predecessor, Tetar van Elven.

The drawing studio was on the top floor of the Polytechnic School building on the Oude Delft. It was lit by skylights and featured an amphitheatre and rows of tables. In addition there was what was known as the Sculpture Gallery, which doubled as a classroom for art history. Gips had his students measured and drew exclusively from authentic objects in a variety of materials, which he selected from the educational collection. The students could also do still life sketches and even sketch live, needless to say, dressed, models. For his lessons he added architectural and decorative fragments to the collection in order to provide an almost complete review of styles through the ages. Gips considered sculpture particularly important for his teaching method, since a well-carved statue allowed a
looking BACK
Architectural training was also in need of a hotly debated controversy for the ensuing almost non-existent. To meet the demand of painting and sculpture, as it used to be with that of a classroom. Gips set great store by the close-up experience of beauty. He added many casts from the Musée de Sculpture at the Paris Trocadéro, the Museum of Monumental Art in Brussels, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and the Museum of Antiquities in Leiden to the small collection of Greek and Renaissance statuary started by Tetar van Elven and Lacombe. On the walls he put water colours of monumental buildings and photographs of famous paintings and sculptures, completing the catalogue of available styles.

Just like his colleague Karel Shuyterman (who taught decorative art) Gips put together a collection of photographic slides to provide illustrative material for his subjects, sketching and art history. It all helped to make the classes more exciting than they were wont to be, and the interest shown by the students increased accordingly. Former student Leliman wrote: ‘Drawing was neither highly regarded nor enthusiastically attended. When crowds were to be expected only incidentally an individual would report to the drawing studio, quite timidly as though the demonstration of so much zeal might earn him the dreaded reputation of being a rotter. However, suddenly, the importance of drawing skills had been increasingly stressed, the attendance of classes had witnessed such a reversal that the last decade had seen the doors swung down more than half the day during the previous half century, and the available space had become so small that it was always fully booked in advance and numbered tickets were required, and... an assistant was found to be necessary.’

Protest

The fresh breeze Gips sent through the arts department was a blessing for the art academy. The proposal met with the reorganising committee. To Gips the art of sketching is a necessity to the architect, [which] has not yet been recognised.

Exhibitions

So drawing remained controversial, and its importance kept having to be demonstrated. A tried and tested means were the annual exhibitions of building and decorative art organised in Amsterdam. Since the 1840s decorative art teacher Adolp Le Comte had his students enter designs for ceiling and wall decorations, door surrounds, and facade decorations in the competition. It is not clear whether the entries came entirely from architecture students and whether students seeking a certificate to teach art were excluded. No records of names or entries survive. Whatever the case, the collective entries were intended to demonstrate the quality of the decorative arts teaching in Delft. From the beginning the contributions from Delft were well received and they earned awards on a regular basis. Starting in 1900 Gips and Le Comte’s successor, Karel Shuyterman, arranged exhibitions from time to time demonstrating their students’ educational progress in studies in oils, water colours, pen drawings, and paintings. Gips and Shuyterman called themselves architect-decorators, what we would call nowadays interior designers. The Polytechnic School taught students the basics of decoration on flat surfaces and this qualified them for the arts teaching certificate, but it did not make them architect-decorators. For that additional courses had to be followed at art academies. Many architects, architect-decorators, decorators, and others active in the applied arts took lessons from Le Comte, Shuyterman, and Gips. Memoirs and publications by former students show that the lessons left a lasting impression. Those students included, in addition to Leliman, J.B. Kam, J.F. Klinkhamer, J.R. de Kruyff, C. Mayouy, M.A.C. Hartman, A. Labouchere, E.J. Niemann, F.J. Nieuwenhuis, C.T.J. Louis Rieper, P. du Rieu, J.L. Schouten, C.C. Th. Sti, J.A.G. van der Steur, J.A. Pool, P.J.W.E. van der Burgh, and G. Knuttel, all of whom had a great affinity for architectural decorative arts and applied arts in general. Remarkably, they were predominantly architects and not architect-decorators like Gips and Shuyterman.