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
Architects in Delft

Increasing trade, shipping, and agriculture, growing industrialisation, the advent of the railways, and improvements to the network of roads and waterways in the nineteenth century boosted Holland’s prosperity, creating a need for an educational system better geared to trade and industry. Secondary education and vocational training were almost non-existent. To meet the demand for new structures from engineers and skilled architects increased attendance of classes had to be expected. Drawing and arts classes were considered the main instrument for stimulating industry.

Architectural training was also in need of reform. The demand for better-trained engineers and skilled architects increased with the demand for new structures from industry and the railways. In the Royal Academy in Delft was established to train architects. However, 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 opened more than they had been in the previous half century, and the available space had become so small that it was always fully booked in advance and numerous tickets were required, and [loosely translated] ‘an assistant was found to be necessary.’

Protest

The fresh breeze Gips sent through the arts department as a result of his less abstract teaching methods came for a time being recognised for the first time as an essential addition to the science curriculum. As a result the position of the teachers in the arts department improved considerably. Gips himself had contributed to the situation. Following the example set by the Association of Civil Engineering, in 1896 he urged the School’s Board to add classes on the history of painting and architecture to the curriculum, suggesting that he himself reach the subject. The proposal met with approval, and the first classes were given in February 1897. From the very start his classes were enthusiastically attended.

The training for architects in Delft included mathematics and technical subjects. The arts curriculum, which covered only three years out of the four-year course, comprised mainly structural and ornamental drawing. This was why it was said that Delft produced neither architects nor artists, just ‘capable structural engineers’. Those wanting to become full-fledged architects generally continued their studies abroad, or completed their training with long tours of other countries.

The 1863 Secondary School Act resulted in a separate chair of architectural arts and the introduction of the secondary teaching certificate for drawing and sculpture. The Royal Academy was abolished and replaced with the Polytechnic School. A young German architect, Eugen Gugel (1852-1931) became its first professor. For almost 30 years he was to leave his mark on architectural teaching in Delft. The decorative arts, sketching, and sculpture became a compulsory part of the curriculum.

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Gips displayed great commitment to his subject. When, for example, the transition from Polytechnic School to Polytechnic Academy, the arts classes came under of the General Sciences heading, and art history was in danger of becoming an elective subject, he lodged a personal protest with the reorganising committee. To Gips sketching for architects was both a means and an end. He failed to convince the committee. In a speech in 1913 Gips touched on the matter again by pointing out that field sketching was a compulsory subject in the curriculum of the upper years. He supported his views by quoting a recent proposition by a doctoral student stating that ‘proper draughtsmanship is an essential, and so drawing and sketching are ... of dominating importance to the trainer architect.’ [loosely translated] ‘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 1830s decorative art teacher Adolphe 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 oils, water colours, pen drawings, and pastels. 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. Memos 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. Klikkamer, J.R. de Krooff, C. Mooyen, M.A.C. Hartman, A. Labouchere, E.J. Niermen, F.J. Nieuwenhuis, C.T.J. Louis Rieber, P. du Rieu, J.L. Schouten, C.C. Th. St., J.A.G. van der Steur, J.A. Post, P.J.W.E. van der Burgh, and G. Kruutel, 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.

Looking Back

Lovey evening

It’s three a.m. and I’m walking the dog. It’s a beautiful night, a little hazy with a full moon just shining through. I am actually on holiday, far from home in beautiful Zwolle, and so I’m restricting my workload to just a couple of hours a day. This evening I sat down to do a ‘few things’, write a paper, reply to some e-mail, and write this column.

Things often get late, especially when there are deadlines for papers to meet. Normal working hours are spent on meetings, hardly ever on production work. I go home on time, walk the dog, eat a bit, then fall asleep in front of the television. Around ten o’clock I’m usually awake again and check on the computer for another couple of hours. After that it’s another quick walk with the dog, then off to bed. Most days I’m in bed by two a.m. and every morning at nine you can find me at TU Delft. It wasn’t until I gained my doctorate that I really began to understand the essence of being a scientist and really went for it. Your time as a graduate and doctrine student, so I learned from a colleague, is just to show that you can do it, that you have the talent. It doesn’t make you a scientist though. You have to go the whole way, show discipline in the way you work and live. He compared it to professional sports. Anyone can dabble in science, but you can only reach the top if you tackle the job with the zeal of a dedicated sportsman.

He was right to criticise my way of working. In my years as a student and during my doctoral research I had had it too easy. I’d never had to work really hard. On the other hand I did complain that he, with fifteen years’ extra experience, knew more than I did, was able to see more connections than I could. I’m embarrassed to remember it. The arrogance of youth! His words also helped me in another way. I was able to choose and go for my work. There is nothing abnormal about spending lots of time on something you really enjoy doing. It’s not all fun and games. Seeing papers and research proposals rejected can be annoying. Sometimes I get angry with the stupid referees, sometimes I get angry with myself because I made a mistake in writing. These are the easy rejections. Other times I have doubts about myself, can I actually do this? Is it really a good idea? Those doubts are much harder to tackle than simple anger.

You have to be able to find the discipline to try again, and it’s hard. I love my work, especially working together with colleagues and students, with the kick you get from the discoveries you make in research and teaching. I do the preparations for those meetings, whether they be lectures or staff meetings, in the evenings and the weekends. The production work, preparing for research, working out research ideas, I love it all. It’s lovely to have a good product at the end of the evening.

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