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SUMMARY

R. N. Roland Holst's views on art and artists are basically founded on two essentially contradictory theories: a concept of art which is idealistic in origin and a view of history which is rooted in historical materialism. Roland Holst strove to reconcile these theories, while giving no indication that he was aware of their contradictory nature.

Roland Holst's art concept dates from the 1890's. He began his career, as did most youth of his generation and social environment, as an impressionistic 'plein-air' painter. An opposition to dominant classical, academic traditions, a certain aversion to theorizing, and an active, carefree life style (which incidently, could turn into inner crisis and neurotic complaints) were a part of this view of artistic calling. Roland Holst's early art critiques are mainly efforts to oppose himself, somewhat bohemianly, to the accomplished bourgeois art world, of which his main targets were exhibitions, competitions, juries and critics. It was necessary to escape this world by retreating periodically to the countryside, where, away from all conventions and regulations, nature could be the one true source of inspiration for art.

From about 1892, this view of art changed very fast. Rather than an opportunity for experiencing and representing nature, the countryside now provided an ideal, quiet place for assimilation of impressions, reflection and self examination. At the same time, being closer to the origin and authenticity of existence, the artist could better search for the essence of changing outer appearances. Influences from France and Belgium played a large role in this change of mentality.

Among the young avant garde of the nineties, the need arose for an art which, in the words of Roland Holst, could reflect the 'thought-feelings behind the concrete'. Impressionism was now considered superficial. For the visual arts, the theory of French art critic Aurier on synthetism was very important. His philosophy was that the senses only offer a large number of divergent external phenomena; the essence behind, the true reality, is only recognizable through thought. Thought constituted the only reality. The outer form of an object was only a container for the actual meaning. It was the task of the artist to strip the forms of their external accessories to reveal their essential qualities. Forms, lines, colours made up a system of symbols through which the artist could express essential truths. In his later writings, Roland Holst used the expression 'the art of the Symbol' to define the art he defended. Opposed to this was the 'art of the Picture', the unthinking imitation of reality, which he, along with Aurier,

linked to the 19th century positive-empirical world view. Aurier also believed art should be decorative. Many similarities to his theory could be found in the tradition of mural art, going back to the Nazarenes.

Roland Holst's idea that the means of pictorial expression formed a system of symbols did not lead to a complete transmutation or abstraction of those means. Ruskin's reflections on rendering ideas into events and persons supported him here. Ruskin too was set against a detailed, imitative reproduction of reality.

For Ruskin, Giotto was the ideal embodiment of what he advocated in art, and late-medieval Florence was the ideal matrix for art. Roland Holst adopted this ideal of social artistry. Likewise, the organically cohesive Florentine urban society painted by Ruskin offered an alternative to the

disintegrated society which the 'art of the Picture' had produced. Art in tre-and quattrocento Florence had been purposeful, decorative and symbolic; the ideal materialization of such art was mural art, which was tied to architecture. For art after the Middle Ages, in contrast, the portable, exchangeable easel painting (portable art) was the suitable art form. Painting was not intended for representing social ideas, but only as the active, individual form of expression, aimed solely at aesthetic pleasure.

For Roland Holst and many of his generation, dissatisfaction with their own society led to inner crisis. In some cases, one sought a way out by joining the socialist movement in the expectation that this would lead in a short time to the formation of a new society. The English socialist William Morris portrayed such a social order in his utopian romance News from Nowhere. Through the abolition of the money-based economy, bartering and production for the market had disappeared. Since then, production of goods had been based on actual need; demands of durability, quality and fine workmanship had regained prominence. Likewise, the capitalist labour relations, which had exploited the worker, were replaced by labour based on equality and personal dedication, under conditions as pleasant as possible. Work was once more a source of delight, and this permeated everything that was made, in the form of beauty. Hereby an end had come to the increasing division of labour, mechanization and hierarchy in labour relations which had begun in the Renaissance.

While describing the origins of Nowhere, Morris had used Marx's division of the history of mankind into three stages: the slave owner society, the feudal society and modern, bourgeois or capitalist society. Ultimately, this evolution must result in the final phase, the socialist society. Marx and Morris's division was based on the various ways in which production and ownership of goods had been organized. Roland Holst used this division as well. For him, art was a form of production that changed along with the form of society: from purposeful art in feudal society to a free art in the commodities society. Roland Holst used the historical-materialistic view of history not so much to expose the decline of the crafts as did Morris, but to link this to the forms of production in painting. 'Portable art', easel painting, was typical of this

production of goods. The transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance was for him a definite breaking point.

'Purposeful' art for Roland Holst meant art with a social function, not only practical but also idealistic. Such art reflected the commonly shared ideas of a society. The individualistic art of the 19th century could not accomplish this. This lay both in the nature of that art itself and in the dissonance of a class society, where there could be no real commonly shared values. Through his ideal of an art bound to an idea commonly shared by society, Roland Holst could link his views, stemming from the 19th century, on Idea Art and mural art to a Marxist historical view.

Roland Holst's adoption of socialist concepts was eclectic. He borrowed Morris' course of history coupled with the decline of the crafts, but he grafted these upon his own art. He was heavily influenced by Ruskin's views on decorative painting and on a type of artist who practiced it, but he clearly did not share Ruskin's social visions. Further, elements of his thoughts on the nature and development of art and his criticism of prevailing art practices can be recognized in Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale by Proudhon and Qu'est-ce que l'art? by Tolstoy. He did not bring their preference for a committedly realistic art into practice, however, except in a small group of lithographs at the end of the '90s. He continued to adhere to Aurier's views on Idea Art and for his entire life retained his objection to classical-allegorical and historicating art as well as to naturalistic and individualistic expressive art. His campaign against an 'expressionistic' interpretation of Van Gogh's work is an example.

Roland Holst also participated in word and deed in the socialist movement: as a member of the S.D.A.P. (Labour Party), he was active until 1910 with strikes and collections. His wife Henriëtte and his friend Herman Gorter were intensively involved with party politics and Marxist-theoretical discussions, and when conflicts flared up in the S.D.A.P., they broke with the party. Roland Holst, who did not enter the discussions, remained a member, probably until 1919/20. His last article in which a clear socialist standpoint is recognizable ("Modern Demands and Artistic Considerations") appeared in 1919; this was, however, a reprint from 1917. For the Roland Holsts and Gorter, party membership was closely allied to their struggle to create a system of socialist aesthetics. This is reflected in the series of murals Roland Holst made in 1907 for the A.N.D.B. (Diamond Workers Union) building. In addition to elements from Aurier, Ruskin and Morris, they contain Henriëtte Roland Holst's ideas about socialist artistry and proletarian class morals.

For many progressive artists in the Netherlands, the role of Germany and the German Socialist Party during WWI and the revolutionary events in Russia and Germany in 1917-18 brought about first anti-military and anti-imperialistic sympathies and then revolutionary expectations. With Roland Holst this was evident in his joining the Union of Revolutionary-Socialist Intellectuals and his active participation in the then politically radical *Architectura et Amicitia* and the periodical Wendingen. For Henriëtte Roland Holst, anti-militarism was closely

allied to her interest in psychology as a means to unriddle the incentives behind nationalism and militarism. Her 1920's study, "Historical Materialism and Art", is an effort to combine Marxism with psychology. At the same time, this interest in psychology played a role in her theoretical development of a 'personal' or 'ethical' socialism.

Roland Holst shared these interests to a certain extent, as can be seen in his article, "Strange Similarities", in Wendingen, essays in Reflections of a Blackberry Hunter and in his later oeuvre, especially his 1937 series of murals for the A.N.D.B. He remained aloof from his wife's political party changes, however, especially her membership in the C.P.H. (Dutch Communists).

Roland Holst strove to live up to his ideals about art and artistry in his practice of art and his personal life. His personal life style was marked by a stylization of his home, dress and behaviour, and a preference for country life, which in the synthetic-symbolic tradition must serve as a pure source of Idea Art on one hand, and on the other, must reflect Ruskinian moral ideals of a sober and conscientious life style. In various articles he defended his colleagues who exhibited the same basic principles and criticised those artists with a contradictory mentality. Further, he entered into debates about the enhancement of public life and other aspects of art. From personal correspondence it is clear that keeping his personal image intact was not always without problems.

His professorship and later directorship of the National Art Academy took a special place. In keeping with ideas about artistry he'd borrowed from Ruskin, he did not try to reform the Academy in a technical sense, as did Antoon Derkinderen, but rather to make it a breeding place for an elite corps of monumental artists.

After 1920, when the direct influence of the socialist movement on his thinking had decreased, Roland Holst was more open to other views. His contacts with the historian Huizinga opened his eyes to the schematic character of his historical outlook, among other things, the break between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Also he was seized for a time by Spengler's cyclic historical philosophy, which was linked to prevailing cultural pessimism. Eventually, however, these influences wore out. What Roland Holst retained was his personal view of history combined with the Spenglerian contradiction between macro and micro cosmoses. His views became more nuanced, but remained in essence the same. This most likely had to do with similarities in 'story structure' between historical-materialistic views on the development of history and the synthetic-symbolic self concept of artistry. Despite their different origins, historical and aesthetic life ideals could coexist. Roland Holst's late work displays both nuances and constant elements in his views, especially in iconographic, but also in stylistic aspects.

Translation: Sharon Belden.