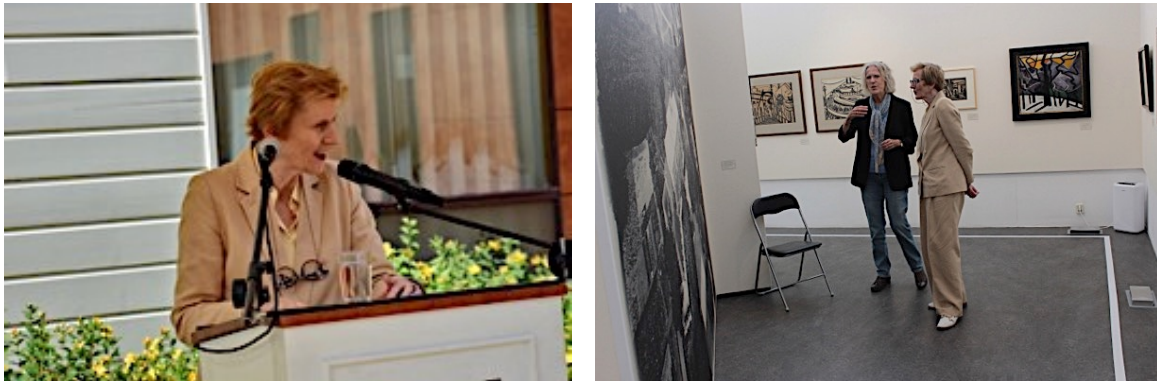


**Opening speech at the Vernissage of the MTVP & ICEAC Domburg exhibition
JACOBA VAN HEEMSKERCK (1876-1923). ARTIST AND INSPIRATOR | A
SMALL TRIBUTE at the MTVP Museum Domburg, on July 1, 2023**

**by Katlijne Van der Stighelen, professor of art history in Leuven and member of the
Advisory Board of the Museum Domburg**



Opening speech by Katlijne Van der Stighelen; Francisca van Vloten shows her around the exhibition

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In her introductory lecture, Francisca van Vloten indicated that it made no difference to Jacoba van Heemskerck as an artist whether she was a woman or a man.

That is without a doubt a revolutionary statement: ‘it does not matter whether Van Heemskerck was a woman or a man’. She was an artist. No more and no less. She was at the very beginning of a new era. Van Heemskerck is a pioneer for that reason alone. Unfortunately a lone pioneer. It will be more than a century before many female artists can develop careers comparable to those of their male contemporaries. Even today, female artists claim that their gender does make a difference and that they still feel that it is more difficult to become an artist as a woman than as a man.

In 1860, sixteen years before the birth of Jacoba van Heemskerck, the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* still read: ‘*The male genius has nothing to do with the female (...) Let women occupy themselves with those art forms which they always preferred (...). Let them paint flowers. Only these paintings of flowers are able to rival the women themselves.*’

In 1884 – Van Heemskerck was then eight years old – it was noted in an art criticism of *L’Art Moderne*: ‘*There is only one art in which women excel: that is the art that does not need deep thoughts or great feelings and for which one must not have had too much schooling.*’ Apparently, they can yet paint flowers and landscapes.

The art critic Albert Plasschaert, who gave the traditional ‘Amsterdamse Joffers’ their name and fame in 1912, thought that women and abstraction did not go together. According to him, women are ‘realists by nature’ and are incapable of abstraction.

Jacoba van Heemskerck was lucky. She received her first drawing lessons from her father, got a professional education at the Academie van Beeldende Kunsten in The Hague, was able to study with prominent contemporaries and spent a year in Paris. Back in The Hague, she met Marie Tak van Poortvliet who invited her to spend the summers in Domburg. In 1979, Germaine Greer pointed out the great importance of female patrons. She called on women to

collect art by women: *'Women should become streetwise as collectors. The ones with money have tremendous power.'*

Indeed, Marie Tak van Poortvliet had that, *'money and power'* to bind artists and bring them into contact with each other. This is how Van Heemskerck's career could start. She was well educated, didn't have to worry about money, had her own studio in Marie's garden – what Virginia Woolf in 1929 called a *'Room of one's own'*. In Domburg she had the chance to meet artists such as Jan Toorop and Piet Mondrian, the chance to exhibit and, above all, time; plenty of time to think, be inspired and work. She remained unmarried, which is, from a historical point of view, the best choice an ambitious female artist could make. But the mistrust of female artists persisted and manifested itself at the most unexpected moments.

In 1912 the *Domburgsch Badnieuws* wrote about her: *'Even Jonkvr. van Heemskerck van Beest has seen Cubism as the direction in which she prefers to express herself. The form is already so familiar to her that she uses it without much effort and with her diligence and good will she will also be able to master the right colour.'* The critical tone is clear. Not because of her talent, but because of *'her diligence and good will'*, she might be able to find the right colours in the future ...

Marie Tak van Poortvliet gave Jacoba van Heemskerck wings as an artist and just as important – if not more important – was her meeting in 1913 with the German art critic Herwarth Walden. He was also the publisher of the authoritative magazine *Der Sturm* and the pivot of the Berlin avant-garde milieu. He became her main admirer and mediator. It is undoubtedly thanks to him that, in the same year, she participated in the *Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon* in Berlin, where work by Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, Sonia Delaunay, Chagall and Paul Klee was shown, among others. The contacts became closer. Marie Tak van Poortvliet and Van Heemskerck travelled together to Berlin and in the summer of 1914, Walden and Nell Roslund, his eccentric second wife, stayed at Loverendale. The Swedish Roslund was a painter, collector and writer with whom Van Heemskerck also had many contacts. From 1914, Herwarth Walden and Van Heemskerck corresponded intensely with each other. It has become a unique exchange of letters in which the young artist manifests herself as a fully-fledged conversation partner.

Meanwhile, Van Heemskerck feels alienated from her Dutch colleagues. Her focus shifts more and more to Berlin where she feels she is being taken seriously and her art becomes more abstract. This is also reflected in the titles of her works. In the summer of 1914 she decided to only number her paintings: *'Above all, colours and lines have their own language that cannot be captured in a title. [...] Abstract art cannot be made in isolation. One feels various forms in their inner cohesion. For example: when reading a fairy tale, I can get the inspiration to paint a forest in completely abstract shapes with tree motifs.'*

Walden takes care of her and from 1915 Van Heemskerck exhibits her paintings in the gallery *Der Sturm* and these are internationally appreciated. In his book *Expressionismus, die Kunstwende*, published in 1918, Walden devotes a great deal of attention to the work of Jacoba van Heemskerck. In 1923, the year of her premature death, Walden organised a travelling retrospective of her oeuvre and wrote a: *'Nachruf auf Jacoba van Heemskerck'*. It is enlightening that in this *In memoriam* he does not write about Van Heemskerck as *'Künstlerin'* but as *'Künstler'*: *'Und wieder ist ein Künstler dem Tod verfallen, ein Künstler im Sturm des Geschehens [...] Aus der Kraft der Sinne hat Jacoba van Heemskerck die Bilder geschaffen, die die Welt bedeuten [...]'*.

Walden believed unconditionally in Van Heemskerck as an abstract artist. Contrary to the then accepted view that women were incapable of making abstract art, he ensured that her work was exhibited and published. Walden was used to dealing with emancipated, artistic women and that may have played a role in his relationship with Van Heemskerck. In 1903 he

was married to the German expressionist writer and painter Else Lasker-Schüler. In 1910 he founded *Der Sturm* together with the aforementioned Nell Roslund. Two years later he divorced Lasker-Schüler and married Nell. Incidentally, Nell Roslund had already set herself up as a patron of Van Heemskerck by purchasing two of her paintings that were on display at her first exhibition in Berlin.

Jacoba van Heemskerck was very lucky. While Marie Tak van Poortvliet made the start of her career possible by supporting her materially and introducing her to the heart of the Domburg artistic network, Herwarth Walden took the initiative to promote her as one of the most important avant-garde artists around the Berlin magazine *Der Sturm*. This is how Jacoba van Heemskerck became who she is. Without Tak van Poortvliet and without Walden, her talent would probably have languished in a bourgeois house in The Hague.

That's what it's about. On July 30, 1914 Van Heemskerck wrote about her Dutch colleagues: *'Die meiste Künstler vertrau ich gar nicht, die finden es besser dasz eine Frau nicht weiter kommt.'* In short: male artists don't want female artists to progress and become as good as themselves. It is a unique statement by Van Heemskerck in which she refers to gender patterns. Perhaps she had heard something of what had happened in London that had sharpened her attention to the situation.

Five months earlier, on March 11, 1914, an excited Mary Richardson had visited London's National Gallery and stopped in front of the *Rokeby Venus*, one of the finest paintings produced by Diego Velazquez, the foremost Spanish Baroque painter, circa 1648. The canvas shows a woman, with her back to the viewer, lying naked on a bed. It may not have been immediately clear why Mary Richardson targeted this painting in particular. The fact is that on that day in question she battered the painting with a number of targeted axe blows. Mind you, Richardson was not a hysteric, but an intelligent lady of rank who needed the thrill of token violence to bolster her denunciation of Emmeline Pankhurst's arrest.

The socially well-positioned Pankhurst – she was the wife of the radical lawyer and politician Richard Marsden Pankhurst – was known as the most combative of the suffragettes who all worked for women's suffrage in England. On March 9, 1914, she gave a speech that caused much commotion, in which she said, among other things: *'Our greatest task in this women's movement is to prove that we are human beings like men.'* Afterwards she was captured and two days later her friend Mary Richardson showed them what *'equal justice'* meant to them. She battered Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* so badly that it took years to complete the painting's restoration.

Richardson's rebellious act can be interpreted as an exponent of the paradox that has also characterised the relationship between women and art for centuries. Mary Richardson chose an important art-historical work to support her protest. With the destruction of the reclining naked woman, she immediately got to the heart of the problem. Women were apparently not made to become artists, but they were suitable as models to lie on a bed to the delight of men. For example, the Western visual tradition has fed *'the male gaze'* and made women into objects. After all, the iconography of the whole of Western art history has largely been invented **by** heterosexual men **for** heterosexual men. Richardson wanted to get rid of the straitjacket of this tradition in which there was no place for women as artists.

This action by a suffragette from 1914 illustrates the close connection between politics, feminist activism and women's artistry. The women who demanded women's suffrage were labelled *'unfeminine'*, a perverse way of hitting them in the heart and making it clear that there was only one role for them in society: that of wife and mother. But the tide could not be turned. Britain gave women the right to vote in 1918, and the Netherlands in 1919.

For centuries, women's talent was not given a chance to develop and was considered inferior by definition. Earlier quotes were cited that show that women were not supposed to make 'great' art. They wouldn't get any further than painting flowers anyway. Change was afoot, but it would take decades before women slowly but surely got a place in the margins of official art history. The breaking point was the publication of Linda Nochlin, who in 1971 published the ground-breaking article entitled 'Why have there been no great women artists?' This was the starting signal to dust off forgotten female artists. In 1976, the first-ever exhibition of the work of dozens of female artists who were active between 1550 and 1950 was held at the Los Angeles County Museum, among other places. Germaine Greer succeeded even better in documenting the range of female artistic activity in the Western past with *The Obstacle Race* of 1979. The book offers an encyclopaedia of female artists and focuses mainly on the 'hurdles' faced by women with artistic ambitions.

Liesbeth Brandt Corstius, who died in 2022, was one of the founders of the Stichting van Vrouwen in de Beeldende Kunst [Women in the Visual Arts Foundation] in 1978. In 1982 she became director of the Gemeentemuseum Arnhem, where from the year of her appointment she pursued the policy of reserving at least half of the purchases and presentations for female artists. For example, she bought works by Marlene Dumas very early on. In 1987, Mrs Wilhelmina Cole Holladay founded the first National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, where works by women are exhibited exclusively. No works by Jacoba van Heemskerck are included in the collection. But that will come. Thanks to her individuality as an artist and the trust she enjoyed from Marie Tak van Poortvliet and the Walden-Roslund couple, she was able to profile herself. And also thanks to Francisca van Vloten, curator and advisor of the museum in which we now find ourselves. Thanks to her tireless efforts and commitment, the Marie Tak van Poortvliet Museum is heading towards a new future in which Jacoba van Heemskerck will take a permanent place and can continue to be a source of inspiration for new generations of artists such as those present here.