The Rijksmuseum Building and Cuypers’s Decorations as Inspirations for Wright

In an interview with the author, Richard Wright said that the Rijksmuseum building itself was his main source of inspiration for making the decorations and explained what it was that so inspired him. Wright knew the building from earlier visits to see the museum’s collection of paintings. He was fascinated by it even then, and thinks that the architecture is much improved after the renovation. The museum has become more open and lighter, and is no longer the dark labyrinth it once was. Wright believes that it probably now looks more as it was originally intended to look.

It comes as no surprise that he is enthusiastic about the nineteenth-century decorative scheme. Total works of art like this, he says, are very few and far between in this day and age. One reason is that in the past materials were expensive and labour was cheap; now the situation is reversed. Today the production costs would be so high that it would not be feasible to decorate the whole interior of a large building in this profuse manner. Wright feels that the countless hours that all this handwork must have taken are tangible in the Rijks-

Fig. 14
Cuypers’s design for nineteenth-century decorations in the Rijksmuseum.
museum. To his mind, this makes it a unique and special building.

The building itself was Wright's principal touchstone for his ceiling paintings. He came to look over it many times during his preparations and also gained inspiration from discussions with the architects. Wright describes the exuberant, almost obsessive way Cuypers decorated the building as 'ecstatic'. In his view it makes the Rijksmuseum a spiritual place, like a church. He is intrigued by the religious air emanating from it. He argues that faith is a sort of obsession and an obsession with beauty is actually also a faith. This circular reasoning led him to conceive of the Rijksmuseum building as a place of contemplation and meditation – a place where the visitor can get closer to the world and try to give the world human forms. This process, according to Wright, is what beauty really is.

The artist made a thorough study of Cuypers's decorations and designs. What really struck him – more, even, than the colour, form or ornament – was the rhythmical organization and structuring of the decorations. In his proposal to the Rijksmuseum he wrote, 'It seems to me that this extraordinary building of Pierre Cuypers emerges from two interlinked trajectories: the first of which is an action – the art of building. The second, which perhaps manifests itself more in the surface treatments, concerns itself with something more overt and conscious – a revival which perhaps turned this house of art into a temple. My proposal is to make a work, which perhaps comes more from the first trajectory but which also addresses the manners of the second. The work responds to the way in which Pierre Cuypers layered accent and ornamentation within the making of the building. Style often emerges as solution to a problem: a resolution to the disruption of one surface's meeting with another. ... I want [the painting] to belong as much to the past as it does to the future – to refer to and disperse into the language which Cuypers used in surface treatment and the built structure of his original building'.

The 'language' of Cuypers's decorations inspired Wright to make a spatial, geometric pattern of black stars. The painting has an optical effect and creates the illusion of a vaulted ceiling. Wright is alluding here to the structure of the vaulting in the arcade arches in the underpass. The painting should not be seen, though, as a direct reference to that part of the museum, but rather as an association with the repetition of the architectural structure and the traditional way it was made. Wright is thus referring not literally, but on a meta-level to structures and regularities in both the building and the designs of Cuypers's decorations. He was inspired, for instance, by the abstraction, system and repetition of the bricks in the exterior, and he worked these characteristics into the repeating lines of the stars in the ceiling painting. The symmetrical, almost geometric structure of Cuypers's designs for the decorations is also reflected in Wright's work. What struck him particularly were the almost abstract figures: circles, triangles (fig. 14). He brings all these elements together – the ornament, the vaulting, the structures of the geometric patterns – in his ceiling paintings.

A comparison with Wright's earlier paintings reveals that the decorations in the Rijksmuseum are a natural fit in his oeuvre. A 2007 ceiling painting for The Common Guild on the occasion of the Edinburgh International Festival, for instance, is an optical pattern of black triangles (fig. 15). There, however, he did not confine himself to the ceiling, instead carrying over on to the top of the wall. In 2006 he painted another black optical pattern, this time dots, under a skylight in the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (fig. 16). The paintings in the
Fig. 15
Photo: Ruth Clark.

Fig. 16
RICHARD WRIGHT, no title, 2006.
Mönchengladbach (Germany), Städtisches Museum Abteiberg.
Photo: Achim Kukulies.
Rijksmuseum differ from the rest of his oeuvre in scale and preparation time, but the final result is entirely at home in it. Wright himself says that his earlier decorations with geometric forms were purely abstract in execution, and that the choice of a figurative ornament – the star – in the painting in the Rijksmuseum is exceptional. This star is an element that Cuypers often used in his decorations for the Rijksmuseum, for instance in the painted vault in the Aduard Chapel (fig. 17). Wright finds it a mysterious ornament and used it here as a deliberate reference to Cuypers’s decorations (figs. 18a and b).

Interestingly, Wright chose black for his ‘Cuypers star’ rather than a ‘Cuypers colour’ such as the sage green or terracotta so typical of the nineteenth century. Colour is less important to him than form and structure, and in choosing the colour he was influenced by modern artists with a limited palette. Here, the work of Piet Mondrian was his example. Around 1908 Mondrian (1872-1944) began to experiment with the intensification of colour and the simplification of form. He was striving for a form of painting with autonomous powers of expression and for the expressive capture of light and space. This process eventually resulted in the famous paintings featuring compositions of black lines and coloured planes. Wright also feels
an affinity with Mondrian in another respect. Like Mondrian, in 1990 Wright began to make art for the sake of the process and not for the work of art itself.38

A more limited palette is also important in the creation of the painting. Wright sees this as comparable to working with a machine: the colours are standardized and the process of painting is almost mechanical, but the eventual result is human. It is like playing the piano: the sound created by pressing the keys is mechanical and hence always the same, but the succession of notes and the way they are played project emotions, ideas and concentration; that is the human factor. Making a painting requires complete concentration and active thought: while he is painting the artist is like a machine, but concentration creates the design. By looking at the design the artist forms his ideas about it and the result emerges. Wright hopes that there will be the same interaction between the work of art and the viewer: by looking at and thinking about a work of art, one sees oneself. If a work of art does not show us ourselves, argues Wright, it is not (good) art.

Although Wright takes his inspiration from the Middle Ages, like Pierre Cuypers, and from the spirituality of the East, he nevertheless finds a certain degree of topicality essential in understanding the work. If The Night Watch were not still topical, he contends, we would no longer look at it and be touched by it. The emotional relationship is now at an abstract level. Wright is concerned about the humanity of painting, feeling the presence of the artist. This brings him close to the spiritual,
emotional approach to ornament, architecture and beauty championed by John Ruskin.

Light plays an important role in Wright’s design. The idea is that the painting does something to the space in a subtle way. The light changes because of it, so that the effect of the painting remains hanging in the air, like an echo. This change in the light and the space is tangible rather than literally visible. It consequently does not matter to Wright whether visitors notice his painting late or not at all. His aim, after all, has been to make the painting one with the building and its decorations.

**Wright and Cuypers Side by Side**

In his design proposal Wright wrote that he would concentrate above all on the structures of Cuypers’s decorations, and certainly a great many geometric structures were used in the decoration of the vaulting in the Rijksmuseum. The star Wright chose as the ornament in his painting occurs there repeatedly. In this sense there are literal visual parallels in the two artists’ paintings. Cuypers’s aesthetic surface treatment in the Rijksmuseum, the harking back to old traditions and materials in a contemporary idiom and the striving for unity in the design likewise correspond with Wright’s approach. Nonetheless, the differences between the two artists are more evident.

In the first place, Cuypers and Wright both made their paintings by hand, but whereas in Wright’s case this was a conscious choice in order to get closer to the past – as are the traditional techniques he often uses – for Cuypers it was more of a necessity. The stencils that Cuypers frequently chose to use in the Rijksmuseum even testify to a need for uniformity and mechanization. The ‘human’ aspect of painting seems to have been irrelevant to Cuypers.

The second obvious difference lies in the use of colour. Cuypers’s extraordinarily bright and colourful decorations dictate the appearance of the interior and demand one’s full attention. Wright’s paintings, in contrast, are relatively inconspicuous and seem literally to be part of the building. The use of monochrome contributes to the unobtrusiveness of Wright’s work.

The most striking difference of all, though, is the totally different approach to the building. Where Cuypers used rational ornamentation of the surface – in line with Owen Jones’s views – Wright adopts a spiritual, emotional approach to the building, more akin to the ideas of John Ruskin. The various painted forms give Wright’s paintings a kinetic effect. Influenced by the changing light and the viewer’s position, different parts of the star pattern become more clearly visible so that the effect of the painting changes. Cuypers’s decorations, on the other hand, are static and rational and serve the architecture. He used the ornamentation to bring about an extensive, hierarchical structure and a route through the museum. This is diametrically opposed to the three-dimensionality, kinesis and adaptation to the space that characterize Wright’s work. And yet Wright’s three-dimensionality is a conscious reference to the vaulting in the Rijksmuseum building. He achieved this indirectly, without following Cuypers’s decorations literally.

In so doing, Wright also augmented the spaces, as Cuypers did in many buildings in his capacity as a restoration architect. The rooms beside the Night Watch Gallery are almost the only ones in the museum without vaulted ceilings. One could argue that Wright has actually rectified this ‘omission’, although this was not his intention. Cuypers would probably have done the same. His practice, after all, was to restore buildings to the ideal form in which they had originally been conceived (rather than adhering to the historical form).
Wright's paintings should not be seen as literal references to Cuypers's ornamen-
tation, but — in their unobtrusiveness — they allude to and show respect for the
building. It was the appearance of the
building rather than Cuypers's ideas
that formed the basis for Wright's work.
Where Cuypers's paintings are static,
flat and rational and perfectly reflect the
spirit of the times, Wright's painting is
mobile, three-dimensional, emotional
and timeless. In his terms: human. It
is an organic painting that lives and
changes with the building. And so the
Rijksmuseum remains topical — like
good art, as Wright would say.