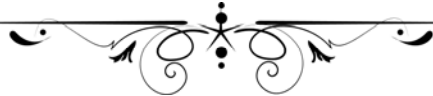


The Spiritual art paintings by C. E. Bensman (1877 -1955)

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Abstract

In the 2015 winter edition of the Journal of Exceptional Experiences and Psychology, a first introduction to mediumistic art from the Netherlands during the period 1900 – 1940 was presented. After a general introduction, the article focused on the drawings by the Dutch medium J.H. Verwaal (1889 – 1972). In this follow-up article, we will focus on another mediumistic art painter from the Netherlands: Catharina Elizabeth Bensman (Amsterdam, June 8, 1877 – January 2, 1955). Although we do not know much about her mediumship, her paintings speak for themselves and reveal to some extent the way in which her work was conceptualized.

Keywords: Catharina Elizabeth Bensman, mediumistic art, mediumship

Introduction

On July 11, 2014, I (Wim Kramer) visited the Utrecht Chapter of Harmonia, the Dutch National Spiritualist Society in order to discuss an ongoing project with Harmonia's archives. Harmonia's building is located in the center of the medieval city of Utrecht. The building itself is at least 400 years old and owned by Harmonia since 1922. Ever since the beginning, all meetings and séances of the society are held here. The interior decoration and even parts of the furniture of the building have not changed much since the Second World War. During my visit we were discussing mediumistic paintings. The chairman of the society suddenly mentioned that in the attic there was a very old wooden box with several creepy, even 'evil' paintings in it that he had once seen a long time ago, but was afraid to ever see again. Of course this made me instantaneously curious and I suggested we should go up and take a peek. At first the chairman bluntly refused, stating: 'for no gold in the world I would go up that attic again'. However, after some polite but persuading pressure and offering to take the lead, he gave in and we climbed the stairs.

The attic was clearly abandoned for a long time and we even needed to find a ladder to get up there. Upon putting my head through the hatch, it became immediately clear that nobody had been there for decades. It was dark, dusty and gloomy, with just a small, dirty and partly broken window providing some light. The floorboards were cracked so we had to be careful to walk only on the solid-enough parts. The attic was stuffed with old cloths, suitcases, and a pile of junk. The wooden box was there, covered in decades worth of dust and the even more dusty paintings were inside. The chairman's anxiety proved not to be unjust. The paintings showed to depict rather frightening scenes filled with demons, devils and biblical monsters. In the box we found a total of eight paintings. On the backside of each painting someone had glued a note, which over time had become brownish. The notes were written with a typewriter and gave short explanations of the work in question. The chairman noticed my fascination with the paintings and spontaneously proposed to donate the works to the Dutch '*Het Johan Borgman Fonds*' foundation. I gratefully accepted. The chairman was happy to see the paintings leave the building and we at the Johan Borgman foundation are delighted with the eight new additions to our collection of mediumistic art.

Artist's Identity

After dusting them off at our office we started to investigate the paintings in detail and tried to find out more about the artist. This turned out to be harder than expected, because even though it became immediately clear that the works were all painted by the same person, they were signed with different names. After a long time of painstaking efforts we thought we had a lead to the identity of the artist but it turned out to be a dead end and we had to give up. However, about two years later, in the autumn of 2016, we tried our luck again and this time we succeeded. Thanks to new internet databases we were finally able to clearly pinpoint the right mediumistic painter.

It turned out to be the fairly unknown Dutch female medium: Catharina Elisabeth Bensman. She was born and raised in an upper-middle-class family in Amsterdam on the 8th of June, 1877. At the age of 18 she got married to Carel Gustaaf Johan Willem Koopman (March 2, 1873 – May 3, 1934). Her husband held a master's degree in engineering and had a successful career at the Dutch National Railway Company. She took her husband's family name and was now called Mrs. Koopman or Mrs. Koopman-Bensman. On May 21, 1903 their son Jan George is born in The Hague were they had just settled three weeks earlier, coming from the town of Nijmegen.

Mediumship

Although we have searched all available archives, the internet and piles of books and journals we only found four tiny references to Bensman's activities and mediumship. All four dated between 1918 and 1922. Two of them describe Bensman's work as an author and translator in the realm of Spiritism. She wrote a small booklet on the Fox Sisters that was published in 1918: *'Gezusters Fox, Leah, Margaret en Kate, mediums en kampioenen van het moderne spiritualisme. Met portretten'*. (In English: *'The Fox sisters Leah, Margaret and Kate, Mediums and champions of modern spiritualism, with pictures'*). In 1922 she translated the two Claude's books (*Claude's book* and *Claude's second book*) by Kelway-Bamber into Dutch. This translation was published in The Netherlands by K.H. Noest Jr. Spiritualist Publishers and Booksellers in Amsterdam, a well-known publishing house in those days specialized in spiritualistic and theosophical publications.

The other two tiny references are on Bensman's capacity as a medium: the first is a remark at the end of a Dutch review on *Claude's book*. The reviewer is rather negative about the original book, but states at the end of her review: "Mrs. Koopman, who translated the book, is trustworthy both as a person and as a medium". The second reference is in a list published by Harmonia in the society's newsletter 'Ons Organ' (English: Our Newsletter) of April 1919. In this list of 'Healing Mediums, Psychic Healers and Trustworthy Somnambulars' Mrs. Koopman is listed as 'Healing Medium' with a footnote stating that she does not have open practice hours but can only be consulted after making a written appointment.

London

The Koopman family moves to London on January 5, 1925. Their 21-year-old son Jan George probably went straight on to study at Cambridge University because the formal governmental documentation lists his new address not to be in London but in Cambridge. In 1930 the family lives in the Golders Green suburb in London. In 1934, after a long period of illness Catharina's husband dies. Three years later, on April 17, 1937, she gets re-married to Mr. Jan Albert Willinge (Assen, 29 June 1876 - ?) a widower himself. Catharina dies ten years after the war on January 2, 1955. Before her passing, however, she had been widowed for the second time because her obituary in a Dutch newspaper mentions that she was widowed twice. Additionally, the obituary reads that her body was cremated in silence on the 6th of January. Unfortunately it is not mentioned where she was cremated. Since there are no records of activity in a different place than London before her de-

mise, it seems logical to assume that she died there. Hopefully future research might be able to shed more light on her personal life and specifically her later years.

Paintings

As mentioned above, the eight paintings are believed to be ‘received’ by Bensman from the world beyond the veil. Six of them are painted on canvas and two on panel. Almost all of the paintings share strong similarities both in the themes and in the techniques of painting they display. The subject the paintings primarily seem to depict is that of the evil beings and forces in the Bible and in folklore legends. In some cases scripture forms the direct inspiration, for example in painting No. 14 titled ‘Abaddon’ where we see the biblical monster depicted as a dragon rising up from the flames of the underworld. The same goes for painting No. 22 where Bensman has written ‘Rev 21 V 6’ at the bottom of the work. This refers to Revelation 21 Verse 6, a passage in the Bible describing the contents of the Promised Land, the new Jerusalem. In this work the force of



No. 14, “Abaddon”

evil appears somewhat more abstract; by the symbolic number of Satanism: ‘666’. In some of the other works we see Satan-like and demonic figures such as the enormous demon terrorizing the people and destroying churches and factories in painting No.11 or the similarly big, black-feathered and red-eyed skeleton clamping itself to a spherical object in the sky in painting No.15. In painting No. 18, titled ‘De Eenzame’ (‘The Desolate One’) we see the face of an evil entity captured in a knotted willow standing solitarily in the landscape and in No. 6 we see a red, horned demon shoot fire at fleeing elves dressed in white. In one of the paintings (No. 9) there are no figures nor symbols representing evil,

but we see the lake of fire, where the wicked would be eternally tormented in the after-life. Mediumistic art and the spirituality that forms its foundation is often strongly linked to Christianity and the more prevailing forms of belief in the afterlife and ‘the world beyond’. Bensman’s clear Biblical inspiration thus is rather unsurprising. However, where the Old Testament promises the triumph of the good over the evil, Bensman’s paintings seem more pessimistic and far less hopeful. The ‘good’ is not absent in her works: we have the delicate elves in No. 6, the nuns in No.11 and the cross (the quintessential symbol of good) in No. 22, but they are always the losing factor in the scenes. It seems as if they are there simply to provide a basis for the evil to contrast with. This is highlighted and emphasized by Bensman’s use of colour and brushstrokes: in many of the paintings she contrasts a ‘cold’ palette of colours, like blue, purple and grey (representing the good) with a ‘warm’ palette like red, yellow and deep-purple (representing the evil). No.14 (Abaddon) is the perfect example,



No. 22, “Rev 21 V 6”



No. 15, “1938”

showing us how Bensman constructed a contrast by painting a blue-purple sky with light, 'dotted'



No. 6, "Forest"

brushstrokes, which then abruptly transforms into a flaming, dark red 'underworld' created by strong, vertical strokes of the brush. Even in a work with little contrast in colours, like No. 18, we see that Bensman has divided the painting into a lighter left and a slightly darker right (where the devilish willow is positioned),



No. 9, "Lake of Fire"

once again representing the struggle between the good and the evil, between the light and the dark.



No. 12, "Mars"

Painting No. 11 has another interesting dimension to it, because after close



No. 18, "The Desolate One"



No. 11, "Untitled"

examination of the depicted scene we deemed it very plausible that it resembles the Russian Revolution of 1917. The domes of the churches and the robe of the man in blue next to the demon are both in Orthodox-Christian style. It is clear that it is the Orthodox-Christian tradition which is the subject of the devils attack, together with capitalism, which are represented by the factories in the center-background (these where exactly the subject of attack in the Russian Revolution) The nuns in the bottom-right corner are clearly isolated and victimized by the attack. What then is the role of the mass of people upon which the arrows of Satan fall down? At first we thought that they were being tormented and killed by the arrows, but then we came to the realization that the arrows symbolize the manipulation of Satan (Lamentations 3: 12, 13). He is striking the people with his poisonous arrows, which cause the people to tend to corrupted beliefs. This also would explain the arrows depicted on the banners

that the people are carrying, they are not against Satan but they are following him. Bensman, an upper class woman, presumably was not very appreciative of communist revolutions and saw it as a devilish endeavor. It seems that Bensman believed that communists were controlled and instructed by a satanic entity in order to destroy Christianity. The description on the back of the canvas states that the work was created in 1913. This is quite remarkable and even problematic for our interpretation; for it would mean that the work was painted four years before the Russian Revolution started. This would mean that Bensman not depicted but predicted this historic event. Could this be prove of her mediumistic capabilities? Perhaps, but we suspect that she did not paint this work in 1913, but much later and that the person who added the description –biased due to his or her appreciation for Bensman’s medium ship - fueled by wishful thinking. The notes – in Dutch - were added much later (after 1955) and Bensman is addressed by the name Willinge, which she would only carry after 1937. So it is very unlikely that the person who wrote the note had firsthand knowledge of the actual date of the work. Painting No. 15, allegedly painted in 1938, can similarly be seen as a mediumistic prediction, this time of the mass-loss of human lives in the Second World War, with the angel of death looking down to the earth like a bird of prey, impatiently waiting to wreak havoc. Once again, it is (more) likely that this work was just coincidentally a seeming prediction of the destruction to come or that it expressed a more widely felt fear of another World War.

Out of the eight paintings there is one that does not fit the themes of religion and evil that the other ones explore. Painting No. 12, titled ‘Mars shows us a landscape of Mars with surreal characteristics: a yellow atmosphere, strange red plants reminiscent of snakes and big blue crystals. This subject seems unusual and inconsistent with the other seven paintings, but is not unusual in mediumistic art as whole. Around the start of the 20th century Mars was subject to widespread fascination. People speculated endlessly about life on Mars and it was believed that there were whole societies inhabiting the planet. Within Spiritism it was often believed that the deceased of our planet now lived on Mars and they came in contact with them during their séances. One of the most famous ‘Mars-mediums’ was the French Catharine-Élise Müller who was given the pseudonym Hélène Smith by the French skeptical psychologist Théodore Flournoy, who wrote a book about her called *Des Indes à la Planete Mars* (From India to the Planet Mars) in 1900. Smith became famous through this book for her elaborate descriptions and art works about Mars and more importantly, the people living there. She even, in automatist writing-séances, constructed the alphabet of the Martians and translated it into French. Smith became a big inspiration for both mediumistic artists as surrealists and expressionists because Flournoy had argued that it was not a connection with the spirit-world which led to Smith’s creations, but the ability to work her creative imagination through her sub-consciousness. This legitimized the belief in automatism and that artistic works could be a product purely of the artist’s intuition and sub-consciousness. This unique work in the collection of eight shows Bensman’s versatility and places her within this sub-tradition in mediumistic art.

Like with many mediumistic artists, it is hard to fully understand the process and beliefs of Bensman, especially since we have relatively little information about her personal life. Being a mediumistic painter meant to detach oneself in part or in whole from the product, since the artist functioned merely as a bodily tool of the spirit world. If Bensman truly interacted with the mysterious world beyond the veil, the product is far from comforting because the paintings - which are in essence a visual articulation of her interaction with the spirit world - show us not only a frightening and alienating evil, but also the losing battle against it.

Canvasses and Frames

One of the paintings (No. 15) has a clear date on it. On a second one (No. 11) a reference to the year of origin is made, but this is most probably done by the person who decades later wrote the texts on the small white papers glued on the backside of each of the eight paintings. The wooden frames of the paintings are all in the same style and are clearly homemade. This makes it evident that all eight paintings are framed by the

same person around the same time. The frames are made of cheap wood, do not perfectly fit and in some cases the wood has split because the used nails are too big. Another clear indicator is the fact that the glue that is used is the same for all frames. They are also all glued quite sloppily, with a clear lack of effort to prevent the glue from ‘bulging out’ on the front side of the paintings. This again fortifies the argument that the works were framed by one and the same person.

No	Material	Width (cm)	Height (cm)	Title	Signature	Remarks
6	Panel	24,9	17,1	N/A	C.E. Koopman-Bensman	On the frame, written with pencil: ‘Bosch’
9	Panel	21,1	29,9	‘Hellezee’	C.E. Koopman-Bensman	N/A
11	Canvas	25,5	35,5	N/A	N/A	Side of the canvas shows stamp which reads: ‘Winton’
12	Canvas	35,5	25,5	‘Mars’	C. Koopman	Stamp Reeves and Sons Ltd., Ashwinstreet, Dalston
14	Canvas	22,1	39,9	‘Abaddon’	C.E. Koopman-Bensman	Canvas made by Tenzer
15	Canvas	30,5	49	‘1938’	C. Willinge	Canvas made by Tenzer
18	Canvas	45	30	‘De Eenzame’	C. Koopman-Bensman	Canvas made by Tenzer
22	Canvas	30	45	‘Rev 21 V 6’	C. Koopman-Bensman	Canvas made by Tenzer

Four of the paintings have a clear stamp of the shop where they were bought. It is a stamp from the firm Tenzer at the Noordeinde 139 A in The Hague. This shop was established in 1887 and has been out of business for a long time. Today the location is occupied by a tapas restaurant but so far we were not able to find any information on when the shop has closed. Further close examination of the paintings showed that two of the paintings were painted on canvas bought in England. By measuring the dimensions of the canvas it seemed that some of the measurements were weirdly specific for professionally made canvasses (which were generally made in round numbers). Then we realized that some of the paintings had to be measured in inches in order to let the measurements be accurate. Later on, when we removed the paintings from their homemade frames, this theory was proven by the fact that on the side of the canvas of painting 11 with the figures ‘14’ and ‘10’ and the word “Winton” was stamped. It turned out ‘14’ and ‘10’ are exactly the size of painting No.11 in inches. From the internet we learned that Winton was a kind of oil paint used by (amateur) painters back in the 1920’s. Later on we found that on the backside of the canvas of painting No.12, partly hidden under the white paper, we could detect very vaguely the outline of a stamp. It turned out to be the stamp of the shop where the canvas was bought: ‘Reeves & Sons Ltd., Ashwinstreet, Dalston’. The internet showed that this shop existed from 1886 – 1954 in the London district Dalston. This explained why those canvasses were modelled after the imperial measuring system: they were bought in England.

The discovery that at least two of the canvasses were bought in England made us wonder if we could find out when the canvasses originating from Tenzer in The Hague were bought. The stamp of the shop does not only mention the address but also the phone number: (H) 4229. Once again the internet proved very useful. We found out that only recently the Dutch national phone directories between 1920 and 1929 were made available on-line and even better, could be searched. In short, the number (H) 4229 was changed in the directory to 14229 on July 1, 1925. The reason for this is that the telephone services needed more numbers in order to be able to give unique numbers to the fast growing telephone-owning demographic. The lack of the number ‘1’ in

the phone number stamped on the canvasses proves that they were bought before July 1, 1925. This information is very much in line with the history we had reconstructed so far since it proves that the canvasses were bought in The Hague before the Koopman family left Holland.

When it comes to the question how the paintings ended up in the attic of the Utrecht chapter of the Dutch Spiritualist society Harmonia we entertain two plausible scenarios. The first is that Bensman herself left them to Harmonia in her will. The second scenario is that after Bensman's death the paintings were handed over to a Dutch friend or family members to preserve them for the future. This person then brought it back to the Netherlands and might have donated it to Harmonia sometime later.

Conclusion

Practicing art history in the world of Spiritism is often a difficult task. This difficulty comes from the fact that we try to approach the world of the cryptic, the occult and the supernatural with our limited human rationality and with science. It is to try to measure the immeasurable. This makes it hard, especially considering the little knowledge of Bensman herself, to interpret the works we found in the dusty attic. This is accompanied by the need to be careful about the information we find (like the notes on the back of the paintings), because a distinction must be made between the information we consider valid historical evidence and the information which is merely a product of wishful thinking or bias. We found out relatively much about Bensman, but there are still many questions unanswered. What we can say with certainty, however, is that Bensman is a fascinating artist and her works are striking and unsettling. She is therefore a welcome addition to the Dutch mediumistic art tradition.

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Biography

Wim Kramer is managing director of the Dutch 'Het Johan Borgman Fonds' foundation (HJBF). Thomas Dobbelaer studies Art History at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy. He is the 2018 summer intern at the HJBF.

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