

## Beyond the Veil: A Short Introduction to 1900 – 1940 Mediumistic Art from the Netherlands

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### Abstract

In the process of collecting and preserving Dutch parapsychological and spiritualistic archival materials, we encountered several original art paintings and drawings from the 1930s. This triggered a serious interest in the origins, the mediumistic artist and the artistic quality of these works. In 2013 we started a preliminary study on these art paintings and drawings. This article presents a first impression on Dutch mediumistic art between 1900 – 1940 with a focus on the art drawings made by the, now forgotten, Dutch medium Mr. J.H. Verwaal.

### Introduction

Ever since the rise of the spiritualistic movement in the late 19th century, there have been expressions of mediumistic art like paintings, drawings, sculptures, texts, and music. These artworks were produced by mediums who claim to receive their messages from “beyond the veil,” not in words (e.g., somnambulism, direct voice) or the typical physical phenomena (e.g., ouija board, automatic writing, trumpet voices, apparitions, ectoplasm), but by the involuntary automatic movements of their hand producing a piece of art. Often the medium is in another state of consciousness (trance) while producing the art. In general, the medium reports afterwards to have no memories at all about what they produced during the trance state. Unfortunately, unlike the written reports of séances and audio-recordings of vocal expressions made during trance, not much of the trance art objects have survived the ravages of time.

During the course of the long running project “Preserving the History of Dutch Parapsychology” (PHCP), in which we collect and archive historical documents on Dutch spiritualism and parapsychology, we incidentally came across interesting historical artifacts. In the old days these were either used as communication devices (e.g., trumpets, ghost-lights, planchettes, slates) or produced (e.g., art paintings, drawings, sculptures) at séances in the inter war years in Holland.

Over the years we obtained an interesting collection of original art paintings and pastel drawings from the 1930s produced by Dutch mediums. Throughout the 20th century these mediumistic art expressions were highly valued by members of the spiritualistic movement as they considered it to be “proof beyond all doubt” of the reality of the “world beyond the veil.” Art historians, museums, and private art collectors considered this kind of sculpture, painting, and drawing in general as “childish,” of poor quality and having no artistic value at all. However we recently notice that this negative point of view is slowly changing towards a more open and serious interest in these kind of art expressions. Out of curiosity we started in 2013 preliminary research on the background of the art paintings and drawings in our collection.

### History

Not much documentation about the origins of mediumistic art in Holland can be found. The reason is that most documents and archive materials of the spiritualistic movement, Spiritist societies and séances held in Holland dating from before WW2 are lost forever. By the end of 1941 the German Occupation forces in Holland banned all esoteric movements, including Spiritism. All societies and interest groups were at once strictly forbidden by law and all kinds of documents, books, journals, and artifacts dealing with occultism in general were declared of an unfriendly nature to the German ideology. The Germans immediately started to actively remove all books, journals, and documents from all university libraries and all belongings and build-

ings of “occult groups” were confiscated. The confiscated materials were partly destroyed right away but most of it was sent over to Germany and stored. Being caught in possession of a spiritualistic publication or participating in an occult activity was a serious criminal offense and could send anyone directly to certain death in one of the concentration camps.

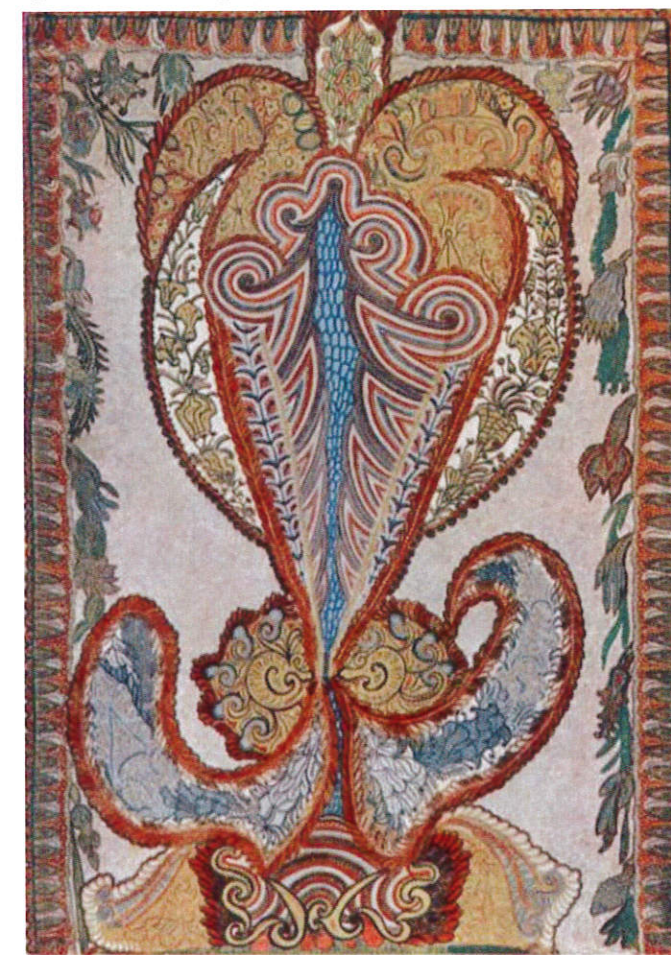
Our research on mediumistic art in Holland is mainly based on short remarks and short articles found in Dutch spiritualistic journals between 1897 and 1955. The oldest reports we found were not about Dutch but German medium-artists. The 1902 volume of the Dutch spiritual magazine *Het Toekomstig Leven* (HTL; *The Future Live*) mentions the work of the German mediumistic artist Gabriel von Max. In the 1909 volume of HTL the German Mrs. Wilhelmina Assmann was introduced. In October of that year her mediumistic art paintings were on display in Holland at two exhibitions in Utrecht and The Hague. Mrs. Assmann was inspired by

the spirits of deceased persons who continued to live on another planet and liked to show to us how beautiful the world is over there.

In the 1919 volume of a magazine for psychic healers we found an advertisement for an exhibition in Amsterdam from December 22, 1918 to January 21, 1919. At this exhibition, paintings and sculptures originating from “involuntary expressions” and “trance art” were shown that were made by artists, children, psychiatric patients, and “primitive cultures.” Unfortunately no further information is published about the works on display nor about the artists involved.

From the 1920s onwards, more and more Dutch spiritualistic mediums were expressing their “messages for the world beyond the veil” in paintings or sculptures at (sometimes public) séances: an example is Mrs. J.C. Calkoen (1866 -1944). In the 1920s and ‘30s she was a well-known and respected medium, an active propagandist of spiritualism, author of spiritualistic novels and a mediumistic art painter. Unfortunately it is unknown what happened to them. Only two vague, low quality pictures in the HTL magazine are all that thus far discovered remain of her paintings. The pictures show some of her paintings hanging on a wall at the spiritualistic art exhibition held in 1931 in The Hague. One of these pictures clearly resembles the work of the Dutch art painter Jan Toorop (1858 - 1928). Mrs. Calkoen mentions in an article that Jan Toorop, next to some others, is the primary deceased art painter that continues to produce his art paintings by using her as the medium.

In our collection we have several interesting artifacts including pencil drawings and a view small paintings that once belonged to the so called Spiritualistic



Mediumistic drawing by the medium Mrs. Wilhelmine Assmann. Picture published in the 1909 volume of HTL. According to the medium, this drawing shows how the world looks like on the planet where our beloved deceased are living. After publication there was much demand for reprints. These were made available by the publisher of HTL for 30 cents with a stiff carton back, so they

Museum. This museum was founded in 1935 by Mr. D. Heijnis from Haarlem. In reality this museum was nothing more or less than a traveling show of artifacts. The intention of Mr. Heijnis was to show to the general public the reality of spiritualism by organizing small exhibitions throughout the country. Unfortunately the majority of these drawing and paintings are not signed nor dated. However, between 1935 and 1941 Mr. Heijnis published two dozen short articles in which he explained the importance for the case of spiritualism of several of the artifacts and drawings in his museum. By pure luck some of these artifacts and drawings survived time and are now secured in our collection.

By far the most famous Dutch mediumistic art painter in Holland during the pre WW2 years was Mr.



H.C. Mansveld (1874-1957). He mediumistically received his first painting in 1920. His breakthrough, also in Holland, came in 1925 thanks to his participation in an exhibition at Hugo Gratz in Berlin, Germany. At this exhibition his mediumistic paintings sold very well and he became more or less famous overnight all over Europe.

We have some original paintings of Mansveld in our collection. The technical high standard of his works impressed the people in those days and convinced them that it was actually the work of various famous deceased Dutch art painters like Jacob Maris (1837 – 1899). Although his work was valued highly within the Spiritist community during his life time, today, as seen from an artistic point of view, it is considered to be less impressive. Noteworthy are the spiritualists sculptures made by the end of the 1930s by the two brothers Jaap and Wim Gmelig Meijling from Haarlem. Next to their art paintings, they became quite famous with their paraffin sculptures within the spiritualists society. Their artwork was shown at various exhibitions and they even made a film about their work. On the Internet, some examples of their art works can be found.

### J.H. Verwaal (1889 - ?)



Mr. J.H. Verwaal, 1940

In our collection we have 35 original drawings signed by Dutch Medium Mr. J.H. Verwaal dated between April 1933 – July 1939. We know that the Utrecht Chapter of the Dutch Spiritualistic Society "Harmonia" has at least one drawing by this medium artist Verwaal on display on the wall in their meeting room.

Since some of the drawings by Verwaal have an interesting artistic touch, we like to present here some examples of his works from our collection. The first shows a tree in which prominently three fruits are hanging on the lower branches on the right hand side. On the lower right hand corner, the drawing it is dated April 15, 1933, signed J.H. Verwaal and there is a small scribbling that looks like an eye and the letters (initials?) A E. In the 1938 volume of *Spiritische Bladen* (*Spiritualistic Magazine, SB*), the pre-war magazine for members of the Spiritistic society "Harmonia," we found the story behind this drawing.

At Friday night, April 7, 1933, while sleeping in bed next to his wife, Verwaal had the following experience: he felt how his astral body moved in a

horizontal position through the room. In his sleep he was wondering what was going on but instead acting on his first spontaneous response to resist, he decided to go along and see what would happen. Suddenly he found himself in a beautiful landscape and met a young boy of about 16 years old. He assumed him to be his deceased younger brother. This feeling gave him peace of mind. There was also an older man present who turned out to be his control spirit. Both took him by the hand and all together they wandered around. A little further away he noted a third spirit, a little old man who rubbed in his hands and was clearly thinking about something. They joined and all together they wandered around for



Mediumistic received pastel drawing by J.H. Verwaal, 15 April, 1933, 60 X 40 cm.

some time to have a look around in the landscape. Then he passed over a small path onto a wide, colorful mountain. The young spirit took him around the waste and told Verwaal in a friendly voice not to have any fear.

The landscape was exceptional, fresh in morning colors and transparent. The three spirits brought Verwaal to a tree and told him that he was free to pick some fruit of the tree. He looked intensely at the tree and chose three purple fruits from it. He put these three fruits in his pocket. The spirits complimented him with his choice of fruits that were called "love for mankind," "brotherhood," and "sympathy." After a short discussion between the two older spirits, the control spirit told Verwaal that he was chosen to become a medium and to pass on messages to the earth by drawings. The smaller, old spirit called himself Paratti; he also told the control Spirit to instruct Verwaal on the exact kind of pencils, paper, and paint he must use for his mediumistic work. After that both spirits escorted him back to earth and soon Verwaal woke up and found himself in his bed-



"With Christ through the Crucifix to God," mediumistically received pastel drawing by J.H. Verwaal, 9 – 10 April, 1933.

55 X 25 cm.

The next day (Saturday) Verwaal bought all the materials as he was instructed by his control spirit. That night he was guided by a spirit called "Beta" and completed his first mediumistically received pastel drawing "With Christ through the Crucifix to God."

It turned out that the original of this pastel drawing is now in our collection. In the lower right hand corner of this drawing it is signed, "Beta." On the backside of the paper, it is written - Mediumistically received by the medium Verwaal in the night April 9 to 10 between midnight and two a.m. Completed between 8 p.m. and 9.30 p.m. (Note: Sunday evening). Present while completing this drawing were Mr. and Mrs. Van Putten, A.C. Kruikers(?), Mrs. B(?), M.J. Verwaal, Joh. Versteeg, J. Baren, T. Verwaal – Buitendijk." This last mentioned person is the wife of the medium Verwaal. The listing shows that eight people witnessed the completion of the first mediumistic drawing by Verwaal.

It turned out that Verwaal must have been very productive because in the January 1934 issue of SB we found a very short note mentioning a three day exhibition of 40 of Verwaal's drawings during Christmas 1933. The author, Mr. J. Kakebeeke, a prominent member of Harmonia in those days, is under the impression of Verwaal and characterizes him to be "a simple and sympathetic medium and also a very gifted psychic healer that uses coarse sandpaper for his drawings."

### Procedure

Dr. V.D. Hoogt published an article in the 1938 volume of HTL in which he describes the process of



how the drawings are received by Verwaal. Before starting the séance Verwaal makes sure that all materials needed for receiving a mediumistic drawing are arranged and on standby. During the séance, Verwaal is in trance and afterwards, he does not remember anything that happened during the process of mediumistically receiving the drawings. Often, the mediumistic drawings are made with other people present in the room observing Verwaal in trance while making a drawing. During the trance state his eyes are blindly staring without any impression, he mumbles in French, Italian, and other languages that he does not master in normal waking state. Verwaal never learned to master any other languages than Dutch. Once in trance he presses all the colored pieces of chalk against his forehead and returns the ones he does not need on the table, putting the pieces of chalk he needs on the edge of his easel. Then he sharpens the tips of the chosen pieces of chalk, like an art painter would do with his different kinds of pencils, and works, apparently without any plan for fifteen minutes up to two hours in a row. After completion the drawing is signed with the name of the spirit (in this case Beta) and Verwaal's control spirit will very quickly dictate through the medium Verwaal (by direct voice) what every single detail in the drawing means within in the context of the sphere of the earth. The witnesses hastily try to write down this explanation.

The process of returning back to his normal state of consciousness is very intense for Verwaal. During this time, Dr. v.d. Hoogt writes, Verwaal very intensively experiences himself to be in another reality. His body is shaking heavily, his eyes see everything vibrating in the earthly sphere and he would say something like, "How beautiful."

This process takes about seven minutes in total. Afterwards the medium and witnesses sign and date the mediumistically received image on the back of the drawing. We noted that many of the pastel drawings of Verwaal in our collection are not on regular art paper but on sandpaper.

### Biography

Jan Huijbrecht (J.H.) Verwaal was born on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1889 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In his 1940 article "How my Mediumship Developed," he mentions that he had a six year older sister and that his parents did not have much time to look after him. So, as a boy he kept his emotional feelings hidden for the outside world. At school he was a "dreamer," living in a fantasy world, and found it difficult to focus on the teacher in the classroom and his homework. In his article, Verwaal describes a few examples of psychic experiences from his boyhood and at school. He was trained as an electrician and was employed by the Community Electrical Department. Once he experienced a 500 Volt shock, that, to his surprise, did not harm him at all. Another psychic experience he mentions happened when he and a coworker were cycling next to each other along the road on the way to their daily jobs at the local electricity plant. While they were talking to each other, and thus not paying attention to the road, Verwaal suddenly felt a warm hand firmly pushing him at the left side of his neck. The effect was that he fell over his coworker and they both fell down from their bikes. At that same moment a train was passing through, just five feet from them. They had not noticed that they arrived at a railroad crossing and that the station master had forgotten to let the gates down. The psychic hand out of nowhere had literally saved both of their lives. Verwaal writes that it would take several more years before he had to choose between his job or being a fulltime medium.

At 24 he married on August, 20, 1913 in Rotterdam with the 25 year old Ms. Teuntje Buitendijk. They lived in Dordrecht, a town near Rotterdam, had a daughter called Maartje and a son called Co. On August 21, 1935 bad luck hit the family. Verwaal and his wife were riding on their motorcycle in Rotterdam when all of a sudden the front wheel got stuck in the tram rails. The fell down and very unluckily his wife's head smashed on the pavement. She was in a critical condition and brought over to a hospital where she died two days later. We found a short note written on the back of one of his drawings suggesting that in 1936 he is married for a second time. Also it is known that he was an active charter member of the Dordrecht chapter of "Harmonia." This is all we are able to find out of the life of Mr. Verwaal.



Mediumistically received by J.H. Verwaal. Dated November 20, 1933. Description on the back. "1848 Spiritualism reaches the earth." Chalk drawing, 55 X 37 cm, received from the Spirit of Jan Hackaert (Dutch art painter, 1628 – about 1690)

### Further Research

This article is intended to be no more than a first introduction to the expressions of mediumistic art made in Holland between 1900 – 1940. Most of the original works are lost over time but in the past few years we were lucky to obtain about 45 original art paintings and art drawings of that period. In 2013 we started our preliminary studies on this topic and assembled our preliminary findings in two catalogues for internal use at the foundation Het Johan Borgman Fonds. At the PHCP conference of June 2014 we exhibited five of our mediumistically received arts paintings in the meeting room of the conference. Ms. Joanne Zwart, student of art history at the Free University of Amsterdam, used our catalogues and documentation for her internship (Oct. 2014 – Jan. 2015). In June 2015 she finished her bachelor thesis in art history on this topic. We hope to find the time to continue this line of research in the near future and welcome any student researcher interested in mediumistic art to feel free to use our preliminary findings for further studies in this fascinating topic. For more information on our archive project and the PHCP conference, see [www.hetjohanborgmanfonds.nl](http://www.hetjohanborgmanfonds.nl)

### Biography

Dr. Wim H. Kramer, MBA, MBA obtained his degree in clinical and experimental psychology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He practiced for five years as a clinical psychologist specialized in counseling clients reporting 'paranormal experiences'. He continued his career for 15 years in several senior management positions in the telecoms industry and obtained a Dutch (Nyenrode University) and US (Simon school, Univ. of Rochester, NY) degree in business administration. Currently he holds the position of Managing Director of the Dutch Foundation "Het Johan Borgman Fonds."