



THE APPRENTICE

My occupation from 1985 to '88, was at this location, Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal 284, 1012RT Amsterdam at the Galerie Magdalene Sothmann.

It was more of an apprenticeship than anything else, one of those things that you learn as you do. So under the guidance of Johannes and Vita Marcus I learnt commercial paper restoration and conservation.

The inspirer to this work was Anton van der Gulik, a master, who had done restoration work for almost all the museums in the area. I had not even studied the history of Dutch printmakers yet, but had read about map makers and heard the stories from Anton. The Goltzius¹ he had found at some small antique dealer amongst a folio put out in the street. He managed to buy it with help from Erna (his wife then and sister of Johannes). This print was then pinned on a wall in their home and the who's who of the art scene of Amsterdam, dropped in to see it and debate over its authenticity. It was a genuine one and has sold over the years for quite some sums. This is the eye of a master.

Anton, was an alcoholic when I got to know him. He was kind of a father to my husband as he had dated my mother in law when her boys were young. As a young lad Anton had wished to be a missionary, however, this did not come to pass and the boy was returned to his parents after sometime with the church as being unfit for the task.

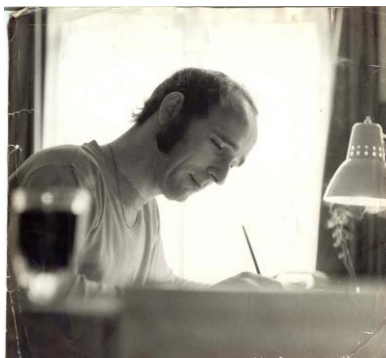
He had a fantastic studio, just off the Utrechtse Straat, near his favourite café owned and run then by Arie Krom². It was a large space with spherical B&O speakers hanging from the ceiling a kiln and a gas heater with dark wooden flooring. Somewhere was a record player and there was a story that he once donated all his records to the second hand record shop Concerto³, also on the Utrechtse Straat. He hosted parties on his birthday with outlandish dress codes, drinks on the house, while his faithful Tao Lao Tse lay quietly in some corner. Tao he said was "a black Chinese work dog" and invariably you would see the two headed in some direction, where Tao was definitely the boss, dragging a grumbling Anton behind him. Tao knew all the favourite pubs and could lead you to his master if lost. Anton is what one would call a *bon vivant* or in Dutch a *bourgondier*, he lived king sized from

¹ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/golt/hd_golt.htm

² <https://www.facebook.com/cafekrom/>

³ <https://concerto.amsterdam/en/>

the income he generated once or twice a year, by supplying his art to the state as member of the BKR⁴. This is where I collaborated with him on some occasions, dragging him to the studio in the morning and ensuring he did not disappear on some pretext or the other while I was not looking. Typically Anton, to ensure you are comfortable and properly flattered, thus lenient to his disappearances, would lavish you with plenty of fruit juice, snacks and even include the odd bottle of perfume or bonbons. All probably without a single penny in his pocket, that's the kind of charm he had. Occasionally when things got out of hand, you would get a call or be paid a visit, with a simple request, "would you be able to spare me some pocket money?" He could be very generous, stingy and often the person you love to hate for the commotion he could create with his binge drinking. His mother bought him his underwear and socks till she lived. But, he was so concerned about my being sent back to India, that he offered to marry me and also spoke to Johannes Markus to provide any paperwork or work needed to keep me in the country. I could fill pages on his quirkiness, on his use of drugs, French, stamps collection, accordion collection, cats & dogs all named with a "T", the sack full of goodies at St. Nicholas, records and books that were meant to go from hand to hand, etc.



While he told me about the prints and maps he had worked on, repaired and coloured, we worked on his more modern work, geometrical stuff that required precision on mirrors. He used to spray paint these first, but the quicker and cheaper method was to use self-adhesive foils. The marking and cutting still needed to be very accurate and a mistake could be a loss of major bucks in income. Through him I got to learn about the early years of Amsterdam, met many of his flower power gang over Dylan and Tim Hardin. People looked at me strangely, a very quiet serious girl from India, looking lost amongst these worldly wise men, which drank orange juice and spoke accent less Dutch mixed intermittently with English.

During this time we also started buying folios from the auctions which had maps of India stashed amongst them. I read everything I could about map makers and printmaking. Amsterdam University had a special department on Cartography on the top floor of their library building on the Koningsplein. Here I spent hours and could even check out original maps by the great Blauw family.

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist_subsidy_\(Netherlands\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artist_subsidy_(Netherlands))

At the gallery, in the cellar back room was my domain. I had at my disposal a radio, an iron, basic chemicals, three shower basins, folio stands (2), tonnes of blotting paper, a clothes rack and two magnificent old wooden presses (1), besides other paraphernalia like a bone paper knife, which I shaped with sand paper according to my needs.



1.



2.

Johannes only gave me a basic idea about how to start and what the end result should be. It was my first “learning by doing” job. My hands trembled ever so often as I saw prints in the water float up in different bits, there was a trick to salvage them and still once or twice it went totally wrong. Paper can be really fragile when wet, wood based and rice paper can bring tears to your eyes and require a shoulder massage after a day’s struggle. Handmade paper from cotton rags is the best to work with when restoring, the tray watermark helps in concealing the repairs if done well.

A couple of months into my apprenticeship, I developed an allergy to the chlorine fumes that I poured over each day. My acne responded by exploding over my face and the only treatment provided burnt the layers of affected skin. I dared not show my face and remained house bound for almost a month. But the rush of repairing kept me going till Vita said I was not to return till completely healed.

With my heart in my mouth, I ripped the illustrating prints out of Wagenaar’s (not family as far as I know) History of Amsterdam (several volumes). A lot of old Amsterdam could still be discovered in the ‘80s as printed in the book. Sometimes you found that the same plate had been reused with additions in a later edition or for an altered angle of the location.

Hofdijk’s⁵ views of the grand houses of Utrecht province was a nerve racking but extremely rewarding project (3). These were some 150 sheets of chine applique⁶, in the footnote you will be able to read up on what this kind of print is. My task indeed was to do the best possible restoration; Johannes said never claim you did this, because no one will believe you. Every print that went into the water became two parts, the carrier and the etched rice paper. An occasional print where the rice paper had already been damaged came up in two or three parts. The carrier and print could not be mixed up; otherwise the fit would not be made later when remounting. Each had to be put into the drying press in the right sequence. Then came the part where the print had to be reaffixed without damage, air bubbles or the slightest shift from its original location. Potato starch glue at just

⁵ Cannot forget the name as his descendent was my lawyer when there was an issue with my residence permit

⁶ <http://antiqueprintsblog.blogspot.com/2009/10/chine-applique.html>

the right consistency applied in a particular manner to avoid ruffling of the paper shape. The slightest mistake meant that you had messed up and there was no going back. In case of a mistake, all you could do at that point was make a ball and chuck it in the bin, not really an option. Once this was done, they had to be hand coloured with water colours. Unlike old maps where orphans in homes were made to colour in the cities with vermillion and homes with blue roofs, this was fine work.



3. one of the series

Prior to this lot was that map of America, it had more holes than a sieve. I suspected that my two feline companions Karel and Marie were responsible for most of those perforations. When Johannes handed me this one, I stared at it for almost two full days. Then I ironed it out gingerly and slowly addressed each tiny hole at a time, using a side strip from the map so that the paper matched. Orientation of each piece had to be carefully matched to the watermark. I don't think I used the *vouwbeen* (paper knife) as much before or after this project.

Lastly I would like to describe my love affair with the nature prints, I am not sure if it's the same as Herbarium prints, but it was amazing. This was a book on ferns. Each illustration was a real fern embedded in the paper with its various shades of green colour intact, its roots often there all muddy and even the spores on the leaves intact. The chemical process of removing any age related stains did not change the original colour or feel, it did not let loose of its paper carrier either. It was only when Johannes pointed this out to me and I let my fingers run over the print did I feel the plant.

The sad reality of commercial restoration is that the value each print brings is more than the intact book, so antique shops around the world have pulled apart travel guides, atlases, scientific, research and history books to sell their illustrations.

This phase of my life where I frequented auction houses, bid on lots, attended antique book fairs was a lovely time of learning and discovery. At one of these I purchased a leather hardbound Ramayan printed in the late 1800's in Benaras. With my husband I learnt to frequent old bookstores and made the weekly Saturday trip to the flea market from where most of our books originated. Others were bought during the rounds made on Queens Day, from private people's collections. In India Crosswords was a regular haunt till a decade ago, but it does not compare to discovering a gem in a shop or stall somewhere. I sold most of my maps collection last year, but I have pictures of them.

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