

BEvH.

Barbara van Houten

In the Light of the Mesdags

De
Mesdag
Collectie

Den Haag



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Barbara van Houten

In the Light of the Mesdags

Barbara van Houten (1862–1950) was a strong-minded, original and multifaceted artist who found beauty and inspiration in her immediate surroundings. She made intimate drawings, vibrant watercolours and colourful oil paintings. She was especially well-known in her own time for her distinctive etchings. Today, however, few people know her name.

Close family ties played a decisive role in her art and artistic development. With the support and encouragement of her family, including her aunt, Sientje Mesdag-van Houten and uncle, Hendrik Willem Mesdag, she evolved into a skilled and respected artist.

This is the first time that Van Houten's work has been exhibited in the Mesdags' former home. This house was like a second home for her, and she made many works of art here.

Portrait of Barbara van Houten, ca. 1880-1901

Photo from: Philip Zilcken, 'Barbara van Houten'. Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift 11 (1901), p. 799.

Room 1 - Large garden room

Close family ties

Barbara van Houten came from a wealthy Groningen-Drenthe family that had already produced several artists. With the encouragement and financial support of her family, she chose the life of an artist at an early age. The warm relationships within her family nourished her artistic development.

Van Houten grew up in the house next door to this museum, which was built by her aunt and uncle, the Mesdag-van Houtens. She had a lifelong, special relationship with them, characterised by artistic collaboration, inspiration and mutual support.

Family was an important theme in Van Houten's work. She regularly portrayed family members in tender portraits or homely scenes, and on personal gifts.

Support image

Group portrait. Back row, from left to right: Alida van Houten (1868–1960), Aleid ten Bruggenkate; seated, from left to right: Barbara Elisabeth van Houten, Martha Mesdag, Keetje van Houten, Mejuffr. Sina Blaupot ten Cate, Jans Mesdag, Anna ten Bruggenkate, Barbara Elisabeth Blaupot ten Cate; front row: Daatje van Houten, Sientje van Houten (1876–1970), 1880–85

Gerrit van Houten Archive, Groninger Archives
Photo: Friederich Julius von Kolkow

**‘Barbara van Houten is one of those rare, awe-inspiring artists who pursue their own course, independent of advertising and social cliques.’
– Philip Zilcken**

The Living Room in Riouwstraat, The Hague, in Daylight, 1875-1931

watercolour and pencil on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, purchased with the support of the
F.G. Waller-Fonds

Portrait of Samuel van Houten, undated

oil on canvas

Collection Museum Panorama Mesdag, The Hague

Van Houten used smooth brushstrokes to depict her father Samuel leaning back calmly in his chair. Here you can see how she used paint to bring out the depth and expression in his timeworn face. The Van Houten family moved from Groningen to The Hague in 1868 for her father's work as a politician. Barbara sometimes accompanied her father on trips abroad, and they would often discuss current affairs and social issues.

Self-Portrait, 1920-1950

oil on canvas
Groninger Museum

In this painting, Van Houten portrays herself as a respectable lady of The Hague. She is enveloped in a dark coat and wears a broad brimmed hat. The soft yellow of the blouse and cool blue of the scarf emphasise the red glow in her face. But her slightly upturned mouth and penetrating gaze betray her headstrong and self-assured character. She was somebody who paid little attention to the opinions of others.

Interior with a Reading Frederick A. Leith-Ross and Marie Anna van Houten, 1890-1900

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bequest of S. Emmering, Amsterdam

Portrait of Marie Anna van Houten, 1890-1900

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bequest of B. van Houten

Van Houten made this etching of her beloved half-sister Marie Anna. The bright sunlight and shadow of her straw hat create sharp contrasts in her face. Following the death of her father Samuel's second wife, Barbara took on the care of his two young children. She often paid the young 'Maretje' to sit for her: 10 cents for sitting still while reading and 25 cents for eye contact.

Portraits of Family Members, page in an album presented to Sientje Mesdag-van Houten on the occasion of her 70th birthday (diverse makers), 1904

pencil and watercolour on paper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Barbara van Houten, Hendrik Willem Mesdag,
Sientje Mesdag-van Houten en Hendrik Willem
**Mouton Kamerscherm aangeboden aan Samuel
van Houten ter gelegenheid van zijn zeventigste
verjaardag, 1907**

etching, watercolour, coloured pencil and graphite pencil
on paper, with wood and silk
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag
Collection, The Hague (State of the Netherlands)

Van Houten made this folding screen together with the family for her father's 70th birthday. It depicts Samuel, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. The Mesdag-van Houtens also occupy a prominent place on the screen. This gift highlights the strong bond between the two families. Sientje and Hendrik Willem each contributed a small painting inside a panel decorated by Van Houten. The back of the screen features decorations made by grandson Hendrik Willem Mouton and personal birthday wishes. The etched floral still life was made by Van Houten.

Sientje Mesdag-van Houten Seated at a Table by Lamplight, c. 1883–90

etching on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Following the death of her mother, the ten-year-old Van Houten found comfort with Sientje Mesdag-van Houten. Having lost her own son Klaas just a year earlier, Sientje took care of Barbara as if she were her own daughter. Later, when Van Houten was starting out as a young artist, she learnt a great deal from her aunt, including portrait painting. They also shared a studio in the Panorama Mesdag building for many years. Her aunt's opinion was the one Van Houten valued most highly.

Letter from Barbara van Houten to her cousin Daatje [Alida van Houten] about her connection with the Mesdags, 16 November 1932

Groninger Archives, 2107, 33

[previous page, not visible]

[...] The ties that bound me to Aunt and Uncle began when I was a child and used to play with Klaasje. – when I asked my aunt once why she and Uncle were always so kind to us, she answered

[right page]

Child, I could never do enough for you to repay the debt I owed to your mother for helping me through my misery after the death of Klaas. – This is why mother was buried with Klaasje at their request. It may be a good idea to tell Martha and Bernard about this. – An inheritance like that of my aunt is difficult to handle. In particular, I am reluctant to destroy anything. I took care of my uncle as best I could because, of course, we loved each other, but also to repay all that had been done for me. – I would like to have letters 1 and 2 back. – and I ask you please to regard all this as confidential. I ask the same of Bernard and Martha.

[left page]

Once I have received the letters after they have been read, I will write to you again.

Yours sincerely,

BEvHouten.

I hope that you can read this letter. I have hurt my hands rather on the hard edges of my woodwork, but they are already getting better. Maybe Derk would be so kind as to allow Bernard and Martha to read this letter. –

Portrait of the Marine Painter Hendrik Willem Mesdag, c. 1877-1915

pencil on parchment
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

The downward gaze, small glasses on his nose and relaxed pose suggest that Mesdag is reading. Van Houten often drew her family engaging in this intimate activity. Mesdag valued her work highly, saying it was ‘every bit as original’ as she was. In 1891, the Mesdags had a studio and apartment built for their niece at the top of the Panorama Building. Some years later, at her uncle’s request, she was appointed as its artistic director.

Construction of the Museum Mesdag, c. 1887

pencil on paper

De Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Construction of the Museum Mesdag, c. 1887

pencil on paper

De Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Room 2 - Small gardenroom

An Etcher with a Distinctive Style

Barbara van Houten was one of the few female artists of her time to take up etching. Around 1880, she spent a year in Paris, where she taught herself the techniques almost entirely on her own. She combined sharp powers of observation with technical mastery to produce powerful etchings.

This did not go unnoticed by her fellow artists and critics, who described her as a 'truly remarkable personality in modern etching'. Her work was published in portfolios and exhibited in the Netherlands and beyond. Van Houten was also awarded medals in other countries.

Barbara derived some of her inspiration from The Hague. She lived with the Mesdags for two years at some point between 1884 and 1890. Surrounded by the art in their museum and home, she made drawings, etchings, and illustrations, including still lifes, interior scenes, and reproductions of objects from the collection.

Support image

Hendrik Willem Mesdag at the table with Barbara van Houten in the salon on the first floor of their house, c. 1910–15

Photo: Nationaal Archief/Collectie Spaarnestad/Photographer unknown

Still Life with a Vase of Petunias, c. 1880–81

etching on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection,
The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Portrait of an Unknown Girl, c. 1880–1910

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bequest of B. van Houten

In this floral still life, the thick, coarse lines of the background are in contrast with the subtle lines of the delicate petunia leaves. Although Van Houten only made line drawings, she experimented extensively within this technique. In contrast to the still life of flowers, Van Houten opted for simplicity in her depiction of the girl. Using lines of consistent thickness, she confidently committed her subject to paper. Large areas of the paper were left completely empty.

Christ on the Cross, c. 1883–90

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, gift of B. van Houten

Eugène Delacroix

The Raising of the Cross, undated

chalk on paper

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

As with all of Van Houten's reproduction etchings, this is not an exact copy. What she aimed to do was understand the artist's intentions and capture them in an etching. She made this etching for Pulchri Studio, the Hague artists' association, in around 1890. It is based on a chalk drawing by Eugène Delacroix from the museum collection. She has captured the movement and sketch-like essence of the work in a profusion of lines. Of all her etchings, this has been exhibited the most. It was shown in Chicago and New York.

Studio of Hendrik Willem Mesdag, c. 1880–1910

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bequest of B. van Houten

In this glimpse of Mesdag's studio, Van Houten has captured the light in great detail. Sharp, contrasting lines of light and shadow permeate the space. In some places, it appears that she has even scratched away areas of ink to place even more emphasis on the bright light. A later photograph of the studio shows that Van Houten was not particularly concerned with exact proportions: the cabinet in the etching is noticeably taller.

Support image

Corner of the studio of Hendrik Willem Mesdag, with model ships on the cabinet, c. 1915

albumen print

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Chair with Cushion and Foot Stove, c. 1886

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

This meticulously detailed etching appeared in the first publication of the Nederlandsche Etsclub (Dutch Etching Club) in 1886. Van Houten joined this association of printmakers when it was founded in 1885. The way in which she depicts so many different materials demonstrates her mastery of the etching technique. Just look at the velvet cushions, or the wooden foot stove. An unnamed but famous foreign etcher thought so highly of her work that he once acknowledged her at a dinner as his master.

Studio of Hendrik Willem Mesdag, c. 1883–1910

etching on paper

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Still Life with Mortar, Pot and Zeeland Button, c. 1883-1910

etching on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Still Life with Mortar, Pot and Zeeland Button, c 1883-1910

pen and ink on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

From left to right, top row:

Table with an Open Book by Lamplight, c. 1883–90

etching with pen and ink on paper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Interior with Table, Chair, and Mirror by Lamplight, c. 1883–90

pen and ink with pencil on paper
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

From left to right, bottom row:

Table with Kettle and Mirror by Lamplight, c. 1883–90

pen and ink with pencil on paper
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Table and Mirror by Lamplight, c. 1883–90

etching on parchment
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Sientje Mesdag-van Houten Reading at the Table, c. 1883–90

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, gift of B. van Houten

Sientje Mesdag-van Houten Reading under a Lamp, c. 1883–90

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, gift of B. van Houten

These intimate etchings and drawn studies are part of Van Houten's series, *Lamplights*. These are evening studies of the interior of the Mesdags' home, in which Van Houten explored the effect of light in the dark rooms. She experimented with the reflection of lights refracted by mirrors and the effect of different line thicknesses on materials such as paper and parchment. These are domestic scenes, in which her aunt is often depicted reading in the glow of a table lamp.

These objects were collected by the Mesdags and served as inspiration for Barbara van Houten. Can you spot them all in the artworks on the wall and in the display cases?

Vase, Qajar Iran, 19th century

copper alloy with silver
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Incense Burner in the Shape of a Peacock, Qajar Iran, 19th century

brass
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Kimura Toun

Incense Burner with Relief Decoration of a Dragon, Japan, second half of the 19th century.

bronze
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Foot Stove Decorated with Baskets with Fruit and Leaves, third quarter of the 19th century

wood and copper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Kettle, Qajar Iran, undated

copper alloy with tin
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Etching Plate: Ex Libris August Sassen, 1908

copper

Huis van het boek, The Hague

Ex Libris voor August Sassen, c. 1908

etching on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Sunrise, from the Print Series Six eaux-fortes par Mlle B.E. van Houten, no. 5, 1886

etching on parchment

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

This etching, based on a painting by Camille Corot, is part of a series. After completing her studies at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, Van Houten proposed to the Mesdags that she make reproduction etchings of French paintings in their collection. With their support, and in collaboration with the Parisian publisher Boussod, Valadon & Cie., a luxury portfolio containing six etchings was published in 1886. This special edition immediately gave her international visibility as an up and coming artist.

Camille Corot, Sunrise, c. 1870-1872

oil on canvas

The Mesdag Collection

Take a look at the original Corot painting on the second floor of the permanent collection

Letter from Barbara van Houten to Daatje [Alida van Houten] about making reproduction etchings for her first album, 1 December 1932

Groninger Archives, 2107, 33

[left page]

[...] Father also suddenly gave us a second mother – we had all just lost our mother, so often that didn't make anyone very happy. Father and Martien made the same mistake of wishing, and in Father's case demanding, that she be called "mother". We always called her German Mina, and even then I believed it would have been better to leave it at that; we probably would have started [calling her mother] naturally. Looking back, now that you see your life as a road travelled, they all had to work too hard. – It killed Mother, and Marietje's mother too, I fear that, even though we weren't difficult children, we were in awe – and somewhat afraid – of our father. When I learned to control my nerves and discuss things calmly with him, everything turned out all right, but it took a long time. The big difference between [...] Noor and myself is that I never thought one had the right to be in the house

see next page for continued transcription

[right page]

of your parents and I have to laugh at how comical my departure from it was. I was nineteen years old, had just finished my exams and was looking for lessons: I had already taken some. I had been out all day and had to see mother that evening so that she could congratulate me. Mother was reading. She said the very best of luck to [...] this home could have been yours. I left, thinking about this. I could have married mother's brother, who had always been very kind to me. At that moment, my aspirations to talk to your Sam – certainly weren't headed in that direction. I went straight to Uncle and Aunt, asked if I could earn something with them for a year, made the etchings for the first album, and a week later I found myself living on my own in just a few rooms. For the time being, it felt pleasant, but strange. – I don't have time for it just now, but sometimes I feel the urge to describe what it's like to be an unmarried daughter living at home who, as I recently read, is dependent on her family. My experience is that the family

[next page, not visible]

places more burden on the daughter.

Drawing of a Covered Vase of the Day and Night Garniture, c. 1885–88

pen and ink with pencil on paper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Interior of the Studio of Hendrik Willem Mesdag, c. 1883–1915

pen and ink with pencil on paper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Drawing of an Incense Burner with Relief Decoration of a Dragon, c. 1883–90

pen and ink with pencil on paper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

In 1888, Van Houten made drawings in pen and ink of objects from the Mesdag collection. Some featured in articles about the Mesdag Museum and the Haagsche Plaatelbakkerij Rozenburg, of which Mesdag was a shareholder. They are in the display cabinet behind you. They were probably commissioned by the Mesdags as a way of supporting their niece while also promoting the museum. Van Houten's drawings are free and sketch-like in nature; not every detail is worked out. You can compare them with the original objects in the display cabinets.

Dead Birds, c. 1880–93

etching and dry point on paper
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

What is impressive is the deep black that Van Houten was able to achieve in her etchings—not ‘dead black but a living darkness’, wrote an art critic in 1923. Even in the darkest areas, the individual black lines remain visible, like tangible threads resting on the paper. At times, she ventured beyond the limits of the material, creating paler areas of light, as on the right wing of the large bird.

**Illustrations for the article ‘Het Museum-Mesdag’
in Eigen Haard: Geïllustreerd Volkstijdschrift,
by Jeronimo de Vries, 1888**

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

**Illustrations for the article ‘De Haagsche
plateelbakkerij “Rozenburg”’ of Leo Simons Mz.
in Eigen Haard: Geïllustreerd Volkstijdschrift.
Haarlem: Kruseman & Tjeenk Willink, 1888**

Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam

Theo Colenbrander

Vase, 1886

earthenware

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Pointed Chalice, 1886

earthenware

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Vase, 1887

earthenware

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Wall Plate, 1887

earthenware

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Support image

**Room in the house of Hendrik Willem Mesdag
and Sientje Mesdag-van Houten at
Laan van Meerdervoort 9, The Hague, c. 1915**

gelatine silver print

The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Room 3 - Small Colenbranderzaal

Transition to Colour

In 1890, Van Houten's flourishing career as an etcher was interrupted when she had to return to her parental home to care for her younger half-siblings. She continued to work, but increasingly this was in other media, such as watercolour and oils. Around 1910 she stopped etching for good. Her health was deteriorating, and the physical effort that etching required was too demanding.

It was also clear that she was becoming increasingly attracted to colour. Colour began to play a central role in her work. She found inspiration close to home in seemingly ordinary things.

Van Houten made her larger paintings in her studio in the Panorama Building, where she could work without disturbance. She moved there in 1931 and devoted herself entirely to her art until her death in 1950.

Barbara van Houten seated in a chair with a dog on her lap, c. 1935–50

‘Beauty is not only to be found in certain specific objects, there is beauty in everything. [...] a person walking down the street is beautiful, chair, a pot, a vase of flowers is beautiful, just the way it is.’

- Barbara van Houten

Theo Colenbrander (ontwerp)

‘Fish’ carpet, c. 1996

virgin wool

This carpet was made in 1996, based on a design by Theo Colenbrander. It owes its name to the fish-like shapes against the orange background.

Van Houten also had a carpet by Colenbrander in her home in Riouwstraat. She also collected works by the designer herself, which she bequeathed to the Groninger Museum.

Cato van Houten Doing Needlework and Marie Anna van Houten Reading in the House at Riouwstraat 6, The Hague, 1875 –1931

watercolour and chalk

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds

Still Life with Glass Vases and Pumpkins, 1890–1940

pencil and watercolour on paper

Private collection

Van Houten's still lifes display clear similarities to those of Sientje Mesdag-van Houten. The two women worked alongside each other in the studio, and often chose the same subjects, such as fruit and pumpkins.

Support image: Sientje Mesdag-van Houten

Still life with Pumpkins and Apples, c. 1870–1909

watercolour on paper

The Mesdag Collection

Still Life with a Glass Vase, Pumpkins, Peppers and Grapes, 1900–50

pencil and watercolour on paper
Private collection

In these two still lifes, Van Houten played with colour, material and reflected light. She gave each work a slightly different focus. In the work on the left, the emphasis is on the complex reflections of the windows in the smooth, translucent vases. In the other, very different textures are combined: a heavy Persian rug, sturdy pumpkins and dull grapes contrast with shiny peppers and aubergines. The bright colours are characteristic of her later watercolours.

Still Life with Flowers and Pottery on a Table, 1891–1950

oil on canvas
Private collection

Still Life with Poppies and Glass Vases on a Table, 1891–1950

pencil and watercolour on paper
Private collection

In this watercolour, Van Houten contrasted the fragile red petals of the poppy with the reflections in the glass vases. This watercolour differs from other floral still lifes by Van Houten in the unusual cropping of the image and the combination of colours. The pencil sketch was developed further using watercolours, leaving parts of the paper empty. This gives the impression that the work is not completely finished, lending the composition a modern look.

Panels Depicting Sunflowers, 1932–50

wood

Private collection

At the age of 70, Van Houten took a remarkable step: she started to make wood carvings. Her experience of engraving wood blocks in Paris, at the start of her career proved very useful. She focused exclusively on floral motifs. The sunflowers and leaves subtly break through the edges of the wooden frame, creating a playful composition. These may have served as decorative elements on a piece of furniture, such as panels for cabinet doors.

Still Life with Red Vase and Flowers, 1949

pencil and watercolour on paper

Private collection

‘I would like to paint for another hundred years’, Van Houten said in 1948, ‘it’s so wonderful’. Even though she was in poor health and in her 80s, Van Houten wanted to spend as much time as possible on her own so that she could work on her paintings. This small, colourful still life bears witness to the fact that she continued to paint until the end of her life. It is one of the few works she dated: 1949, just one year before her death.

Portrait of Mrs Van der Gaag (her Seamstress), c. 1939-50

pencil and watercolour on paper
Private collection

Portrait of Jan van Houten, 1907-49

oil on canvas
Private collection

Van Houten learned from her aunt how to paint portraits from life. It was one of her favourite genres, but certainly not the easiest. She believed that the role of the artist was to capture the inner world of their subject. That is why she often chose to paint people she knew well. The subject of this painting is Barbara's brother, reading. She used loose, quick brushstrokes to capture characteristic details, such as the wrinkles on his neck and forehead.

Corner of the Living Room at Riouwstraat 6, The Hague, 1890–1931

watercolour on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection,
The Hague

View in Garden, 1875–1931

watercolour, pencil and black chalk on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, gift of M.A. van Houten, Zeist

Van Houten painted these watercolours at her home in Riouwstraat, in-between taking care of her family and the household.

Watercolour was the perfect medium for this: it did not take up much space, dried quickly and was easy to use. She often started out by making a pencil drawing, which she frequently left partially visible, as here in View in Garden. This created an interesting contrast with the flowing colours, giving the painting a sketch-like quality.

Sketch of Two Women Seated and Two Figures Standing, 1900–50

chalk on paper
Private collection

Sketch of Two Young Children and Tulips, 1900–50

pencil and watercolour on paper
Private collection

Portrait of Annie Sakkee (her Housekeeper and Companion), 1930–50

pencil on paper
Private collection

Portrait of Marie Anna van Houten, 1920–50

pencil and coloured pencil on paper
Private collection

Landscape in Otterlo with Trees, 1930–50

pencil and coloured pencil on paper
Private collection

Landscape near water in Norway, 1878–1930

pencil on paper
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection,
The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Drawing formed the foundation of Van Houten's art. It enabled her to capture ideas quickly for later use in preparing her etchings and paintings. Her sketchbooks clearly show that she was attracted to a wide variety of subjects, ranging from everyday scenes to portraits and nature studies. They also offer a glimpse into Van Houten's working methods, both in monochrome and in colour.

Browse through Barbara van Houten's sketch books on display here for yourself. Many of these sketch books are privately owned. They are fragile, and are therefore not always available for viewing. We have photographed some of the drawings especially for this exhibition.

Room 4 - Large Colenbranderzaal

Are you feeling inspired by the extraordinary work of Barbara van Houten? Make your own artwork here. Find a place, take some paper and sketch what's on the table. A floral still life, a fragment of the room or a glimpse of the garden? When you are finished, please feel free to hang your art on the wall.

Audio story

Take a seat, and listen to an interview with curator Merle Janssen about the exhibition.

Length: 23 minutes



If you want to continue listening at home, scan the QR code or visit our website.

The technique of etching

Etching is a graphic printing technique. The artist draws with an etching needle into a thin layer of wax that has been spread on a copper plate. The plate is then placed in an acid bath, which etches the design into its surface. The final step is to make a print of the plate on paper. Etching is a labour-intensive process that requires time and skill.

Van Houten discovered the technique by chance in Paris, where she came across a box of etching equipment in a shop window. With only a brief explanation from the seller and the well-known instruction book by artist Maxime Lalanne, she taught herself the technique. She probably also received advice from the Dutch etcher and art critic Philip Zilcken, who later brought her work to public attention at exhibitions.

Watch the video below if you would like to see how an etching is made.

Length: 1.32 minutes.

Detail of Studio of Hendrik Willem Mesdag, c. 1880–1910

etching on paper

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bequest of B. van Houten

Taking care of the legacy

Van Houten played a key role in the management and preservation of the Mesdag legacy. After the death of her aunt and uncle, she took charge of cataloguing and attributing their artworks. When the director of Museum Mesdag changed the permanent exhibition in 1926, Van Houten fiercely opposed this move because it violated the agreements that had been made with the Mesdags. She wrote to the minister, and the original display was restored.

Van Houten took a down-to-earth approach when it came to her own legacy. In particular, she did not want to burden her next of kin with too much work. 'Anything I have made myself must be sold after my death. If it's worth anything, it will bring something in, and if not, art lovers can buy it for a small sum'.

Portrait of Barbara van Houten, c. 1910–40

Private collection

Much more than just an artist

As well as being an artist, Van Houten was an art collector, a teacher of drawing and etching, a collection manager and an exhibition curator. In 1898, she and her aunt were part of the three-person FineArt Committee for the National Exhibition of Women's Work. In this role, she was jointly responsible for selecting the work of fifty female artists.

In 1909, she was appointed artistic director of Museum Panorama Mesdag. She led the restoration of the building, received important guests and organised exhibitions of the Mesdags' work. In 1938, at the urging of others, she also exhibited her own work here.

The combination of work, caring for her elderly father and duties within her parental home made considerable demands on Barbara. She found respite in her studio, where she spent what she called 'my hard-won hours of freedom'. Two years before her death, she looked back on her life: 'I have toiled and laboured my entire life, that is all'.

Portrait of Barbara van Houten, c. 1890–1920

matte daylight collodion silver print

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

Photo: Antonie Johan Marinus Steinmetz

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