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## Numismatics in the Netherlands – a personal impression

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The paper seeks to give a broad overview of numismatics in the Netherlands, looking at the history of both collections and scholarship from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. The position of numismatics *vis-à-vis* other disciplines in the academic world is examined, and the lack of an established tradition of teaching different aspects of our discipline at university level is contrasted unfavourably with the situation in Austria. A plea is made for closer contacts and use of numismatic evidence, not only with the obvious cognate disciplines, such as archaeology and history of art, but also with linguistics, ethnology, anthropology, sociology, metallurgy and computer science. The impact of metal detecting, and the recent strong emphasis on greater accessibility of collections, are identified as major factors in the change of work patterns in the last 10 years, which has resulted in a decline in scholarly output. Finally, the nature of the modern exhibition philosophy is compared and contrasted with that of a generation ago, and the potential of computer technology to enhance the visitor experience via a virtual “open storeroom” is enthusiastically embraced.

Numismatics is no small science, and the Netherlands is no small country. However, although there are many possible subjects to discuss, we must limit ourselves to the more important issues. We need to begin by looking at where we are now in the field of coins, paper money and medal studies, and what should be done next. The position of numismatics *vis-à-vis* other scholarly disciplines in the Netherlands also deserves our attention. We shall finish with comments on numismatics in Dutch museums in general, and in the Geldmuseum in particular.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholarly Dutch numismatics was dominated by Hendrik Enno van Gelder, Director of the National Collection of Coins and Medals for more than thirty years, who published hundreds of articles and numerous books on mediaeval and modern coins, coinage and monetary history. His output was phenomenal, and so was the quality of his work. He covered all periods of Dutch numismatic history, but was primarily focused on the later medieval and early modern period. Despite his extensive work on coinage, he did not write much about paper money; collecting and researching that topic was left to the Dutch Central Bank. However, this did not lead to any significant publications, although a useful general survey on Dutch banknotes was written by Jan Grolle. In fact, it was left to the outsider and art historian Jaap Bolten to produce a beautiful book on the development of the notes of the Dutch Central Bank in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Medal studies, however, seemed to suffer with the focus on coinage. This is often thought to be due to the fact that several curators were given only a limited number of years to build up experience and focus on the subject. Gay van der Meer’s long-standing interest in the Holtzhey family did not, unfortunately, materialize in the expected monograph and catalogue, although

he produced many small and important contributions on this and other subjects.

Of the colleagues responsible for ancient coins, most left the National Coin Cabinet after a relatively short time for positions elsewhere in the academic world. Their numismatic experience may have resulted in more empathy for our discipline than usually exists among archaeologists, but not much else was gained for classical numismatics itself.

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new generation of numismatists was trained and gradually took over the positions of the previous curators, the natural process that can be observed anywhere. However, in the Netherlands, the production of scholarly contributions seemed to slow down dramatically. Of course, all the work involved in moving the National Coin Cabinet from The Hague to Leiden in 1986 took its toll, but the personal inclination of those involved, and the way in which they organized their work, no doubt also contributed to a reduction in purely academic output. I only need to look at myself for proof of this statement.

However, I would like to draw attention to another factor. Western society as a whole has made considerable democratic progress in the last hundred years or so; more particularly, since the Second World War, the emancipation of the working class has reached new heights. Previously, there was little time for anything other than the acquisition of food and shelter. Leisure activities were a prerogative of the happy few – and so was serious coin collecting. Recent decades, however, have seen a radical change in this respect; collecting activities have also been democratized. At the same time, a more open type of museum has come into existence. Nowadays, governments are only prepared to spend money on museums when their collections are made accessible to the general public by way of more popular displays. Many of us will be aware that it is fun to produce exhibitions when the proper amount of space and money is available, but it cannot be denied that this development has also taken its toll; putting together an exhibition is a very time-consuming activity.

Unfortunately, the democratization of coin collecting has not led to a significant increase in scholarly output by private individuals. More and more contributions are being produced annually, but most of them are too narrowly detailed, or too superficial in character, to yield important results.

The previous remarks more or less mirrored the situation within the Dutch national numismatic collection during the last century, since for most of the period, this was the only academically-staffed institution. The Dutch State Mint in Utrecht already held a significant collection of coins and medals for a century and a half before it decided to appoint a full-time curator. His job also involved taking care of other aspects of the industrial heritage of this old institution, which meant building a real museum from scratch. Being heavily understaffed, not much could be expected in terms of numismatic scholarship.

The situation with the Dutch Central Bank in Amsterdam was slightly different. A collection of coins and paper money was established more than a century ago, but virtually no numismatic work was done until a full-time keeper was appointed some thirty years ago, with the addition of a second curator shortly thereafter. Unlike for the State Mint, the numismatists at the Central Bank were neither concerned with building an historic collection nor producing temporary exhibitions, so their time could be devoted to the study of coins and paper money. This resulted in several monographs by Jan Grolle, of which the most prominent is a very thorough study of the coinage of the counts of Holland from the 11<sup>th</sup> through to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Looking back, it seems obvious that the combination of curatorial duties and academic writing is a difficult one in a normal museum. Activities like collections management, development of exhibitions and the provision of an identification service take a lot of time, effort and energy, and we should not be surprised that good research ideas are often placed on the backburner while time-consuming day-to-day practicalities which cannot be ignored get priority.

However, for the survival of numismatics – and passionate numismatists – it is essential (as we say in Dutch) “to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance”. So we keep making plans and seeking solutions. My colleagues and I are now undertaking long-term research projects on subjects such as the monetization of Roman *castella* along the river Rhine, the coinage of the Franks and neighbouring Germanic peoples in the Merovingian period, the global flow of precious metal and its interaction with diverse local monetary systems, the development of state paper money in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and – last but not least - Renaissance medals, with their small and beautiful images that document the likes of Erasmus and his contemporaries.

As the debate between scholarly publications and exhibition could go on *ad infinitum*, I will shift focus to help understand the position of numismatics *vis-à-vis* other disciplines in the Dutch academic world. In the Netherlands, much to my personal regret, there is no established tradition of teaching the different aspects of numismatics at university level. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pieter Otto van der Chijs held a Chair for several decades, but then more than a century elapsed until 1976, when Van Gelder was appointed a professor in numismatics and monetary history, remaining in the post for some ten years. During this last period, the numismatic curator Jos van der Vin started teaching ancient numismatics in Leiden, but this never translated into a formal professorship. After his retirement in 2003, his colleague Paul Belien took over the position. Teaching ancient numismatics was also part of the job of the archaeologists Zadoks and Maaskant, who were successive professors of classical archaeology in Groningen from the 1950s until recently. Apart from these, one observes here and there the occasional introduction to ancient, mediaeval or modern numismatics for undergraduate historians and archaeologists, but these efforts are hardly worth mentioning. As far as I am aware, no attention has ever been paid to medals by those who teach art history at university in this country.

Although through the years there have been several students working on ancient, mediaeval or modern coinage, mostly in combination with temporary employment in the National Collection of Coins and Medals, none went on to pursue numismatics as an academic study, so no purely numismatic dissertations were produced, with the exception of the Roman coin specialists Fleur Kemmers and Joris Aarts of course. There have been dissertations from the history field that relate to numismatics, but these clearly emerged from a starting point that lies in monetary history rather than in numismatics, and an occasional lack of numismatic training and understanding is evident. Finally, although archaeologist Nico Roymans, now a professor of prehistory, has developed a great interest in Celtic coinage and returns to the subject regularly, it is clear to all of us that numismatics is a small field, where there are simply not many jobs available.

On the other hand, the example of Austria shows us what is possible. In Vienna, dozens of students have completed doctorates in numismatics over the years, and all of them have found a job in the field - in the archaeological or museum world, or in the commercial sphere - within a short period of time. We should not look down upon the last of these; it is a good thing to have more trained numismatists around.

We are all aware that numismatics is cognate mainly with historical disciplines, including archaeology and the history of art. Just as numismatists often use material from a wide range of subjects to support their own arguments, these other disciplines in turn may fruitfully use the insights and/or material from our subject. Language research, ethnology and anthropology, metallurgy and image-recognition study in computer science are only a few of many examples. Sociology in general is a discipline where money forms an important object of study: Gerard Borst is actively involved in research on aspects of human behaviour in relation to money, especially the role of saving as a vehicle for the so-called "civilization offensive" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

We do see cooperation between numismatists and representatives of other disciplines in the academic world, and this sometimes results in joint publications or exhibitions. Making available relevant sections of our collections, documentation and libraries to external researchers is another important element of establishing contacts. But, however important such activities are, they do not seem to have the potential to attract much attention beyond the academic world. The only area in which we have been successful in this respect is the identification and registration of coin finds. This has been done in a structured way for more than half a century, and on a more incidental basis for some hundred years prior to that. Not only is this activity relevant to the private individual who needs information on a single find or hoard, and the numismatist who wishes to get a clearer insight in the monetary circulation of a certain period, but the identification and registration of coin finds is also vital for archaeologists. Our advice and data are important considerations in the preservation of archaeological sites. Our good relations with responsible metal detectorists over the years have

resulted in the satisfactory recording of coins from all periods and from every corner of the country. The records are available for further research - numismatic, archaeological and administrative. However, a *caveat* needs to be inserted here. Over the years, we have become the victims of our own success; more finds means more work, and so does good service to the public. In the past three decades, there have been times when finders stopped sending in material, as it was taking too long before being returned, and this is happening again. The Geldmuseum ran into financial difficulties in 2007, and several members of the curatorial staff were made redundant, causing problems for find registration. Those who remain are trying to cope with the help of volunteers, who do identifications electronically in their own home, at a time which suits them best. Obviously their work is checked before the results are stored in the coin finds database. Unfortunately, in the Netherlands, there is no such thing as the renowned Portable Antiquities Scheme developed by our British colleagues, who have managed to organize and fund the activity in a much better way.

In order to encourage closer relations with other disciplines, a series of annual lectures named after Van Gelder was started a few years ago. We also hold out great hopes for projects, some already started and others to come, in the areas of monetary history and art history. These employ an approach that is less focused on objects and more on developments in society. Our contribution must be to combine or integrate the knowledge we have of the metal objects in our trays with the information available in archives and libraries, and depicted on the prints, paintings and photos in museums and elsewhere. Subjects such as the global flow of precious metals, and the export of trade coins from the Netherlands to the Baltic, Mediterranean and Asia, seem promising. And we must not forget the coinage of the Merovingians, truly international in scope and study.

The final subject of this survey is numismatics in museums of the Netherlands, although the use of the plural is a little misleading. Teyler's Museum in Haarlem has a permanent display of coins and medals, and room for small temporary exhibitions. Many regional and local museums also have coins and medals here and there in their displays, but nothing specifically numismatic. A few decades ago, in the province of Friesland, one of the banks housed a fine permanent display of material from the provincial museum, and another regional bank later put part of its own collection on public display. The famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam also houses a good collection, but it is locked away because of the long-term, total refurbishment of the building. Finally, there is the large collection of non-western coins in the anthropological museum in Rotterdam; sadly, it remains completely hidden, with no curator to look after it. Needless to say, in other museums the numismatic items are also subject to neglect to a greater or lesser extent. Responsibility for numismatics in the Netherlands would therefore appear to rest on the shoulders of the curators at the Geldmuseum in Utrecht, and – being a dedicated numismatic institution – quite rightly so.

Since the merger in 2004 of the collections of the National Coin Cabinet, the State Mint and

the Central Bank into what is so prosaically called the “Money Museum”, more than 350,000 numismatic objects have been housed here. However, of all this material, probably no less than 99.9% is kept in the vaults. The space for showing objects to the public in a meaningful way is immense in comparison with the very modest exhibition rooms that were formerly available in Leiden and Utrecht. The Board of Trustees and former Directorate of the new institution chose to make a completely different “museum”. In fact, what is to be seen is mainly electronic equipment, gadgets with buttons, lights, wheels and so on. The purpose has been to create a centre for financial educational for youth, and this has been done so rigorously that virtually no room is left for the “real thing”. The impression is more of an assembly of play stations than a museum. However, it must be admitted that this way of approaching young members of the audience has turned out to be very successful, witness their visiting us in such large numbers.

However, there is more to museum life than this. Earlier in this paper, reference was made to the importance of research and publications. At this point, it needs to be stressed that our job should not be limited to research; the production of temporary exhibitions for the general public is also important. Before the merger, this was done on a regular basis by the former National Coin Collection and the Museum of the State Mint, and this activity should be resumed as soon as possible. Of course, a permanent display is also needed. However, it will take a considerable sum of money to fund the heavy showcases needed for our kind of material. We are all aware that coins and medals (and often paper money as well) are difficult to display, as the objects are full of detail but relatively small in size, and the need for security often prevents too close a look.

The traditional display method of “creating a coin catalogue in a showcase” was abandoned several decades ago in favour of a more narrative approach. Nowadays, a selection of numismatic objects is combined with other items - documents, images and a short text - in order to create a separate “chapter” in each showcase. A given number of showcases adds up to a complete story, preferably one in which a particular individual (or small group of people) plays a role, thus facilitating easy transmission of a message to both a general and more advanced audience.

Much work remains to be done in the areas of repacking and integrating the three collections, updating the electronic registration, and adding images to an open-access database. With this last tool even more objects can be shown to the public, in a virtual “open storeroom” that safeguards them much better than a conventional showcase could ever do. In the same way, viewing the objects on a computer screen allows both sides to be seen much more easily and in greater detail, anytime and anywhere. A brief description and references to relevant literature are easily added. This is all still far away, but might soon become a reality...

*Note:* In January 2009, the Geldmuseum, under its newly-appointed Director Heleen Buijs, introduced initiatives to make the collection much more visible to the visiting public.