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Unwavering Legacy: 18th-Century Women Artists in the RKD database

By Romy Kerkhof on 2 December 2024

After completing her Bachelor's thesis at VU Amsterdam in 2021, Romy Kerkhof specialised in researching female artists of the eighteenth century. A challenge in this relatively unexplored research area is finding useful archival and visual material. In her internship project at the RKD, Romy integrated data on these female artists into the databases in RKD Research, with the aim of providing as complete an overview of their legacy as possible. In this RKD Story, she shares a selection of her work.

Shoulder-to-shoulder

In shaping the early modern cultural landscape, women artists have played a vital role, making significant contributions to the Dutch artistic scene. They met market demands, fulfilled educational needs, and pursued personal creative endeavors through diverse mediums including brush, pencil, pen, needle, or scissors.¹

(#footnote1_tNywNYfxWefKcrHLL2ske58cw9J7Sn5f2fEd7vzn8Fk_wPkBLtI7sxQH) In the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Dutch Republic, women's social status experienced notable advancements, partly driven by the widespread circulation of prints and pamphlets. These publications not only introduced new perspectives on gender roles, sparking debates about shifting dynamics, but also fostered a remarkably progressive cultural climate for the time – one in which women themselves were (co-)producers or publishers.²

(#footnote2_UBpAb3py7xe2umKocmGjdb8FULkt2C9Zh5Y7D6S3uRc_uFxRZK5Lm7oF) Ongoing research continues to reveal valuable insights into the artistic practices of women during this period, shedding light on their production processes, the distribution and preservation of their works and collections, and their workshop activities, among other aspects. Nevertheless, the delay in documenting and integrating these findings into art historical databases risks losing this critical information. To address this gap, my internship project focused on updating and enriching the records of RKD Research, incorporating newly available research on a selection of Dutch eighteenth-century women artists. Additionally, I critically reviewed the existing records for accuracy, relevance, and the appropriateness of the terminology used, aligning with the RKD's mission to serve as a globally accessible repository for art historical knowledge and resources.

Gender bias in RKD records

The perception of art is profoundly shaped by the linguistic concepts and frameworks inherited from history. Language plays a pivotal role in molding our understanding, with terms serving as the medium through which art historians and critics express their interpretations and value judgments. But as feminist art historians have examined, an analysis of the impact of language within art historiography reveals how nineteenth-century art criticism fostered a marginalization of women artists, laying the groundwork for subsequent art historical narratives. Consequently, terms like 'artist', 'master', and 'painter' became imbued with gendered connotations, reinforcing the entrenched notion that true artistic genius was a uniquely male attribute.³

(#footnote3_hN4iYnXZIFymMOuGHxK1I7MDS-5pPAQED9Efa9VY_q77wPaziL0tB) This critical exploration recalls the groundbreaking feminist debate ignited by Linda Nochlin nearly half a century ago in her seminal essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971). In addressing her provocative question, Nochlin argued that the absence of recognized women artists was not due

Until recently, the RKD database reflected gender biases through terms like *kunstenaarsdochter* (artist's daughter) and *kunstenaaersvrouw* (artist's wife), while lacking male equivalents such as *kunstenaaerszoon* (artist's son). As part of my project, these terms have been revised to challenge such restrictive depictions. Similarly, phrases like *hometrained by her father*, which previously appeared in the records of artists such as [Barbara van Nijmegen](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F227280?c=q%3DBarbara%2520van%2520Nijmegen%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filter=1713-1771)
([https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F227280?
c=q%3DBarbara%2520van%2520Nijmegen%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filter=1713-1771](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F227280?c=q%3DBarbara%2520van%2520Nijmegen%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filter=1713-1771)) and the sisters [Anna](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F28477?c=q%3Danna%2520folkema%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%3Ddb%26filter=1695-1768)
([https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F28477?
c=q%3Danna%2520folkema%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%3Ddb%26filter=1695-1768](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F28477?c=q%3Danna%2520folkema%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%3Ddb%26filter=1695-1768)) and [Fopje Folkema](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F503903)
(<https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F503903>) (1690-1752), reflected narratives that limited women's roles and have now been replaced to provide a more accurate representation of their contributions. As recent research has shown, early modern Dutch artistic households were collaborative spaces. Artistic production, training of younger generations, financial management, and household responsibilities were shared across family members, regardless of societal gender expectations.⁵

(#footnote5_NzBH177wDKwLoLyTcLXBR8vXmJBuih-BpbuRtXnjAM_qrl8kDKIHAIO) These findings call for a revision of how we describe women's familial and professional roles.

In light of these insights, I have replaced terms like ‘artist’s wife’ in RKD records with more inclusive terms such as ‘member of artist family’ or ‘second-generation artist family.’ For instance, [Susanna de la Croix](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F364525?c=q%3Dsusanna%2520de%2520la%2520croix%26filters%25B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26f1755-1789) (<https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F364525?c=q%3Dsusanna%2520de%2520la%2520croix%26filters%25B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26f1755-1789>), formerly labeled as an ‘artist’s wife’ to still-life painter [Jan van Os](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F61023?c=q%3Djan%2520van%2520os%26filters%25B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26f1744-1808) (<https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F61023?c=q%3Djan%2520van%2520os%26filters%25B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26f1744-1808>), was an active member of her artistic household, producing her own work while co-educating her children, including the still-life painter [Maria Margaretha van Os](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F61025?c=q%3DMaria%2520Margaretha%2520van%2520Os%26filters%25B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26f1779-1862) (<https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F61025?c=q%3DMaria%2520Margaretha%2520van%2520Os%26filters%25B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26filters%255B0%255D%255Bfield%255D%3Ddb%26f1779-1862>). By listing her as a co-educator alongside her husband in their children’s database

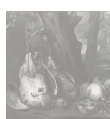
records, rather than merely as Van Os's wife, we present a more accurate and equitable portrayal of her contribution to her family's artistic lineage.



1 / 2: Agatha van der Mij, Dead Hare hanging on a rock, c. 1727, former coll. Forglen House, Turriff (Scotland)



2 / 2: Agatha van der Mij, Dead Hare hanging on a rock, c. 1727, former coll. Forglen House, Turriff (Scotland)



([8 \(#footnote8_-YSqbBP1Tk6-NbNTobl8cEroXg2l5vnSPeQVKkIVU_sSwEZKXDsjHG\)](https://research.rkd.nl/en/detail/https%3A%2F%2Fdata.rkd.nl%2Fartists%2F472046?c=q%3DJohann%2520Wilhelm%2520von%2520der%2520Pfalz%2520%26filters%255B0%255D%255(1658-1750), Anna Maria Luisa actively preserved and expanded the family's renowned art collection at their court in Düsseldorf. Through their shared patronage, numerous national and international artists, including the Dutch still-life painter <a href=)

Until recently, the RKD records of this project's selected group of women artists associated with the couple's court only referenced the name of the Palatine Elector, excluding the significant contributions of Anna Maria Luisa. One of the key outcomes of this project has been the inclusion of her name in these records, ensuring that her role as a patron is now recognized. It was through Anna Maria Luisa's unwavering commitment to the preservation of her family's art collection that the legacy of artists like Ruysch continues to be part of Florence's cultural heritage.



1 / 2: Rachel Ruysch, Flowers in a glass vase with pomegranate on a marble tabletop, 1715, Palatine Gallery Palazzo Pitti, Florence

2 / 2: Rachel Palazzo Pitti



Role of women

As part of the ongoing evolution within the field of art history, it is increasingly important to document and incorporate research on the contributions of women as active participants in the socio-economic and cultural dynamics of early modern society. Building on the foundational work of previous scholars, new research questions, materials, and areas of interest are opening up opportunities for a growing number of emerging scholars. This growing body of knowledge pushes institutions to re-evaluate their data flow and ensure more inclusive and accurate representations. Through my project, I hope to have made a modest yet meaningful contribution to this ongoing effort, fostering a perspective where the role of women in the history of art and society is recognized as self-evident.



Romy Kerkhof

Author

Romy Kerkhof is currently pursuing a master's degree in Arts of the Netherlands at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Her research focuses on Dutch eighteenth-century women artists and the circulation of their works in the contemporary art market. During her internship at the RKD past summer, she integrated part of these findings into the RKD database. She is currently Research Intern at the Print and Drawing Department of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.