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The Hague Gasworks: Van Eeden & Van Gogh

The places where Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) lived and worked have captured the imagination of many artists. Marcel van Eeden (The Hague, 1965) is one of those artists. Van Gogh's drawing *Gasworks*, made in The Hague in March 1882, inspired him to create an entirely new series of works.

With his drawings, Van Eeden always reconstructs places and events from before his birth. In doing so, he tries to draw near to a certain moment when he himself did not exist. In this case, the early spring day in 1882 when Van Gogh recorded the gasworks on the outskirts of The Hague on paper. Van Eeden himself has a strong connection with that spot: he was born in The Hague and his flat is near the site where the factory once stood.

In-depth research into Van Gogh's *Gasworks* resulted in six imposing charcoal drawings and a photo reportage. They form a bridge to the past, to that particular time and place.

Research

Crucial to Van Eeden's working method is conducting extensive research. Before he begins to draw, he gathers historical images and texts from books, newspapers, magazines or photo albums related to an event that took place before he was born.

In his investigation into Van Gogh's *Gasworks* Van Eeden applied a similar method. What did the factory look like? What happened on the day Van Gogh drew it? What was the weather like, what were the positions of the stars? And what was going on in politics at the time?

This is how Van Eeden builds up a story for his drawings. A selection of the documents he found are on view here.

Gasworks, The Hague, March 1882 (replica)

Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)

pencil, brush and ink, white opaque watercolour, on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the Rembrandt Association)

Sometime between 12 and 23 March 1882, on the outskirts of The Hague, Van Gogh drew the first municipal gasworks. Industrialisation was accelerating and cities such as The Hague were expanding rapidly. Vincent deliberately chose to capture a sign of modern times rather than a picturesque square. A bold choice for an emerging artist. Pictured are the three gigantic gas holders. Apart from a group of workmen and the black birds, the landscape is deserted. For Van Eeden, the drawing has an ominous atmosphere.

Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (replica)

The Hague, 11 March 1882

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

‘Theo, it’s almost miraculous!!!’ Vincent wrote in a PS to his brother in March 1882. Their Uncle Cor (C.M.) had just dropped by and ordered twelve cityscapes – ‘small pen drawings ... views of The Hague’ – from Vincent for 2.50 guilders apiece. A nice first commission, on which he immediately set to work. We do not know exactly when Van Gogh made *Gasworks*, in any case after 11 March. On 24 March he informed Theo that he had finished all of his drawings.

Various documents from the archives of the Municipal Gas Company, the Council Committee of the Gas and Electricity Company and the Advertisement Collection (Special Collections). The Hague City Archives

The archives of the municipal gasworks in The Hague are well preserved. As a result, we know how much coke was burned for gas production in March 1882 and, for example, that on 6 March an employee named Coenraads was suspended for 14 days. The municipality built the factory complex in 1876 to meet the rising demand for gas. Now, almost 150 years later, we are aware of the great disadvantages of using gas and the need to discontinue doing so.

Untitled series

Marcel van Eeden (1965)

gum bichromate print on paper

Van Eeden also made a reportage about Van Gogh's *Gasworks*, consisting of 27 black-and-white photographs. Some feature his visit to the Van Gogh Museum, others the exact location where Van Gogh must have been drawing and the surroundings where the gasworks once stood. Today, only the office building remains and there is a city park ironically called 'De Verademing' (Breath of Fresh Air). The gum bichromate technique from 1855 provides yet another link to Van Gogh's era and lends the photographs an aura of mystery.

Van Gogh & the Mesdags

In the second half of the 19th century, The Hague was the beating heart of the Dutch art world. That was why novice artist Van Gogh moved there in December 1881. By then, Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831-1915) and Sientje Mesdag-van Houten (1834-1909) were already highly influential and popular figures on the Hague scene. It is quite likely that Van Gogh met them. They visited the same exhibitions and places, such as the artists' society Pulchri Studio. But Van Gogh never set foot in Museum Mesdag (now The Mesdag Collection). It didn't open until 1887, when Van Gogh was already living in France.

Four months after Van Gogh made his drawing *Gasworks*, he saw French paintings from the Mesdags' collection featured in an exhibition. For more on this, see the presentation *Through the eyes of Vincent van Gogh* on the top floor of the museum.

Pieces of truth

Van Eeden based his imposing charcoal drawings largely on historical photographs of the gasworks. Most date from the years around its demolition in 1924. Gas holders and factory buildings can be distinguished in the dark depictions. He added years and words in graceful lines. The deep black charcoal evokes an association with coal. Here, Van Eeden creates a new reality, composed of 'pieces of truth,' as he himself puts it.

Untitled series

Marcel van Eeden (1965)
charcoal on canvas