

New and old domestic silver, continuity and contrast in the collection of the Netherlands Silvermuseum Schoonhoven.

By Marjan Unger

In the fall of 2003, the Schoonhoven Rotary Club took a memorable decision. It was going to invest an amount of Euro 4500. – every year for a period of five years in order to complement the collection of the only museum solely focused on gold, silver and clocks in the Netherlands. This museum, which symbolizes Schoonhoven's glory as the Dutch production center of precious metal objects,

had been struggling to buy good pieces for many years. As a matter of fact, the gap between the museum's holdings of the collection of Dutch domestic silver from 1600 until 1970 and the contemporary production of precious metal objects was widening.

The gesture by the Rotary Club was unexpected but much appreciated. Those who had thought that designing and



Shade of a Candle, 2007, Design by Gijs Bakker, Amsterdam, made by Jan Mathesius, Schoonhoven, galvano plastic, h. 23 cm

making contemporary domestic silver were a thing of the past now had to admit that things were again happening in this beautiful profession. The market for large commissions of liturgical silver had dried up since the 1960s yet there was still an active demand for commissioned domestic silver.

The seed for the renaissance of contemporary silver was sown in Schoonhoven, where craftsmanship in the old tradition is still being taught today. A number of silversmiths then took the initiative to exhibit their work together, thus commanding more attention both in the Netherlands and abroad. By participating in international exhibitions it became clear that their work stood up well to that of their international colleagues¹.

Museums and organizations in Holland's neighboring countries such as Germany, Belgium, England and Scan-

dinavia, do regularly purchase contemporary silver. They also often commission both renowned and younger silversmiths' work.

After the Schoonhoven Rotary Club had announced its Zilverproject, the museum sprang into action and appointed an advisory committee, comprising Annelies Krekel, a silver specialist, Paul Derrez, a gallery owner, jewelry designer and designer of domestic silver since a number of years, and Marjan Unger, a historian and publisher of art, who mainly deals with contemporary design. This committee had everything going for it: good chemistry among its members, the moral and financial support from the Rotary Club, the reputation and, particularly, the willingness of the museum to offer support when needed, and the challenge of selecting the most interesting pieces of evidence for that renaissance of contemporary domestic



Shallow bowl, by Paul de Vries, 2004, diameter 37 cm

silver. The choice always focused on the museum's collection. The chosen guidelines were design properties of the objects, their importance as a museum object and the way they were made. Apart from appreciating the traditional craftsmanship of the silversmiths, we also kept an eye on topicality and technical innovation.

The five acquisitions:

In September 2005, the first acquisition was presented to the museum's director, Gemke Jager, at a special ceremony. In consultation with the museum, the committee had decided to concentrate on cutlery and spoons for its first choice. This subarea of silversmithing was the subject of interesting and lively developments, as an artists' product, artistic concept and contemporary design. This theme also enabled us to bridge the gap between the museum's collection and today, because we were allowed to acquire works from no fewer than

three different designers, covering three different periods. They were:

- a set of silver 'folded' flatware, comprising a three-piece large and small flatware set and a two-piece dessert flatware set by Wouter van Baalen (1956);
- a silver flatware set, comprising a three-piece large and small flatware set by Hermann Hermsen (1953);
- the silver set of spoons *Uit je handen eten* and the ten-piece set of spoons *Met je handen eten* by Manon van Kouswijk (1967).

For that occasion, the museum, the advisory committee and the Vakschool Schoonhoven (a school for gold- and silversmiths) had organized a special seminar about the future of silversmithing. All three silversmiths spoke about their work and the flatware sets in particular².

Ask someone to draw up a list of favorite silver objects, and they often

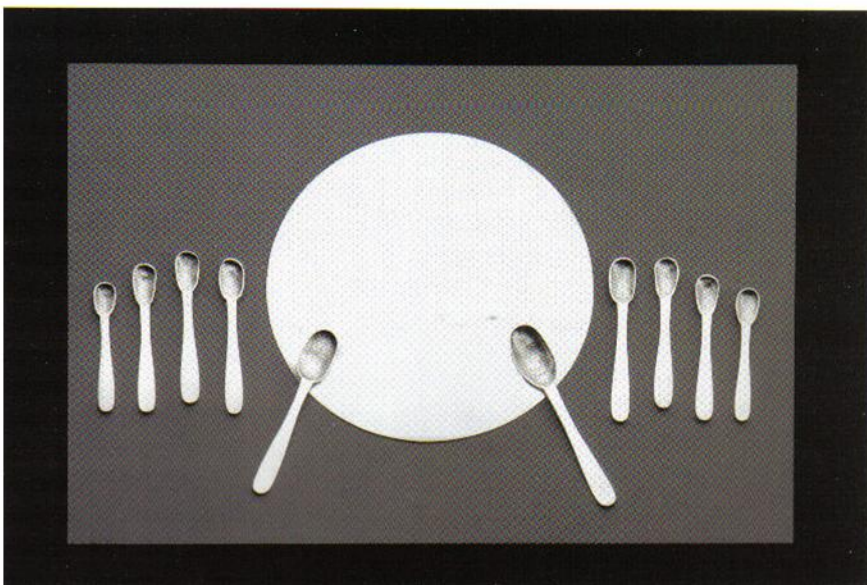


Flatware by
Herman Hermsen,
Arnhem

add a vase. That is why, in 2006, the choice fell on the cubic vase *Chief Walking Buffalo*, made in 2003 by Jan van Nouhuys (1949). In his work he made optimal use of the special qualities of silversmithing, creating unexpected shapes and reflections. This choice at the same time honored a smith from Schoonhoven who had been in the business for more than thirty years and who could boast an impressive oeuvre of large silver objects. In 1990 he started the *Zilver in Beweging* project, giving talented sil-

versmiths and designers the opportunity to show their vision on design of contemporary silver³.

As a committee you can sit and wait for Dutch domestic silver to be offered, or you can also control that choice by asking certain designers if they are prepared to design and make a silver object. Such a process takes time, but in the end it was *Shade of a Candle*, after a design by Gijs Bakker (1942) that was presented as the 2007 acquisition. This candleholder was executed by Jan Matthesius from Schoonhoven. Gijs Bakker



Met je handen eten
Hand-made spoon
set by
Manon van Kouswijk,
Amsterdam 2001



Chief Walking Buffalo
Jan van Nouhuys,
Vase, h. 25 cm
Schoonhoven 2003

used a candelabrum from the museum's collection as source of inspiration and asked people to consider the following when looking at his *Shade of a Candle*: "*Why are classic candleholders often regarded as beautiful and modernistic ones as ugly? The variety in shape and form of the former hides the details. Yet the complex shapes and their sheen give that magical effect, overpowering the details. The modernistic candleholder often exhibits smart functional solutions not observed by the viewer - all they often perceive is bareness. I have gone for something in between, an area between fiction and reality. I borrow a detail from a real image and make it appear as a vague memory. Is this real, or just a shadow of the real thing?*"

Following a visit to the PAN Arts and Antiques Fair, the choice for 2008 was made relatively quickly. The sturdy dish by Paul de Vries (1958), a

silversmith from Schoonhoven, had such a strong effect that it forms a magnificent contemporary reference point for a number of handsome historic dishes in the museum's collection. The 'padded' shaped had two interesting sides: a visually attractive top and a functional bottom. Thanks to its special design, enabling the dish to sit beautifully on the pointed shapes underneath, the bottom also determines the overall appearance.

The jug by Pauline Barendse (1967) is the dazzling proof that the Rotary Club's generosity and the commitment of all those involved can lead to an unexpected climax in contemporary design. Ordering Pauline Barendse's jug follows a long tradition of commissioning silver, it also opens new future perspectives. Pauline Barendse is one of those Schoonhoven silversmiths who manifest themselves through highly individual work. Her original design formed part of the prominent



Kan JUGUM 2009,
Pauline Barendse,
galvano plastique, h. 20cm

international *Poëzie in Zilver* exhibition⁴, where it was conspicuous for its irony: a ‘Flintstone’ jug, hewed out of stone as it were. Such rawness and spontaneity is rare in silverwork, where perfection and a high-polished finish are the standard. Nevertheless, the surface of the jug, which she made especially for the museum in 2009, underwent four finishing stages before all details in the main shape were completed. The inside is matt and the patina of the rough stop gives it a slightly darker hue than the jug itself. With this jug, the museum holds another valuable piece of domestic silver – a definite attention-getter.

Continuity and contrast

At the Nieuw en Oud exhibition, the five acquisitions of contemporary silver are presented in conjunction with other important items from the collection of the Museum for Gold, Silver and Clocks. For the various sets of flatware, the vase, the candleholder,

the dish and the jug, similar objects were chosen: all are in sharp contrast – some due to the technique and treatment method used, some for their design. Jan van Nouhuys’ vase with its high-sheen surface stands next to a richly decorated center piece, while Paul de Vries’ dish sits next to a dish on legs. Pauline Bar-endse’s funky jug is presented next to elegant historic jugs.

Gijs Bakker’s candleholder is displayed next to the candlestick whose arm formed the basis for Bakker’s design. Next to the folded flatware by Wouter van Baalen we see various sets of flatware which have been hammered, cast or die-stamped. As packaging is an important part of Herman Hermsen’s cutlery design, it is displayed with historic sets of flatware in beautiful cases. The spoon sets by Manon van Kouswijk are displayed with charming rivals in the form of sugar vases from the museum’s collection. The exhibition’s main aim is the fun derived from



Flatware by
Wouter van Baalen,
Amsterdam 2005

showing a continuity of domestic silver.

By combining old and new, everyone can see that the generous donation from the Schoonhoven Rotary Club has given both a high-quality and much-needed boost to the collection of the Museum for Gold, Silver and Clocks. As such, it highlights the function of this museum as a platform for contemporary developments in domestic silver.

Endnotes:

1. Silvertriennale (Hanau) and later Schoonhoven Award (Stichting Zilverkunst, Schoonhoven)
2. The key-note speaker was Simone ten Hompel, silversmith and lecturer at the Sir John Cass Department in London. She won the prestigious Jerwood Prize 2005 in Great Britain, that year being the first time that the award was dedicated to metal/silver.
3. Thanks to the initiative of the Schoonhoven Rotary Club, the Netherlands Silver museum – Schoonhoven was the first in the country to add an important piece by Jan van Nouhuys to its collection of contemporary silver. Co-financers: SNS Fonds Rivierenland, Friends of the Netherlands Silvermuseum Schoonhoven, and a private donor.

4. Exhibition of the Schoonhoven Silver Award 2009.

Illustrations:

- Erik en Petra ,Hesmeg (Fig.1)
Rob Glastra ,Schoonhoven
(Figs.2,3,4,6,7)
Fred Weegenaar, Den Haag (Fig. 5)

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