“De Beuning kamer” - A mid-eighteenth century mahogany room from Keizersgracht 187, Amsterdam

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Abstract

One of the richest interiors from houses along the famous Amsterdam canals will become part of the new presentation in the Rijksmuseum, to open in 2013. This large and high room was created between 1745-1748, for the wealthy merchant Matthijs Beuning. It has panelling made of Cuban mahogany with wonderful woodcarving and a marble mantel piece with a painting by Jacob de Wit in the mahogany chimney-breast. It is preserved including its opulent plaster ceiling. Keizersgracht 187 was demolished in 1896 after which the room was on display in the Stedelijk Museum until 1976. It is the first and one of the few rooms in the Netherlands where mahogany was used. This article focuses on art historical aspects, the quality of the room, research into previous dismantling of the room, conservation of the different materials and decisions about reconstructing and displaying the room.

Keywords
Canal house, mahogany, marble, painted fabric, picture, plaster, reconstruction, Rococo

‘Moving rooms’

When the Rijksmuseum reopens its doors in 2013 the new presentation will include various period rooms. The ‘Beuning kamer’ is a room with splendidly carved Cuban mahogany panelling complete with an exuberant plaster ceiling. It is one of the richest of its kind and will give our visitors the rare opportunity to enjoy the splendour of the houses along the Amsterdam canals [Fig. 1-2].
At present, 2010, Amsterdam is being criticised for being a huge building-pit. A new underground line is under construction straight through the centre of Amsterdam. Three prominent museums are being renovated: The Rijksmuseum, Stedelijk Museum and Scheepvaart Museum. Construction works in Amsterdam are not a new phenomenon. In 1896 a new road, the Raadhuisstraat, was created in the centre of Amsterdam, connecting the Royal Palace on the Dam square with the Westermarkt. Some 20 historic houses along Keizersgracht and Herengracht were demolished and a small canal, the Warmoesgracht, was filled-in. The mahogany room, together with an ornate staircase and a large house-organ, was saved from one of the demolished houses, Keizersgracht 187 [Harmanni, 1990, 39].

One year earlier the Stedelijk Museum had been opened near New Rijksmuseum, built 10 years previously. Part of the Stedelijk Museum would remain closed until 1900 to install the period rooms which would house the collection of the Sophia-Augusta Foundation, which had contributed generously to the Museum. The most important room was the Beuning kamer from Keizersgracht 187. It was adapted to fit into a gallery in the Stedelijk Museum, where it stayed until 1976, when it was dismantled and transferred into the care and storage of the Amsterdam Historisch Museum. Fortunately the period rooms were not completely forgotten. In 1990 Richard Harmanni wrote his thesis in art history about the history of the former period rooms of the Stedelijk Museum. In 2001 the main elements of the Beuning kamer were given on loan to the Rijksmuseum, for a big exhibition on Rococo in the Netherlands [Baarsen, 2001; Van Loosdrecht, 2002]. This was very successful and the Amsterdam Historic Museum, not having sufficient place to erect the room, proposed to include this fantastic room into the plans for the New Rijksmuseum.
Keizersgracht 187

Keizersgracht 187 dates back to 1617 [Harmanni, 1990; Baarsen, 2001]. The front of the house was quite narrow. The mahogany room was created between 1745-48 for the wealthy merchant Matthijs Beuning (1707-1755) and his wife Catharina Oudaen (1704-1764). Matthijs Beuning inherited the house in 1744 from his mother Geertruijd van den Bosch (1689-1744). The achterhuis, containing the mahogany room, was two rooms wide, extending along the back of the house to the right. The façade of the achterhuis is shown in a painting on glass by Johan Zeuner dated 1780 [Christie’s 2001]. A plan for the renovation of the houses by the architect G.B. Salm, 1864 shows a long corridor leading to the house at the back.[1] At the end of the corridor were five marble steps and a landing with doors to the two rooms and a circular staircase to the first floor. On the right was the Beuning kamer, 7m80 by 8m70 and 4m80 high, and connected by two ornate double doors to a slightly smaller room on the left. Both rooms had three windows in the rear wall of the achterhuis. The main features of the Beuning kamer are the double doors, the mantelpiece, two pier mirrors placed between the windows and four quarter-round corner cupboards, seemingly supporting the ceiling. The solid Cuban mahogany wood has beautifully carved scrolls, shells, foliage, fruit, flowers, vegetables and above the mirrors eagles and pierced hearts. The walls have 90 cm high mahogany panelling, with fabric above. The big mantelpiece is carved out of Belgian rouge royal marble and the mahogany chimney-breast contains the picture ‘The baptism of the eunuch’, dated 1748 and signed J.deWit (Jacob de Wit, 1695-1754). The coved plaster ceiling has a rectangular field with a slightly higher plain elliptical central field surrounded by a heavy moulding. Smaller mouldings further

Fig. 2: Detail of chimney piece, 2010. ©Rijksmuseum.
divide the ceiling into different compartments [Fig. 3]. The mouldings are ornamented with delicate scrolls, shells and foliage. In the four recessed triangular corners of the rectangular field, the ornamentation consists of a half open jewellery box with a horn of plenty, a stork along the waterside, a temple and a sword with a fire pot.

Beuning and his wife were leading members of the Hernhutter or Moravian communities in Amsterdam and Zeist and the rooms in the achterhuis were used for their meetings [Harmanni, 1990]. The subject of the painting by Jacob de Wit as well as some of the ornamentation probably had a symbolic meaning for the Hernhutters. It is one of the few rooms in the Netherlands and probably the first where mahogany was used and the carving is of the highest quality [Baarsen, 2001]. Mahogany was not common in those days, and for the room the best quality Cuban mahogany (Swietenia mahogani) was used. Apart from the involvement of the famous painter Jacob de Wit we do not know who was involved in designing and executing this room. It is of interest that the sober religious community of the Hernhutters had meetings in such an opulent room.

*Fig. 3: Drawing of the ceiling 1976. ©Amsterdams Historisch Museum.*
Matthijs Beuning had to sell Keizersgracht 187 in 1753 and died in 1755. In 1781 the owner Jan de Groot (1733-1801) ordered designs for the walls by the painter Jurriaan Andriessen (1742-1819) [Harmanni, 2006]. Two sets of designs have survived but, apart from two female figures crowning the double doors, the painted fabric had vanished before the room was dismantled and moved to the Stedelijk Museum in 1896 [Fig. 4] [Van Someren Brand, 1901, 313].

Dismantling and installation in the Stedelijk Museum

J.E. Van Someren Brand, the first keeper of the Stedelijk Museum put in a lot of effort to save the Beuning kamer. Initial plans of the Major and Aldermen to have the room auctioned were abandoned in favour of installing the room in the Stedelijk Museum.[2] Van Someren Brand specified his interests, including drawings of the ceiling in case this would be impossible to dismantle. Documentation about the dismantling and installation has not yet been located, but fortunately Van Someren Brand wrote a long article about the period rooms. He states that the four full-length corner cupboards concealed the fact that the walls were not set at straight angles and that the corner cupboards next to the window contained the window-shutters whilst the others had shelves. He claims the cupboard to the right of the mantelpiece had a spring mechanism for opening the concealed door to the storage cupboard and describes that the mirrors and their supporting panels were set between narrow windows [Van Someren Brand, 1901, 310-314].

Van Someren Brand (1901) was of the opinion that it was impossible to make casts of the ceiling, for that reason and against the advice of experts the ceiling was cut into sections. He witnessed that the wooden planks of the plaster ceiling were separated with great difficulty from the beams of the building as each plank was fixed to each beam with two rows of seven wrought-iron nails. Sometimes ornaments fell off revealing the design in black chalk on the plaster above.

The original wall with the three windows was extended with a bay window to include the bigger window of the museum building, next to which the mirrors and their panels were placed. The panels were hinged to enter the space behind the panelling. Van Someren Brand states there was no other option. Adapting historic interiors was not uncommon at the end of the nineteenth century [Van Duin, 2002]. Van Someren Brand (1901) describes the mahogany used for the additions as “Sapeli”. He is enthusiastic that French polish could be removed to reinstate the original wax finish and that many layers of whitewash could be
removed to reveal the quality of the ornaments of the ceiling. He further describes that the walls were covered with fabric from Kasteel Heeswijk, painted with landscapes [Fig. 1], and that the public entered the room through the same door as in Keizersgracht 187 and left the room through the former cupboard door, now leading to the corridor and staircase from the same house. Van Someren Brand asked the Council of Amsterdam for permission to move the cupboard door sideways, it is not known if permission was asked to change the wall with the windows.

The construction supporting the walls and the windows is not described or documented. During the conservation in 2001 and 2008-present we discovered that the panels were fixed with hooks, making dismantling easy. The construction of the ceiling on the contrary, was never meant to be dismantled. Holes were made in the plaster and screws and bolts, with a diameter of 10 mm, were fixed through the plaster and its original boarding into the new beams. The heads of the bolts were covered with new plaster. They must have miscalculated the height of these beams, as the 3 cm higher boarding above the heavy elliptical moulding and flat central field had been cut away at every beam. Subsequently, the remaining boarding was fixed between the beams and the plaster nailed straight onto the new beams. A very difficult task, which must have caused much damage and seriously affected the original construction. The plaster and boarding of the flat central field was almost completely renewed. Undoubtedly, the experts that earlier advised against moving the ceiling would have questioned this decision.
In 1976 the room was dismantled. Before dismantling, architectural drawings of the walls and ceiling were made, including details of the mouldings [Fig. 3]. The room was completely photographed. Again the ceiling was cut into sections, this time including the firmly attached beams. The coved border was cut in 14 sections and the middle field in 21, totalling 35 pieces. The cuts were indicated on the drawing. Everything was listed and packed in 65 crates and put into storage.

**Construction**

The panelling is constructed of solid mahogany glued onto an oak support, except for the large panels behind the mirrors which are glued onto pine. Most panelling is made of rebated frames to hold the central panels. The joints between frames and panels are covered with mouldings and ornaments.

The ceiling is constructed of pine boards, 3 cm thick and varying in width from 26 to 30 cm. They have grooves on both sides with no apparent purpose. The distance between the planks is minimal, generally 1 cm. The coved part of the ceiling is reinforced at the back with stretchers following its curve. They are supported at the base by a beam which would have been fixed to the wall and at the top by horizontal beams connected to each other to form a rectangle surrounding the ‘flat’ part of the ceiling. As described by Van Someren Brand, the boards were attached with wrought iron nails to the now unknown beams above. The boarding of the rectangular field does not extend into the elliptical central field, which boarding overlaps that of the rectangular field [Fig. 5]. Underneath the boarding of the rectangular field, thinner boards of 2 cm are nailed, with open spaces which form the recesses for the four figurative compartments in the corners. The boarding is covered with reed held in place with copper wire and iron tacks. The reed mat provides the key for the coarse first layer of plaster, consisting of lime, sand, ground limestone and horsehair as reinforcement. The core of the mouldings is made out of a bundle of cane. The final smooth layer of plaster consists almost completely of lime.

**Conservation**

The purpose of the conservation is to preserve and exhibit the room as well and as authentic as possible. We knew from the conservation in 2001 that the panelling was basically in good condition, with only small missing parts [Van Loosdrecht, 2002]. The main challenge would be the reconstruction of the wall with the three windows. We hoped that the components of the bay window would give us clues to the original appearance. We also had to establish if all other components were still present.

The first step was transporting the 65 crates containing the panelling and ceiling to our storerooms, where we managed to secure enough space to examine the contents of all crates. Everything was dusty because the crates had open tops and some components were damaged because the crates had not been strong enough. At one point our directors seriously contemplated not to use the ceiling, but fortunately at the end of 2007 the room was definitely incorporated into the designs for the New Rijksmuseum. Ceiling and panelling are an inseparable unity as Van Someren Brand had argued 100 years ago. The conservation started in the summer of 2008 when contracts with wood and plaster conservators were signed. Erecting the walls and piecing together the ceiling has provided us with a more detailed understanding of the room.

**Wood**

Most of the panelling is original and in good condition. We found signatures dated 1896 of previous conservation treatments, such as cracks that were filled and/or reinforced at the back and corner blocks and many screws reinforcing the chimney breast. New panelling underneath the museum window was identifiable because of a lighter coloured mahogany, different quality of carving and dimensions conforming to the window. The craftsmanship of most adaptations is high and we are still unsure about the authenticity of some components such as the panels behind the beautifully carved mirror frames as the carcass wood is not oak but pine. The two narrow panels flanking each mirror are undoubtedly additions as they are of a lighter mahogany on pine and the carving somewhat stiff. These panels were part of the Rococo exhibition, but being able to examine the whole room it became obvious that they are new. We
did not find many clues to the design of the original windows. The dust on the panelling could be removed with a brush and a damp cloth. Loose parts were fixed with animal glue, the few missing parts were not replaced. As in 2001, the existing resinous wax surface could be polished to a high gloss and only certain areas needed some extra wax [Van Loosdrecht, 2002].

**Marble**

The chimney-piece consists of two front stiles, a frieze, and each side has a plinth, a large panel and a top. The right stile, both panels and plinths were broken, the panels badly. The crates for the marble pieces had not provided enough support. The marble was treated in 2001 and glued with epoxy resin, coloured with earth pigments, also filling small cavities. The stile was reinforced with stainless steel rodding. The back of each marble component was reinforced with 22 mm plywood, fixed onto the marble with dots of MS-polymer glue with a thickness of 2 mm, making future removal of the plywood relatively easy. The plywood also facilitates joining the pieces together when building up the chimney piece. The marble was cleaned with fine steelwool, removing dirt from the waxed surface. [Van Loosdrecht, 2002]

*Fig. 6: The ceiling reconstructed 2009. ©Rijksmuseum.*

**Ceiling**

The conservators responsible for treating the plasterwork started unpacking the pieces which were stored upside down in the crates. Without reinforcements the components could not be taken out of the crates, so the tops and sides of the crates were removed instead. Some components had severe damage. Many beams, dating from 1896, were attached to all components [Fig. 5]. At that time they carried the ceiling, now they doubled the weight of the original boarding and plaster. We decided to remove all later additions and ended up with even more sections of the ceiling because of the now exposed saw cuts from
1896. We gave the highly fragile sections stability by mounting them upside down onto wooden frames and assembled the ceiling on trestles [Fig. 6]. This enabled us to deduct the exact floor plan from the size of the ceiling. The plaster conservators are in the process of consolidating cracks with calcium casein, filling cavities and joins with a mixture of lime, chalk and sodium gluconate. The final smooth layer of plaster in those areas will be applied after the installation of the room in the Rijksmuseum in 2012.

Despite the removal of layers of whitewash after the installation in the Stedelijk Museum, as described by Van Someren Brand, we still found up to four layers of limewash, white with grey or yellow tones. We mechanically removed those layers from a small section to reveal the magnificence of the plasterwork and are now looking for funding to expose the ceiling completely [Fig. 7].

**Paintings and fabric**

The ‘Baptism of the Eunuch’ was cleaned and slightly retouched in 2001. As the varnish has yellowed over the years, its removal is being contemplated. Only recently it was proposed to include the female figures attributed to Jurriaan Andriessen above the double doors. Their condition has to be assessed but undoubtedly the painted fabric is in need of conservation.

**Reconstructing the room in the Rijksmuseum**

Fitting the room into the chronological circuit was not easy as it needs a very big and high gallery. A place has been found in the eighteenth century galleries, where the public will be able to enter the room through the door formerly leading to the storage cabinet. The exit will be the door to the left of the closed double doors. The Beuning kamer is such an important object in itself that it will not be furnished with other objects. A construction to support the ceiling and walls is being designed. We intend to cover the museum parquet floor with wide floorboards to resemble the original floor and will also choose a suitable fabric to cover the walls above the panelling. The window wall will include the mirrors and the reconstruction of the windows needs further research and discussion [Fig. 8].

![Fig. 7: Plaster ornament after removing layers of limewash 2010. ©Rijksmuseum.](image)
Modern installations to be included in the room are air-conditioning outlets behind the mantelpiece and the windows; a camera behind the windows; temperature and humidity sensors; smoke and fire detectors through a small hole in the ceiling. The room will have a central gilt wood chandelier but further illumination has to be decided.

**Conclusion**

An object as the Beuning kamer needs a multi-disciplinary approach and is a fascinating challenge. The sheer size of the room and its many components, their weight and fragility is daunting. Information comes from archives and literature and has to be checked against technical aspects of the room. Various disciplines have to cooperate closely, such as the plaster, wood and picture conservators. This needs communicative as well as technical skills, for instance removing the obsolete but firmly attached beams exposed old sawcuts and caused extra damage to the fragile plasterwork. A ceiling is of course not made to be dismantled and has little stability once removed from its original construction. The panelling is easier, as it was made separately before being attached to the brick walls. It is highly rewarding to obtain a good impression of the room now the components are assembled. Undoubtedly the Beuning kamer will become one of the main attractions of the Rijksmuseum.

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Endnotes:


2. Amsterdams Historisch Museum, documentation of the room, inv. ka 2902-ka 2907, letters of J.E. van Someren Brand to the Major and Aldermen of Amsterdam dd. 16-12-1895, 4-5-1896, 3-10-1896, letters of the Department of Public Works to the agent A. Bom dd. 8-1-1896, 13-2-1896, letter of Department of Public Works to J.E. van Someren Brand dd. 20-1-1896.

References:


Catalogue Christie’s Amsterdam, 27 June 2001, lot 226: Jonas Zeuner, 1780: Achterzijde van Keizersgracht 187. Verre eglomise, engraved in silver and gold (50 x 63 cm.).


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