



Travels the World Over

Published in: Newsletter of the International Institute for Asian Studies, August 2005.

by Paul van der Velde,
IIAS
p.vandervelde@let.leidenuniv.nl
in conversation with antiquarian bookseller
Gert Jan Bestebreurtje

In the centre of the old city of Vianen, close to Utrecht in the Netherlands, stands a beautiful house occupied by antiquarian bookseller Gert Jan Bestebreurtje. The interior is furnished with antique oak and mahogany bookcases, filled with many books bound in parchment and leather. It exudes the atmosphere of a 19th century study, in which it is possible to read and browse through the many books in peace. We sit down at a large table and Gert Jan Bestebreurtje begins with enthusiasm to tell the story of his business.

In 1975, hoping to find some information about the antiquarian business, I dropped in at Beyers (the auctioneering firm) in Utrecht, where only books and prints are auctioned off. Towards the end of my visit, I was told that I was welcome to work there. I accepted the offer on the spot, a decision I have never regretted. Working there was an invaluable experience.

During the three years I worked for Beyers, I saw a plethora of books of all ages ranging from medieval texts to books for the modern bibliophile. Several large libraries were auctioned during that period. My work consisted of describing the books for the catalogues. In doing so, I learned to collate the books (verify that they are complete) and to carry out research for background information about the books. I have seen books on every possible subject: books about theology, law, medicine, history, biology, ethnology, and so on. I was able to build up considerable general knowledge which has been the basis for the rest of my career. After three years I needed the challenge of a new experience and I started working for an internationally-oriented antiquarian bookseller in Utrecht, where I worked for another three years.

Travel books

During the six years I had been working in the antiquarian business, I had become especially interested in books about geography and ethnology, or, as we now say, travel books. In 1981, when I started my own antiquarian business with my wife, I knew exactly which specialty we would choose: travel books. We cleared the attic of our home and set up all our bookcases and desks there.

Our first purchase was a large library containing books on Indonesia. I described these books for our first catalogue. The sales results from that first catalogue were good. With the money we earned from it we were able to pur-

chase new assets, and this way the business slowly grew. Around 1980 the interest in books and prints on Indonesia began to rise steadily in the Netherlands, and foreign universities also began to show an interest in the subject. Our first catalogue turned out to be along the right lines.

My personal interest is in old and rare books. Seventeenth century Dutch travel books, such as the journals and travel books of Joan Nieuwhof, Wouter Schouten and Cornelis Matelief are my greatest joy. These books are expensive, so I could not afford to specialize in this category exclusively. Thus, the bulk of our starting stock consisted of 19th and 20th century scientific books. I did not wish to concentrate exclusively on Indonesia, so in compiling our second catalogue I added a selection of books on the former Dutch colonies in the West, the area of the Dutch West India Company: Surinam, the Dutch Antilles, West Africa, Dutch Brazil and New Netherlands.

All the other areas of the Dutch East India Company were represented as well: Southeast Asia, the Far East, Australia, and South Africa. Later on, I expanded the selection with books about maritime history, whaling and travel in general. Now, 25 years later, we have grown into an international antiquarian bookshop, in which the sales of antiquarian and scientific books about the former Dutch colonies form an important part of our turnover. The rest consists of 16th-19th century travel books.

Each new acquisition is collated and then described in English. A lot of attention is paid to the description of the condition of the book, the binding and, if applicable, the artist who created the illustrations. In the notes, we provide information about the author and the printing history of the book and we refer to national and international bibliographies. Most of our books are sold through our catalogue. Five or six times a year we make a selection from our stock and make this into a catalogue. Our entire list of books and prints is now stored on the computer. In the past, putting together a catalogue was a time-consuming job, but nowadays, with computerization, it is a piece of cake. The catalogue is mailed all over the world. Universities, libraries and museums are our regular customers. We also number many private collectors, in the Netherlands as well as abroad, among our clientele. Nowadays 25 percent of our sales are realized through the Internet, but I still prefer to deal directly with my clients, with many of whom I have a good relationship.

Book fairs

Several times a year we go to specialized



The headquarters of Gert Jan Bestebreurtje Antiquarian Booksellers

book fairs. In the Netherlands for many years we have attended the annual book fair organized by the Dutch Association of Antiquarians in Amsterdam. This fair is also open to foreign participants and has developed into a leading international antiquarian fair. I have taken part, with varying success, in fairs in Tokyo, Boston, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Brussels, Paris, London and Cologne. I still find it fascinating to meet collectors and bibliophiles from different countries and to find out what makes them tick. I maintain friendly relations with many collectors all over the world. Antiquarian fairs are perfect occasions to meet with each other and browse through beautiful books.

Each country has its own national association of antiquarians which is affiliated with The International League of Antiquarian Booksellers / Ligue Internationale de la Librairie. English and French are the official languages used. It is important to be affiliated with the League because it is the best way to remain up-to-date on international developments and to keep in contact with colleagues. Lately, we are increasingly offering certain antiquarian books to clients personally by fax or letter. Through many long-standing personal relations with institutes and private collectors, I am very much aware of what is available and what is not (yet). Most people appreciate such personal attention, and it is convenient for me because it provides a faster turnover rate.

Publishing

There has been an enormous increase in interest in books on Indonesia and Asia. In the past, the Japanese have

bought a lot of antiquarian material. They have been very interested in the 'Dutch period' in Japan (1600-1850). The number of Dutch books about this period is not excessive and the Dutch-language descriptions of Japan by Montanus, Kaempfer, Titsingh, Overmeer Fisscher, Von Siebold and others are much in demand in Japan. Also, Dutch scientific books, which entered Japan via the island of Deshima in the harbour of Nagasaki and were translated into Japanese, are coveted objects.

In Asia, studies are being carried out on buildings, mostly fortresses and churches, which are the legacy of the Dutch East India Company. The upshot is an expanding interest being shown in books which include descriptions and illustrations of these buildings. Photo collections, which may be used for examining the architecture or for studying costumes and utensils are now being put together.

Before the Asian economic crisis (1998), demand for the work of Western artists who chose Indonesia as their theme was strong in Asia, especially in Singapore and Indonesia. In the absence of any reference work on this subject we published such a book. The lexicon by Leo Haks and Guus Maris: *Lexicon of Foreign Artists Who Visualised Indonesia (1600-1950)* has turned out to be a useful tool for the librarian and for the collector. In 2002 we published a *vademecum* on the Dutch East and West India companies. We are now nurturing plans to expand this publishing venture.

Future developments

The acquisition of antiquarian books is

becoming more difficult. We ourselves are also guilty of causing the stream to dry up by selling to official authorities. Doing this means that a book will not appear on the market again, while selling to private collectors means the book collections will re-enter the market with the passage of time. I have been very fortunate in the last few years with the acquisition of several large private libraries. I hope to be able to make such purchases again in the future; it keeps the stock exciting. I see China and India as new potential markets because a lot of books have been written about those countries in the past and the libraries in those countries are now starting to buy them.

I am not pessimistic about the future, in spite of the fact that people do not read as much as they used to. The modern student uses computers and photocopyers and hardly has the opportunity to get acquainted with old books. Yet, one or two of them will find their way to the bookcase; true book lovers will always exist. The group of serious collectors has dwindled, but on a positive note, the quality of old books is now better safeguarded.

The application of computers and the Internet will never stop the true enthusiast from making antiquarian purchases. Many museums are now presenting their collections of paintings via the Internet and they are not being closed for lack of public interest, are they? Modern techniques have made scientific research more accessible, but I believe that the desire to see the original yourself, or to have it in your own bookcase, will never die. ■