The Great 'Umar Khayyam

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How ʿUmar Khayyām Inspired Dutch Visual Artists

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Two years ago William Martin and Sandra Mason published *The Art of Omar Khayyām: Illustrating FitzGerald’s Rubaiyat.* The index of this most informative and richly-illustrated book does not mention any Dutch illustrators. Understandably: the authors focused primarily on the various versions of *The Rubáiyát* that have been published in English. Nevertheless, they made some reference to *Rubáiyát* illustrations in other languages, and of versions by translators other than FitzGerald. They did not mention Dutch artists. In my contribution I will discuss some visual artists in the Netherlands who were inspired by quatrains attributed to ʿUmar Khayyām. But first I want to make some preliminary remarks.

To begin with, the title of this contribution needs some explanation. Many scholars have tried to establish which quatrains attributed to ʿUmar Khayyām are authentic. A definitive answer to this question has not been given, and probably it will never be possible to do so. When I speak about ʿUmar Khayyām inspiring artists, I mean the Omar they imagined, from the literature they used. The fact that the artists used various, differing, translations or renditions partly accounts for the variety in the illustrations that I will discuss.

A second remark is that Martin and Mason dealt with illustrations published in books. Of course, visual artists did not only produce drawings and paintings to be published in books. And even if they did, it did not always lead to a publication. To my knowledge, no thorough research has been done in this field and no publications have dealt so far with this subject systematically. In my contribution I will show you some examples of this phenomenon. Most of the works are unknown, or only known by a few people, even in the Netherlands.

I deliberately did not entitle my contribution ‘How Dutch visual artists illustrated ʿUmar Khayyām’s Rubáiyát’. Although some of them did make illustrations, others, who were undoubtedly inspired by Omar, did not. I will go into this further, when I deal with the artist concerned.
The first artist from the Netherlands who made illustrations pertaining to Khayyám was Willem Arondéus (1894-1943).² Arondéus is known in our country for his paintings, illustrations, and designs for posters and tapestries. About 1935 he gave up the visual arts to become an author. Although he is not an artist of great reputation here, he is certainly not forgotten. That is not only due to his artistic achievements. Arondéus was homosexual and lived openly as a gay man from a young age. Even in the artistic circles of the early nineteenth century, this was daring behaviour. During the Second World War he showed his courage in the Dutch resistance movement. In 1943 he led a group in bombing the population registry in Amsterdam. Unfortunately, he and the other members of the group were arrested within a week of the attack. Arondéus was executed that July.

As a young man, about twenty years old, Arondéus tried to earn a living by making illustrations for the poems of prominent poets, hoping and expecting his work was to be incorporated in reprints of their books. It all appeared in vain. Among the poets whose poems he illustrated were J.H. Leopold and P.C. Bouten, two of the most famous men of literature at the beginning of the twentieth century in the Netherlands. Both poets wrote translations, or rather, personal renditions of quatrains attributed to ‘Umar Khayyám, generally regarded as works of excellent quality.

Boutens’ “Rubáiyát: a hundred quatrains from Omar Khayyam” was published in 1913.³ The poet used a number of translations for his own rendition, including those of Nicolas (1867), McCarthy (1889), Whinfield (1882) and Heron Allen (1998).⁴ Boutens has often been described as one of the most outspoken Dutch representatives of symbolism. In a thorough analysis of four quatrains from Boutens’ rendition, Rianne Batenburg has demonstrated how Boutens changed more descriptive words from his original sources into symbols that referred to a higher world, supposed to be hidden behind the immediate perceptible.⁵ As a poet, he is initiated into this world, which is only known by a few. Of this higher world he speaks in a suggestive, ambiguous language. That Boutens considered ‘Umar Khayyám as a congenial, enlightened poet is apparent from a quote from Plato’s Phaidros, printed as a motto at the beginning of his book.

That Arondéus felt attracted to this world is clearly demonstrated by his illustrations (see illustration 1 in the full color section). He chose ten quatrains from the 1913 edition for which he made drawings in sepia and he also made a drawing for the cover. The first quatrain he chose, the seventh in Boutens’ collection, is most significant. I will quote it here in the English translation, made by Henri Wildermuth, an Englishman who lived in the Netherlands for many years and who was a great admirer of Boutens, with whom he was acquainted:⁶
Ontwaak, o vreemde knaap, het dagget al!
Vul met robijnen most het klaar Kristal.
Want nooit hervindt uw levenlange zoeken
Dit sterflijk leen, dit uur in dit aardsch dal.

Bestir thee, boy, and fill with crimson must
This crystal cup for see! The dawn has thrust
Its arm across the sky and who recovered
Ever this mortal feud, this hour of dust?

It is a pity that Wildermuth did not translate the first line more literally. Nearer to the Dutch would have been: “Awake, strange boy, day is already breaking!” The Dutch word ‘knaap’ is much more meaningful than the English “boy” which is a more common and neutral word. Of course, everybody acquainted with FitzGerald’s version will recognize the exclamation “Awake,” from FitzGerald’s first quatrain. Arondéus choice of this verse as the first to be illustrated suggests that it can be read as the declaration of a young man, becoming aware of his sexual preference. He apparently discovered in Boutens, who was also attracted to members of the same sex, a congenial man.

Arondéus put the first line on top of his illustration. Its style is characteristic for a movement called Monumentalism, which Arondéus himself called ‘Neo-Monumentalism’. In this period he admired then famous artists such as Richard (Rik) Roland Holst, Willem van Konijnenburg and Jan Toorop. This movement is characterised by an emphasis on the importance of thought as a means of finding the truth behind the so-called reality. The outer form of an object was only a container for the actual meaning. Impressionism was considered superficial. A striking feature of the monumentalists is their superfluous use of decorative and ornamental elements.

Illustrations 2 and 3 in the full color section accompany Boutens’ quatrains 43 and 99:

Voort gaat de nachtelijke karavaan...
In curious guise life’s caravan passes on...

Benut de korte rust u toegestaan!...
Be on your guard, for happiness Waits upon

Maal schenker, niet om ’t morgen uwer klanten.
No man, nor tarries till to-morrow...
Boy.

Reik ons den wijn: want reeds verbleekt de maan.
Bring us the wine: the moon grows wan.

Mijn krank hart vond geen kruid;
My sick heart finds no herb; my
mijn ziel, gestegen
soul, upon
Ten lippen, smacht nog steeds den bruïgom tegen.
My lips now, yearneth still to look upon
Let us return to Martin and Mason. Considering the style and content of the illustrations of the *Rubáiyát*, they observe that abstract art had only a limited impact on book illustration (p. 14). The only book they mention containing illustrations with ‘an element of abstraction and symbolism’, is Steven Morris’ limited edition from the Black Night Press (p. 27). To my knowledge likewise, there are no books with illustrations of *The Rubáiyát* of a totally abstract character. That does not mean that Omar did not inspire artists to make abstract paintings. In 1993 I saw an abstract painting in an exhibition dedicated to the painter Ger Gerrits in the Gemeentemuseum Arnhem (Arnhem City Museum). Before the Second World War, his work was figurative. But the war awakened in him the idea that art had to free itself from its prewar language, and he switched to full abstraction. A good example of a non-figurative painting is ‘Compositie 64’ from 1949, considered by Gerrits himself to be one of his best works (see illustration 4 in the full color section). The catalogue gives an explanatory note to this work. It states that Gerrits was an admirer of *Umar Khayyām* and that he was inspired by a quatrain, reading:

*Gij vraagt den zin van dit bewogen wonder?*  
*Zoveel omzie ik van den wanklen vlonder.*  
*Een wijd vizioen uit grondlooze oceaan stijgt op*  
*En duikt in de eigen afgrond onder.*

The origin of the quatrain is not mentioned in the catalogue, but for every reader of Boutens’ quatrains it is clear that it was the 30th verse in his rendition. I quote one of Wildermuth’s translations of this poem:

*You ask me to explain this strange wonder.*  
*To tell the whole truth would take too long: from under*  
*The bottomless abyss of a vast ocean*  
*Looms up Illusion, and then again sinks under.*

We are lucky to have a letter, written by Gerrits himself in 1960 to someone who wanted to know more about ‘Compositie 64’. He writes: “One of his (*Umar Khayyām’s*, JB) quatrains gives the same image in words as my paintings do in form and colours.” In his interpretation, the vast
wonder is the universe. Standing before the painting, the spectator should imagine that he is looking into the universe. The lines disappear in different directions: up and down and sideways. It would take us too far to quote Gerrits’ whole letter here, I confine myself to establishing that Gerrits wanted to create a painting in which he evoked the infinity of the universe. In circles, lines, blots and colours, he evokes the genesis of a universe, corresponding with the image he found in Boutens’ quatrain.

This verse apparently continued to occupy him for some time. A few weeks ago I spoke with Henk Walst, a now 80-year old nephew of Gerrits, who told me that his uncle’s friend and fellow-artist, Henk Henriët, used to walk through Gerrits’ studio, reciting Boutens’ quatrains. Henk Walst still possesses Boutens’ 1919 edition, in which Gerrits had written his own name. He also told me that Gerrits made two other abstract paintings, inspired by the same Boutens’ quatrain. In both cases Gerrits wrote the lines that inspired him on the reverse of the paintings. Both date from 1961 and are in private collections. The first belongs to Walst himself, and has a small variant on the text of the last two lines (see illustrations 5 and 6 in the full color section):

‘t stijgt op uit grondeloze oceaan
En duikt in eigen afgrond onder.

The second painting is entitled ‘Rode Planeten’ (Red Planets – see illustrations 7 and 8 in the full color section). The same variant of the quatrain is written on the back of this, and attributed to 'Umar Khayyām.

To my knowledge, there are no other abstract paintings directly related to quatrains of 'Umar Khayyām. Illustrators such as Vedder and Dulac show us images of 'Umar Khayyām as an astronomer, looking into the universe. Gerrits used pictorial means to express the same feeling of infinity that, he thought, 'Umar Khayyām felt when looking into the universe.

Siep van den Berg (1913-1998)

In January 1993 I bought four silk-screen prints and an original, made by Siep van den Berg, a Dutch painter, who lived from 1913 to 1998. They were accompanied by silk-screen prints of five quatrains of 'Umar Khayyām in the rendition of the poet J.H. Leopold (1865-1925). The style of the prints had much in common with the works of Mondriaan (see illustrations 9 and 10 in the full color section). I remember that, looking at the prints, I wondered how these quatrains could have inspired Van den Berg in the making of the prints.

As I was curious to know more about it, I made an appointment with Mr. Van den Berg in his studio in Amsterdam, later in 1993. He then told me that the images on the prints were not directly related to Leopold’s
quatrain at all! When he had painted them and decided to publish them in print, he had chosen five quatrains of Leopold that he had known by heart for many, many years, because they had the same rhythm and evoked the same feeling as the paintings. Publishing images and poems together was a good means to bring both to the attention of the public.

Van den Berg had a great interest in the poetry of Umar Khayyām and joined the then three-year old Dutch Omar Khayyām Society that year, of which he remained a member until his death in 1998. During that period he surprised the members of the society with a small print of a quatrain by Leopold, illustrated by himself and two other artists in 1993. In 1997 he made the frontispiece for Jaarboek 3 (Year Book 3) of the society, which was published by the Avalon Press in 2000.

Theo Forrer (1923-2004)

The work of the last visual artist I will discuss today, Theo Forrer, is of a totally different character. Forrer was born in Batavia, in Indonesia. As a young man he was taken prisoner-of-war by the Japanese, who forced him to work on the Burma railway and afterwards to work in the coalmines near Nagasaki. From there he was liberated by the Americans, more dead than alive. In 1946 he went to the Netherlands, where he became a fairly well-known artist. He had exhibitions in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and in the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem.

In 1949 Forrer obtained a book with a Dutch translation of FitzGerald’s Rubáiyát, given to him by its translator, Johan van Schagen (1920-2005). They had become acquainted when they worked for the same magazine, Van Schagen as a poet, Forrer as an illustrator. The poems had a strong appeal to Forrer, who made drawings for all 83 quatrains, which, in 1950, were shown in an exhibition in Amsterdam. Afterwards Forrer gave them to Van Schagen. A friendship developed between the two, which was to last until Forrer passed away in 2004.

Van Schagen, one of the founders of the Dutch Omar Khayyám Society, was to suffer from the ‘Omar fever’, as he once called it, all his life. He passed something of the virus on to Forrer. When Van Schagen published a new FitzGerald translation in 1953, Forrer made eight lithographs for the book (and two special editions for Van Schagen and himself with eight linocuts).

In 1997 Van Schagen published a third FitzGerald translation, now containing 115 quatrains. Again Forrer, who was an extremely prolific artist, made drawings for each of the quatrains, which he also gave to his friend Van Schagen.

I have already said that Forrer’s work differs completely from that of the other artists I discussed. His images are figurative, but the most striking feature is that they all are deeply influenced by the horrors he had
experienced during the war. Suffering men and women, signs of transitoriness and death appear in almost every drawing. As Forrer’s widow once said to me: drawing prevented him from going mad.\textsuperscript{10}

In a recently published article in \textit{Jaarboek 5} of the Dutch Omar Khayyám Society I wrote a rather extensive article about Forrer, Van Schagen and ‘Umar Khayyám. Here I confine myself to four examples of images, created by Forrer. The first and third are drawings for Van Schagen’s translations of 1947 and 1997 (see illustrations 11 and 12 in the full color section), the second is a lithograph from the 1953 edition (see illustration 13 in the full color section). The last illustration is a portrait of ‘Umar Khayyám, drawn by Forrer in 1997 to illustrate an unpublished story he had written, in which ‘Umar Khayyám played an important role (see illustration 14 in the full color section).

To my knowledge, all images I have shown today are unique illustrations or creations, related to or inspired by poems of ‘Umar Khayyám. I had never seen sepia drawings in the monumental style of Willem Arondéus. Nor have I seen abstract paintings or prints like those made by Ger Gerrits or Siep van den Berg. And I have never seen Rubáiyát illustrations deeply influenced by the war, like those of Forrer. That these visual artists could create works that were so completely different, undoubtedly has to do with the character of ‘Umar’s poems. No matter whose translation or rendition they read, all artists were inspired by his words about ‘human Death and Fate.’

Nobody knows if any of the quatrains we now read was indeed written by ‘Umar Khayyám. If we speak about his legacy nowadays, we only know that poems ascribed to him inspired many men and women. Centuries later, we can only be grateful to him and to Edward FitzGerald, who gave him a new life, so that ‘Umar could inspire many men and women, even those gathered here today.\textsuperscript{11}

Notes

6 For more information about Wildermuth see the articles written by Paul Begheyn S.J. and Harry G.M. Prick in Maatstaf, Amsterdam, 1992/3, 1992/10, 1993/9 and 1994/1. Wildermuth’s translations in unpublished manuscripts and typescripts are in the Library of Amsterdam University (collection Wildermuth Hs XXXII A 3, 1-5).

7 Ger Gerrits 1893-1965. Arnhem 1993. See for ‘Compositie 64’ p. 22. For more information about Ger Gerrits see also www.gergerrits.com, which among other works also contains an image of ‘Compositie 64’.

8 The painting is in the ‘Instituut Collectie Nederland’, which possesses a copy of this letter (nr. AB 6827).

9 The portfolio is dated ‘14 januari 1993’. It was published by Forma Aktua, Groningen. The poems are the numbers 14, 15, 19, 23 and 24 of Leopold’s series ‘Omar Khayam’ (for the first time published posthumously in 1926 in Verzen. Tweede Bundel, 1926, pp. 79-84). When I received the portfolio, I discovered that Van den Berg committed an inaccuracy in the second line of quatrain 14. Instead of ‘dat in den morgenspiegel hij zag staan’ it had the text ‘dat in de vroege morgenspiegel hij zag staan’. When I pointed this out to Van den Berg, he had a new, improved print made, which he sent me a few days later.

10 See Jaarboek 2, Woubrugge 1995 (frontispiece and p. 27); Jaarboek 4, Woubrugge 2006 (p. 41) and Jaarboek 5, Woubrugge 2009 (frontispiece and pp. 30, 33, 36, 38 and 40). The Year Books of the Dutch Omar Khayyám Society published some drawings of Forrer.

11 I am very grateful to Mr. Theo van de Bilt who scrutinized my text and made a number of most valuable remarks, and to my grandson Emiel Hoogeboom, whose computer skills were very helpful when I prepared the beamer presentation of the displayed works.

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