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Century Magazine by *Emma Eames Chase*
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[This account was prepared a few years ago with the kind permission of the artists. - Editor]

A DEVOTEE of the modern school of Dutch art never paints to paint a "picture," but endeavors to portray some simple phase of nature or some quiet sentiment of every-day life. The work of the school is chiefly remarkable for its purity of color, its decided individuality, and its originality of conception. Their subjects, taken from the life around them, — the picturesque people, old cities, flat fields, winding canals, windmills, and clumsy boats, — must of necessity be simple and quaint. They combine the delicate perception of nature peculiar to the best French landscape painters with a sense of something higher and greater than purity of color and beauty of form — something that must come from the heart of man. In short, their work is first simple, then vigorous; as a consequence fresh, and always unacademic.

It was on a lovely morning at the Hague that we set out to call upon Mr. Josef Israels, the founder of the present school of Dutch figure-painters. There is a delightful little garden separating his studio from his house, and it was through this little Eden, flooded with sunshine, that we passed as we approached the studio door. He smilingly ushered us into the spacious, well-lighted, and handsomely furnished room. Being assured by our host that we were "as at home," we noticed the sketches here and there on the quiet gray wall with the high walnut wainscoting; the fine cabinets; the small but choice library of French, English, and Dutch authors; the little book-case, which he laughingly tells us is his shrine where he keeps his own etchings; and the elegant portfolios characterized by that same simplicity which makes the rest of the furniture interesting. "The English people," he

said, noticing that we were scrutinizing the appointments of the room with some interest — "the English people have paid for all these pretty things; in fact, England furnishes a market for all my work. I suppose you have heard how I struggled along in my painting for years until I happened to send a picture to England and had the pleasure of waking up one morning to find myself famous. In a short time after that picture was sold I had n't a picture left, not a sketch or a piece of scribbled paper; and from that time to this I have scarcely been able to paint enough to satisfy my patrons." "What a sudden success!" we involuntarily said. "And right alongside my recollection of success," added Mr. Israels, "is a most vivid picture of how I once painted a portrait for fifteen guilders and then left the town for fear the purchaser might become dissatisfied."

The picture of a mother standing outside the cottage door watching her baby with outstretched arms trying to toddle away without assistance is one he has been especially happy in painting. As he brought it out from the corner and set it before us he turned and remarked, "Now this is a true Israels." We feel in this, as in all his work, that charm and delicate sentiment, that pure simplicity, which reminds one strongly of [Millet](#), though without imitation. A large picture upon an easel, representing some peasants returning home across the fields under a twilight sky, was treated with tenderness and truth. Then there were sketches of seashore life and fisherfolk that fully carried out the feeling of nature and simplicity manifested in everything he does.



In the studio of Mrs. Mesdag

In the Laan Van Meerdeervoort, near the Scheveningen Gate, is the house of Mr. H. W. Mesdag, the marine painter, and of his wife, a

landscape painter of almost equal renown. We can hardly tell whether it was the artistic beauty of all the house within or the companionship of the enthusiastic master and his talented wife that made the anticipation of a visit there so delightful. As we pause a moment in the hall to lay aside our wrappings we cannot but notice the old carved bench, the tall clock, the long narrow mirrors in painted frames, and the rich hangings of tapestry lighted up by a rose window at the head of the stairs. Ascending to the studios we receive a friendly greeting from Mr. and Mrs. Mesdag.

The studios are two large rooms, overlooking the garden at the back of the house and connected by folding-doors the panels of which have been decorated by the artists' fellow-painters. Each room is lighted by a large sheet of plate glass, which furnishes a pure out-of-door light, and the harmonious and luxurious warmth of color surrounding us is a constant source of pleasure. A few choice pictures by various masters, ancient and modern, mirrors in quaint old frames, and beautiful tapestries, cover the walls. Two fine oaken cabinets are covered with models of every variety of Dutch craft, and others are filled with costly bric-à-brac. The Smyrna carpet, the carved chairs and tables, and the oddities of costume peculiar to the peasant people of the Old World, combine to make every corner and bit of wall a fine still-life, and yet form a broad and simple background for the numerous pictures on easels about the room.



Corner at Mesdag's

Adjoining the studios is a large well-lighted room arranged as library and picture gallery. The walls are hung with a collection of modern

pictures, including many by Dutch painters, with excellent examples of other schools, particularly French landscape, to which Mr. and Mrs. Mesdag are partial. Finely carved cabinets are on each side of the room, and there are chairs of walnut, rich and dark with age, made comfortable by cushions of embroidered satin and velvet. In the center of the room stands a large table covered with all the latest art journals, albums of photographs, and an unfinished aquarelle. Near one window is a portfolio filled with a collection of water-colors. Mr. Mesdag buys many water-color works, "because," he says, "I can keep such a large number of them. Just take them out of their frames, mount them on a simple cardboard, and stow them in a portfolio." The reader will understand the value of the remark when he is told that the studio and house, even to the attic, are filled with pictures — the accumulation of some fifteen years, for Mr. Mesdag is a great buyer. Laboring with all his energy to raise the standard of modern Dutch painting, he loses no opportunity to encourage a young painter whose work shows him to be working in the right direction, by buying and by encouraging others to buy whatever he produces that is meritorious. Quick to recognize all that is good and true in a picture, he is unsparing in his criticisms of what is false: feeling instantly any spark of originality or individuality, he is wholly unforgiving, or, worse, indifferent, when he sees a man in any way imitating another.



A bit of Dutch history

"I have some new pictures to show you," was his greeting as we looked into his studio one summer morning, and in spite of our

protestations that he must not let us interrupt him, he laid aside his brushes and palette, adding, "It is not good to work too steadily; and, besides, a look at the gallery will refresh me." In the gallery we found, resting upon the seat of an arm-chair, two small panels. My companion exclaimed, "[Corots!](#)" and bent eagerly forward to drink in all the beauties of those subtile grays of sky, water, and foliage. Meanwhile Mr. Mesdag drew up one curtain and lowered another, then came back and stood quietly studying them with such thorough enjoyment beaming in his face that we scarcely knew which to enjoy the more, the Corots or his delight. A magnificent head by [Munkacsy](#), the original study for the principal figure in his picture "The Last Day of the Condemned," was then set up in a good light, and, after that, a fine sunset by [Daubigny](#).

"They are good and true," he said, "because the men who painted them devoted their lives to an endeavor to depict Nature as they saw her through their own eyes — not as some one before them had seen her, not after changing and reconstructing her to conform to specific academic rules, but fresh and ever variable as they found her; and then not by a little dabbling in paint, but by an earnest and persevering application of such knowledge as is recognized to be legitimate in good art, by a wholesome devotion to Nature, and by a determination to be original."

"But is there much opportunity left to be original now?" we say. "It seems as though everything had been done, and that all which follows must more or less resemble the work of some man or school that has gone before."

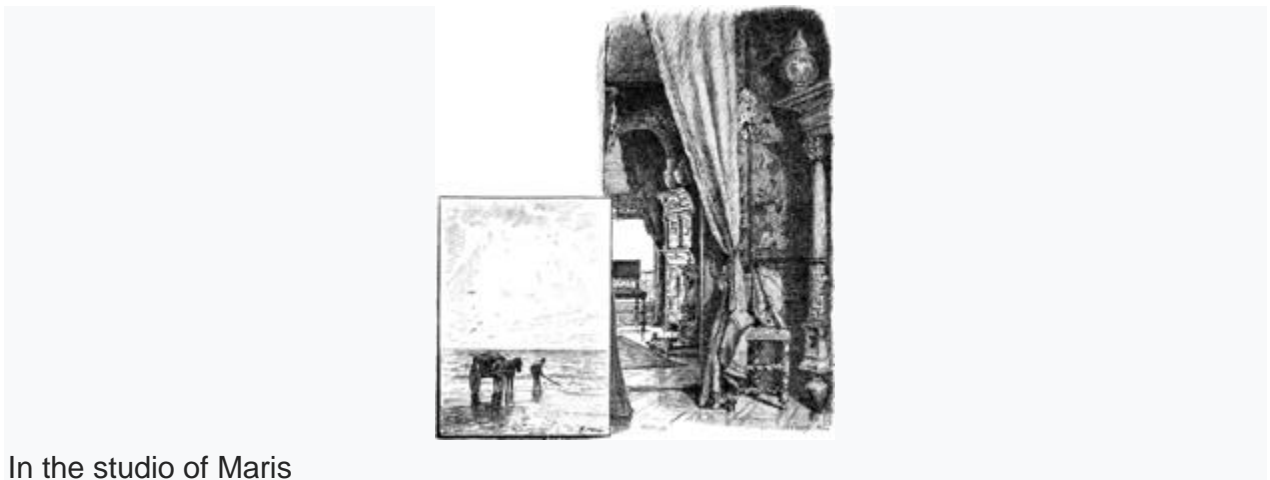
"My dear friends," said the master, laying his hands upon our shoulders, "it is as easy to be original to-day as it ever was; for that lies in the man, and not in the time in which he happens to live. To be original it is best to avoid academies, which have set rules for things that are subject to no rule; where you are set to copy the work of other hands and brains, instead of teaching you the use of your own; and where all votaries of this beautiful art are put through the same mill, regardless of genius or taste, and with no reference to what their subsequent aims may be. Go to work for yourself, with the criticism of a good master, if possible; and if you can succeed in reproducing on

canvas the effect Nature produces upon you the result must be original, for Nature never looks at two people with precisely the same face."

"But," interrupted Mrs. Mesdag, "you are too severe on the academies. You must acknowledge that they are the best places for one to learn the necessary technicalities." For although Mr. Mesdag has been her only master, and she and her husband agree perfectly in their opinions of artists' work, they always disagree as to the best means of acquiring the rudiments of art.

"The study of still-life, the living model, nature in any form, is quite sufficient for all purposes," he said, "and you never need study from the antique to produce true art; for there is no such thing in nature, although academies give this subject more attention than perhaps any other." Then leading us back into the studio he laughingly remarked that the antique furnished material for many a good-natured discussion between his wife and himself.

In the studio we find his Salon picture for 1879 — a Dutch fishing-boat coming to anchor in the yellow, sandy surf of Scheveningen. The picture is full of light and motion, of the immensity and strength of the sea, and of the fierce March wind that is bringing the boat ashore. It illustrates perhaps better than we can describe the peculiar freshness of his work. "He has the genius of the Japanese for putting things where we least expect to find them; and yet, having found them, nothing seems more natural than that they should be so placed." So spoke one of his pupils.



In the studio of Maris

"At last I think I have what I was working for," he remarked, turning to another canvas whereon is painted a pale moonlight, strong, yet so full of sentiment that we find a great poem in it.

"He never gives up his original idea of a picture after it is once begun," said Mrs. Mesdag, "however fine an effect he may secure by accident. He is not satisfied if it be not the identical effect for which he was striving, and he will work a year or more upon one idea; but succeed he will. And when the picture has given him much trouble he at last contracts such an affection for it that nothing will induce him to part with it. It becomes more to him than it could ever be to any one else."

We learn that it is his custom to keep one or two pictures from each year's work, that he may watch his own progress and be on guard against retrogression.

As we look around on all the art treasures with which he has surrounded himself, and study the many pictures he has painted, we find it difficult to realize that this man who gives his time, his influence, and his wealth to raise and advance the standard of Dutch art, was employed in mercantile pursuits until his thirtieth year, and did not until then begin the study of his profession. When he did begin, however, it was with characteristic earnestness, giving up all other business and going to Brussels, there to study under his cousin [Alma-Tadema](#) and a landscape painter named [Roeloffs](#).

He enjoys telling now of the surprise and amusement his first studies caused among his friends, and of how day after day he made studies of the street pavement before his window; and among his reminiscences not the least interesting is his narration of how he visited Ostend by mere chance, and there discovered that marine and not landscape was his forte. Once decided to devote himself particularly to the sea, he moved his home to the Hague and built his present house at the edge of the city, within easy walking distance of the sea.



Israels at work

That he continues earnest and constant in the study of nature the improvement in each year's work conclusively proves. Already his work ranks with the first in all Europe; and the admiration of France and England, as well as numerous medals and royal recognitions, serves to establish him in a most enviable position among contemporary painters.

Mrs. Mesdag is as earnest and enthusiastic in her work as is her husband. Her pictures show a vigorous, free handling, a fine perception of color, and a delicacy of feeling that place her among the first landscape painters of Holland. She is fond of choosing her subjects from the low, flat turf-lands of Drenthe and the rolling sand-dunes, although she is equally successful in wood-scenes and in still-life. Her water-colors show a richness and purity of tone that is really beautiful, while Mr. Mesdag's are exceedingly delicate and gray in tone, appearing to be almost in black and white.

THE name of Maris had become a very familiar sound to us through hearing frequent mention of the three gifted brothers who bear it, either one of whom would make it a name to be remembered in the world of art. The eldest, [Matthew](#), a figure painter, lives a very retired life in London, caring for no companionship save his painting, which occupies him from dawn till dark and often far into the night. His works are peculiarly rich in color.

The work of William Maris, the youngest, who devotes himself to animal painting, is simple, vigorous, and true.

Of Mr. Jacob Maris the other painters always speak with peculiar respect, with a nod of the head that says more than words, expressive of their belief in a special genius which is not bestowed upon all men. We entered his presence with awe, but were quickly set at ease by his hearty, pleasant manners.



Bosboom's "Chapel"

"I have scarcely anything to show you to-day," said he, looking about him, except this picture on the easel, which is about finished. The critics have been complaining that I always paint in a very low key, and I have done this to show them that they are mistaken."

The large canvas before us showed the sea and the beach lying under a brilliant sun-lit sky, with only a man and a cart at the water's edge to cast a shadow. In one corner of the room there was a sketch of one of his children that is charmingly simple and rich, and Rembrandtesque in effect. He was pleased that we had noticed and still remembered his pictures at the Paris Exposition, and he spoke of the eight years he prosecuted his study in that gay city. A peculiarity of this artist is that he rarely carries pencil or paper when he goes out for a day's observation, but you may meet him almost any day sauntering across the fields, along the canal, or over the dunes, with one of his little ones running along at his side. Then if you should happen to call on him a few hours later you would find him at work on a sketch of something seen that morning, in which he seems to catch more of the true feeling and sentiment of the scene than would be possible in a sketch made

on the spot through two or three hours of changing effect, and in his finished pictures he succeeds in preserving the strength and freshness that so charm you in his sketch.

Thoroughly original and extremely clever, he makes us feel in his pictures something of the intensity with which he himself is impressed by nature. Said one of his brother painters, "Maris paints with a great deal of heart." We recall an aquarelle in Mesdag's collection that well illustrates how deep into reflection his pictures seem to lead, and exemplifies how intense are his conceptions of the subject. It represents an old fisherwoman sitting on the dunes in the twilight, with her back to the sea and the western sky, from which the light has nearly faded, leaving only a streak of deep yellow along the horizon. The tawny dunes are already full of the black shadows of night; the old hag, with her broad straw hat pushed back from her ugly face, glowers at you with eyes full of hate and anger. As we gaze, fascinated by its tragic weirdness, we do not wonder that it is called "The Night before the Murder." Mr. Maris is not partial to any class of subjects, and seems equally successful whether he chooses landscape, figure, or marine.

Perhaps one of the greatest charms of these Dutch studios is the marked individuality we find in each, and the perfect harmony of the surroundings with the tastes and works of the painter. Nowhere has this impressed us more vividly than in the beautiful studio of Mr. Johannes Bosboom, who is famous for his church-interiors.



In Bisschop's house

Passing through the small garden at the back of his house we enter a vestibule divided from the studio proper by a screen of dark walnut. At the right, and overlooking the garden, is an old-fashioned Dutch window with tiny square panes, before which are suspended frames filled with bits of old stained glass. Beside the window are an old oak table and an easy-chair, and in the opposite corner a stand of flowers is placed where the sunlight visits them every morning, keeping them bright and smiling. On one side is a small altar surmounted by a carved crucifix set between two candles. A lectern stands near, upon which a book of parchment lies open, disclosing curious illuminated letters in red, blue, and gold.

Drawing aside the tapestry portière, we disclose a large room with pointed roof and naked beams, which gives one the impression of a chapel in use as a studio. This effect is heightened by the arrangement of light, which, falling clear and strong on the painter's work, leaves the rest of the apartment somewhat in shadow. The walls are wainscoted with black walnut to the height of about six feet, and above this they are white; the upper portion, however, is almost hidden beneath curious bits of carved wood, escutcheons of ancient heraldry, banners, and religious pictures. From the beams hang queer brass lamps and censers, while on all sides quaint candelabra hold waxen tapers. From carved brackets and the tops of oaken chests singular little wooden figures of angels, saints, popes, and bishops, that by some happy chance escaped the rage of the image-breakers long ago, now look calmly down on us. Carved chairs, desks, tables, and screens, with a thousand odds and ends, most of them relics, telling of the former glory of the Netherland churches, are collected here.

Mr. Bosboom possesses a very valuable collection of rare books, illuminated parchments, and official ancestral documents bearing great waxen seals. These occupy shelves at one end of the studio in the shadow of a fine old cabinet.

From this churchly studio come fine interiors of cathedral, chapel, or convent, in depicting the solemn majesty of which the pencil of Bosboom is unequalled. His work is noted for richness and quality of color, masterly management of architectural details, and simple and imposing grandeur of composition.



Some relics

His portfolio of aquarelles is filled with interesting studies of churches and other buildings in all parts of Holland. That he loves out-of-door life and sunshine, as well as gloomy aisles of ghostly edifices, we are assured in looking at his sketches of cottage and street scenes.

In the best modern collections in Europe his pictures are frequently found, and at the principal exhibitions of the world he has received high recognition and numerous medals. He is one of the oldest of the group of painters at the Hague, and with his wife, who is an authoress of talent and of wide reputation in her own country, is held in high esteem.

In a quaint old house on the opposite side of the city live Mr. and Mrs. C. Bisschop, both of whom are popular and clever painters. The place, like a little castle, is surrounded on the two approachable sides by moat-like canals. Crossing the smaller one by a drawbridge, we rang at a gate in the high brick wall, over which we read the legend, "Ons Genvegen" ("Our Delight"). A round-faced maid swings open the gate, and passing under the gnarled branches of an old mulberry tree we approach the house through the garden. Under the vine-covered portico we enter and find ourselves half bewildered by our surroundings.

The parlors in which we are sitting have each a large south light, and the broad window-shelf is filled with bright flowers and plants. Through the small square panes of old stained glass we catch a glimpse of loaded barges slowly gliding along the canal.



In the studio of Bloomers

The white walls with wainscoting of oak are graced by old pictures, among them a [Quentin Matsys](#) and a [Holbein](#); the unplastered ceiling shows the dark wood of the beams and the floor above. Old Delft tiles line the great fireplace, and the projecting chimneypiece of finely carved wood, from which hangs a beautifully embroidered valance, supports choice specimens of old blue ware. On the hearth below glitters a brazen stand of curious workmanship, on which dames of old were wont to brew their tea; while in a neighboring corner a graceful antique silver tea set bears testimony to the friendship of the late Queen of Holland, and is a reminder of her frequent visits.

Candelabra, rich in design and highly ornamental, with great reflectors of polished brass, and tiles suspended in narrow walnut frames, form other graceful decorations. Another piece of fine carving is an old pew, which, before the Reformation stripped the Netherland churches of such vanities, occupied a place in the cathedral at the Hague. Above it hangs a curious piece of tapestry illustrating the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins.

Mrs. Bisschop takes us into the dining-room, a lofty and spacious room, with quaint windows, corner cupboard, and massive furniture. The long narrow hall leading to the studios, with little oval windows, antique clock, tiles, pictures, shining candelabra, and flowers, is exceedingly picturesque. Even the kitchen is artistically arranged with tiles and old blue plates, glittering copper and brass utensils. A motto

in old German text covers the projecting chimneypiece, above which hangs a fine still-life painting by Mr. Bisschop.

During the past twenty years the artist has taken great delight in collecting rare and beautiful objects for the furnishing of his house, until now it forms a perfect model of a Dutch manor-house of the seventeenth century, and many objects that elsewhere are simply bric-à-brac here acquire a new charm from their appropriate surroundings.

We reach Mr. Bisschop's studio by a winding-stair tucked away in one corner of the hall, with a tempting window half-way up that gives a glimpse of the sunny garden below. A large still-life on which he is at work is intended for his own dining-room, and represents a table decoration much used at old-time banquets. An enormous pasty, surmounted by a large stuffed swan decked out in jeweled necklace, gold crown, and other trinkets, is surrounded by great crystal goblets, and set up behind them is a brightly polished brass salver. The rendering of the different substances, the feathers, glass, and metal, is particularly fine. The vigorous original sketch for the portrait of the late Prince Henry, painted for the yacht club of Rotterdam, stands in one corner, and near it is the full-length portrait of a golden-haired American boy dressed as a page.

Mr. Bisschop's work always shows careful study and clever handling. While in composition and color it resembles more nearly the English school of to-day, the painter is in complete sympathy with those who are striving to advance the national art.

A new surprise awaited us in the studio of [B. J. Bloomers](#), for we had not expected to find still another so original in design.

Mr. Bloomers finds his pictures in the every-day life of the fisher and peasant folk of this part of Holland, and is particularly happy in depicting children and babies. No one ever succeeded better than he in rendering the erratic action and the bland, wondering expression peculiar to babies. His work, good in drawing and fine and true in color, is conscientious, and his subjects are full of the charm and poetry of child-life.

Mr. Bloomers's studio consists of two large apartments, and is at once interesting and practical. The first we enter is a lofty room lighted from

the north by a large plate-glass window; the wall opposite is paneled with oak almost to the ceiling, and at one end of the room are tables, chests, and corner shelves filled with bric-à-brac. The opposite end is entirely open, and admits us into a low room that is a fac-simile of a fisherman's cottage, with an open fire-place lined with tiles, a heap of fagots on the hearth, and the inevitable shining brass tea-kettle suspended on an iron crane. Old Dutch ware decorates the chimneypiece, and the wainscoting is of blue tiles, which, like all the furniture, were collected by the painter from peasant homes. Here Mr. Bloomers poses his models, using the other room simply as an atelier. An open door and a low window light the "cottage" from the north, but quite another effect may be obtained by closing these and opening a small high east window. Again, the entire feeling of the place may be changed by admitting the light from the south only. On that side there is a large window of old Flemish design, with diminutive panes, complicated oaken shutters, and finely wrought latches and hinges, which admits of great variety in the amount and direction of light. Various screens and a green baize curtain on a swinging bracket beside the studio window are so arranged as to prevent the light of one room interfering with that of the other. Our sketch was taken from the studio, just showing the dividing line between it and the cottage, with a view of the chimney and the east window.



A Dutch parlor

Another young man of talents is Gerke Henkes. He has chosen to portray the everyday life of the middle class in Holland, especially such incidents and customs as are peculiarly national. One of his subjects is a charming interior of that peculiarly Dutch institution, a teahouse.

Three old ladies with their knitting are seated around a table on which the pretty tea-service and box of sweet-cakes are arranged, while beside one of the ladies the shining brass kettle is steaming away over a bucket of glowing turf. Through the open window behind them a glimpse is caught of the sunlit meadows.

A. Mauve, the landscape and animal painter, who died last spring, had talents and individuality. Painting in a simple, artistic manner, he sought the quiet tones of gray days on the fields and dunes of Holland. Approaching more nearly the French landscape-painters than those of any other school, with a fine perception of color and a quick sympathy for nature, he imparted his own healthy enthusiasm to all his work. Some of his best efforts were in water-color, with which he produced fine effects of atmosphere and distance.

Of the great number of painters residing at the Hague there are many besides those already mentioned whose work and reputation stand so high that we regret the necessity which allows only the mention of such names as Artz, Sadee, the brothers Albert and Joseph Neuhuys, and others.



In Henkes's studio

The Dutch school of water-color is fast becoming famous, and the annual exhibition at the Hague is perhaps unequaled. The painters all seem to be as expert in the use of water-color as of oil, employing it frequently in their sketches from nature.

The Painters' Club, of which they are all members, affords opportunities for social intercourse, amusement, and study. The club-

house, formerly a chapel, is an ancient building situated on a quiet street at the end of a long court-yard. The janitor conducted us up the broad oaken stairway and admitted us into the spacious, well-lighted hall with high-arched wooden ceiling. The open fireplace, lined with ornamental tiles, and the great chimneypiece, carved and gilded, are the principal features of the room. Set in the mantel is a fine copy from Paul Veronese by Jacob Maris. The walls are hung with engravings, etchings, and with numerous sketches by the members. A bare oaken floor and oaken furniture, upholstered in dark olive stuff with embroidered dragons and curious figures, add to the somber and antique appearance of the room. On the long center-table are the principal art journals of the day and many finely illustrated works: a fine old cabinet contains still others, with portfolios of etchings by different masters. Two billiard-tables and a piano offer other amusement, and in one room is posed every evening a model in costume for those who may wish to make a study. Occasional exhibitions of these drawings and sketches take place, to which the public are invited. One of the most agreeable incidents in our intercourse with the painters of the Hague has been meeting them at one another's studios. The kindly interest one takes in the work and progress of another, the pleasant manner in which criticism is given and received, the frankness and openness manifested among them, the universal recognition given to the individual talent of each, show plainly an absence of that petty jealousy which too often mars the intercourse of such men.

Edward Rowland Sill→

