

SARTON CHAIR LECTURE

Laudatio Auke VAN DER WOULD

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Prof. Dr Auke Van der Woud is an art historian and presently professor in the history of architecture and urban development at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. He was a curator and later a deputy director at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo (until 1981); he taught architecture history at Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, and, after his promotion in 1987, he became professor of the history of architecture at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, a position he held until 2002.

After publishing a number of art-historical studies as a young scholar and curator, Auke Van der Woud wrote a few studies of extraordinary interest on the subject of the history of urban development and the landscape. They include *Het Lege Land. De ruimtelijke orde van Nederland 1798-1848*, Amsterdam 1987 (fourth edition in 1998), 687 p. – a publication based on his doctoral dissertation – a study in which he emphasises the importance of landscape study for the history of urban planning and architecture; *Waarheid en Karakter. Het debat over de bouwkunst 1840-1900*, Rotterdam 1997, 483 p.; published in English as *The Art of Building: From Classicism to Modernity. The Dutch Architectural Debate 1840-1900*, that testifies to the author's interest in and knowledge of Dutch architecture and architectural philosophy of the 19th century; *De Bataafse hut. Denken over het oudste Nederland (1750-1850)*, Amsterdam 1998, 222 p. (an adaptation of a book from 1990, entitled *De Bataafse hut. Verschuivingen in het beeld van de geschiedenis 1750-1850*); and an architectural monograph on the Dutch architect Wim Quist in 1989.

The published research of Auke Van der Woud covers the history of architecture and urban development in the period 1850-1940. Since 2001, Van der Woud has been working on an extensive project, a sequel to *Het Lege Land*, on the subject of the transformation of the cities, towns, and countryside of the Netherlands between 1850 and 1900.

It is difficult to pick the most important of these publications. However, one work in particular that is both surprising and extremely

interesting is 'De Bataafse hut. Denken over het oudste Nederland', in which Van der Woud examines how the Dutch themselves thought about their own earliest history in the 18th and the first half of the 19th century: the history of the Batavians in the Netherlands. In the daringly personal concluding part on 'historical consciousness', Van der Woud writes that "the value of explanations is relative and they often have a negative effect, because they lock our thinking into existing concepts". The book he has written "is really one long demonstration of the fact that explanations function as part of a particular social or scientific convention. Such a convention makes for coherence; it integrates; and it makes no difference whether the accepted authority is the Bible or recent specialist literature." Consequently, writes Van der Woud, "I am more interested in the riddles, not looking for solutions, and certainly not for explanations".

In those words, I believe, Van der Woud sets out the fundamental intellectual attitude he has maintained to this day, and at the same time, points to the importance of the discipline of the historiography of science for thinking and culture in general. Philosophy of science does not have a monopoly on the critical evaluation of explanatory models. Simply following the history of different 'explanations', approaching them as a history, already yields a relatively 'exterior' point of view: one that does not 'know better', that is not superior, but, instead, that puts the overly simplistic idea of scientific work as a process of accumulation and progress – as if, with every scientific discovery and insight, we are getting things increasingly 'right' – into its proper perspective. Certain kinds of science naturally seek explanations – and therefore conclusions, which comes down to consensus – but the reflection on that science, be it philosophical or historical, is under no such obligation. I quote Van der Woud: "Explaining is a habit from the old reality, an academic ritual that stems from the 18th-century obligation to demonstrate philosophical connections. Let us face the fact that our age no longer needs the help of such academic customs. It is sufficient that we see the new reality emerge, and observe this process as sharply and as clearly as possible, without seeking to judge or explain." This invitation to 'look calmly' at the world and the pursuits of man – to think, describe, and formulate with accuracy, and to seek the right words for it – is simultaneously the expression of the intellectual ethics advocated by Van der Woud: the humble detachment of the historian, combined with an eye for 'beauty', a

beauty that is not so much aesthetic as it is intellectual, a beauty that is found in the lives and actions of people, and revealed when it is captured, named, and preserved in words, images, and forms.