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## Decorative Borders for Children's Good Wishes

Evelyne Verheggen

Leontine Buijnsters-Smets, *Decoratieve prenten met geschreven wenssen 1670–1870*, Nijmegen, VanTilt, 2007, 256 pp., 64 col. and 74 b. & w. ills., €35.

In 1995 the art historian and psychologist Leontine Buijnsters-Smets (b. 1937) completed her PhD on the life and work of the sixteenth-century painter Jan Massys from Antwerp. Her love for the prestigious art history of paintings was quickly overtaken by her already life-long passion for youth literature and books for older children. Together with her husband Piet Buijnsters, a professor of Dutch literature, she published in 1997 the *Bibliografie van Nederlandse school- en kinderboeken 1700–1800* ('Bibliography of Dutch School and Children's Books 1700–1800'), which was followed in 2001 by *Lust en leering: geschiedenis van het Nederlandse kinderboek in de negentiende eeuw* ('Passion and Learning: the History of Dutch Children's Book in the Nineteenth Century'). The inspiration for both books derived from their student days. Since then, the couple have been frequent visitors to antiquarian bookshops, auctions, museums, archives and libraries in search of youth literature and similar publications. They became collectors of these items and now have a huge private collection of old children's books and other curios. In 2005 they wrote a comprehensive study about paper toys in the Netherlands (*Papertoy's, speelprenten en papieren speelgoed in Nederland (1640–1920)*). For their pioneering research and works in 2005 they received the important G. H. 's-Gravesande-price, a Dutch prize for special works of literature that is awarded every three years. Piet Buijnsters continued his writing on the history of Dutch antiquarian bookshops, which appeared in 2007 (*Geschiedenis over het Nederlandse antiquariaat*).

Leontine Buijnsters-Smets's publication in the same year, a study about decorated sheets for writing good wishes, is the subject of this review. Her book, based on a *corpus* of 1,092 decorated sheets from Dutch museums and private collections, reveals for the first time the history of such sheets in the Northern Netherlands. The prints are quite large sheets with a printed decorative frame that is frequently hand-coloured (see fig. 182). Inside the frame is a space for a hand-written verse, often in rhyme, as a dedication. Together with the often very fine handwriting or calligraphy of these verses, the prints are beautiful decorative art works. Printers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century use the term 'wreath' for these sheets. The original collections were mostly formed by collectors of folk art as F. G. Waller (1867–1934), whose collection is now in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, and G. J. Boekenooien (1868–1930), whose collection is in the Openluchtmuseum, Arnhem.

More than 70 per cent of the studied sheets are written as lyrics. The good wishes were normally produced by upper-class children between seven and fourteen years old. Surprisingly, twice as many boys wrote lyrics as girls. The children

presented their good wishes to their parents or relatives at Christmas (about 10%), New Year (63%), Easter (6%) and Pentecost (3%), or when there was a fun-fair in town (11%). Parents and other relatives also received a decorative letter on the occasion of their birthdays (5%). In writing the lyrics, the children were generally helped by their schoolteachers, who often devised the ingenious calligraphy of the capital letter. For the children, the writing of a decorative letter was meant to be an exercise in penmanship. To write well and clearly was an important skill in previous centuries. The lyrics were usually not very original; they were copied out of example books or exercise books from school.

The wreaths were printed on large sheets of paper (about 420 mm x 330 mm). The oldest letter found by Buijnsters-Smets is dated 1659. Like her other four seventeenth-century examples (and some from the beginning of the eighteenth century) these letters have printed calligraphic frames. The curlicues are modelled into ingenious decorations, for example a Christmas crib. From the middle of the eighteenth century the sheets with calligraphic frames become rare. The margins are now decorated with flowers, pillars, leafs or rocailles with medallions. The corners were mostly decorated with figures, animals or miniature scenes. Often the decoration is in watercolour. The most popular era of etched or engraved wreaths was between 1760 and 1830. Sometimes the sheets were woodcuts. From 1840 the popularity of the wreaths decreased and if made at all they were lithographs.

Sometimes the print is signed or has a number. Only a few artists, for example Hendrik Numan or Leonard Sweickhardt (1783–1862), signed their names as printmaker or lithographer under the decorated sheet. One part of the sheets is signed by the publisher. In light of this information, Buijnsters-Smets concludes that most of the prints were made in the Dutch provinces of North and South Holland, followed by Friesland and Utrecht. In general, the same publishers and book printers produced numerous catchpenny prints. They were sold by stationers, schoolteachers, at the fun-fair or by a hawker.

The 'Krans-of Lyst-printen' (the old Dutch name of the wreaths) may be considered a form of consumer graphics. They are important not only for art history, but as an approach to other disciplines such as ethnography and literature. In a certain sense, the decorated sheets are important sources for regional research and the dynamics of family life in that period and also for other forms of cultural and social historical research. They give us, as Buijnsters-Smets writes: 'a certain view on family relations and genealogical relations of past times'. From the decorated sheets, we learn that the relationship between parents and their children was very formal and very different from nowadays. Especially in the opening and closing words of the letters, the distance between children and their parents becomes clear. For example, one group of letters opens with: 'Letter to my esteemed and high



182. Anonymous Artist, *Decorative Border with a Fair-Ground*, inscribed by Antje Jansz. Olij to her parents, 1826, published Amsterdam, W. J. Ratelband and J. Brouwer, op de Rooze Gragt Zuyd-zyde, in de Bybel-Drukkerye, hand coloured engraving with pen and ink, 400 x 320 mm (Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet).

Uncle', and some of them close humbly, for example with: 'Your noble and humble Servant and Son'. In the content, there seems to be little childish spontaneity. It was important to show how beautifully the child could write and that the writing skills increased over the years. Sometimes the child asked for a present, such as sweets or money – the latter was specially requested in the letters written on the occasion of a fun fair. Only after 1830 did the letters become less formal. German sources also record that the child should recite the letter on the particular occasion.

The decorations in the corners and frames of the sheets deserve particular attention. More than half of the sheets display these, with a cartouche in the middle left blank for the text. Apart from religious imagery from the Old or New Testaments, which are connected to the themes of the holy days, Buijnsters-Smets distinguishes eight central themes in the prints: historical events, allegorical and mythological images, genre scenes, topography, military and hunting scenes, traditional crafts, folk customs and fairground attractions. The wreaths with these themes are illustrated in the book, for example steps for each decade of life, the four seasons, the twelve months of the year and parts of the day. Playing children and fun-fair scenes are closely connected to the objectives and users of the decorated sheets. Some images, such as those in the topographical and historical prints, serve not only as illustrations but also had an educational function. The prints are often inspired by earlier prints and paintings. As far as possible, the author searched for the prototypes from which the decorations around and under the wreaths were copied.

In chapter IV Buijnsters-Smets draws attention to the Belgian, English and German decorated sheets. In France, Italy and Scandinavia the phenomenon was unknown. The German decorated sheets, however, are numerous and give a lot of information. Unlike the Dutch and English sheets, they have often been the subject of research and Buijnsters-Smets gives a representative survey, comparing the style and content of the German sheets with the Dutch ones and noting the differences and similarities.

Her book is a splendid publication with many fine illustrations and loving attention paid to style. The quality of the

freestanding prints is very high and all the prints are easily readable. Often only one sheet is printed on the page, so that the book is not only for reading but also for looking at the decorated sheets. In total, 130 decorated sheets are illustrated, with the hand-coloured originals reproduced in full colour. Only a number is given alongside the prints, with the further information given in the text. The reader can therefore study the print precisely before reading about its history. In the back of the book a catalogue lists all the 1,092 prints, with information about the written text, by whom it is written and its date and intention. The printer's number, genre of illustration and inventory number of the provenance collection are also provided. If the print is signed, it is classified under the printer or publisher. The whole provides an interesting perspective on the printers and publishers who were employed in this sideline. Part B of the book describes the sheets without the publisher, classifying them under their location. The volume concludes with an index and an extensive summary in English.

In spite of the variety of themes, written texts, printmakers and publishers, the author was successful in writing a lively book that enhances our knowledge about youngsters in former centuries. The illustrations offer a comprehensive insight into the daily lives of our forebears and give a nuanced view of Dutch folklore. Few questions remain unanswered. The only aspect that seems to be underexplored is the historical context of the decorated sheets. Although Buijnsters-Smets suggests parallels between children's literature and the catch-penny prints, possible similarities with other comparable expressions of folk life are undiscussed. For example, is there a similarity with the contents and style of the *Liber Amicorum* that was flourishing in the same period? And was the diminution in decorated sheets influenced by the rising popularity of Dutch 'poesiealbums' (albums of verses for children)? Is there a connection with the development of Christmas cards, New Year's greetings and other occasional prints? Nevertheless, these questions are details. The book is of great benefit to bibliophiles, ethnographers, men and women of letters, historians and art historians. It expresses and visualizes a magnificent subject of printmaking.

## The Capital of the Comic Strip

David Kunzle

Thierry Groensteen, *La bande dessinée: son histoire et ses maîtres*, La Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image, Paris, Skira Flammarion, ESFP, 2009, 424 pp., 419 col. and 49 b. & w. ill., €49.

Angoulême, probably not a town of immediate tourist interest, well-situated in hilly countryside but without many buildings of note, has been for many years the location of an extraordinary institution, now grandly named Cité Interna-

tionale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image (International City of the Comic Strip and the Image). It comprises a patrimonial library benefitting from documentary association with the Bibliothèque Nationale, a specialized public library, an international residence for artists (authors' housing), a reference library, a technical multimedia support centre and a cinema with two rooms for art, research and experimentation. The Cité is recognized as of great national and international importance, perhaps the greatest (in my judgement) of its