

It fascinated Evert, who saw it as a means of increasing his knowledge. At his departure, he received 10.000 of these photo images as a gift, and they became the basis of the present library. Once again, here was a Douwes generation that made a case for documentation, and would hand it on to the next generation. In 1918, he wrote to a trainee being considered for employment about his future activities: “ Bookkeeping at present is simply structured, but we are lagging behind. Once we have caught up, there will be much time for talking with possible visitors, setting up a card index filing system, and the collection of Old-Amsterdam. I have laid the basis for a technical library (still modest, though) that will serve every member of the firm.”

When, a couple of years later, Evert opened his London branch, he met Sir Robert Witt (1872-1952). A passionate man, who collected and catalogued art reproductions of paintings and also of sculptures. Together, they improved and perfected both of their systems. The Douwes archive was in long rows of green boxes containing grey folders. The traditional green boxes later formed the start of the DeWitt Library, a part of the famous London Courtauld Institute of Art .

In the Netherlands, we have the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie - RKD (‘National Bureau of Art Historical Documentation’). Of this respected institute, too, Douwes was the one who laid the basis. He had met Professor Cornelis Hofstede de Groot (1863-1930), a well-known art historian, publicist, collector, and expert in the field of 17th century Dutch painting. Already in 1895, the basis for Hofstede’s interest in art documentation was laid when, as an assistant to Mauritshuis director Bredius, he made the museum catalogue. Many years later at Douwes’s, he saw the ‘green boxes’, which resulted in an identical setup of his own art archive. Eventually, in 1926, he donated this archive to the nation, and formed the basis for the founding of the RKD.

Douwes Sr.: “My father always bought three catalogues when at an exhibition. He kept one, and the remaining two were completely cut up. Thus, of each artist he collected as many pictures of his work as possible. In this way, with the help of the whole family, the library grew to such proportions that, in the eighties, we sold to the Getty Museum those foreign art movements and art schools that we did not do business in. At present, we focus on archiving only those that we do business in.”

In addition to the easily accessible photo library, over forty-thousand slides of paintings are the result of shots taken since the sixties. Two-thirds is primarily 17th century, half of which still lifes, the rest is 19th century. The library and multi-media section are famous at home and abroad. Many students find their way to them, and many a curator or museum director drops by. Douwes Sr. in fact continues what his great-grandfather started in 1905, and what the latter’s son continued with an initial 10.000 carbon transfers. Senior takes about seven exposures per painting. “Putting these in a row next to each other, you can see right away whether something is good, has been restored, or is a fake, but especially can one study the ever so important brush technique. My slide collection is some sort of a hobby. I also take

pictures with colleagues at fairs and such, in order to collect as much material as possible. I want to record for later generations the knowledge I have acquired. When my son wants to buy a flower still life and thinks, “is it a David de Heem or a Cornelis de Heem”, he can go upstairs and project a number of paintings by both, and by then it should be clear to him.”

The Douwes family is very grateful for the visionary professionalism of previous generations. It will keep a long tradition and expertise alive.