

Stories from Our Travels, Part I

By Ulrike Schmiegelt, November 23, 2012

For two years, our curators travelled across all of Europe in search of artworks for our exhibition. And anyone who travels has a story (or two) to tell. Every Friday, we would like to recount one of these stories. In our first story, co-curator Ulrike Schmiegelt tells how her intuition about the whereabouts of a mislaid ring led to a successful loan.

Lost and Found, or: How we won over a lender.

It is December 2011, and most of our requests for loans have been agreed to, although several wishes remain unfulfilled. The older artists and their works, which are meanwhile modern classics, have turned out to require negotiations, although most of their potential lenders have been enthusiastic about concept. Many artworks created in the '40s and '50s are now so fragile that they are not allowed to travel.

This also applies to works by the Dutch artist Constant, who we wanted to represent with one of his utopian room designs from the *New Babylon* project. We had already tried several times, but our efforts had been in vain. Until a museum suggested that we contact the artist's widow, Trudy van der Horst-Nieuwenhuys, with our loan request. She would have a large collection of his work, was the administrator of his estate, and had lent some of his works permanently to Dutch museums.

Mrs. van der Horst showed interest when we initially contacted her and was open to the exhibition project. She invited us to come to Utrecht, where she would like to show us her collection and learn more about the project. It was clear to Monika Flacke and me that we would need to visit her and be successful in convincing her of our project, if we were to return with a loan agreement. And that was our goal!

So shortly before Christmas, we travelled to Utrecht. On a rainy Tuesday morning we rung the doorbell of her quaint and narrow gable house. We were a bit nervous, wondering what to expect and whether our conversation would be difficult. Then the door opened, and an attractive woman with curly blonde hair invited us in, 'Good morning, I'm Trudy.' She had planned out the day with us: First we would have coffee, and she had already prepared a small lunch. She wished to show us the collection there and then we would drive to Constant's house in Amsterdam, where other works were kept. The conversation flowed easily and we talked about our exhibition project, about Constant's art, and about Trudy's life with the artist—how the two of them met, and finally about her worries as a widow and caretaker of his estate. She showed us her house, which was full of works by Constant. We looked through albums of graphic works, admired the paintings and architectural models, and quickly identified our favourite. If it is at all possible, we wanted to exhibit an architectural model consisting of two delicate tower constructions. Trudy hesitated at our suggestion, saying that this piece is very dear to her. She encouraged us to wait with our decision until we had seen the other works.

We then headed for Amsterdam, after reorganising the car a bit and setting up the back seat. It had begun to rain and our host suddenly seemed agitated. Was our visit going to get difficult?

The house in Amsterdam was unheated and the morning's relaxed atmosphere seemed to have been lost. While Trudy was out of the room for a moment, Monika and I agreed that we should cut the visit here short and go to a (heated) café to wrap up our visit and allow Trudy to go about her day without us. But that was not to be. Trudy returned, asking if we had noticed whether she was wearing a ring that morning. I was able to

confirm this, for I had indeed noticed the ring with an unusually large moonstone. It had been a gift from Constant, a lovingly kept memento, and now it was missing. She had noticed this during the drive, but was not sure whether she had even had the ring on that day. My answer upset her and she frantically began to try to reconstruct where she might have lost the ring—perhaps while setting up the car seat, so perhaps it was in the boot. We looked, but it was not to be found. Had the ring maybe slipped from her finger and fallen on the street or—worse still—into the toilet back at the house. We tried to calm and comfort her as best we could.

I remembered that she had washed the dishes: had she perhaps taken the ring off and put it aside? No, she never took the ring off while she was wearing it. Or maybe it had just slipped off in the soapy water? So we asked Trudy to go straight home to look for it. Unfortunately we couldn't go with her, because it was only a few hours until our flight. So we said our good-byes more quickly than expected and in a less cheerful mood than as we had met, sending Trudy off with our best wishes for the trip home and feeling somewhat low. Hopefully she would find the ring, but we could do little else, but cross our fingers and hope for the best.

The next morning we got a message from Trudy: she had actually found the ring. It had been in the sink. Thank heavens!

Our support in that moment of need, our advice, and in the end—our correct guess about the supposedly lost ring's whereabouts—assured us a place in Trudy's heart. Of course our favourite work could be in the exhibition.

Ulrike Schmiegelt