

# The Polyphonic Object



## Judith van Gent

Art Historian

Experienced researcher, curator, and author, with broad knowledge of (Dutch) art history. Dr. van Gent is currently the head of collections and research at Amsterdam Museum.

---

## Jan Lucassen

Historian

Fellow of the International Institute of Social History and a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Science. Dr. Lucassen has published books such as 'Migratie als DNA van Amsterdam 1550-2021' (2021).

---

## Anita Böcker

Sociologist

Associate professor of Sociology of Law (Centre for Migration Law) at Radboud University. Prof. Dr. Böcker has published widely on the social/legal status of labour migrants, the regulation of migration and immigrant integration.

# Registration of Belgian Refugees in the Amsterdam Stock Exchange

Amsterdam Museum Journal

In 'The Polyphonic Object' three analyses by scholars from different perspectives and academic fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their (art historical, historical, and sociological) reconstructions, they uncover the different stories behind the painting *Registration of Belgian Refugees in the Amsterdam Stock Exchange* by Herman Lugt (1914) (on loan, Stichting Genootschap Amsterdam Museum, 1960). Painted at the start of the First World War, it depicts Belgian refugees arriving in Amsterdam, the capital of the (neutral) Netherlands.

Issue #1 Fall 2023



Herman Lugt (1881-1950)

*Registration of Belgian Refugees in the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, 1914*

On loan, Stichting Genootschap Amsterdam Museum, 1960

When Germany invades Belgium in 1914, one million Belgians flee across the border to the Netherlands, which remains neutral. The Dutch government attempts to distribute the refugees evenly throughout the country, to ease the pressure on its south. Amsterdam receives 25,000 of these Belgians, who are registered in the Stock Exchange building. Most of them are housed in schools, churches, and warehouses at the port.



# Judith van Gent (art historian)



People in a long line; mothers carrying small children, men packed with sacks and bundles, an old woman supported by two policemen. They look exhausted and defeated. In the centre of the painting, we see a young woman, dressed in black and holding a young boy by the hand. She seems somewhat isolated and on her own, a dramatic effect that is further enhanced by the fact that she seems to be the only person looking at the viewer. They are Belgian refugees who came from Antwerp via Roosendaal to Amsterdam after a long journey in an overcrowded train. From Central Station they then walked to the Stock Exchange on Damrak and there walked up the stairs. Painter Herman Lugt (1881-1950) captured the moment when the refugees, coming

up the high staircase, are about to enter the hall of the Stock Exchange to register themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The painting is dated 1914, the year the First World War started. Germany had invaded Belgium in August of that year and had conquered Antwerp after a bloody battle on 10 October. From the beginning of October, one million Belgians fled across the border to the neutral Netherlands. About a quarter of them ended up in Amsterdam. Most of the refugees arrived there between 9 and 12 October. In a photograph by H.J. Witters we see them walking along the Damrak in an impressive procession.<sup>2</sup> Amsterdammers – as the inhabitants of Amsterdam are called – are watching. Herman Lugt must also have been there. He presum-

ably made preliminary studies for his painting in the Stock Exchange. Recent research into the painting's creator, its donor and their families provides insight into the circumstances in which it was created.

### Herman Lugt

Herman Lugt was born on November 6, 1881 in Amsterdam as the third child of the insurer Johannes Hermanus Lugt (1849-1945) and Johanna van Maurik (1849-1930).<sup>3</sup> After high school, he studied engineering at the Polytechnic School in Delft, but his heart lay in painting and drawing.<sup>4</sup> From 1901 he took drawing and painting lessons from Frederik Hart Nibbrig and Jan Veth in Laren (the Netherlands). The latter sent him to the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten (National Academy for the Visual Arts in Amsterdam). Between 1906 and 1924, Lugt had studios on Hobbemakade, on Singel (in the same building as painter Coba Ritsema) and on Rembrandtplein in Amsterdam. He was a member of artists' associations Arti & Amicitiae and Sint Lucas, and exhibited there several times. He traveled extensively. He had been awarded a Royal grant for three years, which he spent on journeys to Rome and Morocco. After his return to Amsterdam, he fully participated in the artistic life in the city. For example, he was one of the artists who worked on the decorations for the artists' party in Theater Bellevue in 1915. Lizzy Ansingh painted his portrait in 1915. In the 1920s Lugt moved to Schoorl with his wife Gerda Lugt-Hoefsmit. He had problems with his eyes and became blind in one eye in the early 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Completely blind, Herman Lugt died on March 29, 1950 in Alkmaar.

Lugt painted landscapes, portraits, figures and still lifes. As far as we know, the painting of the Belgian refugees is the only one in which he depicted a group of people.

In 1951, a year after Lugt's death, on the

initiative of his widow, ninety-two of his paintings and drawings were exhibited in a memorial exhibition at Arti & Amicitiae. A third of the works on display were contributed by his widow, the others by family and friends. The painting depicting the arrival of the Belgian refugees was also on display, as was a second painting with the same subject. According to the exhibition catalogue, both paintings belonged to a 'Mrs. H.S. de W.' from Hilversum.<sup>7</sup>

### Johannes Hermanus Scheltema and Augusta Louisa de Wit

'Mrs. H.S. de W' was Augusta Louisa de Wit (1867-1961), widow of Johannes Hermanus Scheltema (1864-1945). In 1960 she donated the painting of the Belgian refugees to the Stichting Amsterdams Historisch Museum, the foundation that supports the Amsterdam Museum. The museum has had the painting on long-term loan ever since.

There are strong indications that, in 1914, the Scheltema-De Wits commissioned a painting with as subject Belgian refugees in Amsterdam from Herman Lugt.

The Mennonite families Lugt and Scheltema were connected through several marriages.<sup>8</sup> Johannes Scheltema and Herman Lugt were second cousins by marriage and will certainly have known each other personally. Apart from family ties, the families were in the same industry. The Scheltemas had been tobacco manufacturers and traders for generations. Herman Lugt's mother was the daughter of Justus van Maurik, who owned a cigar-factory in the Spuistraat and a tobacco shop near Dam Square in the center of Amsterdam.

Johannes Scheltema, born in Amsterdam, left for Antwerp in 1885 where he was further trained in the tobacco trade and where he set up the tobacco dealership Scheltema & Rebel, together with his cousin Gajus Scheltema. In 1890 he married Augusta

Louisa de Wit in her hometown Oosterbeek. Together they lived in Antwerp for five more years. They actively participated in society and were socially engaged. For example, in 1892 Scheltema was one of the founders of the Nederlandsche Vereeniging tot Hulpbetoon in Antwerp (Dutch Society for Relief in Antwerp), which devoted itself to supporting the unemployed (Scheltema 1934).

In 1895, the couple Scheltema-De Wit moved to Amsterdam and Scheltema founded Scheltema & Co's Tabakshandel on the Rokin. Between 1904 and 1921, he was a municipal councilor for the Union of Free Liberals. When the Support Committee for Amsterdam was founded in August 1914, Scheltema became its first treasurer. The committee devoted itself to the unemployed and was responsible, among other things, for distributing the funds it collected.<sup>9</sup>

Mrs. Scheltema-de Wit was also socially active. In 1916 she was secretary of the Urgency Council for Women's Suffrage.<sup>10</sup> Around that time she probably also devoted herself to the Belgian refugees in Amsterdam. Although her name does not appear in the archives of the Central Committee for Belgian Refugees to Amsterdam, a mention in her obituary of 4 September 1961 states that Augusta Louisa de Wit was 'bearer of the medal of Queen Elisabeth of Belgium'.<sup>11</sup> This medal was awarded to both Belgians and foreigners for exceptional services to Belgian citizens or military personnel during a period of at least one year between 1914-1919, which makes it obvious that Scheltema-de Wit devoted herself to the Belgian refugees during those years. Incidentally, the name of To Lugt-Klever, wife of art collector Frits Lugt, cousin of painter Herman Lugt, can be found in said archives. In October 1914 she headed the temporary reception of Belgian refugees at the Institute for the Blind in Amsterdam's Vossiusstraat. Her husband must have organized this; he was a member of the

Central Committee's 'Housing' subcommittee.<sup>12</sup>

All these circumstances – their 'Belgian past', their social commitment, the medal and the family bond – make it plausible that, in 1914, Johannes and Augusta Scheltema-De Wit asked Herman Lugt to record the poignant story of the Belgian refugees in a painting. The fact that Scheltema-de Wit owned two versions of the painting in 1951 seems to confirm this assumption. Unfortunately, this second painting has not been traced to date.

## References

Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, 2005.

12 Amsterdam, City Archives, Archief van de Tijdelijke Afdeling en Centrale Commissie voor de Belgische Uitgewekenen, no. 470, in particular 'Naamlijst Centrale Commissie' and 'Lijst van doorgangshuizen van Belgische uitgewekenen'.

## Endnotes

- 1 Amsterdam Museum, inv. no. SB 4522, on loan from from the Stichting Amsterdam Museum since 1960; canvas 60,5 x 73 cm. On show in Panorama Amsterdam.
- 2 Henricus Jacobus Witters (1879-?) was a shoemaker and an amateur photographer in Amsterdam. He mainly took pictures from high vantage points. Amsterdam, City Archives, inv. no. 010003047622.
- 3 Most biographical information about Herman Lugt comes from the introduction in the exhibition catalog by the painter Kasper Niehaus (Niehaus 2-4).
- 4 See, for example, his comment in a letter to Jan Veth from Paris in April 1904: 'ik weet zeker dat ik niet graag iets anders zou zijn [dan schilder]' ('I'm sure I wouldn't like to be anything else [other than a painter]'). Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-D-1984-40-H.LUGT-2.
- 5 On Friday, January 15, 1915, the Tweede Amsterdamsch Kunstenaarsfeest was organized by the Weekblad De Kunst in the halls of Bellevue. The decoration of the party rooms was done by various artists, including Jan Ponsstijn, Leo Gestel and Jan Sluijters. The proceeds of the party were transferred to the support committees. See Amsterdam, City Archives, Archief van het Feest van Vereniging De Kunst, no. 30444, image nos. B00000029183 and B00000029184.
- 6 RKD, handwritten note by unknown. Documentation folder Herman Lugt.
- 7 Niehaus cat.nos. 20 and 21.
- 8 Lugt family: *Nederland's Patriciaat* 29 (1943), p. 291-318, in particular p. 311-312; Scheltema Family: *Nederland's Patriciaat* 27 (1941), p. 218-288, in particular p. 238-243.
- 9 Amsterdam, City Archives, Archief van het Algemeen Steuncomité Amsterdam 1914, no. 855.
- 10 'Vrouwenarbieid tijdens de mobilisatie' in: *De Tijd* : godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad, 19 juni 1916.
- 11 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 4 september 1961, p. 6.



# Jan Lucassen (historian)



The Amsterdam Bourse (Amsterdam Stock Exchange), which had already been the center for the free movement of capital for three centuries, suddenly witnessed the forced movement of people in October 1914.

The Netherlands managed to stay out of what was to become the First World War, but Belgium fell victim to the German army. Marching against their archenemy, France, the Germans attacked its small neighbor on the 4th of August 1914 and the first Belgian refugees appeared at the Dutch borders soon after. They first went to Limburg, but soon to Noord-Brabant and Zeeland as well. During the first months of the war the northern provinces of the Netherlands engaged in financial assistance only, but the bombing of Antwerp

on the night of 7/8 October triggered a mass exodus in the northern direction. Within weeks an estimated 1 million refugees had to be accommodated in a country with 6,2 million inhabitants, necessitating a more equal distribution across its territory.

From the 10th of October onward, free railway transportation became available. The government asked all local authorities for any possible assistance in receiving Belgian civil refugees, promising to moderately compensate for necessary living costs. An equal number reached France and England. On top of the civil refugees, the Belgian military had to be disarmed and interned, 45,000 of whom in 12 camps across the Netherlands. Amsterdam took on its fair share of refugees as well, and

on October 11th the city already hosted 14,000 of them; ten times more than its burgomaster (mayor) had offered to welcome only a few days earlier. The town declared itself full.

Registration of all these people by the police was a priority, not only for obvious bureaucratic reasons, such as the claim for financial compensation from the government in The Hague, but also to trace family members from whom they had become separated on the road. Many children had lost their parents in the chaos. Two spacious and recently built centers, within walking distance from the Central Station, had been designated for this purpose: 1. the stock exchange at the end of the Damrak and, a little further away, 2. the Diamond Bourse on the Weesperplein.

There they arrived after sitting or lying on the straw clad floor of freight wagons and animal carts for 24 hours, with all the belongings they had been able to save in a duffel bag. This scene, at the entrance of the stock exchange, has been captured by Herman Lugt (1881-1950) on his canvas *Registration of Belgian Refugees in the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, 1914* (*Registratie voor Belgische vluchtelingen in de Effectenbeurs te Amsterdam, 1914*). At the moment represented in the painting, none of them knew what the next day would bring, let alone the next days, weeks, months or years. Where could they stay, and for how long? After the fighting in Belgium had ended, the majority of the refugees returned home, but some 100,000



Henricus Jacobus Witters (1879-?), *Belgian refugees on Damrak on their way to the Stock Exchange, 1914*. Amsterdam, City Archives, inv. no. 010003047622.



civilians stayed in the Netherlands for the duration of the war.

Initially the local population and the town government were filled with sympathy and compassion. A spontaneous collection outside the stock exchange yielded no less than 250 guilders, which amounted to nearly two hundred (ordinary) daily wages. According to a newspaper report, the poor Belgians were received with extreme friendliness by the citizens of the capital, including police officers, railway workers, soldiers and members of the Salvation Army. All of them were eager to help the poor fellows.

Apart from the happy few with enough money to book a hotel, there were two options: 1. lodging offered by well-willing citizens (according to the common political denominations either Catholic, socialist or liberal) or 2. central relief, which was the available option for the 4,000 mostly poor Belgians. Moreover, the authorities tried to encourage the refugees to return to their homeland as soon as possible. One of the methods to advance this was to make the conditions of those depending on temporary central relief as austere and as unattractive as possible. The harbor sheds along the remote Handelskade and the Sumatrakade in Amsterdam, where these 4,000 unlucky ones were lodged, were extremely uncomfortable; they had no windows and light could only enter through the roof. Inside, long wooden tables with benches attached to them were the only pieces of furniture, besides the straw-mattresses on the floor at both sides of the tables. There was no privacy whatsoever; one tap per 130 persons, open air stoves, buckets on the quay for the laundry, and planks outside above the water serving as public toilets. Debates in the town council caused some small improvements, such as some privacy for families and separate taps for men and women.

It then came as no surprise that within a month many refugees had decided to leave; 2,400 people returned to Antwerp and 135 of them went to England instead. Finally, at the end of November, public indignation forced the burgomaster and aldermen to close the makeshift camp, offering those who were still there to return to Belgium or to switch to a refugee camp; for the lower social classes at Nunspeet or, for those who were slightly better off, at Ede, some 80 kilometers (about 49.71 mi) east of the capital. The majority preferred the second option.

In the years to come, the Amsterdam authorities remained reluctant to accept refugees, fearing negative sentiments among the local population (Belgian families were given nearly two times more financial assistance than local dependents of social relief), too heavy a workload for the police and a lack of means. No wonder, as they had sent all blankets and straw mattresses to Nunspeet. Although sympathy and compassion can be captured in a painting, as Lugt clearly has tried to do, in reality, these sentiments do not tend to last very long. More is needed to face the challenge of such a magnitude. After the initial enthusiasm only 2,500 Belgian refugees were to stay in Amsterdam until the end of the war.

## References

- Martin Bossenbroek & J.B.C. Kruiskoop (red.), *Vluchten voor de Groote Oorlog. Belgen in Nederland 1914-1918* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1988).
- Marij Leenders, *Ongenode gasten. Van traditioneel asielrecht naar immigratiebeleid, 1815-1938* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1993).
- Jan Lucassen & Leo Lucassen, *Migratie als DNA van Amsterdam 1550-2021* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact 2021).
- Evelyn de Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten. Vluchtelingen en krijgsgevangenen in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Zaltbommel: Europese Bibliotheek, 2000).

# Anita Böcker (sociologist)



Amsterdam Museum Journal

## March 2022

There is war in Europe again, resulting in large numbers of refugees. On the night of 23/24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. In the first days of the war, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, mainly women and children, fled their country. Barely two weeks later, their number had already risen to 3 million. Poland and other neighboring countries have taken in most of them, but even in these first weeks, some had already traveled on to other countries, including the Netherlands. Some of them were picked up at the Ukrainian border by engaged Dutch people. The Russian invasion of Ukraine – just like the German invasion of Belgium at the time – has triggered a wave of solidarity. Many Dutch people, including

the royal couple (King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima), spontaneously offered to host Ukrainians. The State Secretary responsible for Dutch immigration policy said he finds it “heartwarming to see how many citizens and civil society and commercial organizations want to contribute to the reception of Ukrainian refugees” (Thränhardt 2023). Meanwhile, the government is working on a regulation that will make mayors and their municipalities responsible for receiving and accommodating the war refugees.

The European Union is also proving capable of decisive and unified action in this crisis situation. On March 4, barely a week after the start of the war, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) was activated, for



the first time since its entry into force in 2001. This means that Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country will receive temporary protection in the EU. They are allowed to stay in the EU without having to apply for asylum. They are entitled to accommodation, social and medical assistance and access to the labour market and (their children) to education. It also means they are not subject to the so-called Dublin regime for asylum seekers and can choose for themselves in which member state they seek protection.

The TPD came about after the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, which also resulted in large numbers of refugees. It provides for an emergency mechanism that can be activated in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons to provide collective protection and thus relieve pressure on member states' asylum systems. However, during the 2015 'refugee crisis' caused by the war in Syria, the TPD was not activated and member states could not agree on 'burden-sharing measures'. Instead, an agreement was made with Turkey to keep refugees from crossing into Greece. At that time, too, many European citizens spontaneously wanted to help, but helping refugees enter and transit through the EU was criminalised in several member states.

### March 2023

A year after the start of the war, 4 million Ukrainian refugees are staying in the EU. With 100,000 refugees, the Netherlands' share is relatively modest. Most Ukrainians stay here in (group) accommodation provided by municipalities. Municipalities have managed to arrange 90,000 places with remarkably little fuss.<sup>1</sup> The municipality of Amsterdam has organised 2,300 reception places, but a larger number of Ukrainian refugees, about 3,500, are staying here in private accommodation, mostly with fellow

Ukrainians who were already living in the city. In Germany, which is hosting about 1 million Ukrainian refugees, a much larger share are living alone or with family members in private accommodation (Brücker 2023). Other differences with Germany are that Ukrainians in the Netherlands do not receive residence permits and are excluded from language courses for third-country nationals. Compared to its neighbour, the Netherlands has implemented the TPD in a much less generous way (Franssen 2011). On the other hand, many Ukrainians have found work here, helped by the tight labour market.

### Summer 2022

The application centre in the village of Ter Apel where all refugees have to report to apply for asylum in the Netherlands is overcrowded. More and more asylum seekers – 700 by the end of August – have to sleep outside. An average of 150 asylum seekers a day arrived in Ter Apel this summer. It makes one wonder how Amsterdam and other cities managed to register much larger numbers of refugees in 1914 – without a large government apparatus and ICT. Probably with a lot of improvisation, and by welcoming private initiative – similar to how the influx of Ukrainian war refugees is being dealt with. The registration process was – and is in the case of the Ukrainians – also much more straightforward, without extensive and time-consuming identity screening. However, the chaos in Ter Apel is mainly caused by another political choice: the capacity of both the government agency that processes asylum applications and the reception centers where asylum seekers are accommodated pending the decision on their application is not geared to peaks, whether or not foreseeable, in the influx of applicants. Each time a peak occurs, the agency tasked by the government with providing asylum seekers with accommodation, has to start

negotiating with municipalities about the establishment of new reception centres. Most municipalities show little willingness, often out of fear of protests from their citizens. The central government has not always been responsible for the reception of asylum seekers. Refugees could initially report and settle in a municipality of their choice. Most did so in Amsterdam and other big cities. In the mid-1980s, when several thousand Tamils from Sri Lanka – where a civil war was raging at the time – wanted to settle in Amsterdam and The Hague, these cities put pressure on the government to ‘relieve’ them and organise the reception of asylum seekers centrally (Puts 1995).

### Epilogue

Amsterdam and other cities in the Netherlands and Western Europe have had to accommodate war refugees repeatedly over the centuries. It will be no different in the future. Much criticism can be levelled at the current difference in treatment – at local, national and European level – of Ukrainian in comparison with other (war) refugees. It is more interesting, however, to explore what we can learn from our experiences with the mass influx of Ukrainians today and the Belgian war refugees over a century ago to improve the reception of other groups of refugees now and in the future.

### References

- Brücker, Herbert, et al. *Geflüchtete aus der Ukraine in Deutschland: Ergebnisse der ersten Welle der IABBiB/FReDA-BAMF-SOEP Befragung*. Nürnberg/Wiesbaden/Berlin: IAB/BiB/BAMF/SOEP, 2023.
- Franssen, Karina. *Tijdelijke bescherming van asielzoekers in de EU. Recht en praktijk in Duitsland, Nederland en het Verenigd Koninkrijk en richtlijn 2001/55/EG*. Den Haag: Boom juridische uitgevers, 2011.
- Puts, Jos. *Asielzoekers tussen Rijk en gemeenten. Onderhandelingen over de huisvesting van migranten*. Den Haag: VNG-uitgeverij, 1995.
- Thränhardt, Dietrich. *With open arms – The cooperative reception of Ukrainian war refugees in Europe. An alternative to the asylum regime?* Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Cijfers opvang vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne in Nederland”. [rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne/cijfers-opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne-in-nederland](https://rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne/cijfers-opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne-in-nederland).
- <sup>2</sup> “Grote steden blijven zoeken naar opvangplaatsen Oekraïëners”. Binnenlands Bestuur, 23 February 2023, [binnenlandsbestuur.nl/sociaal/grote-steden-blijven-zoeken-naar-opvanglocaties-oekraïeners](https://binnenlandsbestuur.nl/sociaal/grote-steden-blijven-zoeken-naar-opvanglocaties-oekraïeners); “Oekraïense vluchtelingen, 1 november 2022.” [cbs.nl/nl-nl/maatwerk/2023/05/oekraïense-vluchtelingen-1-november-2022](https://cbs.nl/nl-nl/maatwerk/2023/05/oekraïense-vluchtelingen-1-november-2022) (see Tables 5 and 6).