

# Modernizing the Mauritshuis

**DIRECTOR EMILIE GORDENKER IS TAKING THE VENERABLE DUTCH MUSEUM INTO THE INTERNET AGE WHILE PRESERVING ITS UNDERSTATED ELEGANCE.** BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



From top: Interior of the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis; Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, 1654, oil on panel.

SITUATED IN A DIMINUTIVE 17th-century palace adjacent to the inner court of the Dutch Parliament in The Hague, the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis offers visitors a world-renowned collection of Golden Age art—including such masterpieces as Vermeer’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and Fabritius’ *Goldfinch*—in an intimate setting whose elegance harkens back to a bygone era of understated refinement. But this venerable museum, founded in 1816, when the heirs of Prince William V of Orange donated 200 works from his collection to the state, is more than just a charming time capsule. Vibrant and dynamic in its institutional philosophy, the Mauritshuis is at this moment in the midst of an exciting period of growth and innovation under the leadership of its new director, the American-born Emilie Gordenker.

A graduate of Yale University and the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU, Gordenker took over as director of the Mauritshuis in January 2008, succeeding the ever-popular Frits Duparc, whose 17-year tenure was marked by a steady growth in attendance;

the successful privatization of the formerly state-run collection as a not-for-profit foundation; memorable loan exhibitions such as the blockbuster Vermeer show of 1996; and the acquisition of 30 major paintings, among them a 32-million-guilder work by Rembrandt, *Portrait of an Old Man*, one of the most expensive pictures ever purchased by a Dutch museum.

Although Duparc will not be an easy act to follow, Gordenker’s eclectic, and to some extent unconventional, background may help her to usher the Mauritshuis into a new era. The child of an American father and a Dutch mother, the bilingual Gordenker not only served, prior to assuming her post in The Hague, as a curator of Dutch art at the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh but also held key positions with several companies providing technology and new-media solutions for art museums.

“I saw that computers and computer technology could be incredibly exciting for the future of art history,” says Gordenker, noting that digital databases have transformed the way that museums handle and archive information. “It wasn’t that long ago that museums were hesitant to put anything on the Internet.”

In 2002, while employed at a British firm specializing in audio guides, Gordenker collaborated with Tate Modern to design the first multimedia tour intended for personal hand-held devices that incorporate sound and images. The project, which was aimed primarily at visitors in their late teens and early 20s with little prior exposure to museums, placed an emphasis on user interaction with both technology and art. “When you have a little screen in front of you,” says Gordenker, “it’s very tempting to just look at that screen and ignore the picture on the wall. So we wanted to use this application to help people understand what they’re looking at and to encourage them look at the art more closely.”

Technological initiatives, including the



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, oil on canvas.

digitization of collections, the introduction of new data storage systems and tentative steps toward a redesign of the museum's website, are currently under way. But by far the largest project facing Gordenker in her new job exists not in the virtual realm but in the workaday world of bricks and mortar—literally.

"We have an opportunity to expand the Mauritshuis," she explains, pulling out a book of plans and drawings. Although the museum's existing building is a historic landmark that cannot be significantly altered, a long-term lease on a handsome, if somewhat uninspired, 1930s brick Art Deco structure across the street (until now an annex of the august literary club "De Witte") will allow the Mauritshuis almost to double in size after a €16 million construction and renovation project planned for 2012–13. Architect Hans van Heeswijk, who oversaw the work at the recently opened Hermitage Amsterdam, was

selected in November 2009 to move forward with his concept for connecting the Mauritshuis to the De Witte building by means of an underground plaza and to outfit the new space with many facilities that the museum currently lacks.

"Right now, when we do a special exhibition we have to take down the permanent collection," says Gordenker, emphasizing that the additional space should help to reduce the frequent gallery re-installations that this arrangement entails and allow for greater flexibility in programming.

The Dutch Ministry of Culture has agreed to help underwrite the project, and the national lottery has offered a generous grant, but substantial funds must still be raised from private sources. The American Friends of the Mauritshuis will be working to support this initiative, as will prospective donors in the Netherlands.

Although the renovation will require the closure of the Mauritshuis for approximately one year, beginning mid-2012, part of the collection will still be on view elsewhere in the Hague. Until that point, the museum is planning an active and ambitious schedule of exhibitions. Highlights include *The Young Vermeer*, which will shed new light on the Delft master's artistic evolution by focusing on the three earliest known works in his oeuvre, and a rare public showing of the Eijk and Rose-Marie de Mol van Otterloo collection, one of the finest groups of Dutch Old Masters in private hands.

Exciting though the plan is, one wonders if this jewel-box museum will lose any of its special charm once the expanded facilities are unveiled by the end of 2013. Gordenker thinks not: "We want to retain what everyone loves about the Mauritshuis while opening it up to a new generation." 

