WHEN DID ARTIS OPEN? SOME COMMENTS ON A NEW BOOK ABOUT AMSTERDAM ZOO
BY HARRO STREHLLOW

In 2006 Donna C. Mehos published a book Science and Culture for Members Only: The Amsterdam Zoo Artis in the Nineteenth Century, which I bought last year and read just in November. Although the subtitle is somewhat misleading, it is a very interesting book. The author mostly deals with the development of the Dutch bourgeoisie and Dutch nationalism in the 19th century, and especially with the Amsterdam bourgeoisie and their self-confidence. In this context the founding of the society Natura Artis Magistra is just one aspect of cultural development. Mehos writes (page 13): 'The history of Artis also has been chronicled' But in footnote 13 (p. 139) she qualifies this remark: 'Unfortunately, many authors fail to cite their resources or they repeat errors from other secondary sources.' Despite this problem she does not try to give the real history in her book.

Donna Mehos criticises the new overviews about the development of zoological gardens for making the same errors as the literature they draw on. And at this point she becomes specific – in contrast to her criticism of the Dutch books, which is only general. In particular she criticizes my paper (Strehlow, 2000) in Kisling (2000): ‘Harro Strehlow, ‘Zoological Gardens of Western Europe’ . . . is full of distortions and mistakes but few footnotes.’ She then gives four examples of the ‘mistakes’.

As I was interested to learn about my supposed mistakes, I tried to find out what is true and what is incorrect on the history of Artis in my paper. Mehos mentions first: ‘For example, on May 1, 1838 the zoo did not open but rather the first meeting was held and the society formally founded’ (footnote 15, p. 139). Indeed, I wrote that the zoo opened on 1 May 1838. I gave my source (Smit, 1888), a book which Mehos characterizes as ‘more serious, but not well-documented’ (footnote 12, p. 139). It could be that Smit was wrong, so I tried to find out more about the opening of the zoo. I could not visit the archives at Amsterdam and I did not have some of the older books on Artis history. But what I found was somewhat irritating. Witkamp (1872) is the oldest source I have. He writes that in the spring of 1838 the three founders of Artis, Westerman, Wijsmuller and Werlemann, bought a garden called Middenhof for 6,400 guilders. After acquiring the plot of ground, measuring just 60 by 80 metres, they published a circular to enrol subscribing members. When the first meeting took place the membership was about 120. Witkamp writes further (p. xvii): ‘In the garden . . . the first works were undertaken quickly. Cages for peacocks, parrots, cockatoos and vultures were built, besides stalls for monkeys, deer, a Javanese ram and a magnificent spotted leopard’ [my translation]. During the summer the paths of the garden were crowded with visiting members of the society. Witkamp gives no exact date for either the opening or the first meeting of the members, but it is clear from his paper that by summer 1838 Artis had a small collection of exotic animals, the beginning of the zoo.

It is interesting that Nieuwendijk (1988) shows a map of the Middenhof on the Middellaan, the first site of Artis, from 1 May 1838. On this map you can see the pond, some paths and four structures which seem to be small stalls with enclosures. How the enclosures looked is shown in a painting of 1840 which is published in de Vries (1981).

Astonishingly Mehos (2001) gives another year for the opening of the zoo: ‘As soon as it was clear that the zoological garden gates would open in 1840, Westerman presented the Board of Directors . . .’ (p. 110). Rickes-Müller and Dittrich (1989) also give 1840 as the year of Artis’s opening. It was in fact in this year that the animals of Cornelis van Aken’s menagerie could be shown on the Artis site, as it was only then that Artis got permission to build accommodation for them.
It is still not clear precisely when in 1838 the gardens of Artis opened. Donna Mehos believes the first meeting of the members of the society was on 1 May, but this seems to be wrong. Nieuwendijk (1981, 1988) writes that the first meeting was on 31 May, but he does not give any source for this. I think it should be possible for somebody living in Amsterdam to look at the minutes of this first meeting to find out the date. De Vries (1981, p. 33) shows an entry ticket to the gardens for foreigners dating from April 1838. In Nieuwendijk (1970) is a copy of a bill for ten guilders as a subscription to Artis from 1 May 1838. But Nieuwendijk also writes that the first animals came in in May, for example a *Surinamse boscatte* (Surinamese jungle cat) on 6 May. It is not clear if this was the first animal at Artis or only the first animal worth recording.

In de Vries (1981) is published (p. 39) a paper which seems to be the first circular inviting the citizens of Amsterdam to join Natura Artis Magistra. Unfortunately it is undated and differs in some ways from the text of the first circular cited by Nieuwendijk (1981, p. 38). Maybe the reprint is of a later edition, but as de Vries gives only a very few comments on his illustrations this remains unclear too. Nieuwendijk (1970) writes that this first circular was published on 1 May 1838, but in a later publication says that the prospectus was sent out in April 1838 (Nieuwendijk 1988).

The 1st of May is mentioned in another document, reprinted in Nieuwendijk (1970, p. 30), stating that J.J. Wijsmuller, one of the founders of Artis, had a medal (*Gedenkpenning*) made to commemorate 1½ years of Artis. The inscription reads ‘Natura Artis Magistra. 1. Mei 1838 / 1. November 1850’. This seems to imply that 1 May 1838 is the official date of the foundation of Artis, but it could also be the date of the first meeting of the gardens.

Donna Mehos writes that ‘Westerman never intended the zoo to be opened to the public’ (footnote 15, p. 139), but does not give her source. I think Westerman’s first letter to King William I is the best basis for interpreting his initial intentions. On 29 April 1836 he wrote to the king asking for permission and support for the foundation of a zoo. This letter, published in Nieuwendijk (1988), does not mention a zoological society, but writes: ‘... that a permanent zoological garden will be founded, either under Your Majesty’s special protection, or paid for by the Government, or as a private enterprise ... which will be a special benefit for young people in their studies and a fine adornment for the capital.’ The king welcomed the idea, so Westerman sent him an outline scheme for the zoo. I could not find this published anywhere, but a summary is given by Witkamp (1872). Here there is no mention of a society, but instead a proposal that the zoo should be financed by an entrance fee of 25 cents.

What followed is well known. The mayor of Amsterdam did not want a zoo in the city, so Westerman’s idea was rejected. It was two years later that Westerman and his two partners bought the garden Middenhof as a first step towards the creation of Artis. The first circular was sent to many people – the well-off, naturally, as ten guilders was a great deal of money at that time – but it was not until the first meeting of the members that Artis became an exclusive society. At this first meeting it was agreed that new members would only be accepted by the recommendation of an existing member and the agreement of the others. As I do not know the protocol, it is not clear if this was Westerman’s idea or what was his opinion about this new exclusive membership.

Mehos deals with the entrance fee in detail at another point, but we can assume that her argument would be the same even at this early stage: ‘Artis was not opened to the “poorer masses” in 1852’, she writes, contradicting my statement that it opened for the poorer masses on two weekends in September 1852. Mehos explains (p. 24): ‘In 1852, Artis reached out to the lower middle class when it instituted the annual “inexpensive month” (goedkoope maand) of September. In that month, Artis was open to anyone able to pay the reduced entrance fee... While the low fee admitted a class of Amsterdammers not usually seen in the zoo, it was high enough to keep out the poorer working classes.’ In footnote 15, p. 143, this point is explained further. ‘In 1862, for example, the entrance fee was 25 cents, or one quarter of a labourer’s daily wage.’

De Vries (1981) shows a ticket of this time, also mentioned by Mehos. This is inscribed *Alleen an werklieden en dienstbaren* (‘Only for workers and domestic servants’). The argument from the fact that 25 cents is a quarter of a daily wage seems not to be valid – today the entrance fee at Hagenbecks Tierpark is as much as #25 for the zoo and aquarium, more than a quarter of the daily wage for many German people, but nobody would claim that Hagenbeck is only for wealthy people in Germany. Smit (1988) also writes that in 1852 Artis was opened on two Saturdays in September for the public, meaning workers and domestics, as shown by de Vries.

24
Although Mehos’s arguments and criticism seem to be incorrect, there is still something mysterious about the opening of Artis to the public. De Vries published a reprint of an announcement by H.C. Muller and J.W.H. Werlemann: ‘For the benefit of all the poor people of the town, the zoological garden and the museum of the Society Natura Artis Magistra is being opened for a visit.’ The period for this opening was Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 9 a.m. till 5 p.m from 17 November until 15 December. De Vries does not give the year in which this announcement was published, but as Muller served on the board of directors from 1838 until his death in 1840, it seems that Artis was sometimes open to poorer people even before 1852. The entrance fee was as high as one guilder for men and 50 cents for women and children. I have not found any more details on this early opening to the public, as Witkamp too only writes about the opening for ‘servants, workers and lower bourgeoisie’ in 1852.

The last point Mehos mentions is the acquisition of van Aken’s menagerie: ‘… when van Aken arrived at Amsterdam and the animals were housed in barracks rather than in Artis, it was not because the city council did not allow Artis to build cages but because the city council feared the danger of wild animals within the city gates’ (footnote 15, p. 139). The story was really a complicated one and is written about in detail by Mehos and others. The fact is that the council did not allow appropriate enclosures and cages to be built for the animals before 1840, whatever the reasons may have been. It seems to me something like pedantry at best if Mehos describes it as an error or distortion to give the fact instead of the background to the fact.

Donna Mehos’s book is very interesting, but, in view of the points mentioned above, I wonder whether the rest of the book is better founded and researched than her footnote 15 on my paper. Maybe somebody else with a better knowledge of Dutch history will review the book and its usefulness for the history of zoos.

References


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