

Introduction:

Gerard Isaac Liefstinck

J.P. Gumbert

Palaeography, in various forms, has long been known in the Netherlands. One might mention the excellent engravings after charters given by Adriaan Kluit (1735-1807) in his *Historia critica comitatus Hollandiae et Zeelandiae*, 1777-82; the useful description of the Egmond Gospels, also with fine engraved (and partly coloured) plates, in H. van Wijn (1740-1831), *Huiszittend Leeven II*, 1812; the 17 lithographed plates of script specimens and text booklet, published (as a school-book!) by Jacobus Koning (1770-1832), *Algemeene ophelderende verklaring van het oud letterschrift*, 1818; or, in a different field, the famous Leiden Hellenist Carel Gabriel Cobet (1813-89), who used his knowledge of Greek letterforms as a crowbar for emending Greek texts. From a later period one should certainly not forget to mention Bonaventura Kruitwagen OFM (1874-1954), if only for his studies about the scripts used by the Modern Devotion (reprinted in his *Laat-Middeleeuwsche Paleografica* [...], 1942). But all of this is not what we would call modern. Modern palaeography and codicology begin, in our country, with Liefstinck.

Gerard Liefstinck lived a long life: his dates are 1902-94. But during the last fifteen years or so he lived a life of retirement, so that already at his death there was a whole generation who had never seen him.

1. Lief tinck, *De Middelnederlandsche Tauler-handschriften*.
2. Lief tinck, *Codicum in finibus Belgarum ante annum 1550 conscriptorum qui in Bibliotheca Universitatis asservantur*, Pars I.

He started his career studying medicine, but after some time his interest in medieval mysticism led him to switch to Dutch studies, and he decided to study the Middle Dutch translations of the fourteenth-century German mystic Johannes Tauler – and found he could not, because they had not been well published; one had to study the manuscripts first. So he went to Willem de Vreese, at that time the foremost scholar for Dutch manuscripts, a Fleming but in exile in Rotterdam; in 1936 his doctoral thesis on the Tauler manuscripts appeared.¹ He also got involved with the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* (BNM), the huge card file on all Dutch manuscripts that De Vreese spent his life compiling. When, after De Vreese's death in 1939, the BNM went to the Leiden library, Lief tinck went there too, and eventually became Keeper of Manuscripts. He also started to teach, combining this with the Keeper's job, until the teaching became full-time and his rank that of professor until 1972 – the retirement age for professors then still was 70.

His training with De Vreese, combined with the work in the stacks of the Leiden manuscripts, gave him a deep knowledge of Dutch manuscripts. I think that one of his colleagues also played an important role: K.A. de Meyier, a Greek scholar. Being handicapped (he was virtually deaf, and his speech was very difficult to understand), he could not work with the public. Following the habits of the time he was permitted to work in the hidden parts of the library, at first for nothing, later for a pittance, and did excellent work there. He prepared himself for cataloguing the Vossius manuscripts, and by way of exercise did a smaller catalogue, the *Perizoniani*, in 1947. In the same time Lief tinck prepared a catalogue of an important section of Dutch manuscripts, which appeared in 1947 (dated 1948).² The two catalogues follow the same model, which the two scholars probably elaborated together. Lief tinck explicitly names De Vreese's

description of the Ruusbroec manuscripts as his model; but his is clearer and better – and, in fact, modern. They not only give a listing of the texts, but also a material description, including a good collation, identification of watermarks, description of decoration and binding; and they show an awareness, at least in the more evident cases, of the problems of composite manuscripts. Such catalogues had not earlier appeared in our country.

During the work on the catalogue he also came, following the lead given by Kruitwagen, to a clearer understanding of Dutch palaeography, recognizing the script he called ‘bastarda’ (later rebaptized ‘hybrida’) as a historical entity.

In his later life he made several valuable contributions to the study of Medieval Dutch literature and its manuscripts, which I shall not discuss here.³

But his interest widened. Already in 1948 he studied the Martinellus that an eleventh-century bishop of Utrecht gave to his church: he identified it as a work of a South-German scriptorium, and drew historical conclusions from this fact.⁴ I think he was wrong: it was made in Utrecht, not in Augsburg. But if Lief tinck’s result was wrong, his approach was right: he looked at the book with the eyes of a palaeographer and a codicologist, which no one had done before; and he saw the likeness to German script – at that time nobody had realized that Utrecht was, in that period, very much a province of the German empire. The same with his study of the Egmond Gospels (1949): the solution was not quite the right one, but the approach was perfectly right and perfectly novel.⁵ He travelled in Belgium and Northern France; these travels resulted in 1953 in a study of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts of the Flemish Cistercian abbeys Ter Duinen and Ter Doest.⁶ Again he tackled them with what is obviously the right approach: distinguishing the house products from the books that had been produced else-

3. These include Lief tinck’s ‘Het Ridderboec als bron voor de kennis van de feodale maatschappij in Brabant omstreeks 1400’; ‘Drie handschriften uit de librije van de abdij van Sint Bernards opt Schelt’; ‘“Methodologische” en paleographische opmerkingen naar aanleiding van een hert met een wit voetje’; ‘Middel nederlandse handschriften uit beide Limburchen: Vondsten en ontdekkingen – Het Lutgart-handschrift’; *Problemen met betrekking tot het Zutphens-Groningse Maerlant-handschrift*; ‘Pleidooi voor de philologie in de oude en eerbiedwaardige ruime betekenis van het woord’.

4. Lief tinck, Bisschop Bernold (1027–1054) en zijn geschenken aan de Utrechtse kerken. This publication was Lief tinck’s inaugural lecture as Lector.

5. Lief tinck, ‘Het evangelarium van Egmond’ and ‘Het oudste schrift uit de abdij van Egmond’.

6. Lief tinck, *De librijen en*

scriptoria der Westvlaamse
Cisterciënser-abdijen Ter
Duinen en Ter Doest.

7. Liefstinck, 'Pour une
nomenclature de l'écriture
livresque de la période dite
gothique'.

8. Liefstinck, *Manuscripts datés
conservés dans les Pays-Bas I.*

where. Again, not all his results are final. But again, this had never been done for any of the Belgian abbeys – and, what is worse, it has, as far as I know, not ever been done, for this or any other Belgian abbey, in the almost sixty years since then. It is evident that, from studying manuscripts because they contained interesting texts, he had gone on to study manuscripts as archaeological objects: what we now call a codicological view.

On these travels he gained many friends, the most important ones in England, among them Roger Mynors, Neil Ker and Ian Doyle. He also was among the founders of the *Comité de paléographie latine*. In that context he presented his views on Dutch palaeography.⁷ He was not understood by the audience, because they were all accustomed to the manuscripts of their own countries, and at that time no one realized that Liefstinck's distinction of *hybrida* from *cursiva*, according *hybrida* the status of a separate script type, was a perfectly real, but regionally limited phenomenon. In Germany and France it simply is not so; but in our country it is. Liefstinck's way of seeing things therefore met with scepticism and aversion, instead of the comprehension and moderate acceptance which it deserved.

This 'blindness' of knowing only the manuscripts one has at home should, in the course of time, have been remedied by the great undertaking of the *Comité*: the *Catalogues des manuscrits datés*. Liefstinck immediately and energetically (and virtually single-handed) started on the Dutch part of this series; volume I, concerning the manuscripts of non-Dutch origin kept in our country, appeared in 1964.⁸ (Volume II, on the Dutch manuscripts, was not finished until 1988, by his successor). Again he had an original approach: for each manuscript he indicated how it fitted into his system of script types; and he ordered the plates not simply by date, as all the other countries did, but by country of origin and script type – for was not palaeographical clarity the aim of the

whole project? Neither his distinction of *hybrida* as a separate script type (which was actually much less clear in volume I than it was to be in the Dutch volume II), nor his use of the term *cursiva* for a formally defined script type (and not as an equivalent of ‘speedy and/or sloppy script’), nor his ordering of the plates were appreciated by his international colleagues. Rare were those who realized that Liefstinck had made an important contribution to the knowledge of late-medieval script, and to the form in which clear knowledge is always expressed: terminology (which for this subject is called ‘nomenclature’). But Julian Brown once wrote to me: ‘I bless his name every time the subject comes round.’

Of other work, I mention: his discovery of the Fulda Gellius manuscript in Leeuwarden (1955), his facsimile edition of the Corbie Servius (1960), and his contribution to the discussions about ‘imposed’ manuscripts (1961).⁹

In his later years his interest shifted to art history, the culmination of which is his study of the Master of Mary of Burgundy (1970).¹⁰ Art historians do not judge this work very favourably; this, together with the not particularly clear presentation, regrettably obscures the many excellent observations of details that are hidden in it.

Liefstinck was not a man of systematic clearness, neither in teaching nor in writing. But he was a man of taste and a feeling for quality; and he was often modern in his way of tackling matters – more modern than his contemporaries, and perhaps he himself, realized. And he was also a gentleman and a very nice man. Although he is perhaps not to be counted among the really ‘great’ palaeographers, he certainly was the man who put the Netherlands ‘on the map’ as far as manuscripts are concerned. He will do very nicely as a ‘patron saint’ for palaeography and codicology in the Netherlands.¹¹

9. Liefstinck's 'Le ms. d'Aulugelle à Leeuwarden executé à Fulda en 836 (Leeuwarden, Bibl. Prov. de Frise, ms. B.A.Fr. 55)'; 'The "Psalterium Hebraycum" from St Augustine's Canterbury rediscovered in the Scaliger bequest at Leyden'; *Servii Grammatici in Vergilii carmina commentarii*; and 'Medieval Manuscripts with "Imposed" Sheets'.
10. Liefstinck, *Boekverluchters uit de omgeving van Maria van Bourgondië*.
11. A full bibliography of Liefstinck's publications is found (in installments) in Gumbert and De Haan, *Essays Presented to G.I. Liefstinck*.