

REVIEW

ICONS

Big, Bigger, Biggest

A new exhibition at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum spotlights oversize works, including 36-foot-high sketches for church windows and a 75-foot-long section of a moving panorama.

By J.S. MARCUS

Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum has nearly one million objects in its permanent collection, and some of the largest—including a 9-foot-wide 16th-century map of Venice and a 75-foot-long section of a 19th-century moving panorama—have managed to fall between the cracks. Starting July 1, the museum will remedy the situation with “XXL Paper,” a suitably mammoth exhibition of 27 of these works, many of which will be on display at the museum for the first time.

The brainchild of Jane Turner, the recently retired U.S.-born head of the Rijksmuseum's print room, “XXL Paper” is being held in the museum's double-height Phillips Wing, home to temporary blockbuster shows. Even its 26-foot ceilings, however, weren't high enough to install a set of sketches, several over 36 feet, for stained-glass windows in Haarlem's Grote Kerk, the Gothic church in the city's main square. Dating to around 1541, the

A set of giant sketches will be draped on a double-sided display structure using a cherry-picker.

cartoons, as they're known, were plans for windows donated by an Utrecht bishop, who had hopes of immortalizing himself and his family in what was then a Catholic church with a scene involving the Holy Trinity.

The windows were modified a few decades later when the church became a center of Reformed Protestantism, which frowned on the Trinity imagery, and came down completely around 1735. But the chalk-and-watercolor cartoons, drawn to scale, survive as elegant, if gargantuan, works of art. To show them, the exhibition staff has devised an enormous double-sided structure to drape them on; they are being put



in place by staff members working with a mechanical cherry-picker.

Parchment, made from animal skins, was the dominant medium for books and graphic works in Europe in the Middle Ages, says Idelette van Leeuwen, head of the museum's team of paper conservators. Fragile and hyper-luxurious, the material meant “you needed a whole herd for one book.” The Age of Discovery, which created demand for maps and atlases, and the Reformation, which put an emphasis on literacy, sped up the shift to paper, allowing for larger formats at a fraction of the cost. Early modern paper made from rags is “a super material” that can last centuries, Ms. van Leeuwen says.

“XXL Paper” includes a selection of immense early-modern maps, such as the richly detailed bird's-eye view of Venice (ca. 1500-14), made up of six woodblock prints. The map, which includes buildings' individual windows, is incredibly accurate, says

Maud van Suylen, the show's curator: “You would honestly think they had a drone.” An 18th-century map of greater Delft, at 9 x 10 1/2 feet, shows each and every one of the area's numerous waterways.

Moving panoramas, a proto-cinematic form of entertainment popular in the 19th century, simulated physical movement for seated spectators by moving background scenery between two spools. The Rijksmuseum's “Giant Cyclorama” fragment was part of an original that ran nearly one mile long. Probably made in Germany in the early 1850s, the immense work served as the dynamic setting for a two-hour-long show dramatizing a journey over mountains and valleys.

The concluding section, delicately colored and fancifully rendered, was meant to suggest an arrival in sunny Italy. This 75-foot fragment probably entered the Rijksmuseum collection at the end of the 19th century, was

misidentified as wallpaper, and then “nobody ever looked at it again,” says Ms. van Leeuwen. Rediscovered in 2018 and thoroughly researched, it will be on display for the first time in “XXL Paper.” “We have to bend it around corners,” says Ms. van Suylen, “which paper fortunately allows us to do.”

The show comes up to the present with innovative works of oversize modern and contemporary art. In 1961, Dutch artist Woody van Amen made a 42-foot-long action painting using the perforated cardboard music book from a mechanical organ that played the Habanera aria from Bizet's opera “Carmen.” The curators will mount Mr. van Amen's “Habanera,” dribbled with red, blue and yellow paint, in a slightly compressed 23-foot-long display, accordion-style, allowing light to shine through the holes.

Though the Rijksmuseum is best known for its holdings from the

Conservators at the Rijksmuseum work on a 75-foot-long segment of a 19th-century panorama.

Dutch Golden Age, it actively collects photography, and “XXL Paper” will include the museum's largest inkjet photograph, “Gunkanjima (Hashima),” by Dutch artist Sanne Peper. Measuring 4 1/2 x 6 1/2 feet, the 2008 work shows a now-deserted Japanese island used as a site for forced labor during World War II. The large-format print gives the ghostly digital image a pointillist quality.

In order to draw attention to the unusual size of the artworks and objects, whose scale will no doubt surprise visitors, the curators plan to put captions on 8 1/4 x 11 3/4 inch labels, the standard size known as A-4. “Everybody knows A-4,” says Ms. van Suylen.