Revisiting Julius S. Held

In 1989, Historians of Netherlandish Art (HNA) honored Julius S. Held (fig. 1) by granting him Life Membership in the organization, which had been founded in 1983 ‘to foster communication and collaboration among historians of Northern European art from medieval to modern times.’ Held was the first scholar to be so honored by HNA, which implicitly recognizes his preeminence in Northern studies.

Then, more recently, in February 2006, HNA honored Held more publicly, at the widely attended Annual Conference of the College Art Association. It was an appropriate venue, since he had made what he called his ‘maiden appearance before an American learned audience’ at the 24th Annual CAA meeting, in Washington, in May 1935. Participants in the session that HNA sponsored in 2006, ‘Revisiting Julius S. Held,’ were invited to examine Held’s methods and evaluate his legacy, especially its relevance for a younger generation trained to frame scholarly inquiries from new perspectives. The enthusiastic response to the session has prompted this publication in *Oud Holland* of one of the papers, which have been supplemented by three others that focus on Held and his work. This contribution is based on my introductory remarks to the session.

Julius Samuel Held was born in Mosbach, in southern Germany, near Heidelberg, on 15 April 1905. Some 70 years later, he looked back on his youth, in the Preface to *Rubens and His Circle*, the collection of his studies on Flemish painting that David Rosand, John Walsh, and I assembled to mark our teacher’s 75th birthday. Reminiscing about the origins of his life work, Held wrote that he had known art as practice in his childhood, but it was a trip to The Netherlands made when he was about eighteen that set the course for his career as an art historian. On that trip he discovered not only the actual Dutch landscape but also the land ‘transformed and purified’, in his words, in Dutch paintings in the Mauritshuis and the Rijksmuseum. He wrote that it was the museums ‘that made these weeks an enchantment which has remained with me ever since.’

On returning to Germany, Held entered the University of Heidelberg and also studied in Berlin and Vienna, under such teachers as Adolph Goldschmidt, Julius von Schlosser, Oskar Fischel, and Frederick Antal. He credited Fischel with opening his eyes to Rubens, in lectures in the old Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in front of the master’s paintings—many of which were later destroyed. Held received a Ph.D. *summa cum laude* from the University of Freiburg in 1930, with a dissertation on Albrecht Dürer’s influence on Netherlandish art, published a year later as his first book.

That same year, 1931, Held began an apprenticeship at the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum—working two doors away from the director, Max J. Friedländer. But a few years later he abandoned his promising career in Germany, because of the anti-Semitic climate, and came to the United States. He arrived there in January 1934. Held took the risk of returning to Germany to persuade Ingrid-Marta Petterssen, a Swedish paintings conservator, to come with him to America, which she did. Julius and Pim married in 1936 and settled in New York City, where Held was then lecturing part-time at New York University. He later wrote that he had been picked up, in Walter Cook’s expression, ‘as one of the apples, a small one to be sure, that had fallen from the German art historical tree shaken by Hitler.’

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