Short notice

A Dance Mask Made of Metal: *Satire on Modern Dance* (1933)
by Siem van den Hoonoard

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The worker in precious metals and sculptor Siem van den Hoonoard (1900–1938) is regarded as one of the pioneers of Dutch metal sculpture. The art historian and critic A.M. Hammacher maintained that the Rotterdam-born artist was the only Dutchman who made ‘figural open metal sculptures’ in the years between the wars. He was also ‘the only one in our country’ to make metal wall masks; his *Clown* is the best known (fig. 2).

Van den Hoonoard began his career in 1922 as an independent worker in precious metals in the centre of Rotterdam. He called himself a ‘kunstedelsmid’ – an ‘artsmith’ – and from the outset concentrated on breaking down the barrier between art and industry. The art critic W. Jos de Gruyter said that Van den Hoonoard’s clocks betray ‘a free artist rather than a practical artist’. From 1931 onwards Van den Hoonoard also turned his hand to sculpture, mainly inspired by classical mythology, Balinese culture and modern jazz music and dance in Rotterdam. In 1932 he made *Mask Dance*, a small metal sculpture of a masked female dancer moving with elegant, flowing grace (fig. 3).
Less than a year later, Van den Hoonaard went on to try an interesting experiment: a metal dance mask for the Rotterdam dancer Gerie Folmer (1901-1983) (fig. 1).

The arrival of the mask dance in the Netherlands was brought about by another pioneer, the German dancer Gertrud Leistikow (1885-1948), who performed for the first time in the Netherlands in 1914. Her modern approach to dance soon aroused great interest in her performances. In her biography of Leistikow, the historian Jacobien de Boer writes that the changes in the art of dance were just as revolutionary as the transition from figurative to abstract in the fine arts that had taken place around the same time: ‘This must have been abundantly clear to Leistikow’s audiences. They had never seen dancing like that before. Dance used to be made up of beautiful, elegant, flowing movements, but Leistikow also made ugly, angular movements. She showed emotions: she could dance sadness and joy. She turned herself into an ugly monster and danced wearing a mask. All this was new for the audiences of that time’ (fig. 4).³

Gerie Folmer was one of Leistikow’s students – as were so many dancers at that time – for the German pioneer had opened schools in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. In an interview Folmer gave to the 1 February 1930 issue of Het Centrum, she said she had had ‘all her training’ from Leistikow. And in the same conversation she went
so far as to say ‘she has become my artistic mother’ (fig. 5). From 1928 onwards, Folmer was the prima ballerina at the N.V. Italiaansche Opera, a company that performed Italian operas, from Verdi to Puccini, for a wide Dutch audience from 1897 to 1943 (fig. 6). But she was also active with her own ballet group which performed modern dance à la Leistikow, including the mask dance. In 1934 she opened her own dance studio on the corner of Mauritsweg and Aert van Nesstraat in the heart of Rotterdam.

In the early nineteen-twenties, Leistikow collaborated with Hildo Krop (1884-1970), Amsterdam’s famous city sculptor. In 1921 and 1922 he made two masks for her from a variety of materials including felt (from an old hat), polychromed papier-maché and strands of wool (fig. 4). The success of Leistikow’s mask dances encouraged other dancers to team up with artists, too: Tilly Sylon had dance masks made by Jaap Pronk, and Hein von Essen made them for his wife Dini. The mask maker Grietje Kots (1905-1993) actually had several regular clients. Almost all these dance masks were made of plaster, fabric, wood or papier-maché and their makers all belonged to the circle surrounding the expressionist, architectural and art magazine Wendingen (1918-33). Issue 6-7 of 1920 was completely devoted to masks.

Siem van den Hoonoord and Gerie Folmer met in the autumn of 1932.
The painter and sculptor Herman Bieling (1887-1964) probably introduced them. Bieling was an important figure in the world of modern art and modern dance. He was a tireless networker and was friends with Van den Hoonaard and with Leistikow and Folmer (fig. 7). Van den Hoonaard and Bieling were both members of the R 33 artists’ association and for a long time had their home and workshop in the little village of Hillegersberg, just to the north of Rotterdam.8 Folmer’s name, address and telephone number are written in pencil halfway through one of Van den Hoonaard’s sketch-books, dated 1932-33. This contact gave the artist, who was well known for his ‘desire for adventure and passion for experimentation’,9 the opportunity to put an unusual idea into action: to make a metal dance mask for a leading dancer. It is interesting that Van den Hoonaard immediately
made a sketch of it on the pages that followed Folmer’s contact details (fig. 8).

On 7 July 1933, an article about Van den Hoonaard was published in the weekly newspaper Groot Rotterdam, accompanied by a photograph of Folmer dancing, wearing a dance mask based on that first rough sketch (fig. 9). In a draft of a letter to someone called ‘Nic’, the artist wrote ‘I enclose Groot Rotterdam where there are photographs of my work. The new dance mask is a great success. You can see a photograph of it there.
There are still a great many possibilities there." He went on to make the dance mask Humor for ‘his’ dancer, a mask that has survived but unfortunately is incomplete and badly damaged (fig. 10).

Folmer’s mask dance was called Satire on Modern Dance. Perhaps the title was designed to poke fun at the rival ‘modern’ dancers – the countless dancers who had not been trained by Leistikow and who in Folmer’s opinion were clueless. We will never be able to find out the precise meaning of this performance, but at least there is one piece of written evidence about this dance, in which the dancer ultimately...
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Dutch East Indies, which we can see in the ‘shadow play’ of the expressive Witches’ Dance (1934) (figs. 12a-b). It is very likely that while creating Satire he took into account the light and shade effects during a dance in the spotlights. It is also interesting that the metal mask is quite heavy, much heavier than dance masks made of the materials that were customary at that time, like papier-maché and felt. This must have affected Folmer’s dance style. Satire probably forced her to move more slowly.

Metal dance masks were extremely unusual, so it was distressing that both the unique masks by this artist who died young – Siem van den Hoonaard passed away at the age of thirty-seven from a fungal infection of the lungs – were destroyed during the bombing of Rotterdam on 14 May 1940. At least, that is what Frans van den Hoonaard always believed. He managed his brother’s estate until his own death in 1979 and was convinced that the two masks had been burned. Beneath the photograph of Folmer dancing Satire he typed: ‘Dance mask. Gerie Folmer danced in it. Lost during the bombing of Rotterdam’ (fig. 13).12 His assumption was an understandable one: Folmer’s dance studio was inside the area of the bombing and the fire in the city that followed. In all probability, though, the dancer kept her dance masks at home, which was outside the area of destruction. The joy of Siem van den Hoonaard’s family and the lovers of his work was thus all the greater when Satire surfaced at the Botterweg auction house at the end of 2019 and was purchased by the Rijksmuseum.13
NOTES


8 According to De Boer 2014 (note 5), p. 15. Herman Bieling gave Gertrud Leistikow a mask as a gift when she officially left her Rotterdam dance school in 1934. Gerie Folmer opened her dance institute in that same year. Bieling most probably provided the invitation to the opening with a futuristic portrait of the dancer. This is described in detail in Van Duijn 2020 (note 3)


12 ‘Dansmasker. Werd mede gedanst door Gerie Folmer. Tijdens bombardement van Rotterdam verloren gegaan.’

13 *Humor* was then discovered through Gerie Folmer’s family (fig. 10).
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