

Observing birds on Griend Island: evolving states in the oeuvre of Charles Donker*

Jan Piet Filedt Kok

Oddly enough, the Utrecht graphic artist Charles Donker (b. 1940) has never built up an international reputation, unlike the art historians who have been avidly collecting his work since the 1970s, among them Eddy de Jongh, Peter Schatborn, Ger Luijten and Peter Hecht. The largest collection was put together between 1976 and 2001 by Joop Nieuwstraten, former director of the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), and was added to the collection of the Rijksmuseum printroom in 2003/04.¹ The high regard in which numerous art historians hold Donker's intimate prints must be due to his rendering of the Dutch landscape, of birds and other animals, which is of a piece with seventeenth-century Dutch graphic art, matching that lofty standard, yet of our own day and age.

It was Peter Hecht who encouraged the present author to compile the catalogue of Donker's prints, which came online in December 2012 as an RKD monograph under the title *Charles Donker-grafiek*.² In the past few years, thanks to Peter's introduction and friendship, the artist permitted me and Lieve d'Hont to arrange the unsorted impressions covering a period of 50 years in his chock-

full chests of drawers, in the course of which we discovered many early states and proof impressions worked up with the pen. It was engrossing and surprising, because the sheets reveal a great deal about Donker's working method. His own comments also helped considerably. As a declared aficionado and friend of the artist, Peter has regularly been able to select recent and earlier impressions from those same drawers in the past few decades, with a marked preference for unusual and unfinished prints, which encouraged Donker to rework plates that he had abandoned.³

In practice it is well-nigh impossible for a collector to acquire a graphic artist's complete oeuvre, for new prints and states are being added all the time, but we did aim for comprehensiveness in the catalogue. And although almost all the Donker prints that we later found with collectors, at auctions and with dealers were familiar to us, we sometimes had the pleasant surprise of coming across an unknown sheet. A print in a recent auction, *Two buckets on a wall* (fig. 8), reminded me of a 1973 etching of the same size of the Griend Island bird sanctuary

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1 So Charles Donker's prints are amply represented in Dutch public collections, above all in Amsterdam but also in the Fondation Custodia in Paris, the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and in the Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam. They are not nearly as familiar in foreign collections, although the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum did recently acquire several groups of prints numbering 15 sheets, thanks to donations

by Dutch enthusiasts, while the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston now has nine sheets due to the efforts of the curator Cliff Ackley. See further my essay "De verspreiding van de prenten van Charles Donker en zijn werk in openbaar bezit" at <http://charlesdonker.rkdmonographs.nl>.

2 See <http://charlesdonker.rkdmonographs.nl>. The first version, covering the years up to 2012, came on line in December 2012. The revised version extending this up to 2014 has been online since the autumn of 2015. Earlier publications providing a survey of Donker's work and development are E. de Jongh and P. Schatborn, *Charles Donker: etser*, Amsterdam 2002, and J.P. Filedt Kok, "Charles Donker: vogels en Rhijnauwen," in J.P. Filedt Kok and E. de Jongh, exhib. cat. *Peter Vos en Charles Donker*, Utrecht (Centraal Museum) 2010, pp. 36–62.

3 For instance, Donker recently used etching and aquatint to work up the sketchy *Architecture study with architrave* (CD 88–7), of which Peter bought a unique impression, into a second and third state.

(CD 73-10).⁴ Donker confirmed that it must have been a preliminary stage of that print that he had forgotten all about. He had reworked the plate almost entirely, removing much of the original composition. Only the lower part of the wall and the grass and weeds is still recognizable in the later impressions (figs. 11-15).

The 1976 exhibition of Donker's prints in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht contained examples of similar metamorphoses in a series of proof impressions, but such a complete transformation of form and content is remarkable,⁵ so there is all the more reason to take a closer look at the context and genesis of the print of Griend Island.

After studying the monumental arts at the Koninklijke Academie in 's Hertogenbosch in the late 1950s, Donker became increasingly attracted to etching in the 1960s. At first his prints had a slightly decorative, surrealist look, but gradually his work took on a more naturalistic look. He only became a confirmed landscape etcher in the early 1970s, when he found a studio near Fort Rhijnauwen, a small wildlife area just outside Utrecht bordered by the Kromme Rijn river and the new Uithof university development. It was a varied landscape with meadows, orchards, broad-leaf woods, historic country houses and farmhouses, and masses of songbirds. It was this landscape that then became the main subject of his work.

The part that birds played in his life and prints grew even more important in this period. Rarely are they immediately visible in his etchings, but they are there all the same when, like the bird-lover Donker, you recog-

nize their distinctive songs. He etched the names of more than 40 types of bird prominently below his print *Kromme Rijn landscape/Rhijnauwen with bird names* from the autumn of 1973 (fig. 1). They are "sperwer" (sparrow hawk), "torenvalk" (kestrel), "ransuil" (long-eared owl), "kraai" (carrion crow), "kauw" (jackdaw), "ekster" (magpie), "vlaamse gaai" (jay), "reiger" (heron), "ijsvogel" (kingfisher), "meerkoet" (coot), "waterhoen" (moorhen), "dodaars" (little grebe), "wilde eend" (mallard), "kuifeend" (tufted duck) "keep" (brambling), "vink" (chaffinch), "goudvink" (bullfinch) "bermsijs" (redpoll), "sij" (siskin), "putter" (goldfinch), "ringmus" (tree sparrow), "mus" (house sparrow), "roodborst" (robin), "winterkoning" (wren), "heggemus" (dunnock), "boomklever" (nuthatch), "boomkruiper" (short-toed creeper), "bonte en zwarte specht" (great spotted woodpecker and black woodpecker), "koolmees" (great tit), "pimpelmees" (blue tit), "staartmees" (long-tailed tit), "matkopmees" (willow tit), "merel" (blackbird), "zanglijster" (song thrush), "kramsvogel" (fieldfare), "koperwiek" (redwing), "buizerd" (buzzard), "fazant" (pheasant) and "patrijs" (partridge).⁶

The birds that Charles Donker observed and heard are the main characters in the first diary he kept between March 1972 and 1976, which is titled *VOGELS/BIRDS/OISEAUX/VÖGEL*.⁷ He had been keeping and watching birds from an early age, and as a schoolboy in Maartensdijk he would go out into the polder to watch birds with his father. Later, he and friends of his counted birds in

4 Sale Bubb Kuyper 61, 27 November 2014, nr. 3887. The sheet came from the collection of the late Jan Briels, the artist's tax consultant. In 2016 that impression was donated to the Frits Lugt Collection in the Fondation Custodia in honor of Peter Hecht, together with a few other Donker prints: (CD 69-2 I(3), CD 73-7 II (3) (fig. 16) and (CD 73-9 II(2) (fig. 7)).

5 Comparable examples in the early prints are the transformation of a bare landscape with a little owl into a sparrow hawk between two trees (CD 69-2), and of a bat between two walls in a park landscape into *The tape measure* (CD 69-9). Only the inscription under the first state of *Beehive at Rhijnauwen* (CD 77-27), which is of a meadow with trees and plants, remained in later states, while in *The barn owl's house, Groningen* (CD 77-28) the house in the early states was replaced in the fourth state by an outbuilding, which was Donker's studio house in Rhijnauwen. Many of the proof impressions of the early prints that were worked up with the pen and Indian ink were exhibited in 1976; see L. Broszek, exhib. cat. *Charles Donker*, Utrecht (Centraal Museum) 1976. Most of them are now in Utrecht and Amsterdam. Following on from those early prints, Joop Nieuwstraten acquired many of Donker's prints between 1976 and 2001, together with many proof impressions worked up

with the pen in Indian ink, which are now in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

6 There are some 30 bird names written in the blank margin below a proof impression of the first state of this print worked up with the pen in black in Amsterdam (RP-P-2010-133-73), all of which are etched below the second state.

7 The bird diary titled *VOGELS BIRDS OISEAUX VÖGEL* in the artist's possession, which is sewn into a black marbled cover (SVH 306/725, 100 pages), 16.5 × 10.5 cm, contains more than 150 notes written in black ink in a delicate hand between December 1971 and 16 January 1974. There must also have been a similar diary for the period from then until 23 March 1976, preceding a thick, leather-bound *Dag- en schetsboek 1976-1983*, on which see Filedt Kok, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 39-44. The *Dagboek Rhijnauwen*, Baarn 1977, published by Thomas Rap, contains heavily edited extracts from the diary entries for 1975-77, which are about the wildlife around Rhijnauwen and are illustrated with reproductions of Donker's etchings. He stopped keeping a regular diary in 1983, but between 2001 and 2013 he did make notes, with sketches, in a small album measuring 15 × 12 cm and with a brown leather cover, of his foreign visits to the Pyrenees in 2001 and to Peru with Artists for Nature in 2013.



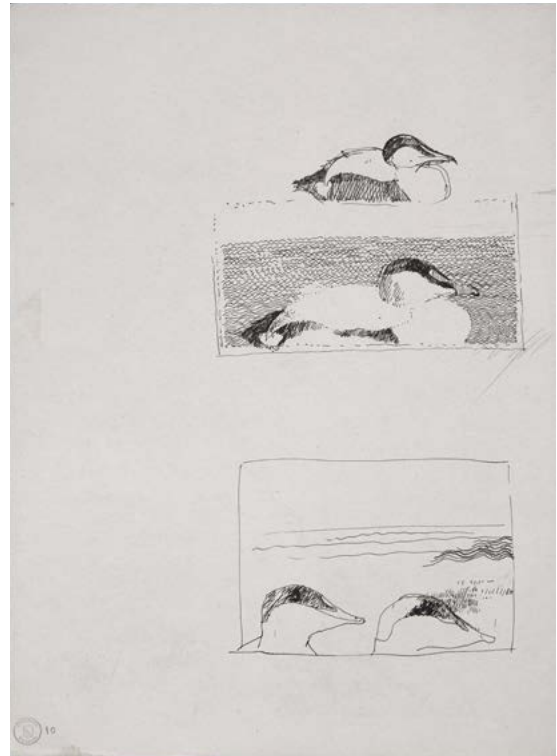
1 Charles Donker, *Kromme Rijn landscape/Rhijnauwen with bird names*, autumn 1973, etching, 175 × 198 mm, 11(3) state, with bird names in the plate (CD 73-15 11(3)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

wildlife areas for the Bird Protection Society. That was how he learned the distinctive calls of dozens of species, noting them down in his diary when he heard them, and frequently at the bottom of his prints as well. He shared his love of birds with colleagues like the sculptor Kees van der Woude (b. 1948), with whom he started sharing the small studio house in Rhijnauwen in 1972. His interest in them took on a new dimension there, for now they were everywhere, and bird-watching was also an integral part of short holidays with friends like Peter Vos and Reuven Schekel on the islands of Terschelling, Vlieland and Schiermonnikoog.

A milestone in this respect was his brief visit to Griend Island, from which visitors are usually barred, in late May 1973. It is a bird-watcher's paradise in the Wadden Sea off the south coast of Terschelling, with great flocks of nesting birds. In the middle ages there was a prosperous town there and a monastery school, but storms and the sea have changed the shape of the island dramatically, and nowadays it is rarely more than 500 meters across. It has not been inhabited for centuries, apart from the visiting bird sanctuary wardens. In spring and autumn great flocks of migrating birds can be seen in the skies above the island, and in the breeding season it is home to



2 Charles Donker, *Studies of nesting birds*, p. 5 from *Schetsboek Charles Donker*: 1973, pencil and pen in Indian ink, 28 × 21 cm, 25 May 1973. Utrecht, Centraal Museum



3 Charles Donker, *Studies of eider ducks, two framed*, p. 10 from *Schetsboek Charles Donker*: 1973, pencil and pen in Indian ink, 21 × 28 cm, late May 1973. Utrecht, Centraal Museum



4 Charles Donker, *Oystercatchers on Griend*, etching, 145 × 225 mm, inscribed "SCHOLEKSTERS OP GRIEND", summer 1973 (CD 73-11). Utrecht, Centraal Museum

around 40,000 pairs of nesting birds, among them terns, black-headed gulls, herring gulls and oystercatchers.⁸

It was thanks to the biologist Ruud van Beusekom, who was a regular warden on the island, that Donker and van der Woude were able to spend a few days drawing there in May 1973. They spent the nights in the small, stilted wardens' house, and observed the nesting birds from a hide. The *Vogel-dagboek* (Bird diary) that Donker kept between 24 and 29 May 1973,⁹ and ten sheets in his sketchbook (figs. 2–3, 6, 9–10),¹⁰ are the records of his stay, which resulted in three etchings (figs. 4, 7, 15).

After arriving on the island by boat from Terschelling on Thursday, 24 May, he noted down in his diary the names of the birds he had seen: oystercatchers, brent geese, eiders, Arctic tern, common tern, black-headed gulls, bar-tailed godwits, curlews, ringed plovers, gray plovers, mallards, redshanks, herring gulls, and a little later on turnstones, redstarts, garden warblers, tree pipits, swallows and stonechats. On Friday, 26 May, he wrote: "In the daytime there is the screaming of birds the whole day long, when they fly up they literally form clouds, there are an awful lot of nests on the ground, you have to be careful not to tread on the eggs, the birds are still active in the evenings and nights, they just carry on flying." On 28 May, the last day he was there, he reported that "This evening, at high tide, there was a leaden sky in the NE, the sun hung in the west, southwest, shining on all the high-water flyers; it was a wonderful sight:

200 curlews
40 herring gulls

⁸ For recent informative publication about the island, lavishly illustrated with color photographs, see P. Lautenbach, *Griend: Terschelling-er Vogeleiland*, Assen 2012, and J. Veen and J. van der Kam, *Griend: vogeleiland in de Waddenzee*, Zutphen 1988.

⁹ See note 7, notes on ten pages between Thursday, 24 May and Tuesday, 29 May 1973

¹⁰ *Schetsboek Charles Donker: 1973*, Romney Series A-42, 28 × 21 cm, in the Centraal Museum, Utrecht, inv. nr. 20299/1–51, with sketches of Griend op pp. 5–11.

¹¹ Charles Donker, *Vogel-dagboek*, 29 May 1973: "...overdag is er de hele dag vogelgeschreeuw, als ze opvliegen zijn het werkelijk wolven, er liggen verschrikkelijk veel nesten, je moet oppassen niet op de eieren te trappen, s'avonds en s'nachts blijft de activiteit van de vogels ze blijven maar doornvliegen.... Er hing vanavond bij hoog water een loden lucht in het N.O. in het west-, zuidwesten hing de zon en bescheen al de hoog water vluchters; het was een geweldig gezicht:

200 wulpen
40 zilvermeeuwen
1200 rotganzen

1,200 brents
300 bar-tailed godwits
3,500 dunlins
40 gray plovers
1,800 oystercatchers
25 eiders."¹¹

On 25 May he described drawing the birds sitting on their eggs. "Sat in the hide for about two hours. Try to draw an oystercatcher on its nest. After about an hour the other oystercatcher comes to relieve it. The bird sitting on the nest suddenly began a long drawn-out trilling and cheeping, then walked off the nest with its beak vertical, taking rather exaggerated steps. The other bird walked normally to the nest and continued to brood on the three eggs. To the left an Arctic tern's nest with two eggs, the birds also relieve each other constantly. The Arctic tern sitting on the oystercatchers' side eats a few bits of shell, he swallows them right down. Sitting roughly 35 cm behind the hide is a black-headed gull with three eggs.... Sitting to my left are 25 turnstones, oddly round birds that now come to rest here a little at high water. Most of them are sleeping a little, as most of the sitting birds do, for that matter.... Further off there is a group of 50 bar-tailed godwits."¹²

This is when Donker must have made the drawing of a series of bird's heads in black ink and pencil in the sketchbook (fig. 2). Most of the pencil and Indian ink sketches in the book are of birds and their heads, with the exception of a sand flats landscape done with delicate dots and dashes (fig. 9), and a ringed plover in a land-

300 rose gruttos
3500 bonte strandlopers
40 zilverplevieren
1800 scholeksters
25 eidereenden."

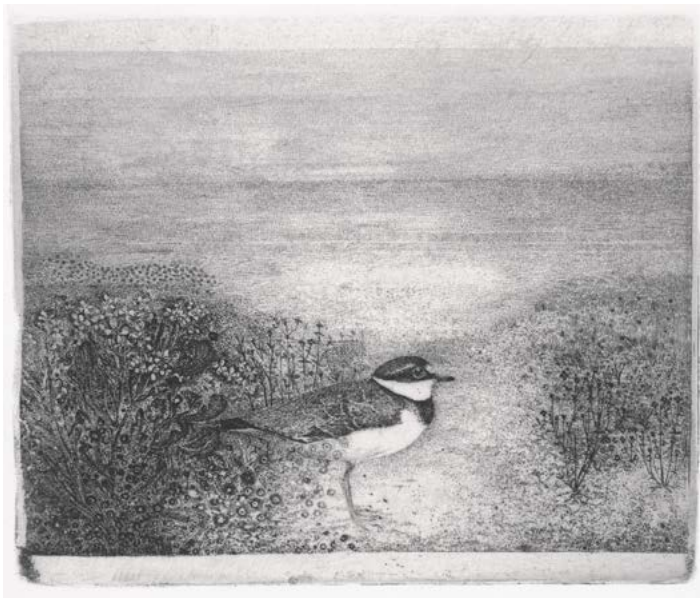
¹² *Ibid.*, 25 May 1973: "Ca. 2 uur in de schuilhut gezeten. Een scholekster op het nest proberen te tekenen / na ongeveer 1 uur kwam de andere scholekster aflossen. de vogel die op het nest zat begon plotseling langgerekte rollend te piepen, liep toen van het nest af met de snavel verticaal, een beetje uitgesproken pasjes makend, de andere vogel liep normaal naar het nest en zette het broeden op de 3 eieren voort links een noordse stern nest met 2 eieren, de vogels wisselen elkaar hier ook voortdurend af, de noordse stern die aan de kant van de scholeksters zit eet enkele stukjes schelp op, hij slikt ze direct in, achter de schuilhut ± 35 cm zit een kapmeeuw met 3 eieren.... Links van mij zitten 25 steenlopers, wonderlijk ronde vogels, die nu bij hoogwater hier wat komen rusten, de meesten zitten wat te slapen, zoals trouwens de meeste broedende vogels doen,... verder weg een groep van 50 rose gruttos."



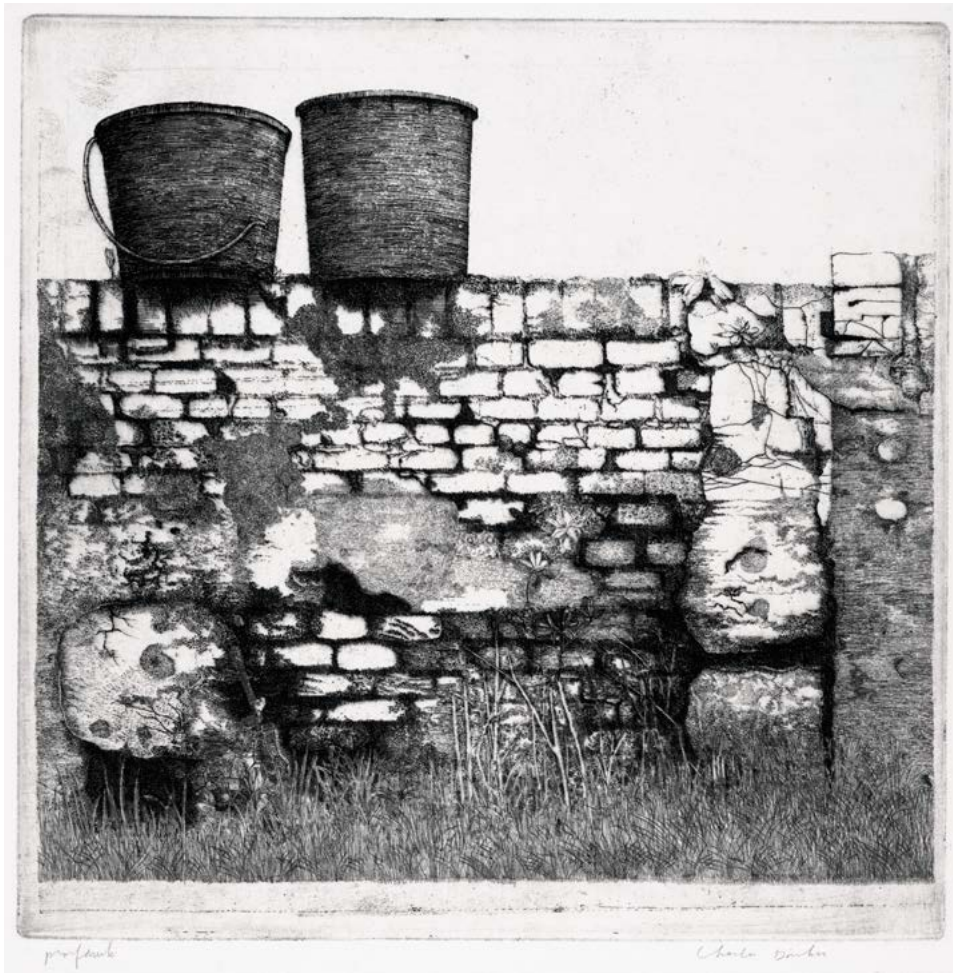
5 Charles Donker, *Ringed plover*, etching, 1(2) state, with birds drawn in Indian ink, 202 × 190 mm, summer 1973 (CD 73-9 1(2)). Utrecht, Centraal Museum



6 Charles Donker, *Landscape study with ringed plover*, p. 7 from *Schetsboek Charles Donker: 1973*, pencil, 28 × 21 cm, late May 1973. Utrecht, Centraal Museum



7 Charles Donker, *Ringed plover*, etching, 11(2) state, summer 1973 (CD 73-9 11(2)). Paris, Fondation Custodia, Frits Lugt Collection (gift in honor of Peter Hecht, 2016)



8 Charles Donker,
Two buckets on a wall,
etching, 252 × 252 mm,
1(7) state, renamed *The
Wadden island Griend*
in later states, c. 1971
(CD 73-10 1(7)). Paris,
Fondation Custodia,
Frits Lugt Collection
(gift in honor of Peter
Hecht, 2016)

scape (fig. 6), which seems to have been the initial idea for a later etching (fig. 7). The framing of the image in some other drawings, such as the studies of an eider duck (fig. 3), also seem to be ideas for etchings. On another sheet from the sketchbook he made detailed drawings of the heads of eiders (fig. 10), about which he wrote on Monday, 27 May. “The head of the eider duck has really turned out quite well, but I must watch out for a certain stiffness in the drawing, which is perhaps due to doing so

much etching. In that respect it is perhaps a good thing that I only have ink and pencil with me here. If I could sit here for longer I think I would start painting again. I say that all the time, perhaps because of the total lack of hurry, something I suffer from a lot in the city.”¹³

The three etchings that Charles Donker made as a result of his stay on Griend must have been done in the summer months back in his Rhijnauwen studio, working from the sketches. There is no etching of the one with the

¹³ Ibid., 27 May 1973: “De kop van de eidereend is wel aardig gelukt maar ik moet oppassen voor een zekere stijfheid in de tekening dat komt misschien door het vele etsen, wat dat betreft is het misschien toch wel gunstig dat ik hier alleen maar inkt en potlood bij mij heb. Als

ik hier langer zou kunnen zitten zou ik denk ik weer schilderen dat zei ik toch wel voortdurend, misschien wel door het volkomen afwezig zijn van gejaagdheid iets waarvan ik in de stad veel te lijden heb.”



9 Charles Donker, *Sand flats landscape*, p. 6 from *Schetsboek Charles Donker*: 1973, pen in Indian ink, 21 × 28 cm, late May 1973. Utrecht, Centraal Museum



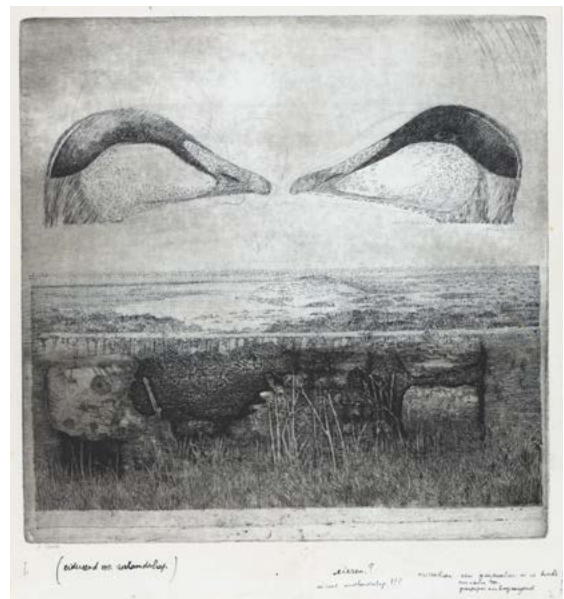
10 Charles Donker, *Studies of the heads of eider ducks*, p. 8 from *Schetsboek Charles Donker*: 1973, pencil and pen in Indian ink, with annotations, 21 × 28 cm, late May 1973. Utrecht, Centraal Museum

two eider heads, but there is a comparable composition with two oystercatchers against the backdrop of a calm sea inscribed “SCHOLEKSTERS OP GRIEND” (fig. 4).

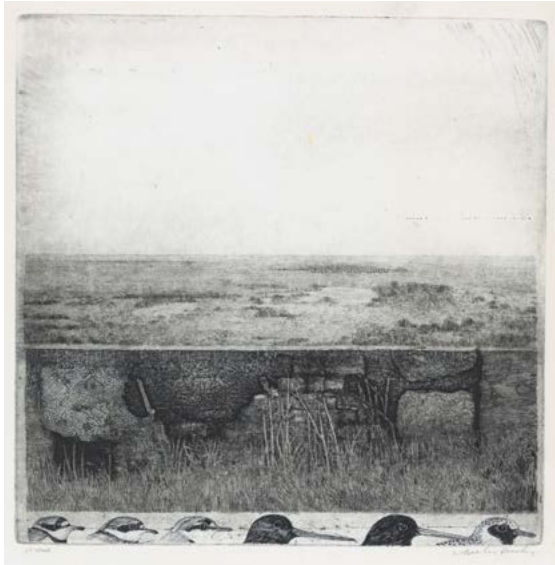
This oystercatcher print is not very complicated, and is based on the sketchbook composition with two eiders, but the other two etchings had a more complex genesis that involved a search for a convincing way of fitting the birds into the landscape.

In the almost square *Ringed plover* (fig. 7) he first etched the landscape of sand flats ending in a calm sea with some vegetation in the foreground. The problem was how to proceed from there. He drew two possible ways of depicting the birds with Indian ink on a proof impression (fig. 5). In the first place the cursory outlines of a large standing bird that dominates the picture surface, and secondly a series of bird's heads in profile in the foreground, the one in the middle being the ringed plover, but surrounded by other birds, like a turnstone and a gray plover. In the final state there is denser vegetation in the foreground and a far smaller ringed plover in profile, as in the sketchbook drawing (fig. 6).

Matters became even more complex in *The Wadden island Griend* (figs. 11–15), when Donker decided to turn his *Two buckets on a wall* (fig. 8) into a print of the island landscape. It is not known when he made the first version, but it would have been a little earlier, shortly before 1970. It is probably the irregularly constructed rear wall of the garden of his studio in Schalkwijkstraat, where he worked until 1969. Although only a few scattered bricks



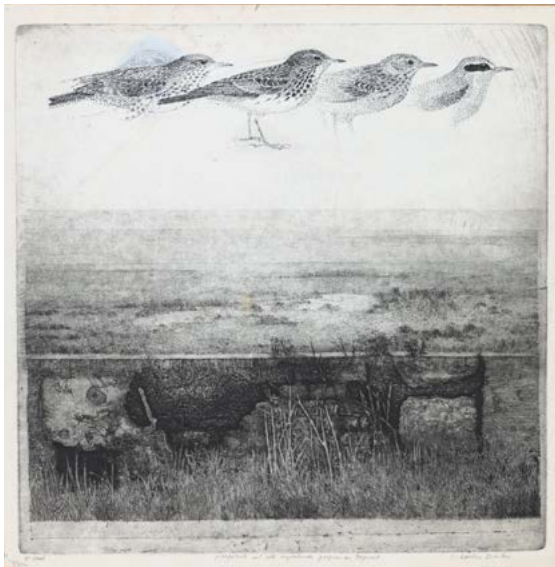
11 Charles Donker, *The Wadden island Griend*, etching, 252 × 252 mm, 11(7) state, with the sand flats and the heads of two eider ducks drawn in the background in Indian ink, and annotated in the bottom margin “(eiderend voor zeelandschap) eieren.? // een soort wadlandschap??? // misschien een gierwaluw in de lucht? // een eider kop.? // graspieper omhoog zingend.?” , summer 1973 (CD 73-10 11(7)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



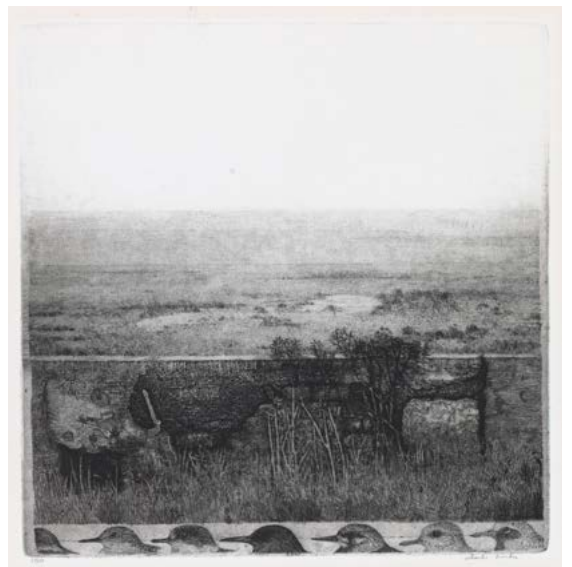
12 Charles Donker, *The Wadden island Griend*, etching, 252 × 252 mm, III(7) state, with birds' heads in the margin in Indian ink, summer 1973 (CD 73-10 III(7)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



13 Charles Donker, *The Wadden island Griend*, etching, 252 × 252 mm, IV(7) state, with a small tree in front of the wall and birds at the top, all in Indian ink, the bottom margin covered with white, summer 1973 (CD 73-10 IV(7)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



14 Charles Donker, *The Wadden island Griend*, etching, 252 × 252 mm, V(7) state, plants added on the wall and birds in the sky, all in Indian ink, inscribed "4e staat, proefdruk met ingetekende piepers en tapuit", summer 1973 (CD 73-10 V(7)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum



15 Charles Donker, *The Wadden island Griend*, etching, 252 × 252 mm, VII(7) state, with etched birds' heads, summer 1973 (CD 73-10 VII(7)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

on Griend testify to the medieval settlement on the island, he decided to keep a small low wall, with the landscape beyond done with delicate dots and dashes and ending in a calm sea, for which he must have used the drawing in his sketchbook (fig. 9).

He developed the seascape and the foreground in four successive later states, but he was still left with the same problem as in *Ringed plover* (fig. 7), which was how to fit the birds into the scene. He drew various possible solutions in several proof impressions (figs. 11–14). In the second state, in which he lowered the high wall but did not etch the landscape and the sea, merely drawing them in, there are two large heads of eider ducks (cf. fig. 11 with the sketchbook sheet, fig. 10), adding “(eidereend voor zeelandschap)” (eider duck before seascape) in black ink, together with a few possible additions followed by question marks: eggs, a sort of sand flats landscape, a swift in the sky perhaps, an eider, a meadow pipit singing towards the sky. In the third state (fig. 12), which includes the etched landscape and sea, he added six bird’s heads in the margin with pen and ink. Reading from left to right they are a ringed plover, a little ringed plover, a Kentish plover, two oystercatchers and a gray plover, similar to the row of heads in the final, seventh state. However, he was still hesitating over their position. A fourth-state impression (fig. 13) has the horizon drawn higher up and five profile heads of birds: a redstart, icterine warbler, wheatear, whinchat and stonechat. In the bottom margin he drew a few more heads in black ink which he then covered over with opaque white. In an impression of the fifth state (fig. 14) he drew a similar series of four birds, three meadow pipits and a wheatear, which are identified by the inscription in the bottom margin. In the final, 50-sheet edition of the print there is a series of six and a half bird’s heads etched in the plate, two of which are recognizable as a turnstone and a gray plover (fig. 15). The corrected proof impressions of the etchings show how Donker had wrestled with the combination of landscape and birds.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to early states of



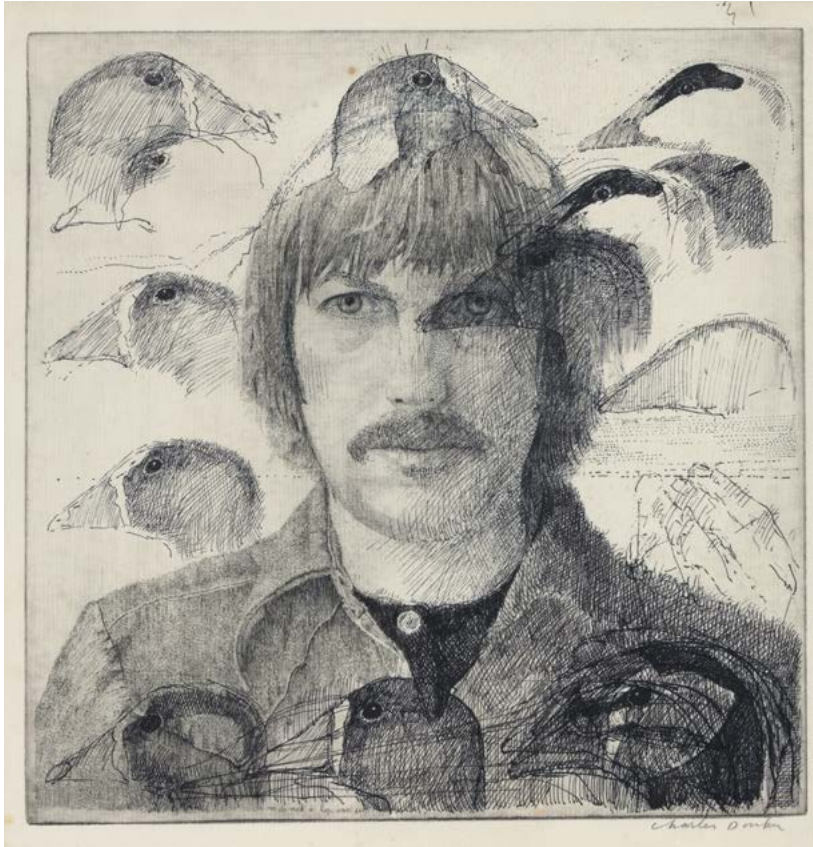
16 Charles Donker, *Red cabbage*, etching, 219 × 250 mm, 11(4) state: with a wren drawn in Indian ink and then covered with white gouache, autumn 1973 (CD 73–7 11(4)). Paris, Fondation Custodia, Frits Lugt Collection (gift in honor of Peter Hecht, 2016)

The red cabbage (CD-73–7), which dates from slightly later in the autumn of 1973 and in which Donker recorded the fully grown red cabbage behind the house in Rhijnauwen. The proof impressions of the first three states have a varied series of birds drawn between and on the leaves of the plant. In the first state they are two wrens, in the second state there is the head of a pheasant behind the cabbage and a wren at bottom left, and in another impression a larger number of wrens pop up between and on the leaves, some of which were covered over with white gouache (fig. 16), and in a proof impression of the third state there is an owl flying over the plant.¹⁴ Ultimately, though, in the final edition or fourth state there is no bird to be seen at all. Donker explained in July 2015 that he left them out because he found them too anecdotal, and that the inscriptions “oktober” and “winterkoning” (wren) would be enough to keep most of the caterpillars off the cabbage.

He employed the idea of including the head of a bird

14 See CD 73–7. Four states were described in the first version of the online catalogue on the basis of Broszek, op. cit. (note 5), nrs. 158–61, which are now in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, inv. nrs. 20519–21, but it seems more likely that there are only three. The proof impression in Utrecht, which was described as the fourth state, is actually of the third state with a flying owl drawn in and the stone wall in the back-

ground worked up and the inscriptions “oktober” and “winterkoning zorgt er in dit geval voor dat niet te veel rupsen in de kool komen” added. Two impressions of the second state from the artist’s own collection have surfaced since, one in Amsterdam, inv. nr. RP-P-2010–133–46, and one in Paris, Fondation Custodia, inv. nr. P-2016, promised gift (fig. 16).



17 Charles Donker, *Self-portrait en face*, etching, 241 × 238 mm, inscribed “om de nek de kop van een buizerd,” proof impression worked up with the pen and Indian ink, with ducks’ heads, spring 1976 (CD 75–6). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

in the margin of a landscape etching one more time in the second state of *Farmhouse beside the Kromme Rijn* (CD 73–19), but here too it was burnished out in the next state. After that the birds and their songs are only present in the names etched at the bottom of the plate. In an interview that he gave in 1978 Donker said that he rapidly jotted down the names of the birds that he saw or heard in the distance on the etching ground so as not to forget them. “I used to get rid of them later, but now I often leave those scribbles in. I try to incorporate the annotations on the plate graphically in the composition.”¹⁵

The heads of birds appear one more time in his oeuvre. In the proof impression corrected with pen and black ink of his *Self-portrait en face* (CD 75–6; fig. 17), his face is surrounded by drawings of white-fronted geese and eider ducks, analogous to the proof impression of the second

state of the Griend print (fig. 11). In his first self-portrait of 1957 he portrayed himself as a bird-catcher, but in the later, self-assured one he is a bird draftsman surrounded by the heads of his birds, which is how we imagine him when reading his bird diaries. However, it never got further than the proof stage, with the inscription merely stating that there was the head of a buzzard by his neck in the unfinished etching. The birds that he depicted from now on became more naturalistic; they usually lie there, obviously dead.

In the notes in his Griend bird diary he said that the birds he had drawn from life looked stiff. It is true that there are a few prints from that period with full-length birds, such as *Pheasant* (C 73–2), *Common snipe* (CD 73–5) and a *Water rail* (CD 73–5), but they all appear to be based on stuffed specimens so they would obviously be rather

¹⁵ Interview with Vera Illes, “Het voorjaar is het mooiste wat er is,” in *Cultureel supplement NRC/Handelsblad*, 7 April 1978: “Vroeger werkte

ik die dan weg, maar ik laat die krabbels nu vaak staan. Ik probeer de notities op de plaat grafisch te verwerken in de compositie.”



18 Charles Donker, *Landscape with cranes in Extramadura*, etching and aquatint, 378 × 283 mm, reserved inscription in aquatint: “EXTREMADURA DELHESA”, I(6), proof impression worked up with Indian ink and colored gouache, 1994 (CD 94–5 I(6)). Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

stiff. Apart from a few wood owls, which he kept for quite a long time,¹⁶ the birds in his prints were rarely done from life.

In that respect, Donker's experiences when incorporating the sketches he made on Griend in the related etchings must have been crucial. As we saw, the series of touched proof impressions show him exploring ways of fitting the birds into the landscape. In the decades that

¹⁶ Filedt Kok, op. cit. (not 2), pp. 40–44.

¹⁷ This Israel visit from 9 March to 11 April 1979, by way Venice and then a ship to Haifa, yielded a detailed diary the same size as the bird diary, with drawings in pen and Indian ink, mostly of birds of prey in flight, which is now in Donker's private collection. Peter Vos made similar birdwatching trips to Israel with Reuven Schekel in 1977, 1978 and 1980, and also kept detailed bird diaries.

¹⁸ R. d'Arcy Shillcock et al., *Wind, wad en waterverf: 25 kunstenaars tekenen en schilderen op Schiermonnikoog*, Groningen 1992, pp. 119: “Ik heb me moeten beperken tot enkele plekjes op het eiland, omdat

followed his interest in birds did not flag at all, but he no longer drew them from life. He did, though, regularly portray dead birds as still lifes.

His intense interest in birds is clear not only from his diaries but also from his travels with friends to watch birds. In the early spring of 1979, he and his Israeli friend Reuven Schekel traveled to Israel on a bird-watching trip.¹⁷

That was very different from the meeting in May 1990 on the island of Schiermonnikoog of 25 international bird draftsmen, among them the Englishmen John Busby, the Russian Vadim Gorbato, the American Thomas Quinn and the Dutchmen Kees te Kiefte, Piet Klaasse and Peter Vos. They stayed there for a week, drawing the wildlife around them. The fruits of that stay were published in 1992 in the book *Wind, wad en waterverf* with reproductions of the work of the participants, including several brush drawings by Charles Donker. He wrote by the watercolor *Wad*: “I had to restrict myself to a few spots on the island because I have no experience at all in drawing moving birds. I am usually immersed in the landscape, then I can arrange things in peace and quiet.” Yet he must have seen many of the same birds that he had observed on Griend in 1973, again in May, which he had drawn from life in his sketchbook and incorporated in his etchings. In the 1992 book he said “Drawing birds out of doors? I have never got much further than dead birds, which lie still, and a few stuffed ones,” but he added: “In that sense the meeting was a revelation to me, for it turns out that it really is possible to work directly from birds out of doors. I had slowly forgotten that. I was able to learn a lot from the others in that week. Yes, that meeting set me on the track of birds again — I began to neglect them badly.”¹⁸

He lamented at the time that he was going to stop etching dead birds, and he did so in the late 1990s, not because the prints sold badly but because he had had enough of them. Around 1994 he made two portraits

ik geen enkele ervaring heb met het tekenen van bewegende vogels. Meestal ben ik verdiept in het landschap, dan kan ik in alle rust arrangeren,” and 162: “Vogels tekenen buiten? Veel verder dan dode vogels, die liggen immers stil, en wat opgezette exemplaren ben ik nooit gekomen,... In die zin was de ontmoeting voor mij een openbaring, want het blijkt wel degelijk mogelijk om direct buiten naar vogels te werken. Dat was ik langzamerhand vergeten. Ik heb die week veel van anderen kunnen leren, ja de ontmoeting heeft mij weer op het spoor gezet van vogels — ik begon ze behoorlijk te verwaarlozen.”

of a *Teal* in the water, both in etching and aquatint (CD 94-13/14), and in 2001 a *Nightjar among small branches and fir cones* (CD 00-5), but his distinctive portraits of dead birds did return in his etchings after 2002. In June 2003 he made two monumental etched portraits of a dead young crow (CD 02-11/12), followed around 2010 by a whole series of dead birds, among them several water rails and partridges, but also long-tailed tits, wagtails and other birds laid out beside each other.

The successful meeting of bird artists on Schiermonnikoog led to the creation of the Artists for Nature Foundation, which every two years since 1992 has enabled wildlife artists to go to a wildlife area somewhere in the world, often a threatened one, to work from nature for a fortnight. Donker went on seven of those excursions between 1992 and 2009.¹⁹ In the early spring of 1994 he went with Artists for Nature to the wild and rugged Extramadura nature reserve in Spain to witness the mass migration of cranes.

On that trip he made a number of bold watercolors of the imposing mountain landscape, and on his return four large etchings with aquatint in which he captured the barren rocky landscape in a remarkably expressive way. There are several states of all four prints, in which they undergo surprising changes in ductus and tone, as if they were monotypes, and recall his early prints of around 1962 with their abstract and ornamental appearance. Two of them (CD 94-4/5) show cranes in the rocky landscape as birds of different sizes and with their Latin name *grus* repeated several times. A large crane is the central motif in a proof impression of *Landscape with cranes in Extramadura* worked up with the pen and white and gray gouache (CD 94-5 I; fig. 18). Here there is once again a unity between landscape and bird, as there is in the *Ringed plover* of 1973 (fig. 7), but now on a monumental scale.

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¹⁹ The foundation's activities led to the following publications about trips in which Donker participated: R. d'Arcy Shillcock (ed.), *Portrait of a living marsh*, Wormer 1993; N. Hammond (ed.), *Artists for Nature in Extramadura*, Wormer 1994; J. Sargatal (ed.) *Mature forests in the*

Catalan Pyrenees, Barcelona 2003; R. Williams, *Treasures of the forgotten forest*, Lavenham (Suffolk) 2004; C. Gerrard (ed.), *The Great Fen*, London 2006, most of them with reproductions of works by Donker.