

*Sunday, 28 August 2005*



One chilly evening in March, I saw a huge fire near the Rijksmuseum. Black smoke against a purple grey sky. The fire started in a construction pit. It was frightening to see a fire so close to our temple of art with all those treasures. The Fire Department needed fifty of its heroes to stop the fire. Eight of them ended up in hospital.

The finest master at depicting fire was definitely J. M. Turner. Like no other artist, he could paint fires on ships reflected in the sea. He witnessed the famous fire at the House of Parliament. Upon hearing about the fire, he grabbed his sketchbook and rushed down the Thames to record the scene. From a rowboat, he could see the progress of the destruction and made a series of nine rapid watercolour sketches that night. He later made two large oil paintings in his studio.

I was asked to join *Graafwerk*, an exhibition about the construction pits in Amsterdam, and made a pastel of the fire. Since I usually work from direct observation, it was a challenge to work from memory. I remember the fire, the smoking sky and how the fire lit the museum facade, but it was hard to draw a complex building like the Rijksmuseum from visual memory, and photographs did not work for me either. So I bicycled over to the museum to make some detailed sketches on the spot, and then went to Museumplein where the Uitmarkt, the annual cultural market, was taking place. At the Rembrandt House stand, I was lucky enough to get a free poster of one of another master's drawings.



The original drawing is only 90 x 67 mm, approximately the size of a shopping list. This *Self-portrait with open mouth* is by Moses, the youngest son of the Ter Borch family of artists. The fact that a small sketch can be so greatly enlarged and still maintain its strength proves the quality of this art. It was drawn when Moses was only 15 years old. One can see the smiling face of a boy with round cheeks, a turned-up nose and long curly hair under a small skullcap. The face might look rounder because he used a curved mirror. It is touching to see a self-portrait of a person with the features of a child but the skills of a mature master. The drawing was made on blue grey paper with black chalk and a few white highlights. Moses surely was a promising talent and it was good that he started so young. At the age of 22 he was killed in a sea battle on the English coast.

Back home, the poster turned out to be even more super-sized than I expected. It was larger than my carpet, larger than my door. Where could I hang it? In the end I covered the wall of my storage basement with it. In museums as well, the best art is often stored in the basement.