



André H. Ligthart Schenk
**Seventeen
unusual calendars
by Joseph J. Visser**

Since 1993 Joseph J. Visser designs calendars for Drukkerij Douma Dokkum (DDD) issued as business gifts. An uninterrupted series of seventeen calendars, and also a still growing entity of graphic works of art. A *work in progress*. This article is about these calendars, their interrelationships, their texts and themes and about their audible and visible sounds and music.

The calendar as a type of document

These calendars contain an element of the typical Dutch Saint Nicolas' poem that goes with the surprise gift. These poems express some unpleasant truth in a scoffing way. The home-made, and symbolic present underlines the meaning of the poem. It is with this last aspect – the material form of these calendars – that the members of the jury of the annual calendar competition organized by the KVGGO (Koninklijk Verbond van Grafische Ondernemingen, Royal Dutch Association of Printing and Allied Industries) find themselves in trouble with each year. About the calendar of the year 2000 the jury wrote that they were enchanted by the rapidly fading colours of the paper and the use of a type of twine used in the times of lead typeface, but some members complained about it being useless (Het Grafisch Weekblad, December 6, 2000, week 49 nr. 49).

The calendar competition is being organized each year since 1983.

Ever since 1993 the DDD calendar is sent in to participate in the competition. The calendars for 1999 and 2001 were nominated, and in 2008 the jubilee prize was presented to Nico Douma and Joseph Visser 'to express the jury's appreciation for the persistence of both gentlemen to design and print 15 unusual and useless concepts in a row'.

The calendar is closely related to the 'Koppermaandag prent', a print made at the beginning of the year by which printers celebrate all aspects of the *freedom of the press*. For the 2003 exhibition catalogue *11 x Nederlands diver*, Horn, Austria, Joseph wrote an article on this subject. This article reports on his research into rituals and traditions related to the beginning of the new working-year. In texts as early as the 13th and 14th century Joseph discovered *copperkens dach* or *coppeldach* being mentioned as a holiday for all manual labourers at the beginning of a new year. In the article he describes the different meanings of the concept 'kopperen' over the centuries. One of the meanings he discovered is the 'part-song', a song written for more than one voice. My view is that it cannot be coincidental that printing music and making music came together there. The article as a whole can be read (in Dutch) on: [_http://www.itplein19.nl/horn/pagtekst/artNL.html_](http://www.itplein19.nl/horn/pagtekst/artNL.html) and in the calendar for 2006.

The circumstances under which these calendars come into being, and their exceptional layouts are described in *Grafisch Weekblad* of December 6, 2000. The printers of DDD and the artist Joseph Visser seem to stimulate each other into breaking new grounds. The article from *Grafisch Weekblad* can be found at the bottom of: [_http://www.itplein19.nl/Paginas/kalenders/aakalender.html_](http://www.itplein19.nl/Paginas/kalenders/aakalender.html). Also see for my article on the 'dangerous techniques' Joseph used for the creation of

the 2005 calendar in *Compendium Forum Book Art*, Hamburg 2006.

Graphic design

Joseph once called the traditional calendar a tragic object: if you don't know the date of today, you cannot find the date of tomorrow. And if you do know, you would not need a calendar. Only the block-calendar with just one day per leaf is a solution to this problem (providing you would conscientiously tear off one leaf every day), but Joseph did no design for such DDD calendar until now. They become rather voluminous, and one of the restrictions imposed by DDD on the design is that the calendar must possibly be sent by letter mail.

The seventeen calendars that Joseph designed all look very different. They differ in material form and typographic design. A few examples:

The calendar for 2002 is a four yards long chain of twelve transparent envelopes. In Joseph's words "in each month-envelope fragments of concentrated music, pure colours



and scattered texts. All these elements inspired by Spanish ballads, the so-called romances that have undergone the influence of Arabic and Roma culture.”

In the calendar for 1996 Joseph writes in a clarification to his design: ‘Six times the same distinct shape, six geometrical cutting-lines.

On each sheet two coloured shapes, mathematically chosen and designed on the basis of the textual contents and the provisions of the cutting-lines.

The font size is determined by the size of the empty space left as the uncut part of one coloured shape.

The size of the numbers being determined by the systematic division of the larger shape. The texture of the numberprinting has been manipulated on the offset sheet.’



The calendar for 1997 (Boccaccio) is a punched sheet that can be folded into a 50 cm high marbled sculpture. On the base - among other things – texts by Boccaccio in Italian and translations in Dutch.

The one for 1998 (Seafarer) is a very complicated pop-up of a ship in rough seas. Classical Italian portraits and Scandinavian scenes are combined in the imagery.



The calendar for 2006 is made of ingeniously folded sheets joined by stickers, with on the one side a text on ‘kopperen’ and on the other side reproductions of crayon sketches and ‘digital collage’ from Josephs hand.

The most recent calendar (2009) is a collection of twelve sheets 50 by 70 cm with a full scale pattern of a men’s coat. The coat was found at the excavations of an early Norse colony on Greenland.

The last example; the calendar for 2005 (Coastal Pieces). On the reverse side of somewhat transparant sheets compositions by Joseph for celesta and for chimes are printed. On the front, next to the calendar, there are poems by Joseph printed in gold and silver. And also on this side; digitally manipulated prints.

To find a more plastic impression of these calendars it is worthwhile to visit the webpages that are dedicated to the DDD-calendars:
[_http://www.itplein19.nl/Paginas/kalenders/aakalender.html_](http://www.itplein19.nl/Paginas/kalenders/aakalender.html)

The relation to Josephs other work

The calendars that Joseph has designed for DDD are no ‘quickies’,

no occasional printings in the negative meaning of the word. In April of 2008, he said that he was already preparing the 2009 calendar. The calendars represent everything that occupies him as an artist. They are an integral part of his work.

In my experience these calendars are living creatures arising from an environment in which they have their ground. And they themselves are again the fertile soil for new works.

Wandering through the site with the description of all the calendars, or sitting at my desk with some of the calendars before me, I feel like roaming through a landscape. A landscape of shape, colour, sound, light and dark, known and unknown animals and plants. And a landscape also with traces of culture, language and the history of peoples. Through his calendars, Joseph has created a landscape that is an essential part of his world. The focus is on human condition, but in an unusual way to modern European thinking. In his world man is not a supreme being that can do things in his own way.

In this world man has learned to be modest, to show respect for his environment. Not 'because otherwise things go wrong', but out of interest, inquisitiveness, admiration and from the experience that it is beneficial to his environment and his own existence.

See also Joseph's site:

[_http://www.josephjohnvisser.nl/JosephOnLife/JosephLife.html_](http://www.josephjohnvisser.nl/JosephOnLife/JosephLife.html)

A decisive proof of the close relation between the calendars and Joseph's other works can be seen in the calendar for 1998 entitled *Seafarer*. What was started as an idea for a calendar developed into a gigantic project



Page from the calendar of 1993

resulting in an impressive book around a translation into Dutch from the Old English poem *Seafarer*. And the project has not yet been finished.

Another example is the calendar for 2001, *An Evening in Edo*. Joseph also made a musical theater play on this theme with a special scenic design, dresses, music, texts and an integrated puppet theatre.

Themes

It will be clear that these calendars have a meaning. They are not – as so many calendars – a more or less well designed empty space where you would write down your engagements and the birthdays of your friends.

But what are they about? Some examples:

The calendar for 1996 is about the sounds belonging to the seasons. Two text passages:

januari-februari
de hemel - het zoemen

het bijna onhoorbare geluid van
een wolk vliegjes, die opstijgt uit de
warmte
van een juist gekeerde
composthoop en die daarboven blijft
hangen, op een koude, maar
stralende dag in mijn achtertuin

January-February
the sky - buzzing

the nearly inaudible sound of
a puff of flies, ascending from the
warmth of a just turned compostpile
and lingering over it
on a cold but
glorious day in my backyard

and

september – oktober
de knal

exploderende graanstengels tussen
de knetterende vuren op de juist
geoogste velden, tijdens een zons-
ondergang,
die schuilgaat achter flarden rook
bij Sudbury, Suffolk;
breken/verweren van rots in Yorkshire

September - October
the crack

exploding wheatstalks between
the crackling fires on recently
harvested fields at sundown hiding
behind
patches of smoke near Sudbury,
Suffolk;
the breaking/eroding of rock in
Yorkshire

In this calendar for 1996 sounds can be heard, no music.

Music as written scores is one of the means of expression in a number of

calendars. On the website you can hear musical sketches after clicking on the calendar for 1997 (Boccaccio). On the printed calendar the score twists around the base of the sculpture. A cd with music for music box is part of the calendar for 2001 entitled 'An Evening in Edo'. The theme of the calendar of 2002 is music, ringing the chimes and playing the carillon. In his explanation Joseph writes:

'Light, smell, tastes, colours; they are so characteristic for a region that only a small portion of them recalls vivid memories. Like 'landscape' belongs to painting, 'soundscape' belongs to music. Everyone has his inner soundscapes; the rhythms, tone-structures, and pitch belonging to the 'home-sounds'. In our personal soundscape chimes play an important role. The – often too late – ringing bells when we were playing in the fields. I guess that there are no people without special memories of the playful descent of chimes.'

Travelling, being on the way, is an important theme in Joseph's work. The calendar for 2006 is about travelling, wandering about. The prints are alternately scanned crayon drawings of journeys through the Scottish Highlands and photographic collages of travels through Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. In the website: <http://www.itplein19.nl/Paginas/kalenders/06/k2006.html> click on the link 'Schetsen van de Highlands' and you will hear a composition for electronic music by Joseph.

Music scores are printed over the drawings on the printed calendar. Joseph calls these 'Crude sketches about travelling and what struck the eye along the way: the memories of a fog in the Highlands and mist on the Danube (and the differences between them), and waterfalls (that high and narrow one in Italy),

and plains (by train through the puszta to Debrecen and by bus across Anatolia)'.

Travelling, being on the way, is an important theme in Joseph's work. The journeys Joseph and his wife Ludi make, but also the journeys and voyages of others, leave traces in the calendars; the Seafarer (1998), the travels of Saint Columba and Bonifacius (2004) and of the Vikings (2009). As a result of the discovering of well-designed clothing of Scandinavian origin on Greenland from around the year 1000, Joseph studied navigation and travelling over land by the Scandinavians and got impressed by their courage and knowledge long before the Southern-European explorers claimed to discover the world.

The traditional stories of mankind, the myths, belief and superstition (who tells the difference?), the stories that are told from generation to generation, but also forgotten stories can be found in Joseph's work. He has a sharp eye for the forgotten stories and for the shades of meaning in well-known stories that 'we' have lost sight of. Obviously these stories appear in the calendars too. Some examples:

The calendar for 1993 entitled '*Kleine demonologie van de Transylvaanse Roma* explains in a dramatic, almost scriptural language the causes of the diseases that can strike mankind.

The Seafarer from the Book of Exeter (1998) is an Old-English epic poem on the ghastly life of a sailor who at the end explains that there is nothing above a life at sea. The poem ends in a religious mood: worldly bliss is compared to celestial happiness. Joseph made a fine translation into Dutch that can be read on the calendar website.

The theme in the 1999 calendar is South and Central American stories of deities. The magic spells and incantations against disaster and disease in the 2003 calendar breathe the same atmosphere.

Geographical space

Finally something has to be said about the geographical space where all this takes place. Joseph is a European man. He maintains close contacts with many artists throughout Europe, from Scotland and England to Bulgaria, from Lithuania to Spain. He is not afraid of getting into the car at Easterlittens and driving through Germany, Czechia, Austria, Hungary and Rumania to Bulgaria in order to visit friends/colleagues in all these countries. Along the way works of art and ideas are exchanged and cooperation planned. Apparently he uses foreign languages with some ease. To him they are not foreign. As are from English and Dutch the mediaeval forms that can be found at various places in his works. Take the calendar for 1994 in which the origin of the names of the days are given in nine modern languages and in five old ones. Naturally the calendar for 1997 (Boccaccio) contains texts in Italian and the one for 1998 is (as said before) built around the translation of an Old-English poem (Seafarer). And then we did not mention Frisian and recently Bulgarian (in Cyrillic script).

The use of all these different languages is immediately related to the themes that interest him and to his traveling.

Conclusion

Looking closer at the calendars that Joseph made for DDD, it becomes obvious that they are more than business presents in the shape of calendars. Together they represent a series of works of art among his

other works. Sometimes running ahead, sometimes following his development. They are called *calendars* and are criticized for not being very useful. Don't call them *calendars* and see the `presents from the graphic artist/printer/composer Joseph J. Visser, presented to you by Nico Douma of Drukkerij Douma Dokkum'.