



# ESCHER on ESCHER

---

## EXPLORING the INFINITE

M.C. ESCHER

---

With a contribution by J. W. Vermeulen

Translated from the Dutch by Karin Ford

---

ABRAMS, New York

# A GRAPHIC ARTIST WITH HEART AND SOUL

Acceptance speech by M.C. Escher upon receiving the Culture Prize of the City of Hilversum on March 5, 1965.

Hilversum, March 5, 1965

Mr. Mayor,

Ladies and gentlemen of the city administration,

Members of the jury,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to express my gratitude to the mayor and aldermen of this community for the honor that is bestowed on me today. With sincere appreciation I receive from their hands the 1965 Hilversum Culture Prize.

I also owe thanks to the members of the jury who considered me worthy of being nominated for this distinction. Specifically I owe thanks to the president and the secretary of the jury, who made a real effort to recommend my work in such flattering terms.

I am also very pleased that some of my family members and many of my friends have considered it worth the effort to come here for the ceremony. Their presence is heartwarming.

I want to cordially thank you personally, Mr. Mayor, for the friendly and appreciative words that you have just addressed to me. I wish my reply to them could be as spontaneous and witty as those I recall of my colleagues, who in previous years received this distinction.

However, by nature I am simply not spontaneous. The execution of a graphic print requires patience and thoughtfulness. In addition, the ideas I want to express therein

usually crystallize only after careful pondering. In fact, I spend most of my time in a quiet studio and, as propitious as that may be for the exercise of my profession, it definitely does not advance eloquence.

I must make a confession to you. When the secretary of the jury came to tell me the happy news a few weeks ago, my first reaction wasn't one of happiness but rather of terror. My first thought was, "Oh, oh, now you will have to come out of your shell and spend an evening exhibiting polite and pleasant behavior.

But that initial feeling of diffidence about a public ceremony fortunately was soon dispelled by more pleasant sensations.

First of all, whether you want to or not, you feel flattered when something like this happens to you.

Secondly, I was pleasantly surprised by the announcement that I would not have to appear all by myself as the focus of the festivities, but that a young colleague had been chosen by the jury as my partner. By the way, my pleasure in this certainly isn't just because the presence of Marte Röling as a fellow honoree is a support for me. No, I am also very glad because I admire the work that testifies to her great talent. I ask you, who wouldn't be happy to be in such attractive and excellent company?

And then there is a third circumstance, which has swept away the last remnant of my faintheartedness. The honor fell to me to select the musical accompaniment for the evening. Now I didn't have a moment's trouble with that. I'll quickly tell you why.\*

It must have been in 1950 when, in the Small Hall of the Concertgebouw, I first heard Janny van Wering play Bach's Goldberg variations on the piano. That concert made an indelible impression on me. I sat listening in breathless ecstasy to that glorious music. And the farther along the stream of variations advanced, the greater my admiration became for her masterly interpretation. That was the Bach to whom I have pledged my heart and my intellect at the same time. Such beauty, of composition as well as of execution, cannot possibly be expressed in words.

Subsequently I again heard Mrs. van Wering play the Goldberg variations, and I have also gotten to know them better through recordings. All the pearls of that string are of a miraculous purity, but that doesn't mean you cannot prefer one pearl more than another. It is a matter of personal taste. For example, my special preference goes to the twenty-fifth in the series. Do you understand now how proud I am that she has consented to play that particular variation for me as a part of her program today?

Bach's music may perhaps provide the occasion to say a few words about my work. I had better not expound on the affinity I seem to have discovered between the canon in polyphonic music and the regular division of a plane into figures with identical forms, no matter how striking it is to me that the Baroque composers have performed manipulations with sounds similar to the ones I love to do with visual images.

Allow me to say only that Father Bach has been a strong inspiration to me, and that

many a print reached definite form in my mind while I was listening to the lucid, logical language he speaks, while I was drinking the clear wine he pours.

When one speaks about "lucid" and "logical," one thinks involuntarily of mathematics. In high school in Arnhem I was a particularly poor student in arithmetic and algebra because I had, and still have, great trouble with the abstractions of numbers and letters. Things went a little better in geometry when I was called upon to use my imagination, but I never excelled in this subject either while in school.

But our path through life can take strange turns.

When upon completion of high school I became a student at the Haarlem School for Architecture and Decorative Arts, I came within a hairsbreadth of having the opportunity to become a useful member of society. My parents registered me as a student in architecture. But the school also offered a course in graphic arts taught by S. Jessurun de Mesquita, and I have every reason in the world to remain grateful to him for the rest of my life, first as teacher and later as fatherly friend. He saw something in the small linoleum carvings I had made while still in high school, and he persuaded my parents to let me drop architecture in order to try and see if I had it in me to be a graphic artist. In the beginning my father didn't think it such a good idea, but I myself was only too pleased with that change of direction.

Although I am even now still a layman in the area of mathematics, and although I lack theoretical knowledge, the mathematicians, and in particular the crystallographers, have had considerable influence on my work of the last twenty years. The laws of the phenomena around us—order, regularity, cyclical repetitions, and renewals—have assumed greater and greater importance for me. The awareness of their presence gives me peace and provides me with support. I try in my prints to testify that we live in a beautiful and orderly world, and not in a formless chaos, as it sometimes seems.

My subjects are often also playful. I can't keep from fooling around with our irrefutable certainties. It is, for example, a pleasure knowingly to mix up two- and three-dimensionalities, flat and spatial, and to make fun of gravity.

Are you really sure that a floor can't also be a ceiling?

Are you definitely convinced that you will be on a higher plane when you walk up a staircase?

Is it a fact as far as you are concerned that half an egg isn't also half an empty shell?

Such apparently silly questions I pose first of all to myself (because I am my own first observer), and then to others who are kind enough to come and observe my work. It is satisfying to note that quite a few people enjoy this kind of playfulness, and that they aren't afraid to modify their thinking about rock-solid realities.

Above all I take pleasure in the contacts and friendships with mathematicians that I owe to this. They have often provided me with new ideas, and sometimes an interaction between them and myself even develops. How playful they can be, those learned ladies and gentlemen!

To tell you the truth, I find the concept "art" a bit of a dilemma. What one person calls "art" is often not "art" for another. "Beautiful" and "ugly" are old-fashioned concepts that are only rarely brought into the picture nowadays—maybe rightfully so, who is to say? Something repellent, something that gives you a moral hangover, something that hurts your eyes or ears can still be art!

Only when the sentiment is kitsch is it not art; we all agree on that. Certainly, but what is kitsch? If only I knew that! I find such determinations of value based on feelings too subjective and vague. If I'm not mistaken, the words "art" and "artist" did not yet exist during and before the Renaissance. Architects, sculptors, and painters at the time were simply considered practitioners of a craft.

The graphic arts are also an honest craft, and I consider it a privilege to be a member of the guild of graphic artists. Cutting with a gouge or engraving with a burin in a woodblock polished mirror smooth is not something on which you necessarily pride yourself; it is simply a pleasant type of work. The only thing is that as you get older it takes more time and effort and the chips fly somewhat less tempestuously about your workbench than they used to.

So I am a graphic artist with heart and soul, but the rating "artist" makes me feel a little embarrassed.

That is why, Mr. Mayor (and I would like to end on this note), I prefer to receive my honor as a graphic artist pure and simple, if I may express it this way. I hope that you consent to my accepting it as such.