

## **TRAVELLING FAIR MEMORIES**

As a subject for drawing, the travelling fair – with its colourful decorations and its moving and spinning objects – gave me the freedom to use any motive or colour, material or technique and mix it all together. Although I never really liked joining funfairs myself, as I am afraid of heights and I am not fond of spinning at high speed, I sure did have a lot of fun drawing it.

### History

For a lot of people the travelling fair used to be - and still is - an event to look forward to every year. The roots of the travelling fair in the Netherlands date from the eleventh century in terms of a yearly fair to celebrate the construction of a church with a meat market, travelling street musicians, actors and animal games. As time went by the amusement aspect became more important. In the sixteenth century there was an increase of different games and attractions and people enjoyed themselves watching puppet shows, fortune tellers, acrobats and later on also freak shows with dwarfs and giants, Siamese twins and bearded women.

In the early nineteenth century people let themselves spin around in a primitive carousel driven by manpower or horsepower. By the end of the nineteenth century the carousels were driven by steampower and nicely decorated with wood carved gilt stamped patterns, colourful painted horses. And then another attraction was introduced: the huge Ferris wheel that rotates slowly as to provide up the passengers in the top cabins with a great view over the city. Since the sixties and eighties we can drive in bumper cars and spin around each other very fast in the 'Calypso' or 'Breakdance' attractions.

### Lovers and riots

In many villages the travelling fair took place in September after the hard work of harvesting has been done. It was a week to spend your money, to forget your troubles and have fun – with maybe a little help of some alcohol. But the yearly market or travelling fair has also always been a meeting place, not only for families but also for boys and girls of the marriageable age.

In Lochem, a small town in the east of the Netherlands where I went to school as a kid, it used to be a tradition for the boys to chase the girls trying to mark them by drawing a chalk stripe on the back of their coats. If a boy succeeded in this game, it meant the start of a relation and often even a marriage. In nineteenth century Amsterdam single working women could hire a lover for the time of the fair only, as it was not appropriate for a young woman to visit the fair on her own.

By the end of the nineteenth century several Dutch cities were often encouraged by the bourgeoisie to cancel fairs or even forbid them for a few years, apparently because of health and safety reasons, too much drinking and fighting and indecent behaviour at the fairground. In Amsterdam and other cities this led to riots, such as the smashing of shop windows, while people were yelling: 'the rich have their party all through the year, you can't take away the only pleasure we have'.

### Memories

As I remember from my time in high school, the fairground is an attractive place with its dazzling attractions and glittering atmosphere. But above all a hangout for teenagers to experience the first kiss or a broken heart. Being spinned around and turned upside down by high speed attractions, you are lifted out of the daily reality into a surreal dream world. When the colourful lights come on at night, not only adrenaline but also hormones are flying through the air.

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