

Houses of the House of Orange

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(Marieke Spliethoff, curator of paintings of Paleis Het Loo, deputized for Johan ter Molen)

Many of the important art museums in Europe have grown out of the historic collections assembled by royal and noble families. This is very much the situation we have in the Netherlands. In 1774 Stadholder Willem V was the first prince of Orange to open his art collection to the general public, establishing a gallery in the Buitenhof in The Hague. After the French invasion of 1795 and the expulsion of the stadholder and his family, the bulk of these paintings were transferred to Paris. Then, with the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire, they were returned to Holland in triumph, and added to the Royal Cabinet of Paintings, which soon became known as the Mauritshuis, after the building in which the collection was housed. The minor works from this collection, which had been ignored by the French, originally hung on the walls of the Huis ten Bosch Palace. They were later transferred to Amsterdam where they formed the nucleus of the Rijksmuseum. A few years ago Willem V's Gallery of 1774, which is the country's oldest museum, was completely refurbished. Visitors can again have an impression of how the paintings would have been presented to the public in the 18th century.

All in all the works that were in the possession of the Orange family during the late 18th century represent just a small proportion of the art that adorned their palaces over the centuries. There were times when the collection of paintings was considerably larger and more diverse, but sadly these moments lasted no longer than a generation and the vast majority of these works are now dispersed all over the world.

As you might expect, many of the princes and kings born into the House of Orange had only a very limited interest in art. However, among them were also some genuine art lovers who collected avidly and managed to assemble collections of major importance. Apart from their personal interest in visual art, they also wanted to glorify episodes from national history, as well as wishing to support living artists.

I would like to talk briefly about two members of the Orange family who became particularly distinguished collectors and patrons of the arts.

First, there was Frederik Hendrik and his wife, Amalia van Solms. In the second quarter of the 17th century, a period in which Holland prospered both financially and culturally, this couple filled their residences in and around The Hague with large numbers of paintings by important masters. In addition they bought huge quantities of chinaware, oriental lacquer, sets of tapestries, inlaid furniture, silver sculptures, and other precious objects.

The inventory of their paintings shows that the collection was assembled with specific areas of interest in mind: the school of Utrecht (including Bloemaert, Moreelse and Honthorst), the Flemish painters (for example, Rubens and van Dyck), and artists belonging to a slightly older generation (among them Cornelis van Haarlem, Paul Bril and Jan Bruegel). It was Constantijn Huygens, the prince's secretary, who encouraged the couple to acquire the work of two talented young painters in particular: Jan Lievens and Rembrandt.

After Frederik Hendrik's death Amalia van Solms wanted to have the *Oranjezaal* of the newly built Paleis Huis ten Bosch decorated, wall-to-wall, with paintings celebrating the life of her late husband. She invited no fewer than 15 established artists to contribute to this ambitious project. Some came from the Northern Netherlands (including Gerard Honthorst, Salomon de Bray, Caesar van Everdingen), but there were also, interestingly, a number of artists from the Catholic South (for example, Jacob Jordaens, Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert and Theodoor van Thulden).

After Amalia van Solms's death the bulk of this extensive picture collection was divided between the couple's four daughters who were all married to German princes. It is no coincidence that several important works now hanging in museums in Berlin came originally from this estate. To name just a couple of examples: there is a picture of Paradise, by Roelant Saverij, and a portrait of King Charles I's children, by Anthony van Dyck. The *Oranische Erbschaft* of one of the daughters ended up in Mosigkau Castle near Dessau, including the wonderful portrait of Prince Willem II as a young boy, also by van Dyck. Only a fraction of the famous art collection remained in the Netherlands, and almost all that was left eventually leaked abroad, through bequests.

It was not until two centuries later that another member of the Orange family, King Willem II, assembled an art collection of international standing. In the years around 1820 the prince spent much of his time in Brussels and began to collect works by early Flemish painters. These paintings were suddenly attracting renewed interest after a long period of neglect. He managed to acquire two van Eycks, an *Annunciation* (now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington) and the so-called *Lucca Madonna* (now in Frankfurt, in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut), as well as panels by Rogier van der Weyden and the famous series of *The justice of Emperor Otto*, painted by Dirc Bouts for the City Hall in Leuven. Willem II was also very partial to Italian art and owned paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Sebastiano del Piombo and Guido Reni, as well as important drawings by Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo. Both the Flemish and 17th-century Dutch Schools were well represented, with paintings by Rubens and Teniers, Rembrandt and Hobbema.

As a young man Willem studied for a while in England, where he became interested in the Gothic style. Inspired by the architecture of Christ Church College, Oxford, he extended his palace on the Kneuterdijk in The Hague with a gallery for his art collection. This structure, in a style that is rather unusual for the Netherlands, was completed in 1842 and there are paintings of both exterior and interior by Bart van Hove.

Sadly the Netherlands also lost this magnificent collection. When King Willem II died unexpectedly in 1849, he left debts of millions of guilders, owing money to various people including his brother-in-law, Tsar Nicholas I of Russia, as well as a number of the dealers from whom he had bought pictures.

This meant that the collection, the only one of its kind in the country, had to be sold. The auction, in August 1850, lasted for seven days. The Russian tsar received a number of paintings for what he was owed, and these can still be seen in the Hermitage today.

One residence belonging to the Orange family that has not been mentioned so far is Paleis Het Loo, where the study trip will conclude on Sunday. It was originally built in 1686 as a hunting lodge for Stadholder Willem III, Frederik Hendrik's grandson. A few years later when Willem III had been proclaimed king of England, he decided to have the lodge extended to form a magnificent palace with formal gardens. The interior design and decoration of the palace were largely left to the Frenchman Daniel Marot.

As was customary at the time the palace building included a picture gallery. An international selection of works was assembled to decorate its walls, among them paintings from the English royal family which were brought over by King William for his new residence. There were portraits by Holbein, as well as Italian paintings, and recent as well as earlier works by masters from both the Northern and Southern Netherlands. It is a pity that hardly any of these are still there today.

When Willem III died, childless, in 1702, a long argument ensued over his estate. The works of art from his palaces in The Hague went to the King of Prussia. A number of these paintings are still in the museums of Berlin and Potsdam, among them Honthorst's *Granida and Daiphilo*, and an *Oriental figure* by Lievens, formerly attributed to Rembrandt.

Paleis Het Loo and its valuable contents fell into the hands of the Frisian branch of the family, the Nassaus. Soon after, however, financial problems led to the family selling the entire art collection at auction in Amsterdam in 1713. There was a lot of interest from foreign collectors who seized the opportunity to buy works of exceptional quality. Some of the paintings ended up in private houses where, nearly three centuries later, they can still be found today (Schloss Weissenstein near Pommersfelden is one example). Others were acquired by royal collectors and were later transferred to museums in St Petersburg, Braunschweig and Munich. The Mauritshuis also has several paintings from Het Loo, including an interior by Dou and two works by Holbein. Today Het Loo has only one or two paintings from the time of Willem III, mostly works that were incorporated in the original paneling, for example an overmantel painting by Hondecoeter with exotic animals.

Quite by chance Paleis Het Loo was able to buy back a painting that used to hang in Willem III's gallery, when it came up at auction in New York in 1989. As it happens, the auction house was not aware of the painting's provenance. The inventory of Het Loo lists a work by Cornelis van Poelenburch the subject of which is relatively rare, Mercury and Herse. However, the dimensions given in this old document seem strangely at odds with the size of most of van Poelenburch's paintings. So it seemed likely that this was a mistake, especially as the Mauritshuis has a painting by van Poelenburch of this subject. The logical assumption was that this much smaller work was in fact the one that appeared in the inventory of Het Loo.

Then suddenly this second *Mercury and Herse* turned up in New York, its dimensions (159 x 109 cm) exactly matching those given in the inventory. With the help of a grant from the *Vereniging Rembrandt* it was possible to acquire the painting, and now it hangs again in its original position.

At the end of the 18th century the French occupiers of the Netherlands transferred a painting by Jan Davidsz. de Heem to France. It was never returned, and it currently hangs in the museum in Lyon. This stolen painting, originally from the collection at Het Loo, is of a sumptuous floral wreath which contains a portrait of King-Stadholder Willem III.

A national campaign organized in honor of Queen Beatrix's silver jubilee last year, enabled us to acquire another splendid work by de Heem, which is an expression of allegiance to the House of Orange. In the center of the still life is an orange, surrounded by various plant motifs and symbolic objects; an inscription on a stone plinth leaves us in no doubt of the painting's message: *Vivat Oraenge*.

Over the centuries Paleis Het Loo has undergone a number of renovations and extensions. Its brick façades, for instance, were covered with stucco, and during the 19th century the formal gardens were relandscaped into a park in the romantic tradition. This can be seen in a painting by Schelfhout, dated 1837. There has recently been a lengthy and thorough restoration program which has brought both exterior and interior of the building close to their original splendor. At the same time the late 17th-century design of the garden, unique for the period in the Netherlands, has also been reconstructed. When the restoration was finished in 1984 the palace was turned into a public museum. It will be my pleasure to welcome the participants in the study trip this Sunday.