

The Espigas Foundation and Dutch and Flemish art in Argentina

Angel Navarro, Professor of art history, Universidad de Buenos Aires

The Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, founded at the end of the 19th century, is the principal center of Dutch and Flemish art in Argentina. Its rather small collection, comprised mainly of donations, includes some good-quality works dating from the 16th to the 20th century. These include a landscape attributed to Patinir, two Rubens *bozzetti*, a *Landscape with the ruins of the abbey of Rijnsburg* by Aelbert Cuyp, and two landscapes with Diana and nymphs, one by Jasper van der Lanen and the other by Jan Bruegel and Hendrik van Balen. Among artists from the 19th and 20th centuries, there is *Le Moulin de la Galette* by Van Gogh, the only work by the artist in a public collection in Argentina. The Hirsch Gallery, given to the museum in 1983, deserves special mention: it contains works by Henri met de Bles, Isenbrandt, Adriaen van de Velde, Moreelse, Govaert Flinck y Aert de Gelder and an interesting Rembrandt female portrait from the beginning of the 1630s, which I believe to be the result of a collaboration between the master and his assistant Flinck. The museum collection also contains a small number of drawings and engravings.

The Museo Nacional de Arte Decorativo in Buenos Aires also has some Dutch and Flemish paintings, including a *Family portrait* by both Cuyps, Jacob Gerritsz. and Aelbert. In Rosario, Argentina's second city, the Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino and the Museo Municipal de Arte Decorativo Firma y Obdulio Estevez also own some Dutch and Flemish paintings; the latter museum owns Eeckhout's *Granida and Daifilo*, which was reproduced as the cover of our book *Dutch and Flemish art in Argentina*.

Art dealers began importing European art into Argentina in the 19th century. In 1828, the Spaniard Jose Mauroner arrived with a group of paintings that included works by Dutch and Flemish artists. But it was from 1880 onwards, when the country became politically organized, that European galleries, such as Bernheim, began to open branches in Buenos Aires, increasing the interest in collecting art. To satisfy the local tastes, they offered paintings from the Italian, Spanish and French schools, together with a few Dutch and Flemish pieces.

In the 20th century, dealers such as Frederic M. Vermorcken (born in Brussels in 1862) organized shows that included paintings from the Low Countries. Frederic C. Müller, who arrived in Argentina as the curator of the German section at the Centennial International Exhibition of 1910, remained in Buenos Aires, first dealing in German contemporary artists and, later, Old Masters and contemporary artists from Holland and Belgium. From 1930 onwards, he organized a series of engraving exhibitions targeted not only at collectors, but also at the public at large. These exhibitions were held in Buenos Aires and also in Rosario and Santa Fe, two other large cities in Argentina.

In 1943, Paula de Koenigsberg arrived in Buenos Aires to sell a collection that included paintings from the Low Countries. There were only a few collectors who concentrated on old Dutch and Flemish

paintings, the most important of them being Alfredo Hirsch, who gave his name to the previously mentioned Hirsch Gallery.

Regarding local artists, some of them, such as Carlos Alonso, took Rembrandt as an inspiration for their drawings and paintings and others learned and applied painting techniques from the 17th century. The Dutch artist Jacques Witjens also became a local artist. Born in The Hague in 1881, he moved to Buenos Aires in 1920, and remained in Argentina for the rest of his life.

A number of exhibitions have been held to celebrate Dutch and Flemish art in Argentina: in 1941, in 1950/51, in 1964, in 1965 to celebrate the visit of King Baudoin and Queen Fabiola of Belgium, a Rubens exhibition in 1977, and exhibitions in 1983 and 1990 commemorating Van Gogh. More recently, in 2002 and 2003, Rembrandt was the focus of attention, with works from the Rembrandthuis being exhibited not only in Buenos Aires, but also in Neuquen, a city in Patagonia. In 2003, the wedding of Prince Willem Alexander to Maxima Zorreguieta was the subject of an exhibition that featured a selection of Dutch paintings from private collections in Buenos Aires. Other Dutch artists have had exhibitions devoted to them, as was the case with the 1999 Erik van der Grijn exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. An essay in the catalogue discusses his work and states that he does not live in Buenos Aires. Last year, however, there was a new exhibition of his work and he bought an apartment in Buenos Aires.

The reception and appreciation of Dutch and Flemish art was the subject of a project developed under my direction at the Fundación Espigas, a center devoted to collecting and cataloguing documents concerning art history in Argentina. Director Mauro Herlitzka talked to me about this subject some six years ago, but the project only became reality in November 2004 thanks to the support of institutions such as Stichting Cultuur Inventarisatie and its director, Lia Gorter.

This project was completed last November. We added 805 new entries to the Espigas database, and created a book that includes some 70 articles from exhibition catalogues and local or international periodicals, selected with the idea of creating a corpus to be used in schools and art academies. The book also includes an essay examining the subject. The essay confirmed some suspicions that we had about the reception of Dutch and Flemish art in Argentina: firstly, the significant impact of the art of the Low Countries upon cultural activities and artistic training in Argentina, and secondly, the existence of a marked preference for contemporary works of art.

We should also mention that activity in art galleries and local collections has helped to increase the knowledge and appreciation of Dutch and Flemish art, as it has been possible to focus on techniques that are not always understood by the public, such as engraving and etching.

Projects have also been set up to establish connections and influences between Dutch and Belgian artists and local artists through works created as a team or by a Dutch or Belgian artist providing guidance and instruction, as was recently the case with the Dutch artist Pat Andrea.