

Flemish and Dutch art in French provincial museums: a brief historical survey

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It is our aim, in this short lecture, to emphasise the specific history of French provincial museums, whereas they preserve a substantial part of the Dutch and Flemish heritage in France.

In the field of northern art, the situation of the French provincial museums is still largely determined by the historical circumstances of their foundation. Most of the major institutions were founded in the post-revolutionary context. Created as municipal structures, they often benefited from important deposits by virtue of the central government's policy aiming to stimulate regional development. If the original endowment has been generous, subsequent public support (municipal as well as governmental) has generally been oriented toward other fields than Dutch and Flemish art, and that part of their collections, underwent fewer changes during the two past centuries, particularly as regards the Flemish. Unfortunately, major purchases will probably remain rare, as the gap tends to increase between the national institutions' means and what the wealthier provincial museums can afford.

A government decree of 1801 – known as the “Chaptal decree” – contributed to establish fifteen major municipal museums all over the country. Its purpose was to add to the paintings seized locally during the revolutionary period major government deposits, among them a large group of artworks captured abroad and subsequently excluded from the restitution policy implemented after Napoleon's fall. The beneficiaries were Lyons, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Marseilles, Rouen, Nantes, Dijon, Toulouse, Caen, Lille, Rennes and Nancy (together with Brussels, Geneva and Mainz which formed part, at the time, of the Republic). Many other institutions were created across the country during the same period which also benefited occasionally from government's *envois*, but less generously than the 15 towns chosen by Chaptal. As an example of the original endowment of a provincial museum, I will just mention here some pictures deposited at Grenoble. Its museum has been particularly spoilt with some large masterpieces like the *Saint Gregory* altarpiece by Rubens, seized in Antwerp, the magnificent Jordaens' *Adoration of the shepherds*, probably seized in Liège, two Caspar de Crayer seized in Kortrijk and what remain the most remarkable Abraham Bloemaert preserved in a French collection : the huge *Adoration of the Magi* seized at the Belvedere in Vienna.

While the local seizures were often of minor importance, as regards Dutch and Flemish painting, such was not the case in the northern part of the country (which had belonged until the seventeenth century to the Habsburg Netherlands). Strong ties had long been preserved with cities like Antwerp and Brussels and, in that area, churches were often adorned with Flemish altar-pieces. This explains why, in this part of the country, exist outstanding collections of Flemish paintings, even in towns, like Valenciennes, which did not benefit from the 1801 decree. In the rest of France, the museums excluded from the “Chaptal distribution” may possess fine Flemish paintings; but they are not in the position to display comparable *ensembles*.

The nature of the revolutionary and Napoleonic seizures and their subsequent deposits, together with the specific situation of northern France explain the fundamental imbalance between Flemish and Dutch art in French museums. This point must be stressed. The pioneer exhibitions *Le Siècle de Rembrandt* (Paris, 1970-1971) and *Le Siècle de Rubens* (Paris, 1977-1978), both exclusively based on French collections, clearly showed that one can provide a comprehensive survey of seventeenth century's Flemish painting, such solely based on non-Parisian collections; it is however not possible to present the Dutch Golden Age in a satisfactory way without substantial loans from the Louvre. You can, for example, admire Rembrandt paintings in several Parisian museums. But, out of Paris, only three pictures are now attributed to the master, even if the nineteenth century catalogues mentioned works by him everywhere in France. Three early paintings, among them the famous *Lapidating of St. Stephen* at Lyons, the artist's first dated painting (1625) and the *Flight in Egypt*, in Tours (1627).

Strikingly, the provincial museums took little advantage of the eighteenth century Dutch-oriented character of the French collectorship. The case of Montpellier is, in that respect, a sort of exception. With Fabre's gift (1825) and the Valedeau bequeath (1838) it inherited an *ensemble* of Dutch *tableaux de cabinet* of the highest quality, reflecting a collector's taste typical of French neoclassical culture. Settled in a city excluded from the Chaptal list, the museum does not house, however, the large Flemish paintings elsewhere on display.

Generally speaking, the existence of significant collections of small-scale Dutch pictures is a legacy of mid- and late nineteenth century. Since the first half of the century – despite some ambitious purchases –, the growth of the various collections in the field we're considering here depends primarily on private donations, public support being more commonly devoted to the acquisition of contemporary art. Fortunately, provincial collectors have been comparatively more generous than their Parisian counterparts. There is, during the whole century a regular stream of gifts, certainly of variable quality but *in fine* rather rich. It is specially true in southern cities like Aix, Avignon or Nimes, while some other wealthy merchant cities, like Marseilles and Bordeaux, gathered more modest harvest. In the matter of northern painting, the twentieth century has rather been a period of sporadic acquisitions, as local collectorship and a certain kind of cultural civism was dramatically turning down.

Later in the nineteenth century, other museums were founded with very substantial collections of northern art. Among them, the musée Condé is one of a kind and can hardly be regarded as a *musée de province* in the classical sense of the word: it contains the amazing art collection offered to the country by the duc d'Aumale, a son of the King Louis-Philippe, with the castle of Chantilly and a wonderful library. The gift was accompanied with a double clause: the original layout would not be altered and loans would be positively excluded. One can find a comparable restrictive clause in other provincial collections, like those offered by Léon Bonnat to Bayonne and by Magnin to Dijon.

If some museums, like Lille, have been able to carry out acquisitions of exceptionally high level, the efforts to make up lost time in the field of cataloguing constitute the most remarkable development during the last decades. The museums of Quimper (1987), Bordeaux (1990), Troyes (1990), Lyon (1991 and 1993), Grenoble (1994), Caen (1994), Brou (1994), Orléans (1996), Montpellier (1998), Châteauroux (2001), Toulouse (2004), Avignon (2006) presently possess catalogues drawn up in accordance with the highest scholarly standards. Several of them were edited with the support of the Fondation Custodia. Some "joint ventures" such as the catalogues published by the Région Rhone-

Alpes (1992) or the Région Franche-Comté (1998) should also be mentioned. Other catalogues are being planned, like Rouen's (2009).

The attention is presently sliding to the field of drawings: i.a. we may quote the Musée de Grenoble's project to publish the complete catalogue of its Dutch and Flemish drawings.