

Broadening a broad collection

Gero Seelig, curator of paintings, Staatliches Museum Schwerin

[Abstract:] The Staatliches Museum Schwerin's collection is large in number and broad in scope. However, its outlook is restricted by historical conditions. Its Dutch and Flemish works of art reflect 18th-century views, particularly those of Christian Ludwig (d. 1756). Since these historical origins cannot be denied, they should be addressed in the presentation of the collection. Museums need to communicate this approach in an outspoken and comprehensible way.

Schwerin is not one of Germany's most famous museums and has only a very few works, if any, by some of the leading masters more amply represented in other collections. Rubens (one painting), Jordaens (one painting), Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Vermeer and Frans Hals (two paintings) are virtually absent. On the other hand, it is strong in names such as Willem van Aelst, Gerard de Lairesse, the Van Mieris family, Ludolf Backhuysen, and boasts close to 600 paintings.

In 2013 the collection will be expanded with a donation from a German private collector of 150 paintings by minor masters such as Jacob Velsen, Hans Goderis and Adriaen van Stalbermt. Is this wise? I think so, as it will enable us to document Dutch and Flemish painting in all of its diversity. This gift does more than simply add to the number of paintings. Even prior to its arrival, it has already generated publicity for the Staatliches Museum.

Politicians generally judge museums by their visitor numbers. Yet, there is a host of other criteria that reflect the achievements of these institutions. Accordingly, the museum has as its mission to educate not only the public, but politicians as well.

About Gero Seelig

Gero Seelig has been curator of paintings at the Staatliches Museum Schwerin since 2001. He has written two catalogues of the Dutch and Flemish paintings in the museum's permanent collection (Flemish paintings, 2003; Dutch genre paintings, 2010) and was responsible for the exhibitions devoted to Carel Fabritius (2005, with the Mauritshuis, The Hague) and Nicolaes Berchem (2007, with the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem). Together with Liesbeth Helmus, curator at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, he is currently preparing an exhibition on Abraham Bloemaert that will be shown in Utrecht (November 2011) and Schwerin (February 2012).

Apart from painting, Seelig has published on German printmaking of the 16th century (Hollstein volumes on Jost Amman and Johann Siebmacher) and on the history of collecting.

Seelig is co-founder of the Arbeitskreis für Niederländische Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte (ANKK), which aims to further the study of Dutch and Flemish art in Germany. This association is holding a major international conference in Frankfurt in September of this year (www.ankk.org).

Full text of presentation:

In the 18th century, the dukes of Mecklenburg-Schwerin amassed collections of art which were remarkably large in comparison with the political and economic power of the principality. They include, most famously, the collection of paintings [almost 4000 works (numbers of today)], but also sculptures, and (about 60.000) prints and drawings, (more than 10.000) works of applied art in the form of porcelain from Meißen, Prussia and other manufactories, ivory carvings, wax reliefs, cork carvings, tapestries, a large collection of clocks, precious weapons (as well as ca. 32.000) coins and medals. These collections of the past have been enlarged by others formed in later times, some of which were deaccessioned or lost in the last century, for instance the collection of plaster casts. Several attempts have been made to install a policy of continuous acquisition of contemporary art, that is after the opening of the museum in the 1880s, after it was taken over by the state in the 1920s, in GDR times on a limited scale, and again since 1990. But even today, the old collections not only are the core of the museum's holdings regarding quality but they also still form the bulk in terms of quantity (at least if you do not count the large holdings of court portraits). Apart from a few dozen French paintings (most notably the Oudry animals), as well as some Italian, early German and early Netherlandish paintings, it is still the Dutch and Flemish paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries for which the museum is known (if known at all). They number about 600 in all. As this part of the collections has not been substantially enlarged in the last two centuries, it still largely resembles the holdings of the ducal gallery of the 18th century. It is the restricted outlook of three centuries ago, so different from the restrictions of our own time, that comes alive when browsing the collection. It lacks all the great names of today's canon, except for one painting by Jacob Jordaens and one by Rubens (the latter acquired in the 1850s). Van Dyck as well as Rembrandt and Vermeer are completely absent, while two small genre pieces of Frans Hals have luckily been preserved although foreign to the dukes' tastes. The founder of the picture gallery, duke Christian Ludwig (who died in 1756), in accord with the taste of his times, loved Willem van Aelst, Gerard de Lairesse, the Van Mieris family, Ludolf Backhuysen, and Jan van Huysum. He had to (and did!) compete with the big collectors of his day, Wilhelm of Hessen-Kassel, the Palatine Elector, the kings of Poland and Prussia for paintings by Gerard Dou and Gottfried Schalcken, Philips Wouwerman and Nicolaes Berchem.

Therefore, expectations of our contemporary public cannot be met completely (although we do our best). Although the collection has its strengths – especially in genre and landscape painting – it cannot give the whole picture of the Golden Age, most notably the early masters are missing, much more so for the Antwerp school (notwithstanding three Jan Brueghels).

It seems imperative to me that in this situation and with such a large number of works we should not try to hide the lacunae in a chronological, art historical presentation that attempts to celebrate the history of art according to the canon of today. Instead of concentrating on the grand masters and the masterpieces according to this canon, we should try to make visible the canon and taste of the 18th century, when the collection was brought together. The holdings as they are bear the chance to visualise the universe of a princely collector of the mid-18th century, including some very beautiful works as well as some strange and interesting ones (I. Moucheron. Th.v. Pee. Carré). At the same time this would be a way to make sense of showing more of the holdings than would figure in a presentation according to the canon.

I am aware of the fact, that this is a scholarly approach – not at all an idea that is coherent with current public and political desires. On the other hand, it seems obvious to me, that putting the history of the own collection at the root of its message, must result in a truly unique and memorable presentation instead of a provincially reduced version of a museum encompassing the whole history of art. Next to the fascination of the works themselves, a show of the "old collection" celebrates its own uniqueness instead of having the same message as the big few, only not so glittering.

It is a scholarly approach, but one that can be successful, I think, in making the museum visit a memorable experience. Perhaps this is not even anything special. In a way, all museums attempt to do it to some extent. I would wish, that we would do it more explicitly.

In 2013 the collection of 600 paintings will be expanded with a donation from a German private collector of 150 paintings by minor Dutch and Flemish masters such as Jacob van Velsen, Hans Goderis and Adriaen Verdoel, not the missing Pieter de Hooch, Jacob van Ruisdael or Abraham Bosschaert.

Is this wise? I think so, as it will enable us to document Dutch and Flemish painting in even greater diversity. Schwerin may become an important reference collection for studying these minor masters.

But the broadened scope of the collection resulting from this addition, to my mind, is only one aspect of the question.

Imagine a museum that includes a gallery and three castles in three different towns: Schwerin, Güstrow and Ludwigslust. It receives three times more visitors in the castles than in the gallery. Even the visitors to Schloss Schwerin very seldom find their way to the gallery situated across the street from the castle. Schwerin is visited because of the castle and the beautiful little town – one of the few ones in Germany not destroyed during the war – but it is not known for its art collections. This may seem odd, considering that the collections are connected to the ducal family no less than the castles, and they are much older (at least older than Schwerin castle). The Schwerin museum is constantly struggling to make its mark as a location for art between the two metropolises, Hamburg and Berlin.

In this situation, the acquisition of a private collection of such a number of paintings is capable of raising attention. Although not the largest private collection in Germany, it is probably the only one that will be given for free. It does add numbers and names to the collection, that can be boasted of. Schwerin will then have six paintings by Paulus Potter, many more than any other German museum. It will altogether hold much more than twice as many Dutch and Flemish paintings as the Hamburger Kunsthalle and, hard to believe, about as many as the Berlin Gemäldegalerie. It will have a number of masters' names for the work of which no other German museum can show an example (Claes Bergoijis, V. Bos, Gerrit Pietersz de Jongh, Hubert van Ravesteyn, Justus de Verwer, Jan Harmensz. Vijnck, Jacob van Velsen, Claes Claesz. Wou). These are just a few of the superlatives that this private collection will help the Schwerin museum to boast of. And, as you know, it is only the superlatives that the mass media communicate.

The donation, therefore, helps the Schwerin museum to raise the attention of a public which is trained to be interested exclusively in events. It is my belief, that for museums it is one of the tasks for the future to get attention back to the collections. Therefore, I am extremely happy about headlines like the one of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in July of last year. Referring to the Schwerin Genre exhibition, it titled: "Schweriner Kernkompetenz: Her mit den Alten Niederländern" (Schwerin's central capacity: Give us those old Netherlandish paintings!) This was an exhibition showing exclusively paintings from the own collection. The curator was a bit uneasy when the press related that some or even many of these had never been on show before, because that simply and obviously is not true.

In the case of the donation, on the other hand, it will be true and will, I hope, also stir enthusiasm. The task we have already embarked on is to keep that attention up and transform it into a prolonged interest in the museum and its collections, not just an event of limited time span. We try to do this by, among other things, coming up time and again with the subject of the donation itself. We have had an exhibition of the collector's drawings, which he has already donated to the Berlin print room, we will celebrate the donation by exhibiting all of the paintings in 2013/2014 and will, later on, also show 17th century prints in his possession.

To celebrate this particular collection in this extended form, I see as part of a pedagogical mission. I would like to convince the public that it is the collections in general which the museums are there for, not the events. I think we should make every effort to transform the current hunger of the public for events into a hunger for news about our collections. This is not something we can wait for to happen, of course. Much to the contrary, it has to be consciously induced. As far as I can tell, the acquisition of this private collection by the Schwerin museum is a major chance to work in this direction.

But this still is only part of the profit the museum gains from it, and it is also only part of the task we are grappling with. On top of the public address, there is also a political significance. On one evening during the drawings exhibition, the minister of culture of the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern declared himself to be committed to the project. Everybody knows how reliable declarations like that are, and at the same time how important they are.

As far as I can tell, the culture professionals, we, not only have to educate the public, but we must also educate the decisionmakers. In Germany, it is visible quite clearly that the generation of politicians stepping down now had as matter of course been exposed in their upbringing to art, literature, the humanities. Not so the new generation. Whatever the reasons, the younger politicians, like the public in general, very pronouncedly have a stronger connection for instance to sport events than to what in German is termed "Kultur".

Economic considerations, on the other hand, they understand very well. Often therefore, the only question they have about a museum is: how many visitors. Compared to a soccer stadium, a museum will always look like an enormous luxury.

But now a large number of art works are being donated. The state receives them for free. Aha, this is something we can understand and therefore support. The museum, in the end, must be interesting in some way, if the collector wants to donate his valuable paintings.

The process I want to take advantage of has only just begun. I want to be short, therefore. But it is important, I think, that we in Schwerin should be careful to use this current interest stirred by the donation to drive home the message about our art collections. If we do this prudently, I do have hopes that we can move things for the better.

To conclude, the donation of a collection of 150 Dutch and Flemish paintings has so many implications for Schwerin, that it cannot be judged only in terms of the quality of the works and the rank of the artists. It has already, years before arriving, stirred up a lot of support for the museum and some of its central issues. If managed carefully, the whole enterprise can bring profits for the museum in a lot of separate ways.

I said, the collection cannot ONLY be judged in terms of quality. That is not to say that it does not have its merits. I therefore close by showing you some of the highlights it also includes (J.de Momper, S.de Vlioger, Pieter Gijssels).