

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Low Countries developed into a major junction for international goods from the twelfth century on, because of their central location. Its inhabitants drew on their knowledge and artistic creativity to generate revenue. Indeed, this was essential, because the soil of the polders contained no valuable ores or minerals. They made tapestries out of the wool they imported. Miniaturists passed on their knowledge and skills to the next generations. Panel painters began to use linseed oil instead of using egg-yolk as a binding medium, which created a substance that dried more slowly and offered the advantage of being easier to work. From then on, painters could render shades of light and dark more convincingly and found renewed pleasure in depicting the visible world – the reflection of a window in an eye, the tactility of fur, a fly on a flower. Portraits had never appeared so real. This technical revolution in painting was soon recognized throughout Europe. Paintings from the Low Countries stood for quality and were exported from on the beginning. Van Eyck, Van der Weyden, Van der Goes, Bouts, Memling and David had clients in Florence, Venice, Genoa, Barcelona, Valencia and Lisbon. Their work was copied on a massive scale.

In addition to existing art intended for church and nobility, a new market developed for the middle classes. New genres emerged, such as landscapes, interiors and still lifes. Many artists dedicated themselves to producing scenes that were partial to everyday and anecdotal subject matter. These characteristics are typical for Flemish and Dutch art from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Inevitably, this successful style soon made others jealous. Those who saw Greek and Roman culture as paramount dismissed Northern art as anti-intellectual, as the painters from the Netherlands had not based their art upon the rules and aesthetics of antiquity. It may seem inappropriate to mention to such criticisms during a conference that celebrates Netherlandish art, but these remarks tell us a great deal about painting in the Low Countries. For the sake of this audience, I have reduced an art-theoretical lecture into three telling quotations.

Michelangelo is supposed to have said that: “In Flanders, they paint with a view to external exactness or such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill, as for example saints and prophets. They paint stuffs and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees, and rivers

and bridges, which they call landscapes [...] And all this, though it pleases some people, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skillful judgment or boldness, and, finally, without substance or vigor.” And to divert the taste of his readers from Northern to Italian art, Francisco de Holanda, who actually wrote this, cunningly added that art from the Netherlands only appeals “to women, especially to the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen with no sense of true harmony.”

I also want to share a passage from the twelfth *Discourse* that Sir Joshua Reynolds delivered to his young students at the Royal Academy in 1763. In it, he deals with the perception that Dutch painting reflects Nature. “The terms beauty or nature, which are general ideas, are but different modes of expressing the same thing,” he says, “whether we apply these terms to statues, poetry, or picture. Deformity is not nature, but an accidental deviation from her accustomed practice. This general idea therefore ought to be called Nature, and nothing else, correctly speaking, has a right to that name. But we are so far from speaking, in common conversation, with any such accuracy, that, on the contrary, when we criticize Rembrandt and other Dutch painters, who introduced into their historical pictures exact representations of individual objects with all their imperfections, we say, - though it is not in good taste, yet it is nature. This misapplication of terms must be often perplexing to the young student. Is not art, he may say, an imitation of nature? Must he not therefore who imitates her with the greatest fidelity, be the best artist? By this mode of reasoning Rembrandt has a higher place than Rafaele. But a very little reflection will serve to show us that these particularities cannot be nature: for how can that be the nature of man, in which no two individuals are the same.”

Eugène Delacroix also made note of the Flemish and Dutch inclination towards imitation in his *Journal*. “Flemish artists who are so admirable in family scenes [...] have echoed these in their mythological, historical, heroic and poetical works. They cover simple Flemish people, painted from nature, in draperies and mythological accessories and paint them as faithfully as they would do while rendering a brothel scene. The results are variously bizarre and turn a Jupiter and a Venus into citizens of Bruges or Antwerp in travesty.” Strangely enough, Delacroix thought Rubens was an exception to this rule. But aren’t Rubens’s quivering mythological nudes also inspired by a desire to turn antique statues into living creatures? By the challenge of making goddesses look real?

Flemish and Dutch art has much in common and cannot be separated as easily as nationalist art historians of the nineteenth-century tried to do. Invention travelled then, as it does now, if perhaps a bit more slowly. Condemned for being sentimental and ill-conceived, without harmony, looked upon with contempt because of the vulgarity or ugliness of the models, the art of the Low Countries was – and still is – mainly praised for its unparalleled illusionism and frequently outspoken and unvarnished naturalism. It rejoices in observation.

Love for Dutch and Flemish art is certainly alive and kicking among museum visitors and art collectors today. As proof, we have invited four distinguished collectors, who will be interviewed by Rudi Ekkart in the concluding session of this symposium. We are honored to welcome George Abrams, George Kremer, Thomas Leysen and Marieke Sanders. But the international taste for the art of the Low Countries was established by a relatively small number of connoisseurs in past centuries. Aristocrats, politicians, businessmen, writers and art historians were eager to pay homage to the exceptional artistic talents of the past.

The catholic Habsburgs, Bourbons and Stuarts, the protestant Oranges and the orthodox Romanovs had a particular love of Baroque Flemish and Dutch history paintings with grand gestures. They saw these compositions primarily as visual tools that could glorify absolutism or as suitable decoration for their palaces. For this reason, imperial and royal dynasties throughout Europe commissioned, bought, inherited and accumulated many hundreds of history paintings. This also explains the presence of more than one hundred works by Rubens and his studio in the Prado alone. (Alejandro Vergara will shed light on the collections of the Spanish kings during his lecture tomorrow.) In 1656, Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, governor of the Southern Netherlands, took his famous collection of Flemish masters to Vienna, where he retired. Four years later, the Antwerp artist and court painter David Teniers published the *Theatrum Pictorium*, the first illustrated printed catalogue of a major paintings collection. This opulent book contained etchings that reproduced 243 paintings, which now form the nucleus of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. In 1698 Maximilian Emanuel of Bavaria, another governor of the Southern Netherlands, purchased 101 paintings from the Antwerp art dealer Gisbert van Colen, works that can still be seen in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

In the early 1700s, banker and connoisseur Pierre Crozat, one of the foremost drawings collectors of his time, acted as buying agent for **Philippe, duke of Orléans**. The French regent's acquisitions were shown in his palace in the center of Paris, today the Palais Royal. It contained some 500 paintings, including famous Italian pictures by Raphael, Correggio, Titian and Veronese. Dutch and Flemish works were displayed in smaller rooms with rich furniture, porcelain and *boiseries*. The Flemish works were dominated by Rubens, with 19 paintings, including a group of 12 oil sketches, van Dyck with 10 works and David Teniers with 9. The Dutch paintings included 6 Rembrandts, 7 works by Caspar Netscher and 3 by Frans van Mieris. There were 3 Gerrit Dou and 4 Wouwermans. The rooms had been rearranged to accommodate the paintings and connoisseurs were particularly taken by the *Galerie à la Lanterne*, with its even, sunless top light diffused from the cupola overhead. The collection was accessible to the public for most of the 18th century, aided by the printed catalogue of 1727, republished ten years later. The Northern paintings in the Palais Royal collection were a prime source of inspiration for French artists such as Watteau, Fragonard and de La Fosse. The collection was sold off by the bankrupt Philippe-Egalité in 1788. Parisians deeply regretted the dispersal of these masterpieces, which ended up mainly in English collections.

On the other side of the channel, at around the same time, an important collection of Dutch and Flemish works was assembled by England's first prime minister **Sir Robert Walpole**. I only mention him briefly, because his activities will be dealt with later today in Irina Sokolova's lecture. And tomorrow, Elinoor Bergvelt will focus on King of Poland Stanislaw Poniatowski's frustrated ambitions to form a collection.

Taste for smaller Dutch and Flemish genre paintings, especially for Leiden fine painters, increased notably in the first half of the eighteenth century. One of the best collections was formed by **Augustus the Strong** and his son **Augustus III**, electors of Saxony and Kings of Poland. They collected paintings of the highest quality in vast quantities, regardless of subject-matter or country of origin. The volume of their purchases only lessened with the beginning of the seven year's war in 1756. The numbers are striking: 38 pictures by Wouwermans, at least 16 by Teniers, 14 by Gerrit Dou and 13 by Frans van Mieris. The collection boasted 11 Ruysdaels, 11 Jan Brueghels, 9 Jan Griffiers, 8 Berchems

and 8 works by Adriaen van der Werff. A first catalogue of the collection was published in French in 1765. The Dresden Gallery was an artistic laboratory for Winckelmann, Goethe and many others.

Another important advocate for Dutch and Flemish art in the early eighteenth century was **Johann Wilhelm of the Palatinate**. In his capital city Düsseldorf, he built a gallery with five large rooms for his collection of more than 300 paintings, mostly by Netherlandish masters. Aside from outstanding works by Rubens and Van Dyck, the collection included the famous Passion series by Rembrandt and many works by Honthorst, Berchem, Weenix, Metsu and van den Eeckhout. This early museum played a key role in the formation of the aesthetics of its famous visitors, such as Diderot, Goethe, Herder, Brentano, the von Humboldt brothers and Thomas Jefferson. A catalogue was published in 1778. The collection was transferred to Munich in 1805 and is now on view in the Alte Pinakothek.

Dutch and Flemish art came into the spotlight again in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Looted art from various European churches and collections was brought together in the Louvre under the guidance of Vivant Denon, who formed an encyclopedic collection that could be consulted by the *citoyens* of the Republic. Aside from Classical antiquities and masters of the Renaissance, the French middle classes also discovered and rediscovered the work of lesser-known Northern European Baroque artists, as well as Early Netherlandish painting, which was considered obsolete until that time. Luckily, some important artworks that were closely tied with local identity remained in their place of origin. Tomorrow Manfred Sellink will tell us more about the artistic patrimony of Bruges and Norbert Middelkoop will reveal some of Amsterdam's treasures.

One of the first collectors to acknowledge the importance of early Flemish, Dutch and German painting was **Sulpiz Boisserée**. He and his brother began to collect more than 200 ancient panel paintings from 1804 onwards. They did this together with their friend Johann Baptist Bertram. They met regularly with Goethe, who visited their vast collection in Heidelberg. In 1827 large part of this collection was sold to king Ludwig I of Bavaria and shown in the Alte Pinakothek from 1836 onwards. The enthusiasm of the Boisserée brothers for the sincere aesthetic and the origins of oil painting inspired several other collectors in Europe, such as **Florent van Ertborn**, who would reunite 140 paintings, including works by Van Eyck, Van der Weyden, Memling, David and Fouquet. I have been showing

pictures of some of these during the course of this lecture. Upon his death in 1840 Van Erborn left his stunning collection to the Royal Museum in Antwerp. That **King Willem II of the Netherlands** decided to buy 42 paintings through the Brussels art dealer Nieuwenhuys must have been at least partly due to his awareness of national artistic heritage. After his ascension to the throne in 1840 the king added an elaborate series of Neo-Gothic halls to his residence at the Kneuterdijk in The Hague for his collection, which had steadily grown to 350 works. This included the *Annunciation* by Van Eyck, the *Judgement of Emperor Otto* by Bouts and the *Portrait of Nicolaes Ruts* by Rembrandt. Unfortunately, this collection was dispersed after the King's death in 1850, but is the subject of an exhibition that has recently opened in the Hermitage and will then travel to Dordrecht and Luxembourg.

Aside from the renewed interest in paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the middle of the nineteenth century also witnessed a growing taste for the naturalism in Dutch landscapes, interiors and still lifes. It is no coincidence that the change in taste took place at the same time as the rise of Realism in what was then contemporary art and with the growing power of the bourgeoisie. The transfer of the cabinet of Stadholder Willem V to Paris in 1795 caused quite a sensation. From then on, French art lovers would make a pilgrimage to Holland to study paintings of the Golden Age *in situ*. The interest in Dutch art was stimulated by the writings of **Théophile Thoré-Bürger**, who was intrigued by the works of Frans Hals and Carel Fabritius. But most of all, he was stunned by Vermeer's *View of Delft*, which he saw in the Mauritshuis in 1842. The author went on to publish a catalogue raisonné of the master in 1866 and to buy several of his paintings. These are now in London and Berlin. Thoré-Bürger and Marcel Proust are undoubtedly the founders of today's worldwide cult of Vermeer.

When the German Empire was established in 1871, Kaiser Wilhelm II decided to create a museum collection in Berlin that would equal – or even surpass – the prestigious princely collections in Vienna, Dresden and Munich. The renowned art historian **Wilhelm von Bode**, a specialist on Rembrandt and Dutch painting, was charged with the formation of a collection that would meet international expectations. He was assisted by the scholar **Max Friedländer** from 1896. Bode's close relationship with the Kaiser, his political astuteness, and his relationships with artists, art dealers and collectors enabled him to buy major works for the museum. Unlike most princely collections, the approach was

systematic and the emphasis placed on painting from Germany and the Low Countries. Bode and Friedländer managed to shape this magnificent art-historical survey in only two decades. Their efforts resulted in a gallery, which has the best collection of Early Netherlandish painting in the world, as well as a group of Rembrandt paintings that is surpassed only here in the Rijksmuseum and in St. Petersburg.

The intimate, quiet feeling that Dutch interiors convey, appealed especially to art lovers in Great Britain and the United States. Many Protestant collectors were struggling with the power of images, and were unfavorably disposed towards any depiction deemed catholic, exuberant or morally improper. From a Protestant point of view, the visual arts and worship have very little to do with one another and art should only have an ornamental function. According to Luther “images, bells, eucharistic vestments, church ornaments, altar lights, and the like I regard as things indifferent. Anyone who wishes may omit them.” To Calvin, there was a more intense rivalry between the visual image and the spoken word. He dismissed visual images as idolatry and as a vain and dangerous attempt to represent God. These views were in line with the John Adams’s philosophy. The second president of the United States had seen a threat to democratic liberties in the glories of French art. In his opinion, painting and sculpture were essentially antidemocratic and associated with despotism and superstition. He added that he “would not give sixpence for a picture by Raphael or a statue of Phidias.” A similar sense of morality and embarrassment was reflected in the policy of museum trustees. As late as 1871, the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum let it be known that they did not intend to open it for public on the Lord’s day “as a place of amusement.” It would seem that American Society harbored a deep-seated anxiety about “immoral images,” in other words about art. This explains the preference for portraits and virtuous subjects on the part of the coal-, steel-, and railway magnates of the Gilded Age. Dutch painting appealed especially to tycoons in Boston, Philadelphia and New York, many of whom were not too far removed in spirit from the early settlers in New England and *Nieuw Amsterdam*. They did not acquire frolicking Venuses, but chased contemplative letter readers. This attitude can still be sensed today in American museum collections and among American collectors, and I expect we will hear more about this from Walter Liedtke later on. The exception that proves the rule is circus entrepreneur John Ringling, who accumulated a collection of large and populated Baroque pictures,

including several gigantic Rubens tapestry cartoons in the 1920's. It is housed in the sunny resort of Sarasota, Florida.

Ever since the birth of French Realism in the 19th century, Dutch painting – especially genre painting – has enjoyed a steady rise in popularity. This is not surprising, given that it is highly accessible art that can be appreciated without much prior knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology or Christian iconography. It is art that can be understood by a large public. It is unlike history painting, which is intended for worship or conceived for the educated few and for those who know that a woman with eyes on a plate represents Saint Lucy and a man covered with eyes all over his body is called Argus. In Dutch painting, a milkmaid is a milkmaid and sunflowers are sunflowers: what you see is what you get. For this reason Dutch and Flemish pictures are Holland and Belgium's best ambassadors. They open doors throughout the world.

Thank you.