

The History of the Dutch and Flemish Art Collection of the Szépművészeti Múzeum

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Brussels – Vienna – Buda: Netherlandish Paintings from the Collection of Leopold Wilhelm

Leopold Wilhelm (1614-1662) and his art collection played a defining role in shaping the presence and popularity of seventeenth-century Netherlandish art in Central Europe. The Archduke of Austria built up the larger part of his collection in Brussels, when he was governor of the Netherlands. Compiled with exceptional expertise and taste, and comprising paintings from Italy, Germany and the Low Countries, the collection surpassed the greatest galleries of the seventeenth century. In 1657, the archduke moved back to Vienna, bringing his collection with him. Under the terms of his will, the collection was inherited by his nephew, Emperor Leopold I. Originally amounting to around 1400 outstanding paintings, the collection – although it has not survived intact – still makes up the lion's share of the imperial collections (today in Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). The imperial collection of paintings, including Leopold Wilhelm's gallery, was transferred in 1729 to Vienna's Stallburg, and then in 1776 to the Belvedere, the former summer retreat of Prince Eugene of Savoy. The royal residences in Hungary were also furnished by the imperial household. Maria Theresa and Emperor Joseph II would send furniture and paintings from their collection in Vienna to the newly rebuilt palace in Buda and the castle in Bratislava. One such occasion was when Prince Albert von Sachsen-Teschen and Archduchess Maria Christina moved to Bratislava to act as governors. After the couple's brief stay there, some of the paintings were returned to Vienna, while the rest made their way to the newly reconstructed residence in Buda, where they were divided among the living quarters of the palatine and of the president of the court chamber.

As we can see from the above, the artworks in the imperial collections were subject to regular movement. Around 400 of the works originally belonging to Leopold Wilhelm's collection can still be seen in the Viennese gallery, while the next largest group is kept by the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. No inventory of the pictures placed in the Buda Palace in the eighteenth century has yet been found, and there is only patchy information about what happened to them thereafter. The 78 works in the living quarters of the president of the court

chamber were moved, by decree of Lajos Kossuth (Regent-President of the Kingdom of Hungary during the revolution of 1848-49), to the National Museum in 1848, and later to the Museum of Fine Arts. Buda Palace was seriously damaged during the siege of 1849, and many artworks were destroyed. Still, over 500 paintings survived, though their fate was uncertain for a while. Then in 1856 “they were sold off for a pittance at auction”, and now they are virtually untraceable.

Among the Netherlandish paintings removed from Buda Palace in 1848 and now in the Museum of Fine Arts is a work made after a lost painting by Rubens, *Soldiers Carousing*, which was part of the artist’s estate in Antwerp in 1640 sixteen-fourty, and which the sources tell us was then owned by the Spanish king. *Gaius Mucius Scaevola before Porsenna*, by another painter from Antwerp, Peter van Lint was moved from Vienna to Bratislava in 1781, and from there to Buda. In addition to contemporary copies of portraits of *King Philip II of Spain* and *Queen Mary I of England* made by the court painter to the Spanish Habsburgs, Anthonis Mor, there was also a copy of Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Bacchus Singers*, which had also been in the collection of Leopold Wilhelm, and a picture of *Diana and Actaeon* by the Flemish painter Bernaert de Rijckere, dated 1582. Seventeenth-century Dutch painting was relatively poorly represented in Buda Palace, although one important work is the *Still Life with Cheese* by Floris van Dyck of Haarlem. Over the years, a few paintings from the archduke’s former collection have turned up at auctions or in private collections, such as *Venus with Cupid Holding a Mirror* attributed to Titian, and the *Portrait of an Old Man* by Joos van Cleve (?), which were auctioned from the collection of Hugó Kilényi in 1917. The *Barnyard* by Melchior Hondcoeter, a popular Dutch painter of bird pictures, was still in Budapest in 1948, but its whereabouts are currently unknown.

From the Finest Princely Gallery in Hungary to the Old Masters’ Gallery – Netherlandish Paintings in the Esterházy Collection

The famous Esterházy gallery owes its true founding to Miklós the Magnificent’s grandson, Miklós Esterházy II (Nikolaus II, Prince of Esterházy; 1765-1833). Although the prince clearly favoured classicism and adored Mengs, Thorvaldsen and Canova – he commissioned the latter to sculpt his daughter, Leopoldina – when collecting, he strove for completeness, and wanted nothing more than to have every style and movement of art represented in his

gallery with works by the greatest painters. He received immense support in this venture from the Viennese etcher, Joseph Fischer (1769-1822), whom he met in 1803 in Paris, where he was already recognised as an art expert. Prince Miklós took him into his employ, and from that autumn, Fischer dedicated himself to organising the prince's collection. From 1804 he served as inspector of the collection of paintings and engravings, becoming its director in 1811. Prince Miklós held the works of Italian artists most dearly – which is unsurprising, given the tours of Italy he undertook, and the time he spent in Naples with his uncle, the imperial envoy there – whereas Fischer was particularly familiar with Netherlandish painting, so the knowledge and experience of the two men complemented each other perfectly. Between 1803 and 1810 the collection was enriched with works by painters including Ridolfo Ghirlandaio, Bernardo Strozzi, Guido Reni, Rubens, Van Dyck, Jordaens, Rottenhammer and Jan Brueghel the Elder. Aptly described by Stefan Körner as a “maniac art collector”, Prince Miklós bought over 1000 paintings, 3500 drawings and 50,000 prints during his lifetime.

Apart from the consciously held principles for augmenting the gallery, the purchases made at home and abroad were also influenced by lucky finds and opportunities, or by the fluctuating financial situation of the prince's treasury. It was partly due to Fischer's own personal taste, but also partly down to the general practice of art collecting in those days, that Netherlandish paintings were more intimate in terms of both size and theme, and were beloved and eagerly welcomed in the gallery of Miklós Esterházy.

The Esterházy gallery was opened to visitors in 1812, with 528 paintings on display. A catalogue was also published, compiled extremely accurately by Fischer, but with a cautious approach when it came to attributions. The largest part of the collection, with 263 pieces, by then was already the Netherlandish section. Despite Fischer's interest and diligence, he was not always able to distinguish between Dutch and Flemish artists, nor at times between the masters of certain Italian schools. The comparatively few Netherlandish paintings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were placed among the works of early German artists (in rooms 1 and 2 of the gallery in Laxenburg). Seventeenth-century paintings were allotted six rooms; as already mentioned, works by Dutch and Flemish painters were not separated. The arrangement also depended partly on the subject: in room 8, for example, all but one or two of the works were landscapes, while the following room contained a variety of paintings of birds and animals. Room 11 was given over to portraits and historical themes, and in the next room visitors could see autograph pictures by Rembrandt, and Rubens as well as other painters from

their respective schools. At that time, the jewels in the crown were Aelbert Cuyp's *Cows by the Riverside*, which was once owned by the famous eighteenth-century English collector, John Barnard; the *Portrait of a Man* by Frans Hals, previously thought to be a portrait by Jan Asselijn (in the Esterházy gallery, this work was attributed to Karel Dujardin); a Bartholomeus van Bassen painting of a Gothic church interior ; Melchior de Hondecoeter's imposing canvas showing his much loved pelican with some other water birds; a *Portrait of a Man* by Jacob Jordaens, purchased from the art dealing company, Artaria in Vienna, and a *Portrait of a Woman* each by Jan Miense Molenaer and Willem Drost – the last two were ascribed to Rembrandt, as was *The Old Rabbi*. It is interesting to note that in the Esterházy gallery, Leonard Bramer was deemed to be the author of the unusual *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* – the attribution of which still provokes much debate, along with the pair of portraits of one of seventeenth-century Holland's richest merchant families, Jacob Trip and his wife, which are now known to be by Nicolaes Maes. In 1814 Miklós Esterházy bought the palace in Mariahilf, Vienna, that had once belonged to Wenzel Anton, Prince of Kaunitz-Rietberg, and from 1815, the doors to its gallery were open to visitors twice a week. In 1817 Esterházy purchased several works from the heirs of the art dealer Martin Deissler, including Saenredam's *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk in Haarlem*, and two landscapes attributed at the time to Jan van Goyen. At auctions from the Kaunitz collection held in 1820 and 1829, and directly through the mediation of certain art dealers, Miklós Esterházy managed to purchase several important works, including Anthonis van Dyck's *Portrait of a Married Couple*, Jan Brueghel the Elder's *The Fall of Man*, and the joint work by Rubens and Van Dyck, *Mucius Scaevola before Porsenna*. The inventory of the Esterházy gallery from 1820 already lists the painting by the Utrecht artist, Cornelis van Poelenburgh, *The Seven Children of Frederick V, Elector Palatine, "the Winter King"*, which comes from the collection of King Charles I of England. The same inventory also contains one of the finest Dutch landscapes in the collection, Salomon van Ruysdael's *After the Rain*. Jan van der Heyden's still life, *Corner of a Room with Curiosities*, is noteworthy not only for the unusual objects portrayed, or the meticulous technique, but also for the signature of the artist, proudly announcing his age of 75 years.

Prince Esterházy also augmented his collection by purchasing, among others, the collection of engravings from the Counts Pálffy, the Kollowrat collection of drawings and engravings in Prague, and the collection of drawings from Antonio Cesare Poggi. He thus acquired a

number of truly important pieces, among them several works by Rembrandt and his circle. After the death of Miklós Esterházy in 1833, his enormous collection was inherited by his son, Miklós III, who in 1865 exhibited part of the collection in 14 rooms in the Hungarian Academy building in Pest. There were several Dutch paintings among those not displayed in Pest, including one by Rembrandt. Five years later, the Hungarian state bought 637 paintings from the Esterházy collection, as well as thousands of drawings and engravings, and the extremely valuable art library owned by the princely family. The need to house and maintain the now state-owned paintings from the former Esterházy gallery led to the establishment of the National Picture Gallery in 1871, the legal predecessor of today's Museum of Fine Arts, the current building of which was completed by 1906.

A “Rembrandt Room” without a Rembrandt

With the passing of time it has proven that all the works attributed to Rembrandt in the Esterházy collection, and now in the Museum of Fine Arts, were painted by other hands. Even when the list of works being offered by the Esterházy gallery, and their values, were presented to the state, Otto Mündler refused to accept that the large painting of *Christ before Pilate* was by Rembrandt. He suggested it was by Jan Victors of Amsterdam, and for a long while it was held to be by Nicolaes Maes. Following Sumowski, the work is now attributed to Reynier van Gherwen. The *Portrait of Rembrandt* is not a self-portrait, but an old copy of an original from around 1655, which is now only known from copies. The truly exquisite *Portrait of a Woman* was ascribed by the famous Dutch collector and art historian, Abraham Bredius, to Vermeer van Delft in 1888, and the painting was included in the Vermeer exhibition in Rotterdam in 1935. (There are probably very few works indeed that have been attributed, at various times in their history, to both Rembrandt and Vermeer!) Following more than half a century of the published proposal that Rembrandt's pupil, Willem Drost, could be the portrait's author, this has recently been accepted by Drost's monographer as well. The painting in Budapest fondly referred to as *The Old Rabbi* is the one that managed to hold on to its attribution to Rembrandt for the longest time: it was not until the second half of the 1980s that the literature reclassified the work as originating from the master's circle. Prince Miklós Esterházy III (1817-1894), who had instigated the sale of the collection, decided upon its successful conclusion in 1870 that, "... I shall donate to the nation six of the finest oil paintings that have remained in my

possession.” Of these, the date (1660) and the signature on the *Portrait of a Young Woman* attributed to Rembrandt turned out to be later additions, and by the end of the nineteenth century it was regarded as a work by Paulus Moreelse. In his catalogue on the Dutch portraits in Budapest, Rudi Ekkart convincingly proved that the painting is by the Haarlem artist, Jan Miense Molenaer, known mainly for his genre pieces, and Ekkart also identified the work’s original pendant (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm). In the 1812 catalogue of the Esterházy collection, the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* is listed as a work by Leonard Bramer of Delft, but opinions on its author (or authors) continue to vary among art historians. Since being tentatively postulated as the joint work by Rembrandt and Gerard Dou which features in a seventeenth-century inventory, this identification has endured the longest. After the Esterházy purchase, a further work purported to be by Rembrandt was added to the National Picture Gallery’s collection. In 1888 Károly Pulszky bought a picture of the *Dream of Joseph* from Aloys Hauser, a museum art restorer from Munich, which does indeed bear a strong resemblance to the art of Rembrandt, although there is still no clear and precise attribution. The collection of György Ráth, the noted art collector and the first director of the Museum of Applied Arts, was the source of a *Portrait of a Girl*, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, which featured in the 1888 exhibition of private collections in Budapest’s Kunsthalle as a work by Salomon Koninck, but was given the title *Jewish Bride*, by Rembrandt, in the 1906 catalogue of the Ráth Museum. In the 1920s, the picture was included by the monographer of Jan Lievens in the oeuvre of this studio associate, and rival, of Rembrandt’s in Leiden, and this attribution has held ever since. Once in the collection of the eminent Parisian art dealer, Charles Sedelmeyer, and then owned by Ráth, the *Slaughtered Ox* was displayed at the 1898 Rembrandt exhibition in Amsterdam. Rembrandt’s authorship of this work, with its subsequently added signature, was also questioned: Sumowski attributed it to an unknown artist of the Rembrandt school, while Fred Meijer has recently put forward the idea that the work could be by one of the Ostade brothers.

The Heyday of the Golden Age” in Hungary: the Nineteenth Century and the tierce of the Twentieth Century

The traditional centre for art collecting in Hungary had long been Vienna. Here assembled Count Sámuel Festetics (1806-1862) his famous collection. A substantial part of this gallery

consisted of seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings. Though the Festetics auction was advertised in 1859, it never took place. Most of the pictures were bought by the Viennese art dealer Friedrich Jakob Gsell for a sum above their estimated value. When Gsell's collection was auctioned in 1871, Count Edmund Zichy seized the opportunity to "take back" into Hungarian ownership some valuable items from his compatriot's former collection. Similarly, he set his heart on not allowing the Esterházy gallery to be dispersed far and wide among foreign hands, and he himself purchased some of the paintings sold off from the Esterházy Castle in Pottendorf.

After Edmund Zichy's death, the collection was inherited by his son, Count Jenő Zichy, who enriched the gallery – long with the splendid collection of applied art that he had also inherited – with exotic artworks brought home from his expeditions from the Caucasus mountains and East Asia. The rich collection of art objects were installed in the Jenő Zichy Museum, which was built adjacent to his mansion in Budapest and opened in 1902. The count bequeathed his entire collection to the capital city, therefore many of his works were housed in the Municipal Picture Gallery, and when that was taken over, in the Museum of Fine Arts. The seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish schools were also significantly represented in the Zichy collection, among them pieces such as Jan Miense Molenaer's *The Duet*, Jan Cornelisz Droochsloot's enormous canvas, *Village on a River with Peasants Entertaining Themselves*, which probably already formed a pair in the count's Viennese mansion with another work by the painter of similar size and theme, *Village Street*. Also forming pendants to each other, in identical carved frames, were two outstanding Dutch still lifes: the *Still Life with Fruit and Roemer* painted jointly by Pieter Claesz. and Roelof Claesz. Koets and the *Still Life with Ham, Silver Jug and Nautilus Cup* by Willem Claesz Heda. Standing out among the relatively few Flemish works is the religious allegory by Frans Francken the Younger, *Christ in a Painter's Studio (Pictura Sacra)*.

After the death of the founding director of the Museum of Applied Arts, György Ráth in 1905 his widow donated his collection to the state. It contained some absolute masterpieces: the *Merry Company in the Garden* by Dirck Hals, the meticulously executed painting of *A Shepherd Playing the Flute and a Singing Shepherdess* by Paulus Potter, Melchior de Hondcoeter's *Barnyard* and the *Portrait of a Girl* by Jan Lievens, mentioned earlier, Nicolaes Maes' imposing portrait of Maria van der Meer as a child, a *Portrait of a Man* by Bartholomeus van Helst, the favourite painter among the elite of Amsterdam, and Aert van

der Neer's *Moonlit View of a Large River*. Since the collection in the Ráth Museum was distributed among public collections in Budapest, the paintings listed above, and many further pieces, have become some of the most treasured pieces in the Museum of Fine Arts.

After the Esterházy collection, which formed the basis of the National Picture Gallery, the second most important group acquisition by the Museum of Fine Arts was the bequest of Count János Pálffy (1829-1908). Born into an old and respected family, the count owned mansions in Vienna, Budapest and Bratislava, and his enormous collection of art was distributed among these three mansions and his castles in Bojnice, Pezinok and Kráľová pri Senci (now in Slovakia). Among the more than a hundred paintings that arrived in the Museum of Fine Arts in 1912 as part of the Pálffy bequest, the seventeenth-century Dutch school is represented by such masterpieces as Bartholomeus van Helst's *Portrait of Captain Gideon de Wildt*, a remarkable portrait by Jan Lievens of the 116 Petrus Egidius de Morrion, Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of the Amstel in Amsterdam* and Jan Steen's *Drunken Woman* (or *Dutch Cocotte*, as it was named by Térey).

When Károly Pulszky was director of the Museum of Fine Arts (1893-1896), he enriched its collection with a number of important Netherlandish works (even though his main purchases were from the Italian Renaissance). Among them were the afore-mentioned *Dream of Joseph*, a *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* once believed to be an early Rembrandt, but now attributed to Jacob van Spreeuwen, Bartholomeus van Bassen's *Interior of an Imaginary Church with the Tomb of William the Silent*, and a portrait by Jacob van Loo of the wealthy Amsterdam trader, Jan Hinlopen and his wife. The museum's body of works from the Low Countries was greatly augmented as a result of the acquisition policy of Gábor Térey during his time as head of the Old Masters' Gallery between 1904 and 1914. During his career he exchanged regular correspondence with outstanding foreign colleagues and museum experts of the day, most notably Max Friedländer, the leading researcher on early Netherlandish painting, and Wilhelm Bode, the museum director from Berlin and the supreme authority on seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish painting. Their influence clearly played a part in the fact that, during Térey's time, the museum bought or was gifted (including the Pálffy bequest) around 330 paintings, and nearly half of them were works by Netherlandish artists. In addition to the pictures acquired from private collections in Hungary – predominantly Budapest – there are also some significant pieces that were purchased from foreign art dealers, such as Goudstikker of Amsterdam, Miethke and Wawra of Vienna, and Sedelmeyer and Kleinberger of Paris. The

works bought on the international art market include some pieces that are still highlights of the Museum of Fine Arts today, such as Willem Buytewech's *Merry Company* and Hendrick Avercamp's winterscape, *Frozen River with Skaters*. It is largely due to the efforts of Gábor Térey, then, that the collection of Netherlandish art at the Museum of Fine Arts, with particular regard to its seventeenth-century Dutch school, is one of the richest and most diverse in the museums of Europe.

Isolation and Re-Integration

Art collecting in Hungary, which had grown apace from the second half of the nineteenth century and had thrived during its golden age, was halted by World War I and the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and then as a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon. Total collapse resulted from the anti-Jewish laws passed in the 1930s, which affected the majority of collectors in Hungary, and then came the cataclysmic World War II. The final nails in the coffin were hammered in by Nazi and Soviet troops, who plundered the country of many artworks, most of which are either still unreturned or untraced.

During the years of socialism, artworks could only be sold or auctioned officially through the Consignment Trading Company (BÁV), and on occasion, the Museum of Fine Arts made purchases there, such as the decorative *Vanitas Still Life* by Franciscus Gijsbrechts, Gerard de Lairesse's French-style work, *The Allegory of Constancy*, and the gloriously colourful *Company Making Music* by the Netherlandish Caravaggist painter, Wouter Pietersz. Crabeth. The museum also had some opportunities to add to its collection by buying from private individuals.

The regime change launched a new era in opportunities for the museum to acquire works. Under the directorship of Miklós Mojzer between 1989 and 2004, about a hundred paintings were added to the Old Masters' Gallery, most of them sold or donated by Hungarian private owners. Mojzer succeeded in purchasing some of the more significant pieces among them, such as the large panel, *The Road to Calvary*, by the distinctive Mannerist artist, the Master of the Augsburg Ecce Homo, and *The Allegory of Sight* from the workshop of Jacob de Backer (of the series on the five senses, the one depicting *Smell* also later joined the collection, the *Portrait of a Man* painted in 1601 by Michiel van Mierevelt, Willem Key's *Susanna and the Elders*, *The Continnence of Scipio*, attributed to Jan van Noordt, and a *Saint Jerome in his Cell*

made after a lost composition by Marinus van Reymerswaele. Of the works on display here, another important acquisition is Pieter Lastmann's dynamic *Resurrection* by Rembrandt's teacher. In the past decade and a half, the permanent exhibition in the museum has expanded not only through new purchases – among them Barend van Orley's panel showing, *The Agony in the Garden*, from his four-part Passion-series, and Johnson van Ceulen's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, which previously passed through the collections of both Marcell Nemes and Mór Lipót Herczog – but also through generous long-term loans of works from private collectors, such as the *Allegory of Colonial Power* by Willem de Poorter as the *Allegory of Joy and Melancholy* by Abraham Janssens. Three versions of Janssens' composition are known, including one that was once in the Brussels collection of Leopold Wilhelm. It could very well be that the painting currently in Budapest belonged to this collection and that is the piece visible on Tenier's painting.