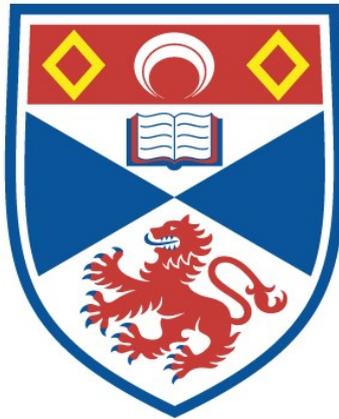


**'THE NATION'S TEMPLE': NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND NATIONAL
IDENTITY, A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY**

Juliet Edwards

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews**



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**'The Nation's Temple': National Museums and
National Identity, a Comparative case study**

Juliet Edwards

A thesis submitted in Candidacy for the degree of MPhil in
Museum and Gallery Studies

April 2005



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Abstract

One of the institutions fundamental to European nation-states, national museums play host to various socio-political constructs including that of national identity. The public art museum is part of the complex institutional dynamic linking the political state and the nation; and as a public institution accessible – at least in theory – to all areas of society, it can play a homogenising and binding role within the state. This is a quality partly created, and often drawn upon by dominant discourses in an effort to encourage identification with a prescribed set of values inherent in the display of images and objects recognised as ‘national heritage’.

This term is ambiguous, its meaning and application subject to change and political subversion. Broadly speaking ‘national heritage’ is a quality bestowed upon cultural artefacts by their display within a public space, encouraging the viewer, specifically the national viewer, to engage in the communal ownership implied by the museum space. In turn this raises many issues concerning the nature of cultural possession and the reality of national consciousness with regards to the consumption of such exhibits.

Presenting the nation to itself and the world was one of the most important tasks of the national museum in the nineteenth century; a means of defining national identity and of bolstering ideologies to political ends. In the twentieth century many of these ‘truths’ were undermined and criticised, allowing for more varied interpretations of national pasts and cultural achievements to be developed.

The Royal Museums of Fine Art in Brussels were involved in a fervent nationalisation process following the country’s independence in 1830. In accordance with revolutionary ideals a common identity was needed in Belgium to link the people to each other and the state; the museum provided a forum for this, displaying a ‘glorious common past’ cultivated by the nationalist iconography of contemporary public art. However, the national idyll of Belgium did not correspond to the historical and geographical reality of the region; evinced by the fragmentation of the state that resulted in the country’s federalisation in 1993. This effectively undermined the unitary identity promoted by the ruling elite, instrumental in the development of the museum and challenging its *raison d’être*.

In the case of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, imagery and symbols have been used systematically to substantiate and consolidate a national identity based in a semi-

mythical history of national exceptionalism. This is manifest primarily through the presentation and scale of the seventeenth century painting collection, encouraging a visual identification with this period of the country's history.

Whilst the incentives behind their formation and their presentation differ, these museums illustrate the manner in which symbols and imagery drawn from history and myth, can be used to promote or substantiate prevailing discourses of identity within a state structure. The success of such an enterprise is another matter, the degree of intent and the gap between intent and effect also serve to illustrate that the romantic ideal of the nation as understood by its founders or promoters does not necessarily impinge upon its reality.

Acknowledgements

For their help with my academic work I would like to thank the following people at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; Mr Taco Dibbits, 17th century painting curator who took the time to answer all my questions and gave me a commented tour of the collection; Mrs Maggie Archdale, education officer, for the considerable amount of information and many publications she gave me on the educational policies of the museum; and Mrs Ann-Marie Ettehoven, archivist, for letting me photocopy all the floor plans I could carry!

At the Musées Royaux des Beaux-arts in Brussels I am indebted to; Mr Dominique Maréchal, 19th century curator, for information on the recent developments in the Modern collection and the role of nineteenth century art in Belgium; Mrs Veronique Bücken, 16th century painting curator, for her insights into the structure of the museum and its ideological complexities; and Mrs Michèle Van Kalck, archivist, for granting me access at very short notice to the plans and archives of the museum.

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Last but by no means least I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support, their faith in me and my work, and for making me multi-cultural.

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Introduction

Museums are a common feature of the national landscape; the largest and most prestigious are automatically identified with the capital of the country and the political heart of the state. Common indicators of the nation-state in the Western world, museums are regarded as essential elements of 'civilised' nations, indicative of their status and presenting their people and culture to the world. Broadly speaking, 'culture is an abstract term related to perception or vision. In tangible form it is one kind of 'property'. Implicit in this is the original creative and aesthetic intervention of human beings.'¹

Terms like 'cultural property' and 'cultural heritage' are rather ambiguous and devalued by indiscriminate use. According to Jeanette Greenfield, Anglo-Saxon countries tend to use the term 'culture' in the scientific, ethnological, and artistic sense; whilst the rest of the world applies the more general and political meaning; equating culture as 'anything that heightens national consciousness.'² It is as well to remember that individual and subjective state definitions of these terms, determined by the specific historical and social factors of each country, operate within the rhetoric of national museums.

The public art museum, outcome of the Enlightenment and nineteenth century nationalist ideology, is clearly therefore, far from being a neutral space. The nature of national art collections varies from country to country and their interpretation accordingly. The majority of national museums of art in Europe and America share similar founding principles of social improvement, national glorification and the promotion of the national self. Over time the visual arts came to be associated with the nation itself, the one embodying the other, and the implied public ownership of national collections served to establish the individual within the greater community of the nation as such. Whilst such concepts have evolved over time, they remain written into the architecture and popular understanding of these institutions.

In itself, the label 'national museum' implies a mission; a museum of and for the nation, within the nation. However, this begs the question, what constitutes a nation and how does a museum serve and represent that nation?

¹ J. Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures*, Cambridge 1995, 253.

² *Ibid*, 256.

This thesis focuses on the production of museum representations; the manner in which art museums can be used as ideological vehicles in the nation building process, contributing to the creation and dissemination of communal identities articulated by dominant groups within the state. By definition highly subjective, identity is subject to change according to context and location. Its development and implementation are, therefore, nation specific. For these reasons two museums in neighbouring countries have been chosen as case studies: the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and the Musées Royaux des Beaux-arts in Brussels (MRBAB).

How these institutions evolved and their contribution to the development of the concept and role of national schools and canons is representative of the development of the public art museum in continental Europe. These case studies were chosen for their geographical and historical proximity and because, in spite of an overlapping cultural and social history, Belgium and the Netherlands have evolved into two distinctive nation-states with different concepts of social identity and its articulation at a state level.

This paper is split into two parts the first of which; 'Identity in the Low Countries', addresses notions of identity, the nation, and the causes and ramifications of nationalism. The focus is on the development of national consciousness in the Low Countries, the creation of Holland and Belgium, and concepts of identity in the region today; thereby providing the background and context within which the museums were created and operate.

Entitled 'Nationalism and the Museum', the second part of the paper concentrates on the role of national museums, specifically the Rijksmuseum and the MRBAB, as identity brokers and their development as sites of state ideology and cultural power in the nineteenth century. Through their architecture and collections national museums have been used to realise, in both visual and material terms the values the state claims to embody. 'The museum's primary function is ideological. It is meant to impress upon those who use or pass through it society's most revered beliefs and values.'³ This does not mean however, that all national museums correspond to the prescribed ideological agenda of one dominant discourse. These beliefs and values are inherently connected to specific concepts of identity founded in the history, language, and national myths of 'becoming' endorsed by an elite defined in time and space and

thereby subject to change. The impact and actuality of museum displays is hard to gauge as it is subject to the ambiguity of the consumer's gaze, something of which we still know too little and that cannot be addressed by this study.

National mythologies, overlapping histories and borders, immigration, emigration and trans-national ethnic ties all render the definition of 'the nation' ambiguous. A nation does not necessarily correspond to a state, though the state may define it politically and socially. Concepts of identity and nationality are increasingly the subject of debate and conflict in society. The part that national museums, particularly those of art and history play in the development and illustration of identity has been the focus of much argument in recent years, highlighting; 'the increasingly complex task of representing a multiplicity of past experiences, in diverse nations with ethnic, regional and cultural differences, without abandoning the idea of a common heritage.'⁴

Each museum is by definition of its national status unique, though it adheres to certain cultural and social precepts that remain valid beyond state boundaries; in so far as there is a 'world heritage' or 'universal knowledge'. If the incentive is often the same, an institution that showcases the nation, the results vary drawing as they do upon specific cultural and historical sources. As national institutions museums are inherently bound to state ideology and identity, functioning within a set of norms and values proscribed by the dominant cultural and political body. Whilst the Rijksmuseum and the MRBAB have many points in common, particularly the circumstances in which they came about and the region's art history, the nature and meaning of their collections differ. Above all it is the attitudes and perceptions of the nationals themselves that have, in the long run determined the role played by these cultural bodies in the identification of state and nation.

Whilst the ambiguities inherent within terms like 'identity' and 'heritage' are recognised, certain assumptions must be made for the purpose of this study.

³ C. Duncan and A. Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum", *Art History* 3, number 4, 1980, 448-469, 449.

⁴ G. Wright (ed.), *The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology*, Hanover and London 1996, 13.

Part 1
IDENTITY in the LOW COUNTRIES

1.1 Nations, Nationalism and Identity

Subject to increasingly disputed interpretations, the concept of identity is at the heart of most social and cultural discourse. In the twenty-first century we are confronted by terminology like *globalisation*, *multicultural*, and *ethnic minority* on a daily basis, whilst movements for regional autonomy and ethnic recognition have become routine in international politics. The acknowledgment and integration of peripheral identities and the resurgence of nationalism, both at regional and state level, dominate the headlines and political agendas of many nations with apparently established cultural and political identities. The idiom of identity at an individual, communal, and global level remains a consistent source of conflict within otherwise secure state structures.

Since the Second World War state nationalism has been regarded as potentially dangerous and divisive in Western Europe. Smaller groups however, can be openly and even militantly nationalistic without attracting the same degree of criticism, particularly if they consist of immigrant minorities within larger traditionally 'white' states. This can create an imbalance and ultimately lead to a more dangerous situation as native communities, forced to belittle or deny their ethnic and cultural identity may react aggressively towards those whose identity is perceived as overwhelming. This is increasingly the case in the economically appealing nations of Western Europe where large, ethnically distinct communities, have joined cultures whose historical identity has been undermined by internal and international events in the aftermath of decolonisation. This is the case in France; traditionally a culturally confident nation-state it is struggling to come to terms with unprecedented divisions in its social makeup following the influx of francophone Muslims from Algeria and Morocco.

This chapter examines concepts of identity in the area of North-Western Europe traditionally known as the Low Countries; specifically, the social and political context in which the modern states of Holland and Belgium first emerged and the part that nationalism and national identity played in their formation and development. Cultural nationalism in particular, its role in the creation of distinctive state identities and its museological application will be addressed in accordance with mainstream theories of nationalism and citizenship.

i. Concepts of the Nation

Nations and nationalism emerged as subjects of political and intellectual discourse alongside what we now regard as national movements, preceding the creation of modern nation-states in America and Europe in the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century French political ideology and empire building redrew the map of Europe, determining the ideological and political construct of the nation-state well into the twentieth century.⁵ To understand the role of nationalism in the formation of group identities and nation-states its origins within concepts of the 'nation' must be reconsidered. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition:

An extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language, or history, as to form a distinct race or people usually organised as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory.⁶

The Larousse definition, 'a group of people united by historic, linguistic or religious tradition that feel bonded and *aspire to maintain, or create a community,*' places slightly more emphasis on the will of the group to become, or remain, a socially defined political unit.⁷ Both descriptions suggest that a nation is validated and legitimised by its existence within a political structure linked to a territory. It is, however, increasingly clear that not only do stateless nations exist, but that they can possess identities strong enough to challenge ideals of state unity and its stability.

'Nation' is derived from the Latin *nasci*, meaning to be born and hence the noun *nationem* implying breeds, stock, or race.⁸ An early tendency to apply the term to the inhabitants of a country, replacing less specific categories like 'the people' or 'citizenry', meant that by the seventeenth century the word 'nation' in English described the inhabitants of a country and state; regardless of their ethno-national origins and composition.⁹

In the West a nation has become predominantly a territorial and spatial concept; nations must possess well-defined territories, which in turn determine the people who live in them.¹⁰ This territory constitutes a physical repository of historic memories and associations, a 'homeland' whose topography becomes unique, even sacred and its

⁵ A. Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe*, New York 2003.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol X, Oxford 1989, 231.

⁷ *Grand Larousse de la langue française*, vol.4, Paris 1975, 3553. (Author's trans. and italics)

⁸ *OED*, op.cit.

⁹ W. Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group, is a..." in J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smith (eds), *Nationalism*, Oxford 1994, 36-46.

¹⁰ A. D. Smith, *National Identity*, London 1991.

resources exclusive to 'its' people, i.e. not for alien exploitation. The revolutionary French model of the nation stipulated natural borders as evidence of its integrity and organic development. A common culture and civic ideology were also needed to generate common understandings and aspirations all of which, articulated by a centralised republican government, bound the people to each other and to their 'homeland' thereby creating a single and indivisible nation.¹¹

It was Ernest Renan who provided the basis for this in 1882 when he stated that a nation was determined by the will, or *volontée* of its members to be a nation; 'to have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have accomplished great things together, to wish to do so again, that is the essential condition for being a nation.'¹² The idea of great deeds as a binding force generating a common purpose suggests a community of descent, with a history of cohabitation and alliances resulting in communal self-consciousness. Over time this may become a desire for auto-determination in turn developing into a political identity that takes the form of a state. In this manner the fate of the two becomes interlinked, creating the 'nation-state'.

The French Revolution established the ideal of the people, *le peuple*, as the source of political power. Henceforth nation and state became interchangeable, and the original association with a community linked by blood superseded by that of a community linked by the state through a common culture, territory, and language. In theory a nation-state is a geographical and political unit whose borders roughly coincide with the territorial distribution of a national group.¹³ The legitimacy of this unit is based upon the cohesion of identities and wills within its borders; usually brought about through the actions of a dominant national or ethnic group whose people are a bonded community, the state's sovereignty thereby inherent within them. Ideally this creates a self-conscious, homogenous, cultural and political community with clear borders.

In reality, however, this is rarely the case as state structures often mask diverse and fragmented internal realities. Many ethnicities with deeply rooted territorial or 'regional' identities may co-exist within the overarching political structure of a nation-state. This is the case in European countries like Spain, Belgium, and

¹¹ O. Dann and J. Dinwiddy (eds), *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution*, London 1988.

¹² E. Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?", in Hutchinson and Smith, 17-18, 17.

¹³ Connor, op. cit. 36-46.

Switzerland. Gradually the term 'ethnic', from the Greek *ethnos*, has come to be applied to subgroups within a larger society. Though often placed in opposition to each other the intrinsic meaning of the word 'ethnic' is the same as that of 'nation'; a group characterised by common descent.¹⁴

If a nation is a community linked by descent and common history, at what point does it come to consider itself as such? In order to be a nation there must be a degree of self-awareness, Renan's common will and sense of purpose. This forms the basis for a group consciousness that can result in an auto-determination expressed through nationalism.

Nationalism is first and foremost a doctrine of popular freedom; the people must be liberated from any external constraint and be allowed to determine their own destiny. In the nineteenth century this was elaborated into a political theory that declared that each nation should have its own state and autonomy.¹⁵ In Europe this model of nationalism had its hey-day in the early nineteenth century when it provided the basis of a nation-state's legitimacy. Nationalism can exist outside the nation-state and is often regarded as the process by which a state structure is created around a specific nation, viz. Israel. It can also be a means of defending or maintaining the autonomy of a national or ethnic group within a state system, viz. the Basques. Today, 'nationalism in Western Europe most often takes the form of anti-immigrationist movements, a form of majority nationalism against ethnic minorities.'¹⁶

The ideal of a state identified in terms of a specific bonded society with a self-conscious cultural identity, was promulgated in the wake of the American Revolution whose principles were reshaped in France before being forcibly exported to Western Europe.¹⁷ Whilst this principle was soon challenged within those countries that nominally adopted the French model, many institutions were established to promulgate the ideology of one nation, one state, and one identity.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hutchinson and Smith, op. cit. 3-14.

¹⁶ J. Helbling, "The Nationalist Game: State dominance and ethnic nationalism", in H. R. Wicker (ed.), *Rethinking Nationalism and Ethnicity: the struggle for Meaning and Order in Europe*, Oxford 1997, 225-250, 238.

ii. Nationalism and Museology

Amongst such institutions were museums of the arts and sciences whose main purpose was to educate, inform, and enlighten the nation within the framework of the state. The use of the museum as a nationalising tool is in many instances undeniable; 'national museums, [...] took on a similar role to nationalism in general – national and political cohesion and civic progress.'¹⁸ The relationship between nationalist discourses and national museums is part of the complex dynamic governing nation and state; 'the dynamics of nationalism shape and re-shape the cultural institutions that represent national identity.'¹⁹ This thesis primarily addresses the production aspect of museum representations and the form they take within the specific physical space of the art museum. Cultural policies, collecting policies and macro-level institutional change are amongst the tools used to legitimate, create, and define national identities, as illustrated by the case studies that constitute the second part of this paper.

According to a certain school of thought museums are intricate amalgams of historical structures and narratives, the practices and strategies of display and the concerns and imperatives of various governing ideologies.²⁰ The museum cannot be an objective space as it participates in the construction of categories and perpetuates dividing practices of historical periodisation.²¹ The act of display is part of the signifying process through which museums endow objects with meaning, involving assumptions about the community being addressed. Exhibitions can be viewed as the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art.²² This implies a potential ideological function inherent in all works of art structured by the part spectacle, part socio-historical event that is the museum exhibition.²³

The history of national museums is often regarded in terms of cultural politics and power games, particularly regarding the early museums of the West. Whilst the merging of politics and aesthetics in the nineteenth century affected subsequent use of art at a public level, this did not prohibit the concurrent development of a more

¹⁷ A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge 1997.

¹⁸ N. Prior, *Museums and Modernity*, Oxford 2002. 44.

¹⁹ F. Foster-Hahn, "Shrine of Art or Signature of a New Nation? The National Galleries in Berlin 1848-1968", in Wright G. 79-99, 79.

²⁰ D. J. Sherman and I. Rogoff (eds), *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, London 1994.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson and S. Nairne (eds), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London 1996.

aesthetically driven museological discourse.²⁴ It is the status of art itself that has determined its place and function within the state, and by extension the museum institution. 'Art may be seen as good in itself and as something which promotes national unity ("our heritage") and the nation's reputation among other nations'.²⁵

In Europe and the US, nation-states governed by bourgeois elite's and wealthy individuals have used museums to legitimate their hegemony and promote a value system based on older precepts of culture and civilisation rooted in an idealised antiquity. It would be a mistake however to judge the actions of the past by the values of the present and there is a tendency to place too much emphasis on merely the political aspect of these nineteenth century institutions. The idea of providing a space in which a growing public could gain access to knowledge by means of cultural display was motivated by a genuine desire for social progress and improvement, coupled with the nationalistic ideal of a homogenous state. The identification of national museums with the nation was part of a gradual process of national definition that included the creation of heroes, national monuments, and the elaboration of myths of origin, that took place in many European countries in the nineteenth century.²⁶

Whilst the Napoleonic Louvre was the archetype of the 'universal museum' and the model for subsequent national museums across Europe, many of these tried to actively contrast its ideology. The National Gallery in London, for example, prided itself on the fact that it was a 'democratic' enterprise governed by parliament, emphasising its fair acquisition methods and raised awareness of the need to protect artistic heritage. Little or no attention was given to national schools and artists, a lacuna that attracted much public criticism as the gallery was seen to fail in its role as a national showcase:

Is it National to keep out of the Gallery that which would distinguish it as National? Why is it not made a prime object of the institution to cull freely from the best works of the English school and to encourage the leading artists of the day to record the progress of the art in this country? That would indeed make it a National Gallery.²⁷

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ H. S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, London 1982.

²⁵ Ibid. 180.

²⁶ D. Horne, *The Great Museum: the Re-presentation of History*, London 1984.

²⁷ Cited in J. A. Tomlinson, "State Galleries and the Formation of National Artistic Identity in Spain, England and France 1814-1851", in M. Facos and S. L. Hirsh, *Art, Culture, and National Identity in Fin-de-siècle Europe*, Cambridge 2003, 30.

This highlights the relation between the site of artistic production and that of its display and 'consumption'. We have already seen the ambiguity inherent within the concept of heritage and cultural possession yet the emotional and symbolic value of 'art of one's own nation' is indisputable. The act of cultural possession bestows additional emblematic value to that which is possessed, particularly within its country of origin. This was further developed once the issue of repatriation was broached at the Congress of Vienna in 1815; nation, soil and artistic production became entwined with political and moral idealism:

The Allies, in 1815, insisted 'on the necessity of reliving each school's work under the sky that had witnessed their birth and in the surroundings intended for them by their creators.' The rule was established that 'national heritages', by way of works of art, were not trophies of war, and if they had a home they must be returned to it.²⁸

By the late nineteenth century artists and intellectuals in Europe were trying to define a unique cultural identity that embodied the essential and distinguishing characteristics of the nation.²⁹ National schools and artists came to be associated with the nation itself and were seen to express the character of the people.³⁰ In those countries recently freed from alien rule or constraint the celebration of national characteristics in visual culture was particularly important as a means of bolstering patriotism. In Belgium art was used to encourage national sentiment:

The Flemish school has revealed itself with an unsuspected power and richness! Is that not a patriotic task? To show the past richness and power of Flanders, does not that stimulate national sentiment? Our legitimate pride...has made us prouder of our quality of Flemings, prouder of our name as Belgians.³¹

Whilst in Holland it was celebrated as evidence of the organic and permanent nature of the Dutch national character.

In the decades preceding the First World War rival nationalism's were propagated by means of large-scale exhibitions devoted to the 'best' and most 'national' artists as nations vied for ideological and cultural superiority.³² Permanent displays and national exhibitions encouraged the development of new modes of expression that were more evocative of national history than instructive, in an effort to create styles

²⁸ J. Greenfield, *op.cit.*, 278.

²⁹ Facos and Hirsh

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Taken from the closing speech of the 1902 exhibition of Flemish Primitives in Bruges; cited in Haskell, 105.

that appealed specifically to the national group. 'For the first time since the Middle Ages, the goal of artists was not to emulate a more progressive, prestigious, or promising style regardless of its point of origin, but to evolve an authentic visual language derived from presumed indigenous sources.'³³

As already discussed, certain factors such as language, race, religion, geography and history, define cultural and ethnic boundaries. They further serve to identify unique aspects of the national character thereafter cultivated to form an easily recognisable national profile and identity.³⁴ The function of the museum as a citizen-making environment, a space in which the audience is united in ownership of the heritage it observes, is controversial. However, as the following case studies will demonstrate, the articulation of a public space around a common heritage identified with its audience by means of visual codes and historical associations, contributes to the development of a more communal identity based around the state as well as older regional and ethnic ties. In the 1930s National Socialism in Germany reiterated the nineteenth century purpose of the museum as a tool in the consolidation of state and people; 'museums should [...] with all their powers contribute to the shaping of an amorphous mass of population into a nation.'³⁵

This brings us neatly to the issue of the cause and effect of national museums upon visitors, or the consumption of museum productions; what is the extent of the produced narrative's influence on the visitor. The potency of the ideology or national vision presented varies according to the visitor, raising many questions concerning the use of museum displays, and the effect and identity of the gaze. Though a logical progression, this is a topic that extends beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on the first part of the process; the creation of the museum narrative. The author is aware however that in order to gauge the full extent to which a national art museum is involved in the 'nationisation' of a country, its impact upon the consumer must also be addressed. Due to a lack of reliable material concerning visitor types and feedback this is a complex matter worth further investigation in the future.

³² F. Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the rise of the Art exhibition*, London 2000.

³³ Facos and Hirsh, *op.cit.*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Cited in K. Schubert, *The Curator's Egg: the Evolution of the Museum Concept from the French Revolution to the Present Day*, London 2000, 35.

iii. Nationalism and National Identity in the Low Countries

Nationalism was around long before it was given a modern political and intellectual dimension. Nationalist movements usually stem from the belief that one's ethnic or national tradition, and by extension identity, is under threat and worth defending.³⁶ Smith defines nationalism as 'an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation''.³⁷ Revolution is a powerful indicator of nascent or repressed nationalism; in order to reject a system of government a degree of communal self-awareness is needed to allow the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. In this manner the revolt of the people of the Low Countries against the subjugation of Catholic Spain in the sixteenth century demonstrated the existence of a proto-nationalism that would eventually lead to the creation of a nation-state.

The last decades of the sixteenth century witnessed a profound crisis in the Low Countries. The attempts at centralisation and growing absolutist tendencies of the Spanish authorities were diametrically opposed to the traditions of autonomy that existed in the pluriform society of the Flemish and Brabantine cities:

Thus one could argue that the conflict was essentially between two fundamentally opposed civilisations, between the Castelan nobility, steeped in the spirit of the *reconquista* and colonial acquisition, and the progressive world of trade and commerce which nourished the many new cultural impulses of the Renaissance.³⁸

This tension came to a head with the iconoclastic revolts of 1566 that culminated in the establishment of the Dutch Republic in 1588; precursor of the modern Netherlands and one of the earliest independent nations in Europe it would later be the first country to adopt the French model of the nation-state.³⁹

At the time, the people of the Northern and Southern Netherlands shared a common cultural and historical identity, a kinship accentuated by external threat. Religion triggered the Dutch Revolt and would prove to be the greatest force of division and union in the area. From 1688 the north became Protestant and Calvinist whilst the south, forced to undergo the Counter-Reformation, became predominantly

³⁶ Hastings

³⁷ Smith, op. cit. 73.

³⁸ W.P. Blockmans, "The Formation of a Political Union" in J. C. H. Blom and E. Lamberts (eds), *History of the Low Countries*, trans. J. C. Kennedy, Oxford 1999, 55-142, 126.

³⁹ Hastings

Catholic. Though no permanent division was foreseen at first the religious and cultural separation ensured the development of increasingly distinct societies.

Within the Republic the successful resolution of the struggle for independence generated a feeling of kinship and pride; the 'common glories in the past and common will in the present' that Renan would later give as criteria for nationhood. This feeling was strengthened in the following century through trade and the emergence of the Dutch Republic as an international power; further accentuating the alienation of the south and laying the foundations of later concepts of Dutch identity.

An often ignored yet vital part of both Dutch and Belgian history, is the immigration of over 100,000 refugees to the independent north from the Southern Netherlands during the violent suppression of the Reformation in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴⁰ This unprecedented influx of people from the highly developed and prosperous south provided a tremendous stimulus to the nascent Republic in the north. The émigrés boosted the economy, strengthened Calvinism, helped fuel the development of trade and industry and significantly influenced Dutch art; ultimately providing the cultural and economic foundations for the Golden Age that would prove such a deciding factor in the formation of the modern Dutch nation.⁴¹ This part of Dutch history was later largely ignored, as 'Dutch nation-builders were reluctant to acknowledge that the rise of the Republic was due in part to the émigré population from the Southern Netherlands'.⁴²

In the early nineteenth century the Kingdom of Belgium was also the outcome of a nationalist movement reacting to the erosion of a way of life based on history and tradition. Unlike the Netherlands, however, the people of Belgium were unable to develop a national history with a strong common identity that would in the long term bolster the nation-state. The ethnicities that make up the majority of the population share a common history through cohabitation rather than through deed and do not have common political aspirations.

Nations are usually formed around a dominant ethnic core or ethnicity, thereafter influencing the character, language and boundaries of the nation-state, as is the case of the Netherlands. The identity of a nation or national persona is subsequently largely

⁴⁰ M. Hooghe, "Borders of Hospitality: the Difficult birth of a Multicultural Society" in, *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands* 9, 2001, 94-107.

⁴¹ F. Bolkestein, "Dutch Identity in Europe", *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands* 12, 2004, 86-97.

⁴² *Ibid*, 89.

characterised by the origin myths, language and ideology of its dominant ethnicity. However, if these conflict with the language, identity, and origin myths of other native ethnicities an internal schism may occur. External pressures of modernisation and centralisation can force a peripheral group to develop a self-protective movement that takes the form of nationalism; 'nationalism is to be justified as an appropriate protest against a universalising uniformity, dominance by the other'.⁴³ The aims of peripheral nationalisms and their manifestation differ according to the degree of the ethnicity's contribution to the titular identity.

Belgian independence and the failure of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830 - the Dutch attempt to unite the northern and southern provinces endorsed by the great powers after the fall of Napoleon - confirmed that the Low Countries were irrevocably composed of two distinct proto-national groups. The creation of the Kingdom of Belgium in 1831 and its international recognition made this a political reality.

In the new Belgian state the Flemings, though culturally and numerically dominant, felt threatened by the francophone elite's desire to homogenise the country linguistically. Language became both the cause and object of 'difference', encouraging an identity defined against 'the other' linguistic group. In the twentieth century Belgium became a plurinational democracy, recognising the coexistence of more than one national identity within the same political structure. This was economically and culturally viable because the country renounced the French model of one state, one nation, one people, adopting instead the federal structure of the United States of America. Theoretically this allows conflicting identities, largely defined in contrast to each other, to acquire equal status and representation at a political level.

Once the nation has created a state and become a nation-state it must ensure its continued existence by instigating a strong national identity to supersede those already in place. Through collective self-awareness and the encouragement of myths of election and exceptionalism, a concept of the community as unique and distinguishable from the 'other' is created or reinforced. Perceived threats to this quality will trigger 'national' feeling or patriotism as a collective form of self-preservation.

⁴³ Hastings, *op. cit.* 34.

The gaze of the 'other' is a powerful definer, both at an individual and at a national level. All nations are to a certain extent characterised by the image or persona they present to the outside world. This image is made up of diverse elements based on historical and cultural achievements, often clouded by the mythological truths of nineteenth century historicism. Inhabitants of the countries are given - by themselves and foreigners - national characteristics or traits that can develop into seemingly unshakeable stereotypes, long after they have lost any actuality. Stereotypes are useful indicators of the strength of a national persona presenting as they do the memorable or iconic aspects of a country and people. Similarly, symbols are fundamental to the formulation of a lasting national identity:

The linguistic, semiotic and symbolic forms of the nation-state (flags, coins, anthems, uniforms and monuments) helped to actively foster an homogenous, standardised public national culture with its own 'organic' history. Indeed, the formation of a glorious and continuous past, in which national traditions are legitimated in the present, is an enduring feature of nations and states.⁴⁴

When looking at the emergence of national identities within the area historically known as the Low Countries, it is worth noting that outsiders have commonly conflated the various ethnicities and their history. This is most blatant in the discipline of art history in which the term 'Flemish' is often applied to work produced over a geographical area that far exceeds the boundaries of Flanders, past and present. The overlapping history and languages of the region are a common source of confusion and ambiguity when trying to identify what is Dutch, Belgian, proto-Belgian, Flemish, or simply Netherlandish.

In order to legitimise the Belgian state, a uniformity that transcended historical differences had to be achieved, encouraging the idea of one nation and its indivisibility. To this end a programme of 'nationalisation' was implemented across the country in the wake of the patriotic fervour of the revolution.⁴⁵ Though the Dutch state was older than the Belgian both countries asserted their identity in accordance with nineteenth century ideals of nationhood, emphasising their 'uniqueness' in relation to their neighbour to the north or south. In the aftermath of the Belgian Revolt, the Netherlands suffered something of an existential crisis and had to re-

⁴⁴ Prior op.cit., 42.

⁴⁵ J. Stengers and E. Gubin, *Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918: Le grand siècle de la nationalité belge*, Brussels 2002.

evaluate its identity at an international level. Both countries drew on their pasts for material from which to create a national history that would bolster the modern state. 'Thus, in the Low Countries, the definitive split of Belgium and Holland after the Revolution of 1830 fomented an intense new awareness of each nation's artistic and historical traditions.'⁴⁶

The arts were instrumental in linking the nation's present to its past, mythical or otherwise, and over the course of the nineteenth century cultural nationalism became a common form of auto-definition. Past artistic and cultural achievements were celebrated as examples of national genius or native originality whilst contemporary styles and movements demonstrated the creativity of the modern nation. Neo-classicism, developed in France in the mid eighteenth century, was one of the earliest forms of artistic nationalism, lastingly embodied in the work of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Jean-Louis David. The qualities of patriotism and solidarity associated in intellectual circles with the Spartans, Athenians and the Republic of Rome, were taken as models of public and heroic virtue in a conscious return to classical antiquity in literature, politics and the arts. More varied currents succeeded neo-classicism, and the political and ideological dimension of painting became a defining aspect of the avant-garde; 'the artist must express the beliefs, hopes, fears of his own time and country, for nationalism is a corporate form of individualism closely linked with the idea of freedom.'⁴⁷

Romanticism in particular was associated with the independence movements of the nineteenth century. It celebrated the senses and emotions over the conscious mind adapting the theme of the fatherland, *patria*, to emphasise the experience of the individual within a contemporary historical context. 'In those countries whose identity or very existence came under threat from revolutionary France, national histories gained a new potency.'⁴⁸ This was the case in Holland and Belgium, where the creation of national mythologies and the assertion of 'essential' and 'native' characteristics distinguished the nations in the face of external homogenising forces. As Belgium could not lay claim to a 'national' history prior to 1830, the revolution was glorified as the moment of auto-definition. 'The belief on the part of many

⁴⁶ R. Rosenblum and H. W. Janson, *Art of the Nineteenth Century*, London 1984.

⁴⁷ H. Honour, *Romanticism*, London 1979, 16.

⁴⁸ D. B. Brown, *Romanticism*, London 2001, 207.

members of the nation that it 'had a glorious and heroic past or pasts provides a vital underpinning for their sense of national identity.'⁴⁹

In Belgium past artists and painting styles were nationalised in an effort to link the modern school to older traditions of painting. In Holland artists like Bosboom produced work that mimicked the style of seventeenth century painters, Holland's Golden Age, and artistic distinctions between the two countries, both past and present, were emphasised or created:

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the time of flowering nationalism as well as the period when the discipline of art history took shape, Dutch and Belgian art historians drew precise territorial lines along the geographical borders of that time.⁵⁰

State based nationalism led to imperialism and colonialism in many European states, namely Spain, France, Britain and the Netherlands. The attainment and possession of colonies overseas was regarded as one of the necessary trappings of the developed western state, leading recent arrivals like Belgium and Germany to seek colonial dominions. By the end of the nineteenth century nationalism in the visual arts was both assumed and promoted, and the Great Exhibitions provided the ideal arena for the display of national power, progress, and the fruits of colonialism.⁵¹

Classification by race and nation granted state identities further validity through the exhibition of national products.

In the twentieth century established concepts and definitions of what constitute a nation, a state, and ideals of nationhood, were irrevocably undermined by the collapse of such hegemonies as the Soviet Union and demands for the recognition of regional, more 'ethnic' nations and identities. In the early days of state nationalism the general consensus was that such groups would ultimately be subsumed within a common national persona identified with the state. The ethnic revival of the 1960s in affluent Western countries and the resurgence of regional movements in, amongst others Wales, Quebec, Flanders, Scotland and Catalonia, underlined the fact that many of the people in these regions regard themselves as distinct nations or ethnic groups within a larger political structure. This is complicated by the fact that elements of these 'ethnocentric' identities, such as their language or culture, have contributed to titular

⁴⁹ A. D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, New York 2003, 168.

⁵⁰ E. J. Sluijter, "State of the Art in Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Studies", *Historians of Netherlandish Art*, Antwerp Conference 2002, www.hnanews.org/2002/sluijter2.htm.

state consciousness, underpinning a more generic identity construct, as is the case of the Flemish in Belgium.

The immigration of ethnically defined communities has been a source of conflict in the Low Countries since the 1960s. Again it is the perceived threat to a way of life, rooted in a historical cultural identity that has triggered a resurgence of nationalism in both Holland and Belgium. In Belgium this nationalism is apparent at a linguistic and regional level due to the fragmented nature of the country. Nevertheless, it is based in a fear for the cultural integrity of a nation-state that provides a legitimate forum for the various native identities.

The relative minority status of Holland and Belgium on the world stage and the disruptive history of the region have made both countries fervent advocates of a strong European Union with an emphasis on national individualisms. Internally much attention has been given to the creation of comfortable societies characterised by a predominantly bourgeois culture evident in a high standard of living. 'A certain pragmatism and a focus on succeeding in the sensory aspects of culture have been among the chief features of the bourgeois civilisation of the Low Countries.'⁵²

⁵¹ T. Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex", in D. Boswell and J. Evans (eds), *Representing the Nation: A Reader*, London 1999, 332-361.

⁵² J. C. H. Blom and E. Lamberts, "Unity and Diversity in the Low Countries" in Blom and Lamberts (eds), 461-474. 466.

1.2 Early Nationhood and Dutch National Identity

App. A: map 1.

A low-lying, waterlogged area of land facing the North Sea, Holland is known for its tulip fields, clogs, windmills and Rembrandt; whilst the capital, Amsterdam, is internationally famous as a centre of counter culture, marijuana and legal prostitution, the results of famous Dutch liberalism. According to the Dutch prime minister and former European Commissioner Frits Bolkestein, 'there are very few countries in Europe that have such a pronounced 'national identity'',⁵³ Pride in their nation, its achievements and the Dutch way of doing things is revealed in an almost superior confidence, often expressed through a 'we know best attitude'.

The Dutch frequently mystify foreigners by turning up at international sporting events wearing bright orange. This colour is not associated with the Dutch flag but with the monarchy, the House of Orange, or *Oranje*, and constitutes a national badge of belonging. Unusual by modern, somewhat anti-monarchic standards - imagine an English football supporter displaying the colours of the Windsor's - this identification with a royal house is indicative of a deep rooted attachment to certain symbols and values within the national psyche. The dynasty is perceived as having shared the plucky underdog status of the Dutch in their war of independence, and therefore identified as part of the nation rather than merely ruling over it.

In spite of this, the popular view in Holland is that nationalistic feelings are the monopoly of larger countries such as France and Germany. The term 'nationalism' itself retains the negative associations of the 1930s and 40s:

...the term 'national identity' sends many Dutch people into a spin of denial. They prefer to define their 'identity' in folkloristic terms such as polders, windmills and clogs, and to express the national character with phrases such as 'we say what we think'.⁵⁴

Nationalism in the Netherlands has traditionally been galvanised by the fear of an erosion of the national self, embodied in the Dutch language, cultural history, and traditions. Definitions of 'Dutchness' and national characteristics were dominant themes of the post-war period in Holland. The first minister for Education, Arts and Sciences after the Second World War, Gerard van der Leeuw, stated that, 'being

⁵³ Bolkestein, op. cit. 86.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 86.

Dutch is not a condition but a task, ... an ideal, and a conviction'.⁵⁵ At the time, intellectuals were concerned that in the aftermath of war and occupation the country was threatened by moral decline. To prevent this, the nation had to be re-educated to be Dutch; 'a people who do not respect their own culture and don't know how to make sacrifices for it will in the long term go to the dogs'.⁵⁶ This was a reaction not only to five years of German occupation and Nazi doctrine, but to the growing pressure of Americanisation.

In recent years national consciousness has been heightened by the increasing power of 'Brussels' over internal affairs such as education, an area traditionally involved in shaping collective identity. Since the 1990s a more culturally minded nationalism has been developing in response to European integration. The Dutch language has received particular emphasis, resulting in the creation of international bodies like the Dutch Language Union that promote its use outside Holland.⁵⁷ The nature of Dutch identity and the role of the nation in the changing European Union is now the subject of much debate.

The presence of ethnic minority cultures new to the Netherlands presents a more disruptive and immediate threat to traditional concepts of 'Dutchness'. Predominantly from former colonies like Surinam, as well as people of Moroccan and Turkish origin from the 'guest worker' schemes of the 1960s, these immigrants do not share the common cultural or educational links of past immigrants who were mainly European or Indo-European repatriates. Traditionally an ethnically homogenous society, the Netherlands is struggling to come to terms with the development of so-called multiculturalism within its borders. The main issue is that of the non-integration of Muslim groups into mainstream Dutch society owing to a conflict of fundamental values.⁵⁸ The rapid growth of these segments of the population has provoked alarm and division in Holland, resulting in the controversial anti-immigration party *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF). This was a first for the Netherlands and a severe blow to their traditional image of tolerance and liberalism, further aggravated by the assassination of party leader Pim Fortuyn in 2002.

⁵⁵ Cited in R. van Ginkel, "Discourses on Dutchness" trans. D. Denné, *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands* 9, 2001, 116-123, 121.

⁵⁶ J. Pollmann cited in van Ginkel, 116.

⁵⁷ G. Van den Bergh, "Europe, Dutch and the Dutch Language Union", trans. Y. Mead, *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands*, 1997-1998, 282-284.

⁵⁸ Hooghe, op. cit. 94-107.

The influence of America, and the perceived threat posed by the presence of non-integrated immigrant communities to Dutch culture and identity have given rise to various integration projects:

...in 1998 an Immigrants Assimilation Act was introduced in the Netherlands, under which immigrants are expected to attend assimilation courses so as to become acquainted with the Dutch language, the Dutch political and economic system and the prevailing standards of behaviour.⁵⁹

In order to present a programme of 'nationalisation' a very strong idea of what is, and what is not Dutch is needed. Whilst the language and political system are more or less generic aspects of a nation-state 'the prevailing standards of behaviour' are certainly culturally and nationally specific. Characteristics associated with the Netherlands and its indigenous population have, since the late eighteenth century, been linked to the emergence of the Dutch Republic in 1588 as a precocious 'modern' state. Early Dutch nationalism stemmed primarily from a cultural and ideological antipathy vis-à-vis the ruling power. Coupled with the possession of a historically associative territory and language, the Dutch Revolt laid the basis for a Dutch identity well before the formal development of the nation-state as such. Though an inherently national enterprise, the Republic did not constitute a nation-state as the provinces remained predominantly self-serving within a federal structure largely unchanged from that of the preceding United Provinces. It was not until the late eighteenth century that a modern 'national' consciousness appeared.

In the 1770s a nationalist group known as the Patriots emerged who identified with the American cause and blamed the House of Orange and its political allegiances for Holland's decline. They promoted the republican and social ideals of revolution and used the Dutch Republic as an example of national glory, calling for a return to past values in order to strengthen the nation. 'Let everyone embrace the virtues of his brave forefathers; thus economy, industriousness and probity will once more be the virtues of our nation and the old fruitfulness will return.'⁶⁰

These virtues were detailed in an essay published in 1797 by the Patriot Willem Anthonie Ockerse, in which he outlined the Dutch character as phlegmatic, bourgeois, reserved, indifferent and cautious.⁶¹ This placed the Dutch, 'in between the frivolous

⁵⁹ Ibid. 106.

⁶⁰ Cited in H. Reitsma 'The United Provinces' in Dann and Dinwiddy (eds), *Nationalism in the Age of the French Revolution*, London 1988, 171-183. 175.

⁶¹ Van Ginkel, op. cit. 118.

liveliness of the French and the proud dreariness of the English'.⁶² He went on to deplore the erosion of these qualities by foreign influences and, 'the mixing of the blood', calling for a restoration of the Dutch national character, its patriotism and 'national passion'.⁶³ A British traveller in the early nineteenth century gave the following description of the Dutch:

As to the phlegmatic character of the Dutch, nothing can afford strangers a more lively picture of it than the coolness and silence with which even sailors manoeuvre. You may see them working their ships up to the shore or a quay amidst the most provoking obstacles and incumbrances without uttering a syllable!⁶⁴

Over time the concept of an essential Dutch character formed in the seventeenth century became accepted, forming the basis for myths of national exceptionalism. This was reinforced by the respect that the democracy and economic stability of the Republic had commanded abroad both in the seventeenth century and later; 'Holland has been the cradle of European liberty'.⁶⁵

In 1798 Holland was the first country to take over the French nation-state model when the Patriots with French support established the Batavian Republic.⁶⁶ This eventually resulted in its annexation by the French Empire in 1810 and a critical break with the country's past. French rule engendered widespread national resentment, 'this resentment did not lead to a political form of nationalism, but it intensified Dutch cultural identity which had been growing since 1800'.⁶⁷

The successful Belgian Revolt of 1830 was a fresh blow to re-emerging Dutch pride; no longer a real contender at sea, unable even to control the 'despicable and mutinous Belgian race',⁶⁸ Holland had to come to terms with the fact that it was a small nation-state dependent on others for its safety and would never again be a major power. Once this sobering realisation had sunk in, the Dutch, swept up in the Romantic nationalism of the period set out to redefine their identity and themselves. 'The country's glorious past [...] fostered this national pride, and many poems were

⁶² Ibid. 118

⁶³ Ibid. 118

⁶⁴ Cited in F. G. H. Bachrach, "The Low Countries through British Eyes in Ages Past", *The Low Countries: Art and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands 1997-1998*, 61-71, 67-68.

⁶⁵ J. Burroughs, *A short View of the Differences between Holland and Belgium*, London 1832, 20.

⁶⁶ Dann and Dinwiddy, op. cit.

⁶⁷ J. Roegiers and N.C.F. Van Sas, "Revolution in the North and South 178-1830" in Blom and Lamberts (eds), *History of the Low Countries*, trans. J. C. Kennedy, Oxford 1999, 269-474, 282.

⁶⁸ J.C. H. Blom, "The Netherlands since 1830", in Blom and Lamberts (eds), 387-460. 388.

sung and statues erected to commemorate it. Nationally minded historians like R. Fruin, [...] transformed the country's past into a veritable national epic'.⁶⁹

The term 'Golden Age', or *gouden eeuw*, is often used to refer to the Dutch seventeenth century. This was a period in which the Netherlands rose to international prominence in such a short space of time that Schama describes this as resulting in a widespread nervous insecurity, causing intimations of mortality in the subconscious of the Dutch people, triggering fear for their well being and that of their wealth.⁷⁰ For a period of eighty years or more the country witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of the arts fuelled by trade and naval domination. Never again in Dutch history was there such a concentration of human achievement in engineering, art, literature and scholarly discourse. This was the period that produced amongst others, the painters Rembrandt, Hals, and Vermeer, the philosopher and lawyer Grotius, and the poet Vondel.⁷¹

Serving as an enduring point of reference, a benchmark in the arts, commerce, trade, government and morality, the period of the Republic became a model of the ideal Dutch nation and a touchstone in times of doubt. 'Even if the prosperous and great era of the Republic would never return, its glory days could remain a powerful source of inspiration for the Dutch nation.'⁷² Articulated by nineteenth century historiography influenced by the Romantic Movement, 'the unique nature of the Dutch people and their great national potential received much emphasis'.⁷³

Much of our knowledge of this period is gleaned from its visual legacy. Paintings in particular have acquired an emblematic quality, their subject matter and style often regarded as embodiments of 'Dutchness', both to the Dutch and foreigners. This is largely due to the efforts of later art historians and intellectuals keen to promote the achievements of the seventeenth century. It was in truth nineteenth century nationalism that shaped modern perceptions of this period as the Dutch Golden Age. 'Golden ages represent, for nationalists, the pure and pristine nature of the nation, its essential goodness, as it was and as it should be, though presently obscured and disfigured beneath 'irrelevant' class, regional, and religious divisions.'⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibid. 419.

⁷⁰ S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: an interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age*, London 1991.

⁷¹ Blom

⁷² Blom, op. cit. 390.

⁷³ Ibid. 390.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 215.

A national idyll is all the more appealing and powerful in periods of crisis, such as war or occupation. In Holland it was defined in contrast to the country's decline in the eighteenth century. A unifying 'myth of origin' and 'becoming' was particularly important in the early nineteenth century as the newly termed 'Kingdom' of the Netherlands needed to cultivate an identity in keeping with its modern structure. Traditionally the Northern Netherlands had, like its southern counterpart, consisted of distinct provinces, and it was in cities like Amsterdam, Delft and Haarlem that the culture we now think of as 'typical' of the Golden Age had developed. This culture now had to become a common 'national' heritage recognisable as such to all.

From the eighteenth century onwards the origin of Dutch painting was equated with the birth of the Dutch nation; for if the Dutch Revolt was the defining moment in the creation of the national 'self' then a national form of expression would confirm it. 'There now remained, to affirm its actual existence and give it the lustre of prosperous civilisations, but one thing – to produce immediately an art which should consecrate it, be a credit to it and represent its inner being.'⁷⁵ A causal link was gradually created between republicanism in politics and realism in art, rooted in a spirit of national and intellectual independence. In a series of lectures on aesthetics between 1817 and 1829, Hegel associated the realism of Dutch painting with the liberation of Western man from the grip of religion, which according to him was only possible in:

...a country that reformed the church by itself, that wrested itself from the sea on its own; a country without aristocrats, with few peasants...inhabited largely by burghers, [who nurture] the bourgeois spirit, entrepreneurial drive and pride in business, concern for [the] welfare [of their fellow burghers], cleanliness, pleasure in the small [things of life].⁷⁶

Not only is this indicative of the estimation of the Dutch in this period but it supports the view of the seventeenth century Netherlands as a precocious modern nation, ahead of its time and neighbours and therefore, exceptional. Dutch art's deviation from the norm of contemporary European countries was emphasised in this period and attributed to the unique history of the nation; no other people would have taken elements from their daily lives as subject matter to the same extent. The realist quality of seventeenth century painting was, for a long time looked upon as an honest portrayal of the period and people. Hegel regarded these paintings as reflections of the

⁷⁵ E. Fromentin, *The Masters of Past Time: Dutch and Flemish Painting from van Eyck to Rembrandt*, trans. A. Boyle, Oxford 1981, 95.

fabric of the society, and lives of the burghers who collected and commissioned them. This opinion was very much in keeping with the spirit of the age; these products of a major European civilisation had been created by, and for, the middle class, no social elite was required for the production of good art. 'Bourgeois artists attuned to the basic conditions of life around them, trusting to their own sensibilities and powers of observation alone, were capable of capturing the ultimate meaning of their culture.'⁷⁷

By the nineteenth century catchwords like realistic, honest, simple, wholesome, domestic, and austere were being used to describe Dutch art. Criteria were thereby established as to what did, and did not, constitute Dutch art, what was characteristically Dutch and what was not.⁷⁸ This was especially clear in attitudes to 'style'; any suggestion of Italian, French, or southern Netherlandish influence was rejected as being untrue, 'not real Dutch art'.⁷⁹ A limited canon of 'real' Dutch art was established, corroborated by the collecting policies of institutions like the Rijksmuseum. However, the genres developed in the Golden Age were themselves part of a deliberate promotion of Dutch identity, the first conscious wave of nationalism in the country, and nowhere near as simplistically 'honest' as was once thought.

Following the spread of Calvinism and the marginalisation of religious art, a new middle class elite with money to spend on the decoration of their interiors and their own immortalisation, fuelled the development of secular painting on an unprecedented scale. History, myth and daily life were conflated into artistic subject matter to promote political and ideological cohesion between the Provinces. A 'realist' style was used to give the depicted situations the natural ring of 'truth' and Dutch history was used in a comparative manner to create symbolic antecedents of the Republic.⁸⁰ The early inhabitants of the area, the Batavians, were mythologized and hailed as the precursors of the modern Dutch, their insurrection against the Romans analogous to that against the Spanish. Amsterdam's new town hall commissioned a series of paintings chronicling the Batavian revolt. One of these, *The Conspiracy of Claudius Civilis* by Rembrandt (1661-62), depicts a group of figures swearing

⁷⁶ Cited in G. Schwartz, "Art in History", in D. Freedberg and J. de Vries (eds), *Art in History, History in Art*, Santa Monica 1991, 7-13, 8.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 8.

⁷⁸ E. de Jongh, "Real Dutch art and not-so-real Dutch art: some nationalistic views of seventeenth century Netherlandish painting", *Simiolus* 20, 1990-91, 197-205.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ M. Westermann, *The Art of the Dutch Republic 1585-1718*, London 1996.

allegiance to their leader Claudius Civilis, with whom the stadholder William of Orange was identified in this period.⁸¹

Historically significant sites became popular subjects for landscape painting; Nijmegen for example, believed to be the seat of both the Batavians and Charlemagne was painted from many angles including Aelbert Cuyp's *View of Nijmegen* that emphasises the fortress, (pl. 1). Windmills, bleaching fields, and ice skaters are common themes in seventeenth century landscapes and, according to Westermann, refer to Dutch ingenuity in harnessing the elements to their own ends.⁸² Ruisdael's *The Mill at Wijk bij Duurstede*, his *View of Haarlem*, and Avercamp's *Winter Landscape*, all in the Rijksmuseum collections, are representative examples, (pls 2-3). Similarly, scenes of cattle and agriculture were emblematic of the success of the Dutch dairy industry and the use of reclaimed land, whilst church spires on flat horizons and Amsterdam canals were testimonies to architectural innovation and population growth:

While landscapes, city scenes, and animal paintings advertised the indigenous foundations of Dutch economic success, other genres – marine painting foremost – acknowledged its more significant basis in overseas trade and colonial ventures.⁸³

The Dutch character and ideals of behaviour were also given their place in paintings of the period. Civic duty and 'belonging' received much emphasis through the medium of group portraiture; a uniquely Dutch genre developed in the sixteenth century it became synonymous with the success of the patrician class and civic pride. The burgher was a citizen first and foremost, and civic guards or militias were the embodiment of civic patriotism.⁸⁴ Leftovers of a more feudal age, these companies were little more than social clubs by the early 1600s but have had a lasting impact on Dutch national consciousness through their many surviving group portraits. Chief amongst these is *The Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and William van Ruytenburch*, better known as *The Night Watch*, painted by Rembrandt in 1642, (pl. 4).

Art-historically this painting is important because the irregular alignment of the figures and dynamic composition is a singular departure from contemporary

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid. 112.

⁸⁴ A. Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. E. M. Kain and D. Britt, Los Angeles 1999.

conventions governing group portraiture. The largest of all Rembrandt's paintings, (363 x 437 cm), it is also the most nationally symbolic by dint of its subject matter. Though largely inactive by the time the painting was commissioned, the guard companies were associated with the defence of the city walls and had played an important role in the Revolt against Spain.⁸⁵ The fact that they were composed of civilians meant that the militias became symbols of the 'everyman', endorsing the principle of a truly democratic nation, by the people, for the people.

During the Second World War the painting became emblematic of the nation's struggle and its original associations with freedom and patriotism were reinforced. Once it became clear that Nazi invasion was unavoidable all major Dutch museums were evacuated and their collections stored in secret locations around the country. Between 1940 and 1945 *The Night Watch* was moved four times, under the very noses of the occupying forces. That people should risk their lives and those of their families in time of war to save a painting underlines the momentous symbolic value of this picture to the Dutch nation as the embodiment of their 'cultural soul'.⁸⁶ Once an icon of Amsterdam, depicting the role and duty of 'everyman' to protect his city, it became a symbol of the independent spirit of a small nation at war with a giant. Parallels with earlier conflicts were readily drawn to bolster national pride and encourage resistance. The pride and joy of the Rijksmuseum and without a doubt the best-known painting in Holland, *The Night Watch* occupies a special place within the national psyche.

In his famous essay on Dutch culture published in 1935, Johan Huizinga took the exceptional status of the Dutch as the central theme of his argument. He listed some 'typical' Dutch characteristics; simplicity, tolerance, moderation, distaste for heroics, cleanliness, tidiness and industriousness, as well as some national flaws like parsimony, small-mindedness and lack of imagination.⁸⁷ It is interesting that the terms used to describe the national character are similar to those applied to seventeenth century Dutch painting. This trend has encouraged identification with the people of the past through the nation's visual heritage, creating a sense of continuity and stability.

In the nineteenth century individual artists were singled out and celebrated as embodiments of the values and characteristics of 'Dutchness' they expressed in their

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Greenfield op.cit., 235.

⁸⁷ Cited in Bolkestein, 88.

work. National exceptionalism in the arts, as in all other activities, was the defining criteria for 'real Dutch art'. Of the artists of the period and their work Huizinga stated, 'all of them breathe a completely different spirit, sound an entirely different note. In fact, in its essentials, the Netherlands of the seventeenth century bore only the slightest resemblance to contemporary France, Italy, or Germany.'⁸⁸ Rembrandt was, and to an extent still is, championed above all others as the 'best of Dutch'. In the nineteenth century the man became almost as important as his work; the subject of many essays and studies he was gradually mythologized as the 'eternal Dutchman'. As late as the 1940s, Rembrandt was described thus by a fervent Dutch National Socialist:

[he is] the epitome of a Dutchman,... a child of the Dutch national temperament, plain and unadorned,...and so attached to his native soil that he allowed the customary journey to Italy made by all artists in those days to pass him by. ...in order to embrace the everlasting values of his own people; the atmospheric beauty of the land and its inhabitants, the urge towards the simple life and the life of the simple.⁸⁹

Ultimately, Dutch national identity is the outcome of specifically local factors that acquired a semi-mythical symbolism within the communal psyche. These were developed into more recognisably modern identity constructs under the influence of political nationalism and by nineteenth century historiography.

The topography of the Netherlands and its precarious relationship with the sea have fostered a spatial concept of the nation innate in the Dutch attitude to, and use of, their environment; '...the early Dutch [...] saw themselves as formed by the high seas and as forging (literally) the earth they possessed and made their own.'⁹⁰ Land drainage, the dyke system, the early development of sailing ships, and the constant vigilance needed to retain arable land from the water helped form the character of the people. 'Those who live in a watery region must be organised, orderly, meticulous and industrious, simply in order to survive.'⁹¹

'Some of the traits which are frequently found in the literature on the Dutch national character are love of liberty, individualism, sobriety, domesticity, tranquillity, burgher ideals, simplicity, severity, honesty, Calvinism and cleanliness.'⁹² The Dutch

⁸⁸ Cited in J. de Vries, "Art History", in Freedberg and de Vries, 249-267, 253.

⁸⁹ T. Goedewaagen cited in de Jongh, 201.

⁹⁰ Smith, *National...*, 9.

⁹¹ Bolkestein, op. cit. 88.

⁹² de Jongh, op.cit. 199.

themselves has frequently reaffirmed these qualities of simplicity and honesty, particularly in their 'we say what we think attitude'. Policies of neutrality developed in the eighteenth century for predominantly economic reasons were gradually reinforced and justified by the higher principles of international law and ethics. 'In this way, neutrality, aloofness, and independence each became, as circumstances dictated, unshakeable principles by which the Dutch judged their country's position in the world.'⁹³ The presence of the International Court of Human Rights and the Yugoslavia war crimes tribunal in The Hague testify to the Netherlands' lasting desire to lead by moral example.

Traditional concepts of identity based on ethnic and cultural homogeneity, and enduring morality, have been seriously challenged in the late twentieth century, undermining traditional structures of authority. Civil unrest in the 1960s and 80s revealed social problems and inequalities, whilst the development of Amsterdam as a counter-culture Mecca has engendered a 'pop-culture' centred on the capital that challenges more traditional value systems. In the twenty-first century the Netherlands has to come to terms with the 'multiculturalism' and immigration that has triggered 'uncharacteristic' nationalism in the country. Despite this, Dutch society retains a high level of cohesion and common purpose, rooted in a history that continues to generate a feeling of pride and provides an enduring national frame of reference for the majority of the population.

⁹³ Blom, *op.cit.* 391.

1. 3 Identity and the Nation in Belgium

App. A: map 2

'Belgium is more of an idea than a state.'⁹⁴ This declaration is indicative of the scepticism and ambiguity with which the concept of a Belgian nation-state is regarded by those who inhabit it. In Belgium issues of cultural identity are rooted in linguistic and territorial conflicts that predate the country as such. In 1831 a state created a nation; the nation did not create a state, and it was soon clear that the French model of one nation, one culture, one state, would not be viable in the long term. This format was incompatible with traditional structures of governance in the region. Existing identities could contribute to a titular national consciousness but came into conflict with each other and threatened the country's stability if the state tried to homogenise them.

Language laws and state reforms became commonplace as the country strove to reach a common accord, culminating in the Constitutional amendment of 1993 that officially made Belgium a federal state. The opening sentence of the original Constitution that read; 'Belgium is divided into provinces', became 'Belgium is a Federal State made up of communities and regions'.⁹⁵ The communities represent Belgium's three native linguistic groups and are primarily concerned with cultural matters; they are the Flemish, French, and German speaking communities. The regions possess greater economic autonomy and consist of the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital regions. A central federal government retains responsibility for foreign affairs, defence, finance and justice, though many responsibilities are shared with the regional governments. (App. A: maps 2-3).

The process of federalisation and its social and ideological impact on the country has been the cause of much debate over the past decade; 'conciliating regional and cultural identities in a federal structure is easier said than done but has the advantage of bringing the decision making process closer to the population.'⁹⁶ In a country of ten million people, divided into three communities and three regions, spread over ten provinces and 589 communes, with seven parliaments, six governments and three

⁹⁴ W. Thomas cited in J. Fontaine, "La République et le Bonheur", in A. Pickels and J. Sojcher (eds), *Belgique toujours grande et belle*, Brussels 1998, 145.

⁹⁵ "Les troisièmes et quatrièmes réformes de l'Etat", Portail Fédéral, www.belgium.be (Author's trans.)

⁹⁶ "La Belgique, un Etat fédéral", Portail Fédéral (Author's trans.)

official languages, can there be such a thing as a Belgian nation or a single Belgian national identity?

External perceptions of Belgium reflect the elusive nature of the national character. Chocolate, beer, Tintin, Jean Claude Van Damme ('the muscles from Brussels'), and Hercule Poirot are amongst the most common popular associations. The absences of clear-cut and commonly accepted characteristics mean that obscurity and ambiguity have themselves become stereotypical features of the country and its inhabitants. Belgians abroad are frequently faced with the 'can you name ten famous Belgians' question as, despite having made considerable contributions to all fields of knowledge and culture, Belgians and their creations are often identified with one of the country's larger neighbours:

We probably could have survived without Tintin, Hercule Poirot or Manneke Pis but what about the saxophone, the internal combustion engine, the stroboscope, bakelite, the electric railway or the dynamo? These are all Belgian inventions which have had a very significant impact on civilisation over the years.⁹⁷

The people responsible for this are the Belgians themselves who rarely proclaim any sense of pride or 'belonging' to the country. Unlike the French, keen to promote their culture and values and therefore recognisable to outsiders, Belgians do not readily make themselves known to others. A lack of national pride and a fiercely individualist streak characterised by self-effacing scepticism and an emphasis on privacy, mean that once outside the country one is barely aware of its existence.

If the self is defined by what it is not, then Belgium provides a useful source of comparison for its larger neighbours. During the 1860s Charles Baudelaire railed against the country and its inhabitants declaring that Belgium was an example of what France would have become if it had stayed under the control of the bourgeoisie; 'by making a sketch of Belgium there is the added advantage of creating a caricature of France'.⁹⁸ The third largest French speaking community in the world, francophone Belgians are identifiable by their accents, often considered ugly and amusing in France, thereby confirming their 'otherness'. A slightly patronising even derisive attitude towards Belgium ultimately stems from the unease that the country generates in the French national psyche. As the country that defined the modern nation-state and exported it across Europe, France clings fiercely and proudly to the centralised state

⁹⁷ www.famousbelgians.net

system and the disintegration of a former French territory into a federal state on their border worries them.

For the British, Belgium has predominantly negative connotations. Whilst the World Wars are still a living memory, Belgium remains the set of bloody death recalled through rituals of remembrance 'in Flanders field'. Overshadowed by the new European identity of Brussels synonymous with what, in more conservative circles, is perceived as a loss of British power and autonomy within an expanding EU, the country is often dismissed as 'dull', significant only as 'that place on the way to the ferry', or thought to be part of France.

Holland's attitude is similar to that of France, veering from grudging respect to patronising contempt. The region's history has contributed to this by being a source of bitterness and rivalry in the past. The Benelux system of economic cooperation established in 1944 was a step towards reconciliation and a corner-stone of the EEC. Cultural and ethnic links have also been improved, though these are concentrated around the Dutch language group in the north of the country.

Belgians are not keen to discuss the issue of their identity; some dismiss it as an accident of birth and inconsequential, 'the beautiful thing about being Belgian is that it does not mean a thing.'⁹⁹ Others doubt the existence of a single national identity or reject the concept as artificial; a political invention of the nineteenth century necessary for the establishment of an independent state and, once that goal achieved, obsolete. 'Belgium [...] was born of a misunderstanding and has nothing to do with a nation'.¹⁰⁰ People in Belgium will more often voice an affiliation to a region or city than to the country as a whole. Unwilling to associate themselves with a unitary identity they are Belgian by default. Many would agree with Jules Destrée's opinion, voiced in a letter to the king in 1912, 'there are in Belgium Walloons and Flemings; there are no Belgians'.¹⁰¹ Doubt and a lack of pride in themselves, revealed in auto-derision and scepticism, may well constitute the most 'national' characteristics of the people of Belgium:

Firstly let us note that the Belgian being what he is, his history can but be pure fiction [...] Whilst others sustain themselves with illusions of a past that would have mysteriously brought them to their present point and within the exact State

⁹⁸ C. Baudelaire, "Pauvre Belgique" in, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Bruges 1968, 1319. (Author's trans.)

⁹⁹ Pickels and Sojcher, op.cit. 198. (Author's trans.)

¹⁰⁰ H. Claus cited in P. Roegiers, *Le Mal du Pays: Autobiographie de la Belgique*, Paris 2003, 93. (Author's trans.)

¹⁰¹ J. Destrée cited in D. Pavy, *Les Belges*, Paris 1999, 97. (Author's trans.)

that they find themselves, the Belgian, going back to the dawn of time, can only conclude that he comes from nowhere and is cheerfully going back there. This manner of passing from nothing to obscurity is, without a doubt the most beautiful lesson that the Belgian can give the world: that of the diffidence of an utterly absurd national condition.¹⁰²

An in-built defeatism with regards to national unity is the outcome of a history of invasion, occupation and repression, none of which helped generate a social confidence and the desire to work towards a common goal. In itself it is this history that unites the people of Belgium. Flemings, Walloons, francophones and germanophones all operate within a state in a geographical area that they have shared for centuries.

The dichotomy of identity in Belgium is the outcome of particular geographical and historical factors. The modern territory consists of the ten provinces of the Southern Netherlands and the Bishopric of Liège that remained under Habsburg rule following the creation of the Dutch Republic.¹⁰³ Early economic success and the development of liberal and humanist ideas helped foster individualism and a loyalty to the cities and provinces rather than to distant rulers in Austria and Spain. Foreign rule was tolerated so long as monarchs respected the singularity and autonomy of the Southern Netherlands in general and of the provinces in particular. This individualism, coupled with a history of repression and external control has engendered a general apathy in Belgium concerning governance and politics. In turn this has allowed corruption and mismanagement to flourish unchecked resulting in the national crisis and state breakdown of 1996, the effects of which are still being felt.

Attempts at territorial and ideological cohesion in the Southern Netherlands have always resulted in insurgency and further division. The earliest instance was the revolt of the sixteenth century, which defined the future structure of the area; from this point on the fate of the two language groups that make up the majority of the population were irrevocably bound together.

The *Brabanconne* revolution of 1789 was sparked by Joseph II's reforms aimed at the creation of a unitary state. These were considered a threat to traditional rights embodied in ceremonies like the *Blijde Inkomst*, or Joyful Entry; a charter granted in January 1356 by the Dukes of Brabant, that confirmed both the provinces' loyalty to

¹⁰² S. Baurins, and A. Clette, *Histoire du Belge: Comment il est sorti du tombeau. Comment il y est rentré*, Brussels 1996, 3-4. (Author's trans.)

the sovereign and guaranteed their privileges and rights.¹⁰⁴ Its abolition strengthened the population's self-awareness and, influenced by the events in America and France, quickly developed into full-blown republican nationalism and the first 'Belgian' revolution.

In 1790, following the expulsion of the Austrian forces, the *Etats-Belgiques-Unis* were proclaimed. The envisaged format of the new state was a federal structure modelled on the American example, respecting extant provincial and regional delineations. However, the civic and social reforms of the ensuing French occupation (1791-1814) undermined provincial and urban traditions to such an extent that they would not even feature in the later Belgian state, founded in 1830-31.

Following the second revolution of September 1830, the need to create a neutral buffer state in the region, as well as the right to autonomy for the proto-nation of Belgium was recognised internationally. Whilst the Great Powers supported Belgian independence they also dictated the terms and conditions of its existence; Belgium was to be a constitutional and hereditary monarchy instead of the republic hoped for by the revolutionaries, as Britain would not allow the new state to model itself on France.

From the outset Belgium had to be self-effacing, even self-negating, in order to ensure its existence. It did not choose to form a unitary nation-state with a constitutional monarchy, or its king Leopold Saxe-Coburg Gotha, given the new throne over the Belgian choice of a French prince (again due to English pressure).¹⁰⁵ Having achieved political autonomy after centuries of foreign rule the country found itself burdened with an alien system of governance and a foreign monarch who was a Lutheran Protestant freemason to boot.¹⁰⁶ The Belgian monarchy would later become a symbol of the nation's strength and independence under Albert I (1909-1934), consolidated by Baudouin I (1950-1993) whose sudden death in 1993, 'deprived [the country] of a monarch who had, for more than forty years, been the symbol of national solidarity.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Ten Provinces of Southern Netherlands: Brabant, Flanders, Gelders, Hainault, Limburg, Luxembourg, Malines, Namur, Tournai-Tournaisis and West Flanders.

¹⁰⁴ M. Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era*, New York 2001.

¹⁰⁵ Pavy

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 14. (Author's trans.)

The recognition of Belgium and its constitution - promoted internationally as a model of excellence - in 1831, signalled a period of growth and stability for the country and the celebration of its newly acquired status as an independent, modern nation-state. In accordance with contemporary definitions of nationality and citizenship prevalent amongst the francophone elite, Belgium had to become a unitary state socially and culturally as well as politically to survive. A strong identity was needed that would supersede existing regional loyalties and foster patriotism, creating a homogenous nation with a common will. This was acknowledged from the outset as demonstrated by the motto on the Belgian coat of arms; *L'union fait la force*, 'Strength through Unity'. Above all it was the hearts and minds of the people that had to 'become Belgian'. As Rousseau put it, 'the first rule which we have to follow is that of national character: every people has, or must have, a character; if it lacks one, we must start by endowing it with one'.¹⁰⁸

To this end a programme of 'nationalisation' was implemented through the educational system, the arts, literature, and nationalist historiography. National symbols were elaborated and endowed with the associative powers of history and *patria*, in order to situate Belgium as a nation amongst others. A tricolour flag, modelled on the French design, used the colours of the arms of Brabant and was referred to in the new national anthem as a symbol of the Belgian people's escape from the 'tomb of slavery'.¹⁰⁹ Before the year was out the Revolution was being mythologized and the dead glorified through songs, literature, painting, and monuments all over the country. Brussels' position as the political and cultural capital was accentuated by monumental building programs, in an effort to create a European centre to rival Vienna and Paris:

By the end of the century, the royal palace and museums, the king's official residence in Laeken, the Palace of Justice, the Sacred Heart Basilica, and the Cinquantenaire exhibition halls and memorial monument, stood as permanent reminders to the Belgian public of the importance of their king and their own growing economic, social and cultural prominence in Europe.¹¹⁰

Belgium was keen to assert and defend its independence as the artificiality of the Belgian state, its lack of linguistic identity or natural boundaries and reliance on other nations to guarantee its existence, all meant that the prevailing opinion in mid-

¹⁰⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, cited in Smith, *National...*, 75.

¹⁰⁹ G. H. Dumont, *Chronologie de la Belgique: de 1830 à nos jours*, Brussels 2003.

nineteenth century Europe was that Belgium would soon be divided between France and Holland; 'there is a moral weakness in some countries, that prevents them from standing alone.'¹¹¹ The French in particular regarded the new state as the 'sliver of an empire that would, sooner or later be reformed'.¹¹²

Language is the single most important identifier in Belgium and one of the reasons that larger nations with linguistically defined cultures have difficulty pinning an identity or character on the country. Unlike the inhabitants of Holland, the people of Belgium do not share one common language but several, all associated with specific areas of the country. French, German and *nederduits* - a dialect from the same root as German from which Flemish and Dutch evolved - are the traditional languages of the Low Countries, along with Frisian in the north. 'During the eighteenth century, the French language enjoyed a high degree of respect throughout Europe, and even more so in Flanders and Brussels, because there was nothing which looked like a cultural language to set against it.'¹¹³ By 1830 French had become the language of the elite and social distinction, even if Flemish remained the mother tongue. 'French is not known, no one knows it, but everyone pretends not to know Flemish. It's in good taste. The proof that they know it very well however is that they shout at their servants in Flemish.'¹¹⁴

The existence of three language groups in Belgium has hindered the development of a linguistically defined state identity. Furthermore, the fact that all three are associated with larger countries has prevented the creation of a cultural tradition based on linguistic excellence and individualism. Invariably purists in Holland, France and Germany regard the Dutch, French and German spoken in Belgium as 'dialects'. For the Dutch and the French in particular, the versions of 'their' languages spoken over the border are by turns a source of ridicule and concern. Dialects are commonly associated with peripheral marginal, or 'folk' cultures, the accents and regional particularities often becoming the subject of disparaging jokes. The Dutch may refer to the Flemish as *boeren* or yokels as Flemish is traditionally considered a 'lower' or

¹¹⁰ S. M. Canning, "La Foule et le Boulevard", in J. Block (ed.), *Belgium, the Golden Decades 1880-1914*, New York 1997, 40-49.

¹¹¹ C. F. Henningsen, *Scenes from the Belgian Revolution*, London 1832, 68.

¹¹² Cited in J. Stengers and E. Gubin, *Histoire du Sentiment National en Belgique des origines a 1918 : Le Grand Siècle de la Nationalité Belge*, Brussels 2002, 199. (Author's trans.)

¹¹³ G. van Istendael, "Brussels, City of the Coming Century" in, *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands 1994-95*, 10-17, 11.

¹¹⁴ Baudelaire, op. cit. 1370. (Author's trans.)

improper form of Dutch, whilst the French enjoy telling 'Belgian jokes' that invariably present the Belgians as slow and coarse.¹¹⁵

It was the attempts in the mid-nineteenth century to create a 'Belgian' literature that brought to light many of the language issues for the first time. In order to develop a uniquely 'Belgian' subject matter rooted in the nation's past writers used Flemish tales and characters reinventing them in French, the dominant cultural language. The desire to create a francophone literature distinguishable from that of France meant that early Belgian writers consciously set out to develop a hybrid language.¹¹⁶ Old dialect words and Flemish expressions were assimilated in order to create French distinguishable from that of France.¹¹⁷ Henceforth, Belgian authors were distinguishable from their southern counterparts by their *belgicisms*. These soon became a linguistic stigma, considered crude and indicative of inferior literature. By the mid-twentieth century francophone Belgians themselves were keen to eradicate all such 'aberrations'.¹¹⁸ To be recognisable as Belgian through written or spoken French was to be avoided, in order to be a respected author the language had to be 'pure'.¹¹⁹ In the 1970s a literary movement known as *belgitude* tried to counter this by celebrating the 'otherness' of Belgian French defending its use both in literature and speech.¹²⁰

According to the theories of Renan and his contemporaries, however, the essence of a nation resides in the will of its members to be a nation rather than in a common language. This was certainly the belief of the revolutionary elite who whole-heartedly set out to promote a national identity and character grounded in historical and cultural achievements. In keeping with the Romantic idealism of the period, evidence was needed that Belgium was an organic nation-state built around a homogenous ethnic nation rather than a mere political creation. Between 1900 and 1932 the historian Henri Pirenne produced a seven-volume history of Belgium in which he demonstrated the existence of a Belgian people prior to the middle Ages. Arguing that the Belgian nation-state was the outcome of a natural evolutionary process similar to that of

¹¹⁵ Pavy

¹¹⁶ C. Berg, "The Symbolic Deficit: French Literature in Belgium and 19th century National Sentiment", in Deprez and Vos (eds), *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities 1780-1995*, New York 1998.

¹¹⁷ Stengers and Gubin

¹¹⁸ P. Bury, "Une Belgitude peut en cacher une autre", in J. Sojcher (ed.), *La Belgique malgré tout*, Brussels 1980, 17-21.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Stengers and Gubin

France, Pirenne took the Celtic group the *belgii*, as its point of origin. Though the term *gallia belgica* was used by Caesar to denote areas occupied by these tribes it applied predominantly to regions now in Germany. It was not until the eighteenth century that the term *Belgique* was commonly associated with the principalities between the North Sea, the Rhine and the Meuse.¹²¹

A sense of history and natural process was enthusiastically promoted, providing 'the moral lessons needed to mobilise and unify the people'.¹²² Historical novels nationalised past victories as evidence of a struggle waged for centuries and recently won. Events like 'The Battle of the Golden Spurs' of 1302, when peasants led by the Counts of Flanders defeated an army of French knights, were given a more national significance. This was later appropriated by Flemish nationalists and is now commemorated every 11 July by the Flemish Community. However, such events were first used to demonstrate the existence of a proto-nation with a self-awareness manifest in a common past, legitimising the modern Belgian state and fostering nationalism. 'The history of Belgium offers a clear illustration of the fact that national identity and nationalism are not natural phenomena, existing from time immemorial, but that they are created'.¹²³

From 1830-1914 the fine arts and literature were instrumental in the creation and popularisation of a national ideal, part of the symbolic legitimisation of the country. Painting was one of the most efficient mediums by which to evoke a glorious past, a bright future, and the 'eternal' character of the Belgian people. 'The entire country realises that the greater part of its national splendour is to be entrusted to artists and that their works and progress need to contribute towards the acceptance of the notion "Belgian" abroad.'¹²⁴ Patriotic history painting flourished, 'because we have a nationality, we have to strengthen our national feeling. Hence, works of historical art will be powerful and important tools for the benefit of the nation.'¹²⁵ Like in Holland, artistic figures from the past were taken as proof of a natural national genius and Rubens became emblematic of the greatness of Belgian art:

In an organic link between the past and the present, the international fame of the artistic forefathers, especially of Rubens and the 17th century Antwerp School,

¹²¹ *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 3-4, AUS-CAL, Eleventh Edition, London 1910-1911.

¹²² Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, op. cit. 190.

¹²³ K. Deprez and L. Vos, *Nationalism in Belgium: Shifting Identities, 1780-1995*, New York 1998, 18.

¹²⁴ "L'Artiste", 1834, cited in Pil, "Painting at the Service of the Nation" in Deprez and Vos (eds), *Nationalism in Belgium*, 48.

¹²⁵ "L'Artiste" 1835, *ibid.* 43.

was regarded as a dowry which gave the new state the necessary dignity to take up an honourable place among the older European nations.¹²⁶

The bolder strokes and colours of the seventeenth century artists in general and Rubens in particular were revisited, and the 'First Antwerp Romantic School' was established to encourage a more 'national' style of painting, breaking with the neo-classicism that had dominated prior to the revolution. For subject matter artists were encouraged to draw inspiration from the country's past:

Since Belgium has raised herself to the rank of nation, and her independence [...] has been recognised by the whole of Europe, we are able to look back over past centuries, and demonstrate that we too have periods of brilliance, remarkable eras, and that better than many others, we can find what we need to nourish our genius and exert our talent here at home.¹²⁷

Gustaaf Wappers is the most important nationalist painter of this period and his *Episode from the Revolution of 1830*, painted in 1835, set the tone for much subsequent heroic history painting in Belgium, (pl. 5). On a smaller scale but dealing with similar subject matter was historical painting, accessible to a larger audience as its scale made it available for private use. The perceived lack of spirituality and the emphasis on the 'baser' aspects of human nature in the work of earlier artists were considered harmful to the opinion created of the Belgian people abroad.¹²⁸ The painters De Braekelaar and Madou reinvented popular interior scenes and genres to present a more demure and respectable image of the people than that evident in the paintings of Teniers and Bruegel, (pl. 6). Like had happened in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century, the national landscape was used to create iconic images of historic sites, thereby raising public awareness of national architecture and natural patrimony. All painting genres were expected to play nationalist didactic roles, strengthening patriotism through associative imagery of collective glory and culture:

Artistic and intellectual life in this period was largely characterised by a quiet romanticism in service of the nation. This Belgian nationalism, which found support both among the middle-class liberals and Catholics, did become stronger over time, in turn strengthening the authority of the state itself.¹²⁹

So long as Belgium remained united the myth of a homogenous community bound by a common history, aware of itself and its singularity as developed by Pirenne,

¹²⁶ Ibid. 44.

¹²⁷ Alexandre Pinchart, cited in J. Stengers, "Au Lendemain de 1830 les raisons d'une fierté nationale", Stengers and Gubin op.cit., 15. (Author's trans.)

¹²⁸ Pijl

could be maintained. Once the divisions in the country were acknowledged politically in the 1960s, it became increasingly evident that a Belgian citizen had been created from the myths, symbols and common values of the two principal ethnicities.¹³⁰

It is the art, myths, and history of Flanders that formed the basis for nineteenth century Belgian identity. However, the 'Frenchification' of the elite and early attempts to make French the sole national language sparked a Flemish reaction that developed into a movement for regional recognition and greater autonomy. This effectively undermined the construct of Belgian identity and many of the iconic and memorable historical figures and events were claimed by the Flemish movement, including Rubens and the Battle of the Golden Spurs. The Walloon movement developed in reaction to this, but was from the start primarily a francophone affair as language is the strongest uniting factor in Wallonia; the people are not only local but from Flanders, France, Italy and Morocco, drawn to the area by the promise of employment in heavy industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹³¹

The eventual recognition of the diverse sources of national mythology and the gradual decentralisation of power dealt a fatal blow to the ideological construct of Belgian identity. Federalisation ultimately created a vacuum between the 1830 'idea of Belgium' and the actuality of the modern state.

Today the idyll of an indivisible Belgian nation-state is regarded as a nineteenth century dream that nonetheless provided a framework within which the people of the country are free to assert their identity after centuries of conflict and repression. The Belgian establishment maintains a federal discourse of intercultural cooperation; the people of Belgium are bound together by economic interest and a Constitution rather than common descent or language. In spite of this one third of the population still identifies exclusively with Belgium.¹³² 'There does not exist a single, self-evident national identity in Belgium. The most obtrusive identity is still the official one, which is mentioned on the identity card and referred to abroad.'¹³³ This 'Belgian' identity however only makes itself known in times of international conflict or competition, when marginal identities are not recognised.

¹²⁹ E. Lamberts, "Belgium since 1830" in, Blom and Lamberts. 313-386, 328.

¹³⁰ Pavy

¹³¹ C. Kesteloot, "Growth of the Walloon Movement", in Deprez and Vos, 139-145.

¹³² B. Maddens, R. Beerten and J. Billiet, "The National Consciousness of the Flemings and the Walloons: an Empirical Investigation" in, Deprez and Vos.

¹³³ Ibid. 199.

Brussels further clouds the issue; as one of the official regions of the federal state, neither Walloon nor Fleming, the Brussels-Capital Region probably contains the most 'Belgian' Belgians who may, nevertheless, abjure the titular identity by calling themselves *Bruxellois* or *brusselaar*. The city's history of internationalism has allowed a hybrid character to develop, creating a more generically national environment than anywhere else in the country. It is here that the proponents of *belgitude* are to be found, defending the peculiarities and particularities of Belgium without condoning a unitary state:

Since Belgium is situated at the very intersection of the Latin and Germanic civilisations, the supporters of *belgitude* consider the country to be the incarnation of cosmopolitanism, anti-racism and anti-nationalism (entailing, perhaps, even the rejection of the notion "nation" itself).¹³⁴

Furthermore, this lack of a strong nationalism makes it relatively easy for immigrants to assume the identity of their choice. Belgium in general, 'this non-state, this country by default' and Brussels in particular, is a haven for the cosmopolitan stateless, offering the 'opportunity of mongrelism or bastardy'.¹³⁵ On the other hand, tensions between the predominantly Caucasian Christian population and Muslim minorities are increasing due to a conflict of fundamental values that hinders cultural assimilation.

Whilst a clearly defined and centrally promoted identity is no longer viable in Belgium (if it ever was), the people are united beyond their communities and regions by a mutual cultural history, attitudes, and food and drink. '*L'union fait la frite*'; a characteristically cynical pun on the kingdom's motto, this is a reference to that cornerstone of Belgian cuisine the chip; united the Belgians make chips, if nothing else.¹³⁶ Sarcasm aside a genuine quiet pride is discernible in areas relating to culture and national produce. Belgian chocolate and beer have become internationally renowned, painters of the region are key to the development of Western art and a great number of national sites are listed as world heritage. 'Despite suffering from an almost pathological modesty, [...] this little country has no lack of assets.'¹³⁷

Above all Belgians can be characterised by their 'leave us alone' attitude. Privacy and personal freedom are very important in Belgium and even with the European Union in their capital they keep largely out of the international eye. Individualism and

¹³⁴ J. Fontaine, "Four Definitions of Culture in Francophone Belgium", in Deprez and Vos, 158.

¹³⁵ A. Morelli and J-P. Schreiber, "Are the Immigrants the Last Belgians?", in Deprez and Vos, 251.

¹³⁶ F. de Coninck cited in Pavy, op.cit. 138. (Author's trans.)

¹³⁷ Ibid. 90. (Author's trans.)

non-conformism are expressed in the urban development of Brussels; a strange incoherent medley of styles and periods it is emblematic of the national divisions and individualist disregard for others; just as Paris, with its serried ranks of buildings of even height and style exemplifies French faith in the power of the nation inherent in its centre.

To a large extent Belgium is a nation by default; a lack of alternatives and the vagaries of history having left it as such. In spite of the innate cynicism and fatalistic approach to all things official of its inhabitants, it remains a nation in so far as the majority of its people are bound together by a grudging common will to remain as such. Though the century old threat of a permanent division of the country between north and south, with Brussels Jerusalem-like in the centre is always in the air, the Belgians, on the whole, recognise that they are better off in their federal state than they would be in any other format.



Plates 1-2





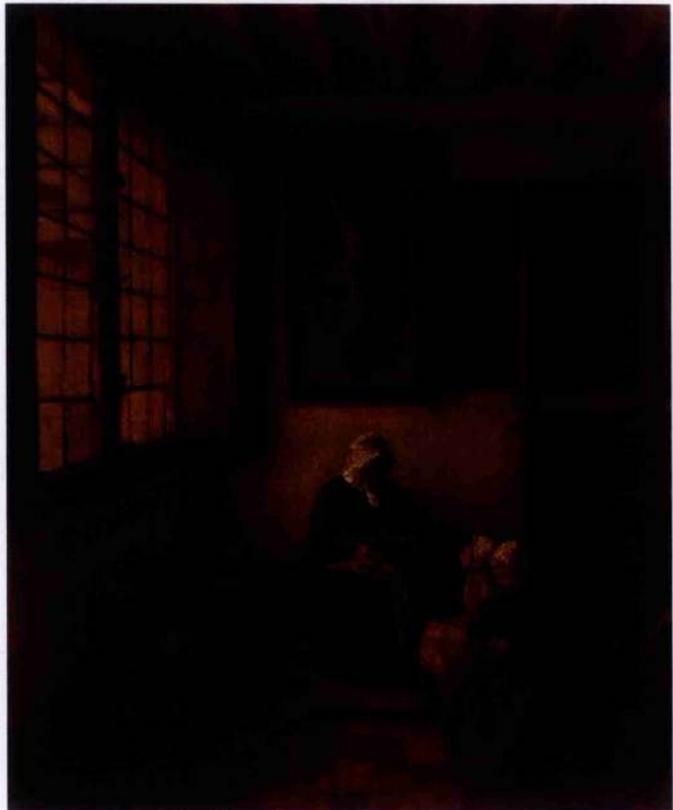
Plate 3



Plate 4



Plates 5-6



Part 2
NATIONALISM and the MUSEUM

2. 1 Museums and the Nation

'It is the peculiar burden of our national galleries and collections that they should both reflect an element of national identity and help to define it.'¹³⁸

The origins of the national museum are well documented; its evolution from princely gallery to public space via Enlightenment ideals of reason, moral progress, and knowledge culminated in the ideologically charged rhetoric of the revolutionary Louvre, the archetypal universal museum, in the nineteenth century. Changes in society and the political map of Europe and the desire for state aggrandisement helped disseminate the idea of the modern national art museum. It was 'the early nineteenth century which saw the mobilisation of the nation-state as the guardian of the museum idea', making it a common feature of European cities by the end of the nineteenth century.¹³⁹

Having evolved from private collections designed to enhance the status of their owners public art museums have, to a certain extent, retained this function; making the country and those who run it 'look good'. In western society culture and knowledge are valued highly and displays of material culture and heritage are traditionally considered indicative of the sophistication and historic awareness of a nation thereby determining its status in the civilised world.

Emerging nation-states in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were keen to establish national institutions that would focus the attention of the people on their new status as citizens. Prestigious national institutions were key components of the nation-building and 'nation-imaging' process. Public museums provided a space in which the state could articulate its role as protector of language and custodian of knowledge. The national museum was, and in many case still is, an ideological and social construct that allowed for the visual substantiation and development of national mythologies. In 1792 the French Minister of the Interior, Roland, described the purpose of a national museum for the arts in Paris:

As I conceive of it, it should attract and impress foreigners. It should nourish a taste for the fine arts, please art lovers and serve as a school to artists. It should be open to everyone. This will be a national monument. [...] It will have such an influence on the mind, it will so elevate the soul, it will so excite the heart that it

¹³⁸ T. Hunt, "Which Nation", *Quarterly* Autumn 2003, 16.

¹³⁹ Prior, *op.cit*, 37.

will be one of the most powerful ways of proclaiming the illustriousness of the French Republic.¹⁴⁰

In the wake of the Louvre national museums became political instruments that participated in the definition of the state and its people; 'educated opinion understood that art museums could demonstrate the goodness of a state or municipality or show the civic-mindedness of its leading citizens'.¹⁴¹

What therefore constitutes a national museum and how is it defined? Is it an important art collection held on national soil as a collection of art for the nation? Or does it represent the nation, being therefore of the nation? Arguably it can be all these things and may change over time with the nation itself though two preconditions apply regardless of later interpretations. Firstly; the existence of a centralised state or power with the ability to both create and maintain a national institution, commonly a nation-state¹⁴². Secondly, the state must experience the need for a national museum; this need stems partly from a desire to address the national audience, representing the nation to itself and thereby playing a role in shaping it. How this is then realised depends upon the collections, their origin, interpretation and articulation within the physical framework of the institution in and the ideological framework of the state. There is also a need to represent the nation to the world beyond its boundaries allowing the nation-state to define itself in the eyes of others and to situate itself vis-à-vis the international community.¹⁴³

The two case studies upon which this thesis is based predate the formation of the modern states in which they now exist. Both the Rijksmuseum and the Royal Museum in Brussels are the result of external forces active in the late eighteenth century. In both countries the creation of a public art museum became a focal point for the development of nationalist feelings. In the Netherlands, the need to engage with an independent national history was one of the motor forces behind the public art gallery that became the Rijksmuseum. 'The national collections were to contribute to the development of national consciousness, the civilisation of the people and the progress

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Duncan and Wallach, 454.

¹⁴¹ C. Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship" in, I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, London 1991, 88-104. 88.

¹⁴² Whilst this is a specifically Western view and subject to criticism, it conforms to the context in which the concept of the national museum originated.

¹⁴³ A. Wallach, "On the problem of Forming a National Art Collection in the United States", in G. Wright (ed.), *The Formation of National Collections of Art and Archaeology*, Hanover & London 1996, 113-125.

of arts and science.¹⁴⁴ Belgium on the other hand, had never existed as such prior to 1830 and therefore had no 'national' artistic heritage. Instead this quality was grafted onto the cultural heritage of the country's provinces and cities following the creation of the state.

Interpretations of the role and content of national art museums vary from country to country, determined by the history and cultural politics of their ruling powers. The collections that constitute the museums, their origins and the manner in which they enter the institutions also come into play. Many European museums are based on royal, private, and ecclesiastical collections, some given to the nation by the owners - Joseph II' collection in Austria, the Medici's *Uffizi* in Florence - others appropriated by the state through revolution and ideological upheaval, the case in France and the territories it appropriated.¹⁴⁵ Collections linked to specifically national contexts, that is to say, originating within the nation group and 'homeland', may acquire the status of a bequest to be honoured; a unique heritage to be held in trust by the people, the national community.¹⁴⁶

The nature of museum collections, be they national, local or international, diverse or specific, religious or secular, all affect subsequent acquisition and display policies. In some cases the artistic development of the nation is given precedence through the evolution of a 'national' school defined by an international context. 'Frequently the presence of native artists in the collection transforms a passive inheritance of mainstream values into an active participation in and contribution to that civilisation.'¹⁴⁷ In others, specific periods of the country and people's history may be emphasised, highlighting or inventing distinctive 'national characteristics'. In both cases the museum has an ideal national audience in mind and the presentation situates that audience within an idealised historic community.

The concept of culture as commodity is a fundamental aspect of the national museum's development.¹⁴⁸ Starting with a shift in the perception of royal possessions in the second half of the eighteenth century, art works gradually came to embody transcendental universal values; 'in France, [...] the royal collection came to be seen

¹⁴⁴ M. C. van der Sman in F. Kuyenhoven (ed.), *Developments in Dutch Museum Policy*, Amsterdam 2001, 9.

¹⁴⁵ Duncan and Wallach

¹⁴⁶ Hunt

¹⁴⁷ P. Fisher, "Local Meanings and Portable Objects: National collections of Literature, Music and Archaeology", in Wright, 15-27. 29.

¹⁴⁸ Prior

as national property, part of the nation's cultural patrimony that had to be preserved for posterity.¹⁴⁹ The 're-appropriation' of this patrimony invested the new Museum of the Revolution in Paris and its contents with a hitherto unexplored ideological dimension. Symbols of elitism and power within a previously forbidden royal space were subverted to become symbols of the power of the masses and the Republic.¹⁵⁰ Outside France this was considered dangerous by the establishment and inspiring to others. From this point on the national museum became an ideological arena associated with state power and authority.

Some museums, particularly in North America, Britain and Germany, following the example of the Napoleonic Louvre have, in the past, taken as their natural role the acquisition and display of the art of the whole western world and beyond. These 'global' or 'universal' museums are founded upon a belief in the universal history of civilisation that emerged in the nineteenth century, brought about by exploration and archaeological discoveries.¹⁵¹ Whilst 'the recent past was historicized as the newly-emerging nation-states sought to preserve and imemorialize their own formation' universal histories were, 'annexed to national histories as, within the rhetoric's of each national museum complex, collections of national materials were represented as the outcome and culmination of the universal story of civilisation's development.'¹⁵²

For the nation-states that gained autonomy in the nineteenth century the possession and display of a historic and noble heritage was needed to validate their existence:

Museums could make a variety of cultural claims for their nations. They facilitated the construction of a lineage which presented their countries as the latter-day incarnations of the great empires of the past, casting them in the role of political and moral heirs.¹⁵³

Artefacts from high points of history were therefore essential to the cultural and historical integrity of the nation. Classical antiquity in particular was considered a model of 'universal' excellence, and the display of Greco-Roman artefacts, from pillars to potshards became common in both art and archaeological museums and a source of international rivalry. In the race for imperialist expansion museums were

¹⁴⁹ A. McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in 18th century Paris*, Cambridge 1994, 7.

¹⁵⁰ Duncan, in Karp and Lavine

¹⁵¹ T. Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex" in, R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson and S. Nairne (eds), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London 1996, 81-112.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* 99.

used to portray their political masters as the custodians of world culture, saving art and heritage neglected in the countries of origin. The successful acquisition and display of these objects within the public space of the museum then validated these claims before a national audience.

The view that some nations were better suited to manage the heritage of the world than others was first elaborated during Napoleon's campaigns in the 1790s, to defend the looting of conquered countries and the assimilation of their possessions into the Louvre. The first arguments justifying cultural appropriation were put forth following the removal of paintings from the Austrian Netherlands in 1794. Whilst it was unnecessary to justify the pillaging of 'inferior' peoples, appropriating the cultural heritage of fellow Europeans called for an idealistic rationale. A convoluted argument linking freedom, nationhood, and connoisseurship was developed, forming the rhetorical basis for all subsequent campaigns:

The fruits of genius are the patrimony of liberty...For too long these masterpieces have been soiled by the gaze of servitude. It is in the bosom of a free people that the legacy of great men must come to rest...the immortal works of Rubens, Van Dyck and the other founders of the Flemish school are no longer on alien soil...they are today delivered to the home of the arts and of genius, the land of liberty and equality, the French Republic.¹⁵⁴

National superiority as justification for unlawful acquisition found its ultimate expression in the plundering of Europe during the Second World War. Echoes of this argument are found in the defence of some 'universal' museums of their continued possession of objects that are the subject of repatriation claims by the countries and, or, nations of origin. The most famous case in point is that of the Parthenon, or Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. Several times during the long-running debate the BM has declared its role as a museum for the world, 'and that the museum's trustees have a duty to hold the objects so as to secure maximum public benefit'.¹⁵⁵ Which public and what benefit is a bone of contention. Though the idea that these artefacts belong to all nations as part of a universal culture has been reiterated time and again, the implication is that whilst the British rather than the Greeks are their custodians, it is they who are the true ideological and moral heirs of the Classical world.

If there exists an international heritage what then constitutes national heritage? The artefacts of those groups that make up the nation, past and present, fall under the

¹⁵³ Schubert op.cit. 23.

¹⁵⁴ L. Barbier cited in McClellan, op.cit. 116.

broad and flawed banner of national cultural heritage. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett defines heritage as 'a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past', and display as 'an interface that mediates and thereby transforms what is shown into heritage'.¹⁵⁶ This corroborates the view that it is the act of display itself that endows the subject with specific museological meaning and associative value.¹⁵⁷ For example, Italian Renaissance painting is valued highly and therefore displayed in national museums; or, Italian paintings are in national museums and are therefore valued highly. Once in a museum art works are endowed with new meanings that involve certain assumptions regarding the public being addressed.¹⁵⁸ Tastes and ideals of quality are moulded or validated by the canon of quality in evidence in museums, major national collections thereby help to create and maintain criteria of excellence.

The connection between heritage and identity has been recognised and exploited for a long time. As the material culture and products of a community are linked to the notion of 'self', the destruction, control, or appropriation of a people or nation's heritage undermines and threatens the image of that 'self', thereby asserting the power of the dominant 'other' who carries out these actions. Recent events in Iraq and Afghanistan, repeated cries to 'save art for the nation' in the UK and the ongoing demands for the restitution of art works appropriated during the Second World War demonstrate the symbolic potency of cultural heritage in society. As Jeanette Greenfield states in *The Return of Cultural Treasures*, 'the truest common concern of cultural return [is the] recovery of the national soul.'¹⁵⁹

The development of the art museum is inherently linked to the status of art itself. The discipline of art history and aesthetics that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century redefined the collecting and viewing of art, rendering what was once the exclusive province of the elite accessible to the middle class.¹⁶⁰ Classification and labelling helped develop a visual ideology of the spiritual heritage of the nation manifest through works of individual and collective genius thereafter displayed chronologically by national 'school'.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Cited in, *Quarterly*, Spring 2004, 7.

¹⁵⁶ B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: tourism, museums and heritage*, Berkeley 1998. 7.

¹⁵⁷ 1.1 ii. *Nationalism and Museology*, 13-16.

¹⁵⁸ D. J. Sherman and I. Rogoff (eds), *Museum Culture: histories, discourses, spectacles*, London 1994.

¹⁵⁹ Greenfield, op. cit. 235.

¹⁶⁰ Schubert

¹⁶¹ Duncan, in Karp and Lavine

Exhibitions of national schools and artists are important in sustaining and developing notions of genius and national exceptionalism, whilst generating interest in the fine arts at a national and international level.¹⁶² At the end of the nineteenth century retrospectives devoted to significant national artists began to be held across Europe, an outcome of the ideal of the 'great artists' developed at the end of the eighteenth century. Subsequently, art in general and painting in particular acquired a unique quality; it became special, a medium for the expression of truths to be isolated from other activities in a separate building.¹⁶³

In their seminal article, *The Universal Survey Museum*, Duncan and Wallach argue that structures traditionally associated with religious ritual were subverted and adapted in museum architecture to create a ritual space for secular truths. In the first great age of museum building, palaces, temples, treasuries and tombs were post-ceremonial forms idealised and translated into museum buildings.¹⁶⁴ The architectural rhetoric of the classical world in general and Rome in particular - the temple front, Pantheon dome, and coffered ceiling - was the most widely used in the construction of national museums. Visual evocations of periods of 'high' civilisation asserted the position of the state as the descendent of earlier democratic and civil bodies. Monumental classical forms created an interior articulated around large halls and corridors, encouraging associations with liturgy, both religious and royal.

In *Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship*, Duncan goes on to suggest that the museum-goers themselves participate in the ritualisation of the museum space through their use of it.¹⁶⁵ Audience experience varies according to social group, education, gender, and of course nationality. For many, art remains an elitist prerogative associated with wealth and education. Though established partly to challenge this view, national art museums have transformed the display of private property into that of a sacred and selective heritage, entrenched in often-anachronistic ideals of what constitutes a national audience. For some, a museum of fine art is a forbidding space, the old precept of having to 'understand' a work of art in order to truly enjoy the gallery experience influences individual observation and may alienate certain groups.

The display of art within a ritual space associated with nationhood acts as a powerful definer; the individual whose ideals of beauty are in greatest accord with

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Prior

¹⁶⁴ Duncan and Wallach, op. cit.

those visible in the museum may be seen to enjoy a greater share of the heritage on display and, by extension, of the collective identity.¹⁶⁶ Implicit in this is the suggestion that 'those who best understand how to use art in the museum environment are also those on whom the museum confers this greater and better identity'.¹⁶⁷ In this manner national museums can reinforce the conceptual bodies of the nation, who belongs and who does not.¹⁶⁸ It is as well to remember though that whilst the museum space is not neutral, individuals enter museums with preconceived ideas as to their content and meaning, determined by a range of social factors.

All this begs the question for whom does the national museum exist? In turn raising the issue of the definition of the nation, how it is to be represented and who chooses the manner of its representation. This is all the more pertinent when applied to what are perceived as traditional museums founded upon the presumptions of an elite whose credibility has since been either undermined or seriously questioned.

History has run its course and civil liberties and freedoms have affected the structure and fabric of western society. De-colonialisation, mass immigration, and the increased ease of international movement mean that many previously isolated or homogenous cultures and groups have been brought face to face for the first time. If national art museums in Western Europe appear to have remained largely unaffected, this owes more to art history than history. Those museums whose collections range from early to contemporary art can present themselves as microcosms of their nation, whilst galleries that end with the nineteenth century have to engage more closely with the past in an effort to acquire meaning for in the present.

Nationalism itself is not an archaic phenomenon but is in flux, in turn affecting national institutions, '...the dynamics of nationalism shape and re-shape the cultural institutions that represent national identity'.¹⁶⁹ In the mid twentieth century militant cultural nationalism reached its extreme conclusion in the racial politics of Nazi Germany after which centralised nationalism lost most of its credibility in Europe. The resurgence of nationalism at a regional level has severely eroded ideals of the centralised nation-state, undermining the concept of culture as a force for unification. Belgium, one of the newest nation-states in Western Europe, has become a federal

¹⁶⁵ Duncan, in Karp and Lavine

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Duncan, in Karp and Lavine op. cit, 102.

¹⁶⁸ Boswell and Evans

state after less than one hundred and seventy years. Even Great Britain, for so long a dominant cultural and political force on the world stage, has initiated a process of devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, recognising their demands for cultural and political differentiation.

In the majority of those countries witnessing its resurgence, regional nationalism has always been a component of state identity. Where before, the 'ethnic' identities of native minorities were assimilated under the banner of British, Spanish or Belgian, they are increasingly distinguished as Welsh, Catalan, or Flemish. More than the demands of these relatively component elements it is the present climate of over sensitive post-colonial apologism that is testing the ability of 'old' nations to assert identities intertwined with histories of cultural and political domination. There is a danger that present concerns for political correctness result in a revisionist approach to national histories, subsequently obscuring and what is worse, misrepresenting the development of countries and their nations.¹⁷⁰ Whilst this primarily affects history and archaeology collections, art museums are also implicated in so far as the context of production and the provenance of their collections may be subject to ethical reappraisal.

Post-colonial 'white' guilt and the efforts of affluent western European states to bolster the concept of a multicultural society are challenging traditional definitions of identity and cultural authority in countries like France, the Netherlands and the UK. The ideal of a single nation, visible to itself and the world through its institutions is being questioned not only by native groups, but also by the hybrid identity of new nationals. Such minority and peripheral elements did not feature in the original concept of the national art museum but must be included if the institution is to remain true to 'its' nation.

Museums are now being created dedicated to the portrayal of splinter identities, providing them with political and social credibility. The *Museum of Scotland* in Edinburgh, the *Musée de la Vie Wallonne* in Belgium and most recently, *The National Museum of the American Indian* in Washington D.C. are examples of this new breed of 'national' museum and indicate a return to a more racial understanding of the term

¹⁶⁹ F. Forster-Hahn, "Shrine of Art or Signature of a new nation? The National Gallery(ies) in Berlin 1848-1968", in Wright, 79-99, 79.

¹⁷⁰ Schubert

'nation'.¹⁷¹ In this manner the museum institution regains one of its primary functions; as a state body that justifies and articulates the identity of a self-defining group through the medium of its heritage.

Ultimately the question of how to render a national museum of art national remains embedded in the concept and interpretation of the nation itself. Recently, national museums, particularly those with broad, historically diverse collections, have focused on their educational potential; marrying aesthetics, art history, history and social history, in an effort to encourage contemporary identification. Over time the art museum can become self-defining, blending with the national landscape merely through its continued presence, its collections unquestioned or unnoticed. In some cases this has resulted in a loss of public and state interest, the museum being perceived as a throwback to another age, the vehicle for outdated mores and concepts. Blockbuster exhibitions and the appearance of marketing in the museum sector are helping to counter this trend.¹⁷²

The greatest challenge facing national art museums in the early twenty-first century remains that of identity. Fraught with emotional and political minefields this is an issue that must be dealt with carefully and intelligently. It would be misleading to think that immigration and the problems associated with the integration of alien cultural groups is a recent development in European society. However, unlike in previous centuries, these are issues given more prominence within more transparent national frameworks. The national mythologies and chauvinist prejudices of the past deserve their place within public museums as they constitute an important part of the nation's history and have contributed to its evolution. The hidden and peripheral histories must also be told and alternative interpretations explored without denying or removing the basis for mainstream identities, be they multicultural or fiercely uni-national.

¹⁷¹ 1.1 *i. Concepts of the Nation*, 10-12.

¹⁷² Schubert

2.2 *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*

This case study looks at the manner in which the Rijksmuseum came about, the incentive for the creation of a national art museum in Amsterdam, and addresses the importance of the museum building and its relationship to the collections it houses. Collecting policies, the collections themselves, their display and didactic applications will be examined; identifying those elements emphasised above others, how and why this is done, and the national function and symbolism of the institution in general. Finally, the place of the Rijksmuseum in the cultural and national consciousness of the modern Netherlands, whether it is a museum of, or for the nation, and its role in the creation and substantiation of a Dutch identity will be addressed.

Built at the tail end of the nineteenth century, the Rijksmuseum was a statement of re-emerging pride and strength for a nation struggling to come to terms with its new rank in the world order. Purpose-built, the structure is itself an elaborate celebration of national achievements and a glorifying homage to the artists and cultural history of the Netherlands. The museum's display constitutes an unequivocal celebration of the art and history of the Netherlands, due in part to acquisition policies and partly to the time frame it addresses. Today it is one of the chief tourist attractions of the capital and a famous landmark. For the Dutch themselves it is something of a pilgrimage destination, as within its walls it holds the holy of holies, Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. (pl. 4)

Though the museum holdings are extensive and diverse, this paper focuses primarily on the European painting and history collections as these compare readily to the collections in Brussels. However, the applied arts, Asian art, and furniture collections are integral to the function and identity of the museum and therefore taken into account.

In late 2003 the museum was closed to undergo extensive renovations following which its display policies and layout will be radically different. Whilst the proposed display policy for the reopening in 2008 is well documented it is impossible to judge its success as yet. Consequently, all observations and ensuing analysis of the layout and presentation of the Rijksmuseum are based on the layout and hang of September 2003 as well as archival and printed material.

The use of the term 'cultural heritage' in this chapter is consistent with the definition and application used to formulate cultural policy in the Netherlands.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Cultural heritage: museums, historic buildings and sites, archaeology, archives. from, 'Netherlands 3.2 National Definition of Culture', *Cultural Policies in Europe: a compendium*, www.culturalpolicies.net/profiles, 2003.

i. Making a National Museum

Though museum catalogues give 1800 as the Rijksmuseum's founding date it was at this point, neither in Amsterdam nor within a *Rijk*, (a kingdom), and would change name and location many times before finding its present site on the green outskirts of the city eighty years later.

Celebrated as 'the nation's treasure chamber'¹⁷⁴, the Rijksmuseum originates within a period of national doubt and instability; that of the Batavian Republic, French rule and annexation (1795-1813). As had happened in Brussels in 1794, it was the threat of a permanent dispersal of the country's cultural heritage that provided the impetus for a museum that would go on to acquire a national function and purpose.

Following the 'liberation' of Holland by the French and the establishment of the Batavian Republic (1795-1806), the stadholder's cabinet of paintings, *objets d'art*, and renowned natural history collection were removed to Paris; in accordance with Napoleon's *pays conquis* policies.¹⁷⁵ The remaining royal possessions in The Hague, including a considerable number of paintings, were auctioned off in what has since been described as a 'cultural bloodletting'.¹⁷⁶ Dutch intellectuals had yet to think of former aristocratic collections in terms of a heritage significant to them as Dutchmen, rather than solely as indicators of the wealth and status of a discredited elite.

Appointed to manage the estates and holdings of the House of Orange, the finance minister Izaak Jan Alexander Gogel, keen Patriot and firm believer in the ideals of the Batavian government, took it upon himself to create a national museum for Holland; inspired somewhat ironically by the *Musée Central des Arts* in Paris.¹⁷⁷ He gathered together art works and objects from minor palaces and government buildings around the country left largely untouched by the French who had focused their efforts on The Hague. The ensuing collection was placed in the former royal residence of *Huis ten Bosch* outside The Hague, itself considered to be a high point of seventeenth century culture.¹⁷⁸ Opened on the 31st of May 1800 as the *Nationale Kunstgallerij*, or National

¹⁷⁴ F. Van der Avert, *The New Rijksmuseum: for the 21st Century Public*, Amsterdam 2003, 5.

¹⁷⁵ Grab

¹⁷⁶ J. J. P. Van Thiel, C.J. de Bruyn Kops, J. Cleveringa, W. Kloek and A. Vels Heijn, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1976, 10.

¹⁷⁷ G. Van der Ham, *200 Jaar Rijksmuseum*, Zwolle 2000, 19.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Art Gallery, it was the first public art gallery in the Netherlands and contained nearly two hundred paintings.¹⁷⁹

Gogel wanted the museum to play a role in the creation of a strong national identity that would in turn support the unitary state the Batavian government was trying to create from the federal structure of the former Republic. Symbols were created, drawn from history to 'create a single entity from nation and state'.¹⁸⁰

The museum had to provide an important contribution to the promotion of a new feeling of unity. The museum would provide visual evidence of the harmonious past being propagated by the state, a past in which every 'Batavian' could recognise themselves and take pride.¹⁸¹

The majority of the contents of the new gallery were former Orange possessions, the best elements of which had been removed by the French that reflected the stadholders' tastes and their history. It was, therefore, crucial that the museum acquire works that epitomised the new state's ideology. 'The museum was intended to be a monument to the history of the fatherland, and the acquisition policy reflected this. The early accessions were nearly all portraits of national figures [...] or historical scenes.'¹⁸² Above all the museum set out to acquire paintings from, and relating to, the seventeenth century.

Jan Asselijn's *The Swan*, painted in 1650, was the first painting to be formally acquired; bought at auction in Amsterdam in 1800 it remains a popular favourite to this day, (pl. 7).¹⁸³ Inscriptions added in the eighteenth century turned it into an allegory of the vigilance of Johann de Witt, who had lost his life defending the interests of the Republic against the wishes of the stadholder in 1672.¹⁸⁴ The value of the painting lay therefore in its presumed subject matter rather than particular artistic merit. Several other purchases were made for similar reasons in this period, particularly portraits of historical figures like van Oldenbarnevelt; the pensionary who had supported the principles of a free state, and popular military heroes like Admiral De Ruyter.¹⁸⁵ All contributed to the image of a Golden Age gradually being established.

¹⁷⁹ Van Thiel et al.

¹⁸⁰ Van der Ham, op.cit, 19. (Author's translation)

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 20. (Author's translation)

¹⁸² Van Thiel et al, op.cit, 11.

¹⁸³ Taco Dibbits, 17th century painting curator, in an interview with the author on the 25th September 2003, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

¹⁸⁴ Van Thiel et al.

¹⁸⁵ Van der Ham, op.cit, 21.

Following the failure of the Batavian Republic and the coronation of Louis Napoleon as king of Holland, the collection was moved from The Hague in 1808 to the second floor of the town hall in Amsterdam, remodelled as a palace. In keeping with his centralising policies the king had made the Netherlands' largest city his capital and considered it the only fit location for the public artistic and scientific collections.¹⁸⁶ The museum was renamed the *Koninklijk Museum*, Royal Museum, in keeping with the new status of the Netherlands as a kingdom.

Though his reign was short lived and later reviled for being 'alien', the centralising policies and innovations Louis Bonaparte brought about in law and civic matters made a lasting impression on Dutch society.¹⁸⁷ Keen to promote the arts in general and the development of the national museum in particular, he emphasised the didactic value of the museum as a school for living artists, 'although the original nationalistic impulse was by no means completely displaced'.¹⁸⁸ This approach shaped museum policy well into the twentieth century and a sizeable study collection still forms part of the museum today.

By 1815 the House of Orange was back in power and the museum re-housed in the institute of sciences, literature and the arts in the *Trippenhuis*, a large mansion in the centre of Amsterdam, where it remained until moved to its present quarters. It was also given its definitive name; *Rijks Museum*. The same year, the new king sent the director, Cornelis Apostool, to Paris to recover all works of art seized by France. Thanks to the intervention of the Duke of Wellington, the former stadholder collections with the exception of eighty paintings inaccessible in provincial French museums were returned to Holland via Antwerp later that year. None of the paintings, however, got beyond The Hague, where they formed the basis for the 'Royal Picture Collection of the Mauritshuis' established in 1821. Only the prints would later make it to the Rijksmuseum when the Royal library was integrated in 1816.¹⁸⁹

The economic difficulties and apathy that followed the revolt of the Belgians in 1830, coupled with the lack of any official cultural policy, meant the Rijksmuseum stagnated until the late 1870s.

Though the idea of a purpose built national museum had been around since the turn of the century it was not until 1862 that a "Commission to prepare the

¹⁸⁶ R. Van Luttervelt, *The Rijksmuseum and other Dutch Museums*, London 1967.

¹⁸⁷ Grab

¹⁸⁸ Van Thiel et al, op.cit, 14.

establishment of an Art Museum” was formed by private enthusiasts. The committee was banking on the wave of nationalism expected to break over Holland the following year to mark the 50th anniversary of emancipation from French rule. The building would be a monument to Dutch independence and the king, as well as a national museum.¹⁹⁰

Another twelve years passed before the idea was approved by parliament and the need and value of a purpose built museum was recognised at a national level. This was due in part to an article written in 1873 by the senior civil servant Victor de Stuers, called *Holland op zijn smallst*, or ‘Holland at its meanest’, ‘exposing the lamentable state of Holland’s cultural affairs [and] the dissipation of the national heritage’.¹⁹¹ De Stuers was particularly incensed that important Dutch artefacts were on display in other countries, having left the Netherlands without a murmur.¹⁹² Gradually the realisation began to dawn that Holland did not meet the standards set by other European nations in the presentation of its cultural heritage, thereby running the risk of appearing less civilised and developed. This helped renew interest in the museum project.

In 1875 the new museum got under way the city of Amsterdam donated land and money and promised to make the city’s painting collection available. An architectural competition for the design of the museum was announced and Petrus J. H. Cuypers’ design chosen; work began in 1876 and the museum opened its doors as the *Rijksmuseum* on its present site in 1885.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Van der Ham.

¹⁹¹ Van Thiel et al, op.cit, 23.

¹⁹² Van der Ham.



Plate 7



Plate 8

ii. Cuypers' Cathedral

(see pl. 8)

'The Netherlands has many museums with an international reputation, but there's only one Rijksmuseum.'¹⁹³ This was Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok's response in 1999 to the lower house of parliament's request for government support of the Rijksmuseum renovation project. This statement underscores the esteem in which the Rijksmuseum is held. Building and collection have become synonymous; as unique and precious as the works it contains, the structure has entered the nation's heritage in its own right.

The original decorative programme of the museum is such that it deserves a separate study and cannot be addressed in full here. However, as previously elaborated the physical space in which heritage is exhibited affects the ritual of display and is, therefore, fundamental in determining the meaning of the whole. A medium in itself the structure plays a vital role in articulating cultural possessions for public consumption. The Rijksmuseum building is, arguably, as important as its contents; the entire structure having been conceived as a celebration of Dutch achievements in the arts and by extension, the nation's contribution to the advancement of mankind.

Upon completion in 1883 the museum was the largest building in the Netherlands.¹⁹⁴ Intended as a receptacle for the best of Dutch art - considered that of the seventeenth century - the building was to reflect this purpose. The competition had stipulated 'an ancient Dutch style' and the winning design had originally been reminiscent of seventeenth century town houses with classical elements.¹⁹⁵ The end product however was rampantly neo-gothic and highly controversial.¹⁹⁶ With its vaulted ceilings, arches, ribbed vaults, steepled bell tower and large stained glass windows the Rijksmuseum is reminiscent of a huge cathedral and upon its inauguration in 1885 was accused of being a 'bishop's palace', inappropriate and in poor taste.¹⁹⁷ William III, already irked that the museum would bear neither his nor

¹⁹³ Wim Kok, 'The New Rijksmuseum - Policy', www.rijksmuseum.nl/uk/over_het_rijksmuseum/beleidsvisie.htm, 1.

¹⁹⁴ Van Thiel et al.

¹⁹⁵ J. Kiers and F. Tissink, *Le Rijksmuseum: L'Histoire d'un bâtiment*, trans. M. Jay, London 1992.

¹⁹⁶ H. Van Os et al, *Netherlandish Art in the Rijksmuseum: 1400-1600*, Waanders 2000.

¹⁹⁷ Kiers and Tissink, op.cit, 12.

his grandfather's name, refused to inaugurate it as planned declaring 'I will never set foot in that monastery'.¹⁹⁸

The nineteenth century witnessed a widespread revival of the gothic style in northern Europe. In Holland it came to be associated with the churches being erected across the country following the emancipation of Dutch Catholics in 1795.¹⁹⁹ A keen follower of the neo-gothic revival, Cuypers had been allowed free reign during the construction of the building to alter his original design by friend and fellow Catholic, de Stuers, government representative on the building committee and author of the article that had helped initiate the process two years earlier.

Built in response to a growing awareness of the importance of cultural heritage and the potential of a national museum as a status symbol, the museum became emblematic of renewed religious and social tensions in the country. Its neo-gothic design went against the prevalent Protestant middle class identification with the cultural flowering of the seventeenth century. In their opinion 'the independent Netherlands had always been a Protestant nation' and it was 'a real disgrace that a medieval and Catholic eye sore be built for the *'burgherlijke'* art of the seventeenth century, the glory days of Protestant Holland'.²⁰⁰ For the Catholics on the other hand the middle Ages were a source of inspiration and Cuypers' building a much-needed reference to this period of Dutch cultural history. Ultimately the Rijksmuseum is a compromise; though the structure has strong religious overtones the collection it contains is predominantly secular, both in its origins and subject matter.

Its carefully articulated external decor, still largely intact, is one of the most surprising features of the museum and goes a long way to expressing its identity and function. This elaborate decorative programme was meticulously coordinated with the building's contents by means of allegorical narratives and sculptures. These locate the structure geographically and historically firmly within Netherlandish traditions of art and architecture; stating its purpose as a receptacle for the cultural artefacts of a 'unique' civilisation and the promotion of the arts and history of the Netherlands. Detailed tile mosaics depict foreign dignitaries and royalty visiting Amsterdam; patrons of the arts, Dürer in the Netherlands, the building of an important monastery and sculptors at work, (pl. 9). On the wall of the library are the names and images of

¹⁹⁸ Cited in Van Thiel et al. 33. (Author's trans.)

¹⁹⁹ Blom and Lamberts

²⁰⁰ Van der Ham, 148. (Author's trans. and italics)

art historians, whilst etchers and engravers adorn the print cabinet. The names and busts of artists alternate in niches above the windows behind which their work was originally displayed.

The facade facing the old town is the most elaborately decorated as it is here that visitors enter the museum through the two doors flanking the *Museumstraat*, the road that bisects the building. References to drawing, painting, sculpture, and architecture, figurative representations of the cities of the Netherlands, and scenes from art history abound. Running above the arcade over the road is a sculptural frieze known as, 'The Glory of Dutch Art' the central panel of which depicts the Maid of Holland enthroned distributing laurel crowns to six artists representing important periods of Dutch art history; amongst them are Jan Steen, Lucas van Leyden and Rembrandt. (Pls 10-12)

On the roof above a winged victory looks out over the city, the only reference to the original idea of the museum as a monument to Dutch independence. On the other side of the building, the Rembrandt extension built in 1906 is decorated by tile mosaics and a frieze showing the master at work on *The Syndics* surrounded by pupils; stressing the importance of the workshop environment in which knowledge is passed from master to student.²⁰¹

Whereas the outside of the museum has remained largely the same the interior has changed dramatically. In the twentieth century space became the most pressing issue and the two courtyards that served as light wells and sculpture halls were filled in to provide more wall space. The south wing, now the 'Philips Wing', was added in the early twentieth century to house the nineteenth century collection and later the Asian Art collection.

More so even than the exterior, the interior of the museum was once rife with elaborate allegorical tableaux relating the history and development of the Netherlands and the arts. These were set in prominent places throughout the building, some on canvas others painted straight onto the walls. However the rich ornamentation and allegorical imagery were soon considered inappropriate backdrops and all painted decoration was removed or covered with a thick coat of white paint between 1920 and 1950, rendering the museum more neutral in keeping with modern tastes.²⁰²

The main hall at the top of the stairs was the most heavily decorated; it was not intended as an exhibition space but rather as, 'a place where the visitor could meditate

²⁰¹ Kiers and Tissink

on the great achievements of Dutch art.²⁰³ The cycle of life and signs of the Zodiac and the seasons were depicted in the floor whilst the world of the intellect was represented under the vaults of the ceiling and scenes taken from Dutch history decorated the lower walls. Portraits of men and women in historic dress represented the applied arts, vivid architectural details were painted onto the plaster, scrollwork ran along the rib vaulting and iron beams, and artist's names and dates were to be found on the walls of all the exhibition rooms. (Pls 13-14)

Although some elements of the painted decor were restored in the 1980s and others will be by the forthcoming restoration programme, the only unadulterated surviving elements of the original internal décor are the five stained glass windows in the main hall. These contain detailed portraits of painters, including Apelles, Lucas van Leyden, Rembrandt, and the sculptors Phidias and Hendrik de Keyser. This visual association implies a link of artistic descent from the skills developed in antiquity to later Dutch masters.

From the main hall the Gallery of Honour, the spine of the museum that runs north to south over the bisecting road, faces the visitor. This has always been the most important space in the building, traditionally reserved for the most significant works in the collections. A vast echoing space, with alternating rib vaulted arches topped by circular light wells, it contains eight exhibition bays. Once elaborately painted with heavy curtains draping the entrances to the bays, the Gallery is now compared to a Pieter Saenredam church interior, white and bright: (pls 15-17). Modelled on the nave of a gothic church or cathedral, the design automatically triggers certain associations in the visitor; its purpose is to instil awe and respect, elevating the works displayed here to the rank of holy relics or icons.

It is highly likely that Cuyper also had the Louvre's *Grande Gallerie* in mind when he decided to create this central space with connotations of ritual and power. Dutch art and artists are the subject of glorification in Cuyper's museum, evinced by the names of northern Netherlandish and Dutch artists throughout the building. One artist in particular though has been singled out: Rembrandt van Rijn.

The Gallery of Honour culminates with the Rembrandt Room, built for the sole purpose of displaying *The Night Watch*; (pl. 18). Central to the collection since its incorporation in 1808, the painting's display in the Rijksmuseum building since its

²⁰² Van Thiel et al.

opening in 1885 has been instrumental in converting it into a national icon. During the inauguration ceremony on the 13th of July 1885, the assembled guests were taken on a tour of the museum whereupon reaching *The Night Watch* it was unveiled by the painter Johannes Bosboom whilst in the courtyard a choir struck up Jan Pieter Heye's rhapsody 'Rembrandt'.²⁰⁴ The importance of the artist is emphasised by the decor of the room itself; four caryatids, dawn, day, evening and night, referring to 'Rembrandt's mastery over light and darkness' flank the entrance.²⁰⁵ Cuypers wanted *The Night Watch* at the heart of the museum both physically and symbolically. By means of the building's layout he effectively placed it at the beginning and the end of the visitor's experience, making it the museum's alpha and omega:

...Pierre Cuypers, conceived of the national museum as an encapsulation of all Dutch history and art. The central object in his vision was none other than the *Night Watch*. He created a space for it where the painting took on a nearly sacral character.²⁰⁶

Nineteenth century photographs show heavy curtains draped across the entrances to the side bays and the Rembrandt Room allowing only a glimpse of the painting on the back wall.²⁰⁷ Considering the religious symbolism of the building and the convictions of the architect it is no great leap to say that the Gallery of Honour functions as a nave, the Rembrandt Room is an apse, and the curtains a rood screen separating the two; 'he [Cuypers] also turned Rembrandt's *Night Watch* into the nation's altarpiece'.²⁰⁸ The enormous stained glass windows on the facade lighting the main hall and Gallery heighten the pseudo-religious atmosphere. Despite a degree of incoherence in the present layout as a result of modern alterations, this effect has been maintained. Visitors still approach *The Night Watch* through the Gallery of Honour, and as they peruse the flanking bays containing examples of some of the best of Dutch art, they catch glimpses of the Rembrandt masterpiece glowing tantalisingly at its end. (Pls 19-20)

In late 2003 the Rijksmuseum began a major refurbishment and restoration programme scheduled to end in 2006. Many years in the making, the guiding principle of the project is 'continuing with Cuypers', his original design will be

²⁰³ Kiers and Tissink, op. cit. 32.

²⁰⁴ Van Thiel et al.

²⁰⁵ Van der Ham, 180. (Author's trans.)

²⁰⁶ Gary Schwartz, *The Night Watch*, Amsterdam 2002, 36.

²⁰⁷ Van Thiel et al.

²⁰⁸ H. Van Os, *Netherlandish Art; in the Rijksmuseum 1400-1600*, Amsterdam 2000, 15.

recreated as far as possible.²⁰⁹ Practically speaking this means removing the additional floors that have filled the courtyards on either side of the building allowing illumination from the sides as well as above. This will help consolidate the structure in need of repair and general maintenance whilst adapting it to modern technical and curatorial needs.²¹⁰ Some of the original interior decor will also be restored though modern sensibilities and tastes will determine to what extent.

Whilst the structure and general aspect of the building will be closer to its original form, the use of the space will be radically different. From when it reopens in 2008, the Rijksmuseum collections will be integrated, former divisions between painting, the applied arts and history swept aside. However, *The Night Watch* will retain the place designed for it and the Gallery of Honour will remain the high point of the museum structure.

²⁰⁹ 'The New Rijksmuseum', www.rijksmuseum.nl/uk/over_het_rijksmuseum/nieuwe_rijks.htm, 2.

²¹⁰ Ibid.



Plate 9

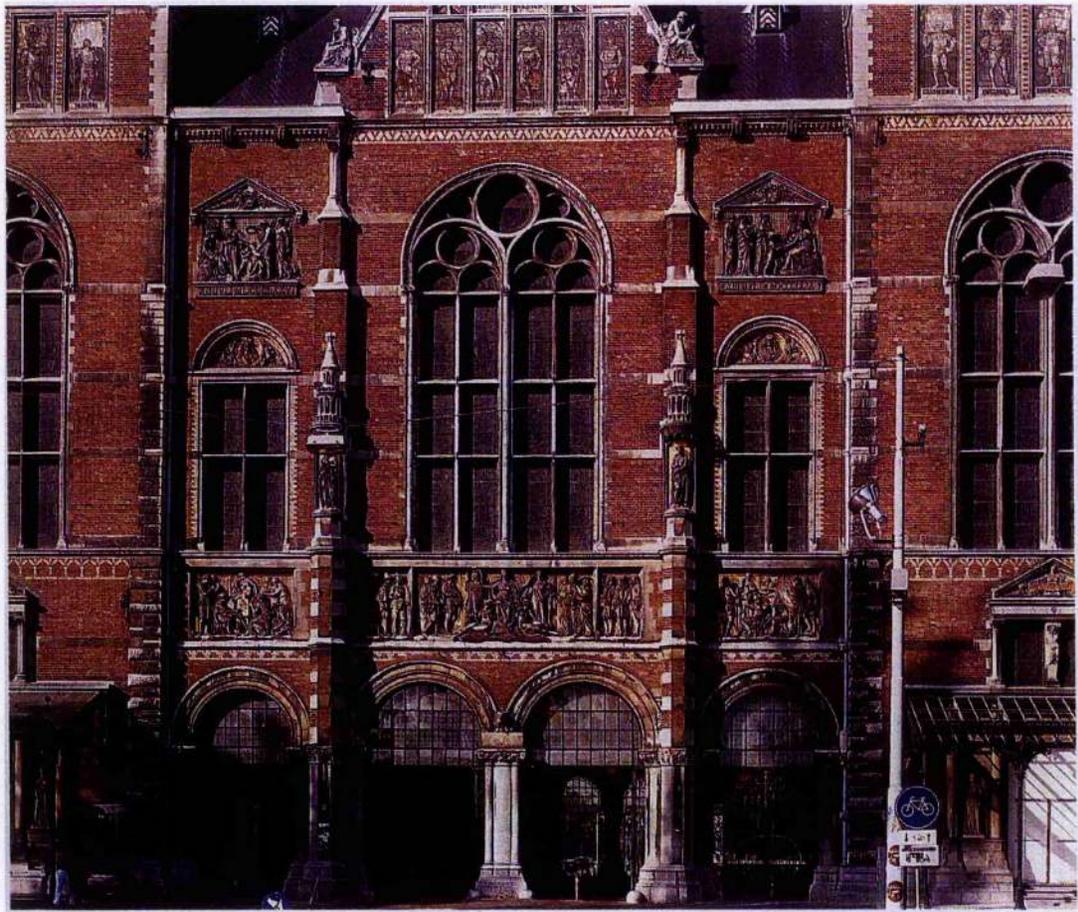
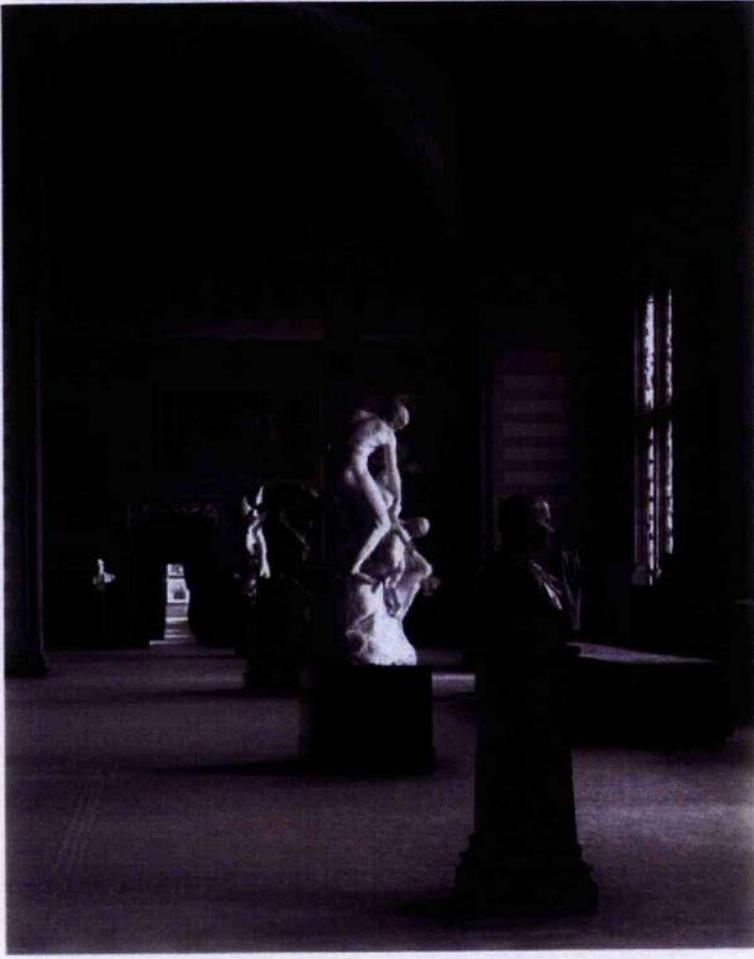


Plate 10



Plate 11-12





Plates 13-14

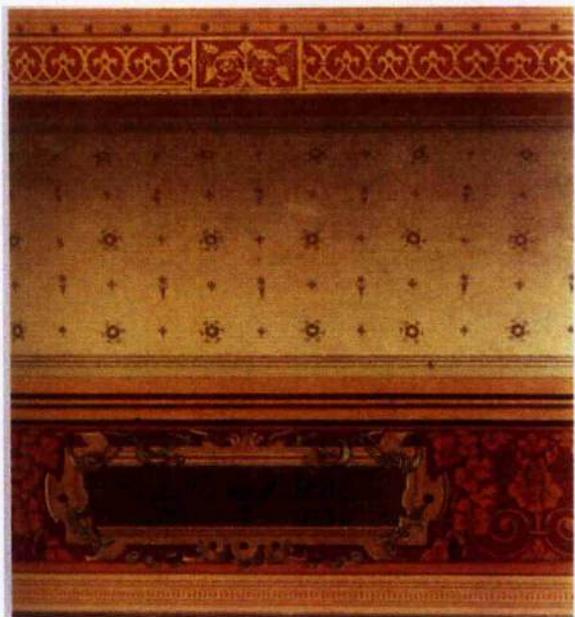




Plate 15



Plate 16



Plate 17



Plate 18

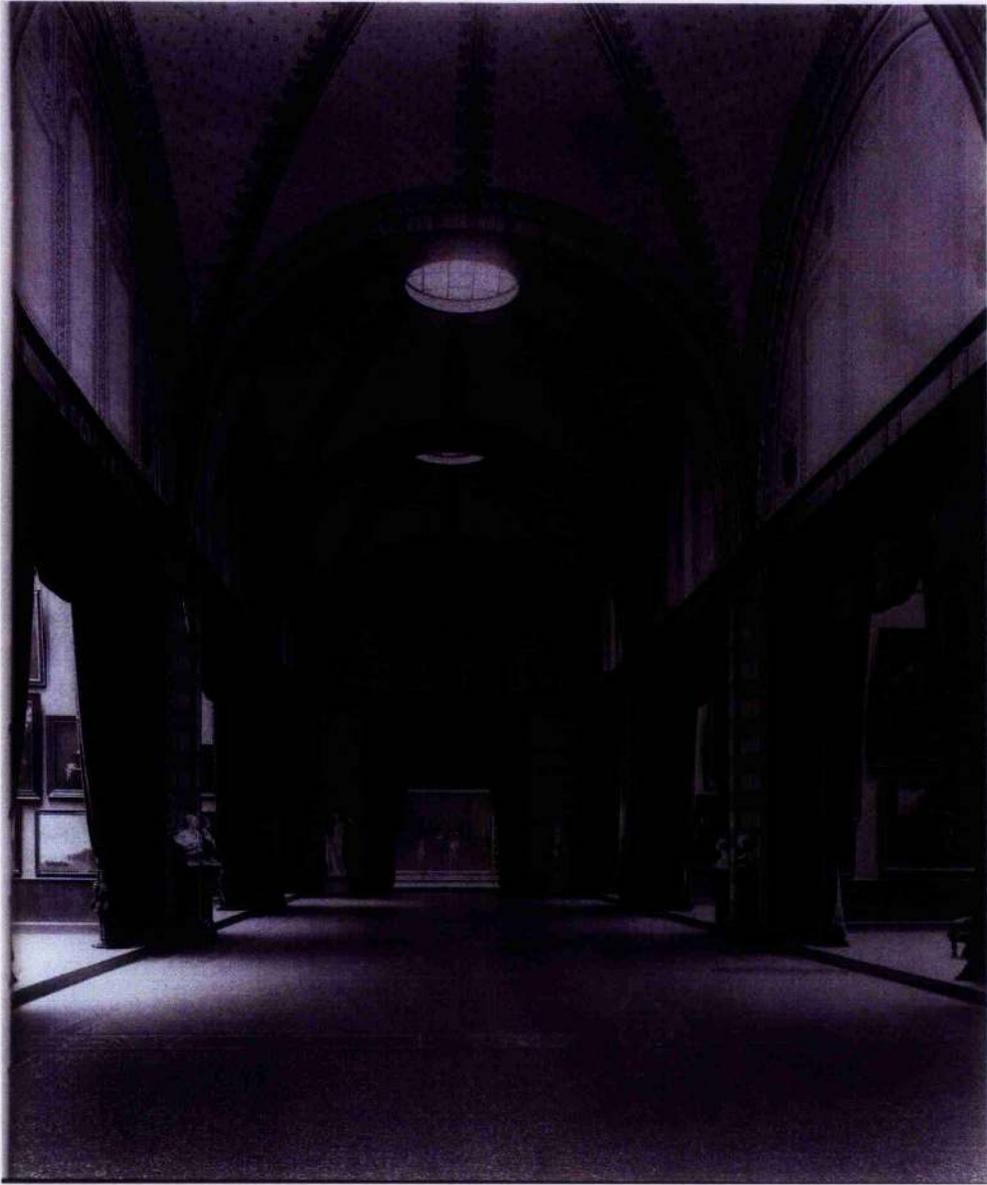


Plate 19



Plate 20

iii. Collections

The Rijksmuseum is a museum of art and history whose goal is to provide a representative overview of Dutch art and history from the Middle Ages onward, and of important aspects of European and Asiatic art, for both a national and an international audience. In pursuit of this aim the Rijksmuseum keeps, cares for, conserves, restores and researches artistic and historical objects; it treats collects and displays them, making them accessible and organising exhibitions.²¹¹

The Rijksmuseum's mission statement above, clearly states its desire to provide nationals and foreigners alike with an overview of Dutch history and culture through its collections. Part of a network of national institutions, (according to a recent survey there are over 900 museums in the Netherlands, twenty-five of which are national²¹²) the *Rijksmuseum Amsterdam* must compete for funding and visitors in an age when the place and role of the museum in society is being reappraised.

In 1995 the Rijksmuseum became partially independent, reorganised as a foundation run by a supervisory board of trustees. Still subsidised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (*OCenW*), it generates extra income through ticket sales, publications, corporate events and sponsorship. All buildings and collections remain the property of the state, responsible for their preservation and maintenance.²¹³

Since the implementation and completion of the ten year *Deltaplan voor het cultuurbehoud*, 'Delta Plan for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Netherlands', there have been many positive innovations within the Dutch cultural sector. Launched in 1990 with a total budget of € 150 million (£ 100 million), its aim was the registration, preservation and conservation of the country's 'movable heritage', defined as collections within museums, archives and libraries.²¹⁴ One of the outcomes was a set of guidelines for writing collection plans produced by the *Instituut Collectie Nederland* or *ICN*, a branch of the *OCenW* aimed at promoting access and good practice in the heritage sector.²¹⁵ These guidelines have had a big impact as prior to this no general procedure for collection management and care existed, each museum simply followed its own system.

²¹¹ *Jaarverslag 2002 Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, Zwolle 2003. p.9. (Author's trans.)

²¹² Council of Europe, "Netherlands 7.2: Status/role and development of major cultural institutions", *Compendium: Cultural Policies in Europe*, www.culturalpolicies.net/profiles, 2003.

²¹³ OCenW; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap

²¹⁴ S. Scholten, "The Delta Plan for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Netherlands" in Kuyenhoven (ed.), 17-21.

²¹⁵ This booklet has since been used in Belgium, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

Once museums began drawing up collection plans they were better able to gauge the true nature and extent of their collections; its strengths, weaknesses and place within the national framework. In turn this has allowed for clearer marketing and collecting policies, each museum aware of what it has 'over' others in the field. In the case of the Rijksmuseum, over 80% of its visitors annually are foreigners and its biggest competitor is the Van Gogh museum.²¹⁶ Despite their proximity, one on each side of the *Museumplein*, people tend to go to one or the other but rarely both. Due partly to this and partly to the existence of institutions with similar collections like the 'Mauritshuis' in The Hague, the Rijksmuseum has chosen to promote and develop its Dutch seventeenth century collections in particular.²¹⁷ It is in this area that the museum excels and upon which it has built its reputation.

The reappraisal of the Delta Plan period has led to more innovative collecting and display policies, and the implementation of projects aimed at increasing the mobility and accessibility of collections. One such project was the creation of a permanent display space within Schiphol International airport, inaugurated by the crown prince in 2002. A special area in one of the terminals holds a display of approximately ten pieces alongside interactive information units. Entry is free and the exhibits are changed regularly. The aim is to raise the profile of the Rijksmuseum whilst using elements of its collections to introduce a broader international audience to the country; 'the millions of passengers travelling every year via Schiphol will be able to use this unique opportunity to get a taste of the Cultural Heritage of the Netherlands'.²¹⁸

Overall the Rijksmuseum collections comprise nearly one million objects visited by about one million people each year.²¹⁹ The present institution incorporates five older collections and has a library and print cabinet attached to it. At the time of writing the collections are divided into painting, applied arts, Asian art and history. There are approximately 5,500 paintings in the permanent collection, of which 600-800 are foreign works, twenty are by Rembrandt and seventy are guard company portraits.²²⁰ Only a quarter of the paintings are on display at any one time. The collection of foreign works of gallery quality is small and does not constitute a

²¹⁶ Dibbits

²¹⁷ Van Thiel et al.

²¹⁸ 'Rijksmuseum on Location: Schiphol', www.rijksmuseum.nl.

²¹⁹ Rijksmuseum, *Jaarverslag 2002*, Amsterdam 2003.

²²⁰ Dibbits

representative overview of the development of painting outside the country. Particularly surprising is the obvious lack of paintings from the Southern Netherlands and Flanders. Due in part to historic prejudices these lacunae are also the result of a 1940s agreement between the Rijksmuseum and the Mauritshuis regarding their respective acquisition policies. From this time on the Amsterdam museum focused on early Northern Netherlandish, Italian and Spanish holdings, as well as developing its seventeenth and nineteenth century Dutch collections; whilst the Mauritshuis elaborated its Southern Netherlandish and eighteenth century French collections.²²¹

As for past prejudices regarding foreign art these are rooted in the country's history, particularly regarding the work produced in the Southern Netherlands and modern Belgium. Prior to the division of the Low Countries most important centres of art production were in the south around Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, and Brussels. Close ties between artists of the two regions encouraged a dynamic exchange of skills and ideas, creating a flourishing art market.²²² Dutch independence and the ensuing political and religious differences put an end to this and over time the cultural gap between the regions was exacerbated. Work by Flemish artists came to be regarded as overtly Catholic both in subject matter and style and was therefore deemed primitive and unsuitable for display within the national museum. Crucially, 'religious art' came to be considered 'un-Dutch', even when produced in the Northern Netherlands.²²³ In the early nineteenth century differences in the artistic production of the two regions were emphasised and exaggerated, increasingly associated with the national characteristics being established. The belief that all Flemish art was religious and decadent was juxtaposed to that of Dutch art as a predominantly secular or *burgher* matter; reflecting the moral and 'honest' character of the Dutch through representations of the everyday and 'real' people.²²⁴

The true extent of the differences between Dutch and Flemish art is increasingly being called into question, as is the tendency to view the two in isolation. The creation of Belgium in the 1830s led Holland, like a disappointed suitor, to vociferously reject any artistic similarities or cultural links with the south. As the two countries sought to establish independent artistic pedigrees their art historical boundaries were reinforced.

²²¹ Van Thiel et al.

²²² C. D. Cuttler, *Northern Painting: from Pucelle to Bruegel, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth century*, Fort Worth 1991.

²²³ de Jongh

²²⁴ 1.2: Early Nationhood and Dutch National Identity, p. 15-25.

Nation building and nation consolidation exerted a lasting influence on the national collections in both Amsterdam and Brussels.

As previously discussed it was the art of the Dutch Republic that was most keenly sought after in the late eighteenth century. Under the influence of Patriot rhetoric the directors concentrated on acquiring works relating to the history of the fatherland. For the national museum to present paintings – sought more actively than other branches of the arts – from the ‘glorious seventeenth’ was to offer the citizens of the new republic a visual link to their past, a source of pride for all Dutchmen. The subject matter of paintings from this period and the typical ‘Dutchness’ they were seen to embody, received much emphasis and such works were avidly collected.

Since the 1940s the painting department’s acquisition policy has been working to redress this imbalance to show that northern Netherlandish and Dutch artists also dealt with religious themes, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²²⁵ Whilst it is rather late in the day to start collecting Flemish Primitives the museum does possess a handful of later pieces by Rubens, Jordaens, and Van Dyck. The focus now is on acquiring works by under-represented artists of national relevance, significant pieces by important Dutch artists, and to fill gaps within particular national genres such as still life of which there are few examples in the museum.²²⁶ In March of 2004 the museum acquired the *Burgomaster of Delft and his Daughter* by Jan Steen, (pl. 21). Painted in 1655 it is a key seventeenth century piece important for its ‘characteristic depiction of the mentality of the Dutch burgher in the Golden Age.’²²⁷ At € 11, 9 million, (approximately £ 7, 5 million), it is also the most expensive painting ever bought by the museum.²²⁸

Though most tourists come for the paintings and the Delftware, the museum also contains the national history collection. This is unusual in so far as it operates inside the walls of an art museum and there are no plans to separate the two. As regards the presentation and analysis of national culture this is a unique opportunity that the new display policy will develop from 2006. The core of the history collection consists of objects and pictures from institutions linked to the Dutch state and its predecessors, including the stadholder’s court, the Dutch East and West India Companies (VOC and VIC), the admiralties and the present Navy Ministry. Up until the Second World War

²²⁵ Dibbits

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ www.rijksmuseum.nl

national glory was the abiding theme, objects and images were used to commemorate achievements in war and trade as well as individuals like the popular heroes Admirals Tromp and De Ruyter. Recently collecting policies have begun to deal with other aspects of the country's history, taking into consideration different views of the past. Paintings of defeats and objects recovered from East Indiamen wrecks provide a more detailed picture of Dutch trading activities, whilst the social impact of the colonies has begun to feature in the displays.

Like many other nineteenth century museums the late twentieth century was characterised by a re-evaluation of the museum's collections and their use in an effort to counter the prejudices of the past. In future the Rijksmuseum collections will be called upon to play a far clearer role in the portrayal of the art and history of the Netherlands, for both a national and an international audience. In 2002 the following was added to the museum's existing mission statement:

To manage the collections so as to bring about widespread awareness of the outstanding importance of this national treasure house. The Rijksmuseum exists to make the art of the past and history meaningful in the present.²²⁹

Coinciding with the public launch of the plans for the restoration and major refurbishment of the Rijksmuseum it emphasises the museum's desire to increase access to, and awareness of its collections, through a more integrated approach that will help render the past 'meaningful in the present'. This statement reiterates the status of the institution as the 'national treasure house' and the responsibility that befalls it thereby.

Collections management and care has evolved in recent decades as has the discipline of Museology itself and many new factors must now be taken into account. Ethics, mis-appropriation, the inclusion of marginal social groups and the recognition of peripheral ethnic identities and histories are all issues that curators and collection managers must now consider. The 'New Rijksmuseum' display policy is a radical break with the past that will undoubtedly lead to further changes in the management of the collections in the future.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Van der Avert, op. cit. 26.



Plate 21

iv. Display

A number of considerations and criteria that vary according to the nature and purpose of the museum govern the choice of which works are exhibited. A recent publication by the museum's Marketing Department stated that as 'the nation's treasure chamber and museum of the Golden Age, the Rijksmuseum celebrates Holland's finest hour on the world stage'.²³⁰ Throughout the museum and in all departments with the exception of the Asian collection - slightly segregated in the south wing - it is the period of the Dutch Republic from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century known as *de gouden eeuw*, or Golden Age, that receives the most attention and space.

On the dark ground floor the history collection is displayed in a series of somewhat labyrinthine rooms. Starting in the fifteenth century the circuit focuses on the development of the Netherlands as a nation; constitutionally, politically, geographically and culturally. Separate rooms are devoted to naval victories, the Admirals, William III, the Dutch in Sri Lanka, the Battle of Waterloo, and the brief union with the southern Netherlands before ending with Dutch society on the eve of the Second World War. The greater part of the display space is given over to the birth of the Netherlands as such and its rise to international super power through trade and naval dominance in the seventeenth century. In the main area, originally the left courtyard, the larger pieces are exhibited. Soft lighting and the low ceiling create a hushed and restrained atmosphere as the visitor moves from flags, captured vessel memorabilia and bloodied jerseys, to canons and spice chests; (App. B: plan 1a).

The right hand side of the building is devoted to the applied arts, whilst the painting collection is spread over the left side of the first floor and the Gallery of Honour; (App. B: plan 1b). A chronological hang allows for a tour of the development of painting in the Netherlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. It was first developed in the 1920s by the then director Schmidt-Degener, and modelled on Wilhelm von Bode's arrangement of the Kaiser Friederich Museum in Berlin.²³¹ The paintings were hung side by side rather than above one another, alternating subject matter and often combined with furniture, ceramics and *objets d'art*.²³² The applied arts were later segregated in the right wing and it is worth noting that the presentation

²³⁰ Ibid. 5.

²³¹ Van der Ham

²³² Van Thiel et al, op.cit., 36.

planned for 2008 will be something of a return to this earlier, more integrated approach to display.

For the various reasons discussed above, the Rijksmuseum's Golden Age paintings are its biggest asset and this is reflected in their hang. The main criterion for display is 'best of Dutch', and those works germane to the development of Dutch genres and portraiture.²³³ In the first half of the seventeenth century for example, Van Goyen was central to the development of Dutch landscape painting, whilst in the latter half Van de Velde became synonymous with the seascape, an offshoot of the former genre. Strictly speaking there are no Dutch 'schools' but genres and groups often associated with cities; such as the Utrecht Carravaggists, hung together whenever possible.²³⁴ The aim of the curator is to present a balanced overview of the evolution of art in the Netherlands up to the nineteenth century in the most harmonious manner possible given the physical limitations.

The Gallery of Honour has traditionally been used to present highlights from all the collections. In the first display of 1885 the gallery's bays contained only Dutch paintings amongst which were many of the city's guard portraits.²³⁵ A catalogue from 1910 shows the bays numbered as rooms 244-247, and the hang described as 'Choice works of the Dutch School of the XVII century.' (App. B: plan 2)

From the mid 1920s Delftware was displayed in the central aisle of the gallery, which by the 1930s was devoted to the decorative and applied arts of the seventeenth century.²³⁶ Over the following decades different combinations were displayed in the gallery and in the 1970s it was given over to the foreign schools. By the 1990s the space was once again filled solely with the 'most important' Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century, before being re-hung circa 2002 to provide a European context for the development of art in this period. This hang was still in place prior to the museum's closure in 2003. (App. B: plan 1b).

At this time representative works of the seventeenth century, both Dutch and foreign were organised by type; portraiture, mythology and landscape. Juxtaposing Dutch paintings with the best foreign pieces allowed for easy comparisons of style, raising the issue of 'national schools' or genres. All bays on the left hand side were Dutch; with paintings by Hals, van der Helst, Bol, Dujardin, Maes and Rembrandt,

²³³ Dibbits

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ 1885 floor plan, Rijksmuseum archives, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

(pl. 22). Opposite, three bays held Italian, Spanish and Flemish works; amongst them Veronese, Tintoretto, Goya, Rubens, Van Dyck, and no less than five pieces by Jordaens (pl. 23). Comparable Dutch portraits and historical subjects on the other side of the gallery faced the Flemish paintings. The fourth bay on the right was devoted to three of Rembrandt's best known pieces; *The Jewish Bride*, *The Syndics*, and his *Self-portrait as St Paul*. This concentration of Rembrandt paintings just before the room housing *The Night Watch* acts as a prelude to what the Dutch regard as their greatest artist's greatest masterpiece.

Hung on the back wall of the Rembrandt Room, flanked by other civic guard portraits, the painting's presentation is consistent with its intended setting in the great hall of the *Kloverniersdoelen* where it hung from 1642 to 1715 surrounded by other portraits of the militia company.²³⁷ Since its incorporation into the national collection by Bonaparte, the painting has been gradually isolated visually, culminating in the pseudo-shrine designed for it by Cuypers. The time and money devoted to the hang of this one painting is indicative of its importance within the collection.

Criticism of the lighting from above in 1903 eventually led to the construction of an annexe onto the back of the Rembrandt Room, completed by Cuypers's son in 1906. Here *The Night Watch* was re-hung at right angles to the back wall, losing its focal function.²³⁸ Contemporary photographs show it roped off in a small room with stools placed before it, as though in readiness for prayer or meditation; (pl. 24). Debate and controversy surrounded the project from the outset and it was satirised mercilessly in the press. A contemporary American arts magazine unimpressed with the new arrangement wrote, 'the grandest painting on earth is put in a closet'.²³⁹ It was not long before *The Night Watch* was moved back to the Rembrandt Room, though it continued to be hung on the side walls until 1984 when it was finally restored to the south wall.

Although *The Night Watch* is famous beyond the Netherlands this owes more to the fame of its maker than to its subject matter. Other less famous pieces in the museum, such as *The Merry Drinker* by Hals and Asselijn's *The Swan*, (pl. 7), are also national favourites and on permanent display.

²³⁶ Van Thiel et al.

²³⁷ Riegl

²³⁸ Schwartz

²³⁹ Cited in Van der Ham, 218.

Exhibitions are a good way of gauging the value placed on certain artists or topics by the museum-going public. Looking back over visitor figures for past exhibitions a pattern emerges; Rembrandt is a consistent crowd puller, though figures may be misleading, as international visitors are not distinguished from nationals. Other topics like the “Stadholder King” exhibition of 1950 are interesting as visitor figures were high but the topic is nationally specific.²⁴⁰ In 1945 the museum put on a display of highlights from all national collections evacuated during the occupation in a massive exhibition called “Return of the Masters”; this attracted the largest number of visitors to any one event in the museum’s history, queues reached into the street and the dates were extended to meet demand.²⁴¹ In 2000 the Rijksmuseum broke all its previous records with “Glory of the Golden Age” to which 596,000 people came.²⁴² Though other factors come into play and must be considered when regarding visitor figures it is nonetheless clear that there has been consistent popular interest in national subjects and artists since the early years of the museum.

²⁴⁰ www.rijksmuseum.nl/asp/framuk.asp?name=zoek

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.



Plate 22



Plate 23

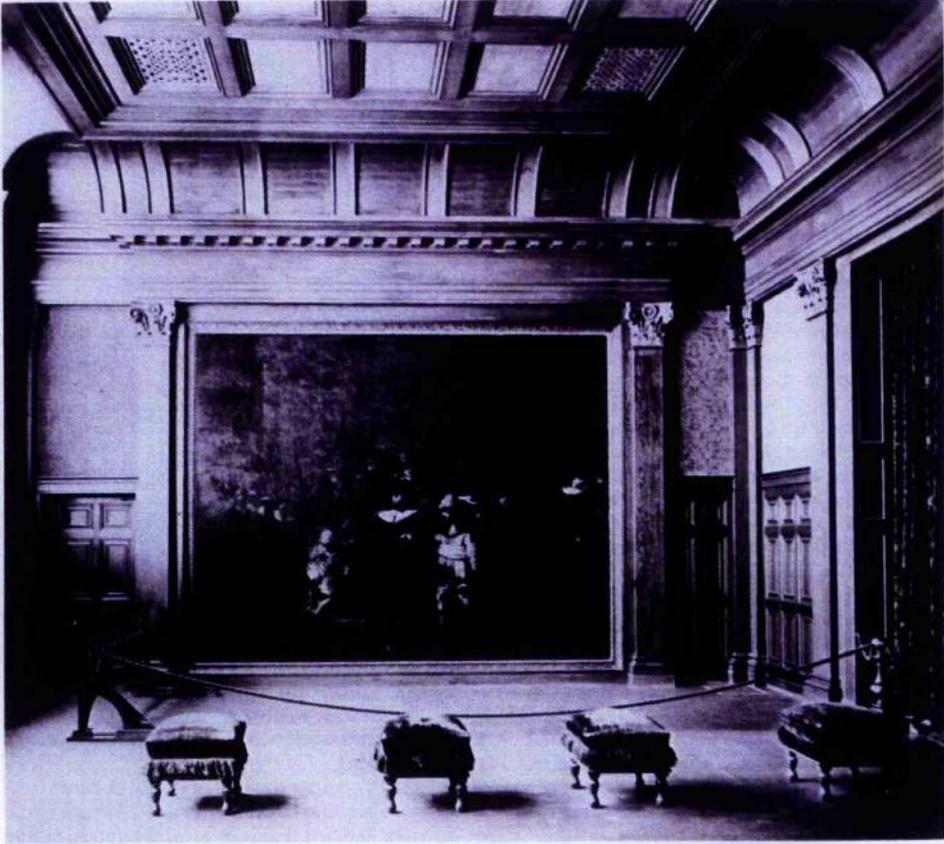


Plate 24

v. *The New Rijksmuseum*

Since the 1970s there has been debate in the Netherlands, as in other European countries over whether museums should collect for the benefit of art history, the furthering of academic knowledge and historic value, or to fulfil a primarily educational, and increasingly a 'socialising' role within the nation.²⁴³ Museums in the Netherlands have done well from public funding in recent years, a trend that though somewhat on the wane indicates an active interest and promotion of the cultural sector within the country. Dutch cultural policy objectives now reflect the four cultural principles of the Council of Europe, specifically those regarding the promotion of identity and diversity.²⁴⁴ In a trend to be found across most of Western Europe at the turn of the century it is the tricky issue of cultural identity that is receiving special attention. In keeping with this, established sites like the Rijksmuseum are being re-evaluated in an effort to accommodate changing interpretations of 'identity' within Dutch society as it struggles to come to grips with 'multiculturalism'. As well as the ongoing development of existing collections and sites, the integration of the heritage of immigrants and 'new Netherlanders' is being tackled in current policy documents like "Make way for Cultural Diversity".²⁴⁵

As a museum famous for its collections of fine and applied arts, produced and collected during a period of colonial expansion, reflecting primarily northern European cultural tastes and values, the Rijksmuseum is having to reinvent itself; drawing upon those aspects of its considerable collections often overlooked due to space restrictions and display conditions. Central to this is the history department, for too long confined to the dark ground floor where it is often by-passed unwittingly.

In 1999 a document entitled "The Rijksmuseum in the 21st century" stressed the need for a complete reorganisation and renovation of the building alongside a reappraisal of the use of the collections. The didactic value of the museum is to be developed by improving access to all areas of the arts in order to generate a greater understanding of the history and culture of the Netherlands. To do this all collections

²⁴³ Compendium: Cultural Policies in Europe, *Netherlands 3. General Objectives and Principles of Cultural Policy*, www.culturalpolicies.net/profiles, Council of Europe 2003.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ 'Ruim baan voor culturele diversiteit', Cultural Policy Document 2001-2004, Dutch Ministry of Culture, www.minocw.nl/english

will be integrated and viewed holistically rather than in isolation.²⁴⁶ Old divisions between painting, sculpture, the applied arts, textiles and archaeology are being swept away as these elements are conflated in order to better illustrate Dutch history. It is hoped that this will create a more comprehensive image of the historical and cultural development of the Netherlands. In line with changes in national cultural policy and the focus on people of non-Dutch origin; one of the themes in the new display will be 'the integration of migrants who have found a new homeland here in the course of history (Huguenots, Indonesians, and Surinamers).'²⁴⁷

The fate of the building in particular has generated widespread interest and debate, leading to public forums and workshops organised by the museum. Structural renovations will restore the building to something closer to its original aspect whilst innovative architectural alterations will improve the function of the collection in its new setting. It is hoped that '...the renovated interior will ensure that the Rijksmuseum remains the cultural calling card of the Netherlands.'²⁴⁸ At the time of writing, the museum is in the early stages of its transformation and the success of the project especially that of the proposed display must remain conjecture until its re-inauguration in 2008.

During this period the museum is maintaining a core collection, something of a 'mini-Rijksmuseum' on display in the Philips wing. 'An Amsterdam without the Night Watch, Vermeer and other favourites is impossible to imagine. Not just for tourists, but also for the thousands of school classes who visit the National Treasure House every year.'²⁴⁹ Called "The Masterpieces" this exhibition presents the 'greatest hits' of the Rijksmuseum collections and concentrates exclusively on the Golden Age. Laid out in a manner not dissimilar to that of the main building with historical artefacts on the ground floor and paintings on the second there is, nevertheless, a hint of the future presentation in the combination of paintings and objects to be found in the Dutch Republic exhibit on the ground floor. This is extremely successful in communicating a sense of the period to the visitor. More so even than in the old display this exhibition raises the question of the difference of visitors' experiences based on nationality as the artefacts take on mnemonic functions.

²⁴⁶ 'The New Rijksmuseum: Policy', www.rijksmuseum.nl/uk/over_het_rijksmuseum/beleidsvisie.htm, 2003.

²⁴⁷ Ibid. 4.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. 10.

²⁴⁹ Van der Avert, op. cit. 23.

'Really, every Netherlander should have visited the Rijksmuseum at least once, to see something of the history, art collections and the culture of the Netherlands.'²⁵⁰

This statement is taken from a booklet produced by the museum aimed at 'new Netherlanders'. In keeping with the Assimilation Act initiatives of the 1990s it uses the museum to introduce foreigners and immigrants to the culture and history of the country. This use of the museum reinforces its function as a showcase for the Netherlands, not only for the aesthetic pleasure of tourists and art lovers but in promoting ideals of 'Dutchness'.

As a national institution with a clear identity within the country and the world, the Rijksmuseum displays the visual and material history of the Netherlands with particular emphasis on the seventeenth century, a period fundamental to Dutch concepts of identity and culture. Inherent in this is the implication that never before and never again have the Dutch been as powerful and progressive as they were then, and that despite something of a fall from grace every Dutch person is innately rooted within that Golden Age.

By the end of the twentieth century the changing face of western European society and the fallout of colonialism have made this a somewhat tricky premise to maintain, however innocently. Elements of history previously dismissed as minor or irrelevant must now be taken into consideration as well as parallel interpretations of the past that challenge established views of the nation and its history. How this will affect the perception of the Netherlands for the Dutch and 'new Netherlanders' in the future can only be guessed at.

Above all it is the quality of the viewer's experience that determines the success of a museum and the use of its collections. This is often hard to gauge as national attitudes and preferences may differ from the taste and understanding of outsiders. Similarly, the museum experience will differ for the local and the day tripper from out of town. Whilst the international tourist goes to the Rijksmuseum to see the products of Dutch 'high' culture, specifically that of the Golden Age, and to enjoy the 'unique' quality of 'typically' Dutch painting; the Rijksmuseum is important nationally for its physicality as the distinctive landmark in the capital, unique architectural creation, and above all as the resting place of that national cultural altarpiece: *The Night Watch*.

²⁵⁰ E. Runia, *Het Rijksmuseum – het museum voor aller Nederlanders*, Utrecht 1999. 2. (Author's trans.)

Although the traditional view of Dutch seventeenth century painting as a mirror of nature has been largely discredited, for the Dutch these images remain akin to photographs of ancestors, a visual record of a collective past. Similarly, the social status of painting in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands affected the public's approach to it thereafter.²⁵¹ Historically there is less of a divisive class stigma attached to the fine arts, their appreciation and possession, than in other countries such as England. This dates from the period of the Dutch Republic when 'farmers and artisans bought pictures for investment since there was not enough land to go round.'²⁵² British travellers of the period were struck by the decoration of Dutch houses; 'their lining is yet more rich than our side; not in hangings but in pictures, which even the poorest are furnish'd with.'²⁵³

The fact that about 95% of the entire Rijksmuseum collection is of Dutch (or Northern Netherlandish) origin, or directly related to the history of the Netherlands makes the Rijksmuseum an unparalleled source of information on the historical and cultural development of the country. As the current seventeenth century curator put it, 'our collection is primarily visual, but it is also a story, the story of our Dutch history.'²⁵⁴ In this sense the Rijksmuseum is, without a doubt, a museum of the nation.

²⁵¹ Freedberg and de Vries

²⁵² F. G. H. Bachrach, op.cit. 66.

²⁵³ Cited in Bachrach op. cit. 66.

²⁵⁴ T. Dibbits, cited in, *Rijksmuseum Kunstkrant* 5, Year 29, October 2003, 16-17. (Author's trans.)

2.3 *Musées Royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique*

As a recent arrival in Europe, Belgium has carved itself a cultural niche of some importance, both at a European and at an international level. The arts 'have probably contributed the most to the international cultural influence of Belgium.'²⁵⁵ This is a process in which the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* have played a significant part. As the national museums of fine art they collect, maintain and develop the artistic heritage of the nation. A task made the more challenging by the fragmented nature of the country.

The purpose of a national museum within a federal state, the complex nature of Belgium's artistic heritage and its display, all relate to the manner in which the state came about and the ongoing identity debate in the country. Although strictly speaking the term 'Belgian art' cannot be applied to work predating the creation of the state, the word 'Belgian' was connected with art produced in the area prior to its independence. In fact, the desire for a gallery containing paintings of the Southern Netherlands, and the recognition of the art historical importance of a public museum for the perpetuation and development of a 'Belgian' school date from the late eighteenth century.

The Fine Arts Museums of Belgium, officially known as the; *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* or *Koninklijke Musea voor schone Kunsten van Belgie*, (MRBAB or KMSKB) are composed of four museums or collections.²⁵⁶ Two of these, the Museum of Ancient Art (15th-18th century), and the Museum of Modern Art (late 18th-21st century), are in effect one museum divided into two departments, managed and overseen by the same committee.²⁵⁷ The other two are the former studios of important nineteenth century Belgian artists: the Antoine Wiertz Museum (integrated in 1868), and the Constantin Meunier Museum (1936).²⁵⁸ Though officially part of the MRBAB, the Wiertz and Meunier museums are in separate locations with, to all intents and purposes, separate collections.

The following study focuses upon the Museums of Ancient and Modern Art, whose history and display are intimately connected with the development and

²⁵⁵ "Culture", Portail Federal, www.belgium.be, (Author's trans.)

²⁵⁶ The French abbreviation; MRBAB, is used throughout.

²⁵⁷ Whilst the term 'Early' would be more accurate for the 15th to 18th century collections, 'Ancient' is the official English translation.

²⁵⁸ *Musées Royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique*, "Les Musées", www.fine-arts-museum.be.

articulation of the Belgian state. When speaking of the MRBAB it is in reference to these collections.

i. Location

(App. A: map 4)

Unlike the Rijksmuseum the location of the MRBAB is more significant than their actual structure. The museum complex is extensive, occupying several buildings on the *Coudenberg*, or *Montagne de la Cour*, a hill linking the lower and upper towns of Brussels, the medieval centre and the later city including the European quarter. Traditionally this hill separated the marshy trading centre in the valley from the court and palaces on the higher ground, hence its name.²⁵⁹

The *Coudenberg* has been a locus of power since the Dukes of Brabant built their castle there in the eleventh century, later adapted by, amongst others Charles V and Archdukes Albert and Isabella. Destroyed by fire in the early eighteenth century, it was replaced by a neo-classical square, the *Place Royale*, ringed by the residences of the nobility and the small palace of Charles de Lorraine built circa 1757.²⁶⁰ Itself a radical break with the past and precursor of the modern era, the Royal Square looks down onto the spires of the medieval town centre, forming the epicentre of a series of powerful national symbols.²⁶¹

Despite the city's expansion this delineation between the old town and the elite power base has been emphasized by nineteenth century building programmes aimed at the 'aggrandisement' of the capital. Keen to transform Brussels into a sophisticated European centre, Leopold II's architects remodelled the city on an unprecedented scale; enlarging the Royal Palace, tearing down the slums to build the massive *Palais de Justice* law courts, and gathering all governmental institutions into one area around the Royal Park and palace at the top of the hill.²⁶²

The MRBAB occupy two corners sides of the Place Royale at the back of which are the present royal palace and park (the scene of insurgency in 1830). The street that runs past the museum's main entrance ends in the law courts that dwarf the west end of the old city; (pl. 25). In a straight line on the right are the park, the fine arts academy, federal government buildings and the eternal flame for the dead at the foot of the Column of Congress, culminating in the church of St Mary; echoing the law courts at the opposite end of the avenue. In the middle of the square and facing out

²⁵⁹ C. Weightman and A. Barnes, *Brussels; Grote Markt to Common Market*, Brussels 1976.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ E. Witte, "The Formation of a centre in Belgium: The role of Brussels in the Formative Stage of the Belgian State (1830-40)", in *European History Quarterly* Vol. 19, 1989, 435-468.

²⁶² J. Block, *Belgium the Golden Decades 1880-1914*, New York 1997.

over the city stands a statue of *Godefroi de Bouillon*, leader of the first crusade in 1096 and later king of Jerusalem. Erected in 1843 it is one of many examples of the new state's efforts to legitimise its existence through the nationalisation and exaltation of historic figures.

Attached to the museum complex by the former Lorraine palace are the archives and "Albert I Library" further down the hill. The proximity and common history of these collections form a site of considerable historical and symbolic value associated with the country's heritage. Regular renovations, extensions, and the acquisition of neighbouring *hotels particuliers* and their structural integration, mean that the MRBAB now unobtrusively occupy a considerable part of the *Coudenberg* and the surrounding area. By dint of its location the museums are part of an axis of civic and royal power at the political heart of the country and nation.

It was, however, chance rather than design that led to the creation of a museum on this site as like the Rijksmuseum, the MRBAB owe their existence to French empire building and the Republic's aggressive cultural policies.

58. Bruxelles. Palais des Beaux Arts.



Plate 25

ii. Origins

Once Austria's grip on the region was definitively broken, France established its control over the southern Netherlands, ultimately annexing the region in 1795. Part of this process involved the appropriation of the cultural goods of the former Habsburg territories. As the *commissaires* combed the region for art works, their finds were gathered together in the former palace of Charles de Lorraine on the *Coudenberg*. Already in situ were the paintings and artefacts confiscated from Jesuit institutions by the Austrian government some twenty years previously.²⁶³ French delegates inventoried all works and those deemed worthy were sent to Paris. In total approximately two hundred and seventy paintings left the southern Netherlands during 1794.²⁶⁴

Various intellectuals in Brussels began to take an interest in the fate of those paintings left behind. Charles-Antoine de la Serna Santander, librarian of the *Ecole Centrale*, was keen to create a museum or gallery for the school; an environment in which artists could learn by example the techniques and styles of past masters. Permission was eventually granted to use rooms in the former palace for this purpose. From the fifteen hundred or so artworks that remained the director of the city's Art Academy Guillaume Bosschaert, selected a hundred paintings and established a small gallery of which he was made curator in 1798.²⁶⁵ His main concern thereafter was the recovery of the paintings confiscated by the French. Over the next few years Bosschaert wrote tirelessly to ministries and officials in Paris, regularly going in person to plead the case for the return of 'Belgian' art and the importance of a museum in Brussels that contained examples of the so-called 'Belgian' school:

The Belgians are painters; their school is necessary to the balance of artistic production; French and Italian art will decline if ours does not continue to flourish. But our youth no longer have the examples of the great masters before them. For this reason the creation of a fine museum in Brussels is imperative. Furthermore this town is a centre visited by the English, the French, and the Germans. Brussels has no great commerce or industry; it is a town condemned to death if we do not revive an interest and cultivation of art.²⁶⁶

Though there was no history of an autonomous political state in the region the existence of a unique heritage was strongly felt, increasingly linked to what would be

²⁶³ F. Roberts-Jones-Popelier, *Kroniek van een Museum*, Liège 1986.

²⁶⁴ L'histoire des Musées', www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/FR/html/museehist.html.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

presented as a 'Belgian' identity post 1830. The need for an environment in which this legacy could be given contemporary relevance whilst raising the profile of the capital motivated the establishment of a 'fine museum'.

That the art produced in a country reflected something of the nation was a theory partly generated by the hang by national school in the Louvre.²⁶⁷ Links between the soil, the nation and art were further developed over the course of the nineteenth century; 'to explain scientifically the art of every country as the flower that grew from the seed of race and blood planted in the soil of the nation where the particular climatic conditions of the nation would produce distinct varieties.'²⁶⁸

The value of cultural heritage to the nations in which they originated, and the emblematic impact of their removal was gradually being recognised and some people in France were sympathetic to the cause of repatriation. One such person was Doulcet de Pontécoulant, *préfet* of the Dyle Department²⁶⁹ who became actively involved on behalf of the fledgling museum and corresponded with Bosschaert on the matter; '...the regrets of the artists and friends of the arts to no longer find in the fatherland of Rubens and Vandyck [sic] a single monument to their glory, a single trace of these great men.'²⁷⁰

Concerted pressure eventually bore fruit and in 1801 an imperial decree established fifteen regional museums; partly to assuage growing international protest over France's cultural policies and partly in order to decentralise the art collections now overwhelming the Louvre.²⁷¹ The motley collection of paintings in the former Lorraine palace became the *Musée de Bruxelles*. In addition, 'a collection of paintings [are] to be taken from the Louvre and Versailles museums and placed at the disposal of the city once an appropriate gallery had been found'.²⁷² Fourteen rooms were set aside to receive these paintings and a year later the *premier renvoi* arrived in Brussels.

In July 1803 the museum opened its doors and produced a catalogue containing two hundred and fifty one entries. It was accessible predominantly to artists, serving

²⁶⁶ G. J. J. Bosschaert, cited in F. Roberts-Jones-Popelier, *Kroniek van een Museum*, Liège 1986. 11-13. (Author's trans.)

²⁶⁷ A. McClellan

²⁶⁸ Hippolyte Taine (1869) cited in, M. Muller, "Anthony Van Dyck and Flemish National Identity", in H. Vlieghe (ed.), *Van Dyck 1599-1999: Conjectures and Refutations*, 305-309, 305.

²⁶⁹ The Former Austrian Netherlands was divided into nine departments in 1795. Brussels was in the *Département de la Dyle*.

²⁷⁰ Doulcet de Pontécoulant, 18 April 1800, MRBAB B21 no. 146. (Author's trans.)

²⁷¹ McClellan

²⁷² Decree of 'Fructidor year IX' (September 1801) cited in, Roberts-Jones, 13. (Author's trans.)

as a sort of studio in which they could work, with two days a week reserved for public viewing.²⁷³ In August 1811 the city was given responsibility for the museum and a new catalogue with three hundred and five entries published following the return of more paintings.²⁷⁴

After the upheaval of Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna, Brussels became the second capital of the United Netherlands under William I. This was an important period in the development of the museum and its collections. Keen to promote his standing in the region as well as its cultural and economic regeneration, the king was a generous patron.²⁷⁵ In the 1820s extensions were added to the Old Court museum, in a design that blended with that of the older structure. Little was changed inside the former palace however, as a visiting Englishman wrote in 1832; 'it has still, both in external and internal appearance, the air of a princely residence'.²⁷⁶ These extensions were inaugurated in 1830 with that year's Salon, shortly followed by the revolution of September that put paid to any hopes of a re-united Netherlands and common identity in the Low Countries.

²⁷³ Roberts-Jones

²⁷⁴ Roberts-Jones

²⁷⁵ J. Roegiers and N. C. F. Van Sas, "Revolution in the North and South 1780-1830", in Blom and Lamberts, 269-312.

²⁷⁶ C. F. Henningsen, *Scenes from the Belgian Revolution*, London 1832. 59.

iii. A museum for the Nation

In January 1835 Leopold I issued a Royal decree recognising the historical contribution of the fine arts to the development of the Belgian nation and their continued importance in society.²⁷⁷ In view of this it was decided that, 'a national museum devoted exclusively to the most remarkable creations of Belgian painters, sculptors, etchers, and architects, shall be created in Brussels.'²⁷⁸

Above all, the king was keen to create an environment conducive to the development of contemporary national art. The museum would exhibit not only the great masters of the past but encourage those of the future, thereby creating a canon of reference for the glory of the country. 'Considering that the creation of a national museum, destined to receive the most eminent works by the best Belgian masters, will stimulate and maintain a worthy rivalry amongst artists, favourable to the progress of the arts.'²⁷⁹

All branches of the arts were to be developed in Belgium and the museum would be instrumental in raising awareness of national artistic achievements at home and abroad. Belgian artists were to be encouraged and their best work acquired for the museum. Statues to commemorate 'the great men of Belgium' were to be made and placed in the museum and other public buildings, emulating d'Angivillier's project in the Louvre.²⁸⁰

In 1841 the collections were bought from the city by the state and officially given to the people five years later as the *Musée royal de peinture et de sculpture de Belgique*, turning the gallery into a national museum. As the Museum of Brussels, one of several departmental institutions within the French Empire, or a gallery in the second capital of the United Netherlands, the collections retained a regional identity; only once an independent state and monarchy had been established could they acquire a truly 'national' character. As an institution of the state the museum now had a part to play in the consolidation of the nation.

From the mid nineteenth century to 1914 the artistic and intellectual scene flourished, making Brussels the centre for various avant-garde movements like *Les*

²⁷⁷ *Moniteur Belge* 11, 11 January 1835, MRBAB 9/135.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.* (Author's trans.)

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* (Author's trans.)

²⁸⁰ Roberts-Jones

Vingt, established in 1883.²⁸¹ As the capital grew so did the reputation of the museum helped by its role in the exhibitions of the avant-garde attracting celebrities, international interest and criticism. Stendhal praised the Italian collections as early as 1838, whilst William Thackeray declared it to be 'an absurd little gallery, absurdly imitating the Louvre' and Delacroix waxed lyrical about the Rubens altar-pieces.²⁸² Eugène Fromentin, in his seminal treatise on painting in the Low Countries, was complimentary; 'the merit of the Gallery at Brussels has always been far greater than its reputation'.²⁸³

The increasingly cramped nature of the buildings became the subject of much criticism and there were calls for a display space that would do justice to the city and the nation. Though the quality of national painting had been recognised, the feeling was that without a suitable display space the country would lose face:

By the importance and the value of its creations, [the Belgian School] rivals the schools of the greatest nations. The works of its artists enrich all museums. It is humiliating to see it reduced to squalid conditions of display in our own capital, more inadequate than in any other city in Europe. The sad effect of this inferiority reflects upon the country as a whole.²⁸⁴

A new purpose-built structure to house exhibitions and national events would emphasise the importance of the arts in Belgian society, providing tangible evidence of the cultural and intellectual abilities that made the Kingdom of Belgium the equal of its neighbours.²⁸⁵ One of the main concerns was the centrality of the new building; 'Exhibitions must take place in a building situated at the very heart of circulation ; it must be in the path of the crowd in order to, in a sense, stop it on its way [...] One must not be forced to attend the exhibition ; one should enter it.'²⁸⁶

The site of the museum and the projected redevelopment of the area made the present location an obvious choice. The commission fell to Alphonse Balat, one of the architects involved in the city's remodelling. Now known as the Balat building it was inaugurated in 1880 as the *Palais des Beaux-Arts*. Of all the structures that house the MRBAB it is the only one with an external decorative programme indicative of its

²⁸¹ Block

²⁸² Cited in, Roberts-Jones, 30-31.

²⁸³ E. Fromentin, *The Masters of Past Time: Dutch and Flemish Painting from Van Eyck to Rembrandt*, ed. H. Gerson, transl. A. Boyle, Oxford 1981. 1.

²⁸⁴ From 'L'Art Moderne' 1899, cited in Roberts-Jones, 79. (Author's trans.)

²⁸⁵ Stengers and Gubin

²⁸⁶ Cited in Roberts-Jones, 37. (Author's trans.)

function and representative of the nineteenth century concept of the museum space as a citizen-forming environment.²⁸⁷

Stretching back from the street in a simple 'shoebox' shape the building is neo-classical in design, conforming to popular standards of public architecture in this period. Bronze figures representing painting, sculpture, architecture and music, top four granite columns that flank the main entrance: (pl. 26). Between the columns and above the three doors leading into the foyer are the busts of Rubens, Van Ruysbroeck (architect of the town hall), and Jean de Bologne. Though only the first of these names is now instantly recognisable these men embody painting, architecture and sculpture. Two bas-reliefs in white marble above the windows on either side of the colonnade depict 'music' and the 'industrial arts' whilst on the buttresses at each end of the facade are two large sculptural groups; the 'Crowning of Art' and the 'Teaching of Art'.²⁸⁸

During its brief tenure as an exhibition hall, the Balat building's role as a space devoted to the contemporary arts allowed a more diverse and tolerant artistic environment to develop in which a variety of styles and movements evolved side by side. *Les Vingt* was the most famous of these and exhibited in the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* for several years. Exhibitions of individual artists became regular occurrences raising the profile of contemporary artists. The first such retrospective took place in 1886 and was devoted to Constantin Meunier. In 1887 the building was turned over to the early collections, sorely overcrowded in the Old Court, and the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* became the *Musée d'Art Ancien*, which it remains to this day.²⁸⁹

The less extensive modern collection was inaugurated as the *Musée d'Art Moderne* in 1880 and remained in the palace and Industry rooms. (App. C: plan 1) Over the next few years, thanks largely to the involvement of the *Vingtistes*, it became an international gathering place for artists, musicians, and writers. Yearly exhibitions of the avant-garde were held; displaying Pissarro, Whistler, Monet, Ensor and Khnopff amongst others. In the early twentieth century the modern section held a number of exhibitions such as, "Impressionist Painters", "The External Evolution of

²⁸⁷ Duncan

²⁸⁸ Roberts-Jones, op. cit. 41.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

Impressionism”, and the first Cubist exhibition outside France, all of which helped establish Brussels as an international artistic capital.²⁹⁰

The war years and ensuing decades saw a great many changes in Europe and the country, affecting the museum’s assessment of itself and its role. By 1927 Belgium was a bilingual state and the museum was given its definitive name in both official languages: *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, or *Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België*, later abbreviated to MRBAB and KMSKB.²⁹¹

Cultural policies were developed in Belgium following the Second World War and to a large extent determined by the country’s wartime experiences.²⁹² A framework for the development and application of cultural policies was completed towards the end of the 1960s governed by the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, whereby the State does not directly intervene in cultural matters other than through general regulations and grants. This system was adopted partly as a reaction to the fascist cultural policies of the occupation, and partly to differentiate from the State culture of communist countries, and the market regulated culture of the United States.²⁹³ As Belgium developed into a federal state, all cultural policies and decision-making systems were distributed across the independent linguistic communities, under the tutelage of the overarching Federal state.²⁹⁴

Since 1989 the MRBAB are amongst the ten National Scientific Federal Institutions granted ‘self-supporting’ status, something of a compromise between privatisation and total state control.²⁹⁵ Collections and buildings remain the property of the state under the authority of the Ministry for Scientific Policy, but a board of trustees rather than the Treasury regulates the budget. Whilst this allows the museum to collaborate with the private sector and reinvest any profit, it makes it very difficult to secure extra government funding in the form of grants.²⁹⁶

Institutions under federal control were, for the most part, established or consolidated following the ratification of the Belgian constitution and are thereby intrinsically linked to the nineteenth century vision of Belgium as a unitary nation-

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ ‘L’histoire des Musées’, www.fine-arts-museum.be/site/FR/html/museehist.html

²⁹² Cultural Policies in Europe: Compendium, *Belgium 1. Historical Perspective*, www.culturalpolicies.net

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ F. Van Noten, “A Facelift for the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels”, in D. Gaimster (ed.), *Museum Archaeology in Europe*, Oxford 1994, 37-48. 37.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

state. Under central federal responsibility they remain, at least in theory, national; 'so as to allow them to continue to preserve and develop as appropriate what is a priceless indivisible heritage.'²⁹⁷ Use of the term 'indivisible' in this context is interesting as it supports the existence of a common cultural and historical legacy, overriding regional identities and separatist nationalisms.

²⁹⁷ Scientific and Technical Information Service (STIS), *Museum Statistics in Europe: Report Belgium*, Federal Office for Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs (OSTC), October 2002. 3.
www.stis.fgov.be/cultivate

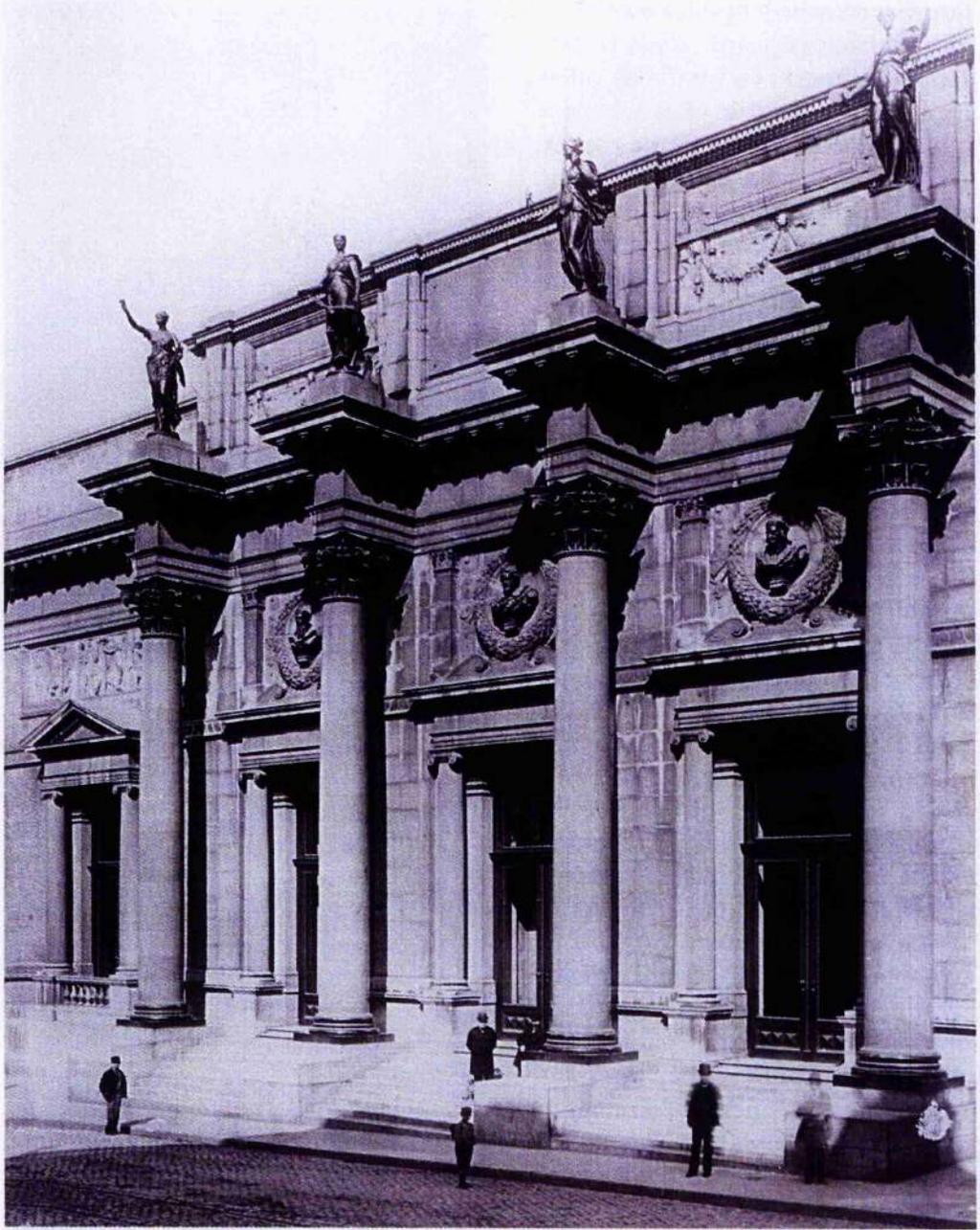


Plate 26

iv. Collections

The MRBAB collections consist of over twenty thousand drawings, paintings and sculptures.²⁹⁸ The central mission of the museum is to present the extremely rich art historical development of the region within the context of European art history by means of its collections, continuously developed through an active acquisition policy.²⁹⁹ One of the defining characteristics of the MRBAB is that regional art history predates the country proper; 'Belgian' art can only be described as such following the recognition of the country's constitution in 1831.

Unlike many contemporary European institutions the Belgian national museum is not founded on a princely gallery. Centuries of external governance meant that nearly all royal and princely collections left with the rulers and their court. In the sixteenth century Philip II moved his collection of Flemish masters to Spain, where they later formed the basis for the Flemish galleries in the Prado. Similarly, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm used his sizeable private collection acquired whilst governor of the Netherlands to found the Picture gallery in Vienna in the mid-seventeenth century.³⁰⁰ As for the Dukes of Brabant, all that remains today of their collections are the manuscripts in the royal library adjacent to the museum. William I of Orange was the first ruler to contribute to the creation of a collection on Belgian soil that was not destined to leave.

Traditions of production and the nature of the art market in the Low Countries contributed to this exodus; paintings, miniatures, altarpieces and tapestries were made primarily for the Spanish or Austrian nobility and export.³⁰¹ Religious bodies and institutions were the biggest patrons in the Southern Netherlands after the court and it was predominantly their material culture that remained in the area. The location and wealth of the region have long made it the setting of war and power struggles one of the consequences of which has been the systematic dispersal of its movable heritage. The Third Reich later emulated Napoleon's efforts and in both instances the collections of the MRBAB have been affected. To a certain extent the museums have

²⁹⁸ ARTE news, "Prestige de la Belgique", hors série, Brussels October 2003.

²⁹⁹ Musées Royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, *Le guide des collections d'art ancien et d'art moderne*, Brussels 1999.

³⁰⁰ Roberts-Jones

³⁰¹ Van Os

benefited from these situations as works of art taken from individuals later untraceable were made the property of the state when returned to the country.³⁰²

During its annexation to the French Republic two consignments of paintings, known as the *premier* and *second renvois* were returned to the Southern Netherlands and incorporated into the museum. The first in 1802 included four paintings by Rubens, three of which were large altarpieces, as well as works by Guercino and Palma Vecchio. The second consignment in February 1811 comprised three hundred and ten paintings, following which a new catalogue was issued containing three hundred and five entries.³⁰³ These restitutions, though solicited by the curator, led to claims from the various churches and institutions from which the works had originally been removed. Bosschaert arranged for the return of many pieces and in some cases established loans between the original owners and the museum to temper losses to the gallery. In 1815 the collections were further swelled by the large-scale repatriation of paintings following the Congress of Vienna.

It is the department of Ancient art, encompassing the late fourteenth to eighteenth century that has had to deal with the ambiguous nature of its collections and their role within the framework of a national institution, as they predate Belgium. At the heart of the early holdings is the world famous collection of early Flemish painting, or Primitives. The museum possesses a particularly large and rich selection of panel paintings by the likes of Rogier van der Weyden, the Master of Flémalle, Dirk Bouts and Quinten Metsys, as well as four pieces by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, (pls 27-29).

Although it would be inaccurate to describe these artists as 'Belgian', their work is representative of the contemporary styles and genres developed specifically in the area later known as Belgium. Outside influence was for a long time ignored or denied in order to sustain the myth of the native genius of the soil.³⁰⁴ The collection of Flemish Primitives is quite literally on home ground as they were produced predominantly in the Southern rather than the Northern Netherlands. However 'it would be wrong to make any distinction here between Dutch and Flemish. At that time it mattered little whether one was born on that or this side of the Meuse.'³⁰⁵

³⁰² Roberts-Jones

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ J. M. Muller in Vlieghe

³⁰⁵ Fromentin, op. cit. 8-9.

Though not very highly valued outside Belgium in the nineteenth century, the Flemish Primitives acquired great national importance as the historical source for all 'Belgian' art:

Nationalistic sentiment must have contributed to this reappraisal of the Flemish primitives, for Belgium could pride itself not only on Rubens, its supreme 17th century master, but also on what was believed to be the discovery of oil painting in the 15th century.³⁰⁶

The quality of these works and their presence in the museum authenticated the nation-state organically and historically. From the 1840s the museum sought out many more Primitives to complement the existing collection. Edouard Fétis, art critic and author of the 1863 catalogue spoke of this in 1847:

The gallery called the Ancients, formed from the start, was composed of approximately 80 works, by known masters as well as anonymous ones. There had been little difficulty in gathering them together as there was at that time little esteem for anything in the arts that predated the period known as the Renaissance.³⁰⁷

Within the early collections two artists stand out above all others; Peter Bruegel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens. The most famous 'Belgian' artists in the Musée d'Art Ancien they are well represented. Rubens and his seven monumental altarpieces in particular are the most famous attractions in this section of the museum. The space given to the display of Rubens, the signs that lead to his works, and the number of pages devoted to him in museum publications all highlight his fame and popular appeal, already the subject of comment in the mid nineteenth century.

In 1851 the sculptor David d'Angers wrote, 'in the Brussels museum I study Van Eyck's contemporaries. The masses pass before these paintings with an air of indifference...The crowd runs to Rubens...'³⁰⁸ Baudelaire was especially scathing, 'Rubens, decadence. Rubens anti-religious. Rubens, insipid. Rubens, fount of banality. Marvellous richness of the Museum in effect of *primitives*.'³⁰⁹ Along with Magritte in the modern collections, Rubens is the most internationally recognised national artist exhibited in the museum, with Bruegel a close second. As the present curator of Ancient Art, Veronique Bücken put it; 'the Japanese in particular, race to

³⁰⁶ J. P. Filedt Kok in, *Netherlandish Art ; in the Rijksmuseum 1400-1600*, Zwolle 2000.28.

³⁰⁷ E. Fétis, 1847, cited in Roberts-Jones, 11. (Author's trans.)

³⁰⁸ D. d'Angers, 1851, cited in Roberts-Jones, 31. (Author's trans.)

³⁰⁹ C. Baudelaire, 1865, cited in Roberts-Jones, 31. (Author's trans)

the Bruegel room, make a bee line for Rubens, then leave.’³¹⁰ Rubens also predates Belgium, however, and in recent decades has been claimed as ‘Flemish’ rather than Belgian by regional nationalists.

As a whole the early collection acts as a chronological tour of artistic developments in Europe up until the end of the eighteenth century. German, Italian, French and Dutch paintings are an integral part of this. Throughout both the early and modern collections, international artists provide a context for the evolution of art in the Low Countries and modern Belgium. In the 1870s Fromentin described the early collection as an inventory of painting in the Low Countries and the museum as ‘an enormous national treasury’, which along with the collections of Holland was the richest in the world after Italy.³¹¹ ‘Belgium [...] is a glorious art book, whose chapters, happily for the good fame of the provinces, are scattered broadcast here and there, but whose introduction is at Brussels, and at Brussels alone.’³¹²

The Museum of Modern Art picks up where the Ancient ends in the eighteenth century. The modern art collection developed fast in the climate of creative and economic euphoria that characterised Belgium’s development in the mid-nineteenth century.³¹³ State sponsored artists and their work, destined to glorify the history and heroes of the nation, were central to the early acquisition policies of the modern collection and the development of a truly national school.³¹⁴ The visual substantiation of real and mythical histories through the choice of subject matter, as well as national followers of international trends meant that, ‘these works, placed in the museum for posterity, will establish the reputation of their authors and do honour to the country.’³¹⁵ The Romantic Movement in particular helped promote nationalism following independence, breaking with neo-classicism to return to the ‘truer’ national style of Rubens.³¹⁶

The father of the Belgian Romantics, Gustaaf Wappers, reinstigated history painting giving it a distinctly nationalistic and didactic function.³¹⁷ His most important painting is the monumental *Episode from the Revolution of 1830*, painted in 1835, (pl.

³¹⁰ Veronique Bücken in an interview with the author at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-arts de Belgique, 27th July 2004 Brussels.

³¹¹ Fromentin, op. cit. 2.

³¹² Ibid. op. cit. 1.

³¹³ Block

³¹⁴ Pil, in Deprez and Vos

³¹⁵ *Moniteur Belge* 11, 11 January 1835, MRBAB. (Author’s trans.)

³¹⁶ Stengers and Gubin

³¹⁷ L. Pil in Deprez and Vos

5). It owes much, both in composition and subject matter to Delacroix's *Liberty leading the People* of 1830 that Wappers had seen in Paris.³¹⁸ Like Delacroix's painting the scene is one of civilian turmoil and patriotic sacrifice against a backdrop of nationalistic resonance, in this case the medieval market square of Brussels. The largest painting in the MRBAB it was commissioned by the state for the Antwerp Salon of 1835 and displayed across Europe to great acclaim before taking its place in the museum in Brussels.³¹⁹ Here it assumed its intended function as a glorifying national tribute to self-determination.

National heroes were created from Belgium's pre-history and immortalised in painting for similar reasons. Another notable example in the collection is the *Last Honours of Counts Egmont and Horne*, painted by Louis Gallait circa 1851; (pl. 30). Betrayed and decapitated in the sixteenth century for defending principles of religious freedom, the two men became symbols of Spanish oppression.³²⁰ It is amongst the nineteenth century paintings therefore that the clearest national imagery within the MRBAB are to be found.

Acquisition policies have always reflected the museum's purpose. Following independence its aim was 'to complete as far as possible the collection of old and modern masters'.³²¹ From this point on the museum focused on acquiring works by artists linked to the Low Countries past and present, the importance of past masters in the formation of modern artists remained a major priority. The early twentieth century in particular saw many new works added, including Pieter Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus*, (pl. 29), bought at auction in London in 1912 which made a big impact on artists of the day; the Belgian Fauve Rik Wouters described it to a friend as, 'the most beautiful painting I know, the whole manner is refined.'³²²

In the 1960s the modern collection was enriched by the acquisition of many surrealist paintings by the two national masters of the genre Delvaux and Magritte, as well as foreign representatives like Dali, Ernst, Picabia, and Tanguy. Throughout the twentieth century the modern collection continued to grow and, in keeping with the logical process of artistic evolution that originates in the Museum of Ancient Art, continues to do so.

³¹⁸ R. Rosenblum and H. W. Janson, *Art of the Nineteenth Century*, London 1984.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Pfl in Deprez and Vos

³²¹ Cited in Roberts-Jones, 27. (Author's trans.)

³²² Rik Wouters cited in Roberts-Jones, 61. (Author's trans.)

At present there is a move to develop the European nineteenth century painting holdings in order to create a broader backdrop to the evolution of Belgian art in this significant period of the country's history. National artists and nationally relevant works remain the priority; a painting by Wappers was recently bought in London to feature in an important exhibition in 2005 to mark the country's 175th anniversary of independence.³²³

In the Museum of Ancient Art, Flemish or Netherlandish works are the most actively sought after, though bequests and donations have substantially enriched the collections with German, Dutch and Italian painting. A list of artists whose work is under-represented or absent from the collections is used as a guide for acquisitions. Ideally, strong elements of the collection like Bruegel and Rubens should be reinforced and complemented with related works. This is rarely possible, however, due to a lack of funds.³²⁴ The idiosyncrasies of Belgium's political structure means that the MRBAB's acquisition budget is small, in relation to the size and importance of the institution; € 1, 75 million (£1 million) for a total collection estimated at € 16 million (£ 10 million).³²⁵ In spite of this the museum acquired the *Battle of Carnival and Lent* in the 1990s by Bruegel the Younger. Rubens pieces on the other hand are virtually impossible to buy, if ever on the market.

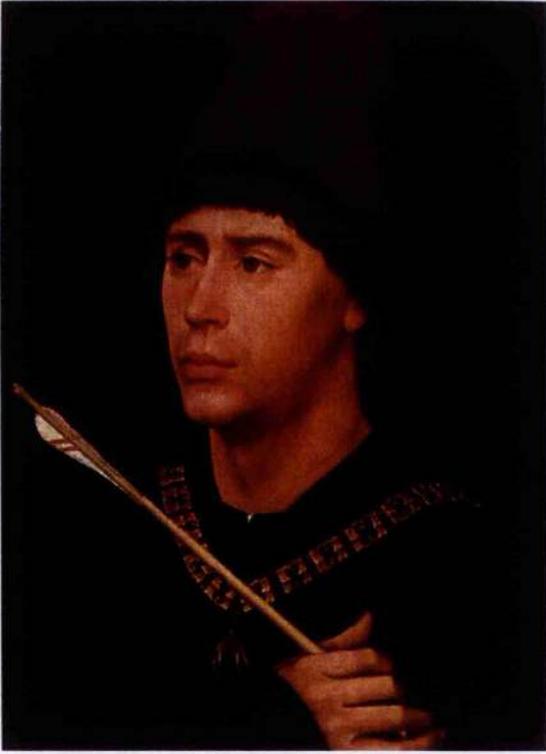
The Museum of Modern Art also focuses primarily upon national artists but 'as regards foreign art, it is not forgotten. The acquisition policy has in effect, as its mission, to ensure that the collection of modern Belgian art remains firmly anchored within an international context.'³²⁶

³²³ Dominique Maréchal, 19th century painting curator, in an interview with the author at the MRBAB, 30th September 2003 Brussels.

³²⁴ V. Bücken

³²⁵ D. Maréchal

³²⁶ ARTE news op.cit. 27. (Author's trans.)

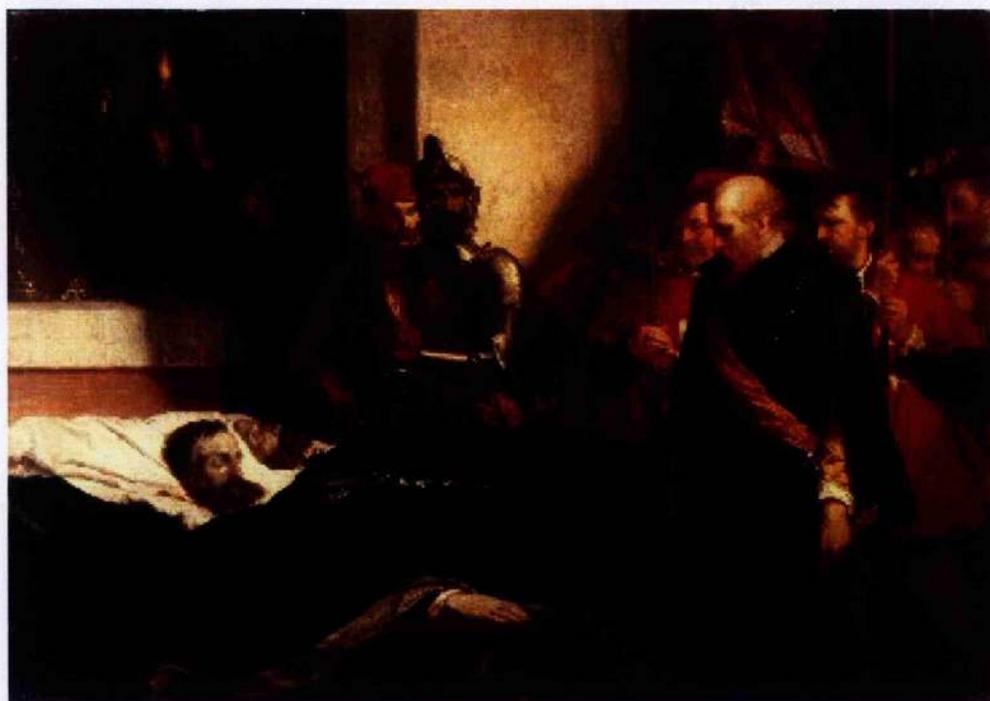


Plates 27-28





Plates 29-30



v. Display

Presentation of, and access to the collections is determined by the physical structure of the museum, which due to its staggered growth and the piece-meal adaptation of older buildings is not always ideal. The story of the MRBAB is characterised by endless building projects and compromises in an effort to meet the needs of the collections and the standards of the public. Space has always been at a premium and innovative methods have been developed to incorporate additional exhibition rooms and facilities; the 1984 Modern extension sunk into the hill under the museum is the most dramatic of these; (pl. 30). The abiding concern is the integration of the museum's disparate physical elements to create a harmonious and logical space for the display of the ever-expanding collections.³²⁷

In December 2003 the MRBAB completed the latest phase of renovations and expansions with the inauguration of another 2, 600 square metres of public gallery space in the Museum of Ancient Art.³²⁸ Several important works are now on permanent display for the first time including a large selection of seventeenth century Dutch paintings and a private collection containing several important early Flemish pieces. The rapid growth of the collections coupled with space restrictions has led the museum to favour some works over others. National artists and schools have always been prioritised, which is why the range of Dutch paintings now on show will come as a surprise to many repeat visitors.

The two collections are curated and displayed in a series of separate buildings linked by the Forum, a central space in the Balat building. The Museum of Ancient Art is divided into two sections; starting on the ground floor with the Flemish Primitives culminating in the Bruegel room, and continuing on the first floor with seventeenth and eighteenth century paintings. A small gallery in the basement displays clay models whilst larger sculptures are distributed throughout the rooms. The Museum of Modern Art, linked to the Balat building by an underground passage, now has a separate entrance on the Royal Square. It too is divided into two circuits; the nineteenth century collection is distributed over six levels in the neo-classical building, and the twentieth century collection occupies the sunken gallery in the centre of the museum complex. (App. C: plan 2).

³²⁷ ARTE news

³²⁸ Ibid.

There is no common architectural and spatial discourse articulating the function of the museum due to the extended and varied nature of the present museum complex. Only in the Balat building, specifically designed as an arena for the promotion of national culture, is there a common focus for both collections.

Internally straightforward, the structure is coordinated by a large atrium with a coffered ceiling and light well. From here visitor's access galleries that follow the shape of the hall over two floors whilst an arcade provides glimpses of the paintings hung on the first floor. In its early days the open design of the Forum attracted some criticism being described as 'a swimming pool'.³²⁹ Designed to impress the visitor and be a flexible space for temporary and permanent exhibitions, it has traditionally been used to display large-scale work. Until 2003, the Forum was the only point of access to both collections (pls 32-33). It was here that the visitor formed their first impression of the museum:

From entering the great hall on the ground floor one is under the spell of all the beautiful things, [...] the sculptures both old and modern that, [...] stand out against the magnificent tapestries stretched across the walls; further up, spectacle of impressive and mysterious beauty, one can glimpse the large paintings of the first floor galleries...³³⁰

Now a bright and largely empty space, the Forum has been developed as a public area; accessible without a ticket it is a popular gathering place for tourists and locals alike, as well as the point of entry to the collections. A handful of sculptures and paintings taken exclusively from the nineteenth century collection are displayed here as the curators consider this period most in keeping with the setting.³³¹ In the centre of the hall; in a direct line from the entrance, stands a life-size marble statue of Leopold I holding the Belgian constitution. To its left is the monumental Wappers painting, *Episode from the Revolution of 1830*, (pl. 33).

Since its conception this painting was destined for display in the museum in order to be accessible to the broadest possible audience. In recent years, however, it has been relegated to the stores and dark back rooms of the museum, too dirty and damaged for exhibition. The advent of the country's anniversary made funds available for its cleaning and rehanging. Today it is the representative art historical importance

³²⁹ Roberts-Jones, op. cit. 55.

³³⁰ "Touring Club Guide" 1917, cited in Roberts-Jones, 56. (Author's trans.)

³³¹ D. Maréchal

of the work, the quality of the painting and its size that determine its display in such a prominent position rather than any latent nationalistic feeling.³³²

Echoing the statue of Leopold I, official photographs of the reigning monarchs flank the entrance to the hall from the vestibule. Though most of the works in the hall are rotated the statue is rarely, if ever moved, and it seems likely that the Wappers painting will remain in situ once the exhibition is over. These are the only overtly national references in evidence in the museum in so far as they indicate the museum's location within monarchy and state through their layout rather than their content.

Outside the Forum Bruegel and Rubens are emphasised by the space accorded their work. From the doorway leading to the early collections signs indicate them separately from the general circuit. Furthermore, in the fourteenth to sixteenth century galleries only the Bruegel room has coloured walls. Painted a deep burgundy it stands out from the previous cream, white, and grey spaces, providing a visual respite as well as creating a sense of difference that hones the visitor's attention. It is part of display policy to hang one of the Elder's paintings on the far wall opposite the door making it visible from the preceding room.³³³ Until recent research confirmed its misattribution, *The Fall of Icarus* had this place, now occupied by *The Census at Bethlehem*. In this manner the visitor is drawn into a space that implies exceptionalism and 'otherness'.

On the first floor signs direct the visitor to two of the largest rooms in the museum, devoted to Rubens. The first contains drawings and portraits by the master, his teachers, admirers and pupils; whilst the second holds seven large altar pieces of similar size; three on the left, three on the right, and one on the far wall, (pl. 34). Installed in their present location - the *salle d'honneur* of the museum henceforth known as the Rubens Room - in the late 1880s, this group display appears to have been policy from the time of their entry into the collection as Delacroix commented on it as early as 1850:

Rubens is magnificent there; the *Road to Calvary*, the *Jesus threatening to blast the earth* [now *The Virgin and St Francis ...*], well all of them, in different ways made a greater impression upon me than those in Antwerp. I think that this is due to their being gathered together in one room and all close to each other.³³⁴

In the early 1980s the *empire* frames were removed and the paintings set upon metal brackets raised off the floor by wooden blocks in an effort to recreate the format

³³² D. Maréchal

³³³ V. Bücken

of an altar presentation.³³⁵ A suspended filter similar to that in the Rembrandt Room of the Rijksmuseum diffuses light from above and the wall tones are pale and neutral; (pl. 35).

In the Modern Museum the grouping is thematic as well as broadly chronological, Belgian and international artists are more readily mixed. To some extent this is synonymous of the evolution of the museum and its discourse; whilst in the earlier section more conservative display values are in evidence determined not only by the physical structure but the art works themselves, the modern wing has chosen a different classification system, in flux as the collection expands. Only René Magritte stands out on the twentieth century floors due to the size of the collection of his work, said to be the richest in the world.³³⁶ Displayed alongside other surrealists, the Belgian artist unequivocally claims his place at the centre of one of the most important art movements of the last century.

Changes in taste and advances in curatorial practice and research have influenced the selection and display of the collections. Neglected areas of art history are now being given their rightful place in a more coherent hang, implemented in 2003. This incorporates the masters and teachers of famous artists, long ignored or belittled to maintain the myth of the 'self-made' genius, as is the case of Van Veen, one of Rubens' masters.³³⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century nationalism in the visual arts was both assumed and promoted by many artists, theorists and intellectuals.³³⁸ One way of doing this was through nationalist art exhibitions.³³⁹ In the early years of the MRBAB's existence the most important of these was the exhibition of 1880 held to mark the inauguration of the Balat building.³⁴⁰ Opened by the king, it celebrated fifty years of independence with a retrospective of Belgian art. It covered the neo-classicism of Navez, Romanticism with Gustaf Wappers and Antoine Wiertz, portraiture and traditional genres, the pre-Rubensism of Henri Leys, Orientalism, and the rise of realism in the work of Joseph and Alfred Stevens.³⁴¹ The message was .

³³⁴ Eugène Delacroix cited in Roberts-Jones, 30-31. (Author's trans.)

³³⁵ V. Bücken

³³⁶ MRBAB, *Guide des collections*

³³⁷ V. Bücken

³³⁸ Facos and Hirsh

³³⁹ Haskell

³⁴⁰ Roberts-Jones

³⁴¹ Ibid.

clear; not only was Belgium an autonomous nation-state but it had the artists to prove it. Many of them are now intimately associated with the early years of the state and instrumental in developing a visual nationalist rhetoric.³⁴² A similar exhibition was held in 1980, “150 Years of Belgian Art”, whilst the forthcoming anniversary exhibition “Romanticism in Belgium” will be devoted to the movement that blossomed in the early years of the monarchy.³⁴³ As the most ‘Belgian’ of the art movements it communicates the ‘triumphant nationalism and euphoria founded in the newly acquired independence [that] characterised the atmosphere of the young nation.’³⁴⁴

Similarly, large retrospectives devoted to individual artists have been the means of consolidating the museum’s standing as a serious institution involved in research and specialist study. ‘Le Siècle de Bruegel’ in 1963 broke all previous visitor records with 150, 000 visitors; a figure later more than doubled by the Magritte retrospective in 1998, one of three major exhibitions dedicated to important Belgian artists in the Modern collections: Delvaux, Magritte and Ensor.³⁴⁵

Federalisation and the development of Brussels as a European centre have all had an impact upon the museum and its evolution. Belgian institutions have had to deal with the politically and ideologically changing structure of the country. During the upheavals that preceded state reform in the 1980s and 1990s the regional identity of artists was politicised and pressure was put on the staff to compile a list of Flemish and Walloon artists in the early collections. This came to nothing, as the curators argued that such divisions being largely fictitious before the late nineteenth century they are, therefore, inapplicable to earlier artists.³⁴⁶ This attempt to usurp what comprises a common heritage for divisive ends is emblematic of the difficulties that Belgian institutions have had to face over last few decades.

The demise of the unitary state has challenged the very *raison d’être* of Belgian national museums; established to demonstrate the power of common histories to shape the future and to foster common cultural identification. As one of many institutions fundamental to a self-respecting European nation state in the nineteenth century, the MRBAB were instrumental in raising the profile of the arts and

³⁴² Stengers and Gubin

³⁴³ ‘Le Romantisme en Belgique’ at the MRBAB, 18/03/05 – 31/07/05 Brussels

³⁴⁴ ARTE news op.cit. 31.

³⁴⁵ www.fine-arts-museum.be

³⁴⁶ V. Bücken

encouraging the development of national schools and genres. The early appearance of regionalism, however, undermined the collective cultural environment the museum was promoting.

Language regulations are a bureaucratic blight in Belgium, and the order and presentation of the two main languages on the labels and panels of the MRBAB has been a constant source of aggravation. Both Flemish and French are to be given equal importance within federal institutions so all museum publications and documents are bilingual. German, though one of the officially recognised languages retains a minority status. Externally operated and separate education departments serve the two main linguistic communities. There is unfortunately no common education policy, each service has its own programme and there are no joint activities.³⁴⁷ Though the collections remain the property of the State and therefore the people, regardless at least in theory of linguistic community and origin, there appears to be no interest in creating a more co-operative programme of access and interpretation.

Now that issues of regional and linguistic autonomy have been, if not solved at least temporarily defused, ideas of a 'national' culture and heritage are once again being tentatively aired. On the 21st of July 2004, the Day of the Dynasty or national day, all federal museums were accessible for only € 1 and were visited by 13, 677 people.³⁴⁸ This was part of an effort to raise general awareness of the country's common cultural and historical heritage in preparation for the forthcoming celebrations in 2005.

Since 1830 the arts have been promoted as a source of pride and national prestige in a country notorious for its existential crisis. The state and bourgeoisie have traditionally encouraged the visual arts through the framework of the museum's permanent collections and large-scale exhibitions that helped situate the country within a broader European context.

In the heart of Europe and the capital of the EU, in a country that still has a monarchy, songs, flags and other emblems of a nation-state, the MRBAB collect, curate and display the country's artistic heritage. Though no overtly patriotic sentiment is encouraged they remain museums for the nation in all its complex ambiguity. The collections present the development of European art from the vantage

³⁴⁷ MRBAB, Dutch speaking and Francophone education departments, 30th September 2003 Brussels.

³⁴⁸ www.fine-arts-museum.be

point of the Low Countries in general and Belgium in particular. The systematic progression from the fourteenth century to the present day and the regular acquisition of contemporary art are two of the museums main strengths, underlining the importance of the region in the story of European culture. Though a dominant national identity in Belgium is hard to determine, the MRBAB are by dint of their history, size, location and the nature of their collections, national.

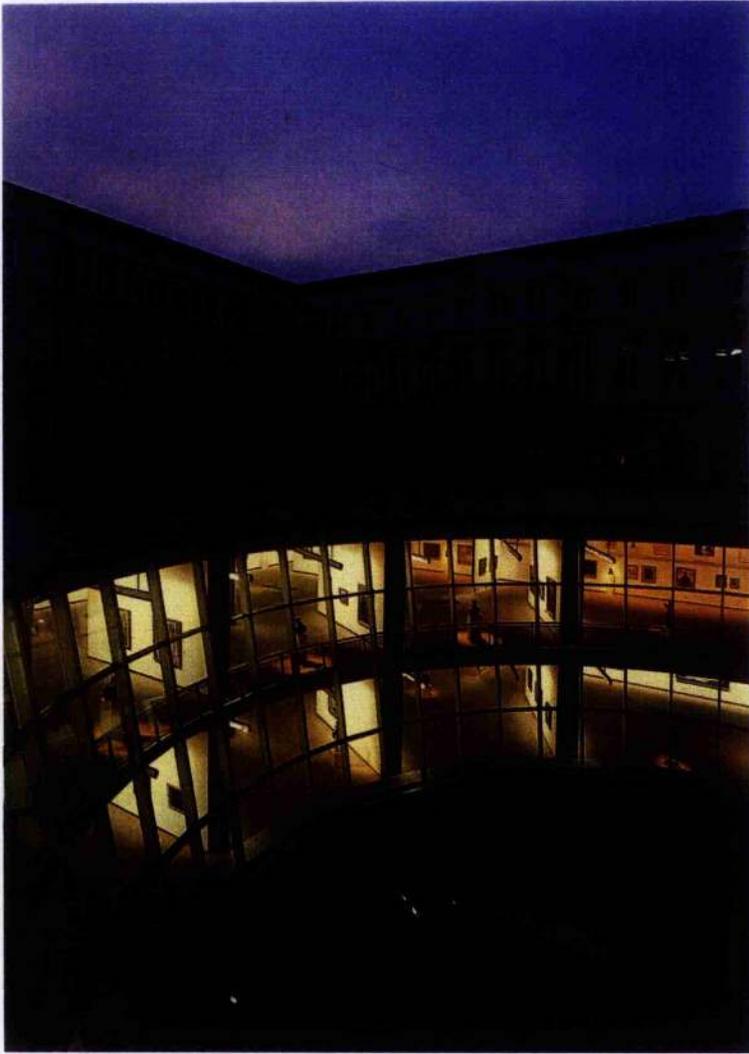


Plate 31



Plate 32



Plate 33



Plate 34



Plate 35

Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the manner in which national art museums contribute to the development of collective identity through the framework of a nation-state. Having revisited the origins of the nation-state within nineteenth century concepts of the nation as an organically, and/or historically bonded society, actively expressed by means of nationalism; it is clear that collective notions of identity are determined by local factors and therefore highly subjective. In turn political ideology, and the historical and social factors that establish the nation-state, contribute to the formation of state institutions such as the public art museum; thereby outlining its place and purpose within the nation.

Going on the principle that each nation interprets their identity subjectively, this study looked at two nations that share many social and historical links; in order to appraise the manner and extent to which they have developed simultaneously distinct identities from a relatively mutual basis. The Netherlands and Belgium constitute a particularly fascinating subject of study in the field of identity due to their overlapping cultural history and physical borders, as observed in the first section of this paper. This proximity has influenced the perception the two countries have of each other and their common history, affecting their attitude to the collection, and display of the region's cultural heritage.

The place of material culture and heritage within Western concepts of civilisation are partly the result and partly the cause of the rise of the public museum. As with the term 'nation' the meaning of 'cultural heritage' is determined by a number of subjective factors, rendering it an ambiguous but powerful concept rooted within history and the possession of material culture.

Much attention has been given in this thesis to the early history of the Western museum, specifically the elaboration of the national museum concept in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as it coincides with the rise of nationalism and the establishment of modern Belgium and Holland. The ideology and prevailing social discourse of the period have therefore indelibly marked perceptions of the national museum and its place within contemporary society.

Like in many contemporary European nations, the MRBAB and the Rijksmuseum are part of broader national networks that comprise museums of history, archaeology, natural science, and the colonies. The majority were formally established in the

nineteenth century and played a part in the validation and glorification of their nation-states. The need to bind disparate ethnicities or peripheral national groups into a social body that identified with the political state defined the rhetoric of large art museums in Europe well into the last century. Part of a citizen-making environment, the art museum upholds values of 'beauty' and cultural excellence, promoting the arts as an educational and civilising force.

Like the nations they serve, the two museums share a common history in so far as the French occupation of the Low Countries was the catalyst for their creation; institutions whose mission was to preserve and present the region's cultural heritage to the nation. The threat of a permanent loss of the national memory embodied in the region's cultural patrimony through the actions of a culturally aggressive external power provided the impetus for the creation of art museums in the Low Countries. A similar pattern was to be found in other nascent European states in the early to mid-nineteenth century as cultural nationalism grew in the wake of Napoleon's conquests. This was often triggered by the return or potential loss of important works of art or historical objects; valuable not only in themselves but for the mythical associations they hold for a specific cultural group.³⁴⁹ Their possession or return contributes to the development or reinforcement of national consciousness based in history and location.

As Howard Becker states in *Art Worlds*, art can become an integral part of national identity, a thing that the country is known for and a positive force in national life, mobilising the population for desirable national goals.³⁵⁰ As was witnessed in the Low Countries overlapping histories and the ambiguity of cultural borders, prompted the search for new styles and modes of expression that would appeal predominantly to a specific national group. This contributed to the propagation of rival nationalism's by means of large art exhibitions in the period leading up to the First World War; bolstering the concept of national characteristics innate in painting.³⁵¹

This need to represent the national 'self' to the outside 'other' is part of an auto-defining process that bonds a community of people to their state and each other. In Belgium a common past was created in order to validate the existence of the modern state and ensure its survival; *L'union fait la force*. Closely involved in the 'nationisation' of the country the MRBAB are a space in which past and present are

³⁴⁹ Greenfield

³⁵⁰ Becker, op.cit., 181.

³⁵¹ Haskell

linked by means of a chronological display. Continuous artistic development in the area of Belgium is shown through the structure of the collections that combine 'Ancient' and modern art within one institution. This is unusual in so far as displays of contemporary art particularly national collections are often consciously divorced from the traditions of the past. Presented in this manner the collections constitute a timeline of artistic developments in the Low Countries in general and Belgium in particular. This is a subtle declaration of pride, a muted statement of cultural integrity in a country wary of national labels.

Though contemporary to the MRBAB, the Rijksmuseum collections draw upon an earlier period as a source of nationalistic self-imaging. For the Dutch the defining national moment predates the modern state, unlike Belgium where the creation of the state *was* the moment of national definition. The Rijksmuseum fine art collections end in the nineteenth century, thereby precluding any visual link between the art of the past and the present. Its dual function as art and history museum contribute to the Rijksmuseum's function as a microcosm of the nation's cultural and historical development and is emblematic of the importance of the past to the identity of the modern nation. Whilst the Belgian state asserted itself as a nation through the artistic and architectural idioms of the time, looking ahead in a spirit of proud enthusiasm, the Netherlands eschewed modernity in favour of past glory feeling the shame of its diminished standing within nineteenth century Europe.³⁵²

It is often said that the museum institution helps reinforce and determine the conceptual boundaries of who belongs and who does not.³⁵³ As previously discussed the nature of the collections, their display and the physical articulation of the museum all contribute to this. Whilst ideas of the museum as a 'citizen-making' environment may be considered outdated, the Rijksmuseum is clearly confident of its purpose as an educational and ideological social tool. By means of its collections and their articulation the museum is actively involved in the assimilation of 'new Netherlanders' through the promotion of Dutch culture, values and history. Similarly, outreach projects such as the gallery at Schiphol airport present the cultural identity of the country in an environment dedicated to international travel and exchange. A pretty clear idea of the national self is required, confidence of what is and what is not Dutch, in order to present it to outsiders in such a decisive manner.

³⁵² Blom and Lamberts

The varied nature of the collections, the impossibility of justifying one identity over another and the divisive national atmosphere prevent a similar use of the museum in Brussels. It is this very lack of a dominant identity that makes the country attractive to foreigners, offering as it does a certain degree of flexibility and, unlike other nations no particular pressure to conform.³⁵⁴ Whilst the Netherlands have a plethora of national symbols and artists clearly linked to the country and emblematic of the Dutch nation, Belgium must share its rich cultural heritage between various regions and linguistic groups that lay claim to different aspects. The MRBAB must be careful not to be seen to promote one group over another, maintaining instead a precarious foot hold in the nineteenth century Belgian ideal.

National symbols and iconic moments of unity in the country relate to great crises like the First World War, a truly national event like the death of a loved monarch – Albert I and Baudoin I – or the vagaries of an awkward colonial history in the Congo. For these reasons the nineteenth century is seized upon as the most national period of the country's existence heavy with a patriotic symbolism now seen as historically interesting or even slightly embarrassing. As the concept of national identity in Belgium was soon found to be a paradox in itself the people have grown keen to promote a more flexible understanding of identity and 'belonging' than that of the early years.

In spite of this, the MRBAB remain inherently national, collecting art of, or relating to the Southern Netherlands and modern Belgium. Thereby proving that it is possible for a nineteenth century institution founded upon Romantic idealism, to reinvent itself as a national museum in the broader sense, whilst remaining rooted within a specific cultural discourse. It also demonstrates the ability for a national museum to operate in several languages for several peoples, allowing for a more flexible understanding of what constitutes a nation as such. The MRBAB cannot be museums *of* the nation in the same sense as the Rijksmuseum, as there is no common definition of the Belgian nation recognised by the people themselves. Instead they are *for* the nation as important art collections that pertain to the history and status of the country situated on national soil.

³⁵³ Duncan

³⁵⁴ Morelli and Schreiber, in Deprez and Vos.

Duncan and Wallach argue that the physical space of the museum can reinforce notions of citizenship through structures that connote rituals of power.³⁵⁵ As a space that reinforces group identity over that of the individual; the 'public' quality of the collections implies a shared responsibility based in a common history. The architectural expression of this role is clearly a contributing factor. Although this thesis is unable to address in full the ramifications of public architecture and its role in the nation-state it is worth considering the impact of an adapted structure to one that is purpose-built on the institutions they house. The original example is of course the Louvre famously situated in a former palace it converted royal space into one of the first public ones thereafter promoting an ideal of French cultural superiority inherent within the people.³⁵⁶ In contrast, The National Gallery in London and the National Gallery in Washington D. C. were purpose built in a classical style that endorsed the Anglo-Saxon ideal of civilisation based within the classical world.³⁵⁷ This thesis has demonstrated that the Brussels museum is a secular space with classical overtones, a combination of adapted and purpose-built structures within a nationally significant location. The Rijksmuseum on the other hand was purpose-built far outside the city gates and designed as a statement of nationhood in its own right.

Cuypers Rijksmuseum is particularly interesting, as it does not conform to the contemporary standards of museum architecture. Leaving the Greco-Roman model behind and opting instead for the specifically western European symbolism of the Gothic church, he gave the museum a unique cultural and historical context. Thereby proving that a national museum established in the nineteenth century can promote a nation without recourse to a classical idiom.

Both museums were designed to contain a space that evokes ritual. In the MRBAB the Forum, drawing upon classical references, symbolises state authority. Containing only nineteenth century pieces, some of which in particular are associated with the birth of the state, it acts as a reminder of 'the dream that was' Belgium; presenting the ideal of a nation bound to a state by a monarch, a Constitution and a glorious history. Whilst the 'Belgian' history was in fact very brief, the monarchy has had its ups and down's, and the Constitution has been changed repeatedly, the Forum nevertheless discreetly reminds the visitor that this is a national institution in the

³⁵⁵ Duncan and Wallach.

³⁵⁶ McClellan

³⁵⁷ Boswell and Evans

capital city of a country born of nation-building and political idealism. The Gallery of Honour in the Rijksmuseum is the unmistakable axis of collections and building. This church nave-like space culminates in the national altarpiece *The Night Watch*, a painting nearly every Dutch person is familiar with from childhood. The progression from the Gallery to the room at the end raises the value of the works on display, endowing them with additional associations that differ according to the viewer.

The history of the nation and where it posits itself in relation to a more 'universal' cultural history of man therefore, determine the use and ritual symbolism of the museum space. As Cuypers' building makes claims of artistic descent from the masters of Antiquity through its decorative program, the classicism of the Balat exhibition hall combines references to nineteenth century nationalist rhetoric with specifically local artists on the façade.

It is as well to remember that in order to fulfil its purpose a so-called ritualised space is dependent upon the audience's recognition of it as such. Whilst this paper has focused predominantly upon the production of museum displays at a national level the author recognises the equal importance of the consumption of such displays. Though the Rijksmuseum building evokes church architecture the associative subtleties of the Gallery of Honour will be lost on an audience unfamiliar with European church architecture and the social and spiritual connections. There is a tendency within museology to forget the impact of the observer upon that which is observed. Increasingly acknowledged in the discipline of art history the power of the gaze is only gradually being formally considered in relation to museum presentations and their rhetoric.

This raises the fascinating issue of the 'identity of the gaze'. Different audiences will interpret the same exhibit differently according to variable socio-cultural factors. The Rijksmuseum for example is clearly nation specific, presenting itself to the world through Dutch cultural heritage taken from a fixed point in time. How this is experienced and perceived will vary according to the national, social, and cultural background of the visitor, determining the values they bring with them. Many objects and paintings contain associative meaning accessible according to nationality and education. Dutch school children are familiarised with Rembrandt's *Night Watch* from an early age and by extension with a period of national glory. In this manner the quality of the experience of a Dutch visitor seeing this painting for the first time differs from that of a foreigner; the painting has a symbolic resonance for the Dutch

that lies within an inherently national story rather than just art history. Whilst this may be oversimplifying the issue, it remains true nevertheless that national identity is, to an extent, in the eye of the beholder.

Acknowledging that the consumer affects the received meaning of the museum display; nationality thereby becomes one of the factors involved in the interpretation of exhibits articulating nationality. If one is contributing to the definition of the other, where does one end and the other begin? This then questions the extent to which state education is involved in the promulgation of concepts of communal identity and, fundamentally who is setting conceptual boundaries for whom.

As institutions that evolved within a specific ideological environment, that emphasised social betterment through knowledge and the transcendental values of high culture, public museums have become the sites of conflicting ideals and mores as the old and the new converge. Concerns are increasingly being voiced over the reality and extent of the influence that public spaces like museums, operated by centrally defined dominant cultures, actually have in society. Again it is the all-pervading issue of identity that fuels the debate as peripheral identities traditionally marginalised by race, language or religion stake their claim to a part of the national persona.

The juxtaposition of the MRBAB and the Rijksmuseum reveals the differences between the nations themselves. The evidence presented by these case studies suggests that the evolution of the national museum institution is indicative of the development of national self-imaging within the state, regardless of conscious ideological agendas. Whilst the MRBAB do not consciously intend to present an image of the country to the world but rather the cultural and artistic heritage of the region, the complex and conflicting political and physical structure of the institution is emblematic of the paradoxical nature of Belgium itself. Similarly the Rijksmuseum's self-confident navel-gazing is indicative of the manner in which the Dutch have, for a long time been resolutely inward looking and self-involved.

The recent opposition of globalisation and localisation due to the resurgence of anti-nationalist movements and the rise of European regionalism have revealed the fundamental importance of place and language to concepts of identity, both collectively and individually. In Western Europe this is discernible in the clear shift from the post French Revolution ideal of a homogenous nation inherent within the state towards a multifaceted state that must acknowledge multiple cultural, ethnic and regional differences. Concurrent to this is the growing popularity of a 'Europe of the

regions' that would allow peripheral groups and histories their voice without recourse to a broader political structure, amalgamating many narratives rather than merely the dominant one.

Connected as they are to the idealised vision of the nation-state museums must also adapt, re-evaluating their purpose as the concept of the nation is in transition around them. As they move away from traditional notions of heritage toward the translation of culture, history and peoples, national museums continue to operate as sites of 'belonging' through the presentation of common heritage, situating the national in relation to the 'other'.

APPENDICES

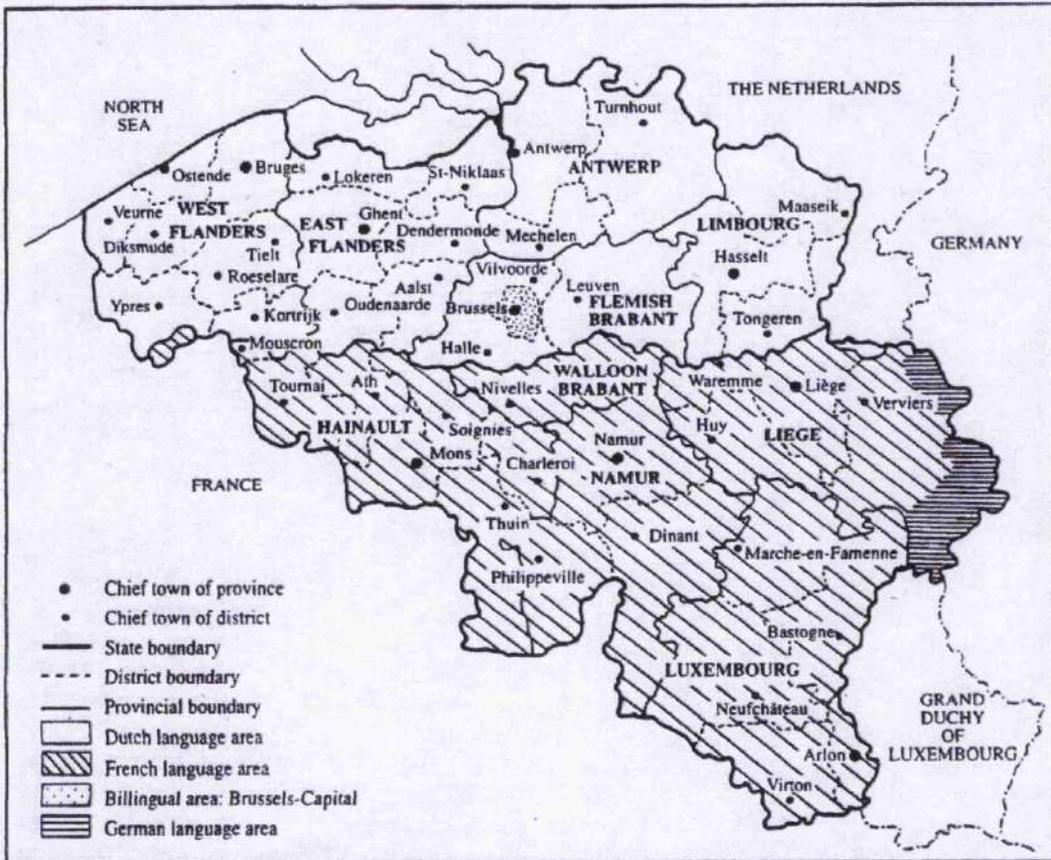
APPENDIX A: Maps



1. The Netherlands



2. Belgium

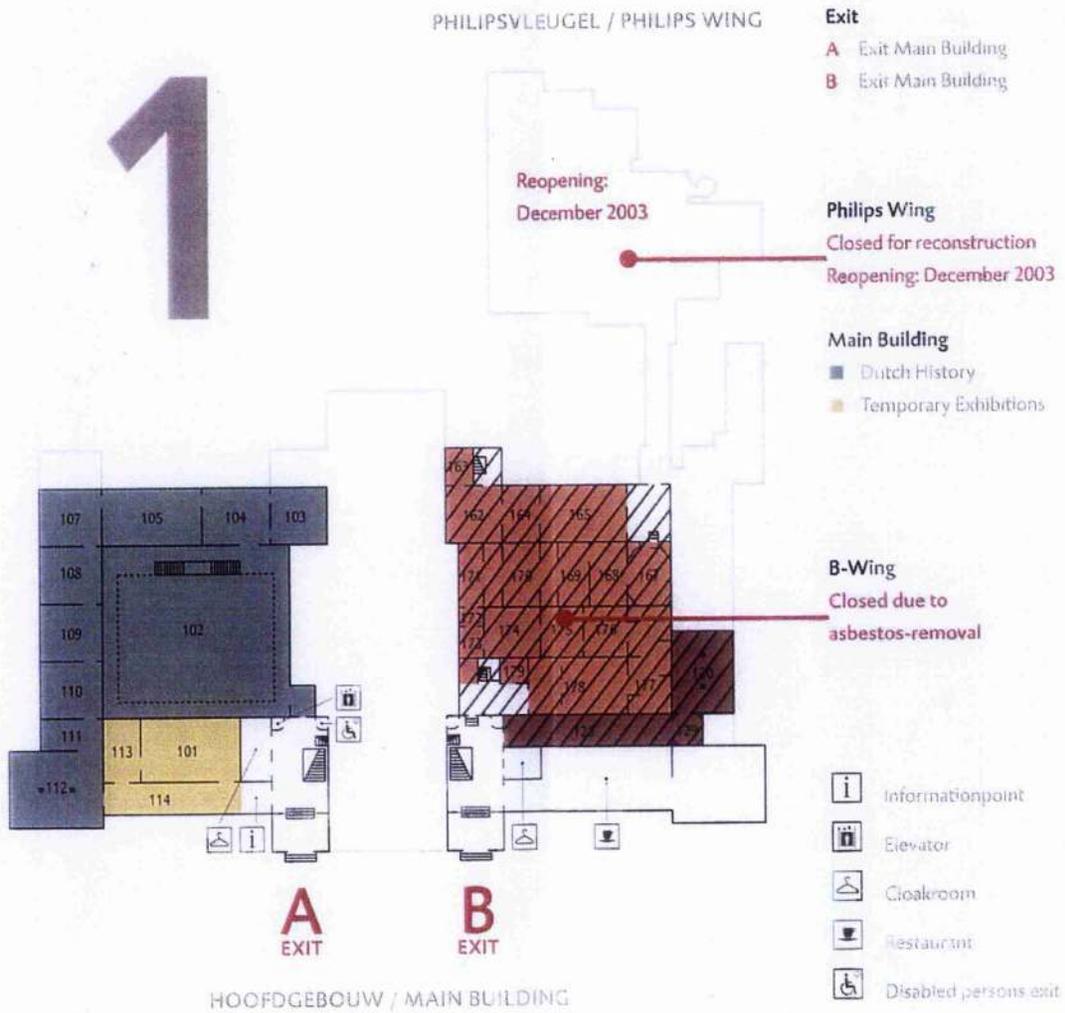


3. Language areas and provincial boundaries



4. Rue de la Régence and Museum area

APPENDIX B: Rijksmuseum Floor Plans



1a. 2002 ground floor

2

PHILIPSVLEUGEL / PHILIPS WING

Main Building

- Dutch Paintings
- Acquisitions

Reopening:
December 2003

Philips Wing

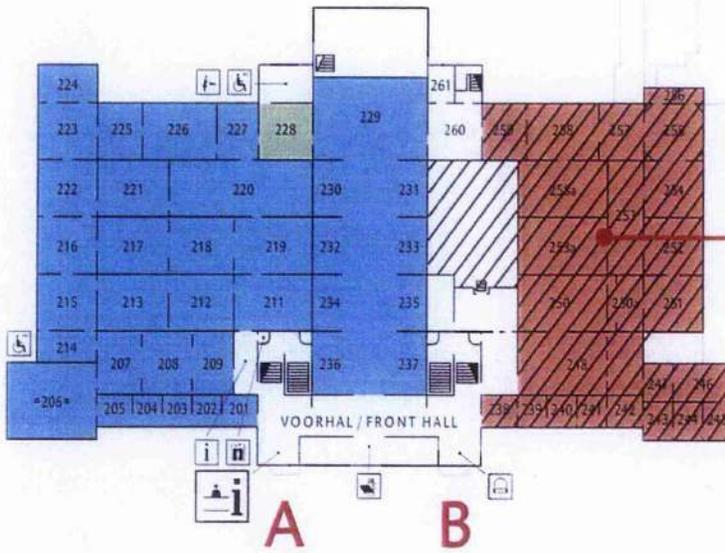
Closed for reconstruction
Reopening: December 2003

Highlights

- The Nightwatch (Room 229)
- Kitchen Maid (Room 218)
- The Jewish Bride (Room 231)
- Van Gogh Self-Portrait (Room 227)

B-Wing

Closed due to
asbestos-removal



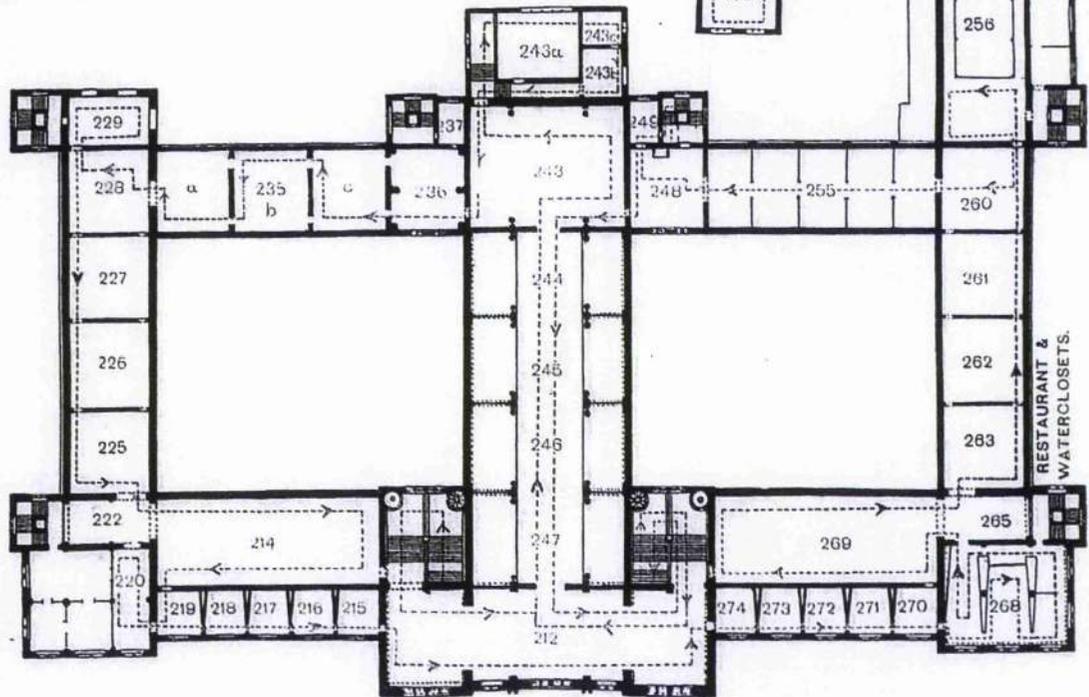
HOOFDGEBOUW / MAIN BUILDING

- Baby changing room
- Disabled persons toilet
- Informationpoint
- Elevator
- Informationdesk
- Museumshop
- Audiotour

1b. First floor

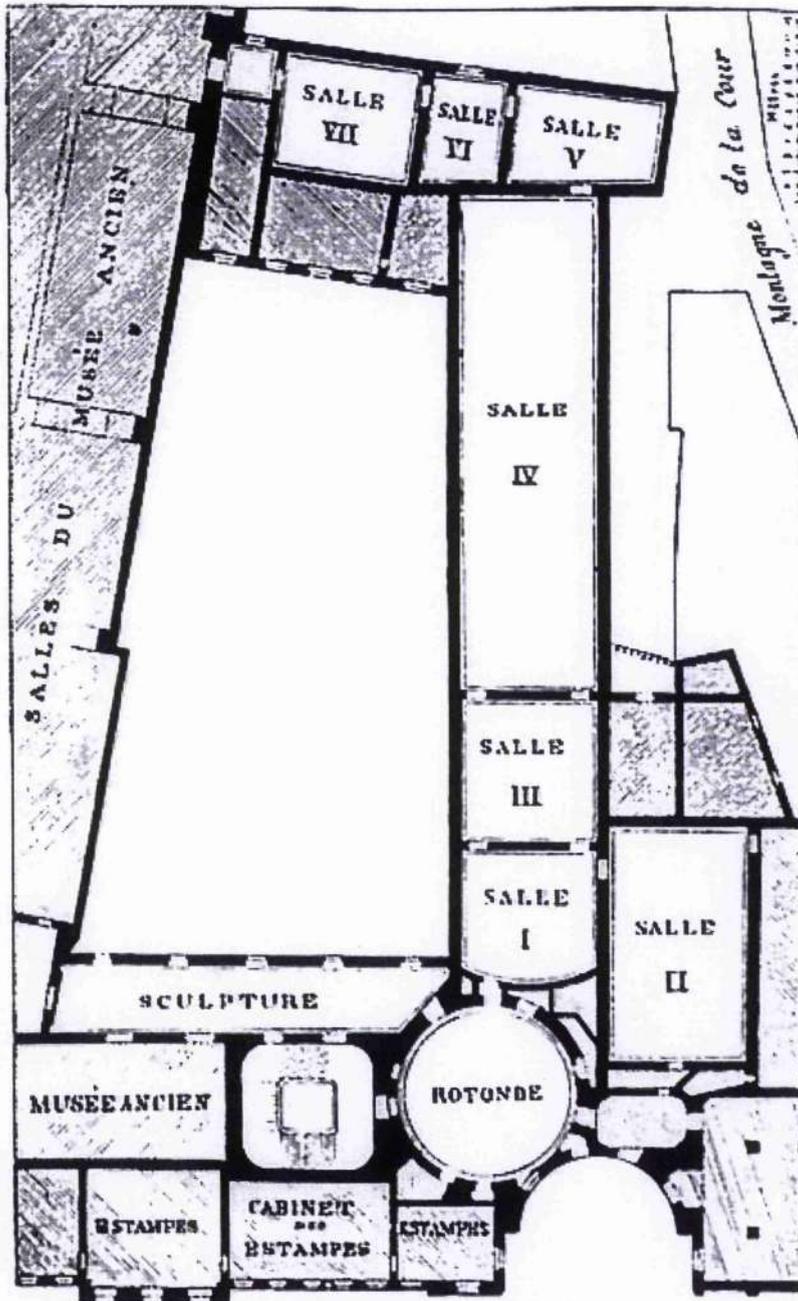
FIRST FLOOR. Pictures of the Early Schools.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>212. Large Vestibule, or Salle des Pas-Perdus.
 214. Corporation paintings.
 215, 218, 219. Dutch School of the XVII century.
 219. Primitives.
 217. Six collection.
 220. Surgeon's Guild pictures and Bicker collection.
 222, 225, 226. Dutch School of the XVII century.
 227. Dutch School, early part of the XVII century.
 228, 229. Primitives and paintings of the Dutch School of the XVI century.
 235^a, b. Gallery of foreign masters.
 235^c. Van Dyck and Rubens pictures.
 236. Carolingian room.
 243. Hall of Honour.
 243^a. Nightwatch Hall.
 243^b. Rembrandt's Clothiers' Hall.
 243^c. Small Rembrandt Hall.</p> | <p>244, 247. Choice works of the Dutch School of the XVII century.
 248. Regents' Hall (XVII century).
 249. Pictures in loan.
 255. Historical paintings and portraits.
 256. Cabinet of medals and library.
 260. The "Orange" room (portraits and pictures). Miniatures.
 261. Jhr. J. S. H. van de Poll collection.
 262. Dupper collection.
 263, 265. Van der Hoop collection (1st half).
 268. Portraits of artists and collections Baron Collot d'Escury, Jhr. J. S. R. van de Poll and Jhr. de Witte van Citters.
 269. Van der Hoop collection (2^d half).
 270, 271, 272, 273, 274. Dutch School of the XVII century.
 299. Paintings of the vaulted arches of the churches of Alkmaar and Kerkwijk.</p> |
|---|--|



2. 1910 Painting Galleries

APPENDIX C: MRBAB Floor Plans



PLAN DU MUSÉE MODERNE

1. Old Court building 1880

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FLOOR PLANS

RIJKSMUSEUM

1885: archives (no number)
1887: archives “
1893: ditto
1903: ditto
1909: ditto
1910: ditto
1927: ditto
1938: ditto
c. 1950: ditto
1962: ditto
1965: ditto
1971: ditto
c.1976: ditto
1991: ditto
1993: ditto
1996: ditto
2001: ditto
2003: own copy

MRBAB

1950-60: MRBAB A10/I
1963: MRBAB AA15/1
1967: MRBAB A10/14
1990s: own copy
2004 : own copy

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The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, seen from the back across the Museumplein

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Rijksmuseum: tile mosaic on east wall, sculptors

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Maid of Holland frieze: detail of Maid

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Maid of Holland frieze: detail of artists

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Main hall of Rijksmuseum circa 1890

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MRBAB: Modern extension, night

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MRBAB: Forum, general view

- author's photograph

MRBAB: left hand-side of Forum

- author's photograph

Pieter Paul Rubens, *Road to Calvary*, circa 1630

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MRBAB: Rubens room

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