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Dossier

Aristocratic collecting practices in Belgium and the Netherlands (c.1780-1950)

Edited by: Ulrike Müller, Ilja Van Damme and Gerrit Verhoeven



Fig. 1. A gallery in the Château de Belœil, the castle of the Prince de Ligne (from A.A. van Uffelen, *Belœil: Het kasteel en zijn hovelingen* (Antwerp, 1951); coll. Stad Antwerpen, Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience, K 258731 [M-546 a])

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An introduction

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Noble habitus in modern times

The current special issue brings together new empirical research on aristocratic collecting practices in Belgium and the Netherlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Motivations for doing so have to start, invariably, by placing the articles assembled here in a broader historiography and debate on the continuous importance, functioning and lifestyle of the nobility in the modern period. Traditionally, it was believed that, in the nineteenth century, the aristocracy slowly but surely crumbled under the forces of economic modernisation and political democratisation, eventually becoming obsolete and quasi-indistinguishable from the conquering bourgeoisie in the newly arising liberal nation states of nineteenth-century Europe.¹ Being considered mere fossilised remnants of the past, such historical reading of the evolution of European nobilities, however, is nowadays increasingly criticised and deconstructed as teleological fallacy. Above all, it expresses a Whiggish gaze on a supposed linear trajectory and the hope for disappearance of the high and mighty of older days: a lingering noble species considered unfit and ill adjusted to the political clamors and overt materialism of a new age of industry and mass society.²

- 1 The 'decline of aristocracy' was in itself a standard topic of nineteenth-century social commentary and thought. E.g. R. Evans, *The pursuit of power. Europe, 1815-1914* (London, 2017), 274-82; J. Osterhammel, *The transformation of the world. A global history of the nineteenth century* (Princeton and Oxford, 2014), 750-61.
- 2 E.g. E. Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world* (New York, 2006). For an essential overview on the

From the 1980s onwards, emphasis among historians has shifted from stressing modernisation and rupture to continuities between the *ancien régime* and the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ Ushering in such historiographical reversal, the European nobility in modern times was, so to speak, rediscovered as object of study by both socio-economic and political historians. Noble investment strategies, economic activities, political power, and social coalition building under the umbrella of the nation state, came under scrutiny to establish where and how old noble families coped with and responded to rapidly changing times.⁴ More recently, interest has grown in the persistence and importance of what we would call *noble habitus*: a set of cultural practices, lifestyles and mores, colouring the group distinctiveness and continuous *status* of European aristocracies during the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century.⁵ Whereas noble privilege over economic and political power gradually eroded under the corrosive forces of capital and meritocracy – the new cornerstones of the bourgeois nation state – noble habitus continued to emanate awe and prestige among *das Bürgertum* for still a very long time.⁶ Becoming ennobled remained, under strict conditions, not only possible under national rule; many a noble family only gained their titles and status long after the ‘age of revolu-

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Belgian aristocracy, P. Janssens, *De evolutie van de Belgische adel sinds de late middeleeuwen* (Brussel, 1998). A concise introduction to the Dutch nobility can also be found in J. Moes, *Onder aristocraten. Over hegemonie, welstand en aanzien van adel, patriciaat en andere notabelen in Nederland, 1848-1914* (Hilversum, 2012).

- 3 Here is not the place to do justice to such rich historiography, but any such overview needs to start with the work of A. Mayer, *The persistence of the old regime. Europe to the Great War* (London, 1981). See also: *Les Noblesses Européennes au XIXe siècle. Actes du colloque organisé par l'Ecole française de Rome et le Centro per gli studi di politica estera e opinione pubblica de l'Università de Milan en collaboration avec la Casa de Vélazquez (Madrid), le Deutsches historisches Institut in Rom, l'Institutio svizzero di Roma, le Nederlands Instituut te Rome en l'österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaft (Rome 21-23 novembre 1985)* (Milan, 1988).
- 4 An important and early article in this aspect for Belgium, is: S. Clark, ‘Nobility, bourgeoisie and the Industrial Revolution in Belgium’, *Past & Present* 105 (1984), 140-75. On the ways in which noble families in France coped with the profound social, political and economic changes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see E. Macknight, *Aristocratic families in republican France, 1870-1940* (Manchester, 2012).
- 5 On language use, an important, non-material aspect of noble habitus, see e.g. P. Janssens, ‘De culturele identiteit van de Belgische adel: taalkennis en taalgebruik in de 19de en de 20ste eeuw’, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 88 (2010), 541-56. See also Wendy Wiertz’ publications on aristocratic women active as amateur artists in Belgium between 1806 and 1914. W. Wiertz, *Adellijk en artistiek. Amateurkunstenaresen met blauw bloed in België (1815-1914)* (Leuven, 2023).
- 6 The notion of “*la trahison de la bourgeoisie*” has been mainly attested and examined for the early modern period, but could well be extended to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the study of the notion of *noble habitus*. See H. Soly, ‘Het verraad der 16de-eeuwse burgerij: een mythe? Enkele beschouwingen betreffende het gedragspatroon der 16de eeuwse ondernemers’, *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis*, 86 (1973), 262-80; Karel Degryse, ‘Fortuin en sociaal prestige. Enkele beschouwingen over het “verraad van de burgerij” tijdens het Ancien Régime’, *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 3 (1977), 283-93; and recently R. Vermoesen, ‘Het verraad van de boerende bourgeoisie. Grondbezit- en grondgebruik in de buitenwijken van een kleine, vroegmoderne stad’, *Het Land van Aalst* 72 (2020), 17-29.

tions' (mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries) had come to an end. Aspiring to become part of the aristocracy and living the noble life, was also increasingly entangled with symbolically charged material markers and conspicuous consumerist lifestyles, which, in principle, if often not in practice, were in reach of a growing group of people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (from diplomats, over politicians, to commercial rentiers, industrialists and even artists). More than ever, 'the nobility' became a catch-all for birds of different feathers.

Recent studies into cultural practices of the nobility have underlined, first and foremost, the centrality of estates and stately country houses – or even castles – in performing noble habitus. Being in itself a practice predating the rise of the nation states, buying land and accompanying elite residences – both in cities and even more common, in the suburban and rural outskirts – continued to ground noble ambitions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well.⁷ The practice dated back to early modern times when castles and *heeren huysen* (manor houses) were bought in the vicinity of cities by well-off nobles but also by bourgeois merchants, bankers, government officials and the like. Often this concerned 'lordly' residences, where the new owner or 'lord', following the usage of the feudal Middle Ages, also obtained jurisdiction and privileges over adjoining territories and village subjects – the villagers often considering the owners of the estate as their rightful 'noble peers'. Following a classically humanist inspired lifestyle, the *villa rustica* or *villa suburbana* was symbolically elevated to expressing status and noble habitus, an essential element of an aristocratic country life of leisurely gardening, fishing, hunting, walking and philosophizing with dinner guests over the state of the world.⁸ While manorial privileges ceased to exist, eventually superseded by national and municipal lawmaking, the long-standing symbolic connections between elite homes and noble habitus were carried over in modern times.⁹ As we will also encounter in the new contributions brought together in this special issue, buying a 'castle' or elite residence was often a first, essential step of high symbolic importance in signaling noble status or aristocratic ambitions.

As important for such performance of noble habitus as a home, were its material possessions: the collections of arts, antiques and luxurious objects that could often be found *in situ* in the city palaces and country estates of nobles. Again, the practice had antecedents in earlier times, where *pronken* or flaunting luxury tapestries, paintings, prestigious cabinets and other household effects, had given rise to social debates and

7 For a long-term overview and introduction: J. Dunne and P. Janssens, eds, *Living in the city: Elites and their residences, 1500-1900* (Turnhout, 2008); and J. Stobart and M. Rothery, *Consumption and the country house* (Oxford, 2016).

8 See, e.g., for Antwerp: R. Baetens, ed., *Het 'soete' buitenleven. Hoven van plaisantie in de provincie Antwerpen, 16^{de}-20^{ste} eeuw* (Antwerpen, 2013).

9 C. Gietman et al., eds, *Huis en habitus. Over kastelen, buitenplaatsen en notabele levensvormen* (Hilversum, 2017).

commentaries from at least the sixteenth century onwards.¹⁰ Classical-humanist discourse once more set the tone, where old treatises and manuals on ‘proper’ aristocratic behaviour mediated luxury consumption through notions as *magnificentia* and *sprezzatura*: the seemingly effortless expression of refinement and grace in consumption habits and ways of living, devoid of ‘excessive spending, without order, without method, without measure’.¹¹ Noble consumption was not one primarily – let alone exclusively – focused on the ‘new luxuries’ of the global and eventual industrial age to be: the shiny newness of fashionable wallpapers, upholstered furniture, industrial toys and others.¹² This was a world of brash materialism welcomed in the first place by the striding bourgeoisie, not so much by the aristocracy. Rather, amidst an increasingly materialistic world, noble consumption patterns ventured more towards the old and prestigious, material objects gaining sign value and meaning due to their ‘age’ and *patina* – the veneer of the past.¹³ Amidst such consumption practices, the act of collecting itself, as complex social endeavor, takes up an important, yet so far underacknowledged position in the performance of noble habitus in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

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Noble collectors in a changing world

For a long time, the European history of collecting has been the history of noble habitus, of aristocratic art lovers and their cherished possessions. The practice of assembling collections of works of fine and decorative arts, rare manuscripts and books, *naturalia*, curious objects and myriad other precious items has deep and long-running roots and is intimately tied to the endeavours of early modern courts, noblemen and women and clerical elites. Again starting in the 1980s, scholars have been researching the motives that drove the early modern elites to amass extensive *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* (art and curiosity cabinets), imperial or church treasuries for the sake of dynastic legitimization and representation, splendour, as well as for ritual purposes.¹⁴ Collecting came to be considered as a crucial practice of, in most instances, noble men

10 See, for example, R. Rittersma, ed., *Luxury in the Low Countries. Miscellaneous reflections on Netherlandish material culture, 1500 to the present* (Brussels, 2010).

11 Cited in G. Guerzoni, ‘Liberalitas, magnificentia, splendour. The classic origins of Italian Renaissance lifestyles’, *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999), 336.

12 On this distinction between ‘new’ and ‘old’ luxuries, see: J. De Vries, ‘Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age in theory and practice’, in: M. Berg and E. Eger, eds, *Luxury in the eighteenth century. Debates, desires and delectable goods* (Houndsmills, 2003), 41-56.

13 M. Charpy, ‘Patina and the bourgeoisie: The appearance of the past in nineteenth-century Paris’, in: G. Adamson and V. Kelley, eds, *Surface tensions: Surface, finish and the meaning of objects* (Manchester, 2013), 45-59.

14 K. Pomian, ‘Collection. Une typologie historique’, *Romantisme* 31 (2001), 9-22; K. Pomian, ‘The collection. Between the visible and the invisible’, in: S. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting objects and collections* (London, 1994), 160-74; A. Schnapper, *Le Géant, la licorne et la tulipe. Les cabinets de curiosités en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988).

and women, touching upon matters of patronage, exchange and display.¹⁵ Another rich body of research has especially been devoted to the eighteenth century, the heyday of noble collecting and self-presentation. With a special focus on the princely collections in France and Germany, recent research has explored such varied aspects as the interrelation of collectors' tastes, social practices and networks,¹⁶ the (changing) status of the concepts of amateurship and *curiosité*¹⁷ and the importance of 'politics and aesthetics of display' in aristocratic collections.¹⁸ Especially in the Low Countries and in Britain, *connoisseurs nobles* were slowly but surely losing ground, as they were rivalled – and soon surpassed – by wealthy commoners, without a noble pedigree, but with money to buy exclusive paintings, tapestries, furniture and other collectables. They even adopted – and completely transformed – the aristocratic tradition of the *Grand Tour* to gaze upon artwork in Rome, Florence or Venice.¹⁹

It was during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the practices and premises of collecting underwent an even more fundamental change. In this period, art collecting as a social and cultural phenomenon saw a radical expansion: more people of ever more diverse social backgrounds gained access to culture and the arts, and they increasingly obtained the means to buy works of art.²⁰ This shift was due to, among others, the impact of the large-scale social and industrial transformations and secularisations that deeply shaped the Western European cultural landscape at the turn of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the French Revolution had caused the flooding of the art market with vast numbers of artworks and other precious objects from the nationalised estates of dissolved religious institutions and from the confiscated collections of aristocrats who had fled the country. In France, this resulted in the almost complete elimination of traditional aristocratic art collections, while

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15 See, for example, the book series *Collecting Histories*, edited by S. Bracken, A. Gáldy and A. Turpin and published since 2009 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Within this series, the volumes *Collecting and dynastic ambition* (2009), *Collecting and the princely apartment* (2011) and *Women patrons and collectors* (2012) are especially noteworthy.

16 R. Ziskin, *Sheltering art. Collecting and social identity in early eighteenth-century Paris* (University Park, 2012).

17 J. Fripp et al., eds, *Artistes, savants et amateurs. Art et sociabilité au XVIIIe siècle (1715-1815)* (Paris, 2016); c. Guichard, *Les amateurs d'art à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Seyssel, 2008).

18 G. Weber, 'Die Galerie als Kunstwerk. Die Hängung italienischer Gemälde in der Dresdner Galerie 1754', in: B. Marx, ed., *Elbflorenz. Italienische Präsenz in der Dresdner Galerie 1754* (Dresden, 2000), 229-42. Quote: A. McClellan, 'The politics and aesthetics of display. Museums in Paris 1750-1800', *Art History* 7 (1984), 438-64, at 459.

19 There is an abundance of literature on the topic of early modern art collectors and connoisseurs in the Low Countries. A not representative sample: V. De Laet, *Brussel binnenskamers. Kunst- luxebezit in het spanningsveld tussen hof en stad, 1600-1735* (Antwerpen, 2009); J. Montias, *Art at auction in 17th century Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 2002); G. Verhoeven, "'Mastering the connoisseurs' eye". Paintings, criticism and the canon in Dutch and Flemish travel culture (1600-1750)', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 46 (2012), 29-56.

20 C. Loir, 'Aux origines de la vie publique de l'artiste en Belgique', *Revue Belge de Philologie et 'Histoire/ Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 83 (2005), 1211-24; J. Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 1962).

internationally, the previously unprecedented circulation of artworks and cultural objects brought about a major change in the history of taste and collecting.²¹ On the other hand, the booming industrialisation in Britain and on the continent (especially spearheaded by Belgium) and the development of global commercial empires (such as in the Netherlands), in tandem with social revolutions and democratisation processes of the early nineteenth century resulted in the emergence of a new, financially strong bourgeois middle class that enthusiastically appropriated traditional practices of noble collecting to demarcate their newly gained status in society.²²

The general understanding of nineteenth and early twentieth-century collecting is thus dominated by the breakthrough of the bourgeois *collectionneur* as new social type. Within the broader historiography of collecting, much attention has been paid to the new group of businessmen and industrial tycoons, as well as the (higher) middling sort of collectors, all eager to tap into a growing 'collection mania'. Recent research in this field has focused, among others, on the growing desire among the middle class to appropriate traditional collectors' items associated with the nobility (including Old Masters paintings and antiques),²³ bourgeois collectors' importance in the emergence of new artistic trends, the close ties between patronage and philanthropy,²⁴ and the rise of female *collectionneuses*.²⁵ It is also the bourgeois middle class, and especially the uncountable collectors, donors and patrons from its ranks, that are generally associated with the boom of public museums as novel collection and educational institutions with a primordial national scope and purpose.²⁶ The strong fo-

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- 21 See, for example, T. Stammers, *The purchase of the past. Collecting culture in post-revolutionary Paris c.1790–1890* (New York, 2020); T. Stammers, 'The bric-à-brac of the old regime: Collecting and cultural history in post-revolutionary France', *French History* 22 (2008), 295–315; R. Panzanelli and M. Preti-Hamard, eds, *La circulation des oeuvres d'art. 1789-1848* (Rennes, 2007); F. Haskell, 'Revolution and reaction', in: idem, *Rediscoveries in art. Some aspects of taste, fashion, and collecting in England and France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), 39–84.
- 22 I. Reist, ed., *British models of art collecting and the American response. Reflections across the pond* (Farnham, 2014); M. Preti-Hamard and P. Sénéchal, eds, *Collections et marché de l'art en France, 1789-1848* (Rennes, 2005); D. Macleod, *Art and the Victorian middle class. Money and the making of cultural identity* (New York, 1996).
- 23 M. Charpy, 'Patina and the bourgeoisie. The appearance of the past in nineteenth-century Paris', in: G. Adamson and V. Kelley, eds, *Surface tensions. Surface, finish and the meaning of objects*, (Manchester, 2013) 45–6; c. Fanslau, "'Wohl dem der's sehen kann!'" Private Amsterdam Collections 1770–1860', in: R. Rittersma, *Luxury in the Low Countries*, 159–89.
- 24 J. Ott, *Manufacturing the modern patron in Victorian California. Cultural philanthropy, industrial capital and social authority* (Farnham, 2014); S. Kuhrau, *Der Kunstsammler im Kaiserreich. Kunst und Repräsentation in der Berliner Privatsammlerkultur* (Kiel, 2005).
- 25 J. Verlaïne, *Femmes collectionneuses d'art et mécènes de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris, 2014); Macleod, *Art and the Victorian middle class*.
- 26 See, for example, C. Meyer, *Die Geburt des bürgerlichen Kunstmuseums. Johann Friedrich Städel und sein Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt am Main* (Berlin, 2013); E. Bergvelt et al., eds, *Napoleon's legacy. The rise of national museums in Europe 1794-1830* (Berlin, 2009); D. Poulot, *Musée, nation, patrimoine. 1789-1815* (Paris, 1997); S. Kuhrau, 'Die neuen Medici. Der Einfluss großbürgerlicher Mäzene auf die Museumsreform', in: A. Joachimides et al., eds, *Museumsinszenierungen. Zur Geschichte der Institution des Kunstmuseums, die Berliner Museumslandschaft 1830-1990* (Dresden, 1995), 157–70.

cus on bourgeois collectors and cultural benefactors in nineteenth-century studies is closely related to the idea that the values and ideals of nationalism, national art and heritage that flourished in this period were embraced in particular by the middle classes as signs of their categorically modern attitude to social and cultural life.²⁷ Accordingly, examinations of nineteenth-century (bourgeois) taste and collecting tend to give central attention to debates of modernity, socio-cultural and artistic progress and the rise of the avant-garde.²⁸

As a symptom of this trend, aristocratic collectors remain much less studied for this period. While eighteenth-century noble and royal collections are generally understood as forming the origin of public museums as we know them today,²⁹ research on nineteenth-century aristocratic collectors is scarce and fragmented. It is a well-known fact that, in the aftermath of the social upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, numerous noblemen and women in different parts of Europe were forced to sell their prized family collections during the age of political, industrial, and cultural upheavals, thereby supposedly heralding a new era of bourgeois taste and collecting.³⁰ Many other high-born amateurs, however, retained their titles and fortunes and continued to collect for economic reasons (as investment) or for reasons tied to their specific, albeit changing, social and cultural status in modern society.³¹ Some of these noble collectors continued to play an important role in urban society and cultural life during the nineteenth century and their collections enjoyed great popularity and visibility. Several galleries were accessible to the public at regular hours or by appointment, thereby building on a tradition established by their aristocratic predecessors in the eighteenth century.³² But noble collectors al-

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27 J. Leerssen, *Nationaal denken in Europa. Een cultuurhistorische schets* (Amsterdam, 1999), 119; A. Turpin, 'Appropriation as a form of nationalism? Collecting French furniture in the nineteenth century', in: J. Baetens and D. Lyna, eds, *Art crossing borders: The internationalisation of the art market in the age of nation states, 1750-1914* (Leiden, 2019), 220-55.

28 J. Seigel, *Modernity and bourgeois life. Society, politics and culture in England, France and Germany since 1750* (Cambridge, 2012), esp. 420-5.

29 B. Savoy, 'Zum Öffentlichkeitscharakter deutscher Museen im 18. Jahrhundert', in: B. Savoy, ed., *Tempel der Kunst. Die Entstehung des öffentlichen Museums in Deutschland 1701-1915* (Mainz, 2006), 9-23; V. Spenlé, 'Die Öffentlichkeit fürstlicher Sammlungen in Sachsen und Frankreich. Die Dresdner Gemäldegalerie im 18. Jahrhundert', in: P. Rosenberg, ed., *Poussin, Lorrain, Watteau, Fragonard... Französische Meisterwerke des 17. Und 18. Jahrhunderts aus deutschen Sammlungen* (Bonn, 2005), 106-12; A. McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre. Art, politics, and the origins of the modern museum in eighteenth-century Paris* (Berkeley, 1994).

30 See, for example, J. Pomeroy, 'Conversing with history. The Orléans collection arrives in Britain', in: Reist, ed., *British models of art collecting*, 47-59; and the section 'La collection d'Orléans, son devenir et ses effets/The Orléans effect', in: Panzanelli et al., *La circulation des oeuvres d'art*, 25-82.

31 See, for example, U. Müller, 'A private collection in the public sphere. The Brussels Art Gallery in the nineteenth century', in: M. Derez et al., eds, *Arenberg. Portrait of a family, story of a collection* (Turnhout, 2018), 332-9; J. Tollebeek, 'Het verleden in de negentiende eeuw. Arthur Merghelynck en het Kasteel van Beauvoorde', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* (1999), 107-47.

32 É. Oléron Evans, 'Housing the art of the nation. The home as museum in Gustav F. Waagen's Treas-



Fig. 2. Portrait of chevalier Théodore de Coninck in his gallery (*lithograph, Pierre Degobert after Henri Van der Haert, from Galerie de tableaux du chevalier Deconinck (Brussels, 1838); coll. Ghent University Library, BIB.G.014161*)

so regularly contributed items from their collections to Fine Arts Salons and other temporary exhibitions, or made their collections accessible via illustrated catalogues or other publications, as did for example Knight Théodore de Coninck de Merckem (1807-1855) in Ghent (Fig. 2).³³ And yet, little is known about the broader trends, continuities and discontinuities of noble collecting practices during changing modern times. For example, a recent quantitative examination of the social profiles of 121 art and antiques collectors active in the Belgian cities Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent during the long nineteenth century (1789-1914) suggested that from the 1850s onwards, aristocratic collectors came to be much less visible in the cultural public sphere, judging from the decreasing references to these collectors and their collections in travel literature, art journals and other published sources.³⁴ This does, however, not necessarily mean that the actual number of noble collectors decreased radically, but may merely be an indication of the fact that they gradually disappeared from the public stage of contemporary cultural life and concentrated more on their personal interests and networks.³⁵ Many questions as to the public and private lives of noble art collections therefore still remain unanswered. Neither have there been any overarching comparative examinations that consider aristocratic collectors' actual relationship to their bourgeois peers, nor those that throw a light on their relation to and interaction with the emerging public museums during the period in question.³⁶

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Collectionneurs Nobles in Belgium and the Netherlands: questions, themes and challenges

Even though the theme is worth exploring in a wider European context, this collection of essays zeroes in on collectors and collections in Belgium and the Netherlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There are several reasons that can motivate such a choice. On the one hand, the Low Countries share a time-honoured tra-

ures of Art in Great Britain', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 17 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2018.17.1.2>; U. Müller, 'The amateur and the public sphere. Private collectors in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent through the eyes of European travellers in the long nineteenth century', in: *Journal of the History of Collections* 29 (2017), 423-38; L. Nys, 'Particulier bezit in het museumtijdperk. Bezoek aan privé-verzamelingen in België, circa 1830-1914', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire/Belgisch tijdschrift voor philologie en geschiedenis* 83 (2005), 453-78.

³³ See, for example, U. Müller, *Between public relevance and personal pleasure. Private art and antique collectors in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, ca. 1780-1914* (Turnhout, forthcoming), esp. chapters 2 and 4; J. Ogonovszky, 'Le commerce de tableaux en Belgique sous la règne de Léopold Ier (1831-65)', *Art & Fact* 21 (2002), 6-14; S. Bobet-Mezzasalma, 'Les galeries lithographiées. De la duchesse de Berry à Artaud de Montor', in: M. Preti-Hamard and P. Sénéchal, eds, *Collections et marché de l'art en France 1789-1848* (Rennes, 2005), 409-30.

³⁴ Müller, *Between public relevance and personal pleasure*, chapter 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ For an attempt to pose some general questions regarding the interrelation between bourgeois and noble private collectors during the nineteenth century, see Müller, *Between public relevance and personal pleasure*, esp. chapters 2 and 4.

dition of collecting, that dates back to the late medieval and early modern period. From an early stage onwards, collectors with a noble and a more bourgeois pedigree were entangled in a fierce competition to buy the most exclusive collectables on the art and luxury markets.³⁷ From 1815 onwards, the regions were governed together as the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, until the declaration of the Belgian independence following the revolution of 1830. During the nineteenth century, Belgium became the centre stage of a forceful industrialisation, which resulted in a booming economy and a fast-growing bourgeois middle class. Yet numerous aristocratic investors also seized the chance to capitalize on the industrial and economic expansion. In the Netherlands, where the bourgeoisie benefitted from the expanding colonial empire and the booming global trade, the nobility seemed to remain more strongly attached to their traditional fields of activity, including land ownership, diplomacy and politics. Therefore, a comparative analysis of *collectionneurs nobles* in Belgium and The Netherlands provides an excellent case to scrutinize the interaction and relationship of these collectors with their (changing) socio-cultural environment. Combining the approaches of social, cultural and political history with the history of collections, material culture and nobility studies, the issue brings together a selection of essays that draws a detailed and multifaceted portrait of these *collectionneurs nobles*, their changing social profiles and their motivations. Who were these highborn collectors? What did they collect and why? How different were their motives and aims from their emerging bourgeois competitors? What were the norms and values that fuelled aristocratic collecting during the nineteenth and early twentieth century?

First of all, the chapters in this special issue more than ever illustrate that ‘the nobility’ as such did not exist. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it still included nobles born and bred, such as baron Willem Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, who was a scion of the illustrious house of Wassenaer and thus ranked among the highest nobility in the Netherlands. Simone Nieuwenbroek analyses how the family collections were used to underline the high-born status of the family together with a family estate of more than 250 acres and the sumptuous castle of Duivenvoorde. Another archetypical example was the large and prestigious collection of the dukes of Arenberg, who ranked among the highest nobility in Belgium and who figure in the chapter of Soetkin Vanhauwaert and Ulrike Müller.

On the other side of the spectrum, there were the aristocratic upstarts or the *nouveaux riches*: wealthy commoners, who had made their fortune in trade or industry and used their recently acquired economic assets, their social network and their cultural capital to buy themselves into the nobility. Jo Tollebeek provides a textbook example with Maurice and Gaston de Ramaix, who gained prestige through a diplomatic

37 I. Van Damme, ‘Recycling the wreckage of history: On the rise of an “Antiquarian consumer culture” in the Southern Netherlands’, in: A. Fennetaux, A. Junqua and S. Vasset, eds, *The afterlife of used things: Recycling in the long eighteenth century* (London and New York, 2015), 37-48.

career – still the *via regia* into the nobility – and by acquiring a *château* in Grune (in the Ardennes). A collection of delftware, renaissance prints and other collectables underpinned their aristocratic ambitions and noble habitus. Eventually, they were ennobled in 1888 by King Leopold II. That this phenomenon was not confined to national borders is exemplified by the chapter of Barbara Lasic. William Williams-Hope, a descendant of the eminent Dutch Hope-clan, established his fortune and status – and his collection – in the context of the Parisian beau-monde, where he moved in an exclusive circle of privileged collectors and inscribed his collecting practices within a distinguished genealogy of eighteenth and nineteenth-century noble connoisseurs. Lasic's contribution also demonstrates the important role that the Dutch and Flemish artistic heritage – in the shape of canonical Old Master paintings by Rembrandt van Rijn, David Teniers and Paulus Potter – played in forging a noble identity and habitus for the collector.

Even though the nobility *pur sang* slowly but surely lost its privileged position in society, the acquisition of a noble title obviously remained an attractive prospect for wealthy, bourgeois families. For a lot of families, it was the ultimate icing on the cake. Aristocratic ambitions were also a motive for Louis Cavens, whose peculiar passion for collecting is scrutinised in depth in Claes' and Montens' contribution. 'Count' Caevens collected out of personal interest and patriotism, but he also used his collections as a strategic lever for social promotion and to secure a noble title. Nevertheless, Cavens' case also illustrates that such (self-)fashioning was not always entirely successful, since his DIY title of 'count' was frowned upon – or even mocked – by 'true' blue-blooded Belgians. In Antwerp, where Knight Fritz Mayer van den Bergh and his mother Henriëtte used their family fortune, acquired through trade and business, to collect a range of exclusive paintings, sculpture and decorative arts, similar motivations were at play. Fashioning oneself as a *collectionneur noble* could serve as an admission ticket to join the nobility *pur sang*. Mayer van den Bergh's case is also interesting in another sense, as it illustrates the lasting importance of private museums. Exhibiting the collection in a house museum especially built for this purpose, Henriëtte created a semi-closed environment, that was only open to a select choice of noble or aristocratic friends, acquaintances and connoisseurs, who moved in the same conservative circles as Henriëtte herself. The contrast with the burgeoning public museums that were, under the influence of liberal ideas, gradually opened to middle and lower-class visitors could not be sharper.

Even though the differences with more bourgeois art buffs were small, these *collectionneurs nobles* also seemed to collect (slightly) different objects than their red-blooded competitors. Not surprisingly, arms and armour were popular collectables, as they were a perfect reminder of the military function of the nobility in the past, not only for the members of the princely de Ligne family who have been the owners of Belœil castle in the province of Hainaut since the fourteenth century (Fig. 3). Both Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Cavens were devotees. In her chapter, Christien Schrover also suggests that noble collectors had a penchant for medieval – often religious – art, which functioned as a portal to travel back in time to the

safe, class-ridden society of the Middle Ages before the dawn of the liberal age. Nostalgia for a world that was utterly lost sometimes fuelled noble collecting. Jo Tollebeek also hints at the possibility that certain types of objects – in de Ramaix' case delftware – had an aristocratic ring, as it was old, high-priced and exclusive. Canonical masterpieces – by preference old, rare and expensive – were also a hallmark of aristocratic collecting, as Lasic, Vanhauwaert and Müller show.

However, *collectionneurs nobles* above all cherished their family heirlooms, masterpieces and other art treasures that had been carefully handed down through the generations and showed the marks – or better, the patina – of time. The search for continuity may certainly be considered one of the defining characteristics of the *noble habitus*, including the formation and passing-on of noble collections. Family portraits were the ultimate embodiment of a time-honoured and noble pedigree, which is illustrated by Schimmelpenninck van der Oye's labour of Hercules to keep the family possessions together, the large collection of family portraits the Arenbergs kept in their Brussels city palace as well as in their castle in Heverlee near Leuven (Fig. 4) or Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh's efforts to give the family a more aristocratic aura by

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Fig. 3. The armory in the Château de Belœil, the castle of the Prince de Ligne (from A.A. van Uffelen, *Belœil: Het kasteel en zijn hovingen* (Antwerp, 1951); coll. *Stad Antwerpen, Erfgoedbibliotheek Hendrik Conscience*, K 258731 [M-546 a])



Fig. 4. Grand salon rouge in Hôtel d'Arenberg, Brussels, 1878 (*water colour on paper, Friedrich Zeller; private collection, photo KU Leuven, digital lab*)

ordering a posthumous portrait of her knighted son Fritz. Genealogy was also an ideal tool to underline aristocratic aspirations. De Ramaix even tried to piece together his own noble pedigree from scattered family papers. Together with an art collection, an estate and a *chateau*, an illustrious – yet fictitious – family tree might help to underline noble ambitions.

Finally, the chapters in this volume illustrate that the heyday of aristocratic collecting was gradually coming to an end in the first half of the twentieth century. Noble – or ennobled – collectors faced several difficulties, including the decrease of revenues from large estates, the snowballing costs for staff and other calamities, that slowly eroded their fortune. Examples of this trend can be read in the biographies of Schimmelpeninck van der Oye and the Ramaix, who finally had to sell their estate, castle and collections to public or government bodies. However, their collections lived on in private museums, public collections and other institutions. Together they have helped to keep the memory of these *collectionneurs nobles* alive. For ever and ever, beyond the grave, as their original blue-blooded owners would have hoped.

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