

# VIRTUS

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# A noble collector without a private collection

## The case of Count Louis Cavens

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### Introduction

In nineteenth-century Belgium, private art and antique collectors played a major role in cultural life. Various historical studies of the last decades provide examples of those Belgian collectors who often combined the purchase of old works with other activities of patronage or philanthropy.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Albert Boisme observed in France, the nineteenth century saw a ‘blurring’ of the categories of ‘collector’ and ‘patron’, which, in earlier times, were distinct: the former bought old works while the latter protected living artists.<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, those two aspects were often combined into a single person. One famous Belgian example is Edouard Empain, whose business dealings in Egypt led him to develop a passion for the antiquities of that country. He also seems to have provided work for the contemporary sculptors Jef Lambeaux and Hen-

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- 1 See for example the studies on two most renowned ancient art collectors in nineteenth-century Belgium; on Raoul Warocqué: A. Verbanck-Piérard, ‘La collection d’antiques de Raoul Warocqué au musée royal de Mariemont: motivations et idéologie d’un fondateur’, in: A. Tsingarida and D. Kurtz (eds), *Appropriating Antiquity. Saisir l’Antique. Collections et collectionneurs d’antiques en Belgique et en Grande-Bretagne au XIXe siècle* (Brussels, 2002), 299-342, and D. Parée, *Du rêve du collectionneur aux réalités du musée: l’histoire du musée de Mariemont (1917-1960)* (Bruxelles, 2017); on Isabelle Errera: M. Van Raemdonck, ‘Isabella Errera and the Brussels Royal Museums’, *Hali* 148 (2006), 74-9. It should be noted that many of these studies were carried out by museum curators who developed a strong interest in the history of the collections they were in charge of.
  - 2 A. Boime, ‘Les hommes d’affaires et les arts’, *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 28 (1979), 57-75.

ri Boncquet.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, those Belgian collectors appear to have been increasingly involved in the creation and development of public museums. For example, the research project conducted jointly by the U.L.B. and the University of Oxford on the reception of Antiquity in Belgium and Great Britain in the nineteenth century has shown the major role of antique collectors in the emergence of national collections of classical antiquities in Belgium.<sup>4</sup>

Among the private art and antique collectors were prominent aristocrats, like the prince of Ligne or the duke of Arenberg, whose collections are indicative of the practice of collecting art which had long been an integral part of the culture of nobility. A recent historical study on the family of Arenberg demonstrated how the high standing of the Arenberg lineage was reflected in the superior quality of its art collection.<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century, the duke established a gallery in his palace in Brussels which was renowned for its Flemish and Dutch masters and was explicitly recommended as a private museum in travel guides of the time.<sup>6</sup> In the same city, the bequest of an aristocrat and diplomat from Mechelen, Emile de Meester de Ravestein,<sup>7</sup> in 1874, enriched considerably the collections of the national museum devoted to arms and ‘antiquities’ at the Halle

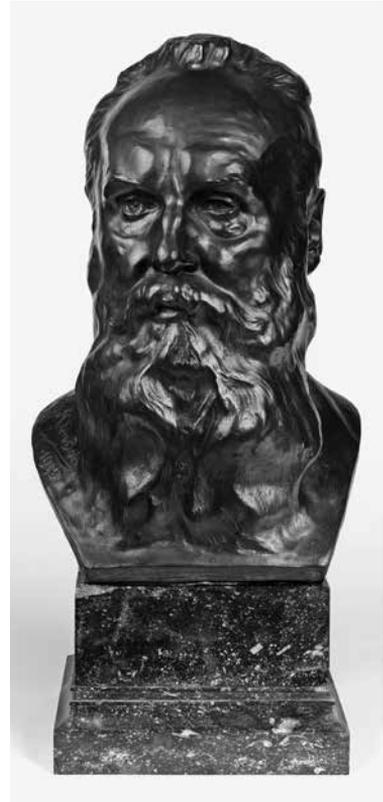


Fig. 1. Bronze buste of Louis Cavens (Louis Dubois, 1915; coll. Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, B.5594.1, ©RMAH)

- 3 A. Duchesne, 'En faveur de l'archéologie et des musées. Le mécénat d'Edouard Empain (1852-1929)', *Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* 51 (1982), 61-71.
- 4 See the Belgian papers in the two publications resulting from this research project: A. Tsingarida and D. Kurtz (eds), *Appropriating Antiquity*; A. Tsingarida and A. Verbanck-Piéard (eds), *L'Antiquité au service de la Modernité? La réception de l'antiquité classique en Belgique au XIXe siècle. Actes du Colloque international organisé du 27 au 29 avril 2005 à l'Université libre de Bruxelles et au Musée royal de Mariemont (Lucernae novantiquae 3)* (Brussels, 2005).
- 5 See M. Derez, S. Vanhauwaert and A. Verbrugge, *Arenberg. Portrait of a family, story of a collection* (Turnhout, 2018).
- 6 See 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', *Journal of the History of Collections* 29 (2017), 423-38.
- 7 See C. Evers, 'Emile de Meester de Ravestein, diplomate et archéologue', in: A. Tsingarida and A. Verbanck-Piéard (eds), *L'Antiquité au service de la Modernité?*, 259-78.

Gate.<sup>8</sup> The *Musée de Ravenstein* was constituted by the antique objects De Meester de Ravenstein collected during his stay in Rome from 1846 to 1859. It formed the core of the collection of antiques which would considerably develop in the next century. In Antwerp, Ridder Florent van Ertborn is particularly well known thanks to his bequest, in 1840, of an outstanding collection of European Primitives which included masterpieces by Van Eyck, Van der Weyden and Fouquet to the Academy Museum (today the Royal Museum of Fine Arts).<sup>9</sup> A few decades later, Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, son of a wealthy German merchant, who was elevated to the nobility in 1888, assembled a rare collection of early modern fine and decorative arts which was set up by his mother Henriette in a dedicated museum after the premature death of the collector in 1901.<sup>10</sup> To our knowledge, none of those noble collectors participated on such a regular and prolonged basis (almost 50 years), both in the enrichment of public collections and financing of projects, as did Count Louis Herman Marie Cavens (Antwerp, 12.03.1850 – Ixelles, 4.11.1940; fig. 1).

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Few articles were devoted to Cavens in the past. In the 1960s, Albert Duchesne, curator of the Royal Military Museum, devoted a notice to him in the Belgian National Biography, in which he particularly emphasized Cavens's fascination for the Battle of Waterloo. The collector published a series of pseudo-historical brochures aimed at obtaining the preservation of the site. His collecting activity is succinctly described as an undertaking to collect 'with too often indiscriminate relentlessness' archaeological finds, weapons and memorabilia from the Napoleonic era. His patronage is described mainly in the form of a list of institutions and projects to which he distributed his favours.<sup>11</sup> Among them is the *Maison des Orphelins* in Malmedy, founded in 1830 by his grand-uncle, which he supported regularly. In 1979, Malou Haine, curator at the Musical Instruments Museum, studied the correspondence between Cavens and the curators Mahillon and Closson between 1892 and 1932, and showed how he contributed to the enrichment of the collection of the *Musée du Conservatoire*.<sup>12</sup> A few years later, Janette Lefrancq, archaeologist and curator, took up the study of this character with a 'passionate temperament' and explained how Cavens developed, thanks to his friendship with the archaeologists Baron Alfred de Loë and Emile De Munck, a particular interest in Prehistory and became the promoter of the National Archaeology and Gen-

8 Created in 1835, the *Musée d'armes anciennes, d'armures, d'objets d'art et de numismatique* moved in 1847 to the Halle Gate and became the *Musée royal d'Armures, d'Antiquités et d'Artillerie*. By 1889, the Halle Gate became too small and the collections (except the armours and weapons that remained at the Halle Gate) were relocated to the newly built *Parc du Cinquantenaire* and integrated into the new Museum of Decorative and Industrial Arts (today the Art and History Museum).

9 See L. De Jong, *The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp. A History 1810-2007* (Oostkamp, 2008).

10 See U. Müller, *At home in a museum, the story of Fritz and Henriette van den Bergh* (Veurne, 2021).

11 A. Duchesne, 'Cavens Louis', in: *Biographie Nationale de Belgique*, vol. 33 (Brussels, 1965), 153-6.

12 M. Haine, 'Un mécène du Musée instrumental du Conservatoire royal de Musique de Bruxelles, Louis Cavens (1850-1940)', *Revue belge de musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap*, 32-3 (1978/79), 208-15.

eral Prehistory sections of the Museums of Decorative and Industrial Arts.<sup>13</sup> Finally, more recently, Catherine Gauthier, curator at the Brussels City Museum, compared the profile of Louis Cavens with that of Jules Vandevoorde. They had one common goal: enriching the museum's collections and safeguarding Brussels's heritage. But while one was very involved, the other gave the museum complete freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Less attention has been paid in these publications to the motives and drives of this aesthete. Which ideas animated his choices? What did he collect and why? And what role did he, as a patron, wanted to play for the museums to whom he donated? We will try to give an answer to these key questions using some new documents we could find in the archives of the City of Brussels. Indeed, it seems that Cavens's personal papers were methodically classified and inventoried by the author himself. He established a 'List of documents to be given to the town of my legal residence or, failing that, to the Maison des Orphelins in Malmedy, to be kept by either of them, with kindness'.<sup>15</sup> Some records of the different museums that he enriched will also be (re)used: the Brussels City Museum, which preserves mainly correspondence with the direction relating to Cavens's donations and the Royal Museums of Art and History, where the name of Cavens appears in the acquisition files, in the correspondence of the direction, as well as in the correspondence of the curators Joseph Destrée and Georges Macoir.

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In what follows, we will outline a portrait of a man who, in the known socio-economic context of the nineteenth century, strived to work his way up from bourgeois collector to noble collector. As a result, he finds himself somewhat on the fringes of this special issue that focusses on aristocratic collecting practices. The 'case Cavens', nevertheless, merits a separate chapter. Through a short overview of his donations and collectors' practices, it will be made clear that Cavens, a self-proclaimed nobleman, wanted to measure up to the nobility and adopts its customs, cultural practices and lifestyle in every action he undertook. The scrutinized documents will allow us to better understand his multifaceted personality that, on the one hand, strongly relates to his desire to acquire the noble title and, on the other hand, to his nationalist ideals. The latter will also reflect in the choice of the artefacts he was to collect.

13 J. Lefrancq, 'Le Comte Louis Cavens (1850-1940)', in: Herman de Meulenaer (ed.), *Liber Memorialis 1835-1985* (Bruxelles, 1985), 89-98.

14 C. Gauthier, 'Aux origines des collections du musée de la ville. Le cas de deux mécènes, Louis Cavens et Jules Vandevoorde', *Cahiers Bruxellois-Brusselse Cahiers* 48 (2016), 185-206.

15 'Liste des documents à donner à la Ville de mon domicile légal ou, à défaut, à la "Maison des Orphelins" à Malmedy, pour être conservés par l'une ou l'autre, avec bienveillance'. The documents are contained in one box including nine folders (Archives of the City of Brussels, Collection des Archives privées 14, Cavens (Archives du comte Louis), 1874-1931).

## Background and origins of Louis Cavens's patronage

Cavens descended from a family of Prussian origin who had settled in Malmedy as early as the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>16</sup> His grandfather and great-uncle ran important tanneries and draperies in the area which had been part of Prussia since 1815. His father, Charles-François Cavens, was sent to represent the family company in Antwerp at the time of the commercial revival of the metropolis. He married the daughter of an important Antwerp merchant in 1840. In 1850, the couple, their two daughters and two sons moved to Brussels, the Belgian's capital where several newly created museums would later benefit from Cavens's generosity.<sup>17</sup>

50 Very little information exists about Cavens's younger years, apart from a few lines in an autobiographical document found in his personal papers. In this document he wrote that after having opted for the Belgian nationality, he conducted his military service in 1870 and started university studies in philosophy and literature the same year.<sup>18</sup> In a letter from 1921 to Georges Macoir, curator of the Museum of weapons and armours in the Halle Gate,<sup>19</sup> Cavens explains his passion for antiquities since his early youth: 'I will state my opinions about the Hal Gate clearly. I visited it for the first time in 1855 and then, almost every year and since then, very often until 1900. This is to say that it is an old acquaintance for me.'<sup>20</sup>

In 1880, Cavens became a member of the Commission of the National Exhibition of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Belgian Independence, together with his brother Charles (1844-1921).<sup>21</sup> This exhibition, held in the *Parc du Cinquantenaire* was primarily commercial and industrial, but also included an important historical-artistic section, at the origin of the future Museum of Decorative and Industrial Arts.<sup>22</sup> Cavens would, however, only become active as a patron from the end of the 1880s onwards, after his father passed away and he inherited a part of his family's fortune.

At this time, Cavens's career was devoted to the development of the port of Brussels. In 1881, he founded the *Cercle des Installations maritimes de Bruxelles*, together with his father, his elder brother, and the engineer Auguste Gobert. He became successively assistant secretary and secretary, until 1906. As an ardent defender of the project to provide Brussels with a seaport, he made study trips to Europe and wrote brochures about the topic between 1883 and 1935.

16 M. Lang, 'Généalogie de la famille Cavens', *Folklore Stavelot-Malmédy-Saint-Vith* (1956/1963) 51-146.

17 Duchesne, 'Cavens, Louis', 235.

18 Archives of the City of Brussels, Collection des Archives privées 14, Cavens, f.1. personal documents, s.d.

19 At this period, only the arms and armours remained at the Halle gate, the antiquities having been transferred long before to the palace of the Cinquantenaire (1890).

20 'Je vais vous exposer, nettement, mes opinions au sujet de la Porte de Hal. Je la vis la première fois, en 1855 et puis, presque tous les ans, depuis lors très souvent jusqu'en 1900. C'est vous dire que c'est pour moi une vieille connaissance.' Archives Art and History Museum (RMAH), correspondence G. Macoir, letter of Cavens to Macoir, 28 July 1921.

21 Lang, 'Généalogie de la famille Cavens'.

22 See Müller, 'The amateur and the public sphere'.

In 1890, Louis Cavens received the title of Roman Count from Pope Leo XIII, together with his elder brother Charles Cavens. The circumstances in which this title of nobility was awarded are unclear. Either way, we can assume that it had to do with the brothers' support for the Church's charitable activities such as the founding by their great-uncle Jean-Hubert Cavens of the Malmedy orphanage where children received a Catholic education.<sup>23</sup> This title, personal or hereditary, was in the nineteenth century awarded by the pope on a large scale mainly to non-Vatican State citizens. In Belgium, about seventy Catholic people received it between 1830 and 1930. Sometimes it was followed by a concession of Belgian nobility awarded by the king.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Cavens, the title was soon recognized by the King of Italy. As early as 1891, the brothers petitioned Leopold II for a Belgian concession of nobility. A Royal Decree was published in 1895, but it was not until 1923, at the age of 73 and after the death of his brother, that king Albert I signed the letters patent ennobling Louis Cavens.<sup>25</sup> One year later, he married his 'housekeeper', Catherine-Victorine Abts. The couple did not have any descendants.

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Cavens's membership of the Royal Archaeological Society of Brussels<sup>26</sup> was probably the catalyst for his further activities.<sup>27</sup> This society was founded in 1887 on the initiative of, among others, young archaeologists such as de Loë and De Munck, and the curator of the collections of 'antiquities' in the Halle Gate Museum Joseph Destrée.<sup>28</sup> It had as main aim the promotion of archaeology and the encouragement of the study of national antiquities. Among the members were Cavens's brother, Charles Cavens, former officer in the Belgian army and collector of paintings, aquarelles, and drawings,<sup>29</sup> but also other important connoisseurs as Emile Lhoest, Gustave Vermeersch, Louis and Albert Evenepoel<sup>30</sup> whose collections would later enrich the Museum of Decorative and Industrial Arts integrated in the Palace of the Cinquantenaire.

23 H. Cunibert, *Centenaire de la Maison d'orphelins fondée par J.-H. Cavens à Malmedy 1830-1930* (Liège, 1930).

24 Information kindly communicated by the Association Royale de la Noblesse belge.

25 Information kindly communicated by the archivist of the Royal Palace.

26 Noteworthy is that Cavens, *membre effectif à vie* within the Society, submits his resignation in 1894 for 'known reasons previously conveyed to the president'. His love for archaeology will all but cool, as he writes to Saintenoy: 'je garde un intérêt aux choses de l'Antiquité' (Archives SRAB, letter of Cavens to the society, 6 January 1894). He maintains good contacts with each of the members.

27 J. Van Looveren, *Ildele hoop? Een politiek-institutionele geschiedenis van de archeologische monumentenzorg in België (1830-1991/3)* (Antwerpen, 2014), 153.

28 J. Lavalleye, 'Destrée, Joseph' in: *Biographie Nationale de Belgique* vol. 32 (Brussels, 1963-64), 135-8; A. Cahen-Delhay, 'De Loë, Alfred', in: *Nouvelle Biographie Nationale* vol. 5 (Brussels, 1999), 105-8. Some biographic elements concerning Emile de Munck can be found in: J. de Heinzelin, R. Orban, D. Roels and V. Hurt, 'Ossements humains dits néolithique de la Région de Mons (Belgique), une évaluation', *Bulletin de l'Institut royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique, Sciences de la Terre* 63 (1993), 311-36.

29 A. Duchesne, 'Cavens, Charles', in: *Biographie Nationale de Belgique*, vol. 33 (Brussels, 1965), 150-3.

30 A.-M. Marien-Dugardin, 'Albert Evenepoel (1835-1911)', in: De Meulenaer (ed.), *Liber memorialis 1835-1985*, 107-13; G. Derveaux-Van Ussel, 'Het legaat Gustave Vermeersch van 1911 en het legaat Henri Verhaeghe de Naeyer van 1943' in: De Meulenaer (ed.), *Liber memorialis 1835-1985*, 165-76.

The first intervention of Cavens within the society is revealing for his personality and future ambitions. He pleaded for the rescue of the *Hôtel Ravenstein*, which he said was ‘of such remarkable and picturesque architecture’ and ‘one of the rare specimens of our ancient civil architecture which has survived the bombardment of 1695’. He added: ‘In my opinion, the matter could be extended so that the conservation of this hotel would be the first step towards endowing our capital with a Museum of Flemish Industrial Art,’ which would exclusively comprise ‘specimens of Flemish art, specimens relating to the use for which each room was intended. The State Antiquities Museum would provide the first fund of collections which would be completed in time (...)’.<sup>31</sup> Cavens thus gives here his own view in the debate around the creation of an industrial museum which would show objects as models for the industry. From the 1860s many personalities, such as Théodore Juste, director of the Halle Gate Museum, had asked the authorities to create an institution similar to the South Kensington Museum of London (today the Victoria and Albert Museum).<sup>32</sup> For Cavens this museum should include an historical dimension and highlight the decorative tradition of the country (which he calls ‘Flemish Art’).

### An overview of Louis Cavens’s art patronage

Several Brussels museums have benefited from Cavens’s generosity. Foremost among them are the Museums of Decorative and Industrial Arts, directed from 1891 to 1898 by Prosper de Haulleville and from 1898 to 1925 by Eugène Van Overloop, to which the patron donated an important collection of prehistoric, Belgo-Roman and Frankish antiquities, together with a wide variety of art objects, classical and Mediterranean antiquities, ethnographic objects and weapons.<sup>33</sup>

The first years of this institution, created in 1889, were particularly difficult, as it had to integrate collections of a very different nature such as the *Musée des Moulages*<sup>34</sup> and the ‘antiquities’ from the Halle Gate Museum in a new entity. Its first two chief curators faced many problems relating to the lack of exhibition rooms, qualified staff and finances.<sup>35</sup> In these circumstances, the support provided by patrons such as

31 ‘(...) d’une architecture si remarquable et si pittoresque (...) un des rares spécimens de notre ancienne architecture civile qui ait échappé au bombardement de 1695. (...) dans ma pensée, la question pourrait être étendue de façon que la conservation de cet hôtel ne soit que la première étape en vue de doter notre capitale d’un “Musée de l’Art Industriel flamand” (...) des spécimens de l’art flamand, spécimens se rapportant à l’usage pour lequel chaque salle était destinée. Le Musée d’antiquités de l’Etat fournirait le premier fonds des collections qui se complèteraient avec le temps (...)’. *Annales de la Société royale d’Archéologie de Bruxelles* 3 (1889), 83-5.

32 C. Leblanc, ‘Les disciplines décoratives en Belgique avant l’Art Nouveau: repères ‘ in: C. Leblanc, ed., *Art et Industrie. Les arts décoratifs en Belgique au XIXe siècle* (Bruxelles, 2003), 22-32.

33 Lefrancq, ‘Le Comte Louis Cavens (1850-1940)’.

34 V. Montens, *Les moulages des Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire. Histoire de la collection et de l’atelier des reproductions en plâtre* (Brussels, 2008).

35 V. Montens, ‘Les ‘créateurs’ du Musée du Cinquantenaire’, *Bulletin des Musées royaux d’Art et d’His-*

Fig. 2. Artichoke-shaped pot  
(Brussels, eighteenth  
century; coll. Royal  
Museums of Art and History,  
Brussels, I.A.3087, ©RMAH)



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Louis Cavens was precious. Several letters written between 1891 and 1908 show how a collaboration quickly emerged between Louis Cavens and the curator of the ‘antiquities’ Joseph Destrée.<sup>36</sup> For several years, Cavens pointed out a wide variety of objects to the curator which he seemed willing to acquire for the museum: glass, seals, ceramics, fragments of stained glass, watch clocks, statuettes... (fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> For example, about an eighteenth-century clock: ‘If you had the time, I would be obliged if you would go and see it at M. Wehrle’s, n°2 Place du Petit Sablon and tell me your opinion. It would be for the Museum’.<sup>38</sup> Or the earthenware seen the following year at a public sale at Fievez: ‘There are several pieces of antique Brussels earthenware that could be acquired. If you have seen them, I would be obliged if you could point out to me the objects from which a choice can be made.’<sup>39</sup>

Cavens even financed acquisitions without seeing the objects themselves.

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*toire* 78 (2007), 121-36; V. Montens, ‘Le musée d’Eugène Van Overloop 1898-1925’, *Bulletin des Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire* 80 (2009), 239-55.

<sup>36</sup> Archives RMAH, Correspondence Destrée.

<sup>37</sup> See the Industrial Arts Inventory (in Archives RMAH).

<sup>38</sup> ‘Si vous en aviez le loisir, je vous serais obligé d’aller la voir chez M. Wehrle, n°2 Place du Petit Sablon et de me dire votre opinion. Ce serait pour le Musée’, Archives RMAH, Correspondence Destrée, letter of Cavens to Destrée, Brussels, 17 August 1891.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Il y a là plusieurs pièces de vieilles faïences de Bruxelles dont l’acquisition pourrait être faite. Si vous l’avez vue, je vous serais obligé de me dire les objets parmi lesquels on pourrait faire un choix’. Archives RMAH, Correspondence Destrée, letter of Cavens to Destrée, Brussels, 16 March 1892. The items purchased at the Tielemans auction bear the inventory numbers I.A.3084 to 3088.



Fig. 3. Double-manual harpsichord combined with a virginal (*I. Ruckers, Antwerp, 1619; coll. Musical Instruments Museum, Brussels, 2935, ©RMAH*)

Some time ago, you told me about various wooden objects and alabaster heads that you had found during a study trip to provincial antique shops, he wrote to Destrée. The conditions of purchase seemed very advantageous. If you could acquire them, I would gladly offer them to the Museum of Antiquities. On this occasion, I congratulate you for your dedication in bringing objects into the collections of the state museum free of charge and for the initiative you have taken in making scientific and research excursions in Belgium, thus putting you in direct contact with people who possess objects of interest for art and art history. It seems to me that it is part of the mission of a dedicated curator to do what you do. It's not waiting in your office for dealers to come in and offer objects at high prices, of course. The curator has to do the most active research himself.<sup>40</sup>

40 'Vous m'avez parlé, il y a quelques temps, de divers objets en bois et de têtes en albâtre que vous aviez trouvées au cours d'un voyage d'études chez des antiquaires de province (...) Les conditions d'achat

Cavens also took an interest in musical instruments.<sup>41</sup> By means of repeated donations from 1892 onwards, he offered more than 150 different instruments from the former Low Countries to the young instruments museum of the Brussels Conservatory.<sup>42</sup> The curator, Victor Mahillon, was very much appreciated by the art lover, who regularly made available small sums of money and donated items that he himself had acquired. In 1907, he financed the acquisition of an exceptional collection of 437 Flemish and Dutch antique instruments (fig. 3).<sup>43</sup>

Cavens's favourite fields of interest also included arms. In this context, it should be underlined that his father had been an officer in the Prussian army and that his brother had begun a career in the Belgian army between 1868 and 1879. Cavens himself was mobilized in 1870 in the observation army that stood guard at the borders during the confrontation between the French and German troops.<sup>44</sup>

In 1905, Cavens met Georges Macoir, assistant curator of the Museum of Weapons and Armours at the Halle Gate. The latter regularly travelled to Waterloo to examine the antique weapons that Cavens proposed to donate to the museum, including helmets, breastplates, shotguns, sabres and pistols. The discussions resulted in a significant selection of pieces which, according to the curator would 'fill many gaps in our collections. In addition to their documentary value, some of the pieces have very appreciable artistic qualities'. It should be noted that Cavens allowed to exchange items that otherwise would have been redundant in the museum's collection.<sup>45</sup>

The two men maintained a regular correspondence: Cavens asked for various information on pieces, proposed the organization of a retrospective exhibition of weapons from the First Empire, indicated one or more sales, financed purchases (as he did with Mahillon), discussed the presentation of objects, deposited new pieces, etc.

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paraissaient très avantageuses. Si vous pouviez les acquérir, je les offrirais volontiers au musée des Antiquités. A cette occasion, je vous félicite du dévouement de vous mettez à faire entrer – gratuitement – des objets dans les collections du musée de l'Etat et de l'initiative que vous avez prise de faire des excursions scientifiques et de recherches en Belgique vous mettant ainsi directement en rapport avec des personnes possédant des objets intéressants pour l'art et pour l'histoire de l'art. Il me semble que c'est une des parties de la mission qui incombe à un conservateur dévoué que de faire ce que vous faites. Il ne s'agit pas d'attendre dans son bureau que des marchands viennent proposer des objets à des prix élevés, bien entendu. Le conservateur doit faire lui-même les recherches les plus actives'. Archives RMAH, correspondance Destrée, letter of Cavens to Destrée, Bruxelles, s.d.

41 Haine, 'Un mécène du Musée instrumental'.

42 The museum dates back to 1877. Today it is named the Musical Instruments Museum (MIM).

43 Archives MIM, letter of Cavens to Mahillon, 8 August 1907 (cited by M.Haine, 'Un mécène du Musée instrumental', 210).

44 He later became an honorary member of the *Société des anciens militaires de 1870*. See A. Duchesne, 'Le mécénat au Musée royal de l'Armée. Le comte et la comtesse Louis Cavens', *Revue belge d'Histoire militaire* 17 (1967), 236.

45 '...des pièces qui viennent combler bien des lacunes de nos collections. Certaines pièces du reste joignent à leur valeur documentaire des qualités artistiques fort appréciables'. Archives RMAH, Acquisition file 3/122, letter of Macoir to Cavens, Brussels, 13 March 1906.

Cavens was, furthermore, passionate about Napoleon and the battle of Waterloo. He devoted many writings, poems and drawings to the event and campaigned for the preservation of the battle site. The exhibition in the Halle Gate of the 'souvenirs' he collected during his many stays in the country house he had built at Mont-Saint-Jean<sup>46</sup> received his particular attention. Thus, Cavens wrote to Van Overloop:

I thought that, if possible, they could be exhibited in a part of the second floor (...) In this way, the public, which is absolutely ignorant and, does not understand anything unless it is made to understand things in a precise way, would grasp the meaning of the small collection.<sup>47</sup>

This donation was to be followed by 77 paintings commissioned from the painters Jacques Madiol<sup>48</sup> and Emile Vermeersch<sup>49</sup> and a series of 368 gouaches, depicting sites in and around Waterloo, weapons and uniforms of the armies and portraits. Thus, Macoir developed the idea of installing a documentary collection relating to the battle on the third floor of the Halle Gate. The creation of the Royal Military Museum<sup>50</sup> after the First World War put an end to these projects. At the insistence of Cavens himself, the Halle Gate Museum deposited a large part of the donated items in the new institution and solely kept the 'ancient' weapons.<sup>51</sup>

Cavens's intervention in favour of the Panorama of Cairo, an immense canvas painted by the Belgian artist Emile Wauters (fig. 4), further reveals the prominent role of the patron in Brussels's cultural life at the time.<sup>52</sup> At the insistence of Antoine Van Hammée, curator of the monumental painting section of the Museum of Decorative and Industrial Arts, Cavens acquired and donated it in 1896 to the museum.<sup>53</sup> With a view on the International Exhibition of 1897, Cavens negotiated with the minister of Public Works to construct a mosque-like building to display the painting. The

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<sup>46</sup> This house was located on the road to Nivelles, next to the *Hôtel des Colonnes*, where Victor Hugo spent the summer of 1861 writing *Les Misérables*.

<sup>47</sup> 'J'ai songé que, si c'est possible, ils pourraient être exposés dans une partie du 2<sup>e</sup> étage (...) De cette manière, le public, qui est absolument ignorant, qui ne comprend rien si l'on ne lui fait comprendre les choses d'une façon précise, saisirait le sens de la petite collection'. Archives RMAH, Acquisition file 8/418, letter of Cavens to Van Overloop, Waterloo, 27 February 1912.

<sup>48</sup> Painter of figures, portraits and landscapes. Jacques Madiol (1874-1950) was a student at the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts. From a young age, he painted landscapes in the vicinity of Brussels. He was one of the founders of the Le Labour circle with J. Stobbaerts. See Louise Fredericq, 'Madiol, Jacques', in: Ph. Roberts-Jones and Éléane De Wilde (eds), *Dictionnaire des peintres belges*, vol. 3 (Brussels, 1995).

<sup>49</sup> Painter and aquarellist. Born in Bruges, Emile Vermeersch (1870-1952) began his art studies there from 1896 to 1901. He later studied at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and attempted the Rome competition in 1910, obtaining only the medal of honour. Vermeersch lived in Laeken from 1912 to 1924.

<sup>50</sup> Today the War Heritage Institute.

<sup>51</sup> Duchesne, 'Le mécénat au Musée royal de l'Armée'.

<sup>52</sup> E. Warmenbol, 'Het Panorama du Caire van Emile Wauters (1881). Het meesterwerk van het Belgisch Oriëntalisme', *TA-MERY* 11 (2018-2019), 2-18.

<sup>53</sup> Archives of the City of Brussels, Collection des archives privées. 14 Cavens, Panorama du Caire. Correspondance officielle, 1897-1920.



Fig. 4. Fragment of the *Panorama of Cairo* (E. Wauters, 1881; coll. Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, 2021.0104, ©RMAH)

costs of construction and installation were initially financed by the patron, but later reimbursed.<sup>54</sup>

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Another institution attracted the attention of Cavens: the Brussels City Museum.<sup>55</sup> The correspondence between Cavens, Van Malderghem (city archivist and director of the museum) and the city council from 1891 onwards relates to works that Cavens owned, acquired or identified for the museum. The list of the patron's donations comprises circa 80 items,<sup>56</sup> including paintings and drawings by Brussels painters of important monuments and viewpoints, but also earthenware and porcelain produced by Brussels manufactories, pewters, weapons, and sculptures. From 1900 onwards, many of them related to the 1830 Belgian Revolution, in particular portraits and scenes that Cavens commissioned from contemporary artists such as the sculptor Paul Dubois<sup>57</sup> and the painters Eugène Van Gelder,<sup>58</sup> Emile Vermeersch and Jacques Madiol.

From time to time, Cavens included in his letters more general considerations about his vision for the development of the museum and its collections and decreed

<sup>54</sup> See the convention signed on the sixth of February 1897, modified by the convention of the seventeenth of November 1900, kept in the archives of the City of Brussels (ibid).

<sup>55</sup> Gauthier, 'Aux origines des collections du musée de la ville'. The archives of the Brussels City Museum conserve a chronological list of his various donations, as well as correspondence files between Cavens and the museum's administration.

<sup>56</sup> Archives of the museum of Brussels City, file 24, undated document entitled 'dons Cavens'.

<sup>57</sup> Belgian sculptor. Paul Dubois (1859-1938) attended sculpture courses at the Academy of Brussels. He took part in the renewal of artistic expression in Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century and in 1883 he was one of the founding members of the Brussels avant-garde group Les XX, then of the Libre Esthétique. Professor at the Academies of Mons and Brussels, his eclectic work consists of small sculptures, medals and jewelry, as well as statuary, public monuments and funerary works. See Paul Piron, *Dictionnaire des artistes plasticiens de Belgique des XIXe et XXe siècles*, vol. 1 (Ohain-Lasne, 2003), 517-8.

<sup>58</sup> Belgian painter and draftsman. Eugène van Gelder (1856-1920) was educated at the Academy of Brussels: he was a pupil of Jan Frans Portaels. His preference was genre scenes. See Louise Fredericq, 'Van Gelder, Eugène' in: Roberts-Jones and Jones and De Wilde (eds), *Dictionnaire des peintres belges*, vol. 3 (Brussels, 1995), 1070.

specific requirements that had to be interpreted as conditions of donation. For instance, when he offered the city an ivory and silver bust of Paul Dubois, *La Liberté*, the administration had to make a display case at its own expense according to the drawings attached. A letter sent by Van Malderghem to the mayor is clear:

If the City were to refuse the proposal (...) I would be very much afraid, knowing Mr. Cavens's character, that he would take offence at this refusal and that he would give up forever on doing anything else for it. It is for a refusal of this kind that he has stopped his contributions to the Royal Museums (this last sentence is crossed out).<sup>59</sup>

### Louis Cavens's *Belgique ancienne* at the Royal Museums of Art and History

58 Cavens is undeniably a key figure in the development of national Belgian archaeology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At that time, numerous regional museums and archaeological societies existed around the country, but a national archaeology museum was still lacking. The eminent archaeologists de Loë and De Munck found in Cavens the ideal partner-in-crime to finance their plans to establish a national museum of Archaeology, following the example of other European countries such as the French *Musée des Antiquités nationales*, the Leiden *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden* and the Danish *Nationalmuseet*.<sup>60</sup>

The publication of additions to the Ethnography section of the museum (later department of *Belgique ancienne*) in 1895 and 1896 reveals the vast number of items that Cavens donated to the museum in that period.<sup>61</sup> In the collections' inventory, his name is associated with no fewer than 150 archaeological artefacts or ensembles.<sup>62</sup> They stem from purchases, but also from archaeological excavations and exchanges with European museums. He also strived to establish an excavation service within the museum.<sup>63</sup>

Cavens considered the acquisition of archaeological collections for the museum as a civic duty. He contacted and visited private dealers and collections and informed the museum and its staff in case of interesting purchases. Conversely, de Loë and De

59 'Si la Ville refusait la proposition qui lui est faite (...) je craindrais fort, connaissant le caractère entier de M. Cavens, qu'il ne se frotte de ce refus et qu'il ne renonce à tout jamais à faire encore quoique ce soit pour elle. C'est du reste pour un refus de ce genre qu'il a cessé ses envois aux musées royaux'. Archives of the Museum of Brussels City, file 24, copy of a letter of Van Malderghem to the mayor, 26 July 1903.

60 J. Van Looveren, *Ijdele hoop? Een politiek-institutionele geschiedenis van de archeologische monumentenzorg in België (1830-1991/3)* (Antwerpen, 2014).

61 A. de Loë, 'Les accroissements de la Section d'ethnographie ancienne des Musées Royaux du Cinquante-naire en 1895 et en 1896', *Bulletin des Commissions royales d'Art et d'Archéologie* 39 (1900), 65-122.

62 Archives RMAH, archives Belgique ancienne, collection inventory.

63 Belgian's first Excavation Service will be established by ministerial decree in 1903. The Service was headed by Baron de Loë assisted by Edmond Rahir.

Fig. 5. Neolithic flint picks found during the excavation campaign at Spiennes, financed by Louis Cavens, between 1912 and 1914 (coll. Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, Bo05283, ©RICH)



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strée wrote to Cavens as soon as interesting archaeological artefacts and ensembles were presented on the market. Patriotic motives seem to have limited Cavens to purchasing archaeological collections from Belgium and neighbouring countries. On this subject Capart writes to Cavens in 1930:

I remember a conversation I had the honour of having with you on the eve of my first departure to Egypt. I asked you to assist me in my efforts in acquiring Egyptian antiquities. You then told me the excellent reasons you had for not allowing yourself to be drawn into making donations to sections other than the one of *Belgique ancienne*.<sup>64</sup>

The notable exception here is the remarkable Spanish protohistoric El Argar collection, unearthed by two Belgian Henri and Louis Siret, that Cavens bought up in 1899 and donated.<sup>65</sup> After Van Overloop appointed de Loë as curator of *Belgique ancienne*, Cavens continued financing de Loë's excavations. The important excavation campaigns at Spiennes would even be published as '*les fouilles de Cavens*' (fig. 5).<sup>66</sup>

Cavens's first donation in 1891 concerns 'a series of Belgo-Roman, Frankish antiquities, etc., found at Thy-le-Bauduin'.<sup>67</sup> The tenor of the letter accompanying the donation

64 'Je me souviens d'un entretien que j'eus l'honneur d'avoir avec vous à la veille de mon premier départ pour l'Égypte. Je vous demandais de m'assister dans mes efforts pour acquérir des antiquités égyptiennes. Vous m'avez dit alors les excellentes raisons que vous aviez de ne pas laisser entraîner à faire des libéralités à d'autres sections que celle de la Belgique ancienne'. Archives RMAH, directorate archives, letter of Capart to Cavens, 16 May 1930.

65 M.E. Mariën and M. Ulrix-Closset, *Van Neolithicum tot Bronstijd in Zuidoost-Spanje. Verzameling Siret* (Brussels, 1985).

66 A. de Loë, 'Les fouilles de M. Louis Cavens à Spiennes en 1912', *Bulletin des Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire* 12 (1913), 36-7 and 44-6.

67 '[U]ne série d'antiquités belgo-romaines francques etc, trouvées à Thy-le-Bauduin'. Archives RMAH, Correspondence Destrée, letter of Cavens to *Monsieur les président et membres de la commission du musée royal d'antiquités de l'état*, Brussels, 15 January 1891.

is characteristic of the rest of his patronage. He imposed several conditions: he wanted the collection to be exhibited in its entirety in a separate showcase and he reserved the right to lend a number of pieces for the archaeological conference which would be organized later in Brussels. Finally, and this is a constant throughout the years, he demanded the name of the donator to be clearly linked to the collection and mentioned.<sup>68</sup>

Cavens was very much involved in the exhibition and arrangement of the collections. Thus, he wrote in 1900 to Van Overloop:

The prehistoric objects you possess do not belong in a museum of ancient industrial art. They would fit in my collection. I think that the exchange would be beneficial to all. In reality it would only be a transfer from one part of the museum to another.<sup>69</sup>

Cavens thus clearly considered the *Belgique ancienne* Department as his personal museum. On several occasions he also made suggestions for the purchase of display cases and arranged for the transfer of pieces between the museum and private dealers. He furthermore strived to exhibit 'his' collections following a chronological order rather than in separate entities. To do so, he would entirely rely on the knowledge of the archaeologists and curators with whom he had regular contacts.

Despite his generosity, Cavens was very demanding, no doubt to the displeasure of some museum employees, with whom he had occasional altercations. Hence, Destrée wrote to Van Overloop: 'I visited Mr. Louis Cavens yesterday. We had been at odds for some months. Today everything is fine'.<sup>70</sup> To the same Van Overloop, Cavens wrote about de Loë:

He doesn't answer me anymore. Nobility does not oblige for him! Further on, he continues: He is, perhaps, not very pleased that I have to look for museums to exchange myself, in a recent letter I have pointed out three important ones to him. I have the right to be even less satisfied that he left all my material to be exchanged in corners (of the museum) when he had the opportunity to create the collection for this purpose.<sup>71</sup>

68 Archives RMAH, Correspondence Destrée, letter of Cavens to *Monsieur les président et membres de la commission du musée royal d'antiquités de l'état*, Brussels, 15 January 1891.

69 'Les objets préhistoriques que vous possédez ne sont pas à leur place dans un musée d'art industriel ancien. Ils seraient à leur place dans ma collection. Je pense que l'échange en question serait avantageux pour tous. En réalité ce ne serait qu'un transfert d'une partie du musée dans une autre partie'. Archives RMAH, Directorate archives, letter of Cavens to Van Overloop, 17 May 1900.

70 'J'ai rendu hier visite à Mr. Louis Cavens. Nous étions en froid depuis quelques mois. Aujourd'hui tout est pour le mieux'. Archives RMAH, Correspondence Destrée, letter of Cavens to Van Overloop, 16 January 1899.

71 'Il ne me répond plus. Noblesse n'oblige pas pour lui. Soit ! (...) Il est, peut-être peu satisfait que je me dois occuper à chercher et à trouver des musées pour échanger, dans une récente lettre, je lui en ai indiqué trois importants. J'ai le droit d'être encore moins satisfait, qu'il ait laissé tous mes matériaux à échanger dans de coins quand il pouvait créer la collection à cet effet'. Archives RMAH, Directorate archives, letter of Cavens to Van Overloop, 17 May 1922.

Also, not everyone was convinced of Cavens's newly acquired nobility. On this subject, de Loë wrote to Capart: "There is indeed no problem writing "Donation COUNT Louis Cavens", although this count is only a tale, but we are not at the Heraldic Chamber, this is a matter between him and De Ridder.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, de Loë would continue to address Cavens as 'Monsieur Cavens'.

## Conclusion

By examining the case of Count Louis Cavens, an ardent collector, who passed from the 'world of the haute bourgeoisie' to the 'world of the aristocracy', we contributed to a better understanding of the proximity of both social categories, who share (more often than not) the characteristic of possessing significant financial means. Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century Cavens had a fortune that permitted him to be not only a philanthropist following the family tradition (see his donations to the *Maison des orphelins* in Malmedy), but also a patron of the arts. Having no direct heirs, he devoted himself to his passion for history and for the objects that bear witness to it.

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Although very little information is revealed by his personal documentation, his motivations for collecting seem to be pinned between his patriotic ideals, entirely in the spirit of this time,<sup>73</sup> and his aspirations of becoming a part of the aristocracy. Driven by these patriotic motives Cavens's patronage was oriented towards national archaeology and history. He purchased national 'antiquities' in many diverse forms going from archaeological artefacts to decorative arts and he was determined to see the development of a national archaeology museum in Brussels. At the same time, Cavens used the act of collecting to fulfil his aristocratic aspirations. He behaved as a noble man and expected everyone to address him in that way. That this was not always reciprocated, is shown by the negative reactions of other noblemen who questioned Cavens's status.

Besides some weapons and Waterloo souvenirs, Cavens did not constitute his own private collection. He would, on the contrary, bequeath various public collections that emerged in Brussels at the end of the nineteenth century. He also had an interest in working with national contemporary artists, whom he often commissioned. In this way he is also an exemplary collector, who, in the nineteenth century, combined collecting with support for living artists. Cavens's working method was multifaceted and remained relatively consistent throughout the years. He actively researched and purchased objects for the museums via public or private sales, without recourse to a clearly defined network of art dealers and auctioneers. As he was aware of his own

<sup>72</sup> 'Il n'y a, en effet, aucun inconvénient à imprimer "Donation COMTE Louis Cavens", bien que ce comte ne soit qu'un conte, mais nous ne sommes pas la Chambre héraldique et c'est affaire entre lui et De Ridder'. Archives RMAH, Catalogue section Belgique ancienne, letter of 20 August 1926.

<sup>73</sup> See the general introduction.

scientific limits, he let the curators choose which objects should enter the museum collections. Throughout his many donations, Cavens influenced without any doubt the acquisition policy of the museums he was interested in. In return, he wanted to be involved in many aspects of the museum life and demanded for his name to be associated with the collections he donated. By doing so, he was even able to create his own ‘Cavens Museum’ within the Decorative and Industrial Arts Museum, following previous examples of noble collectors such as De Meester de Ravestein in the Halle Gate.

Despite his generosity, Louis Cavens had a strong personality, most certainly to the displeasure of some curators. Indeed, the art lover never hesitated to ask information on pieces, give his firm opinion about the acquisition policy of the various museums he helped, discuss the presentation of objects, and express his frustration when things were not going his way. The type of patronage Cavens exercised remains nonetheless exceptional. It certainly contributed to his great notoriety and the acquisition of the Belgian noble title he aspired for so many years... and of which he was so proud!

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

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