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Preserving conservative values in a Liberal world

Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh and ‘her’ museum in Antwerp around 1900

In 1904, a new museum opened its doors in the centre of Antwerp (fig. 1). The building, located between upper-class residential buildings, was designed to resemble the fifteenth-century rectory of St Walburga’s church in Antwerp, which was demolished in 1885. For the select few invited to enter, this new museum contained a diverse range of historical artworks, including paintings, sculpture, applied arts and furniture, placed in interiors designed to resemble historical living spaces. The collection, which focused especially on religious and late medieval artworks, was presented as the legacy of a single collector: Chevalier (‘knight’) Fritz Mayer van den Bergh (1858-1901). However, Fritz was not the museum’s founder. It was his mother, Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh (1838-1920), who commissioned the building and established the museum in memory of her late son.¹

Museum Mayer van den Bergh is exemplary of a personal ‘collection museum’, a type of museum frequently founded between 1880 and 1940. Those collection museums were structured around a collection brought together by a single private collector or a collecting family. As a result, their collections reflected individual taste and they were typically imbued with a sense of exclusivity and privacy, often only open to a restricted audience. In that sense, the collection museum emerged as a counter-reaction to the rising number of public national museums, which were open to all

1 U. Müller, *Thuis in een museum. Het verhaal van Henriëtte en Fritz Mayer van den Bergh* (Veurne, 2021); Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp (MMB), Stukken betreffende de collectievorming.



Fig. 1. Early 20th-century photograph of the interior of Museum Mayer van den Bergh (coll. *Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, MMB.F.276*)

sorts of visitors with the clear intention to ‘educate the public’. Where the public museum relates to the emerging bourgeois culture in nineteenth-century Europe, collection museums were often connected to conservative and aristocratic values, at a time when aristocratic power was quickly diminishing.²

In Antwerp around 1900, this shift of power was visible: within the region, the Catholic and politically conservative nobility was losing its influence to the Liberal bourgeois city council. Catholics and Liberals became increasingly opposed around 1900, eventually leading to a process of pillarization in which the different ideological groups developed separated social institutions and structures.³ Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh holds an interesting place in these developments. Although she never entered the nobility, she did adhere to its conservative political ideology. Socially, she mostly moved within Catholic and aristocratic circles, and aspired to tie her family name to the nobility. When her son Fritz unexpectedly died in 1901, Henriëtte

² A. Higonnet, *A museum of one's own. Private collecting, public gift* (Pittsburgh, 2009), 2-23.

³ P. Vosch, ‘Pillarization and democracy: the case of Belgium’, *Dutch Crossing* 47 (1992), 53-68.

consciously decided not to bestow his collection to the public museum of Antwerp, which she considered too Liberal, but instead chose to create a museum of her own. This decision allowed her to express her political values and ambitions through her museum, and as a female museum founder, Henriëtte also gained a uniquely public position within the art circles of Antwerp.

Several studies have already been devoted to the activities of Fritz and Henriëtte Mayer van den Berg. In 1979, Jozef de Coo published *Fritz Mayer van den Bergh*, which deals with the figure of Fritz and his collection, but pays little attention to the museum built around this collection.⁴ Recently, Ulrike Müller has written several articles about Henriëtte and Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, as well as the book *Thuis in een museum* (*At Home in a Museum*, 2021) which explores the history of Museum Mayer van den Bergh and its collection in the context of the historical collection museum.⁵ The present article distinguishes itself from these aforementioned studies by zooming in on Henriëtte's own activities and by looking at the way in which Museum Mayer van den Bergh functioned as an instrument in Henriëtte's pursuit of noble status. How did the museum mirror her ideological convictions and social aspirations? And, in what ways did Henriëtte's position as a woman affect her approach to the museum?

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In order to answer these questions, I will first briefly examine the political situation in Antwerp around 1900 and the position of both public museums and collection museums within this political context. I will then look at Museum Mayer van den Bergh itself and the extent to which Henriëtte's ideals and aspirations are expressed in the collection and museological set-up of the museum. As is common for nineteenth-century female collecting activity, an understanding of Henriëtte's position within the collection requires reading around the sources and looking at her implicit presence within the museum. By means of a museological analysis, Henriëtte's efforts become more explicit, as well as the way in which she used the format of the collection museum to ground her family in historical continuity. Her museum is a case comparable to that of other aristocratic collection museums in Belgium and the Netherlands. In this process, the display of 'cultural capital' – a concept coined by Pierre Bourdieu – plays an important role and will be used to explain the functioning of the collection museum.

The development of museum culture in Belgium

The period between 1880 and 1940 was one of large political shifts within Europe.⁶ While the old aristocratic elite gradually lost its power and influence, the upcoming bourgeois and upper middle-class population gained more control. In the Belgian con-

4 Jozef De Coo, *Fritz Mayer van den Bergh. De verzamelaar, de verzameling* (Schoten, 1979).

5 Müller, *Thuis in een museum*.

6 Higonnet, *A museum of one's own*.

text, this change of power was complicated by issues of national identity and religion. In the nineteenth century, the aristocracy of Belgium was seen as strongly Catholic, in contrast to the Liberal *nouveau riche*, who were generally considered to be more secular. Catholics were associated with conservative values and had the strongest influence on rural populations, while the Liberals were often predominant in urban populations.⁷ As to their political approach, these two groups were not necessarily radically different. In fact, many aristocrats and practicing Christians voted for the Liberal party.⁸ Both parties held a similar economic position, focusing on the promotion of free trade and the open market, and they were both elitist at their ideological core. Catholics nor Liberals supported broader access to education or a wider democratic representation. However, both parties operated from opposing standpoints. Where the Catholics were driven by nostalgia for a 'more Christian' past and by a deep distrust of modernity, the Liberals promoted the benefits of scientific progress and industrialisation.⁹

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For most of the nineteenth century, Liberals and Catholics co-governed in Belgium, without too much major conflict. This changed in the early 1880s, when the Liberal party attempted to reform the Catholic-controlled school system. The Liberal party wanted to implement a secular, state-governed educational system instead. Practising Catholics and aristocrats, who had previously nonetheless voted Liberal, turned against this secularisation of education, leading to an overwhelming majority for the Catholic Party in nationwide politics in 1884. On a national level, the Catholic party would remain dominant until the First World War.¹⁰ In the urbanized region of Antwerp, however, the Liberal party distanced itself from the school reform and from several other radical policies imposed by the national Liberal party. As a result, the Antwerp Liberals managed to keep their dominant position after the 1884 election. Between 1892 and 1906, the mayor of Antwerp was the progressive Liberal Jan van Rijswijk.¹¹ Thus, while on a national level the Catholics clung to power in Belgium, in the local context of Antwerp, the Liberals were more influential.

The Antwerp political situation in the early 1900s was further complicated by the conflict between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking part of the general population. In Belgium, the elite generally communicated in French, as opposed to the lower and middle classes in the northern part of the country, who tended to speak

7 M. Buelens-Terryn, I. Jongepier and I. Van Damme, 'Shine a light: Catholic media use, transformations in the public sphere, and the voice of the urban masses', in: S. Lenk and N. Majsova, eds., *Faith in a beam of light. Magic lantern and belief in Western Europe, 1860-1940* (Turnhout, 2022), 101-22.

8 P. Jansens, *De evolutie van de Belgische adel sinds de late middeleeuwen* (Brussels, 1998).

9 C. Strikwerda, *A house divided. Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in nineteenth century Belgium* (Lanham, 1997), 27-35.

10 H. de Smaele, *Rechts Vlaanderen. Religie en stemgedrag in negentiende-eeuws België* (Leuven, 2009), 399-401.

11 L. Hancké, 'Jan Van Rijswijk, Burgemeester van Antwerpen. Flamingant en Sociaal Liberaal', *Brood & Rozen* 4 (2006), 43-57.

Dutch. This Dutch-speaking population resented the privileged position of French as the official language for all formal documents and communication. As the middle classes became more influential, the Dutch-speaking population started to identify as 'Flemish', and this resentment led to the development of a pro-Flemish movement, dedicated to the promotion of the Dutch language and Flemish culture. Antwerp had a relatively large Dutch-speaking populace, and thus the Flemish movement was considerable there: its mayor, Jan van Rijswijck, was outspokenly pro-Flemish. However, there was also a significant group of Liberal politicians that opposed this Flemish movement, creating an internal dispute. A similar division between pro-Flemish and French-speaking figures existed within Catholic circles.¹²

This complicated political situation was intertwined with the development of museum culture in Belgium, where the first large national museums opened their doors in the first half of the nineteenth century. Originally, these public museums functioned as nationalist symbols, providing a way to showcase the legacy of the newly-founded country of Belgium. Their visiting audience consisted mostly of academics, wealthy tourists and artists.¹³ Between 1860 and 1890, this emphasis shifted under the influence of Liberal politicians, especially the Brussels mayor Karel Buls, who considered it unjust that the museum, as property of the nation, should remain exclusive to only a small group within that nation. As such, these politicians started to think about the museum as a useful instrument to educate the 'general' people. Buls emphasized the need for a museum with a more didactical set-up and he also lobbied for greater accessibility of the national museums in Belgium, including a lower entry fee and a longer opening hours.¹⁴ This approach became dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century, making public museums representative of Liberal values as an instrument of the Belgian democracy.

With the increased significance of public museums, private collections became increasingly less relevant. These collections were difficult to access – often requiring one or several letters of introduction – and had to compete with the often far larger public museum collections. Overall, visits to private collections decreased in Belgium after 1850.¹⁵ At the end of the century, many collectors felt they either had to donate their collection to a pre-existing museum or found a new museum, in order to keep their collection relevant. Of these two options, the founding of a personal museum came at a considerably higher cost and took noticeably more work. Thus, the founders of these museums tended to have their personal motivations. In some cases, there might simply not have been a local public museum suitable for the private collection, or there was

12 L. Gevers, 'The Catholic Church and the Flemish Movement', in: K. Deprez and L.Vos, eds., *Nationalism in Belgium: shifting identities, 1780–1995* (London, 1998), 110–8.

13 L. Nys, *De intrede van het publiek. Museumbezoek in België 1830–1914* (Louvain, 2012), 100–1.

14 Nys, *De intrede van het publiek*, 141.

15 L. Nys, 'Particulier bezit in het Museumtijdperk. Bezoek aan privé-verzamelingen in België, circa 1830–1914', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 83 (2005), 478.

some form of political disagreement between the private collector and the public museum.¹⁶ Art collectors also saw the private museum as a way to keep control over their collection, and to (self-)fashion an image of themselves.¹⁷ Notably, the collection museum also developed as a response to the general set-up of public art museums, which since their beginning had been the subject of criticism. Many critics considered public museums to be too large, too empty and overall too impersonal. These criticisms characterized museums as ‘dead’ and even compared them to mausoleums or graves. Works in public museums were said to lack the ‘life’ that artworks in the old private collections used to have.¹⁸ In response, founders of collection museums consciously tried to bring a more intimate and interactive experience to the museum visit, which would bring back some of the ‘aura’ of the artworks.¹⁹ Because of this set-up, collection museums tended to be more exclusive and elitist, catering only to an audience that was already well-familiar with artworks instead of trying to educate the general populace.

90 Collection museums inhabit a realm between private (the personal collection) and public (the museum space). Most of these collection museums were founded by collectors themselves or founded in their memory, reflecting personal taste. As such, they typically contained a level of self-expression or even self-immortalization, which was often reinforced by clauses stipulating that they should remain open after the passing of the founder. In collection museums established between 1880 and 1940, the private quality was also emphasized in the set-up of the museum itself, as the museum spaces were typically designed to resemble personal residences, often with a historical atmosphere. The artworks were often presented in so-called period rooms, recreating the ambience of historical private residences in an effort to create a more authentic ‘historical’ experience. Porcelain, dinnerware and other personal effects were used to dress the rooms like living spaces. As a result, a visit to a collection museum can feel almost voyeuristic. The visitor, however, only saw a highly constructed image of this private realm, in which the collector or the collecting family was depicted exactly as they wanted to be seen and remembered.²⁰

Importantly, collection museums could also function as expressions of cultural capital. The term ‘cultural capital’ refers to persons’ social assets: their knowledge of how to behave and present themselves in a way that provides upward social mobility. An important aspect of cultural capital is knowing how to differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste. The concept has been defined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that taste is mostly learned and that upper classes primarily decide what

16 F. Herrmann, ‘Collecting then and now: the English and some other collectors’, *Journal of the History of Collections* 21 (2009), 263-9

17 For an example of this self-fashioning, see the contribution by Montens and Claes in this volume.

18 Higonnet, *A museum of one’s own*, 18.

19 L. Nys, ‘Aspirations to life. Pleas for new forms of display in Belgian museums around 1900’, *Journal of the History of Collections* 20 (2008), 113-26.

20 G.S. Walker, *The private collector’s museum. Public good versus private gain* (Abingdon, 2019), 25-7.

constitutes ‘good’ taste. Upper classes can then use this ‘good’ taste to distinguish themselves from other social groups.²¹ Applied to Liberal Antwerp of around 1900, members of the aristocracy could distinguish themselves from members of the bourgeoisie through a perceived higher cultural capital, rather than by political or by economic power. Nobles received a high-quality education from an early age on, and they were socialized from birth to adhere to specific social conventions, in a way that was difficult to acquire for the newly wealthy. Typically, members of the nobility had access to family collections of artworks to help develop their taste and to gain an understanding of what accounted for ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art. Not only their ability to select excellent pictures was a token of this higher cultural capital; a significant amount of knowledge was needed to find specific pictures, contextualize works, and to discover older paintings. Finally, noble families could also lay claim to history. Their lineage often consisted of well-known figures stretching back generations and they possessed the family portraits, heirlooms and historic houses to show for this history. Such access to history was strongly desired by the newly wealthy, who actively collected antiques and older artworks, but could not claim a similar family lineage that legitimized their historical collections.²² An historic art collection thus signalled its owner’s cultural acuity and pedigree. This understanding of taste and collecting was easier to access for members of the noble classes because of higher access to cultural capital, and in turn, their resulting collection functioned as a confirmation of this higher cultural capital. In that regard, the collection museum provided a way to display a higher cultural capital and thereby emphasizing the distinction between the nobility as a social class and the newly wealthy..

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Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh

As the collection museum was gaining in prominence, Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh (1838-1920) decided to found her own museum. Henriëtte was born into the Van den Bergh-Essen family, a wealthy family with a long history as businessmen and merchants, but with no aristocratic background to speak of. Although she never officially became part of the Antwerp nobility, Henriëtte grew up in noble social circles. Jean Félix Van den Bergh, Henriëtte’s father, was a politically active figure in the Catholic circles of Antwerp. He was a member of the Meeting party, a local political party that was pro-Flemish and opposed to the Belgian government. The Meeting party started out with both Liberal and Catholic members, but as tensions between these groups rose, it became exclusively Catholic. Henriëtte herself was raised with strong

21 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste* (London, 1986), 12-4.

22 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.

Catholic values and her father obtained a papal title of nobility later in life, although this title was not passed on to his children.²³

In 1857, Henriëtte married the Cologne businessman Emil Mayer with whom she had two sons, Fritz and his younger brother Oscar. Although few of her own writings survive from the period before Fritz's death in 1901, there are clear indications for Henriëtte's aspirations to an aristocratic lifestyle. Firstly, Henriëtte and Emil lived in a large mansion in Antwerp, but they also owned hunting grounds in Baarle-Nassau and, in 1878, Emil bought the castle Pulhof in Berchem. The countryside castle and especially the hunting grounds were clear indicators of the lifestyle of the nobility. Even the design of the couple's hunting lodge, with a characteristic tower, signaled this noble ambition. Secondly, Henriëtte pursued typically noble activities: she was preoccupied with charity work and founded the *Sint-Fredericusgesticht* (St Fredericus Institute), which provided housing for retired servants of the Mayer van den Bergh-family.²⁴ She constructed a garden village, which was intended to provide healthy and affordable housing to forty-two less fortunate families. Since members of the aristocracy profiled themselves as devoutly Catholic, philanthropy was seen as part of their Christian duty to perform 'good deeds'. Similarly, charity was part of the *noblesse oblige*: the traditional obligation of nobility to take care of the poor. Moreover, philanthropy allowed noble families to display their wealth without flaunting it. For Henriëtte, just like members of the aristocracy, charity was explicitly linked to her Catholic ideals. For example, all inhabitants of her Sint-Fredericusgesticht were required to attend Mass every day of the week.²⁵ Thirdly, Henriëtte moved through mostly noble and Catholic social circles. The archives of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh contain pictures from balls the Mayers attended, and they include photographs of members of many prominent noble families in Antwerp with whom Henriëtte would have interacted, such as the Guyot, the Della Faille de Leverghem and the Du Bois.²⁶ A member of the latter family, Romaine du Bois d'Aische, married Henriëtte's eldest son Oscar in 1889. In preparation of the marriage, both Oscar and Fritz were granted noble status, and Fritz was also given the title of *chevalier* (knight). Both the marriage and the new noble status of the sons gave significant prestige to the Mayer van den Bergh family and legitimized its position in Catholic aristocratic circles. From these indicators, it is clear that Henriëtte lived the lifestyle of the Antwerp nobility, and although she herself never obtained a noble title, she was tied to nobility through both her father and her children.

Henriëtte's position as museum founder is interesting, not only because of her social aspirations but also because of her position as a woman. Half of all collector

²³ De Coo, *Fritz Mayer van den Bergh*, 84.

²⁴ Müller, *Thuis in een museum*, 212.

²⁵ Gemeente Mortsels, *100 jaar Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh* (Mortsels, 2020), 9.

²⁶ Müller, *Thuis in een museum*, 70-5.

museums established between 1890 and 1940 were founded by female collectors or collecting couples.²⁷ This is a remarkably high number in a time when women generally had difficulty accessing public positions in the art world.²⁸ Women, especially in the upper and middle classes, often engaged in collecting practices, but the objects they typically collected – such as textiles, embroidery or lace – were considered trivial and held a relatively low status. Even if they did collect paintings or other more highly regarded types of art, women were considered amateurs who created collections mostly to decorate their private residences. On the other hand, male collectors were collecting objects that were seen as ‘serious’ artworks, intended to be seen within the public sphere. Their activity was characterized as rational and guided by study – and therefore, superior.²⁹ Thus, even those women who did collect were rarely considered ‘art collectors’: they were simply decorating their homes or partaking in their hobbies.³⁰ Trying to understand these collecting efforts from a historical perspective thus tends to require a ‘reading around the sources’, looking at what is implicitly said about women’s activities and making use of sources such as diaries or personal correspondence.

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Opening a collection museum was one of the few ways in which a woman could gain a public position in the art world and have her activity taken seriously. The homely character of collection museums, as well as their resemblance to private interiors, helped to legitimize the position of these female museum founders. The relatively high number of women-owned collection museums also presents yet another juxtaposition between the collection museum and the public museum around 1900: in the public museum, women were not allowed to hold any public positions.³¹ The gendered quality is very much present throughout Museum Mayer van den Bergh, both in the presentation of its collection and in its museological set-up. Henriëtte was well aware of her position as a female museum founder, which gave her a uniquely ‘public’ position for a woman. She actively presented the museum as the result of her son’s labours and minimized her own contributions to the collection. For example, she wrote: ‘(T)he works of art collected by my son which he left me are more like a deposit that he entrusted to me than my property’.³² In such statements,

27 Higonnet, *A museum of one’s own*, 192-3.

28 U. Müller, ‘The amateur and the public sphere: private collectors in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent through the eyes of European travelers in the long nineteenth century’, *Journal of the History of Collections* 29 (2017), 429-30.

29 S. Cheang, ‘The dogs of Fo. Gender, identity and collecting’, in: A. Shelton, ed., *Collectors. Expressions of self and other* (London, 2001), 56-7.

30 T. Stammers, ‘Women collectors and cultural philanthropy, c.1850-1920’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 31 (2020), 18-9.

31 K. Hill, *Women and museums 1850-1914* (Manchester, 2016), 23-6.

32 ‘Les objets d’arts collectionnés par mon fils et qu’il m’a délaissés sont plutôt pour moi un dépôt qu’il m’a confié qu’une propriété.’ MMB, MMB.A.1625, letter from Alphonse Cols to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 12 March 1906.

Henriëtte describes the museum as the product of motherly duty. This idea was also understood by her visitors, who often described the museum as the product of her motherly love, or praised Henriëtte for carrying out her son's wishes. By framing her efforts as such, Henriëtte managed to legitimize her position as a museum founder. It could be seen as radical amongst conservative Antwerp circles for a woman to consciously take up a public position by founding a collection museum, but an act of carrying out a son's wishes could be regarded as a Christian moral duty. Much like in the public museums of her day, Henriëtte did not employ any women in her museum or let any women into her council. That is not to say that visitors were unaware of Henriëtte's unique position: the Belgian artist Louise de Hem wrote to Henriëtte that she was especially impressed with her museum efforts because she did it all as a woman.³³ From these testimonies, it seems that founding a museum as a woman was certainly not as straightforward as Henriëtte made it seem. The museum was after all very much the result of her personal efforts and she left her own mark on the museum collection.

Henriëtte within the collection

Most of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh collection was brought together between 1890 and 1900, after Fritz gained his noble title. Before placing Henriëtte in the collection, it is important to give an overview of Fritz's activity in this period. Although he collected objects before 1890, he sold a large portion shortly after obtaining his noble title. Afterwards, he changed his collection practices, perhaps to reflect his newly gained position.

Within a relatively short period, Fritz managed to bring together a large and broadly varied selection of artworks. His collection included paintings, sculptures, stained glass windows but also everyday objects such as porcelain, furniture and mantelpieces.³⁴ He was interested in late medieval art and works depicting Catholic themes. Fritz also had a partiality for Netherlandish artists, especially Antwerp artists such as Quentin Matsys and members of the Bruegel family. Probably the most well-known work in the Mayer van den Bergh collection is *Mad Meg (De Dulle Griet)*, which Fritz bought at an auction in Cologne (fig. 2). At this auction, the work was sold as a Pieter Bruegel the Younger, but based on a description by Carel van Mander. Fritz, however, recognized the work as a lost painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This finding was especially exciting since, although Bruegel the Elder was one of the most famous artists from Antwerp, very few of his works actually remained in the city. With this purchase, Fritz managed to bring one of Bruegel's works 'home'.³⁵

³³ MMB, MMB.A.2132, letter from Louise de Hem to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 5 February 1905.

³⁴ J. de Coo et al., *Museum Mayer van den Bergh catalogus* (Schoten, 1960).

³⁵ Müller, *Thuis in een museum*, 154-64.



Fig. 2. Mad Meg (Dulle Griet) (oil on panel, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563; coll. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, MMB.0045; photo Michel Wuyts)

The narrative around Fritz's rediscovery of *Mad Meg* perfectly suited his ambitions and the image he wanted to project. By 'discovering' the painting, he showed his innately developed sense of art, and he could foster an image of himself as a true *amateur*. The 'amateur', as it came to be defined in the eighteenth century, did not just buy art but also had expertise that went beyond mere visual appreciation. Moreover, this notion was specifically associated with aristocratic collectors. Fritz could present himself as an amateur through studying the objects he collected and by showcasing a natural intuition for recognizing artists.³⁶ His friend Auguste Delbeke wrote: 'Chevalier Mayer van den Bergh *felt* the artwork'. By displaying this natural 'feeling', Fritz could indicate his cultural capital, in the sense that such a feeling was considered only attainable to those with the right background. This cultural capital, in turn, functioned as a legitimization for Fritz's noble title: he had the right cultural capital

³⁶ C. Guichard, 'Taste communities: the rise of the "amateur" in eighteenth-century Paris', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45 (2012), 519-47.

to distinguish himself from upper-class collectors who were not a part of the nobility. Fritz's collection efforts and his taste were also in line with other noble collectors in Antwerp. It is probably no coincidence that he focused on collecting religious artworks, as the Antwerp nobility was deeply Catholic, but also his taste for late medieval and gothic art was indicative of noble taste. Members of the *nouveau riche* tended to focus more on contemporary art.

It is difficult to position Henriëtte within the collection before Fritz's death in 1901. Mother and son lived together for Fritz's whole life, and it seems likely that they often discussed the collection in private, but no correspondence between the two survives. Archival documents show that Henriëtte joined her son in auctions and helped him with his collecting activities. For instance, Henriëtte lent her son a large sum of money when he decided to buy the Micheli-collection, a collection of mostly sculpture and late medieval art objects brought together by the Parisian sculptor Carlo Micheli.³⁷ Fritz unexpectedly got the opportunity to buy this collection when Micheli's daughter approached him shortly after her father's death, but she was only willing to sell the collection in its entirety, and he had to act quickly. In a short timespan, Fritz scraped together the money to buy the complete collection. Henriëtte must have approved this decision, as she financially assisted him in his purchase.³⁸

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Next to supporting Fritz in his collecting activities, Henriëtte also bought her son gifts. In the final months of his life, she bought him *The Temptation of St Anthony* by David Teniers the Younger. This work fits well within the Mayer van den Bergh collection, as a religious painting by an artist with strong ties to Antwerp. Fritz already expressed some interest in the painting before. Still, it was clearly Henriëtte's decision to obtain the work and add it to the Mayer van den Bergh collection. Reversely, Fritz also bought his mother gifts, especially lacework. In one letter, a dealer writes he will attempt to procure a piece of lace that Fritz 'wants to attain for [his] mother at all cost'.³⁹ These pieces of lacework also became part of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, together with lace that Henriëtte collected for herself. Lacework was generally considered a 'female' collecting object and therefore seen as far less significant than objects typically collected by men, such as painting and sculpture. However, the lace collection is a valuable and historically significant contribution to Museum Mayer van den Bergh, which can be credited to Henriëtte's personal interests.

In this implicit reading of sources and the museum collection itself, the presence of Henriëtte becomes visible in the Mayer van den Bergh collection, and we get an idea of the influence she had on Fritz'collection while he was still alive. Henriëtte

37 J. De Co, *L'ancienne collection Micheli au Musée Mayer van den Bergh* (Paris, 1965).

38 MMB, MMB.A.0943, letter from Joseph Spiridon to Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, 12 June 1899; MMB, MMB.A.0853, receipt to the amount of £1,549 from Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh to George R. Harding, 9 May 1898.

39 'dat gy kost wat kost hem wilden hebben voor uwen Moeder.' MMB, MMB.A.0470, letter from Jozef van Snick to Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, 7 July 1894.

also left her mark on the collection after her son's passing, by excluding one of the works Fritz collected. It concerned a picture of a drunk woman painted by a follower of Jan Steen, which she considered to be low in quality, but she also thought the image of the drunk, unclothed woman was vulgar. In addition, Jan Steen was not an artist related to Antwerp or late medieval painting, and thus the painting was not a work of priority within the collection. Apparently, it did not suit Henriëtte's vision for the museum as a Catholic aristocratic collection.

The Museum Mayer van den Bergh as an instrument of noble distinction

Although Henriëtte's position within the collection appears implicitly, her vision of Museum Mayer van den Bergh becomes explicit when looking at the museological structure she designed. When in 1840 the prominent noble collector and politician Chevalier Florent van Ertborn passed away, he donated his entire collection of Flemish paintings to the public museum of Antwerp. In 1900, Henriëtte did not even consider donation an option: she did not want the collection to end up in the hands of the Liberal government, 'which [Fritz] detested'.⁴⁰ The tension between Catholic and Liberal circles was far stronger in 1900 and exemplified in the distinction between the collection museum and the public museum. Henriëtte did not want any association with the Liberal government, and at the same time she wanted to affirm her position within Catholic and noble circles. By turning away from the Liberal public museum and founding a museum of her own, this became possible.

The Museum Mayer van den Bergh was to be erected right next to Henriëtte's residence, in a building of similar dimensions to her own house. Thus, already seen from the outside, the museum read as a home. Visitors would typically enter Henriëtte's own living spaces first, where they might drink a cup of tea with the museum founder herself. Afterwards they would be guided into the museum through a small hallway connecting the residential home with the museum building. In this set-up, the boundaries between museum space and private space were blurred, something confirmed by visitor responses as well. For example, one visitor commented on Henriëtte's private interior, which was 'filled with the most beautiful, sculpted furniture' before moving to a similar description of the official museum space.⁴¹

The little hallway, located in 'what used to be a bathroom',⁴² led the visitor to the first room of the museum, known as the 'Small Gothic Room' (fig. 3), designed to resemble a fifteenth-century domestic space with a large mantelpiece. This room contained late medieval objects, such as sculptures and altarpieces. After passing through

⁴⁰ MMB, MMB.A.1627, letter from Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh to Alphonse Cols, 20 May 1906. Quoted in Müller, *Thuis in een museum*, 116.

⁴¹ MMB, MMB.A.1597, letter from Frédéric Charles de Bent to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 27 November 1905.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

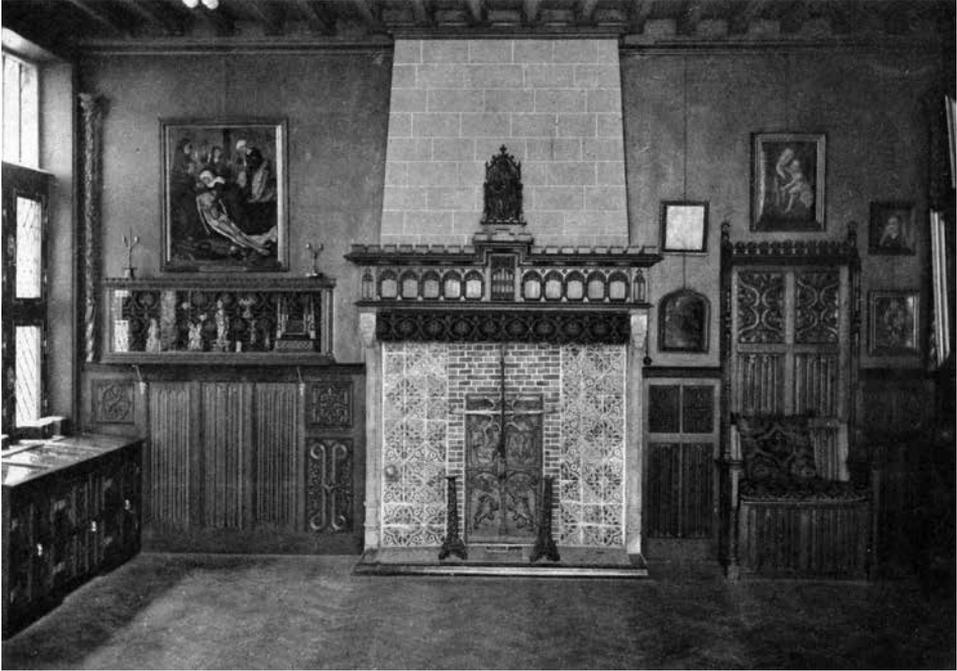


Fig. 3. Picture of the Small Gothic room in its original setting, the first room museum visitors would enter. The Christmas crib can be seen on the left, underneath the painting (*coll. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, MMB.F.191*)

a series of rooms in late medieval style, visitors would enter the ‘Renaissance Room’, the seventeenth-century styled library filled with portraits, and then finally the Salon, which was designed in an eighteenth-century Louis XVI style (fig. 4, p. 102). Henriëtte ensured that pieces from Fritz’s collection, such as historical mantelpieces and stained glass windows, were integrated into the design of these rooms. This way, Fritz’s taste could be emphasized and the works also gained back some of their original function. Henriëtte furnished these rooms as so-called ‘period rooms’, where all elements of the interior helped to create an authentic, historical atmosphere.⁴³ These period rooms were characteristic of collection museums, and can also be seen in international examples such as the Wallace Collection. This setting provided a direct contrast to public museum spaces, where objects were exhibited in a context disconnected from their original function, and where different types of objects tended to be separated instead of presented together.

⁴³ Nys, ‘Aspirations to Life’.

In Museum Mayer van den Bergh the visitor was supposed to encounter the object in a way that resembled the experience for which it was intended. Through these encounters, an intimate and personal experience was created. For example, by positioning a stained glass window in a place where natural light could pass through it, and by incorporating this window in a room filled with late medieval altarpieces, the experience of these objects was connected to the experience of visiting a church. To enhance such experience, all visitors were given a guided tour, either by the chief conservator Juvenal Peellaert or by Henriëtte herself, and these tours would involve physical interaction with the museum space. Peellaert would open drawers to show prints or small objects, and he would handle objects to better show them to the visitors. These tours allowed Henriëtte to exhibit objects that were difficult to present in a typical public museum space, such as drawings that could not be exposed to too much sunlight. But it also provided an involved experience that was completely different from the static state in which public museum objects existed. There was also a layer of exclusivity and intimacy: these tours ensured that the museum was never crowded since only one tour would be given at a time, and the tours could be adjusted to visitors' personal tastes. For example, Peellaert organized a special tour for a group of lace enthusiasts, wherein he emphasized the textiles part of the collection.

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With this museological set-up, Museum Mayer van den Bergh was conceived as a 'living' space, where interaction between object and visitor was an important element of the experience. The connection between the house and the museum space helped to portray the museum as a historical place where life was nonetheless still happening. That is not to say that the recreated experience was intended to be completely historically accurate: often, furniture or other pieces were taken from different locations, contexts and time periods and presented together in a type of historical eclecticism. Accuracy was not the point. Instead, the museum looked at history for alternative methods of displaying art, that would resolve the problems encountered by public art museums. The historical examples provided a toolkit, and one could use whatever one wanted.⁴⁴ This approach towards history as providing solutions to problems caused by modernity was in itself indicative of the conservative nobility, a social group characterized by both nostalgia for the past and a deep distrust of modernity.

In aristocratic collection museums, historical aesthetics were often used to evoke a sense of historical continuity. One example from Henriëtte and Fritz's social circle is the Dutch noble collector Henri Sypesteyn. Sypesteyn started building a collection museum in 1902, with the goal of presenting and preserving his family history. For this museum, he made use of historical and neo-gothic styles, and he collected objects that were not intended to refer to his family directly, but to represent their his-

44 J. Tollenbeek, 'Het verleden in de negentiende eeuw. Arthur Merghelynck en het Kasteel van Beauvoorde', *Verlagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* (1999), 145-50.

toric taste. He also built his castle on the location where he – mistakenly – believed his ancestors had lived. Although the Sypesteyn family had only entered the nobility in 1815, the use of historic and gothic styles suggested a continuity that might have gone back to the Middle Ages.⁴⁵ Fritz and Henriëtte were certainly aware of this project since Fritz corresponded regularly with Sypesteyn. Henriëtte did not have any aristocratic ancestors to refer back to. Nonetheless, the historical atmosphere of her museum provided a way to gain a grip on history. The period rooms in themselves suggested an old family residence with a prominent history. The connection between Mayer van den Bergh and Antwerp's history is perhaps most explicitly visible in the exterior of the museum. The building's façade was a recreation of *De Drie Koningen* (The Three Magi), a fifteenth-century Antwerp rectory that was demolished in 1885.⁴⁶ Gothic architecture was considered the inherently Catholic aesthetic, making it the preferred style for the Catholic nobility of Antwerp.⁴⁷ The gothic style made Henriëtte's aristocratic aspirations visible, but since this was a building connected to the history of Antwerp itself, she also directly tied the Mayer van den Bergh name to the city's past.

In spite of Henriëtte's lack of noble ancestors to refer to, the museum definitely was a family museum. Throughout the museum Henriëtte emphasized Fritz and his noble status, positioning the museum as the product of his efforts rather than her own. This approach worked well: for example, a description from 1929 stressed how Fritz's thought and soul inhabits the rooms.⁴⁸ Through this focus on Fritz and his noble status, she also imbued her own museum with an aristocratic quality. She included Fritz's coat of arms in the museum design and commissioned a posthumous portrait of him from the painter Jozef Janssens de Varebeke, who specialized in portraying Catholic and noble figures. This portrait was hung in the museum, together with portraits of historical and aristocratic figures. Doing so, Henriëtte inserted Fritz into this history. Her approach was not unique: the Belgian aristocratic genealogist and museum founder Arthur Merghelynck did the same. Merghelynck's family was ennobled in 1773 and just like Henri Sypesteyn, he opened a museum in their memory. In his Beauvoorde Castle, Merghelynck created a portrait gallery in which he inserted historical artworks that were not part of his family history, suggesting an even longer history. Portrait collections presented another way through which collection museums could be used to take control over family history and suggest continuity.⁴⁹

45 Peter van Mensch, 'De uitvinding van het verleden. Jonkheer Henri Sypesteyn op zoek naar zijn stamslot', in: R. van der Laarse and Y. Kuiper, eds., *Beelden van de buitenplaats. Elitevorming en notabelencultuur in Nederland in de negentiende eeuw* (Hilversum, 2005), 208-10.

46 Müller, *Thuis in een museum*, 112.

47 J. Van Cleven et al., *Neogotiek in België* (Tielt, 1994), 22-5.

48 E. Vuillermoz, 'Un sanctuaire d'art à Anvers,' *L'Illustration* (1929).

49 J. Tollebeek, *Een slapeloos doordenken van alle dingen. Over geschiedenis en historische cultuur* (Amsterdam, 2017), 73-6.

For Henriëtte, the focus on family and specifically on Fritz had the added benefit of justifying her position as a female museum founder. Indeed, the image she created of herself carrying out her son's wishes was continually present in the museum presentation. Interestingly, the first works a visitor would encounter related to the position of motherhood. Entering the Small Gothic Room, the first thing visitors would see was a painting of the Lamentation of Christ hanging next to an image of the Virgin and Child. Between these paintings, visitors found a miniature crib from the second half of the fifteenth century. This so-called 'Christmas crib' was used as a devotional object in nunneries, where it would have been present when women took their vows. During Christmastime, a small sculpture of the Christ Child would be placed in the crib and rocked up and down. Thus, the first thing visitors were reminded of when entering the museum, was the love of a mother for her son.

The gendered dimension of this museological set-up can also be connected to the period rooms, as these rooms contained a clear resemblance to private living spaces. Women in the 1900s had the responsibility for decorating private interiors but were certainly not present in the grand public museums, a space characterized as overwhelmingly masculine. The collection museum held an in-between position, being both public and private. As Susan Armitage wrote in connection to female museum founders: 'The association between women and domesticity was absolute in the nineteenth century, and few men objected to women's attention to those particular sites'.⁵⁰ Henriëtte created a space that was similar to the home, not only visually, but also in the interaction between space and visitor. A visit to her museum was not all that different from a social tea visit: a typically female activity. Visitors experienced a museum visit as 'very intimate', like 'coming home'.⁵¹ This homely quality was a continuation of Henriëtte's previous activities in decorating her own private residences, and this legitimized her activities as a museum founder. Clearly, the design of the museum was perceived as feminine and moreover, this feminine quality was appreciated. The writer and curator Pol de Month wrote to Henriëtte that 'even museum curators can learn from your efforts.'⁵²

The private quality of the museum also emphasized its sense of exclusivity. Museum Mayer van den Bergh was not an open museum. Anyone who wanted to visit it either had to be invited by Henriëtte personally or had to write to her asking for permission. It was prestigious to be able to enter her museum, and this position also gave prestige to Henriëtte in turn. The visitors whom Henriëtte attracted were part of a specific group: she especially invited many members from noble and Catholic circles. In her guest book, we read notes by members of the Ullens de Schooten family,

⁵⁰ S. Armitage, 'Introduction', in: V.J. Danilov, ed., *Women and museums: A comprehensive guide* (Lanham, 2005), 8.

⁵¹ MMB, MMB.2506, letter from Gustave Vermeersch to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 1 July 1906.

⁵² MMB, MMB.A.1608, letter from Pol de Mont to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 20 December 1904.



Fig. 4. Photograph of the Louis XVI-room, the final room in the Mayer van den Bergh visit (*coll. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, MMB.F.409*)

the De Borrekens family and many other important noble families.⁵³ The book also includes notes from important clerical figures in Antwerp, such as Henri Rommel, canon of the chapter of St Salvator's, and well-known Catholic politicians such as Baron Gaston van de Werve de Schilde, who would later become governor of Antwerp. Absent are prominent members of the Liberal city government, and Henriëtte also kept the museum doors shut for a lower-class audience. When asked if she intended to open her museum to the public, she answered:

⁵³ All of these signatures can be found in the Mayer van den Bergh guest book. The archive also contains several cards and letters from these visitors. MMB, MMB.A.1753 letter from Monsieur Ullens de Schooten to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 12 December 1904; MMB.A.1773, letter from Monsieur et Madame Ullens de Schooten, to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 11 December 1904; MMB.A.1888, letter from Victor de Borrekens to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 12 December 1904; MMB.A.1887, letter from Ludovic Moretus de Bouchout to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 12 December 1904, MMB.A.1896, letter from Emile Moretus de Bouchout to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 10 December 1904.

This depends on what you mean by 'public'. Do you mean everyone, the masses? No. Are you referring to my friends, art lovers from Antwerp and abroad, famous people or people who were recommended to me? Yes, they will have access to the museum and I will be happy that so many of them have demonstrated an interest in my artistic endeavours.⁵⁴

In that sense, we can see a direct juxtaposition in groups between the lower-class 'masses' and Henriëtte's own social circle. It was not her intention to democratize or educate members from different social classes or different political denominations, as a public museum would do. Instead, her museum functioned as an instrument of distinction: a way for Henriëtte to distinguish herself from other groups in society and thereby place herself explicitly in the group of Antwerp nobility. By deciding who could visit the museum, and by composing an experience that tied in with noble collecting practices, Henriëtte was able to create an impression of historical continuity and emphasize her family's cultural capital.

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Conclusion

Museum Mayer van den Bergh shows that Henriëtte was a figure with clear noble aspirations and a strong awareness of her own position as a woman in the Antwerp art world. These signifiers can be read both in the collection – although her impact on this collection remains implicit – as well as in the museological concept of the museum itself. Within the collection, the artworks collected created an image of Fritz as a noble collector with an innate sense of art and a taste befitting a member of nobility: his noble title also gave the collection the status of a noble collection. Henriëtte also left her mark on this collection, but it is difficult to trace the extent of her influence. She certainly added her lace works and removed a work which she found unfitting. Although Henriëtte presented herself as solely the executor of her late son's wishes, the museum was her own work. On the one hand, the homely and private setting of the museum helped her to legitimize her project, and to, even in conservative circles, be accepted as a female museum founder. On the other hand, the set-up of the museum helped her to use the museum as an instrument in her pursuit of noble status. She actively fostered an atmosphere of history within the museum and created an intimate and private experience that juxtaposed the public museum experience, an effort in which she connects her museum to Catholic and noble circles. The visitors that she invited into her museum, consisting mostly of noble and Catholic figures, also emphasize that she used the museum to connect to nobility.

Finally, her emphasis on the image of Fritz ties together both the gendered dimension and the position of the museum as an instrument in the pursuit of noble status.

⁵⁴ Sontag, 'Le musée Mayer van den Bergh', *La Métropole (20-08-1904)* as quoted in Müller, *Thuis in een museum*, 191.

By dedicating the museum entirely to him, and creating an image of him as a true amateur with an innate understanding of art, she presented him as a noble figure, with the cultural capital that could distinguish him from other, non-noble collectors. The emphasis on her son also provided Henriëtte with a sense of control in presenting the legacy of her family. Ultimately, the collection museum presented its founder with a way to construct a history. For Henriëtte, this helped in connecting her name to aristocratic status.

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

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

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