

VIRTUS

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Virtus

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Ten geleide

Adellijke geschiedenissen zijn er ook op plekken waar je ze niet onmiddellijk vermoed, in het kunstmuseum bijvoorbeeld. Stedelijke kunstcollecties zijn niet zelden begonnen bij een edelman op grand tour of een adellijke dame die verzamelde voor het stadshuis of de buitenplaats. Edelen hechtten aan hun rariteitenkabinetten, beeldencollecties en de *Ahnengalerie* (portrettenreeksen van voorvaders); deze collecties waren vaak minstens net zo belangrijk als de stoeterij of het landschapspark. In het dossier van *Virtus* 2023 staan aristocratische verzamelpraktijken in België en Nederland tussen 1750 en 1950 centraal. In zes artikelen wordt antwoord gegeven op vragen als: Wie waren deze hooggeboren verzamelaars? Wat verzamelden ze, en waarom? En verschilde de adellijke van de burgerlijke verzameling? De collectiepraktijken van bekende en minder bekende figuren uit België en Nederland komen voorbij zoals William Williams Hope, W.A.A.J. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh en leden van de Arenberg-familie. De artikelen worden voorafgegaan door een inleiding geschreven door de drie gastredacteurs: Ulrike Müller (postdoctoraal onderzoeker erfgoedstudies UAntwerpen en wetenschappelijk medewerker aan de Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten in Brussel), Ilja Van Damme (hoogleraar geschiedenis UAntwerpen) en Gerrit Verhoeven (professor erfgoedstudies UAntwerpen & archivaris bij de Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis).

In deze *Virtus* verder veel recensies en het gebruikelijke ‘Object in Context’, dit keer over een vernuftige Arenbergse koets, ofwel ‘reiscoupé’ of *dormeuse*. Gebouwd in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw door de Parijse carrossier Binder, een zeer prestigieuze koetsenbouwer, was deze reiscoupé voorzien van allerlei snufjes en gemakken. Het artikel gaat echter niet alleen in op de vernuftige rolgordijntjes, uitklapbedden en veringen, maar ook op de wijze waarop deze peperdure koets verrassend snel zijn waarde verloor. De eigenaren schakelden enkele decennia na de aankoop al over op het nog veel ingenieuzer automobiel; conservatoren van de musea waar de *dormeuse* onderdeel van ging uitmaken, bleken maar weinig interesse te hebben in het tentoonstellen van de ooit zo dure en prestigieuze koets.

Voor het interview in deze editie van *Virtus* sprak Steven Thiry met Brigitte Adriaensen, hoogleraar Spaanse talen en cultuur, en historicus Dries Raeymaekers, beiden werkzaam aan de Radboud Universiteit in Nijmegen. Het gesprek ging over het archief van de familie de Bourbon de Parme, dat het Katholiek Documentatiecentrum (KDG) en de Radboud Universiteit in Nijmegen twee jaar geleden van prins Carlos de Bourbon de Parme in bewaring kreeg. Dit archief, iets minder dan zestig

streckende meter, bestrijkt de laatste twee eeuwen en brengt zowel het dagelijks leven van deze zeer internationale adellijke familie over het voetlicht, als de rol die de familie vervulde op het politieke toneel. Verrassend zijn de dagboeken, brieven en autobiografieën in de collectie, én de vele foto's die één van de vrouwelijke familieleden begin twintigste eeuw maakte tijdens haar reizen.

Graag staan we in dit Ten Geleide ook even stil bij een zeer gewaardeerd redactie-lid dat afscheid neemt. Leon Wessels heeft als secretaris met zijn nauwkeurigheid en organisatietalent de afgelopen jaren lijn gebracht in het redactieproces. Hij bleek bovendien de juiste man in covdijtd; wij waren in 2020 een van de weinige redacties zonder video-vergadering-gestuntel omdat Leon allang wist hoe om te gaan met *muten*, koptelefoons of *owls*. Leon heeft daarnaast verschillende bijdragen geschreven voor *Virtus* en nog meer geredigeerd. Wij zijn hem daarvoor zeer dankbaar.

Dossier

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

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



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

Ulrike Müller, Ilja Van Damme and Gerrit Verhoeven

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

An introduction

11

Noble habitus in modern times

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Noble collectors in a changing world

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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