‘The Golden Cabinet’. The Royal Museum at the Rockox House

Imbued with an eternal metropolitan sense, the City of Antwerp twice constructed a brand-new arts temple to accommodate its unique Rubens collection in the course of the nineteenth century. The purpose of the monumental programmatic painting by Nicaise de Keyser that adorns the staircase of the museum is immediately apparent: it celebrates the Antwerp school of painting, whose very finest pieces await the unsuspecting and invariably overwhelmed visitors who are about to enter the galleries.

One of the exquisite products of the Antwerp school is the so-called Kunstkammer or ‘art cabinet’, a rather unique genre that is reminiscent of the city’s Golden Age, when Antwerp was an important centre of production of and trade in luxury goods. Wealthy local citizens would devote themselves to building inspired collections of art to show off to and share with their peers. Some of these cabinets were internationally renowned in humanist circles and considered an essential ingredient of cultural and intellectual life. Arguably the most iconic example is the picture gallery of Cornelis van der Geest (Rubenshuis), whose motto Vive l’esprit rather fittingly epitomizes the spirit of the time, but there were many others. Van der Geest’s contemporary and fellow burgher Nikolaes Rockox, a patron and friend of Rubens, compiled an equally impressive cabinet. This observation, combined with the fact that the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (kmska) needed to temporarily relocate for renovation, provided the premise for an exceptional experiment.

‘The Golden Cabinet’ is an exhibition at the Rockox House that immerses the visitor in the universe of a wealthy seventeenth-century burgher. We know what the home of patrician and burgomaster Rockox looked like from his inventory and from a painting representing his art cabinet by Frans Francken II (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). Over a hundred showpieces from the kmska and highlights from the collection of the Rockox House Museum will transform Rockox’s residence into an opulent art cabinet from Antwerp’s Golden Age. The paintings on display include work by Van Eyck, Van der Weyden, Memling, Rubens and Van Dyck. The exhibition occupies five rooms in the historical city mansion. The first two are devoted to late medieval painting, in a manner that assigns focus and space to the works of art. For the decoration of the remaining rooms or saletten, the curators have drawn inspiration from typical Baroque art cabinets, with their characteristic gold leather wall covering bedecked with paintings. Mantelpieces reveal the original purpose of each of the rooms: the kitchen, the reception room, and the study. | Dr Paul Huvenne, General Director KMSKA

An expat in London

Born and bred in Antwerp yet living and working in London taking care of works of art from the Low Countries, I find it most gratifying to reconnect to my home country through my job. As a curator of Dutch and Flemish drawings and prints at the British Museum, I couldn’t be luckier: thanks to the enthusiasm of many British collectors, the Department of Prints and Drawings boasts one of the foremost collections of works on paper by Dutch and Flemish artists.

Among the almost seven thousand Dutch and Flemish sheets kept at the British Museum, all major artists are represented. The strong collection of Flemish masters from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century includes Peter Paul Rubens’s fascinating ‘Costume Book’ and Anthony van Dyck’s invaluable ‘Italian Sketchbook’. My personal favourite is (maybe unsurprisingly) the intimate portrait of Isabella Brant drawn by Rubens ‘aux trois crayons’ a few years before his first wife’s death and later supplemented on the verso with a drawing of himself and his second wife, Helena Fourment.

Almost one hundred years have passed since the Dutch and Flemish drawings were systematically described in five catalogues, and even though all drawings can be found on the museum’s online database (www.britishmuseum.org/research), additional research is necessary. I have decided to tackle this major task in a chronological order, starting with the in-depth study of our superb collection of fifteenth-century drawings, a dozen of which are currently being scientifically analysed in preparation for a forthcoming exhibition on silverpoint drawings. After completing the study of early Netherlandish drawings, I will concentrate on our sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Flemish works and I look forward to the no doubt frequent research visits to the Rubenianum this will require.

Thanks to my Antwerp colleagues my past visits here have always been special. I cannot wait to come ‘home’ again while delving into our rich holdings of Flemish drawings!

An Van Camp, Curator of Dutch and Flemish Drawings and Prints, The British Museum
The 2013 meeting of the Corpus Rubenianum authors

The second CRUB authors' meeting took place in Antwerp at the Rubenianum on 1 and 2 February 2013. The first meeting in 2010 had been a success and, once again, the majority of Corpus authors (some twenty altogether) attended the meeting.

Arnauld Bal, chairman of the Centrum Rubenianum, the foundation responsible for the publication of the CRUB, opened the meeting on 1 February: "In those days, there were plans to finish the Corpus Rubenianum, Ludwig Burchard’s 1975 book. This plan proved to be little more than quixotic. Over the years, experience has taught us that there are steps which we were afraid of executing on the whole enterprise. With the creation of the Rubenianum Fund in 2010 the Centrum took on the commitment to have the entire series on the shelves by 2020. This might sound like yet another quixotic scheme, but thanks to the Fund, three editorial assistants came to reinforce the team, ensuring that manuscripts, once submitted, could smoothly be seen through the publication process. A major weakness, however, remains the very demanding academic and/or museum commitments of the many volunteer authors, which hinders the prompt submission of their manuscripts. The year 2013 demonstrated this weakness rather painfully, since not a single manuscript was delivered before the end of the year; but more than that, this situation will have to be avoided if the master plan is to be accomplished. Our goal is to revert to a balanced publication scheme and to intensify communication with the authors. Véronique Van de Kerckhof then commented on the present activities of the Rubenianum, the City of Antwerp’s art-historical documentation centre, for which she, as its director, has responsibility. A recent phenomenon is the increasing diversity of organizations and people working under its roof: apart from the Rubenianum and the Centrum Rubenianum these include the Rubenshuis staff, the Rubens researchers from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, as well as visiting scholars and Corpus authors, interns and volunteers. Regular meetings between these partners, including the Rubenianum Fund, enhance internal collaboration and common projects. An important innovation is the collaboration with the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD) in The Hague that will enable online access to the Rubenianum’s rich collections. Also, many efforts go to unlocking the personal scholars’ archives.

Making available Ludwig Burchard’s Rubens archives is another priority for the Rubenianum. As soon as the necessary funds are found, digitized catalogue entries of already published volumes will be made available as rss files (albeit with a ‘moving wall’ of fifteen years).

In the next, more ‘hands-on’ session, Bert Schepers and Priscilla Valckenaers introduced the authors to less well-known records and files. The recent moving of the Burchard cabinet and the freshly installed office for the authors in residence was one of the major tasks giving the authors a tour around the premises. ‘No art object is by definition or intrinsic to art-historical investigation; it is purely notional and depends on more than a solemn attribution to the artist.’ Professor Bert Demanin instructed the authors on the legal aspects of providing opinions on works of art, providing the audience with information from different legislations in the recent past to support his argument. Dr Demanin’s legal advice can be summarized as follows: ‘Stricto sensu, the opinion of the art historian is free. However, if you give commercial expertise, you might be held liable.’

After these lectures and discussions, the first day of the meeting ended with the group being invited to take part in the opening of the ‘Gulden Cabinet’ exhibition at the Rockox House.

The next day started with Thomas Leyssen, chairman of the Rubenianum Fund, addressing the Corpus authors: ‘The creation of the Fund and the cooperation with the King Baudouin Foundation is now three years old and we need to think of new strategies for fund-raising.’ The Rubenianum Quarterly, the Sunday lectures and the annual sponsors’ trip need to be seen as part of this whole. The Centrum Rubenianum maintains its commitment to organizing their work in an efficient and pleasant way. This also implies some financial arrangements. In general, there is no money to pay substantial fees to the authors but we have organized a system of reimbursement for expenses, so that at least the authors will not have to spend their own money.

Bert Schepers and Priscilla Valckenaers reported on their tasks as editorial assistants. Priscilla focussed on the different editorial aspects and the assistance the authors can expect from the ‘Task Force’. The editorial team is there to make the life of the authors as easy as possible. Bert gave an impression of the electronic tools and databases we are using now.

After a nice standing lunch, the authors’ meeting concluded with Rubenianum curator and Corpus author Ben van Beneden showing us the museum’s latest acquisitions.

During this fruitful gathering a platform was created for exchanging ideas and enhancing cooperation. Some of the authors took full advantage of the opportunity to come a few days in advance or to stay on a bit longer to study the Burchard files and make use of the rich library at hand. The get-together of so many Rubens specialists gathered interesting discussions at the office of authors in residence as well as at the coffee-machine – the origin of many great ideas. We can speak of a real Corpus-buzz! Priscilla Valckenaers

A Noble Mission

Interview with Dominique Allard, Director of the King Baudouin Foundation

The Rubenianum Fund was set up within the framework of the King Baudouin Foundation. Could you tell us about this Belgian foundation?

On February 1, 1973, the King Baudouin Foundation is an independent public utility foundation, created in 1975 with the vocation of working in all fields of public interest. Heritage is one such area. It also sets out to provide a resource for philanthropists who wish to create, alone or with others, a sustainable philanthropic initiative with a specific objective, which they select, and which can also benefit from the King Baudouin Foundation’s own networks of expertise and services. The Rubenianum Fund makes use of both facilities: it uses the Foundation’s support services, notably to facilitate fundraising efforts in Belgium and abroad, and it shares the Foundation’s desire to protect and promote the country’s heritage. There are over four hundred individual funds within the Foundation, each a particular initiative.

As part of the Foundation, our Centre for Philanthropy has the mission of facilitating the work of those who wish to devote their energy to changing something in the world or conserving something at all costs. This might be saving a work of art, a monument, a collection or a nature site, so that it may be handed down to future generations in good condition, or the philanthropist might wish to secure greater social justice for disinflicted people or contribute to progress in medical research. We do that by putting philanthropic support in touch with the people and resources and people, supporting them so that they can make a real impact and ensuring continuity for their objectives and efforts. An awesome mission!

Does the Foundation itself also get involved in heritage activities?

Oh yes, and how much year, it liberates important sums of its own to ensure the preservation of endangered works of art or historic documents. It is thanks to these efforts, supported over twenty-five years, that numerous important works can now be admired in our loveliest museums. Some of the works we saved in extremis when they risked being dispersed, as was the case for the collection of drawings and models assembled by the Antwerp antique dealer Charles Van Herck. If you are in Maastricht, you may care to take a look at these very beautiful sculptures, which are temporarily on display (until 2015) at the Bonnefantenmuseum. Another example is the collection of drawings and models of the Antwerp artist Stanley, who worked extensively for King Leopold II. It is difficult to imagine that all of his archives, thousands of letters, manuscripts and the first photos of Central Africa, are now cared for in Belgium, providing a mine of information for today’s historians.

But the Foundation can also finance the restoration of works of art, works which are exhibited in Belgian collections of course, but even in European public collections. The Joonkeure Fund for example aims at helping only those institutions with a cultural heritage, paying particular attention to the conservation or restoration of works of art that are not adequately protected or preserved in any form of dimension. In that way, it could for example help finance the treatment of the Triumph of Melchior of 1589 by F. van Mieris set of St John’s co-cathedral in Malta. This set was woven after designs by Rubens.

Nevertheless, I suppose that your financial means are somewhat limited?

Of course, and that explains why any intervention by the Foundation’s Heritage Fund, provided over by Thomas Leyssen, must be highly selective. Only works estimated to represent a capital part of Belgium’s cultural creation through the centuries can count on our support and this, of course, within the available resources. Sometimes it is extremely painful to see an important work of art being dispersed because of our being able to summon the necessary means to keep it here or return it to Belgium.

But, yes I guess you are not always alone! No, the Foundation does not participate in collective appeals with other institutions or the public authorities. When the call ‘we want everyone to try to sing from the same hymn sheet’, we believe that it is total ownership that guarantees the perpetuity of a work. So any decision to save a work must meet our own requirements for its appropriate conservation.

On the other hand, the Foundation’s work attracts so much goodwill that private individuals are pleased to work with us. This was the case, for instance, with the marvellous ceramic silver that once belonged to Rubens and had remained in his family’s possession until it was put up to auction in Monaco, where it was acquired by Pierre and Collette Bauchau and immediately offered for donation to the Foundation. Another set is one of the works of reference in the Rubens House in Antwerp [fig. 1], having been returned after four centuries to the very place where it used to glaze under its illustrious owner’s eyes.

Are there any other special examples? Well, staying with the Rubens House, there is the famous de Ganay Monograph acquired by the Foundation last year and Jordaens’s Bagpiper [fig. 2], acquired by the Fondation Baudouin in 2004, in collaboration such that this has built up our collection of over eight thousand works during the last twenty-five years.

Other funds have been set up around a particular collection that has been patiently assembled by a philanthropist who wishes to hand it down to the greatest possible number of people. The Foundation does everything in its power to help such collections, such as artefacts with noble gestures, so as to prolong the life of a passion and endow the collection with the same quality and respect. The Thomas Noyek Fund is a good example, created around a collection of works by the CoBrA artists. Even more moving is the Christian Dior Foundation, set up in 2012 by Mr Guy and dedicated to the memory of this important twentieth-century post and
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