

**Report on the symposium
“Collection, revaluation and
donation: The importance of
private art collections in Belgium
and the Netherlands, 19th century
to today” (Studiedag Verzamelen,
herwaarderen en schenken: Het
belang van private kunstcollecties
in België en Nederland, 19de
eeuw tot vandaag), Antwerp,
Rubenianum, 26 November 2021**

On Friday 26 November 2021, the symposium *Collection, Revaluation and Donation: the importance of private art collections in Belgium and the Netherlands, 19th century to today* took place in the Rubenianum, Antwerp. The symposium, which was originally planned for 13 March 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was a joint initiative of Museum Mayer van den Bergh and the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (RMFAA). The symposium was organized on the occasion of the exhibition *Madonna meets Mad Meg: Masterpieces and Their Collectors*, an exhibition about the two nineteenth-century Antwerp art collectors Fritz Mayer van den Bergh and Florent van Ertborn (Museum Mayer van den Bergh, in association with RMFAA), and the publication of the book *1818–2018: Schenkingen aan het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen (1818–2018: Donations to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp*, by Leen de Jong, Nanny Schrijvers and Ulrike Müller, Tiel: Lannoo, 2020). Some of the contributions of the symposium will be published in the forthcoming volume *Philanthropy and Social Entrepreneurship in the Cultural Sector: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Annick Schramme, Nathalie Verboven and Ulrike Müller (London: Routledge, 2022).

Private art collecting in the Low Countries has a long and rich history. But today private art collections are also a hot topic. In recent years, private collectors have increasingly emerged as leading figures in the art and cultural world – internationally, but also in Belgium.¹ Private collectors organize exhibitions, fund research and publications, and build their own private museums.² As donations to public museums decline, private collectors establish foundations of their own to preserve and manage their collections

as a whole.³ At the same time, in the contemporary cultural heritage field there is a growing interest in collaborations and partnerships with private collectors and foundations. In his strategic vision memorandum on cultural heritage of March 2021, Jan Jambon, Flemish minister of culture, formulated the specific objective of stimulating cooperation between public and private players in the sector.⁴ This raises many questions about the legal, ethical and organizational conditions as well as the practical realization of such collaborations in the short, medium and long term.

Starting from the topical nature of the subject and its relevance for the sector, the aim of this symposium was to trace the origin and development of private collecting and art donations since the nineteenth century, and to map the most important contemporary trends in public-private interactions from a multidisciplinary perspective. Specific attention was paid to the question of the role private collectors and donors of (ancient and contemporary) art played and play in cultural life; what their relationship with public cultural institutions looks like; and how relevant their activity is today. This included the various profiles, networks and motivations of collectors and donors

¹ See, for example, Marta Gnyp, *The Shift. Art and the Rise of Power of Contemporary Collectors* (Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing, 2018); Georgina Walker, *The Private Collector's Museum. Public Good Versus Private Gain* (London: Routledge 2020). For Belgium, see, for example, Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, 'Artikelenreeks Belgische privéverzamelaars', *De Morgen*, 26/11/2008, <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/artikelenreeks-belgische-priveverzamelaars-ward-daenen-en-eric-rinckhout~ba4c2b87/>.

² See, for example, <https://phoebusfoundation.org/en/projects/exhibitions/>, <https://vanhaerentsartcollection.com/>, <http://artcenter.hugovoeten.org/>.

³ See, for example, <https://museum-dereede.com/museum/>.

⁴ *Strategische visienota cultureel erfgoed 2021*, https://www.vlaanderen.be/cjm/sites/default/files/2021-04/strategische_visienota_cultureel_erfgoed.pdf esp. p. 23-24.

⁵ *Regeerakkoord Vlaamse regering 2019-2024*, <https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/regeerakkoord-van-de-vlaamse-regering-2019-2024> esp. p. 126.

in the past and present, the influence of social, political and policy factors, as well as the legal and tax framework for donations and bequests. The lectures by speakers from both the museum sector and the academic field and the ensuing debate on the role of private collectors today and in the future sought to grasp the subject in its complexity, thereby offering new perspectives on the relationship between private collectors and public cultural institutions in the past, present and future.

The day began with an introductory lecture by Helleke Van den Braber (Utrecht University, chair of patronage studies). Under the title *The Complex Art of Gift-Giving in Six Propositions*, Van den Braber sketched a general, social and cultural-theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of art donations. She started from the observation that the history of donating is a history of relationships (namely between donors and museums, between different donors, and between donors and society), and that in the triangular exchange between donors, museums and society a complex game between giving and taking takes place. Moreover, the exchange is influenced by the different interests of the individual stakeholders in an ever-changing dynamic. In other words, in the case of a donation of a work of art to a museum, both parties invest and benefit at the same time, and there is an exchange of both tangible (= the object) and intangible (= connections, appreciation, proximity, influence) gifts. Giving to culture can thus be seen as a transaction in which money (financial capital) is converted into legitimacy (social and cultural capital), a strategy that should be considered neither altruistic nor egoistic. According to Van den Braber, donations can make a positive contribution to the position of all parties involved, but only if relationships are reciprocal, sustainable and stable.

The morning session, moderated by Jan Dirk Baetens (Radboud University Nijmegen), zoomed in on the origins and context of art collections and donations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the first lecture *Romantic Ideals and Political Circumstances: the collecting drive of Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée*, Bernhard Ridderbos (independent art historian) outlined a general context for the growth and flourishing of the passion for collecting in the nineteenth century, with an emphasis on the artistic and art-historical reevaluation of late medieval and early modern ('primitive') painting during the

Romantic era. He discussed in particular the public and educational goals of the Boisserées, and on a more general level the (often difficult) relationship between the interests of private collectors and the needs and wishes of the public museums, institutions that were then still new and relatively underdeveloped.

Ulrike Müller (Museum Mayer van den Bergh/Antwerp University) delved deeper into *The Public-Private Divide: private collectors and the art and museum world in Belgium during the long 19th century*. From a historical perspective she analyzed the evolution of the relationship between private collectors and public museums. While private collectors were important and visible actors in urban cultural life in the first half of the nineteenth century, their public function was later increasingly taken over by museums. Private collectors therefore increasingly defined their role on the basis of individual considerations and interests. The resulting tension between public and private formed the breeding ground for a number of prejudices and a mutual skepticism that can still be felt today and that can hinder public-private partnerships.

The third speaker of the morning session, Herwig Todts (RMFAA), presented a historical case study from the perspective of the museum. In his lecture *Locally Anchored?: the Antwerp art world and the collection of modern art of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp*, he investigated the close relationship between the RMFAA and the local art and collecting world, and its impact on processes of taste and canon formation. In doing so, he explained the special profile of the RMFAA's collection of modern art through the museum's strong ties to local artists, art dealers, collectors, connoisseurs, enthusiasts and politicians. The association Kunst van Heden/L'Art Contemporain (1905-1955) in particular had a major influence on a collection that, on the one hand, bears witness to international ambitions, but on the other remains representative of an important part of local artistic production.

In the afternoon session, moderated by Filip Vermeylen (Erasmus University Rotterdam), the developments, background and structures of collection and donation culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were further explored. The lecture by Johan De Smet (MFA Ghent), entitled *The Art of Giving: the private symbiosis between public and private art circles around the Museum of Fine Arts Ghent, 1897-2020* examined

the case of MFA Ghent and its relationship with its donors from a long-term perspective. He discussed the diversity of factors that influence the relationship between public museums and their donors, and that help shape the success of public-private partnerships. He emphasized, among other things, the role of chance and emotions (of both the collector/donor and museum committees and management), the impact of a well-functioning museum friends association, the importance of constant dialogue and the cultivation of interpersonal relationships, as well as the observance of different types of collectors and donors, their needs and interests – because, according to De Smet, contemporary collectors have long ceased to be uninformed amateurs.

Oliver Lenaerts (lawyer at Contour Law, Brussels) then shared his knowledge and expertise regarding the contemporary legal context for art philanthropy in Belgium. In his lecture *Transforming Art Collections into Philanthropic Opportunities: some legal context (the case of Belgium)*, he gave an overview of the different ways in which private individuals today can put their collections and assets at the service of the general public: in particular 'traditional' art donations, the placing of collections in a separate structure or foundation (with the aim of establishing a private museum), and new, more democratizing initiatives such as crowd funding. For each type, he also discussed possible pitfalls and issues from a legal and fiscal point of view, such as the impact of inheritance law, the possibility of maintaining unity and control and the management of income from the collection.

In her lecture, Sigrid Hemels (Erasmus University Rotterdam/Lund University) also examined current regulations regarding donations (*Tax Facilities for Art Donations in the Netherlands Today*). She went into more detail on specific tax opportunities in the Netherlands, for which non-Dutch institutions are also eligible. For example, registration as a public benefit institution in the Netherlands (ANBI) – also for foreign institutions – entails many tax advantages for donations, including the deduction of gifts, exemption from gift and inheritance tax in Belgium, or the option to pay inheritance tax using artworks. However, Hemels also pointed to the (partial) lack of transparency. While such schemes should serve as incentives to preserve cultural heritage for the Netherlands, the legislation does not require that the

works of art donated via the ANBI status must also be effectively made public or publicly accessible (as is the case, for example, in England, where donations to public institutions are published once a year).

As an introduction to the last part of the symposium, Nico Van Hout (RMFAA) presented the results of a research project into the donations to the RMFAA between 1818 and 2018, which were published in Leen De Jong's above-mentioned book in 2020. Van Hout outlined the changing context, profiles and motivations of the donors, as well as the changing meanings of their donations. The case of the RMFAA shows how the number of donations increased steadily until the Second World War, then decreased sharply until the 1980s, only to increase slightly in recent years. Van Hout underlined the lasting importance of donations: after all, a considerable part of the most important works in the RMFAA collection were donations. Public museums therefore remain largely dependent on their benefactors.

The symposium concluded with a debate on the social role and relevance of art collectors and donors today and in the future. Participants in the debate were Bart Caron (former member of the Flemish Parliament for the Green Party and ex-chairman of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Sport and Media of the Flemish Parliament), Thomas Leysen (chairman of Umicore, Mediahuis, King Baudouin Foundation, Flemish Masterpieces Council and the Board of Regents of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh), Harry Rutten (collector and initiator of Museum De Reede in Antwerp), Annick Schramme (professor of cultural management at the University of Antwerpen and director at the Antwerp Management School) and Bruno Verbergt (general director ad interim of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, and former director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa). The debate, moderated by journalist Ann De Bie, examined the central question of what private collectors, donors and public museums can mean for each other today and in the future.

When asked about his experiences with donations to public museums, Bruno Verbergt pointed out the importance of trust and personal ties between collectors and public institutions. According to him, there is often mistrust and skepticism. In addition, donations must provide concrete added value for public museums: they must fill gaps, fit within

specific collection plans and meet various conditions, such as the availability of exhibition or storage space, financial resources and personnel for conservation, management, registration and research. On the other hand, gifts from private collectors can also entail risks. For example, a poorly documented or undocumented provenance can hide looted art or contested colonial heritage.

As the owner of a large collection of graphic art, Harry Rutten did not opt for a donation to a public museum, but for a foundation of public interest that today manages his collection and makes it accessible to the public as Museum De Reede. Several reasons played a role in Rutten's decision to set up his own private museum. On the one hand, he rejected the idea of a donation after a negative experience with a public museum following a loan for an exhibition. What was decisive for him, however, was the prospect of being able to display his graphic art collection as a whole and on a permanent basis, an ambition that would not have been possible in a public museum (due to matters of conservation as well as the size of the collection).

Thomas Leysen then spoke about the role of the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF) as a mediator and center of expertise regarding philanthropic opportunities in Belgium. According to Leysen, such an institution offers support to public museums as well as private collectors and potential donors. Annick Schramme agreed on the importance of institutions such as the KBF that aims to bring the two different worlds closer together and to bridge existing prejudices and clichés. Her own research has shown, among other things, that the organizational structures and working methods of contemporary, professionalized museums and the passion and ambitions of private collectors are often diametrically opposed. In order to overcome the often mutual prejudices, a greater basis of trust between museums and collectors is therefore necessary.

According to Bart Caron, a series of structural conditions and a strong policy are also crucial for the success of public-private partnerships. He pointed in particular to the relatively young and weak cultural heritage policy in Flanders and the tight subsidies that the sector receives. Caron therefore argued for a global reinforcement of the sector, including the associated budgets, which would also boost confidence in cultural heritage policy. Museums have a public mission and fulfill a social role, and institutions such

as the Flemish Masterpieces Council – which advises the Flemish government on cultural heritage policy – are an important instrument in this regard. In turn, the panel members reacted cautiously to the concept of a private masterpieces foundation, launched in the Flemish Coalition Agreement 2019.⁵ According to Thomas Leysen, such an initiative raises a number of practical objections and ethical questions, for example about privately owned works of art that, labeled as masterpieces, are exhibited in public museums only to end up on the art market shortly after.

When asked about the conditions for realizing sustainable collaborations between private collectors and museums, the panel members agreed that there is no magic formula. For Annick Schramme, it is important – following the example of the KBF – to focus on relationships of trust and to keep an eye on the individual dynamics of the relationships. In addition, it is up to the government to continue working on a clear legal framework and a sustainable heritage policy. Bart Caron also argues for initiatives to raise awareness among both private collectors and the general public, with the aim of stimulating a collective consciousness that caring for art, culture and heritage is a task for everyone.

In conclusion, Bruno Verbergt noted that the government obviously does not have a monopoly on culture, and should never have one. According to Harry Rutten, Thomas Leysen and Bart Caron, it generally makes little difference to the wider public whether a museum or exhibition is publicly or privately managed, unless this makes it too expensive or difficult to access. The panel members agreed that it is mainly the amplitude and diversity that make up the richness of the cultural landscape. Of course, this does not alter the fact that good agreements and a well-considered and sustainable museum and cultural policy must create the basis for this landscape to grow and prosper.

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