

This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

A digital future for a dispersed noble heritage: the Arenberg Art Collection Project

Reference:

Müller Ulrike, Vanhauwaert Soetkin.- A digital future for a dispersed noble heritage: the Arenberg Art Collection Project
Virtus: bulletin van de Werkgroep Adelsgeschiedenis / Werkgroep Adelsgeschiedenis [Zwolle] - ISSN 1380-6130 - 30(2023), p. 133-144
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.21827/virtus.30.133-144>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/2010590151162165141>

A digital future for a dispersed noble heritage: The Arenberg Art Collection Project

Soetkin Vanhauwaert and Ulrike Müller

The art collections of noble families are important historical documents of the practices, preferences, norms and values of their owners at any given time and place. Often, these collections also had an important public function before this role was gradually taken over by public museums since the emergence of these institutions in the course of the long nineteenth century. In the same period, in light of the development of new nation states and with the rise of the bourgeoisie as the new financial and cultural elite, the nobility's position in society underwent major changes. As a result, age-old collections and long cherished traditions of taste were increasingly challenged by new aesthetic ideas and practices. Faced with revolutionary struggles, growing economic hardships or political clashes, many noble families saw themselves forced to sell off (parts of) their treasured collections. A noble collection that maintained its role and reputation during the nineteenth century but came to be dispersed due to a twist of fate at the end of the First World War was the gallery of the Dukes of Arenberg. The members of this family belonged to the old nobility in the Low Countries, and they held a principal position in European aristocratic circles since the sixteenth century. A current research project lead by KU Leuven, in close collaboration with the Arenberg Foundation, intends to help to virtually reconstruct this collection. For this purpose, the project compiles a digital database which will be an essential tool and key reference for future research into the collection. After a short introduction on the history and significance of the Arenberg collection, this essay describes the Arenberg Art Collection Project, detailing its methodology and major aims, and providing an insight into the research potential enabled by the project.

'The finest private collection of old masters'

During the nineteenth century, the collection of the Dukes of Arenberg was the most well-known of all noble art collections in the Low Countries, and it enjoyed an international reputation. In 1875, the British author Lord Ronald Gower wrote that the art works owned by the ducal family formed 'the finest private collection of old masters' in Holland and Belgium.¹ The collection contained such iconic masterpieces as Peter Paul Rubens' *Self-portrait* (today in Antwerp's Rubens House) and Johannes Vermeer's *Study of a young woman* (today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York).²

The praised treasures embellished several noble residences, among which the most important were the ducal palace in the heart of Brussels and Heverlee castle, the family's favourite summer

¹ R. Gower, *A Pocket Guide to the Public and Private Galleries of Holland and Belgium* (London, 1875), 234.

² For general information on the Arenberg collection in the nineteenth century, see U. Müller, 'A Private Collection in the Public Sphere. The Brussels Art Gallery in the Nineteenth Century', in: M. Derez, S. Vanhauwaert and A. Verbrugge, eds, *Arenberg. Portrait of a Family, Story of a Collection* (Turnhout, 2018), 332–39; A. Verbrugge, 'De Kunstverzameling', in: M. Derez and J. Roegiers, eds, *Arenberg in de Lage Landen. Een hoogadelijk huis in Vlaanderen & Nederland* (Leuven, 2002), 325–28.

residence, which had been in their possession since the death of Charles de Croÿ in 1612. The Brussels palace had a separate picture gallery, built between 1836 and 1838 with the explicit aim to showcase the masterpieces of the collection and receive art-loving visitors in a semi-public exhibition space (fig. 1). In the following decades, the gallery was referred to as ‘much more precious than the public museums’,³ and the French journalist and critic Émile Montégut even wrote that the Arenberg collection could be regarded as the true museum of Brussels.⁴ By the end of the century, the collection had acquired a truly museum-like status, with regular opening hours from 10 am to 4 pm, an entrance fee (for charitable purposes) and a guide to show visitors around the gallery.⁵

The ducal gallery was the apotheosis of a long and rich family tradition of noble patronage and collecting that reached back to the early modern period. Since the sixteenth century, members of the Arenberg family were prominent players at the European courts and battle fields. Originating from a small county in the Eifel region in Germany, the family became one of the most influential noble families of the Habsburg Netherlands. Their political and economic power provided access to the highest social and cultural circles and formed the basis for expansive art patronage and for the creation of a valuable art collection. Among their protégés were such renowned artists as Anthony Van Dyck, Adriaen Brouwer and Paul De Vos. However, only very few of the artworks adorning the Brussels Arenberg palace in the nineteenth century originated from the old family property, as much of the original art collection had been destroyed by fire in 1695.

During the nineteenth century, the collection was considerably expanded by Prosper Louis (1785-1861), the seventh Duke of Arenberg. In 1833, he inherited an important set of 112 old master paintings from his uncle, Prince August of Arenberg, Count of La Marck (1753-1833). This collection is well-known thanks to a catalogue published in 1829 by the Brussels artist and printmaker Charles Spruyt (1769-1851), listing 105 paintings and illustrated with fifty-four lithographs.⁶ Prosper Louis made significant additions to the collection and heightened its quality. In 1854 the Duke constituted the *Majorat*, by which the most important old master paintings in the collection were to remain in the family and had to be passed on to the firstborn son of the family. In this way, Prosper Louis’ son Engelbert August (1824-1875) and grandson Engelbert Marie (1872-1949) fostered the collection until the early twentieth century.

The collection of the Dukes of Arenberg unites many characteristics that were typical of traditional aristocratic taste and collecting practices.⁷ First, the Brussels gallery contained almost exclusively paintings by canonical old Dutch and Flemish masters including Rembrandt, Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch, Rubens and Van Dyck, as well as a few eighteenth-century paintings by French and German artists such as Antoine Watteau and Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich, thus reflecting a traditional aristocratic taste. The content of the collection underlined not only the dukes’ attachment to

³ J.E. Tennent, *Notes d’un voyageur anglais sur la Belgique: industrie, commerce, cultures, arts, état moral* (Brussels, 1841), 168–69.

⁴ É. Montégut, *Les Pays-Bas. Impressions de voyage et d’art* (Paris, 1869), 21.

⁵ K. Baedeker, *Belgique et Hollande y compris Le Luxembourg. Manuel du voyageur* (Leipzig, 1894), 15; *Grieben’s Guide Books. Brussels and Antwerp* (Berlin/London, 1911), 16.

⁶ C. Spruyt, *Lithographies d’après les principaux tableaux de la collection de S.A.S. Monseigneur le Prince Auguste d’Arenberg, avec le catalogue descriptif* (Brussels, 1829).

⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the Arenberg collection during the nineteenth century, see U. Müller, ‘Enlightenment and the persistence of noble collecting’, in: id, *Between public relevance and personal pleasure Private art and antique collectors in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, ca. 1780-1914* (Turnhout, forthcoming).

traditional aesthetic values and their superior financial means (in a period that experienced exponentially rising prices for old master paintings due to a strongly increasing demand on the international art market), but also their devotion to the family's own history and long tradition of patronage. Second, an important section of the ducal collection consisted of cherished family portraits, most of which embellished the representative reception rooms of the ducal palace and Heverlee castle. Such collections illustrate the overarching importance placed on the celebration of the family's illustrious lineage and the related noble values.⁸ Third, the fact that Duke Prosper Louis created the *Majorat* as a juridical means to protect the most important masterpieces of the collection reveals the desire to preserve this important part of the family's heritage for the future. Fourth, the nineteenth-century dukes laid much emphasis on the public accessibility of their picture gallery. By this means, they inscribed themselves in the eighteenth-century tradition of providing public access to their gallery, in line with the educational and aesthetic ideals of the Enlightenment. This philosophy was mirrored by the gallery's architecture and display mode, which followed the conventional, eighteenth-century model of the princely picture room, with walls fully covered with paintings, all arranged symmetrically to create a harmonious, decorative effect (fig. 1).⁹ Last but not least, the case of the Arenberg gallery reveals the extent to which noble collections often had an ambiguous relation to the (national) museum that saw the rise as a new public institution during the nineteenth century. In fact, the Arenbergs never held any public office in the new Belgian nation state, and Prosper Louis' son Duke Engelbert August even openly distanced himself from the Belgian monarchy and its cultural politics.¹⁰ While rejecting the national ideals associated with the public museum, the nineteenth-century dukes rather inscribed themselves in a tradition of transnational, aristocratic European values and ideals.

From analogue records to digital catalogue

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the praised ducal collection was dispersed by a twist of fate. Due to the Arenbergs' German nationality, the family was forced to leave Belgium at the end of the First World War. Prosper Louis' grandson Duke Engelbert Marie withdrew to Germany, taking part of the collections with him to the castle of Nordkirchen. The family left the estates in Brussels and Leuven. The duke sold the Brussels palace to the city of Brussels; today, the palace is owned by the Belgian state, housing the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a conference centre. The castle in Heverlee became the property of the Belgian state, and was transferred to the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in the early 1920s. In the following decades, the university erected many other buildings in the 29 hectare park. That way, a new green campus based on the American model was established in the old ducal park. Today, the Arenberg castle houses the Faculty of Engineering, as

⁸ On the traditional use of portraits in noble residences, see, for example, S. Beranek, 'Strategies of Display in the Galleries of Amalia van Solms', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 9, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2017.9.2.4>; D. Eichberger and L. Beaven, 'Family Members and Political Allies. The Portrait Collection of Margaret of Austria', *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 2 (1995), 225-248.

⁹ G.J.M. Weber, 'Die Galerie als Kunstwerk. Die Hangung italienischer Gemalde in der Dresdner Galerie 1754', in: B. Marx, ed., *Elbflorenz. Italienische Prsenz in der Dresdner Galerie 1754* (Dresden, 2000), 229-242

¹⁰ M. Derez, 'Arenberg na de revolutie', in: M. Derez and J. Roegiers, eds, *Arenberg in de Lage Landen. Een hoogadellijk huis in Vlaanderen & Nederland* (Leuven, 2002), 92.

well as the Department of Architecture and the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation.

Together with the castle and the park, important collections connected to this patrimony – including archives, works of art and related historical collections – ended up at the KU Leuven as well and are today managed by the university's heritage offices.¹¹ Based on this valuable heritage, in recent decades, the university regularly contributed to exhibitions and publications about the Arenberg site and/or associated collections.¹² These projects were realized in collaboration with the Arenberg Foundation, which aims to promote scientific research as well as broader public interest in European culture from a historical perspective.¹³

During these projects and as a result of a durable cooperation with the Foundation, KU Leuven's Art Collection Office compiled extensive files documenting the Arenberg (art) collections in Leuven, and more generally on the heritage of the Arenberg family and the once famous art collection that has been dispersed during the twentieth century. The files contain information about individual objects and their current whereabouts, the family's relationships with artists, collections and collection history. It formed the basis for the research in preparation of the major exhibition *Power and Beauty: The Arenbergs* in Leuven's Museum M in 2018, which focused on the Arenberg art collection. At the same time, the files were further supplemented with new data during the project.

In preparation for a working visit to the USA to ensure the loans for the 2018 exhibition, a brief overview was made of the most important Arenberg objects in American museums known to us. The list made clear that many works of art could not be included in the already extensive museum presentation and publication. More importantly, however, during the preparations for the exhibition, it occurred to us that many pieces from the Arenberg collection are probably in public museums but are still not identified as such. At that moment, the Arenberg Foundation formulated the idea of bringing the collections together in a virtual museum, which would provide an overview of the contents of the former Arenberg collection(s) and the current (or last known) whereabouts of these works of art.

Starting from that idea, KU Leuven and the Arenberg Foundation launched the Arenberg Art Collection Project in the fall of 2022. In the course of this two-year project, the knowledge of the Arenberg art collections from both institutions is being brought together in an internal, virtual

¹¹ The Archives of the Duchy of Aarschot are preserved in the University Archives (<https://www.kuleuven.be/ahp/universiteitsarchief/collecties/archieven-en-verzamelingen/huis-arenberg>), part of the Arenberg Library is part of the Special Collections of KU Leuven Libraries, and the art and heritage collection is managed by the Art Collection's Office (<https://www.kuleuven.be/english/ahh/artcollection/collections/arenberg>) (visited December 19, 2022).

¹² Y. Delannoy, J.P. Tytgat en A. Verbrugge, eds, *Een stad en een geslacht. Edingen en Arenberg* (Enghien, 1994) (publication on the occasion of an exhibition in Enghien around paintings from the Arenberg collection at the University of Leuven); M. Derez, J.P. Tytgat and A. Verbrugge, eds, *De blinde hertog* (Leuven, 1996) (publication on the occasion of an exhibition Leuven); M. Derez, M. Nelissen, J.P. Tytgat and A. Verbrugge, eds, *Arenberg in de Lage Landen* (Leuven, 2003); M. Derez, G. Langouche and A. Verbrugge, eds, *De Celestijnenpriorij te Heverlee. Van klooster tot bibliotheek* (Leuven, 2005) (publication on the occasion of an exhibition in Leuven); M. Derez, S. Vanhauwaert and A. Verbrugge, *Arenberg. Portrait of a family. Story of a collection* (Turnhout, 2018) (publication on the occasion of the exhibition *Power and beauty: The Arenberg* in Museum M, including also a city festival and an exhibition at the University library).

¹³ <https://www.arenbergfoundation.eu/en> (visited December 19, 2022).

environment, which will make it from the start an important source for research into the family and its collection. It can also be a useful tool for the organization of future exhibitions or publications on the heritage of the Arenberg family at home and abroad, as well as a means to answer more general questions in the fields of the history of collections and patronage, provenance research and nobility studies.

The Arenberg Art Collections Project intends to compile a database that collects data on works of fine and applied art, which have been in the possession of the Arenberg family over the centuries. The aim is to centralize and organize the available information about these works of art, so that it becomes searchable in a more structured and systematic way. The data is recorded in an independent repository of the digital collection registration system used by Leuven University to manage its art and heritage collections.

First, the data already collected will be systematically recorded in the digital registration system. Here, the files of the KU Leuven's Art Collection Office serve as a solid starting point. Naturally, relevant objects from the collection of KU Leuven and the Arenberg Foundation will also be included in the database.

Second, the catalog will be supplemented by research in databases and publications of major museums and libraries worldwide. More and more institutions are making efforts to make their collections available online. And because of the increased importance of provenance research, more information on previous ownership can be found online as well. Consequently, undoubtedly more information will be available online to complement the KU Leuven file. Archival documents and inventories can serve as a basis for this additional research. Although the focus in this project is on the works of art that can be located, important objects with currently unknown whereabouts will also be included in the database, for example some of the paintings from the large nineteenth-century gallery in Brussels. This will be done by means of a targeted selection of archive documents. If available, these object records will be supplemented with old (photo- or lithographic) images in order to facilitate the identification with works of art in external collections.

Further, the project team hopes to make additions to the dataset by launching calls in specialized forums and from contacts with experts and curators of large and small museums in Belgium and abroad, in the hope of finding works that have not previously been linked to the Arenberg collection.

Specific fields are included in the data model of the project, such as the names of the sitters of portraits, the names of residences that are depicted, or other associations with the family, such as a known commissioner, the owner of a coat of arms that appears in an artwork, or provenance details and information about the place where an artwork was previously located. Consequently, the project will make it possible to answer specific questions, for instance about evolutions in the family collection, what objects are connected with certain family members, or about the path of an artwork within the various family residences. But the accumulated data will also allow to make analyses of a more general kind, for example regarding the character and development of the collecting practices, tastes and artist-patron- or dealer-collector networks of noble families.

The inclusion and connection of artworks from different institutions and private collections enriches the project. However, exactly this aspect also brings with it the most profound challenge concerning

authorship and image rights. Much information can be added to the database without knowledge of the current owner – most institutions are not directly involved in the project. It also means, however, that the rights to the collected data and the associated images have to be cleared if they ought to be published online at a later stage. Although the project foresees to include links to the relevant and, if available, persistent web pages of the owning institutions themselves, many issues often remain to be resolved regarding the sharing of data. Therefore, the online publication of the database is not within the scope of this project. The results of the Arenberg Art Collection project will in first instance remain an internal research tool.

Towards a virtual reconstruction

Over the past decades, the creation, processing and disclosure of digital collection data has experienced a strong increase in museums worldwide. While the digital registration and valorisation of collections as such is no longer revolutionary anno 2023, a number of technological developments and specific trends within the digital turn in museums have inspired new ways of engaging with digital collections, for research purposes as well as for the benefit of the broader public. One important trend that has emerged in the digital valorisation concerns the recreation of dispersed collections in virtual environments. In Antwerp, for example, the Rubenianum recently coordinated a project that focused on the virtual reconstruction of the archival collections of the nineteenth-century art historian and Rubens specialist Max Rooses (1839-1914), which – due to Rooses' different professional affiliations and later donations of his heirs – is fragmented and spread over different institutions in the city (Rubenianum, Letterenhuis, Museum Plantin-Moretus, and Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp). The project (2020-2021) accomplished the uniform description and digitisation of the material in all partner institutions, thus providing an essential base for future systematic research into Rooses and his work.¹⁴ Another recent project in Antwerp (2021-2022) had as its goal the complete registration and digitisation of the historical archives of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh, a museum dedicated to the private art collection of Fritz Mayer van den Bergh (1858-1901) and founded by the collector's mother Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh (1838-1920). In addition to making the museum's historical archives accessible via a public user interface, the project especially focused on the incorporation of references to associated archival material preserved elsewhere in Belgian and international institutions, and on the further valorisation of the data by means of realising the virtual interconnection of archival documents and related art objects from the museum's collection, combining archival and collection registration systems. These resulting links are made accessible through the museum's online collections and archives platforms.¹⁵ Comparable projects in other countries include, among others, the Czech National Museum's initiative to create a database that unites the scattered book collections of Bohemian provenance in Czech and foreign libraries,¹⁶ and an ongoing research at the Jewish Museum in

¹⁴ <https://www.rubenianum.be/nl/pagina/max-rooses-reconstructie-van-een-verspreid-archieff> (visited December 19, 2022).

¹⁵ U. Müller, 'Archives and access. Digital strategies to re-evaluate collection museums and their diverse histories', in: S. Bracken, A.M. Gáldy and A. Turpin, eds, *A matter of access* (Cambridge, forthcoming). See also <https://museummayervandenbergh.be/en/verhalenarchieff> (visited December 19, 2022).

¹⁶ <https://www.nm.cz/en/about-us/science-and-research/virtual-reconstruction-of-scattered-book-collections-of-bohemical-provenance-in-the-czech-and-foreign-libraries> (visited December 20, 2022).

Moscow aiming at the virtual reconstruction of the archive and collection of the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society.¹⁷ All these projects are situated within a broader movement referred to as 'Open GLAM' (Open Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums), which shares the intentions to make diverse heritage collections more digitally accessible beyond traditional institutional borders, by 'allowing users not only to enjoy the riches of the world's memory institutions, but also to contribute, participate and share'.¹⁸

Specifically with regard to the digital reconstruction and valorisation of (dispersed) art collections, some institutions have even gone one step further and have experimented with the possibilities for virtually recreating no longer existing galleries in a digital environment, often by means of 3D technology. An example that starts from a quite similar content to the Arenberg Art Collection project is *The collection of a beheaded king reunited in 3D*, which focuses on the seventeenth-century art collection and private gallery of King Charles I in Whitehall Palace, London.¹⁹ The project, supported by the Royal Collection Trust, studied and digitized contemporary archival documents and inventories to track down objects from the collection, and to create a historically accurate, digital reconstruction of King Charles I's private quarters in 3D. The digital environment brings together the works of art from the former collection, now held in more than a hundred different public and private collections. Although for the time being only a third of the original collection was found, the result of the project is inspiring.²⁰

The rich archival holdings concerning the Arenberg family and their collections preserved at different institutions including the KU Leuven, Arenberg Foundation, and the General State Archives of Belgium, provide sufficient meaningful material to embark on similar endeavors. The nineteenth-century Brussels gallery of the Dukes of Arenberg, for example, is exceptionally well documented. Among the archival records concerning the gallery are floor plans, published and hand-written catalogues, several inventories with detailed indications of the locations of exhibited artworks, the correspondence of the Duke's secretary and keeper of the collection, photographs, and even a series of hanging plans specifying the exact placement of the paintings on the gallery's walls in 1886. All this material can function as the basis for a virtual recreation of the Duke's gallery interior, the placement and functioning of the art collection within it. The following final paragraphs will illustrate the potential of the project by means of a case study based on an earlier examination of the content and layout of the Arenberg gallery.²¹

In the Brussels gallery, the pictures were displayed in a conventional style that reflected the duke's adherence to the traditional artistic canon and the aesthetic ideals of the Enlightenment. The hanging plans from 1886 give us a visual idea of the gallery's complex display scheme (fig. 2).²² In the

¹⁷ <https://www.jewish-museum.ru/en/research-center/research-groups/virtual-reconstruction-of-the-archive-and-collection-of-the-jewish-historical-and-ethnographic-socie/> (visited December 20, 2022).

¹⁸ <https://openglam.org/principles/> (visited December 19, 2022).

¹⁹ <https://lostcollection.rct.uk/> (visited December 20, 2022). For a description of the project and methodology, see <https://surfaceimpression.digital/royal-collection-trust/> (visited December 20, 2022).

²⁰ For another inspiring example, see W. Bellion, L.C. Stephenson, and J. Kelleher, with A. McLeod and K. Nassif, 'West on the Walls. The 1807 Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2022), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2022.21.1.21>.

²¹ U. Müller, 'Enlightenment and the persistence of noble collecting'.

²² *Galerie de tableaux. Placement des tableaux dans la galerie d'après les panneaux* (1886), General State Archives of Belgium, Fonds Arenberg, SA 6000. The hanging plans was drawn up as part of an insurance police.

gallery, the paintings were not arranged chronologically or by schools. Rather, they were presented according to the traditional eclectic method applied to many eighteenth-century princely collections, favouring the creation of a harmonious, rhythmic and decorative effect.

In the gallery, the wall space was divided up into nine separate units (*panneaux*), each consisting of eight to thirteen paintings, and separated from one another by paintings in vertical rows (*colonnes*) placed on salient pilasters. Within the units the pictures were arranged symmetrically, with larger compositions in the centre and pendants of portraits, landscapes or genre scenes to the left and right, referring to and complementing one another in a complex system. The analysis of one of the central *panneaux* of the gallery may here serve as an illustrative example. The sixth unit – the one located approximately in the middle of the room – featured two of the masterpieces of the collection, Rubens' *Self-portrait* and his *Portrait of a young woman with curly hair* (once presumed to be of his wife) (fig. 3). These two portraits in the middle tier were positioned next to another work by the Antwerp master, a study of three angels' heads, said to represent the artist's three children,²³ which is today untraced. Above these hung two larger works, a religious painting by Gaspar de Crayer representing *The miracle of the loaves and fishes* (private collection), and an animal scene entitled *La poule blanche* by Melchior d'Hondecoeter, and below them a Dutch interior by Pieter de Hooch (private collection), flanked by a Dutch cityscape by Gerrit Berckheyde and a bucolic landscape by Nicolaes Berchem (both untraced). This intricate display scheme shows that the paintings in the gallery were arranged so as to emphasise the status of certain artists (centrality of Rubens) and to highlight meaningful correlations among pictures (accumulation of portraits of Rubens' supposed family members). At the same time, different artists, genres and subject matters were deliberately juxtaposed in order to demonstrate the richness of the collection.

In the nineteenth century, the art collections of the Arenberg family belonged to the absolute top in Europe, in both size and quality. After 1918, their holdings were gradually dispersed. While some of the paintings formerly belonging to the ducal collection could be traced in museums and private collections all over the world, many others are only known from old reproductions, such as Spruyt's lithograph album from 1829 or photographs from the early twentieth century. Today, the diverse heritage related to the noble family holds an enormous potential for the future, providing novel directions for provenance research, (art) historical and socio-cultural studies, as well as examinations of the material culture and practices of (noble) art collectors. By initiating the Arenberg Art Collection Project, KU Leuven and the Arenberg Foundation wish to facilitate further research into this important piece of European heritage.

Help us improve our research database!

Do you know any works of art connected to the Arenberg family?

²³ É. Fétis, 'Bruxelles', in: H. Moke, É. Fétis, and A. Van Hasselt, eds, *Les splendeurs de l'art en Belgique*, (Brussels, 1848), 229.

If you have any information about objects (paintings, sculptures, tapestries, antiquities, precious metalwork) featured in this project, particularly identifications or current whereabouts of works of art that have remained unnoticed before, please contact us: kunst@kuleuven.be

Abstract

During the nineteenth century, the Brussels gallery of the Dukes of Arenberg was one of most widely-praised and publicised private art collections in the Low Countries. Just as the history of the noble family itself, their collecting and patronage reaches back to the early modern period. But due to a twist of fate, the collection was dispersed in the aftermath of the First World War, and the famous masterpieces that once constituted the glory of the Arenberg gallery are today spread over public museums and private collections in different parts of the world. The ongoing Arenberg Art Collections Project – a research project coordinated by KU Leuven, in collaboration with the Arenberg Foundation – aims to virtually reconstruct the collection in a digital database. By this means, the project not only wishes to provide a digital future for the dispersed heritage of the noble family, but also aims to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of European history and culture.