



## **Great Narratives or Isolated Statements? History in the Dutch National Museums (1800–1887)**

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### **Summary**

This essay asks why the Dutch national museums did not offer any coherent historical narratives in the nineteenth century, but only isolated objects that were not set into the context of a coherent narrative. After some preliminary remarks, I will give a summary of how the theme of history was approached in these museums. The historical dimension appeared as an explicit element of display only at the beginning and end of the century. In the interim period (1806-c. 1870) art and the aesthetic value of objects, was more important than history, a fact that may be observed by looking at both the acquisitions and their presentation. The development of funds available for the museum that may be observed after a long ‘period of national indifference’ (1830-c.1870) was accompanied by a new consideration for objects of historical interest. But even when the Netherlands Museum for History and Art, combining history and the applied arts, founded in The Hague in 1876 was transferred to Amsterdam and opened in 1887 as part of the new Rijksmuseum, history remained a subject of minor importance. Even during the rearrangement of the history sections in the 1930s in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam when a coherent story was finally displayed, art historians retained the upper hand.

This specificity of the Dutch museum world will be explicated by considering the contexts of dire economic circumstances, politics (liberalism) and religion (Protestants versus Roman Catholics), but also by relating it to the form of government (with the cities playing such an important role), the management of the museums and the education of academic historians. In general however after Louis Napoleon the national art (and history) museums were far removed from the interests of Dutch rulers, kings or politicians, some as King Willem II were even downright hostile towards them.

## Preliminary remarks

It was only in the very first period (1800–1806) and again right at the end of the nineteenth century that Dutch national museums were thought to function as instruments for educating the general public. In the meantime both of the national art museums were mainly considered as schools for artists: the Rijksmuseum (1800–1808 in The Hague; after 1808 in Amsterdam) and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings (after 1816 in The Hague), later better known as the Mauritshuis (after its location from 1822 onwards). In the nineteenth century paintings were purchased for one of two reasons: as an example of the work of an important painter, or for historical motives. History was an afterthought: lists were drawn up of Dutch and Flemish painters that should be represented in the museum, but nobody ever thought of making one of important historical people or historical scenes. However that may be, acquisitions made for historical reasons were always much cheaper than the artistic ones.

A separate museum dedicated to Dutch history never came into existence. In the Netherlands, history found a place in museums mainly dedicated to other subjects and at best it was given a separate section with the same status as the art section. On most occasions however it was treated as inferior. Indeed, in order to get an overview of the great narrative of Dutch history in the nineteenth century one needs rather consider illustrated books or popular prints, like the one published by the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen* (Foundation for Public Benefit), c. 1790.



Figure 1: *Vaderlandsche Mannen en Vrouwen* (National Men and Women), woodcut, 406 x 330 mm, print published by the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen* (Foundation for Public Benefit), c. 1790, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.no. RP-P-OB-102.143.

This very widespread print (many editions are known) depicts two poets (Hubert Poot and Jacob Cats), two admirals (Michiel de Ruyter and Piet Hein), two painters (Jan Steen and Rubens – not Rembrandt!), one doctor (Herman Boerhaave), the only Dutch Pope (the sixteenth-century Adrian VI), one philosopher (Erasmus), and three famous women. The first, Anna Maria Schuurman, was an intellectual and a painter; the second was Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaar who defended the city of Haarlem besieged by the Spanish during the Eighty Years' War; finally

there was the fifteenth-century Duchess Jacoba of Bavaria, who was at the time seen as an exemplary woman with various Enlightenment virtues. We will come across some of these figures later (Bergvelt 2010a).

The development of the theme of national history and great historical narratives can however be observed in the private enterprises of foundations (the Royal Antiquarian Society, which had collected and exhibited work since 1858; see: *Voor Nederland bewaard* 1995), or due to private individuals such as the Amsterdam collector Jacob de Vos, who formed a Historical Gallery with sketches (1850-1863; Carasso 1991), and exhibitions. In 1876 and 1925 two exhibitions were organized, the first on the occasion of the sixth centenary of the foundation of Amsterdam and the second on its 650th anniversary (Coucke 2002; Tibbe to be published). During this period no comparable exhibition was organized about the history of the country as a whole. It was a long time before Dutch cultural life, traditionally organized according to a municipal frame of reference, rather than a national one, started to look to national organizations and institutions.

## **The History of Dutch National Museums**

### **The Batavian Republic (1795–1806)**

The National Art Gallery, the predecessor of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, opened in The Hague in 1800. It was the time of the Batavian Republic, which was as enthusiastic an advocate of *Liberté, Égalité et Fraternité* as its French sister republic. The French and the Dutch ‘Patriots’, as they called themselves, had put an end to the *ancien régime* of the Dutch Republic of the Seven United Provinces in 1795. Before that time the Dutch Republic had had a strange form of government: it was a republic, but with a Stadtholder, who had to be chosen from the House of Orange. Central government was very weak compared with the cities, especially Amsterdam. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were characterized by tensions between the Stadtholders, the cities and later the Patriots.

In 1795 the House of Orange, from which the Stadtholders were chosen as heads of state – in any case they were commanders-in-chief of the army and the fleet – fled to England and their most important collections were confiscated by the French armies and transported to the museums in Paris. The National Art Gallery was founded in 1798 on initiative of the Minister of Finance, who thought that it would look ‘barbaric’ if the Batavian government did not take care of the collections and the palaces that the Stadtholder had left behind. This art gallery was opened in the west wing of one of the former palaces of the Orange family, *Huis ten Bosch* (literally, House in the Wood), which was at the time located outside the municipal boundaries of The Hague. The National Art Gallery had to start with the remnants of the Orange collections, so initially the history of the Stadtholders and their family dominated this museum.

One was only allowed to visit the museum by following a tour lead by curator Jan Waldorp. He started in the rooms and cabinets with the historical and artistic displays and ended in the middle of the House in the Wood, in the Orange Room, dedicated to the memory of the seventeenth-century Stadtholder Frederic Henry. It was somewhat ironic that the main part of the museum was devoted to one of the predecessors of the hated tyrants of the *ancien régime*.

The Batavian Republic was comparatively poor, but it nevertheless tried to change the content of the museum and redress the balance of representation by purchasing portraits of adversaries

of the Orange family, like the *Threatened Swan*. This painting of a white swan by Jan Asselijn was at the time considered to be an allegory of Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt (*wit* is the Dutch word for white). De Witt was head of state in the middle of the seventeenth century, a period during which the Orange stadtholders were not in power. He was an outspoken enemy of the Orange family. The painting cost only a hundred guilders, a very small amount of money compared with other acquisitions, the prices of which could go up to more than three thousand guilders for a Rubens (Grijzenhout 1985; Bergvelt 1998: 28–54).

The swan was hung in the first room, one of two dedicated to Dutch history. The other three rooms and some cabinets were dedicated to art (Van Thiel 1981). This first room and cabinet also contained portraits of admirals like Michiel de Ruyter, of Stadtholder Willem III, who later became king of England, an Allegory of the struggle between Protestants and Roman Catholics at the beginning of the seventeenth century by Adriaan van de Venne, and a naval battle with the Spanish in 1602 by Hendrick Corneliszoon Vroom. A depiction of the bodies of the De Witt brothers, murdered by the mob in The Hague in 1672, and a portrait of Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer, whom we have already met in the popular print, were also among the works bought.

The Monument Room was the second room dedicated to Dutch history. Among other exhibits it included a chair supposed to have belonged to Duchess Jacoba of Bavaria, also known from the print. While the portraits of Jacoba and her husband, and her chair were displayed in the same room, a painting of one of her castles was hung in the corridor.

The Monument Room contained objects described as ‘national relics’. They had been part of the collection of the Stadtholder (Smeets 2010), and had been handed over by the French to the Batavian Republic.





Figure 2: Some 'national relics' being transported from the Cabinet of Stadtholder Willem V to the Assembly Hall of the States-General, 11 March 1795. Engraving, R. Vinkeles del. et sculps., Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, coll. F. Muller 5391.

Some of these national relics were thought to have belonged to Admiral Michiel de Ruyter, the most famous Dutch naval hero. The portrait of the admiral however was hung in the first room. In other words, to view all the objects related to one person – whether it was Michiel de Ruyter or Jacoba of Bavaria – one had to visit several rooms. Consistency was not the strong point of this presentation. It is likely that Waldorp would have explained the connections between these scattered objects during his tour. We can be certain that he was implementing the policies of the Batavian Republic and that his task was to educate the public by introducing them to figures such as Michiel de Ruyter, Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaar or Jacoba of Bavaria as hero models from the national past for citizens of the contemporary Batavian Republic. He would have been unable

to provide a complete survey of Dutch history as there were too many gaps in the collection. There were not enough new historical acquisitions to ‘dethrone’ the House of Orange as it were and provide a more complete survey of Dutch history, even though half of the works added to the collection during this period were acquired for historical reasons and the other half for artistic ones.

### **The Kingdom of Holland (1806–1810)**

This situation changed completely during the reign of Louis Napoleon, one of the emperor’s brothers, who was appointed King of Holland in 1806 (Grijzenhout 1999; Bergvelt 2007; Bergvelt 2010b). He moved the national collection to Amsterdam, where it has remained to this day. He turned the republican collection into a Royal Museum and located it on the third floor of the former Town Hall, a seventeenth-century monument, which he took over and used as his palace. By purchasing two major collections of Dutch seventeenth-century paintings – he considered the collection with foreign paintings which his disgraced brother Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino and Musignano, too expensive – the emphasis came to lie on the Dutch national artistic content of the museum. Moreover he ordered the city of Amsterdam’s seven most important paintings to be loaned to his Royal Museum. Some have remained there, as is the case with Rembrandt’s *Nightwatch*, which continues to be the Rijksmuseum’s supreme artistic masterpiece and the *Syndics*, also by Rembrandt. While the emphasis in the museum in The Hague had been on the House of Orange, in the Royal Museum of Louis Napoleon, the city of Amsterdam became the underlying theme.

The king’s instructions were that his Royal Museum should consist of an art section, a separate room for contemporary paintings and another for the national historical paintings. The historical paintings were hung in the museum’s large room, along with the biblical and mythological scenes, with the three-dimensional objects from the National Art Gallery presented in display cases. Altogether there were 199 paintings of battles, views, memorable events and famous men, including the seven Amsterdam paintings. In the words of museum director Cornelis Apostool in 1810:

Le grand Salon est entierement décoré de Pieces d’Histoire, la plus part concernant l’Histoire du Païs et representant plusieurs Batailles, événements mémorables, Portraits d’Hommes Illustres, Vues, Antiquités et Curiosités, au nombre de 199 Tableaux, des quels les sept le plus remarquables, appartiennent à la Ville d’Amsterdam’ (...) ‘Dans les autres appartements sont exposés le reste des Tableaux d’Histoire au nombre de 71 et 86 Tableaux de Genre, 95 Tableaux de Pajjsage, 16 Tableaux de Marine, 33 Tableaux de Gibier Mort, de Fleurs et de Fruits et 52 Tableaux modernes, ou de Maîtres encore vivans: le nombre total des Tableaux se monte à 552 Pieces (Bergvelt 1998: 68, n. 81 on p. 303).

If one judges by the number of historical works in the collection, the King must have considered history the most important subject. Most of the acquisitions however were made for artistic and not for historical reasons, just as was the case at a later period in the museum’s history (Bergvelt 1998, Appendix XIII, 393–416). The numerous paintings hung in the large room did not give a very clear picture of Dutch history and there was no longer a guided tour or a Waldorp to clarify matters. A catalogue was produced however with some comments on the pictures; and some of these comments are of a historical nature. Too many subjects were still not represented

by any works, so that there was no balanced overview of Dutch history in the museum galleries; moreover, many paintings were barely visible as they were hung high on the walls.

The museum's two most important paintings – Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* and Bartolomeus van der Helst's *Celebration of the Peace of Westphalia* – hung in this large room. Since the eighteenth century the latter work had been regarded as the city's most important historical painting, celebrating as it did the conclusion of the Eighty Years War in 1648 and the recognition of the Netherlands as an independent nation by the other European states. The *Nightwatch*, on the other hand, was considered to be a painting without any historical subject; it was merely a masterpiece by Rembrandt, something of artistic rather than historical importance.

Louis Napoleon's contribution to the history section of the Dutch national museum was much less substantial than his acquisitions for the art section. The seven masterpieces loaned by the city of Amsterdam combined with the architecture of the seventeenth-century town hall overshadowed the contribution of the House of Orange, which had been so overwhelming in *Huis ten Bosch*. The dominant image conveyed by Louis Napoleon's Royal Museum was that of the power of Amsterdam.

## **The Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815- )**

The Orange family returned from exile in 1813. Two years later, the Congress of Vienna united the combined territories of the northern and southern Netherlands (the present Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg) into a single kingdom, with the aim of counterbalancing the power of France on its northern borders. The son of the last Stadtholder, Willem I was appointed king of this territory – the first to enjoy this title. He saw himself as the successor of Louis Napoleon and maintained all the bodies that the latter had set up, with almost all the civil servants retaining their posts.

The new king founded several new museums in existing buildings in Leiden and The Hague. Among them was a second national art museum in The Hague, which was dubbed the Royal Cabinet of Paintings, although it is better known to us as the Mauritshuis, as named after the building it has occupied since 1822 (at first only one floor and after 1875 both floors). The paintings that were housed in this building had constituted the collection of the Stadtholders, which had been expropriated by the Netherlands state before being transported to Paris. Part of this collection had now been brought back from the Louvre and restored to the nation. The king renamed Louis Napoleon's Royal Museum 's *Rijks* (or national) *Museum*. In 1817 this museum was given premises in the *Trippenhuis*, where it was combined with the National Print Room (Bergvelt 1992; Bergvelt 1998: 88–137). Whereas the Mauritshuis is a symbol of the stadtholder's power, the Amsterdam museum is representative of the successive enemies of Orange: the city of Amsterdam, the Batavian Republic and Louis Napoleon. During the reign of Willem I no one thought of combining the two museums in Amsterdam and The Hague, let alone merging them with the most important collections in the southern Netherlands, namely those in the municipal museums of Brussels and Antwerp. Although the king's policy, logically enough, was to do everything he could to unify his new kingdom, he did not deploy art and museums as instruments in this endeavor.



The *Trippenhuis* was at the time the largest mansion on the canals of Amsterdam, but it was also a seventeenth-century building. The largest room on the second floor was comparable to the large room in the Royal Palace, and it was designated to receive the paintings that represented the 'history of our homeland', including the seven large Amsterdam paintings. The large room on the upper floor contained the other historical pictures and those with biblical and mythological scenes. The antiquities and other curiosities were displayed in showcases. The smaller cabinet pictures were hung in the smaller rooms at the back, where they were classified by genre: still-lives, Italian or Italianate landscapes, Dutch landscapes, seascapes and interiors. This arrangement was adapted to the study needs of contemporary painters.

In 1825 the Ministry of the Interior decided that the national collections had to be reorganized. All three-dimensional objects were to be transported from the Rijksmuseum and sent to other national museums in The Hague or Leiden. In 1825 therefore all historical objects were moved from the Rijksmuseum to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities in The Hague. The director of the Rijksmuseum did not protest about the loss of the so-called 'national relics'; indeed he declared that they were not very important. In his view, they were only important if they were believed to be authentic and he clearly thought they were not (Bergvelt 2010a: 187).

Among other objects the sixteenth-century chair purported to have belonged to the fifteenth-century Jacoba of Bavaria, and the eighteenth-century weapons made in Sri Lanka, said to have been wielded by the seventeenth-century admiral Michiel de Ruyter, were sent to The Hague. These objects were allocated their place in the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities on the second floor of the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

# PLAN OF THE ROYAL CABINET OF RARITIES 1826

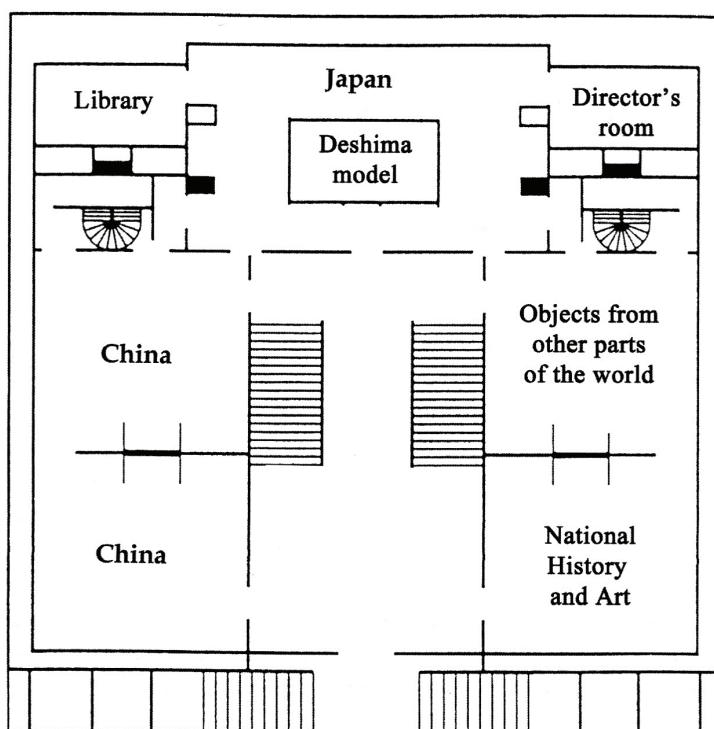


Figure 3: Ground plan of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities on the second floor of the Mauritshuis, The Hague, 1826. From Effert 2011: 155.

This was a cabinet of curiosities in the old-fashioned sense, with the largest part dedicated to objects from China installed in two rooms (Effert 2011). The central attraction was a model of the island of Deshima in Japan, where the Dutch had had a trading post since the beginning of the seventeenth century. One might think that this would belong in a Dutch history section, but it was shown in the context of ethnological objects from distant lands. Dutch national history was confined to one small room on the right, and it had to share even that with applied arts objects.

As a consequence of these changes, the museum in the Trippenhuis ended up after 1825 solely as a painting gallery, except for the print room. The Rijksmuseum was reorganized. The still-lives, landscapes, seascapes, and interiors stayed in the same rooms, but the contents of the two larger rooms – that is, historical paintings of all sorts were divided into two categories: the historical paintings went into one room and the portraits into the other. The portraits were arranged like a sort of board room in the museum room, which indeed doubled as such for the Royal Dutch Institute for Arts and Sciences. No early depiction of that room exists. After 1825 the museum was increasingly given the function of a school for artists, since the portrait painters and history painters also now had their own rooms for making copies of artworks. This made it even less of a venue for educating the general public in Dutch history than it had been before.

In the other large room – the one with historical paintings – the pictures of subjects from Dutch history were distributed around the space, in between scenes from the Bible and Greek and Roman mythology. Those works by Rubens (*Cimon and Pero*), Scorel (*Mary Magdalen*), Van

Eyck (now: Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The holy kinship*) and the Allegory already seen to have been present in the gallery in The Hague were combined with large paintings by Lairese (Scenes from the story of Odysseus), Cornelis van Haarlem (*The fall of man*) and Caspar de Crayer (*The adoration of the shepherds* and *The descent from the cross*) (Bergvelt 1998, figs. V-VI and 52–53). Clearly this museum concentrated on art and not on history.

Most of the acquisitions were of paintings deemed artistically important and not of works of art intended in some way to inspire the viewers with a ‘feeling for the fatherland’. Since Louis Napoleon the historical aspect had been treated as secondary to the artistic merits of the paintings. The same was the case in the Mauritshuis. Both museum directors would have preferred an international collection, with paintings by Raphael, Domenichino, Guido Reni and Murillo, like other national art museums of Europe at the time. The few acquisitions of historical paintings made in the period before 1830 were lesser (and cheaper) works, mostly portraits. Instead of politicians, princes, and naval heroes as had been the case in the National Art Gallery, the director now favoured images of artists (including self-portraits), poets and other cultural heroes, which was very appropriate for the board room of the Royal Dutch Institute for Arts and Sciences: their predecessors looked down upon their meetings.

### **The ‘Period of National Indifference’ (1830– c. 1870)**

1830 was a crucial date in Dutch museum history. It was the year of the Belgian Revolt, which signaled the emergence of Belgium as an independent state. From this year onwards almost no money was spent on the Dutch national museums. This ‘period of national indifference’, as it is known, lasted some forty years. In around 1870 the Dutch economy started to expand again and new museums were founded, including the new Rijksmuseum.

The year 1830 marked the end of almost all purchases by the national museums. The Rijksmuseum experienced a period of total inertia between 1830 and 1870. This was not merely due to the war with Belgium but also to the policy of the liberal governments of that period for whom culture was a matter for private individuals and not a task for the authorities. King Willem II (1840–1849) moreover, unlike his father Willem I, felt an aversion towards the national museums, preferring to concentrate on his own art collection for which he had built a beautiful Gothic Hall and a Marble Hall in The Hague (Bergvelt 2004; Hinterding/Horsch 1989).

In 1844 the famous Dutch author Everardus Potgieter wrote an article advocating a change in the content of the Rijksmuseum, suggesting that it should be reorganized according to the model of the *Musée historique* at Versailles, with the portrait room as its departure point. He describes exactly which scenes of Dutch history he would have liked to see in the museum rooms. While Versailles was a project dear to the heart of the French King himself, in the Netherlands nobody was interested in the museum, let alone in history in the museum, certainly not King Willem II. He preferred his Murillos and van Dycks. As a consequence the Rijksmuseum remained, as it was – a gallery of paintings, with the emphasis on the artistic achievements of Dutch and Flemish painters, intended primarily for contemporary artists to study. It was another thirty years before a serious concern for history in museums emerged once more. Potgieter also asked Willem II and private individuals for gifts and bequests to lay the foundations of his dreamed-of historical museum, but his plea met with no response, inside or outside the museum (Bergvelt 2010a).

In 1844 the director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam died; he had been a salaried state employee since 1809, but after his death director and curators were supposed to run the museum unpaid, as the director of the Mauritshuis had done since 1816. It was only in 1875 that the new director of the Rijksmuseum, J.W. Kaiser, was given a part-time post. His other appointment was as professor of engraving at the National Art Academy (*Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten*; Bergvelt 1998: 209).

The directors were amateurs or, in the cases of Apostool and Kaiser, artists. It was only in the 1880s that art historians were given appointments in the museums, and throughout the nineteenth century no historians held posts as curators or directors. This may also have had to do with the fact that historians educated at the Dutch universities were mostly interested in documents, not images. A few amateur historians showed an interest in cultural history, for instance Conrad Busken Huet, author of the books *Het land van Rubens* (1879) and *Het land van Rembrandt* (1882–1884). The internationally renowned twentieth-century scholar Johan Huizinga was the first academic historian to incorporate the arts as a part of his field.

### **New initiatives and reorganizations (1870–1940)**

In the 1870s the Dutch economy started to flower again. Funds became available and this period has even been called the Second Golden Age. With the liberals finally out of power, the decision was taken to build a new Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It opened in 1885. Attendance figures grew from about forty thousand a year in the *Trippenhuis* to 632,466 in the new building. No longer an institution catering mainly for artists (and tourists), it became a popular museum with Dutch people of all social classes, who visited the various sections – old masters, contemporary art, the print room, the rooms for the different epochs and the history sections. According to visitors' books, extant from 1844 until 1877, however, a large number of ordinary Amsterdam citizens paid a visit to the Rijksmuseum in the *Trippenhuis* in September, during the annual Amsterdam *kermis* (fair). This was the only time they got a holiday (Bergvelt/Hörster 2010). The fact that they visited the Rijksmuseum indicates that the museum was at the time not regarded as a special preserve of the educated classes.

The architect of the new museum was Pierre Cuypers, famous for the many neo-Gothic churches he had built throughout the Netherlands. After 1853 the Catholic episcopate was recognized and Catholics were permitted to build their own churches. Before that time the churches of all denominations were designed by engineers of the Ministry of Public Works, often in a neo-classical style. The freedom to build their own churches led to an explosion of new Catholic churches in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands, mostly in a neo-Gothic style. Cuypers was one of the most important ecclesiastical architects. The fact that he was chosen to design the museum was a sign of Catholic emancipation in the Netherlands. Protestants were very critical of the style of the Rijksmuseum, as can be seen in the caricature comparing the museum with an episcopal palace.

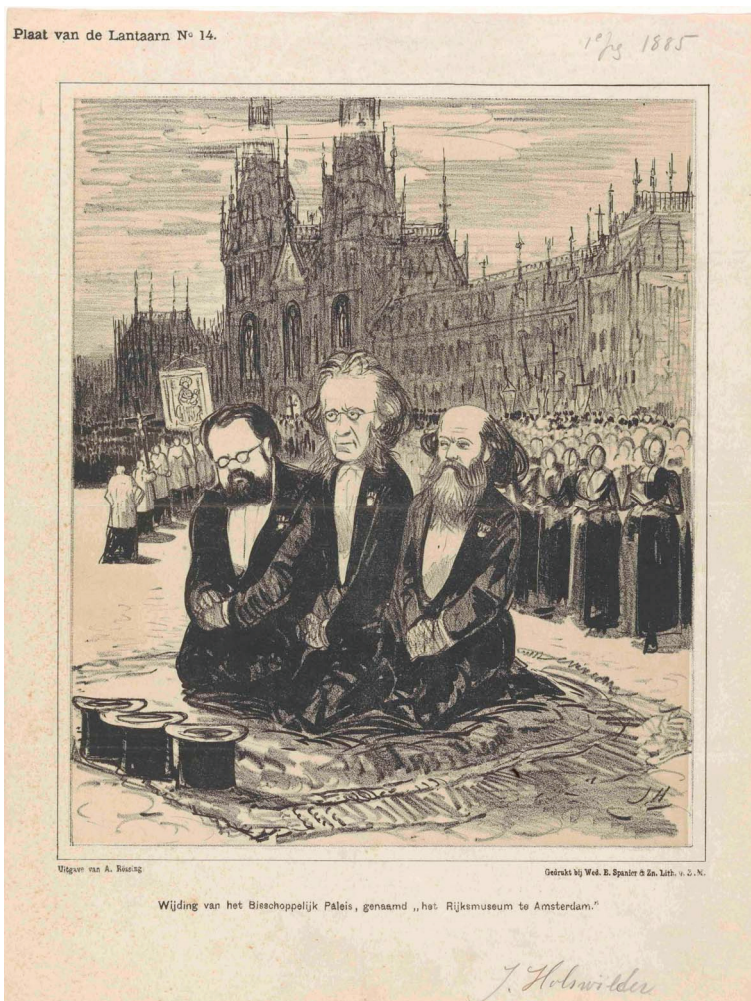


Figure 4: J.P. Holswilder, caricature ‘The consecration of the episcopal palace called “the Rijksmuseum at Amsterdam”’. From left to right: Victor de Stuers, Joseph Alberdingk Thijm and Pierre Cuypers. From: *De Lantaarn* 1885.

Indeed all three men involved, the architect Cuypers on the right, his adviser J.A Alberdingk Thijm in the middle, and the civil servant of the Ministry of the Interior, Victor de Stuers, on the left, here depicted kneeling, were Catholics.

Before the Rijksmuseum was built, the same Victor de Stuers took the initiative to found the Netherlands Museum of History and Art in The Hague. This museum collected everything loosely related to Dutch history and the applied arts, although when he was putting forward the case for founding this museum, De Stuers had said that its purpose would be to illustrate the history of the fatherland by presenting material around its rulers and other famous figures. The annual reports however show a huge and widely divergent variety of objects: spectacles, metal fastenings, anything dug up during excavations or when rivers were dredged, horse-sleighs, anything remotely related to the guilds, but also Delftware, silver objects by the silversmiths Adam and Paulus van Vianen and historical paintings from government buildings. It seems that De Stuers was carrying out a rescue operation, without any specific list of historical or artistic objects. There was no system whatsoever in his selection and any objects that were acquired that may have had a nationalist import or celebrating the glory of the Netherlands were lost among the plethora of folk art objects and archaeological finds (Bergvelt 1998: 200–201). This is a good



example of the ‘rhetoric of cultural policy’: what was written in official documents bore no relation to the practice.

The paintings section in the Rijksmuseum was opened in 1885 on the second floor, with the *Nightwatch* as centrepiece, presented in such a way that it looked like a high altar in a Roman Catholic church; two years later extremely varied collections were on display on the first floor.

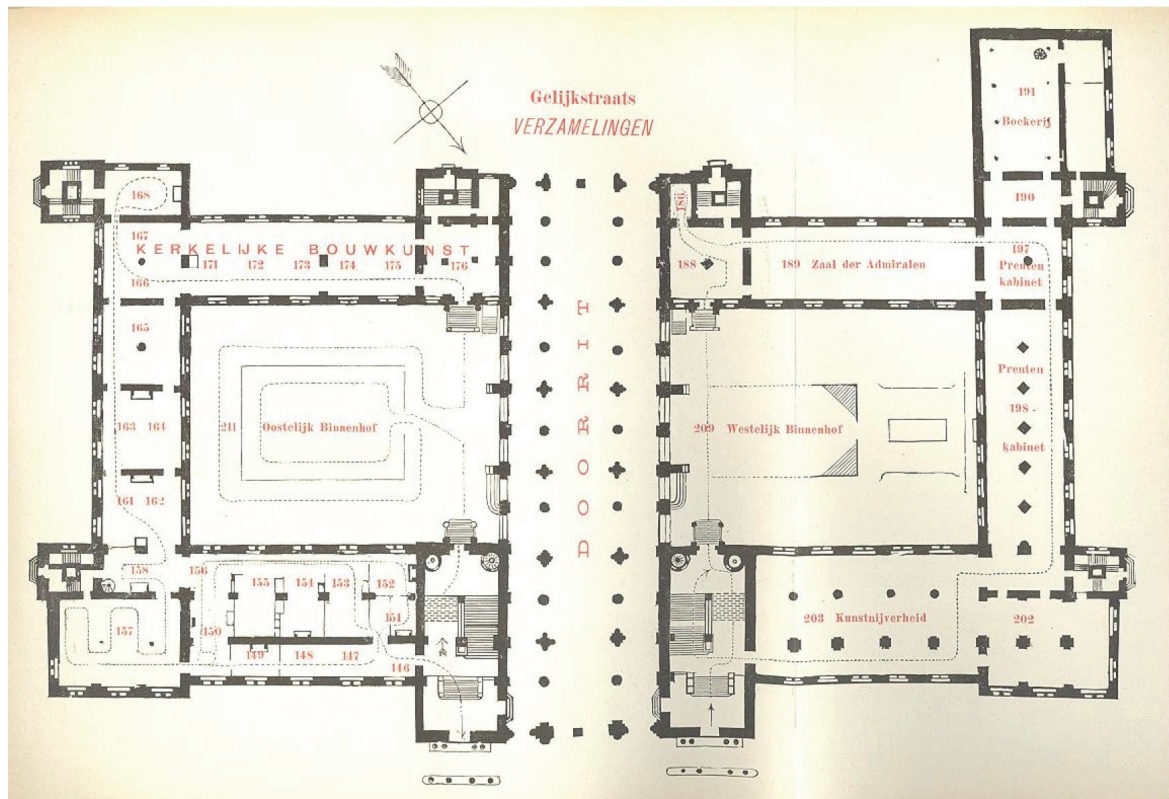


Figure 5: Plan of the ground floor of the Rijksmuseum in 1887. On the left the section, *Kerkelijke Bouwkunst* or church architecture (rooms 166–168, 171–176;), room no. 152 with historical objects; on the right the *Prentenkabinet* or print room (197 and 198), *Kunstnijverheid* or decorative arts (203) and the *Zaal der Admiralen* or Gallery of the Admirals (189). From: Obreen 1887: 86–7.

The largest sections were devoted to plaster casts in the western court and the print gallery with the library and the applied arts section in the rooms surrounding it. In the eastern court were some trophies, for instance the stern of the flagship, the Royal Charles captured from the British in 1667, during the second Anglo-Dutch War, when the Dutch sailed up the Medway and came close to taking London. But these important commemorative objects were not kept together but dispersed around the space and juxtaposed with objects of cultural history, devoid of explicit political content, such as carriages, and musical instruments. While these trophies did convey a sense of national pride, they were not forged into a great narrative, but appeared as isolated statements, weakened by the political insignificance of the surrounding objects.

The eastern court was boarded by period rooms with church architecture (*Kerkelijke bouwkunst*) designed by the architect, Pierre Cuyper. It seems that the museum thought that the representation of cultural history provided by these period rooms was more important than political or other kinds of history. The only rooms that had a classical historical content were the Gallery of the Admirals (no. 189) next to the western court and the room dedicated to historical objects (no. 152) next to the eastern court. The Gallery of the Admirals contained not only

portraits of admirals, but also of generals and battle scenes, military and naval – altogether some 130 paintings. Once again then one finds a presentation that was not coherent, probably because it had to be compiled in a very short period of time. The same applies to the art section. It was a case of a new and very expensive building, at the time the largest in the country, but which still had no time and money for the museum curators or directors to travel abroad in preparation of arranging the display. Also the interior and exterior decoration programmes showing the glory of Amsterdam (on the West side) and scenes of patronage of the arts in the Middle Ages (on the East), seem to have been designed haphazardly for each side of the building separately, with repetitions (Rembrandt appears five times on the exterior!) and without any strong relation with the contents of the museum (Bergvelt 2011), except for the original central scene on the South side (Rembrandt painting the *Syndics* surrounded by his pupils). What to think of the foundation of the castle of The Hague in 1258, Dürer visiting Bois-le-Duc in 1520, rulers offering the stained-glass windows to the church of St. John in Gouda or Jan van Eyck working in The Hague? (see for an overview of the most important scenes on the exterior and interior Bergvelt 2011; for the 82 names and medallions on the exterior, Bergvelt 1998, 387–388)

### Some answers

The most important reason that the Rijksmuseum was unable or unwilling to provide a coherent survey of Dutch history was probably due to the underlying tensions between Catholics and Protestants and that explicitly came to the forefront after the reinstatement of the Catholic bishops in 1853. The result was the compartmentalization (or 'pillarization') of Dutch society into different religious and secular or political denominations between roughly 1900 and 1965. Each religious denomination or social group – Catholics, Protestants, liberals and social-democrats – had its own newspaper, political party, schools and, later on, broadcasting company. That also meant, for instance, that Protestant Dutch history was different from Catholic Dutch history: a national institution like a national museum had to be very circumspect when it offered a general survey of Dutch history. It seems that the Rijksmuseum postponed making any choices, or explicit historical statements at least throughout the nineteenth century.

It was only after a national debate in the 1910s and 1920s (Meijers 1978) that the Rijksmuseum sections were modernized and reorganized: the paintings section in the 1920s, the section of Dutch maritime history in 1931, and that of Dutch history in 1937 (Bos 1997). But even then the art historians had the upper hand (Luijten 1995).

Why did it take so long? There are several reasons that we have invoked throughout this article. Firstly there was the dire economic situation that only improved after 1870, coupled with the decline of liberalism occurring at around the same time. Secondly there was a change in the intended public of the museum: at first it was primarily meant for artists (although during the fair in September the people of Amsterdam overrun the museum in the Trippenhuys), but it was only in the new building that the target group of the museum really became the broad public. For them the two new sections with overviews of Dutch history were made in the 1930s. Then there were the length of time it took for cultural life to be organized on a national instead of a municipal level, the slow development of professionalized museum staff and the fact that historians only started taking an interest in artefacts, as opposed to textual evidence, in the twentieth century.

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