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Summary

‘A Kind of Museum’: Origin, History and Future of Museum Willet-Holthuysen, 1853-2010

This dissertation deals with the changing fortunes of Museum Willet-Holthuysen, which first opened in Amsterdam in 1896. The eponymous legator (1895) was the fourth in half a century to bequeath a private collection as the basis for a municipal museum; the others being Van der Hoop (1854), Fodor (1860) and Lopez Suasso-de Bruijn (1890). Of these nineteenth-century museums, only Museum Willet-Holthuysen has survived into the twenty-first century. That it still exists is due paradoxically to various adjustments to the terms of the legacy left by Louisa Willet-Holthuysen (1824-1895), widow of the art collector Abraham Willet (1825-1888) of Amsterdam.

It is remarkable how negative the image of the museum, the collection and the original collectors has been for much of the twentieth century. This disapproval is in sharp contrast to the admiration Willet garnered for his involvement in culture in his own lifetime, a positive sentiment that encompassed his collection too. There are several reasons for this reversal: a general rejection of the nineteenth century; changing views about museums and a novel written by the museum’s first curator, Frans Coenen. Interest in the nineteenth-century aspects of the museum began to revive in the closing decades of the twentieth century, a phenomenon that reflects an international interest in collection and museum history and in museums that comprise a historic (collectors) house. The four-part presentation of this dissertation - Celebrated, Reviled, Forgotten and Rediscovered - mirrors the dramatic changes in the public perception of the museum in the course of the twentieth century.

The first section, Celebrated, covers the period of the collection before the museum was established and casts new light on the lives, networks and aspirations Willet and his wife had for the collection. Using previously untouched sources such as correspondence and the unpublished memoirs of Maurits van Lennep, a college friend of Willet (and later related by marriage), the first chapter shows that it was not just Abraham who was raised on a diet of art and culture. Louisa had also been interested in art from a young age, and remained so all her life. Even after her husband died in 1888, she was still buying paintings. Clearly her part in the creation of the collection was more substantial than previously thought. She did not publicise her purchases. But as a married woman, she was able to support her husband in his ambitions in the world of art and culture in more than just a financial sense.

Willet had already begun to collect art before his marriage in 1861, and his interests were wide. Besides paintings and sculpture by contemporary French masters, which links him in the 1850s to the Dutch avant garde, he also bought Dutch old masters and antiques such as furniture, glass and ceramics. The accepted view that he only owned French paintings before his marriage to Louisa and began collecting other objects later is incorrect. This area was certainly the main focus of his collection in the 1860s. And indeed this was the trend; the growing interest in antiquities is reflected in the foundation of the Royal Antiquarian Society in 1858, which Willet helped set up.

Abraham Willet was a popular figure in Amsterdam's art world. He was a respected member of *Arti et Amicitiae*, and served for many years as curator of the Society mentioned earlier. At *Arti* he helped organise and present many exhibitions. He often contributed loans to exhibitions in Holland and abroad, as the accompanying catalogues show. Willet also acquired a considerable reputation with his art lectures at the Royal Antiquarian Society meetings. After the Willet-Holthuysens bought their villa outside Paris in 1874, Willet's involvement in Amsterdam's cultural life gradually waned.

In this largely biographical chapter, the future contours of the collection begin to emerge. Given the remarkable fluctuations of the collection through various sales (including 1858 and 1874), gifts (see Appendix V) and a fire (1884), it seems that Willet never saw it as having a permanent status worthy of a museum. He had already given away too many pieces to other museums, up until shortly before his death. It was his widow who wanted a museum, as a monument to civic pride and for their personal prestige.

Chapter two investigates the couple's art collection further. A comparison between documents from Willet's day and the inventory of the estate in 1895 shows that there was a huge difference in the size and content of the collection in its early days and when it was bequeathed. This confirms the suggestion in the previous chapter that Willet had no wish to create a permanent collection. Indeed, Willet seems also to have sold pieces to private buyers in undocumented transactions. Like the glass goblet Willet bought in 1859, which found its way into London's British Museum ten years later in a bequest from a British collector.

In conclusion, therefore, the Willet-Holthuysen legacy is the remains of a far larger corpus that had often changed shape in the couple's own lifetime. Some parts of the collection had almost completely disappeared by 1895, such as the paintings by contemporary masters of the Barbizon School (sold in 1858 and subsequent years) and

ceramics (especially stoneware, majolica and Delftware, sold in 1874). The weaponry collection appears to have been lost in the fire at the villa in France.

All this shows that Willet was an eclectic collector and capricious. As the owner of one of the earliest collections of contemporary French masters he belonged to the Dutch avant garde; yet with his collection of antiquities he followed the trend along with other collectors in Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap circles. His interest also originally focused on stoneware and glass rather than on Delftware and Oriental porcelain. Yet his taste for majolica, German silver showpieces and objets d'art was not typical for a Dutchman. He probably bought many of those items in Paris; the market in Amsterdam for these loud pieces was limited. Willet's glass collection, meanwhile, reveals a more than average interest in this area, as his contributions to exhibitions and contemporary accounts show.

Even among the contemporary masters that he collected later with his wife, a foreign, particularly French element remains. It was in this area that Louisa's influence is especially evident. Few other houses in Amsterdam could boast a similar range of work by the salon artists she favoured. In her predilection for the proto-impressionists of the Oosterbeek School, she kept her finger on the pulse. All in all, the Willet-Holthuysens were receptive to whatever was in vogue at the time, whether on the conservative or the more progressive side of the artistic spectrum.

Regarding works on paper, particularly prints, a certain pattern emerges, though perhaps less clear. The photo collection is remarkable in several ways. Willet was intrigued by the new medium and bought items with a keen eye for quality. This, and the documentary value of many of the photos, makes it an extremely important part of the collection, not least in relation to other sections. The same is true of Willet's library of art books. This provides the intellectual background to the other sections of the collection, to his personal life and that of his wife. Willet was an aesthete who viewed his home, his art collection and his library as a Gesamtkunstwerk, despite the fluctuations of his collection.

This is clear from presentations of the collection in the Willet home, which - like the possible plans for a museum - form the subject of chapter three. The elegant interior of their home at Herengracht 605, in the neo-Louis XVI style then in fashion, formed a fitting backdrop for Willet's collection of art, antiquities and books. The house was not stacked full, as the pictures show. In the rooms on the ground floor, furnishings, paintings and objects were carefully selected to form a whole. One contemporary described the ensemble as a

‘public lesson in style and taste’, a comment that expresses an appreciation for the distinguished, harmonious way in which Willet furnished his house.

Part of Willet’s collection was at his house in France. Unlike the French style of the rooms in Amsterdam, here it was the romantic that dominated, especially in the so-called studio. The interior reveals a preference for artistic expressions of the glories of the Dutch Golden Age, particularly pewter, brass and Delftware. Despite indications to the contrary, nothing in the interior was left to chance: the rooms exude a studied nonchalance. As in the house in Amsterdam, no piece is solitary, each item is part of the whole, a picturesque whole. This valuable inventory was largely lost in the fire that engulfed the house in 1884.

Interested visitors were given only partial access to Willet’s house in Amsterdam. Of other nineteenth-century collectors in Amsterdam, such as Van der Hoop and Fodor, we know that they received foreign guests on introduction on particular days. Willet is not known to have opened up his house like this, perhaps because his collection comprised more objects than old masters, which is what most foreign connoisseurs came to see.

This does not mean that Willet was not interested in encouraging others to appreciate art. His contributions to exhibitions show that he was, as do the many art lectures he held for his artistic friends at Arti and the Royal Antiquarian Society, as well as in his own home. The public museum, which we have already seen Willet never actually envisaged, was therefore not preceded by a period as a semi-public museum.

Since Willet never intended his collection to become a museum, his wife’s role in the realisation of the museum is all the more remarkable. Despite the absence of documentation, it seems that Willet’s widow was aided in her museum plans by a close family friend: Daniel Franken, an art historian and collector. Certain aspects suggest a more than superficial involvement in the creation of the museum.

The second section, *Reviled*, deals with the museum up to the Second World War, when Museum Willet-Holthuysen began to draw increasing criticism as a nineteenth-century institution. Successive curators and directors left their mark on the museum and its collection in this period. Chapter four deals with the museum as an independent municipal institution run by writer and curator Frans Coenen. During his tenure it was the library that took pride of place; no more acquisitions were made for the art collection, indeed pieces were lost. Coenen made few changes to the interior of the ground floor. He expanded Willet’s book collection to create a library of the decorative arts. It was employed as a didactic tool according to the

social-democratic principle of the day that art and popular education went hand in hand. That optimistic expectation was never realised, although for many years it was the library that kept the museum afloat.

Coenen, who belonged first and foremost to the world of literature, wrote up the collection in two catalogues and published various articles. Yet his greatest impact came posthumously, in 1936, when his novel *Onpersoonlijke herinneringen* (Impersonal Memories) was published. The work, with its negative image of the last inhabitants of the house and the age in which they lived, served as a historical source until well into the twentieth century. It profoundly influenced public opinion about the legators and the museum.

Various external factors also helped diminish the museum's reputation, such as the debate about renewal of the Dutch museum world in the 1910s. A museum presenting the finite accumulation of a nineteenth-century collector had become an anachronism. It was rejected both in a personal sense - it was a time when art appreciation was reduced to generally applicable norms - and in terms of the period which the museum and its collection represented: the reviled nineteenth century. Though some called Museum Willet-Holthuysen a dead museum, it survived the onslaught.

While the museum may have stagnated, in the 1930s a major change occurred. The arrival of Amsterdam University's Institute of Art History in 1929, due to the presence of Willet's library, heralded a series of profound adjustments. After Coenen's retirement in 1932, Museum Willet-Holthuysen came under the aegis of the Stedelijk Museum.

Chapter five discusses the museum in the 1930s, when art historian and curator I.Q. van Regteren Altena revived the museum with new acquisitions, exhibitions and evening presentations. The new dynamic required some adjustment to the ebullient furnishings of Willet's interior, and a more sober display was the result. Art could be better appreciated in a neutral ambience, it was argued, rather than a decorative setting. The front room was the first to be revamped in 1936, when a show of Watteau drawings was held there to mark the museum's fortieth anniversary.

The furnishings were also subjected to a critical reappraisal, implying a categorisation into genuinely old and nineteenth-century. As a result, much of the furniture and numerous objects were consigned to storage or given away on permanent loan. Indeed, several pieces that had once stood in the Willets' salons were given an entirely new lease of life as theatre

props at Amsterdam's Stadsschouwburg. For the first time since 1896, a steady stream of new acquisitions began to enter the museum, though often more to replace than to complement the Willet collection. All this meant the beginning of the end for the museum's original character, and so too the memory of the original benefactors disappeared.

On the first floor, the Art History Institute was making its presence felt. More space was needed for the ever expanding library, the collection of reproductions and the students. The institute hoped to establish itself as an internationally recognised academic body along the lines of London's Courtauld Institute, and so the library grew. The constant lack of space eventually began to affect relations with the museum on the ground floor. This was the situation at the outset of the Second World War, during which the status quo remained unchanged.

The third section, *Forgotten*, shows how interest in the museum revived after the low of the 1940s, thanks to new, contemporary initiatives. At first this left little space for the original collectors and their collection. Chapter six discusses the years 1939 to 1950, when the museum was evacuated as a precaution and the premises were rented out until after the liberation. This was almost the end of the nineteenth-century museum and its collection. The presentation which had until the 1930s remained an integral display expressing the personalities of the collectors, was broken up. During the war, the virtually empty building was used by the resistance and people hid there from the Nazi authorities. The museum's future looked bleak. Yet while official sources mentioned the possibility of closure after the war, that did not happen. Although it was not until 1950 that the museum reopened, the Art History Institute had already resumed its activities five years earlier.

Chapter seven reveals that the closing of the museum in this period served Willem Sandberg, director of Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, well. The nineteenth-century aspects of the museum had largely vanished, and as far as Sandberg was concerned, for good. In the 1950s, it was light and white that dominated. The exhibitions of historical applied art that he organised attracted large crowds, but his ambitious plan to turn Museum Willet-Holthuysen into a period house of around 1700 met with substantial resistance.

He envisioned a museum in which new period rooms would show life in Amsterdam in a wealthy house, including the servants quarters in the basement and attic. The new interior would use part of the Willet-Holthuysen legacy; most of the pieces would come from other municipal collections. Since Sandberg's plans were contrary to the terms of the bequest, he

was forced to apply to the Supreme Court to have these changed. In 1956 this was granted, though not entirely as Sandberg would have wished, which led to complications and delays.

The chronic lack of space in the museum and the Art History Institute prevented the immediate implementation of Sandberg's plan. The institute was therefore moved, although not until 1961/62, and then part of Willet's library went with the institute on permanent loan. In addition, an extension was planned in the garden, though never realised. The new plan proved difficult to implement. By the time Sandberg retired (1962), the only tangible progress was a late eighteenth-century kitchen. Actually, part of that interior dated from the early nineteenth century, the period which the director had intended to exclude above all.

Chapter eight explains why Sandberg's plan was never carried out in full in the 1960s and '70s, after Amsterdam Historical Museum took over from the Stedelijk. Curator Frits van Erpers Royaards combined Sandberg's ideas with various ad hoc decisions. The resultant lack of consistency, due in part to practical considerations, meant that some nineteenth-century aspects of the interior remained unchanged. The dining room and the conservatory were largely unaltered since the time that the Willets had redesigned them, so too the nineteenth-century interior of the main room, which Sandberg had proposed to radically restructure ten years before. After the Art History Institute left, a nineteenth-century bedroom from another house was installed, giving a kind of upstairs-downstairs feel to the house. The addition of a Baroque period garden (1972) was more in line with Sandberg's vision, as was the addition of the so-called blue room on the ground floor (1979/80), highlight and swan song of the sweeping 1950s plan.

The exhibition programme that Sandberg had initiated was continued enthusiastically in the 1960s and '70s in the rooms that had once housed the Art History Institute. Popular concerts were held in the ground floor rooms. An active acquisitions policy was also pursued. In addition to filling the interiors, these purchases were intended to produce a robust and independent collection of Dutch applied art. These would stand alongside the best pieces from Willet's collection, which consisted largely of objects made abroad.

In the 1970s, a reappraisal of the nineteenth century occurred, leading to an unprecedented broadening of horizons. A new appreciation emerged for a period that had been reviled and forgotten, leading to a flourishing multi-disciplinary research programme and a flood of publications.

Rediscovered, the fourth section, investigates the extent to which Museum Willet-Holthuysen participated in the growing interest in the nineteenth century. Chapter nine defines various transitional moments: the 1980s, 1996 and 2010. The centenary of Willet's death in 1988 was marked by a milestone exhibition and accompanying publication. For the first time, the collection, the founders and their motives for collecting were subjected to serious study. It was the start of their rehabilitation, an initiative of Michiel Jonker, Van Erpers Royaards's successor, assisted by a number of external experts.

This was followed by the centenary of the museum itself in 1996. Under the aegis of director Pauline W. Kruseman, the museum was renovated. Research undertaken during the renovation and subsequently, including an investigation into the history of the building, its interior and the Willet-Holthuysen collection, laid the foundation for a new policy concentrating on the original benefactors and life on an Amsterdam canal. Given the specific problems relating to Herengracht 605 - twentieth-century changes to a nineteenth-century museum in a seventeenth-century house - the focus is now on creating an overall vision for the museum. Gusta Reichwein and Hubert Vreeken, Jonker's successors, are developing the policy proposals. Their plans will incorporate the adjacent premises recently purchased by the municipality. These proposals have given a new impetus to the museum's public function, expressed for example in a successful series of thematic primary school tours. The year 2010 therefore represents a turning point: under its new director, Paul Spies, the museum is about to put the words of recent years into practice.

The conclusion compares the different visions of the museum sketched in the preceding essays from a cultural-historical and a museological perspective. It is clear that the importance currently attached to the museum and the collection is largely a consequence of the house, interior and collection as an ensemble, and in relation to the original owners. Finally, various recommendations suggest ways to implement the plans in the future.

Tibbon Translations