

History in the Dutch National Museums 1800–1900¹

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The premise of the 2022 conference at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg was that every European country in the nineteenth century had a government that wished to form a (cultural) nation, for which purpose objects were displayed in national museums. With these objects a national narrative was told, intended to forge a national identity and thus a (cultural) nation. In the Netherlands, however, things were different.²

First, there was no museum of national history. There still is none.³ During the Batavian Republic (1800–1806) a *Nationale Konst-Gallerij* (National Art Gallery) was established in The Hague, where in addition to the rooms for fine arts there were others (and adjacent cabinets) dedicated to the history of the country. In 1808 the collection of that gallery was moved to Amsterdam, and in 1817 it was renamed 's *Rijks Museum* (National Museum); a new building to house this collection was erected at the end of the century. That building housed several further museums, among them the *Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst* (Netherlands Museum of History and Art). Its collection also came from The Hague, where it had opened in 1875. But, as the name implies, it was not really a historical museum: part of it was devoted to arts and crafts from the past.

Second, Dutch rulers of the nineteenth century, in the few cases where they formulated ideas about museums or even developed policies for them, were more interested in art than in history. Until 1830 considerably more money was paid for pictures deemed to

- 1 Many thanks to Barbara Laan, Erik Schmitz (Stadsarchief, Amsterdam), and Lieske Tibbe.
- 2 This article is based on my book (in Dutch) about the history of the two national Dutch art museums in the nineteenth century – the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam and the *Mauritshuis* in The Hague – with an emphasis on the acquisition of pictures: see Bergvelt 1998, see also the later articles (in English): Bergvelt 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2018.
- 3 Despite an initiative by the Dutch House of Representatives in 2006 to create a museum of national history. In fact, an architect had already been at work on the museum, which was supposed to be in Arnhem, and a group of people had been hired to make further preparations. Despite work on the project from 2008 to 2011, the plan failed. See Elshout 2016, 771–817. Meijers 2009, 53, sees the survival of regionalism as an important factor in resistance to the plan. More recently, in December 2021, the plan for a museum of national history was again put forward, this time in the coalition agreement of the Fourth Rutte Cabinet. However, given the history, as well as the current crisis situation, it seems unlikely that it will ever be realized.

be of artistic value than for those with historical significance.⁴ However, in the middle of the century almost no money was spent on Dutch art and culture, to the extent that the time between 1830 and 1870 was justly characterized – by the Amsterdam alderman Emanuel Boekman in his dissertation of 1939, which gives an overview of Dutch cultural policy – as the era of national indifference (*nationale onverschilligheid*).⁵

Finally, in the nineteenth century there was no Dutch national museum that told a chronological or thematic story of Dutch history: the historic objects were presented at best decoratively; often, objects related to a single person were displayed separately.⁶ In a case that is exceptional for the early years of the Dutch national museums, at the National Art Gallery in The Hague the curator Jan Waldorp provided guided tours, during which he seems to have told a coherent story in accordance with the ideals of the Batavian Republic, forming an object-based narrative across different rooms.⁷

Fig. 1: Jan Asselijn, *The Threatened Swan*, ca 1650, oil on canvas, 144 × 171 cm.



- 4 See Bergvelt 1998. That seems to be contradicted, at least for the later period, by Laan 2014–2016, 71 and 93 (note 7), where the Netherlands Museum of History and Art is discussed.
- 5 Boekman 1939, 15–35.
- 6 The situation seems to have been different at the Netherlands Museum of History and Art in The Hague: see below.
- 7 Grijzenhout 1984, 10–11; Bergvelt 1998, 34–54; and Bergvelt 2012, 118–121.

To explain what was happening in Dutch museums in the nineteenth century in the matter of history (and nation-building), I will discuss three objects and the changes they underwent during their many relocations and rearrangements in that century. The first is a seventeenth-century painting by Jan Asselijn, *The Threatened Swan* (fig. 1). My second case study is an eighteenth-century cannon taken in 1765 from the island of Ceylon, now better known as Sri Lanka (fig. 2). The third is a seventeenth-century painting by Ferdinand Bol, *The Portrait of Michiel de Ruyter*, the most famous of Dutch seventeenth-century admirals (fig. 3). This portrait is included because the eighteenth-century cannon from Sri Lanka was later mistakenly thought to have belonged to or been associated with De Ruyter.

Fig. 2: Cannon, Sri Lanka, before 1745, bronze, silver, gold, rubies, and wood, ca 54 (h.) × ca 181 (w.) × ca 77 (d.) × ca 98 (l.) × ca 43 (diam.) cm.



Fig. 3: Ferdinand Bol, *Michiel de Ruyter as Lieutenant-Admiral*, 1667, oil on canvas, 157 × 138 cm.



The Batavian Republic (1795–1806)

The French armies and the Dutch so-called Patriots, who were opponents of the stadtholders, ended the *ancien régime* of the Dutch Republic of the Seven United Provinces in 1795. This brought to a close the federation of provinces, in which cultural life had been locally organized – as evidenced by city drawing academies, for example. Before 1795, no national cultural institution existed under the aegis of the stadtholder or the States General. Now a centrally organized administration arose with national institutions, such as a national library (1798) and a national art museum (1800). A royal academy was not established in Amsterdam until 1822. The House of Orange-Nassau, from which the stadtholders had been chosen in the previous centuries, fled to England, with their jewels, money, and some of their collections, but they left their best pictures in The Hague, along with very important natural history collections. These holdings were taken by the French to Paris; some of the pictures are still in the Louvre and other French museums, the natural history collections are still in the *Muséum national d'histoire naturelle* (French

National Museum of Natural History). In the Netherlands, all the possessions of the House of Orange were nationalized. What had been left behind in the other palaces began to be sold. After a while, however, minister of finance Alexander Gogel realized that, from an international perspective, it might come across as barbaric to sell the cultural heritage of the House of Orange. Moreover, the objects could be used to represent the aims of the Batavian Republic, which shared with its sister, the French Republic, the values of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. It was Gogel who, in 1798, proposed to found a national museum. Gogel's first aim was to raise the moral standard of the Dutch public. That objective fits in general with the subject of nation-building: works of art with images of esteemed historical events or persons could indeed serve this purpose. Gogel, however, did not mention anything about offering a complete overview of Dutch history in the proposed museum. His other two objectives had to do with the art that would be on view.⁸

The French had taken with them to Paris the pictures and the natural history collections of the former stadtholder, who was their real enemy in the Dutch Low Countries. But there were other, historical, parts of his collection that they did not want or deemed unimportant. Whatever the reason, in 1795 the so-called *Vaderlandsche gedenkstukken* (reminders of the Fatherland), also referred to as *nationale of historische relieken* (national or historical relics), were handed over by the French to the States General in an official ceremony (fig. 4). Among these national relics were some weapons that had been taken from Sri Lanka in 1765 and presented to the stadtholder.⁹

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- 8 Second, Gogel sought to spread good taste by means of works of art, both from home and abroad, and thereby raise the level of civilization of the general public. Third, contemporary artists could study the work of their predecessors in the museum in order to improve their own work. This, it was believed, would in turn benefit the country's economy, see Bergvelt 1998, 31; Grijzenhout 1984.
- 9 See the recent report on the cannon from Sri Lanka: Schrikker and Boogaart 2022a. Until now, at least in Van Thiel 1981, this object, along with the golden sabre (inv. no. NG-NM-560) and silver sabre (inv. no. NG-NM-7112) from that same island, were thought to have belonged to the *Vaderlandsche gedenkstukken*. However, in the recent reports (Schrikker and Boogaart 2022b-c) a different provenance is given, without taking into account Van Thiel 1981. Recently, on 6 July 2023, the State Secretary of Culture decided to return the objects to Sri Lanka, see <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2023/07/06/tegen-gave-van-cultuurgooier-ten-indonesië-en-sri-lanka>. On December 5, 2023, the objects were transferred: they were on display at an exhibition at the National Museum in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka.

Fig. 4: Reinier Vinkeles, Return by the French of Historical Items from the Stadtholder's Collection to the States General, 1795, published in 1803, etching and engraving.



Thus the end of the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of a national collection, consisting of these national relics and the many paintings left behind in palaces. These were mainly portraits of admirals, generals, and members of the House of Orange-Nassau. There were also quite a few paintings with still lifes or animal subjects, as was usual in palaces used for hunting. In any case, reminders of the Orange family were prevalent. This was further emphasized when the first Dutch national museum, the National Art Gallery, opened on 31 May 1800 in the west wing of *Huis ten Bosch* (House in the Wood) near The Hague. In the centre of this palace was the *Oranjezaal* (Orange Room), dedicated to the memory of the seventeenth-century Stadtholder Frederik Hendrik. Waldorp's tour ended in the *Oranjezaal*, a masterpiece of Dutch seventeenth-century art, to which various Dutch and Flemish painters had contributed.¹⁰ It was somewhat ironic that the main part of the Batavian museum was devoted to one of the protagonists of the *ancien régime*.

Since the French troops had taken the stadtholders' most beautiful pictures to Paris, the House in the Wood could only display the leftovers of their collection. Nevertheless, initially the national museum was dominated by the history of the House of Orange.

Although the Batavian Republic was in precarious financial condition (it had to pay millions of guilders to France), it attempted to balance the contents of the museum by purchasing portraits of opponents of the House of Orange. This was apparent from the very first purchase for the National Art Gallery, in 1800: *The Threatened Swan* by Jan Asselijn (see fig. 1). This painting was at the time thought to be an allegorical depiction of the Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt: since *wit(t)* means 'white' in Dutch, the link between De Witt and the swan was quickly made. An outspoken enemy of the House of Orange, De Witt had in 1653 become the most powerful man in the Dutch Republic during the first stadtholder-less era (1650–1672), when the House of Orange-Nassau was not in power. The formidable swan in the painting defends its nest, and the egg therein, against a dog that may be barking. To make the message clear, inscriptions were incorporated reading "the Grand Pensionary" (beneath the swan), "Holland" (on the egg), and "the enemy of the state" (above the dog).¹¹ There was disagreement as to whether this 'enemy' was England or Orange, or perhaps both. Asselijn probably conceived the painting only as an animal picture. He could not have known that Johan de Witt would become Grand Pensionary, given that he died a year before De Witt took office. It later turned out that the inscriptions had been added in the eighteenth century.¹²

This first acquisition for the National Art Gallery was rather cheap, only 100 guilders. In general, more was paid for paintings acquired for artistic reasons, such as *The Hippopotamus Hunt* by Rubens (now a copy after Rubens) for 3,300 guilders and *The Beheading of John the Baptist* by Rembrandt (now attributed to Carel Fabritius) for 775 guilders.¹³ In

10 See <http://oranjezaal.rkdmnographs.nl/> (first published in 2015).

11 The inscriptions read: "DE RAAD-PENSIONARIS"; "HOLLAND"; and "DE VIAND VAN DE STAAT".

12 Van Thiel 1981, 173. According to him, the words were added during the so-called *Wittenoerlog* (Witt's War). This fierce battle of pamphlets in 1757 counted more than seventy titles. At stake was the significance of Johan de Witt for the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. Two parties were diametrically opposed – Orangists versus what was then called the Loevestein faction.

13 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-600 (copy after Rubens; burned in 1942), see Bergvelt 1998, 395 (*1804–16); Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-91 ("Rembrandt"), see Bergvelt 1998, 394 (*1801–7).

the end, 129 paintings were acquired in the Batavian period, for which a total of 64,000 guilders was paid. This included roughly equal numbers of paintings deemed important for historic as for artistic reasons.¹⁴

We are fairly well informed about the objects in the collection and how they were displayed. Waldorp drew plans of the walls in the winter of 1800/1801, writing on them, in picture frames, the names of the artists and the titles of the paintings. In 1801, the director of the museum, Cornelis Sebillé Roos, compiled a catalogue in manuscript in the collection that was not published until 1909.¹⁵ In 1981 the art historian Pieter J. J. van Thiel used Waldorp's wall plans and Roos's catalogue as a basis to identify the 225 paintings and other objects that were present at the time, most of which have ended up in the *Rijksmuseum*; some are in the *Mauritshuis*, while others are missing.¹⁶

Waldorp's drawings show that while the National Art Gallery had three rooms as well as some cabinets devoted to art, two rooms were dedicated to Dutch history. In the first history room and cabinet hung Asselijn's *Threatened Swan*, next to portraits of admirals, members of the House of Orange-Nassau, and seascapes. Curiously, we do know that some years later, in 1804, Waldorp moved *The Threatened Swan* from the history display to one of the fine-arts rooms, placing it alongside the other pictures of animals.¹⁷ It seems he thought Asselijn's painting had been out of place in the former room, which mainly contained portraits, including Bol's depiction of De Ruyter (fig. 3).¹⁸

The Monument Room was the second room dedicated to Dutch history. This is where the 'national relics', including pieces from Sri Lanka, were displayed. The Dutch had seized the splendid cannon (fig. 2) and other weapons as booty during a military campaign in 1765, when the palace of the king of Kandy in Sri Lanka was captured. They were presented to Stadtholder William V (r. 1751–1806) for his cabinet of curiosities in The Hague. In Roos's catalogue of 1801, however, the cannon was recorded as a seventeenth-century object – as “present from the emperor of Tunis to the state, conveyed by Michiel de Ruyter”¹⁹ and assumed a relationship with De Ruyter, the Dutch hero of the seventeenth century.

Despite the purchases made during the Batavian Republic, it was by no means possible to present an overview of Dutch history in the two historic rooms of the National Art Gallery. It seems this was not the aim, as is apparent for instance from the placement of the portrait of De Ruyter in the first room and the display of the cannon that had supposedly belonged to him in the Monument Room. Nevertheless, during Waldorp's tour the visitor would have received a clear message concerning the commendable bravery of all

14 Crijzenhout 1984, 12 and 43 (note 56).

15 Moes and Van Biema 1909, 47–53.

16 Van Thiel 1981, 180–223.

17 This can be deduced from the list that Waldorp made in 1804. There he maintained the interpretation of the swan as Johan de Witt: Bergvelt 1998, 43 and 297 (note 91).

18 Of the six official portraits of De Ruyter that Bol made in 1667 for the Dutch Admiralties, four survive. Two were in the national collection during the Batavian period: in 1799 one came from Amsterdam, and another arrived from Rotterdam in 1800. They seem to have disappeared. The one that is still in the *Rijksmuseum* arrived in 1808 from Middelburg. On the several versions see Van Thiel 1981, 193, no. 95.

19 Moes and Van Biema 1909, 53, no. 229.

those seventeenth-century admirals who ruled the seas. The Oranges had contributed to the fight against Spain, and one of them had been not only stadtholder but also king of England. The Netherlands had been a very important European power.

From Kingdom of Holland (1806–1810) to Part of the French Empire (1810–1813)

A complete change followed during the reign of Louis Napoleon (r. 1806–1810), who was made king of Holland in 1806 by his brother Napoleon, the emperor of France. Because Napoleon was dissatisfied with Louis for identifying too much with his subjects, he recalled him in 1810 and annexed Holland to France (1810–1813). Louis Napoleon had chosen Amsterdam as his capital and had moved part of the national collection there from The Hague. He turned the former town hall into his royal palace, and in 1808 the national collection was installed there, forming his Royal Museum. Louis transformed it into a true art museum by purchasing two major collections of paintings from the Dutch Golden Age for more than 200,000 guilders, thus spending much more than the Batavian Republic had.²⁰ He wanted to show himself to be a real Dutchman, hence his emphasis on Dutch art in the Royal Museum. Although Louis Napoleon stated that Dutch history was important and that material related to it should be collected, this attitude is not apparent from the purchases for the museum.²¹ In addition to Dutch works, emphasis was placed on the city of Amsterdam, since the Royal Museum was located in the former town hall. The king ordered that the seven most important pictures of the city be shown in his museum. Amsterdam had, like the other main Dutch cities, acquired works of art that had been expropriated from churches and monasteries at the end of the sixteenth century when the Netherlands converted to Protestantism. The cities also became repositories of the possessions of the militia and guilds when those were abolished in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. That is how Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* came into the possession of Amsterdam.²² These paintings have been in the national collection since the time of Louis Napoleon, although still in the form of a loan from the city.

The paintings *The Threatened Swan* and *Portrait of Michiel de Ruyter*, along with the national relics, were brought from The Hague to the Royal Museum, located on the third floor of the Royal Palace in one large room and four smaller ones. The organization of this space was described in 1810 by Cornelis Apostool, who had been made director of the Royal Museum in 1808:

The great salon is entirely decorated with historic works, most of them concerning the history of the country and depicting several battles, memorable events, portraits of

20 On the acquisitions for the national art collection during the reign of Louis Napoleon see Bergvelt 1998, 68–77, 303–305 (notes 84–137), 396–400 (nos *1806/1–*1806/6; *1807/1–*1807/3; *1808/1–*1808/90; *1809/1–*1809/146; and *1810/1–*1810/2).

21 Bergvelt 1998, 70 and 390 (appendix XIIc): of the 247 paintings acquired under Louis Napoleon, there are 29 whose subjects could be seen as related to national history.

22 Seven paintings from Haarlem's municipal property had already been sold to the national government and placed in the National Art Gallery, see Meijers 2009, 46–48.

famous men, views, antiquities and curiosities, comprising 199 paintings, of which the seven most remarkable belong to the city of Amsterdam.

In the other apartments the rest of the history paintings are displayed of which there are 71, and 86 genre paintings, 95 landscape paintings, 16 marine paintings, 33 dead game, flower and fruit paintings, and 52 modern paintings, or by masters who are still alive: the total number of pictures comes to 552.²³

It is questionable whether *The Threatened Swan* or the Portrait of Michiel de Ruyter would have made any impression among these hundreds of paintings. There was no guided tour to bring order to the chaos. Interestingly, in Apostool's alphabetically organized catalogue, published in 1809, *The Threatened Swan* is still characterized as an allegory about Johan de Witt, and it remained so until the beginning of the twentieth century. In this catalogue, the cannon from Sri Lanka is listed under "Antiquities and Curiosities", where it is said to have been gifted – though it does not say by whom – to Michiel de Ruyter rather than the state.²⁴ Apostool states in his 1810 description that the "Antiquities and Curiosities" were located in the large room. However, since his catalogue is organized not by room – as Roos's had been – but alphabetically, we have no idea whether the cannon was in the same room as Bol's portrait of De Ruyter.

With the departure of Louis Napoleon in 1810 the Netherlands became part of the French Empire. The museum went through dark times. The staff were no longer paid. One can't help suspecting that they didn't protest because they were afraid that this would attract attention, and that the French might decide to transport the Dutch national collection to Paris to join the imperial collection in the Louvre.

After the initial impression of chaos, the message conveyed by the national collection during its stay in the former town hall of Amsterdam must have been one of the great importance of Amsterdam (through the building and the seven important large paintings of the city), the patronage of Louis Napoleon (for the 52 contemporary paintings and the two Golden Age collections he had acquired), and a first overview of the painting of the Golden Age. The history of the Netherlands would gradually disappear from the museum, and return to it in 1885.

From United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–1839) to Kingdom of the Netherlands (1839–present)

The House of Orange-Nassau returned in 1813, not as stadtholders but as kings. The Netherlands were made into a kingdom by the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), when, after their victory over Napoleon, the European allies gathered to discuss the situation in Europe and possibly draw new borders. The congress decided that the territories of the northern and southern Netherlands should be combined into a single kingdom, led by the son of the last stadtholder. The newly established kingdom was intended by the

23 Bergvelt 1998, 67–68, 303 (note 81 gives the original quote in French).

24 Apostool 1809, no. 2 (Asselijn's *Threatened Swan*), no. 37 (Bol's *Portrait of De Ruyter*), and no. 473 (*De Ruyter's cannon*).

European powers as a counterweight to France and Britain. When the Belgians revolted in 1830, however, none of the European powers seems to have objected to the founding of the Belgian nation.

The first king of the House of Orange-Nassau was William I (r. 1815–1840), son of William V, the last stadtholder. In principle he built upon the institutions that had been founded by Louis Napoleon. The old museums were maintained, and new ones created. Civil servants were allowed to stay on, including Apostool. William I renamed Louis Napoleon's Royal Museum 's *Rijks Museum*, and moved it from the Royal Palace to the *Trippenhuis* on the *Kloveniersburgwal*. The *Trippenhuis* was at the time the largest house on a canal in Amsterdam, but like the House in the Wood it was an existing building. William I also founded a second national art museum for the paintings that had originally belonged to his father, which were partly recovered from the Louvre. This was the *Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen* (Royal Cabinet of Paintings) in The Hague, better known as the *Mauritshuis* with reference to the building where it was housed in the winter of 1821/1822. Since then there have been two Dutch national art museums, representing the two centres of power in the Dutch Republic before 1795: on the one hand Amsterdam with its merchants, and on the other hand The Hague with the stadtholders and their court.

Although the two art museums had different names – one was 'national' and the other 'royal' – they were funded in the same way. Neither had a budget of its own: they had to appeal for each purchase individually to the ministry, and in the end the matter had to be approved by the king himself, at least until 1848 when a new constitution was passed limiting the king's power. Before 1830 there was a small budget for the museums in the ministry, and the king had a considerable sum available for unforeseen expenses in general, on which he could decide. When both these sums were exhausted, the king sometimes offered to help from his own resources. The *Mauritshuis* was regarded by the king as 'the' national museum: it received almost three times as much funding as the *Rijksmuseum* (250,000 rather than 83,000 guilders).²⁵ Both museums first purchased examples of the work of well-known Dutch and Flemish artists.²⁶ Only rarely were paintings with historical subjects acquired. Both museum directors kept a list of painters whose work should be purchased, whereas a comparable list of historical persons or events was never made.

From 1817 the *Rijksmuseum* in the *Trippenhuis* was organized by genre, which was rather unusual in Europe: at the back of the building was a room with still lifes, one with Italianate landscapes, one with Dutch landscapes and sea pieces, and one with genre paintings (*tableaux de genre*) or interiors. Of the two larger rooms at the front of the *Trippenhuis*, one was filled with pictures devoted to the "History of our Homeland" and the other with pictures of historical, mythological, and Biblical subjects. That room also housed the national relics and some antiquities.

25 See Bergvelt 1998, 93. A total of 220 'Old Master' paintings were bought for the *Mauritshuis* and 75 for the *Rijksmuseum*.

26 For the *Rijksmuseum* some foreign pictures were acquired; for the *Mauritshuis* the majority of the 220 pictures came from abroad. See Bergvelt 1992, 272–282.

In 1825, at the instigation of the ministry, all three-dimensional objects were removed, as part of a more general reorganization of the national collections. All historical objects, including the cannon from Sri Lanka, were sent to the *Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden* (Royal Cabinet of Rarities) in The Hague. The director of the *Rijksmuseum* did not object; indeed, Apostool stated that the historical relics were only important if one believed that they were authentic, which he clearly did not.²⁷ After the removal of all objects, both from antiquity and from Dutch history, the *Rijksmuseum* became a museum solely for paintings, with the *Rijksprentenkabinet* (National Print Room) added in 1816. There was also a room for everything that did not belong to the Dutch Golden Age, such as paintings by Rubens (visible in the foreground of fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Gerrit Lamberts and H. A. Klinkhamer, *Smaller Room, Looking towards the Front Room upstairs in the Rijksmuseum in the Trippenhuis, Amsterdam*, 254 x 330 mm. Visible in this (non-Dutch Golden Age) room are works by Rubens (the upper picture to the left of the arch), Geertgen tot Sint Jans (upper left to the right of the arch), and other early Netherlandish painters. Through the arch is one of the large “historic” rooms with a picture by Paulus Potter, the so-called “Rembrandt” (now Fabritius), a militia painting by Govert Flinck, and against the ceiling small portraits from the (Orange) Honselaarsdijck series.



27 For Apostool's original Dutch quote, see Bergvelt 2010, 187 (note 35); for Apostool's earlier (1821) and comparable remarks on the proposed reorganization and on the historical relics, see Bergvelt 1998, 93 and 310 (note 41).

After the departure of various objects – and also some paintings through an exchange with the *Mauritshuis* – the paintings in the *Trippenhuis* had to be reordered. Apostool transformed the two rooms with historical subjects into one with portraits and another with scenes from national history, together with scenes from mythology and the Bible. The smaller rooms could remain as they were. Now all the rooms were devoted to a particular type of painting. The result was that the *Rijksmuseum* became an art museum with rooms that were too small, increasingly regarded as a disgrace to the Netherlands, especially when compared to the accommodations of the many new national museums that had opened all over Europe.

That was not the point of emphasis, however, in an article the Dutch poet and author Everhardus Johannes Potgieter published in 1844. His fierce criticism was rather aimed at the room with portraits that Apostool had arranged in 1825. Potgieter wanted this to be transformed into a room devoted to the history of the Netherlands. He described exactly which historical scenes and which historical figures should be presented to form an overview of Dutch history. In addition, he asked private individuals and the king (then King William II, r. 1840–1849) to give or bequeath such historical pictures, given that the Belgian Revolt of 1830 had put an end to almost all spending for the national museums. No response has been recorded to Potgieter's article, or any relevant gift or bequest predating about 1870. Until that year, private donors mainly focused on local institutions. Potgieter was seeking something completely different from what the contemporary museum staff (and the government) had in mind for the *Rijksmuseum*: to provide an overview of the best works by Dutch and, to a lesser extent, Flemish painters.²⁸

Alas, since Apostool's catalogue is not organized by room we do not know where Asseijns's *Threatened Swan* and De Ruyter's *Portrait* were hanging either before or after 1825. Only two images survive from after 1825: one of the historic room,²⁹ and the other of the room, at the front of the building, for works not belonging to the Dutch Golden Age (figs. 5, 6). We can assume that the rather large *Threatened Swan* did not hang in the small back room, with the still lifes, but rather in one of the large rooms, alongside the 'history' paintings: another large animal picture, the great *Bear Hunt* by Paulus Potter, is partly visible at the left end of the far wall of the front (historic) room. De Ruyter's image must have been in the room with portraits on the floor below.

28 Bergvelt 1998, 190–191; Bergvelt 2010.

29 Confusingly, at the time 'historic' meant both real history and also mythological and Biblical scenes, and clearly from the images also large animal pieces, as well as pictures too large to be hung in the smaller back rooms.

Fig. 6: Gerrit Lamberts and H. A. Klinkhamer, *Front Room upstairs in the Rijksmuseum in the Trippenhuys, Amsterdam, Looking towards the Smaller Room*, 235 x 410 mm. In this “historic” room the arch is flanked by pictures by Gaspar de Crayer. In the smaller room beyond is a glimpse of *The Fall* by Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem.



The ‘reminders of the Fatherland’ found their place in the Royal Cabinet of Rarities on the first floor of the *Mauritshuis*. The works of the Royal Cabinet of Paintings were on the second floor. These two museum collections were housed in spaces that were far too small. The Royal Cabinet of Rarities was the only national museum that had a historical component, but it was mainly an ethnographical museum, with one large room featuring a model of Deshima, the Dutch (and only Western) trading post in Japan prior to the American navy’s forcible opening of the country in 1853. There were also four smaller rooms: two devoted to objects from China and one to objects from the rest of the world. National history was confined to the fourth room, which was shared with the applied arts. This is where the cannon from Sri Lanka was housed; in one of the many undated catalogues, it is again described as a gift to Admiral De Ruyter, but with yet another invented provenance: now it had been a gift from the East India Company.³⁰

The financial troubles ended in the 1870s as the Dutch economy began to flourish again – so much so that this period is called the Second Golden Age. First the Netherlands Museum of History and Art was founded in The Hague, and eventually the decision was made to build a new *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam and to include there the contents from the Netherlandish Museum.

30 On the Royal Cabinet of Rarities see Effert 2008; the undated catalogue is Van de Kastelee n.d., no. 660.

The Netherlands Museum of History and Art in The Hague

The era of national indifference was slowly coming to an end. After some earlier initiatives to preserve Netherlandish national antiquities, in 1874 the *College van Rijksadviseurs* (Board of Government Advisors) was established, with the task, among others, of tracing remnants of Dutch art and history from earlier times. The advisors interpreted this broadly, not only collecting objects from the past but also exhibiting them in the building where they met, in The Hague. In 1876 one of the advisors, David van der Kellen Jr, became the first director of the collection named the *Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst* (Netherlands Museum of History and Art).³¹ The Roman Catholic jurist Victor de Stuers was appointed as the highest civil servant in the Ministry of the Interior, and he put things in order, including the museums. For example, he decreed that the national museums should produce annual reports, which they did from 1877. He also oversaw the construction and fitting out of the new *Rijksmuseum* and can be regarded as the 'national collector'. Protestants in particular strongly criticized the architectural style, decoration, and display of the new building, which they considered to be far too Catholic; indeed, in the furnishing and decoration much attention was paid to the Middle Ages, the period before the Netherlands became Protestant. Acquisitions were also the subject of criticism. For example, the author Carel Vosmaer, also a member of the Board of Government Advisors, believed that there was not enough emphasis on the Dutch Golden Age and too much on the 'ultramontane' – meaning medieval and ecclesiastical (and hence Catholic) – art.³²

A cursory glance at the first annual reports of the Dutch national museums shows that Vosmaer was wrong, however: large quantities of seventeenth-century Dutch silver and Delft pottery, for instance, were acquired in 1877–1879.³³ Every now and then, a medieval object can be discerned. Therefore Vosmaer's remark must be seen as prompted by his Protestant struggle against the Catholic Victor de Stuers. According to Vosmaer the museum received thousands of guilders more than any other collection,³⁴ but he provides no evidence to support this claim.³⁵

De Stuers accomplished a lot and left no stone unturned. In his letters to the minister he often said one thing but did another. This was the case, for example, when he advocated the establishment of the *Nederlandsch Museum* (Netherlands Museum). In the first place, he said that it was to illustrate the history of the fatherland by means of images of

31 Laan 2014–2016.

32 Vosmaer 1877.

33 Verslagen 1877–1880.

34 Vosmaer 1877.

35 His claim is readily adopted by Duparc 1975, 11, although the figures Duparc gives elsewhere seem to point in a different direction (*ibid.*, 110): in 1886, the *Rijksmuseum van Schilderijen* [of paintings] and the *Rijksprentenkabinet* together received 19,000 guilders; in 1891, they received 20,000 guilders; the Netherlands Museum received 11,500 guilders in 1886 and in 1891; in 1896, the three institutions together received 51,916 guilders. Laan adopts these figures, see Laan 2014–2016, 71 and 93 (note 7). It falls beyond the scope of this article to attempt to determine the precise figures for the various museums. Unfortunately, no figures are mentioned in the annual reports of the museums.

its princes and great men. In addition, beautiful and instructive objects from the various branches of art were to be exhibited for the development of the taste of the general public and for the education of craftsmen. If we look again at the annual reports, however, we can see that if objects related to important patriotic heroes or rulers were collected at all, they disappeared behind an immense mass of simpler objects – things dredged from rivers, national costumes, horse-drawn carriages, and musical instruments. De Stuers and Van der Kellen apparently wanted to display objects related to the ordinary Dutch person and not just to elite culture.³⁶

Director Van der Kellen also emphasized history in his writings. For instance, in 1879 he published a six-part magazine article summarizing what he called *historische herinneringen* (historical memories) in the Netherlands Museum of History and Art.³⁷ He did not give an account of the department of applied arts at that time, let alone compile a catalogue of the holdings of the museum, given the quantity of objects acquired. In the same year, in an article on the new installation he arranged at the museum in The Hague, he complains that a

placement according to some scientific principle has long since become a dream, which can only be realized [when the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam is completed]. Until then, [the Netherlands Museum of History and Art] should only be regarded as a warehouse or collection point for materials from which a beautiful whole can later be formed [namely in the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam].³⁸

Ultimately, however, in the new *Rijksmuseum* the presentation both of the applied arts and of history left a lot to be desired.

Van der Kellen did not lack a critical view of his collection. Like Apostool, he had great doubts about the authenticity of the Dutch ‘reminders of the Fatherland’, which, during a subsequent reorganization of the national collections, the Netherlands Museum of History and Art had received from the Royal Cabinet of Rarities. In an article about the cannon from Sri Lanka, Van der Kellen cannot see how it could have anything to do with De Ruyter, who never travelled to Ceylon. He recognizes that the inscription on the cannon is from Ceylon but notes that he has not succeeded in deciphering it (that would not be accomplished until 1894).³⁹

The New Rijksmuseum

The new *Rijksmuseum* building designed by the architect Pierre Joseph Hubert Cuypers housed several museums: the *Rijksmuseum van schilderijen* (of paintings), the National Print Room, the Netherlands Museum of History and Art, and several private collections. The second floor of the new building, with the paintings, opened first, in 1885 – with Rembrandt’s *Night Watch* as its centrepiece. *The Threatened Swan* hung in the third

36 Bergvelt 1998, 200–201.

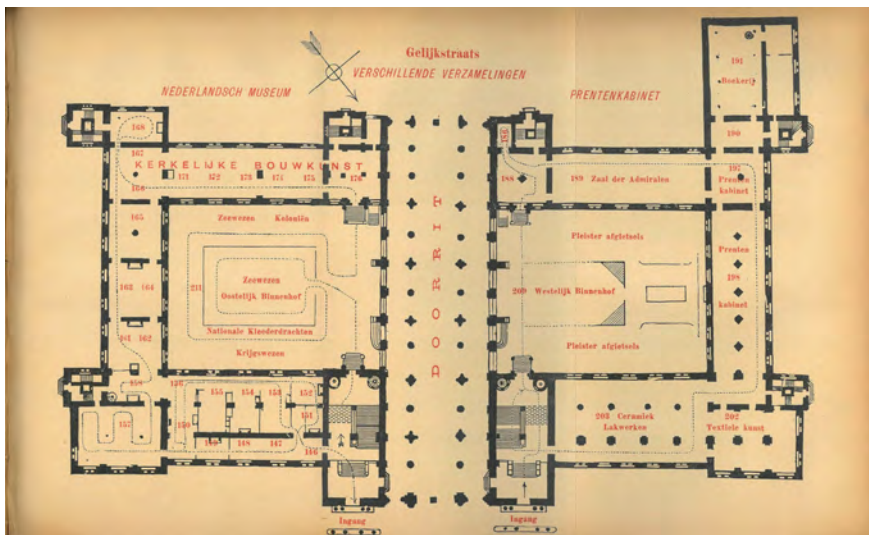
37 Van der Kellen 1879a.

38 Van der Kellen 1879b.

39 Van der Kellen 1880; Schrikker and Boogaart 2022a, 31.

compartment of the Gallery of Honour, which leads to the location of *The Night Watch* – still making reference to the vigilance of Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt, but in the context of art rather than history. Not until 1909 did Ernst W. Moes and Eduard van Biema, in their publication about the early years of the *Rijksmuseum*, point out that the inscriptions on Asselijn's painting must have been written later, because Asselijn had died before De Witt became Grand Pensionary.⁴⁰ The Netherlands Museum of History and Art was gradually installed in the later 1880s and 1890s on the first floor, next to the print room and the library. It included period rooms, some dedicated to ecclesiastical architecture (fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Plan of the ground floor of the Rijksmuseum.



In the furnishing of these rooms, quite a few copies were included. Next came the seventeenth-century rooms, for which many further authentic objects were available. Finally, there were rooms displaying historical subjects. Only two rooms on the first floor presented purely historical content. One was the Room of the Admirals (no. 189; on the right in fig. 7), and the other was a very small room dedicated to historical objects (no. 152; bottom left in fig. 7). There, at last, almost everything related to De Ruyter was exhibited, including his portrait.⁴¹ In the two courtyards, extremely varied historical collections were displayed, with musical instruments next to weapons, and life-size dolls with traditional costumes next to a sculpture commemorating the colonial war in the Indonesian province of Aceh. In the eastern courtyard portions of the historical collection

40 Moes and Van Biema 1909, 175 (appendix V).

41 The large stern decoration of the *Royal Charles* was exhibited in the eastern courtyard, as room 152 was too small. This British ship had been captured by the Dutch in June 1667, when Michiel de Ruyter and Cornelis de Witt undertook an expedition to the River Medway to destroy the fleet at anchor near Chatham.

were given a sort of trophy arrangement, as in the great halls of British stately homes (fig. 8). The cannon from Sri Lanka must have been in a display case in this courtyard. Van der Kellen still thought it a beautiful object; in the 1890 addition to his guide of 1888, he noted: “without proof it was said to have come from De Ruijter, but it seems that it was donated by a Javanese prince to the States General”.⁴² Had De Stuers forbidden Van der Kellen from mentioning Sri Lanka as the origin?

Fig. 8: Display of the Netherlands Museum of History and Art in the eastern courtyard of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1900–1915, photograph, 230 × 290 mm.



When the display of the Netherlands Museum was finally completed around 1900, its installation told no coherent story but rather made loose statements about Dutch history.⁴³ This approach to arranging the contents of the collection was not up-to-date: the contents of decorative art museums were generally arranged according to technique and material, not in rooms devoted to any particular period.⁴⁴ In 1927, the Netherlands Museum was divided into two departments, that of Dutch History and that of Sculpture and

42 Van der Kellen 1888[–1890], 139–140. He first displayed the cannon in 1883 in a major exhibition at the *Rijksmuseum*, in a sort of test presentation. In the accompanying catalogue, he remarked that it probably came from Ceylon and that it was previously thought to have been given to De Ruijter: Van der Kellen 1883, 16–17.

43 Bergvelt 2012.

44 This is one of the many criticisms of the arrangement of the *Rijksmuseum*. Contemporary museums of applied art, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, displayed the development of

Applied Arts. The former department could then begin working on displays that were more current in their curatorial approach and, above all, historically accurate. The display of Dutch history at sea was realized in 1931 and Dutch history on land in 1937.⁴⁵

At the *Rijksmuseum* at the end of the nineteenth century a chronological, cultural-historical story was told via period rooms, with attention also paid to the lower classes and the countryside. After Van der Kellen's death in 1895, his successors did not know how soon they could dismantle those rooms. The *horror vacui*, the copies, and the decorative ensembles that had characterized the display in the new *Rijksmuseum* were replaced by objects of elite culture that were authentic, of aesthetic value, and grouped by material. Rural culture was sent to the *Openluchtmuseum* (Open Air Museum) in Arnhem, established in 1918.⁴⁶ The decoration of Cuypers' building, considered too dominant (or too Catholic), was whitewashed in the course of the twentieth century, and partly restored in 2013.

History itself found a problematic position in the nineteenth-century *Rijksmuseum*. When the historical objects came to the new building they did not receive proper attention: both De Stuers and Van der Kellen were more interested in cultural or art history. Indeed, history was of minor importance in the early Dutch national museums, especially because the museum staff was made up of artists and art historians. At the *Rijksmuseum* that changed in the twentieth century, and even more so in the twenty-first. But in the nineteenth century there was a struggle between history and art. And history lost most of the time.

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the individual branches of applied art, not cultural-historical ensembles, see Laan 2014–2016, 85. On the Victoria and Albert Museum, see Burton 1999.

45 Bos 1997.

46 Laan 2014–2016.

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