In the context of globalization, the role of religion in today's society is a regular subject of public debate. Since the 1990s, there has been renewed interest in this issue as it applies to earlier periods, and not just in history but in visual culture studies too. According to writers like Hans Belting and Victor Stoichita, religious paintings saw their spiritual meaning erased by their status as works of art from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards, but others have referred to the diversity of contexts to challenge this point of view as an overgeneralization.

One of the most interesting of these contexts is the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands, where three historical events engendered major changes in religious buildings. The Austrian government's edicts of 1773 and 1783, suppressing first the Jesuit Order and then religious houses, produced the first two instances of the Southern Netherlands' impoverishment in terms of works of arts, since they led to massive sales of moveable assets and, more particularly, of paintings. The country's invasion by troops of the French Republic in Year 2 (1794) constituted the third stage of this loss, with several thousands of objects seized and sent to Paris. The fall of Napoleon in 1815, however, resulted in such large-scale restitutions that in less than a quarter of a century works of art had passed through one country and then another (the Austrian Southern Netherlands and France) and been displayed in highly differentiated locations: sometimes a church, sometimes a museum. I would like to ponder these changes of exhibition space and installation methods in this article in order to emphasize the importance of local history and culture for understanding the meaning given these works by the spectators of the day.

While not disputing that the artistic value of pictures has acquired increasing importance in modern times, I shall be focusing rather on the fact that this aesthetic point of view did not erase the devotional value of religious works. I shall be looking at the ways in which these two views of religious works of art cohabited as a great many factors came into play to give paintings either a cultural or an artistic value. This can be demonstrated by turning to the religious as much as the social practices of the period in each of the two countries concerned. To this end, I shall be enlisting archival material, contemporary accounts and visual documents. I shall then look at the exemplary case of Rubens's Descent from the Cross triptych (1611-1614, Antwerp Cathedral), which, from being the jewel of Antwerp Cathedral in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, came to...
symbolize the Flemish School once it was moved to the *Musée central des arts* in Paris. As a result of this change, a 'national' value was added to the painting's artistic and devotional values. Its emergence can be understood by studying not just the succession of spaces in which the altarpiece was displayed and how it was installed but also the commentaries these provoked in their day. In changing country, the work effectively disappeared from view as far as the Flemish were concerned to become visible to the French who until then had known it only from written descriptions. I will show that, through a phenomenon comparable to that of communicating vessels, the presence of this triptych in Paris was naturally experienced as an absence in Antwerp, which radically altered the perception the various communities of spectators could have of it. Between one location and the next, a local masterpiece had, in effect, become a national asset.

**The context of Enlightenment France**

When it comes to the autonomization of works of art, there is no denying that Enlightenment France played a particular role, thanks to the annual exhibitions held by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris from 1737 onwards. While, in terms of exhibitors, these Salons at the Louvre were reserved for academy members, they were open to all (or nearly all) visitors and paved the way for a new sociability devoted to fine arts rather than merely *belles-lettres*. In this way the Salons gave rise to a proliferation of critical texts in which the authors, whether distinguished or unknown, expressed their feelings about the qualities and defects of the works exhibited. From this it was often deduced that aesthetic appreciation took precedence over content, and it is true that in the 1760s, influential members of the academy, such as Charles-Nicolas Cochin, believed the plastic qualities of paintings were more important than their subjects.

It seems wrong, however, to conclude from this general trend that religious works of art had become completely meaningless. Indeed, it is essential to remain alert to the relative importance each kind of literature had at the time. Thus, while art historians base their discourse primarily on the writings of painters and critics, it must be remembered that these often had a far smaller readership than more widely circulated texts, particularly those written by clerics. With this in mind, it must surely be observed that the Salons at the Louvre gave new visibility not solely to secular works but also to religious paintings, since artists would often present these in the exhibitions before delivering them to their commissioners. These paintings also garnered critical remarks about their plastic qualities. Since this was merely what was expected of the high-society sociability of the Salon, it is impossible to deduce from it that the paintings' spiritual content no longer mattered. Rather, it seems logical to suppose that a work's devotional significance drew more comment once it was installed in a context of worship.

Moreover, recent studies have shown that French religious painting most certainly did not pass away with the death of Louis XIV and that, in
the eighteenth century, a good many churches continued to commission elaborate programmes of works. This phenomenon confirms that the content of the paintings had not become a secondary issue in any sense. The contrary might even be claimed, since subject matter was often carefully selected to allow the commissioner to adopt a stance on the Jansenist question, the burning issue in the 1700-1750 period in particular.

The context of the Southern Netherlands

The case of the Southern Netherlands was very different. Since public exhibitions were unknown before 1789, the church remained the key venue for viewing works of great artistic merit outside the galleries of private collectors. The churches were especially well supplied, because the Southern Netherlands, like Italy, were particularly productive during the seventeenth century as they strove to meet the demands of the Counter-Reformation. Rubens himself, plus a multitude of creative master painters, produced specifically Flemish output of a high standard, which strengthened the spirit of competition that existed between towns and, even more, between corporations. Thus, in order to bear witness to their faith, but also to their respective wealth, the guilds were eager to commission the most sumptuous altarpieces possible, even if it meant running up sizeable debts. Alfons Thijs has long since established that the ostentatiousness of these altars served purposes as varied as devotion, social prestige and commercial interest. At a practical level, one outcome of investing more money than another guild was the ability to secure the choice of subject for the main scene. This simple example confirms the notion that the meaning given to an altarpiece and its material value were closely entwined. This intimate connection between the religious and aesthetic purposes of works of art is illustrated by an appeal from the churchwardens of St. James's Church, Antwerp, in 1661, asking their city council to continue to provide subsidies. They justified the request as follows: 'The construction of this church is a work deserving of praise, which seeks as much the admiration of foreigners as the adornment of the city and serves not just the parishioners but the community as a whole.' This sentiment enables the realization that the spiritual dimension was part of the aesthetic and material value of objects commissioned for churches, since these had to satisfy the parishioners just as much as the residents of the town or foreign visitors.

Did this cohabitation of devotional and artistic purposes in religious works of art, which held good for the seventeenth century, continue thereafter? Two features tend to suggest that they did. The first is based on the observation that, as was the case in France, major commissions continued to be made for ecclesiastical buildings in the Netherlands throughout the eighteenth century despite the advance of Enlightenment thought. The second is based on the testimony of a man who is key to any understanding of the artistic exchanges between France and the former Austrian Netherlands between 1750 and 1800.
Jean-Baptiste Descamps and Rubens’s ‘masterpiece’

That man is the painter Jean-Baptiste Descamps (Dunkirk 1715–Rouen 1791), who was born French but always said he was Flemish. This sense of identity can be explained by the fact that the town of Dunkirk, where he was born, had become French only recently, while the local language and culture remained Flemish. Even so, Descamps was fairly young when he left Dunkirk to train as a painter in Antwerp and Paris. Subsequently, he made his career as a drawing teacher in Rouen, at the same time becoming famous through the publication of two important books that gained him recognition as an expert in northern painting. French collectors were very much attracted to the northern painters, but there were no French texts that catered to their needs. Descamps was quick to make good this lack with the publication of his first book, La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandois (Paris 1753-1763, 4 vols.). Based on direct reference to Dutch sources, particularly the biography collections of Karel van Mander and Arnold Houbraken, Descamps’s book was skilfully attuned to the expectations of the collectors of its time. It was an immediate success. Encouraged, Descamps went on to publish his Voyage pittoresque de la Flandre et du Brabant (Paris & Rouen 1769), which completed his establishment as an expert in Flemish painting.

Without dwelling on the literary models used by Descamps or on his way of writing, I will simply stress that his books played a key role in French collectors’ taste for the northern masters. The attraction had existed since the reign of Louis XIV, but Descamps’s books helped increase it by providing information about numerous painters and a great many works that had been unknown in France until then.

Rubens also benefited from this extended knowledge, but in his case it was based on admiration dating back to the seventeenth century and, more specifically, to Marie de’ Medici’s commissioning of a cycle of paintings for the Galerie du Luxembourg (1621-1625, Paris, Louvre Museum) and to the writing of Roger de Piles. Descamps’s contribution, however, lay in encouraging young artists and collectors to visit the towns of the Southern Netherlands to see Rubens’s works for themselves. Following publication of the first volume of La vie des peintres, in which Descamps lists some 60 Rubens altarpieces to be seen in churches in Flanders and Brabant, Voyage pittoresque mentions the specific locations of more than 200 works. Thereupon, more and more French artists began visiting the Austrian Netherlands to see Rubens’s paintings for themselves. While their routes from one town to the next might have differed, they always included Antwerp, its cathedral listed as home to Rubens’s ‘masterpiece’, the famous Descent from the Cross triptych.

To my knowledge, there is no contemporary visual representation of the altarpiece in its original context. Its location, which remained the same until the French Revolution, is, however, known from various sources. Painted by Rubens from 1611 to 1614 for the Arquebusiers’ Guild, the triptych was placed in the south transept. Furthermore, travel guides and old maps reveal that it was surrounded by a great many large-scale masterpieces, which spurred Rubens on to devise an even more imposing...
work (fig. 1). Upon entering the transept via the nave, the last painting visible before Rubens’s was The Fall of the Rebel Angels (1554), a triptych by Frans Floris, which was over 3 metres high but only 2.2 metres wide, as it had already lost its side-panels. Immediately into the transept, there were two triptychs before Rubens’s: Triptych of the Guild of the Old Arbalest, representing Christus Triomfator (1590) by Maerten de Vos, and Triptych of the Guild of the Old Bow, with a central panel, The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian, by Michiel Coxcie (1575) and side-panels by Ambrosius Francken (c. 1590). The impressive size of the De Vos triptych (fig. 2) probably led Rubens to conceive of his own on an even more colossal scale. When open, the former is 3.47 metres high by 5.30 metres wide; Rubens would make his as much as 4.21 metres by 6.17 metres. The size of the altarpiece – linked to the powerful emotion of the depiction of the body of Christ, slumped and held up by the gravediggers – often drew visitors’ attention, eclipsing neighbouring works. This at least is what emerges from the testimony of sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet (1716-1791), as he describes what he felt on seeing Rubens’s work in 1781:

It is in Flanders, and in Antwerp most of all, that this Painter [Rubens] must be seen in works of great theatricality. I am not talking about the various works of his that I have seen. I shall confine myself here to saying that his famous Descent from the Cross is one of the most frightening paintings I know and perhaps the one that horrified me most, presenting me with all that is most expressive in art.... Are these

1 Peter Paul Rubens, Descent from the Cross triptych, 1611-1614, oil on panel, 421 x 617 cm (open), Antwerp Cathedral (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels [Belgium], cliché N16596)
or are they not Rubens’s praises that I am singing? I really don’t know: I am painting the effect the picture had on me when I saw it in Antwerp and while the effect has somewhat lessened now that I can no longer see it, it remains sufficiently strong as to have almost the same impression upon me. Let us acknowledge the simple sublime in other great Artists, be they Greek or modern; but we cannot escape the hold the Belgian Painter’s art has on our souls.25

This comment, which belongs neither to the realm of aesthetic judgement nor to that of religious sentiment, is interesting in that it conveys the effect produced by direct experience, as was recommended by writers as different as John Locke and the Abbé Du Bos.26 Going back to Descamps, who wrote about the same altarpiece, his is, by contrast, a purely plastic discourse intended to enable the amateur spectator to assess the qualities and defects of each panel. Furthermore, Descamps shows no compunction about saying that, while he admires the central composition, he does not like the figure of Saint Christopher on the outside of the side panel, regarding it as too mannered.27

Devotion and delectation. Concomitant functions of religious works of art

If Descamps’s remark, which relates specifically to the Rubens triptych, is taken on its own, it is possible to conclude that the writer had no interest
in the work's religious meaning. In fact, the preliminary texts of *Voyage pittoresque* show that the reverse was true. Descamps was at pains to define his guidebook's intent in a lengthy ‘warning’, which clearly set out that, in order to avoid becoming pointlessly weighed down, the book was exclusively devoted to understanding paintings. As a result, there were no digressions on the evocative power of certain religious images, like those found in the guide to Antwerp’s churches written by Jacob de Wit (1695-1754) in around 1748. Descamps’s comments are purely technical and aesthetic and consist in identifying subjects and characters in order to move swiftly on to the work’s inherent properties. Descamps’s suggested routes around church interiors had nothing to do with the notion of pilgrimage: he omitted objects of piety and the majority of tombs, thereby confirming the break with earlier topographical guides, published by Lodovico Guicciardini, Antonius Sanderus, Adam Boussingault and Jacques Le Roy. Nevertheless, even as he set himself the goal of cultivating the taste of the connoisseur through an exploration of the best churches and their art treasures, Descamps took the trouble to add the following:

> All the churches there are decorated with grandeur and magnificence; they are all monuments to a pure piety, of which one partakes when visiting; it helped great talents blossom and their perfection today constitutes the wealth of this country, which is so deserving of a visit.

From this it would appear that a work of art was seen both as an expression of piety on the part of the commissioner and the artist and as a source of piety for the spectator invited to share in it. It is impossible to be more explicit about the fact that, for Descamps, the discourse about a work of art did not erase its religious meaning. His travel guide had simply set itself a different task to that of worship. While the educational role of a work of art was logically given priority by Descamps, the Rouen-based drawing teacher, it did not obliterate the spiritual content, since this coexistence of meanings was fully incorporated into the Flemish tradition. It had, moreover, resulted in lucrative practices in the churches of Flanders and Brabant, which this same Descamps condemned in his book:

I have noticed another abusive practice that sometimes goes as far as indecency. Since most of these chapels belong to trades or fraternities, the servants of these companies close the curtains or the side-wings that cover these paintings and refuse to reveal them unless you pay the price they are asking. They have been seen to close the curtains just as travellers approach; lastly, those with but a little time to spend in a place have, to their great regret, been unable see everything because of the absence of those who are at pains to conceal objects made to be seen by those whose piety or curiosity brings them thither. It is to taste and the authorities that I address this complaint. To put a stop to an abusive practice, so much at variance with their opinions and with the arts, a painting should be protected only from the heat of the sun; it would be sufficient to protect it to put a curtain over the window through which the sun’s rays enter.
Despite the fact that he condemned this process primarily for the convenience of future travellers and art lovers, Descamps had the good sense to recall that concealing objects also thwarted parishioners’ devotions. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, side-panels are known to have been opened in accordance with specific rituals, the significance of which has been confirmed by Lynn Jacobs. She observes that these rituals were part of a process of unveilings and had multiple meanings, since the panels were generally called ‘doors’. The rituals are less well known for the period that concerns us here, but it would appear nonetheless that from around 1650 onwards, the tendency was for triptychs to be left open so that the interior paintings were on permanent display. The trend became more widespread sometimes for purely technical rather than ceremonial reasons or simply in order to make money.

This was the case with Rubens’s Descent from the Cross triptych. Its panels became so damaged by being constantly opened and closed that in 1753 the guild considered replacing them with copies. In commissioning the work the corporation wanted to see its patron, Saint Christopher, in a central position, which was forbidden by the injunctions of the Counter-Reformation. Brussels painter Guillaume-Pierre Mensaert (1711-c. 1777) was the first to relate the highly credible oral tradition whereby Rubens designed his triptych to present the theme of the various people who carried Christ: Saint Christopher, the Virgin Mary, the gravediggers. This enabled the Antwerp master to give prominence to Saint Christopher when the altarpiece was closed, to the great satisfaction of those who commissioned it (fig. 3). In this way, the work offered concomitant effects of contrast and unity corresponding to the regular opening and closure of the panels: the worshipper could admire the patron saint’s reassuring strength on the outside and the emotion of the crucifixion on the inside. The one inconvenience was that the constant alternation gave rise to the technical problems mentioned above. Even so, in 1753, the guild abandoned its plans to replace the panels with copies and contented itself with having the entire triptych restored by Balthazar Beschey.

Be that as it may, we know from Descamps’s testimony that the panels were opened and closed in accordance with sometimes ritual, sometimes profit-making practices. These customs confirm that works of art in churches were believed to have a dual purpose, both spiritual and worldly, according to practices that were deeply rooted in the culture of the Southern Netherlands. In that country, this ambivalence stemmed from a tacit interaction between owners, parishioners and outside visitors. Obviously, visiting a church to admire paintings or to pray were separate acts, but they continued to exist in parallel, neither cancelling out the other. That these practices coexisted is confirmed, moreover, in old depictions of Flemish churches where meandering visitors and worshippers at prayer can be seen simultaneously. This is the case in a 1645 painting by Hendrik van Steenwijk the Younger, in which two gentlemen can be clearly discerned admiring a triptych that a man is pointing out to them in a chapel on the left, while, a little further on, a kneeling woman prays at another altarpiece, not looking at it at all (fig. 4). This variety of activities in churches is further confirmed by the many
Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Christopher and the Hermit*, outer wings of the *Descent from the Cross* triptych, 1611–1614, oil on panel, 421 x 311 cm (closed), Antwerp Cathedral (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels [Belgium], cliché B95152).
views of Antwerp Cathedral painted by Pieter Neeffs the Elder, particularly the one now held in Brussels (fig. 5). Although there is always an element of recomposition in these different views, which were also designed to show perspective, the coexistence of the two types of visitors engaged in individual pursuits seems natural, since we are outside the times reserved for the liturgy.

Returning to Descamps, it is possible to sum up his position by saying that for him, Beauty was not external to piety but was intimately bound up with it. Nevertheless, the educational role he gave his guidebook led him to set aside the devotional aspect of Beauty in art in order to focus solely on its pedagogical value.
A plea to keep works in their original context

Furthermore, this principle made Descamps a keen advocate of keeping religious paintings in their original locations. He explained his reasons as follows:

I would like the municipal magistrates to forbid works in public settings being touched without their permission and to be certain of the virtue of those to whom they are entrusted; this would be the way to preserve items which are of interest to those who love the arts and which serve as models to those who study them. I cannot guarantee the places in which the paintings I mention are today; greed has consigned some to foreigners, others have been withdrawn to be replaced with mediocre substitutes. The latter practice, which is the effect of a lack of taste or knowledge, is less dangerous because they may be restored to their former place once people learnt of it as they will in reading my book.41

The fact that he was committed above all to the educational role of works of art led Descamps to make two demands: that owners should not only keep their works in good repair but should also make them easier to access for all. These issues had been subjects of debate since the Abbé Du Bos recalled that in Ancient Times the works of the masters were regarded more as ‘the jewels of a State & a public treasure’ than as objects intended for private enjoyment.42 In subsequent years, writers seeking to champion this notion of the collective utility of art would point out the benefits the Schools of painting would derive from making works accessible to the public. To the extent that an artist’s training consisted of imitating good examples in order to equal and ultimately surpass them, it was becoming imperative to promote not just accessibility to masterpieces but also their preservation. The press became the preferred medium for debating the various restoration procedures developed in the eighteenth century. It was believed at the time that these interventions would enable the works to last forever.43

It is no surprise then that, as a painter, Descamps should have included these concerns in his Voyage pittoresque, but he did not confine himself to merely commenting on the state of repair of certain paintings. He also supported the idea that these works belonged to places rather than individuals. If, in 1763, Mensaert condemned the export of Flemish works from private cabinets,44 Descamps, for his part, shifted the debate to ‘works in public settings’ wanting their maintenance entrusted to municipal agencies. On two occasions in his book he applauds the refusal to allow works to go to foreign buyers, because, for him, ‘the fine works in public settings... are the only objects that induce curious travellers to travel around this country’.45 This remark – which refers to the triptych of The Entombment of the Lord by Quentin Metsijs (Antwerp Cathedral), even though Descamps was not fond of sixteenth-century art – clearly shows that its author saw works ‘in public settings’ as a ‘public asset’, in the sense that they played a ‘public interest’ role. Similarly, he wanted an end
to rotating displays of the various altarpieces of a single altar so that they
could be permanently visible, as well as better preserved.46

This thinking, which establishes an intrinsic link between the works
and their public settings, has various sources. One stems from the history
of the Netherlands, where communal identity was always essential to the
local population, since it offered the cultural stability that its governments
– sometimes Burgundian, sometimes Spanish or even Austrian – could
not provide. Moreover, the wars and the many border changes that
followed one another in succession during the eighteenth century
heightened this very strong municipal consciousness. Another source
probably came about for Descamps by observing the contrasting
situations of France and the Southern Netherlands. The cultural
dynamism of Paris and the major French cities had only grown since
Descamps settled in Rouen in the 1740s, and he was a keen observer of the
immense force of attraction exerted by the Salons at the Louvre, which he
visited regularly. The contrast with the protracted artistic inertia,47 from
which the Netherlands was slowly beginning to emerge, may well have
made Descamps realize the importance of the religious heritage and the
role it could play in making Flanders and Brabant attractive. While the
description of the state of the country, which he sketches as a preface to
Voyage pittoresque, is not devoid of clichés, it is striking above all for the
contrast between its idyllic report on the local geography and civilization
on the one hand and its much more negative depiction of the economy,
subject to Austrian and European politics, on the other.48 Over and above
his personal interests, Descamps realized that the Netherlands could play
the art tourism card just as the Italian regions and European capitals did.
In this way, he turned himself into the promoter of a country he had
always considered his own. A key concept in his guide was therefore the
suggestion that publicly displayed works of art belonged more to those
who gazed upon them than to those who owned them, since they were
linked to the places that housed them. This stance, condemning exports of
Flemish art, spread to other actors in the cultural life of the Austrian
Netherlands in the second half of the eighteenth century.49 Unlike them,
however, Descamps adopted it in a context that greatly preceded the
massive sales that resulted from the suppression of the Jesuits and the
religious houses in 1773 and 1783.

It can quite rightly be argued, however, that Descamps himself helped
ensure the export of a certain number of objects to France, since he
visited Flanders regularly to supply his business as well as collector
friends. It seems, however, that it was characteristic of Descamps to draw a
line between works from the private domain and those in the public
sphere. He had no problem dealing in works from private cabinets, but
when it came to those on public display, he recommended that they
should remain in place because they constituted the wealth of the country
and thereby contributed to its identity. Of the paintings by Rubens, Gerard
Seghers and Cornelis Schut in the Jesuit church in Antwerp, moreover, he
clearly stated that ‘not exposing them to the view of the curious traveller
was to deny him the sole objects that could pique his curiosity’.50 I think
that in one way, this vision of art, which closely associates works of art
with their original location in order to define them and present them to
the gaze of the greatest number, prefigures the notion of heritage. Of
course, a great many components of the concept did not yet exist at the
time, but some could be discerned in latent form in Descamps's thinking.

The Austrian edicts of 1773 and 1783 and the first
decontextualizations

However, the desire Descamps expressed in 1769 to keep works of art in
place went unheeded and, in 1777, eight years after the publication of
Voyage pittoresque, over 2,000 art objects, including 1,836 paintings from
Jesuit establishments, were sold on the order of Empress Maria Theresa –
onece she had had a certain number removed for her personal collections
in Vienna.51 Although the government feared the 'adverse effect'52 of
expatriating these masterpieces on the local population, Minister
Plenipotentiary Starhemberg fought against any plans to set up a gallery in
Brussels, and the paintings were dispatched to the Austrian capital. Eight
years later, history was repeated when the suppression of religious houses,
ordered by Joseph II in March 1783, decreed that 22,000 paintings should
go to the Austrian state to be sold in the months following (1785).53
Beforehand, Guillaume Bosschaert (1737-1815), clerk to the Notarial
Chamber in Uccle, Brussels, and an art lover, was asked to pick out the best
pieces. His selection corresponded to 272 items listed in the catalogue for
a sale held in Brussels in September 1785, once the emperor had made his
own selection for his collections in Vienna. During the sale, moreover,
Bosschaert acted as an intermediary, making purchases on behalf of the
king of France, who bought five paintings.54 At this time, Bosschaert was
far from being the defender of the national heritage that he became when
the Brussels museum was set up in 1801.55 On 23 November 1785, he wrote
to the Comte d'Angiviller, who was Louis XVI's Director General of
Buildings at the time:

In a sense, this dispossession is not something I should desire and I
know not by what spell I am enthralled; this acknowledgement
substantiates the very simple thought whereby if it were not I who
removed my countrymen's paintings, it would be someone else; and so,

Thirteen years later, in 1798, Bosschaert had changed his tune and was
asking the French government on behalf of the city of Brussels to
repatriate works seized as compensation.57 His request stemmed from the
fact that in the intervening period Descamps's Voyage pittoresque had
genuinely served as a guidebook on what to take for French troops
pillaging Belgium in Year 2 (1794).58 This criticism, which has often been
categorically but vaguely made, is entirely justified by the requisition
records held in the National Archives in Paris.
French requisitions and the Republic's taste

Of the requisition records, the most interesting bears the title ‘End of notes and details on Belgium by Le Brun, submitted on 19 Thermidor 2 Rep. [6 August 1794] by the Committee of Public Instruction’. It appears to follow on from another document, unfortunately now lost. As it runs to 14 pages, it is quite sufficient to provide a clear idea of how the signatory, painter and art dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun (1748-1813), formulated his guidelines to the commissioners sent to make the requisitions in Belgium. Several recent studies have stressed the remarkable detail of these instructions, marvelling at the contrast with the more piecemeal information received by the Temporary Commission of Arts with respect to Germany and Italy. The explanation lies in the fact that Lebrun’s notes on Belgium are an almost literal reiteration of Descamps’s words in *Voyage pittoresque de la Flandre et du Brabant*. A close study allows the conclusion that Lebrun’s report resulted in greater dispossession in quantitative terms. Relying on the figures published by Charles Piot, 271 art objects were transferred to France in 1794, among them Rubens’s celebrated *Descent from the Cross* triptych, which was removed from Antwerp Cathedral.

These seizures, attributed primarily to Lebrun and alleged to represent the ‘Republic’s taste’, are in fact more in keeping with the taste of the Ancien Régime and, to a considerable extent, of Descamps himself. Quite unwittingly, the latter had provided Lebrun and the revolutionaries with a model of the choices to be made, since the Flemish style he described in the churches was large-scale historical painting, which broke with the taste of Louis XV and prefigured the policy of Comte d’Angiviller (Director General of Buildings of Louis XVI from 1774 until 1791). Despite their shared taste in northern art, however, Descamps and Lebrun were diametrically opposed on the issue of moving works of art. Whereas Descamps in 1769 advocated keeping works of art in their own setting, 25 years later Lebrun favoured bringing together in the museum in Paris works seized from the whole of Europe so that all might see ‘masterpieces that were being brought to ruin by their owners’ lack of concern’. There is no point dwelling here at length on the many arguments in favour of setting up a universal museum designed for liberated peoples, since these have already been the subject of recent research.

The Rubens triptych in the Louvre as a symbol of the Flemish School

From the time it arrived in France, Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross* effectively became the focus of debates about the meaning of works of art in terms of where they were exhibited. The triptych was one of the first works to be displayed in the Grand Gallery of the Louvre because the many enthusiastic commentaries about it had created a real ‘horizon of expectation’. Furthermore, the impact of the triptych’s move from textual description to field of vision for the French public could be seen in the crowds that came to admire the painting and in the mainly appreciative
articles. A few discordant voices were raised even so, particularly that of the anonymous writer in the 10 November 1794 edition of *La Décade philosophique*, who took advantage of remarks about Rubens’s merits to conclude as follows:

To these reflections, the fitness of which is easily sensed, we shall add a few other questions which might perhaps be more difficult to resolve. Have not the *Descent from the Cross* and the other two large paintings on wood which have come to us from Belgium at vast expense lost more from their move than we have gained? Is it possible to bear gazing upon all these hideous crucifixions anywhere but in those places where they imbue the soul with religious feelings and memories? Should the tortures so often lavished upon the spectacle by catholic mythology be offered to a people delivered from the superstitions of catholicism? Should they be brought to them at so much cost and from so far away? Can these colossal representations, designed to be seen in a magical distance, be relocated here at the viewing point required to soften their proportions and exaggerated forms, attenuate their flaws and allow their beauties to be felt? Finally, do not these three paintings and those of the same genre which may yet be brought to join them lose their value when leaving the churches dedicated to the suffering being they depict and the credulous nation to which this being is still a God?66

With faith depicted as outmoded credulity, according to the standards of the French Revolutionary period, the writer raises two issues that are of greater interest to the art historian: firstly, that of the loss of meaning brought about by taking a work out of context and, secondly, that of the loss of the magical effect of a composition designed with a specific setting in mind, which cannot, therefore, simply be relocated elsewhere. Here, the devotional criterion and the aesthetic criterion are evoked together to demonstrate their dependence on the original exhibition site. By breaking this interactivity, the revolutionaries denied the works’ spiritual content to retain only their aesthetic and educational functions, in line with secular criteria.55 To do so, they quickly opted, for educational reasons, for the paintings brought together in the Louvre to be displayed chronologically and according to individual School. This measure, which linked each painting to a nation, was compounded when the Central Museum became the ‘Napoleon Museum’ in 1803, under the leadership of a new director: Dominique Vivant-Denon (1747-1825). Vivant-Denon was with Bonaparte during the Egypt campaign, and his main aim was to make the museum ‘a visual history of art’.68 He therefore changed the installations in the Louvre’s Grand Gallery so that each division corresponded to a single School of painting, arranged around one or more masterpieces. It was at this point that the Rubens triptych took on a fully fledged national significance as the centre of the space assigned to the Flemish School.

The crowning moment of the painting’s religious meaning transmuting into national symbol came when Napoleon chose to immortalize his marriage to Marie-Louise of Austria on 2 April 1810 in the

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66 From Antwerp Cathedral to the Musée Napoléon

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Grand Gallery of the Louvre. To demonstrate both his political hegemony and the universal nature of his collections, during the ceremony the emperor passed a selection of masterpieces summarizing the three main Schools of painting. The museum catalogue of 1810 reveals that there were a great many of these masterpieces, but given the lack of space, illustrator Benjamin Zix (1772-1811), tasked with recording the event so that the Sèvres Manufactory could later produce a commemorative vase, was obliged to show only the most important (fig. 6). As a result, Zix condensed the gallery’s nine divisions into three groups. The single section devoted to the French School was retained intact, but the four areas devoted to Italy and Flanders were each reduced to just one section. He opted to depict Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross* in the centre of the section symbolizing the Flemish School (fig. 7), which itself was in the middle of the Grand Gallery between masterpieces from France and Italy. Granting the Flemish School this central location may be interpreted as consecrating the School itself but more especially the supremacy of Rubens. Indeed, the Flemish School was the only one represented by the works of a single master – Rubens – (fig. 8), whereas France and Italy
were symbolized by artists who were just as prominent but of greater number. In the French section, Nicolas Poussin and Eustache Le Sueur rubbed shoulders with other seventeenth-century masters (fig. 9), while, of the Italians, Raphael was surrounded by works by Perugino, Francesco Francia and Andrea del Sarto (fig. 10).

This paradoxical triumph of Rubens in France at a time when most art historians talk only about the success of Jacques-Louis David is partly explained by French writing about the arts, which had, for the most part, been positive about Rubens since the seventeenth century. It was summed up by the Chevalier de Jaucourt who, in 1755, wrote about the Antwerp master in the *Encyclopédie*: ‘He is the restorer of the Flemish School, the Titian and the Raphael of the Netherlands.’ On reading this statement, it becomes apparent that placing Rubens’s paintings, and the *Descent from the Cross* triptych in particular, in the centre of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre merely transposed visually what had been written about him in Enlightenment France. Eighteenth-century writing had already consecrated Rubens as the leader of his School, but now his triptych came to symbolize Flemish art through the central location it was given in the Napoleon Museum.

This ‘national’ value of the triptych, which overtook its devotional and artistic importance, was logical inasmuch as the work had been cut off from its original religious context. However, it would continue to take precedence in how the altarpiece was seen even after it was restored to Antwerp Cathedral. It was returned in the autumn of 1815, and on its arrival in Flanders, the local press in fact described it as ‘a national asset’, the return of which appeared to say that ‘the Belgians were a nation once more’. On reading this statement, it becomes apparent that placing Rubens’s paintings, and the *Descent from the Cross* triptych in particular, in the centre of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre merely transposed visually what had been written about him in Enlightenment France. Eighteenth-century writing had already consecrated Rubens as the leader of his School, but now his triptych came to symbolize Flemish art through the central location it was given in the Napoleon Museum.

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French government, to which it is the immediate successor. 75 This stance led to the works of the destroyed churches being assigned to the new Brussels museum, which provoked a good deal of debate. As for paintings from buildings that still existed, these were returned to their original locations even though they were no longer wholly owned by the churches. It was in this way that the return of Rubens’s *Descent from the Cross* triptych to Antwerp Cathedral was authorized in March 1816. 76

The initial euphoria over, however, its integration into the cathedral proved more difficult than expected since the furniture, destroyed by the French troops, no longer existed. The triptych regained its original place in the southern transept (fig. 11), but the magic of the installation Rubens had designed for it had gone forever and, with it, the site’s devotional capacity. As it happens, the loss of the furniture and numerous works prevented the recreation of the spatial fragmentation and intimacy required for prayer. Indeed, destruction by the French had only one unexpected positive consequence: it exposed and highlighted the
View of the south transept of Antwerp Cathedral with Rubens’s Descent from the Cross triptych in 2014 (photo: author)

View of the nave and the side aisles of Antwerp Cathedral in 2014 (photo: author)
building’s Gothic architecture. The main change as regards the *Descent from the Cross* triptych was its installation in what had become an empty space, since the works that were previously nearby did not return to the church but remained at the Recollects’ Convent, a foreshadow of the future museum of Antwerp. Possibly, the triptych’s new isolation served to intensify the focus on Rubens, already a national myth. As for the cathedral as a whole, lengthy reflection on its interior organization was only beginning at the start of the nineteenth century and may still be considered ongoing today. In the twenty-first century, the most striking event has been to remove some of the paintings commissioned by the corporations from the museum to restore them to their homes in the side aisles of the church (fig. 12). This decision heightens an understanding of the site as a museum space devoted solely to tourist perambulations rather than a place in which devotional practice and aesthetic delectation could coexist. The disconnect is not solely psychological; it is physical too. To enter the church, you must pass through a security barrier that opens only if you have bought a ticket...

**Notes**

Translation by Melanie J. Moore. I would like to thank Frits Scholten, Eveline Koolhaas and the editorial board of the *NAJ* for their fruitful comments on the first version of this paper.

1 Belting 1990; Stoichita 1993.
2 On the Jesuits, see Piot 1878 and Scheelen 1888. On the religious houses, see Piot 1877.
3 Piot 1883.
4 Christin 2002; Muller 2005.
5 P.P. Rubens, *Descent from the Cross*, triptych, 1611-1614, oil on panel, 421 x 311 cm (closed), 421 x 677 cm (open), Antwerp Cathedral. Judson 2000, 162-190, nos. 43-46.
7 Michel 1993, 253-278.
8 Cousinie 2000, 129.
9 Schieder 1997; De Savignac 2002.
11 Loir 2004, 61-64.
12 Knipping 1975; Freedberg 1994; Vliegh 1998, 13-114 (including earlier bibliography); Philipott et al. 2003. For Antwerp, see Prims 1924 and Thijs 1990.
14 In the altarpiece jointly commissioned from Frans Francken II in 1587 by the Schoolmasters’ Guild and the Guild of Soapmakers, the schoolmasters were able to choose the subjects of the central panel (*Christ among the Scribes*) and the left side-wing (*Saint Ambrose*) because they had contributed more money than the soapmakers, who were given the right side-wing (*The Miracle of the Flowing Oil*). See Cat. Antwerp 2005, 161-165, cat. no. 6.
15 ‘De bouw der voors kercke is een loffelijck werk dieende tot verwonderinge van alle vremdelingen tot ciraet deser stadt & dist niet alleenelijck vande parochianten maer vande geheele gemeijnte der selve.’ Quoted in Muller 2005, 80, note 8.
16 Philipott et al. 2003.
17 The town became French in 1662 for the first time.
18 Maës 2005.
19 Van Mander 1604; Houbraken 1718-1721.
22 Despampe 1753-1763, vol. 3, 320: ‘The city of Antwerp is so rich in paintings that it offers us thirty-six by the same artist [Rubens], which are on public display, not to mention those in private homes. The Church of Our Lady has its own masterpiece, of which we have already spoken. This is the painting for the Hotel [sic] of the Fraternity of the Mall: it has two side-panels, the middle depicts a Descent from the Cross; on one side-panel is the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, & on the other the Presentation in the Temple: on the outside of the side-panels are Saint Christopher Carrying the Infant Jesus, & a Hermit holding the lantern that guides the saint.’
23 Frans Floris, *Triptych of the Fencers’ Guild* (*The Fall of the Rebel Angels*), 1554, oil on panel, 368 x 220 cm, (side-panels missing since the end of the sixteenth century), Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 112; currently on display in the cathedral.
25 Falconet 1781, 27: ‘C’est en Flandres, à Anvers surtout, qu’il faut voir ce Peintre [Rubens] dans les compositions à grands ressorts. Je ne parle pas de ses différents ouvrages que j'ai vue je me borne à dire ici que sa fameuse Descente de Croix est un des plus effrayants tableaux que je connaisse, & peut-être celui qui, en me présentant ce que l’art a de plus expressif, m’a le plus fait horreur... Est-ce ou n’est-ce pas l’éloge de Rubens que je fais? Je n’en sais rien; je peins l’effet que son tableau fit sur moi, quand je le vis à Anvers; & si en ne le voyant plus, les traces en sont en quelque sorte affaiblies, elles ont cependant assez de force encore, pour me faire à peu-près la même impression. Reconnoissons dans d’autres grands Artistes, soit Grecs, soit modernes, la sublimité simple; mais nous ne pouvons nous soustraire à l’empire que l’art du Peintre Bélgne, exercé sur notre âme.’
26 Locke 1690; Du Bos (1719) 1995; Bonno 1950.
27 Descamps 1769, 145-146: ‘At the Altar of the Arquebuse Fraternity, this Descent from the Cross, a famous painting, is in the centre; the Visitatio is on the inside of one of the side-wings, the Purification on the other: when the side-wings are closed, Saint Christopher is seen on the outside, carrying the Infant Jesus on his shoulders. He is crossing a river while a Hermit lights the way with a lantern: all painted by Rubens, vol. 1, p. 207. The subject in the middle is well composed and clearly drawn, the heads are all beautiful and very expressive; the effect of the light is stunning, broken then taken up again and always connected with all possible skill: the colour is admirable and such as nature at its loveliest might reveal. The Visitatio, on the left-hand panel is just as well composed: the Virgin is full of grace and beauty and everything is in motion, emotions of the utmost tenderness are well expressed in all the figures and on their faces. The left-side panel [the right-side panel], with a painting of the Purification, is also very fine and particularly Saint Simeon who holds the Infant Jesus: this old man's face has a most erudite remarks, have made this book more entertaining and embellished it with stories about each town or with a brief history of Flanders, giving an idea of the manners of its inhabitants, their customs, their industry, the trade and soil of this beautiful country: all this would have run to several volumes but I would not have achieved my goal which concerns only the arts. One volume in which the objects are not confused will be of more use to amateurs who ask of an artist only what he does best.’

28 Descamps 1769, x-xj: ‘I could, with a few cut passages with religious connotations, conduct the voyageurs curieux à par où ses rayons passent.’

29 Jeffrey Muller has shown that Bosschere out of his edition of J. de Witt’s manuscript (De Witt 1758). He gives the example of a marble plaque in Antwerp’s Carmelite church. Painted on it was the face of Christ, its beauty leading to its immediate veneration by believers. See Muller 2005, 78-79.

30 Descamps 1769, xj-xij: ‘Tous ces temples y sont décorés avec grandeur et magnificence; ce sont autant de monumens, d’une piété pure, qu’on partage en les visitant; elle a contribué à faire éclorer le genre des grands talents, et leur perfection est de nos jours la richesse de ce pays qui est digne d’être visité.’

31 Descamps 1769, xxj-xxij: ‘J’ai remarqué un autre abus poussé quelquefois jusqu’à l’indécence. Comme la plupart de ces chapelles appartiennent à des corps de métiers ou à des confréries, les valets de ces compagnies ferment les rideaux ou les volets qui couvrent ces tableaux, et refusent de les découvrir si on n’accorde le prix auquel ils vous taxent. On les a vu fermer les rideaux au moment que les voyageurs en approchoient; enfin, ceux que la piété ou la curiosité y refusent de les découvrir si on n’accorde le prix auquel ils vous taxent. On les a vu fermer les rideaux au moment que les voyageurs en approchoient; enfin, ceux que la piété ou la curiosité y conduisent, c’est au goût et à l’autorité que je m’adresse cette plainte. Pour faire cesser un abus si contraire à leurs vues et aux arts, un tableau ne doit être garanti que de l’ardeur du soleil; il suffirait pour le conserver de placer un rideau à la croisée par où ses rayons passent.’


33 Thijs 2006; Fabri 2009.

34 Muller 2008, 453-454.


36 Mensaert 1763, vol. 1, 229-231. Judson wrongly attributes the original account to J.F.R. Michel in Histoire de la vie de P.P. Rubens (Brussels 1771). The mistake is repeated in most commentaries on the triptych. See Judson 2000, 166.

37 See Jonckheere 2012, 134-139.

38 Hendrik van Steenwijk the Younger. Church interior, 1645, oil on copper, 37.5 x 57 cm, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, inv. 2066.

39 Pieter Neefs the Elder, Interior of Antwerp Cathedral by day, s.a., oil on panel, 59 x 84 cm, Brussels, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, inv. 1355.

40 See Fuseniuc 2005.

41 Descamps 1769, 33: ‘Je voudrois que les magistrats défendissent de toucher, sans leur permission, aux ouvrages placés en public, et qu’on fût certain du mérite de ceux à qui on les confie; ce serait le moyen de conserver des productions qui intéressent ceux qui aiment les arts, et qui servent de modèles à ceux qui les étudient. Je ne réponds pas des places où sont aujourd’hui les tableaux que j’indique: l’aristocratie en a célé à des étrangers, d’autres ont été retirés pour en substituer de médiocres. Ce dernier objet, qui est l’effet d’un début de goût ou de connaissance, est moins dangereux, parce qu’on peut les remettre dans leur première place, lorsque les personnes en seront instruites, comme elles le seront par la lecture de mon livre.’

42 ‘Finally, the works of the great masters were not looked upon, in the times of which I speak, as ordinary furniture destined to embellish the apartments of some private individual. They were reputed the jewels of a State and a public treasure, the enjoyment of which was owed to all citizens.’ Du Bos [179] 1993, 236.

43 See Étienne 2012 and Massing 2012.

44 ‘Having gradually come across some excellent pieces, adorning and enriching the cabinets of many collectors, one of these gentlemen told us that the best pieces from that of the late Mr. de Fraula had gone to foreigners: Mensaert 1763, vol. 1, 53.

45 Descamps 1769, 152: ‘les bons ouvrages placés en public… sont les seuls objets qui conduisent les voyageurs curieux à parcourir ce pays.’ See also 280.

46 ‘It is unpleasant for the curious to learn that of the three or four paintings which alternately decorate an altar during the year, only one may be seen at a time: since, when one of the paintings is on display, the others are often shut away in places that are difficult to access. It may also happen that those which are not on display are the only ones worth seeing; thus, it would be better for the curious and for the preservation of the paintings, if changes are required, to remove them from their place: only to put them on full view in the same church.’ Descamps 1769, xj-xij. For examples, see Descamps 1769, 64, 142, 182, 187, 274-275.


48 Descamps 1769, xvij-xx.

49 Galesout 1853; Goovaerts & Stein 1888; Loir 1998, 13-34.

50 Descamps 1769, 186-187; ‘ne pas les exposer ensemble à la vue du voyageur curieux; c’est le priver des seuls objets qui peuvent
Émile-Mâle 1994, 9; Savoy 2003, vol. 1, 26. See in particular Pommier 1991; McClellan 64
65
66
Lebrun 1793. See also Panzanelli & Preti-Piot 1877; Laenen 1905; Denorme 1970.
59
60
Anonymous 1794, 11-14 frimaire an II [4 December 1794], quoted in Tuylot 1921, vol. 1, 621-623.
61
62
The triptych went on display at the end of September 1794, as did three other works by Rubens: the sketch for Descent from the Cross, The raising of the Cross and Christ on the Cross between the two thieves, known as Le coup de lance. Van den Nieuwenhuizen 1962; Émile-Mâle 1964, 165; Émile-Mâle 1994, 12.
63
Anonymous 1794, 287-288: 'A ces réflexions, dont il est aisé de sentir la justesse, nous ajouterons quelques autres questions, qui seraient peut-être plus délicates à résoudre. La Descente de Croix et les deux autres grands tableaux peints sur bois, qui nous sont arrivés de la Belgique avec des frais énormes, n’ont-ils pas plus perdu à leur déplacement que nous n’y avons gagné? Tous ces hideros crucifiens peuvent-ils être supportables aux regards, ailleurs que dans les lieux où ils portent à l’âme des sentiments et des souvenirs religieux? Les tortures dont la mythologie catholique étaile si fréquemment le spectacle, doivent-elles être offertes à un peuple délivré des superstitions du catholicisme? Doivent-elles lui être apportées à tant de frais et de si loin? Ces représentations colossales, destinées à être vues dans un lointain maginaire, pourront-elles être replacées chez nous à ce point de vue nécessaire pour adoucir leurs proportions et leurs formes exagérées, pour atténuer leurs défauts, et faire sentir les beautés? Enfin, ces trois tableaux et ceux du même genre que l’on y pourra joindre encore, ne perdront-ils pas de leur prix en quittant les temples consacrés à l’être souffrant qu’ils représentent, et la nation crèdule pour qui cet être est encore un Dieu?’
64
The power of the museum to elide original meanings and to substitute for them new aesthetic and art historical significances is well understood today, but it is an attribute of museums first conceived and exploited during the Revolution. McClellan 1994, 113.
65
66
Cat. Paris 1810.
67
Benjamin Zix, The bridal procession of Napoleon and Marie-Louise of Austria, 1810, pen and watercolour, 24 x 172 cm, Paris, Louvre Museum, deposited by the Sèvres Manufactory. In a donation dated 2012, the Louvre received another four drawings depicting the wedding procession. They had belonged to Vivant-Denon (inv. BF 54 935-54 936).
68
Elle n’est pas perdue à leur déplacement que nous n’y avons gagné? Tous ces hideros crucifiens peuvent-ils être supportables aux regards, ailleurs que dans les lieux où ils portent à l’âme des sentiments et des souvenirs religieux? Les tortures dont la mythologie catholique étaile si fréquemment le spectacle, doivent-elles être offertes à un peuple délivré des superstitions du catholicisme? Doivent-elles lui être apportées à tant de frais et de si loin? Ces représentations colossales, destinées à être vues dans un lointain maginaire, pourront-elles être replacées chez nous à ce point de vue nécessaire pour adoucir leurs proportions et leurs formes exagérées, pour atténuer leurs défauts, et faire sentir les beautés? Enfin, ces trois tableaux et ceux du même genre que l’on y pourra joindre encore, ne perdront-ils pas de leur prix en quittant les temples consacrés à l’être souffrant qu’ils représentent, et la nation crèdule pour qui cet être est encore un Dieu?’
69
‘Le grand convoi contenant les tableaux et objets d’art repris au Musée de Paris, et qui appartiennent à la Belgique, est arrivé le 15 aux frontières du royaume.... Ces énormes chariots, renfermant tous les chefs-d’œuvre de l’école flamande, s’avancant lentement sur la grande route, entourés des braves gens qui les ramènent dans leur terre natale, offraient un air triomphal et majestueux, il semblait dire que les Belges étaient redevenus une nation. ’The great convoy containing the paintings and art objects reclaimed from the Museum in Paris and which belong to Belgium arrived at the border of the kingdom on 15... The huge wagons, holding all the masterpieces of the Flemish school, advancing slowly along the highway, surrounded by the doughty souls who were returning them to their native land, had a triumphant and majestic air. It seemed to say that the Belgians were a nation once more.’ (Druce, no. 322, 17 novembre 1815.)
70
71
Quoted in Piot 1883, 356-358: ‘Sous le rapport du droit, il est incontestable que c’est à l’état entier et non à une section de l’état quelconque qu’appartiennent les tableaux provenant des couvens supprimés; le gouvernement du roi est investi de tous les droits du gouvernement français, auquel il succède immédiatement.’ On this topic, see Loir 1998, 123-141.
72
Piot 1883, 399-402.
73
Manderyck 2009.
74
The paintings by De Vos and Coxcie were not seized by the French and so never left Antwerp; see Grieten & Bungeeers 1996, 304-305, cat. nos. 9.12.
75
See in particular Huemer 1944, 40-45; Repp-Eckert 1988; Guédron 1998.
76
Cat. Anvers 2009.
77
78
79
Here is the quotation in full: ‘Le grand convoi contenant les tableaux et objets d’art repris au Musée de Paris, et qui appartiennent à la Belgique, est arrivé le 15 aux frontières du royaume.... Ces énormes chariots, renfermant tous les chefs-d’œuvre de l’école flamande, s’avancant lentement sur la grande route, entourés des braves gens qui les ramènent dans leur terre natale, offraient un air triomphal et majestueux, il semblait dire que les Belges étaient redevenus une nation. ’The great convoy containing the paintings and art objects reclaimed from the Museum in Paris and which belong to Belgium arrived at the border of the kingdom on 15... The huge wagons, holding all the masterpieces of the Flemish school, advancing slowly along the highway, surrounded by the doughty souls who were returning them to their native land, had a triumphant and majestic air. It seemed to say that the Belgians were a nation once more.’ (Druce, no. 322, 17 novembre 1815.)
80
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81
Cat. Anvers 2009.
82
83
Belting 1990
84
85
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From Antwerp Cathedral to the Musée Napoléon

Bonenfant 1924

Bonno 1950

Boyer 1971

Brière 1920

Châtelain 1999

Christin 2002

Cousinié 2000

Crow 1985

Dambryune 2006

Denorme 1970

Descamps 1753-1765
J.B. Descamps, La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandais, Paris 1753-1765, 4 vols.

Descamps 1769
J.B. Descamps, Voyage pittoresque de la Flandre et du Brabant, avec des réflexions relativement aux arts et quelques gravures, Paris & Rouen 1769.

Diderot & D’Alembert 1755

Émile-Mâle 1964

Émile-Mâle 1994
G. Émile-Mâle, Inventaire et restauration au Louvre de tableaux conquis en Belgique (septembre 1794-février 1795), Brussels 1994.

Engerand 1901
F. Engerand, Inventaire des tableaux commandés et achetés par la direction des bâtiments du roi (1709-1792), Paris 1901.

Étienne 2012

Fabri 2009

Falconet 1781
E. Falconet, Œuvres d’Étienne Falconet, statuaire, vol. 5, Lausanne 1781.

Freedberg 1994

Fusenig 2005

Gachtingen 1995-1997

Galesloot 1853
L. Galesloot, ‘Des mesures projetées par le gouvernement de Marie-Thérèse pour empêcher la vente des tableaux de prix appartenant à des corporations religieuses et séculières,’ Annales de l’Académie d’archéologie de Belgique 10 (1853), 185-188.

Gob 2007

Goovaerts & Stein 1888

Gouzi 2007
Cat. Paris 1810

Le Pas de Sécheval 1996

Philippot et al. 2003

De Piles 1708
R. de Piles, Cours de peinture par principes, Paris, 1708.

Piot 1877

Piot 1878

Piot 1883
C. Piot, Rapport à M. le Ministre de l'Intérieur sur les tableaux enlevés à la Belgique en 1794 et restitués en 1815, Brussels 1883.

Pommier 1991

Poulot 1997

Prak et al. 2006

Praks 1924

Repp-Eckert 1988

De Savignac 2002

Savoy 2003