The past is always present: The image of early Netherlandish art in the long nineteenth century

In 1881, the American collector Stephen Whitney Phoenix bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York a painting by the artist Wilhelm (Guillaume) Koller (1829-1884/1885) entitled *Hugo van der Goes painting the portrait of Mary of Burgundy* (fig. 1). Koller, who trained in Vienna and Düsseldorf, moved in 1856 to Belgium, where he exhibited this painting at the Brussels Salon of 1872. The picture imagines an encounter between Van der Goes (ca. 1440-1482) and Mary of Burgundy (1457-1482), shown as a child seated on the lap of her young stepmother Margaret of York (1446-1503). Behind them is likely Charles the Bold (1433-1477), who married Margaret after the death of Mary’s mother, Isabella of Bourbon (1434-1465). Koller’s painting offered nineteenth-century audiences an appealing, if fictional, image of an esteemed northern European artist depicting a moment in the domestic life of a noble dynasty closely identified with the history and heritage of Belgium.
Koller specialized in genre scenes celebrating fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European culture, and particularly that of present-day Belgium, Austria, and Germany. This painting engages directly with what we now call early Netherlandish art, produced between about 1420 to 1550, largely in centers of creativity in the Burgundian, and later Habsburg, Netherlands. In Koller's day, this art historical period was closely identified with the 'Flemish Primitives' and the 'northern Renaissance' – terms with national and ideological implications, as discussed in the next section of this introduction. Koller's painting raises a set of questions central to this issue of Oud Holland: what sparked the artist's choice of subject? What perceptions of early Netherlandish art and history does the picture convey? What relationship between the early Netherlandish past and Koller's present does the scene imply? The answers to these questions lie in the impulses driving the phenomenon of historic revival in nineteenth-century Belgian art and the concurrent surge of interest in early Netherlandish painting.

In his seminal study History and its images (1993) Francis Haskell argued that the 'rediscovery' of early Netherlandish painting in the long nineteenth century brought to light a corpus of artworks that played a pivotal role in the emergence of new historical discourses, the articulation of contemporary political and cultural ambitions, and the uneasy formation of national identity that characterized the beginnings of the modern Belgian nation-state. Haskell's study is a lynchpin for a body of scholarship examining the reinvigoration of early modern artistic exemplars in the nineteenth-century Belgian context. In the wake of Belgium's separation from the Kingdom of the Netherlands and emergence as an autonomous national entity in 1830, the country's leaders promoted an illustrious artistic history as a basis for a common heritage around which the body politic could unite. There was a great deal at stake in the concept of cultural continuity: the new Belgian nation represented an uneasy marriage of predominantly Flemish-speaking territories in the north and French-speaking territories in the Walloon South, each with its own linguistic and regional identities.

This essential tension was amplified by the pressures of industrialization, urbanization, laissez-faire capitalism, disputes over the role of the Catholic Church in national life, and, beginning in 1885, colonialism — social fault lines that made a splendid artistic heritage all the more attractive as a rallying point for the young Belgian state. The symbolic currency of art history could hardly have been higher, and players across the political and cultural spectrum accordingly tried to stake a claim on the art of earlier eras. Their efforts yielded multiple, at times competing, conceptions of the past and its implications for Belgium in the present.

The exploration of this artistic heritage was capacious, extending from the Van Eyck brothers to Rubens. Yet early Netherlandish painting enjoyed special significance as the 'originary' expression of regional 'genius' that positioned Belgium at the center of an artistic transformation: the purported invention of oil painting by Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441), which enabled a new degree of naturalism, and the beginnings of a northern Renaissance. The Belgian poet and art critic Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916), contemplating the Ghent Altarpiece, proclaimed that the art of this period was, "like a great painted book, wide open, / enclosing, in its red or blond pages / and in its golden texts, four thousand years of the world: / the entire dream of humanity in the face of the universe .... a grandiose and pure and marvelous poem." Koller's subject would have resonated in this cultural landscape as an evocation of early Netherlandish artistic genius and its alignment with political and economic power — a vision that dovetailed with the aspirations of the nineteenth-century Belgian state. In this respect, the picture exemplifies the essential interconnectedness of Belgian nationalism and the early Netherlandish revival. Yet at the same time, this nationalism existed within a complex set of impulses surrounding the 'rediscovery' of early Netherlandish art, which extended well beyond questions of Belgian identity and beyond the nation's borders: the desire for alternatives to artistic conventions seen as
empty and stale; a new interest in forms of realism; a related esteem for art that seemed to embody simplicity, vitality, and fidelity to nature; and, more broadly, with the assertion of a variety of religious and political agendas and identities.7

Inventing early Netherlandish art

Koller’s painting also calls attention to some of the ways in which the nineteenth century gave rise to the concept of early Netherlandish painting as a distinct field of art historical inquiry and continues to shape our understanding of artistic developments north of the Alps in the early modern period. Suzanne Sulzberger’s groundbreaking La Réhabilitation des Primitifs flamands: 1832-1867 of 1961 demonstrated how overlapping scholarly, aesthetic and commercial interests raised the profile of this period in art history, and of its leading artists, in the context of European, and particularly German and English, Classicism and Romanticism. At the same time, Sulzberger revealed the cultural, political and nationalist implications of the shifting terminology used to describe this period.8

These variances in nomenclature are encapsulated by two exhibitions held in Bruges about thirty years apart. One, in 1867, was organized by the English scholar W.H. James Weale (1832-1917) under the title Tableaux de l’ancienne école néerlandaise, a construction that closely resembles ‘early Netherlandish’ painting, the term preferred by more recent scholars, including many of the contributors to the present issue, to refer to art produced before the scission of the Northern and Southern Netherlands in the Dutch Revolt (1566-1648).9 The second and more famous exhibition, organized in Bruges in 1902 under the direction of Baron Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove (1856-1928), advertised the artists on view as the ‘Primitifs flamands’ (fig. 2). The exhibition’s coordinators settled on this compound term after much debate. Scholars, including the Belgian patriot Jules Helbig, opposed describing early Netherlandish art as ‘primitive’ – a concept associated with evolutionary models that nineteenth-century critics had applied to Italian painting before Raphael.10 Yet the committee unquestioningly approved the use of ‘Flamands’, embracing a term that Belgian writers had almost universally adopted to refer to the early rise of independent oil painting and its practitioners.11 Although articulated in French, which was then the culturally dominant language in Belgium, the exhibition’s title thus emphasized the ‘Flemish’ origins of the tradition of oil painting. It also helped to propel a nationalist discourse in Belgium that privileged ‘Flemish’ culture over a more expansive, pan-Netherlandish identity encompassing both the Northern and Southern Netherlands.12 As the essays in this issue attest, the term ‘Flemish Primitives’ still retains a degree of currency, particularly in French scholarship.

The 1902 exhibition marked a turning point in the understanding of early Netherlandish art.13 Incorporating multiple media and spanning over a century of artistic production, this major loan exhibition attracted considerable international attention, giving rise to some of the period’s most important studies of Netherlandish art and culture, and inspiring exhibitions in cities including Düsseldorf, Paris, and Barcelona.14 While the 1902 exhibition sparked a wide range of critiques as well as influential scholarship, it was also hugely important for cementing longstanding rifts in the scholarly and critical reception of early modern art produced in the Low Countries. The German art historian Max Friedländer (1867-1958) emerged from the exhibition with a laudatory view of the legacy of the Van Eycks. In his eyes, these painters and their near-contemporaries broke with centuries of stagnation by looking to the “infinite diversity” of nature and using their mastery of oil painting technique to examine and depict the world around them—not unlike nineteenth-century concepts of realism.15 Friedländer’s writings position the Netherlandish tradition as a threshold to artistic modernity, and ascribe to Netherlandish art a positive value that does not depend on Italian ideals of perspective or classical depictions of the body.16 His interpretation largely parallels those of contemporaries including Hippolyte Taine and Louis Courajod in France,
LES PRIMITIFS FLAMANDS
à BRUGES
Exposition de 400 Tableaux de
VAN EYCK, VANDER WEYDEN, MEMLING
BOUTS, GERARD DAVID, METSYS
etc.
& d'Objets d'Art des XVᵉ & XVIᵉ Siècles
OUVERTE JUSQU'AU 15 BÉVRÉ J.902.

LITH. J.L. COFFART BRUXELLES
Karl Voll in Germany, and Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert in Belgium, all of whom understood early Netherlandish painting as the point of origin for a distinctly northern Renaissance. Friedländer would devote his career to studying this art and developing a multivolume catalogue that remains an essential point of reference.27

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) responded differently to the 1902 exhibition.28 His visit to the show shaped the assessment articulated in *The autumn of the Middle Ages*, his highly influential yet contentious study of Netherlandish culture, first published in Dutch in 1919.29 In that text, he famously identified in the ‘naturalism’ of the Van Eycks a belated “unfolding of the medieval spirit” in decline.30 Where Friedländer invited favorable comparisons to nineteenth-century realism, Huizinga saw the decadence of a premodern society of spectacle focused on ritual performances.31 Huizinga’s arguments stand apart for their rejection of any explicit connection between the Netherlandish past and contemporary Dutch or Belgian culture – a prevailing view advanced by his influential Belgian contemporary Henri Pirenne.32 Yet Huizinga’s determined resistance to seeing a modernist-realist character in early Netherlandish art is a measure of just how successful his nineteenth-century predecessors were in establishing the terms on which this art was exhibited, studied, and invoked as a common heritage for modern Belgian society.33 Both Friedländer’s and Huizinga’s projects reflect the ways in which nineteenth-century understandings of the past shaped the historiography of early Netherlandish art as a site of contested significance. The ‘rehabilitation’ of the masters that culminated in the 1902 exhibition was, ultimately, a deeply political effort, enmeshed in debates about how (or if) the Netherlandish past could be brought to bear on Belgian culture in the present and appropriated in other contexts for specific ideological purposes.

The past is always present

It is the intersection of artistic and art historical practice in the long nineteenth century, and its enduring impact on the development of early Netherlandish art history as a field of study, that inspired this issue of *Oud Holland*, which originated as a panel held at the Historians of Netherlandish Art conference in Ghent in 2018. The essays examine the myriad ways in which, to quote the Belgian playwright and poet Maurice Maeterlinck, “the past is always present”.34 They are concerned with the study, creative adaptation, reception, and active promotion of early Netherlandish art, in particular painting, in Belgium, and in England and German-speaking regions that took a keen scholarly and political interest in their young neighbor.35 The essays address varied aspects of this cultural and intellectual landscape: art historical writing and exhibitions; architecture and design; painting and drawing; and photography. Collectively, the authors illuminate how the past and the present were brought into productive interplay through a range of interconnected practices.

The essays form three thematic pairs, each highlighting a different facet of the nineteenth-century engagement with early Netherlandish art. The section *Documenting the past* considers the deeper meanings of attempts to record and preserve the Belgian artistic heritage. Sandra Hindriks presents a case study on the impact of nationalist agendas on art historical interpretation. Examining a ceremonial goblet presented to the Antwerp painters’ guild of St Luke in 1549 but now destroyed, she explores how nineteenth-century views of the city’s artistic heritage may have given rise to a significant mistake in identifying one of the figures portrayed on the precious object as Jan van Eyck, rather than Raphael. Correcting this error, and the historiography to which it gave rise, she exposes how nineteenth-century historians in Antwerp constructed an artistic history with more explicitly nationalist or regionalist claims than their early modern forebears, whose more international outlook has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention.36
Érika Wicky’s contribution revisits photography’s role in establishing the early Netherlandish canon. Her investigation into Belgian photographer Edmond Fierlants’ state-sponsored project to create highly detailed reproductions of early Netherlandish paintings elucidates the vital part played by photography in enabling connoisseurship. Wicky’s essay also highlights perceived technical and aesthetic parallels between centuries-old paintings and the very modern medium of photography, which, advocates argued, made it uniquely suitable to the task of documenting and promoting early Netherlandish art.

**Appropriating the past** analyzes creative borrowing and reuse as strategies for bringing early Netherlandish painting to bear on the concerns of the present. Douglas Brine examines a set of drawings by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and Yale University’s Beinecke Library, revealing how the distinctive vocabulary of forms that shaped Pugin’s architectural practice in Victorian England was rooted in his study of Netherlandish art in private English collections, in printed reproductions, and through travel to the Low Countries. Brine demonstrates how Pugin tapped into the perceived religiosity of early Netherlandish art to market designs specifically to English Catholic patrons.

Susan Canning explores the artist James Ensor’s ironic mode of citing and co-opting the Netherlandish past. Adopting the critical lens of ‘flandricism’, the linguistic practice of intermingling Flemish idioms in French texts, she considers how Ensor used pictorial references to Flemish and Netherlandish art and history to express his own artistic and cultural identity, and critique contemporary Belgian society and politics. In a culture that took its art and history very seriously indeed, Ensor’s irreverent and satirical approach to the exalted exemplars of the past, stands out as a marked counterpoint and site of resistance.

**Interpreting the past** brings together two essays that examine the important role of German art historians in shaping an international image of Netherlandish art. Henrik Karge examines Karl Schnaase’s *Niederländische Briefe* (Letters from the Netherlands), published in 1834 – a heterogeneous volume of travel writing, personal reflections, and extensive discussions of art. By providing a close reading of a selection of passages discussing art in the Low Countries, Karge demonstrates how Schnaase developed an identity for Netherlandish art in contradistinction to Italian traditions. In doing so, he advanced an early form of comparative art history for Netherlandish painting, mapping a synthetic history of the development of art by peoples and cultures decades before such practices crystalized in academic discourse.

William Diebold examines a text written by Paul Clemen, the curator of the 1904 exhibition in Düsseldorf of paintings from the Rhineland, which came on the heels of the 1902 exhibition in Bruges. Diebold demonstrates how Clemen’s musings on his era’s preference for ‘primitive’ art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries contravene explanations of that predilection as a product of nationalism and artistic modernism. Diebold identifies other associations of this art, which emerge, explicitly and implicitly, in Clemen’s text, including its gendered connotations and its conservative appeal to notions of piety, craft, tradition, and community in opposition to ideals of progress and modernity.

Diebold’s essay is an apt conclusion to this issue. Standing on the threshold of a new century, Clemen was able to cast a critical eye over the resurgent interest in early Netherlandish art in prior decades. He began to explore the nature of the field’s appeal, working through its multiple and sometimes divergent significations, and, perhaps most importantly, expressing an incipient recognition that the tastes and the concerns of the present conditioned understanding of the artistic past.
ABOUT THE GUEST EDITORS

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NOTES

1 On Koller’s art and career, see J. Dafforne, “Modern painters of Belgium: No. XI. Guillaume Koller,” The Art- Journal, new series 6 (1867), pp. 92; “Koller, Wilhelm,” in Österreichisches biographisches Lexikon 1858-1953, vol. 4, Vienna 1969, p. 92. Koller exhibited two paintings at the Brussels Salon in 1872, both of which celebrated Belgium’s noble past. Nr 243 showed the German merchant Anton Fugger (1499-1561) and Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (1500-1558). Nr 444 was “Hugues van den Goes, reçu par la duchesse Marguerite d’York, seconde (sic) femme de Charles le Teméraire, fait le portrait de Marie de Bourgogne,” see Exposition générale des Beaux-Arts 1872: Catalogue explicatif, Brussels 1872, p. 53. The identification of this work as the one now in The Met is supported by J.D. Champlin, Jr. (ed.), Cyclopedia of painters and paintings, vol. 2, New York 1927 (orig. 1886), p. 473, who describes The Met’s painting as “Hugo van der Goes painting the portrait of the infanta Maria de Bourgogne.” The armorial in the background of the scene are approximations of the coats of arms of England and Burgundy in the period. The paintings in the background have not been identified; it is possible that Koller invented them.

2 Keen-eyed readers will note that Koller exercised some creative license: Margaret of York married Charles the Bold in 1468, when Mary of Burgundy was eleven, much older than the child in the painting. Given that Koller’s title in the 1872 exhibition catalogue incorrectly identifies Margaret of York as Charles the Bold’s second wife (she was actually his third, and Isabella of Bourbon was his second), the artist may not have had access to the correct facts, or may simply have gotten them wrong. In any case, no records exist of a Van der Goes portrait of Mary of Burgundy at any age. On the reception of Hugo van der Goes in the nineteenth century, see D. Wolflath, “Hugo van der Goes: A historiographical study,” Center 26 (2005-2006), pp. 165-167, which discusses Émile Wauters’ “The painter Hugo van der Goes at the Rode Klooster (Brussels, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, inv. 2536)” also exhibited at the Brussels Salon in 1872, nr 873.

3 Mary of Burgundy’s marriage in 1477 to Maximilian of Austria (1459-1519), encouraged by her stepmother, was a politically transformative union that aligned the Burgundian State with the Habsburgs and initiated an enduring French-Habsburg breach. We are grateful to Maryan Ainsworth, Jan Dirk Baetens, Douglas Brine, and Diane Wolflath for their insights into The Met’s painting.


The Belgian elite spoke French and were guided by French cultural exemplars, Flemish language (and, to a certain extent, culture) only gained grand official recognition. On Belgium's regional and linguistic identities and their nationalist implications, see Deprez 1998 (note 7), pp. 35-71, 83-181, 193-212. For the early modern context, see A. Duke, The elusive Netherland: The question of national identity in the early modern Low Countries on the eve of the Revolt, Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlandsen 19 (2004), pp. 22-38. See also Susan Canning's essay in this issue.

The notion of symbolic currency employed here is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, see P. Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital', in J. Richardson (ed.), Handbook of theory of research for the sociology of education, Greenwich 1986, pp. 241-258.

See note 7.


"Comme un grand livre peint et largement ouvert, / Elle enfermait, en ses pages rouges ou blondes / Et dans ses textes d'a quatre mille ans du monde: / Tout le rêve de l'homme en proie à l'univers, / L'homme en proie à l'univers. / L'œuvre dardait dans l'art / textes d'or quatre mille ans du monde: / Tout le rêve de / enfermait, en ses pages rouges ou blondes / Et dans ses..."

On Verhaeren's writings on the northern Renaissance, grateful to Douglas Brine for his thoughts on this topic. See the critiques of the term 'northern Renaissance' in A. Hokanson, 'Henri De Braekeleer (1842-1888), Ph.D. diss. New York University 2003, 'The Netherlandish interior', pp. 223-236. It is noteworthy that Lionello Venturi, one of the most important scholars of the Italian 'primitivi', visited the 1932 Bruges exhibition, see L. Venturi, Il gusto dei primitivi, Bologna 1926, and the important critical study of M. Aguirre, 'From imitation to creation: Lionello Venturi, Medieval art, and fascism', Convivium 4 (2017), pp. 88-173.

Sulberger 1966 (note 18), pp. 24-20. Although few of the artists exhibited were actually from Bruges or even the historic county of Flanders, Amédée Lynen's official poster in this context, see A. Hokanson, Tenri De Brueeleer and Belgium's nineteenth-century revivalist movement', in A. Lepine e.a. (eds.), Revival: Memories, identities, utopias, London 2015, pp. 135-149, spec. 144-145. It is noteworthy that Lionello Venturi, one of the most important scholars of the Italian 'primitivi', visited the 1932 Bruges exhibition, see L. Venturi, Il gusto dei primitivi, Bologna 1926, and the important critical study of M. Aguirre, 'From imitation to creation: Lionello Venturi, Medieval art, and fascism', Convivium 4 (2017), pp. 88-173.


Haskell 1993 (note 6), pp. 461-468; Hayum 2014 (note 20), passim.


Krul 2015 (note 25), pp. 256-257, situating Friedländer’s views in relation to Jacob Burckhard’s hugely influential Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy of 1860.


The original title in Dutch is Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen, which was rendered as The waning of the Middle Ages in the original, 1924 English translation, produced with Huizinga’s authorization, but later re-translated as The autumn of the Middle Ages in a new critical version based on Huizinga’s first and second (1924) editions of the text and earlier translations into German, as cited in note 30. See P. Arnade and M. Howell, ‘Introduction’, in P. Arnade e.a. (ed.), Reading Huizinga: Autumn of the Middle Ages, a century later, Amsterdam 2019.


Huizinga’s interest in spectacle has generally been discussed in relation to his study of early modern play, Homo ludens, see D. Penner, Rethinking the spectacle: Guy Debord, radical democracy, and the digital age, Vancouver 2019, pp. 89-93.


On reactions to his work specifically in the field of art history, see D. Wollthal, ‘Art history and Huizinga’s Autumn of the Middle Ages’, in Arnade 2019 (note 19), pp. 123-142.


Tollebeken 1998 (note 22), pp. 335-336. Writings by German and English scholars and critics played an important part in supporting Belgium’s independence and bolstering its national awareness as a bulwark against French power and cultural predominance.


For a recent comparative study of the formation of national histories and identities in the nineteenth century in the Low Countries and Britain, see H. Dunthorne and M. Wintle (eds.), The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Britain and the Low Countries, Leiden 2013.

PHOTO CREDITS

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1); Royal Library (KBR), Print Room (2).

SUMMARY

This special issue of Oud Holland offers new perspectives on the ‘rediscovery’ of early Netherlandish art in the long nineteenth century. It probes the intersection of creative and scholarly practices that helped to establish the importance of this corpus of artwork, produced between about 1420 to 1550 in the Burgundian (and later Habsburg) Low Countries, and to secure its status as a cultural landmark and a distinct field of art historical inquiry. Investigating topics ranging from Karl Schnaase’s pioneering writings, to Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin’s influential designs, to James Enser’s radically unconventional imagery, the six essays in this volume explore specific cases in the appropriation, reception, interpretation, and promotion of early Netherlandish art – particularly painting – in a range of cultural practices and circumstances. Topics addressed include art criticism and exhibitions, architecture and design, painting and drawing, and the emergence of ‘reproductive’ photography.

The essays expand upon such foundational studies as Francis Haskell’s History and its images (1993), which demonstrated how the surge of interest in the work of the Van Eyck brothers and their compatriots was inextricable from the evolving national identity and cultural politics of the modern nation-state of Belgium. While the Belgian context is central, several contributors enlarge the scope of inquiry with projects rooted in England and German-speaking regions, which forged strong intellectual and political ties with Belgium and engaged enthusiastically with its artistic heritage. Collectively, the essays advance new insights into the evolution of art history as a discipline, the complexity of artistic modernism(s) and revivalism(s); the role of nationalism and religion in nineteenth-century cultural life; and some of the myriad ways in which the artistic past and present inflect one another.