‘His excellency at home’
Frederik Hendrik and the noble life at Huis Honselaarsdijk

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Huis Honselaarsdijk was the lifelong project of Frederik Hendrik, Prince of Orange and Count of Nassau (1584-1647). After he purchased the property, in 1612, Frederik Hendrik kept the house and its environs in an almost constant state of construction and improvement. In 1647, when Frederik Hendrik died, Honselaarsdijk had been the definitive aristocratic home in Holland for a quarter of a century.

Much of the existing scholarship on Honselaarsdijk has focused on discrete academic topics. On the one hand, historians of architecture have long considered the building an important preparatory moment in the development of Dutch classicism. On the other, art historians have looked at the artistic possessions of Frederik Hendrik as evidence of a collecting mentality. Even the gardens have been subjected to detailed analysis. A survey of the archival record and contemporary accounts, however, suggests that such a fragmented approach is not only limited, but obscures the true nature of the house. Honselaarsdijk was built as, and should be seen as, a unified environment, one in which architecture, the visual arts, garden design and social life worked in tandem as conceptually related bearers of meaning. As the principal home of the Republic’s most eminent nobleman, Honselaarsdijk came to signify the aristocratic lifestyle, with all its attendant delights, luxuries, and perquisites, and had a significant impact upon the domestic projects of the regent class in Holland. Thus, a better view of the totality of the house and its environs will help clarify the function and influence of the noble domestic environment within the Dutch social system. This article will explore the interrelated themes found in the structure and decor of Honselaarsdijk, and sketch a new outline for the interpretation of the prince’s palace.

The building

Over the course of four decades, Frederik Hendrik methodically developed his old-fashioned castle into a residence worthy of a prince. Comparison of the old castle Honsholredijk (fig. 1) as it appeared in 1615 with the freshly remodeled Honselaarsdijk of about 1638 (fig. 2) reveals the extent of these changes: in place of the round, squat, and jumbled castle, made up of several discrete parts ringing an irregular yard, is a graceful, symetrical house, with three elegantly appointed wings enclosing a magnificent ceremonial court.