Willem F.J. Mörzer Bruyns

Frederik Muller & Co and Anton Mensing

The first international art auction house in Amsterdam, and its director

Frederik Muller started his rare books business in Amsterdam in 1843, and combined his commercial activities with scholarship. After he died his business partner, Frederik Adama van Scheltema, continued the firm and in 1885 employed Anton Mensing, a young, energetic, and ambitious bookbinder, as his assistant. In 1892 Mensing became a partner in the firm, and when Adama van Scheltema died, he continued Frederik Muller & Co, soon expanding it with art auctions. These became a great success, and resulted in the first international market for works of art, applied art, and historic scientific instruments in the Netherlands which continued into the 1930s. In 1936, long after Mensing’s death, fake historic scientific instruments were associated with the Strozzi and Heilbronner collections that had been sold by Mensing. This caused international concern but recent research shows that there is no reason to believe in Mensing’s personal involvement.

FROM FREDERIK MULLER TO FREDERIK MULLER & CO

Frederik (Frits) Muller (1817-81) was the second son of a Mennonite minister in Amsterdam. At the age of 17 Frits entered the service of Johannes Muller, an uncle (who maintained the German spelling of the name), and who owned the ‘Bibliopolium’, a rare books shop in Kalverstraat in Amsterdam. Frits had to pack books and deliver these to buyers, and he later compiled sale catalogues and so got to meet many of his uncle’s customers, which gave him the opportunity to learn the trade. In 1840 Frits left the ‘Bibliopolium’ to work for Jacobus Radink, another rare books seller in Amsterdam, from whom he learned how to organize book auctions. Three years later Muller started his own business, which he established in a basement at 143 Rokin in Amsterdam. Muller held his first book auctions in October of 1847, and two years later lack of space obliged him to move his business to a house named D’Vogel Struis at 329 Herengracht.

Frits married Gerarda Jacoba Yntema (1818-63) in 1846. She was the daughter of a bookseller and editor of a literary journal, and the couple had two daughters and two sons. After Gerarda died, Muller married Johanna Engelbertha Doyer (1827-1913), which marriage remained childless. For a short period during their university studies Muller’s sons Samuel (1848-1922), and Jacob Wybrand (1858-1945), worked in their father’s firm. He hoped that they would succeed him in the business, but both preferred an academic career. As a rare book

1 For Frederik Muller’s life, family, and work see Frederik Muller (1817-1881) Leven & werken, ed. Marja Keyser, J.F. Heijbrock & Ingeborg Verheul (Zutphen 1996).
dealer Muller compiled and published sale catalogues, mostly in French, of the more than 170 private libraries that he auctioned. Besides being a prolific bibliographer and publisher, Frits was an ardent collector. He started this in the 1850s, and when he died left over 25,000 historical and topographic prints of the Netherlands and portraits of Dutchmen, drawings, and some 3,000 books. Muller catalogued his historic prints, and starting in 1863 published these in De Nederlandse geschiedenis in platen, to this day an important reference work. After Muller's death the Print Room in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam purchased his collection, one of the most important acquisitions in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In order to devote more time to cataloguing Muller went into partnership, in 1876, with his relative Frederik Adama van Scheltema (1846-99) who had studied theology and already worked for Frederik Muller for seven years. At the time of the partnership Adama van Scheltema married Rinne Lulofs whose sister, Maria Geertruida Lulofs, married Muller's son Samuel two years later, making the two young men brothers-in-law. Like the Mullers, the Adama van Scheltema and Lulofs families were Mennonites. The firm's name was extended to become Frederik Muller & Co, and Frederik Adama van Scheltema took charge of the book section. In 1880 lack of space forced Frederik Muller to move his business once again, this time to 10 Doelenstraat. He died the following year and a contract was drawn up between his widow and four children, and Adama van Scheltema.

Unfortunately the archive of Frederik Muller & Co was wilfully destroyed after World War II, but fortunately a private dossier of the Muller family was acquired by the aforementioned Print Room. It shows that, in accordance with Muller's wishes, his widow invested 2,000 guilders, being 5% of her capital, in the firm. In return she received a substantial percentage of the firm's annual profit, as a widow's pension.

Adama van Scheltema continued the firm in Muller's tradition, and in 1885 employed the young Anton Mensing as his assistant, who in 1892 became his business partner. The contract between Adama van Scheltema and the Muller family was renewed in 1896, the main change being a reduction of the per-

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2 Nederland's Patriciaat, 19 (1930), pp. 156, and idem, 27 (1941), pp. 222-9. There were more close family ties. Frederik Adama van Scheltema's younger sister Magdalena in 1872 married Rinne's brother Sicco Lulofs, and the daughter of this couple, Bregje Lulofs, married Samuel Muller's son Frederik in 1905.


4 Inventory no. RP-D-1990:044.

5 The actual percentage is not stated, but a later annotation in the Muller dossier indicates 50%. The annotation was found in a typescript titled 'Overzicht der verhandelingen over de firma Frederik Muller en Co', by Dr J.W. Muller, and probably dated from 1937.