

Dutch and Belgian artistic and intellectual rivalry in interwar London

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This paper compares two major exhibitions of Dutch and Belgian art held in London's Royal Academy of Art in the 1920s. Part of a new strategy of public diplomacy, both ventures owed much to the initiative of binational friendship associations which, aware of Britain's importance in diplomatic and commercial terms, saw in displays of their respective artistic heritage a means to project their image to a wider but also elite British public. Ironically, the rivalry between these organizations led to an expansion of the scale and scope of their exhibitions that, apart from setting the tone for many similar enterprises to come, both necessitated and facilitated increasing international collaboration. In addition to analyzing the function of art as cultural capital in Dutch and Belgian cultural diplomacy of this time, which was even more complicated by both countries' joint origins (what counts as Dutch and what as Belgian? – a difficult question to answer as one goes further back in the history of the Low Countries), the paper also investigates the ways in which this cultural-diplomatic competition contributed to the development of interwar internationalism.

Keywords: Internationalism; interwar period; cultural diplomacy; public diplomacy; Anglo-Dutch cultural relations; Anglo-Belgian cultural relations.

Introduction

Like all cultural production, art can function as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). At various times in history it has been instrumental in gaining influence and (soft) power, politicizing the artistic heritage of a nation. This paper will present a little-known case in point, namely the intellectual and artistic rivalry between London-based Dutch and Belgian organizations in the 1920s, embedded in the wider international climate of the time.¹

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article.

In order to situate this extraordinary competition, one needs to recall the *political* rivalry between the Belgian and Dutch governments in the interwar period, which is hardly conceivable today. In contrast to the common Benelux idea, developed during and implemented after World War II (and since complemented and superseded by joint membership of the European institutions), Dutch-Belgian relations in the period immediately following World War I and throughout the early 1920s were characterized by a persistent undercurrent of competition, centred on conflicting territorial, economic, and security claims around the River Scheldt estuary (Tuyll van Serooskerken 2017; Middelkoop 2010).

This rivalry was also reflected amongst expatriate communities in the British capital, where Dutch business interests were well established, not least around the big Anglo-Dutch corporations, of which Royal Dutch Shell was the most prominent, whereas the Belgian presence was largely due to the influx of huge numbers of refugees to the United Kingdom (as well as to the Netherlands) during the war. Anglo-Belgian and Anglo-Dutch friendship associations were vying for influence in British academic, government and public opinion, which mattered enormously to both nations as Belgian claims on Dutch territory were discussed at the Paris Peace Conference, and London then was still the centre of the political world system.

The aim of this article is to examine the artistic side of this Dutch-Belgian competition for the favour of British public opinion, which, as will be demonstrated, also played an important role in the development of interwar internationalism in London.

Anglo-Dutch and Anglo-Belgian organizations

What were these binational friendship organizations and who was involved? Firstly, the Anglo-Belgian Union of 1918, a bilateral association with offices in Mayfair, which under the name of Anglo-Belgian Society, the result of a merger in 1983 with the Cercle Royal Belge de Londres of 1922, is still in existence today. The Union was born out of the “brotherhood in arms” of World War I, as its Constitution from April 1918 points out right at the beginning, and its aim was “to maintain and develop feelings of friendship between the British and Belgian peoples, to promote more intimate relations between the two nations, and to commemorate the brotherhood in arms which arose from their mutual loyalty to the treaty of 1839” (Anglo-Belgian Union/Union Anglo-Belge 1918, 1).

Its patrons were nobody less than the two monarchs, King George and King Albert, its initial president the liberal politician and later party leader Herbert Samuel (followed by newspaper baron Viscount Burnham, the Belgian ambassa-

dor Paul Hymans, and again Burnham). They were supported by a provisional committee that on the British side was headed by Herbert Gladstone, the youngest son of the 19th-century prime minister and former governor-general of the Union of South Africa, and on the Belgian side by Comte Eugène Goblet d'Alviella, a liberal senator and rector of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). The organization's honorary vice-presidents counted many notable politicians, among them Asquith, Balfour, Cecil, Austen Chamberlain, Bonar Law and Lloyd George on the British side, and Charles de Brocqueville, Paul Hymans, Carton de Wiart and Émile Vandervelde on the Belgian side, as well as the Belgian poets Maurice Maeterlinck and Émile Cammaerts. The Union had offices in Burlington House, at 6 Burlington Gardens, off Piccadilly Street, sharing premises with the Royal Academy of Art before, later on, moving to close-by Albemarle Street. In practical terms, Algernon Maudsley, a prominent yachtsman and philanthropist of independent means, who during the 1900 Summer Olympic Games in Meulan, France, had won two gold medals for the U.K. racing sailing yachts and who during the war had been Honorary Secretary of the Belgian War Refugees Committee, as well as Vicomte Henri Davignon, who had run the semi-official *Bureau de propagande et de documentation* in London for the Le Havre-based Belgian government-in-exile, acted as general secretaries (Anglo-Belgian Union 1936).



Figure 1. Club House of the Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen on Sackville Street in London.
Source: Eigen haard: Geïllustreerd Volkstijdschrift, 10:157 (March 5, 1898).

On the Dutch side, the business community was centred around the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging te London* ('Dutch Association in London'), a gentlemen's club for Dutch expatriates with offices first on Regent Street, then on Sackville Street, off Piccadilly Street, as shown in Figure 1. Founded in 1873 by E. H. Crone, the driving force behind it was very much Frederick ('Freek') Cornelius Stoop (1854-1933), seen in Figure 2. Two years after the association's founding, he was elected to its committee and from 1886 to 1932 served as its chairman (Reyneke van Struwe 1923, 13). A banker, stockbroker and financier by profession, from an old family of patricians in Dordrecht, he had moved to England in 1873, where he settled in West Hall near Byfleet, Surrey, and became naturalized in 1878. He used his considerable wealth to build up a growing art collection (Van Gogh and Picasso were among his acquaintances), while also supporting philanthropic activities (Vrijhoff 2015; Wakeford 2016; Byfleet Heritage Society 2015).



Figure 2. F. C. Stoop, *Ridder van den Nederlandschen Leeuw* ('Knight of the Dutch lion'), *Voorzitter van de Nederlandsche Vereeniging te Londen* ('Chair of the Dutch Association in London'). Source: Eigen haard: Geïllustreerd Volkstijdschrift, 10:159 (March 5, 1898).

According to the vignette in the biography of Stoop's son Adrian (Cooper 2004), a much-revered gentleman-rugby union player for the Harlequins, whose training ground in Twickenham still bears the name Stoop, and captain of the English national team, Frederick had made his fortune in the early days of oil exploration as London-based managing director of the *Dordtsche Petroleum Maatschappij*, set up by his elder brother Adriaan on Java in 1887. Shrewd investment in refinery technology had allowed the Stoop brothers to remain the last independent oil producer in the East Indies, before in 1911, through an exchange of stock, being merged into Royal Dutch Shell, itself the result of the 1907 merger between two rival Dutch (*Koninklijke Oliemaatschappij* / Royal Dutch) and English (Shell) companies.

The *Nederlandsche Vereeniging* preceded and remained separate from the Anglo-Batavian Society (today's Anglo-Netherlands Society, founded in 1920 and renamed in 1944) that did not primarily cater to the expatriate community like the Dutch Club – actually its membership consisted mainly of Britons – but had the aim of “promot[ing] good fellowship between the English and Dutch races” (Reyneke van Struwe 1923, 47). However, there was a large overlap in membership between the two organizations. The Dutch ambassador in London, Jonkheer René de Marees van Swinderen, was honorary member of both associations and Stoop as well as his fellow *Vereeniging's* members H. S. J. Maas and H. van den Bergh (from the Anglo-Dutch consumer product company Unilever) also served as vice-presidents of the Anglo-Batavian Society (47).

Both the Anglo-Belgian and Anglo-Dutch organizations aimed to promote bilateral ties of friendship between their respective countries and Britain, particularly in the fields of culture and education. The most prominent outcome of their particular campaigns regarding education was the establishment of the first Chairs for Dutch and Belgian Studies at the University of London (Tiedau forthcoming). There had been widespread concern in Anglo-Dutch business circles about the reputation of the Netherlands, whose neutrality during the war was widely, if not necessarily correctly, perceived as having been more favourable to Germany. In an effort at soft diplomacy, in 1919 a joint university and *Nederlandsche Vereeniging* committee led by Stoop (and presided over by Ambassador van Swinderen) appointed Pieter Geyl – until then London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* newspaper – as the first professor for Dutch studies at the University of London, the first such university chair ever created in the Anglophone world.

While establishing himself quickly as an eminent and highly original historian in British academia, the former journalist's continued political support for the Flemish movement and the *Grootnederlandse* ('Greater Netherlands') idea – which sought to unite Flanders with the Netherlands culturally, if not politically –

was seen by the Anglo-Belgian Union as so deleterious to Belgian interests that in 1920 it started a fundraising campaign with a view to containing the Dutch Chair's influence on British academic, government and public opinion of the Low Countries with a (counter-)Chair for Belgian Studies. After a decade of delays due to the organization's lack of funds as well as Geyl's behind-the-scenes manipulations of the university bodies, in 1931 this Chair could finally be instituted, with Émile Cammaerts, the Anglo-Belgian poet whose patriotic war poems had been set to music by Elgar, and a collaborator of Davignon's *Bureau*, as first incumbent (both scholars had been long-standing and prominent members of the Dutch Club and the Anglo-Belgian Union respectively).

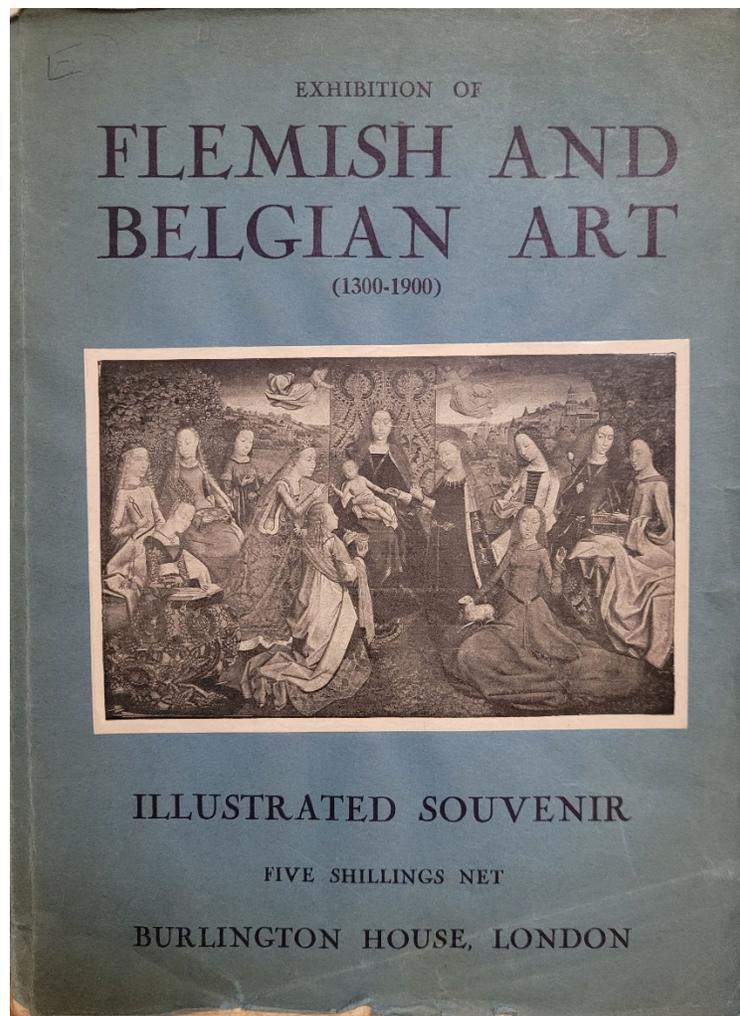


Figure 3. Illustrated souvenir catalogue of the exhibition of Flemish and Belgian art from 1300 to 1900, held in London in 1927. Cover image photographed by author.

Public diplomacy

But the “academic proxy war” between Dutch and Belgian interests, as I like to call this conflict, was only one aspect of the interwar rivalry between the two organizations, for its public-facing side was even more important. Beyond academia, the two organizations directed their attention to the wider public as they sought to capitalize on both countries’ rich artistic traditions, supported by their (newly appointed or designated) Chairs. The start was made by the Anglo-Belgian Union, which since 1923 had been working towards staging a high-profile loan exhibition of Flemish and Belgian art from the 14th to the 19th centuries, opening in January 1927 in the Royal Academy of Arts, one of London’s finest addresses for high culture, as illustrated in Figure 3. Co-organized with the Belgian government and with the royal couples of both countries as patrons, it was no doubt the most prominent enterprise of the organization in the interwar period. Only two years after, in 1929, the Anglo-Batavian Society followed suit, with a landmark exhibition of Dutch art in the same venue, likewise with dual royal patronage. Both hugely successful, the two exhibitions established the format of many high-profile Royal Academy exhibitions to follow, with loans from international galleries, governments, heads of state and private collectors, a tradition that continued until World War II and beyond. Having inaugurated this tradition, the Dutch-Belgian artistic and intellectual rivalry thus also contributed directly to the development of the interwar internationalist spirit in the art world.

As has been pointed out before, in T. P. Cowdell’s (1980) study of the role of the Royal Academy in English art and Ilaria Scaglia’s (2011) investigation of the series of interwar exhibitions as a whole, including large exhibitions of Italian (1930), Persian (1931), French (1932) and Chinese (1935-1936) art along the lines of the Flemish/Belgian and Dutch models (both largely focussing on the Royal Academy’s institutional perspective), it was in the spirit of peaceful international cooperation that these pioneering exhibitions were organized, an atmosphere characteristic of the time that Geyl, with regard to education, remembered in his memoirs, written in German captivity during World War II (Geyl 2007), as follows:

After the war the climate was very much in favour of international cultural exchange between the peoples, and London back then tried to become a large international centre in this respect. University chair after university chair was founded for the language, literature and history of one country after another. We [members of the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging*] did not want to miss out and formed a committee to raise funds: at that time money was easily available and we managed to raise substantial funds. (85)

After the devastation wrought by the war years between 1914 and 1918, international understanding and cultural exchange between the peoples of Europe (*'rapprochement des peuples'*) was clearly a dominant desire, but in the cultural field, this understanding tended to be organized on a bilateral level, despite the newly founded League of Nations with its international outlook. Further, it was often a rather competitive bilateral understanding, and the existence of active Anglo-Belgian and Anglo-Dutch organizations as competing non-governmental actors driving the agenda, helps explain why Belgium and the Netherlands led the development.

An exhibition of Flemish and Belgian art in London had long been one of the Anglo-Belgian Union's favourite projects (*Anglo-Belgian Notes* 1927, 3). There had been earlier successes for Belgian public diplomacy with smaller-scale, if already impressive, exhibitions of Belgian art in Paris (1923) and Berne (1926) (Fiérens-Gevaert 1923; *Exposition de l'art belge* 1923; *Exposition de l'art belge* 1926; Brockwell 1926, 103).² Extending the series to London, the capital of Belgium's closest ally and exile for hundreds of thousands of refugees during the war, was a logical consequence, given the desire to continue and solidify the close and beneficial relationship for the future, especially given that the intensity of the alliance had started to ebb off after Belgian demands on Dutch territory at the end of the war, along with the Franco-Belgian military accord of 1920 and Belgian participation in the Ruhr occupation in 1923-25, all to the chagrin of the British government.

The initiative had originated, in early 1923, from Paul Lambotte, the director of Fine Arts in the Belgian Ministry of Science and Arts, who was also an honorary secretary of the Union's Belgian section (Lambotte 1928). The idea was warmly welcomed by its newly appointed president, Viscount Burnham, the proprietor of the *Daily Telegraph*, the British newspaper that during the war had most prominently supported Belgian refugees (Caine 1914). Algernon Maudslay, the British section's honorary secretary, was sent to Brussels and managed to enlist the support of the Belgian government, helped by the fact that the just appointed foreign secretary, Paul Hymans, had previously been ambassador in London and also Burnham's predecessor as president of the Anglo-Belgian Union (Annual General Meeting 1927, 59).

With such government aid secured, the challenge became finding a suitable and appropriate venue and, although the Anglo-Belgian Union was occupying premises in Burlington House, for several years the Royal Academy's Council saw itself unable to grant the use of their galleries to an external

² The Berne exhibition inspired Robert Walser to compose the prose text "Belgische Kunstausstellung" (Walser 1975).

organization. Other London museums also kept declining until eventually Burnham's and Maudslay's perseverance paid off when Sir Frank Dicksee was elected new director of the Royal Academy and convinced the Council to grant the Union permission to rent their galleries for two months in January and February of 1927.

Like in the case of the professorial appointments, joint committees between the association and the institution were formed.³ The overall organization was entrusted to the Union's honorary secretaries, Maudslay on the British and Lambotte on the Belgian side (Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian art in London 1926, 82). Importantly, because the financial success of the enterprise was in no way guaranteed and considerable risk was taken – the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* of January 1927 expressed the hope that “all members will not only try to attend themselves but will urge all their friends to do likewise, so that the Exhibition may be not only an artistic but also a financial success” (Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art 1927, 4) – the finance committee had managed to “raise a guarantee fund not exceeding £10,000 in case the receipts did not come up to expenditure” (Annual General Meeting 1927, 3).

For Dicksee the Union's proposal offered an opportunity to take up the tradition of the Royal Academy's winter exhibitions of old masters that from 1870 until World War I had been held annually at Burlington House. Yet it was also much more ambitious than the pre-war series. Not only did it set out to represent the whole range of medieval and early modern Flemish painting for the first time since the 1902 *Exposition des Primitifs Flamands et d'Art* in Bruges, but it also set forth the evolution of Southern Netherlandish painting until the turn of the century by including works by painters from the period after Belgium's independence (1830), who were unknown in Britain. The longitudinal character of the exhibition, stretching from the 14th to the 19th century, projected Belgian nationhood – not incorrectly – back a couple of centuries before independence but also – somewhat more contentiously – established a “national” claim on late-medieval and early 16th-century Netherlandish primitive painters, when there had been no sign of partition in the Low Countries. The dual descriptor in the exhibition's title – Flemish and Belgian – similarly pointed at problems of national delineation.

Originally the plan had been to only borrow pictures from Belgian museums (Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, and Bruges) and churches, as had been done

³ Assuming a variety of roles, the committees included Viscount Burnham, Lord Emmott, Sir Robert Kindersley and Sir Cecil Hertslet for the Anglo-Belgian Union and the curators and art historians Sir Frank Dicksee, Sir Lionel Earle, Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith, Sir George Frampton, Sir Robert Witt, Sir Martin Conway, Sir Charles Walston, Sir Joseph Duveen, Mr. Campbell Dodgson, Ms. Anning-Bell and Ms. A. Alma Tadema for the Royal Academy.

in the exhibitions at Paris and Berne, although not including the brothers Van Eyck's famous Ghent altarpiece, as the rumour of its loan to London had caused outcry in the Belgian press (Kew, FO 370/236/5221; Some comments from the Belgian Press 1926, 101). Soon, the enterprise grew into the largest international loan exhibition undertaken up until that point, with loans being "sent in not merely from England and Belgium but from France, Holland and even the United States" (Exhibitions of Flemish Art 1926, 102). As such, it was a ground-breaking enterprise for internationalist collaboration in the field of art, irrespective of the fact that the exhibition's conception also undoubtedly displayed a nationalist undertone. Further, in terms of format, another novelty was the inclusion of statues, tapestries, and other art forms in an exhibition predominantly made up of paintings.

The Belgian exhibition was rightfully considered the "greatest triumph" of the Anglo-Belgian Union in the first two decades of its existence (Anglo-Belgian Union 1936, 19), as its organ, the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* (1927), proudly noted:

It has often been the fate of parents to be overshadowed by their brilliant children. This has been the situation of the Anglo-Belgian Union and the Flemish Exhibition. A few friends of Belgium pay a pound a year for the privilege of membership, for reading the "Notes" and making or receiving an occasional visit from fellow members. Suddenly they are responsible for what has been described as the most important event in the artistic world in modern times. The Anglo-Belgian Union is greater than it appeared to be. (57-58)

Netherlandomania

Now the Dutch, who in 1919 had beaten the Belgians in establishing the first Chair at the University of London, an occasion during which Ambassador van Swinderen had not hidden his country's satisfaction at being put in the limelight by the University of London, had to make amends. Preparations for a winter exhibition of Dutch art along similar lines began shortly after the Belgian exhibition opened, "as an aid to the cultural relations between the two countries" (Finest Dutch art show in London 1929, 12). Organized under the auspices of the Anglo-Batavian Society, with Swinderen as (honorary) president and the Earl of Albemarle as chairman, while the Dutch Club (*'Nederlandsche Vereeniging'*) extended its hospitality to the committees and the organizing staff (NA inv. no. 2.05.44.913: Meeting of Finance Committee, 30 Jan. 1928), it was open to the public from January 4 to March 9, 1929, and broke all records previously set by the Flemish-Belgian exhibition (Dutch Art Exhibition: The private view 1929).



Figure 4. Souvenir catalogue of exhibition of Dutch art, held in London in 1929.
Cover image photographed by author.

As Sir Robert Witt (1929), trustee of the National Gallery and one of the co-founders of the Courtauld Gallery of Art, points out in the introduction to the lavishly produced souvenir catalogue *Dutch Art: An illustrated souvenir* shown in Figure 4, the last major display of Dutch art in Britain had taken place more than a quarter of a century ago (1903), in the Guildhall, and although “some

International Exhibitions have been held [in the meantime], the Rembrandt exhibitions in Amsterdam in 1898 and in London in 1899, the Rembrandt *Tercentenaire* in Leyden in 1906, the Dutch Exhibitions in Paris in 1911 and 1921 and in Rome in 1928, none of these has been comparable in extent with the present” (5). And indeed the scope of the exhibition was breathtaking; lenders included all important Dutch and British museums, as well as private collections including the Royal Households of both countries and overseas collections from “no less than twelve other European countries, with the warm co-operation of their respective Governments; while, through Sir Joseph Duveen, help of the most liberal scale was given by America” (Holmes 1930, xxvii). Many curators and art historians of distinction were involved:

Major A. A. Longdon acted as Secretary-General, and Dr. W. Martin, Director of the Mauritshuis, Mr. F. Schmidt-Degener, Director-General of the Rijksmuseum, and Sir Robert Witt were chiefly responsible for the selecting, hanging, and arranging of the paintings, Mr. Campbell Dodgson and Mr. A. M. Hind, of the British Museum, and Mr. D. Hannema, of the Bozmanns Museum, Rotterdam, doing the same for the drawings and etchings. The catalogue is by Dr. Schneider, of the Mauritshuis, and Mr. W. G. Constable, of the National Gallery, Sir Robert Witt writing the historical introduction. (Dutch Art 1929, 13)

Recalling the hope that was expressed in the introduction to the Flemish exhibition’s catalogue, “that such a remarkable collection of works of art might be the precursor of many others” (Witt 1929, 1), Witt adds: “[o]nly two years have passed and the Galleries of the Royal Academy are once again opened to the masterpieces, great and small, of a friend and neighbour nation. Nor, for all the distinguished success of its predecessor, does the present Exhibition fall short of it either in quality or scope, and in some features, may not unjustly claim to surpass it” (1). Even if this can also be read as an expression of curatorial pride about having outperformed a previous success (he also had authored the introduction to the Flemish exhibition catalogue; Witt 1927), a language of comparatives and superlatives pervades the catalogue’s introduction, inevitably invoking comparison with the predecessor exhibition. The term “friendly rivalry” is even used explicitly, albeit with reference to the loans of third-country governments (7). Still, on more than one occasion Dutch-Belgian “friendly rivalry” or competitive international understanding, is implied between the lines. It is also explicitly referenced in the letter announcing the Exhibition of Dutch art, as shown in Figure 5.

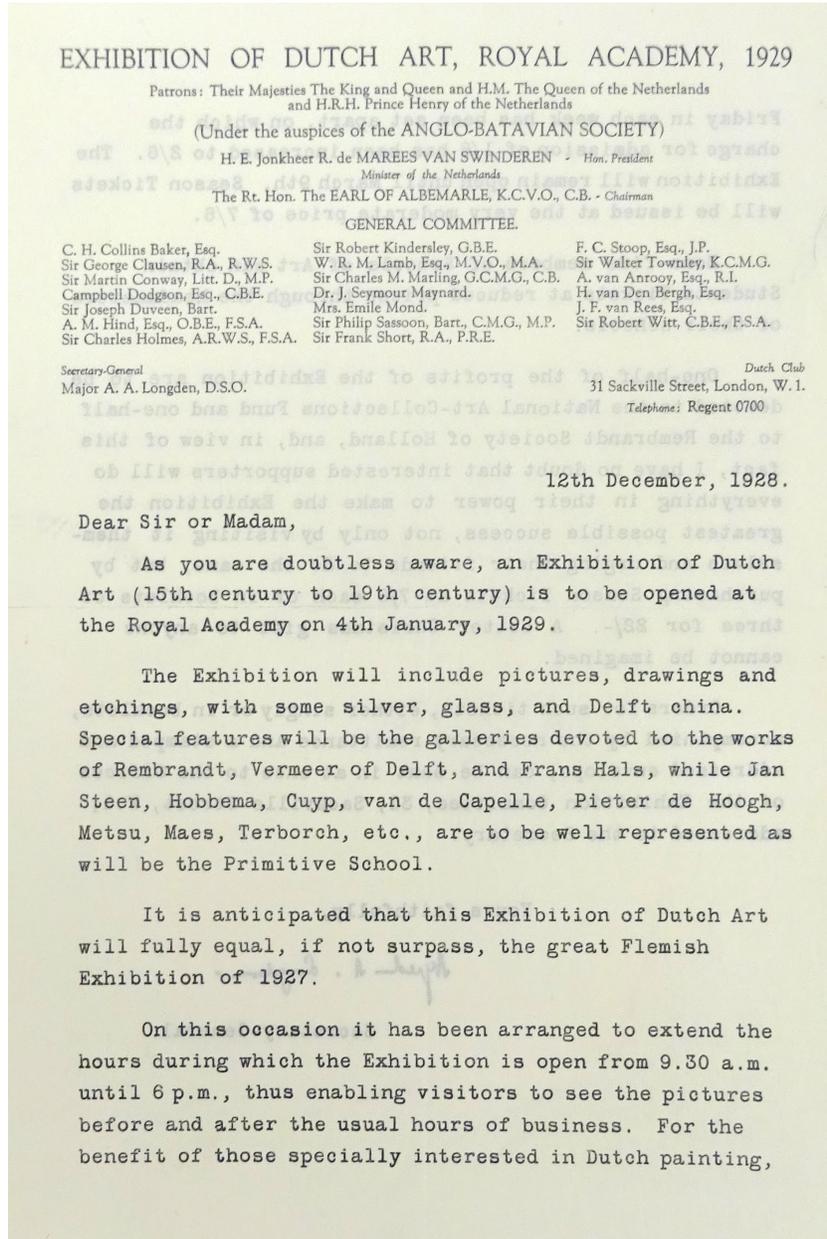


Figure 5. Letter announcing the opening of the Exhibition of Dutch Art, comparing it as possibly superior to the Flemish Exhibition of 1927. Source: Nationaalarchief Den Haag, bestand Gezantschap Londen, Nederlandse kunsttentoonstelling te Londen, inv. no. 2.05.44.913.

As Witt continues, “The outstanding feature of the exhibition is the contribution made by the Dutch Government, exceeding anything that any State has made before beyond its own frontiers” (Witt 1929, 7). Similarly, C. J. Holmes in the more

extensive commemorative catalogue published in the year after as a means of permanent documentation writes:

One of its outstanding features was the magnificent part played by the Dutch Galleries and private owners in Holland, who together contributed 445 out of a total of 963 exhibits. The Rijksmuseum at Amsterdam, the Mauritshuis at the Hague, and the Galleries at Rotterdam and Utrecht, lent generously from among their greatest treasures. Never before has a State lent so freely of its finest and rarest works of art beyond its own frontiers.

(Holmes 1930, xxvii)

A similar kind of language characterizes the rest of the catalogue's text and that of ancillary publications. The competitiveness was also picked up by the press, which reported about the artistic and financial success of the enterprise. As *The Times* reported two weeks into the Dutch exhibition, using the traditional success measure for exhibitions: "In the fortnight since it was opened the exhibition has been visited by 57,000 people. The total number of visitors to the Flemish Exhibition of two years ago, which ran for eight weeks, was 150,000" (The Glasgow "Hobbema" 1929, 10).

As these figures show, the Royal Academy's announcement had led to a real "Netherlandomania" in London's art world, for which the ground, of course, had been paved by the preceding Flemish and Belgian exhibition. During the preparation phase, galleries across Britain competed to have their Dutch paintings included in the exhibition and on more than one occasion protested against non-inclusion decisions by the selection and hanging committees not to exhibit their pictures (The Glasgow "Hobbema" 1929). Other public and private London galleries used the occasion to schedule Dutch-themed exhibitions at the same time. The National Gallery, for example, displayed "some 50 of [their] Dutch paintings normally hung in the Reference Section of the Gallery or lent to other galleries" (Holland in Piccadilly 1929, 10), while the British Museum put up a concurrent exhibition of a large selection of drawings by Rembrandt and of engravings, etchings, and woodcuts by old masters of the Dutch School, such as by Lucas van Leyden and Hercules Seghers. These were on view in the museum's Gallery of Prints and Drawings (Dutch art: Exhibition at British Museum, press clipping s. d. in NA inv. no. 2.05.44.913). There was also the Westend antiquarian Bumpus, who put the Dutch tradition of printing, as exemplified by books, postage stamps, and paper money printed at the office of Joh. Enschedé en Zonen, based in Haarlem, on display at its premises on Oxford Street. It was a printing tradition that in the words of *The Times* indeed recalled "the quality of Vermeer" (Art exhibitions: Examples of Dutch printing 1929, 14). To some extent this effect could already be seen during the Flemish exhibition too, such as in a special exhibition of Flemish

miniatures, mostly of the 15th and 16th centuries, in the British Museum's Grenville Library (Art exhibitions: Flemish miniatures 1927).

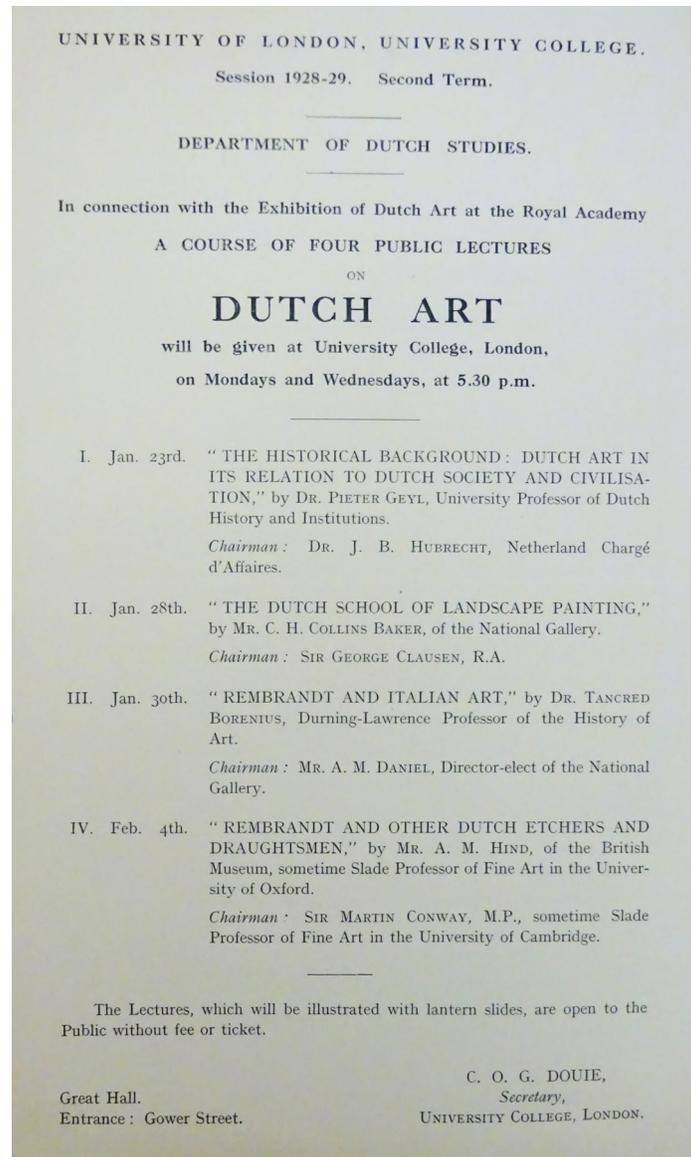


Figure 6. Announcement of public lectures on Dutch art to be given at University College London during the 1928-29 session. Source: Nationaalarchief Den Haag, Archief van het Nederlandse Gezantschap/Ambassade in Groot-Britannië (en Ierland tot 1949), 1813-1954, inv. no. 2.05.44.913 Nederlandse Kunsttentoonstelling.

Visits by the Royal Couples of both countries to Burlington House, prominently reported in the press, added to the public appeal (NA inv. no. 2.05.44.913: Royal

Academy to Dutch Legation, 3 Jan. 1929), as did the (incognito) visit, on May 8, 1929, by Emma, the Queen Mother of the Netherlands, who when led around the exhibition, did not approve of the arrangement to shut off each room in turn to afford her a private view of the pictures and insisted on mingling with the public instead (Royalty at Dutch exhibition 1929; Queen-Mother of the Netherlands 1929; Queen Emma sees Dutch art show 1929). A well-attended lecture programme, as in the case of the Flemish-Belgian predecessor, accompanied the exhibition, as illustrated in Figure 6, with both Geyl and Cammaerts prominently featured among the speakers (Landscape in Art: M. Cammaerts' historical survey 1929; NA inv. no. 2.05.44.913: Foster to Swinderen, 25 Jan. 1929 with enclosed programme; Geyl 1929). Following the Burlington house exhibition's closure in March, a smaller exhibition of Dutch art was also held at the Manchester City Art Gallery (Exhibition of Dutch Art 1929, 13; Dutch Paintings in Manchester 1929, 13; NA inv. no. 2.05.44.914).

Not just in terms of collaboration between galleries and governments the Dutch exhibition, like its Belgian predecessor, was an expression of emerging interwar internationalism, but also in terms of its public audience, an international spectacle with global attraction. As the art critic of *The Times* pointed out in a major review, "[T]his is an exhibition not only for London but for the world. (...) [N]ever before, in any country – not excluding Holland itself – has the art of Holland been so triumphantly displayed under one roof" (Dutch art 1929, 13). Calling Burlington House "the international lodestone of connoisseurs of painting" (Millier 1929, C15), the *Los Angeles Times*, on January 3 predicted that "[t]housands of Americans will make journeys to London for the express purpose of visiting the great exhibition of masterpieces of Dutch art gathered there from many countries" (C15). The emphasis was put upon great masters from the 17th century (the Dutch Golden Age), focusing on Rembrandt, Hals, Vermeer, Jan Steen, Cuyp, Ruisdael, and Hobbema in particular, each of which represented "the culmination of a school or tendency" (Dutch art 1929, 13), which of course added greatly to the exhibition's public appeal. A newspaper rendering of the public interest in the exhibition can be seen in Figure 7. Vermeer and Rembrandt, to whom separate galleries were dedicated, constituted the "great moments" of the exhibition. They were, as *The Times'* art critic expressed it, "of emotional depth and pictorial order respectively, and they are wisely separated by several rooms, so that an even distribution of visitors is encouraged" (13), before he came to the inevitable comparison:

Taking in the exhibition as a whole it is impossible to avoid a mental comparison with the Flemish exhibition of 1927. Allowing for broader style, a more human and less decorative appeal, and the concentrated absence of the small brightness of the Primitives, which inevitably concentrated attention

in the first rooms, there can be no doubt that the organizers of this exhibition have benefited from the experience of that one. It is much better arranged – a smaller reach in time assisting in the effect of homogeneity – and more easily seen. Easily as it can be seen, however, it would be idle to promise even the person accustomed habitually to ‘read’ exhibitions anything like a proper impression at one visit, and a season ticket is a necessity. (Dutch Art 1929, 13)

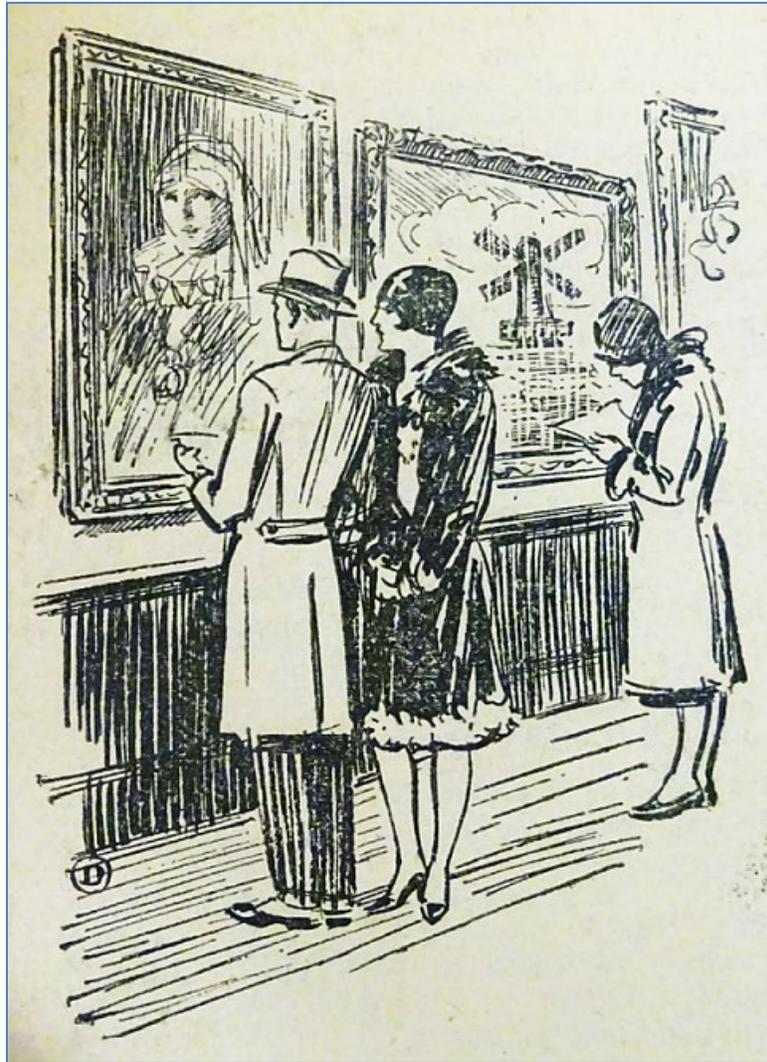


Figure 7. Impression from the Dutch Exhibition.

Source: Evening Standard (London), January 10, 1928;
NA inv. no. 2.05.44.913 Nederlandsche kunsttentoonstelling

At the end of the show visitor numbers would total 225,000, including student- and season-ticket holders, as well as school visits even “upwards of 255,000,” exceeding the box-office sales of the Flemish and Belgian exhibition, of roughly equal duration, by 50 per cent (Holmes 1930, xxvii-xxviii).

Whatever the criticisms were that could also be found in the specialist art historical press, it should not be forgotten that the enterprise’s main purpose was one of public diplomacy. And as such it definitely was a resounding success. As the *New Statesman* commented, “The object of the exhibition, we are told, is the promotion of friendly relations between Holland and this country, and no better gesture towards such an end could be conceived than this generous loan of what is in no small part of Holland’s wealth. [...] The exhibition has a significance which should not be lost as an international event. As peace-propaganda, whether implicit or not, it has a very definitive value” (Earp 1929, 466). And, referring to the naval escort of the Dutch vessel that brought the loan pictures to London (NA inv. no. 2.05.44.913, Ministerie van Onderwijs, Kunsten en Wetenschappen to Swinderen, December 6, 1928), passing through Tower Bridge on December 11, 1928: “By evidence of goodwill, and encouragement towards it, it might almost cancel out the launching of a new cruiser. At any rate, the two torpedo-boats which, it is reported, guarded some of the pictures on their passage from Holland were engaged on a happier mission than their constructors could have anticipated” (Earp 1929, 466).

Conclusion

What remains to be said about the two largely complementary cultural enterprises, in spite of their initial underlying rivalry? Both exhibitions surpassed the keenest expectations of their organizers. Two catalogues were published for each exhibit. One was an illustrated souvenir catalogue for a general public and the other was a specialist art historical volume for a specialist audience, containing high-quality reproductions and creating a permanent record (*Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art 1300-1900*, 1927; *Dutch Art: An illustrated souvenir* 1929; *Commemorative Catalogue* 1930). In the Anglo-Belgian case, the organizers very well may have been taken by surprise at the scale of their exhibition’s critical and public success, so that this improved second publication was only produced later. As Mary Chamot writes in the *Anglo Belgian Notes*:

Seldom has a publication been awaited with such eagerness as the Memorial Volume of the Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art. The manifest imperfections of the catalogue sold at the turnstiles, and the enormous demand for reproductions in any shape or form, to say nothing of the phenomenal success of the exhibition itself, clearly called for such a task to

be undertaken, and it is a pleasure to record at last that it has been most handsomely performed. The general editor, Sir Martin Conway, his collaborators, and the publishers, The Anglo-Belgian Union and Country Life are alike to be congratulated on the sumptuous volume they have produced.

(Chamot 1928, 5)

The Dutch exhibition aimed even higher and planned both a popular and a specialist catalogue publication from the outset, using the same publisher as the Belgians, *Country Life* magazine, for the popular catalogue. Concerning the specialist catalogue, a commemorative one with Oxford University Press, the description “stately” (*The Observer* 1930, 7) reflected the catalogue’s place at the top of respected academic publishing. It is worth mentioning that *Apollo* magazine and other art critical journals also printed a great number of reproductions from both exhibitions (Lambotte 1928; Gibson 1928; The Dutch exhibition at Burlington House 1929a; The Dutch exhibition at Burlington House 1929; Van Puyvelde 1929).

Regarding the development of interwar internationalism, the initial Dutch-Belgian “friendly rivalry” instigated a series of highly popular large-scale loan exhibitions of the artistic heritage of foreign nations in the Royal Academy (Scaglia 2015). They were international spectacles because, or in spite of, the tension between the internationalist collaboration in making them happen and displaying one nation’s artistic heritage in a longitudinal manner, which inherently conveys a nationalist and teleological message – an assessment not just from today’s perspective but also one noticed by contemporaries, such as by the art critic Walter Bayes in *The Saturday Review* from January 12, 1929:

Of a body of artists who bring together a picture show for the delectation of the general public we might reasonably ask [...] that it should be made up of pictures artistically comparable, thus incidentally offering to the unfortunate critic a limited theme adapted to his very limited space and getting the public into that mood of appreciation which even the best of painting needs. I do not want to see Hals or Rembrandt – still less Van Gogh – on the same afternoon as I am occupied with De Hoogh and Vermeer, de Witte and Ter Borgh: I should very much like to see the last quartette along with Chardin, with Canaletto, with Hogarth.

(Bayes 1929, 147)

From a different angle, Geyl in *The Contemporary Review* admonished both exhibitions for artificially claiming primitive painters for their respective nations, at a time when there was largely still cultural unity in the Low Countries:

Of this first Netherlands school of painting, as of mediæval Netherlands literature, the great centres were in the south, and they attracted some of their best artists from Holland. Bouts and David, who were represented by

some fine works at the Flemish Exhibition, were both Hollanders. I do not, of course, mention this because I grudge their glory to the Flemings. On the contrary, my point is that the Flemish and Dutch Primitive schools form a unity, so that it does not much matter whether a particular painter is included in one or other of the two: the most rational thing to do would be to show them together as Netherlands Primitives. (Geyl 1929, 324)

He added that this seemed to be evidence for him that “art critics no less than historians or whatever category of scholars or laymen you like find it difficult, when looking at the past, to free their minds from the conceptions suggested by the present” (Geyl 1929, 324). After World War II, Geyl would expand on his crusade against what he regarded as ahistoric art historians (Geyl 1959; Grasman 1998).

Then again, these exhibitions were “easy to criticize, but it should be borne in mind that displays like the present one are arranged for the general public, which is eager for knowledge, but still more eager for æsthetic sensations, and that the result obtained here is a richer, more complete, more homogenous collection of Dutch art as has [sic] never been seen before,” as Leo van Puyvelde pointed out conciliatorily in *Apollo* magazine (Van Puyvelde 1929, 141). And this is what their primary purpose was, using the artistic heritage of both nations (complicated by their joint origins and contested claims as to national “ownership” of certain painters and artistic traditions) as cultural capital for public diplomacy (or to use a more contemporary term “cultural propaganda,” although it needs to be borne in mind that this term then had not yet acquired the negative connotation that it has today). The value of the bilateral cultural work did not go unnoticed by the authorities and was, for example, pointed out by the Belgian *Commission permanente des Affaires Etrangères*, proudly cited in the Union’s organ *Anglo-Belgian Notes* of July 1926:

[N]os relations intellectuelles et artistiques avec les autres pays sont de celles qui doivent avoir une répercussion heureuse sur nos amitiés à l’extérieur et éveiller l’intérêt et les sympathies des peuples à l’endroit de la Belgique. (...) Mais ici l’initiative privée peut beaucoup, et on ne saurait assez faire appel à son action pour vivifier au dehors cette propa-gande. (...) Citons à titre d’exemple, l’activité de L’UNION ANGLO-BELGE qui, depuis la guerre n’a cessé d’entretenir avec les Britanniques des relations qui ont abouti à de nombreuses conférences anglaises en Belgique.⁴ (Les relations anglo-belges 1929, 74)

⁴ “[O]ur intellectual and artistic relations with other countries are those which must have a positive influence on our friendships abroad and arouse the interest and sympathies of peoples towards Belgium. [...] But here the private initiative can do a lot, and we cannot encourage it enough to

Both exhibitions were early examples of interwar cultural exchange by way of staging exhibitions, an increasingly popular public space in which internationalism took shape. While the tradition of world fairs and exhibitions, mainly related to manufacturing and technological progress, had been established since the mid-19th century, in the interwar period after the catastrophic experience of World War I, international exhibitions also took on the role of a primary vehicle for international communication and cultural exchange. About the same time that the Belgians devised their art exhibition, the British Empire Exhibition was held at Wembley (1924-25), with the purpose of promoting the unity of the British empire. As one of the largest international exhibitions ever held to that date, it is quite possible that its scale may have influenced the Belgian and subsequently the Dutch plans, as reports about the British Empire Exhibition appeared regularly and in great detail in the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* (Stevenson 1924). Exhibitions as a means of choice for public diplomacy abroad had a tradition in Belgium as the examples in France and Switzerland demonstrate (Brockwell 1926). In the spirit of true reciprocity, the Anglo-Belgian Union also co-organized an exhibition of British art in Brussels (Exhibition of British art in Brussels 1927, 87). Furthermore, in 1927, Belgium was already gearing up for the 1930 centenary exhibitions, celebrating the nation's independence from the Netherlands, as Paul Hymans pointed out in the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* (Annual General Meeting 1927, 57-61). The Anglo-Batavian Society could follow the successful model established by the Anglo-Belgian Union, and, with generous government support, take it to another level, whereas for the Royal Academy – a previously very conservative organization, whose winter exhibitions “[f]or about half a century [...] were of old masters, very largely of the English school” (“Holland in Piccadilly” 1929, 4) – these ventures offered a means to re-establish its leadership in the art sector. As the *Manchester Guardian* indicated, it was “a striking development of the Royal Academy's ideas of the use of its beautiful gallery that it should now be given so frequently to exhibitions of the art of other countries. We are all becoming internationally minded” (“Holland in Piccadilly” 1929, 4).

In summary, by competing with each other, the Dutch and Belgian bilateral friendship organizations in conjunction with the Royal Academy established an extremely successful model for internationalist collaboration in the field of art, in spite of, or precisely because of the organization's initial “friendly rivalry,” both in the academic-intellectual realm, and as presented here, in the artistic field.

bring this propaganda alive abroad. [...] By way of example, let us quote the activities of the Anglo-Belgian Union which since the war has not ceased to maintain relations with the British and resulted in many English conferences in Belgium.”

Nationalism and internationalism did not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive at this point in time, but could go hand in hand.

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Une compétition culturelle et artistique entre les Néerlandais et les Belges pendant l'entre-deux-guerres à Londres

Cet article compare deux grandes expositions d'art hollandais et belge organisées à l'Académie Royale des Arts de Londres dans les années 1920. Faisant partie d'une nouvelle stratégie de diplomatie publique, les deux entreprises devaient beaucoup à l'initiative d'associations d'amitié binationales qui, conscientes de l'importance de l'Angleterre en termes diplomatiques et commerciaux, voyaient dans les expositions de leur patrimoine artistique respectif un moyen de projeter leur image vers le grand public mais aussi les élites britanniques. Ironiquement, la rivalité entre ces organisations a conduit à une expansion de l'échelle et de la

portée de leurs expositions qui, en plus de donner le ton à de nombreuses entreprises similaires à venir, ont rendu nécessaire et ont facilité une collaboration internationale croissante. Outre l'analyse de la fonction de l'art en tant que « capital culturel » dans la diplomatie culturelle néerlandaise et belge de cette époque, ce qui était encore plus compliqué par les origines communes des deux pays (que peut-on considérer comme « néerlandais », quoi comme « belge », plus on remonte dans l'histoire des Pays-Bas?), l'article examine également la manière dont cette compétition culturelle-diplomatique a contribué au développement de l'internationalisme de l'entre-deux-guerres.

Nederlandse en Belgische artistieke en intellectuele rivaliteit tijdens het interbellum in Londen

Dit artikel vergelijkt twee grote Nederlandse en Belgische kunsttentoonstellingen uit de jaren 1920 die in de Royal Academy of Art te Londen werden gehouden. Beide exposities maakten deel uit van een nieuwe strategie van openbare diplomatie en hadden veel te danken aan de inzet van binationale vriendschapsverenigingen. Vooral omdat ze zich bewust waren van het diplomatieke en commerciële belang van Groot-Brittannië, vonden deze verenigingen door middel van het tentoonstellen van hun betreffend artistiek erfgoed een manier om een bepaald imago bij een breed Brits publiek, waaronder ook de elite, onder de aandacht te brengen. Ironisch genoeg leidde de rivaliteit tussen deze verenigingen tot een grootschalige uitbreiding en reikwijdte van hun tentoonstellingen die enerzijds de toon aangaven voor vele andere soortgelijke exposities, en anderzijds een toenemende internationale samenwerking noodzakelijk en mogelijk maakten. In het artikel wordt een analyse geboden van de functie van kunst als cultureel kapitaal binnen de Nederlandse en Belgische culturele diplomatie van dit tijdperk. De gemeenschappelijke oorsprong van beide landen voegt er een complex element aan toe (vooral wat betreft de vroegere geschiedenis van de Lage Landen is de vraag: wat telt als zogeheten Nederlands en wat telt als Belgisch?). Tevens belicht dit artikel de wijze waarop de cultureel-diplomatieke competitie heeft bijgedragen aan de ontwikkeling van het internationalisme tijdens het interbellum.