

## The Oldest Museum in the Netherlands

### Arts and Sciences at Teylers in Haarlem

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[ I L J A V E L D M A N ]

Teylers Museum is the oldest museum in the Netherlands. No other museum from the same period has been as beautifully preserved. When a museum is named after someone it is often because it was commissioned to display an individual's large collection of artwork, but the history of Teylers Museum is more unusual in this respect and more interesting for it.

Pieter Teyler van der Hulst (1702-1778) of Haarlem was a prosperous Mennonite cloth and silk merchant whose forebears emigrated from Scotland to the Netherlands in the sixteenth century for religious reasons. Teyler and his wife, Helena Wijnands Verschaaven, initially lived in the house called *De Hulst* in Damstraat, but moved into the grand property at no. 21 in 1640. After Teyler's death, this became the seat of the foundation and societies he established. Mennonites are known for their belief in charitable work. In 1752, Pieter Teyler bought a *hofje* (almshouses built around a courtyard) at Klein Heiligland. After his death this was replaced with a new, larger *hofje* at Koudenhorn, which was managed by the Teylers Foundation until recently. As a follower of Enlightenment ideas, Teyler was convinced that the arts and sciences help to enrich people's lives and would help the advancement of society. In 1732 he developed plans for a society designed to promote the study of theology and natural history – liberal believers regarded the study of nature as a means of studying God's wondrous creations. Teyler was also a co-founder of the Haarlem Drawing Academy (*Haarlemse Tekenacademie*), for artists and craftsmen, and he placed *De Hulst* at its disposal. At his home at no. 21 he began to build a library and a modest collection of coins and medals, prints, drawings, paper cut-outs, stuffed birds and preserved animal specimens.

In 1756, childless and now widowed, Teyler drew up a will in which he stipulated that his fortune should be used to promote the arts and sciences. For this purpose he created the Teylers Foundation (*Teylers Stichting*), governed by five directors, and two societies: the Theological Society (*Godgeleerd Genootschap*) and Teyler's Second Society (*Teylers Tweede Genootschap*), which was intended to promote the arts and sciences. His home, since known as Foundation House (*Fundatiehuis*), was never to be sold and should instead become the meeting place for the foundation and societies. It was also to be a residence for a 'painter or other lover of the arts and sciences', who would be the keeper of the Cabi-



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Entrance hall © Teylers Museum, Haarlem

net of Prints and Drawings. The person Teyler had in mind for this position was the portrait painter Taco Jelgersma who was commissioned to make a pastel portrait of Teyler, showing him with his books and items from his collection of coins and medals. When the will was executed, however, Jelgersma felt that he was too old to take up the position, and the painter Vincent Jansz van der Vinne was appointed keeper instead. Notably, in drawing up his detailed plans, Teyler did not envisage a museum in the modern sense of the word, but a scientific institute supported with study collections.

### **Testament to the Enlightenment**

Pieter Teyler died in 1778. Because he had left the textile industry and become a successful banker, Teyler bequeathed not only his home, library and a modest collection, but also a fortune of some two million guilders (roughly 80 million euros), at that time an unprecedented sum that brought unparalleled opportunities. The directors he appointed were all members of Haarlem's Mennonite community and 'regent' class, and took up their task with great enthusiasm. Already the following year, they decided to build a public room behind the Teyler residence in Damstraat. The young Leendert Viervant was commissioned, and he produced a striking neo-classical design. The Oval Room could be used by members of the societies to give demonstrations and lectures in which they could refer to the art and science objects displayed in the tall wall cabinets with

glass doors and in various glass cases. The natural history library was housed on the gallery, and an astronomical observatory was built on the roof.

The creation of an encyclopaedic museum was entirely in keeping with the ideals of the Enlightenment. There were five main collecting themes: scientific instruments, fossils and minerals, prints and drawings, coins and medals and the library. The collections were not only open to society members, but were also intended 'for the benefit of the common good'. Haarlem residents could visit the collections on Tuesday mornings, and those from outside the city could visit on weekdays between 12 noon and 1.00 p.m. Visitors' books from as early as 1789 still survive in the foundation's archives. Even when the museum first opened, visitor numbers were relatively high: 200 to 300 per year.

There were ample funds for acquisitions. In 1780 the library was enhanced with Diderot and d'Alembert's 35-volume *Encyclopédie*, the standard work of the French Enlightenment. Various illustrated botanical reference works were subsequently purchased, including the well-known five-volume *The Birds of*

Taco Hajo Jelgersma, *Portrait of Pieter Teyler van der Hulst as a Collector* (ca. 1760-1778)  
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*America* by John James Audubon. From 1780 onwards, drawings by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch masters were purchased. The most important acquisition, however, was made by Willem Anne Lestevenon of Teyler's Second Society. In 1790, while travelling in Italy, he managed to acquire some 1,700 drawings from the heirs of Duke Livio Odeschalchi. Most of the drawings had previously belonged to the collection in Rome of Christina, former queen of Sweden, and included many works by Raphael, Michelangelo, Guercino, Claude Lorrain and Hendrick Goltzius.

## Admired by Napoleon and Einstein

Two figures were influential in the early days of the museum: Martinus van Marum (1750-1837), the museum's first director, and the painter Wybrand Hendriks (1744-1831), who succeeded Van der Vinne as keeper of the art collections. Van Marum was a renowned and versatile scholar who had great ambitions with respect to the natural sciences. He acquired an important fossil collection, which was the foundation of the Palaeontological and Mineralogical Cabinet. On a journey through Switzerland he also acquired the skull of *Homo diluvii testis* (Man, a witness of the Deluge), one of the world's most coveted fossils. The Physics Cabinet comprised his most important acquisitions. He had managed, with some difficulty, to convince the directors that it was necessary to commission the building of the world's largest electrostatic generator. The gigantic machine was installed in the Oval Room on Boxing Day in 1784, and Van Marum used it for various experiments, some of which involved a battery of Leyden jars. Later, his interest shifted to combustion apparatus, which he built himself. By 1812, according to a catalogue compiled by Van Marum himself, the Physics Cabinet already comprised 435 objects, thanks to numerous acquisitions from all over Europe that included Volta's voltaic pile. He used some of these objects in his public teaching and experiments. Because he had good contacts in France, the collections were not confiscated during the 'French period' in the Netherlands. In 1811, Napoleon visited Teylers Museum. According to Van Marum, the emperor had personally urged him to continue with his educational activities.

The directors of the Teylers Foundation not only managed its finances but also faithfully carried out Teyler's wishes with regard to supporting the visual arts. Wybrand Hendriks purchased important drawings and also laid the foundation for the collection of graphic art, including almost the complete graphic work of Rembrandt and Adriaen van Ostade. Drawings by living artists were also purchased. When Hendriks was succeeded in 1820 by the landscape painter Gerrit Jan Michaëlis, the directors further decided to establish a collection of contemporary painting – a 'first' in the Netherlands.

The collection grew rapidly and the museum soon ran out of space. Between 1824 and 1826, on the east side of the Oval Room, the Fossil Room was built, along with the *Eerste Schilderijenzaal* (first art gallery), a larger room with cabinets for drawings and prints that was designed for exhibiting works by living masters. A library and reading room were built above the gallery. A second art gallery, also designed to house large works, was built in 1893. In the centre of the room, in accordance with the fashion of the time, there was an oval seat

Oval Room  
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surrounding a radiator, on top of which stood potted palms. The keeper of the art collections, J.H. Scholte, published a catalogue of the paintings in 1894. A catalogue of the Dutch, French and German drawings was published in 1904.

The museum also kept pace with developments in the exact sciences. Acquisitions made under Van Marum's successors included a daguerreotype camera, a spectacular Powell & Lealand microscope and a model of Foucault's pendulum. The increasing lack of space was an incentive to mark the museum's first centenary with a major expansion in the form of three exhibition rooms for fossils and instruments built onto the Oval Room, with a completely new entrance on the Spaarne. An international design competition was held in 1877 for this purpose. The imposing façade, in the Viennese Classicist style, was designed by Christian Ulrich. A staircase leads from the lobby, with its glass cupola, to a gallery which gives access to two auditoriums and the library extension. Along the ceilings of the upper floor there are cartouches bearing the names of famous Dutch natural scientists. Over the years, some of the names have been overpainted with those of scientists who have made greater discoveries, most recently in 1971.

The catalogue of instruments in the Physics Cabinet, published in 1882, was intended for specialists. The guide published in 1898 was for the lay public. This illustrates the double function envisaged for the museum. The sciences were given a major stimulus in 1909, when the internationally renowned Nobel Prize winner H.A. Lorentz was appointed keeper of the Physics Cabinet. He had the use of a brand-new well-equipped laboratory, where he was visited by Albert Einstein, among others. Teylers Museum was a centre of physics research for many years until the laboratory was closed in 1955 due to funding problems. Another renowned scholar who was affiliated to the museum in the first half of the twentieth century was Eugène Dubois, who discovered Java Man (*Pithecanthropus erectus*). The museum has him to thank for its collection of fossils and casts of skulls. The Numismatic Cabinet was established at the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to donations from the collector and archivist Adriaan Justus Enschedé.



## Steamed fish with carrots and mashed potato

For Pieter Teyler, the founding of the two societies, each with six members, was an essential part of his will. The task of the Theology Society was to consider all subjects relating to religion, particularly subjects relating to the freedom of religion. The society's members are scholars of the philosophy of religion, religious studies, the exegesis of the Old and New Testaments, the history of Christianity, and practical theology. The society was recently expanded following the endowment by the Teyler Foundation of the chair of 'Enlightenment and religion in historical perspective' (Leiden University).

The areas of expertise of the six members of Teyler's Second Society encompass physics, biology, literature, history, art history and numismatics. Within this select company, the exact sciences and the humanities still co-exist in harmony. Since 1928, the chair of the history of science, also endowed by the Teyler Foundation, has traditionally been a member of the Second Society. Various scholars played an important role not only as members, but also as keepers of the various cabinets: the aforementioned Van Marum, Enschedé, Lorentz and Scholten, as well as Jacob Kistemaker, the pioneer in uranium enrichment, and the art historian Johan Quirijn van Regteren Altena. Members of the Second Society have also included renowned historians such as Robert Fruin and Johan Huizinga.



Raphaël, *Study for Two Angels* (1517-1518)

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Library © Teylers Museum, Haarlem

In his will, Teyler stipulated that members had to give regular lectures at the museum, and that each society should hold an annual essay competition. The writer of the best essay was to be awarded a gold medal, depicting personifications of Freedom, Religion and Truth. Since 1778, a precise record has been kept of the essay subjects and the entries deemed worthy of an award. Many of the essays submitted are now standard works in the relevant field of science. Only occasionally have the essay subjects strayed into the realm of inanity. One example was the 1834 competition: 'The causes of the increased lack of taste displayed in Dutch theatre', for which, incidentally – as was often the case – no prize was awarded. Both a gold and a silver medal were awarded for entries on the subject 'How has poetry, particularly that of previous centuries, influenced the civilising of the human mind?' (the essay competition of 1799). Entries are still submitted to the directors anonymously, under a motto or aphorism, as Teyler originally stipulated in his will. The envelope containing the entrant's real name is not opened until the decision has been made.

Until recently, the directors' meetings were held in the *Grote Herenkamer* (Large Boardroom) and society meetings in the *Kleine Herenkamer* (Small Boardroom) of Foundation House, observed by Pieter Teyler looking down from the posthumous portrait by Wybrand Hendriks (1787). The pewter inkstand in the painting is still in the possession of the foundation. The interiors of the rooms in Foundation House have remained virtually unchanged since the end of the eighteenth century, and on the first Friday of November, the society members have lunch there. The dinner service was originally owned by Pieter Teyler, and the menu consists of steamed fish with carrots and mashed potato, a dish that, as tradition has it, was enjoyed by the legator. After lunch, the annual meeting of the directors and society members is held. As Foundation House is currently undergoing extensive restoration, the meetings are held in the museum.

## Creaking chairs

It has always been the museum's policy to preserve the authentic character of the building and the way in which the collections are presented – the building was lit by gas lamps until 1970. Clearly, however, modifications had become necessary by the twentieth century. However, in a country where the urge to modernise is widespread, Teylers Museum has fortunately escaped disastrous modernisations. Entering the monumental entrance hall, visitors still feel transported back to the nineteenth century. The lobby, decorated with stucco reliefs depicting personifications of the various scholarly disciplines, leads to three dimly lit rooms where the collections of fossils, minerals and physics instruments are displayed in large glass-fronted cabinets. The pattern on the marble floors of the 'new museum' is the same as that in London's Natural History Museum. The cast-iron gratings were installed for central heating. The various rooms lead into the Oval Room, which greets visitors in its restored glory. The art galleries have been embellished with new acquisitions. A highlight of the collection is the large painting *De Tuin* (The Garden, 1893) by the Haarlem painter Jacobus van Looy, which the museum was able to acquire in 2013 thanks to contributions from various funds. The museum now also has a modern café and a large space for temporary exhibitions, which has hosted various popular international exhibitions in recent decades, such as drawings by Michelangelo and Raphael.

Work on the academic appraisal of the permanent collection continues; the series of catalogues of the drawings collection is almost complete. Art books and catalogues can be purchased from a modern, spacious museum shop that has been built to the left of the entrance. The museum publishes a periodical, *Teylers Magazijn*, and has a very informative website. Today, the essay competitions are announced online. However, lectures and presentation ceremonies still take place in the nineteenth-century auditorium – using PowerPoint rather than a slide projector – and audiences are happy to take a seat on the creaking, slightly uncomfortable chairs. ■

[www.teylersmuseum.nl](http://www.teylersmuseum.nl)

John Cuthbertson (1743-1821) after a design  
by Martinus van Marum (1750-1837),  
*The Great Electrostatic Generator*, 1784  
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