

## In Careful Hands

### Exceptional Private Collectors

34

[ ERIC RINCKHOUT ]

Since the start of the nineteenth century, private collectors all over the world have greedily sought out the old masters of the Low Countries. Painters such as Jan van Eyck and Pieter Bruegel were rediscovered thanks to tireless research on the part of private collectors who worked their way up to become true connoisseurs. Other painters, such as the ever-popular Rubens and Rembrandt, were bought by fabulously wealthy collectors who acquired an ensemble the likes of which museums could only dream of having.

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, Henry Clay Frick and the married couple Némie Jacquemart and Edouard André still welcome visitors into their private collections in Antwerp, New York and Paris respectively. The collectors themselves may be long dead, but their spirits still inhabit their houses: a cosy patrician's house, an elegant city palace and a luxurious *bonbonnière*. Visiting their collections is always a true pleasure, as the visitor is confronted with their personal, generally exquisite taste. The art collections reflect their characters, knowledge and, yes, identity.

Collectors such as the Anglo-Austrian Count Antoine Seilern and the Antwerp ex-mayor Florent van Ertborn chose to donate their phenomenal art collections to the community on their deaths: Seilern's staggering ensemble of works by Rubens can now be viewed at the Courtauld Gallery in London, while Van Ertborn's invaluable collection by Van Eyck, Van der Weyden and Fouquet contributed to the foundation of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp.

Each of these collectors harboured the express wish to develop, and, yes, to elevate, the cultural knowledge and aesthetic taste of their contemporaries and subsequent generations through their collections.

### **Mad Meg for under 500 francs**

Fritz Mayer van den Bergh (1858-1901) was one of Antwerp's most exceptional late nineteenth-century collectors. In the city so closely associated with Rubens, he resolutely avoided baroque art. Fritz Mayer's father Emil Mayer came from Cologne and in 1849 set up a family business in Antwerp to import spices and pharmaceutical products. He married Henriëtte van den Bergh, the



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet (Mad Meg)*, 1562, oil on panel, 115 x 161 cm  
© Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp

daughter of a brewer and shipbroker from Antwerp. Fritz Mayer, who studied literature, philosophy and law at Ghent University, seemed destined for the diplomatic service, but after his father's death he devoted himself exclusively to his great passion, collecting art. The family was sufficiently well off to make that possible. Fritz worked with his beloved mother to expand his collection. She was so dear to him that he even changed his name to Fritz Mayer van den Bergh.

After what he himself termed his 'trial period', he sold off his antiques to 'begin again' and from 1891 focussed resolutely on the art of the medieval period and the renaissance. A year earlier, Fritz Mayer had already bought his first Bruegel print, a remarkable *démarche*, as at the end of the nineteenth century Pieter Bruegel the Elder had only a modest reputation. The wider public had barely heard of him but presumably Fritz Mayer had studied the authentic Bruegel paintings during his many trips to Vienna and found himself captivated by the sixteenth-century master, who was glaringly absent from Belgian museums and collections.

In 1893 he bought as many as twenty-two Bruegel prints from an antiquarian in Brussels. He also collected paintings by the son, Pieter Bruegel the Younger, who copied his father's work: *Winter Landscape with Bird Trap and Flight into Egypt* and *The Census at Bethlehem*. Fritz also owned work by Jan Bruegel, Bruegel's second painter son and a good friend to Rubens.

In her book *Pieter Bruegel. De biografie*, Leen Huet calls Fritz Mayer's interest in Bruegel 'original and eccentric': 'most collectors at the time, after all, were after classic art or variants on that theme from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.' Huet moreover attributes Bruegel's rediscovery entirely to Fritz Mayer, the 'shrewd young collector from Bruegel's home city of Antwerp'.

Mayer's 'tour de force' was yet to come. On 5 October 1894 a strange painting belonging to a jeweller in Stockholm was auctioned in Cologne. The catalogue described it as a 'fantastic depiction', 'a landscape with a crowd of ghostly figures'. On the viewing days the auctioneer hung the peculiar work high



Rogier van der Weyden, *The Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*, 1445-1450, oil on panel, 200 x 223 cm, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp © KMSKA-Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw. Photo: Hugo Maertens (Van Ertborn Bequest)

up. It was not worth much, after all. The young art historian Max Friedländer, working in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, climbed a ladder to inspect the piece but was unable to convince his director. In a letter he tipped off Mayer, whom he called 'the specialist when it came to Brueghel' – Brueghel with an 'h', because at that point it was still thought that the painting was the work of Pieter Brueghel the Younger, alias 'Hell Brueghel'. Fritz Mayer bought the painting through an agent for 390 marks, less than 500 francs. By way of comparison, in the same year a sum of 45,000 francs was paid for Rubens's *Prodigal Son*. Fritz Mayer studied the work thoroughly as soon as it arrived in Antwerp. After a few days he was certain of it: it was the *Mad Meg* described by Karel van Mander in 1604 in his *Schilder-Boeck* (Book of Painting), a painting thought to have been lost. Leen Huet writes, 'His purchase was the clarion call with which research on Bruegel, which has since filled an entire library, began in Belgium.' She also liberally praises Mayer for his thorough interpretation of the piece, some of whose many elements are yet to be elaborated in the art history literature.

Following the acquisition of *Mad Meg*, Fritz Mayer bought his second Bruegel at an auction in Paris in 1899: a panel consisting of twelve separate wooden plates with depictions of proverbs. Unfortunately he had little time to enjoy his purchases or study them further, as he died at the age of forty-three from complications of a fractured skull after falling from his horse. He was unable to complete his research into the mysterious Flemish painter Hugo van der Goes. His mother honoured him by housing his magnificent collection – including Master Heinrich of Constance's thirteenth-century *Group of Christ and St John* and a fifteenth-century manuscript, the Mayer van den Bergh Breviary – in a museum which she had built in late gothic style beside her own house on Lange Gasthuisstraat in Antwerp. The museum opened its doors in December 1904.

## A unique gesture

Leen Huet calls Fritz Mayer the spiritual son of Florent van Ertborn (1784–1840), who was mayor of Antwerp from 1817 to 1828 – under the United Kingdom of the Netherlands – and a gifted collector of antique art. Van Ertborn was born into a family who belonged to Antwerp's financial elite. Art collecting was in their blood. He was five years old when the French Revolution broke out. As a child he fled with his family to Bremen, fearing the French invaders. In Germany he heard stories of raided churches, disbanded monastic orders and works of art carried off by the French troops to Paris. As the Musée Napoleon, the Louvre was intended to exhibit an overview of European art history, but it was really Rubens first and foremost who triumphed here: he was viewed as the highlight of Flemish art. The French had no interest in 'old-fashioned' masters, even when the pieces in question were the central panels of Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* and a triptych by Hans Memling.

The old masters also piqued the curiosity of two young brothers from Cologne: Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée. They were interested in the medieval architecture of the cities of Flanders and Brabant, and in the early nineteenth century they succeeded in purchasing works of art to match their architectural tastes. The second-hand dealerships were pleased to be relieved of their 'old junk'. The brothers thus laid the foundation for the Alte Pinakothek in Munich



Hans Memling, *Man with a Roman Coin*, oil on panel, 30.7 x 23.2 cm,  
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp © KMSKA-Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw.  
Photo: Hugo Maertens (Van Ertborn Bequest)

with work by Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Memling and Dirk Bouts. They made their acquisitions known to a broader circle and in so doing influenced the taste of Florent van Ertborn, who met them in 1824 in Antwerp. Van Ertborn had in fact already purchased a work by Hans Memling, even before 1818, having reputedly spotted it under a layer of dirt and having it restored. Van Ertborn consciously sought out late medieval art: in his view that was the 'missing link' in art history. He even exchanged seventeenth-century paintings for older work: that is how Antonello da Messina's *Calvary* (1475) is thought to have come into his possession.

Van Ertborn travelled a great deal and conducted thorough research, but he was not the only private collector in search of (late) medieval art. The company in which he found himself was that of a relatively small but wealthy group of English and German romantics. The German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, with whom Van Ertborn maintained close contact, was also a proponent of this early romantic trend. Although Van Ertborn often complained that German collectors had beaten him to it, he did succeed in purchasing Rogier van der

Weyden's *Seven Sacraments* in 1826 from a family in Dijon. He is said to have paid the modest sum of 300 guilders, evidence of the scant appreciation for late medieval art at the time. Four years later he acquired the small panel *Saint Barbara* (1437) by Jan van Eyck and five years after that he added *Madonna at the Fountain*, also by Van Eyck. The signed and dated (1439) panel had long been hidden away in a sacristy and came from the village of Dikkelvenne in East Flanders. He further enriched his collection with Rogier van der Weyden's *Portrait of Philip de Croÿ* and Jean Fouquet's *Madonna* among others. As to the purchase price, the collector unfortunately offers no information in the catalogue he drew up in 1828.



Jan van Eyck, *Saint Barbara*, 1437, oak panel, 18 x 31 cm,  
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp © KMSKA-Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw.  
Photo: Hugo Maertens (Van Ertborn Bequest)

At that point Van Ertborn's collection was renowned among art lovers all over Europe. The German novelist Johanna Schopenhauer, mother of philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, visited the collection during her journey through the Netherlands. In *Ausflug an den Niederrhein und nach Belgien im Jahr 1828* (Tour of the Niederrhein and Belgium in the year 1828) she writes, 'The collection is not particularly large, really only filling the walls of a rather large chamber, but outside of the former collections of Boisserée and Solly, which are now in the museum in Berlin, there are none more interesting for the history of antique art. Here one finds very rare works by masters about whom all but their names have been forgotten for some time.'

After his stint as mayor and once Belgium had gained independence, Van Ertborn moved to Utrecht as a staunch Orangist, where he took the office of provincial governor, but he maintained his connections with Antwerp, continuing to play a part in managing the academy there. In his collection catalogue he exhaustively compared the use of colour, perspective and composition by the baroque painters and Flemish Primitives, arguing that Van Eyck and Van der Weyden should be seen as a step in the evolution towards the baroque. He emphasised the importance of the study of so-called primitive painters, offered a nuanced perspective on the exceptional position of Rubens, legitimised his own art collection and prepared the way for his endowment.

In 1840 Van Ertborn died of an eye tumour, which had gradually blinded him – a terrible fate for an art lover. In 1832 he had written a will leaving 115 works to the city of Antwerp, specifically to the academy museum, a unique gesture. Initially, however, the academy was at a loss as to what to do with the gift, simply because it lacked the expertise to estimate the value of the pieces. The Van Ertborn Bequest has since become a benchmark for the sector and the works of Van Eyck, David, Van der Weyden, Memling, Fouquet, Martini and Da Messina are now seen as masterpieces of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp.

## A public monument

At the end of the nineteenth century prices for antique art began to increase rapidly, due to the ever-greedier American collectors. One of them was Henry Frick, a coal magnate from New York. Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919) was the embodiment of the American Dream, rising from a modest background to become one of the most powerful American industrialists. He spent his fortune on European fine arts and built a house, now The Frick Collection, a gallery in a prime New York location, opposite Central Park on the corner of Fifth Avenue and East 70th Street. It is one of the world's best private art collections in a magnificent city palace, built in French neoclassical style.

As an industrialist Henry Frick happened to be in the right place at the right time. He realised that the rapidly rising iron and steel industry in the United States would require a great deal of coke. Steel was used among other things for the railways, which were fast being laid in a country constantly shifting its border westwards. Frick bought up coalfields and in 1871 he built fifty coke ovens, making him a millionaire by the time he turned thirty. From a young age he had been fascinated by art. His office was full of prints and drawings, some



Anthony van Dyck, *Frans Snyder*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, 142.6 x 105.4 cm,  
© The Frick Collection, New York

by his own hand. In 1880 he travelled to Europe and his visit to the Wallace Collection in London convinced him to expand his art collection.

Frick, however, was not the only one with such plans. In the Gilded Age, the industrial 'golden age' of the US between 1875 and 1914, various private fortunes came into being. Carnegie, Rockefeller, Pierpont Morgan and Mellon all followed the example of European aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and were keen to build art collections to confirm their status and prestige, or if necessary to boost it. Their intentions were facilitated by a fiscal reform in the British inheritance system, which caused a number of aristocrats to put their art collections on the market. Those works of art were immediately snapped up by the wealthy Americans.

At the end of the nineteenth century Frick dedicated himself entirely to art. He was well assisted, largely by European advisers, but he had a good nose for art himself, generally purchasing individual pieces rather than buying in bulk. Frick also bought old masters from the Low Countries. Although he had little affinity for religious art, in 1915 he acquired Gerard David's *Descent from the Cross* (c. 1495), a painting which had once been the property of William II of Orange. Frick in fact was most interested in portraits. In that respect the pur-





Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and Laughing Girl*, c. 1657, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 46 cm,  
© The Frick Collection, New York

chase of Anthony van Dyck's double portrait of Frans Snyder, painter of animals and still life, and his wife was a major success. Frick succeeded in uniting the once separated, life-sized, realistic images in 1909. He subsequently bought six more portraits by Van Dyck, whom he greatly admired.

Opposite the Snyders in New York hangs Rembrandt's largest self-portrait, purchased in 1906 in Dorset from the Earl of Ilchester. The fifty-two-year-old Rembrandt depicts himself with a staff in his left hand and is further dressed in an imaginative oriental costume. But the real cherry on the cake was no fewer than three Vermeers, bought in 1901, 1911 and 1919, the year Frick died, representing true luxury to the collector. For *Officer and Laughing Girl* he had to sell two of his Rembrandts. Vermeer had only come back into fashion since 1860 due to the French critic William Bürger, while Rembrandt had always remained a favourite with the public, but prices for Vermeers sky-rocketed.

From 1914 Frick lived amidst his art. After his death in 1919 the house was extended and in 1935 the museum opened its doors, still breathing the personal atmosphere of days gone by. Frick wanted his collection to be a 'monument', a 'public gallery to which the entire public shall forever have access'.

## In a library, in *clair-obscur*

Edouard André and Némie Jacquemart started their collection a little earlier. In their Parisian city palace, surrounded by Italian, French and English opulence, they brought together an essential core of Flemish and Dutch masters. Despite only having been built around 1870, the Hôtel Jacquemart-André is eighteenth-century through and through. It was commissioned by Edouard André, who was descended from a Protestant banker's family and wanted to house his art collection at the luxurious residence on Boulevard Haussmann. In 1881 he married Némie Jacquemart, a portrait painter with a completely different background, rooted in Catholicism and the royalist petite bourgeoisie. Fortunately they shared the same taste, both operating as keen art collectors and generous patrons.

In the library a few Flemish and Dutch seventeenth-century works hang together, very appropriately in *clair-obscur*: a small but dramatic Rembrandt (*The Supper at Emmaus*, bought in 1891), a view of Haarlem with menacing storm clouds by Jacob van Ruisdael and a large, unusual mythological scene with vivid brush strokes by Van Dyck, *Time Clipping the Wings of Love*, acquired in 1899. Those works are surrounded by a few portraits by Rembrandt, Frans



Rembrandt, *The Supper at Emmaus*, c.1629, oil on paper mounted on panel, 37.4 x 42.3 cm,  
Musée Jacquemart-André-Institut de France, Paris © Studio Sébert Photographes



Anthony van Dyck, *Time Clipping the Wings of Love*, c. 1627, oil on canvas, 175 x 110 cm, Musée Jacquemart-André-Institut de France, Paris © Studio Sébert Photographes

Hals and another piece by Van Dyck: a corpulent, ruddy Antwerp magistrate, bought in 1890, when it was still attributed to Jordaens. Edouard André hung these works alongside a portrait of a man by Philippe de Champagne, to highlight the extent of the influence of seventeenth-century masters from the North on subsequent generations of French painters.

### A recluse in a gloomy house

The final salvo is released by an Anglo-Austrian private collector, who had maintained a passion for Peter Paul Rubens almost all his life: Count Antoine Seilern (1901-1978) owned thirty-two paintings and twenty-three drawings by Rubens – enough to turn many a museum green with envy. ‘Everything connected with Rubens interests me,’ was his motto. Seilern’s father was Austrian. His mother was born in 1875 in New York as Antoinette Woerishoffer and it was from her side of the family that Antoine Seilern received a substantial inheritance.

Seilern began studying philosophy, Freudian psychology and art history at the University of Vienna as late as 1933, having previously been occupied with travel, hunting and reading. In 1939 he graduated with a dissertation on the Venetian influences on Rubens’s oeuvre. Shortly afterwards, when World War II broke out, Seilern fled to England, where he had been born. At that point he had already acquired his first works by Rubens, including the legendary *Landscape by Moonlight*, once part of the collection of British painter Joshua Reynolds, two panels from the Achilles series, and designs for the side panels of the



Peter Paul Rubens, *Landscape by Moonlight*, 1635-1640, oil on panel, 64 x 90 cm,  
© The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London (Collection Antoine Seilern)



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Entombment*, 1615-1616, oil on panel, 83.1 x 65.1 cm,  
© The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London (Collection Antoine Seilern)

*Descent from the Cross* in the cathedral in Antwerp and for the ceiling paintings of the St. Charles Borromeo Church, also in Antwerp, which were sadly destroyed by a fire. For these purchases Seilern was steadfastly supported by none other than his friend Ludwig Burchard, an expert on Rubens. In 1937 Seilern published a catalogue about his collection, which was already extensive by this time. After World War II he added the intimate portrait of the *Family of Jan Brueghel the Elder* and a remarkable *Entombment*. When Rubens's paintings became too expensive even for Seilern, he devoted himself to purchasing the master's drawings.

Seilern's collection was not initially accessible to everyone. He insisted on privacy and in fact lived as a recluse in a large, bizarre and gloomy house in Prince's Gate, London. After his death in 1978 his collection was donated to the renowned Courtauld Gallery, as Seilern had stipulated in his will. The Courtauld has since moved to the sumptuous, labyrinthine yet intimate, Somerset House on the Strand in London. Rubens permanently takes centre stage there. Seilern wanted to honour the Flemish baroque master in all his genius: as a portrait and landscape painter, a decorator on an epic scale, designer of tapestries and books, and inquisitive student who paid homage to illustrious forebears such as Titian and Tintoretto. He thoroughly succeeded in his aim. ■

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