

# VIRTUS

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Janet Dickinson

## Power and beauty

The Arenberg family and its art collection

209

Mark Derez, Soetkin Vanhauwaert and Anne Verbrugge, eds, *Arenberg. Portrait of a family, story of a collection* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018, 400 p., 380 colour ill.)

The subject of elite families and their interventions in politics, culture and religion has deservedly received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. This lavishly illustrated book, consisting of a series of brief essays on the Arenberg dynasty over the course of five hundred years of history, constitutes a series of further important contributions to the discussion.

The book is in part a catalogue, published to accompany an exhibition, ‘Power and Beauty. The Arenbergs’ at the M-Museum in Leuven, which ran from October 2018 to January 2019 as part of a wider festival, ‘Five Centuries of Arenberg’, organised by Leuven University and the City of Leuven in co-operation with the Arenberg Foundation. Both catalogue and exhibition call attention to the Arenbergs as an elite family whose members played important roles in the political, military, economic and cultural worlds of the Leuven region, in Belgium and in Europe. The exhibition at the M-Museum gathered together works from the family’s collections, reuniting them for the first time since they were dispersed across the world, in museums and private collections. A sister exhibition at the University Library, ‘Noble Living’, considered one of the Arenberg’s castles at Heverlee, now part of the University campus. In both exhibitions, the lives of those who lived in the castle and who collected the artworks on display were brought vividly to life through objects, artworks and the use of 3D technology. It is very useful to have this book to record these important exhibitions and to convey some of the research that informed them.

Divided into two parts, the first focusing on history and the second on art, the book consists of 38 chapters by a wide range of scholars. I will not attempt in this short review to cover all of the contributions to the book, though it is important to make the point that they are all fully worthy of acknowledgement and one of the great successes of this volume is in bringing together such scope and depth of scholarship. A short biographical note on each of the authors would have been appreciated, not least as a way of tracking down further studies in the field.

A number of important themes emerge from the volume, including the ways in which the Arenbergs interconnected with other noble families in Europe, reminding us that noble families of this kind were accustomed to moving across borders, being part of a transnational elite and engaging with their world in these terms. The prefatory chapter by Mark Derez and the first chapter of the book by Luc Duerloo make for a strong start to the collection, tracking the ancestral German origins of the House of Arenberg in the Eifel, where they were one of the oldest and highest status families, and their expansion to hold wider political prominence, culminating in their elevation to a Dukedom in 1644. This is followed by chapters dealing with the Arenbergs' continued hold on power through their capacity to adapt to changing times and requirements. They fulfilled both the traditional functions of the nobility, raising and leading armies and operating as major landowners and also took on new roles as diplomats, participating on an international scale in some of the great events of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All these subjects are addressed here and it is particularly interesting to see the Arenbergs' role developing over time.

210

Violet Soen's chapter on the role that Margu rite de la Marck and her son Charles of Arenberg played in the Eighty Years' War reveals a much more 'canny' strategy than has been acknowledged. They successfully navigated the complexities of allegiance to allow Charles to emerge as a trusted counselor to the Habsburgs. One of the great highlights of the M-Museum exhibition was the inclusion of the painting depicting the Somerset House Peace Conference of 1604, where Charles formed a key part of the Habsburg delegation, representing the Archdukes Albert and Isabella. Dries Raeymaekers' chapter on the court in Brussels explores the afterlife of this famous image, with Charles and his family in high favour, able to construct networks of patronage that allowed them to further promote their family. The challenges of sustaining this form of power are brought to the fore in the shape of Charles' heir Philip, who ended up imprisoned under suspicion of treason. His death in 1640 at the age of 52 allowed the Arenbergs to escape this period of disfavour and to resume their role at the court until the end of Habsburg rule, playing prominent roles in the military upheavals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Arnout Mertens' chapter on the 'blind duke' Louis Engelbert's decision to throw his support behind Napoleon Bonaparte and the French Empire makes admirable sense of a decision that might otherwise appear surprising. Students would do well to consult the chapters dealing with this complicated period in order to understand how an elite family might persist and even flourish through a time of political and social revolutions.

The Arenbergs worked hard at ensuring their continued political and social significance by amassing connections through their marriages, a subject reviewed in Mirella Marini's chapter on 'Dynastic Strategies'. This picks up on Duerloo's comments on the widening

search for marriage partners, looking to Spain, Italy and Austria as well as the Low Countries, partly through necessity and also reflecting the international scope of politics. The family's determination to ensure the future of the dynasty comes through strongly, with successive generations planning ahead. It is good to see the Arenbergs' collecting practices and cultural patronage taken seriously as an integral part of their activities, merged with strategies of politics and power. Family members constructed their dynastic identity through material culture and this is well covered in chapters touching on the family portrait gallery at Heverlee by Anne Verbrugge and Mark Derez, with missing ancestors restored to place by images based on miniatures or engravings. Steven Thiry's contribution on the family's heraldry and insignia, emphasizing the flexibility and adaptability of this dynastic symbolism, is another valuable addition, recapturing a sense of the importance of these ideas to contemporaries. This dimension of the family's representation is brought up to date in the inclusion of Kehinde Wiley's *Duc d'Arenberg*, a modern interpretation of Van Dyck's equestrian portrait of Duke Albert (1600-1674), swapping boots and armour for trainers and a hoodie.

211

The attention paid to material culture continues in chapters addressing a range of aspects of the family's activities in collecting and in architecture, garden design and interior decoration. A joint chapter by Sanne Maekelberg and Krista de Jonge reflects the content of the exhibition at the University Library, addressing the network of residences that stretched across the southern Low Countries in the seventeenth century. Their particular focus is on Charles of Arenberg's marriage to Anne of Croÿ, through whom he inherited a range of titles and possessions, including the lands and castle at Heverlee and a very large collection of artworks, books and curiosities. These are discussed in Daan van Heesch's chapter, which touches on an astonishing range of items, many with fascinating afterlives following their sale in 1614. There is certainly an opportunity here for future studies of the collection and how it may have been displayed. One of the inevitable frustrations of a volume of this scope and ambition is that some subjects can be addressed only briefly, though the authors of each chapter are helpful in flagging up where further research may be possible and close attention is paid to source materials throughout, including two illuminating chapters on the state and family archives.

Not all family members were politicians or soldiers and one of the quieter pleasures of this volume comes with its discussion of gardeners and bibliophiles. Elly Cockx-Indestege and Pierre Delsaerdt focus on the expansion of the family's libraries during the eighteenth century, led by Duke Leopold Philip and his son Charles Marie Raymond, the first to appoint a professional librarian to oversee the library and the new purchases. This was continued by Louis Engelbert, a key player in the family's collecting practices, a subject worthy of a major study on his own, but placed in context here to demonstrate how family members built on each others' legacies. The range of subjects addressed in the library defy easy summary but we can look forward to the forthcoming publication of a full length study of the 1418 entries in the Arenbergs' *Collection spéciale* by the authors of the chapter included here.

In further chapters we learn about a wonderful array of objects and commissions, from illuminated manuscripts, prints and musical scores to furnishings and textiles. Koenraad Brosens' chapter on tapestries offers a rich glimpse into the family's involvement in commis-

sioning works over several centuries, with a reinvigoration of interest by the ninth Duke who supported efforts to revive the industry after it went into decline during the nineteenth century. One of the family's great treasures, 'Honor', part of the *Gloria Immortalis* set woven between 1525 and 1532, was borrowed for the exhibition and is shown here alongside two others from the series, giving some idea of the beauty and importance of the collection. Other contributors focus on the ways in which the Arenbergs' religion informed their commissions and on the items accumulated through travel and participation in the *grand tour*. One mysterious item, the Arenberg *colcha*, a bedcover originating in the Indies, attracted a great deal of attention in the exhibition but can only be addressed briefly and speculatively in the book, with the intriguing suggestion that it may have been a diplomatic gift. Again, it is to be hoped that further work and insights arise from this volume.

212 The family's elite status was reflected in the quality of artists that they were able to commission over multiple generations, including Rubens, Van Dyck, de Crayer and Watteau. By the nineteenth century the Duke of Arenberg's gallery was highly recommended in travel guides as a private museum with a rich connection of Flemish and Dutch masters, including works by Brueghel and Jordaens (chapters by Anne Verbrugge and Ulrike Müller). The 'blind duke' Louis Engelbert gathered his own collection of travel souvenirs (of a highly elite nature) during his *grand tour* of Italy in 1789-1801, addressed in Joris Van Grieken and Maarten Bassens' chapter on the Arenberg print room and in Gerrit Verhoeven's discussion of how the duke experienced artworks, sculptures and views through touch, smell and detailed descriptions provided by his companions.

This period also represents the political marginalisation of the family as nation states took shape and assumed political prominence. They did not, however, lose their social and economic power, accumulating a large fortune through coal mining and investment in emerging industries, a trajectory outlined in an important chapter by Sander Berghmans on the Arenbergs as landholders. Duke Engelbert Marie acquired Nordkirchen Castle at the start of the twentieth century, undertaking architectural modifications with the aim of producing the 'Versailles of Westphalia', though the plans drawn up were never fully completed. The period studied in the volume draws to a close with the sequestration of property after the First World War, when the family lost the majority of their Belgian and French possessions.

In his prefatory letter to the volume, the current Duke of Arenberg writes of his hope that the family's Foundation will continue to prompt understanding of the history and culture and maintain a 'collective memory that stretches across a thousand years in nine different European countries' as the foundation for building future societies. These aims are well met in this landmark study and it is to be hoped that scholars and students will continue to pursue the directions taken here in further studies of other noble families and their myriad activities.

Houses divided? Noble familial and class connections during the Age of Revolution and Napoleon

9

*Mary K. Robinson*

'Le mariage m'a toujours fait peur.' Ongehuwde adellijke vrouwen in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw

27

*Evelyn Ligtenberg*

Steekpenning of welkomstgeschenk? De strijd voor eerherstel van Gerrit Burchard en Adolf Hendrik van Rechteren

55

*Michel Hoenderboom*

The politics of presence. Place making among the Swedish iron producers in the county of Västmanland ca. 1750-1850

75

*Marie Steinrud*

De Belgische orangistische adel, deel II. De rol van de adel in het Belgisch orangisme (1830-1850)

93

*Els Witte*

