

ExpoTime!

The international magazine for museum professionals

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Sept/Oct 21

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Joost Welten

The Forgotten Princesses of Thorn

Limburgs Museum, Venlo/NL: until April 3, 2022

The impressive exhibition “The Forgotten Princesses of Thorn” brings to life a history as unknown as it is fascinating: that of European noblewomen who for centuries reigned over their own state. The tiny independent state of Thorn, situated near the river Maas in the Southern Netherlands, was, in fact, a fully-fledged part of the Holy Roman Empire. Although the roots of this miniature state date back to the 10th cent., the exhibition focuses on the 18th cent., its golden age.

In Thorn, women are in charge

Thorn was a worldly chapter, ruled by a princess-abbess. She shared her power with 14 princesses and countesses (known as collegiate ladies or canonesses) and six men (canons). Chapters of this type were not uncommon in

the Holy Roman Empire. After the chapter of Essen, Thorn, however, was the most prestigious. Any noblewoman seeking admission had to demonstrate that all of her 16 great-great grandparents had been counts, countesses, princes or princesses. A large painting from 1709 shows the self-confidence of these noblewomen: the portrait of the princess-abbess occupies the central position at the top, followed by the 14 coats of arms of the chapter’s princesses and countesses. The lower part shows the coats of arms of the six canons. The message conveyed is clear: in Thorn, women are in charge; men merely occupy a subordinate position.

At around the age of 14, princesses and countesses of the Holy Empire were sent off to the protected environment of Thorn to complete their education and become



View of the exhibition. Photo: Levin de Boer – LDBFOTO.NL

familiar with the etiquette and mores of high nobility. Many eventually left the chapter to marry a prince or count, others kept their position as canoness for the rest of their lives since the status attached to it was most enviable. A canoness had a substantial personal income of which she could dispose as she liked and was not subject to the authority of her parents, a husband, the church or a lord, which granted her a great deal of freedom to organise her life as she wished. She enjoyed a level of autonomy that next generations of women in the 19th cent. could only dream of.

Until recently, hardly any research had been dedicated to this statelet governed by women. This now has changed, thanks to the extensive archival research carried out for my book “The Forgotten Princesses of Thorn (1700-1794)” [*Die vergessenen Prinzessinnen von Thorn*, published by Schnell & Steiner in Regensburg in 2021]; an English edition is not yet published], upon which the exhibition at Limburgs museum is based. As the guest curator of this exhibition, I had the rewarding task not only of bringing the unknown stories of these women into the limelight, but also of bringing to life the material world that surrounded them. No book of course can evoke the material side of their existence the way an exhibition can. And because this is a story about an aristocratic elite, the objects shown are invariably of great quality, beauty and value. The exhibition offers an intimate glimpse into the lives of the three princesses who are the main protagonists of my book, which gives the visitor the feeling of meeting them personally. It is precisely this combination of a wealth of beautiful objects and the opportunity to get to know the history of the main characters, that makes this a singular exhibition.

Through each of the three princesses, a different aspect of aristocratic life in Thorn is highlighted. Their stories are not only told by means of a wide variety of objects, ranging from paintings and Chinese porcelain to jewelry and fans, but also through quotes from their letters displayed on the walls, as a kind of running commentary. In 60 short stories, an audio tour provides additional information about their lives and the objects on display. It is a large-scale exhibition (750 m²), featuring loans from more than 60 museums and private collections from all over Europe and the USA, including the *Uffizi* in Florence, the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in Vienna and the *Museumslandschaft Hessen-Kassel*. One of the highlights is a portrait of Adélaïde Marquess de Caumont La Force by Hubert Drouais (David Owsley Museum of Art, Muncie IN).



Painting commissioned in 1709 by Anna Juliana, Countess of Manderscheid-Blankenheim (1665-1717), from 1707 Princess-Abbess of Thorn. Foundation Abdijkerk Thorn, Netherlands



François Hubert Drouais (1727-1775): Adélaïde Marquess de Caumont La Force, née de Galard de Brassac (1739-1829). Photo: David Owsley Museum of Art, Muncie IN



Hair brooch in the shape of a feather with rubies and yellow and colourless diamonds, set in gold and silver, 18th cent. Photo: Private Collection

Polyxena: Married at First Sight

Polyxena, Princess of Hessen-Rheinfels-Rotenburg (Rotenburg 1706-Turin 1735) arrived in Thorn shortly before her 14th birthday. Very quickly, she understood how Thorn served as a marriage market for the high nobility. In aristocratic circles, arranged marriages, forged to protect dynastic interests, were the rule. When a golden carriage arrived to take a bride to her wedding, she often had never laid eyes on her husband-to-be ...

Trusted servants of princes and counts would scour Thorn for brides for their masters, readily paying the princesses' chambermaids for information. In 1721 Polyxena saw how scouts from the court in Turin examined the health, beauty, intelligence, manners, mastery of the French language, etc. of her niece, Anna Christina Princess of Palatinate-Sulzbach (1704-1723), like her a

canoness in Thorn. After a positive final report, Anna Christina was chosen as bride for the Crown Prince of Piedmont-Sardinia. Unfortunately, Anna Christina died already in her first childbed. Subsequently, the court in Turin sent scouts to Thorn again, this time to map out Polyxena's allure. No detail of Polyxena's life remained hidden from them. In 1724, she was married to the Crown Prince of Piedmont-Sardinia. Six years later, Polyxena herself became Queen.

The exhibition tells this story by means of full-length portraits of Anna Christina of Palatinate-Sulzbach and Polyxena of Hessen-Rheinfels-Rotenburg (from the Castello Reale di Racconigi, Italy), but also for instance by means of an 18th cent. gilded state coach (from the Art & History Museum, Brussels), the type of carriage used to fetch brides in Thorn for their wedding.

Gabriella: Life in a Gilded Cage

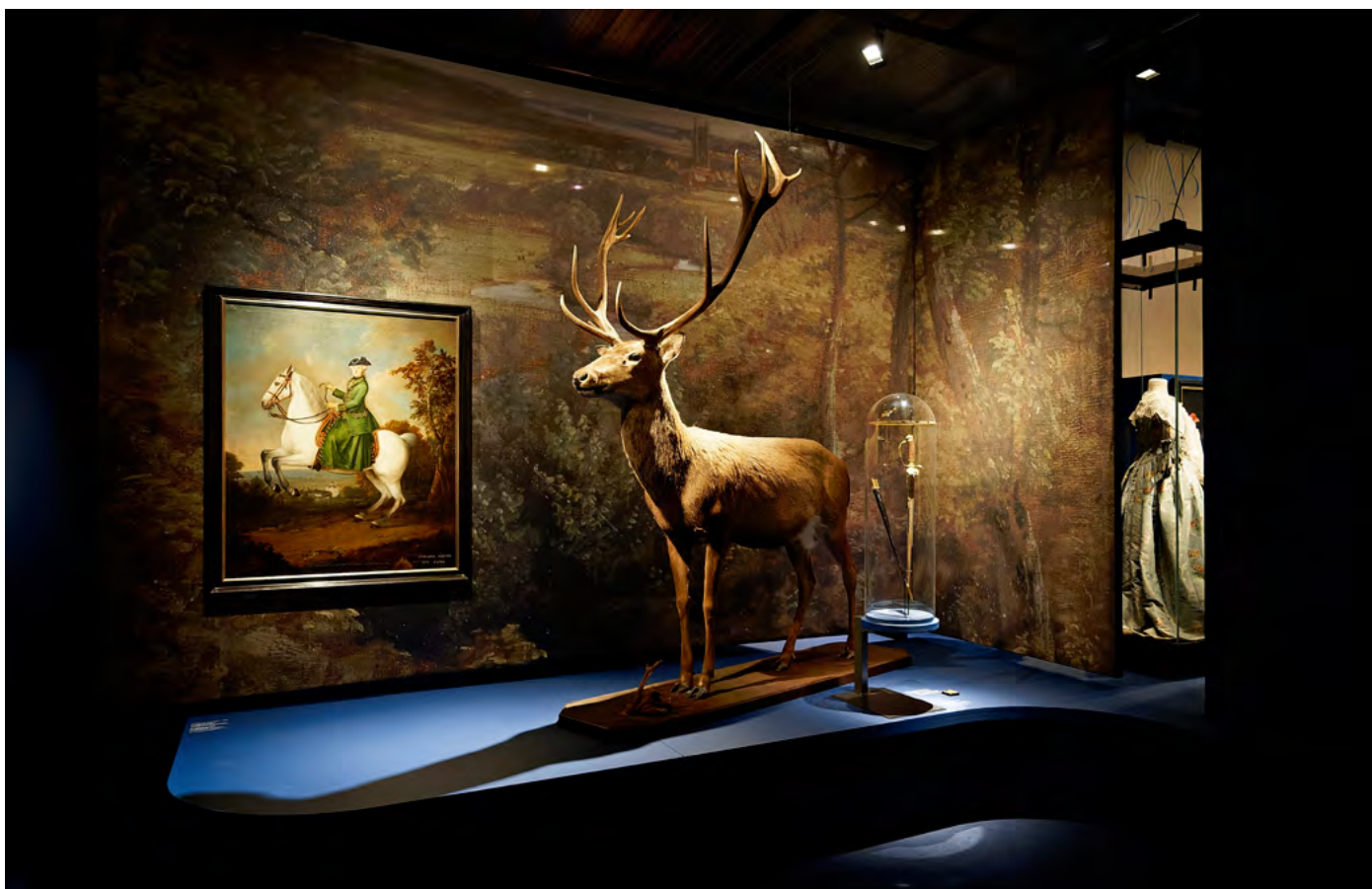
Gabriella, Princess of Salm-Salm (Anholt 1720-Thorn 1794) was raised by a great aunt of hers, who held great sway over the affairs of the family, and also plotted the course of Gabriella's life.

Gabriella's family had very strong ties with the courts of both the emperor in Vienna and the French king in Versailles, as the principality of Salm (not far from Nancy) was officially part of the Holy Roman Empire, but geographically completely enclosed by France.

Gabriella was destined for a prestigious marriage with the grandson of the French King Louis XIV. Those plans however fell through. Ultimately, Gabriella spent most



View of the exhibition. Photo: Levin de Boer – LDBFOTO.NL



Two views from the exhibition. Photos: Jos Saris (above) and Levin de Boer – LDBFOTO.NL



of her life as a worldly canoness in Thorn. She led an exemplary life, albeit in a gilded cage. To keep up her family's honour, she always dressed in the latest fashion and served only the very best wines. Precious silk dressing gowns *à la française* and luxurious fashion accessories bring to life this aspect of Gabriella's life. A bill from a fashion retailer that she couldn't pay, reveals the sobering downside of such a life of representation. In order to maintain her status as a princess of Salm-Salm, Gabriella too often allowed herself to spend money she did not have.

Cunegonda: All in the Family

Cunegonda of Saxony (Warsaw 1740-Dresden 1826) is unquestionably the star of the exhibition. Her iconic childhood portrait (from the *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden*), painted by Rotari, is shown alongside a beautiful 18th cent. hair jewel (from a private collection), which closely resembles the hair jewel Cunegonda wears in this very portrait.

Cunegonda belonged to one of the most powerful families in Europe. Her father was King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, one of her sisters was the Queen of Spain, another sister married the Crown Prince of France... and so the list goes on. Empress Maria Theresia even considered Cunegonda as a potential wife for her son, the future Emperor Joseph II. Cunegonda almost became empress herself... almost, because Maria Theresia ultimately selected a different bride for her son.

Later on, however, Maria Theresa regretted not having chosen Cunegonda as her daughter-in-law. In an attempt at reconciliation, she helped to obtain Cunegonda one of the most prestigious positions an unmarried woman in Europe could strive for: sovereign-abbess of Thorn. Securing this position was not an easy undertaking, as the sovereign-abbess in Thorn was elected by and among the canonesses themselves. Thus, in order to qualify as a candidate, Cunegonda first had to become a canoness in Thorn herself. In the rigorous election campaign that followed, every conceivable method of persuasion was employed, from diplomatic pressure in Vienna and Rome to lavish gifts for the princesses and countesses in Thorn. The kind of precious gifts that were handed out – jewelry and gold snuff boxes (from, among others, the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs* Paris, and private collectors) – are on display at the exhibition.

Cunegonda relished in her life as an independent woman. Her passion for hunting was noteworthy and she could ride and shoot like the very best. But she also had considerable musical talent. She once sang one of the main roles in an opera that was written, composed and produced by her sister-in-law Maria Antonia of Bavaria, "Talestri: Queen of the Amazons". Cunegonda was also widely reputed as one of the best harpsichordists in the Holy Roman Empire, and she surrounded herself with



**Pietro Antonio Rotari (1707-1762):
Cunegonda of Saxony (1740-1826),
Royal Princess of Poland, at the age of 15.
Photo: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden**

musicians wherever she went – including Thorn. Those who were officially employed as her secretary, valet, etc., in fact quite often were professional musicians. The exhibition extensively highlights these two favourite pastimes of Cunigonde, for example by means of the impressive painting of a stag hunt by Alexandre-François Desportes (from the *Domaine de Grosbois*, France).

The French Revolution

The story of the forgotten princesses of Thorn ends abruptly with the French Revolution. In 1794, French revolutionary troops effortlessly conquered this miniature state. They annexed it to France, abolished the nobility and nationalised all the possessions of the chapter. Since then the noble women who for more than 800 years had ruled over Thorn, have passed into oblivion. After the departure of the French in 1814, Thorn became a municipality of the Dutch province of Limburg. Only the magnificent church of the chapter and some well-preserved aristocratic houses remind us of its glorious past.

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