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## The role of Belgian private art collectors in the shaping of a contemporary art market in Belgium.

« Museums have a duty to carry out a programme: 'Present a general outlook, a perspective on the whole'. The collector has a right to love. And because love doesn't require justification, nor blossom, fade or fixation on the mediocre, it is purified by superior values. That is why a collection often juxtaposes the mediocre and the best, next to heights you will see depths, but that doesn't diminish the value at all »<sup>1</sup>

Argues the Swiss collector of modern art Emanuell Hoffman (1896-1932), to demonstrate the added value of a private collector as "the expression of a personality".<sup>23</sup> Already since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Belgium has the reputation of being a country of private collectors. The Belgian private art and antique collections in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, often referred to as "too many to cite them all", are widely described in 19<sup>th</sup> century international travel literature which might indicate that they played an important role in the cultural scene of that time, and moreover that they were accessible for travellers. In the literature we can read that the collections were meeting places to study and discuss art and culture, a public role they still play with regard to contemporary art.<sup>4</sup> This essay briefly describes the history of Belgian collecting in relation to governmental museum politics. It explains how a lack of governmental guidance caused a bottom-up development of the contemporary art scene in Belgium/Brussels, driven by private collections. By outlining the generational differences between these collectors it addresses the way they were co-shaping the contemporary art market. By comparing the characteristics of a private collection and its accessibility with the didactic purpose of museum collections, it gives insight in the difficulties of the Belgian/Brussels contemporary art scene until today.

### **What defines a collections?**

In his essay *Wunderkammer des Abendlandes* Steven Jacobs refers to Walter Benjamin to define a collectible, as "an object disposed of his function and practical value and reduced to its optical feature to be viewed."<sup>5</sup> In his doctoral dissertation notes Tanguy Eeckhout (1980-2018) cited Krystof Pomian to define a collection as "Groups of natural and human-made objects that are removed temporarily or definitively from the circuit of economic activities, that enjoy special protection and are put on view."<sup>6 7</sup> He combined this with the ideas of Susan M. Pearce, that collections are "narratives that depend on *making choices*. If no choices had to be made, we would not speak of a collection, but of a storage depot" and complemented it with Susan Stewart's claim that private collections are very similar to works of art, because "instead of pursuing a historical narrative, they create a *new context*", which according to Van Alphen is more than the sum of the different objects.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne: Privéverzamelingen in België 1945-1980* (Mer. B&L, 2020), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> "Emanuel Hoffmann," a swiss collector of contemporary art who moved to Brussels in 1925 and whose quotes have been assembled in a book, noted by Jean Milo in *Vie et survie du Centaure*, Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne: Privéverzamelingen in België 1945-1980* (Mer. B&L, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ulrike Müller, "The Amateur and the Public Sphere. Private Collectors in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent through the Eyes of European Travellers in the Long Nineteenth Century," Antwerp, October 5 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/29341728/The\\_amateur\\_and\\_the\\_public\\_sphere\\_Private\\_collectors\\_in\\_Brussels\\_Antwerp\\_and\\_Ghent\\_through\\_the\\_eyes\\_of\\_European\\_travellers\\_in\\_the\\_long\\_nineteenth\\_century](https://www.academia.edu/29341728/The_amateur_and_the_public_sphere_Private_collectors_in_Brussels_Antwerp_and_Ghent_through_the_eyes_of_European_travellers_in_the_long_nineteenth_century).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Jacob, "Wunderkammer des Abendlandes," *De Witte Raaf*, January 1995. Accessed May 25, 2023 <https://www.dewitterraaf.be/artikel/wunderkammer-des-abendlandes/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout is a Belgian arthistorian and curator of the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens collection, who passed away in 2018 at the age of 38. His dissertation about Belgian Private collectors for the University of Ghent never was finished, but his notes and essay were published in a book "Maison d'art Moderne: Priveverzamelingen in België 1945-1980.

<sup>7</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, "Maison d'art Moderne: Priveverzamelingen in België 1945-1980, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 18-19.

## Collecting from historical perspective

People are collecting since antiquity, from the royal collecting practices in Mesopotamia to the treasuries in the middle age cathedrals. The medici family was the first to collect without interference of church or king.<sup>9</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a new way of collecting was spreading through Northern Europe, the cabinet of curiosities, *kunstkamer* or *Wunderkammer*. This eclectic mix of rarities: found *Naturalia*, manmade *Artificialia*, *Exotica* from all over the world and *Scientifica* supported the image and self-representation of the owner.<sup>10</sup> Although the cabinet was meant to represent the universe and as such could contribute to a better understanding of the world, their taxonomy was completely irrational, which made it nothing more than a storage space for “tokens of their intelligence, wealth and taste” which according to E. Gombrich “demanded little more of the visitor than the capacity to marvel and to gape”.<sup>11 12</sup> From that moment on we can talk about the ‘act of collecting’ which implies the gathering of objects removed from their original user-value and reduced to collectibles to behold. It is in that context that also older art objects became part of the cabinets and were solely judged on their aesthetic value.<sup>13</sup> That is how *wunderkammers* contributed to the “development of an art market” in which copies of artwork became popular, falsifications were encouraged and the acquisition of an original strongly desired.<sup>14</sup> As such a painting no longer was only valuable because of the mimesis with nature, but because of the artist who painted it and owning a Rubens or Titiaan prevailed the pictured subject.<sup>15</sup> During the 17<sup>th</sup> century the variety of the cabinets narrowed down to artobjects and artifacts, reducing them to private art collections instead of *wunderkammers*.

## The museum landscape in Belgium and Brussels.

During the French occupation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Brussels first comes in as an intermediate for cultural exchange between the Netherlands and France. While holding to their Baroque style and Flemish genre-painting, they succeeded to remain artistically independent until during the French revolution the neo-classical school represented by J.L. David penetrated the french speaking art scene in Brussels.<sup>16</sup> Following the opening of the Louvre in 1793 the *1<sup>st</sup> Musée départemental des beaux-Arts* was opened in 1803 in Brussels with the objective to decentralise and distribute “cultural goods, to enable young generations of artists and students to study the great” (French) “masters”.<sup>17</sup> Later on comparable educational institutions were founded in Antwerp, Ghent and Liege. Under Dutch rule in 1815 artwork from Flemish masters as Rubens and Jordaens entered those museums.<sup>18</sup> After the Belgian Revolution in 1830 there was a need to visualise Belgian identity which resulted in commissions for monumental Romantic historicism. This nationalistic sentiment expressed itself in the desire to change the institutional framework of the visual arts, which motivated in 1845 the separation of the *Musée de beaux arts* in a modern and historic part under the name *Musée Royal de peinture et de sculpture de Belgique*. The museum still enabled young students and artists to study the art of the past, but by extending the collection with Flemish Primitives and Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings the point of reference moved to local art.<sup>19</sup> In line with the growing importance of Belgium as economical power under Leopold II the cultural aspirations followed, leading up to the construction of a centre fusing all cultural functions,

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<sup>9</sup> “Collecting.” Wikipedia, accessed June 4, 2023. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collecting>.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Galambosova, “What Is a Wunderkammer? Best Cabinets of Curiosities.” *DailyArt Magazine*, October 28, 2022 2022. <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/cabinets-of-curiosities/>.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Galambosova, “What is a Wunderkammer?”

<sup>12</sup> Steven Jacobs, “Wunderkammer des Abendlandes,”

<sup>13</sup> Steven Jacobs, “Wunderkammer des Abendlandes,”

<sup>14</sup> Steven Jacobs, “Wunderkammer des Abendlandes,”

<sup>15</sup> Steven Jacobs, “Wunderkammer des Abendlandes,”

<sup>16</sup> Gawan Fagard, “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels,” *Lmu-Munich*, March 5, 2015 [https://www.academia.edu/4680425/A\\_Brief\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_Visual\\_Arts\\_in\\_Brussels](https://www.academia.edu/4680425/A_Brief_History_of_the_Visual_Arts_in_Brussels).

<sup>17</sup> Gawan Fagard, “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels,”

<sup>18</sup> Gawan Fagard, “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels,”

<sup>19</sup> Gawan Fagard, “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels,”

the in 1880 inaugurated *Palais des beaux Arts*.<sup>20</sup> While from origin a platform supporting all the art movements, including the most progressive ones, the collection of *Ancient art* slowly overpowered the *modern Belgian art*.<sup>21</sup> Floating on the prosperity of Belgium, Brussels became a real artistic hub, leading up to the founding of an artistic avant-garde group *Les Vingts* (1883), which grew into *La Libre Esthétique* (1893), whose artists were breaking with the leading bourgeois aesthetics in Brussels. As such they were embraced by the new rich industrial elite “the private collectors of contemporary art”. By inviting foreign artists to participate in their exhibitions and literary circles Brussels got fame as an international artistic centre.<sup>22</sup> The decreasing attention for modern art in the *Palais des beaux Arts* combined with the growing privatisation of the art market stimulated the private initiative of the banker Henry le Boeuf (1874-1935) and the mayor Adolphe Max (1869-1939) to build a new Palais de Beaux Arts designed by the favoured architect Victor Horta (1861-1947).<sup>232425</sup> The new BOZAR opened its doors in 1926 and became the cultural hotspot.<sup>26</sup> Regardless its central role in the cultural life in Brussels, the share of contemporary art in the Bozar collection was limited and mainly focussed on pre-war modern art.<sup>27</sup> The continuing lack of interest in contemporary art on federal level, stimulated the private sector to take the lead. Private initiatives including exhibitions, lectures with international players, the opening of avant-garde galleries as the *Wide White Space Gallery* and the public making of private art collections as was the case with *Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens* started to dominate the artistic field.<sup>28</sup> This fragmentation energised by individuals caused a development of the art scene from the bottom-up which is influencing the international artistic landscape in Brussels until today.<sup>2930</sup> Despite of the efforts of the Belgian Art historian, Emile Langui (1903-1980), who as General director of Fine Arts and Letters organised “Fifty Years of modern art” during the World Fair in 1958, it lasted until 1975 until Belgium got his first Museum of Contemporary Arts, *Het Gentse Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst* (later SMAK).<sup>3132</sup> This museum originated again from a private group of modern art promoters, who in 1957 established the *Vereniging voor het museum van Hedendaagse kunst* and started buying the art of their time.<sup>33</sup> From the 1980’s onwards the cultural structure of Brussel was changed, allowing the Flemish community to get more cultural autonomy. It resulted in several new initiatives in the Flemish provinces, including the MuHKA in Antwerp.<sup>34</sup> In the late 1990’s both the French-speaking as well as the Flemish government started to invest in culture in Brussels which gave rise to several cultural initiatives spread over the city.<sup>35</sup> Finally in 2006, Brussels lifted his budget for contemporary arts which lead to the founding of the *Centrale for contemporary art* in the centre and the international renowned centre for contemporary arts *Wiels* in Forest.<sup>36</sup> Although *Wiels* is Bi-communautaire, it only could arise thanks to the close cooperation

<sup>20</sup> “Alphonse Balat,” Wikipedia, accessed June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023, [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphonse\\_Balat](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphonse_Balat)

<sup>21</sup> Bozar Brussel “Geschiedenis” accessed 4 juni 2023, Bozar, n.d., <https://www.bozar.be/nl/geschiedenis>.

<sup>22</sup> Fagard, Gawan. “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels.”, 332.

<sup>23</sup> “Henry le boeuf” Wikipedia, accessed June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Le\\_Boeuf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Le_Boeuf)

<sup>24</sup> “Adolphe Max,” Wikipedia, accessed June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023 [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolphe\\_Max](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolphe_Max)

<sup>25</sup> “Victor Horta,” Wikipedia, accessed June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023 [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor\\_Horta](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Horta)

<sup>26</sup> Fagard, Gawan. “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels.”, 339.

<sup>27</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,” *De Morgen*, November 26, 2008, <https://www.demorgen.be/leven-liefde/artikelenreeks-belgische-priveverzamelaars-ward-daenen-en-eric-rinckhout~ba4c2b87/>.

<sup>28</sup> Fagard, Gawan. “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels.”,

<sup>29</sup> Fagard, Gawan. “A Brief History of the Visual Arts in Brussels.”, 339.

<sup>30</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., “Part 1: How Did the Visual Arts Scene Come into Being (till 2006)? | Flanders Arts Institute,” Flanders Arts Institute, January 31, 2022, <https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/de-beeldende-kunst-in-vlaanderen-in-kaart/>.

<sup>31</sup> “Langui, Emile,” Monuments Men and Women foundation, <https://www.monumentsmenandwomenfnd.org/langui-emile>.

<sup>32</sup> S.M.A.K., “Geschiedenis,” November 22, 2022, <https://smak.be/nl/over-smak/geschiedenis>.

<sup>33</sup> S.M.A.K., “Geschiedenis,”

<sup>34</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., “Part 1”

<sup>35</sup> Gawan Fagard, “A Brief History

<sup>36</sup> Gawan Fagard, “A Brief History

between the private collector, Herman Daled (1930-2020), the influential curator Dirk Snauwaert (1963) and the support of local municipalities.<sup>37 3839</sup>

The opening of both centres finally indicated some governmental interest. Opposite to that the director of the Royal museum of fine arts decided that the national collection of contemporary art needed to make place for their collection of Belgian Fin de Siècle Art. The contemporary art collection ended in the depot, where it is still hidden until today. "In Brussels the museum of Modern art is missing, since director Michel Draguet closed it in 2011" says Dirk Snauwaert in *De Morgen*, "The museum is not missing, it is there, but it made itself invisible. It is concentrating instead on what is easy marketable."<sup>40</sup>

To compensate Brussels subsidies the multidisciplinary arts organisation, *Kanal-centre Pompidou*, which should boost the institutionalisation of contemporary art. However it will not house the hidden collection of the Musée des beaux arts and will use the French Centre Pompidou collection instead.<sup>41</sup> One can imagine the controversy it is causing. Because it took so long to create a structural institutional framework, withall causing a lot of controversy with still not sufficient exhibition opportunities, new artist-driven project spaces, art organisations and facilities to exhibit art were created with the support of private actors and collectors.<sup>42</sup> Etablissement d'en Face, Imal, La Loge, Fondation A Stichting, Villa Empain and Cloud Seven are only few of the important players defining the artistic landscape of Brussels.

<sup>43</sup> Referring to the conclusion of Dirk De Wit in an article about visual art scene for the Flanders Arts institute one can state that "due to a lack of structural policy framework, exciting initiatives were not always able to continue their development and important knowledge and skills have been lost, while fragmentation means greater inclination towards competition, rather than collective enterprise."<sup>44</sup>

## Belgian private art collections, a bottom-up development of the contemporary art market

In the contemporary art world, Belgian is known as a country of collectors.<sup>45</sup>

This reputation however is not new, but has a historical background. Based on research into travel literature of European Travellers in the 18-19th century, Ulrike Müller, lecturer Heritage Studies at the University of Antwerp concluded, that the reputation of Belgium as a country of private collectors already existed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup> By opening up their collections of arts and antiques to travellers and other art connoisseurs, the collectors in Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent at that time became key players in the urban public sphere, a role which Müller claims, was fitting the long-standing bottom-up organization of public artistic life in the Southern Netherlands. In her research she found out that collectors who used to make their collection accessible for public, started to hold it back as soon as the number of public museums was increasing during the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The factual number of private collectors however was still growing, but it appeared that "their public role[...] was gradually taken over

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<sup>37</sup> "Herman Daled," Wikipedia, accessed June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman\\_Daled](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman_Daled)

<sup>38</sup> Van Der Speeten, Geert. "Interview met directeur Dirk Snauwaert over de toekomst van Wiels," *De Standaard*, July 12, 2011.

<https://www.standaard.be/cnt/ft3cjn4v>.

<sup>39</sup> "Dirk Snauwaert,"

[https://www.google.nl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewjDuKb9qdf\\_AhUNwAIHHbg2AH4QFnoECBsQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aica-be.org%2Fnl%2Fleden%2Fdirk-snauwaert%23%3A%3Atext%3DDirk%2520Snauwaert%2520is%2520stichtend%2520en%2Cdirecteur%2520van%2520het%2520Kunstverein%2520M%25C3%25B9nchen.&usg=AOvVaw1vHUME4lxnme\\_Jam3Z7gez&opi=89978449](https://www.google.nl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewjDuKb9qdf_AhUNwAIHHbg2AH4QFnoECBsQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aica-be.org%2Fnl%2Fleden%2Fdirk-snauwaert%23%3A%3Atext%3DDirk%2520Snauwaert%2520is%2520stichtend%2520en%2Cdirecteur%2520van%2520het%2520Kunstverein%2520M%25C3%25B9nchen.&usg=AOvVaw1vHUME4lxnme_Jam3Z7gez&opi=89978449)

<sup>40</sup> *De Morgen*, "ze zijn alleen met toerisme bezig," *De Morgen*, April 26, 2014, <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/ze-zijn-alleen-met-toerisme-bezig~bec2188c/>

<sup>41</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., "Part 2: Who Are the Main Players since 2006? | Flanders Arts Institute," Flanders Arts Institute, January 31, 2022, <https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/spelers-in-de-hedendaagse-beeldende-kunsten-vanaf-2006/>.

<sup>42</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., "Part 2: Who Are the Main Players since 2006? |

<sup>43</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., "Part 2:

<sup>44</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., "Part 1"

<sup>45</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, "artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars," *De Morgen*, November 26, 2008,

<https://www.demorgen.be/leven-liefde/artikelenreeks-belgische-priveverzamelaars-ward-daenen-en-eric-rinckhout~ba4c2b87/>.

<sup>46</sup> "Ulrike Müller," <https://antwerp.academia.edu/UlrikeMüller>

by the public cultural institution".<sup>47</sup> Not all collectors reacted the same way. Some collectors did keep it open for public with limited timeslots in a way it could easily be assimilated in the national heritage.<sup>48</sup> Others withdrew themselves and focussed on a more exclusive network of artists and intellectuals, while showing their social-cultural aspirations through taking boards in cultural institutions or lending works for exhibitions. Some eventually bequeathed their collection to the state.<sup>49</sup> So bequeathed Henry van Cutsem (1839-1904) in 1904 his heritage of pre-modern and modern art to the city of Doornik, including the financial support to built the *Museum of Fine Arts Doornik* dedicated to his collection.<sup>50</sup><sup>51</sup>

If we apply this frame of mind, as stated by Müller, it is understandable that the lack of interest in contemporary art from the Royal Museum of fine arts as well as the failing public policy, stimulated new generations of private art collectors to fill this gap. Moreover the economic welfare in Belgium at that time, gave rise to a new rich middle class of rich industrials, bankers, doctors and lawyers, who wanted to distinguish themselves from the France oriented bourgeoisie in Brussels by collecting art from their time.<sup>52</sup>

While collectors as Henry Van Cutsem decided to connect with the late 19th century avant-garde and deliberately chose to collect living artists, they still enlarged their collection with older and French art. But as of 1920 there is a group of private collectors who specifically chose to promote contemporary art.<sup>53</sup> From then on about five generations of collectors can be distinguished, each interacting with their present-day art market.<sup>54</sup>

The first group of collectors was active during the interbellum, when some international as well as Belgian avant-garde artists wanted to break with the past, a tendency which was widespread between some art critics, gallery owners and art collectors in Belgium. This group focussed on Belgian experimental art as Flemish expressionism which was ideal to manifest the idea of progress.<sup>55</sup> Inspired by art-galleries in Paris the concept of promotional galleries arise in Brussels.<sup>56</sup> Next to Belgian artists they sold work from l'Ecole de Paris. By exhibiting and selling Flemish Expressionism next to the artists of l'Ecole de Paris, this generation of collectors/gallery owners as Gustave Van Hecke and Emmanuel Hoffmann, promoted Flemish expressionism in an international context.<sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup>The artmagazines and collectors saw it as their mission to defend modern art in Belgium and by "embedding Flemish Expressionism in an international framework", there was hope that Belgian art would obtain international fame.<sup>59</sup>

Around 1931, due to an economic recession many galleries/collectors had to auction their art. The new generation collectors as Victor Sevrancx and Frederic de Goldschmidt seized the opportunity to start their collection with these works, while some rich Flemish industrialists as Tony Herbert and Gustave Van Geluwe started to buy directly from Flemish artists.<sup>60</sup> They gradually grew their collection of Flemish contemporary art, which was strongly connected to their quest for political and cultural identity, against the bourgeoisie fine art culture in Brussels.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ulrike Müller, "The Amateur and the Public Sphere."

<sup>48</sup> Ulrike Müller, "The Amateur and the Public Sphere."

<sup>49</sup> Ulrike Müller, "The Amateur and the Public Sphere."

<sup>50</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 28.

<sup>51</sup> "Henry Van Cutsem," Wikipedia, accessed June 11, 2023 [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri\\_Van\\_Cutsem](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Van_Cutsem)

<sup>52</sup> Rudi Laermans, "De privatisering van het kunstenveld," *De Witte Raaf*, March 2017. Accessed May 15 2013.

<https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/de-privatisering-van-het-kunstenveld/>.

<sup>53</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> Rudi Laermans, "De privatisering van het kunstenveld."

<sup>55</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Hector Waterschoot. "Beeldende kunst, Ons Erfdeel. Jaargang 33 - DBNL." DBNL, n.d.

[https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_ons003199001\\_01/\\_ons003199001\\_01\\_0119.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_ons003199001_01/_ons003199001_01_0119.php).

<sup>59</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d'art Moderne*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Laermans, Rudi. "De privatisering van het kunstenveld, 3."

After the WWII the market was ready for a new visual language with new artists creating mostly abstract art. This trend was paralleled with new “modern collectors” as Roger Matthys (1920-2016) with more international aspirations and coincided with the ambitions of the cabinet secretary of Fine arts, Emile Langui, who started a kind of two-way art program to promote Belgian Artists internationally and present international artist in Belgium.<sup>62</sup> To succeed he needed the help of Belgian collectors who in exchange got their collections exhibited abroad, which helped the promotion of the artists they selected in an early stage and proved their reputation as “successful discoverer of a patrimonium”.<sup>63</sup> The Belgian collections travelled to several Biennials, the Documenta and supported Langui’s highlight “50 years of modern art” during the 1958 exhibition. Even the Royal museum of fine arts was relying on the Belgian collectors to organise their survey exhibition “Art from Manet to Max Ernst”. Because the french oriented Ecole de Paris was widely represented in some of the Belgian private collections also Paris made use of it.<sup>64</sup> More solo exhibitions abroad followed, which contributed to the reputation of Belgium as country of collectors.

After the exhibition of 1958, American Art entered the market and for many collectors it was to late to make the switch.<sup>65</sup> Some collectors donated their early 20th century collection to museums and others as Jules and Irma D’hondt-Dhaenens opened their own museum.<sup>66</sup> Together with the founding of the “Vereniging van Hedendaagse kunst” the new Belgian visual language got a boost and a new generation of collectors with their own specialisms took over. Anton and Annick Herberts upgraded the act of collecting by studying the artists and their ideas while creating a big archive.<sup>67</sup> Maurits Naessens (1908-1982) and Fernand Graindorge(1903-1985) became promoters of Belgian Abstract art and Psychiatrist Roger Mathijs (1920-2016) was accumulating a collection of pop art.<sup>686970</sup> Herman Daled reinvented himself as financial co-producer of installation of site specific art.<sup>71</sup> But what unifies them all is the international playfield of artists and galleries.

After the 1980 the Belgian art scene continues its fragmentation. Contemporary art becomes very difficult to categorise and there are no grand stories and no art-movements to structure the collections.<sup>72</sup> Private collectors get company from bankers and insurance companies, big money enters the market, which often equals less engagement.<sup>73</sup> Of course there are still collectors as Walter Vanhaerents, Frederic de Goldschmidt, Filiep Liebeert and Mark Vanmoerkerke (1952-2022), for whom investment is not the driving force and love for art is superior.<sup>7475</sup> However while in the past many private collections were bequeathed to a museum and therefore contributed to a museum’s public responsibility, this new generation of collectors either auctions the collections allowing it to scatter across the globe or is opening its own exhibition space.<sup>76</sup> Moreover as since 1970 also the communities are responsible for culture a whole spectrum of public subsidies fuelled the art market, resulting in a mixture of private, public and non-profit art initiatives, which especially in Brussels

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<sup>62</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*,:38

<sup>63</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*,:38

<sup>64</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*,:38

<sup>65</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*,:38

<sup>66</sup> Museum D’Hondt Dhaenens,” Wikipedia, accessed June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum\\_Dhondt-Dhaenens](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum_Dhondt-Dhaenens)

<sup>67</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,”

<sup>68</sup> “Maurits Naessens”Wikipedia, accessed June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023 [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurits\\_Naessens](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurits_Naessens)

<sup>69</sup> “Fernand Graindorge,” <https://www.deslegte.com/fernand-graindorge-1903-1985-3282600/>

<sup>70</sup> “Roger Matthijs,” Wikipedia, accessed Jun 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023. [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthys-Colle\\_collectie](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthys-Colle_collectie)

<sup>71</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*,:38

<sup>72</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*,:38

<sup>73</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,”

<sup>74</sup> Mark Vanmoerkerke,”Wikipedia, accessed June 12<sup>th</sup> 2023, [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Vanmoerkerke](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Vanmoerkerke)

<sup>75</sup> Rudi Laermans, “De privatisering van het kunstenveld,”

<sup>76</sup> Rudi Laermans, “De privatisering van het kunstenveld,”

created a melting pot of internationally oriented exhibition spaces, artist-residences, galleries and collectors from both Belgium and abroad.<sup>7778</sup>

### Private collections and public responsibility

To understand the impact of the private art collectors on the public art scene it is important to reflect on the differences between a private art collection and a museum collection.

Different to the general collector said Tanguy Eeckhout does an Art Collector “not seek to and is not able to achieve completeness”.<sup>79</sup> Collecting art is a creative process, each artwork is adding to a growing entity with the only ambition to create a new context or connection which is quite often visible only after a while or not till after curated by an external curator.<sup>80</sup> Building a private collection of contemporary art is an adventure with its own generation.<sup>81</sup> The choices are subjective and largely linked to the collector’s personality and ideas. It can be a passion for the arts, a wish to connect with the artist community, a search for cultural recognition or distinction, an investment, a family tradition, a desire to discover a talent and to be ahead of art history or just a way to create a legacy.<sup>82</sup> Because they have no public responsibility and no educational role, they are free to follow their intuition, and do not need any academic justification.<sup>83</sup> Lastly private collectors do not have to ensure historically continuity. Although in the past many of them shared the museum idea of perpetuity and bequeathed their collections, this aspiration of leaving for posterity is less present since the 80’s.<sup>8485</sup>

The rising number of financially powerful art collectors stimulates the founding of private museums, art foundations or art centers as Vanhaerents Art Collection and Frederic de Goldschmidt his co-workingspace Cloud Seven without the support of the government. The ideological motivation which used to be the guiding principle when making art available to the public is not applicable for private exhibition spaces. There are no rules on how, where and how often the collection is open to the public. Furthermore thanks to the changing governmental subsidy structure much more public money is entering the cultural playfield resulting in many mixed art spaces eg La Loge etc., . , which blurs the distinction between private and public collections.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand museums seem to change focus from being collection driven towards a more discourse oriented approach eg. Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou.<sup>87</sup> On top of that the Belgian museums lack the finances to buy established artists, need to take more risk and acquire less acclaimed young talent instead.<sup>88</sup> After all the artistic intelligentsia who fuelled the academic discourse in 1927 in *le Centaure* finally seem to get what they were fighting for : a museum of contemporary art with a curator “ who would seek inspiration in the attitude of the private collector, who did not wait to see general acclaim for an artist before buying his work, but instead went to search for new talent.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Brussels Centre for Urban Studies, Sophie Alexandre, and Leen De Spiegelaere, “Creatief Met Chaos: Hoe Gaan de Culturele Organisaties in Brussel Om Met Het Institutionele En Demografische Patchwork,” <https://Urbanstudies.Brussels/>, February 2021, accessed June 15, 2023, [https://urbanstudies.brussels/sites/default/files/2021-02/Alexandre\\_De%20Spiegelaere\\_2019\\_Creatief%20met%20chaos.pdf](https://urbanstudies.brussels/sites/default/files/2021-02/Alexandre_De%20Spiegelaere_2019_Creatief%20met%20chaos.pdf).

<sup>78</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., “Part 1: How Did the Visual Arts Scene Come into Being (till 2006)? | Flanders Arts Institute,” Flanders Arts Institute, January 31, 2022, <https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/de-beeldende-kunst-in-vlaanderen-in-kaart/>.

<sup>79</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*.,18

<sup>80</sup> Koen Braems, “De collectie van Annick en Anton Herbert” *De Witte Raaf*, May 1995. Accessed May 1, 2023. 2023. <https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/de-collectie-van-annick-en-anton-herbert/>

<sup>81</sup> Koen Braems, “De collectie van Annick en Anton Herbert”

<sup>82</sup> Rudy Laermans, “Kunst als primaire relatie,” *De Witte Raaf*,” May 2006. Accessed May 5, 2023 <https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/kunst-als-primaire-relatie/>.

<sup>83</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*.,18

<sup>84</sup> Koen Braems. “De collectie van Annick en Anton Herbert,” *De Witte Raaf*, May 1995 <https://herbertfoundation.org/nl/document/5f5c931fbdd8e>

<sup>85</sup> Marc Ruyters, “Kunst buiten het museum - België Verzamelingen van banken, bedrijven en particulieren in België”, *Ons Erfdeel. Jaargang 48 - DBNL*,” n.d. [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_ons003200501\\_01/\\_ons003200501\\_01\\_0114.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_ons003200501_01/_ons003200501_01_0114.php).

<sup>86</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., “Part 2: Who Are the Main Players since 2006?”

<sup>87</sup> Rudy Laermans. “De privatisering van het kunstenveld,”

<sup>88</sup> Rudy Laermans. “De privatisering van het kunstenveld,”

<sup>89</sup> Tanguy Eeckhout, *Maisons d’art Moderne*.,34

In his interview with Rudy Laermans, Joost Declercq described these developments as part of a wider tendency “the enclosure of the commons” in which the private players take over the responsibility which was originally the task of the government, however often without the social accountability.<sup>90</sup>

It is clear that the Belgian and Brussels art market benefited from the interference of the private collectors. They were the financial engine for artistic progress and because they were not afraid to take risk and made choices, the artistic landscape became more diverse. As the private initiatives became and still become bigger, and the quality of the collection often exceeds the contemporary art in museums, the public museum experiences competition and stays alert.<sup>91</sup> On top of that the museum works slowly, needs to compromise and is focussed on visitors numbers. The private collector on the other hand decides independent and quick.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore the available private collections and finances allowed many curators as Dirk Snauwaert, Jan Hoet, Lieven van den Abeele, Benedict Goesaert to curate unique exhibitions and create a much bigger platform to make contemporary art accessible for the public and fuel the artistic debate.

However private collections still miss professionalism. They often are not interested in academic research and the building of an archive, which is necessary to keep artists alive for next generations. Another problem is the restoration and conservation of the collection for which one needs professional education.<sup>93</sup> At last by opening up a collection to a wider public, the collector tells a story which calls for responsibility. So one can discuss if they should not comply to criteria as inclusivity, diversity and sustainability?

## Conclusion and recommendations

Already since the end of the 19th century when the Belgian government failed to support contemporary art, private actors, critics, galleries and collectors took over and started to develop the art market from the bottom-up, which resulted in many small and mid-sized players.

Thanks to their economic power, private collectors strengthened their impact in a way that they now largely determine the artistic landscape in Belgium. Because of the international importance, the complex communitary public policy and the artistic density this interference is magnified as well as blurred in Brussels.

The private collector is there to stay. Bart De Baere, Director of het MuHKA in Antwerpen however is pleading for reinforcement of the public cultural sector, but not to replace the private one.<sup>94</sup> A cooperation between the public and private actor would be beneficial for the Belgian art scene as a whole. But as stated in the article from the Flanders Institute:

Although the private sector can play an important role in the visual arts as a whole, as well as for public actors, there is a general mistrust of galleries, collectors and auction houses that continues to persist in Flanders and Brussels. Despite efforts by a few museums and *kunsthallen* to involve collectors in their efforts, interactions are still dominated by individual relationships based on mutual trust<sup>95</sup>

So there is need for better legislation for loans, cheaper gift taxes and open communication to increase mutual confidence with the objective to combine forces and to exchange knowledge and professionalism with financial leverage.<sup>96</sup> If the cultural sector as a whole

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<sup>90</sup> Rudy Laermans. “De privatisering van het kunstenveld,”

<sup>91</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,”

<sup>92</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,”

<sup>93</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,”

<sup>94</sup> De Morgen, “Laat verzamelaars volledig vrij,” De Morgen, Augustus 17, 2007 <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/laat-verzamelaars-volledig-vrij~bafbcfc1/>

<sup>95</sup> Flanders Arts Institute et al., “Part 2: Who Are the Main Players since 2006? | Flanders Arts Institute,” Flanders Arts Institute, January 31, 2022, <https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/spelers-in-de-hedendaagse-beeldende-kunsten-vanaf-2006/>.

<sup>96</sup> Ward Daenen and Eric Rinckhout, “artikelenreeks Belgische priveverzamelaars,”



could realise this necessary upscaling the potential of the rich and extensive collections available in Belgium can contribute to a powerful exhibition policy.

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