

CURATOR'S PROJECT

Historic Country Houses in the Netherlands

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The Netherlands still has 552 historic country houses, many of them in the provinces of Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel. Unfortunately, these monuments of our national heritage are not very well known either in the Netherlands or abroad. This is a pity, but it is also surprising, because it has been claimed that between 1600 and 1920 this country boasted more than 6,000 of these idyllic spots. The subject offers art historians many unexplored areas of research. Numerous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century portraits featuring an Arcadian setting have been studied with little or no reference to this background, even though our eighteenth-century ancestors were obviously fond of having themselves portrayed on their country estates. It was there, after all, that they spent the most pleasant part of the year.

Historic Country House Complex?

In the Netherlands, a country house that has survived more or less intact is called a “historic country house complex” (*complex historische buitenplaats*). This term is used to describe a monumental house which, together with its service buildings and designed garden, park and/or woods, forms a harmonious and inseparable whole. Many country houses were built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though industrialists were still building them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As early as the Golden Age, country houses were constructed on newly reclaimed land, but large numbers of them were also built behind the dunes and along navigable waterways. There are important differences between country houses and rural estates. In the latter case, agrarian activities are of vital importance. The revenues from tenant farming, cattle breeding, agriculture and forestry were (and still are) essential to the preservation of a rural estate, whereas such activities were less important to the country house, which was maintained with money earned from trade. Sometimes it did have a farm, but frequently its produce supplied only the owner’s kitchen. Another major difference is that country houses are based on an artistic design, whereas a rural estate is formed primarily of natural components (arable land, forest and so on), although sometimes they have designed gardens and parks as well. The dividing line is not always clear. Some country houses grew into rural estates, but the opposite has also occurred: some rural estates came to be used “merely” as country houses. Unfortunately, these concepts can be confusing, and the origins of such estates are often difficult to unravel.

The Rhythm of the Seasons

Our ancestors preferred to travel by boat to their country houses, which explains why many of these summer residences were built on river banks, alongside barge canals

and on the shores of lakes (many of which no longer exist) (fig. 1). Moreover, traveling by boat made it easier to take along the baggage needed for a stay that might last for months, generally from the beginning of April to sometime in October. Families who spent the summer in the country took along their live-in domestic staff and the necessary household effects, closed up the house in town, and exchanged the fetid, oppressive atmosphere of the city for the pure country air. A lady who was forced to spend the summer in town once wrote to a friend that the city was “devoid of respectable people.” The effect this yearly exodus had on shopkeepers and other suppliers has never been studied. This pattern repeated itself every year for centuries. Because many families owned both a town house and a country house, renovations and restorations were usually carried out by the same (city) building contractors, who also worked at scores of places across the country.

Many Amsterdam artists received commissions to embellish country houses with wall paintings, sculptures and garden decorations. The large number of well-to-do Amsterdammers played a leading part in the rise, also in the Republic as a whole, of the Dutch country house. This process began around 1600 with the construction of the first country houses on the shores of a former lake (the Watergraafsmeer) in what is now Amsterdam-Oost.

Various Reasons for Building

Country houses came about for different reasons. An old form of country dwelling concerns castles, stone houses and dungeons, which lost their military or defensive function in the late Middle Ages (fig. 2). Many of their owners, most of whom were aristocrats, subsequently put these structures to use as country residences. In the class-ridden Dutch Republic,

the lifestyle of wealthy merchants in the west of the country was very different from that of the nobility living on rural estates in the south and the east, where trade and commerce had traditionally been looked down upon. The nobility lived mainly on income derived from rents, customs duties, hunting rights (and spoils) and the yields of the harvest. Naturally they placed great importance on land ownership and the continued expansion of their estates.

Country houses also came into being as a result of the changing social conditions during the Eighty Years' War. After 1568 a considerable amount of church-owned land was expropriated. The increase in availability enabled the new ruling class to acquire land or enlarge existing properties. Land had always been a safe investment, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century newly acquired tracts of land were sometimes used to build country houses. An abandoned monastery or convent could either be converted into a country house or demolished to provide building materials for the construction of a new estate. Examples of converted monasteries are those of Sion near Delft, Hageveld at Heemstede, Marienwaerdt at Beesd and Oostbroek near Utrecht.

Country houses also became more popular because of investments made by Amsterdam merchants in land reclamation in the lake area north of Amsterdam. The impoldered land was divided among the participants in proportion to their investment. Much of the reclaimed land was used for agriculture, and countless tenant farms

were built in the new polders. Often a landowner reserved a room or rooms in one of his farms for his own use during the summer. Such quarters soon came to be called a "gentleman's room" (*herenkamer*). Gradually the owner took over the entire farm and the tenant was forced to leave. The surrounding farmland was then transformed into a formal (walled) garden with water courses, garden decorations, orchards, orangeries, a coach house with stables and an ice house. Numerous country houses that developed in this way could be found in the Purmer (fig. 3), the Schermer and especially the Beemster Polders (fig. 4). Sometimes these country houses were referred to as farmsteads, a word with an unmistakably agrarian element.

In fact, it is possible that additional research will show that agricultural crises played a role in the erection of country houses. In times of economic hardship, land became less valuable, and this could make the construction of a country house more lucrative, or at least less costly.

Finally, there was another noteworthy development, which was instigated by the Amsterdam merchant Joan Huydecoper (1599-1661) (fig. 5). With the money his father had earned in the tanning industry, Huydecoper bought parcels of land on the River Vecht and had his own country house – Goudestein – built at Maarssen. At the same time he acted as a kind of project developer in the construction of a large number of new country houses, which he rented out or sold to prominent Amsterdam families, among whom were wealthy Jewish and Mennonite entrepreneurs. The latter in particular were inclined to buy sumptuous country houses. For example, Zijdebalen, a country house near Utrecht, had a splendid garden with many beautiful sculptures linked by an iconographic program. The whole was commissioned by the silk merchant David van Mollem (1670-1746). Another famous country house was Vijverhof, which belonged to the Mennonite Agneta Block (1629-1704). Related by marriage to the poet Joost van den Vondel, Agneta was the first person in the Netherlands to cultivate a fruit-bearing pineapple tree. She commissioned artists and botanical illustrators to make drawings of her extensive botanical collection. The plants she cultivated and the birds she kept were documented by some twenty artists specialized in botany and zoology, including Herman Saftleven, Pieter and Alida Withoos, Maria Sybilla Merian and her daughter, Johanna Herolts-Graff, as well as Pieter Holsteijn, Maria Moninckx and Johannes Bronkhorst. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Mennonite students of theology were required to pursue higher studies in horticulture and agriculture, since the study of agriculture taught one about God's works and therefore about God himself. Agricultural-historical research is an interesting source of information for the study of country houses (fig. 6). In all of this, land ownership plays an important role, yet until now, scant research has been done on what this large group of Amsterdammers actually did with the considerable acreages they owned.

Altogether these landowners possessed sizable swathes of the provinces of Holland and Utrecht. What was their relationship with the local authorities? How did they manage their forests, dunes and waterways? And how did roads and canals come into being?

Monumentality in the Dutch Republic

It is sometimes said that, in comparison with neighboring countries, the architecture of Dutch houses is generally modest and displays little monumentality. Yet closer investigation of the Dutch country house reveals that our ancestors did in fact favor monumentality in the construction of their summer residences. After all, there was more ground to build on in the country than in the city, where the canals and overpopulation made it impossible. In the countryside, one could build monumentally with greenery and brick. Today we cannot always appreciate the composite monumentality of country houses, nor are we capable of judging their artistic and social context. Furthermore, the interaction that existed between urban (interior) architecture and Dutch country houses is also a promising field of research.

Within this framework there is another phenomenon that has scarcely been examined, namely the eighteenth-century amateur architect. "Amateurism" increased enormously in that century, when people devoted themselves passionately to (courtly) poetry, music, botany, zoology and dozens of other artistic hobbies. Many people also became experts on architecture. It is known, for example, that the Amsterdam burgomaster Pieter Rendorp (1703-1760) designed Marquette, his manor house near Heemskerk. Does such amateurism, which sometimes approached the professional level, explain why there were so few Dutch architects of repute in the eighteenth century? It is still not known how many country houses were designed by their owners or built – or renovated – under their supervision. I sincerely hope that architectural historians will investigate this subject. The lack of studies in this area is also due to the fact that little research has been done on the influence exerted by Italian architectural treatises on the development of the Dutch country house. Some of the Flemish who were forced to flee by the Eighty Years' War inhabited castles and small forts as though they were country houses.

They, too, must have contributed to the development of the Dutch country house (fig. 7).

In recent years I have lectured frequently on this subject both in the Netherlands and abroad, in the course of which it has occurred to me that the passing of time has obscured this story. Much has been published about individual country houses, but these studies seldom clarify the wider context, which is why this field of research is lacking in synthesis and a much-needed interdisciplinary approach. To my mind, it is high time to draw conclusions based on existing publications and additional research. Perhaps then we will be able to understand how our ancestors experienced and shaped the ever topical connection between town and country. Art historians can make an important contribution to this endeavor by interpreting portraits, objects and illustrations. In my case, I have co-authored a book (with Jan Holwerda), the *Nationale Gids Historische Buitenplaatsen* (National Guide to Historic Country Houses), which includes a brief history of all official "historic country house complexes." Actually, it is remarkable that this book was published in 2012, a year which also saw the appearance of the first online overview of country houses (www.buitenplaatsen2012.nl). I am currently writing a piece for a publication due to appear later this year on the country houses of Amsterdammers.

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