

## CURATOR'S COLLECTION

**The Liberna Collection: A Hidden Treasure****Thera Folmer-von Oven**

For over seventy years, from 1941 to 2012, the Liberna Collection was known only to specialists, mostly librarians and art historians. The collection owes its existence to Bernard Brenninkmeijer (1893–1976), who began collecting in the early 1940s, when he was living in London. His keen interest in art and literature prompted him to collect books, prints and drawings, and he continued collecting until his death in January 1976. By then the Liberna Collection – Liberna is a conflation of Liber (book) and Bernard – was housed in the library of his private home in Hilversum.

From 1975 onwards the collection was professionally curated. Catalogues were compiled and small exhibitions were organized for family members and friends. Later on the individual objects were digitized. The collection was occasionally studied by scholars and people whose special field of interest was represented in the collection, but the library was not open to the public. This changed in 2012, when the Liberna Collection was moved to Forum Draiflessen in Mettingen (near Osnabrück in Germany), a museum owned by the Brenninkmeijer family that had opened in 2009. In its new premises the Liberna Collection is housed in a large study room – the Liberna Studienraum – together with the reference library. This room also serves as an exhibition space for objects from the collection. A new series of catalogues has been launched (“The Liberna at the Draiflessen Collection”). The first exhibition in the study room, *Marken und Monogramme*, dealt with printers’ marks and artists’ monograms of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century (see exh. cat. Mettingen 2013 in the list of catalogues at the end of this article). The current exhibition on Saint Anne, *Die Heilige Anna – Bildform und Verehrung*, showing medieval manuscripts, woodcuts and engravings, runs until 15 March 2015.

The broad approach to the subject, with early printed books displayed alongside prints and drawings, is a natural result of the collection’s mixed contents. From the very beginning, starting in his early years in London, Mr. Brenninkmeijer sought to acquire both books and graphic art. He initially focused on the fifteenth century: illuminated manuscripts (such as books of hours) and incunables (books printed between ca. 1450 and 1500, during the infancy of printing), as well as “Einzelblätter,” the rare surviving woodcuts from this period. But his interest soon broadened to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Bibles, atlases, travel books and other illustrated works – such as emblem books and festival books – as well as prints and drawings, mainly by Dutch and German masters. The core of the graphic collection consisted of works by a great German and a great Dutch artist: Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt van Rijn. Dürer was also represented by first editions of his art-theoretical works and by many of his illustrations to other books. The prints offer a good opportunity to study his graphic art in depth.

Rembrandt made very few book illustrations. One of these, an etching titled *The Ship of Fortune*, served as an illustration to Elias Herckmans’s *Der Zee-vaert Lof* (1634). A copy of this book is in the collection. Bernard Brenninkmeijer also succeeded in acquiring an early drawing by Rembrandt (see Mettingen 2012, no. 104). Another drawing – assigned in Werner Sumowski’s *Drawings of the Rembrandt School*, vol. VI, no. 1528, to Salomon Koninck – has recently been attributed to Rembrandt by Bernhard Schnackenburg (see exh. cat. Mettingen 2012, no. 105).





To build a serious collection it was essential to engage able advisers. The choice fell on Heinrich Eisemann (1890–1972), a refugee antiquarian from Frankfurt who had settled in London in 1937. For more than twenty years, Eisemann was the chief negotiator in acquiring books, prints and occasionally drawings for the collection. Although his name is now all but forgotten, he was a well-known figure in the London art trade. The collection of drawings received a significant boost when another German refugee, the art historian Edmund Schilling (1888–1974), was engaged as an adviser. Schilling, a drawings specialist, had been curator of prints and drawings at the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt am Main, and had advised collectors, dealers and museum staff about their purchases. Schilling's role is not very well documented, because he did not conduct any purchases himself, but we may assume that he acted as an adviser to Eisemann on this score. The main acquisitions for the Liberna Collection were Dutch and German Old Master drawings, but occasionally there were also successful bids on “foreign” masterpieces, such as a landscape drawing by Fra Bartolommeo from an album with drawings by this master, sold at Christie's, London, on 20 November 1957.

In the war years, purchases were confined to the London art market, particularly the auction houses of Christie's and Sotheby's and the art dealer Colnaghi. The first acquisitions, in 1941, offer a varied picture: in addition to printed books and graphic works by Dürer and Rembrandt, sixteen drawings by Dutch and Flemish artists from a dismantled scrapbook were acquired, including five sketches by Jan van Goyen, a design for a title page by Hendrik Hondius, a watercolor of a house front by Isaac van Ostade and a self-portrait drawn on vellum by Cornelis Visscher. The works acquired in the war years include a design by Crispijn de Passe the Elder for one of the prints in the series *Speculum Passionis Christi* and a watercolor by Jacob Jordaens, probably a tapestry design. Both drawings relate to books in the library.



The De Passe drawing may be compared with the books published and illustrated by this master, while the subject of the Jordaens drawing, *Amor docet Musicam*, fits in perfectly with the contemporary emblem books and songbooks in the collection.

In 1950 the Liberna Collection moved from London to Hilversum. Bernard Brenninkmeijer continued collecting, not only on the London art market but also in Amsterdam, New York, Zürich and other places. The library was significantly enriched by the acquisition of a hand-colored copy of the twelve-volume Blaeu Atlas (1667) and major purchases from renowned book collectors, such as C.W. Dyson Perrins, Sir Thomas Barlow, Paul May and the Dukes of Arenberg. By the early 1970s the collection of drawings numbered almost two hundred sheets (including ca. 165 works by Dutch and Flemish masters) and the time had come to document Mr. Brenninkmeijer's holdings. The collection required permanent supervision, and the need was felt for a collection catalogue. In April 1975 I was appointed curator of the Liberna Collection, a post which I held until my retirement in 2013.

Although the library was the most important part of the collection (it was considered one of the finest private collections of early printed books in the Netherlands), as an art historian I was extremely interested in the prints and drawings. Many of the drawings were unpublished. Fortunately I was able to build up a discreet network of curators from Dutch and foreign print rooms. Thanks to these contacts the collection was studied by various specialists, who came to Hilversum to share their knowledge with us. As a result, quite a few of our drawings have appeared in various publications, though without mention of their provenance. Two drawings by Allaert van Everdingen, for example, are included in Alison Davies's 2007 monograph on the artist (cat. nos. 96 and 230), and three red-chalk drawings by Moses ter Borch appear in Alison McNeill-Kettering's book on the Ter Borch Studio Estate, published in 1988 (vol. II App. 1, cat. nos. 63, 64, 65). In the journal *Delineavit et Sculpsit*, I discussed individual drawings: Van Goyen, in no. 5, May 1991; Pieter Jansz, in no. 7, June 1992; Leendert Overbeek, in no. 19, November 1998).



A chimney-piece design by Jacob de Wit is the subject of my contribution to *Kunst op papier in de achttiende eeuw: Liber Amicorum* Charles Dumas (October 2014). After the publication in 1989 of our *Catalogue of Drawings* – which I compiled together with Jaap Bolten, then director of the print room of the University of Leiden – the contents of the collection began to reach a wider public (see Bolten & Folmer-von Oven 1989). Although the catalogue was not for sale, copies were sent to the colleagues with whom we had had contact during our research. Gradually the network expanded. As one of my colleagues put it, “it was the best-kept public secret.”

The Liberna drawings have been lent to exhibitions on a regular basis. Beginning in 1984 with the sketch by Peter Paul Rubens for Tobias Stimmer’s Bible illustrations, which was lent to the Stimmer exhibition in Basel (exh. cat. 1984, no. 100), our drawings have traveled to Berlin, Colmar, Cologne, Fort Worth, London, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York and Washington, as well as to various Dutch museums. Among the Dutch drawings, the *Presentation in the Temple* by Arent de Gelder is one of the favorites. It has been shown at three different exhibitions together with the related drawing by Rembrandt in the Heybloq Album from the National Library in The Hague (with regard to the last venue, see exh. cat. Los Angeles 2009-10, cat. no. 40,2). Another drawing much in demand is the interior of a painter’s studio by Jan Lievens. It recently appeared at the Lievens exhibition, which was held in Washington, Milwaukee and Amsterdam in 2008-09 (exh. cat. no. 106). A popular loan object among our Flemish drawings is the outstanding sketch by Anthony van Dyck for the San Rosaria altarpiece in Palermo, which Christopher Brown has called “undoubtedly the most important surviving drawing from Van Dyck’s Italian years” (exh. cat. New York/Fort Worth 1991, p. 167). Right now two tapestry designs by Pieter Coecke van Aelst, both from a series of the Life of Paul, are on loan to the Coecke exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum

in New York (exh. cat. nos. 26 and 41). Needless to say, it is an honor for the Liberna Collection to contribute to important exhibitions and to be included in scholarly catalogues.





Personal contacts between curators is of vital importance to the loan traffic between museums and private collections, and my membership of CODART has been very helpful in this respect. One of our drawings, a flower piece by Jan van Huijsum, is from the famous Cobenzl collection, which was purchased in 1768 by the Russian Empress Catherine the Great. It still has the old Cobenzl cartouche on the mount. During the CODART trip to St. Petersburg in 2009 we were guided by Catherine Phillips, who is writing her dissertation on the Cobenzl collection. I sent her an image of our drawing and she was delighted to hear that the “missing”



counterpart of a Van Huijsman drawing in the Hermitage – with the same dimensions and provenance – is still in existence (see exh. cat. Mettingen 2012, no. 120). As stated earlier, the significance of the Liberna Collection lies not only in the individual quality of the works of art, but also in the integration of the different parts – the illustrated books and manuscripts together with the prints and drawings – which allows one to study the objects in a wider context. An album of ten designs by Adriaen van de Venne for illustrations to several books by Jacob Cats is the perfect exhibition partner of the many Cats editions in the collection. Another Dutch poet whose works are present in the collection, the more serious Joost van den Vondel, is portrayed in a delicate chalk portrait by Jan Lievens.





The integration of the various fields is apparent from the subject of the first major exhibition of the Liberna Collection at Draiflessen, organized on the occasion of its transferal to Mettingen in 2012. The exhibition, titled *Von der Schönheit der Präzision. Faszination Buchkunst und Grafik mit der Liberna Collection*, contained nearly eighty highlights, including illuminated manuscripts, printed books, and prints and drawings (see below), as well as some loans from other museums.

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*List of catalogues of the Liberna Collection:*

The books were published in the seven-volume *Catalogue of Books of the Liberna Foundation* (arranged by subject), between 1977 and 1984. A separate catalogue of the manuscripts and miniatures appeared in 1982. The drawings were published in J. Bolten and A.T. Folmer-von Oven, *Liberna Foundation Catalogue of Drawings*, Hilversum 1989. All catalogues are privately published and not for sale.

Since 2012 the Draiflessen Collection has published the following exhibition catalogues:

*Von der Schönheit der Präzision / On the Beauty of Precision / Over de schoonheid van precisie*. Mettingen (Draiflessen Collection) 2012. With an introduction on the history of the Liberna Collection and an essay on the drawings by Thera Folmer-von Oven.

*Marken und Monogramme / Merken en Monogrammen / Marks and Monograms*, Die Liberna in der Draiflessen Collection 1/2013. Edited by Dagmar Täube, with contributions by Iris Mentrup and Thera Folmer-von Oven, Mettingen 2013.

*Die Heilige Anna – Bildform und Verehrung / De Heilige Anna – Beeldvorm en Verering / Saint Anne – Image and Worship*, Die Liberna in der Draiflessen Collection 1/2014, contributions by Anne Margreet As-Vijvers, Iris Ellers, Thera Folmer-von

Oven, Olesja Nein, Dagmar Täube, Hiltrud Westermann-Angerhausen, Mettingen (Draiflessen Collection) 2014.

The study room of the Draiflessen Collection is open by appointment only to scholars and other interested persons. The Liberna Collection is available in the study room. Please contact my successor, the curator of the Liberna Collection in Draiflessen, Iris Ellers, for an appointment. [www.draiflessen.com](http://www.draiflessen.com) / [iris.ellers@draiflessen.com](mailto:iris.ellers@draiflessen.com)