

AT HOME IN A MUSEUM

ULRIKE MÜLLER

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MUSEUM

*The story of Henriëtte
and Fritz Mayer van den Bergh*

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Fritz Mayer van den Bergh,
c. 1875–80, photo, Archive Museum Mayer van den Bergh,
inv. MMB.F.473.07-94



Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh,
undated, photo, Archive Museum Mayer van den Bergh,
inv. MMB.F.473.06-94

In 1906, Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh created a Board of Regents to secure the art collection of her son Fritz Mayer van den Bergh, and the building that she had built for it, for the future. She formulated the mission of the five board members as follows: 'In bequeathing my Museum to you, my intention is to achieve the dream of my beloved and much-missed son Fritz and guarantee the permanent preservation of the museum and its collections. I want to protect these collections from ill fortune and dispersion due to accidental events, which is why I urge you to ensure, in the event that a regent dies, that the remaining regents find a replacement for him within two months, in the form of a reliable and honest friend who will take my intentions to heart, just like you will.'

In January 1922, after Henriëtte's death, the board took advantage of the newly enacted legislation on non-profit associations to transform itself into the non-profit (vzw) Museum Mayer van den Bergh.

Almost a century later, this non-profit organisation and the Board of Regents continue to faithfully fulfil their mission as a mark of their gratitude to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh and her son Fritz. Some members are descendants of the first regents, others were appointed for their specific expertise. The museum's structure is unique on the Belgian cultural scene.

In the meantime, close co-operation with the City of Antwerp has ensured that the organisation's purpose can be realised even better and more effectively, in particular by ensuring that the public can access this collection in the best possible way. At the same time, the museum's collection is the subject of a continuous, systematic and well-thought-through study and review. Hans Nieuwdorp – who served as the museum's curator for almost 30 years in addition to being a member of the Board of Regents – made an excellent contribution to this.

While the regents' mission may seem static, the path for achieving this purpose must remain dynamic, by responding to new developments and opportunities. The museum continues to develop around its core mission: the acquisition of long-term loans; attention and care for the collection; study and research; and anything that contributes to the best possible presentation of the collection and helps establish a connection with the public. At the same time, our visitors of the future must be able to continue to experience and appreciate its intimacy and authenticity, two key assets of this museum.

But the museum and its collection also tell the story of the two remarkable people who contributed to its creation: Fritz, the passionate collector with a good eye for art (and quality), and his mother Henriëtte and her very clear ideas of what she wanted to do with this legacy. To date, this aspect has been somewhat ignored because so little has been published about it. Ulrike Müller's book aims to provide a response to this, through new research and by situating Fritz and Henriëtte in their historical context. The information and research in this book enriches the knowledge about the museum and the understanding of its history, making it more fascinating while adding a human layer. I would like to thank the author and all those who contributed to the publication of this book. The end result increases our appreciation for this exceptional collection and its two founders.

Thomas Leysen

President of the Board of Regents
vzw Museum Mayer van den Bergh





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The Portrait Room

A HOUSE
WITH MANY
STORIES
TO TELL

‘Of all the museums, yours has moved me because of its uniquely personal character. The paintings seem to have been created for these rooms, whereas they are almost randomly hung in most public galleries. In your museum, everything is harmonious, each work seems to have found its rightful place. The artworks are “at home”, making the museum look complete.’

Robert Momber to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh, 9 July 1905¹

The Museum Mayer van den Bergh in Antwerp is a house full of art. Intriguing art, which inspires wonder, which moves you. Today the museum is internationally renowned as the repository of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's famous painting *Mad Meg*. To loyal visitors, it is a cherished, well-kept secret. A treasury where each visit provides an opportunity for new discoveries: the expressiveness of a sculpture that you had not noticed until that moment, the refined aesthetic of an illuminated manuscript, a hidden element in the lavish interior, or a new detail in a familiar painting. At the same time, visitors always marvel at how so much beauty was gathered in one place. Who amassed this unique collection? How and why was this museum established?

Despite its relatively small size, the Museum Mayer van den Bergh is home to an exceptionally large number of artistic masterpieces. The collection comprises approximately 3,100 art objects – including medieval sculptures, paintings by the Flemish Primitives and 16th- and 17th-century artists, highlights of textile and miniature art, magnificent jewellery, antique furniture and other utensils, as well as approximately 2,500 coins and medals. The fact that 51 works in the museum's collection were on the List of Flemish Masterpieces when this book went to print is a good indication of its exceptional quality.² The various objects, formats, styles, materials and textures are presented close to one another in the museum's rooms, enabling visitors to delve deeper into the many aspects of historic art.

Visitors also never fail to be amazed by the unique ambience of the museum, in addition to the diversity and superb artistic quality of the works on display. Those who visit the museum feel as if they have stepped into another world. The museum weaves its magic, enabling us to briefly escape the mayhem of the bustling city and to relax and enjoy ourselves.

A visit to this museum is a total experience, involving all the senses. After crossing the threshold, the curious visitor is immediately immersed in a wonderful historic environment. It feels as if you have travelled back in time, to the house of a 16th-century Flemish burgher. Each detail has been carefully considered and every room is decorated with architectural and decorative elements as well as works of art. The (re-)creation of historic 'living rooms' and the closely arranged artworks facilitate a direct art experience. This (seeming) authenticity contrasts sharply with the 20th-century concept of the 'white cube': a museum or gallery in which artworks are presented separately, against a white wall, drawing attention to the individual object. In contrast, the Museum Mayer van den Bergh enables visitors to experience the artworks, the interiors and the building as a whole.

In addition, the period rooms contribute to the unique sense of intimacy, of homeliness. But appearances can be deceptive. The building was conceived as a museum from the outset. Nobody has ever lived here. And yet, this is a house with many stories to tell. Stories of passion and love, of loss and sorrow, of hope and of an extraordinary vision. This book wants to share these stories.

Henriëtte Mayer
van den Bergh,
early 20th century,
photo, Archive Museum
Mayer van den Bergh,
inv. MMB.F.017

A COLLECTION, A VISION, AND A MOTHER'S LOVE

Two people are inextricably linked with the museum: Fritz Mayer van den Bergh (1858–1901) and his mother, Henriëtte (1838–1920). The entire collection was amassed by Fritz, a man with a deep interest in all things medieval and in the Renaissance. Around 1880, he began collecting coins and archaeological objects. He acquired the majority of his collection, including the most important items, in the last ten years of a short but intense period of collecting. To put together this impressive collection, Fritz relied on a wide international network that he developed over the years. He kept in touch with other collectors, art dealers, researchers and museum curators, tracking down artworks all over Europe and broadening his understanding and knowledge of his own holdings, in addition to exchanging information with other experts.

Fritz died unexpectedly on 4 May 1901 after falling from his horse. His mother Henriëtte had the museum built to house his art collection. Thus she succeeded in preserving this exceptional collection for the future while also keeping the memory of her son alive. The way in which she realised Fritz's dream implies that she must have been actively involved in the development of the collection from the outset. Given her own marked interest in art and music – her family background and education played an important role in this – Henriëtte probably exerted a significant influence on the young collector and his developing tastes.

The museum was inaugurated in 1904, just three years after Fritz's death. The project attests to Henriëtte's love for her son, and her exceptional vision and entrepreneurship. In 1906, she established a foundation to guarantee the museum's preservation. She donated the entire collection and the museum building to a Board of Regents, an association consisting of family friends and art experts, who were tasked with managing the museum. Henriëtte died on 27 March 1920, at the age of 81. Her precious legacy is preserved to this day.

The Museum Mayer van den Bergh is a historic monument with several layers of meaning. On the one hand, the museum is the physical manifestation of Fritz Mayer van den Bergh's passion for collecting and of a lifetime dedicated to the arts. It reflects his consummate passion for beauty, as well as his insatiable quest for knowledge. The institution also attests to his unique fascination for the past, because of its aesthetic appeal as well as for intellectual reasons. Fritz and Henriëtte surrounded themselves with historic art in order to *understand* the past. They were not conservatives, however. They did not isolate themselves from the rest of the world, nor did they retreat into a historic fantasy world and reject modernity. On the contrary, the collector and his mother moved in international circles, keeping abreast of the most recent art market trends and the latest developments in (art) historical







research. Finally, the museum is a tribute to Henriëtte Mayer van den Bergh. Her foundation is a token of a mother's love for her son. Moreover, her work attests to her incredibly strong character, inexhaustible drive, exceptional organisational skills, tremendous perseverance and clear vision for the future.

THE INTERSECTION OF MYTH AND HISTORICAL REALITY

Building an art collection is an extremely personal matter. Like its owner, each collection is unique. A collection is the result of a number of successive choices and decisions, reflecting the collector's individuality. The choices that a collector makes throughout his or her career depend on a number of different factors. Individual taste and personal preferences play a role, as does the collector's family background and education, knowledge and wealth, as well as their network and the historical and cultural context in which he or she lives.

The period in which the collection and the Museum Mayer van den Bergh were built, namely the late 19th and early 20th century, was a turbulent period in many respects, including on social, political, cultural and artistic levels. The decades between c. 1880 and 1920 were marked by ongoing modernisation, industrialisation, internationalisation and democratisation. The economy and international trade prospered in Belgium, coinciding with an increase in wealth and the growing self-confidence of the urban bourgeoisie. This modernisation and forward thinking was offset by a glorification of the past. On the one hand, Antwerpians regarded the recent economic boom as a revival of the Golden Age that the city had experienced in the 16th century. On the other, looking to the past gave some people an opportunity to escape the complexities of modern life.

During this period, Belgium organised six World Fairs, two of which were held in Antwerp. The 1885 and 1894 World Fairs highlighted the past, present and future, showing how modern life was becoming increasingly international. The artistic life and the collecting of art became an increasingly international affair too. During the last two or three decades of the 19th century, demand for historic art from Europe grew exponentially, largely as a consequence of the economic boom in the United States after the Civil War (1861–65). The seemingly unquenchable thirst for culture of a new group of affluent American collectors led to tremendous competition on the international art market, resulting in an increasing shortage of old art in Europe. All these factors to some degree influenced the life and activities of Fritz and Henriëtte, defining how the collection was built and how the Museum van den Bergh came about. The story of the museum and its founders also allows us to better understand Antwerp's complex cultural history in all its national and international aspects.

The existing literature on Fritz Mayer van den Bergh is largely biographical, revolving around a romanticised idea of the ‘collector as a genius’.³ Fritz is usually seen as a sensitive and intuitive connoisseur or art expert, who was ‘ahead of his time’, ‘who collected art in a different way than his contemporaries’ and who, just like the artistic avant-garde that emerged around the same time, had ‘interests that nobody had in common with him’.⁴ Older publications failed to focus on his activity as a collector and on the establishment of the museum in the context of the historic, intellectual, artistic and aesthetic developments of the late 19th century. Furthermore, not much has been published to date on the history of the museum or on Henriëtte as its founder.

In the past few years, a new trend has emerged in art-historical research, and attention is increasingly focusing on private collectors from the past and present in exhibitions and public museums. Belgium plays an important role in this evolution. It is and always has been internationally appreciated as a ‘country of private collectors’.⁵ As early as the 16th and 17th centuries, the Southern Netherlands and Antwerp in particular were important places for art lovers and connoisseurs, a tradition that continued well into the 19th century.⁶ Meanwhile, a lot of research has been carried out that sheds new light on the private collectors of art and antiques in the 19th and the early 20th centuries, and on important actors who helped shape (Belgian and international) collecting culture.⁷ Recent studies no longer regard collecting as exclusively a matter of individual inspiration and personal decisions. Instead, it is approached as a complex phenomenon, which is embedded in a specific historic, social, cultural and political context. In other words, current research believes that a collector’s social position, family background, friendships and ideology – as well as broader social, economic and aesthetic trends and the evolution of the art market and art history – played just as much of a role in the processes of taste formation and collecting practices as the collector’s psychology. The concept of the *collectionneur* as a genius, who is solely responsible for the rediscovery of a specific artwork, genre or style, is thus adjusted and diversified.

A FRESH LOOK AT THE PAST AND FUTURE

This book aims to cast a fresh light on the Museum Mayer van den Bergh and its rich origins. The emphasis is on Fritz as the man who built the collection and Henriëtte as the founder of the museum. The following four chapters highlight different aspects of their activity. As creatures of their time and environment, Fritz and Henriëtte’s preferences, convictions, motives and ambitions are examined against the backdrop of the historical, social, cultural and political context in which they lived. At the same time, these individuals had their own very personal reasons for making specific choices, which cannot always be unequivocally explained. It is this layeredness that contributes to the rich narrative of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh.

Fritz and Henriëtte were discreet, even reserved. It was Henriëtte who decided which objects and personal documents she wished to preserve for posterity. This means that (next to) nothing is known about certain aspects of their private lives. They kept no diaries, and only a handful of loose pages containing notes by Fritz and Henriëtte have been preserved. To date, very few of the many letters that the collector wrote to his international contacts have been traced. Who were the people or other collections that inspired Fritz and Henriëtte in the creation of their collection and the construction of the museum? What motivations and convictions drove Fritz to prefer specific types of objects, genres or representations? What was his vision of the artworks that he collected and how did he use them? What emotions did they elicit in him? Why did Fritz himself not publish anything on his collection? In the following chapters, we attempt to formulate a number of possible answers to these questions – based on what we know for certain about Fritz and Henriëtte, the world they lived in and the practices of other collectors and museum founders from the same era. Other questions – for example, why the collector never married – remain unanswered due to a lack of sources.

That the story of Fritz and Henriëtte and their rich legacy can be told in such detail is the result of new – and in-depth – research into the archive of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh. This archive was left to us by the collector and the museum's founder. After 1920, the Board of Regents and the museum's former curators, Jozef De Coo and Hans Nieuwdorp, supplemented it further. It contains, among other things, numerous letters that Fritz received between 1879 and 1901 from art dealers, agents, museum curators and other specialists from all over Europe. There's a purchase ledger, the collector's address book and a collection of old photos of artworks. The archive also includes Henriëtte's correspondence, photographs of family members, friends and the museum interior, the 'Book of Castles' (an album of photos made by Fritz of the castles and estates of people in his network) and other documents relating to the family's history. Archives of other Belgian and international institutions were also consulted. A wide range of 19th- and early 20th-century publications were also used as sources, including journals, newspapers, travel literature, almanacs, auction catalogues and (art) historical studies.

Thanks to all this information, the reader gains a better insight into the social profile of the Mayer van den Berghs, their familial relationships and friendships and their connection to other prominent high-society figures in Antwerp. It allows us to more accurately determine their position in the city's cultural life, as well as their motives and sources of inspiration. A new analysis of Fritz and Henriëtte's international network paves the way for a better understanding of the collector's activity and the founding

Joseph Janssens
de Varebeke,
*Portrait of Fritz
Mayer van den Bergh*,
1901, oil on canvas,
82.7 x 64 cm, Museum
Mayer van den Bergh,
inv. MMB.1871.2



of the museum. Changing preferences and broader developments in the art market around 1900 add another important dimension to this. The increased focus on the social, intellectual and aesthetic function of art collections in the Belgian *belle époque* also offers new insights into the specific role that art played in the lives of Fritz and Henriëtte. Based on this, we can better understand the unique character of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh.

This book is an invitation to (re-)acquaint yourself with the Museum Mayer van den Bergh and its founders. It is designed to give readers an opportunity to continue to discover the many facets of this exceptionally rich collection in the future – just as Henriëtte intended when she founded the museum.





PREVIOUS PAGE

**Fritz Mayer van den
Bergh's study in his
parental home,
c. 1900, photo,
Archive Museum Mayer
van den Bergh,**

inv. MMB.F.217

LIVING
WITH ART

