Introduction

The Low Countries: Division and unity.

R. Siebelhoff

The names Low Countries, Lage Landen, Die Niederlande or Les Pays-Bas are used by the Netherlanders themselves and by their immediate neighbours, to indicate the delta region in NW Europe. Such names are used most frequently in a geographical context and, for the period after 1400, sometimes to indicate the cultural homogeneity of that region. They do not signify a truly politically unified area. The Columbia Encyclopedia (1983) defines the delta "as a region in NW Europe comprising the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. One of the richest areas in medieval and modern Europe". The New Britannica (1989) goes so far to call it "one of the most important industrial regions in the world". The extensive seaborders and rivers have long determined the nature of these lands and the outlook of its peoples. The fertile delta is traversed by several of the most important rivers of Europe, including the Scheldt, Meuse and Lower Rhine, which indeed belong to the busiest rivers in the world. In the past they have made transportation of people, ideas and goods easier and faster than in any other European country. As a result the inhabitants have always been exposed to foreign influences.

With the Germans to the east, the French to the south and the British just over the North Sea to the west, the Low Countries are located in the geographic centre of modern Europe. It is therefore hardly an accident that the old capital of the Duchy of Brabant, Brussels, is presently the seat of the EEC.

From 57 B.C. to circa 400 A.D. most of this region was part of the Roman Empire, excepting the area north of the Rhine. Julius Caesar and Tacitus have left us the earliest written records. The disintegration of the Empire was a slow process rather than a sudden event. During the following migration periods the Saxons moved into the NE and the Franks settled in the centre and south. Frisian, Saxon and Frankish tribes constituted the main population. They were relatively homogeneous in nature and largely of Germanic origin. At present the greater part speaks Flemish-Dutch, but in the south a specific form of French is spoken. German is used in the SE and Frisian in the utmost north. None of the three states is completely unilingual. During the Frankish hegemony, called the Carolingian period (754–925). The Low Countries underwent a period of slow christianization to which the Frisians offered the greatest resistance.

After the Carolingian kings had disappeared it took until the 15th century before the delta obtained a measure of unity with the beginnings of a central government. The Burgundian dukes gradually united all the Netherlandish regions. In 1477, upon the death of Charles the Bold the last of these French dukes, the Netherlands came into the sphere of influence of the powerful Habsburg dynasty. Mary of Burgundy, only child of Charles, married Maximilian of Habsburg, future Holy Roman Emperor. In 1500 their grandson Charles V was born at Ghent. Elected Holy Roman Emperor and hereditary King of Spain, he finally united the Seventeen Netherlandish Provinces under Habsburg at the Treaty of Venlo in 1543. Unwittingly, Charles V laid the foundations for the conflict between the Netherlands and Spain. This resulted in the break-up of the political, the religious and, later, also the cultural unity of the Low Countries. After a bloody revolt and the Eighty Year War (1568–1648) the delta remained militarily divided into the Habsburg and Catholic south and the independent north. This Dutch Republic was predominantly bourgeois in culture and Calvinist in religion.

The unity of the Burgundian state was therefore shattered. Only once again, after the defeat of Napoleon, who had incorporated the entire delta into his megalomaniac empire, the Low Countries were united briefly, between 1815 and 1830. But economic differences and religious antagonism were now too great for this union to be maintained. A fratricidal war split the delta into the two kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands and the grand duchy

of Luxembourg. Belgium, for the first time truly independent, rapidly industrialised. The Netherlands, by contrast, remained predominantly an agricultural and trading nation. It relied for the latter position on its large colonial empire in the East and West Indies. In 1947 after the devastating experiences of the German occupation, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg created the trade and customs union called Benelux. The two kingdoms had already signed a cultural accord the year before. Politically and economically the Low Countries are now better known under the name Benelux. They were among the founders of the EEC.

The unusually rich cultural heritage of the Low Countries deserves to be emphasized. Specifically, three periods of outstanding achievement have been recognised. The 15th century saw the "waning of the Middle Ages". The Dutch call their 17th century the Golden Age, while Flanders became one of the two main centres of the international Baroque. The third period may be dated from circa 1880 to the 1930's. The designations for the Low Countries varies with these different cultural periods. For the 15th century the term Netherlandish is most often used, between circa 1600 and 1700 one distinguishes between Flanders and Holland or Flemish and Dutch and thereafter between Belgian and Dutch.

The late Middle Ages experienced a flowering of architecture and sculpture which is exemplified by the Brabantine gothic of the cathedrals at Antwerp and 's-Hertogenbosch, both recently restored. However, it was in book illumination and particularly in panel painting after 1420, that the Low Countries experienced an unprecedented development. The considerable number of altarpieces and portraits left to us are linked with artists such as the Van Eycks, Van der Weyden, Van der Goes, Bouts, Bosch and Memlinc. The influences of their studios radiated far beyond the borders of Flanders and Brabant into Germany, France, Spain and even Renaissance Italy. Together with the latter, the Burgundian Netherlands were the artistic centre of 15th century Europe. This flowering lasted into the next century and came to a halt only as the result of the serious economic, social and religious crisis referred to earlier.

The second decade of the 17th century saw the economic rise of the Dutch Republic and also its cultural unfolding known as the "Gouden Eeuw". We associate this period with Grotius, Vondel, the two Huygens and Van Leeuwenhoek. Rather than in architecture or sculpture, it was in painting, drawing and graphics that the greatest experiments and innovations were made. But the arts and the sciences were not yet sharply divided. Frans Hals (1581/5–1666), Rembrandt (1606–1669) and Vermeer (1632–1675) born a quarter of a century apart, appear to represent each a generation in the development. With others such as Gerard Terborch and Jan Steen they created a completely new vision of man: independent, secular and bourgeois. Such innovations were not limited to man and his self-created environment. Contemporaries like Jan van Goyen, Jacob van Ruisdael or Albert Cuyp revolutionized the experiences of the natural world. Once and for all they banished the gods and spirits from the land. What remained was an unheroic landscape populated by actual people. In their work we experience an inconspicious landscape with its many watery surfaces endlessly reflecting the light of the varying skies. Their deep understanding and their almost limitless investigations of the land border on scientific exploration. Nowhere from the past do we possess a comparably complete visual record of the earth's surface. Even after more than 300 years this new secular view of man and nature has not lost its force.

Within the context of the Counter Reformation in the Southern Netherlands painting, architecture and sculpture rose to new heights. The Baroque age will always remain associated with the names of Rubens, Van Dyck and Jordaens. Significantly, the two outstanding architectural monuments are the town halls of Antwerp (1561–1566) by Frans Floris and of Amsterdam (1648–1655) by Jacob van Campen. The latter masterpiece is simply the grandest of all town halls. Its imposing but austere exterior hides a rich program of sculpture in the interior. This was achieved by Artus Quellinus the Elder, the chief representative of Flemish Baroque sculpture, who lived in Amsterdam between 1650 and 1664. It was a truly Netherlandish endeavour by its greatest sculptor from the south and architect from the north.

During the third period from circa 1880 onward any cultural unity in the Low Countries is most difficult to define. By now Belgium and the Netherlands had developed distinct national identities within the boundaries of clearly defined states. These had their own economic and cultural orientation. This was an unusually rich period in many fields, including literature, architecture, painting and the applied arts. It also saw two famous historians. Henri Pirenne (1863–1935) belonged to the world's leading historians of his time and he is the greatest that Belgium produced. Pirenne was professor at Ghent and studied the medieval city extensively. Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) from Groningen, was professor at Lei-

den. His *Herfstij der Middeleeuwen* (1919) remains one of the famous cultural histories written.

National borders not withstanding, the unifying forces of the Flemish-Dutch language remained a significant factor in the cultural unity. A literary revival took place on both sides. At the same time important Belgian literature was written in the French language, for which Maurice Maeterlinck received the Nobel Prize in 1911. The strong international orientation of the fin de siècle in general facilitated contacts everywhere and on all levels. The exhibitions organized by the societies Les Vingt (1883–1893) and La Libre Esthétique (1894–1914) focused much attention on the Belgian capital. For thirty years these annual events placed Brussels in the forefront of contemporary art and music. That among the outstanding contributors to this renaissance in the Low Countries belong three architects is not generally recognised. Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934), one of the international leaders of architectural design, was the founder of modern architecture in the Netherlands. The "Beurs" of Amsterdam (1897–1903) is his masterpiece. Its forms are so free and its detail so original as to be truly revolutionary. Both Albert Verwey and Jan Toorop assisted with the decorations. That the Netherlands was a centre of new architecture world-wide until 1940 was in large measure due to Berlage. Victor Horta (1861–1947) is a unique representative of Art Nouveau architecture and design. He introduced new structural forms in steel and glass. His Hôtel Tassel (1892–1893) belongs to the most significant, and his Hôtel Solvay (1895–1900) to the most mature examples of that style anywhere. Fortunately these and other residences are still to be found in Brussels, but Horta's famous Maison du Peuple (1896–1899) was demolished after the war. For half a century Henry van de Velde (1863–1957) was one of the leaders of architecture and design in Europe. He was deeply concerned with the discipline imposed on the arts by new materials and techniques. His lasting influence was not in the Low Countries but in Germany, where he was active between 1897 and 1914. During the first decade of the new century he founded the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts. He thereby prepared the way for Walter Gropius, who was his immediate successor, and for the Bauhaus (1919). Each of these architects was not only concerned with the totality of the work, but with its minutest detail — to the last doorknob. Their influence was felt far beyond the borders of the Low Countries.

The significant painters of this period are simply too numerous for discussion in any detail. Much of their work has been accessible through publications and reproductions, also in North America. However, it is worthwhile to mention the most important names to give an impression of the extraordinary wealth of talent and genius that emerged. Félicien Rops, born as early as 1833, must be regarded as the oldest of these artist. Vincent van Gogh, Fernand Khnopff, Jan Toorop, James Ensor and Théo van Rysselberghe belong to the same generation as the three architects discussed. The next generation gave us Johan Thorn Prikker, Piet Mondriaan, Théo van Doesburg, Kees van Dongen and Gerrit Rietveld. The turn of the century saw the birth of Réné Magritte, Maurits Escher and Willem de Kooning. Since the end of the 17th century the Low Countries had not witnessed the emergence of so many artist of such high international calibre. Truly this was another Golden Age. This special issue of the CAANS Journal is dedicated to their achievement.

The articles in this collection have been written at various times and under different circumstances. It did not seem meaningful to edit them in such a fashion that they would appear more unified. It seemed more right to publish this material now than to strive for greater perfection at a later date.

The Editors

Cover Illustration: Jan Toorop, ***Fatalisme***, 1892–1893 [detail] Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller. **(See page 86 for full illustration).**