

The deceptive art deal of Van Beuningen

Koenigs Collection Wednesday begins the lawsuit by the heirs Koenigs at Museum Boijmans A case that shows the less attractive side of patron Van Beuningen.

- Arjen Ribbens
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A great art collection often occurs at the expense of previous collectors. This is showed once again by the documents of the lawsuit that was filed Wednesday in Rotterdam against Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

Six heirs of businessman Franz Koenigs demand the return of hundreds of Old Master drawings, which are given to the museum on loan in 1935. This loan was part of a previous, much larger loan which was partly donated to the museum? That is the question at the present proceedings.

The history of the great loan - 46 paintings and 2,000 drawings - is worth telling. She makes clear to which behaviour an obsessive collector is capable of. The protagonist in this story is Daniel George van Beuningen (1877-1955), director of the Coal Trading Association (SHV) and one of the Rotterdam harbour barons who before the war ruled the city and its workers.

It starts in April 1940

In April 1940, when the Nazis set Europe ablaze, Van Beuningen does an art purchase that will be central to the next trial. The Jewish owners of the Amsterdam banking Lisser and Rosenkranz want to flee to the United States. In all haste they try to liquidate their bank. Part of their property is the loaned art collection of Franz Koenigs to Museum Boijmans, which the businessman pawned to the bank after the stock market crash.



Anonymous astrological show, circa 1490.

When Koenigs announces to Boijmans that he must end his big loan, director Dirk Hannema immediately approaches Van Beuningen and Willem van der Vorm,

another Rotterdam businessman and patron. Whether they are willing to buy the collection for the museum?

Van Beuningen first misleads Van der Vorm, and then in the negotiation of the pledged collection he shows his reputation of a businessman with no talent for sentimentality.

A selection from the art collection. The text continues below slideshow.

The bank will take into account Koenigs' desire to preserve his collection for Boijmans and the Netherlands. Van Beuningen uses this to his best advantage. Through Hannema he let the Bank and Koenigs know by letter that he wants to buy the collection to give her in its entirety to Boijmans. He makes a bid of one million guilders with an ultimatum of a few hours - "given the circumstances," emphasizes Van Beuningen, a good offer. Subsequent correspondence shows that he knows that the collection is worth at least 5.5 million guilders.

Forced, the owners of the bank accept his bid. Two days later director Hannema wrote a reassuring letter to Koenigs. Again he promises that "in the future the collection which will always remain connected to your name, will be managed with greatest care." In gratitude Koenigs gave the museum two sixteenth-century drawings.

A deal with Hitler

Meanwhile Van Beuningen, with the knowledge of Hannema, works on his hidden agenda. He sells the German drawings from the Koenigs collection to Adolf Hitler. Even before the transaction with Lisser and Rosenkranz contact is made with Hans Posse, a German art historian who is working on the construction of the Führer Museum in the Austrian city of Linz.

Van Beuningen is aware that he is doing something impermissibly. By letting his son Lucas Peterich to conduct the negotiations, he hopes to conceal that he is the seller.

Peterich is an equally adept negotiator. In December 1940, Hitler buys 1.5 million guilders 528 pages, about a quarter of the drawings collection of Koenigs. Van Beuningen rewarded his son with a commission of 100,000 guilders. The businessman self makes within eight month a gain of 400,000 guilders on his investment .

Van Beuningen selects from the Collection F. Koenigs four paintings by Rubens and a number of important drawings for his own collection. The rest, a gift that did not cost him a penny, he donates to Boijmans.

Museum director Hannema is rewarded for his services to the Führer by a number of senior positions, which he later payed dear. Immediately after the liberation, he is as collaborator detained for eight months.

After the war he is exempted

Van Beuningen in contrast is exempted. In the postwar years, Government officials price Van Beuningen openly "for his love of the national art collection." As a member of the National Art Foundation from 1946 on, the celebrated businessman has a say in the distribution of the in wartime looted art.

Again Van Beuningen is showing his business acumen. Nineteen paintings which he also sold to Hitler, also through his son-in-law, he may repurchase. Paintings for which the Nazis paid him 1.6 million guilders, he will lay his hands on again for just over 300.000.

When Van Beuningen dies in 1955, his heirs sell his art collection for 18 million guilders to the municipality of Rotterdam. The repayment of the debt pressured the budget of the Boijmans for thirty years. When the name of the museum is changed in 1958 into Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam certain families complain about the namesake's war trading. That grumbling however remains indoors. "Netherlands stood still with one foot in the time of the regents," said Harry van Wijnen, the author of the Van Beuningen-biography in 2004 *Grand Prince on the Maas* .

Franz Koenigs has known how Hannema and Van Beuningen deceived him, says granddaughter Christine Koenigs. His friend Max Friedländer tells him how he valued the drawings from his collection for the purchase to Führer Museum. To one of his daughters Koenigs says he will sue Van Beuningen after the war. That never happens. On May 6, 1941 the collector falls at the Cologne railway station between the train and the platform. Rumors that this would be murder, remain unproven.

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