Two voluminous eighteenth-century manuscripts and an accompanying notebook were recently discovered in the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library’s collection in Antwerp. They shed a unique light on the approach to the literary past in that period. Although these three volumes were acquired in 1868, they had escaped the attention of historians of literature until now. The title on the spine tells us that the manuscripts are *Aantekeningen betreffende het leven der Nederlandsche Dichters en Dichteressen* (Notes Concerning the Lives of Dutch Poets) (fig. 2). The first volume contains biographical sketches of Dutch writers, scholars and other key cultural figures born before 1600 in chronological order. The second deals with authors born between 1600 and 1700. The 286 biographies cover more than four centuries of Dutch literary and cultural history: from the thirteenth-century historian Melis Stoke to the Amsterdam-born professor of rhetoric Jacques Philippe d’Orville (1696-1751). The entries always follow the same format with the name and – if known – the years of the birth and death of the author in question, but the biographical sketches differ considerably in scope and content.

The accompanying notebook reveals that these rather dissimilar biographies and notes were not created by chance, but were written as explanatory notes to an eighteenth-century collection of portraits of literary and intellectual figures from the Low Countries, better known as the Panpoëticon Batavûm (fig. 3). The manuscripts were compiled by their second owner, the Amsterdam broker Michiel de Roode (1685-1771) (fig. 1).
They are an important piece of the puzzle in the history of this presently fragmented collection: the Rijksmuseum now holds eighty-one of the more than 350 original portraits. The texts contain a treasure trove of previously unknown information about the dates, attributions and creation of the portraits. Was a portrait, for example, painted *ad vivum* – from life – or did the artist base it on an existing example, and – if so – which? The manuscripts also shed a unique light on the functioning of the collection as a whole and – more generally – on the strong interaction between material and literary culture in the eighteenth-century Republic.

**Culture in Order**

Collecting was fashionable in early modern times. Stones, fossils, shells, insects, stuffed animals and all kinds of monstrosities were housed, arranged and exhibited in cabinets usually made of costly materials. These meticulously classified *naturalia* collections – which increasingly took on a semi-public character – were designed to give visitors an understanding of the wonders of God’s creation. At the end of the seventeenth century, collectors also began to create classification models that proved useful for inherently cultural collections: while sets of insect specimens generated insight into the natural metamorphosis of larvae into...
butterflies, chronologically ordered collections of inanimate objects such as coins, medals and books could be used to trace the evolution of culture.\(^6\) Around 1700, prompted by the growing ambition to create a taxonomy of the cultural past, the Amsterdam painter Arnoud van Halen (1673-1732) embarked on a unique project: he began to make a collection of the likenesses of prominent Dutch writers on the basis of existing prints and paintings (fig. 4). He painted their portraits on small oval supports of uniform size. Around 1719, in order to house the rapidly growing collection in a fitting manner, Van Halen commissioned the architect Simon Schijnvoet (1652-1727) to design a wooden collector’s cabinet. His choice of Schijnvoet shows how much Van Halen positioned his project in line with the contemporary collecting fashion and the fundamental interaction between art and science that underpinned it. Schijnvoet himself was an active collector and the owner of at least four cabinets of art and rarities; he also actively strove to bring the collections of his contemporaries to public notice.\(^7\) He was closely involved, for example, in preparing various descriptions of collections for publication, such as *D’Amboinsche Rariteitenkamer* by Georg Everhard Rumphius (1627-1702), and he made a contribution to the posthumous publications of the work of
Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717). In imitation of popular coin and medal cabinets, he incorporated dozens of flat drawers in the cabinet he designed for Van Halen. Each drawer had room for eleven portraits, chronologically arranged (fig. 5). This allowed viewers to always have access to an episode from the Dutch history of literature in the cabinet. This was the key idea behind Van Halen’s initiative: to generate insight into the evolution of Dutch academic culture.

It soon became obvious that Van Halen’s project surpassed the level of private interest and appealed to a more broadly supported desire to chart the Dutch literary past. While many early modern collections were broken up or absorbed into other collections, the Panpoëticon Batavûm stayed together throughout the eighteenth century. The cabinet passed into the hands of other art lovers, who added new portraits or replaced existing examples with better likenesses. These additions and changes were always meticulously documented in the manuscripts. The collection reached its highpoint at the end of the eighteenth century in the assembly hall of the Leiden poets’ society Kunst Wordt Door Arbeid Verkreegen (art is achieved through labour). It was there that the Panpoëticon Batavûm played a central role during the society’s meetings and the collection inspired the members to develop various initiatives to further explore the literary past. What began as an individual plan grew into a full-blown attempt to chart the evolution of Dutch literary culture.

A History in Images and Words
Besides a material dimension, the collection had a strong textual side to it. Many of the enthusiasts who visited the Panpoëticon Batavûm over the years were inspired to write poems praising the collection. Soon after the completion of the wooden cabinet, and in all probability at the insistence of the founder Van Halen, a voluminous publication about the Panpoëticon...
Batavûm appeared. In 1720, the Amsterdam apothecary Lambert Bidloo (1637-1724) published an ode running to almost three hundred pages in which he gave readers a detailed report of his acquaintance with Van Halen’s collection (fig. 6). He discoursed upon the portraits in the cabinet one by one and gave his imagination free rein. It was from reflections like these, in which the individual objects were linked together in a meaningful chain, that the collection derived its value; in a more general sense they contained the nucleus of the process of building knowledge that was inherent in early modern collections. ‘It was,’ as the historian of science Lorraine Daston put it about the functioning of early modern collectors’ cabinets in general, ‘not the objects themselves but rather the responses they were intended to evoke that impressed the contents of the cabinet with a certain unity.’

Fig. 6
JAN GOEREE,
Engraved title page of Lambert Bidloo’s Panpoëticon Batavûm, 1720.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
Research Library,
318c17.
In order to stimulate and direct this process of attribution of meaning, early modern collectors themselves also engaged in exegesis. Many of them published catalogues of their collections, and prominent collectors like Levinus Vincent (1658-1727) and Joachim Oudaen (1628-1692) also marketed printed companions to their collections; others, like Schijnvoet and (in all probability) Van Halen, asked writers among their friends to take on the task as guides and devote publications to their collections. It was the interaction between these physical and textual dimensions – between the things and the words – that gave a collection its meaning.

Whereas Bidloo’s ode to the Panpoëticon Batavûm can still be regarded in many respects as the private account of the visit of a notorious bookworm, De Roode went a step further in his endeavour to provide the collection with a systematic textual commentary. Soon after he acquired the cabinet in 1732, and possibly inspired by the separate notes Van Halen had already written, he embarked on the meticulous compilation of biographical and bibliographical information about the authors in the portraits and their (most notable) works. With great care, he compiled his entries – which form the core of the manuscripts in the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library – from scraps of information in circulation about the different authors, usually in print, supplemented with information that he was sent, not seldom by the descendants of the authors in question. This tells us that De Roode ultimately intended to have his work published: he regularly included references to fragments of text – possibly as instructions for a future compositor – which he wanted to insert into the final version of his descriptions. However, for unknown reasons, De Roode never managed to publish the fruits of this hard work.

His meticulously compiled manuscripts were stored in the bottom drawer of the cabinet, where they could be consulted by visitors during their study of the individual portraits and the relationships between them.

This did not mean, however, that the publication plans were shelved. Soon after the Panpoëticon Batavûm had passed to Kunst Wordt Door Arbeid Verkreegen in 1772, the society’s board revealed plans to ‘publish a complete Work, encompassing the Lives of the most prominent Poets and Poetesses of our Fatherland’, based on De Roode’s manuscripts. His work was supplemented in various places – probably by Cornelis Heyligert (1743-1803), the society’s secretary. An unfinished transcript of De Roode’s manuscripts, which suggests there may well have been plans for publication, probably also stems from this time; it is now lost. The society’s board also staged various competitions in which they asked for definitive biographical sketches that could serve as supplements and called on the members of the society to share their thoughts with them about the required elements of the ideal writer’s biography. Despite the lofty ambitions and energetic start, however, it proved difficult to decide on the specific form of the publication – for instance how to deal with the various unfinished classifications in the notebook that accompanied the manuscripts. The main sticking point as far as the society’s board was concerned appears to have been whether it should follow the chronological history of literature as shown in the Panpoëticon and described by De Roode, or publish a reference book with entries in alphabetical order. Decades later it had still not come up with a satisfactory answer to this question. Once again, the publication failed to materialize and at the same time it began to become clear that the way the cabinet had been put together no longer met the requirements.
A Parting of the Ways: From Collector’s Cabinet to Library

In 1809, when the board of the by then penniless Kunst Wordt Door Arbeid Verkreegen offered their star possession to Louis Bonaparte for the new Royal Museum – the forerunner of the present Rijksmuseum – the King of the Netherlands said no on the advice of the museum’s new director of collections, C.S. Roos (1754-1820). Aside from the ‘very mediocre’ quality of the individual portraits – ‘awful pictures’ as Roos disparagingly described them – the value of the collection as a whole also no longer proved to be self-evident. Roos refused to purchase it ‘only because they are all the same size and because they just fit into the drawers in a cabinet and can be locked away’. 17

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the way the literary past had been approached a century before seemed hopelessly old-fashioned.

The rejection decided the fate of the collection. It remained together for some decades until it fell into the hands of an art dealer called Samson in 1849. Motivated by the pursuit of profit, he sold off the collection bit by bit. As a result, the portraits ended up in art collections throughout Europe. The manuscripts De Roode had so carefully compiled in order to gain greater understanding of the collection were separated from the portraits. In 1868 they surfaced in Brussels at a sale of a part of the book and manuscript collection of the eminent Belgian Duke Engelbert Augustus of Arenberg (1824-1875), where they were purchased for eleven Belgian Francs by the Hendrik Consience Heritage Library. 18 This is how they found their way into a place that was then reserved for the study of the literary past: the library.

NOTES

1 With thanks to Steven Van Impe and Ton van Strien. This research was supported by nwo Rubicon grant no. 019.1735G.017.

2 Antwerp, Hendrik Consience Heritage Library, inv. no. b 12610 1 to 3. For a detailed bibliographical description see Amédée Dermul, Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de la ville d’Anvers, Gembloux/Paris 1939, pp. 63–64.

3 They were added to the inventory books on 18 July 1886. Stamboek Hendrik Consience Erfgoedbibliotheek, dl. 2: 11.714-23.419, no. 13458.

4 In all probability there was a third volume, devoted to poets born after 1700. In any event entries were made for it. Although the second volume stops at folio 356, the index continues to folio 374, the biography of the Amsterdam playwright Anthony Hartsen (1719-1782).

5 For a detailed history and reconstruction of the collection see Lieke van Deinsen, The Panpoëticon Batavûm: The Portrait of the Author as a Celebrity, Amsterdam 2016.


8 Many of these poems were collected and published in Arnoud van Halen’s Pan poëticon Batavûm verheerlijkt, Leiden 1773.

short notice a tale of images and words: the panpoëticon batavûm


16 Jan Jacob Verheul, Prijsverhandeling over de vereischten in eene levensbeschrijving der dichteren, uitgegeeven door het genootschap: Kunst wordt door arbeid verkreegen, Leiden 1790.

15 Cf. Catalogue de livres anciens, rares et curieux, provenant du cabinet de Mr. N…, Fr.-J. Olivier, 6-9 July, Brussels 1868, inv. no. 111bis (annotated copy kbr, Brussels, 3639 r 140/11.

14 ‘een volledig Werk, behelzende de Leevensbeschrijvingen der voornaemste Dichteren en Dichteressen van ons Vaderland … in het licht te geveen’, Arnoud van Halen’s Panpoëticon Batavûm verheerlijkt, Leiden 1773, p. xxv.

13 Lambert Bidloo, Panpoëticon Batavum, kabinet waar in de afbeeldingen van voornaame Nederlandsche dichteren, versameld … door Arnoud van Halen, en onder … aanmerkingen, over de Hollandsche rymkonst, geopendt, Amsterdam 1720.


7 ‘een volledig Werk, behelzende de Leevensbeschrijvingen der voornaemste Dichteren en Dichteressen van ons Vaderland … in het licht te geveen’, Arnoud van Halen’s Panpoëticon Batavûm verheerlijkt, Leiden 1773, p. xxv.

6 Cf. Catalogue de livres anciens, rares et curieux, provenant du cabinet de Mr. N…, Fr.-J. Olivier, 6-9 July, Brussels 1868, inv. no. 111bis (annotated copy kbr, Brussels, 3639 r 140/11.

5 Jan Jacob Verheul, Prijsverhandeling over de vereischten in eene levensbeschrijving der dichteren, uitgegeeven door het genootschap: Kunst wordt door arbeid verkreegen, Leiden 1790.

4 ‘een volledig Werk, behelzende de Leevensbeschrijvingen der voornaemste Dichteren en Dichteressen van ons Vaderland … in het licht te geveen’, Arnoud van Halen’s Panpoëticon Batavûm verheerlijkt, Leiden 1773, p. xxv.

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2 Jan Jacob Verheul, Prijsverhandeling over de vereischten in eene levensbeschrijving der dichteren, uitgegeeven door het genootschap: Kunst wordt door arbeid verkreegen, Leiden 1790.

1 ‘een volledig Werk, behelzende de Leevensbeschrijvingen der voornaemste Dichteren en Dichteressen van ons Vaderland … in het licht te geveen’, Arnoud van Halen’s Panpoëticon Batavûm verheerlijkt, Leiden 1773, p. xxv.