



An Amsterdam Rococo Interior: The ‘Beuning Room’ in the Rijksmuseum

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‘**A**uch hat Nahl selbst wohl seine eigentliche Sendung in der Gestaltung des Raumes gesehen, jenes Problems, das die Kunst-bestätigung des 18. Jahrhunderts beherrscht hat.’
Friedrich Bleibaum, *Johann August Nahl, der Künstler Friedrichs des Grossen und der Landgrafen von Hessen-Kassel*, Baden and Leipzig 1933, Introduction.

An Unlikely Creation

Few rooms better demonstrate the key statement in the above quotation than the one we call the Beuning Room, an Amsterdam interior dating from about 1745-48 which is the subject of this Bulletin: the fashioning of room interiors was the challenge that dominated artistic output throughout Europe in the eighteenth century. The sculptor and ornamental designer Johann August Nahl (1710-1781), the subject of Bleibaum’s monograph, worked for King Frederick the Great of Prussia and for the Landgraves of Hesse-Kassel, powerful rulers who erected new palaces and other buildings; by contrast, in Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Dutch Republic, the eighteenth century saw little construction of important buildings of any kind, as the seventeenth-century cities proved large enough for a population that had ceased to grow explosively. In such an environment, the design and execution of new interiors assumed an even greater significance as the prime expression of architectural endeavour.

More specifically, the reader of De Fouw’s contribution in this Bulletin, which tells the story of the patrons who

commissioned the Beuning Room, is bound to conclude that the odds were against its coming into existence. Matthijs Beuning and his second wife, Catharina Oudaen, were leading figures in the Amsterdam settlement of the Moravian Brotherhood, a close-knit community within the Protestant church whose members were drawn to mysticism and favoured extreme modesty in demeanour, attire and the appurtenances of life. And yet Beuning, after coming into a substantial inheritance on the death of his mother in 1744, which included her house at 187 Keizersgracht, lost little time in moving his family there from the somewhat simpler dwelling they had occupied until then, and instigating a campaign to enlarge and embellish the existing house. A sizeable addition was built in the garden at the back, extending beyond the width of the house. This accommodated an oval staircase with an elaborate banister, situated beyond the long corridor which ran from front to back of the original house. The stair’s first section, consisting of a short straight flight of elegant marble steps, led to a landing which gave access to a room with three tall windows overlooking the garden.



Fig. 1
Detail of the double
doors of the Beuning
Room.

It was probably rather sparsely decorated, judging from the plain carving on the double doors that confronted visitors when they turned to the right. Through these doors they entered one of the richest interiors in all of Amsterdam, having three big windows on to the garden, with tall mirrors between them (fig. on p. 23). The effect of the room could be best enjoyed when the double doors were closed, revealing the spectacular carved decoration on their backs (fig. 1). Presumably these doors would be shut when the room was in use, the progression towards them having created a sense of drama, surprise and delight.

That the room was to be used for meetings and religious ceremonies by the Moravians could hardly account for its splendour and, indeed, the religious symbolism that permeates it is subtly disguised, with the notable exception

of Jacob de Wit's painting of *St Philip Baptizing the Eunuch*, set above the chimneypiece and immediately catching the attention of anyone entering. There can be no doubt that Beuning, a successful businessman with newly accumulated wealth and clearly a lover of the arts, wished to commission a splendid work of art for his own enjoyment and that of his guests. It is altogether typical that this desire found expression in a fully orchestrated interior in which all the arts were combined to create an overwhelming ensemble. Beuning's passionate involvement with the project is underlined by his wife's equivocal attitude towards it. Later in life, Catharina Beuning, who was probably more deeply attached to the Moravian teachings than her husband, expressed her sense of doubt and unhappiness about the move to the large house and the campaign to embellish it.

A Room as a Work of Art

Beuning undoubtedly shared the ambition of all leading patrons of the arts of his time, to create a perfectly unified interior whose every element contributed to the overall expression of an artistic idea. The inherent problem was that such a room involved the contribution of numerous artists and craftsmen, each of whom inevitably brought his individual characteristics and even idiosyncrasies to the job. Ideally, these were all subordinated to the direction of a designer in charge of the project; the greater this artist's position and prestige, the stronger the chance of success. In Amsterdam in the 1740s there was no obvious candidate for this role. The paucity of large building commissions meant that no leading architect had emerged to follow in the footsteps of Daniel Marot (1661-1752), who, although still alive and active, had not adopted the international rococo style which began to hold sway in the late 1730s, and would therefore not have been considered eligible to undertake a fashionable project.¹ A number of builders, stonemasons, sculptors, stuccoists and even the occasional painter stepped in to take on this essential task. As they often worked together, in varying combinations, and as very few commissions are documented in detail, it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the contributions of these artists, let alone attribute particular projects to them.²

The sculptor and stuccoist Jan van Logteren (1709-1745) probably contributed largely to the introduction of the rococo style in Amsterdam. His few identified works in the novel idiom show him using heavy cartouches, derived from newly published Parisian engravings, in a rather additive manner, without achieving an elegant overall form or outline.³ Van Logteren's approach is very different from the way the carved rococo ornament of the Beuning Room is distributed in an effective, seemingly organic way, successfully accomplish-

ing a rhythmic, flowing disposition of the walls, and turning the entire space into a work of art in the new style. This is all the more remarkable because the symmetrical structure of the individual elements, emphasized by heavily moulded surrounds, is still couched in a traditional vocabulary. Avoiding symmetry by means of countless subtle variations, the exceptionally virtuoso carving everywhere creates a sense of 'contrast', a virtue dear to rococo sensibility. It moreover manages to make the wood seemingly come to life, sometimes assuming the character of water or skin, and everywhere suggesting movement and growth (fig. 2). A characteristic feature is the irregularly shaped, bulging and contracting, raised or sunken panels, some of them plain, others filled with foliate sprays or other ornament.

Fig. 2
Detail of the carving above the chimneypiece.







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Fig. 3
Detail of the stucco
ceiling.

Fig. 4
ANONYMOUS,
Buffet cupboard,
Amsterdam,
c. 1755-65.
Oak and walnut,
veneered with burr
walnut, h. 343 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-2013-1;
on loan from
private collectors.



The essential significance of the paneling suggests that the sculptor who carved it may have played a central role in the conception of the room. The ornamental language of the stucco ceiling is closely related to that of the woodwork (fig. 3), although there are marked differences as well: for example, the large moulded frames in the corners are themselves asymmetrical (fig. on pp. 24-25), and the rococo ornament is somewhat more brittle in character. This suggests that the stuccoist worked to a general design, possibly provided by the sculptor involved, but retained considerable freedom in the execution of the work. Even Jacob de Wit closely allied his painting to its setting: the colourful pyramidal group of chief

protagonists at the front flawlessly follows on to the large carved scrolls to either side and terminates the converging movement of the *rouge royal* marble chimneypiece and the carvings of the lower part of the overmantel (fig. on p. 26). The marble chimneypiece could conceivably have been carved in the same sculptor's workshop as the panelling; the forceful scrolls at its sides, resting on enormous lions' paws, are somewhat more robust than the woodcarving, but this befits their position at the base of the big chimney.

An Unidentified Sculptor

Considering the Beuning Room as an ensemble in this way, it transpires that the unity which has indeed been successfully achieved is the result of the application of ornament. In mid-eighteenth-century Holland, ornament had become a prime concern of even the most highly regarded sculptors, such as Asmus Frauen (1707-1779), a native of Craiova in Transylvania who settled in Amsterdam in about 1738. In 1744 he executed much decorative carving, such as a series of fanciful stair balusters, for a house in Alkmaar, and even his famous pulpit of 1752-56 for the Grote Kerk in Dordrecht comprised much ornamental work, including the design of the brass stair-rail, which was executed by Pieter Rokkers.⁴ In these examples, Frauen's application of ornament has an additive character which recalls Van Logteren. A similar approach is seen in a huge buffet cupboard that was sold in Amsterdam in 1776 from the well-known collection of Anthony Grill, the carved decoration of which may perhaps be given to Frauen (fig. 4).⁵ Again, the feeling is quite different from the panelling in the Beuning Room.

Looking out into the garden from the Beuning Room, one could see the back of the house at 170 Herengracht, where the whaling merchant and syndic of Amsterdam, Jan Tarelink, commissioned the room's only known progeny:



Fig. 5
The mahogany room
in 170 Herengracht,
Amsterdam,
with paintings by
JURRIAN BUTTNER,
1756.
Amsterdam,
Vereniging Hendrick
de Keyser.

another mahogany room, with a painted ceiling and other canvases by Jurriaan Buttner dated 1756 (fig. 5).⁶ There can be no doubt that the carved decoration of this room was executed by the same artist or artists who decorated the Beuning Room. The work is very closely related, and yet the elegant lines of the panels and many details of the ornamentation show that this artist had made enormous progress in his understanding and interpretation of the rococo style. The same evolution can be discerned in the stucco ceiling, and again the room as a whole is pervaded by a sense of unity. It is to be hoped that further research may unveil the identity of the highly talented inventor of these extraordinary creations. There are some further clues: a longcase clock with a movement by the Amsterdam clock-maker Adam Heijmuijs has a case that must have emerged from the same workshop (fig. 6), and some further pieces of furniture may be linked to this.⁷

Mahogany Rooms

All these works of art illustrate a remarkable aspect of Dutch rococo: some of its most spectacular creations were executed in unadorned walnut or mahogany, dark materials that seem at variance with the airy lightness which is a characteristic of the style as practised in most European countries. The choice of mahogany for the Beuning Room was particularly noteworthy, as this costly tropical wood was still something of a novelty in Amsterdam: the city's cabinetmakers only began to make regular use of it in the 1750s.⁸

Outside Amsterdam a few precedents may be found. In 1738 a prominent official of the city of Delft, Gaspar Rudolph van Kinschot, had panelling of mahogany and amboyna installed in a room in his house, which also received a stylistically advanced stucco ceiling; at about the same time, a mahogany room, set with a painted ceiling and some smaller canvases by Anthony Elliger (1701-1781), a painter who



Fig. 6
 ANONYMOUS
 FURNITURE MAKER,
 movement
 by Adam Heijmuijs,
 longcase clock,
 Amsterdam,
 c. 1755-66.
 Oak and walnut,
 veneered with burr
 walnut, h. 311 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. BK-1967-144.

worked in Amsterdam, was made for the newly built house in Arnhem of Johan Brantsen, a member of one of the leading families in that city.⁹ In about 1744, the main room in the house in Alkmaar referred to above was painted to resemble mahogany: apparently, a ‘mahogany room’ had become a recognized, highly desirable type of luxurious interior.¹⁰

The dark tropical wood presumably brought to mind the successful overseas trade that had contributed so much to the Dutch Republic’s wealth, although none of the patrons known to have commissioned a mahogany room were themselves deeply involved in it. Furniture made in Batavia and South Africa for Dutch patrons often had silver mounts which served to set off the shiny woods. It was perhaps in reference to this that Van Kinschot adorned his mahogany room with a chandelier and two wall-lights of silver. Equally, Johan Brantsen may have used two pairs of silver wall-lights that he almost certainly acquired around 1761 in his mahogany room,¹¹ and the room in Alkmaar was fitted with carved wall-lights that were probably painted to resemble silver. Whether Beuning conformed to this model cannot be ascertained, but this would certainly have suited the extravagance of his creation. He did own many silver artefacts; characteristically, when his wife wrote about the forced sale of these pieces in 1753, she only named her husband as their owner, omitting any mention of herself.¹² Markings in the wood to the left and right of Jacob de Wit’s painting indicate that wall-lights were mounted there at some point, but they may of course have been of gilt metal.

The Beuning Room in the Rijksmuseum

Given the overriding position of room interiors in eighteenth-century art, the opportunity presented to the Rijksmuseum by the owner of the Beuning

Room, the Amsterdam Museum, to install it at the heart of the section devoted to the eighteenth century in the newly arranged museum which opened in 2013, was not to be missed. Here the visitor can experience one of the most spectacular rococo spaces ever created in Holland. The challenges and limitations of such a display, divorced from its original setting, are discussed in various contributions in this Bulletin. A particular problem was the treatment of the walls, as their original appearance is unknown.

They may in fact never have been completely finished: Beuning and his wife left Amsterdam around 1749-50, and were forced to flee to London in 1752. There might have been a plan to install tapestries, as Van Kinschot had done in Delft, or painted imitations of them. Alternatively, the idea may have been to cover the walls with painted views of landscapes, following a prevailing fashion in Amsterdam. It is equally possible that like many Dutch mid-eighteenth-century rooms they were, or were intended to be, covered in gilt leather or in a textile material, and this last option was adopted for the new installation. A glazed woollen

damask was woven to a pattern datable to about 1738, in a colour documented to have been used in the 1740s (see the article by Van Duin).

In 1801, when an inventory of the house was made for Jan de Groot, who had occupied it since 1777, the mahogany room was found to contain only a set of upholstered chairs, including two armchairs. In Beuning's time, when the room served for Moravian meetings and ceremonies, it is likely to have had even fewer permanent furnishings. Beuning probably also hoped to have secular assemblies or parties there, which would require specific types of furniture to be brought in. Unfortunately, there is little information in general about the way the great rooms in Amsterdam canal houses were originally furnished and used.¹³ In the present installation it was therefore decided to leave the room empty, allowing museum visitors to fully enjoy the interior itself, with as their only companion a festive gilt wooden chandelier suspended from the ceiling, serving as a reminder of the many elusive eighteenth-century people whose presence must have enhanced this fairy-tale setting.

NOTES

- 1 On Daniel Marot and his work, see Ozinga 1938.
- 2 See Meischke et al. 1995, pp. 76-88; Baarsen et al. 2001, pp. 179-83; Vlaardingerbroek 2013, pp. 81-94.
- 3 See Baarsen et al. 2001, cat. no. 99. On Van Logteren, see Fischer 2005.
- 4 Ozinga 1968; Jensma 1984; Baarsen et al. 2001, pp. 21-22, 180-82. Various other artists were involved in Frauen's pulpit for Dordrecht as well.
- 5 Baarsen et al. 2001, pp. 180-82, fig. VII.5. This cupboard is now at the Rijksmuseum, in the process of being transferred in lieu of inheritance tax. For a number of chairs with closely related carved backs, presumably also made in Amsterdam, see *ibid.*, cat. nos. 101-102.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 208-10, figs. 113a, 113c.
- 7 *Ibid.*, cat. no. 116, cf. no. 115.
- 8 Baarsen 1992, pp. 52-53.
- 9 Van den Berg 1967, pp. 255-61; Haslinghuis 1917. The ceiling painting by Ellinger is dated 1739 rather than 1730 as stated by Haslinghuis. I thank Prosper de Jong for information regarding this room, which is now in Museum de Lakenhal in Leiden.
- 10 I thank Ige Verslype and Richard Harmanni for new information regarding the finish of this room and its components. They are preparing a book in which their many findings concerning the De Dieu house will be published.
- 11 Baarsen et al. 2001, cat. no. 80.
- 12 Letter from Catharina Beuning to Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, Chelsea, 26 February 1754; see De Fouw's article, p. 41, note 77. I thank Josephina de Fouw for this reference.
- 13 See Baarsen 2014.