Summary


The Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) owns many works of art. The state collection consists nowadays not only of the holdings of the former national museums but also of about 100,000 objects in the care of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN). In the 20th century this function was served by the predecessors of the ICN: the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, RBK, 1985-1997; appendix 4), the Office for Dispersed State-Owned Collections (Dienst Verspreide Rijkscollecties, DVR, 1975-1985; appendix 1) and the Office for Dispersed State-Owned Works of Art (Dienst voor ’s Rijks Verspreide Kunstvoorwerpen, DRVK, 1949-1975; appendix 1).

Those objects not on loan to museums, public buildings or Dutch embassies abroad are stored in the facilities of the ICN in Rijswijk, adjoining The Hague. About 29,000 of the 100,000 objects date from the 20th century. They were acquired between 1932 and 1992 in a variety of ways: purchase, commission, legacy or donation. Some were purchased by government officials, some by special committees. This group of art objects and their acquisition by the state form the subject of the present book.

This is the first systematic study of the acquisition policy for 20th-century art of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences (OKW) and its successors. Previous researchers who examined this material were hardly aware that the ministry owned a collection of modern art. Those who do write about it seem to think that it consists entirely of acquisitions made under the Visual Arts Program (BKR, 1956-1987). The BKR and its predecessor (Contraprestatie, 1949-1956) were however programs for social benefits. The objects they brought in were not acquired directly for the state collection.

The general lack of awareness that the Dutch state owns a collection of modern art is understandable. The collection is not on display in a museum of its own. Moreover, until recently people seemed to take too literally the statement of the Dutch prime minister and constitutional reformer Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798-1872): ‘Art is no concern of the government.’

Government acquisition policy can be divided into five periods. It began in 1932, underwent major revisions in 1940, 1945, 1972 and 1985, and came to an end in 1992. Since each of these years marked a new departure, the book will be divided into five chronological chapters. In each chapter the policy we encounter will be compared with actual practice. Because we are dealing with a very large number of works, only the most important acquisitions can be referred to individually.

The relation between policy and practice is viewed from several angles: government cultural policy, the collecting atmosphere and artistic climate. The individuals who performed the acquisitions are identified and their networks examined. Attention is paid to the preference (or lack of it) for certain styles or themes. The available budget is also kept in view, as well as where the object was acquired.
and the space for which it was intended. In the introduction, finally, the key question is faced: what were the results of sixty years of state collecting of modern art?

In 1932, for the first time, a post appeared on the budget of the Dutch government for purchasing contemporary art. This initiative can be seen as a continuation of a one-time move dating from the previous decade: in 1923 the city of Amsterdam received money from the state in order to buy work from artists who were suffering from the consequences of an economic dip. The 1932 allocation however was of a different nature. It applied to all Dutch artists; and the criterion for a purchase was not the financial need of the artist but the quality of the work. Even though the Depression had broken out, successive ministers of Education, Art and Science were against providing social benefits for artists. They felt that this was the responsibility of their colleagues in the Department of Social Affairs. The latter agreed; in 1935 that department instituted a Sustenance Fund for Artists (Voorzieningsfonds voor Kunstenaars) for artists in need.

The 1932 allocation did not reflect a clear policy. This is no surprise, since there was nothing throughout the 1930s that deserved to be called an art policy. Yet, with the Depression in progress and with cutbacks being the order of the day, it meant something that ten thousand guilders (€ 4,545) were reserved for commissions and purchases of art. In keeping with Thorbecke’s dictum, the purchases were not made by civil servants. The minister entrusted this task to a State Advisory Committee for Commissions to Contemporary Artists (Rijkscommissie van Advies voor Opdrachten aan Hedendaagsche Beeldende Kunstenaars). The committee was instructed to purchase works of high artistic quality for the exclusive purpose of decorating government buildings. The upshot was that the new acquisitions were mainly commissions for specified locations. The situation changed in 1937, when the committee gained another source of funding in addition to the ministerial budget post: a portion of the income from the annual Summer Stamp (Zomerzegels) campaign. (These are postage stamps with a surcharge that goes into a charity fund.) The amount of money over which the committee disposed varied from year to year, but it was more than the ten thousand guilders from the ministerial budget. The committee was free to use this fund for socially motivated purchases. In this sense, the Summer Stamp fund was a precursor of the post-war Contraprestatie and BKR programs. The purchases from this source had another character than those from the regular budget. Whereas the latter consisted mainly of sculpture and applied art, the Summer Stamp acquisitions were predominantly graphic art and paintings. Because they were not intended for a specific place or function, they were stored in a depot. This forced the responsible officials to think seriously for the first time about a state art depot, on the model of the Mobilier National in France (chapter 1).

The German occupation brought with it a National Socialist art policy. Although most writings on the subject consider that policy to have been a failure, this cannot be said of the purchase of 20th-century art. The officials responsible for the propagation of the New Order, working for the Department of Public Instruction and Arts (Departement van Volksvoorlichting en Kunsten; DVK, instituted in November 1940) were very keen to make use of art and artists. Along with education, culture was considered an important instrument for the Nazification of the Dutch people. To the functionaries in DVK, art was very definitely a concern of the state. They gave expression to this attitude not only in
speeches and writings but also in facts on the ground. Allocation for art purchases was raised far above the ten thousand guilders at which it had remained since 1932. In 1944 it reached a level nearly three times as high. In addition, DVK disbursed funds for the social support of artists, even setting up a shop for selling applied art (the Art House [Kunsthuis] in Amsterdam) and organizing sales exhibitions in the Netherlands and Germany. To benefit from this support, an artist had to be registered in the Netherlands Culture Chamber (Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer), which did not admit Jews, Communists or the makers of ‘degenerate’ art. Thanks to this policy, between 1940 and 1945 nearly twice as many works of art were purchased as in the preceding eight years. The civil servants did not delegate the purchasing to an outside agency; they did it themselves. The best acquisitions were put on display in 1943 and 1944. From the start, the departmental collection was actively used for the furnishing of government buildings. At the end of the war much of this art was destroyed in bombardments and other destructive events (chapter 2).

After the war art policy was driven by the desire for fairer social and geographic distribution of the blessings of civilization. Good culture, it was believed, would combat spiritual numbness and thereby counteract undesirable behavior. The pre-war procedures were resumed: acquisition committees were instructed to buy the best art being made in the Netherlands. In addition, special purchases were made. Classroom posters were ordered for the lower grades of high school and prints of the Delta Program of dike building were made for foreign visitors. Portraits were commissioned of government ministers, writers, actors, filmmakers, musicians, scientists and artists for placement in theatres and government buildings. Medals were struck in honor of notable occasions. Although the acquisitions were made available in a wide variety of public locations, not enough cultural dispersion was achieved. Various tactics were tried, but none of them had the desired effect. A proposal by the Provisional Arts Council (Voorlopige Raad voor de Kunst) in 1949 to create a Central Exhibition Service to display state purchases was found too expensive. In 1954-1955 OKW organized a traveling exhibition under the title Accounting (Rekenschap), with a choice of the acquisitions from the period 1932-1945. A plan to follow up with a second exhibition was however turned down for financial reasons.

In 1960 these ambitions led OKW, in collaboration with the town government of Rotterdam, to launch a plan to put up a National Museum for Dutch 20th-Century Art in that city. This plan too failed to materialize, on account of insufficient funding and the lack of inner cohesion in the collection. The minister encouraged members of the committee to be more active in activating their networks to find good destinations for purchases and commissions. When this failed, the work in question would end up in the DRVK. Out of disappointment with the relative obscurity of the collection, the minister experimented in the late 1960s with a new policy (chapter 3).

What the new policy entailed became clear in 1972 with the launching of the so-called blank spots plan. The blank spots were areas where the inhabitants normally had little contact with modern art. In 1965 the Ministry of Education, Art and Sciences had been disbanded, and art policy became the responsibility of the new Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work (Cultuur, Recreatie en Maatschappelijk werk, CRM). The name was programmatic. Acquisition policy was now an extension of welfare; art had to be socially relevant. The purchase committees were abolished and replaced by a
single committee that had the task of dispersing culture throughout the country: the Advisory Committee for Programming Exhibitions in the Netherlands (Adviescommissie voor de Programmering van Tentoonstellingen in Nederland), called for short the Programming Committee (Programmeringscommissie). Each year the committee thought up fourteen to twenty ideas for exhibitions that covered as many fields of art as possible. All artists in the country, no less than 14,000, were invited to submit work. Their entries were judged by small, ad hoc project groups that chose twenty to thirty works in their area of specialization. These selections formed the basis for traveling exhibitions organized by the Netherlands Art Foundation (NKS; appendix 2). Complete with posters and catalogues and sometimes augmented with other educational materials, these exhibitions were made available to Dutch museums and other cultural institutions. More modest assemblages of work on paper, so-called Viewing Folders (Kijkmappen), were put together for non-museum venues such as libraries, old-age homes and hospitals. These collections of prints, drawings and photographs in plastic jackets were sent out in loose form so they could be laid on a table and picked up by the visitors.

In order to further the dispersal of Dutch art beyond the national borders, in 1974 the Visual Arts Office for Abroad was set up (Bureau Beeldende Kunst Buitenland, BBKB; appendix 3). The BBKB, which organized traveling exhibitions, was housed in the same building as the NKS, which provided it with manpower and technical support. At the end of a domestic or foreign exhibition tour, the works would be deposited in the DVR depot (chapter 4).

Although the Viewing Folders were quite successful for a full decade, in the long run the blank spots plan fell victim to excessive bureaucracy. In 1983 it was discontinued, at which point the notion of a Central Exhibition Service that had been broached in the 1950s was dusted off. With a recession in progress and with the government engaged in a retrenchment operation, it was decided to consolidate the various government art services. The three institutions that organized exhibitions, the DVR, the NKS and the BBKB, were joined in a single RBK. The official launching of this mammoth organization took place in 1985, but it had already begun its work in mid-1983. In its early years, the main task of the RBK was to organize exhibitions. In addition, it was charged with the care of the state collection of old and modern art, which in 1985 consisted of more than 370,000 objects, including 220,000 from the Artist Support Program, BKR. The sheer volume of the collection caused such serious logistic problems that the minister delayed the official founding of the BKR until a division had been made between art works of museum quality – Exceptional Cultural Value (Bijzonder Culturele Waarde, BCW) – and those of mere Cultural Value (Culturele Waarde, CW), which were destined to be given away when the time came.

In 1985 a new acquisition policy was formulated: ‘broad collecting,’ intended to assemble a representative state collection of 20th-century art and applied art made in the Netherlands. For the purchase of contemporary art an annual sum of one million guilders (€ 454,545) was made available. Additional funding was provided for filling in gaps in the state holdings in older 20th-century art and for acquiring large, coherent collections that deserved to be preserved intact.

The state collection had three aims: Dutch museums could borrow from it; the RBK could organize exhibitions from it at home and abroad; and government buildings could be adorned with it.
As in the war years, the selection of work to be acquired was not delegated to outside committees; the acquisitions were made by specialized curators in the RBK.

A new round of curtailed expenditure at the beginning of the 1990s hit the RBK as well. The bureau became an advisory body; all independent activities came to a halt. The last purchase took place in mid-1992. State funding for the acquisition of modern art was then transferred to the Mondrian Foundation (chapter 5).

Dutch government acquisition policy for 20th-century art has had a bad press on account of its inconsistency. The criticism is justified; in the sixty years that the state was in the market for modern art it shifted direction four times. The attendant criticism that the changes were the result of poor policy is not justified. The policy shifts were the result of developments in society and government that time and again drove a wedge between policy and practice. A number of critics have moreover charged that the acquisitions themselves were not up to snuff. This too is unjustified. Among the 29,000 acquisitions are many inferior works, but there are excellent ones as well. In all five chapters examples are discussed and illustrated.

Government policy for the purchase and commissioning of art may have changed at several junctures, but one factor remained constant throughout: the public function. The acquisitions were always intended to be displayed. And there is the rub: by and large the state collection languished in the shadows. Corrective initiatives of all kinds were launched: exhibitions with and without binding themes, catalogues, loans to museums. The one attempt to found a museum for the acquisitions was abortive. From 1949 until today the collection is stored in a state art depot.

Dutch state acquisition policy for 20th-century art and applied art, as put into practice from 1932 to 1992, resulted in a richly varied collection. Compared with a well-structured museum collection, it suffers from a certain imbalance. The early decades of the 20th century, for example, are underrepresented by comparison with the post-war years. Some artists and some art forms – painting, ceramics, photography, work on paper – are present in abundance, while others – avant-garde artists of the Interbellum, art deco jewelry – are largely if not completely missing. In the diversity of the collection lies a certain strength but also a weakness. The state collection of 20th-century art is not the collection of masterpieces that one might aspire to assemble in a museum. Instead, it is a rich mine of material of all kinds. Researchers, curators of collections and exhibitions and furnishers of public buildings all profit from it. This book is intended to contribute to the understanding of the origins of the collection.

Translation by Gary Schwartz