

COUNT CHARLES COBENZL:  
ART AND POLITICS IN THE AUSTRIAN NETHERLANDS

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Count Charles Cobenzl (Karl Johann Philipp von Cobenzl; 1712–1770), born in Vienna<sup>1</sup>, diplomat and administrator in the service of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI and his daughter Maria Theresa, made his enduring mark on the economic and political history of Belgium and Austria, but his legacy is most felt in the sphere of the arts, not only in Brussels and Vienna, but also in the once imperial city of Saint Petersburg in Russia<sup>2</sup>.

If Cobenzl's untiring efforts to stimulate the artistic industries in the Southern Netherlands – from the making of hats to the weaving of tapestries, the production of paper and porcelain – are recognised, their effects are little felt today. In contrast, Cobenzl is credited quite justly with the foundation, either directly or through example, of three national Belgian cultural institutions, the Académie Royale, the Bibliothèque Royale and the Commission Royale d'Histoire de Belgique<sup>3</sup>. To this one might add the local school of conservation, since in the 1760s Cobenzl fought hard for the preservation of works of art in situ in churches and monasteries. Cobenzl's support for local art schools and for 'pensions' for artists to travel and study abroad also not only contributed to the revival of the arts in the region<sup>4</sup> but set a precedent that was to be followed in later years in Vienna.

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1 See the essays of Miha Preinfalk and Federico Vidic (*Dalla signoria alla corte*) in this book.

2 For a survey of Cobenzl's career and influence: Catherine PHILLIPS, *Art and Politics in the Austrian Netherlands: Count Charles Cobenzl (1712–70) and his Collection of Drawings*, PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2013; available online: <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/4049/>; EAD., *Count Charles Cobenzl (1712–70), Promoting the Arts and Learning in the Austrian Netherlands*, in Katlijne VAN DER STIGHELEN, Leen KELCHTERMANS, Koenrad BROSENS (eds.), *Embracing Brussels. Art and Culture in the Court City, 1600–1800*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013, pp. 119–135.

3 Although the Commission was established only in 1834, it grew out of initiatives introduced by Cobenzl in the 1750s.

4 See: Denis COEKELBERGHS, Pierre LOZE, 1770–1830. *Autour du néo-classicisme en Belgique*, Bruxelles, Crédit Communal, 1986; Alain JACOBS, *A. C. Lens, 1739–1822*, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen, 1989, *passim*.



**Fig. 18.1.** Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Polish Nobleman* (1637), oil on panel. Washintgon, National Gallery, inv. 1937.1.78. Acquired by Charles Cobenzl in 1765. Sold from the Hermitage in 1931.

In Saint Petersburg, Cobenzl is a strong presence in the Hermitage Museum, for in 1768 Russian Empress Catherine the Great purchased the collection he had formed in Brussels, thereby acquiring 46 paintings of superb quality and over 4,000 drawings<sup>5</sup>. That acquisition marked the foundation of the Hermitage's cabinet of drawings and Cobenzl's works of paper remain, even 250 years later, at the very heart of the now world-famous collection of drawings by Old Masters. The sale of works of art from Soviet museums in the 1920s and 1930s brought masterpieces he had once owned – both paintings and drawings – into national collections around the world, perhaps the most notable of the paintings being Rembrandt's *Polish Nobleman* of 1637, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington (**fig. 18.1**). In the book world, Cobenzl's name regularly comes up as items from his famous library<sup>6</sup> emerge onto the market in bindings tooled with

his coat of arms, most recently in 2019 with the celebrated twenty-volume *Atlas Le Mire/Cobenzl*<sup>7</sup>.

- 5 Catherine PHILLIPS, *Collecting Drawings in Brussels in the 1760s: The Collection of Count Charles Cobenzl (1712–70) in the Hermitage, St Petersburg*, in *Les marques de collection: V Rencontres Internationales du Salon du Dessin, 24 et 25 mars 2010*, textes réunis par Cordélia Hattori, Paris, Société du Salon du dessin - L'Echelle de Jacob, 2010, pp. 111–124; EAD., *Кабинет картин графа Карла Кобенцля: опыт реконструкции и история его создания* [Reconstruction and History of the Cabinet of Paintings of Count Charles Cobenzl (1712–1770)], in *Труды Государственного Эрмитажа LVI. Эрмитажные чтения памяти В.Ф. Левинсона-Лессинга (02.03.1893–27.06.1972). 2006–2007* [Transactions of the State Hermitage Museum LVI. In Memoriam Vladimir Levinson-Lessing (02.03.1893–27.06.1972). Proceedings of the Conferences 2006–2007], St Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, 2011, pp. 78–101.
- 6 *Catalogue des livres, en toutes sortes de facultez et langues de feu S. E. le Comte de Cobenzl* [...], Bruxelles, H. Vleminckx, sale 10 June 1771. For a superb study of Cobenzl's library, not only those in the posthumous sale: Claude SORGELOOS, *La bibliothèque du comte Charles de Cobenzl, ministre plénipotentiaire dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens, et celle de son épouse la comtesse Marie-Thérèse de Palffy*, in «Le livre et l'estampe», XXX (1984), no. 119–120, pp. 115–210.
- 7 *Atlas, Novus, Selectus, Universalis et Topographicus...*, 20 volumes with over 2000 hand-coloured engraved maps, Brussels, 1753. There are four views of Naples by Antoine

Standing on the cusp of different cultural histories, Cobenzl has often been studied from a national point of view: for his role in the Southern Netherlands and thus in Belgian history, as a diplomat working on behalf of Austria, or as a member of a renowned family of the Gorizia region. If historical study has often been unaware of the true nature of his collection, that collection has largely drawn the attention of art historians and museum professionals through individual works, with insufficient attention paid to the historical context that has been the focus of most research on Charles Cobenzl himself.

It was staff in the Department of Drawings at the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, notably Alexey Larionov, Keeper of Dutch and Flemish Drawings, who first initiated a project to bring together the different strands, to unite our understanding of Cobenzl the administrator, the man and the collector. For this purpose, they have made available to this author the full range of material in the museum today, including the manuscript catalogue compiled at the time of the purchase in 1768<sup>8</sup>, allowing us to make vital links between documentary material and works of art. Slovenian art historians have in recent years looked more closely at now dispersed eighteenth-century collections, including those of the Cobenzl family<sup>9</sup>, and this conference and its accompanying publication are cause for great optimism that a more holistic picture of Charles' understanding of and role in the arts across cultures can be arrived at through collaboration between the many different interested parties.

## 1. Cobenzl and the arts

More than 250 volumes of the personal correspondence of Count Charles Cobenzl, plenipotentiary minister in the Southern (Austrian) Netherlands from 1753 to his death, have provided rich material for Belgian scholars since the nineteenth century<sup>10</sup>. That correspondence has been used to throw light on numerous aspects of the region under its Austrian government, on politics and religion, the economy and the arts.

The first to look at it from the point of view of Cobenzl's involvement in the arts was Alexandre Pinchart, who published selected extracts demonstrating the minister's network of contacts, from local artists to such

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Cardon tipped in to the last volume. With Daniel Crouch Rare Books, London - New York in 2019.

8 Department of Drawings, Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

9 E.g. Barbara MUROVEC, *Slike Francesca Pittonija iz dvorca Haasberg / I dipinti di Francesco Pittoni del Castello di Haasberg*, in «Acta historiae artis Slovenica», 7 (2002), pp. 56-69.

10 Archives générales du Royaume et Archives de l'Etat Secrétariat d'Etat et de Guerre, Brussels (hereafter AGR, SEG).

major figures as Ange-Laurent Lalive de Jully in Paris and Johann Joachim Winckelmann in Rome<sup>11</sup>. While Ghislaine de Boom was the first to present a dispassionate scholarly appreciation of Cobenzl's political achievements<sup>12</sup>, the Comte de Villermont produced a superb and spirited picture of Cobenzl the man as a whole, a picture in which his artistic policies played a central role<sup>13</sup>. In more recent times, a profound appreciation of Cobenzl's contribution to the discourse on the arts was made by Denis Coekelberghs, who concentrated on the minister's support for artists studying and working in Rome<sup>14</sup>. Emphasizing Cobenzl's achievements while not avoiding criticism of aspects of his character (his many affairs, his debts, his pride and his rivalry with the governor, Prince Charles de Lorraine, etc.), all these authors were working from the perspective of historians of the Austrian Netherlands.

Nonetheless, the many references in the correspondence to the collection formed by Charles Cobenzl led these authors to be cautious in assessing the minister as a collector or 'man of taste'. If Claude Sorgeloos could conduct an informed study of the composition of Cobenzl's library<sup>15</sup>, any analysis of the composition of his artistic collection seemed impossible, since even those who realized that the collection was not lost, merely behind the Iron Curtain, found communication with Soviet museums in the second half of the twentieth century problematic.

Xavier Duquenne's 2004 guide to the Cobenzl documents in Brussels made this vast body of letters accessible to international art historians<sup>16</sup>, one of the first to take advantage of this opportunity to make connections between references to Cobenzl's commissions for the decorative arts and real objects

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11 Alexandre PINCHART, *Correspondance artistique du Comte de Cobenzl*, in *Compte rendu des séances de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, 4me série, XI (séances 1883-janvier 1884), XII (séances 1884), Brussels, 1884-1885; part 1, XI, pp. 193-224; part 2, XI, pp. 269-286; part 3, XI, pp. 353-376; part 4, XII, pp. 18-53.

12 Ghislaine DE BOOM, *Les Ministres plénipotentiaires dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens, principalement Cobenzl*, Brussels, Lamartin, 1932.

13 Carlos DE VILLERMONT, *La cour de Vienne à Bruxelles au XVIIIe siècle. Le comte de Cobenzl, ministre plénipotentiaire aux Pays-Bas*, Lille - Paris - Bruges, De Brower et C.ie Éditeurs, 1925. Unfortunately, the book almost entirely lacks footnotes.

14 Denis COEKELBERGHS, Chapter III, *Un mécénat éclairé*, in *Les Peintres belges à Rome de 1700 à 1830*, Bruxelles - Rome, Institut historique belge de Rome, 1976 (Études d'histoire de l'art / Institut historique belge de Rome, III); ID., *Les peintres belges à Rome aux XVIIe et XIXe siècles. Bilan, apports nouveaux et propositions*, in Nicole DACOS, Cecile DULIÈRE, (eds.), *Italia Belgica : la Fondation nationale Princesse Marie-José et les relations artistiques entre la Belgique et l'Italie 1930-2005: 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire* (Études d'histoire de l'art, IX), Bruxelles, Institut historique belge de Rome, 2005, pp. 236-285.

15 Sorgeloos, *La bibliothèque* cit.

16 Xavier DUQUENNE, *Inventaire analytique de la correspondance générale du comte de Cobenzl (1718 [sic] - 1770)*, Bruxelles, 2004 (Archives Générales du Royaume. Instruments de recherche, 578).

being Rainier Baarsens<sup>17</sup>. One could at last start thinking not just about Cobenzl's own assertion of his taste, or the flattering comparisons with Colbert made by those who depended on his patronage<sup>18</sup>, but about the realities of his artistic competence.

Analysis of Cobenzl's artistic correspondence and individual works of art has demonstrated that we cannot confidently state that Cobenzl was learned in the arts or that he had 'an eye' for all that was best in paintings, sculptures or drawings<sup>19</sup>. His talent lay elsewhere, in appreciating the importance of art in all its forms as a political and economic tool, vital to a country's finances and to its international status. Cobenzl's correspondence can be usefully studied to analyse his collecting practices, of such importance in the increasingly popular sphere of art market studies<sup>20</sup>, but it provides no basis to blindly proclaim him a 'collectionneur d'exception'<sup>21</sup>. Cobenzl was not so much a consumer of the arts as a promoter. For him the arts were not simply a private matter but something of state significance. He knew the value to

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17 Reinier BAARSEN, "Ébénisterie" at the Court of Charles of Lorraine, in «The Burlington Magazine» (February 2005), pp. 91-99; ID., *Albertus de Lannoij, "Ébéniste de la cour du plus curieux des princes"*, in *Actes du colloque Autour de Bayar / Le Roy*, 2008, pp. 255-264; ID., *Sèvres in Brussels: the Collection of Charles of Lorraine*, in «The French Porcelain Society Journal», 3 (2007), pp. 45-57.

18 In 1765 the artist and biographer of artists Jean-Baptiste Descamps sent a drawing to Cobenzl in which he made direct reference to Colbert: «Je vous adresse ci-joint par la poste un petit dessein qui exprime mes sentiments d'après vos bienfaits et votre amour pour notre art. Sous la forme de Minerve vous distribué trois couronnes aux génies de la Peinture, de la Sculpture et de l'architecture. Les armes de l'empereur sur la toile derrière Eux marque qu'ils s'occupent à célébrer les événements glorieux de son règne. Vous êtes appuyé avec votre bouclier sur les lettres de noblesse que vous obtenez pour ceux qui méritent par leurs talents cette marque de distinction: c'est ainsi que Colbert manifesta au loin des grâces; il attira et fixa près de lui le génie et le goût par des bienfaits qui ne coûtent rien au prince, mais qui élèvent l'âme et qui encouragent l'émulation qui a besoin quelquefois des plus gandes secousses». Descamps to Cobenzl, 11 April 1765, AGR, SEG, 1116, fol. 84.

19 E.g. Catherine PHILLIPS, *Rodolphe Valltravers (1723–1815?), Swiss Gentleman, and the Promotion of Useful Knowledge*, in *Век Просвещения / Le Siècle de Lumières*, III, Moscow, Nauka, 2011, pp. 96-121.

20 Valérie KOBİ, *Une prison en or. Le Comte Charles de Cobenzl (1712–1770 : la collection comme stratégie politique*, unpublished conference paper, «Colloque de la relève suisse en histoire de l'art, Fribourg, 17–18 October 2008»; Benjamin GERARD, *La constitution de la collection d'art de Charles de Cobenzl par le biais de son réseau de correspondance*, in «Dix-huitième siècle», 47 (2015), pp. 567-585. Both authors inevitably make errors based on ignorance of the collection itself, but their analysis of mechanisms and motivations is valuable.

21 Patrick MICHEL, *Les plaisirs du collectionneur selon Charles de Cobenzl, ministre et collectionneur d'exception à Bruxelles (1753–1770)*, in *Artistes, musées et collections. Un hommage à Antoine Schnapper*, Paris, Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2016, pp. 265-286. Michel's text, based solely on the archives in Brussels, produces a picture of Cobenzl informed by the minister's own statements or the flattery of others.

himself of declaring his love for drawings publicly or in letters to important correspondents<sup>22</sup>, while his admiration for and promotion of Peter Paul Rubens was, by implication, promotion of the Southern Netherlands and its culture as a whole. By aiming for a more nuanced picture, we arrive at an understanding that Cobenzl's talent was in essence political: it lay in his knowledge, his passion and enthusiasm, his zest for life, both personal and public, and his ability to apply all those things to the achievement of his ends, the flourishing of the Southern Netherlands and, ultimately, the generation of income for Vienna.

## 2. Divided loyalties or a man of the world?

It might appear at first sight to be telling that Cobenzl owned the original drawing for the frontispiece to volume I of Johann Weichard Valvasor's *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain* (1689)<sup>23</sup> (**fig. 18.2**). With its inscription, «His formis lustrata novis patet orbe videnda, CARNIA fida DEO CARNIA FIDA DUCI» (Through these new forms, Krain stands open to be seen by the world, Krain is loyal to God, Krain is loyal to the Duke<sup>24</sup>), this drawing and its place in his collection could be interpreted as a sign of Cobenzl's patriotism, of his esteem for his ancestral lands.

Yet archive documents indicate that this drawing was not bought individually or received as a gift from some compatriot. It was amongst 625 sheets acquired by Cobenzl from the Swiss intermediary Rodolphe Valltravers of Biel / Bienne, who described it as "Symbole d'un mariage. par Eimart"<sup>25</sup>. In itself, this source is important in that though the print was engraved by Johann Alexander Böner (1647-1720), the author of the design was long unknown<sup>26</sup>. It is thus thanks to Valltravers that we can now identify him with some certainty as Georg Christoph Eimmart II (1638-1705), an artist working in Nuremberg,

22 For instance in letters to the head of the office responsible for the Southern Netherlands in Vienna, 6 August 1761, AGR, SEG, 119, foll. 21v-22r, fol. 51v, etc.

23 Johann Weichard VALVASOR, *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain, das ist Gelegen- und Beschaffenheit dieses Romisch-Keyserlichen Erblandes in reines Teutsch gebracht, mit Erklärungen, Anmerck- und- Erzählungen erweitert durch F Francisci*, 4 vols, Laybach-Nürnberg, Endter, 1689. On the publication see: Branko REISP, *Kranjski polihistor Janez Vajkard Valvasor*, Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga, 1983.

24 Translation courtesy of Rudolf Wachter, with thanks to Anna Petrakova.

25 AGR, SEG, 1234, fol. 91r, January 1764, no. 394. On Valltravers see: Phillips, *Rodolphe Valltravers* cit.; Catherine PHILLIPS, *Drawings in the Hermitage from the Collection of Johann Caspar Füssli of Zurich*, in «Master Drawings», 59/4 (2021), pp. 499-528.

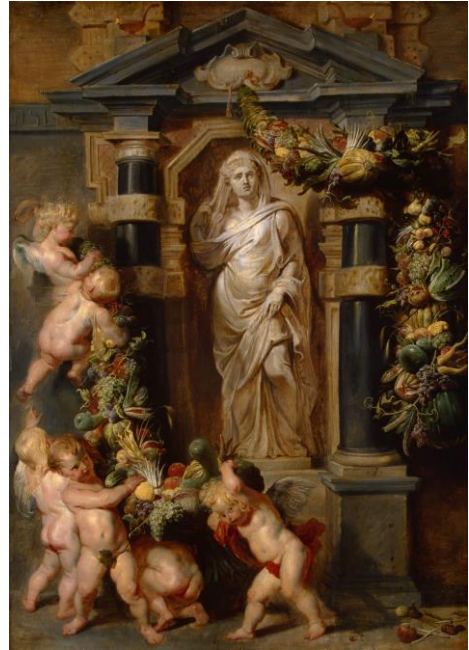
26 With thanks to Mirna Abaffy of the Bibliotheca Valvasoriana, Archdiocese Zagreb, email of 7 November 2012 for this information, and to Blaženka First of the National Museum of Slovenia.

who was, as an astronomer and mathematician, very probably part of Valvasor's circle<sup>27</sup>.

In terms of what the drawing tells us about Cobenzl's relationship to his ancestral lands, however, it was apparently kept with all the other drawings and there is nothing to show he was even aware that the drawing was related to the book, a copy of which he held in his own library<sup>28</sup>.

Indeed, the minister possessed only relatively few books on his ancestral lands, scattered amongst works devoted to the different Austrian possessions<sup>29</sup>. At times his pride in his native region seems to be largely ostentatious, and although he owned not only a bound copy of Franz Anton von Steinberg's *Gründliche Nachricht von dem in dem Inner-Crain gelegenen Czirknitzer-See* of 1758 (Ljubljana, Anna Elizabetha Reichhardtin), which bore a dedication to him, but also 25 unbound copies (he was known to present them as gifts), he was a typical absentee landowner, taking rents whilst doing little for the improvement of his estates.

Cobenzl's loyalty to the centre, to Maria Theresa and the administration, was undoubted, but over the course of his career he demonstrated himself to be extremely adaptable, almost chameleon-like, throwing himself wholeheartedly into each region to which he was sent. During some fifteen years he lived a largely peripatetic existence, lobbying for his ruler. Whether in Lorraine in the late 1730s (entrusted with establishing the



**Fig. 18.2.** Georg Christoph Eimmart II, Drawing for the Frontispiece to volume I of Johann Weichard Valvasor's *Die Ehre des Herzogthums Crain* (ca.1688), pen and grey ink, grey wash, over red chalk in places. Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. OR 4646.

27 Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, inv. OR 4646. Pen and grey ink, grey wash, over red chalk in places; 297 x 180. Mikhail Dobroklonsky (note on the mount and in the inventory of the Hermitage's Department of Drawings) attributed the drawing to Ottomar Elliger (1666-1735) on the basis of the monogram bottom right, 'E. f', which should be interpreted as 'Eimmart fecit'.

28 *Catalogue des livres* cit., lot 1651. This is not a full catalogue of Cobenzl's books, for many were removed before the sale; Sorgeloos 1984.

29 *Catalogue des livres* cit., bound copy lot 1652, unbound copies lot 1653.

borders of the Duchy in preparation for its exchange for the Grand Duchy of Tuscany), networking in different German courts, or based in Mainz from the mid-1740s, he made himself at home, winning friends and joining in with whichever lifestyle dominated at court (in Mainz, this involved considerable quantities of hunting and love affairs, to match the lifestyle of the Landgrave, William VIII of Hesse-Kassel).

It was his appointment in 1753 as minister of Maria Theresa in the Southern Netherlands that allowed Cobenzl to settle down almost for the first time in his life. Although his home in Brussels, the Hôtel de Mastaing, was rented, he set about adorning it as fitted a man of his status, totally reworking the gardens at great expense<sup>30</sup>. He remained in Brussels until his death in early 1770, rarely leaving the regional capital save to visit other towns in the region. Now his ability to immerse himself in local interests, and turn that immersion to the benefit of his monarch, was strongly manifested. He immediately understood the value of policies aimed at revitalising the local economy through patronage of the artistic industries, policies first promoted by his predecessor, Count Antoniotto Botta Adorno<sup>31</sup>, and over the course of the first seven years, he devoted himself to a variety of strategies for raising the region's income.

But Cobenzl's involvement in local life also meant that, however loyal he was to Vienna, he was never blindly patriotic. In endless exchanges of letters with his colleagues in the Austrian capital, not least with Kaunitz himself, he argued that however much Vienna needed money, it made bad economic sense simply to extract it from the region, rather than investing now to increase income in the future. While Kaunitz never doubted his loyalty, Cobenzl found himself in an invidious position: seen as an Austrian imposition by many locals, in Vienna there were those who were critical of his defence of the interests of the Southern Netherlands<sup>32</sup>. But Cobenzl had shared rather than conflicting loyalties: loyal to his semantic fatherland, Gorizia and Carniola, where he had rights, income and interests, to his fatherland of obligation, where he served the state, Austria (Vienna), he was also loyal to the Southern Netherlands, which, as part of the Austrian lands, fell into the sphere of obligation, but which also came to be somewhere that he felt extremely

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30 Chris de MAEGD, «En même temps à la campagne et en ville». *Les jardins de Charles, comte Cobenzl, rue aux Laines à Bruxelles (1753–1770)*, in Claude SORGELOOS (ed.), *Autour de Charles-Alexandre de Lorraine, gouverneur général des Pays-Bas autrichiens, 1744–1780: culture et société*, Bruxelles, 2000, pp. 45–52.

31 On this continuity see e.g. De Boom, *Les Ministres plénipotentiaires* cit.

32 It must be noted that Charles de Lorraine too was sometimes felt to be too dedicated to the region of which he had been governor since 1744. See Michèle GALAND, *Charles de Lorraine, gouverneur-général des Pays-Bas autrichiens (1744–1780)* (Études sur le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, XX), Bruxelles, 1993.



comfortable. De Boom concluded that the criticism of Cobenzl for favouritism to the ‘other side’, coming both from those in the Southern Netherlands and those in Vienna, suggested that he had in fact found some kind of balance of loyalties<sup>33</sup>.

### 3. Flemish patriot

Mon héros Rubens [...] Je le crois le plus fort pour le coloris, égal à Paul de Vérone pour les draperies, et le plus savant pour la composition<sup>34</sup>.

For all our criticism of those art historians who quote the correspondence of Charles Cobenzl without setting it in context, this statement, in a letter to Johann Joachim Winckelmann – himself no great admirer of the aesthetics of seventeenth-century painting – is borne out by everything that we know of the minister. Of the 46 paintings that made up his cabinet, nineteen were Dutch and nineteen were Flemish; six were then given to Rubens<sup>35</sup> (**fig. 18.3**). If Cobenzl had had his way, he would have owned even more works by the artist, for whom he had by the 1760s what might almost be called an obsession.

Cobenzl had been happy to send paintings out of the Southern Netherlands in the early 1750s: in 1754, for instance, he had paintings sent from the *Chambre des Comptes* in Brussels to Vienna, including an *Ecce Homo* that he thought to be by Van Dyck, «un des plus beaux ouvrages de ce grand peintre»<sup>36</sup>. Then in 1756, he acted as intermediary in acquiring a painting (apparently by Rubens) for his old friend Wilhelm VIII of Hesse-Kassel, *Diana Departing for the Hunt*<sup>37</sup>. But by 1762, increasingly aware of the weaknesses of artistic education and achievement in the Southern Netherlands, he saw Rubens as the model to which young artists should aspire. Thus, he not only argued for the preservation of works by Rubens that were still in situ, often in damp or dark conditions, but he came to a realisation that the export of

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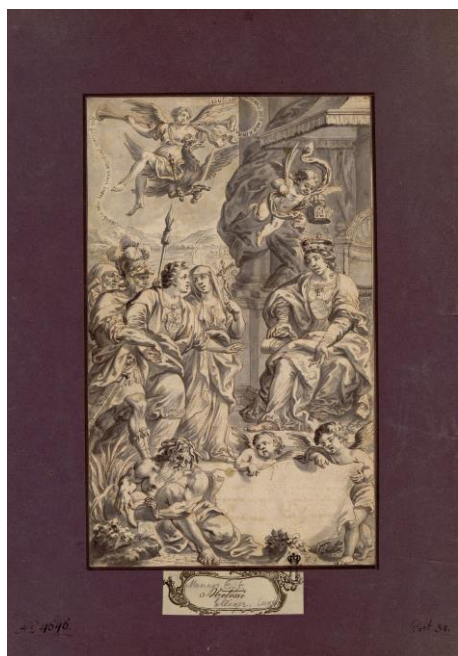
33 De Boom, *Les Ministres plénipotentiaires* cit., p. 242.

34 Cobenzl to Winckelmann, 8 March 1768, AGR, SEG, 1248, fol. 246r; published in Pinchart, *Correspondance artistique* cit., I, pp. 205–206.

35 Phillips, *Reconstruction and History* cit.

36 25 January 1755, AGR, SEG, 1162, fol. 35; late January or early February 1755, AGR, SEG, 1261, fol. 304. I might suggest that this is a painting with an obscure provenance, now given to Gaspar de Crayer, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, inv. GG F15.

37 30 August 1756, AGR, SEG, 1142, fol. 290; published in Pinchart, *Correspondance artistique* cit., III, pp. 368–369. The painting, now given to Rubens’ workshop, is in Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.



**Fig. 18.3.** Peter Paul Rubens, with Frans Snyders, *Statue of Ceres* (ca.1615), oil on panel. Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. GE 504.

paintings and other works of art was doing damage to the local culture. When his good friend Ange Laurent La Live de Jully purchased Van Dyck's *Family Portrait*<sup>38</sup> and needed help sending it to Paris, Cobenzl complied with the request but expressed his regret:

Je le trouve admirable et regretterois encore d'avantage qu'il part de notre pays, s'il n'étoit pas destiné pour une personne que j'estime infiniment<sup>39</sup>.

With only limited resources at his disposal (despite his rich lifestyle, he preferred to defer payment, as his vast debts going back many years prove<sup>40</sup>), Cobenzl sought out more and more works by Flemish and Dutch artists. The acquisition in late 1763 of his largest and most striking painting by Rubens, *Cimon and Pero* (Roman Charity)<sup>41</sup>, may have done much to fire

his enthusiasm. During a tour of the lands he administered in May 1766, Cobenzl took the opportunity to view works by Rubens<sup>42</sup>, making recommendations to some owners that they take measures to preserve the treasures in their care. Horrified at the terrible state of a large *Virgin Giving the Rosary to St Dominic* belonging to the Dominicans of the Hermitage in Lier, he felt that he had to save it... by purchasing it<sup>43</sup>. Another work that gave cause

38 Now Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, inv. GE 534.

39 24 July 1762, AGR, SEG, 1235, fol. 322.

40 Although Maria Theresa paid most of his debts in 1764, on his death in 1770 papers demonstrated that he still had unpaid debts from his years in Mainz, as well as new vast debts incurred since 1764. Executor papers of the estate of Charles Cobenzl, AGR, SEG, 2641-2648; Carlo BRONNE, *Les prodigalités du comte de Cobenzl*, in *Financiers et comédiens au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Bruxelles, 1969, pp. 123-140.

41 Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, inv. GE 470.

42 The itinerary set out clearly in M. MEES, *Van Kluis naar Hermitage. Het Rozenkransschilderij van P. P. Rubens uit het Kluiskekerk van Lier*, in «Lira elegans. Liers genootschap voor geschiedenis. Jaarboek 1991», pp. 109-154.

43 30 October 1766, AGR, SEG, 1078, fol. 320. The painting now in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, inv. GMII 647.

for concern was the altarpiece of *The Stoning of St Stephen* by Rubens in the Abbey of Saint-Amand north of Valenciennes: Cobenzl owned a drawing then thought to be «le dessein original» for the central panel<sup>44</sup>, which he had already had engraved by the Flemish artist Philippe Joseph Tassaert<sup>45</sup> (fig. 18.4).

As he continued to argue ever more persuasively for the establishment of a 'Belgian academy' in Rome, he wrote tellingly of «our Flemish school» (my emphasis)<sup>46</sup>, the use of the word 'our' perhaps a political act, reminding the administration that the Austrian Netherlands were part of the Austrian territories and not a rival state<sup>47</sup>. Cobenzl was still refining his plans and seeking ways of putting them into effect when he died in 1770. If no 'Belgian academy' was to be established, back in Vienna, Cobenzl's insistence on the importance of patronage of local artists also had its effect. The Chancellor, Kaunitz, first started supporting the training of young artists after the opening of the Vienna Kupferstichakademie in 1766, echoing Cobenzl's policies in the Southern Netherlands. He became official Protector of the new, united, imperial Academy and was untiring in his attention to measures that would promote the professionalisation of Austrian artists<sup>48</sup>. In May 1770, just a few



**Fig. 18.4.** Philippe Joseph Tassaert, *The Martyrdom of St Stephen* (1765), etching. With the inscription «Gravé d'après l'Original de P. P. Rubens, au cabinet de S.E. Monseigneur le Comte De Cobenzl, Ministre Plenipotentiaire de S.M.I.R. et Apost. a Bruxelles, Chevalier de la Toison d'Or & Co». Original drawing in the Hermitage, inv. OR 5510.

44 14 May 1766, AGR, SEG, 1081, fol. 22; 1766, AGR, SEG, 1116, foll. 28-34. The drawing is in the Hermitage, inv. OR 5510; Hans Vlieghe, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard*, VIII: *Saints*, 2 vols, London, 1972-73, no. 146c.

45 15 February 1765, AGR, SEG 1119, fol. 166v.

46 For instance, AGR, SEG, 1119, foll. 11-13.

47 AGR, Chancellerie Autrichienne, 494.

48 Gerlinde Gruber, "En un mot j'ai pensé à tout". *Das Engagement des Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz-Rietberg für die Neuaufrichtung der Gemäldegalerie im Belvedere*, in «Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien», 10 (2008), pp. 191-205.

months after Cobenzl's death, he was urging Maria Theresa that «support of the fine arts is an important part of the concern of a wise ruler»<sup>49</sup>. The reasons he cited – that when the arts flourished in Vienna this would enhance tourism and encourage wealthy clients to spend their money in Austria rather than on foreign art – echo those argued so hotly by Cobenzl in letters to Kaunitz himself with regard to the art of the Southern Netherlands. Kaunitz's advice to Maria Theresa and Joseph that they become honorary patrons of artistic societies came nearly twenty years after Cobenzl had given the same advice to Charles de Lorraine<sup>50</sup>. The programme set up in 1772 to train young Austrian artists in Rome was established a decade after such a programme was proposed for artists from the Austrian Netherlands by Cobenzl<sup>51</sup>. Moreover, Cobenzl's suggestion that monies raised by the lottery in the Austrian Netherlands be used to finance the school in Rome was approved of, but used to finance training in Rome for Austrian artists<sup>52</sup>. In all this, we should not forget that by the late 1760s Charles Cobenzl's nephew Philip, who had received his first training with his uncle and had initially been tasked with putting the Cobenzl collection in order<sup>53</sup>, was serving as Kaunitz's assistant.

#### 4. The composition of Cobenzl's collection

In 1768, perhaps flattered by the thought that his collection would pass into the hands of the Russian Empress, Cobenzl sold it in its entirety to Catherine the Great. It must be emphasised that only the 'collection' was sold: family portraits and works that hung on the walls in the Salon and the private rooms were not part of the deal<sup>54</sup>. A manuscript catalogue of the works acquired by Catherine was compiled at the time of the sale in 1768<sup>55</sup> and is

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49 25 May 1770, Archiv der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna, Verwaltungsakten, Fasz. 1.

50 For instance, he recommended they become honorary patrons of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome only in 1773. Kaunitz to Joseph II and Maria Theresa, 18 January 1773, *Ibid.*, K. 2.

51 Hertha SCHMIDINGER, introduction, *Artisti Austriaci a Roma dal Barocco alla Secessione*, Museo di Roma, Palazzo Braschi, 1972, s.p.; Walter WAGNER, *Die Rompensionäre der Wiener Akademie der bildenden Künste, 1772–1848: Nach den Quellen im Archiv der Akademie*, in «Römische Historische Mitteilungen», XIV (1972), pp. 65–110.

52 Report from Kaunitz to Maria Theresa, 4 September 1776, AGR, Ch. A, 482, pièce D:103 ad lit. A:4 / no. 1. Cited in Coeckelberghs, *Les peintres belges* cit., pp. 446–447.

53 Alfred von ARNETH, *Graf Philipp Cobenzl und seine Memoiren*, in «Archiv für österreichische Geschichte», 67 (1886), pp. 1–181, particularly p. 79.

54 See the posthumous inventory of the house contents, AGR, SEG, 2643.

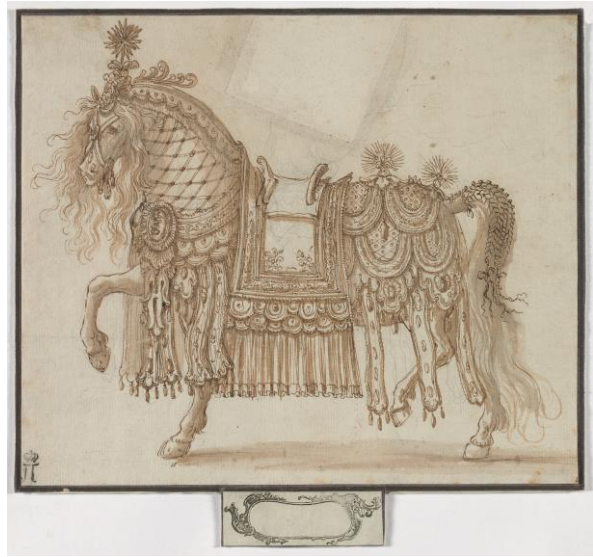
55 It includes every work, even several dated 1768, and the student drawings that were added at the last moment, as we know from the letters of Prince Dmitry Alexeevich

most unusual for its time in listing individually not only the 46 paintings, thirteen sculptures and «huit petites assiettes de fayence», but the 4,030 drawings. This catalogue, combined with later museum inventories, has made it possible to trace nearly every work of art, save for the sculptures<sup>56</sup>, even the works that were sold (**fig. 18.5**). Dominated by Flemish and Dutch paintings (38 of 46), the picture cabinet reflected Cobenzl's tastes quite strikingly. A *Head of a Young Girl* by Jean-Baptiste Greuze is the only French work – and the only contemporary piece – in the cabinet, reminding us of

Cobenzl's dislike of French art in general and his hope that his efforts would lead to an improvement in the quality of art in the Southern Netherlands:

Nous ne produisons pas des Rubens, mais je suis bien trompé si nous ne surpasserions pas bientôt ce Greuze, qui fait l'admiration de Paris et bien peu la mienne<sup>57</sup>.

Nothing indicates that any of the paintings he owned as part of this cabinet had come with him from Mainz. Not only are such paintings not mentioned in his correspondence regarding the despatch of his belongings to Brussels<sup>58</sup>, but



**Fig. 18.5.** Unidentified Italian artist, *Parade Horse*. Early seventeenth-century, pen and brown ink, brown wash, over graphite. Cleveland, OH, Cleveland Museum of Art, Delia E. Holden Fund 1963.241. Sold from the Hermitage in 1931. The cartouche below is part of the mount used for all of Cobenzl's drawings.

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Golitsyn, who organised the purchase and despatch; letter from Prince Dmitry Golitsyn to Prince Alexander Mikhaylovich Golitsyn, 13 June 1768, Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, Moscow, Fund 1263, *opis* 1, *chast* 1, *ed. khr.* 1115, fol. 56v. In one of many errors deriving from misunderstandings or use of outdated sources, Južnič confuses D. A. Golitsyn with his distant relative Dmitry Mikhaylovich Golitsyn, who was Russian ambassador to Vienna: Stanislav JUŽNIČ, *Kobencli (ob tristoletnici rojstva Janeža Karla Filipa Kobencla v Ljubljani)*, in «Zgodovinski časopis», 68 No. 1-2 (2014), pp. 54-83: 66.

56 Just four reliefs and one small statue have been located so far.

57 29 March 1765, AGR, SEG, 1119, fol. 167.

58 1753, AGR, SEG, 1187–1188.

if the attributions of most of the Dutch and Flemish paintings have stood the test of time (save his favourite ‘Rubens’, in fact the work of Lucas van Uden<sup>59</sup>), those of the German works have not: two portraits given to Hans Holbein are now recognised as the work of Bartholomeus Bruyn<sup>60</sup>, while a supposed Dürer came from the school of Lucas Cranach<sup>61</sup>.

As for the drawings, they were extremely varied in quality, from excellent studies by the Flemish Rubens<sup>62</sup> or the Italians Francesco Primaticcio<sup>63</sup> or Giacomo Cavedone<sup>64</sup> to drawings with a glorious provenance, such as those from the Medici collection<sup>65</sup>, to weak sketches by inferior artists. Unlike the paintings, a third were Italian and only 28% Dutch and Flemish, with a small but fine array of early Swiss and German drawings. But as the great Haverkamp Begemann noted, «an unusually high percentage of the most remarkable drawings was made by artists other than the most famous ones»<sup>66</sup>. Those «remarkable drawings» by less well-known artists are often those of greatest interest today.

Cobenzl’s acquisition of drawings – the vast majority bought *en masse*, in bundles of one or several hundred or a thousand – was very much a reflection of a growing fashion for the ownership of drawings as a sign of intellectual superiority, of sensitivity and perceptiveness<sup>67</sup>. Thus, there is no surprise that when Philip Cobenzl was sent to Paris in the summer of 1762, he was entrusted with various errands that included viewing collections of drawings there, in order for Charles to be certain of the quality of his own, as he wrote to his nephew on 4 July:

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59 *Landscape with a String of Carts*, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, inv. GMII 341.

60 Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, inv. GE 678, GE 679.

61 Sold from the Hermitage in 1931, possibly to be identified with a painting now in the Museo Nacional de San Carlos, Mexico City.

62 Alexey LARIONOV, entries on drawings in *Rubens and his Age. Treasures from the Hermitage Museum, Russia*, ed. Christina Corsiglia, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2001.

63 Dominique CORDELLIER, *Primaticcio, maître de Fontainebleau*, Louvre, Paris, 2004, *passim*.

64 Catherine PHILLIPS, *Giacomo Cavedone: Drawings from the Cobenzl Collection, now in the Hermitage*, in «Master Drawings», 56/3 (2018), pp. 317-334.

65 Catherine PHILLIPS, *From Florence to Brussels. Drawings by Francesco Petrucci*, in «Paragone Arte», 134 (2017), pp. 27-62.

66 Review of the exhibition «Dessins flamands et hollandaise du dix-septième siècle. Collections de l’Ermitage, Leningrad et du Musée Pouchkine, Moscow», in «Master Drawings», XI/2 (Summer 1973), p. 176.

67 Christian MICHEL, *Le goût pour le dessin en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles: de l’utilisation à l’étude désintéressée*, in «Revue de l’Art», 143 (2004), pp. 27-34; on «strategies of distinction», the use of art to assert status and intellect, see for instance Charlotte GUICHARD, *Les amateurs d’art à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2008.

Je suis charmé que Vous employez vôte tems si bien et si agréablement, es Vous avez bien des obligations à Mrs de La Borde et de La Live. Je souhaite que Vous voyiez bientôt un Cabinet de Desseins pour que Vous puissiez juger s'ils sont bien préférables aux miens<sup>68</sup>.

## 5. Slovenian archives and collections

That letter in the Coronini Archive shows how fruitful is a juxtaposition of material to be found there and in Brussels, for it complements a whole series of reports from Philip, sent to Charles, in which he does indeed describe collections he has seen and makes the desired (flattering) comparison<sup>69</sup>. Some of the material relating to Cobenzl's orders for frames for his pictures, or the commissioning of new works to adorn his house, can also be found amongst Philip's letters in Gorizia<sup>70</sup>. If the composition of Cobenzl's collection formed in Brussels has been established through comparison of documents and real works of art<sup>71</sup>, research continues into the lost collections of the family estates. Here, particularly, it must be profitable to bring together the riches of the Coronini Archive<sup>72</sup>, archives in Ljubljana and Graz, with those in Brussels, in an effort to recreate the Cobenzl family heritage.

Much that seems 'unknown' in Brussels is obvious in Ljubljana. For instance, for many years the 'loss' of the last portrait of Cobenzl, a marble bust by Ollivier de Marseille produced in the middle of 1769, has been lamented in Belgium<sup>73</sup>, even while the original (although much damaged) stood in Predjama Castle (**fig. 18.6**).

Posthumous inventories of Cobenzl's property in the Brussels archive<sup>74</sup> not only allow us to trace objects of family significance or those that passed to his wife and thus feature in her posthumous inventory compiled in 1772<sup>75</sup>, but also include material about the Cobenzl heritage in Carniola, which may contribute to knowledge of the family possessions (**fig. 18.7**).

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68 ASGo, ASCC, AeD, b. 239, f. 612.

69 AGR, SEG, 1095, foll. 28-45.

70 «Lettres familiaires 1764-1765», in ASGo, ASCC, AeD, b. 62, f. 130.

71 A summary catalogue of the 46 paintings was published in 2011 (Phillips, *Reconstruction and History* cit.) and a detailed catalogue, reflecting the latest research, is in preparation, although the full catalogue of the 4030 drawings is a long-term project.

72 Very accessible thanks to the guide compiled by Lucia PILLON, *Archivio familiare Coronini Cronberg – Gorizia. Partizione Atti e documenti*, [Gorizia,] 1993.

73 Marguerite DEVIGNE, *Augustin Ollivier, dit Ollivier de Marseille. Sculpteur de Charles de Lorraine*, in «Gazette des Beaux-Arts» (1920/II), pp. 95-116; Jacques VAN LENNEP, *Les bustes de l'Académie royale de Belgique*, Bruxelles, Académie Royale de Belgique, 1993, no. 79.

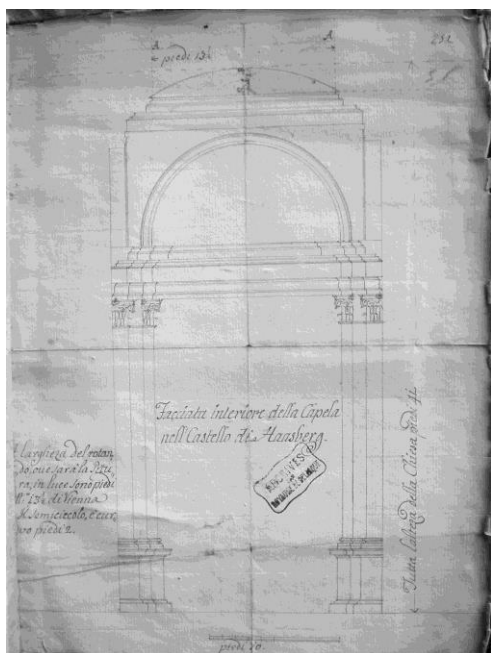
74 Eight volumes of documents: AGR, SEG, 2641-2648.

75 «Casa mortuaria Comtesse Cobenzl 1772», copy in ASGo, ASCC, AeD, b. 63, f. 135.





**Fig. 18.6.** Olliver de Marseille, *Bust of Charles de Cobenzl* (1769). Modern marble copy of an original plaster version made before the addition to the original of the Order of Saint Stephen awarded to Cobenzl that year. Brussels, Palais des Académies.



**Fig. 18.7.** «Facciata interiore della Capela nell'Castello di Haasberg.» Amongst the executor papers of Charles de Cobenzl. Brussels, Archives générales du Royaume et Archives de l'Etat Secrétariat d'État et de Guerre, 2646, f. 252.

A full comparison of such documents is an extremely complex task, bearing in mind their varied quality, lawyer-compiled inventories often describing works of art solely by size and type, without mentioning author or subject<sup>76</sup>, or lists having no heading indicating the location of the works<sup>77</sup>, but promises to be fruitful.

Amongst Philip's letters is one that confirms a family tradition of sending home to Carniola objects seen as central to family history. On 16 July 1765, for instance, he wrote to the agent Beck:

Par la dernière diligence Mon Oncle a fait partir d'ici un paquet contenant des vieux portraits qu'il veut faire garder à sa campagne de Hasberg. Ainsi lors qu'il vous sera parvenu ayez la bonté de l'envoyer à mon Père<sup>78</sup>.

76 Pictures listed in the inventory of Haasberg: SI AS 309, «Zapuščinski inventarji Deželnega sodišča v Ljubljani», fasc. IX, št. 39, foll. 3–6.

77 AGR, SEG, Untitled list of «Große Schildereyen, Schildereyen von mittler Größe, Kleinen Schildereyen», 2646, foll. 225–226r.

78 «Lettres familiales 1764–1765», in ASGo, ASCC, AeD, b. 62, f. 130.



That tradition continued under Charles' son, and this brings me to an item in the Coronini Archive that does not relate to Charles Cobenzl himself, but to his son Louis (1753-1809). From 1779 to 1797 Louis was Austrian representative in Saint Petersburg, becoming a popular member of Catherine the Great's close circle (his charm and merriment – surely inherited from his father – making him a great favourite). He wrote plays for the Hermitage Theatre, for instance<sup>79</sup>, and sometimes accompanied Catherine on her travels, riding in her own carriage. On one such journey to Moscow in 1785 he laid a bet with the Empress that she would be greeted with enthusiasm by his subjects. He described this event in a letter which he sent back to Gorizia, to be kept along with the coin that Catherine presented to him when he won the bet:

Pendant le Voiage de l'Imperatrice a Vischeu Volotsok [Vyshny Volochok] Tver et Moscou cette auguste souveraine dont la gaieté charmante rend bien se preter a toutes les plaisanteries de societé, a parie avec moi que le peuple ne viendrait pas a sa rencontre et ne seroit pas eclater du joie a son arrive a Moscou. A douze verstes de cette capitale tout etoit déjà plein de monde et les habitans de Moscou s'y sont rendus encore huit heures plutot que Sa M. I. ne pouvoit arriver pour etre surs de ne pas le manquer. Les transports de toute cette foule innombrable, tant a l'arrivé de leur bienfaitrise que le lendemain lors de Son Entrée, les remerciemens que chaque fit a Sa M<sup>este</sup> et les marques d'attachemens et de reconnaissance qu'ils ont donné a leur adorable souveraine tout etait au dessus de toute expression et Catherine II a pu se convaincre que le peuple enfin vint apprecier le bonheur qu'il a d'etre sous Sa domination. En un mot le Rouble a ete gagné aussi completement que possible et S: M: Imp m'a fait le grace de me le donner sur le balcon de Kolomenskoye<sup>80</sup>. Je veux qu'il reste a jamais dans ma famille en memoire du bonheur que j'ai eu d'etre a la suite de l'Imperatrice dans ce voyage et des transports de joie du peuple de Moscou dont j'ai été temoin dans le carosse meme de l'Imperatrice.

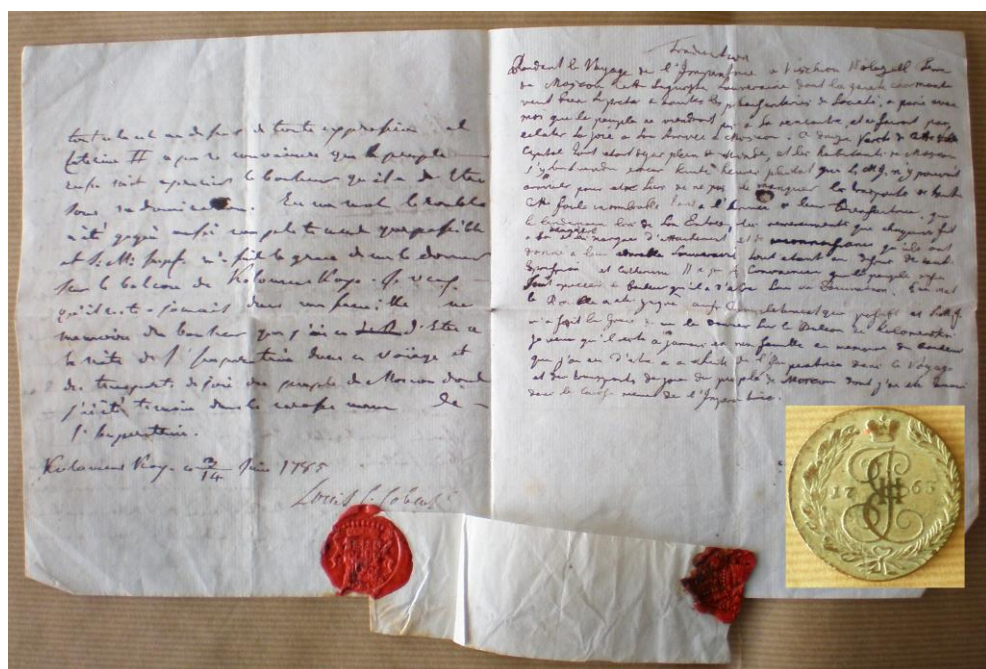
Kolomenskoye le 3/14 Juin 1785  
Louis Comte Cobenzl<sup>81</sup>

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79 Charles HYART, *Le Théâtre de l'Hermitage et Catherine II*, in «Revue de littérature comparée», LXI no. 1 (Janvier-Mars 1981), p. 98.

80 Royal estate southeast of Moscow, now within the city bounds.

81 «Miscellanea 1785-1798: Papiers à envoyer à Messieurs le comte Guido Cobenzl, pour le faire mettre dans les Archives. Passeport et le rouble parié et gagné par l'Embassadeur à S. M. l'Imperatrice de Russie en 1785», in ASGo, ASCC, AeD, b. 259, f. 659.



**Fig. 18.8.** «Miscellanea 1785–1798: Papiers à envoyer à Monsieur le comte Guido Cobenzl, pour le faire mettre dans les Archives. Passeport et le rouble parié et gagné par l'Embassadeur à S. M. l'Imperatrice de Russie en 1785». ASGo, ASCC, AeD, b. 259, f. 659.

That the «rouble» is in fact a five kopek piece does nothing to detract from the fact that it was presented to Louis by the Empress herself and that Louis felt this was something which should be kept not among his own effects but as part of the family archive (**fig. 18.8**).

## Conclusion

Charles Cobenzl was a complex man, whose bonhomie and love of the good life did nothing to detract from his keen understanding of politics and people. His overlords recognised his skill in manoeuvring in complex situations, whether in Lorraine, Central Europe, or the 'Austrian colony' of the Southern Netherlands. They did not, perhaps, always appreciate his ability to capture the spirit of the contexts in which he found himself, to enter into that spirit, apparently – as they saw it – showing more loyalty to the region than to the centre. But it was that ability which led him to identify the multiple benefits that would accrue from support for the arts, benefits that he had witnessed in Mainz and that he could see unfolding in Paris. It also showed him the

importance not only of a gentleman's admiration for art, but of the possession of a collection suitable to his status, which could promote him, both in his position as minister to Maria Theresa and personally, as a man not only of high status but of discernment and sophisticated intellect<sup>82</sup>.

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82 This article is dedicated to the late Xavier Duquenne (1935–2018), who had boundless admiration for Charles Cobenzl and his achievements in the Southern Netherlands, and who was always generous with his research materials.  
The author would also like to thank Alexander Branis, Alexey Larionov, Irina Grigorieva and the staff of the Department of Drawings at the Hermitage Museum.

## **Abstract**

Count Charles de Cobenzl (Karl Johann Philipp Cobenzl; 1712-1770) served Vienna throughout his career as a diplomat, negotiator and administrator, but it is in Belgium and in Russia that his legacy is felt. If the collection that he formed in Brussels was to be sold in 1768 to Catherine the Great of Russia, to lay the foundations of what is now one of the world's great collections of drawings, in Belgium itself he is to this day credited with the establishment of key cultural institutions. Standing on the cusp of different cultural histories, Cobenzl has often been studied from a national (or nationalistic) point of view, but after his appointment as Minister in the Southern Netherlands in 1753, he himself balanced continued loyalty to his rulers in Vienna with an enthusiasm for and promotion of the interests of his new home. He argued that the arts were central to the prosperity of the Southern Netherlands, that however much Vienna needed money, it made bad economic sense simply to extract it from the region, rather than investing now to increase income in the future.

## **Keywords**

Collecting; Old Master drawings; cultural industries; Brussels; artistic patronage