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Ephemerality on the Fringe. Exploring the Venues Hosting Power Quadrilles in Brussels on the Eve of Waterloo and Beyond (1814–1816)

Abstract

After Napoleon's escape from Elba, the Congress at Vienna stalled and Brussels temporarily became the political and military capital of Europe. The use of ephemerality is well documented for the Congress, much less so for Brussels on the eve of the battle of Waterloo. What eyewitness accounts do agree on for both cities is that everybody went dance mad. In Brussels, the troops of the ninth coalition that were to defeat Napoleon, famously rode 'dancing into battle'. Politically speaking, there was ample reason to have pomp and circumstance. The House of Orange-Nassau did not have much credit in Brussels and needed to establish itself. As social climbers, they heavy-handedly used ephemeral means of propaganda to support their wobbly throne. This article discusses the ephemeral ballrooms that were constructed for the official celebrations of their restoration monarchy between 1814 and 1816.

1. *Introduction*

Ephemeral display during the Congress in Vienna is an acknowledged domain in the international historiography dedicated to early nineteenth-century politics and the history of diplomacy. Charles-Joseph de Ligne's (1735–1814) famous quip that Congress danced rather well, without advancing anything else, admirably illustrates the festive atmosphere in Austria's capital during these days. Like Vienna, Brussels was overwhelmed by numerous official festivities around the same time; however, comparable academic zeal discussing public celebrations occurring there is rarer. If quips give any indication of how dance-mad crowds could be, here is another, reportedly uttered by the Duke of Wellington's private secretary, Charles Greville (1762–1832), party crashing

in Brussels during the winter of 1814. It may be less world-famous than De Ligne's, but it reveals a lot in its statement that everybody had been bitten by a tarantula. It plays on the belief that the venom of a tarantula spider caused its victims to start dancing frenziedly, without being able to stop until they dropped (Capel and Uxbridge 1955, 81).

This generalised dance madness, occurring simultaneously in both cities, and the fact that this phenomenon was instrumentalised in order to stage power (equally in both), is the main reason why this paper is devoted to public social dancing as means of the public embodiment of power; in short: a politically charged phenomenon.

I will explore this topic through the ballrooms that hosted the concluding balls of the most prestigious events organised in Brussels between 1814 and 1816. In what follows, three events will be discussed in detail illustrating this process:

1) 17 March 1815: Proclamation of the new King in Brussels
2) 25 September 1815: Coronation of the new King in Brussels
3) 24 October 1816: Brussels Reprisal of the Marriage ball for Crown Prince William and Anna Pawlowna of Russia.

To begin with, the venues hosting these events can be seen as a visible prolongation of the political ambition of those who created them and a necessary backcloth for the staged performances, i.e. public dances or balls. On a second note, they were also shamelessly ephemeral, often created for the purpose of just one event, barely lasting one night, dismantled the next day. For Vienna, these are famous and avidly discussed venues, often documented by picturesque iconography (Hoechle 1814; Mayer 2019). It is all the more remarkable that for Brussels we can barely imagine them to have existed at all – even as they were spectacular – and it strikes us that their splendour and layout seem almost absent from our collective memory (Vanistendael 2018).

British sources are the most cited until now, but they need to be carefully assessed. The lack of attention British authors traditionally paid to the Belgian archives and reporting by local journalists makes it hard to disentangle fact from hearsay or plain invention of tradition in their writings. Lord Byron (1815) and Walter Scott (1815) introduced some intriguing myths about the ongoing dance madness in Brussels in those days, epitomised by the Duchess of Richmond ball. One storyline claims that Wellington's officers rode straight

out of the ballroom onto the Battlefield. This storyline was later amplified by William Makepeace Thackeray (1848) and repeated many times since, even by less literarily inclined authors. This has contributed to and becomes part of the vast historiography with academic credentials. Until today, some of these fictional accounts can still provoke a certain attention as illustrated by Nick Foulkes' brilliant title for his book *Dancing into Battle* (2006). It would take until David Miller's monograph (2005) before some debunking, although his study too is still exclusively based on published eyewitness accounts and no archival research was done locally in Brussels. In my article instead, I return to local sources and accounts.

2. *Peripherality or Centrality?*

There exists such ample literature on the Battle of Waterloo that there is good reason to limit this article to the transnational diplomatic and political dynamics behind the creation of the new Kingdom of the United Netherlands. I consider the political motivation to be the prime mover that eventually set free the financial, logistic, and personal means to create these venues.

The lands between the Channel's coast, the ancient French border from before 1792, and the great rivers (Rhine and Meuse) were called the Southern Netherlands and have always been considered highly peripheral territories. There is good reason to reconsider them as more central here. On the one hand, one could argue that like many other regions on the world map, they were just another bargaining chip placed beside the chessboard of the Congress in Vienna. On the other, because of their proximity to Paris, and because the British government placed so much emphasis on them strategically, they played an outsized role in the historic events of those years. To give just one example: considerable numbers of Prussian, Russian, British, Dutch, and Swedish troops, supplemented with an assortment of regiments from different parts of the German lands, kept the Southern Netherlands occupied for more than two years (1814–1815). Their aim was to make sure they did not fall into French hands once again and to give the negotiators in Vienna the time to establish their new European Concert. Estimates vary, but at least two hundred and fifty thousand men were almost permanently stationed there representing all involved with considerable costs (Zamoyski 2012).

As central as Brussels' role may have been for a short while, Belgian historians did not pay much attention to this episode in their capital's past. The only monograph dedicated to Brussels in this period dates to 1956 (Fleischman and Aerts 1956). The reason for this lack of enthusiasm by local historians may be that the so-called Dutch rule of the Southern Netherlands which was the first outcome of this episode was viewed as oppressive. Hence, the need for a revolution to liberate Belgium and chase the 'cheese heads', as the Dutch were caricatured in the local press, out of Brussels and back to The Hague in 1830 (Pirenne 2016; Aerts and Deneckere 2015).

Dutch researchers delved a bit more deeply into the matter, for the same, albeit partially, opposite reasons: the current Dutch monarchy was founded in those days. There is reason enough to claim that it was in Brussels the new Dutch rulers needed to prove themselves the most, hence providing a sound motivation to invest in lavish ephemeral displays. The Orange and Nassau's were unknown and as such unloved by the local elites when they first claimed power over these territories during the final days of 1813. By the summer of 1814, when they started to put their boots on the ground in Brussels, they first needed to get acquainted with these elites and convince them of their good intentions. This is a process that has seldom been discussed in academia until now and which I will treat here in some detail. The most recent biographies of William I and William II of Orange and Nassau and an even more recent study about the establishment of a Brussels court culture between 1814 and 1830 have provided major advancements in rediscovering the archival materials linked to those days, insofar as they were available in Dutch, British or German archives (Colenbrander 1906; Koch 2013; Welten 2023).

This preliminary social and cultural distance between the House of Orange and Nassau and their Southern subjects-to-be had sound historical ground. It has only been recently fully acknowledged that the House never truly ruled over the Southern Netherlands before 1815. The factual basis for the sixteenth-century precedent they referred to in their propaganda from 1813 onward is not solid. It was based on a historical political construct and narrative rather than on the true military and political prowess of the founding father of the House, William 'the Silent', who was claimed to have first united these territories. If that claim is nowadays considered an overstatement, there nevertheless existed a powerful image to which the House of 1813 could link the story for which they wanted to remind their future Southern subjects. This icon conveniently

linked their own identity to that of the Southern Netherlands as an imagined, shared historical past. It was called the *Leo Belgicus*, first used in the troubled times following William I's death in 1584, after which it gained a life of its own, often re-used and reshaped thereafter with diverging political intentions and agendas in mind (Depuydt and Roegiers 1995; Heijden 2000).

Nevertheless, from September 1815 onwards, their claims became a political reality and one can only imagine how uncertain William I and his eldest son, Crown Prince William (he would go on to become William II), must have felt before the coronation of the former, which took place on 21 September 1815, in Brussels (Renier 1930). Over time, the House of Orange and Nassau would continue to pledge huge sums to invade the Brussels public sphere with monuments and staged events, an effort they never made in their home turf. If anything, this should be interpreted as a hint that they continued to feel insecure about their position in the Southern Provinces until the very end (1830) (Welten 2023).

Another major factor contributing to the increase of ephemeral moments of spectacle (such as social gatherings and feasts) can be related to the differences in personality and rivalry between the King and the Crown Prince. The father was a strict, stubborn traditionalist, clinging to his titles and position to his last breath. As a natural bureaucrat, he preferred his writing desk, reigning from there, rather than trying to ingratiate himself with the nation he ruled. He was a hard worker, given to churning out memos and reports, micromanaging his dominions, and frustrating parliamentary oversight. He famously trusted nobody and would not listen to advice, preferring to isolate himself from political reality, often with disastrous consequences. He also was quite unsuccessful as a military commander even to the point of being accused of treason by the Prussian military for abandoning his troops and his position without a fight.

The son instead, was everything the father was not. He was emotional, shifty, and painfully aware of public opinion, especially in Brussels and the Southern provinces he really appreciated. He loved to throw a party and by grace of his slender build, was a talented dancer. From 1811, barely nineteen years old, he joined Wellington's army on the Iberian Peninsula and became one of the Duke's most trusted *aide-de-camps*. On the battlefield he proved fearless, and rapidly became a true military hero, a reputation that preceded his arrival in Brussels by the end of July 1814. He remained a true Anglophile for the rest of his life, to the point of speaking Dutch with a marked English accent.

After his father's coronation, the relationship between the son and the father rapidly deteriorated, which set the tone for a two-pronged state propaganda. There would be one official version initiated by the father, challenged or rivalled by equally official events instigated by the son. While the father reigned supreme in The Hague, the son ran the Brussels social sphere, often to the detriment of his father. As an internationally acclaimed Waterloo hero, he would marry a Russian princess (Anna Pawlowna) against his father's wishes, plotted against him by maintaining relationships with French radicalised refugees residing in Brussels to overthrow the French throne, and openly maintained bisexual relations which made him vulnerable to blackmail. He eventually would dethrone his father (Koch 2013; Zanten 2013).

3. *Sources and Courses*

Important archives on these public dance events are kept in the Brussels City Archives. Perhaps because nobody expected them to exist, they were never studied in depth until now, despite the rich vein of information contained in them. They are somewhat cryptically called "Instruction publique - série II, section Fêtes et Cérémonies 1795–1911", of which I partly investigated the materials from "Portfeuilles I - XVIII" covering both the French and the Dutch epochs. The main reason for the creation of these series was that there was no court in Brussels in 1814 yet. The only available workforce, capable of organising public events on such a large scale, were the local city clerks. One should bear in mind that the city was in a state of chaos due to the departure of its French administrators and the installation of the temporary and brutal Prussian occupational regime. As such, the city clerks remained the only link to peaceful civilian oversight. From the moment the House of Orange and Nassau was allowed by the coalition powers to gradually take over the military and administrative rule of Brussels and the lands west of the Meuse River in August 1814, the House inherited these clerks. The resulting archival boxes cover the organisational paperwork that went into the practical duty of creating all the public events the House required in order to claim and consolidate its power in Brussels.

Besides the documents kept in the Brussels City Archives, there are three other types of sources I used for this article. First, the local and international press reported on these events regularly, providing us with a rare peek into the

venues used to stage them. We should consider, however, that in the period under discussion (1814–1816), the press was constantly censored. No political overt or covert remarks were allowed, which sometimes makes it hard to uncover the true political intent behind certain events or the details of their staging. This is why eyewitness accounts – that seemingly exist in endless numbers for this era – are crucial sources of side information. These highly personal letters, diaries, and memoirs are often biased because they start from a certain point of view. But by doing so they provide us with a welcome counterweight against the official narrative. To give just one example to illustrate why combining these sources is so important: the official coverage – press and iconography – of William I's coronation shows us the winged stage on which the king stands the moment he is crowned. In reality – and this we know only from private accounts – these wings were not finished and only the middle section of the ephemeral design was actually there (Koch 2013). Lastly, there exists a limited iconography about these events. Alas, none of the public dances I will discuss in this article figured in officially sanctioned prints. Nevertheless, the few examples that I could uncover provided insight lacking in any of the other sources (Tulard 1971).

Historically speaking, social dancing in front of a witnessing audience is what court balls and ballets were all about. The novelty of the Brussels events, as compared to *Ancien Régime* practices, lies, firstly, in the fact that these dances were never held at court. There was no court yet in Brussels before the end of 1815 and historically speaking, there had never been a true royal court in Brussels before the Orange and Nassau's established theirs. Secondly, the massive, transnational crowds attending them, all while being staged indoors, were truly unprecedented for Brussels, lending these occasions a splendour and glamour seldom seen before (and after) in Brussels. Their size had some unforeseen consequences, not least that the cost that went into their organisation escalated significantly. Because of their novelty, and because they were never studied specifically until now, my approach will be less theoretical than practical. My first research goal is to understand how these events were possible at all and to try to understand how they were executed on a practical level, i.e. financially and logistically. Secondly, I want to understand the characters who were artistically involved. Finally, I will assess the political intent that created the financial headroom that enabled them in the first place, and whether it could be detected in their programmatic structure.

The three events I have selected as case studies for this article (March and September 1815 and October 1816) were targeted because of the copious amount of archival evidence available about their organisation. These were probably the most massive events of their kind in terms of indoor audiences. Because no ballroom or theatre was big enough to host them, the temporary interiors needed to accommodate these numbers for just one evening were erected at a staggering cost, inside existing buildings. I will sometimes refer to other occasions to emphasise my argument for the sole reason that archival evidence for specific events is patchy at best. It is only by comparing them mutually with other events that we can complete the picture.

4. *The Predominance of Social Dance in Brussels between 1813–1818 and its Effects on Ephemeral Display*

From the moment Prince Willem Frederik from Orange and Nassau accepted the Sovereignty over Holland in December of 1813 and extended his claims to the Southern Netherlands, he and his sons concluded that they did not have much leverage to enhance their position in these desirable new dominions. Once established (from August 1814), yet another problem presented itself. The historical lack of a true court in Brussels for the previous twenty-five years complicated their plans to recruit their own courtiers. If they wanted to make the world believe they were in charge and not merely clinging to power, they needed the splendour of a spendthrift court. The question now was how to recruit one's court when there was no predecessor and when one was virtually unknown socially by the local elites?

Yet another hurdle came across their path. The conflict between the father and the eldest son was aggravated after the break-up of the marriage plans with the British Crown Princess Charlotte. Nevertheless, as history has it, they eventually succeeded by aligning their views, albeit temporarily. But first, the House needed a genuine Brussels court to serve as a counterweight to its historical base in The Hague. The father, however, disliked public display and reportedly never danced in public himself. As such, it was mainly the Crown Prince who would take things in hand and not seldom to further his own agenda as well. The manner in which he courted the eventual loyalties of the local elites towards the expected monarchy, was not by formally inviting them to

dine as his father would have preferred, but by having a great number of informal occasions, mostly lavish private and public balls.

In a way, the Crown Prince's approach made sense: balls were the heart and spirit of Brussels' society. They had the advantage that one could carefully curate the invite list. Balls were by far the most attractive sociable gathering based on a shared musical culture available. They were 'private' and 'exclusive' enough, but also sufficiently informal to make new acquaintances in a trusted and discreet environment. In chaotic times like the Napoleonic reign and certainly in the days following his downfall, when Brussels was invaded by an international military fast set and welcomed nearly as many international sovereigns as Vienna did, everybody needed to get acquainted. Balls offered this possibility and understandably were the events everyone flocked to (Buurman 2021).

The way Crown Prince William took things in hand was also quite revealing at the political level. During the first weeks after his arrival, he vowed to "make merry and have Balls and Breakfasts without end" (Capel and Uxbridge 1955, 62). By the end of 1814, we can deduce that he was busy laying the foundations of a local network of powerful people in Brussels from which his father would approach to recruit. By the early days of 1815, the Crown Prince even deemed his groundwork ready to present to the world during an informal occasion for the carnival week of that year. Although there is almost no archival evidence about this ball (it was a typical costumed carnival quadrille event), the eyewitness accounts about the rehearsals and the performance reveal some prominent names of the local nobility (Foulkes 2006). The same family names (not necessarily the same individuals) would crop up during successive events that established the new Brussels court in the months to come (Welten 2023).

5. *No Room Big Enough to Accommodate the Masses*

The first of the three events in our list (the proclamation of the new king in March 1815) made use of Brussels' Gothic City Hall, which incidentally still stands today. The *piano nobile* of this magnificent building was splendidly attired using scaffolding and painted cloth, enabling it to host a party of about one thousand attendees. The second (the coronation of the new king in September 1815) was more of a *fête champêtre*, partly outdoors in the botanical gardens of Charles Lorraine's palace and inside the Orangerie. This place connot-

ed a double symbolic meaning for the new monarchs. Firstly, this palace was (falsely) claimed to have been built on top of the ruins of their Predecessor's city castle in Brussels by William I the Silent. Secondly, it was an *orangerie*, built during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, which referred directly to the name of their house.

There is no estimate of the number of attendees, but it is quite possible that it outnumbered the first occasion, which had to be arranged hastily. This is the only event for which we have available a depiction of the ball itself showing us the dancers and the crowds inside the room. It is a watercolour by Pierre Jean Baptiste Le Roy (1784–1862). The last of the three in our list (the reprisal of the marriage ball for Crown Prince William and Anna Pawlowna of Russia in October 1816) appropriated the royal riding school, at the time situated behind the *La Monnaie* theatre. Since then, it burned to the ground during the Belgian revolution. The ephemeral ballroom that was erected inside this huge space was intended to host at least a crowd of twenty-five hundred people (Le Roy 1815).

If we juxtapose these venues, these crowds are indeed smaller than the ones we find in Vienna during the Congress. Nevertheless, for Brussels, a city approximately three times smaller, they remain impressive. They are by all means comparable to those attending the Napoleon's court quadrille events in Paris (Koch 2013; Vanistendael 2022). Numbers are one thing, but how to judge who was actually invited? The Brussels City Archives keep numerous examples of lists with the names, together with papers about the preparatory work. They were made up by city clerks who took things in hand in the years before a true court showed its presence. By discovering handwritten additions referring to older lists dating back to the previous regime, it is quite obvious that the local clerks did as they were told. They made up lists not neglecting anyone the new regime needed support from, including the upstarts that had climbed the social ladder under the French regime. Having found similar lists used for the invitations of a Napoleonic quadrille event from 1807 in the *Archives Nationales de France*, it is possible to compare them and mark their at-times stark differences. In short, the Parisian lists were managed by court clerks and thus based on a rigorous ranking order: names were not only listed per rank of society, but were then ordered according to one's status at the moment of the invitation and not alphabetically. One can assume that these court clerks always followed the officially sanctioned hierarchy indicated by the court. Some people saw their names officially struck from

these lists, facing the displeasure of not being invited to the most prestigious Napoleonic public events ("Fonds Maréchal Bessières (XVIIIe-XIXe Siècles)" 1807–1814). The lists compiled for the early events of the new Brussels court, could not be more different. As mentioned, they were compiled by city clerks, not directly attached to the new court. To begin with, everybody was listed alphabetically regardless of their current standing in the world, noble titles, or antiquated family names.

A marked similarity between the Parisian and the Brussels lists was the separate numbering of the dancers. An approximate headcount for the first ball indicates that from a total of 861 invitees there were 311 male and 299 female dancers to receive an entrance card. The eventual number approached one thousand guests, with the number of dancers not increasing dramatically. This would mean that dancers made up two-thirds of the attendees. Clearly, these events were as much about embodying power as about witnessing the staging of power. This was a deliberate practical and political choice by the organisers. The new quadrille dancing style as developed by the French military between 1800 and 1810 was very ornate and virtuosic, requiring much preparation and strong stamina. This is reflected in the lists, as we can discover mostly youngsters listed as dancers, while their elders and older members of society remained witnessing bystanders. This was also clearly a masculine dancing style, where the male dancer was expected to display his prowess with leaps, ornate steps, or pirouettes. Surprisingly, there were more cavaliers invited than dames, which is probably unique in the history of social dancing.

The other consequence of inviting a large crowd indoors and not restricting invitees to a narrowly defined section of the societal elites was, as mentioned, the need for a larger room. Traditionally, there had not been a royal palace in Brussels. The only building that came close was the neoclassical residence of Charles of Lorraine (1712–1780), the Austrian Governor, for whom the building was constructed on top of the ruins of the Palace on the Coudenberg (it still stands today and currently houses the Royal Museum of Contemporary Art). By 1815, this decrepit city palace was in a sorry state to say the least and it did not possess a ballroom large enough to accommodate the crowds the new regime required to legitimise itself. The local theatre, called *La Monnaie*, was still in its original state: a small baroque theatre seating about six hundred attendees. It was only demolished and rebuilt following the ground plan which still exists today, between 1819 and 1821. Later balls organised by the House of

Orange and Nassau, like the Ivanhoe Ball of 1823, took place in this new venue, which could host above two thousand dancers and onlookers.

In 1815 there was not really an alternative with that capacity available in the Brussels' cityscape. The adaptation of existing buildings thus was a necessity and at the same time meant to embrace Napoleonic court practices. The *Chapelle Saint-Louis*, incorporated into the Military Academy in Paris (opposite the Champs de Mars, where the Tour Eiffel stands) underwent a similar refurbishment under the Revolutionary and in the following Napoleonic years. The only difference was that this room did not have any other permanent function. It could be re-used dozens of times (and it was) without needing much extra investment ("Fonds Maréchal Bessières (XVIIIe-XIXe Siècles)" 1807–1814).

Looking at the programme for these three balls, the similarities with historically earlier examples – not only Napoleonic court practices – seem even more stark. To begin with, each ball was the concluding feast of a long series of official representational events going on for several days. This indicated that at least part of these programmes was blueprinted on traditional models dating back to as early as the sixteenth century. Over time, programmes have been adapted to the wishes of each new ruler and fashion. In the traditional scenario, the ruler would always enter through an ornate gate (a temporary architectural structure) receiving the keys of the city from the mayor, all while being serenaded by musicians on horseback. Then a long pageant would start, following a fixed route through town, leading along the main streets with their ornate monuments. After a couple of hours, it would reach the City Hall or any other official building where a dinner accompanied by music would be offered to the Sovereign. In the evening, Brussels' main streets would be illuminated by thousands of lanterns as would its main buildings.

One of the novelties of ephemeral display that had become popular under Napoleon's rule were the transparent paintings illuminated by candles, posed on a wooden structure behind them. The main reason for this innovative illumination was that the technology that allowed for the creation of large sheets of water-repelling waxed canvas had been manufactured to scale by the industrial application of steam engine-driven presses called calenders. These new materials found a market in the new fashion of the *fête champêtre* for which tents and foldable kiosks were often created that could be used in all weather conditions and re-used after being dried and refolded. The costs for these transparent paintings always figured in the accounts for these occasions in the

Brussels archives and the bills prove they were mostly executed by local artists. They were also often described in the local press and in this way we sometimes know what these pictures showed. As far as I know, none of them survive in the collections and even sketches that served as preparatory works are barely detectable in currently available online databases as they lack key data about their provenance. The only instance I could uncover stems from Napoleon's visit to Antwerp in 1803 ("Réception Du Premier Consul à Bruxelles" 1803; *L'Oracle* 1815; Doderer-Winkler 2013).

In terms of the costs needed to stage these three events, they stood quite apart. The motivation behind this exuberant spendthrift was that it likely played to the core audience those seeking power wanted to impress, namely, the top 1% of the country's elite. In fact, the concluding ball always had a more popular counterpart: a feast staged in the Brussels Park; and in the streets, pubs and ballrooms of the city were open to every class of society. The illuminations of the city and the bands in the park were all paid for by the city council. As for the interior party, where only an invited elite would attend, everything was included: light, dinner, wine, music, and dancing. That is not to say these feasts were a free-for-all. The invitation list for the Crown Prince's Wedding Ball in Brussels, for instance, indicates that those who wished to partake had to pay for the honour out of their own pocket, requiring them to part with the rather hefty admission price of 25 *florijnen* per family.

What was included in this fee then? The scenario was nearly always the same. Guests were welcomed via separate entrances, depending on their status of the day. For the coaches carrying the most prestigious parties, a mapped route was developed to avoid unpleasant or dangerous entanglements. There was a dinner served to all in the French style (all courses and drinks were already on the table when the guests arrived) and, depending on the status of the guest, he or she could sit at a certain table. As far as I can discern, no strict seating arrangements were made, except for the top table. A band played dinner table music during the meal, interrupted at least once or twice for a serenade by the audience, with wording specially composed and appropriate for the occasion.

At around ten o'clock the ball would start with first a performance of the *Quadrille d'Honneur*. This was a uniquely composed and choreographed dance piece, performed by about thirty-two dancers, carefully selected to represent the nation. In fact, they were about the purest form of embodiment of power imaginable. The crown prince had selected them and performed together with

them as he was a talented *premier sujet* (in any regard) among them. The term used here *Quadrille d'Honneur* and the practice to have a representative group of dancers to embody the idea of the nation as a whole are pages right out of Napoleon's book, whose court established this tradition. Rehearsals took place weeks in advance and often lasted days on end, coached by a dancing master paid for by the city council. In fact, the experience (the dance lasted at least a quarter of an hour) must have been many times worse than having to perform just one minuet during a *bal the cour* in front of the King. One can only imagine what stress level these dancers endured as any *faux pas* during the performance of this ballet was not permitted. After the *Quadrille d'Honneur*, "la Ville et la Cour se mélèrent" as the Duchess d'Abrantès once said in her memoirs about the Napoleonic predecessors of these Brussels events, and the ball went on well into the wee hours of the next day (Abrantès 1888, 22). The names of the two dancing masters occurring in the archival sources that were paid to coach the freshly instigated courtiers of the House of Orange and Nassau were Charles Berlot dit Sacré (1785–1831) and Claude Huot (1764–1848). None of their works for any of these occasions were preserved for posterity (Van Aelbrouck 1994; Vanistendael 2022).

Looking more into the detail of the costs the organisers faced, it becomes clear that this final event required a great deal of funding. This was due to the combination of a lavish dinner with drinks, music, and dance and of course the construction of the room in which the event had to take place. For the proclamation of William I as the new King of the United Netherlands, 22 March 1815, the total cost of the event was 60.446,68 *florijnen*, of which the party at the City Hall costed about one third – 22.579,43 *florijnen*. The other significant cost was certainly for the triumphal arch that was erected at the city gates and the pageant that would progress through an embellished and illuminated city, which costed about 27.242,27 *florijnen*. As a contrasting figure: the popular feast in the park and the main streets of the city only costed 10.625 *florijnen*. For the crowning ceremony on 21 September 1815, more elaborate ephemeral architecture was needed, in addition to a complete ball-and-dinner room inside the *Orangerie* and the dinner itself. Nonetheless, the relative costs remained very comparable. The last event in our list was arguably the most expensive of the three as it was vastly superior in terms of the number of attendees. The interior design of the ephemeral ballroom erected inside the royal riding school alone was estimated to cost a spectacular 61.025,37 *florijnen* (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Pierre Le Roy, Ball for the Inauguration of William I on 25 September 1815 in the Orangerie of Charles Lorraine's Palace in Brussels, watercolour and gouache on paper, 54.3 x 37.7 cm. Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium. Photo: J. Gelyns.

* Note the clear visual cues of the decoration against the walls. This was a ballroom installed inside an existing building.

One must recall that this was even before the actual work had started and that it was already the third time the cost had been adjusted upwards. For comparison: the eleven days Napoleon had resided in Brussels indebted the city with a sum of approximately one hundred thousand *florijnen*, which was only an estimate of all the bills having come to the city, about a year after the visit. This was considered to be completely unacceptable spendthrift and the city would go on to mortgage and absorb the costs for more than a decade. As the economy of the first quarter of the nineteenth century was largely characterised by an almost total absence of wage and price inflation, the costs involved for the staging of the new Dutch monarchy during those years become even more appreciably extravagant ("Administratieve Opvolging van de Officiële Feestelijkheden" 1815; Maison, Van Ypersele De Strihou, and Van Ypersele De Strihou 2002; Piketty 2013).

6. *Personal Transfer: Artists and Networks at Work*

As mentioned, prior to those years, Brussels had been merely a provincial, peripheral town at best. As such it did not have much left of its artistic potential which had been present under the Austrian Governors like Charles de Lorraine. Napoleon's visits in 1803 and 1810 respectively had been the most recent events that could be compared to a royal visit. The artists involved in 1803 were mostly the old hands that had worked for the last Austrian Governor Prince Albert Duke of Teschen (1738–1822) until he fled to Vienna in 1794. By 1810 those who worked on the 1803 visit were replaced by a new generation of academically trained artists of local provenance and stature, many names of which we also find in the accounts of 1815–1816 (Buijs and Bergmans 2010).

However, as important as these local artisans and artists would have been to the assemblage of the ornate designs required for the inauguration and staging of the new Dutch monarchs, they did not create the overall design. The role of the principal designer of these events again fell to a loyal Napoleonic official of yore, François Louis Joseph Verly (1760–1822), who had served as the city architect of Antwerp. Antwerp had been at the forefront of Napoleon's strategy to keep Great Britain under pressure by transforming the city into an unassailable bulwark and shipyard to build invasion ships. From 1803 onward, François Verly was very much Napoleon's go-to and he would go on to shape

the transformation of the town from a dormant medieval provincial outskirt at the frontier into a vibrant naval base.

Meanwhile, when his master visited the town in 1803, 1810, and 1811 to inspect the works he had ordered, Verly was also summoned to design the staging for the official visits. The Antwerp city archives contain the detailed bookkeeping of these events and Verly had his fingers all over the design process on all three occasions. This kind of work would probably have been much closer to his heart, as it was largely related to his first job designing Lille's Pleasure Gardens or any given theatrical stage scenery for the local theatre. From 1814, he would go on to become the Orange and Nassau's principal architect, involved in almost all major redesigns of Brussels public space. As such, he designed all ephemeral architecture needed for every single event staged by his masters, from the winged theatre for the crowning to the festive illuminations of the *Allée Verte* to the interior design of the ballroom in the royal riding school ("Administratie En Boekhouding Betreffende Napoleon's Bezoek Aan Antwerpen in 1803" 1803; Duthoy 1972).

Figure 2. François Verly, Interior design to establish an ephemeral ballroom inside the royal riding school in Brussels, gouache on paper [dimensions not available]. Brussels City Archive IP II 2081. Picture by the author.

6. *Conclusions*

To stage one's own ascent to royalty posed an unprecedented challenge to the House of Orange and Nassau. To have to simultaneously recruit a new court almost from scratch in Brussels complicated matters even further. The combination of these two requirements defied what was deemed suitable or even possible at the time and wanted for unprecedented investments in ephemeral display. It is undeniable that the heavy-handed use of ephemeral events, staged in Brussels between 1814 and the end of 1816 helped the Orange and Nassau's to achieve their ends. At the same time, it was during the public balls they organised as closing ceremonies of these events that the stark differences with the *Ancien Régime* – an epoch they longed to emulate – became unavoidable. To not offend the locals whose support they badly needed, the Orange and Nassau's tread carefully, ensuring they did not usurp the achievements obtained by civil society under Napoleon's reign. This implicated that they had to invite a broader section of the civil elites to the staging of their own power than previous instalments of monarchic rule would have been ready to do. As a result, the ballrooms for these concluding festivities needed to grow accordingly to a scale unseen in Brussels' history. These very ephemeral ballrooms (they lasted only one evening) virtually disappeared from the collective memory after these events concluded. No prints of their designs were created to propagate their splendour as was the case with similar ballrooms developed during the Congress in Vienna.

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