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The Dutch Hermitage Folly (1760–1850) in a European Context: Origins, Architecture, and Meaning of the Hermit's Hut in the Landscape Garden

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The phenomenon of a hermitage in a landscape garden has not yet been studied from a transnational historical perspective. In this article we present a European architectural history of the hermitage, paying special attention to Dutch hermitages mentioned in digitised newspapers and other historical sources. The long European history of the hermitage shows that this 18th-century landscape garden folly does not, as is often believed, have an exclusively English origin. The Dutch examples affirm this, although they depart from the standard hermitage narrative in generally being neither royal nor noble. Indeed, they were primarily an urban phenomenon, built predominantly by burghers near cities. As a result, the architecture of the hermit's hut and its meaning in the landscape garden are different from those in other countries.

Keywords: hermitage; landscape garden; garden architecture; follies

Introduction

The earliest hint of a Dutch interest in the hermitage, a garden folly found deep in the garden and associated with solitary contemplation, appears in a letter dated 1760. In it, Cornelis Jansz. Backer, a prominent Amsterdam regent and country house owner, reminded Jacob Boreel, a Dutch statesman and ambassador in London, 'not to forget … to bring along some plans of hermitages with lanes so twisted that it looks as if a worm had crawled through them, which, I have been told, have been admired in England for the last twenty years' (Backer 1760).

The idea that the hermitage in the Low Countries originated in England seems plausible. The gardens in which they were built are generally referred to as English landscape gardens, and many contemporary sources, too, described the Dutch hermitage as being situated within an English garden, wood, or park. The fact that the hermitage is believed to have become popular earlier in England than in the Low Countries — as Backer mentioned in his letter — is also consistent with the idea that the Dutch hermitage has English origins (see, e.g., Harwood 2000: 270). Moreover, not only are Dutch hermitages believed to have had English roots but so are Continental hermitage follies in general. Gordon Campbell (2013: 25) argues that while English garden designs prior to the 18th century had often been influenced by Continental examples, 'the influence began to flow the other way' in the 1700s, and it is the English influence that 'accounts for hermitages and the occasional hermit in Continental gardens'. However, the hermitage in fact has a long Continental history that goes back to Antiquity. The fact that the hermitage — an under-studied subject in general — has never been reviewed as a pan-European phenomenon within the context of transnational architectural history but only within national historiographies means that much remains unclear about where this folly originated and when and where else it was incorporated into gardens (Hlavac 2020).[1] This article shows that the hermitage in the landscape garden in the Low Countries has not only English influences but Italian, German, and French roots as well.

The digitalization of primary sources has brought to light more than 75 previously unknown 18th- and 19th-century Dutch hermitages that support our argument (about three dozen had already been known). This wealth of new data not only provides information about the architecture of the Dutch hermitage and their owners but also discloses what these structures meant to them. Because the Dutch Republic was highly urbanized, with no monarchy (until 1815) and few nobles, the social group that constructed hermitages in it was different from the social groups that built such spaces in Great Britain, France, and Germany. This divergent sociopolitical context as well as specific religious circumstances affected how Dutch people regarded the hermitage.

Whilst the focus of attention with respect to the hermitage in Great Britain has been its sacred geography and especially its connotation of anti-Catholic mockery, the presence of a large Catholic minority in the Dutch Republic meant that such anti-Catholic sentiments were not an aspect of the meaning of the hermitage in the Netherlands (Charlesworth 1994; Harwood 2000; Walsham 2011).

The Long Transnational Preamble of the European Hermitage

The studies on hermitages from Italy, France, Central Europe, and Great Britain indicate they have a long history. Hermitages were built from antiquity well into the 19th century; the period that can be considered as the apogee of the hermitage coincides with the widely adopted 18th- and 19th-century landscape style. Authors like Pliny the Younger referred to a hermitage-like structure, the *diaeta*, intended for solitude and study or for a meal with a select group of people (Witte 2018). A few centuries later, early Christian hermits, following Paul of Thebes, further removed themselves from civilization, going into the desert ('in eremo') for purgation and to show their commitment to God. One of the most famous hermits was Jerome (or Hieronymus), who fled to the desert seeking penance. From the 14th century onwards the hermit and hermitage became a common theme in the arts, and Jerome, set either in nature (in a hut or grotto) or in a study (an architectural structure), was one of the main figures depicted (Velhagen 1993). The later 18th-century *fabrique*, the subject of this article, is reminiscent of both the hermitage as hut and the hermitage as building, predominantly the former.

The ancient *diaeta* reappeared during the Renaissance, both within urban palaces and houses and in gardens around villas. Arno Witte mentions Raphael's designs for two *diaetae* as part of the Villa Madama in Rome, one attached to the house for the winter months and another that served as a garden pavilion for the summer (2018: 414). Petrarch's villa where he withdrew to write is another example, and Pirro Ligorio, at the request of Pope Pius IV, designed a secluded place in the form of a pavilion in the garden of the Vatican Palace (Losito 2000: 83–94; Campbell 2013: 10–11; Witte 2018: 408–9, 414–16).

From at least the 16th century onwards, architectural spaces which provided solitude for religious purposes, study, or reflection were called 'hermitages' (Witte 2007; Witte 2018: 417).[2] Increasingly, hermitages were also being built outside Italy. One early well-documented example is the mid-16th-century hermitage in the garden of Château de Gaillon near Rouen in France. Beginning in the late 16th century, hermitages were built for royalty, including for Queen Elizabeth and Louis XIV (Coffin 1994: 87).

The patrons of the hermitages built in the first half of the 18th century were again mostly sovereigns and high nobles. In 1748, Madame Pompadour commissioned one for the parks of Versailles from Jean Lassurance, and she had two others built at Fontainebleau and Compiègne (Lajer-Burcharth 2001: 81; Scott 2005: 263–64). Catharine the Great built her hermitage next to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg; it started as a relatively small and secluded retreat where a selected few were allowed to see her art collection (Dianina 2004: 630–33). In Bayreuth, Germany, an 'Eremitage' palace and various small hermitages, inspired by Ligorio's hermitages, were created (1715–18) for the local margrave and his court (Campbell 2013: 12–13; Hlavac 2020: 80).[3]

According to David Coffin, the popularity of the British hermitage in the landscape garden throughout the 18th century was likewise owed to 'royal patronage' (1994: 90). The number of hermitages in Great Britain increased from the 1720s onwards; by the mid-1730s, hermitage building was prevalent, and a decade later they 'proliferated' (Coffin 1994: 93), becoming 'de rigueur' (Harwood 2000: 274, 279). Although Great Britain adopted the hermitage as a garden folly early on and hermitages were commonly found there, it was the same on the mainland — and not only, as Campbell asserts (2013: 25), as a response to developments in Great Britain. As is evident from the historiography, by the 18th century, when it was adopted into the landscape garden, the hermitage already had a very long Continental history. While both the appearance and the purpose of the hermitage changed with time, there were two constants throughout its history: the hut's meaning as a place of contemplation and the owner's desire for remoteness from society.

The Dutch Country House Garden and the Hermitage

The history of the Dutch nobility and hence the history of its castle and country house gardens is different from that of most European countries. From the formation of the Dutch Republic in the 16th century onwards, the nobility shrank, and although its contribution to the country house building in the east of the country as well as that of the stadtholder 'court' in The Hague should not be underestimated, it was especially wealthy burghers who were responsible for the vibrant country house culture that existed in the republic from the 17th until the beginning of the 19th century (for historiography, see Kuiper 2016 and Ronnes 2020).

Indeed, the stadtholders, in particular the English king and Dutch stadtholder William III and the high nobility in his entourage, did not take to hermitages in the same way that royals and the high nobility did in neighbouring countries. An exception is Johan Maurits van Nassau, who spent the last years of his life (he died in 1679) in his hermitage in Kleve in present-day Germany. Maurits's hermitage itself was fairly

simple — he described it as ‘a wooden house’ (‘een huys van plancken’) — but the ‘natural’ environment was carefully staged and consisted of walking paths, sculptures, fountains, a chapel, and eventually Maurits’s headstone (Ihne 1979: 95–100). Although real garden hermitages were rare in the Dutch Golden Age, countless prints were produced of simple hermitages with a bell and cross hanging on the roof and of St. Jerome and his cave-like hermitage in the desert (**Figure 1**). Some of the language typically associated with the landscape garden was also already in vogue: in the mid-17th-century the Dutch draughtsman Willem Schellinks described a French hermitage set on a rock along a river as ‘picturesque’ (Bakker 1994: 24). Moreover, entire country houses were sometimes described as hermitages, such as a country house near Utrecht which features on a 1690 map, highlighting that the hermitage was by then a well-known topos (Simonis, Kottman, and Van Bemmel 2020: 167).

Figure 1: Gillis van Scheyndel I, hermit in front of a cave, etching drawn between 1631 and 1656, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.347284.

Hermitages as garden ornaments, along with ruins, Turkish tents, and Chinese, neoGothic and neoclassical buildings, are considered part of the early landscape style in the Netherlands (ca. 1750–ca. 1815), but the idea for them was not imported directly from Great Britain. As Erik de Jong (1987: 11–14) notes, the English influence on the Dutch landscape garden came through the intermediary of French gardens. Heimerick

Tromp (2012: 262) too, asserts that the early landscape style in the Low Countries was not directly influenced by British examples: Dutch people's first experience of an 'English' park and hermitage usually came from visits to German estates and to gardens in and around Paris (Backer, Blok, and Oldenburger-Ebbers 2005: 29–32; Woudstra and Zieleman 2020: 179). Albeit influenced in some cases by English treatises, the architecture books available to and used by Dutch architects were primarily German — Christian Hirschfeld's *Theorie der Gartenkunst* (1780) and J. G. Grohmann's *Ideenmagazin für Liebhaber von Gärten* (1796–1806) — and French — George le Rouge's *Details de nouveaux jardins à la mode* (1776–88) and his *Jardins anglo-chinois* (1770–87) (Steenbergen 2002).

The hermitage folly was already common in the first half of the 18th century in Great Britain, France, and Germany, but it was not in the Dutch Republic. Wim Meulenkamp (1986: 279–300; 1993: 66–71; 1994: 77) distinguishes three phases in the Dutch hermitage: a 'proto-romantic' phase that only commenced in the second half of the 18th century, during which the early landscape style and hermitages were introduced on the bigger, often noble, estates; a second phase in the first quarter of the 19th century that saw the 'bourgeoisization' of the hermitage; and a final phase, in the mid- to late 19th century, when the hermitage became a source of entertainment for the entire population. Our research by and large affirms Meulenkamp's account, but the number of Dutch hermitages now known has significantly increased since Meulenkamp first published his research. While he counted only 36 late 18th- and 19th-century Dutch hermitages, analysis of newspaper sales advertisements of country houses mentioning the hermitages and to a lesser extent travel descriptions and other primary sources have revealed more than 75 new examples (1993: 57). For our research, we used the Dutch online collection of historical newspaper articles and advertisements (www.delpher.nl), applying the search terms 'hermitage', 'hermietage', 'heremitage', 'heremietage', 'hermitagie', 'heremitagie', 'ermitage', 'eremitage', 'eremietage', 'eremitagie', 'eremietagie', and 'kluizenaarshut'. While it had previously been thought that Gelderland, the location of many large, noble estates at the time, was where hermitages clustered in the Dutch Republic, our new data shows that most — at least 80 (see Appendix) — were in fact in the urban and bourgeois west (**Figure 2**).[4]

The hermitage was a typical 'sinkendes Kulturgut': initially built by the high nobility and wealthiest patricians, it was over time adopted by owners of more modest means who had simpler gardens. In his 1778 Dutch dictionary, Noel Chomel described hermitages as 'lonely places in large gardens of Monarchs and other big Lords' (661), but half a century later hermitages adorned town houses, playgrounds, and inns. That this trickle-down process may have taken place very quickly can be concluded from the

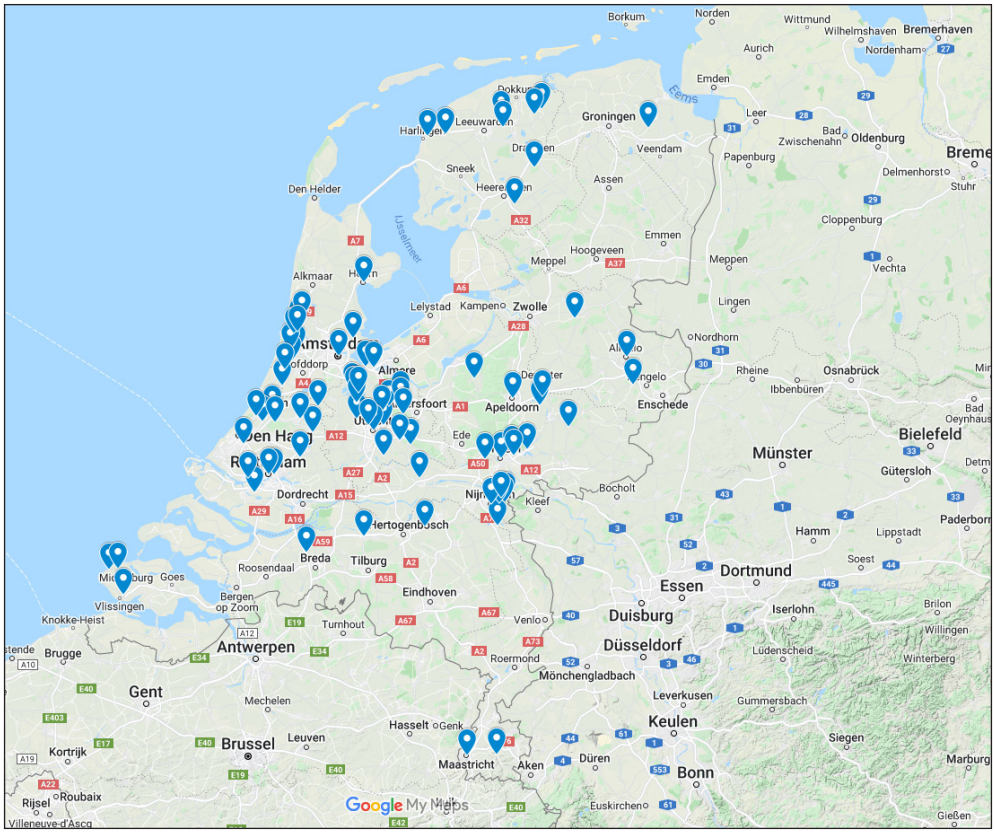

Figure 2: Map of the Netherlands illustrating where hermitages were located.

observations of Nicolaas Meerburgh, a gardener and botanist, who already remarked in 1782 that 'on most all country estates, even when they are not very extensive, an isolated spot is selected to build a so-called Hermitage' (2).[5] A novel written in 1800 in which two characters remark on how hermitages were all the rage, even in very modestly sized gardens, suggests that even smaller estates on the outskirts of towns now had them (Kist 1800: 236). Our data indicates this was indeed the case: although the first mentions of hermitages reach a peak between 1790 and 1810 (see Appendix), given that these mentions appear predominantly in sales advertisements, it can be assumed that the majority of the hermitages being advertised were constructed earlier, roughly in the last quarter of the 18th century. By 1820, the hermitage and hermit seem to have been omnipresent. One commentator implies as much by rhetorically (and perhaps disapprovingly) asking whether there are 'any estates, however small, where one cannot find a hermit' (*Het graauwe mannetje* 1820: 67).

The Architects, Architecture, and Setting of the Dutch Hermitage

The origin of the country house hermitage in the Netherlands is often associated with garden architect Johann Georg Michael, but whether he was responsible for the first

known hermitage — a rustic hut at the edge of a garden featured on a map of circa 1765 at the country estate Bosch en Hoven (**Figure 3**-) in Holland — is unclear (Oldenburger-Ebbers 1991: 77; Campbell 2013: 215, 219). Michael, son of a 'court gardener', was German, and only came to the Netherlands after working, like his father, for the Prince of Waldeck. Michael designed a hermitage for Jacob Boreel on the Beeckestijn estate in 1772 and one on the Elswout estate in 1781 (both in North Holland). Various other hermitages are also likely attributable to Michael. His Beeckestijn plan shows a ruin or cave-like structure topped with a turret or bell that lays hidden under trees in the corner of the small cornfield at the back of the estate. Boreel was very well acquainted with the hermitages in England as well as the English landscape style, according to a letter he wrote in which he also noted that he had visited Great Britain, although there is no historical evidence that Michael did (Oldenburger-Ebbers 1993: 73, 77; Van Oosterom 2010: 10–11). He did, however, read English, French, and of course also German architectural treatises and was probably familiar with various German hermitages.

Figure 3: Detail of a hermitage on a map of the Bosch en Hoven estate, 1765. Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem. https://hdl.handle.net/21.12102/FE5C3BF8FB8E11DF9E4D523BC2E286E2.

Various other garden architects also started to incorporate hermitages in their designs in the 1770s, such as Philip Willem Schonck, responsible for the parks and gardens of the stadtholder. Schonck created hermitages at Soestdijk and Het Loo. The Het Loo hermitage is an early example that our research has uncovered. A year before

Schonck was appointed court architect, he was sent to Paris to study the parks and gardens there. Most likely he saw various hermitages in the royal gardens firsthand. Besides garden architects, *dilettanti* and well-travelled country house owners built hermitages, such as Johan Frederik Willem Baron van Spaen at his Biljoen and Beekhuizen estates. In the case of Van Spaen, a direct English influence also seems unlikely (Tromp 2012: 108–9, 133–34). He made drastic changes to the gardens of Biljoen and Beekhuizen after his German travels in 1783. The estate had several hermitages over the following decades, situated on elevated and often times isolated spots in the large park, although a 'hermits' tree' was placed in the vicinity of the cascade waterfalls.

The proper place for a hermitage in a landscape park was as far away from civilization as possible. Hermitages had to be built 'in the darkest, wildest, and loneliest part' of a forest, on a small, natural elevation allowing a view (*Nederlandsche Tuinkunst* 1837: 55) (**Figure 4**). Ideally, walkers approached the hermitage via a winding path, so that they stumbled on the hermitage, not expecting it (Meulenkamp 1994: 76). Although it is not always possible to pinpoint the exact location of a hermitage in a park, research shows that hermitages were indeed, almost without exception, situated in an isolated place. A wooded area seems to have been the most common location, followed by islands or places where water featured (often in combination with a forest). The travelogue of the student Frans Cornelis Hoogvliet, dating from 1774, elaborates on the location of an early hermitage. On tour with his parents, Hoogvliet visited the Hof in Domburg in Zeeland because they were 'curious about such a rarity'. They first walked through 'a beautiful and fertile garden, behind which is a pleasant forest, shaded by dense trees' and then 'were led on various paths and winding lanes until, after a long detour,' they 'reached the house' of a 'curious stranger', the hermit (Kluiver 1980; Meulenkamp

Figure 4: This illustration from an 1802 issue of Gijsbert van Laar's *Magazijn van Tuin-sieraden* depicts a hermitage that is very similar to the hermitage at Velserbeek.

1993: 64). The hermitage on the Ubbergen estate near Nijmegen, covered with moss, was positioned ‘under different kinds of deciduous trees, hidden in the mysterious darkness’, while another Dutch hermitage was described by an English traveler as being ‘buried in the woods’ (Sonstral 1854: 4, 39; [Smith] 1852: 74).

There are many examples of hermitages situated on islands. At Vijverberg the walk led to an island with a hermitage, equipped with an altar, a skeleton, and a ‘movable hermit’ (Snoeck 1933). The hermit’s grave was located near the hermitage. This island or lakeside location became standard, as the corpus of hermitages designed a few decades later by Lucas Roodbaard in the north of the country suggests.

The Velserbeek estate in North Holland provides a rare example that combines the features of being located in a wood, on an island or waterfront, and on a hill. Visitors remarked that this solitary place was perfectly situated ‘on the other side of a stream, built against a slope, but half visible through the dense greenery’, ‘closed off by high trees’ on ‘all sides’ (*Een regendag* 1879: 274–75). The elevated position, however, was rare, though not unique (**Figure 5**).[6]

Figure 5: Hermanus Numan, drawing of the island with the hermitage at the Velserbeek estate, 1793. Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem. https://hdl.handle.net/21.12102/A1AA170454744A3DA0B6C017521C1B9F.

Prior to the 19th century, hermitages took all kinds of shapes and forms, from cave-like structures, simple huts, garden houses, and chapels to complete miniature country houses. In the earliest hermitage phase, the high nobility and wealthiest patricians still built larger, stone hermitages echoing the *diaeta* and the 17th- and 18th-century royal and aristocratic examples. In 1778, one Wernold Omans received 12 days' wages for supplying 'Gilhuyser [Gildehauser] stones' (which came from a quarry near Bad Bentheim) for the construction of the Twickel hermitage (Brunt and Wessels 2016: 58). Once the hermitage became more common and the way it was designed started to be copied from architectural treatises, its form became more standardised and simple, especially in the Netherlands. The fairly modest country house gardens of the city merchants were furnished with an equally modest and relatively cheap hermitage made of perishable materials.[7]

The ubiquity of the hermitage owes to the fact that the structures were so easy to make and did not cost a lot, which in turn meant it had less cachet than other garden features — even though it was an integral part of the landscape garden, it was never its most important ornament.[8] According to one treatise, *Nederlandsche Tuinkunst*, the hermitage should consist of 'raw wood and straw and rushes' (1837: 55). Another treatise is somewhat more specific and mentions 'tree roots, field stones, peat or reed' and moss (Ulkens 1848: 374–75). Travel accounts confirm the use of these materials, mentioning hermitages made 'from roots of trees' (Boissevain n.d.) and 'moss' (Baggerman and Dekker 2005: 216; Holwerda 2021: 16). The interior of a hermitage was usually sober — also described as 'naive' (Arends 1787: 69) — and ideally consisted of one or more chairs, a sofa or bed, a skull or coffin, an hourglass, books, and a (wooden) hermit (Meulenkamp 1986: 300). Jacobus Craandijk, born in 1834, recalled the decoration of the Schaesberg hermitage, which he visited as a child with his class: 'There was the table with an hourglass on it, … the coffin against the wall, a bed and a "memento mori". And there sat the hermit, the great wooden doll with a long white beard and a brown robe' (1876: 344).

Like the exterior, the interior of the hermitage soon became highly standardised, as is evident from both visual sources and travel reports. After a visit to the Oorsprong estate near Oosterbeek in Gelderland, Taco Scheltema, a Dutch portrait painter, and his wife, Jacomina van Nijmegen, merely noted that it was a hermitage complete 'with everything that belongs in it' (Holwerda 2021: 14). Apparently, it would have been clear

to the reader at the time what that meant (**Figure 6**). Often, this included a hermit: a living one who was either a garden staff member or someone hired to play the part; a hermit doll; or a wooden copy of a hermit, usually dressed as a monk. In a few cases, the hermit was represented only through the presence of a painting. Our research uncovered 25 hermits, which is a relatively high number compared to other European landscape gardens (**Figure 7**). Regularly, the hermit assumed the form of a mechanical doll or 'automata' (see also Harwood 2000: 281). Gideon Boissevain, for example, described a hermit in the hermitage at Lichtenbeek who read a book 'in a moving posture' (n.d.). A note in an account book which mentions that Van Spaen lent 10 guilders 'to Hermit Jan Gartsen' seems to suggest that the Biljoen estate's hermitage had a living hermit. If this was indeed the case, the hermit did not last long; according to contemporary scholarship, soon after, visitors began to encounter an automata upon entering the hermitage that would nod his head and then point to an upright coffin with the words 'memento mori' written on it. The forester set the mechanism in motion and afterwards held out his hand for a reward (Kerkkamp 1964: 86; Tromp 2012: 157). Frankendael's hermit in the Watergraafsmeer near Amsterdam seems to have been almost identical (Meulenkamp 1993: 70; Wiersma 2015: 19).

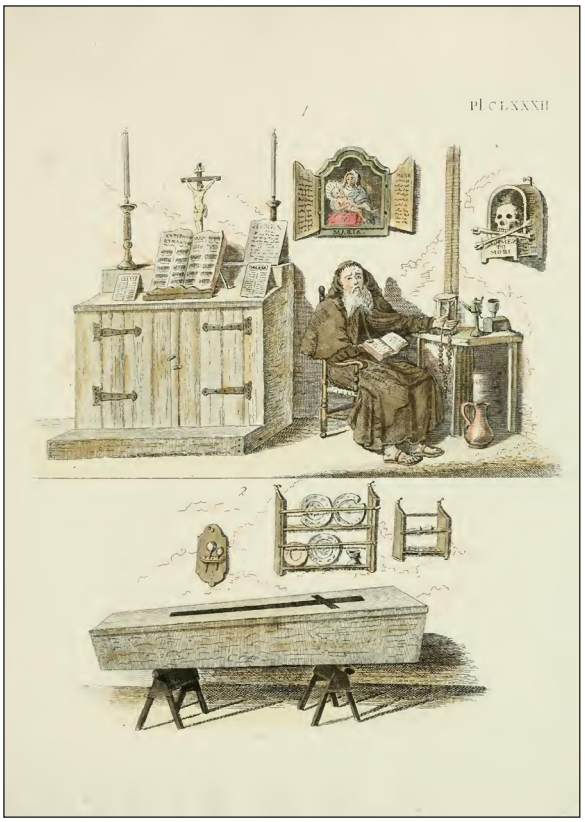

Figure 6: An illustration displaying several attributes and decorations that might be found in a hermitage from an 1802 issue of Gijsbert van Laar's *Magazijn van Tuin-sieraden*.

The Significance of the Hermitage: Nature, Solitude, and Religion

A number of scholars argue that in the 17th century the hermitage was secularised and transformed into a richly decorated structure that no longer invited much (sincere) religious contemplation (Hartleb 2006; Hlavac 2020; Witte 2018: 421). In the 18th century, British hermitages (which have been most widely studied) had lost all meditative aspects, according to David Coffin (1994: 108), and had become 'ornamental playthings'. The reality, however, was more complex. As we have already seen, very

Figure 7: Joannes Josephus de Loose, painting of a hermit, possibly the one at the Sparrendaal/ Rijsenburg estate, ca. 1805–18 (Van Berkum 2021: 14–15). Private collection.

few of the Dutch hermitages were richly decorated. Moreover, the question of whether the modest abode of a hermit should be luxuriously adorned was hotly debated across Europe (see, for example, Stanislas de Girardin 1811: 33). That this discourse also reached the Dutch Republic is evident from the fact that of the two hermitages at Boelens Castle at Olterterp in Friesland, one had a richly decorated interior while the other had a bare one (Ronnes, Van Elburg, and Haverman 2022: 15–16). That hermitages were nothing more than 'ornamental playthings' in the 18th century is also contradicted by architectural treatises and travel accounts suggesting hermitages were still intended as places for a carefully staged experience of nature and for quiet (religious) contemplation.

Nature was all the fad in the 18th century, both for Enlightenment thinkers such as Buffon, Linnaeus, and d'Holbach, who researched, classified, and secularised nature, and another equally large group of thinkers who still regarded nature as God's design and proof of God's greatness (Daston 2000; Edelstein 2009; Sparry 2000).[9] The association between the hermitage and nature was not entirely new. The early 17th-century hermitage of Palazzetto Farnese (an addition to the main palace), in Rome, the hermitage at Ermenonville in France a century later, and the Dutch hermitage in Domburg 80 years after that all referred to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[10] This centuries-long association between Ovid and the hermitage suggests the persistent significance of the hermitage as a transitional space, a space in which a metamorphosis from culture to nature occurs.

The intricate connection between the hermitage and nature undoubtedly boosted the hermitage rage in the nature-minded 18th century. Academic research in France into the origin of architecture in which the subject of nature again played a crucial role further strengthened its popularity. Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753), which traces all architecture back to a 'primitive hut' that represented a form

of divine intervention in human beings' struggle against nature, was especially influential. This hut was popularized by an endlessly reproduced etching published on the frontispiece of the second edition of the book in 1755 that portrayed a simple structure of branches and leaves, very similar to the hermitage (Laugier 1753: 12). It was believed that a return to this more 'pure' form of architecture could lead people to reflect, self-analyze, and morally improve themselves (Dent and O'Hagan 1999: 106; Dent 2005: 14; O'Hagan 2012: 89). At around the same time, in his political philosophy Jean-Jacques Rousseau juxtaposed an original state of nature, in which humans lived a happy, solitary life, with a state of contemporary, corrupted culture. In his famous epistolary novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Heloise* (1761) and in several autobiographical works, Rousseau presents 'real nature' and hermitages as the only places where people can find redemption (**Figure 8**).[11]

Figure 8: 18th-century drawing of Jean-Jacque Rousseau's hermitage at Montmorency. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In Great Britain and the Dutch Republic alike, the hermitage signified a withdrawal from society into nature, an embrace of solitude, and a desire to engage in self-reflection. Although the country house itself was already a place of solitude, removed from the city and society, the hermitage represented the highest degree of withdrawal. Interestingly, the hermitage became popular in the Dutch country house garden at the moment the fashion for solitude reached its peak, as it did elsewhere. Throughout the 18th century, sociality in the form of knowledge, ideas of virtue, and protocols of taste had been circulated via social circles, in societies, and salons (Buijnsters 2002: 55), but during the last quarter a counterreaction celebrated solitude, and no doubt a part of the enormous popularity of the hermitage also derives from this profound interest in solitude.

This emphasis on solitude was to a large extent fueled by Johann Georg Zimmermann's famous studies *Betrachtungen über die Einsamkeit* (1756), *Von der Einsamkeit* (1773), and *Über die Einsamkeit* (1783). Zimmermann contrasted true loneliness with false loneliness: the first characterised the philosopher, the second the bigot. Thus, solitude was not merely positive for Zimmermann or the Dutch authors he inspired, such as Rhijnvis Feith and Elisabeth Maria Post, but was also associated with melancholy, boredom, and fright, as was, importantly, the hermitage (and thus foreshadowed, according to Piet Buijnsters [2002: 57–59, 61], the gothic novel). The only (fictive) reference to a hermitage in the province of Drenthe confirms this. In the summer of 1785, a play was staged in the Laarwoud park. A hermitage was built as a set piece for the occasion, and one of the sons of the owner of Laarwoud, chamberlain to William V, played the role of the hermit (Van Heiden Reinestein 1785). A musical piece titled 'Romance' was sung in French by the boy, whose lyrics included the line 'in my obscure retreat, from the dull, lonely, abandoned world, I observe nature'.[12]

The hermitage was a place that enabled one to withdraw from the world and experience nature, but in line with Zimmermann's thesis, the libretto suggests that this loneliness did not necessarily bring joy. Other descriptions of the hermit's hut in travel reports support this argument: the hermitage of Biljoen was 'gloomy', while that of Domburg stood for a 'gloomy, lonely life' (Kluiver 1980: 143; Van Sandick 1902: 335). This gloom had much to do with the thoughts of 'the transience of human life' that the hermitage prompted (Snoeck 1933). Others, too, were of the opinion that the hermitage 'awakens the walker to grave reflections' (Sontral 1854: 39). The hermitage of Ubbergen and the accompanying inscription aroused a mood of 'seriousness' (*Het reisje* 1830: 160).

While Dutch and English hermitages both signified a withdrawal from society, the two differed when it came to the idea of the hut's association with Roman Catholicism and religious hypocrisy (Harwood 2000: 283) Edward Harwood argues that in Great Britain, the hermitage connoted superstition and religious hypocrisy (2000: 268). Like the abbeys Michael Charlesworth has studied (1994: 75), hermitages could become the 'focus of Protestant Whig hatred of Roman Catholicism'. Alexandra Walsham remarks on this same vulnerability of the hermitage in a Protestant context but adds that the monk's hut was inured to an extent from mockery, frequently being regarded as an antiquity rather than an idol (2011: 75, 136). Unlike in Great Britain, however, the Catholic minority in the Dutch Republic was significant, and country houses had hardly ever replaced abbeys and monasteries. Whilst the monastic isolation associated with the hermitage was probably often viewed with suspicion in (predominantly) Protestant countries, the Roman Catholic legacy exerted a certain fascination in the republic that is reflected in the appreciation of many of the hermitages discussed here. Neither the

hermits dressed as Catholic monks nor the religious inscriptions at hermitages invited criticism but instead drew large captivated audiences and were endlessly copied. Perhaps the fact that Dutch Catholic devotion itself was greatly affected by the romantic movement — emphasizing nature, wonder, the pilgrimage, and one's individual merging with God — facilitated the popularity of the Roman Catholic heritage of the hermitage (Nouwens 1957–58: 102–4). Individual religious and romantic reflections on life and death blurred, with romantic overtones gradually becoming dominant.

That the song sung in the play staged at Laarwoud was titled 'Romance' is significant. For the hermitage folly, 'romantic is the magic word' (Meulenkamp 1986: 300). Because the hermitage became popular in the Netherlands rather late, the Dutch hermitages, in contrast to those in other countries, coincided with the romantic period. Even contemporary sources associated the hermitage with the romantic era (Meulenkamp 1986: 300), as travel reports and handbooks suggest (for the use of variations on the phrases 'the romantic' and 'the picturesque', see Sonstral 1854, De Vriese 1855: 240–41, Ten Hoet Jz. 1862: 92, and Meulenkamp 1986: 300–301). And the hermitage embodied romanticism. In the arts, prior to the 18th century, the hermitage had always been rather 'melodramatic', an effect that was highly valued in the kind of sentimental parks it adorned (Velhagen 1993: 10). Only rarely was the hermitage described in a way that could be called unromantic. In his travel report, Boissevain wrote dryly that a hermitage he visited was 'very interesting' (1813: n.p.); travellers who saw the hermitage of Westhove near Domburg mentioned, rather lukewarmly, that 'it could hold their attention for a good while' (Arends 1787: 69).

The hermitage hardly ever inspired cynicism but only discussions, such as at Domburg where travellers after meeting the hermit debated the value of his solitary existence. Some believed that 'this man's happiness was to be envied', while others thought the happiness of the hermit was 'mere appearance' (Kluiver 1980: 1443). One rare exception is Willem de Clercq's description of Vijverberg's hermitage as 'a filthy hut where we found burnt-out candles and a cardboard skull' (1815: 208). This negative assessment, however, mainly concerned its lack of maintenance.

The ridicule that hermitages in a few other rare cases provoked seems to have been especially inspired by self-congratulatory country house owners such as Petrus van Oosthuyse, who wrote that many important people came to see his hermitage and added their signature to the guest book (n.d.). Van Spaen at Biljoen sulked when 'indecent' remarks were added to his hermitage guest book that contained pastoral verses intended to transport visitors to a poetic, protoromantic realm (Blok 2020: 248–49; Nijhoff 1820: 27; Tromp 2012: 164). The sheer number of hermitages and the way in which country house owners copied one another also elicited contempt (*Het graauwe mannetje* 1820: 67). A foreign gaze on Dutch hermitage culture does finally

betray proper condescension: English visitors 'smiled at the formal bed of rushes' at the hermitage of Sparrendaal ([Smith] 1852: 74–76). This condescension is hardly surprising given that the hermitage had by this time been out of vogue in Britain for at least half a century, with Horace Walpole calling it comical and Samuel Johnson describing it as fit only for 'toads' (Coffin 1994: 106–9).

The end of the hermitage in the Netherlands can be determined fairly precisely on the basis of sales advertisements and travel reports. A commentator in 1855 noted that the hermitage 'was more in vogue in the past than today' (De Vriese 1855: 240–41). Twenty-four years later, the hermitage was referred one of 'the beauties of our ancestors', firmly anchoring it in the past. Two visitors to Velserbeek in 1879 sounded surprised when they found the hermitage still 'perfectly in place' (*Een regendag* 1879: 274–75). The hermitages that survived, such as Frankendael in the Watergraafsmeer near Amsterdam, appear to have been appropriated by children and the general public in the second half of the 19th century. Every year a procession from the working-class neighbourhood of Jordaan in Amsterdam went to visit the hermit of Frankendael (Van Maurik 1882; Wiersma 2015: 19). Hermitages now also became destinations for primary school trips.[13] A newspaper article in 1872 mentions how a class that arrived at Fogelsanghstate in Veenklooster was surprised to see a hermit: it 'was especially difficult for the little ones [to determine] if the hermit was dead or alive' (*Een gelukkige dag* 1872: 47) (**Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Woman posing at the ruins of the hermitage at Frankendael in Amsterdam, ca. 1930. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.

Conclusion

The Dutch hermitage should be understood as a garden feature that coincided with and flourished in the landscape garden but that did not owe its existence to this garden style. As we have seen, the hermitage had gained popularity on the Continent well before the adoption of the landscape garden. People in the Netherlands were already aware of hermitages by the 17th century, and, as with the landscape style itself, most country house owners and garden architects were introduced to the architectural feature in Germany or France. Those constructing gardens and hermitages modified both during the 18th century to make them fit current ideas about nature, religion, and aesthetics. In an era in which nature replaced God, the picturesque and the sublime reigned high over beauty, and solitude was valued more than society, the landscape garden and the hermitage dovetailed perfectly, becoming immensely popular.

The hermitage was quantitatively mainly a bourgeois phenomenon, most common on the smaller estates of urban regents. This means that the Dutch hermitage differed considerably from the noble hermitage in the surrounding countries. Architecturally speaking, the hermitage was generally more modest than in other countries, and this was because it was so widely adopted by wealthy merchants with relatively small country houses. Even though the Dutch hermitage was particularly popular in a large radius around the capital city of Amsterdam and in other urban centres in the west of the country, noblemen in the east as well as the court architect at Het Loo and Soestdijk also built (generally somewhat bigger or at least less sober) hermitages. However, where it was always assumed that the hermitage in the Low Countries flourished especially on these grand noble estates, we now know that they in fact only accounted for a very small fraction of the sum total of hermitages in the 18th- and 19th-century Dutch landscape garden. The often perishable nature of the architecture of the Dutch hermitage itself, however, fits romantic ideas about the picturesque and sublime. It seems to have especially been the romantic quality of the hermitage that inspired Dutch country house owners to install a garden folly that was almost or already out of fashion elsewhere, a circumstance which challenges the aristocratisation thesis that proposes that the bourgeois simply copied the nobility (See Roorda 1980; De Jong, JJ, 1987: 65–68; Price 1995: 36–39; Frijhoff and Spies 1999: 102–5). The perishable hut, the natural and remote setting, and the references to death were all based on the romantic idiom. For the estate owners, the hermitage was a solemn place where they and their visitors were able to reflect deeply on life, death, and transience.

Appendix

List of Dutch Hermitages by Year First Mentioned

Estate name	City	Province	First mentioned
Bosch en Hoven	Heemstede	Noord-Holland	1765
Santvliet	Lisse	Zuid-Holland	1770
Beeckestijn	Velsen-Zuid	Noord-Holland	1772
Hof te Domburg	Domburg	Zeeland	1774
Slangevegt	Breukelen	Utrecht	1780s
Velseroog / Velser-Oog	Velsen	Noord-Holland	1781
Velserbeek	Velsen-Zuid	Noord-Holland	1783
Lathmer	Wilp	Gelderland	1783
Voortwyk	Breukelen	Utrecht	1785
Westhove	Oostkapelle	Zeeland	1786
Kent U Zelven	Utrecht	Utrecht	1787
Soestdijk	Baarn	Utrecht	ca. 1790
Huis Doorn	Doorn	Utrecht	1790
De Boomgaard	Maarssen	Utrecht	1791
Paviljoen Welgelegen	Haarlem	Noord-Holland	1792
Het Loo	Apeldoorn	Gelderland	1793
Vijverberg	Arnhem	Gelderland	1793
America	Leiden	Zuid-Holland	1794
Rijnoord	Oudshoorn	Zuid-Holland	1794
unnamed house	Haarlem	Noord-Holland	1796
Twickel	Delden	Overijssel	1797?
Loenersloot	Loenersloot	Utrecht	1797
De Snelle	Moordrecht	Zuid-Holland	1797
Rhederoord	De Steeg	Gelderland	1797
Huis-Duinen	Haarlem	Noord-Holland	1798
Biljoen	Velp	Gelderland	1798
Leyduin	Vogelenzang	Noord-Holland	1798
Meerwer(c)k	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1799
Hoge en Lage Oorsprong	Arnhem	Gelderland	1799
Rustryk	Muiderberg	Noord-Holland	1799
Beekhuizen	Velp	Gelderland	1799
Elsenburgh	Maarssen	Utrecht	1800

(Contd.)

Estate name	City	Province	First mentioned
Veenhuizen	Noordbroek	Groningen	ca. 1800
Leeuwendaal	Rijswijk	Zuid-Holland	1800
Lommerlust	Beverwijk	Noord-Holland	1801
Zwanenburg	Utrecht	Utrecht	1801
Namaals Beeter	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1803
Wel Na	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1803
Fogelsangh State	Veenklooster	Friesland	after 1803
Zuylenburgh	Zuilen	Utrecht	1804
Huis de Poll	Gietelo	Gelderland	1805
unnamed estate	Vreeland	Utrecht	1805
unnamed estate	Zevenhoven	Zuid-Holland	1805
Soelen	Zoelen	Gelderland	1805
Zorgrust	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1806
Sparrenheuvel	Bloemendaal	Noord-Holland	1806
unnamed house	Haarlem	Noord-Holland	1806
Elsbosch	Nuland	Noord-Brabant	1806
Bleeck-en-Hoven	Bloemendaal	Noord-Holland	1807
unnamed estate	Bodegraven	Zuid-Holland	1807
Sjordema Stins / Sjorda State	Kollum	Friesland	1807
Middeloo	Velsen	Noord-Holland	1807
unnamed estate	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1808
La Retraite	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1809
unnamed estate	Baambrugge	Utrecht	1812
Stadwyk	Muiden	Noord-Holland	1812
Elswout	Overveen	Noord-Holland	1812
Lokaal De Vreede	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1813
Aelbertsberg	Bloemendaal	Noord-Holland	1813
unnamed inn	Almelo	Overijssel	1814
unnamed house	Haarlem	Noord-Holland	1815
Sterreschans	Nieuwersluis	Utrecht	1815
Belvedere	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1816
Valkenstein	Poortugaal	Zuid-Holland	1817
unnamed garden	Rotterdam	Zuid-Holland	1817
unnamed house	Rotterdam	Zuid-Holland	1818
Rusthoven	Haarlem	Noord-Holland	1819

(Contd.)

Estate name	City	Province	First mentioned
Backershagen	Wassenaar	Zuid-Holland	1819
unnamed house	Maastricht	Limburg	1820
Moscou	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1821
Lagerwerf	Broek in Waterland	Noord-Holland	1821
Assumburg	Heemskerk	Noord-Holland	1821
Uleput	Berg en Dal	Gelderland	1822
unnamed estate	Beek	Gelderland	1823
Struisenburg	Rotterdam	Zuid-Holland	1823
Boschwijk	Zwolle	Overijssel	1824
Lyndenstein	Beetsterzwaag	Friesland	after 1825
Olterterp	Olterterp	Friesland	after 1825
Vijversburg	Tytsjerk	Friesland	after 1825
unnamed house	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1826
Broekhof	Cuijk	Noord-Brabant	1827
Nieuwland	Heilig Landstichting	Gelderland	1828
Marienlust	Nijmegen	Gelderland	1829
Vredenhoef	Voorschoten	Zuid-Holland	1830
unnamed estate	Rotterdam	Zuid-Holland	1834
unnamed estate	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	1838
Klaas Bakker's garden	Broek in Waterland	Noord-Holland	1838
Rustenburg	Schalkwijk	Utrecht	1838
Ridderoord	De Bilt	Utrecht	1840
Eyckenstein	Maartensdijk	Utrecht	1840
unnamed estate	Voorschoten	Zuid-Holland	1841
Beresteijn	Voorschoten	Zuid-Holland	1843
Het Park	West-Souburg	Zeeland	1843
unnamed house	Utrecht	Utrecht	1844
Mastveld	Klein Overveld	Noord-Brabant	1845
Breevecht	Vreeland	Utrecht	1845
Huis Vilsteren	Vilsteren	Overijssel	1846
Jagtlust	Oudeschoot	Friesland	1847/48
Sparrendaal	Driebergen	Utrecht	1848
Kasteel Staverden	Staverden	Gelderland	1851
Kasteel Ubbergen	Ubbergen	Gelderland	1854
unnamed house	Vreeland	Utrecht	1856

(Contd.)

Estate name	City	Province	First mentioned
unnamed house	Waalwijk	Noord-Brabant	1856
Holij	Vlaardingen	Zuid-Holland	1859
Jerusalem	Kralingen	Zuid-Holland	1862
unnamed estate	Rotterdam	Zuid-Holland	1862
unnamed house	Hoorn	Noord-Holland	1867
Groot Lankum	Franeker	Friesland	1868
Middelstein	Midlum	Friesland	1868
Stadwijk	Zoeterwoude	Zuid-Holland	1870
Simke Kloostermanhuis	Twijzel	Friesland	1877
Rust-Oord	Soestdijk	Utrecht	1880
Drakenstein	Lage Vuursche	Utrecht	1888
Schaefsberg	Schin-op-Geul	Limburg	1889
De Paltz	Soesterduin	Utrecht	late 19th c.
Het Echobosch	Muiderberg	Noord-Holland	1903
Stania State	Oenstjerk	Friesland	1905
unnamed estate	Nijmegen	Gelderland	1913
Patientia	Baambrugge	Utrecht	1915
Frankendael	Amsterdam	Noord-Holland	unknown
Doorwerth	Doorwerth	Gelderland	unknown
Huis te Manpad	Heemstede	Noord-Holland	unknown
unnamed house	Maastricht	Limburg	unknown
unnamed garden	Rozendaal	Gelderland	unknown
Fraeylemaborg	Slochteren	Groningen	unknown
Overbeek	Velp	Gelderland	unknown
De Wildenborch	Vorden	Gelderland	unknown

Notes

[1] The Dutch hermitage has not received much scholarly attention. Most publications on the subject describe one or a few hermitage huts, such as Martin van den Broeke's 1994 article about the hermitage at Westhove, Lucia Albers's 2003 article about several hermitage huts on estates in North Holland, and Lisa Wiersma's 2015 article about the hermitage at Frankendael. Jan Holwerda (2019; 2021) also has written several articles on the subject. An exception to these usually incidental research projects is the work of Wim Meulenkamp; he has an extensive oeuvre on garden follies, including hermitages. See also Ronnes, Van Elburg, and Haverman (2021).

[2] In the 17th century hermitages were also called 'romitorii.' Gradually, the word 'hermitage' became more common than 'diaeta.' Cardinals such as Odoardo Farnese created hermitages in monasteries and palaces, modifying monks' cells using Pliny's idea of *diaeta* (Witte 2018: 417). In the mid-17th century, Cardinal Chigi built several hermitages in and outside of Rome that featured murals of hermits (Witte 2007: 106–9).

[3] Hermitages were also built for the French king at Marly and the Reichsgrave Franz Anton von Sporck (1662–1738) in Bethlehem (Bohemia). The French *hameaus*, such as those of Marie-Antoinette at Versailles, are an extension of this playful conception of the hermitage.

[4] There were eight hermitages in Friesland, three in Overijssel, and three in Zeeland. One hermitage each was found in Groningen and Limburg, but none were located in Drenthe.

[5] Since hermitages were probably initially thought to be mainly suitable for very large estates such as Ermenonville, where the unsuspecting walker would only come across a hermitage after a long tour through the park, it is not inconceivable that Meerburgh's 'not very extensive gardens' were still fairly large.

[6] Ubbergen, for example, had a hermitage on 'the slope of a hill', which was reached via 'a narrow winding footpath' and 'through dense undergrowth' (Van Meerten 1823: 140–41).

[7] Edward Harwood (2000: 280) also notes that the hermitage was not an expensive garden feature and that it was thus within reach even for country house owners on a tight budget.

[8] In sale advertisements the hermitage is usually mentioned at the end of the list or halfway through, after the house, stable, coach house, various follies, the aviary, menagerie, winding paths, (goldfish) ponds, and the forest. Often it is listed just before 'et cetera', which mistakenly suggests that the hermitage was barely worth mentioning.

[9] Natural scientists were not the only ones preoccupied with the natural world; the highest echelons of society likewise were intoxicated by the 'cult of nature' (Edelstein 2009).

[10] The hermit at Domburg, 'an elderly father in a dark brown skirt … beautifully made of wood', sat at a table with two books on it: *Le song d'un ermite* and *La métamorphose d'Ovide* (Uilkens 1848: 374–75).

[11] In *Julie*, nature as a retreat plays an important role in several ways: it is where children run off to, where lovers meet secretly, and where rejected lovers seek solace.

[12] Perhaps this is an allusion to 'Romance' by Rousseau; a few years later this piece of music was performed in the garden. It is also possible that the children's tutor wrote the piece especially for the occasion.

[13] Craandijk published his book in which he describes the hermitages that were common in his youth in 1876, the very same time that hermitages were becoming a popular school trip destination.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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