Man who put everyone in the picture

By Brian Sewell, Evening Standard  11.06.06

Teniers' painting of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Picture Gallery in Brussels with a selection of the finest Italian paintings in his collection

The Three Philosophers, after Giorgione, a masterpiece of Venetian Renaissance art

Some three and a half centuries have passed since the issue of the first illustrated souvenir of a collection of paintings. By then, 1660, the manuscript inventory was common, though never published, and the illustrated printed book had been available for
more than 150 years, yet no one, collector, curator, printer or publisher, had thought of combining them to provide records of the great collections that had been formed in Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe, until David Teniers the Younger did so for the Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, brother of the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand III.

Teniers called it Theatrum Pictorium, literally The Theatre of Painting, though the sense of Theatrum in this case is the less usual place of exhibition rather than performance. It was a handsome volume devoted only to the more important Italian paintings in the Archduke's possession, 243 of them (a little more than half their number).

With preliminary texts in Latin, Dutch, French and Spanish, it was intended for a far wider market than Flanders and Brussels, where it was printed; Latin was the international language of the day, French and Dutch were local languages, and Spanish was a judicious choice, for what is Belgium now was then the Spanish Netherlands, occupied by Spanish forces, governed by a grandee appointed by the Spanish King - in this case a Hapsburg cousin from distant Austria, the Archduke.

It ran to five editions, the last in French (though published in Amsterdam and Leipzig) in 1755, and, with measurements and attributions, set the model for other catalogues, some very grand indeed, particularly in the 18th century.

In a sense, this Theatrum was a glimpse into that later century, the Age of Enlightenment, in which the urge to record, distinguish, categorise, classify and catalogue came into play as a means of understanding birds, beasts, butterflies and other disciplines of natural history - why not paintings too?

It is too easy to look back on the book and dismiss it as vanity publishing, the boastfulness of a rich and powerful man who wished to be envied and admired for his possessions; this may indeed have been a factor in its genesis, but the book lasted and had influence long after any reader in the lifetimes of the Archduke and his minions.

Had the enterprise continued with volumes illustrating the Flemish, Dutch and German paintings in the collection, the distinctions between national schools would certainly have been evident and their characteristics identified, with as many subdivisions of genus and species as in more scientific subjects. If we consider the way the National Gallery has issued its catalogues and illustrated souvenirs - 15th-century Netherlandish, 16th-century Venetian, Early Flemish, Early Italian - we see exactly the Teniers approach.

Alas, if such other volumes of the Theatrum were intended, they fell by the wayside, as indeed was almost the case with this, for the Archduke was recalled to Vienna in 1656, well before Teniers had completed even the initial stages, and far off and deep in debt he could no longer take an active interest in it, though it contains an illustration of his pictures installed in their new Viennese gallery.
The pairing of the Archduke and Teniers is intriguing. Born in 1614, Leopold was intended for the church, educated by Jesuits, appointed to his first bishopric at the age of 11; by the age of 23 he had been four times a bishop and once an archbishop. At 25, however, his indulgent brother, the Emperor, switched his career from church to army and appointed him Supreme General of the Imperial forces then engaged in the disastrous pan-European Thirty Years War.

The military incompetence of this incurably conceited, ambitious and vengeful leader resulted in defeat after defeat and eventual dismissal, and he was saved from total ignominy only by his cousin, Philip IV of Spain, who, two years before the war's conclusion, gave him his post as Governor in the Netherlands. It was in the nine years between his taking up residence in Brussels in 1647 and returning to Vienna in 1656, that he formed a collection of pictures so great in number that they covered every wall of his palace from floor to ceiling, hanging frame to frame.

Teniers was born in 1610, the son of David Teniers I and at 28 the father of David Teniers III, a family of painters. Heir to the popular tradition of merry peasants misbehaving, a genre common enough in the Netherlands, he bowdlerised their vulgar uninhibited vigour and extended it into pictures of cats and monkeys playing human roles.

Leopold was at once enchanted by his small accounts of the quotidian and, when his official court painter died in 1650, Teniers immediately took over his duties and flattered the Archduke with paintings of him in his gallery of great Italian masterpieces by Raphael, Titian and Giorgione, and works by then almost modern painters.

What part had he played in their acquisition before his appointment? As he includes himself in these pictures in what seems to be the role of curator, is he suggesting that the Archduke's wealth would have been nothing without his good fortune in employing Teniers' connoisseurship and negotiating skills? Was it he who advised his patron on his first major acquisition, 80 Venetian paintings from the estate of the Duke of Hamilton within a month of his execution by Cromwell's men in March 1649?

These were the first part of a huge consignment of 400 of the Duke's paintings to be bought by Leopold, perhaps almost as immediately - a more vital loss to English heritage than the sales from the Royal Collection, for many paintings once owned by Charles I (similarly beheaded) were recovered, while sufficient of Hamilton's are still in Vienna to form a core of the Kunsthistorisches Museum there.

It was probably the Archduke's ownership of the Hamilton pictures that inspired the idea of the Theatrum Pictorium. Paintings that gave a half-truthful, half-fictional account of the crowded hanging of these great works in the Archduke's official residence were of limited value as propaganda, for even if every painting depicted within them was an obvious and recognisable masterpiece, the number that could be included was a mere fraction of the whole; a painting, moreover, could not be disseminated and could only be propaganda in one household or one court.
A book, on the other hand, could be presented to every court in Europe and could include every picture, proving that Leopold's collection, though so new, was one of the greatest in Europe, establishing him, in this field, as the superior of his brother, the Emperor himself.

In painting the various gallery interiors Teniers had shown his skill not merely in recording images of other painters' pictures, but in conveying something of the mood and character of the originals. His first step with the Theatrum was therefore to paint a copy of each of the Archduke's masterpieces, reducing the scale to a format small enough to fit the pages of the intended book, occasionally adjusting their proportions.

These have since been given the name pasticci, though they are not pastiches, but would-be faithful copies (and should always be described, in art historical parlance, as ricordi) from which the engravers were to work; this was a departure from the common practice of providing drawings or paintings in grisaille, that is in tone and outline, but not colour. Teniers left the engravers to decide on these matters, which may explain why some of the prints are unusually crude.

In painting his gallery interiors Teniers recorded the pictures more or less to scale and as faithfully as he could; as the pasticci are larger he could be even more scrupulous and vary his handling of paint to match the originals; he was very good with Mantegna and Tintoretto, and with Titian was even able to communicate the distinction between early and late paintings.

With the evidence of this considerable skill, however, we may be justified in doubting that all pasticci are by his hand. One exists in two versions, of which that in the collection of the Courtauld Institute is now acknowledged to be a workshop replica; and if this Good Samaritan (after Bassano) is not by Teniers, then should we question the authenticity of Veronese's Adam and Eve after the Expulsion, Schiavone's Aeneas fleeing Troy, Palma Giovane's Magdalen and perhaps Schiavone's Tobit and the dead Israelite too?

One of the problems with engraving is that because the engraved plate is in the same sense as the painting, the print it produces must be in reverse; most of the engravings in the Theatrum are back to front, left right and right left, but in a very few cases Teniers confronted this by painting his copy in reverse, thus ensuring an unreversed image in the engraving.

Teniers was not wasting his time in painting these small pictures; in the 17th century, copies of one reputable painter's work by another were not despised, and small pictures to be held in the hand or rested on the knee were in high fashion - witness the enthusiasm for Elsheimer; how long they stayed together we do not know, but by the time the Duke of Marlborough bought 120 of them early in the 18th century, all the others, the plums, had been dispersed.

Poor Teniers - with Leopold's departure for Vienna he was left with the enterprise far from complete and not paid for. As Leopold's successor continued to employ him as court
painter, he was not penniless, but the independent engravers had still to be paid. Bravely, he decided to continue painting his pasticci and, with the sufferance of the engravers, the book was published in 1660, a commercial endeavour rather than the prestigious gift from the Archduke to friends and enemies that was probably its original boastful intention (of these there must, nevertheless, have been a few).

By then, according to a Viennese inventory, Leopold's collection had grown to 517 Italian pictures (almost twice the number in Teniers' book) and 880 of Dutch, Flemish and German origin. That a second edition of the Theatrum had to be published in 1673 suggests that the first had brought a measure of profit and demand; and the third edition followed in 1684, six years before Teniers' death at the age of 80.

Teniers, heir to the Brueghel tradition (Jan Brueghel was his father-in-law) and to Brouwer, art dealer and negotiator (the Archduke sent him to England to see what could be got from the collection of Charles I - four paintings only), was not in any sense an important painter, but his work on the Theatrum secures him an unique niche in the history of art and connoisseurship.

It is perfectly proper that the Courtauld Institute should honour him with an exhibition reminding us of the relationship that could exist between painter and patron in the 17th century, reminding us of how and why great collections were formed and dispersed. No exhibition of Tenier's work has been seen in England since 1972, when the Arts Council, in the heady days when it recognised that it has a responsibility to old art as well as new, showed 36 of these pasticci at Kenwood, and this show of 26, together with three paintings of galleries and examples of the various editions of the book is, in its small way, thoroughly enjoyable.

Its coincidence with the Velázquez exhibition of the National Gallery is, however, cruel - both painters were servant to a Hapsburg master and both were sent on expeditions to buy pictures, but Velázquez we remember for his own great paintings, the equal of anything he bought for Philip IV, while Teniers we remember as a copyist and the founder of the catalogue. The catalogue of this exhibition is a worthy monument to this forefather of scholarship. The Archduke we remember not at all. He died in 1662.

• David Teniers and the Theatre of Painting is at the Courtauld Institute of Art, WC2 (020 7848 2777), until 21 January. Daily 10am-5.15pm. Entry included in tickets for the permanent collection £5; admission free Monday 10am-2pm.