

A Christening Dress of Prince Willem (1817-1890), the Future Dutch King Willem III of Oranje-Nassau, 1817

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Abstract:

The christening of prince Willem, the first born son of King Willem II and Anna Pavlovna took place on the 27th of March 1817 in Brussels. I would like to present his christening dress to the public for its own sake as an interesting costume, which is an enigma in itself, as we cannot decide which part is the front or the back. But I would also like to use this costume as a starting point to tell different related interesting (personal) stories around it.

The dress tells the story of the use of silver and gold brocade as status symbol for a royal prince. It tells the story of the very special christening of prince Willem as a crossover of Russian and Dutch religious christening rituals imposed by his mother Anna Pavlovna. It tells the story of the great importance of the wet nurse in this royal family, who was even painted to preserve her memory. She was also present amidst the royal persons attending the baptism, although she wasn't mentioned in the official program. It tells the story of Princess Anna Pavlovna, the Russian mother of the little prince, who decided to ignore court protocol and to let prevail her role as mother above her role as an imperial princess. It tells the story of all the necessary preparations and costs to transform the church interior for the christening ceremony.

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Introduction



Fig. 1:

Anonymous, Willem III, the future king of the Netherlands, around 1817. Palace Het Loo, Apeldoorn, Holland; on loan from the Geschiedkundige Vereniging Oranje-Nassau.

William, the first born of Crown Prince William (1792-1849) and Crown Princess Anna Pavlovna (1795-1816), Grand Duchess of the House of Romanow, was born on the 19th of February 1817 in Brussels, which was at that time still part of the Netherlands (fig. 1). Anna was a headstrong woman and her arrangements concerning the christening of her eldest son William are a testimony to her character.

This lecture was based on an early text in the accompanying catalogue of the exhibition *Oranje in de Wieg* at Palace Het Loo in 2004. My information was based mostly on archive material from the Royal Archives in The Hague and on the following book: Coppens, Thera. 2003. *Marie Cornélie: dagboek van haar reis naar het hof van Sint-Petersburg 1824-1825*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff. Unfortunately no specific notes were given in the catalogue and my original investigation got lost during the several computer changes I had during these years. If anybody has a question, feel free to ask me: t.rosadecarvalho@paleishetloo.nl

A Costly Baptism

Prince William was baptized on the 27th of March in the Augustine church in Brussels. Nowadays it is hard to imagine that various carpenters and 42 assistants worked for 270 days, and then the painter and his twelve men for 155 days, to prepare the church for the royal baptism. The cloth merchant supplied for almost 2,000 guilders velvet and other cloths, braid and trimmings. The whole church was covered with domestically produced tapestries. As you see, neither cost nor effort were spared for his splendid royal ceremony.



Fig. 2:
Christening mantle of prince Willem, 1817. Palace Het Loo, Apeldoorn, Holland; on loan from the Koninklijke Verzamelingen, Den Haag.

Neither cost nor effort were also spared for a mantle and three cushions in the collection of Palace Het Loo; according to tradition used for the christening of prince William in Brussels in 1817. The christening mantel is made of silver brocade, trimmed with flowered lace on tulle. The mantle had two broad bow ribbons. The silver brocade measures 130 by 157.5 cm and the lace trim measures 19 cm. There are two cushions related to this christening mantle; one of gold brocade and a smaller one of white silk satin, trimmed with lace (fig. 2).

Enigma

The subject matter of the 2017 Annual General Meeting in London was “The narrative power of clothes”. In my lecture the first thing to do was to show the object in its own beauty and enigma to the public. Tradition tells us that the christening mantle was used at the baptism of Prince William, the future King of Holland. As you can read above this occasion was a royal occasion which was prepared without sparing any costs and directed towards royal representation and status. There are two questions related to this christening mantle. The first question or remarkable thing is the fact that despite the important occasion the mantle has no lining as you may have expected (fig. 3).

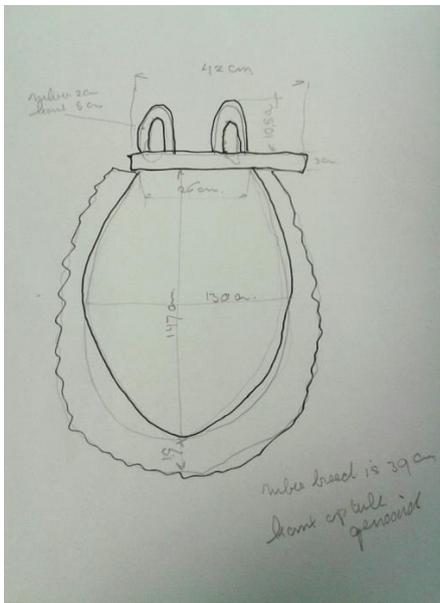


Fig. 3:
A drawing of the christening mantle by Hans Schuite, textile restorer Palace Het Loo.



Fig. 4:
The christening mantel exposed in an exhibition at Palace Het Loo, Apeldoorn.

This leads to the second question concerning the decision of which side to present to the public: the front or the back. Normally you close a christening mantle at the front, so you can take the baby out easily. But if you use this mantle like that, everybody would see the unlined inside, which is odd. But if you use the closure at the back it's not the most convenient way to handle it, as you have to turn the baby on his belly to dress and undress him. Never the less we decided to present the mantle in a former exhibition about royal babies with the closure at the back (fig. 4). It was difficult to decide if we should use a mannequin or not. We decided to put the arms upright to avoid giving the impression to the public of showing a dead baby. At that time we decided to show the mantle on this mannequin in its full beauty. But some people reacted strongly against it, since for them they had indeed the wrong associations.

Royal Status

No cost or effort were spared to embellish the church interior for this royal occasion, which is all about status. The royal materials used in the christening mantle and cushion, silver and gold brocade, are very rich materials and they were only reserved for costumes for royal per-

sons to be worn at royal occasions like baptisms, weddings and inaugurations. They also are an expression of royal status (fig. 5). Princess Anna Pavlovna wore a dress of silver brocade and a cloak of gold brocade, at the inauguration of her husband, King William II in 1840. It has been suggested that maybe the christening mantle has been made of a part of her wedding dress of silver cloth, but I haven't found any evidence for this suggestion.



Fig. 5: Nicolaas Pieneman, Anna Pavlovna, queen of the Netherlands (1795-1865), around 1840. Palace Het Loo, Apeldoorn, Holland; on loan from the Geschiedkundige Vereniging Oranje-Nassau. Photo: Tom Haartsen.

The Christening

The christening ceremony was recorded in an oil sketch by the painter Mathieu Ignace van Bree (1773-1839), dating 1817 (fig. 6). You see the "hofprediker", the chief priest, dressed in black behind the infant performing the baptism. In the middle there is the father, the Prince of Orange with the baby, surrounded by Dutch and Russian family members and many courtiers and officials. To the left you see the 'grootmeesteres', the mistress of ceremonies, holding the christening lace veil. Missing from the painting is the most important person of all, the mother of the child, Princess Anna, which was according to royal protocol. When another of her sons was baptized in 1820 Anna decided to revolt against this rigid protocol, which was quite unforeseen. In the last minute she jumped into the carriage of the christening proces-

sion, and grasped her baby into her own arms. After arriving at church she pushed the 'grootmeesteres' firmly aside and she carried the child into the church so it stayed in her arms during the christening. You can imagine that this was quite disappointing for the mistress of ceremonies.



Fig. 6:
Mathieu Ignace van Bree, 1817, The christening of crown prince Willem, the future king Willem III, in the Augustijnerkerk in Brussels, 27th of March 1817. Palace Het Loo, Apeldoorn, Holland; on loan from the Geschiedkundige Vereniging Oranje-Nassau.

It was probably because of the same obstinacy of mother Anna, that the depiction on this painting seems quite enigmatic to us and not in harmony with the prevailing Protestant christening rituals. We see a baby, who appears to be naked and wrapped in tulle with lace laying on a cushion of gold brocade, which wasn't customary at all at a Protestant baptism ceremony. The christening mantle seems to lay on the red velvet table cloth in front of the painting, so it wasn't worn at that specific moment by the royal baby. You hardly recognize the form, but this painting in oil was a sketch in preparation of the real painting, so the painter didn't elaborate on the presentation of the mantle.

Russian-Orthodox

It was probably Princess Anna Pavlovna, the sister of the Russian tsar, who insisted that the christening of her first born should be Russian tinted. When she married the Protestant Dutch prince William of Orange she insisted that she should remain a Russian-Orthodox and that her Russian chapel should be transported to Holland to enable her to profess her own faith. The idea of Russian Orthodox elements to be intertwined with Protestant christening rituals depicted on the painting becomes stronger after reading the diary of Marie Cornelia van Wassenaar. As a lady-in-waiting, she travelled in 1824 together with Princess Anna to Rus-

sia, where they assisted the baptismal ceremony of a new born Grand Duchess. Mary describes in her diary how this Russian princess was carried into the church in the arms of the grand master. After the swaddlings of the little child were removed, she was rubbed in oil.

During the baptism the baby was completely immersed for tree times into the water by the priest. Afterwards the little child was dried, wrapped up again and dressed behind a screen. Just before the Holy Communion they carried the baby inside again, nicely dressed in a christening dress of silver brocade and lying on a cushion of gold brocade.

Probably something of the baptismal rituals of the Russian aristocracy and court emerged through the christening ceremony of Prince William. After all what we see on the painting is this royal child, scarcely dressed laying on the gold brocade cushion, while the mantle of silver brocade seems to lay on the table in the front. Here the child isn't plunged into the water of the baptismal font. What we see here is a combination of two traditions, Russian orthodox and Protestant.

Dry Nurse

The dry nurse of the little prince was Mrs. Duym, called Truy (fig. 7). Truy was immortalized on canvas by the painter Cornelis Cels (1778-1859), commissioned in 1819 by father William. The fact that she was painted indicates the great importance of her role as the dry nurse of the royal family. The painter received almost 374 Belgian francs on the 18th of May 1819. The picture is still in the Royal Collections in The Hague.



Fig. 7:
Cornelis Cels, around 1819, Portrait of dry nurse Truy. Koninklijke Verzamelingen, Den Haag.

Anna Pavlovna was assisted in the care of her baby by dry nurse Truy. In 1819 Truy earned one thousand guilder a year. On her bills you see the small purchases for child care like powder, white soap, a pair of little scissors to cut the nails, little gloves, irons to pleat the baby bonnets, thread and ribbons.

If we take a close look at the picture of the christening again, there is another peculiar detail to be found. By looking carefully you will see to your astonishment two simply dressed women in the middle of all those royal persons, courtiers and officials, who are all fully dressed in gala (fig. 8). This is another Russian influence being combined with the original Protestant baptism rituals. Just as in royal baptisms in Russia, Baker Truy and the governess were present both in the carriage of the young born prince, part of an elaborated christening procession and at the official royal christening ceremony in church. You see them, simply dressed with their bonnets, unadorned, right there, between the grand master and the vicar. For all the persons present their presence must have been quite exceptional as it wasn't mentioned in the official baptismal program. Probably we witness once again an improvisation by mother Anna Pavlovna. She wanted to press her own and personal imprint on the christening ceremony. I got this last information from an inquiry commissioned by Queen Emma as a preparation of the christening of her only child Wilhelmina in 1880 and I can see it confirmed on the painting. Queen Emma decided to follow this quite 'liberated' example set in 1817 by Anna Pavlovna and that's how new traditions are born in the historical course of life.



Fig. 9:
Detail of the painting of Van Bree with dry nurse Truy and another woman from the delivery room.

Christening Veil

After 1772 according to protocol the role to accompany and to lead the new born baby into the church, laying on a baptismal cushion, was always executed by the grand master or 'grootmeesteres' of the mother of the child. It was she who handed the baby over to the father for baptism and the mother was never present at the ceremony in church. In this detail of the Van Bree painting you see the 'grootmeesteres' holding the christening veil (fig. 9). This protocol of the 'grootmeesteres' carrying the baby into the church still existed in 1938. Then it was Mrs. Fagel Boreel, the grand master of Queen Juliana, who carried Princess Beatrix into church for the baptismal ceremony on the 12th of May 1938 (fig. 10). But by this time they had already forgotten how to exactly handle the christening veil. Normally it was carried by two or four of the chamberlains of the mother, who took the veil by the corners and hung the veil above the baby in a more horizontal way, not vertical like a curtain, as we see here.



Fig. 9:
Detail of the painting of Van Bree with the 'grootmeesteres' holding the christening veil.



Fig. 10:

De 'grootmeesteres' of Queen Juliana and two chamberlains holding the christening veil before entering the church for the baptism of Princess Beatrix, 1938. Photographer unknown, Koninklijke Verzamelingen, Den Haag.

In 2004 Prince Willem-Alexander finally presented his daughter, Crown Princess Amalia on his arm, without the christening cushion and veil, without too much royal fuss. It marks the end of a long existing royal tradition.

The Narrative Power of Clothes

The subject matter of the 2017 Annual General Meeting in London was “The narrative power of clothes”. And indeed, during the investigation around this christening mantle, many different social, emancipating and royal stories were dug up from the archives and various documents, which allowed us to travel back in time from 1817 to 2004.