

### HENRIËTTE RONNER-KNIP (1821 - 1909)

It was her father, Josephus Augustus Knip, who first taught Henriette basic brushstrokes. Josephus began his career working on wallpapers, but quickly left to focus on painting landscapes and animals. The parents took their children on many travels that they made to France to paint in the employ of the rich upper classes. It was no surprise, then, that both Henriette and her brother quickly followed in the footsteps of their father. At 11 years old she received an easel, which was the beginning of a productive existence as a painter. The education she received was countless hours of lessons with her father in his atelier. While her father focused on painting historical works and portraits, genres that sold better at the time, the young Henriette focused more on scenes that took place around the land.

#### **Landscapes, Dogs, Cats**

Life in the country made it possible for Henriette to focus on her favorite subjects: landscapes and the animals of the land. Nature was the subject of her works for her entire life. There are roughly three periods that you can divide her oeuvre into. The first, when she lived in Vught, Beek and Berlicum, painting rural scenes. Because of the industrial changes to the landscape these paintings were very popular. Around 1850 Henriette married Feico Ronner, and they settled in Brussels. Here began another period, during which she produced paintings about her fascination with dogs. They were mostly the less beloved mutts that roamed the streets of Brussels that she painted and sketched. With these works she made her name as a painter of dogs. Even the Queen of Belgium and her sister, the Countess of Flanders, had their dogs' portraits done by Henriette. From 1870 came the third and final period: the cat period.

#### **A Cat of a Good Home**

Suddenly, at the end of the 19th century, the cat was elevated into a classy animal. Cat shows were organized where these animals sat on satin pillows and admired by an elegant public. Henriette took advantage of the new trend. She painted hundreds of cats, romping in the cozy and comfortable 19th century interiors. Tumbling on the piano, playing with wool, sleeping at their mother's side, hanging from a curtain; every conceivable scene was put to canvas. Of interest is that none of Ronner-Knip's cats were strays or street cats, but all were cute and cuddly instead.

#### **'Salon Art'**

During and after her life the works of Henriette were always popular with a wide audience. Amongst the critics, however, were people who found her work too bourgeois and conventional. They also complained that she limited herself to "salon art" and didn't paint anything else other than cats in fine, elegant lifestyles. She was indeed no avant-gardist, but we should not forget that at the time it was not easy for women to break loose of the dominant norms in art circles. Most women painters had to focus only on flowers and other genres that weren't highly thought of, whereas the real work was the domain of their male colleagues. Ronner-Knip was not an innovator, but she was a woman who should be admired: one of the few female painters who could finance their family with their work.