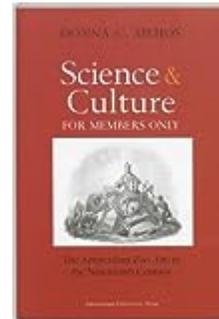




**Donna C. Mehos.** *Science and Culture for Members Only: The Amsterdam Zoo Artis in the Nineteenth Century.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006. 208 pp. \$43.74 (paper), ISBN 978-90-5356-739-5.



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## The Rise and Decline of a Private Zoo

This is the first book I can recall reading about the history of a zoo. I will admit that as an early modern economic historian, I felt like a fish out of water as I approached this book on the nineteenth-century Amsterdam zoo, Artis. I frankly wasn't sure I was up to the job, despite Hubert van Tuyl's urging. In the end, I was glad I read this book. It explained quite clearly the tensions that ensued during the nineteenth century when the interests of private (elite) institutions came into conflict with the city government's desire to protect the interests of the broader public.

Mehos's book began life as a Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania; the book follows the same basic structure and, while expanded, it is in many respects a lightly edited version of her dissertation. This is not meant to be a criticism! Her dissertation was already a high-quality work in the history of scientific institutions, and the book that has come out of it turned out to be a very enjoyable introduction to the topic. Donna Mehos (now a senior researcher at the Technische Universiteit Eindhoven) has succeeded in transforming her dissertation into a tightly focused work that contextually

fits squarely within the history of nineteenth-century scientific and cultural institutions. Indeed, for Mehos a study of the *Natura Artis Magistra* (Amsterdam's Zoological Society) offers a window into the "ideals and expressions of bourgeois culture" in nineteenth-century Amsterdam (p. 12).

Mehos begins her book by discussing the founding of Artis as a scientific institution. At the same time that most enlightenment institutions were in decline, Artis proved to be successful because it sought from the start to appeal to both academic and amateur audiences. In a sense, Mehos suggests that Artis served as a bridge between the elitist enlightenment institutions that preceded it, and the "large-scale national cultural institutions" aimed at the general public that followed and eventually led to the *private* zoo's decline (p. 32). Precisely because of its roots, Artis, from the outset, had a very different idea from the city government about what might best serve Amsterdam's public interest. This proved to be a real sore spot because in order to expand Artis needed land controlled by the city. The city placed chafing restrictions on the zoo that were intended to serve the pub-

lic interest.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Artis's directors took actions that simultaneously moved the institution away from strictly elite patronage (such as opening its gates occasionally to non-members) and, on a scientific level, catered more and more to an academic audience. The academic focus became particularly pronounced with the chartering of Amsterdam's Municipal University, and the resultant close scientific association between the new university and the zoo. But even before close cooperation with the newly chartered university, Artis had been forging important relationships with notable scholars. Indeed, by publishing two academic journals devoted to zoology, Artis showed its commitment to scientific zoology and enhanced its international reputation as a serious society.

The competition presented by newer, more popular, cultural institutions for the patronage of the city's non-academic population forced the zoo on an increasingly professional and scientific trajectory by the end of the nineteenth century. State-funded cultural centers

like the Concertgebouw and the Rijksmuseum, and even privately funded but open-to-the-public institutions like The Park, and the Paleis, appealed to the broader public more than the scientifically oriented zoo. The high ideals of the zoo's founders, who sought to bring amateurs and professionals together in a private institution, no longer appealed to Amsterdammers seeking to patronize cultural institutions. As Mehos puts it, "as zoology became professionalized, science at Artis moved increasingly, and ultimately exclusively, into the university realm" (p. 129).

While overall Mehos does an admirable job at illustrating for her readers the evolution of scientific and cultural institutions in nineteenth-century Amsterdam, her concluding chapter is less successful in explaining what form the zoological society took after its so-called decline. Mehos also includes new material on "colonial connections" in her conclusion that probably should have been presented earlier in the book. Despite these criticisms, I found *Science and Culture* to be an interesting and engaging book.

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