

# The Postmasters' Piggy Bank

## *Experiencing the Accidental Archive*

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**ABSTRACT** Our rediscovery of a seventeenth-century postmasters' trunk in the Museum voor Communicatie in The Hague, containing some twenty-six hundred undelivered letters mostly sent from France, offers the opportunity to think from the ground up about what constitutes an archive and how to approach it. We argue that understanding the process of loss, destruction, and survival of collections is a crucial exercise for historians. Practicing this "archaeology of the archive" makes us keenly aware that the questions we ask are often dictated by the genesis and structure of the archive. Although document survival is often the result of intentional safekeeping, in other cases it can be attributed to sheer accident. Addressing questions of materiality, mobility, and preservation, this article explores the notion of the "accidental archive" to consider what best practices should be developed to ensure responsible access to this unique collection.

**KEYWORDS** archival practices, correspondence, materiality

**H**idden away in the vaults of the Museum voor Communicatie in The Hague lies a most extraordinary trunk (fig. 1). Although it appears inconspicuous, the wooden trunk was once a priceless object, its valuable contents protected from water damage by a layer of sealskin and from prying eyes by a heavy iron hasp lock. Glistening red wax seals bespeak the well-traveled nature of the trunk across the centuries. On opening the vaulted lid, a linen-lined interior is revealed. And the trunk is full, brimming with some twenty-six hundred undelivered letters dispatched to The Hague between 1689 and 1706, including six hundred that are still unopened.

The trunk and its contents belonged to postmaster Simon de Brienne and his wife, Marie Germain, a couple based in The Hague, at the heart of Europe's early modern postal networks. They were jointly responsible for delivering all mail from Spain, Flanders, Brabant, and, most important, the kingdom of France. The fact that this collection has been preserved in The Hague, as well as the multiregional nature of its contents, has no doubt contributed to its neglect in scholarship. Scholars of early modern France—our particular area of



FIGURE 1 The trunk once owned by postmaster Simon de Brienne and his wife, Marie Germain, Museum voor Communicatie, The Hague. Photo used by permission

expertise—usually rely on institutional archives located within the historical borders of the French kingdom to reconstruct the past, resulting in a narrowly “national” history. The trunk thus opens up new and exciting possibilities for research, as the letters allow us to glimpse the early modern world as it went about its daily business. Written in English, Dutch, Latin, Spanish, Italian, Danish, and mostly French, they represent the thoughts, cares, and dreams of a cross section of society: ambassadors, dukes and duchesses, merchants, publishers, spies, actors, musicians, lovers, parents, expatriates, refugees, women as well as men. Here is an archive that will let the voices of the past speak again.

But what do we hear? Recent scholarship, drawing in particular on concepts put forth by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, has questioned the status of the archive as a site of unmediated truth. While positivist historians looked to the archive as a symbol of truth, plausibility, and authenticity—a place where the voices of the past could speak for themselves—we would do well to acknowledge the filters of time, expectation, and desire that shape our approaches to the materials of the past.<sup>1</sup> Such positioning is especially crucial

1. See esp. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*; and Derrida, *Archive Fever*. Historians of France will especially note that interest in the archival experience picked up after the publication of Arlette Farge’s seminal work *Le goût de l’archive* (English trans. 2013). Particularly useful recent evaluations of the archive as a

when we are confronted by something like the Briennes' trunk: a repository that has been only lightly curated and that demands a new set of approaches if we are to unravel its many possible meanings. We must learn to listen *differently*, for the ways in which we hear those voices and recount their stories will always be mediated through our own experiences and training. We need a new archival methodology, one that relies not just on the formal archives consciously created by people interested in keeping a record of the past but also on what we call the "accidental archive": a set of sources handed down to us not by an institution but by people who never dreamed of creating a formal record of the past.

That the Brienne Collection entered a museum, and not an archive or a library, has had significant consequences for how its materials were treated and accessed over the years, as we shall see. Hence our approach here has recourse to what in museum studies is referred to as "object biography": the tracing of a museal object's history and meanings throughout time. Since its emergence in the 1980s this concept has proved a fruitful line of inquiry for scholarship that aims to construct "cultural biographies" and contemplate the "social lives" of things.<sup>2</sup> However, such studies tend to focus on a singular object.<sup>3</sup> Here we apply it to an entire collection in order to question the boundaries between material object and textual artifact, between museum and archive.

In what follows we explore how this accidental archive came into being, all the while remaining mindful of our shifting subject positions within it. Unearthing the history of the Brienne Collection—practicing the archaeology of the archive, one might say—reveals the very contingency and instability of the notion of archive in itself.<sup>4</sup> We will thus work backward through the layers, considering the processes that formed what we now call the Brienne Collection and asking how knowledge of those processes affects our experience and our scholarship. Above all, we emphasize the problems of access to the physical objects today and examine how, in our quest to improve access, we might end up altering the experience of accident. Imposing order on accident, we suggest, runs the risk of erasing layers of meaning and of denying future researchers access to questions we cannot yet ask.

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contingent site include Freshwater, "Allure of the Archive"; Jardine, *Temptation in the Archives*, 1–17; Fritzsche, "Archive"; and Leff, *Archive Thief*.

2. The notion is generally attributed to Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography of Things." See also Gosden and Marshall, "Cultural Biography of Objects."

3. For an excellent recent example, see Häner, "Restoration Reconsidered."

4. The origin of the phrase *archaeology of the archive* may be traced to Cornell, "Mr Boman's Papers." See also Burke, "Commentary."

## Experiencing the Accidental Archive

When approaching something like the Brienne Collection, we must always ask ourselves: Why do we have what we have? In other words, we must ask: Why were these items considered worth saving? What is their history? What value did they have for the collector, whoever that might have been? And how did disparate materials come to form a “collection,” as we have been terming it? In essence, this grouping of letters, accounts, and a trunk was never meant to be an archive, in the sense of a space where official documents are collected, stored, and interpreted. The collection was not formed with the intention of replicating hierarchical structures of power, nor was it mediated by censorship. Rather, the materials in the trunk survived accidentally, the traces of a system that had long before broken down.

The Briennes’ trunk and its contents constitute an *accidental archive*—a term that has seen increasing use since the early 2000s but that remains under-theorized. When the term has been applied in scholarship, it is usually employed only in passing, as a means to express an assemblage of items that have come together in a haphazard way.<sup>5</sup> The operative word here, we argue, is *assemblage*. In a sense first developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an assemblage emerges when heterogeneous elements or objects enter into relations with one another, often unintentionally.<sup>6</sup> An assemblage, by virtue of its multiplicity, is capable of producing any number of effects. Manuel De Landa further developed the notion to highlight that assemblages are products of historically specific processes and that components in an assemblage play both material and expressive roles. Hence, while a single component might have meaning on its own, it gains additional meanings in relation to others.<sup>7</sup> Jane Bennett’s description of assemblages as “living, throbbing confederations” emphasizes the conflation of materiality and expressivity into what she terms “thing-power,” or the agentive capacity of inanimate objects. An assemblage’s effects, she reasons, are “emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen . . . is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone.”<sup>8</sup> The accidental archive can thus be conceived of as a potentially powerful sort of assemblage, expressing connections across time and space.

5. See, e.g., Wallace, “Accidental Archives”; Tector, “Almost Accidental Archive”; and Heathcott, “Reading the Accidental Archive.” More sustained theorization has taken place in digital realms, for instance, Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, esp. 75–99.

6. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*.

7. These ideas are most fully developed in De Landa, *New Philosophy of Society*.

8. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.

While an accidental archive might thus be considered an assemblage, it possesses its own unique ontological status as *archive*: a repository of information, a container in which historical truths might be sought and constructed, and whose component parts beg to be further contained through the processes of ordering, cataloging, and interpreting. How and where such a container might be found, the form of the container, and how it is accounted for thus transform the assemblage into an archive. In the case of the Brienne Collection, there is a trunk that has contained paper. The trunk and its contents acceded into the collection of a museum, and at that moment they were transformed into a unified entity, an archive subjected to rules and organization.

When we first visited the Museum voor Communicatie in the summer of 2012, we were simply hoping to find intriguing stories of French expatriates. At the time, our research projects focused on the circulation of French-language lyric spectacle beyond France and the fate of Huguenot refugees in the Dutch Republic, respectively. Our primary interest was to somehow move beyond well-known figures and their achievements by focusing on the many “average” performers and refugees who tried to get ahead in unfamiliar territory.<sup>9</sup> The problem, however, was finding sources to shed light on their everyday experiences. Serendipity brought us to the Brienne Collection. In the course of her research Ahrendt came across a brief notice published in 1938 by the great theater historian Jan Fransen, who transcribed seven letters addressed to French-speaking actors working in The Hague. Fransen gave a very brief account of the letters’ origins, noting that “the Netherlands possess a Postal Museum in The Hague where, among other curiosities, one may find a certain number of dead letters.”<sup>10</sup> That note prompted a search for these precious documents—did the letters still exist, and would there perhaps be more? Around the same time, Van der Linden was alerted to the existence of the Brienne Collection by his PhD supervisor, who had heard a presentation given by Simone Felten, an external PhD student then working on the collection. Because most of the letters originated in France, he hoped they would illuminate the connections between Huguenots living in France and those who had fled. The desires that guided our first entry into the archive, in other words, were those of the hunter-historian, searching for hidden gems to be unearthed—in our case, letters that captured the marginalized voices of French expatriates.

We were not disappointed. At the same time, we felt slightly frustrated by the access problems that were immediately apparent: as we encountered

9. Ahrendt, “A Second Refuge”; Van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile*.

10. Fransen, “Lettres au rebut,” 85: “Les Pays-Bas possèdent à La Haye un Musée Postal où, parmi d’autres curiosités, on trouve un certain nombre de lettres tombées au rebut.”

the collection, we were also confronted by the rules that governed access to it. To examine the letters, one would first have to make an appointment with the collection's curator, Koos Havelaar, whose cooperation in this project is invaluable. Havelaar, a part-time employee, is present at the museum only two days per week, meaning that time is extremely limited. Work with the letters takes place in Havelaar's own office, at a small table across the room from his desk on the upper floor of the Museum voor Communicatie. There are no book weights, so the researcher must improvise a safe way to hold the often tightly folded letters open to read or document them. Given the constraints of access, a visit comes with the imperative to work quickly: to request as many letters as possible, to make as many photographs as possible, and thus to create a personal archive of the collection. These images themselves often document further assemblages: the experiences of the researcher in the archive.

Consider, for example, a photograph taken by Ahrendt in May 2014 (fig. 2). This image would ordinarily never be included in an article about the Brienne Collection. It was intended for personal use, as a way to save time by avoiding the challenges of transcription while onsite. Yet it is itself a document of a certain moment and of the working conditions in the museum. Reflecting on the image, Ahrendt would note the keys to her bicycle serving as a weight. The weather that day was pleasant: the picture is illuminated by light from the windows of Havelaar's office, and it was nice enough to have ridden a typically Dutch bicycle to the museum. A favorite pencil, now lost, serves as an additional weight. Two fingers of her left hand are also clearly imaged; in an attempt to touch as little of the fragile paper as possible, she has balanced the downward pressure of her fingers with upward pressure from her thumb, just visible beneath the edge of the table. Her memory of the experience is thus kinesthetic as well: she can still feel the smoothness of the table and the coarse grain of the paper. This she remembers when reading this letter, from a woman whose brother has gone missing. Van der Linden would have a very different experience of the picture. Because he was not present when the photograph was taken, he lacks Ahrendt's recollections. What strike him instead are the contents of the letter, the near-oral language of its author, and the beautiful folds in the paper. He also wonders if Ahrendt's pencil isn't a pen, an illegal item in the modern archive. Were this same letter to be imaged for documentary purposes, as is so common in today's mad dash to digitize archives, no such "personal touch" would ever be permitted in the official record. All noise would be removed from the recording. It is only by accident that fingers sometimes appear on Google Books, which actually invites users to report such "faulty images." Yet we might also acknowledge that the assemblage recorded in the photograph becomes another part of the Brienne Collection's accidental archive: it has

the potential to create multiple associations depending on who views it, associations that in turn color the experience of archival texts.<sup>11</sup>

Like any archive, access to the Brienne Collection is also governed by a catalog, allowing researchers to navigate the archive and search for letters that pique their interest. The catalog was crucial in helping us quickly locate the letters that seemed most promising, but we were frustrated by its limitations. The catalog was created using the AdLib system, the museum's collection database. However, this is a database designed for objects, not textual artifacts, and it is accessible only onsite. The capabilities of the database indeed call into question the point at which "object" ends and "text" begins:

attempting to record textual information resulted in a multiplicity of only marginally searchable fields. While the database can express objectness (size, format, type of object, etc.), most textual information has to be crammed into a single field that is typically reserved for the curator's comments. And, as we later discovered, the information contained within this database was itself the product of numerous hands, each with different goals and methods. As Havelaar recounted to us, a first attempt at cataloging the collection had been undertaken by two students of French literature sometime before he arrived at the museum in 1997. They keyed basic metadata derived mostly from the address panel of each letter into AdLib, including recipient, address, and date. A more systematic effort was made between 2010 and 2012 by Felten. Her laborious process included unfolding the already opened letters, reading as much as she could, and adding new pieces

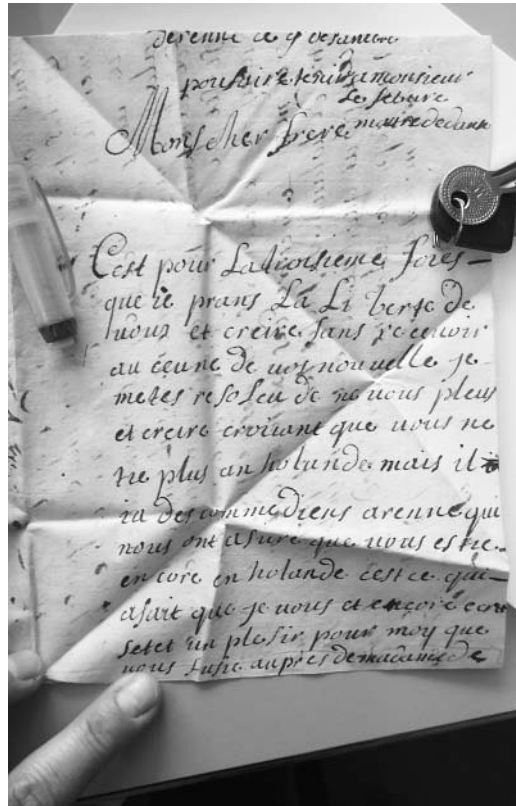


FIGURE 2 An assemblage from the archives.  
Author's photograph

11. For more on tracing associations between and within assemblages, see esp. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

of information regarding occupations, keywords, and locations to AdLib. Felten's growing knowledge of the collection is traceable through her personal notes, making it obvious that had she had more time with the collection and a different database, she might have developed a usable system. Tragically, her part-time work in the museum was ended by the onset of pancreatic cancer in late 2012. She died in May 2013, leaving her own archive of materials related to the project to the museum—a further component of the assemblage that makes up the Brienne Collection.

Having identified letters that might be of interest by using the incomplete catalog, the researcher then asks Havelaar to bring them out of storage. After a few minutes a stack of letters appears. They are no longer stored in the trunk but, for better preservation, are kept in individual protective polyester sleeves, which are stored in acid-free boxes. Each sleeve contains a sheet of acid-free cardstock, annotated in pencil with an inventory number, occasionally with notes made by Felten regarding possible relationships to other items in the collection. The inventory numbers represent a first and crucial layer of ordering the archive. As Havelaar explained, the numbering system was devised in two steps. When the Brienne Collection entered the museum in 1926, it received the general inventory number 0046, inscribed in pencil on each letter. Individual numbers for each letter were added in pencil much later by the two students of French. It seems that no clear structure guided their numbering, though some letters were clearly grouped by occupation. Hence the first thirty-seven letters all concern members of resident theater or opera troupes in The Hague. Material condition also seems to have played a role: most of the unopened letters were placed toward the end of the numbering system. Yet these attempts at organization were not consistently carried through, as letters to or from actors are present throughout the collection, and sealed letters crop up randomly.

Despite its shortcomings, the numbering system proved crucial in restoring order to an archive that had gradually been dispersed throughout the museum (and beyond) over the years, either by accident or on purpose. Before Havelaar's arrival, around a hundred letters had been separated from the collection to become part of a touring exhibition on postal history. The letters were placed into eight frames, each with a unique theme. When Felten started her project, Havelaar decided to reunite them with the other letters, partly because he felt that they needed better curating but mostly because he realized that they were part of the Brienne Collection and needed to be properly cataloged. Only at this point did they reenter the collection and receive inventory numbers, since they had apparently escaped the notice of the two students. Havelaar discovered a further letter hiding among the hundred thousand others the museum houses, which he was able to identify only because it was clearly marked with



the number 0046. Havelaar assigned this letter a unique inventory number, too, thus reintegrating it into the Brienne Collection.

Beyond the various enclosures that have become separated from their mis-sives over the years, another hundred or so letters may once have “belonged” to the collection. A number of letters from the same period and bearing similar marks were disassociated in the early twentieth century by Jan van Nifterik, one of the founding fathers of the postal museum. A well-known philatelist, he removed all letters sent from Geneva, one of the first postal centers to use a stamp, because he was interested in the history of postal marks. Van Nifterik not only opened the Genevan letters; he also unfolded and flattened them, tucking them into an album—which he then took home. He eventually (re)donated the album to the museum later in life. By then the possible connection to the Brienne Collection had been forgotten, which explains why the album was stored apart from the rest of the letters and instead became part of the Van Nifterik Collection. Again, it was the cooperation of Felten and Havelaar that restored these letters, at least conceptually, to the Brienne Collection.

Van Nifterik’s treatment of the Genevan letters is indeed an anomaly in the history of the collection, but it is perhaps indicative of what might have happened to all of the Brienne letters had they ended up in another kind of institution. It may have something to do with the institutional context of the museum: a place where artifacts are intended to be preserved in what is imagined to be their “original” state. However, as we have seen, the Brienne Collection hardly remained stable even within the walls of the museum—items were separated, dispersed, removed, altered. This raises an interesting question: should we try to revert to the “original” collection, or must we also acknowledge the layers of meaning added by people like Van Nifterik? Uncovering the many accidents that helped constitute this archive in the first place may help answer this question, for from the very outset it has been unstable.

### **The Archaeology of the Archive**

As we brush away further layers of dust, more questions emerge. First and foremost is the status of the museum itself, which was organized quite differently from other museums in the Netherlands. How the collection came to this particular museum and under what conditions the collection was formed in the first place underscore its accidental nature. The biography of the archive indeed calls into question the limits of the collection; as we shall discover, parts that may be deemed to be constituent remain dispersed to this day.

The Museum voor Communicatie first opened its doors as Het Nederlandsche Postmuseum in November 1930. The initiative for founding a postal

museum goes back to 1924, when Dutch philatelist Pieter Wilhelm Waller offered to donate his collection to the Dutch state to found a museum.<sup>12</sup> Connections within the Dutch postal system, various ministries, and the elite sports world led to the foundation of a committee for a postal museum, which began collecting items by 1925. The first director was J. D. Tresling, a lifelong postal employee and friend of Waller's from the world of professional hockey. It was Tresling who brought the Brienne Collection to the museum. A letter from the secretary-general of the Dutch Ministry of Finance, J. P. A. Laman de Vries, now kept with the Brienne Collection, reveals that the trunk and "two packets" of undelivered letters were donated to the Rijkspostmuseum (State Postal Museum) by the Ministry of Finance on April 10, 1926, following Tresling's oral request.<sup>13</sup> A note from Tresling to the ministry two days later acknowledged receipt of the gift: one small chest and two packets of hundreds of letters "from the archive of the office of Trusts."<sup>14</sup> Thus materials that had once been part of a state archive became part of a (planned) state museum.

The donation of the Brienne Collection was in fact the final outcome of a decades-long process of streamlining the management of Dutch orphanages. For hundreds of years Dutch cities had maintained an important system of orphanages (*weeshuizen*), which were controlled by the *weeskamers*. In 1852 the Dutch government decided to centralize administration of the orphanages and liquidate the *weeskamers*. The process of elimination lasted almost thirty years, with the state-appointed oversight committee delivering its final reports in 1880. Important for our story is that from 1852 onward material effects belonging to the private trusts managed by the *weeskamers* were gradually transferred to the Ministry of Finance in The Hague.<sup>15</sup> As we know from De Vries's letter, the remaining effects of Simon de Brienne came to The Hague in 1860 as part of this process.

But how did the letters and trunk end up in the orphanage system in the first place? For that, we must turn back to 1707, the year in which Brienne died. The circumstances of his death and the distribution of his estate created the conditions in which the collection was preserved. The most important factor in the preservation of the collection was Brienne's confessional identity. Born Simon Veillaume in the rural French village of Jouy-le-Châtel and raised a

12. Koevoets, "Het Nederlandse PTT Museum," 119.

13. The Hague, Museum voor Communicatie (hereafter MvC), AWS 260420: Letter from the Ministry of Finance to J. D. Tresling, The Hague, Apr. 10, 1926.

14. "Ten geschenke ontvangen ten behoeve van het Rijkspostmuseum uit het archief van het bureau Stichtingen . . . 1 koffertje en 2 pakketten van honderden brieven uit de nalatenschap 'de Brienne.'" MvC, AWS 260410: Letter from J. D. Tresling to the Minister of Finance, Apr. 12, 1926.

15. Smit, "Het afstervingsproces der weeskamers," 91.

Catholic, he converted to Protestantism in the 1660s. His newfound faith proved remarkably durable: when the childless Brienne drew up his will shortly before his death, he created of his estate a private trust to prevent his heirs—his Catholic brothers still living in France—from directly inheriting his fortune. The trust was to be managed by the *weeskamer* of Delft. The Hague would have been a more logical choice, as it had been Brienne's residence for many years, but for reasons unknown he decided to "expressly exclude the Lords *Weesmeesters* of The Hague and all other courts, officials, and persons, who could or would otherwise claim governance [of the estate]."<sup>16</sup> Instead, he appointed the directors of the Delft orphanage to handle payments:

The Testator declared that he did not to want or desire that these his heirs, or any one of them [individually] should have full disposition of their share of the inheritance; but that the capital will be administered by the Directors of the Orphanage of the City of Delft, who shall annually send or distribute to each of them and their descendants their portion of the interest on the said sum, for so long as they will be and remain within the community of the Roman Church.<sup>17</sup>

Only when Brienne's brothers or their descendants would "renounce the errors of the Roman Church" and settle in Holland could they lay claim to his full inheritance. They never did, which explains why Brienne's materials sat in Delft for more than 150 years, potentially untouched, until they moved to The Hague in 1860. And, despite the fact that his trust was liquidated by law in 1922, Brienne's descendants continued to enjoy the interest on his capital until at least 1929, with the remaining cash deposited into state coffers in 1930.<sup>18</sup>

Yet not all of Brienne's materials found a resting place in the museum. In 1879 the oversight committee had decided that all of the *archives*—likely meaning records on paper—of the *weeskamers* should be returned to their respective cities.<sup>19</sup> This was probably in conjunction with the state's push to reorganize and fortify municipal archives at the time. As a result, Brienne's personal papers and most of his postal administration may be found in the Delft

16. "Secluderende tot dien eijnde wel expresselijk bij desen de Heeren Weesmeesteren van 's Gravenhage ende alle hooven, magistraten en personen, die het bewind van dien haar andersints souden konnen of willen aenmatigen." Gemeentearchief Delft, Weeskamer nr. 11867: Testament of Simon de Brienne, The Hague, Jan. 13, 1707.

17. "Verklaarde de Testateur niet te willen of te begeeren, dat deselve sijne erfgenamen ofte eenige van deselve de dispositie van haar erfportien zullen hebben; maar dat de Capitalen van dien sullen werden gebragt onder de Heeren Weesmeesteren ende ter Weeskamer der Stad Delft welke aan haar en hare descendenten jaarlijks yeder sijn portie in de suijsere reserven van deselve Capitalen sullen oversenden of uijtreyken zoolange als zij in de gemeijnschap van de Roomsche Kerk zullen sijn en blijven." Ibid.

18. See the accounts attached to the proceedings of the Dutch parliament, 1930–31, kamerstuknummer 249, ondernummer 2 (*Staten-Generaal Digitaal*).

19. Smit, "Het afstervingsproces der weeskamers," 101–5.

municipal archives (founded in 1859)—except for the accounts of 1702–3, which accidentally ended up in the museum. Whatever the reasons may be, should we not consider the papers that were returned to Delft to be a part of the Brienne Collection nonetheless? And why did the trunk and its letters not go back to Delft? One answer may be found in the 1926 letter to Tresling. De Vries indicated that those materials would be given to the museum because “they have nothing to do with the trust ‘S. de Brienne,’ set up during his lifetime.”<sup>20</sup> The materials were excess, judged to be unnecessary and perhaps accidental.

Can we assume that the Delft archive was simply uninterested in repossessing a trunk and letters that were not formally part of Brienne’s financial legacy? If so, they might have been mistaken, for the letters were indeed accumulated for financial purposes. To explain that, we have to go even farther back in time—to the beginning, as it were, to the moment at which the earliest layers of this archive came into existence. On January 13, 1676, the burgomasters of The Hague appointed Simon de Brienne, né Veillaume, to the lucrative office of postmaster, responsible for all mail to and from “the city of Antwerp and all surrounding places and cities in Brabant, France, Flanders, Mons in Hainaut, and Spain.”<sup>21</sup> Brienne initially shared his office with Christoffel Tromer, a secretary to William III’s intimate friend—and future Duke of Portland—Hans Willem Bentinck. In 1686 Tromer relinquished his position to Brienne’s wife, Marie Germain, who was appointed as postmistress alongside her husband. The day-to-day running of the office was entrusted to commissary Hugo van der Meer, who kept the meticulous accounts that have been preserved to this day.<sup>22</sup> Geertruy Lus, described as *bestelster* (delivery woman) in Brienne’s accounts, was responsible for mail delivery.<sup>23</sup> From 1689 Brienne and Germain served King William III at Kensington Palace, not returning to The Hague until 1700. And it was precisely at the point that they left the Dutch Republic that the undelivered letters began to be preserved. Could this have been an injunction on the postmasters’ part? Or, rather, an initiative of Van der Meer or Lus?

Further digging can help explain why the letters went undelivered in the first place. Judging from the surviving accounts and the fact that most of the letters in the trunk originated in France, we can assume that the postal route between the French kingdom and The Hague was by far the most important. And sending a letter from France to the Dutch Republic could be a complicated

20. “Bedoelde brieven . . . hebben geen betrekking op de door hem in het leven geroepen stichting ‘S. de Brienne.’” MvC, AWS 260420.

21. Delft, Gemeentearchief, Weeskamer nr. 11851: Charter appointing Simon de Brienne as postmaster, The Hague, Jan. 13, 1676.

22. Graswinckel, “Simon de Brienne”; Benschop, *Het postwezen van ’s Gravenhage*, 80–82.

23. Benschop, “Levensloop en nalatenschap,” 24.

and costly affair, largely because postal routes across the Southern Netherlands were controlled by the Counts of Thurn and Taxis. A series of reforms and treaties between France and the Dutch Republic resulted in a system that ran as follows: French postal services gathered all letters in Paris, where they were packed in sealed bags according to destination before being taken by a French courier to Lille—where letters sent from Rouen and the border towns were added—and onward to Antwerp. The courier then crossed into Dutch territory, handing the letters over at Kuipersveer, a river crossing just south of Rotterdam. From there they were carried to the various post offices across the Dutch Republic, including that of Brienne in The Hague.<sup>24</sup>

Once letters arrived in The Hague, the task of delivering them began. This could be a time-consuming and downright frustrating job. A major obstacle to delivering letters before the invention of postage stamps was that recipients, not senders, were responsible for postal and delivery charges from the Dutch border. If the addressee were deceased, absent, or uninterested, no fees could be collected by the postmaster. The Brienne letters still bear witness to this simple fact: many have scribbled on them in Dutch *niet hebben* (refused) or *niet hier* (not here). The Briennes' postal employees were also hampered by the absence of house numbers, which meant that senders had to rely on street names and such helpful pointers as "Monsieur Lavendines, à l'enseigne du Vieux Dauphiné, vis à vis la grande Eglise." Many senders indicated only the city, expecting the post office to track down people like "Monsieur Brandon, marchand à La Haye," in a town that by 1700 numbered around thirty thousand inhabitants. No wonder we find letters in the collection with the cynical note *niet kennen* (unknown). Additionally, a number of letters were only accidentally in The Hague. Addressed to "La Haye en Tourraine" or "La Haye en Flandre," these letters were mistakenly bundled with those for "La Haye en Hollande" by the French postal services. And more still did not have The Hague as a final destination. Rather, they were intended for London, Copenhagen, Berlin, Frankfurt, Warsaw, Hamburg, Stockholm, and other European cities and towns.<sup>25</sup>

By treaty Dutch postmasters were obliged to return such "dead letters" to France within a fortnight, so that the French could be reimbursed for their costs to the Dutch border.<sup>26</sup> Fortunately, the Briennes disregarded this injunction. Perhaps it had something to do with an ongoing dispute between Brienne and the French post.<sup>27</sup> Or perhaps the post office hoped that recipients would still

24. Vaillé, *Louvois*, 432–52; Overvoorde, *Geschiedenis van het postwezen*, 229–36; Biema, "Het een en ander omtrent het oude haagsche postwezen."

25. Giphart, "Lettres et estampilles."

26. Vaillé, *Louvois*, 437–38.

27. Giphart, "Postmerk en Postgeschiedenis," 23.

turn up to retrieve the letters—and pay the postage. A note by the Briennes' accountant Van der Meer, inserted into the accounts of undelivered letters after Brienne's death in March 1707, explains this in detail:

It should be remarked that the undelivered letters had always been available for those who came to ask after undelivered letters, so that after the accounts had been completed a letter was sometimes sought after and handed over, which [transaction] was then settled by divvying up the general fund, known as the piggy bank [*spaarpotje*], the proceeds of which were last split between my Lord de Brienne and my Lord Dedel after New Year's Day 1707.<sup>28</sup>

As Van der Meer's note tells us, undelivered letters were always kept in a separate location, apart from the rest of the post, yet always ready to be given over to anyone who asked. Each letter was ascribed a monetary value, marked on the letters in red crayon: a letter from Dunkirk cost the recipient ten stuivers, from Rouen and Paris twelve, from Bordeaux and La Rochelle seventeen.<sup>29</sup> The note also tells us that the Briennes' post office practiced a rather obsessive form of accounting: projected income (all letters received by the office) was balanced against actual income (all letters delivered), which was in turn balanced against actual and projected expenses on a quarterly basis. Monies transacted from tardy delivery went into a general operating fund, which was divided annually between Brienne and his deputy-cum-successor, Willem Gerrit Dedel, who had been appointed in 1703 to replace Brienne's deceased wife.<sup>30</sup> The undelivered letters thus were an "archive" collected with a financial purpose—to fill the "piggy bank" of the postmasters.

It is the trunk itself that raises some of the most significant questions. At least since the nineteenth century, and perhaps earlier, the trunk has been imagined as the container of the letters. A faded note affixed to the back of the trunk reads "Unopened letters/Inheritance De Brienne/Orphanage Delft."<sup>31</sup> Was this note attached upon Brienne's death in 1707 as his effects were moved to Delft, or only in the 1850s as the trunk and its contents were transferred to the government committee for the liquidation of the orphanages in The Hague? It

28. "Sij te remarqueren dat de onbestelde brieven altijd voor de hand gelegen hebben gehad voor die na onbestelde brieven quaemen vragen soodat na het sluijten der Reeckeninge wel nu en dan een brieff is gesoght en oock uijtgegeen [*sic*], tgeene daer nae is ook voldaan met het ledigen van de gantse kas, dat men het spaerpotje plagh te noemen die nogh na nieuwjaer 1707 laetst aen mijn Heer de Brienne is behandicht voor d'een helft en aen mijn Heer Dedel voor de andere helft." Delft, Gemeentearchief, Weeskamer nr. 11856: Accounts of undelivered letters, unfoliated notice.

29. These fees had been fixed by the burgomasters of The Hague in 1673, following complaints about duties leveled arbitrarily by the previous postmaster: Benschop, *Het postwezen van 's Gravenhage*, 84.

30. *Ibid.*

31. "Ongeopende brieven/Boedel De Brienne/Weeskamer Delft."

is difficult to say. Assuming the trunk was already in use at the turn of the eighteenth century, it would have been a good choice for Brienne's office, as trunks had been the most common form of "archive furniture" for centuries. Trunks were mobile and could easily be transported in case of imminent danger like fire, flood, or war.<sup>32</sup> They could also follow the travels of a peripatetic owner, much like Brienne himself. The site of the archive is thus in itself mobile: this archive, to the extent we can think of it as such, is within the box designed to contain it.

But it was not a state museum that came to house the trunk and its letters. Indeed, the premature donation of state property like Brienne's materials to a proposed state museum caused a flurry of parliamentary debate beginning in the summer of 1928. By that time the queen's cabinet had come to the conclusion that it would be better to create a museum as a public-private partnership. A proposal submitted to the Dutch parliament on July 2, 1928, noted that a private foundation would have distinct advantages: prominent private collectors could serve as board members of the foundation and thus encourage further donations. The state would only have to donate preexisting space within the headquarters of the state post, telephone, and telegraph company and provide for the salary of the director. Thus, at minimal cost, The Hague would be on a par with the many foreign locales that had already opened postal museums, including Berlin, Bern, Copenhagen, London, Madrid, Nuremberg, Paris, Petrograd, Stockholm, and Vienna, with more planned in Hungary, Japan, Mexico, and Poland.<sup>33</sup> Objections were raised, however, principally because state property had already been donated to the founding committee. If the museum really were going to be a private foundation, then "it should not have been necessary—as is now already the case—for state property to have been given away."<sup>34</sup> Fears were assuaged, and by December 1928 a revised proposal including text for the foundation articles and language for a new law was sent to parliament. The law was enacted on May 18, 1929, by Queen Wilhelmina. According to the first article of the law, ministries were *retroactively empowered* to give state goods to the private museum.<sup>35</sup> It is perhaps fortunate that most parliamentarians at the time were avid postage stamp collectors; the minutes of both the first and second houses of parliament regarding further plans for the museum are

32. Friedrich, *Die Geburt des Archivs*, 178–79.

33. Kamerstuk Tweede Kamer 1927–28, kamerstuknummer 384, ondernummer 3: Memorie van Toelichting, July 2, 1928 (*Staten-Generaal Digitaal*).

34. "In dit geval zou het niet—gelijk thans wel het geval is—noodig geweest zijn, dat Rijksgoederen werden weggeschonken." Kamerstuk Tweede Kamer 1928–29, kamerstuknummer 84, ondernummer 1: Report of the Commission, Oct. 23, 1928 (*Staten-Generaal Digitaal*).

35. "Wet, betreffende het in het leven roepen van een stichting 'Het Nederlandsche Postmuseum,'" *Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, Wet no. 249, May 18, 1929.

full of references to specific stamps. Hence the list of state properties given to the museum attached to the proposed text of the law includes detailed accounts of hundreds of different stamps, as well as brief notices of other materials.<sup>36</sup>

Oddly enough, the trunk and its letters were not named, even though they became a long-standing attraction at the museum. It is quite possible that the trunk was already exhibited in the museum's first location, a series of rooms within the headquarters of the Dutch national post, telephone, and telegraph company on the Kortenaerkade in The Hague, when the museum was known as Het Nederlandsche Postmuseum. It was certainly on permanent display after the museum's relocation to its current premises on the Zeestraat after World War II. The trunk remained in the public eye after the museum became the sole responsibility of the Dutch postal service, the PTT, in 1989, and was renamed the PTT Museum. When the state's postal monopoly was at last broken up in 1998, the museum was privatized as the Museum voor Communicatie. In 2002 the trunk moved into storage, to be brought out again for an exhibition in Amsterdam in 2012–13. It was again briefly on display in The Hague in November 2015 in conjunction with the public announcement of our project, until the museum closed for refurbishment in March 2016.

“Ownership” of the Brienne materials has thus passed through a number of different institutional configurations, each time essentially becoming “reacquired” and achieving a new identity. It has been the piggy bank of the postmasters, part of an inheritance, archival evidence for a state-appointed oversight committee, an undesired leftover, and a museum object. And, just as the trunk and its letters have helped change Dutch law, so have they affected how we and others have attempted to comprehend them. Their *presence*—their pristine condition in their original folded states, their paper and seals, the still noticeable sealskin on the trunk—has generally engendered a strong desire among those who have seen and handled them to do no harm.<sup>37</sup> Put simply, this collection has taught us to read and to see and to think differently. Acknowledging the “thing-power” of the collection can help explain its history, as well as point toward its future.

## Forms and Meanings

Only on accession to the collections of the museum did the trunk and its contents achieve the temporal and spatial stability (what Derrida calls *domiciliation*)

36. “Staat van Rijks roerende goederen behorende bij den Stichtingsbrief, bedoeld in 1<sup>o</sup>, van het Enig artikel van de wet.” Ibid.

37. For what is essentially an extension of Walter Benjamin's concept of “aura” into a theory of “presence,” see Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*.



required for an archive to begin.<sup>38</sup> Yet it is hardly stable; rather, what is housed at the museum can be viewed as part of a noisy assemblage of documents, experiences, and images that span vast geographic distances, from the archives of Delft or The Hague and the personal archives on our computers to our project documents stored in the cloud. Noisier still are the voices recorded in these letters frozen in transit, voices that were intended to communicate across distance and time. Our challenge is to animate them again.

Merely attempting to read the letters as we have been trained to read presents significant challenges. Many writers spelled phonetically in their local dialects, their handwriting as frequently chaotic as it is beautiful. Some of the letter writers were in fact barely literate: their letters lack punctuation, and words are run together as they would have been spoken.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, one can best understand these letters as a written record of an oral tradition. The only way to comprehend the content of these letters is, quite literally, to give them voice. Around 1702, for example, Nicolas Beaujean, a musician from Nancy, wrote to his brother in The Hague:

Mon frère si il ya du risque ne uous a jardé pas car ie ceré bien fâché du Malheur qui uous pourray ariué sur les chémain si uous uouller a uoir un passeport de Sons Altesse Royal ie uous en anvoyré un mandé le moy si uous aué une basse uandé la car lon a n'a une qui est a Sons Altesse que lon uous donnera, qui est tres bonne de faite uous deué toutte ce que uous pourré de hardes de peurre desre uollez sur les chémain.<sup>40</sup>

In orthographically correct modern French, that would be:

Mon frère, s'il y a du risque, ne vous hasardez pas, car je serais bien fâché du malheur qui vous pouvez arriver sur les chemins. Si vous voulez avoir un passeport de Son Altesse Royale, je vous en envoie un. Mandez-le moi. Si vous avez une basse, vendez-la, car l'on en a une qui est à Son Altesse que l'on vous donnera, qui est très bonne. En fait, vous devez vendre tout ce que vous pouvez de hardes, de peur d'être volé sur les chemins.

[My brother, if there is any risk, do not hazard yourself, for I would be devastated by the misfortune that could occur to you on the roads. If you would like to have a passport from His Royal Highness, I will send you one. Let me know.

38. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4.

39. Examples of linguistic studies “from below” based on early modern letters include Rutten and Van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*; and Nobels, “(Extra)ordinary Letters.”

40. MvC, Brienne Collection, DB-0456: Nicolas Beaujean to Philippe Beaujean, Nancy and Lunéville, 16 August [n.d., ca. 1702].

If you have a bass [instrument], sell it, because there is one belonging to His Highness that can be given you, which is very good. In fact, you ought to sell whatever you can, for fear of being robbed on the roads.]

It is only through performing the act of reading aloud—of ventriloquizing the letter writer—that we have been able to transcribe and then modernize texts such as this one. Thus, unconsciously, the materials prompted in us the same response that they would have had they reached their intended recipients, for it was common practice to share letters orally.

Besides listening to the voices of the letters, we have also come to view the materials differently. Since we first encountered the collection, our experience has been changed by other voices, the colleagues we have met along the way. After Felten's death in 2013 we determined to continue her work, reaching out to other specialists we connected with both accidentally and on purpose. Our core team, *Signed, Sealed, and Undelivered*, now includes scholars of correspondence, literary, and material culture (Nadine Akkerman and Daniel Starza Smith) and conservation and curatorial sciences (Jana Dambrogio and Koos Havelaar). Their expertise has profoundly altered how we approach the collection. In short, we have become interested not only in the content of the undelivered letters (uncovering fascinating stories from the archives) but also in the often invisible structures that governed early modern correspondence networks, including the production of paper and wax, the practice of letter writing, the functioning of international postal services, and issues of privacy. The work of our colleague Jana Dambrogio in particular has fundamentally changed how we approach our materials. The Thomas F. Peterson (1957) Conservator at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Libraries, she has revolutionized the field of paper conservation by creating the field of "letterlocking": the process by which a substrate such as paper, parchment, or papyrus has been folded and secured shut to function as its own envelope.<sup>41</sup> Crucially, how a letter was locked could enhance its security while acting as an authentication device, not unlike a signature.

Thus, what had been a gut instinct on our part—don't open the closed letters, be sure all are folded back properly—was translated into a field of research and a potential source of meaning. We realize that the letters matter, too, because of their materiality. Nearly all writers of the letters in the Brienne Collection, whether highborn or from humble backgrounds, engaged in letterlocking, protecting the content of their personal missives with wax seals, paper locks, and intricate folding formats. Take, for example, a letter sent from Nîmes

41. Dambrogio, "Historic Letterlocking."

in 1698. When Van der Linden first spotted this letter in Felten's catalog in 2012, he was excited about the content: the author, a Huguenot minister, had traveled to France to covertly preach to Protestants who secretly tried to keep their faith alive. In his letter the undercover preacher offers rare personal testimony of his experiences in southern France: "God, who is infinitely wiser than we, has sent me in this time of distress to comfort and strengthen his children. I can tell you that my presence alone, with the grace of the Lord, supports many in this battle of Faith."<sup>42</sup>

Looking at the same letter now, however, it is the material security features that jump out from the page. The author clearly went to great lengths to protect his identity and the contents of his letter, first of all by practicing "cover within cover," a method still used today by intelligence agencies to provide additional security for operatives in the field. From the outside the letter appears inconspicuous, addressed to "merchant Folcher in The Hague in Holland" (fig. 3), but once opened Folcher would find another sealed letter inside, with instructions "to carry the enclosure to its address," that of refugee minister Couët du Vivier in The Hague (fig. 4). The contents of the second letter were also protected: instead of the usual single seal, the author applied no fewer than three seals to lock his letter shut (fig. 5). He also took the sensible precaution to sign this letter with the asterisks of anonymity instead of his real name. The postscript informs us why this Huguenot preacher practiced such an obsessive form of epistolary security: "I ask you to greet my family, and those who do me the honor of loving me. But it is important that they do not know where I am, nor where I am going."<sup>43</sup> Clearly, the very human desire to stay in touch with family and friends in The Hague had prompted him to write a letter, but to protect his identity and clandestine preaching mission on Catholic territory, it was vital to devise security measures. Ironically, these strategies worked a little too well: the letter passed across French territory without being intercepted, but it was never delivered because Folcher had moved to Leiden and Brienne never forwarded the letter.

We can only guess who eventually opened the preacher's letter. As the collection stands today, of the roughly twenty-six hundred letters, some two thousand have had their seals and other security devices broken. The letters seem

42. "Dieu, qui est infiniment plus sage que nous, m'an envoyé en ce temps de détresse, pour consoler et fortifier ses enfans. Je pourrois vous dire que ma seule présence, avec la grace du Seigneur, en soutient plusieurs dans ce combat de la Foi." MvC, Brienne Collection, DB-0367: Anonymous to Couët du Vivier, near Nîmes, Mar. 2, 1698.

43. "Je vous prie de saluër ma famille, et ceux qui me font l'honneur de m'aimer. Mais il importe qu'on ne sache où je suis, ni où je passe." Ibid.

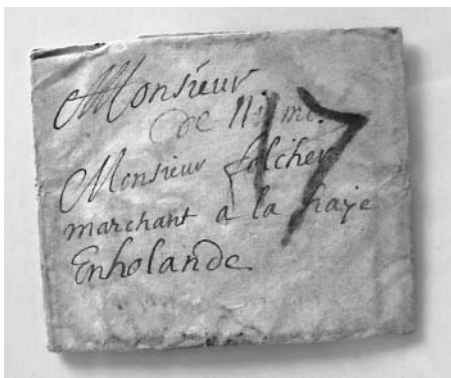


FIGURE 3 The address panel of the letter. Museum voor Communicatie, The Hague, Brienne Collection, DB-0367. Author's photograph

to have remained closed during Brienne's lifetime, as the label affixed to the trunk after his death reads "unopened letters." Whether the letters were opened a long time ago or much more recently is unanswerable. But, most remarkably, after more than three hundred years since Brienne's death, management by two state institutions, two relocations and three major reorganizations of the museum, four curator-conservators, at least three students, and an unknown number of scholars, collectors, and interested members of the public, six hundred of the letters

remain unopened. This cannot be mere coincidence or simply the product of a lack of people power to "process" the collection. While the museal context may be a factor, more significant still are the emotional connections that people have

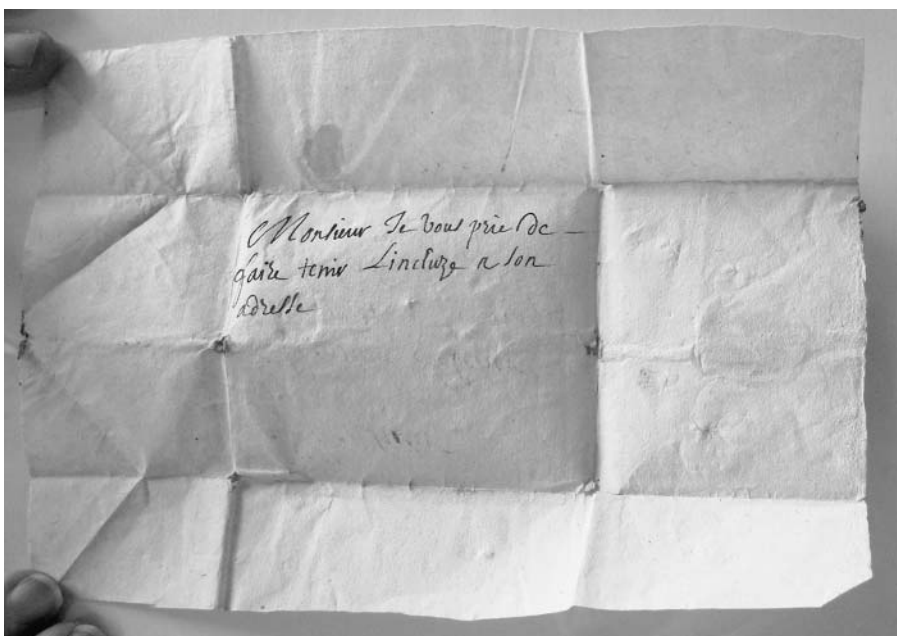


FIGURE 4 The same letter, now unfolded, with written instructions on the inside to hand the enclosed letter to minister Couët du Vivier. Museum voor Communicatie, The Hague, Brienne Collection, DB-0367. Author's photograph

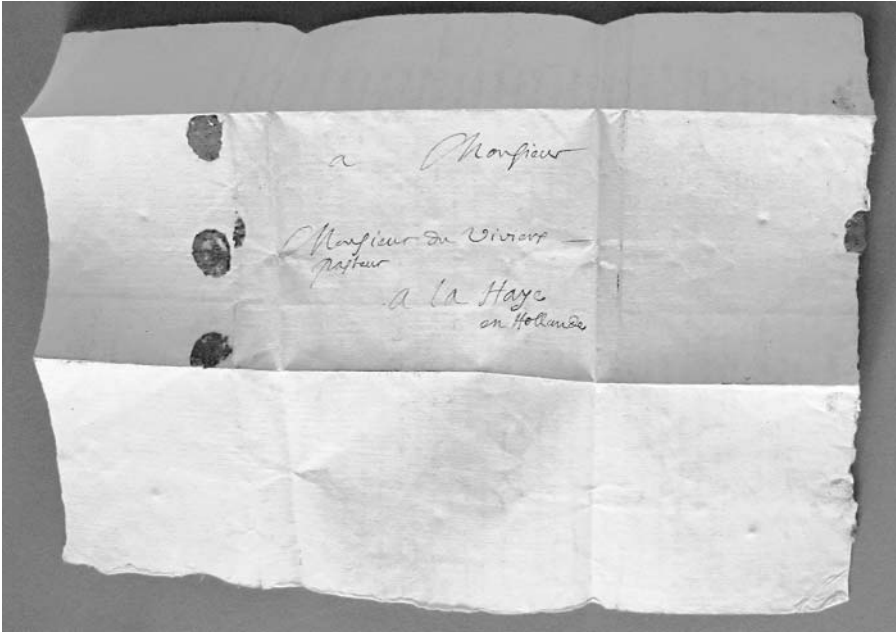


FIGURE 5 The enclosed letter in its unfolded state (address panel), with the three wax seals clearly visible. Museum voor Communicatie, The Hague, Brienne Collection, DB-0367a. Author's photograph

made and continue to make with these letters.<sup>44</sup> We know for a fact that Felten, for one, felt very strongly that closed letters should not be opened. Havelaar, the collection's curator, shares her opinion. For those who have handled the letters in the past, we cannot be so sure. But surely it is not for nothing that Fransen, whose 1938 article so eagerly reported the discovery of letters addressed to the early modern actor Jean Des Urlis, did not open further letters within the collection addressed either to Des Urlis or to members of his company. The thoughts of our colleagues Nadine Akkerman and Daniel Starza Smith echo through our minds: we know of thousands of opened letters from the early modern period, but how many can we think of that are still sealed? Once opened, those letters lose their unique material forms—and hence a great portion of their interest and value for study.

For all of these reasons, an accidental archive like the Brienne Collection necessitates the development of methodologies that ethically and responsibly account for the polyphonic counterpoint between our own interests as

44. For reactions from the general public, see the commentary on the many media stories about this project, linked via [www.brienne.org/press](http://www.brienne.org/press).

academics, archivists, curators, or conservators today and the motivations and experiences of past subjects, many of whom were marginalized in their own day. We would do well to acknowledge our own affective positions when studying them, asking: To what extent can an archival method be built that gives the material freedom to speak with its own voice and not merely ventriloquize the preferences and prejudices of those who “discover” it? And how can practicing an archaeology of the archive change our position within it?

We have only just begun to come to know the Brienne Collection. Our project is to conserve, digitize, edit, and understand it. But before we can do that, we must do some hard mental work, as we have attempted in this article. The accidental nature of this archive—in all of its widely distributed parts, as we outline above—offers a rare opportunity to think from the ground up about what constitutes an archive, how to describe it, and how best to make it accessible via cataloging strategies, database links, image files, editorial practice, and sensitive reading. This collection is especially rare, in that it presents at least six hundred additional accessibility problems: the letters that have never been opened but that promise a multiplicity of historical insights. Researchers might once have simply opened the letters to mine their information, much as is being done today with similar collections. Similarly, the current trend toward digitization of archives tends to focus only on the obtention of content rather than the appreciation of how form is an integral part of creating meaning out of content.

The Brienne Collection thus offers uniquely challenging issues of access that invite particularly innovative strategies. We are therefore creating an open-access catalog that records material features of the letters as well as notes on content. Our recently completed digitization project pushed the boundaries of archival-quality digitization by insisting on leaving the folds visible. Regarding the sealed letters, we have no intention of physically opening them, for in their pristine material condition these letters speak volumes about the care taken by letter writers to ensure that their messages remained private until reaching their final destination. Moreover, technologies are now being developed that may yet allow us to uncover their stories without altering their forms—or, at the very least, to ponder doing so. We are so far encouraged by the results of experiments we have carried out using noninvasive advanced scanning techniques. Even if we ultimately fail to obtain 100 percent readable text, we feel that it is our duty to continue to preserve these letters intact, until future generations have more adept technology.

We are keenly aware of how knowledge is negotiated, filtered across time and through expectation and desire. To understand the importance of such a find also requires an understanding of the processes of circulation, loss, and

survival. It is our goal to responsibly document and improve access to the collection so that anyone interested might consult these uniquely personal letters and hear the voices of the past again. Listening to this noisy assemblage of archives—shaking the piggy bank, as it were—while aware of our own presence within it, might just cause us to hear a very different story of the past.

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