

## **Progress 2007:**

### **Researcher and biographer Eva Rovers on the progress of the Helene Kröller-Müller biography:**

Family history and youth, Germany as birthplace

"How common poor Germany is becoming", Helene Kröller-Müller wrote Sam van Deventer in 1924. In her view, the shabby notepaper Van Deventer had used reflected the state Germany had lapsed into since the First World War. Since the war and the strong anti-German sentiment it brought with it, Müller had increasingly come to realize that first and foremost, she still felt German. Her morals, pride and intellectual formation lay anchored in Germany and it hurt her to have that country's downfall forced upon her.

During the past year, my research for Helene Kröller-Müller's biography has chiefly focussed on the first half of Müller's life up to and including the point in 1911 when she formulated the aim of her collection, namely to accommodate it in a museum. My research into Müller's childhood was partly carried out in the city and church archives of Bielefeld, Osnabrück and Düsseldorf. The information found there has been placed both into the context of the unpublished family chronicles of Aunt Müller and the German cultural history of the 19th century. Eventually, Müller's diary dating from 1882 till 1885 will also serve as an important source. She wrote this little book in the old German Gothic handwriting so it needs to be deciphered before it can be consulted for biography research.

One of the findings of the past year's research is that Helene Müller was a daughter of the Besitzbürgertum, a population group consisting of industrialists, traders and bankers that from the mid 19th century onwards was responsible for the speedy growth in German industrialisation and prosperity. In comparison with Bildungsbürger circles, this class was less susceptible to the arts. Nevertheless, German cultural ideas were to have a far-reaching influence on Müller's views on art, particularly through her education at Mrs. Schuback's Höhere Töchterschule. An equally important influence on her outlook on art and life was Müller's zealous and disciplined character. This character was sharpened by the bourgeois morals of Leistung, which permeated the propertied classes and with that Müller's youth. Her character and her German background ensured that she approached life differently than many of her Dutch contemporaries, even in her later years. Therefore it is highly likely that this intertwining of personal and national identity was crucial in Müller's manner of collecting art. The next stage of my research will examine more closely and substantiate the extent to which this intertwining lay at the base of Müller's unremitting aspiration to put together an exceptional collection and to accommodate it in an equally exceptional museum.