

The Falconers of Valkenswaard and Hawking at the Royal Courts



afr. 84 * Etruskische grafversiering, Rome, 340 vóór Chr.
* Etruscan tomb.

In the 18th century, royalty and the aristocracy of Europe were passionate about falconry, thus giving rise to an extensive trade in falcons. The capture of falcons became subject to a licensing system, in which the falconers of Valkenswaard played an important role.

Introduction

Hunting with hawks and falcons is a very spectacular activity. Falconry is the art of training birds of prey to follow and capture their quarry on command in the field. For the high flight, peregrines and ger-falcons are favourites, while goshawks and sparrow-hawks are used for hunting low-flying game or animals on the ground. Falconry is an ancient sport, extending back many centuries, with

Turkestan as the probable place of origin. It spreads via China to Japan and comes during the Crusades to Europe. Falconry reaches a high level of perfection in the Arab countries and extensive literature on the subject reveals great ornithological knowledge. In Europe, Frederick II (1215-1250) gives a complete description of birds, their care and capture in his treatise "On the Art of Hawking" ('De Arte Venandi'). Rural Brabant, especially the Campine heathlands, with its wide horizons lying in the migratory flight of the peregrines, profits from the increasing demands for hunting birds. With Arendonk as its centre, the region develops its own specialised trapping system. During the autumn the birds are trapped in bow-nets, then tamed and trained for the chase. A class of falconers comes into existence, who have changed their ploughs for bow-nets, bait-birds and decoys. They also supply falconry accoutrements such as rufferhoods, jesses, leashes and gloves. Under the patronage of Maria of Hungary (1531-1555) the fame of Brabant's falconers is established in the courts of Europe in the sixteenth century. To satisfy the increasing demand for more and stronger hunting birds, enterprising falconers travel to Scandinavia and Iceland to acquire ger-falcons. In 1670 Jacob van Oudenhove records that, apart from Arendonk also Valkenswaard is becoming a centre for falconry.

Iceland

Already Emperor Frederick II considers Icelandic falcons the best. The demand for these superior hunting birds, especially the white species, gives an impetus to extensive trapping in the 16th century. And so begins the story of adventurous pioneers who brave great perils and hardships to make their fortunes. The English and their rivals from Hamburg do not restrict themselves to trapping and trading of hunting birds and cause Christian of Denmark in 1614 to decree that all trade with Iceland is his monopoly. European rulers have to apply now directly to



Falconry at the Cultuur Historisch Museum in Valkenswaard

From data of many property deeds and wills from bygone days, the Museum has re-created an example of what a farmer's room and a falconer's room in those days looked like.

Farmer's Room

It is very simply furnished. Most items are made by the farmer himself. He does not have much choice for various reasons. Inheritance laws decree that plots have to be divided amongst the children. Plots thus become smaller. Reclaiming heathland increases the need for manure. The tax system is tough: taxes are levied on land, 'pairs of horns' (cows), and also on land lying fallow. Furthermore, the farmer is obliged to carry out work for the many soldiers in the region, as if they do not cause trouble enough with robbery, plundering and sometimes murdering. No wonder, therefore, that the farmer is poor.

The Falconer's Room

The falconer's life is a great deal better. From the outside his house looks like a farmhouse, but from the interior one can see that he is a wealthy man. He possesses money, land and houses. Considered a man of the world, due to his travels, he is asked to fulfill important functions as alderman, mayor or in charge of the poor. He receives a princely salary from the nobility who employ him. Moreover, he is well paid for the falcons he catches. They fetch 50 to 70 guilders each and he can sell about 30 per year. In the period 1725-1750 Valkenswaard has about 100 falconers out of a population of about 1000 souls. Thus prosperity comes to the region.

Preparation for hawking

Before the falconer can go hunting with his bird, much work has already been done. This is explained hereafter with reference to the peregrine, the falcon which is mostly used in this region.

The Migratory Route of the Peregrine

Peregrines breed in the forests of Northern and Central Europe. The peregrine is really a

non-migratory bird, but towards the north it becomes increasingly a migratory one. Practically all of the first-year birds from Scandinavia, Finland and North Russia migrate in a south-westerly direction towards the middle of Europe. They follow their prey - smaller migratory birds - to the coastal regions and wide open plains. They are therefore frequently seen in Valkenswaard. The migration of the peregrine is hard to observe as the birds migrate singly.

The Catching Place

The catching of the peregrine falcons starts on 1st October, nameday of Saint Bavō, patron of the falconers. In September the catchers start with the construction of the "legge", being the Dutch name for the whole of the catching 'system'. He makes a hut, 1 metre into the ground, 2.5 metres in diameter and 2.5 metres high, covered with turf sods, with peep-holes at the sides, and an entrance on the south side. From outside it looks like a little hill, fitting into the landscape. At a distance of 10 metres, 2 to 4 mounds are built, 1 metre high, on top of which a great grey shrike is tethered with small straps. It absolutely detests large birds of prey, spots them far sooner than a human ever can and starts up a terrible racket. In this way the catcher is warned that a falcon is approaching. At 40 metres from the hut and 40 metres from each other, the catcher sets up 3 wooden posts, 6 metres high. A line attached to the top of the posts is connected to the hut. On top of the first pole a wooden falcon is placed. On the line to the second pole an inferior live falcon and a bundle of feathers are tied. They are both placed on the ground, more or less hidden in the heather. On the third line, a live pigeon is tied, also lying on the ground. At 90 metres from the hut, two bow-nets are placed to coincide with the prevailing wind directions, as falcons prefer to catch their prey against the wind. From the bow-nets a line is connected to the hut. Behind the nets, at a distance of about 15 metres, a mound is made in which a living pigeon is hidden, connected also, but via a





VI2*. Schilderstuk-detail van werk van de bekende Duitse artiest Johann-Heinrich Tischbein de Oudere (1751-1829), vriend van Goethe en schilder aan het Hof van Hessen-Kassel. Afgebeeld zijn de Valkenswaardse Valkeniers Royers, Beckers en Verbruggen.

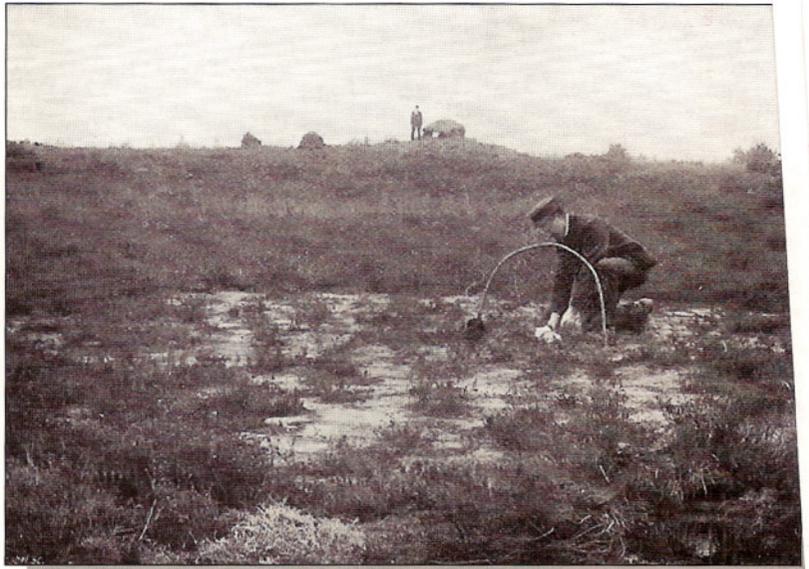
* Detail of painting by Tischbein the Elder, painter at the Court of Hessen Kassel, friend of Goethe. Depicted are the Valkenswaard falconers Royers, Beckers and Verbruggen.



VI3*. Kagiedrager + gedeelte van de hoge vlucht op de reiger door Johann-Heinrich Tischbein de Oudere (1751-1829).

* Cage bearer + part of the high flight on the heron by Tischbein.

small pole in front of the net, to the hut with a line. In total, seven lines come together to the hut. See the scheme on page 32. Falcons fly at a height of approx. 50 to 300 metres. This enables them to survey a tremendous area. They only hunt birds in flight, such as pheasants, partridges and pigeons. They have to be able to catch their prey in the air; as otherwise they would smash themselves to pieces on the ground. When the great grey shrike warns that a falcon is nearing, the catcher tugs at the wooden falcon on the pole, attracting the falcon's curiosity. Then he pulls the line with the living falcon and the bunch of feathers. This looks to the bird as if a falcon is hunting for prey. The great grey shrikes are now hiding in their little mound. The catcher then pulls the living pigeon out of the heath with the third line. It starts to flutter. The wild falcon immediately swoops down on to the pigeon, but, at the right moment, the catcher drops it back on the ground. The falcon rises again and searches for flying prey. The catcher waits until he has the falcon in the best position as far as the wind is concerned in relation to one of the bow-nets. He then pulls out the living pigeon from the little hill behind the net. The falcon swoops down and catches it in flight. The catcher eases out the line to slow down the falcon's speed. The falcon has now landed on the ground. The catcher pulls the pigeon on which the falcon is sitting slowly towards the net. The falcon refuses to release its prey. The catcher can feel from the line when the pigeon is nearing the little pole in front of the net. He pulls the net quickly, and so the falcon is caught. The bird is taken out carefully and put into a linen sack of the right length and diameter and in this way the caught falcon is brought to the falcon's room. With a good catcher, the pigeon is normally unharmed.

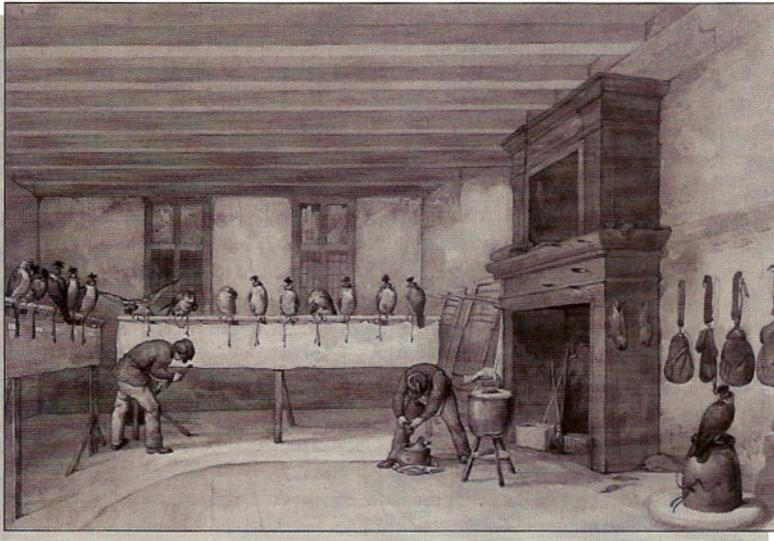


afb. 89 * Het inrichten van de 'legge'; het stellen van een boognet. Op de achtergrond de tobhut en klapeksterheuvels. * Installation of the catching place. Setting up of the bow-net. In the background the hut in which the catcher hides is visible.

The Falcon's Room

In a room as depicted on page 34 and 85 the hunting birds are kept and looked after. There is an obvious difference between young and adult birds, the young ones being much browner. There is also an obvious difference between the male and female birds, the latter being as much as one third larger than the males and, moreover, much stronger. There are a number of attributes connected with hunting and training of the birds: the jesses, or 'shoes', fastened to the claws and, on the other end, to the so-called swivel. The two oval rings are connected by a revolving spindle. On the other ring of the swivel the leash is fixed, a leather line of about 1.20 metres, used to tether the bird to the high rack in the falcon's room, or, outside, to the 'block'. Small bells are fixed to the claws of the bird and, with the slightest movement, give away where it is. The cloth beneath the high rack serves to protect the bird from flapping around the pole and damaging its claws. The hunting bird also wears a rufferhood, which prevents it from seeing. This has a calming effect which is necessary when the bird is being moved around. It is quite an art to put on the hood, as the falconer has only one hand free to do it. His teeth, therefore, come in handy. As falcons are





afb. 90 * De valkenkamer van de Loo Hawking Club op Het Loo (1839-1855). Door J.B. Sonderland. * Falcon's room at The Loo.

born with a fear of humans, winning a hunting bird's trust is a time-consuming process, but essential to falconry, because the bird is free to fly off to hunt, but it has to return to the falconer of its own will. Training begins with carrying the bird on the hand, - protected from the sharp claws by a strong leather glove -, often and for long periods, in order to let it get used to its surroundings. In addition, the falconer always feeds it on the glove which, therefore, becomes a familiar place to return to. After a few weeks, the flight training begins. The bird flies out on a line and is repeatedly lured back by a piece of meat on the glove. Each day the flight distance is increased, starting with 1 metre and finishing with 50 metres. And each time, after the day's training, the bird is rewarded with a full crop of food. After this training on the line, a new device appears on the scene, namely the lure, a pretence prey. The lure's function is to imitate the hunt, whilst the bird is being trained, but it is also useful for keeping the bird in good condition. The falconer keeps allowing the bird to swoop down onto the swinging lure and each time it is allowed a small piece of meat which is fastened there. In the past, falcons were also trained to hunt in pairs on unnatural preys, like herons or kites. Training for that type of hunt lasted many months.

Hawking

Hunting with trained birds of prey is called hawking. Starting point is the unique way of hunting of these birds in nature. Hawking can be carried out in two ways: the high flight with falcons and the low flight for which, amongst others, the hawk is more suitable. For the **low flight** the area does not have to be so widespread. The hawk can reach a very high speed over a short distance and can fly easily and deftly between the trees. When it finds its prey, a rabbit for example, it grasps it on the head with its claws. The falconer comes up to the spot where the bird has caught the rabbit.

He takes a piece of meat from his hunting bag, kneels in front of the bird and holds the meat over the caught beast. The hawk begins to pull at the meat. The falconer then raises his glove, with the meat, slightly upwards. The bird will find it more difficult to pull the meat away, because it needs its claws to do so, and sets one of its claws on the glove. Quickly the falconer brings the glove down again over the head of the rabbit, to give the impression that all is well. After the bird has taken some more of the meat, the falconer raises his glove again and then the hawk also puts the other claw on the glove. The falconer now quickly grabs the rabbit and puts it into his hunting bag. And ..., slowly he pulls the meat from his glove. The hunt can commence again.

For the **high flight** a widespread terrain is needed for the falcon to oversee its hunting area, for the hunters to be able to follow the birds, which can cover a large distance in a short time, and in order to be able to enjoy the spectacle of the hunt. Peregrines are used for the high flight because they are fast and strong and able to drop like a stone from a great height on to a flying prey, a heron for example. Heron hunting, using two peregrines at the same time, is a spectacular sight and seen as a princely entertainment for the nobility. Assistants bring the peregrines to the



setting of theatre, concerts and parades, the aristocracy, clothed in silver-braided liveries, and sporting white wigs tied with black silk bows and hats adorned with heron feathers, take part enthusiastically in the spectacle of the hunting birds and their quarry, as orchestrated by the Valkenswaard falconers. Also along the banks of the Rhine, falconry is held in high esteem. The Elector, Archbishop Clement August of Wittelsbach (1700-1761) is passionately fond of falconry, proof of which can be seen in the brilliant works of art in his castle Augustusburg and the hunting castle Falkenlust, both in Brühl. Hendrik Danckers, kite-master, and his brother Peter, heron-master, both from Valkenswaard, supervise the hunt. The spectacular aerial fights between prey and assailants is followed by the hunters on horseback, and the captured birds are ringed in the presence of the Elector Archbishop. During their nine month's stay, Clement August pays each master falconer 5.000 guilders for the year and he also pays for liveries and hunting birds. The Danckers brothers have to meet all expenses of hired personnel, horses, hunt trappings and costs in Valkenswaard. In Ansbach, hawking reaches its climax under the rule of Margrave Carl Wilhelm Friedrich von Brandenburg-Ansbach (1712-1757). In a period of seventeen years this extravagant and unbalanced ruler spends in total over 450.000 florins on falconry, therewith degrading the hunting parties to slaughtering expeditions. The men from Valkenswaard so dominate the Ansbach court, that many Dutch words find their way into local Ansbach hunting jargon.

Portugal

On the distribution list of Danish 'presents' we see, since 1752, the name of Portugal. It is known from Danish as well as Dutch sources, that the revival of falconry takes place here with Valkenswaard falconers, with family names such as Hertroys, Verhoeven and Weymans. That they are doing well is illustrated by the estate of Willem Hertroys: six thousand guilders worth of gold, silver, debentures and land. Since 1752 good relationships develop between the courts and the falconers of Denmark and Portugal. For example, Jacobus Verhoeven, having worked in Portugal, becomes master falconer at the Danish court;

his two sons, Hendrik and Johannes, become falconers of the Portugese king, having their living quarters in Salvaterra de Magos. In a number of cases Valkenswaard falconers combine a visit to their native village with escorting Icelandic hunting birds, presented by the Danish court. Despite political complications, hawking in Portugal flourishes under Valkenswaard guidance with master falconers such as Pedro Verhoeven, Peter Weymans and Frans Beckers. Whereas hawking in Europe is declining, it continues in Lisbon. Danish gift-birds arrive there until 1806, four years before hawking at the Danish court is given up.

"Falcoaria"

In Salvaterra de Magos, the Falcoaria, residence of the Valkenswaard falconers still exists. It resembles a south-east Dutch farm, square, with one storey. There are many documents relating to falconry in Salvaterra de Magos, signed by the Valkenswaard falconer's seal. In the Falcoaria are the living quarters of the falconers and their families, but also horse-stables, rooms for dogs, hunting birds and storage places for accoutrements and food.

Valkenswaard

In order to evaluate the importance of the Valkenswaard falconers to their native village, one has to review the situation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The infertile land yields only a poor return. The pressure of state taxation, the perpetual wars and the bitter poverty all give rise to almost insoluble problems. Labourers are forced to seek seasonal work elsewhere, at the Haarlem bleaching works or as travelling salesmen and pedlars.

Falconers, perch or cage-bearers and falcon lads are part of this exodus. The wealth of some of the falconers motivates many to seek employment abroad, filling their purses and widening their horizons. They learn the 'tricks of the trade' whilst they travel. Their wealth becomes obvious by their ownership of houses and their ability to lend money to private persons and local councils. As influential people they are elected to become public servants in their communities. Still, they do not lose the common touch. Thus, through the trapping of hunting birds and its associated





afb. 91 * Gedeelte van het Museum'diorama'. * Part of the 'diorama' at the museum.

hunting grounds. The hunting party follows somewhat later on horseback. When a heron is flying over, on its return from fishing, the falconer removes the hoods from his two peregrines and releases the birds. The heron can escape in two ways: by trying to reach the heron woods as quickly as possible, or by climbing up quickly into the sky. Falcons need to be at least 30 to 50 metres above their prey in order to make their first swoop. The heron will initially manage to escape from the swoop of the first peregrine, and also that of the second. The riders follow the scene of action in anxious suspense. The heron defends itself by flying increasingly higher, but eventually it will become exhausted. One of the falcons will then grab it and tumble with it to the ground. The other one is brought back by the falconer with the lure. The first rider to reach the place receives the plume from the heron's head and may stick this 'aigrette' into his hat as a trophy. The falconer removes the heron from under the peregrine and rings it with a heron-band with the name of the club and the year

caught. In the evening the caught herons are released. This way of hunting is not for the catch but only for the pleasure of the game and the beauty of the spectacle.

Two special peregrines

In 1887 two peregrines were caught in Valkenswaard by Karel Mollen and his son Adriaan. The birds were delivered to England and flown by the Old Hawking Club on rooks and stone-curlews in Wiltshire and Cambridgeshire, among others by T.J. Mann. The birds were prepared by the famous bird-painter G.E. Lodge, a good friend of T.J. Mann. When the Cultuur Historisch Museum in Valkenswaard opened its doors in 1986, these two professionally prepared birds, still in beautiful condition, came back as a present from the British Falconers Club.





VI4* Reisoverzicht van de Valkenswaardse valkeniers. Vangplaatsen en Europese vorstenthoven waar zij actief waren, zoals getoond in het Cultuur Historisch Museum te Valkenswaard.***

* Overall picture of catching places and travels of Valkenswaard's falconers, and the European Courts where they were active.



afb. 88 * Met haar beeld van de valkenier heeft de Bergeijkse kunstenaar Willy van der Put-Slegers een ode gebracht aan een vooral met Valkenswaard verbonden cultuurpatroon. * The Falconer, statue in Valkenswaard.

trade, prosperity is brought to Valkenswaard. The saying is: 'The cowsheds in Valkenswaard produce fine ladies', meaning, that even peasants could dress well.

Decline and Fall

The rapidly changing relationship between princes and people due to the French Revolution, the development of firearms, and especially the cultivation of heathlands and the re-allocation of farmlands, all contribute to delivering the final blow to falconry. It becomes impossible to follow the falcon on horseback. Nowadays, hawks are far more popular, because of their short flight, which is better suited to our cultivated landscape with its barbed-wire, ditches, motorways and railways. The falconers of Valkenswaard, no longer able to pursue their craft on the Continent, find employment in England. Frans van den Heuvel, Jan Daems, Jan Bots, Jan Peels are the moving spirits behind the Falconer's Club near London. When a similar

development of cultivating more and more land becomes a threat, the enthusiastic members find new hunting terrain at Het Loo in the Netherlands. With Prince Alexander as an inspiring leader, the old craft revives once more with Jan Bots and Adriaan Mollen, who fly their falcons on the heron. However, in 1855 this dream too comes to an end. Good locations become scarce and the sport becomes too expensive for its members. From then on, falconry is only practised, in a sober way though, by a few clubs in Europe. Adriaan Mollen, bird catcher, trainer and equipment maker, still remains a household word for every practising falconer today. His versatile son, Karel, bee-keeper, clock-maker, falcon-trapper and trainer, well known for his manufacture of bells and rufferhoods, dies in 1935. The falconry tradition is kept alive in The Netherlands by the Dutch Falconry Club 'Adriaan Mollen' and the Cultuur Historisch Museum in Valkenswaard.



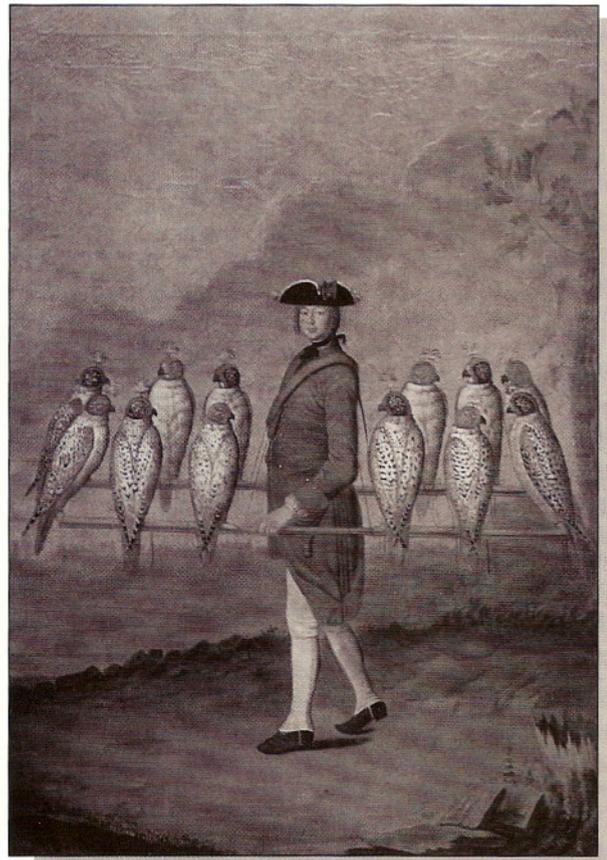
have regularly presented their 'royal cousins' with gifts of hunting birds. The distribution is subject to diplomatic considerations and protocol. The German Emperor and the King of France receive an equal number of birds. Princes of lesser ranks, like the Elector of Cologne, Bavaria and Saxony and the Landgrave of Hessen-Kassel, receive a series of birds on a more modest scale. It is an old custom for the Grand Master of the Hunt to send a tail feather from each bird in the consignment, along with an accompanying letter. In this way the recipient is able to ascertain that the birds he receives are the same as those which are despatched. The falcons, sitting on perches and provided with hoods, are carried to their destinations by Danish or Dutch falconers. They are sent to Lisbon by warship or by cargo-boat to Newcastle. A group of Master falconers from Valkenswaard form the hub of this organisation of royal hunting sports. Their function at court is of great importance and extremely remunerative. From the copious correspondence of Jacobus Verhoeven we know that from 1731-1793 4.600 Danish 'presents' were sent.

The Royal Courts

At the French Court, hawking is carried out with great élan, as nowhere else in Europe. It reaches its peak under Louis XIII, who indulges his passion for the sport at the expense of his state duties. He experiments with various new combinations of hunting, followed by the aristocracy. Using two falcons in the heron chase is a favorite one. Among the Campine falconers at Versailles are Nicolaas van Gool, master of the magpie hunt, Aert Steymans, who supervises the crow hunt and Hendrik Coppen, who organises the kite hunt. In the second half of the 18th century the men from Valkenswaard have completely overshadowed those from Arendonk. The best known is François Daems, who is regularly sent to Copenhagen to fetch gift birds. In 1793 the curtain finally falls on hawking in Versailles. The rivalry between Vienna and Versailles clears the way for the falconers to gain entry to the lucrative Hapsburg court. Around the year 1720, a colony of Valkenswaard falconers, among which Hendrik Beckers, settle in Laxenburg. Hawking reaches its peak there

during the reign of Empress Maria Theresia (1740-1780). At the time, there are four different categories practised, namely for heron, kite, crow and waterfowl. Eight persons are involved in each category, a master falconer, four servants and three lads. Bartel Hertroys, from Valkenswaard, and very successful, travels to Copenhagen to inspect gift-birds or to Brabant to purchase peregrines.

The men from Valkenswaard practise their craft in Parma and Potsdam, in Portugal and Poland. Hendrik Vermeulen and his sons Johan and Bartel organise heron hunts in Bavaria. In Hessen-Kassel, Adam Daems, Adriaan Royers, Willem Verbruggen, Johan Verbruggen and Hendrik Verhoeven are all master falconers from Valkenswaard, their contributions greatly enhancing the status of falconry there. In a



afb. 87 * Kagiedrager. Christoph Anton Hirsch (1707-1760).
* Cage-bearer with falcons.





afb. 85 * Valkenier met boomvalk. David Teniers de Jongere (1610-1690). * Falconer with hobby, by David Teniers the Younger.

the Danish monarch for licences to catch falcons in Iceland. Maurice, Prince of Orange, obtains such a licence for his Valkenswaard falconers, Willem Verbruggen and his sons Peter and Johan. Johan employs as his agent a certain Johan Mom, an adventurer from Hamburg, who easily adapts to the new situation. Because the Prince's Master falconer is tied to his functions in The Hague, Mom has a free hand, which he abuses by primarily realising his own ambitions to gather the exclusive trapping rights in Iceland. Still not satisfied he contravenes the regulations of the Edict of 16th April 1636 and uses English ships instead of those of the Iceland Company. The relationship with Verbrugge deteriorates when he acts as his competitor instead of as his agent. He gets into conflict with the Danish resident in The Hague and the mayor of Copenhagen over a scheme to monopolize salmon fishing. He becomes persona non grata in Iceland, and, embroiled in law suits, he dies in 1667. The trade in falcons now comes to an end, as the Danish king prohibits the sale of falcons to foreigners.

Denmark

In 1664, Crown Prince Christian of Copenhagen sets up a complete falconry centre at Frederiksborg Castle. As the Danes have little experience of falconry, a Master Falconer is brought in from abroad, accountable to a Danish Baron with the title Grand Master of the Hunt. Martin Verbraken, Hendrik Verhagen and Jacobus Verhoeven, all from Valkenswaard, become Master Falconers there in the 18th century.

Their foremen travel to Iceland, where on St. John's day, the 24th of June, at the falcon house in Bessastadir, birds are offered for selection. The prices are fixed: 15 rixdollars for a white ger-falcon, 10 for a partly-white bird and 5 for a grey one. Transporting the precious cargo is always a risky undertaking, lasting from 3 to 7 weeks. The Master Falconer in Copenhagen then proposes a schedule for distributing the birds to foreign courts. Since the thirteenth century, namely Danish rulers



afb. 86 Markgraaf Carl Wilhelm Friedrich von Brandenburg-Ansbach (1712-1757), door Johann Christian Sperling, 1737.

