

Flemish Art: Past and Present

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1. Introduction

“Nowhere in the world are there cities of art in such close proximity to each other as in Flanders”.

From 2018 to 2020, Visitflanders.com invited tourists to “discover Flanders” (<https://www.flemishmasters.com/en/>, accessed on 5 December 2024). Jan and Hubert van Eyck’s 1432 *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, known outside of Flanders as the Ghent Altarpiece, greeted visitors when they arrived on the landing page (Figure 1). St. John the Baptist, presented in a mirror image of his place on the actual painting, appears, within this context, to raise his hand in welcome. On the other side, a small group of herald angels announce the visitors’ arrival to the site. In the lower right, a few of Christ’s disciples are inserted into the frame looking a bit similar to twenty-first-century grumpy tradesmen. While it appears initially that Flanders is identified solely through the van Eyck’s altarpiece in Sint-Baafs Cathedral (fr. St. Bavo’s), additional painters, the so-called Flemish Masters, “offer” themed tours through a series of guides. Interested in culture and the visual arts? Follow Antoon van Dyck to Antwerp. Pieter Paul Rubens’ Bacchus will take those interested in culinary delights to Frans Snijders’ (1579–1657) food markets. The landscapes of Flanders and the cityscape of Antwerp are presented through Rubens’ good friend, Nicolaas Rockox (1560–1640), the mayor of the city. Rubens’ Venus shares information on romance, diamonds, and girl power (!). With James Ensor (1860–1949), we are invited to tour the seaside resort town of Oostende and visit Ensor House and Mu.Zee, to be immersed in the artist’s life and work. Dieric Bouts (1415–1475) takes us to Leuven. Clearly, tourism in Flanders is grounded in its rich painterly history. However, the website included this statement: “Flanders is a breeding ground for artistic trends. Now and in the past”. It was this assertion that led to this Special Issue, “Flemish Arts: Past and Present”.



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Figure 1. VisitFlanders.com. Screenshot. <https://www.visitflanders.com/en/discover-flanders/arts-and-heritage/flemish-masters/jan-van-eyck>, accessed on 5 December 2024.

The idea of what is “Flemish” as it pertains to a geographical region has changed considerably since Belgium formed as a nation-state in 1931. Consequently, “Flemish” as an identifier has meant different things to a variety of communities within Belgium. In this call for papers, we understand Flemish to mean art that relates to or is created in Flanders—as defined by the geographical region of what is now part of contemporary Belgium. Today, Flanders refers to the Flemish Region, the northern Dutch-speaking part of the country. It contains the core of the medieval territory, which included West Flanders and East Flanders. The historic Flemish country also encompassed French Flanders in France and Zeeland Flanders in the Netherlands. Flanders now incorporates Antwerp and the Flemish Brabant, which were originally part of the Duchy of Brabant and the province of Belgian Limburg. Flanders is one of three regions in Belgium. The Walloon Region is the French-speaking area in the southern part of the country, and the Brussels Capital Region is centrally located and is part of both the Flemish and Walloon Regions.

The goal of this special edition of *Arts* is to demonstrate that from the fifteenth century to the present, for many Flemish artists, there has been an underlying connection between artists and their artwork to the specificity of their Flemish heritage. The title of this special edition is deliberately vague. We did not want to be constrained by the historiography of Flanders and Flemish identity, which has been highly politicized. Nor did we wish to limit the issue to just the visual arts. The call for papers was international, and invitations were extended to playwrights, curators, and art and film historians. For this issue of *Arts*, and in line with how art historians tend to identify this period, the term ‘Flemish Art’ refers to the art produced in predominantly Flemish-speaking towns. Until the modern period, the production of art in this region was directly related to political and economic stability.

This introduction outlines a brief history of the connection of the art of Flanders (limited to painting) to the financial stability of the region and the connection between the fifteenth century and the present. It is not, of course, exhaustive. Several of the artists examined below also embrace subject matter and a formal approach to their work outside of a local Flemish historiography. It is also an impossible task, for the papers published in this special edition as well as in the Introduction, to address every art movement explored by Flemish artists from the Middle Ages to the present.

2. A History of the Arts in Flanders

2.1. *Flanders: A Trade Center for Medieval Europe*

Prolific art production during the fifteenth century was possible, in part, because during the High Middle Ages (c. 1000–1300), the trading towns of Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres—the *drie steden* or three cities—became densely populated urban centers acquiring considerable wealth due to cloth production and exportation. However, economic prosperity was not limited to the *drie steden*. Mechelen, Leuven, and Tournai, as well as Brussels, also produced a formidable number of artworks in this period. Clergy commissioned artworks for the churches, and individuals commissioned altarpieces for private chapels. Private citizens commissioned portraits and genre scenes for their homes. While we tend to focus on painting as the medium that identifies the region, sculptors—of both wood and stone—goldsmiths, ceramicists, tapestry weavers, and manuscript illuminators all contributed to the wealth of artistic production.

The Flemish cloth trade was the foundation of urban wealth in the region. Cloth production was established in the Roman Empire, and by the twelfth century, imported English wool was transformed into high-end as well as low-quality fabrics, making a significant impact on almost all levels of European society (Munro 2003). This success cemented the position of Flanders in the commercial structure of western Europe and as a hub of the trade routes from England to the continent (Munro). By the 13th century, Italian merchants created a direct route to Flanders via the Straits of Gibraltar to the North Sea. Bruges became the leading port. Phillip the Good (1419–1467), and other members of the Burgundian court, patronized the arts to underscore power and wealth and served as arbiters of taste. He and other members of the ruling class and culturally elite commissioned

illuminated manuscripts, tapestries, panel paintings, sculpture, metal-work and additional decorative arts. As a result, many of the oil paintings from this period that depict private citizens in Flanders underscore material wealth. The donors depicted in the side panels of polyptychs emphasize both piety and affluence. Portraits became objects of status. Artists solicited buyers through strategically placed panel paintings in shop windows. The upper middle class purchased these panels, many of which also depicted religious subjects, for home display.

Some of the most famous examples are those of Jan van Eyck. His *Man in a Red Turban* (1433), commonly identified as a self-portrait, underscores the social status of the subject through the fine fabrics. If this is indeed a self-portrait, van Eyck was well aware of his status as a sought-after artist. He and his fellow artists increasingly signed their work, claiming ownership of their individual creativity and effort distinct from the co-operative production of paintings within the guild system. The cultural importance of Jan van Eyck cannot be underestimated. His likeness has been pasted or painted by street artists in various locations in Ghent. Spanish artist Taquen painted an image of van Eyck in his red turban on a blank wall at the old fish market (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Taquen, *Jan van Eyck*, 2021. *Oude Vismijn* (Old Fish Market). Creative Commons.

The middle class spent their money on cloth paintings rather than the more expensive panel paintings. Subjects tended to focus on religious scenes. Ready-made panels and cloth paintings were sold at public art fairs, evidence of supply and demand. Religious scenes were sold alongside genre subjects. By mid-century, art dealers emerged. These intermediaries facilitated the international trade of paintings. Domestic and international purchases of art were affected by the gradual decrease in textile production and export as well as the Dutch Revolt (1566/60–1648), also known as the Eighty Years War, a war of independence of the Netherlands from Spain.

While the decrease in textile production was notable, Andrew Brown and Graeme Small have established that Flanders was well positioned to survive the late medieval financial crisis suffered by much of Europe (Mertens et al. 1981). Just as their proximity to the North Sea helped facilitate the import of English wool, it also ensured that food and other goods were readily available. Philippe de Commynes, a Flemish diplomat who served under Charles the Bold, wrote that, under Philip the Good (1419–67), “[The lands] overflowed with wealth. [...] People had money to spend, the clothing of both men and women was luxurious, meals and banquets were larger and more sumptuous than in any other place I know” (de Mandrot 1901, p. 15). Bruges was still the wealthiest city in the region in the mid-15th century (Blockmans and Prevenier 1999, p. 169). The population of Bruges was also very cosmopolitan. However, by the end of the 15th century, the prosperity of Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres waned. Due to the silting of its harbor, Bruges became less accessible to trade ships, and entrance to Flanders shifted to Antwerp to the east. Antwerp’s

location provided easier access to additional trade routes through Germany and a wider array of profitable investments. England also imposed what became a crippling wool tax. Flanders no longer dominated the production and export of wool. With the decrease in international merchants as well as the loss of localized wealth, the production of the major and minor arts declined.

2.2. Antwerp: New Forms of Artistic Expression

Several additional sets of economic circumstances altered the economics of the *drie steden* in Flanders. For example, in response to the revolt of Ghent's artisans in 1450, Philip the Good penalized the city with a fine of 840,000 guilders. He also reduced the powers of the craft deacons and required that the guilds surrender their banners. In 1487, both Bruges and Ghent revolted against the high taxes imposed by Archduke Maximilian of Austria, who ruled the Flemish counties as regent. The Archduke retaliated by blocking Sluis, the port town of Bruges, and ordering foreign merchants to leave Bruges in favor of Antwerp, which cemented Antwerp's central economic and cultural position. Antwerp became a very prosperous city by the 16th century and the mercantile hub of Europe. The city's economics were bolstered by the rise of the diamond trade, sugar refineries, and continued growth of the cloth, tapestry, and silk factories. Its stock exchange was inaugurated in 1531. The population was wealthy as well as cosmopolitan, resulting in an interest in new forms of artistic expression. Antwerp did not have the historic artistic past of Bruges or Ghent, so artists were not beholden to prior tradition. The printing houses in the city gained European acclaim, and painters, borrowing from both northern and southern motifs and practices, produced an eclectic style.

Many of the northern artists were influenced by the Italian Renaissance, but Pieter Brueghel the Elder turned to specifically Flemish subject matter. He was one of the first artists to be working when secular subjects replaced large-format religious paintings as a result of the *Beeldenstorm* (image storm or statue storm), which refers specifically to the attacks on Catholic art that spread through the Low Countries from south to north. The economic rise of Antwerp was also predicated on its position as a Protestant center, particularly for merchants involved in wool weaving and textile production. Antwerp, along with Ghent, Lille, and other cities in Flanders, became a haven for French Calvinists. The result was a schism with the Spanish government of Philip II (r. 1556–98). The Dutch Revolt (1568–1648) was instigated in 1566, the origin year of the *Beeldenstorm*. The assault on Catholic churches began at Sint-Laurensklooster (Chapel of Saint Lawrence) in Steenvoorde, in what is now France, just west of the contemporary French/Belgian border, near the Flemish city of Poperinge. The Reformation was in tandem with the resistance to King Philip II's centralizing politics and the continuance of the Inquisition established by his father, Charles V, in 1522. Those who had faced intolerance for religious reasons—particularly Calvinists—organized public Protestant sermons. In the summer of 1566, this group quickly grew from an underground and persecuted church to a very public religion with a large and, often, militant following.

The *Beeldenstorm* should not be characterized only in terms of the destruction of religious material culture (Suykerbuk 2020). In 1949, Marxist historian Erich Kuttner was the first to analyze the *Beeldenstorm* through the lens of class struggle and socio-economic tensions, which prompted additional economic as well as cultural research into the period (Kuttner 1949). Art historian David Freedberg underscored that iconoclasm illustrates the junction between the cultural and the political (Freedberg 2016, p. 67). Motivations for the *Beeldenstorm* included charges that the money spent on art that adorned the churches and the chapels of the rich was better spent on the poor (Freedberg, p. 82). Since many of the objects were directly related to wealthy individuals, known to the community at large, the iconoclasm was also personal and as much an attack on the wealthy patrons, many of whom were depicted within the polyptychs, as an erasure of the religious figures themselves.

The *Beeldenstorm* was not geographically comprehensive across what is now Flanders. Bruges, for example, was spared. Several towns took measures to protect the churches

and the content. In Ghent the Ghent Altarpiece was dismantled and hidden in Sint-Baaf's tower. In Diksmuide, the city magistrates refused entry to a small army of iconoclasts. Over the course of the next few days, the statues and other religious objects in the church were hidden. The *Beeldenstorm* reached Antwerp in August, and the altarpieces, paintings, sculptures, stained glass windows, and manuscripts were destroyed in the Cathedral of Antwerp.

Small panel paintings marketed to a rising middle class began to replace the overt religious subjects that were lost during the *Beeldenstorm*. Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/30–1569) was a forerunner in his depiction of Flemish landscapes and peasants, elevating genre to the prestige formerly reserved for sacred subjects. Bruegel was part of Pieter Goetkindt's (d. 1583) studio in Antwerp, after which, similar to many artists of his generation, he spent his formative years in Italy. Once he returned to Flanders, he reconceived the round Italian *tondi*, replacing the religious scenes with moralizing and didactic subjects from proverbs and other secular source material. While these satirical and humorous images overtly portrayed the consequences of drunken or other follies of human behavior, they were often framed within a religious and moralizing context.¹ In 1559, the Antwerp publisher Hieronymous Cock issued the Small Landscapes, a series of images of villages, farms, and fields of Brabant. This series of eighteen prints may be the link between the new focus on genre subjects for the Antwerp market, particularly in Abel Grimmer's (c. 1570–1618–19) painting workshop. Cock's Small Landscapes, and a second set of twenty-six views, served as direct models for landscape paintings of the seventeenth century. These landscapes became a commercially profitable staple in Grimmer's workshop (Onuf 2008, p. 192).

By 1585, Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp fell to Spanish forces. As part of the terms of surrender, Protestant citizens had two years to settle their affairs before leaving the city. Some 150,000 Protestant heretics migrated to the northern Netherlands. Others left for England. By 1589, Antwerp's population and that of other Flemish cities, such as Ghent and Bruges, were half of what they were in mid-century (Blockmans and Prevenier, p. 140). This mass migration included many skilled artisans (Bruneel 2006, p. 229).

2.3. Flanders: A New Market

By the seventeenth century, Flanders was transformed from a cosmopolitan city with a large Protestant presence to a Catholic center that played a prominent role in the Catholic Reformation. Antwerp regained its Catholic majority. Recovery of the arts relied on the rise of the middle class with enough income to purchase landscapes and still-lives. The export of these subjects, via the growing role of art dealers, was also instrumental in supporting a burgeoning art market. Construction and ornamentation of churches provided steady work for painters, sculptors, and other craftsmen. While iconoclasts believed that it was impossible to depict a formless God through images, for the iconophiles, the centrality of the image in Catholicism was grounded in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Through the incarnation, Christ was made visible, and images of him were justifiable as they revealed, embodied, and expressed the incarnation (Hodgson et al. 2020). Incarnation and icon were analogous.

Still-lives, landscapes, and portraits, which had been considered secondary art forms after religious panel paintings, grew in popularity due to a shift from religious to secular subjects after the *Beeldenstorm*. Osias Beert the Elder's (1580–1623) breakfast pieces (*ontbijtjes*) and flower arrangements, in particular, were important in the development of still-lives. Joachim Patinir (1480–1524) was one of the first of the landscape painters to emerge from Antwerp's competitive art market. He is credited with introducing what is known as the world landscape, a panoramic depiction of localized Flemish landscapes that dwarfed the religious figures, although the religious context was still an essential component. Landscapes, which were previously relegated to only small glimpses through windows, emerged as a proper subject competitive with religious scenes painted for private domestic interiors. His pictures inspired Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525–1569) to introduce the first landscape

without any religious or narrative context. Wealthy landowners in Antwerp were keen to display their wealth through depictions of the territory they owned, and painters of landscapes increased. Jan Bruegel the Elder (1601–1678) also produced large-scale paintings of common activities of peasants in villages and landscapes. He was supported, in part, by his private patron Cardinal Granvelle. The seventeenth-century merry company paintings (*vrolijke gezelschap* in Flemish) were very popular from the 1620s to the late 1660s, finding buyers from bankers, merchants, and royalty alike (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *vrolijke gezelschap*. Rijksmuseum. Creative Commons.

David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690) was instrumental in creating a market for seventeenth-century Flemish artists. As early as 1635, he signed with Chrisostomos van Immerseel, an art dealer from Antwerp who was living in England, which provided Teniers with foreign buyers for his still-lives, landscapes, and portraits. Around 1650, he was appointed court painter to Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (r. 1640–56). The rural scenes he produced during this period became popular, and the Archduke gave Teniers's paintings as gifts to other European rulers, resulting in a robust market for other genre painters (De Clippel 2007). These rulers became patrons in their own right, establishing the taste for pastoral subjects.

Koenraad Jonckheere points out that referring to this period as seventeenth-century *Flemish* art is an anachronistic term because the art produced during the period primarily centers around the Antwerp school of painting and Pieter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), Antoon van Dyck (1599–1641), and their contemporaries (Jonckheere 2014). Flemishmasters.com refers to Antwerp as a seventeenth-century Silicon Valley, where knowledge, craftsmanship, and technology come together (Visit Flanders (2020), <https://www.visitflanders.com/en/discover-flanders/arts-and-heritage/flemish-masters#viewport>, accessed on 5 December 2024). However, while Antwerp was the most important center of art production, it was but one in what was the southern—Spanish—Netherlands school. Malines, Liège, Brussels, and Ghent also produced formidable art projects. Rubens still looms large in Flanders and art history in general. His large-scale paintings were, more often than not, the work of his students. His studio was a grand factory that produced over 2500 paintings under Rubens' name.

After Rubens's death, the cultural significance of art from the region waned, which coincided with a decline in Antwerp's economy. According to Koenraad Brosens and Katilijne Van der Stighelen, "in 1987, eighteenth century painting was swept into the dustbin almost in its entirety" due to an unrelenting "veneration of Rubens" (Brosens and Van der

[Stighelen 2012](#)). Much of what we now know about this period is due to the *Memorie boek* (1744–80) by Maximiliaan de Hase (1713–81), a Brussels history and portrait painter. The tradition of cosmopolitan History Painting was maintained in Flanders in the eighteenth century. Since History Painting is defined by its subject matter through the lens of classical mythology and biblical stories, it survived to span several centuries across Europe. The leading painters of this period in Antwerp include Jacques van Roore (1686–1747), Maarten Geeraerts (1707–1791), and Pieter-Jozef Verhaeghen (1728–1811). Van Roore painted commissioned subjects for the Antwerp City Hall, such as *Mercury and Ceres Urge Scaldis to Wake Antwerpia*, that addressed the historicity of the city. Geeraerts produced nine grisaille tromp-l'œil paintings for the abbey church in Kamerijk (Fr. Cambrai), which later became the Cathedral of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Verhaeghen is regarded as the last representative of the so-called Flemish School. He provides a bridge between the continued Baroque influence of Rubens, the Flemish tradition of the Antwerp school, and the pluralistic eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

2.4. Belgium: A New Country

In 1830, the country of Belgium was formed. Throughout the nineteenth century, the country faced divisions over language differences and economic development. The artists who lived in the northern region of the new country were now considered, by the political organization of the new country, to be Belgian. It was a period of social and political unrest. The many revolutions across Europe ushered in new political systems, social changes, and economic reform. In the nineteenth century, the relationship between production, distribution, and consumption of art was radically modified. Eager to create an international reputation for the new country of Belgium, the Belgian prime minister Charles Rogier (1800–85) required that the annual Belgian Salon of contemporary art be more international than before. The organizing committee solicited submissions from all over Europe, particularly France ([Baetens 2014](#)). Academic painting still commanded the higher prices at the Salon, but the Belgian artists looked to the French avant-garde, developing new means of artistic expression and form.

The eventual break from the government-sponsored salons, as well as religious and government commissions, led to new buyers such as the rising merchant class. Additionally, an art discourse focusing on notions of national identity helped facilitate the process of internationalization. Artists and dealers were aware of the commercial potential of art through national “branding” ([Baetens and Lyna 2019](#), p. 15). For example, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the buyers were able to take the “Grand Tour on Bond Street”, visiting the German Gallery, the Belgian Gallery, the Japanese Gallery, etc. ([Fletcher 2011](#)) in major cities.

James Ensor (1860–1949) remains a prominent name from this period. He was born and lived in Oostende, the seaside town in West Flanders. His early work looked to Rubens for inspiration, but he soon turned to French Impressionist brushwork. Despite Rogier’s intent to internationalize the Brussels salon with French and French-inspired modern art, Ensor’s pieces were still too much of a challenge for Belgian tastes. His *Entry of Christ into Brussels* (1888), a parody on Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, was rejected from the Brussels Salon 1883 (Figure 4). The ludicrous assumption that Christ would even enter Brussels—in the year 1882, no less—was no more shocking than the smeared and garish colors and the inability to locate Christ himself in the *melée*.

Ensor’s mature style focused on an uneasy narrative of skeletons and masks executed in the bright colors of a carnival. His work is filled with psychological complexity, internal contradictions, and sheer eccentricity. Ensor emphasized stereotypes of bourgeois Belgians ([Spoiden 1997](#), p. 142). For a brief period, after his rejection from the Brussels Salon, Ensor joined Les Vingt, a Belgian group of artists with a common interest in Symbolist painting. They tended to focus on an inner life of mystery and allusion, as opposed to the urban life of the male French Impressionists. However, Ensor’s work was too garish even for Les Vingt, and he was kicked out of the group. Les Vingt, which included Jan Toorop (1858–1928) and

Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), exhibited in Belgium between 1892 and 1893. Their work is categorized by heavy outlines of simplified forms. However, several members eventually transformed their own Symbolist styles into the designs of the Art Nouveau.



Figure 4. James Ensor, *Entry of Christ into Brussels*, 1888. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Creative Commons.

Van de Velde and Victor Horta (1861–1947) are some of the originators of this new period of Belgian art. Horta was a Belgian architect and designer. His breakthrough design was Hôtel Tassel (1892–1893). Horta's interior focused on a space filled with light and open space and ornamented with curving lines that were modeled after natural vegetation. Hôtel Tassel is recognized as the first appearance of Art Nouveau in architecture. Hôtel Tassel was followed by projects for luxury townhouses. Belgian Art Nouveau has been labeled "imperial modernism" by Debora Silverman due to its ties between the Belgian arts and artists and those who benefitted from the policies of imperialism in the Congo (Silverman 2011, p. 2). The artists used raw materials from the Congo, including ivory and tropical hardwoods. The ornamental vegetation was inspired by colonial motifs, including the "sinuous coils" of the rubber vine and the lash of the *chicotte*, or imperial flogging whip made of hippopotamus hide (an early Belgium name for the new art was *Style coup de fouet*, or whiplash style). In addition, they were supported by patrons, above all Leopold II, who—wealthy with profits from the colony, especially from rubber—commissioned their buildings and bought their works (Silverman 2011, p. 144). Horta also accepted a commission for Volkhuis, the headquarters of the Belgian Workers' Party. While several of his buildings were torn down as Art Nouveau fell out of fashion, his Centre for Fine Arts (1923–1929) and Brussels Central Station (1913–1952) are still very much a part of the Brussels urban plan.

2.5. Brussels

The fertile artistic period of the late nineteenth century led to Brussels emerging as a center for the arts in Belgium. The success of the symbolist artists of Les Vingt and the subsequent group La Libre Esthétique helped ferment the emergence of the Belgian Surrealists in the 1920s.

Belgian Surrealism emerged with the publication of *Correspondance* in 1924. *Correspondance* was a self-published periodical that challenged the notions of André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1924. The distinction between Paris and Brussels was underscored in the inter-textual exchanges between Belgian surrealism and its own traditions and between Flemish and Walloon traditions and identities. Rene Magritte (1898–1967), the name most associated with Belgian Surrealism, never agreed with the French interest in a psychic

conception of art. He distanced himself from the importance given to the unconscious and the use of dreams as sources of inspiration, as derived from Freudian psychoanalysis. He identified as a realist, or a hyphenated “sur-realist”, who always situated his work at the level of the “perceived real” (Spoiden 1997, p. 144). Magritte’s work elicits questions about the nature and boundaries of reality and representation. *The Human Condition* (1933) questions the veracity of what the viewer sees (Figure 5). In this painting within a painting, one vision is real and the other a representation. Lipinski has written that, by employing simulation, Magritte sought to “bring about an encounter, an affective experience, of wonder, surprise, disbelief, confusion or bewilderment” (Lipinski 2000, p. 211). This places *The Human Condition* in dialogue with Herbert and Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*. At the time of its conception, the altarpiece represented a new artistic vision, in which the idealization of the medieval tradition gave way to an exacting observation of nature and un-idealized human representation. The van Eyck’s new use of perspective took viewers on a mystical journey conflating the real and the unreal within an expansive, exotic, but also localized Flemish landscape. It was, in the manner of the later Magritte, a window into another world.



Figure 5. Rene Magritte, *The Human Condition*, 1933. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Creative Commons.

Magritte and the other Brussels Surrealists also looked to everyday objects and situations for inspiration. Their potential was best experienced in the suburbs, the marginal zones between city and countryside. This places Belgian Surrealism squarely within a specific national, regional context. Magritte was born in Wallonia, the French-speaking region of Belgium. He lived in Schaerbeek, one of the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels Capital Region and a legally bilingual town. In 1959, the critic Dore Ashton linked Magritte to the “tradition of transcendent quietists” of the Flemish artists Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling (Ashton 1959). His paintings are reminiscent of the Flemish tradition of the mystery inherent in private devotional painting in which the devoted experience a visionary miracle in the ordinariness of the home. Rudi Fuchs notes that Magritte explored mystery and the fantastical in his own parlor. The windows in his paintings are the windows in his house; the hat is his own hat (Fuchs and Hoet 1997, p. 25). In his focus on the banal, he preceded the Belgian Pop artists interests in the objects of everyday life.

In the 1960s, Pop Art from the United States had a considerable influence on artists in the Flemish Region and Brussels. The 1965 *Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme*, etc. exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels exposed Belgian artists to a new approach to materiality (Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme, etc. 1965). They embraced the playful and colorful aesthetic of Pop but tailored it to speak to issues specific to their own domicile. One of the artists to emerge from this exhibit was Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976). Pop of the United States incorporated emblems of mass consumerism into a high art aesthetic. Broodthaers utilized found materials that addressed poverty—his own and others’—and cultural homogeneity. His critical exhibition, *Moules Oeufs Frites Pot Charbon*, was held at Anny De Decker’s Antwerp Gallery Wide White Space in 1966. The title underscores the Flemish-specific objects that were featured in his works of art, particularly his many pots of mussels. Broodthaers titled his pieces in French, the language of his youth.² He omits the ‘le’ or ‘la’ before the word ‘moule,’ resulting in confusion if we need to read the mussel as what it is, a mussel, or as what the words allude to, a mold. In this, Broodthaers uses ‘Moule’ as a metaphor or symbolic construction. The essential characteristics of Conceptual Art are thus also found in Broodthaers’ oeuvre in that the idea of the artwork is the most important and contains more value than the actual physical object.

In 1968, Broodthaers set up the Museum of Modern Art, a space in his Brussels home. The museum exhibited postcards of paintings and packing cases as pedestals. This ongoing exhibit played with issues of authorship, originality, and the role of art institutions in shaping and defining art. Broodthaers’ domestic Museum of Modern Art paved the way for the innovative exhibitions of Flemish curator Jan Hoet (1936–2014). Hoet’s exhibitions, which included *Chambre des amis* (1986), *Over the Edges* (2000), and *Sint Jan* (2012), opened up new ways to engage with objects in spaces not typically associated with art or exhibits. As “discover Flanders” underscores, Hoet is yet another who incorporated the past and the present into his work, layering the histories of a diversity of spaces and adding new meaning to each exhibition site and the understanding of contemporary art practice.

The women of Pop embraced this use of new materials, which permitted them to free themselves from the influence of the male-dominated fields of painting and sculpture (Devillez 2016). They used fake fur and polyester, the perceived materials of the feminine, and expanded the narrative of Pop. Martine Canneel (b. 1936), for example, used industrial materials—plexiglas, resin, and neon lights—and combined them with playful-looking consumer goods, such as toys and figurines. Her works carried a political message, particularly focused on environmental advocacy, such as the piece *Ô, où sont les champs?* [O, where have the fields gone?], which shines a critical light on intensive cattle farming. Evelyne Axell (1934–1972) was inspired by the challenges to the racial, social, and gendered order of the mid-century. Axell used translucent plastic and enamel paint to depict silhouettes of female figures. Her work embraces female desire and eroticism rather than functioning as a commentary on the female body and consumer culture. In *Axell-eration*, the pedals of an automobile are being operated by a woman in red high heels. *The painting pulls together several characteristics of Pop art*: “the fascination with speed and the car as a symbol of a new modern lifestyle; bright colors and an emphasis on stencil-like, two-dimensional surfaces, borrowed from an advertising aesthetic; and last but not least, the eroticization of the female body through the use of the quasi-cinematic close-up” (Wege 2019). However, the woman—perhaps a self-portrait—is not the object of the gaze or the focal point of desire. Axell steps on the gas—axellerating.

Contemporary Antwerp artist Jan Fabre (b. 1958) functions similarly to Rubens as a “cultural entrepreneur”. As Rubens before him, Fabre has been characterized as the “quintessential Antwerp artist”, working in a variety of disciplines as a visual artist, playwright, stage director, choreographer, and designer. In 2018, Fabre was invited to create three works for the former Baroque St. Augustine Church, the central performance and artistic space of AMUZ (The Flanders Festival Antwerp). AMUZ focuses on historically Flemish-informed performances. As a result, as part of the exhibition “Antwerp Baroque 2018, Rubens inspires”, Fabre installed three large green and blue panels that replaced

copies of altarpieces by Antwerpen Rubens, van Dyck, and Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678), which were hung when the church was sanctified in 1618.³ Instead of paint, Fabre chose to echo the brilliant Baroque green color of Rubens with jewel beetles, a species from the Buprestidae family of beetles known for their metallic, iridescent color. AMUZ described them as “an explosion of color with a fascinating play of light, just as vivid as the Rubens used to capture the world”. The central panel, which replaced the Rubens, features the sacrificial Lamb of God, awaiting in acceptance of destiny, which supports on its back a large diamond in reference to Antwerp as the Diamond City. With this large diamond, Fabres underscores his connection to both Antwerp and Rubens (Fabres is not known for his humility).

The name Luc Tuymans (b. 1958) has been synonymous with Flemish art since the 1980s when he received positive reviews for his first solo show at the Palais de Thermes in Oostende. Tuymans is predominantly a painter. However, he has also worked in film and as a printmaker. In his work he explores the mediation of mass media. He photographs mundane objects and the quotidian of objects and places. His sitters are unidentified. He further degrades recognition by photographing his subjects multiple times until the image is almost distorted. It is this almost abstracted image that he then paints. His paintings are not meant to be aesthetically pleasing. He claims that only “meaning and necessity” are important. However, in his titles, he invokes narrative, one that does not take center stage but lurks along the edges of the picture. In 2001, Tuymans was given a retrospective at the Venice Biennale. He presented a series of nine paintings titled *Mwana Kitoko*, which means Beautiful Boy. This was a wholly ironic title, which referred to the Congolese name given to Belgian Prince Baudouin when he visited the Congo in the 1950s. In the Belgian press, it was changed to *Bwana Kitoko*, Beautiful or Noble Man. This was to appease the Belgian public, but now only serves to underscore the fraught relationship of Belgian ownership of the Congo under Leopold II. In Tuymans’ painting of Baudouin, *Mwana Kitoko (Beautiful White Man)*, the prince descends from his plane onto the Congolese asphalt (Figure 6). He wears a starched white uniform with all of the details of the full military regalia. However, his face is blurred, suggesting the universal horror of Congolese contact with Belgium and other European countries that plundered it for rubber and other commodities. Tuymans’ focus on this moment in Belgian history is, again, a link of the contemporary with the past. In this instance, Tuymans highlights a period of Belgian history that has been deliberately obscured, similar to his painterly methodology, underscoring tainted traces of Belgian memory.

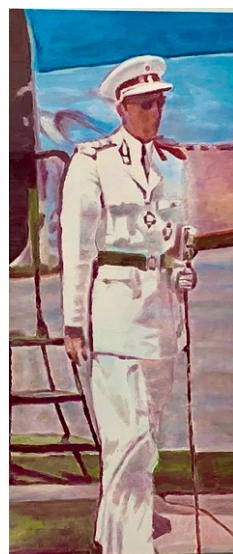


Figure 6. Luc Tuymans, from the series *Bwana Kitoko (Beautiful White Man)*, 2020. Private collection. Creative Commons.

While not all Flemish painters invoke a connection to their historical or art historical past, the artists surveyed in this brief historiography often build a deliberate link to a storied Flemish past.

The papers in this special edition of *Arts*, which specifically examine modern and contemporary artists and artist practices, underscore a connection to the Flemish region.

3. An Overview of Published Papers

The commissions of wealthy patrons funded the more expensive panel paintings found in both the public and private spaces of Flemish churches. In “Recto and Verso: The Pictorial Fronts and the Marbled Reverses of Two Flemish Panel Paintings”, Kathrin Borgers addresses the marbled reverses of two Flemish panel paintings, providing a new way to interrogate the function of the back panels of narrative religious and secular paintings, Jan van Eyck’s *Portrait of Margareta van Eyck* (1430) and Rogier van der Weyden, *Crucifixion* (1440s). This technique may have been utilized to add a facsimile of luxurious stone, such as red porphyry or marble, to the backs of the wooden panels. Since the panels were closed outside of holy days, the decorative marbling indicated the wealth of the church and underscored the importance of the figures on the recto. In her paper, Borgers expands upon this practice by linking the abstract ornamentation of the marbling to a metaphysical, material–semantic, and theological reading of the narratives on the fronts of the panels. She suggests that the materiality of the stone and color were integral to the relevance of the images on the front.

Miyako Sugiyama examines two panels of the *New York Diptych*, one of the most controversial paintings attributed to Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390–1441) and his workshop. Instead of adding her voice to the discussion of the debate, her article, “The Great Chasm”, focuses on an iconographical reading of *The Last Judgement* panel linking it to the fourth sermon by Bernard of Clairvaux delivered on All Saint’s Day in which he argued for an inescapable destiny for the sinful.

In “What Approach to Flemish Annunciations?” Thor-Oona Pignarre-Altermatt examines Flemish fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century paintings of the Annunciation in a domestic setting as an example of the materiality and spiritual dimension form as two inseparable aspects of devotional practice. In Flanders in the fifteenth century, houses became spaces where people could retreat to read, meditate, and pray, and the laity increasingly appropriated the images and sacred objects that were traditionally located in the church. The architecture in Pignarre-Altermatt suggests that depictions of the Annunciation in a domestic setting serve as sources for the history of late-medieval devotion, underscoring that the representation finds real correspondences in the architectural transformations of the house and in the material transformations of religious practices at the end of the Middle Ages.

In *Quatre Peintres Belges au Travail: Paul Haesaerts’s Film on Edgar Tytgat, Albert Dasnoy, Jean Brusselmans, and Paul Delvaux* (1952), Joséphine Vandekerchove examines Haesaerts’s contributions to Flemish art. Together with his brother Luc Haesaerts, he founded the journal *Les Beaux-Arts* in 1930, publishing widely on Flemish modern art. In 1931, the brothers also published the influential book *Flandre: Essai sur l’art flamand depuis 1880*. It was just the beginning of Paul Haesaerts’s focus on Flemish artists of the 1930s–50s. Vandekerchove notes that his innovations explored new ways of practicing art criticism through experimenting with film. In addition to functioning as a piece of *cinéma critique* and as a tribute to the process of artistic creation, *Quatre peintres belges au travail* also functioned as a promotional tool, supporting the international spread of Flemish art and culture in view of the encouragement of local tourism. Steven Jacobs expands upon our understanding of Belgian art during the 1960s and the 1970s. In “*Linen Boxes* and *Slices*: Raoul De Keyser and American Modernism in Belgium in the 1960s and 1970s”, Jacobs interprets De Keyser’s *Linen Boxes* and *Slices* as particular variations on Pop Art’s fascination for consumer items and on Minimalism’s interest in the spatial and material

aspects of Donald Judd's "specific objects" and stresses the physical, phenomenological experience of objects.

Anton Pereira Rodriguez's paper, "The Last Flemish Primitive: Jan Vercruyssen's Self-Fashioning of Artishood and National Identity", examines Vercruyssen's identity as an artist—a *Flemish* artist—in relation to the self-portraiture of van Eyck as a means, as Rodriguez notes, "to express the constructedness of artistic identity". Rodriguez simultaneously links Vercruyssen's self-portraits to a storied Flemish artistic past and to the changing political and cultural context of Belgium and Flanders in the 1980s. Rodriguez considers the national context of Flemish regionalization and Vercruyssen's self-conscious construction of his artistic identity in taking control of his public image.

In "When the Sky Is Low and Heavy: David Lamelas and Transnational Heritage in Flanders", Elize Mazadego and Stefaan Vervoort explore the complex and transnational heritage of artist David Lamelas's (b. 1946) work and its implications on the local Flemish cultural scene from the 1960s to the present. Lamelas's piece was created within the emergence of nationalism in Flanders and a global, postcolonial discourse in the art world. While the authors present Lamelas's *Quand le ciel bas et lourd* and *America: Bride of the Sun* (1992) as a lens through which to challenge a monolithic understanding of Flemish art, they conclude their article by placing *Quand le ciel bas et lourd* directly within a Flemish framework. The piece developed a critical relationship with its public space and the city of Antwerp, asserting Lamelas' relevance to Flanders, Belgium, and local histories of art. In 2011, the piece was donated to M HKA, Antwerp's contemporary art museum, which is located in the Zuid neighborhood and the initial local installment of *Quand le ciel bas et lourd*. It is significant that Lamelas's work is now housed in an institution that defines itself as a "cultural heritage institution of the Flemish Community" that "bridges the relationship between artistic questions and wide societal issues, between the international and the regional, artists and the public" (M HKA n.d.) Within M HKA's collection, Lamelas' work was framed as a memorial to "Flemish art history" and more specifically, "the international post-war avant-garde in Antwerp" (M HKA n.d.).

In "After the Wave, the Flood? Finding a New Autonomy and Relation to Work", Kristof van Barle addresses the economic and social precarity of the arts through the lens of emerging theater-makers in Flanders and Brussels. Van Barle focuses on the 1980s and 1990s, during which an independent theatre scene emerged in opposition to the commercial theatres. His work suggests that it was during this period that the Flemish and Brussels performing arts scene developed autonomy in order to produce innovative responses to economic pressures. This Special Issue concludes with my own paper that examines artist Kris Martin's personal, professional, and historical connection to Ghent. His work invites viewers to participate in a new narrative of the city, specifically through the literal frame of the Ghent Altarpiece and the metaphorical frame of the symbolism of the visual language of Christian art and architecture.

4. Conclusions

"Flanders is fertile ground for art and heritage. This began long ago, when our Flemish Masters first influenced the art of painting. For a period spanning over 250 years, from the 15th century to far into the 17th, Flanders set the artistic tone in Western Europe. We inspired all the most important movements of the time, such as primitive art, Renaissance and Baroque".⁴

In the above advertisement for Flanders, the vibrant art period after the Baroque continues to be marginalized. However, from Visitflanders.com, throughout this introduction, and in the papers included in this special edition, it is clear that a large number of modern and contemporary artists in the region continue to look to earlier Flemish artistic practices for inspiration. This dialogue with the past underscores a continuation of the exploration of innovative materiality, practices, and subjects. The Belgian conceptual artist Wim Delvoye (b. 1965) observed: "We are all children of a Low Country tradition of surrounding the most obvious with a mystical or fantastic aura (Stiles Tyson 2005).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Bruegel's drawings were engraved by Flemish printmaker Pieter van der Heyden (c. 1530—after March 1572) and published by Jérôme Cock (1518–1570).
- ² It was not until legislation in 1962 and 1963 that the current language border was created, dividing Belgium into three monolingual language regions (Dutch, French, and German).
- ³ The original three altarpieces were moved to the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) in the late 1950s for restoration. They are now part of the permanent collection of the museum.
- ⁴ <https://www.visitflanders.com/en/discover-flanders/arts-and-heritage/flemish-masters#viewport>, accessed on 14 March 2021.

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