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Behind the scenes at the Africa Museum

The extraordinary Belgian institute that is more than just stuffed animals

Lisa Bradshaw

The Royal Museum for Central Africa announced its plans for major renovations last month. Its director, Guido Gryseels, is taking the 100-year-old institution into the future – while continuing to maintain its unique connection with a tumultuous and fascinating past.

Guido Gryseels speaks hurriedly, like a man on a mission. His words are clearly well thought out, yet still delivered with a sense of urgency that suggests passion. “We have 300 staff, 80 scientists with PhDs, a budget of €17 million and the largest collection representing Central Africa in the world,” he says. “It’s a major operation, and it’s often underestimated.”

The name “Royal Museum for Central Africa” doesn’t even describe the half of it. The enormous grounds in Tervuren, just east of Brussels, is home to five buildings (two more are located nearby), most notably the stunning neo-classical palace designed by French architect Charles Girault in 1904. The vast, open garden combines greenery, sculpture,

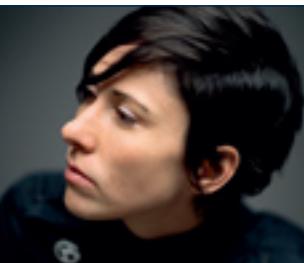
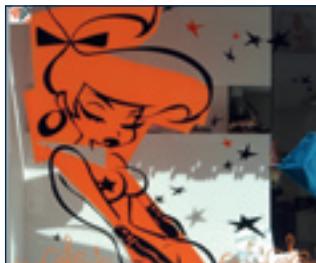
pathways and the “mirror pool”.

Besides the museum, it is a research centre for anthropology, zoology, geology, history and agricultural economy. Every year 175 scientists – mostly African – come to train in the various research institutes, alongside students and conservationists. The department of zoology contains more than 10 million specimens, the image library more than 500,000 films and photos, the xyliarium 56,000 samples of wood, and the ethnomusicology collection 8,000 musical instruments. What visitors see during a trip to the museum is a mere 5% of the total collection. “At this very moment, items from our collections are being displayed in 23 exhibitions around the world,” says Gryseels.

Continued on page 3



Guido Gryseels and friends at Tervuren's Central Africa Museum



Business

The retail market is booming in Flanders as shoppers flash their credit cards in stylish stores. But how long will the good times last?

Active

Antique hunters flock to Flemish markets to pick up rare items at bargain prices. We pick out the best of the markets in Antwerp, Ghent and Tongeren.

Interview

Saskia De Coster is hailed by critics as one of the best young writers in Flemish literature. We find out what she's working on and why she likes Brussels.

Central Bank chief calls for end to deadlock

“The crisis has cost €2.5 billion”

Derek Blyth

Guy Quaden, governor of the Belgian National Bank, issued a strong warning last weekend on the escalating financial costs caused by the current political stalemate. In an interview in the Saturday edition of the Flemish daily *De Morgen*, Quaden said that the failure to form a government could wipe out a projected €2.5 billion surplus projected for 2007 and 2008.

The governor said that the bank had forecast a surplus of 0.3% of gross domestic product for this year, followed by 0.2% next year. But “due to the political crisis, we are unlikely to reach these targets,” he said.

The surpluses had been earmarked to cover the rising cost of providing healthcare and pensions for an increasingly aging population. The governor said that the budget needed to end the year with a €900 million surplus to cover extra expenditure on the elderly. But the political crisis meant that the extra money would not be available. “The best that we can hope for is that the budget is balanced at the end of the year,” he said. “But we have lost the opportunity to cover the costs of an ageing population.”

Continued on page 5

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Erasmus House, Anderlecht

There is, as far as I know, no patron saint of expatriates, but if such a role had to be filled, Desiderius Erasmus would be the perfect candidate. He was born in Rotterdam, taught in Leuven, lived in Cambridge and died in Basel. For someone living in the middle of the 15th century, this was as cosmopolitan as it got.

During his endless travels, Erasmus stopped off for six months in Anderlecht, then a Flemish village with a few hundred inhabitants in the Brabant hills outside Brussels. He stayed with his friend Pieter Wychman, who was canon in the nearby church, claiming that he wanted to play at being a farmer.

For the past 300 years, the neat Flemish brick house in Anderlecht's Kapittelstraat has been a pilgrimage destination for Erasmus' followers. The house hardly owns any genuine relics of the scholar, yet the whole place is filled with the atmosphere of the early 16th century, with its old tile floors, leaded glass windows and creaky staircases.

Some visitors might wonder what all the fuss is about – what exactly did Erasmus achieve in his life? His most famous book is *In Praise of Folly*, a complex philosophical work in which the muse Folly congratulates humanity for embracing her so completely. Folly insults people by calling them "wise" and praises them by calling them "fools." Written almost five centuries ago, it's as tricky and ironic as a post-modern novel.

Erasmus was criticising the

Catholic Church at a time when the slightest heresy could land you in prison. So he could hardly adopt the blunt approach of Michael Moore. *In Praise of Folly* was his way of criticising something rotten by saying the exact opposite.

Foreigners living in Belgium – or any other country for that matter – will perhaps recognise Erasmus as one of their own. He was someone without a fixed home longing to be as rooted in the land as a Brabant farmer. "I am a citizen of the world, my homeland is everywhere, or rather I am a foreigner to everyone," he once wrote.

Most expatriates live in a country that is not their home and never will be, no matter how many hours they spend in language classes. But the longer they live abroad, the place they left feels less like home. They have become, like Erasmus, foreigners everywhere.

Erasmus has long been recognised as one of the great Europeans and has given his name to a student exchange programme that celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. Founded in 1987, the Erasmus Programme has allowed 1.2 million young people to live in 31 foreign countries. They have probably all felt at some time like citizens of the world and at other times like foreigners with nowhere they can call home.

online

www.erasmushouse.museum
www.ec.europa.be



FACE OF FLANDERS

Court, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, London



"Bossy Burger"

Paul McCarthy

This column could be called Face of America this week – for Paul McCarthy has been creating work that he thinks reveals the true face of America for 40 years. The Museum for Contemporary Art (SMAK) in Ghent presents *Paul McCarthy: Head Shop/Shop Head*, a retrospective of the American artist's work.

Those of you who feasted your eyes on the huge pile of dog poop and "Santa Claus with Butt plug" in the grounds of Antwerp's Middelheim Museum during McCarthy's display of giant vinyl inflatables this year, are already familiar with his work – which the word "controversial" does not begin to cover. What you missed is his lavish use of ketchup, melted chocolate and mayonnaise (how Belgian can you get?) to represent a variety of bodily fluids. But don't worry – this comprehensive exhibition represents the full depth and scale of the 62-year-old's oeuvre.

McCarthy's disturbingly sexual – and often violent – installations and video reflect how he feels about American culture and its obsessions particularly in his own city of Los Angeles. There are recurring allusions to Hollywood and Disneyland, which the artist seems to see as plastic-coated contaminants. He's created some brand new works for SMAK, which are showing for the first time, but his classics are here, too. "Mechanical Pig" is a sleeping sow, whose broad smile, multiple teats and slow breathing are so real you want to reach over and pet her. Only the complicated life support system of metal and wire on which she rests suggests she may be less alive than she looks. And wait until you see, a few steps away, what she is dreaming about.

But it's the big installations that really stick in your guts. "Frigate with Caribbean Pirates", loosely based on Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean theme-park attraction, has a ship at its centre, but it again appears to breathe with life, as different parts of it tilt together and apart. It feels carnal, and when you walk to the other side to see a blood-soaked deck littered with severed limbs and buckets of insides, the combination is a bit stomach churning. Some equally disquieting pirates are hanging around, and a TV monitor plays the 1966 film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The film co-starred Elizabeth Taylor – which explains the Liz look-alike among the subjects in the demented video projected on the walls.

McCarthy regularly parodies celebrities and political figures – it's hard to imagine what George Bush's reaction might be to what has been done with his image in *Head Shop*. The photo above – from the installation "Bossy Burger" – depicts the head of Alfred E. Newman, a cult classic character from *Mad Magazine*, a cartoon journal that lambasts American politics and pop culture. Newman's signature phrase suggests he might be an alter ego for McCarthy himself: "What, me worry?"

Lisa Bradshaw

Until 17 February at SMAK, Citadelpark, Ghent, 09.221.17.03,
www.smak.be

TALKING DUTCH

notes on language



Shutterstock

De warme bakker

Sunday morning begins for many in a queue at the baker's. For some, this is followed by a visit to another bakery to pick up the perfect croissants, which the first baker does not quite manage to make. Although you can buy bread at the supermarket, most people prefer *de warme bakker*, who produces an astonishing array of breads, pastries and cakes.

De bakkerij is the perfect place to practise your Dutch. On Sundays I have a standard list in my head, at the top of which is six buns for my kids – I don't want them moping around with long faces if I forget. So here goes:

"Goede morgen! Zes koeken alstblieft."

"De welke?"

Now comes the tricky part. The dozen or so different sticky buns in front of me all have different names, names which will differ if I go to the competition across the street. (Yes, good fortune in Flanders is judged by the number of bakers in your village.)

"Twee achtens (the ones shaped like the figure eight); twee boterkoeken en twee chocoladekoeken."

"Ja?"

"Twaalf sandwiches" ("finger rolls" to you and me) "en drie pistolets" (ordinary rolls) "en dat zal het zijn." (It sounds so Biblical: and that shall it be!)

Then I remember we need a brown loaf for tomorrow:

"Sorry, ik heb iets vergeten: een bruin brood." No doubt I have forgotten something else but the baker's is open all day.

The artisan baker is to be distinguished from the baker who gets deliveries from an industrial estate. The recent drop in the number of traditional bakers is often the subject of scaremongering features in the news. The long hours and demanding work are not seen as being worth the rewards nowadays. Yet recent campaigns – one about *Rudi de wakkere bakker* who is so tired from working through the night that he nods off in the most improbable places – have made people aware of this national treasure. Spending in *warme bakkers* now accounts for two-thirds of expenditure on bread. Some bakers have expanded to more than one shop, an example of consolidating in difficult times. The few bakery chains are mostly foreign – German or French – and none of those is warm.

Rudi and his colleagues do not know when to take rest: you can buy their *achtens* and *pistolets* on public holidays, even on Christmas morning, but Monday is usually their closing day. And, even then, you can often find a bread vending machine.

So will we have *warme bakkers* in the future? The news is conflicting. Either they are disappearing at the rate of one a month: *Elke maand verdwijnt een bakker* runs one headline. Another article points out that the number of bakery businesses is again on the rise compared with last year: *Warme bakkers weer in de lift. Er zijn nu 3144 warme bakkerszaken of 35 meer dan een jaar geleden.*

Certainly, if the general interest in bakers is anything to go by, I will be making that Sunday visit for some time to come.

Alistair MacLean

online
www.vandale.be

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FEATURE



The most popular room with visitors: bugs line the perimeter, murals by Emile Fabry coat the walls, and the crocodiles come alive

Treasures of Africa

Continued from page 1

Tervuren is also the only Africa museum in the world to combine human and natural sciences. And it is the home to the Stanley Archive – which needs an entire building to itself. Scholars come from around the globe to research documents, diaries and belongings of Henry Morton Stanley, the African explorer who uttered the famous line: "Dr Livingstone, I presume?"

Gryseels, 55, had many reasons to accept the position of director of the museum six years ago, and he certainly has the background to take the 100-year-old centre into the 21st century. "I grew up not far from here, and I used to come to the museum with my parents," he says. After doing postgraduate studies in Australia and The Netherlands, Gryseels worked in international agricultural research for developing countries in Ethiopia. He then moved to Rome and took up a post with United Nations, where he was responsible for strategic planning for agricultural research in developing countries. "I've been an expatriate my whole life," he says. "I had never worked in Belgium before, so I thought it was the chance of a lifetime."

In the past six months, the museum has been in the news constantly – BBC did a feature, Dutch TV was there a few weeks ago. They've been on Spanish television and the cover of the Wall Street Journal.

Why? "Because of the importance of our enormous background and archives," says Gryseels.

Here's one striking example. A conflict recently erupted between the Democratic Republic of Congo and neighbouring countries Uganda and Angola, based on a dispute over valuable resources (diamonds and oil) discovered in border areas. "Finally, they discovered that the answer was here in Tervuren," says Gryseels. "We have all the old maps and the archives, so that we could go back in history and state, on a scientific basis, where the borders really run."

The museum works directly with institutions and governments of 22 African nations, and one of them visits Tervuren for one reason or another almost every week. "Now more and more, the value of these collections becomes apparent. It's not just archives on a dusty shelf somewhere; you can really use them to solve contemporary problems."

Meanwhile, about 200,000 people pass through the doors of the museum annually, including 40,000 school students. The museum hosts workshops and study sessions for all of them – from the tallest to the smallest. It also hosts temporary exhibitions alongside its permanent collections – among them mammals stuffed and posed in dioramas and millions of insects, from the tiniest termite you can barely see to the hair-rais-

ing *Palophus centaurus*, a 25-centimetre stick bug from Togo.

Another exhibit in the museum focuses on Belgium's colonial history in the Congo – which is, of course, how Tervuren wound up with this impressive collection in the first place. Leopold II colonised Congo in 1865, and it remained a Belgian colony until 1960. "King Leopold thought that a colony was essential for the Belgian economy," explains Gryseels. Leopold had the museum built to display the greatest treasures of the colony.

"Once he had it, he became fascinated by Africa, and he wanted to encourage the Belgian population to take an interest," says Gryseels. "He was also trying to sell the idea to the Belgian government; he needed to convince them that it was a worthwhile exercise." The museum was indeed a huge success, as most people had never seen such animals or artefacts. "There was a lot of exploitation, and the methods used in Congo were by undoubtedly excessive by the moral standards of today. But you have to look at it in the context of those days. You can't deny that King Leopold had a very clear vision."

But it's a very different world now, and the museum needs to evolve, says Gryseels. Hence, it has just announced plans for a €66-million renovation. The planning phase will take two years, and the entire project will be complete in

2013. "The last major renovation was 50 years ago, which means just before the decolonisation of Congo," Gryseels explains. "The permanent exhibition is still very much related to colonial Africa and to the Africa of the past. We need the museum to reflect the Africa of today and to have a closer link with the themes that dominate Central Africa now, like migration and environment."

One of the major upgrades will be renovations to the museum's signature architectural feature: the majestic glass dome above the entrance hall. The dome's iron cramping has rusted over the years and some of the lead ornamental pieces are so unstable that they've had to be removed. Another major change – and the one that will possibly have the most impact on

visitors – is the repositioning of the entrance. Instead of driving up behind the building and parking across the street, the entrance will be moved to the front of the building so that visitors will have the magnificent view of the gardens and museum as they approach.

The plan also includes the conversion of an existing building to a permanent exhibit on modern Africa, which will include a library and media room. Most of the cost, though, will go into the construction of a new glass pavilion that will serve as a visitor centre, ticket outlet, restaurant gift shop and centre for educational programmes. From there, visitors will go through an underground passageway to reach the museum. The museum building itself is a protected monument and will not be structurally altered. (And when you visit the displays, you'll find materials in English, in addition to the current French and Dutch.)

Changes on such a scale, with the support of the federal buildings department, is a far cry from 30 years ago, when the museum was shuttled to the back of everyone's minds and budgets. "After decolonisation, we were clearly not a priority," notes Gryseels. "We were something that had to keep a low profile." The museum made the bold move of organising a major exhibition on Belgium's colonial past in 2005. "For the first time, we looked very critically at that past," says Gryseels. An enormous success, the exhibition prompted Belgian newspapers and television to explore Belgium's colonial history. It also encouraged debate among Belgians. "A lot of people came to terms with it at that point," says Gryseels. "I don't think anyone in Belgium talks about the colonial past the way they did a few years ago."

The exhibition was a bit of turning point for the Africa museum, leading to a new appreciation for what it had to offer. "We went through a difficult period in the 1960 and 70s," admits Gryseels, but I think we've emerged stronger as a vibrant scientific institute with even more potential."

*The museum underground:
see page 9*

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Bank chief calls for an end to the crisis



Continued from page 1

Quaden called on the political parties to end the crisis as soon as possible. "The situation is damaging for our image abroad," he said. He also advised that the future government, when it was formed, should immediately organise a promotional tour to repair the damage and convey a positive image to potential foreign investors.

The governor went on to point out that consumer confidence had fallen sharply in Belgium in recent

months (see our report on page 7). He urged the new government to introduce policies to protect families hit the hardest by high heating fuel bills. He said this should be done by issuing low-earning families with a "domestic fuel cheque" rather than granting every household a fuel subsidy, as was done in the past.

Quaden also warned Belgian businesses not to use the recent rise in fuel costs as an excuse to hike prices excessively. He cited a recent report by the National Bank that showed that raw mate-

rials represented an average of 20% of the total cost of a product. "If the cost of raw materials goes up by 20%, that doesn't mean you can increase the price of the product by 20%."

Meanwhile, talks to form a new government remained deadlocked over the weekend. Yves Leterme, the Flemish Christian Democrat leader who has been trying to form a government since the 10 June elections, held a series of meetings with potential coalition parties over the weekend but failed to reach an agreement.

Leterme had proposed a two-year "convention" to discuss the controversial proposals on devolving further powers to the regions. But the proposal gained little support from politicians, who want the new government to commit itself to the proposed reforms on areas such as taxation and health.

Leterme was due to report to King Albert II on the state of negotiations as *Flanders Today* went to press. For the latest news on the talks, see the daily online reports at www.flanderstoday.eu.

Diamond heist mastermind extradited

Elio d'Onorio, the man alleged to be the computer brains behind the world's biggest diamond heist in Antwerp in 2003, is now in custody in Antwerp, having been handed over by Italian police after being held in Rome for seven months. The theft took place over the St Valentine's Day weekend in 2003, as the robbers plundered an estimated 109 safe-deposit boxes in the Diamond Centre. The haul amounted to at least €100 million in jewels, cash, bonds and gold – although the true value of the stolen goods will never be known, as owners prefer not to reveal all to the police. The gang's leader has already been sentenced to 10 years by an Antwerp court. D'Onorio was sentenced to five years in his absence.

Flanders paid more tax even in 19th century, professor claims

The Flemish population paid more tax than Wallonia even when the region was poor in the 19th and early 20th century, according to research by VUB emeritus Professor Juul Hannes in a new book. During the period 1832-1912, his research in old records shows that Flanders paid 44% of all tax, with 44% of the population and only 41% of families. Wallonia, at the same time, had 40% of families and 38% of the population but paid only 30% of all tax income. The only tax where Wallonia paid more than Flanders was on luxury horses, he found.

Binding error could make Dutch Harry Potter collector's item

A binding error in the Dutch-language edition of the latest Harry Potter novel could turn faulty copies into collectors' items worth many times more than their face value in years to come, according to a spokesman for Standaard Uitgeverij, which published the book. In some hardback editions, pages 480 to 513 are missing, and some paperback editions are missing pages 160 to 193. Owners are advised to keep the books in perfect condition to preserve their worth, by refraining from reading them, if necessary.

Dutch lessons for pharmacists declared a success

A programme to teach Dutch to pharmacy staff in Brussels was declared "a great success" as the first course came to an end last week. More than 100 pharmacists and assistants applied to take part in the course organised by the Apothekers Van Brussel federation and delivered by the Huis van het Nederlands. But only 70 places were available. A new series of lessons begins in the spring. Meanwhile a campaign to encourage the use of Dutch in shops in the Flemish municipalities around Brussels has met with mixed success. While 59 businesses took part in Grimbergen, 41 in Dilbeek and 27 in Asse, only 10 joined up in Kraainem, and a mere three in Linkebeek.

NEWS FLASH



Molenstraat most popular street name in Flanders

Molenstraat, or Mill Street, is the most popular street name in Flanders, according to a survey by WDB Belgium, with 262 streets of that name across the country. Kerkstraat comes a close second with 261 streets, followed by Nieuwstraat, Schoolstraat and Veldstraat. Kerkstraat/Rue de l'Eglise, with 218 examples, is the most common street-name in Brussels and Wallonia, followed by Rue du Moulin/Molenstraat, Rue de la Gare/Stationstraat, Rue de l'Ecole/Schoolstraat and Rue de la Chapelle/Kapelstraat.

Shipwreck survivors homeward bound

The two Belgian passengers rescued from the stricken MS Explorer, which sank in the sea between Argentina and Antarctica last week, will travel home at the beginning of next week, consular services in Chile announced. The Explorer sank 15 hours after hitting an iceberg while on a cruise of the polar seas. There were 154 people on board, including 91 passengers. They spent three hours in lifeboats in icy waters before being rescued by a Norwegian ship. Two women from Menen near Kortrijk were among the passengers.

Rail strikes warning

The country could be hit by rail strikes in December, warns the Independent Union of Rail Personnel. The union is calling on the Belgian rail operator NMBS to recruit more engineers to cover the current staff shortages. It also wants train drivers to be paid higher salaries. "The most recent changes to the salary scales took place more than 10 years ago," the union says. The first strike is planned for 8 December.

Hof van Cleve best in Belgium

Peter Goossens' restaurant Hof van Cleve in Kruishoutem has been ranked the best in Belgium in the latest edition of the French culinary guide *Gault-Millau*. The Brussels restaurants Comme Chez Soi and Sea Grill were in joint second position, while Danny Horseele of the Zeebrugge restaurant 't Molentje was rated Chef of the Year. The Hof van Cleve has now won the coveted award five years in a row.

Digital cameras switch on

The country's first digital speed camera has been switched on in Brussels. The camera has been installed to catch speeding motorists on the Lambermontlaan in eastern Brussels.

Audi A1 on show

The new Audi A1 was shown off to the press last week at the Audi plant in Vorst, southwest Brussels. The new car, which will be produced exclusively in Brussels, is due to enter production in 2009. It is designed to meet the increasing demand for small cars.

Flemish painting used as a dart board



The Rubens House Museum hopes to be able to exhibit a 17th-century painting of Rubens' Antwerp home that was recently discovered in England after being used for 30 years as a dart board. The painting, attributed to the minor Flemish artist Anton Gheringh, was tracked down by art experts to a former country house in southern England that had been used as a detention centre for young offenders.

The badly-damaged painting was discovered in 1987 following a tip-off by a former inmate. He told investigators that it had been used by detainees as a dart board. "It was a case of boys being boys," said art expert Anne Crowe, who led the investigation.

Ben Van Beneden, curator of the Rubens House, is very excited by the find, which he describes as "a very important historical document." While it is not a great masterpiece, it is the oldest surviving view of the Rubens House, painted between 1645 and 1668, and shows the original lavish decoration of the mansion.

The work, which depicts Rubens and his wife standing in the baroque courtyard, has been restored by the London's National Gallery. It went on display in the museum last week. Van Beneden has already asked for it to be lent to the Rubens House Museum sometime next summer.

Derek Blyth

Flanders to head EU regions body



Flemish minister president Kris Peeters (above) travelled to Barcelona last week to take over the presidency of REGLEG, an organisation that brings together EU regions with legislative powers. More than 30 European delegations were present at the two-day meeting, held in Barcelona's Palau de Pedralbes.

The conference ended with a declaration calling on the EU to grant more power to regions with legislative powers and recognise the need to communicate the aims of the European project to their citizens. "It is important to explain the significance and ambitions of European integration and to involve citizens in this common project," the declaration said.

More than 70 regions within the European Union currently have legislative powers. These regions often have similar powers to a member state, with directly-elected parliaments and governments.

Flanders Region takes over as head of REGLEG in 2008. The European correspondent Rory Watson will discuss the region's plans in *Flanders Today* in December.

DB

NEWS FLASH



Adoption candidates line up for Thomas

At least 25 couples have applied to adopt Thomas De Kleine, the baby left behind in the "founding drawer" of the Antwerp charity *Moeders voor Moeders*. Thomas was five days old, weighed 3.2 kg, and is the first and only baby ever to make use of the drawer since it was opened in 2000. He is being cared for in a children's home. Adoption services have criticised the use of the drawer, which is designed for a new mother to leave her baby in a safe place, while not being identified. Better reception and counselling for such mothers, the Flemish Adoption Service said, produces a positive outcome in eight out of ten cases.

Funeral world shocked by De Clerck's tooth-pulling proposal

Funeral directors have condemned a suggestion by Kortrijk burgomaster Stefaan De Clerck that they extract the fillings of dead people prior to cremation to reduce the pollution caused by burning mercury amalgam. A new crematorium is due to open in the city in 2009. "The mercury problem simply doesn't arise," commented Kris Coenegracht, director of the country's largest crematorium in Lochristi. Crematoria use active charcoal filters which keep the levels of mercury down to 50 times less than the permitted maximum. "The health risk is zero," Coenegracht said.

Telenet faces cable monopoly challenge

Cable operator Telenet could face the break-up of its monopoly in cable internet services in Flanders, the head of the federal regulatory authority said last week. Eric Van Heesvelde, chairman of the Institute for Postal Services and Telecommunications, said the break-up was "a line of thought" and "something that ought to be looked into". Telenet has 55% of the broadband internet market in Flanders, but virtually the whole of the cable network. The difficulty smaller operators face in gaining access and achieving critical mass prevents them putting any pressure on prices, leading to Belgian broadband rates being among the highest in Europe, he said.

Unions protest conditions in cleaning sector

Trade unions last week held protests to complain about the conditions experienced by cleaning staff in offices. On average, a spokesperson said, each cleaner now has to clean 700 square metres an hour, compared to only 300 five years ago. The unions had previously denounced some of the practices of private cleaning companies in hotels, who have increasingly taken over from in-house cleaning staff, as "Mafia-like". They include paying under the minimum wage and declaring only three hours a day while forcing women to work eight hours or more.

Internships for every professional school student

Students in the 5th and 6th years of technical and professional education – the so-called TSO and BSO schools – are to be allowed to serve an internship in industry or business as part of their curriculum. Unions and employers last week reached an agreement with the Flemish government, which has now been approved by the educa-

tional authorities. Teachers demanded guarantees that the internships would involve quality training and not simply photocopying and coffee-making. In addition, 25,000 places are to be found for teachers in the TSO and BSO systems, to allow them to keep pace with developments in their sectors.



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SURVEY

The way forward?

Amcham report calls for fundamental changes to attract foreign investment

Alan Hope

Belgium needs to make some major changes if it is to attract more foreign investment, according to the latest "Foreign Investment Agenda" published last week by the American Chamber of Commerce in Brussels (AmCham). The report's authors call on the government to attract more qualified workers, lower

social security costs and corporation tax, and increase flexibility on working hours.

AmCham's report is based on information gathered from its members based in Belgium. The main fault with the Belgian workforce, the report says, is a "lack of graduates with scientific and engineering degrees, as well as a lack of awareness amongst students of the

career possibilities open to those with such degrees".

Just over 20% of Belgian graduates have degrees in science or engineering, compared to 30% in Finland, 29% in Sweden and 28% in Ireland. In addition, there are not enough degrees on offer which include significant periods of working in industry as part of the curriculum.

AmCham proposes interaction between business and schools to sell the merits of industry-oriented education, as well as internships as early as middle-school. It also urges the government to change the tax system so that money earned by students in internships is not penalised by their parents having to pay higher taxes.

The report also suggests keeping older people in work. At present older workers cost more and are the first to be cut, leading to Belgium having the lowest rate of employment for workers over 55 in Europe. But holding onto skilled and experienced workers would help to bridge the gap between the skills needed by companies and those offered by the labour market, AmCham says.

The report also calls for more



Not enough engineers, warns AmCham

Belgium handicapped by high taxation

Report ranks Belgium 154th in world

Derek Blyth

Belgium is ranked 154th out of 178 countries worldwide in a new report on taxation levels published by the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation and tax consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers. "High taxation and complex fiscal policy are a handicap in attracting new investment," according to the report "Paying Taxes 2008".

The survey looked at how often taxes have to be paid, how many different payments are involved, how much time it takes to comply with all tax requirements and the total tax burden (including corporation tax, social security contributions, wage costs, taxes

on dividends, taxes on financial transactions, taxes on waste, road and car taxes, property taxes and wealth taxes). The authors conclude that there is a win-win opportunity for governments and firms if governments simplify tax systems, ease the compliance cost on business and reduce tax rates.

"Belgium lags at the back of the field in international comparisons of tax rates," says Frank Dierckx, managing partner at PwC Tax Consultants Belgium. "We come behind almost all other European countries. Only France and Italy score worse within Europe."

Dierckx lists some of the taxes that contribute to Belgium's poor rating: "Belgium has the high-

est rate of personal income tax at about 54% (including local authority tax), along with personal social security contributions of above 13% and employers' social security contributions of 35% on salaries, 21% VAT and 34% corporation tax".

The report gave the Maldives top place in its tax rankings, followed by Singapore, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Ireland, in sixth position, was the top performing European country.

Although the former Belgian government tried hard to reduce the tax burden, Frank Dierckx is sceptical about the results. "Taxes and the percentage of income paid for social security remained at 44.2% of GDP in 2007," he notes. "This is exactly the same as in 2006, which shows that the targets are not being attained."

The bottom line is that Belgian taxes take a massive 64.3% bite out of the average company's profits, compared with an EU average of 48%. The tax burden also takes a large chunk out of the average Belgian employee's spending power. Someone earning €41,000 gross in Belgium will take home just over €23,000, whereas an Irish employee on the same salary will get more than €32,000.

Some analysts point out that tax payers in Belgium reap the rewards of high taxes in the form of excellent social benefits. Dierckx agrees:

Consumer confidence plummets

Consumer confidence dropped sharply in Belgium last month, according to a survey by the Belgian National Bank. The bank – which carries out a monthly audit of consumer confidence in 1,600 families – said that the drop in confidence was the sharpest it had measured since the 11 September terrorist attacks on New York in 2001.

The report said that the drop was due to "growing anxiety about rising prices, particularly with regard to fuel and food." It noted, however, that the average Belgian family was still optimistic about employment prospects, though there was growing pessimism about savings and the overall economic situation.

The bank confirmed the pessimistic outlook by noting that economic growth was forecast to fall in Belgium from 2.9% in 2006 to 2.5% this year and 2.2% in 2008.

BUSINESS FLASH



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Photovoltaic

Photovoltaic, a Tienen-based company specialised in power generation from solar energy, is to invest a further €45 million to develop capacity and push production to a peak of 140 megawatts by 2009. The firm, jointly owned by the French Total petrol group and the Suez energy concern, was last week inaugurating a line of solar captors that pushes its present capacity to 90 megawatts.

Ritual Cosmetics

The Dutch retailer Ritual Cosmetics has plans to open an additional 25 stores in Belgium. The company already operates in Antwerp, Mechelen, Leuven, Sint Niklaas, Roeselaere and Hasselt.

Volvo Ghent

Volvo Ghent, one of the Swedish company's largest assembling lines, is considering a cut of 500 workers from its 4,500 strong workforce. Production for 2008 is expected to drop to 203,000 vehicles compared to 240,000 this year. The plant's management hopes that the launch of the Volvo XC60 late next year will make redundancies unnecessary.

Aviapartner

Aviapartner, the airport services company owned by the UK-based investment concern 3i, is selling its Brussels Airport based catering activities to Swiss Gate Gourmet, the world's largest firm in the field. Aviapartner supplies some 3.5 million meals to 30 airlines while Gate Gourmet, previously part of the bankrupt Swissair group, prepares 200 million meals a year. Up to 300 employees will be affected by the move.

Swiss Life

Swiss Life, the insurance company, has sold its Belgian activities to the Dutch SNS Reaal as part of a restructuring of its operations.

Dexia

Dexia, a leading financial organisation that focuses on support for local authorities, has taken over some of the mortgage activities of the UK-based Bradford and Bingley, which is specialised in social housing, for €3 billion. Dexia is said to be taking advantage of the uncertainties created by the sub-prime crisis on the UK property market.

Rubis

Rubis, a French firm specialised in the stocking of petroleum and gas products, is to build a 110,000 cubic-metre terminal in the Antwerp port area.

BlackRock Investment

BlackRock Investment, a New York-based fund with investments in several large Belgian companies such as Cumerio, Umicore, Agfa Gevaert and Nyrstar, has opened an office in Brussels.

Fortis

Fortis Bank, the leading bank insurer, has taken over the Antwerp-based International Diamond and Jewelry Group (IDJG), also known as the Diamant Bank, as part of its acquisition of the local activities of the Dutch ABN Amro bank. The IDJG is a world leader in financing the diamond market.

RETAIL PROPERTY

Shop until you drop

The retail market booms in Flanders



Kammenstraat: Antwerp's coolest street

Simon Barry

The retail property market in Flanders is currently going through a boom, according to Nicolas Orts of CB Richard Ellis, the real estate consultant. Rents are climbing and demand is strong, he says. Orts is reasonably optimistic that the long-term situation will continue to improve due to significant shifts in the structure of the sector and positive consumer spending patterns.

The market once again seems to be waking up to developments in neighbouring countries – where retail property is much more expensive than in Belgium. But the fact remains that shoppers in this region are highly cost-conscious and until recently have

been strongly inclined to save.

Over much of the past 60 years, the household savings rate in Belgium has hovered at around 18% – the second-highest in the world after Japan. This is well over 10% higher than the UK or US. In recent years, however, thanks in part to greater political stability and the introduction of the Euro, the savings rate in Belgium has plunged to about 11%. This has led to a huge injection of disposable income into the economy which has boosted the sale of consumer goods and the demand for retail space.

The sector owes much of its growth to shopping centres such as Woluwe, retail developments such as Maasmechelen Village and the

revamping of major urban shopping areas. Antwerp is today the most expensive city in Belgium for retailers, with space in the most exclusive areas topping €2,000 per square metre. The Meir has rents of €1,600 per square metre, whereas Brussels' Nieuwstraat and the Louisa quarter fall in the €1,400 to €1,600 bracket. Meanwhile, other cities in Flanders such as Kortrijk, Ghent, Leuven and Hasselt are catching up fast.

And the crowds keep coming. Brussels' Nieuwstraat and Antwerp's Meir both attract some 12 million visitors a year. This is admittedly modest compared to the French city of Lille where Rue de Béthune draws 15 million visitors a year, and it hardly begins to rival the main shopping areas of Paris and London, where the figure reaches 50 million visitors a year. While no one expects the main areas of Brussels, Antwerp or any other Flemish city to reach these dizzying heights, it is clear that the spate of new investments and planned developments will bring more shoppers to the region.

Koen Peeters of Flanders DC (an organisation set up to encourage Flemish creativity) told the Flemish daily *De Standaard* that students don't feel the need to set up a business because they are assured of a job as soon as they have graduated.

The best European countries for encouraging business set-ups by students are Hungary, Switzerland and France.

Brussels now hopes to do the

elsewhere in the capital, including the transformation of the neighbourhood close to Brussels Zuid station. The growing network of high-speed train connections (including a new high-speed station at Antwerpen Centraal) is also helping to boost the country's retail sector. There are now plans to expand the Woluwe Shopping Centre and hopes that the deadlock over the Henron project on Gulden Vlieslaan can finally be resolved.

Elsewhere in Flanders, many other cities are now following the lead of Antwerp and Brussels. In Kortrijk, the recently inaugurated Shopping Sint Jan has already rented out most its retail space. And new projects in Ghent and Tienen are being discussed by developers.

The strong Belgian presence at the recent Cannes Mapic retail property market exhibition is further proof of the current boom. Ambitious new companies are regularly entering the market, each one convinced that there is still potential for growth in the market.

An estimated 1,500 international brands – including US-based Abercrombie and Fitch, Starbucks Coffee and Subway sandwiches – are all seeking additional outlets. Even Marks and Spencer, which closed all four of its Belgian stores in 2001, is believed to be considering a move back to Brussels or Antwerp.

The big question analysts are asking is whether this frenzy will last. The weaknesses in the US and UK property markets may spread to Continental Europe faster than anyone expects. The recent drop in Belgian consumer confidence (see our story on page 7) may be the writing on the wall. Is the bubble going to burst once again?



Ostend takes off

A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

Behind the scenes at one of Belgium's most intriguing places



"Have you seen that movie *A Night at the Museum*?" Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi asks me as she takes me down into the bowels of the Central Africa Museum. "Working here is really like that."

I hadn't seen the recent comedy about collections that come alive at a natural history museum, but I had to admit I'd been thinking about it all day. This enormous museum of snakes and spears and bugs can become a little unner-

ving when you leave the crowds and wander into the underground tunnels that link its many buildings. In fact, Leduc-Grimaldi avoids the tunnels, choosing to go outside to cross the property – rain or shine. She says she "forgets" to use them.

A colleague of hers does not, and she has already opened unmarked doors along the never-ending hallways, shutting me into dim rooms filled

with research collections: one contained shelf after shelf of elephant skulls, another antelope skulls (with horns attached). If you creep through the narrow space between the skulls that hang in rows, you'll find more skulls – of hippopotamuses.

Back in Leduc-Grimaldi's office, I'm handed a pair of perfectly white gloves. "Let's go," she says. She's in charge of the Stanley Archives, one of the many research treasures the museum boasts, and she takes me down into the underground rooms that house the collection.

Most of the items and materials in the archive are too delicate to put on permanent display and are only open to researchers. Leduc Grimaldi shows me Stanley's famous hat that he designed himself (having found the traditional explorer helmets too hot), the medicine box he travelled with (with phials of pills still in), and his many choices of guns. Then she reaches into one of a dozen or so identical cupboards (this one is marked "1-89"), opens a drawer and pulls out a diary. She quickly finds the page she's looking for, and Stanley's inky scrawl describes his encounter with a number of natives in eastern Africa. Among them, he believes he sees Dr Livingstone.

Leduc Grimaldi beams. She loves her job, she loves the museum. Holding a legendary piece of history in my white-gloved hands, I understand why.

Lisa Bradshaw

OBITUARY

Maurice Béjart



The French choreographer Maurice Béjart died last week in Lausanne, Switzerland, at the age of 80. Although born in Marseilles, Béjart is widely considered as an honourary Belgian, having worked for 27 years in Brussels, from 1960-87, where he was house choreographer at the Munt opera house.

Béjart's first work at the downtown opera house, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, introduced Belgian audiences to a radically new type of dance that was physical, sensual and violent. He went on to create the Ballet of the XXth Century and in 1970 set up the Mudra dance school. This produced an entire generation of

exciting young dancers, including Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker who went on to create her own company, Rosas.

Béjart eventually left Brussels after falling out with the Munt's director, Gerard Mortier. He moved to Lausanne where he set up the company Béjart Ballet Lausanne. "I didn't leave Belgium, it was Belgium that left me," he wrote in a bitter letter.

Despite suffering from ill health in recent years, Béjart continued to work with his Lausanne-based company, which is currently working on a new show titled *Around the World in 80 Hours*, due to premier on 20 December.

Béjart returned to Belgium last year to present two new productions in Antwerp. He remained attached to Belgium and towards the end of his life asked for his ashes to be scattered on the beach at Oostend. "No other choreographer has introduced so many people to dance," said De Keersmaeker after being told the news of Béjart's death.

Derek Blyth

FASHIONISTA

Designers Against Aids

When the first Aids case was diagnosed in 1982, the press followed with over a decade of awareness campaigns. Interest stayed high with casualties such as Keith Haring, Rock Hudson, Freddie Mercury and a plethora of fashion designers including Halston, Perry Ellis and Willi Smith. Now, more than a quarter century later, Aids seems passé.

The public may have moved on, but the disease has not. World Aids Day is 1 December, with marches and other events scheduled around the world to unite the public in preventing, treating and understanding the disease.

For former fashion journalist Ninette Murk, the day has a personal meaning. "In the 90s, I had an assistant who was mad about fashion," she says. "He developed Aids, but he still loved going to the shows." Eventually, though, he became so weak, he could no longer stand up for more than 10 minutes and had to be seated in the front row at fashion shows in order to see anything. "But label after label refused. 'Why is he even going out looking like that?' they asked. 'Wouldn't it be better if he just stayed home?' My assistant still cared about fashion. Unfortunately, fashion didn't care about him."

Murk turned her outrage into action with Designers Do Denim, a 2001 benefit at Antwerp's Royal Museum of Fine Arts. Dries Van Noten, Walter Van Beirendonck and 33 other Belgian fashion luminaries contributed jeans creations to be auctioned. This one-off event led to a T-shirt series promoting safe sex – complete with condoms. (Sold in style Meccas such Colette in Paris and ***** in Berlin, they continue to be must-haves for conscientious fashionistas.)



Nina Murk: reinvigorating the movement

All of this evolved into Designers Against Aids (DAA), a non-profit that has made Aids awareness fashionable again, while fighting discrimination against HIV/Aids sufferers. "Young people today are blasé – they think they can't catch Aids," Murk shudders. But UN data shows unprotected sex between heterosexuals as one of the leading causes of HIV infection in Europe. Currently, one half million western Europeans are living with HIV. Still, "they think Aids is something their parents worried about," says Murk, "or something that only gays, IV drug users or poor Africans get."

Since cocktail drug treatments have turned an HIV diagnosis from a death sentence to a chronic disease, Murk says young people are much less careful. "But HIV isn't like diabetes. Talk to someone on anti-retroviral therapy, and he'll tell you how gruelling it can be."

Designers Against Aids receives no government funding, relying on sales and personal contributions to stay afloat. This World Aids Day, the organisation will set up shop at Antwerp's Mode Museum. If you can't make it, the website has select limited edition designer goodies perfect for Xmas prezzy. Contributions can also be made directly to Designers Against Aids. Call 03.237.33.82.

Steven Tate

online

www.designersagainstaids.com

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CLASSICAL NOTES

AMUZ: a forgotten church is reborn



Anyone shopping for designer clothes or a postmodern lampshade on Antwerp's trendy Kammstraat will have come across it: an imposing, brick-and-stone, early baroque church. What is not as evident is that it was recently reborn as an arch-cool classical music venue.

AMUZ (short for Augustinus Muziekcentrum) is housed in what used to be the chapel of an Augustinian monastery. It was built in the early decades of the 17th century and was rightly deemed one of the city's architectural gems: three of Antwerp's most famous artists of the time – Jordaens, Van Dyck and Rubens himself – painted altarpieces for it, now kept in the Fine Arts Museum. The church was used for Catholic services until the 1960s, then was closed down and forgotten.

Its second life as a concert hall began during Antwerp's stint as cultural capital in 1993. The ramshackle old building, it turned out, had a fine acoustic for pre-classical music, if you didn't mind the odd draught or traffic noise from the street. *Laus Polyphoniae*, the Antwerp leg of the Festival

of Flanders that takes place every year at the end of August, began staging some of its concerts there.

Now the venue can be used all year round as it's just undergone painstaking renovations by local architecture firm Vanhecken en Suls, who've done a wonderful job updating the building while preserving its original beauty.

"A lot has been done, but you can't see it," says communication officer Kathleen Engels, as she and I stand in the nave, craning our necks to admire the stained-glass windows. And it's true: you can't tell that they've been doubled with thick glass panes lined with acoustic foil for soundproofing. A special acoustic curtain has also been placed behind the choir, and each of the floor tiles removed to install floor heating, then put back in place to depict elaborate geometrical patterns.

Retaining the imposing pulpit, which still towers over the audience, was a conscious but difficult decision, as its space could have been used to accommodate more seats. In the south wing chapel, now turned into a foyer, some beautiful neo-Byzantine frescos

will soon be restored. By contrast, the box office, cafeteria, musician rooms and other modern additions are starkly modern – all charcoal stone floors, minimalist white and lime-green walls and swooping skylights.

AMUZ' programme is also a fine mixture of old and new. There is some attention to the contemporary repertoire, courtesy of artist-in-residence Koen Kessel and his HERMESensemble. But the core is resolutely pre-1750 and "Hip", as in 'Historically Informed Performance': the Collegium Vocale, Huelgas Ensemble and Roel Dieltiens' Ensemble Explorations are all due to perform over the coming months, alongside younger outfits such as B'Rock, Katarina Livljanic's *a cappella* quartet Dialogos, and the glamorous Netherlands-based Quintus Ensemble, who will play songs of war and love from England, Spain and Italy from the turn of the 18th century. How much hipper can one get?

Marie Dumont

online

www.amuz.be

FILM FREAK

Panorama of Belgian Documentary



Children build cities that reflect their own in the film of Flemish filmmaker Sarah Vanagt

In Mali, a family of herders finds their livelihood threatened through development programmes meant to improve conditions for the people of one of the world's poorest countries. An entire Brazilian village forms a co-operative for the production of cane sugar, maintaining an independence unequalled

in most farming communities. Meanwhile, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, children prepare for the country's first democratic elections by playing games that mimic the situation all around them.

No, it's not an international film festival, it's Panorama of Belgian Documentary. Though you'll also

find films shot in this country, Belgium is, let's admit it, a small place, and many of its filmmakers are striking out into the world in search of diverse subjects. "Two years ago, we saw a lot of social films – films about old people in institutions or people living in the street. That's very characteristic of Belgian cinema," says festival

director Natacha Derycke. "This year it's quite different – it's about the lives of regular people, their very special lives."

The festival is a combination of short and feature films, and each screening costs only €2. You can get a festival pass for €15. Among the best of the 32 films on the programme is *First Elections* by Flemish director and visual artist Sarah Vanagt. She has already done projects on Rwandan children coping with their situation through playing games and children in Goma building their own makeshift city on top of the lava-covered ruins of their town. For *First Elections*, Vanagt travelled to the border region between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda to record kids playing "election". It's striking enough to see the children's ability to mimic so convincingly what they see, but Vanagt injects animated babies into the action to parody Congolese leadership.

Also straying outside Belgium are anthropologists Charlotte Gregoire and Anne Schiltz, whose film *Stam* is an intimate and moving portrait of two young women who live in the same Southern Romanian village, one a Saxon and one a gypsy.

Meanwhile, closer to home, Flemish filmmaker Tim De Keersmaecker's *Die Vögelein schweigen im walde* follows 41-year-old Danny, lonely and unhappy, to the German border on a hunting trip – the only thing that gives him joy. Unfortunately, nature can be

as cruel and unpredictable as people. Bram Van Paesschen's *Ici (lettre à Chantal Akerman)* – an answer to Belgian director Chantal Akerman's *Là-bas* – is distinctly lighter in tone. It's about, he says, "colonisation, collaboration, Christmas, sunglasses and sunlight deficiency disorder."

The Panorama of Belgian Documentary takes place every two years in Brussels, organised by the Henri Storck Fund. Storck was Flanders' most prolific short film director until his death in 1999, turning his newsreels of Ostend life in the 1920s into masterpieces of social interaction that helped to promote the Flemish coastal town. Panorama's Henri Storck prize is awarded to the festival's best film, and they also award a prize for best Flemish film and best Francophone film. "We have films from both the French and Dutch communities, which is unique in Belgium," says Derycke. She notes there is less work from the Flemish at the moment because the funding and promotion scheme for Flemish film is relatively new, whereas, she says, "The Walloons have had help from the French community for more than 20 years."

Lisa Bradshaw

December 1-12 at Bozar (02.507.82.00) and Film Museum bis (02.551.19.19), Brussels. Complete programme at www.fondshenristorck.be

ANTIQUES



Photos by Monique Philips

Market forces

Antique buying as a fine-tuned art

Flanders hosts some seriously well-stocked antique markets that appeal to both amateurs and international collectors. Here's where to go, how to buy and what to bid to take home the best

Monique Philips

Place your bid

Vrijdagmarkt, Antwerp

Pick up something for next to nothing at this Antwerp institution. Every Friday morning, an amazing variety of items gets auctioned off. And, unlike most other markets, it doesn't do any harm to arrive late. You're free to pick up any leftovers before the garbage collectors arrive. Everything has to go.

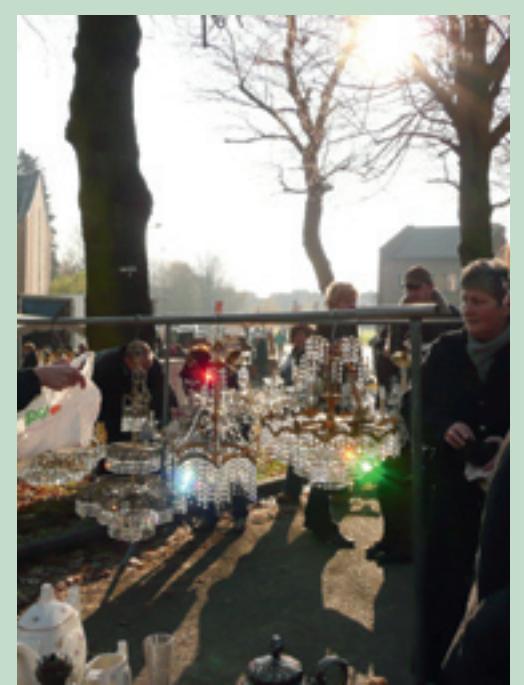
The rather hidden little square in front of the 16th-century

Plantin-Moretus museum is a place unsurpassed for meeting colourful characters and snapping up a bargain. You'll find that most onlookers are more than pleased to speak English. This is a city of sailors, after all.

The items auctioned off at the Vrijdagmarkt, or Friday Market, come from liquidations. The stuff on sale has generally been repossessed from individual debtors, dead or alive, by *deurwaarders*. They're the ones sitting at the small tables next to electric heaters, entering euros into their notebooks. (One euro at a time, since the amounts raised are usually extremely low.)

Trade secrets: top tips for getting the good stuff

1. Skirt the professional stalls. Bargaining is easier at the one-off stands run by amateurs, especially towards the close of the market.
2. Question authenticity and a pristine condition. Sigh heavily.
3. Have someone along who exclaims audibly: "That's way too expensive. Let's go."
4. Look for signs like "*alles moet weg*", "*gratis*" or even "we're moving to a nursing home".
5. When searching the internet for *rommelmarkt*, *ruilbeurs* or *brocante*, type in the coming weekend's date to find out about forthcoming markets.
6. Don't bother about the rummage sales in the river towns along the Maas. Cunning Dutchmen will have visited them a week in advance.



The auctioneer is the sinewy man in the heavy ski vest shouting out the bids and occasionally sipping his beer. Every time a sale is final, he calls out "geluk!" (luck/happiness) – and not, as I first thought, "Luc" (Luke), a feasible name for the secretary, surely.

Assistants display the different lots and collect the money. You buy "as is" – a single lot might contain something as diverse as four oil paintings and a computer. Beware of the small print: an additional 16% commission is charged on all purchases, and no exceptions. There's a lot of quarreling going on between the competitors, but the auctioneer has no time to waste. Heaps of household goods, bicycles, furniture and piled up boxes of rubbish (or treasures) have to be sold by noon. So don't wave to someone across the square or you'll be wondering how to get that marble dining-room table and box of James Last records home on your bike.

Quiet contemplation

Sint-Jacob, Ghent

In the shadow of Ghent's Sint-Jacobs church, you can find two connecting picturesque squares, Sint-Jacobsplein and Van Beverhoutplein. Here, every week from Friday to Sunday, a sprawling flea market is held. The public is almost as diverse as the goods. Night-revellers, their last *pintjes* still in hand, mingle with the upper class ladies in fur coats, who are looking for another special piece for their friends to admire. All stalls at this market are manned by professionals who offer a wide range of products, starting with the usual display of discarded books, clothes and old furniture to the downright bizarre, like original freemasons' attire, World War I gas masks and decapitated heads of oriental statuettes.

The atmosphere here, as always in Ghent, is comfortably laid back, and even on a sunny day it doesn't get too crowded. If, by coincidence, what you're looking for is not for sale at the market itself, you might be tempted to check out one of the many antique and curiosity shops in the surrounding streets.

Prices are plummeting

Tongeren

The oldest town in Belgium, Tongeren is a former Roman Spa and hometown of Ambiorix, the bravest of the Gauls. It bustles with activity on Sunday mornings when up to 350 stands are lined up along its medieval city walls to welcome a weekly average of 6,000 international visitors. Germans show up in large numbers, making a quick trip across the border. The Dutch also travel from Maastricht to pick up a bargain or two. Tongeren is the largest market in the Benelux and, located about 100 kilometres east of Brussels, makes a perfect day out.

The best spots – in the sports hall and adjoining parking area – are reserved for the professional antique merchants, so save those until last and head into the streets



From top: Everybody shops at Tongeren; picking up the leftovers in Belgium's oldest city; sold! Painting goes for €80

for the best bargains. Even if fake and new "oriental-type" items are banned by police order, they still pop up, inciting bitter complaints from regulars Jef and Tin: "They're killing the market," they tell me. Shiny English-style silverware and travelling trunks should arouse suspicion, too. It's a bit difficult to distinguish the buttercups from the dandelions in this particular field. The difference between an original, a fake and a reproduction lies in the intention and knowledge of the seller, as any bargain hunter will tell you.

"All depends on what you're looking for, but there's no need getting here at 5.00 and searching by flashlight anymore," one professional buyer says. The market is stagnant and nervous at the moment. Though small-time dealers are on the prowl, scooping up collectibles to sell directly to buyers, vendors are exhibiting the same wares every week. Hard-core collectors, who used to come here in droves, have turned to the internet. As a result, prices are plummeting. Bargain for at least 30% off.

Don't wave to someone across the square or you'll be wondering how to get that marble dining-room table and box of James Last records home on your bike

Today's dead stock includes antique furniture and other objects that need polishing (silver is out, bronze is in). Best-sellers are glass chandeliers and crystal. Americans will still buy old radios, but only if it's playing a good song. Don't appear to be Asian, though, or vendors will charge you double. Villeroy & Boch vases with animal patterns are highly sought after. One chatty fellow marketer told me he picked up a beautiful specimen at the market recently – covered in peacocks, it was commissioned years ago by a worker at the ceramic plant for his wife, Mrs De Pauw (*pauw* means peacock). But the ones with apes garner prices up to €10,000. Swedish and Danish buyers willingly pay up to €20 apiece for antique acorn-shaped Christmas ornaments. Postcards and other memorabilia of Tongeren fetch high prices amongst locals, and Flemish ceramics and metal advertising panels with stamps and dates remain popular.

If you want to fill up your car with cheaper stuff from Limburg, check out nearby Sint-Truiden's *rommelmarkt* on a Saturday morning, which doubles as a cattle market, making the look and the smell unique. Quite nice, too, are the monthly Sunday book fair in the little begijnhof of Diest and the annual Whit Monday flea-market in the beautiful river town Kanne.

online

www.cultuurweb.be

www.auctions-in-belgium.be

FOOTPRINT



The Scheldt: part two

Last week in this column we wandered along the Scheldt River in East Flanders. This week, we go back to the same area – but for a completely different experience. I call this walk the Mac Pudding because you start at the out-of-the-way restaurant that bears the name. Follow the sign to Oudenaarde/Semmersake off the N60 (which puts you on the N452) and take the first right. At the end of the street, go right and park alongside the road (the restaurant is here). Then backtrack to start your walk. The Scheldt is on your right as you go along a paved path.

Depending on the time of year, you'll encounter gorgeous white flowering bushes or patches of blackberries creeping round the trees. Himalayan Balsam also grows along here in abundance, with those great little seed pods that burst when you squeeze them. Pass a road on your left called Waterstraat, then take the next left turn. You'll soon see a sign marked *Natuurreervaat*. Follow the road to the left past the noisiest bunch of cows in Flanders. You've left the Scheldt now and have entered an area of dirt paths, open fields and little ponds. At the first crossroads, go right. Out of nowhere pops up the cutest little field of bright sunflowers, with a braying donkey in the background. A few steps further lies a group of ponds dotted with islands.

Between here and civilisation is the most charming walk in East Flanders I have yet found. The earth below your feet suddenly turns into cobblestones, and the tree-lined path eventually gives way to cornfields and pastures of horses. The best part is that you never see any houses, as if the animals and flowers run the place, no people needed. For about a kilometre, Flanders is picture perfect.

When you come to Landuystraat, you turn to the left, then walk along a big road (there's ice cream here if you're interested) until you get to Meersstraat, where you turn left. Soon you'll go right onto Ganzenbroek and then left onto Binnenweg. From here keep going in a straight-forward manner past a field of Shetland ponies. When you come to a fork in the road, veer right and you'll wind up back at Waterstraat. Go right to head back to your car.

Another short walk lies in this area along the Oude Schelde, or Old Scheldt. Instead of turning off to the Mac Pudding, continue on the N452. Go over the bridge and take the next right, which is very sharp. Go to the end and park under the bridge, then straight ahead and right, where you'll find yourself on the other side of the Scheldt. After a scenic 15 minutes, you'll see a turnoff on the right along the Old Scheldt. The path is overgrown, and almost no one comes here except the fishermen. It's a quick 20-minute loop with beautifully tall grasses, rustic wooden fences and clearings along the way where you can park yourself and enjoy the calm of this little tributary. In the summer, there is no more romantic place in East Flanders for a picnic.

Lisa Bradshaw

Classical & new music**Brussels**

Astoria Hôtel
Koningstraat 103; 0900.28.877
DEC 2 11.00 Jerrold Rubenstein, violin; Dalia Ouziel, piano: Brahms sonatas

Atelier de la Dolce Vita

Liefdadigheidstraat 37a; 0478.98.54.06
NOV 28 20.00 DeSaFiNaDo alla dolce vita, conducted by Gabriel Laufer, with Laura Pok, flautino; Manu Comté, accordions; Nicolas Achten, theorba; Handel, Vivaldi, Piazzolla

Bozar (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten)

Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.82.00, www.bozar.be
NOV 29 12.30 Leo Wouters and Ward Opsteyn, trumpet: Hubert Bibaut, horn; Jan Smets, trombone; Stefan Van Aenrode, tuba; with Annelies Meskens, soprano: Fonteyn, De Smet, Opsteyn, Westerlinck, Villa-Lobos
DEC 1 19.00 Brussels Choral Society, conducted by Eric Delson, and Chapelle Musicale de Tournai, conducted by Philippe Gérard: Handel's Messiah (tickets: 02.241.51.48 or bcs.tickets@gmail.be)
DEC 3 20.00 Shlomo Mintz, violin; Paganini's 24 caprices for violin (charity concert)

Flagey

Heilig Kruisplein; 02.641.10.20, www.flagey.be
NOV 30 20.15 Brussels Royal Conservatory Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Ronald Zollman, with Liebrecht Vanbeckevoort, piano: Ljadow, Rachmaninov
DEC 5 20.15 Plamena Mangova, piano: D Scarlatti, Beethoven, Brahms

Maison des Musiques

Lebeaustraat 39; 02.550.13.20
NOV 30 12.30 Elektra Trio

Royal Conservatory of Brussels

Regentschapsstraat 30; 02.213.41.37, www.kcb.be
NOV 30 20.00 Pieter Wispelwey, cello: Bach (tickets: 02.507.82.00)

Get your tickets now for...**The Cure**

March 14, 20.00, Sportpaleis Antwerp, Schijnpoortweg 119. 0900.26.060, www.sportpaleis.be

Who doesn't have a memory of The Cure? Whether you were slamming against fellow fans at an underground Sussex punk club in the 70s, spun around in your goth cape on the field of a Chicago arena in the 80s or simply proclaimed "Friday I'm in Love" your all-time favourite song in the 90s, you've heard them or seen them or fallen in love with the rouge red lips of Robert Smith. Make more memories in Antwerp next spring.

DEC 2 20.00 Henschel Quartet: Beethoven, Janacek, Mendelssohn (part of Europalia)
DEC 3 20.00 Patricia Kopatchinskaja, violin; Mihaela Ursuleasa, piano: Biber, Stravinsky, Kurtág, Bartók (tickets: 02.507.82.00)
DEC 4 20.00 Le Concert français, conducted by Pierre Hantaï: selections from Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no 2 and orchestra suites no 2, no 3, no 1 (tickets: 02.507.82.00)

Royal Museums of Fine Arts
Regentschapsstraat 3; 02.512.82.47
NOV 28 12.40-13.30 Joseph Jongen Ensemble: Jongen's Quatuor op 23
DEC 5 12.40-13.30 Sophia Jaffe, violin; Björn Lehmann, piano: Beethoven, Webern, Suk

Saint Michael and St Gudula Cathedral
Sinter-Goedeleplein; 02.217.83.45
NOV 28 20.00 Louis Robilliard, organ: Widor, Liszt, Fauré, Franck

Sint-Marcuskerk
de Frélaan 72; 0474.269.782, concertscholl@skynet.be
DEC 1 20.30 Andreas Scholl, countertenor: English folk and lute songs

Antwerp
Amuz
Kammenstraat 81; 03.248.28.28
DEC 1 21.00 Ensemble Pierre Robert conducted by Frédéric Desenclos: French baroque music by Danielis, Couperin, Clérambault
DEC 2 15.00 Camerata Trajectina conducted by Louis Grijp: music by Jacob Cats and Jacob van Eyck
DEC 5 21.00 Huelgas Ensemble conducted by Paul Van Nevel: lamentations by Orlandous Lassus and Antonio Mogavero; motets by Thomas Crequillon, Nicolas Gombert and Jacobus de Kerle

DeSingel
Desguinlei 25; 03.248.28.28
NOV 30 20.00 deFilharmonie, conducted by Martyn Brabbins, with Michael Collins, clarinet: Van Camp, Rautavaara, Bernstein, Turnage

Bruges

Concertgebouw
34 't Zand; 070.22.33.02
NOV 28 20.00 Les Muffatti, conducted by Peter Van Heyghen, with Lavinia Bertotti and Elena Cecchi Fedi, sopranos; Alicia Berri, alto; Furio Zanasi, baritone; Bononcini's San Nicola di Bari

Ostend

Kursaal Ostend (Casino)
Monacoplein; 059.51.71.75, www.sherpa.be
DEC 1 20.00 Belgian National Orchestra, conducted by Walter Weller, with Plamena Mangova, piano: Strauss, Martinu

Opera**Brussels**

De Munt
Muntplein; 070.23.39.39
DEC 4-22 Werther by Massenet, conducted by Kazushi Ono, staged by Guy Joosten, with Andrew Richards, tenor; Ludovic Tézier, baritone; Sophie Koch and Jennifer Larmore, mezzo-sopranos

Ghent

Vlaamse Opera
Schouwburgstraat 3; 070.22.02.02
Until DEC 1 Der Ring des Nibelungen: Siegfried by Wagner, conducted by Ivan Törzs, staged by Ivo van Hove, with Lance Ryan

Jazz & blues**Brussels**

Archiduc
Dansaertstraat 6; 02.512.06.52
DEC 2 Alexander von Schlippenbach Trio

Art Base

Zandstraat 29; 02.217.29.20, www.art-base.be
NOV 30 21.00 Bracaval Braeckman Lausher Trio

Beursschouwburg

Auguste Orstraat 20-28; 02.550.03.50
NOV 28 20.30 Soundcheck, jazz/experimental/electro

Jazz Station

Leuvensesteenweg 193; 02.733.13.78
DEC 1 18.00 MP4
DEC 5 20.30 My Song Project: tribute to the European Quartet of Keith Jarrett
DEC 6-7 20.30 Octurn

Le Grain d'Orge

Waverssteenweg 142; 02.511.26.47
NOV 30 Waking Up Dolores

Sounds Jazz Club

Tulpenstraat 28; 02.512.92.50
NOV 30 Washington & Fabrice Alleman Duo

The Music Village

Steenstraat 50; 02.513.13.45
DEC 1 20.30 The Feetwarmers
DEC 5-6 20.30 Alina Samba Lúa

Borgerhout

Rataplan
Wijnegemstraat 27; 03.292.97.40
DEC 6 20.30 Saxkartel with Tutu Puoane

Pop, rock, hip-hop, soul**Brussels**

Ancienne Belgique
Anspachlaan 110; 02.548.24.24
NOV 30 19.00 Neisha
DEC 2 20.00 The Hives
DEC 3 20.00 (new date) Rodrigo Y Gabriela
DEC 4 20.00 The Proclaimers
DEC 5-6 20.00 Sttella

Beursschouwburg

Auguste Orstraat 20-28; 02.550.03.50, www.vkconcerts.be
NOV 30 20.30 Cléo + De Mens
DEC 1 20.00 Young Galaxy

Fuse

Blaesstraat 208; 02.511.97.89
DEC 1 23.00 Redhead + Tom Hades

Le Botanique

Koningstraat 236; 02.218.37.32
Concerts at 20.00:
NOV 28 Hey Hey My My
NOV 29 Kill The Young
NOV 30-DEC 1 17 Ans de rap belge (Festival Lezarts Urbains '07)

Recyclart

Ursulinenstraat 25; 02.502.57.34
DEC 1 23.00 Statik Dancin' 4th Bday: Geiger aka Nass + The Field + Darko

Antwerp

Luchtbal Cultuurcentrum
Columbiablaat 8; 03.543.90.30
DEC 1 20.30 Machinefabriek + Ignatz + Stars of the Lid

Sportpaleis

Schijnpoortweg 119; 0900.26.060
NOV 30-DEC 29 Clouseau20

Ghent

Handelsbeurs
Kouter 29; 09.265.92.01
NOV 28 20.00 Hanne Hukkelberg
NOV 29 20.00 Fixkes

Kortrijk

De Kreun
Jan Persijnstraat 6; 056.37.06.44
NOV 29 20.00 On stage with: Jeff Goddard
NOV 30 20.00 Thou + Balthazar
DEC 4 20.00 Fear Falls Burning + Jesu

Leuven

Het Depot
Martelarenplein 12; 016.22.06.03
NOV 29 20.00 Flip Kowlier

World, folk

Brussels
Ancienne Belgique
Anspachlaan 110; 02.548.24.24
DEC 3 20.00 Monsieur & Madame + Federico Aubele

Au Stekerlapatte

Priesterstraat 4; 02.512.86.81
DEC 1 21.00 Le Black Light Orchestra
Bozar (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten)
Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.82.00, www.bozar.be
NOV 30 20.30 Vicente Amigo Grupo, flamenco

Cultural Centre of Woluwe-Saint-Pierre

Charles Thielemanslaan 93; 02.773.05.80, www.art-culture.be
DEC 1 20.30 Ma danse du luth, music by Anwar Abudragh, dance by Myriam Szabo

Antwerp

Zuiderpershuis
Waalse Kaai 14; 03.248.01.00
DEC 5 20.30 José Valencia, flamenco
DEC 6 20.30 Halil Necipoglu, Turkish Sufi

Ghent

Handelsbeurs
29 Kouter; 09.265.92.01
DEC 1 20.00 Mark Olson & The Partchess

Dance

Brussels
Kaatheaterstudio's
Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Vaakstraat 81; 02.201.59.59
NOV 29-DEC 1 20.30 Impure Company presents God exists, the Mother is present, but they no longer care: choreography by Hooman Sharifi

Théâtre les Tanneurs

Huidenvettersstraat 75; 02.512.17.84
Until DEC 1 20.30 Woosh'ing Mach'iné presents Bayreuth FM: choreographed by Mauro Paccagnella, staged by Michael Delaunoy
DEC 5-11 20.30 Les Ballets C de la B in Patchagonia: choreography by Lisi Estaràs, music by Tcha Limberger

Antwerp

Theater 't Eilandje
Kattendijkdok-Westkaai 16; 03.203.95.85
NOV 29-DEC 2 Royal Ballet of Flanders presents Forsythe-Soto-Moles-Elo: Hermann Schmierman, choreographed by William Forsythe, with music by Thom Willems and new works by Cayetano Soto and Matteo Moles & Jorma Elo

Ghent

Vooruit
St Pietersnieuwstraat 23; 09.267.28.28
DEC 6-8 20.00 Ultima Vez/Wim Vandekeybus present Menske, choreographed by Vandekeybus

Roeselare

Cultureel Centrum De Spil
Spilleboudtreet 1; 051.26.57.00
DEC 6 20.00 Royal Ballet of Flanders presents Forsythe-Soto-Moles-Elo: Hermann Schmierman, choreographed by William Forsythe, with music by Thom Willems and new works by Cayetano Soto and Matteo Moles & Jorma Elo

Theatre**Brussels**

Atelier Théâtre de la Vie
Dwarsstraat 45; 02.219.60.06, www.theatredelavie.be
NOV 29-DEC 2 17.00 Brecht/Maïakowski/Hans Albers by Nina Sandow and Jens-Karsten, musical theatre (in German with French surtitles)
Bozar (Paleis Voor Schone Kunsten)
Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.84.44
DEC 4 12.40 't Arsenaal theatre company in Hedda, adapted from Ibsen's Hedda Gabler and staged by Michael De Cock (in Dutch)
KVS Box
Arduinkai 9; 02.210.11.12, www.kvs.be
NOV 30-DEC 8 Global Anatomy by and with Benjamin Verdonck and Willy Thomas (in Dutch and French)

Scarabaeus Espace Theatral

Hollestraat 19; 02.649.79.16, www.scarabaeus.net<br

Visual arts

Brussels

BELvue Museum

Paleizenplein 5; 02.545.08.00

Until DEC 9 Mangia Mangia, the influence of Italian immigration on Belgian cuisine, secrets of Italian cooking, anecdotes and Belgian-Italians' recipes (part of Week van de Smaak)

Bibliotheca Wittockiana

Bemelstraat 23; 02.770.53.33

Until JAN 30 La Nuit bleue, books by the late Belgian poet Pierre Lecuire

Box Gallery

Maliestraat 88; 02.537.95.55

Until DEC 1 Les Silences du promeneur, photographs by Bernard Descamps

Until DEC 22 Photographs of water reflections by Dalia Nosratabadi

Bozar (Paleis Voor Schone Kunsten)

Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.84.44

Until NOV 30 The Void, architecture show with models, plans and photographs of projects by Portuguese architect Gonçalo Byrne

Until JAN 6 Melting Ice, group show on the theme of global warming.

Until JAN 20 The Grand Atelier: Pathways of Art in Europe, 350 paintings, drawings, sculptures, manuscripts, books, prints, furniture and objects dating from the 5th to the 18th centuries

Centre Albert Marinus

Karrestraat 27; 02.762.62.14

Until DEC 9 Le Temps, representations of time in art from the Middle Ages to today

De Electriciteitscentrale - European Centre for Contemporary Art

Sint-Katelijnestraat 44; 02.279.64.31, www.brupass.be

Until JAN 13 Agorafolly Inside, works by 27 young European artists

De Markten

Oude Graanmarkt 5; 02.512.34.25, www.demarkten.be

Until DEC 23 Cf. (Natuur, Nature), multi-media exhibition on the theme of nature with work by Klaar Cornelis, Kikie Crêvecoeur, David Delesalle and others

Elsene Museum

Jean Van Volsemstraat; 02.515.64.21

Until JAN 26 All Roads Lead to Rome. Artists' travels from the 16th to the 19th centuries, paintings, texts and a variety of objects related to travel

Until JAN 27 Ontmoetingen: 1997-2007 (Encounters, 1997-2007), photographs by Géraldine Langlois

Espace Photographique Contretype

Verbindingslaan 1; 02.538.42.20

Until DEC 30 Variations, photographs by Armyde Peigner

Huis der Kunsten (Schaerbeek)

Haachtsesteenweg 147; 02.218.79.98

Until DEC 21 From Here to There, photographs and installation by Marin Kasimir

Husson Gallery Bookshop

Alsembergsesteenweg 142; 02.534.33.54

Until JAN 31 People in Motion by Michel Dusariez

ISELP

Waterloosesteenweg 31; 02.504.80.70

Until DEC 1 Eves' Phase I: le complot, video, drawings, photographs and installation by Didier Mahieu.

Until DEC 1 Interactions, paintings by Claude Celli and sculptures by Clémence van Lunen

Until DEC 1 Porcelain sculptures by Clémence van Lunen

Jacques Franck Cultural Centre

Waterloosesteenweg 94; 02.538.90.20

Until DEC 16 Quel beau cadre!, paintings by Filip Denis

Jewish Museum of Belgium

Minimstraat 21; 02.512.19.63

Until DEC 31 Jewish Spaces and Itineraries: The Shoule of Molenbeek, Aspects of contemporary Judaism

Until FEB 24 Sarah and her Brothers, history through the eyes of the Kaliskis family of artists

Koekelberg Basilica

Basiliekvoordeplein 1; 02.420.55.05

Until MAR 15 Leonardo Da Vinci: The European Genius, paintings, mechanical models, original drawings and manuscripts

Le Botanique

Koningstraat 236; 02.218.37.32

Until DEC 30 Les Poux et les couleurs, works by Cécile Bertrand, prize winner of Press Cartoon Belgium 2007

Loge Architecture Museum

Kluisstraat 86; 02.649.86.65

Until DEC 23 Vienna-Brussels: the Secession Years, the reciprocal artistic influence of the two capitals at the turn of the 19th century

Park Tournai Solvay

Terhulpensteenweg 201; 02.660.99.80

Until DEC 23 Sculptures in bronze, steel and neon by Portuguese artist José de Guimarães

Royal Library

Kunstberg; 02.519.58.73

Until NOV 30 Bollandistes, Saints and Legends: 400 Centuries of Research, exhibition commemorating the 400th anniversary of the publication of Héribert Rosweyde's Fasti Sanctorum

Until FEB 8 Formatting Europe: Mapping a Continent, maps from the Middle-Ages to the 20th century

Royal Museum of Art and History

Jubelpark 10; 02.741.72.11

Until DEC 2 A Princely Hobby, some 150 works from the workshops created by Charles de Lorraine to furnish his palatial residences

Until DEC 31 België op kijkdoosprenten, some 400 views of Belgian cities dating from the 17th and 18th centuries

Until JAN 6 When the Manga Dreams About the West, comic strips by Jiro Taniguchi

Until JAN 6 XPO27: 50 jaar Jeugd en Wetenschap van België (50 Years of Youth and Science in Belgium)

Royal Museums of Fine Arts

Regentschapsstraat 3; 02.508.32.11

Until JAN 27 Rubens: A Genius at Work, major show of works by the Flemish master and his workshop

Until MAR 30 Alechinsky from A to Y, retrospective of work by the Belgian artist on the occasion of his 80th birthday

Until MAR 30 Quadrum: International Magazine of Modern Art, tribute to Ernst Goldschmidt, curator and publisher

Schaerbeek Cultural Centre

Lochtstraat 91-93; 02.245.27.25

Until DEC 7 Pekin Contemporain, contemporary art from China

Sint-Gorikshallen

Place Sint-Goriks 1; 02.502.44.24

Until DEC 31 Brussels, urban landscapes and computer-rewritten photographs by Georges De Kinder

Stadhuis

Grote Markt; 02.279.43.50

Until JAN 13 Van't stadt en schoone buytens, drawings and paintings of Brussels and its surroundings by 18th-century artists Ferdinand-Joseph Derons and Andreas Martin

Stadsarchief

Huivedettersstraat 65; 02.279.53.33

Until DEC 31 Zicht op licht: Het licht in de stad, the history of the use of lighting in Brussels and its effect on society, past and present

Antwerp

Contemporary Art Museum (MuHKA)

Leuvenstraat 32; 03.238.59.60

Until JAN 6 If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, Edition II: Feminist Legacies And Potentials In Contemporary Art Practice

Until JAN 6 Lonely at the Top #6, Recyclable Refugee Camp TOURISM by Ives Maes

deSingel

Desguinlei 25; 03.248.28.28

Until DEC 5 35m³, projects by Ghent architects BARAK

Until DEC 16 The Wrong House: Alfred Hitchcock & Pauhof, exploration of architecture in the films of Alfred Hitchcock with installation by Austrian architectural firm Pauhof

Extra City, Center for Contemporary Art

Klamperstraat 40; 0484.42.10.70

Until DEC 16 Numerous Incidents of Indefinite Outcome, works by Joachim Koester

Until DEC 16 The Nine Monads Of David Bell, works by Luke Fowler

Fifty One Fine Art Photography

Zirkstraat 20; 03.289.84.58

Until DEC 19 Nude Dune, photographs by Simon Chaput

FotoMuseum

Waalse Kaai 47; 03.242.93.00

Until JAN 6 Belgicum, Stephan Vanfleteren's humourous and nostalgic photographs of Belgium

Until JAN 6 Orlogsmaterial by film director Robbe De Hert. Ost.Modern, images from Eastern Europe by Annemie Augustijns

Until JAN 6 Stage fight, thematic exhibition on the effects of the ever-growing presence of cameras in society

Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Royal Museum of Fine Arts)

Leopold De Waelplaats; 03.238.78.09

Until DEC 31 The Rijksmuseum comes to the Scheldt, 40 masterpieces from the 16th and 17th centuries lent by the Amsterdam museum

Mayer van den Bergh Museum

Lange Gasthuisstraat 19; 03.232.42.37

Until JAN 27 Facing death, drawings of the artist's dying wife by Eugène van Mieghem (1875-1930)

Middelheim Museum

Middelheimlaan 61; 03.827.15.34

Until JAN 20 Spomenik: The End of History, photographs of communist monuments in former Yugoslavia by Jan Kempenaers

MoMu

Nationalestraat 28; 03.470.27.70

Until FEB 10 Exuberant fashion designs by Bernhard Willhelm

Rockox House

12 Keizerstraat; 03.201.92.50

Until FEB 10 Samson and Delilah: A Rubens Painting Returns, the famous painting shown along with other works of art originally owned by Antwerp's mayor Nicolaas Rockox

Bruges

Groeninge Museum

Dijver 12; 050.44.87.11

Until JAN 6 Brugge-Parijs-Rome: Joseph Benoît Suvée en het neoclassicisme, paintings

Eupen

Ikob

In den Loten 3; 087.56.01.10

Until JAN 13 La Ricarda, multi-national installation and video project

Ghent

Caermersklooster

Vrouwebroersstraat 6; 09.269.29.10

Until DEC 9 VIPS - Very Important Paintings, portraits by Karl Meersman

Until DEC 9 Provinciale Prijs voor Vormgeving 2006 (Design Prizewinners)

MY FLANDERS

Saskia De Coster

Flemish columnist and novelist Saskia De Coster, 31, is hailed as one of Belgium's best young writers. She is the author of three acclaimed books and has recently published *Held* (Hero), a short, fantastical novel about two children who stage their own disappearance

In a recent interview, you said that books are meant to be visionary, not to register anecdotes.

Sad, autobiographical stories sell. People like to read a narrowing down of reality. The mere fact that things have existed is no justification for writing literature about them. Precisely by writing things down, you can change them. The power of words can change a lot, really transform and hack at reality. That is what literature does, and that's where my focus lies. I want to write stories for the way they are written. A story can be like a window that's so clear you can walk through it without noticing, but I do want it to give you a new outlook on the world.

The beauty of your work lies in the metaphors. None of them are clichés.

My focus is on the particular logic that my main characters follow. In *Held*, the two kids, Lien and Marcus, definitely have their own way of thinking.

Reality is only present at the fringes for these characters. They seem to let conventional reality pass them by.

These two have no set frame of reference. Most kids are moulded into something from which they'll have to break free later. But Lien starts out from her own frame of thinking and uses Marcus and his characteristics to build her own world. There isn't just one truth. I believe that everyone should

start out from his own truth. That would lead to so much more than just going with the flow, where you just end up with a collapsing system, and people clinging at each other to stay afloat.

They seem to have a loving relationship, too. As grown-ups they deeply miss each other.

It's so common to only take lovers seriously from a certain age. But I think differently. That's why I've given them a very intense relationship. They don't have sex, but it is a genuine love affair. They need each other. But there is also a big element of resentment. They're constantly testing each other's boundaries and using each other's negative sides to become the perfect team: to steal or to stock up.

You use the word "schuiven", or transfer, a lot in the book. They don't steal the food, they "transfer" it.

In the end, we're all stuck in the finite box of the universe. There's this fixed set of ingredients, and that's it. So it comes down to moving things around the whole time to find other possible combinations. That's what Lien is trying, in the beginning quite literally, but in the ending as well.

Lien treats life like an experiment. Do you?

There are theories, and then you perform some empirical research: what will the result be? Lien tries to cut open bodies to get out the words, as she does with the "Angel Boy". She claims that he can speak.

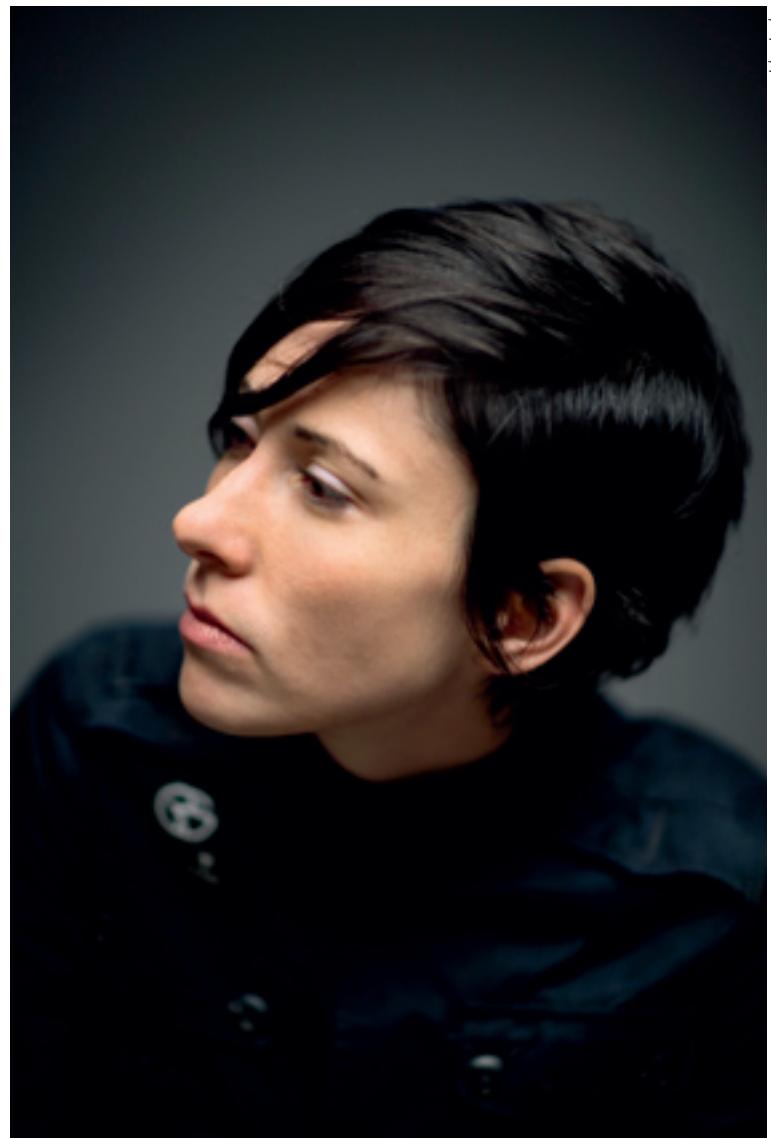
Even if he's deaf, mute and blind, the words are trapped in there. So, let's cut those bodies open and have a look. And she can be as surprised by the result as the next person. But it's a fact. People are like diligent little factories that produce lots of stuff, take things in and transform them. It's a cycle, like the food chain. I feel that there should always be a striving towards extremes, either towards zero or infinity. Otherwise, life isn't worth living. The average is *dodelijk* (deadly).

The second part of the book comes as a total surprise.

Yes, there is this gap of 20 years. Lien is now a journalist assigned to interview a wounded soldier, who turns out to be Marcus. She's decided to cut that person into two people: she creates an official version to show to the world, and then there's the part of Marcus she remembers from her childhood that she wants to keep to herself. But maybe this is her own imagination. Maybe she's the one lying in that bed. I believe that our identity consists of many rooms and that we can wander through them. And in every room there's a different person – people we were or might become – that we can visit. The world and history, too, are constructed like a set of rooms, not as a chronology. Past and future are on the same level. It's never closed off; there are no doors, you can walk through and have a look.

You live in Brussels – is it a good place to be a writer?

Brussels is ideal for a writer like me. It doesn't have the smothering *mas-tu vu* atmosphere of Antwerp and Ghent. Everybody can move around freely among very diverse groups. There is no immediate judgement in my view, as everyone is part of a minority. I do want my work to reach as wide an audience as possible, but I myself consider myself a Flemish writer with a



more hyperrealistic take on life in books.

A final question: how would you solve a problem like Belgium?

I suggest miniature city-states, in which everyone has a function that he or she has knowingly chosen. Colonisation strikes me as a valid alternative, too. Flanders as a colony of Wallonia. Hands that get cut off if we don't obey. Order and discipline. The Flemish have become much too arrogant and self-conscious. They need to be pegged down, and then things

will turn out just fine. I find democracy extremely difficult. It can only exist when you have small groups of about 20 people who follow a dictator that they totally agree with.

Would you like to be such a dictator?

No, no! I would want to be a little slave who cleans the edges of coffee cups or dips glasses in water in order to coat the edges with sugar. A very modest task. One has to know one's station in life.

Interview by Monique Philips

THE LAST WORD

what they're saying in Flanders

"I have a tall, unwieldy body that is impossible to move around in an attractive way. But good: a giraffe also has its own way of moving"

**Piet Goddaer
(better known as Ozark Henry)
Flemish singer**

"We went shopping yesterday. Everyone got €200 to buy new clothes"

**Virginie Breyne
tourist, 31, from Menen, rescued from the MS Explorer after it hit an iceberg**

"No, I'm not euphoric. There's still a lot of work to do"

**Hilde Crevits
Flemish Environment Minister
Announcing the news that Flanders' carbon footprint is now below its 1990 level**

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