

## Transport tragedy

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Flanders celebrates people's novelist

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# The roving ambassador

## Howard Gutman has pledged to visit every single village in Flanders

Leo Cendrowicz

Howard Gutman has fond memories of when his head was chopped off. It was in Eeklo, between Ghent and the Dutch border, where the locals are nicknamed *herbakkers*, or “those who bake again”, after a mediaeval legend. It was there that Gutman, the US Ambassador to Belgium, was charmingly decapitated.

“They chop off your head and bake a new one,” says Gutman matter-of-factly, as if to imply that that makes any sense at all.

Accompanied by federal defence minister Pieter de Crem, Gutman laid his head on a tree stump while a baker pretended

to hack it off. And in keeping with the local legend, whereby the condemned is rejuvenated by drinking a youth elixir, a newly baked head was eventually produced from the oven.

This is not generally part of the job description for an American ambassador. Indeed, one might expect Gutman to be lobbying ministers, hosting lavish receptions in his embassy and channelling intelligence back to Washington DC. He does all that, but he also spends a lot of time in the field as part of a pledge made when he first arrived as ambassador in 2009. That was his promise to visit all 589 administrative districts, or municipalities, in Belgium.

This has made Gutman – a fast-talking, 55-year-old New York attorney – an extraordinary tourist. He spends a key chunk of

his time on the road as he notches up the visits, all the while experiencing traditions, learning history and meeting the locals.

### “No stunt”

Although he initially suggested the tour on impulse, Gutman – pictured above at an Arabian horse farm in Wortegem-Petegem – insists that it has a very practical purpose. “It wasn’t a stunt.” Long before Barack Obama had tapped him for the job of ambassador to Belgium, Gutman had been concerned about the sliding public image of America in Europe. Even as a tourist, he would often find himself on the receiving end of complaints about Obama’s predecessor, George W Bush, on issues ranging



FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope



Bart Moeyaert

One newspaper last week called him “the Tom Boonen of young people’s literature”. But that’s an understatement: Bart Moeyaert’s career has never suffered the peaks and troughs of cyclist Boonen’s. Moeyaert, 47, scooped his first Boekenleeuw (Book Lion) prize for literature for young people in 1992; last week he won for a record fifth time. Born in Bruges in 1964, the seventh of seven sons, Moeyaert’s father wrote school textbooks. He was named after the protagonist of the book *Bartje zoekt het geluk* (Bart Looks for Happiness) by the Dutch author Anne De Vries. His second name is Boudewijn, after the then king, who by law was the godfather of every seventh son. Moeyaert was, not surprisingly, something of a bookworm and a big fan of Astrid Lindgren, creator of Pippi Longstocking, who he still cites as an influence. “A book is like a fortress,” he told an interviewer last year. “A book isn’t dangerous because you can slam it shut whenever it gets too heavy. Reality is different.” The author studied Dutch, German and history with a view to teaching;

his dissertation was on Aidan Chambers, the award-winning British children’s author. Soon after graduating, he went to work for *Flair* magazine, writing reviews of children’s books and a lengthy article on Lindgren, which led to a job as editor at Averbode publishers. Moeyaert won his first prize in 1984, when he was only 19, from the Flemish Children and Youth Book Jury for a *Duet met valse noten* (Duet with Wrong Notes). By 1995 he had won the Boekenwelp, his first Boekenleeuw and literature prizes from Antwerp and West Flanders provinces. Since then the plaudits have not ceased, and the audience for his novels, short stories, scripts, articles and translations continues to grow. The winning novel this year is called *De Melkweg* (The Milky Way), and the jury admitted that they had been so moved that discussion was almost unnecessary. “This is literature, great literature, for young and old,” said the jury in a statement. “Surprising, well-written, rich, sober, allusive, extremely atmospheric and, above all, beautifully structured, sentence after sentence.”

News in brief

Rail traffic was severely disrupted last week following the **derailment of a cargo train** at Melsele in East Flanders. Trains on the main Antwerp-Ghent line were cancelled on Thursday evening, with delays continuing into the weekend. Clearing the accident went faster than expected thanks to extra cranes being brought in, a spokesman for Infrabel said, and, as *Flanders Today* went to press, the two lines were due to be cleared by Tuesday. The accident happened when the train switched tracks, but it’s not yet clear why.

**Flemish fashion designer Raf Simons**, who left Jil Sander in February, has been appointed the new creative director of Christian Dior. He will show his first collection in Paris in July. “I don’t think it’s wrong to call me a minimalist. It’s wrong to call me a minimalist only,” he said in an interview following the announcement. “I am also a romantic person.” His guiding force at Dior will be “femininity,” he said. “When I’m married to a house, I will fully embrace its original intention, its original heritage. ... I wouldn’t go to Dior if I only had minimalism in mind. I’m very aware of what the environment is about.”

**Ketnet, the children’s network** run by Flemish public broadcaster VRT, will move to its own channel on 1 May, after sharing airspace with Canvas since it was launched in 1997. The channel will air programming 14 hours a day until 20.00, which is longer than it does now, as set out in the VRT’s new management agreement with the government of Flanders. The change of channel will be accompanied by a new website and a Ketnet app.

A fund set up to manage donations following the **disaster at the Pukkelpop festival** last August has

reached a total of €630,000. This will now be divided among the families of the five people who died, as well as 35 people who suffered serious injury, when a freak storm hit the festival site in Hasselt. The fund received donations from individuals, companies and musicians, many of whom donated their performance fees.

Belgium has toppled the Netherlands from its place as the world’s **largest producer of potato products**, according to the food industry federation Fevia. Last year Belgium produced 3.2 billion kilos of potatoes, fries and potato preparations, using domestic and imported potatoes, with 49% of the total going for export.

Bobbejaanland in Lichtaart, Antwerp province, and Plopsaland in De Panne on the coast were among the winners of this year’s **Diamond Theme Park awards**, voted on by park customers. Bobbejaanland’s Sledgehammer was voted the most sensational attraction, while Plopsaland was voted the most child-friendly park.

Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent were all unsuccessful in their bids to be the **Green Capital of Europe** in 2014. The short list announced last week includes Bristol, Copenhagen and Frankfurt. The final choice will be announced on 29 June. This year, the honour sits with the Basque town of Vitoria-Gasteiz, followed in 2013 by Nantes in France.

The numbers of **students studying nursing** in Flanders has this year reached an all-time record high, with 6,750 future nurses registered. According to a spokesman for welfare minister Jo Vandeurzen, the numbers need to go higher still to fill the number of vacancies in the coming years, caused by an ageing population

that includes large numbers of retiring health-care workers.

This summer will see the arrival of a new attraction on the Antwerp docks – a **giant floating swimming pool**, which in the winter will be converted into an ice skating rink. The pool, together with a paddling pool, changing rooms and showers will sit in a 120-metre custom-made barge, currently being constructed at a shipyard in the Netherlands. The city will invest €150,000 a year over 10 years, and the entrance price will be €4.

A coalition of 16 non-profit environmental and development organisations has protested at the granting of a permit by the federal government for the cultivation of a field of **genetically modified corn** in Wetteren, East Flanders. The group said that the application for a permit for the project, run by the Flemish Institute for Biotechnology, contained scientific shortcomings.

Knokke mayor Leopold Lippens is under **police protection** after a man posed as an agent of the state security service to obtain Lippens’ whereabouts in a phone call to the Royal Zoute Golf Club. A similar incident occurred last year when Lippens was given police protection after a prisoner threatened to kidnap him or a member of his family.

The Flemish public broadcaster VRT paid out €303,500 last year in **prize money to contestants** on the station’s various game shows, media minister Ingrid Lieten announced. The biggest winners came from the daily show *Blokken*, which paid out €187,080 over 215 episodes. The total is €40,000 more than in 2010, but less than both 2008 (€390,000) and 2009 (€375,000).

FLANDERS TODAY

Flanders Today, a free weekly English-language newspaper, is an initiative of the Flemish Region and is financially supported by the Flemish authorities.



The logo and the name Flanders Today belong to the Flemish Region (Benelux Beeldmerk nr 815.088). The editorial team of Flanders Today has full editorial autonomy regarding the content of the newspaper and is responsible for all content, as stipulated in the agreement between Corelio Publishing and the Flemish authorities.

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OFFSIDE

Alan Hope

Apple for the teacher

Students who get high exam marks tend to give their lecturers a more positive evaluation, according to new research from the University of Antwerp. It seems fairly obvious, doesn’t it? Not that there’s an explicit agreement to trade high marks for good reviews, but it’s surely in the nature of humans as social animals to seek out and reward cooperative strategies? Not quite so simple, according to Pieter Spooren, of the university’s department of political and social sciences, whose doctoral thesis concerned student evaluations of staff. “It’s not the case that a teacher can buy a good evaluation by giving out good marks,” he says. “It is the case that students who get higher marks have a more positive evaluation of their learning situation.” University teaching staff in

Flanders are evaluated once every five years by a committee that looks at their record of teaching, research and management. Part of the committee’s opinion is based on student evaluations. The main reason for the correlation, Spooren says, is that students recognise the contribution of a teacher, and those who do better in exams have more to be thankful for. “It is true that a student who has taken a lot out of a professor’s lectures will tend to score higher marks, and will then go on to give a good evaluation,” he says. “And it’s not always true that the teacher who gives the best scores gets the best evaluation. There are really tough professors who get highly positive evaluations.” Evaluations, Spooren says, “can play a major role in improving education. ...Students who fill

in an evaluation form – and at Antwerp that’s 30% to 60% of them – do it conscientiously. Although there is a selection bias, because students are not obliged to take part.”



“Tough class.”



# The roving ambassador

## City visits strengthen the ties between Belgium and the United States, says Gutman

► continued from page 1

from the war in Iraq to climate change policies.

"I disagreed with many of those policy choices," says Gutman. "But I knew that the values that I now represent are values I believed in and are values I felt Belgians and Europeans believed in."

He realised that he needed to restore confidence between the two countries and raise America's image. "The best way to do that was to visit the country. So I said I would get the message to everybody, literally. That was number one goal. Number two was that it was a fabulous thing to do."

### The official, and the less so

Over coffee in one of the many luxurious rooms of his official residence in Brussels, Gutman pulls out three maps. Since there was no single map of Belgium broken down by administrative districts, he needed separate maps of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, each with small parcels marked out for the individual municipalities.

much smaller, where, if he is lucky, there is someone at the pub or maybe the chemist. "But to be an official visit, I want to have actually seen it," he says. "I walk a block or two, take a picture in front of the church or something recognisable and have someone from the city who can meet me and say that the US Ambassador visited. For these, the most I have done is 11 in a day, and 44 in a week."

### The personal is political

It seems to be succeeding. "I have been amazed with the reception I've gotten," smiles Gutman. "It sort of validates the fact that most of the job is being there – actually saying to people that you are keen to see more and learn more. And now that they know me, they're not going to condemn the United States without thinking about it. We're not some big bad wolf. We now have a connection."

Gutman says he would visit many cities like Bruges and Ghent and Hasselt as a tourist anyway, with his wife, Michelle Loewinger, a former dentist. But he would miss so much

When he tells that story to other mayors, he usually adds: "I love your city; it's a beautiful city. But Buggenhout gave me a monument." On one occasion, a mayor, not realising he was joking, replied: "Well, budgets are a little tight. I don't think we can do a monument, but we might be able to name a street after you."

### Prince of carnival

Gutman says he discovers things from even the tiniest places, like Herstappe. When the communes were reorganised in the 1970s and '80s, Herstappe – in Limburg province on the linguistic border – had both Dutch and French speakers, and there was no easy way to divide it. So the authorities kept it as it was, and it remains the country's smallest municipality. "Just 84 people, and I met about 40 of them," says Gutman. "The mayor himself fixes any potholes or leaks, as they don't have a budget."

Gutman has discovered invaluable "culture, urban planning and politics," he says. "I go to cities with carnivals and parades. They have just 15,000 people, but they have Macy's Day parades. They work all year on their floats and costumes. You learn about people and the pride they have in their cities."

He went to the Aalst carnival this year as a guest of young mayor Ilse Uyttersprot and learned about the city's tradition for political satire. "I got the seat of honour next to her to see the carnival," he says. "The floats come out, and the second one is a giant caricature of the mayor in a tiny bikini with everything sticking out. And I'm sitting next to her, basically saying, 'so, how's the weather?'"

### When you know you've made it

Gutman's outreach efforts include language: He takes both Dutch



With the witches' guild in Laarne



You're nothing in Roeselare unless you're on a bag of tortilla chips

"I love your city; it's a beautiful city. But Buggenhout gave me a monument"

About two-thirds of the municipalities have been hand-coloured in blue marker. "I'm getting there," Gutman says. "I'd done 410 out of 589."

He says there are two types of visits. "We've done perhaps 100 that are: meet the mayor, meet the city council, meet the governor of the province, go see the leading cultural thing – whether a museum or a coal mine – and sometimes go see an American business," Gutman explains. Those are full-day visits. Then there are the towns that are

of the colour, history and humanity of the place if he only went to the big names.

And he would miss some special treats too, like the monument Buggenhout, East Flanders, raised in his honour. "I knew there was a nearby park that had a monument marking the centre of Flanders. I thought I was going to see that, but when I got there, there was another one, wrapped in sheets. I took off the sheets and saw a monument to US Ambassador Howard Gutman," he says.



Howard Gutman and his wife Michelle Loewinger (right) at the unveiling of the monument in Buggenhout

and French classes and can now just about hold a conversation in Dutch when he visits Flanders. His visit of course include more serious occasions: He went, for instance, to Lommel and Heverlee after the Swiss bus accident last month and last year organised an inter-faith peace service in Brussels Cathedral to commemorate September 11. But Gutman is always aware of his job as an ambassador of a country. "Everywhere I go, they know about America," he says. "There is not a single place I've been to where they haven't asked about Barack Obama. They are really up to date on us, even asking about the Supreme Court case on health care."

Gutman insists that even during the Bush presidency, there was always warmth towards America. "The problem was that it was lost on younger people who grew up in an age of cynicism about what we are and what we are doing," he says. "Barack Obama has restored that, not Howard Gutman. My job is to simply take those policies and president I believe in from the newspapers and television to something personal."

The effect has been impressive: After more than 100 appearances on Belgian television, Gutman is quite well known. He was recently invited to present a prize at the Humo Pop Poll. On Flemish comedy sketch show *Tegen de sterren op*, he was even imitated, popping up to say: "Hi, I'm Howard Gutman, your favourite American ambassador".

### Whole lotte love

Before taking up the post, Gutman was one of the top litigators in Washington DC as well as an Obama confidant and fundraiser. He's also an occasional Hollywood player, working with George Clooney on a television series and appearing in the 2009 version of *Fame*. He leapt at the offer of ambassador, even though his new job represents a massive cut in pay. His take-home of about \$150,000 a year is, he estimates, 6% of what he made as a lawyer.

But whether Obama is re-elected or not, Gutman expects to be gone by the summer of next year. He will then start planning his return to the business world.

But, he insists, he will complete his tour. "Every day is a surprise. There is beauty you can't believe in these churches and these magnificent city halls. But the thing that is the most rewarding is the people." He finishes by relating one of the most gratifying of his visits, which came after a schoolgirl called Lotte from Wichelen, East Flanders, wrote to him after hearing about his visits. "So we decided without telling her that we would turn up," he says. "We told the whole rest of the school, but not her. When I walked in, it was totally worth it. You would think I was the biggest rock star in the world."

► [www.usembe.ning.com](http://www.usembe.ning.com)



# Brussels transport back to normal

## Government promises 400 more police agents by 2013

Alan Hope

The Brussels public transport authority MIVB last week resumed services following a six-day strike. Extra police patrols are present on buses and trams, and MIVB has offered partial compensation to transport pass holders. However, a request to draft in 400 police officers to patrol the network promises to be difficult if not impossible to fulfil.

The strike began on the morning of Saturday, 7 April, after an MIVB supervisor was killed in an attack while attending the scene of an accident involving a car and a bus. The management of the MIVB took the unusual step of shutting down all bus, tram and metro services for three days. Talks were then held with representatives of the Brussels-Capital Region, unions and management of the MIVB and federal interior minister Joëlle Milquet, after which unions, unhappy at the measures on offer, advised their members to ignore the company's call to return to work.

The funeral of the supervisor, 56-year-old Iliaz Tahiraj, took place on Thursday, with two minutes of silence observed by transport staff across the country. Public transport in Brussels finally resumed on Friday.

On the same day, police began

special patrols on the Brussels network, with five teams of two officers working under the police zone of Brussels-Elsene. In all, 70 officers have been seconded to transport detail, most of them from the federal police reserve and special intervention squads in various parts of the country.

"Certain lines will receive special attention," said Brussels City mayor Freddy Thielemans. "These officers are working overtime; no police will be removed from the street."

Part of the promise given by Milquet to tackle the problem of security on the transport network by eventually adding 400 police officers to the existing rail and transport division – may be impossible to realise, even with a deadline of October 2013. There is already a shortage of some 1,100 officers – 577 in Flanders and 543 in Brussels. Even if 400 police officers could be found to draft into Brussels, that would not repair the structural shortage already existing. The government is now offering priority to police academy graduates who express a willingness to work in the capital. In normal circumstances, graduates prefer to work in their home area; as a second choice, they prefer to remain in their own language area, with the result that Brussels mostly relies on its



own natives to fill the ranks of police jobs there.

In future, explained Marc Dillen, director of one police school, new officers will receive priority in postings if they are willing to work in Brussels. Those who choose to stay in their home areas will have to wait for jobs to become available. The plan has been criticised by unions and by local police forces outside of the capital.

The man who attacked the MIVB supervisor and, according to his lawyer, killed him with a single punch to the face, appeared in court

last week and declined to oppose his continued detention "out of respect for the family of the victim". The man, who has not been named, is 28 years old. He has only a driving record and was once involved in a drugs case as a witness. He has been charged with assault leading to unintentional homicide.

This week, meanwhile, the MIVB said it would, as compensation to passengers, extend the time on transport passes by three days. Passengers without passes will receive no compensation.

## FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

### How dare they?

The Flemish non-fiction bestseller list is dominated by cooking manuals. Boyish TV chefs, busty celebrities and stevia specialists tell Flanders what it should eat.

Only one book in the top 10 aims to tell Flanders what it should think. *Hoe durven ze?* (How Dare They?) is an unlikely success. The feelings expressed in the book are familiar: anger and indignation at the financial and economic crisis. "Speculators have an almost imperial status, they are meekly called 'markets'. With thumbs up or down, as if they were emperor Nero, they decide on the fate of entire countries," the flap reads.

The author, Peter Mertens, is not just any *indignado*; he is the president of the PVDA, a far-left fringe party (that should not be confused with the Dutch party of the same name). PVDA has no elected representatives in parliament but does count council members in working-class towns such as Genk, Deurne, Hoboken, Lommel and Zelzate.

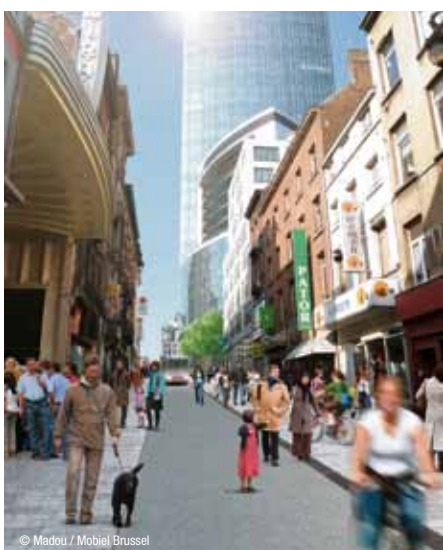
The term "fringe party" may actually not do justice to the PVDA, as its action is steeped in ideology and history. Its historic leaders, Ludo Martens and Kris Merckx, were well respected as, respectively, a student leader in the 1960s and founder of Doctors for the People, which provides near free medical care.

Dour debaters, they were also the butt of many jokes about the constant infighting, their belief that intellectuals and manual workers should join forces and, mostly, their obvious lack of humour. Only recently Jan Peumans, president of the Flemish Parliament, revealed that, as a student, he too joined the group, "until I found out that laughing was forbidden in those circles. After three weeks, I got out."

PVDA and its leaders were also staunch followers of Stalin and Mao, though, hardly a laughing matter.

With Peter Mertens as its new leader, PVDA is trying to shake off this history and tap into new popular themes. They have revealed that large companies hardly pay any taxes in Belgium and contributed to the debates on banking and energy. Though many of their ideas are still outlandish, such as a monopoly savings bank run by the state. And the admiration for Fidel Castro is still there.

Mertens feels strengthened by the success of his Dutch and French colleagues Emile Roemer and Jean-Luc Méchelon, whose popularity extends far beyond PVDA's. Whether PVDA's electoral success will match the book sales remains doubtful, however. Reading is one thing, but for cooking, Flanders tends to prefer more traditional recipes.



The Leuvensesteenweg descending from Madouplein in Brussels, as it will look in a few months, transformed into a pedestrian shopping street with only bus traffic allowed in one direction. Last weekend Brussels mobility minister Brigitte Grouwels and Sint-Joost mayor Jean Demannez inaugurated the first part of the new project: an area of the avenue painted entirely in yellow to show where the pedestrian is king.

### De Lijn releases new app

Flemish public transport authority De Lijn has integrated its schedules and itineraries into Google Maps, making it possible now to search online for directions to any place in Flanders using public transport. The Brussels transport authority MIVB was already integrated, and the rail authority NMBS will join up soon.

For smartphone users, De Lijn also last week released an app for Android and iPhones, which includes a route-planner and timetable information, as well as offering a one-click way

of buying a bus ticket via SMS.

De Lijn this week announced an end to free season tickets for the elderly and for functionaries and politicians. The measures come as part of a round of cuts aimed at saving €60 million this year. From next year, pensioners will pay around €30 a year for their annual passes.

► <http://maps.google.com>

### Non-Belgians on Belgium

Next week sees the second in a series of talks organised by the Council of the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) in which foreign visitors are invited to give their views on living in Belgium, and in particular in Brussels. On 24 April, Ada Dingemans, an EU official from the Netherlands will speak. In June, the guest will be

from Germany.

The talks take place in Dutch in the VGC headquarters in Lombardstraat in central Brussels at 12.30, and the entrance free. Reserve on 0800 13 700.

► [www.raadvvc.be](http://www.raadvvc.be)

## THE WEEK IN FIGURES

**3.51%**

of federal civil servants who work in Brussels actually live in the capital

**40**

minutes for Lady Gaga's concert this September in Antwerp to sell out after tickets went on sale last Friday

**425**

bus shelters in Flanders suffered some damage in 2011, mainly because of vandalism. The region had 5,147 shelters last year, 400 more than in 2010

**52%**

of the training vouchers claimed from the Flemish government by residents of Brussels were used for language courses, compared to 28% in the rest of Flanders

**3**

peregrine falcon chicks hatched in the breeding pair's nest in the tower of Brussels' cathedral. The nest can be viewed by webcam at [www.slechtvalken.be](http://www.slechtvalken.be)



# Bio on the increase

## More organic farmland needed as one in five people buys bio products regularly

Alan Hope

Organic food production and consumption are on the increase in Flanders, with 10% more producers last year than in 2010, according to a report published by the Flemish government and announced last week by minister-president Kris Peeters, whose portfolio includes agriculture. At the same time, consumers in Flanders bought 3% more bio products than the previous year.

According to a survey by GfK Panel Services Belgium, almost nine out of 10 people in the country buy bio products from time to time; one in five buys bio at least once every 10 days. Fruit and vegetables are the most popular products, accounting for more than 62% of sales. Animal products make up 24% and dairy just over 13%.

Bio's share of the market as a whole is only 1.8%, though for some products the share is much higher, including meat substitutes (19%) and eggs (8.7%). On average, bio products cost one-third more than the non-bio equivalents. Specialised stores account for one-third of all sales, with supermarket chains taking half.

Despite an increase in numbers – from 266 producers in 2010 to 282 in 2011 – the farming acreage in Flanders dedicated to organic farming has yet to reach 1%. Most bio farming in Flanders, where land is more scarce than in surrounding regions, are vegetable



Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters talks about bio farming with Yo De Beule of the organic herb producer Duizendblad

producers farming an average of 15 hectares.

A campaign in Flanders last year by the Farmers' Union and the organic sector to try to get farmers to switch to organics set its sights on the pig farming sector in particular. Thirty farmers took up the challenge, among them fruit and vegetable growers, arable farmers and chicken farmers and even two producing goat milk. But not a single pig farmer.

Flanders has four separate authorities

that approve the use of the bio-label by food producers who conform to four main criteria – no artificial fertiliser, no chemical pesticides or herbicides, only bio animal feed and only bio seeds used – as well as various sector-specific rules, such as adequate space outdoors for animals.

In 2011, while the number of organic farmers went up by 10%, the acreage increased by 19% to 4,563 hectares. The largest increase was in grassland, followed by vegetables. One-third of all

land under organic farming is owned by nine companies; 45% of the producers together own 10% of the land.

The government provides €3.4 million in support for the sector, including a transition premium and subsidies for turning land over to bio-production. Research and development support went up 19% to €785,000, most of which goes to research into improving soil quality, plant protection and breeding.

## Dexia on the brink

Dexia bank – recently renamed Belfius – made losses of more than €16 billion last year, almost €5 billion more than suggested by CEO Pierre Mariani in February, according to accountants Deloitte, who last week published their analysis in the bank's annual report. In a worst-case scenario, Deloitte said, Dexia might have to be nationalised, leading to a near doubling of the national debt.

The severe losses, largely a result of the dramatic loss in value of French subsidiary Dexia Crédit Local (DCL), mean that the bank might need to be recapitalised sooner than previously expected. Dexia claims assets of €7.6 billion, but Deloitte points out that a more accurate figure is €2.78 billion. And Dexia's assets on paper include a valuation of €5 billion for DCL, which, given the subsidiary's problems, might have to be written off. That would immediately push Dexia's own-resources into negative figures. If Dexia then requires recapitalisation at current low market rates, the

government would become the majority shareholder, and Dexia's negative balance of €403 billion would be added to the government's debts. The only way out of the situation would be for the government to ease the pressure on Dexia by dropping its demand for higher compensation for the state guarantees it gave at the time of the financial crisis in 2008-2009.

DCL is also, Deloitte warns, failing to come up to the legal standards for liquidity. So far the banking regulators have not intervened, but if they did then DCL could lose its banking licence, making it impossible to apply to central banks for loans and bringing a crash even closer.



## Shoppers get on their bikes

More than 200 municipalities in Flanders will take part in this year's Belgerinkel naar de winkel (Bell-Ringing to the Shops) campaign, which aims to encourage members of the public to walk or cycle to their local shops. The campaign, organised annually by self-employed organisation Unizo, the Christian mutuality CM and environmental organisation Bond Beter Leefmilieu, runs from 5 May to 9 June.

During the campaign, shoppers who come on foot or by bike can save points for a retro-style cycle basket designed by Who's That Girl, as well as take part in a prize draw for a retro bicycle (pictured) by West Flanders manufacturer Achielle (which count Sarah Jessica Parker of *Sex and the City* among its celebrity clients).

According to Unizo, cycling is "safe, good for the environment, faster and cheaper" than travelling by car, "and there's no need to find a parking space". On average, cycling instead of driving saves €3 per 10 kilometres. Last year's action involved 17,000 businesses and 88,000 customers, equivalent to about one million cycle trips.

► [www.belgerinkel.be](http://www.belgerinkel.be)



## THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

### Cafes

#### ► Kafka

The legendary Kafka bar in the Dansaert area of Brussels has closed after its owner declared bankruptcy. Patrice Couturier blamed the €4,000 monthly rent. The owners of the premises on the Visverkopersstraat are now looking for a new licensee.

### Computers

#### ► Apple

Brussels could have its own Apple Store in 2014. A building permit has been submitted for a location on the Guldenvlieslaan. Apple has 361 dedicated stores across the world, and the Brussels store would be expected to serve an estimated 300,000 customers.

### Fast food

#### ► Burger King

American fast food chain Burger King is expected to announce its introduction into Belgium as part of a package of international expansion over the coming years. The chain has estimated it could support up to 230 restaurants in the country.

### Fitness

#### ► Better Bodies

The Better Bodies fitness centre in Antwerp has been awarded €5,000 in damages to be paid by the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, following a report claiming the centre refused some patrons entry on the grounds of race. An investigation by the Centre for Human Rights and the public prosecutor found no grounds for the report, a civil court in Brussels heard.

### ICT

#### ► VDAB

Flemish employment and training agency VDAB will host a job fair in Lisbon next month in an effort to attract engineers and technical staff to job vacancies in Flanders for which no candidates are available. Because of the economic crisis, many highly trained workers in Portugal are unemployed.

### Taxation

#### ► Unizo

Unizo, the organisation representing the self-employed, has issued a booklet explaining the main points of tax law relating to deductible business expenses. The book (in Dutch) is free to download by members of Unizo or can be purchased in a print version for others for €50.

► [www.unizo.be](http://www.unizo.be)

## Dutch court rules on Fortis

Another Dutch court has ruled there was mismanagement at Fortis Bank in the run-up to the splitting of the bank in October 2008. A commercial court in Amsterdam said the bank had

given out misleading messages regarding the true state of the bank's finances between the takeover of ABN Amro in 2007 and the eventual rescue by the Belgian, Dutch and Luxembourg

governments, which led to the Dutch activities being hived off and the Belgian portion of the bank nationalised. Ageas, as what remains of Fortis is now called, said it would appeal. In February

a court in Utrecht upheld a similar complaint against the bank's former CEO and CFO, Jean-Paul Votron and Gilbert Mittler. The two executives have lodged an appeal.





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Publisher: Philippe Wallez, cours Saint-Michel 60, 1040 Brussels.

**ING** 



# Uncommon market

## Fans and purveyors of handmade goods are flocking to online store Etsy

Courtney Davis

What do an urban planner, a jewellery designer and an English teacher have in common? Their love of Etsy, a website dedicated to the buying and selling of all things handmade and vintage. These three people, each with diverse motivations, each use this online marketplace to sell totally different homemade products.

A few years ago, a quick search on Etsy revealed fewer than 50 online stores in Belgium. Now, if you filter the millions of items on sale according to location, Belgium currently has 6,642 items for sale from hundreds of sellers.

The rise in popularity could be the appeal to such a broad range of sellers. Tom Beyaert of Ghent has sold a few items since he opened his virtual Etsy shop, Kameo Craft, in February. An urban planner, he joined Etsy a few weeks ago. "A friend of mine suggested this website because I'm always busy crafting and illustrating. It has a good layout and is easy to use. I liked it immediately."

He's not the only one. Launched in 2005 in the US, Etsy calls itself the world's largest marketplace. It has expanded to hosting transactions in more than 150 countries with sales in 2011 of €400 million. Europe accounts for 6.2% of that, or €25 million.

Beyaert now makes buttons and magnets in his spare time. "This isn't a real business or about making money," he says. "But it's great if I can refund my costs for my crafts and illustrations. It has given me an

ability to try new things and to fund my hobby."

### Serious business

For Elke Peeters of Antwerp, that's actually the reason she didn't join the website for the first few years. "I heard about it but didn't subscribe as I thought it was for housewives making crafts," she admits. "Jewellery is my main source of income, not a pastime. I've been doing this for 17 years, since I graduated from the Academy in Antwerp. Most of the jewellery I make is exclusive. My clients are varied, from young girls about to marry to older, discerning customers who want to do something individual with all their old gold. It's very personal."

She succumbed to the magnetic pull of the online emporium a few weeks ago. "I've been following it and it is becoming more serious, with a lot of creative things being sold," she says.

As most of her clients meet her personally, Peeters' decision to join Etsy wasn't motivated by selling her wares. "This is really for additional promotion," she explains. "If someone wants to buy something, that would be great, but it's not my ambition. I like the opportunity to put it on Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter. I very easily reach a larger public than with my own website. This is very important because I have no shop – only a showroom by appointment – so I'm not visible. It is very important to be able to show it to the world. Etsy helps me do that."

### Eclectic finds

Unlike De Invasie, a Flemish/Dutch online art and craft marketplace, Etsy



Buy local designs on Etsy now: Kimberly Joy sports one of her leather bags made from recycled materials; Flemish designer Elke Peeters models her handmade jewellery



does not have an approval process, which allows a part-time hobbyist like Beyaert to sell a €2 button next to Peeters' one-of-a-kind Mimi necklace for €735. It also helps sellers no matter what their location.

Take Kimberly Joy, an American expat living in Brussels. Having signed up in the early days of Etsy back when she was living in the US, she's witnessed an interesting evolution on the site. "It was relatively new at the time,

and I thought it would be a great way to get my work out in the universe," she says. "I have a shop called Backstitched and sell 'upcycled' bags, purses, wallets and pouches. It was an ideal means to gather support and connect with people who were a part of the craft community and looking to buy handmade goods. Now Etsy is an e-commerce website dialled into the social networks with a broader focus." Even though Joy has moved to

Brussels, she is still able to maintain her original customer base. She makes about one-third of her income through Backstitched. "I have sold to Belgian and European customers through this site," she says. "That's the great thing about it – people from all over are exposed to my shop. I manage to sell and connect with people more than ever."

► [www.etsy.com](http://www.etsy.com)

# The plight of the indie shop

## Record Store Day brings much-needed attention to independent music retailers

Andreas Ilegems

Music lovers, mark your calendars. Next Saturday is the fifth annual Record Store Day, an international event that celebrates the virtues of independent record stores with special sales and in-store shows. On 21 April, Record Store Day hits Belgian indie stores for the second time.

The first Belgian Record Store Day took place last year, thanks to a push by Music Mania in Ghent. This year, more than 30 shops are participating across Brussels and Flanders, including Fatkat, Tune Up and Wally's Groove World in Antwerp; Wool-e shop, Vynilla and of course Music Mania in Ghent; The Collector and Hors-Serie in Brussels; Retro Vinyl Lounge in Aalst; and the Vinyl Touch in Mechelen.

About 15 artists, such as rock band Triggerfinger, indie-rock foursome

Intergalactic Lovers and electro duo 2manydjs, will release albums on the day, while several others will play in-store gigs, including dEUS-guitarist Mauro Pawlowski and rising star Liesa Van der Aa. Radio station Studio Brussel, meanwhile, is releasing an actual record: a vinyl LP of live studio sessions recorded over the years.

Also worth checking out on 21 April is a concert by noise-rock band Drums are For Parades to kick off their Record Store Day-release *IMPERIVM*. Five artists who make guest appearances on the new album join the band live in Ghent's Handelsbeurs: Younes Faltakh (The Hickey Underworld), Tim Vanhamel (Millionaire), Pieter-Paul Devos (Kapitan Korsakov), Papillon (The Subs) and Rudeboy (Urban Dance Squad).

Record Store Day started in 2008 in the US as a celebration of the unique culture surrounding indie stores and as a direct response to the decline in album sales over the last decade. Due to mass digital downloading and supermarket competition, a lot of music retailers around the world have shut down.

The shops seem to reap the fruits of Record Store Day's success. Not only did the initiative boost sales for independent retailers around the world, it also gave them a chance to get their small businesses noticed. From Record Store Day in 2009 to Record Store Day in 2010, sales for independent music stores worldwide increased 109%. Vinyl is also making a comeback. In Belgium there were 65,130 vinyl records sold in 2011, an increase of 39% from 2010.



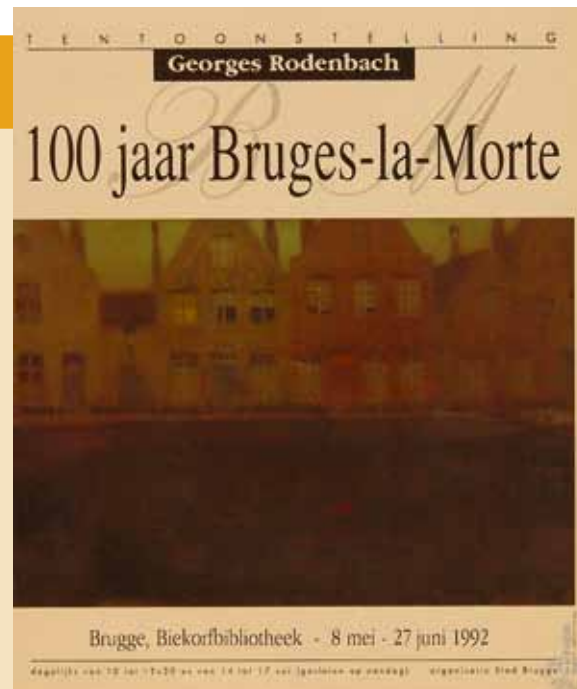
Start your Record Store Day off right at Music Mania in Ghent with coffee, pastry and Mauro Pawlowski

Staf De Vos, owner of Fatkat Records in Antwerp, which specialises in vinyl, is pleased with the attention generated by Record Store Day and continues to be optimistic about the survival of record shops. "As long

as young people remain interested in the physical aspect of CDs and LPs, record stores will be alive and kicking," he says.

► [www.recordstoreday.be](http://www.recordstoreday.be)





# Bruges in posters

A remarkable collection leads Flanders Today on a trip down the cobbles of memory lane

Nicholas Hirst

Whether it's the Flemish primitives, the Battle of the Golden Spurs, Gerardus Mercator or Charles V, Flanders is proud of its past. Yet the past need not be a world away to be strange, interesting and memorable, as illustrated by Pol Martens' collection of posters depicting Bruges through the decades.

"It all started in 1994 when I went looking for some posters for the printing room at a school where I work," says Pol Martens. "At first I couldn't find them, but I did find lots of other great posters of Bruges, which led me to think: Could there be something in this?" So began a collection that has grown to more than 5,000 items in less than two decades. Yet what is particular about Martens' collection is how contemporary it is; while it contains many posters spanning the 20th century, the bulk of the collection is made up of posters from the last two decades. Martens wants to "build as complete a portrait as possible of Bruges in recent

times" through its posters. "There are about 400 a year printed in Bruges, and I try to get as many as I can. I had to work out who publishes the posters and where they are placed. Some venues keep them for me; sometimes I need to request them." Martens is from Maldegem, East Flanders, but is passionate about the city that has become his home. "I fell in love with Bruges when I came here to study as a schoolkid." Now Martens lives in greater Bruges, works at a local school and gives tours of the town. To increase his collection, he has immersed himself in the arcane worlds of posters and local history. "There's been very little written about posters in Bruges," says Martens. "Often I need to look the information up myself in the city archives or in local libraries, since the information is quite fragmented."

## A style of one's own

Almost all of Martens' collection is archived, though a few have been framed, including three beautiful and haunting posters from the early 1900s. "Florimond Van Acker was the professor of fine arts here in Bruges at the

turn of the century. Bruges had not yet seen the large influx of tourists that was to come later and was still very Catholic and traditional," explains Martens. "This was reflected in the style of its posters, which were more conservative than those in Brussels." Van Acker was a classical painter and Bruges' leading poster designer. "He expressly sought to infuse his posters with a mediaeval atmosphere, which ran counter to the Belle Epoque style elsewhere in Europe," says Martens. Van Acker's poster designs are at odds with the bold colours of those developed by the Belgian Railway Company or the Antwerp-New York Red Star Line, for instance. They also break away from the grace of the Art Nouveau posters of Absinthe Robette and Cacao Van Houten. His are more Gothic, with sombre colours, heavy-set fonts, damsels and knights and other apparitions from the Dark Ages. All of which seems befitting of a town that, at the time when Georges Rodenbach wrote his moribund symbolist novel *Bruges-la-Morte*, was crumbling inwards, while Antwerp's port economy and imperial Brussels boomed.

## Highs and lows and quirks

As for Martens' modern collection, it serves as a fantastic *aide-mémoire* for anyone who has lived in the city. "Can you imagine that only 15 years ago, cars would park on the Markt?" says Martens, pointing to a poster from 1997. "A lot of restaurant owners protested" when cars were banned, but now, says Martens, "no one could imagine going back to that". Other posters show the annual Fietseling (a word combining *fietsen*, or bike rider, with *Bruggeling*), which started in the 1990s and demanded that Bruges be more bike-friendly. The *fietseling* posters are drawn by Marec, a well-known Brugs cartoonist who has taken up the artistic mantle from Van Acker, albeit with rather different messages: "Safe cycling" reads one poster as a couple speed past on a bike.

A few years ago, Martens started putting his collection online. About 1,000 images have been uploaded, all of them accompanied by some form of commentary. The archives have notched up 33,000 viewings. What emerges from the collection is a pointillist

portrait of Bruges over the years, of its highs and lows, its quirky traditions and its administrative interventions. Events re-emerge from the past like incongruous echoes: A Modigliani exhibition rubs shoulders with the town's annual drawing competition for schoolchildren, an anti-racism campaign overlaps with residents' efforts to normalise life in Bruges, Cercle Brugge and Bruges-la-Morte celebrate their centenaries. Posters being what they are, their history of Bruges is inevitably uneven and simplistic. Yet they also manage to capture that curiosity of urban life whereby the mundane and the sublime co-exist and overlap – as evidenced by the scores of nostalgic and grateful comments generated by Martens' online archives.

► [www.brugesinaffiches.be](http://www.brugesinaffiches.be)







## A WINDOW ON THE PAST

We amassed posters from the 1990s and asked a few *Bruggelings* whether they recognised the Bruges of days-gone-by.

*Jorijn Neyrinck, director of Tapis Plein, an award-winning NGO that helps people connect with their heritage*

“The first Cinema Novo poster from 1995 resonates. It was then that I started collaborating with the film festival. Since then, I have selected films and have sat on the jury. It was the beginning of a very strong engagement. As it happens, my mother designed that poster - I remember seeing it in our kitchen! Otherwise, the Meifoor - or May Fair - is a very folksy event that goes back to the big markets from mediaeval times, when people mingle and things are turned upside-down. The fair travels from town to town. Children draw pictures and send them to the organisers as part of a drawing competition. There's no doubt that posters have anthropological value: They're a representation of a given moment in time and of the flow of events that start and stop. It's an important collection!”

*Stefan Vankerkhoven, reporter at the Brugsch Handelsblad*

“Since 1997, cars have been banned from Bruges' historical square. A good thing. It's just a shame that there were no extra editions of the Grote Parade on the Markt. Thanks to Cinema Novo, film fans get the opportunity to see movies from other continents. Viewers who are used to action movies from the US need to adapt, but it broadens perspectives. A positive thing is that a lot of Bruges' schools send their pupils to the festival. The Cinema

Memlinc is now a youth hostel - this poster shows the public selling of the building. This building is laden with golden film memories: Roger Moore as James Bond, Terence Hill and the cast of *The Last Emperor*, all of them came to Bruges to present their films in the Memlinc.”

*Jean-Marie Bogaert, Bruges' alderman for tourism and former alderman for social affairs*

“The Grote Parade celebrated the inauguration of the port of Zeebrugge, with the King, the Prime Minister and many other important people in attendance. An important moment since the port gave Bruges the chance to grow. Another poster shows the 10th anniversary of the assassination of the Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, by the country's dictatorship. Bruges had lots of committees co-operating with the third world, and people found that he was socially involved and well meaning.”

*André Van den Abeele, former alderman for urban renovation and author of books about Bruges*

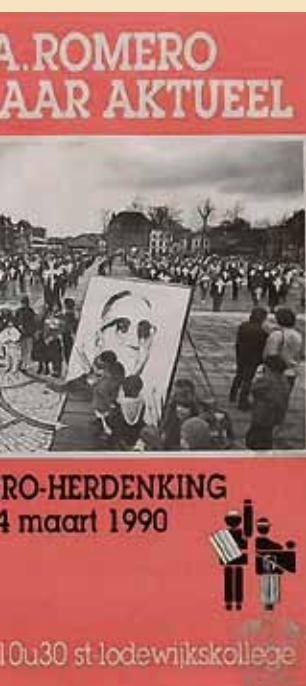
“Modern posters are not exceptional. There's no real artistic expression; they're simply quick means of communicating. But these do show that there are so many things going on in town. Boxing events, organ concerts... When I was an alderman, I went to many events, and I came to the conclusion that Bruges was a conglomerate of small villages. Everything has its public and they live together without mingling. Yet everyone finds their place.”

## A SHORT HISTORY OF POSTERS

Posters took off in the 1870s with Jules Chéret's pioneering of the three-stone lithographic process. Alongside artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Alphonse Mucha, he made posters immensely popular in Paris, from where they spread across Europe and the world. While certain artistic styles, such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco, were very influential, national schools of poster design developed, with their trademark techniques and styles.

Local poster designers such as Lucien De Roeck of Dendermonde and Brussels-born Henri Privat-Livémont are not collected as avidly as their French, Italian or German counterparts, whose designs can change hands for vast sums. A Toulouse Lautrec Moulin Rouge poster once sold for nearly \$250,000, while Heinz Schulz-Neudamm's poster for the film was bought for almost \$700,000. Dealers of local vintage posters include Ma Maison de Papier in Brussels.

► [www.mamaisondpapier.be](http://www.mamaisondpapier.be)







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# Border crossing

## Open Doek celebrates two decades of bringing the world's cinema trends to Turnhout

Lisa Bradshaw

Twenty years ago this month, a group of young people in Turnhout grew tired of having to go to Antwerp or Brussels to see movies from Africa, South America and Asia. So they decided to hold a festival of world cinema. The beginnings were less than auspicious; their first edition only counted eight movies. Now Open Doek screens more than 75 films and brings in directors from across the planet to little Turnhout, where audiences that now number 50,000 continue to respond favourably to films they would never otherwise see. "Before, we would see the films in the bigger cities and then bring them to Turnhout; now, we are more like curators," says Marc Boonen, artistic director of Open Doek. "We are curating new films and illustrating trends in filmmaking. We are a place for experiment and discovery." But this, their 20th anniversary, is the end of an era. After this year, there will be no more Open Doek Film Festival. There will still be a world film festival, though – and it will be bigger. Open Doek, based in Turnhout, and Cinema Novo, the film festival based in Bruges, are joining forces to form an as-yet-unnamed new world film festival that focuses on human rights and social issues. The festival will take

place in both Turnhout and Bruges, as well as host screenings in other towns across Flanders.

Not only do the festivals want to create a more powerful presence that will attract the best films and top directors, they want to save money by pooling their resources. The new festival will also have a more international title, according to Boonen. "With digital cinema," he says, "it's much easier to decentralise your festival. Now you can just put copies of the films on a server. So every film in the future will be screened in both Turnhout and Bruges."

It's that digital revolution that, ironically, makes film festivals even more important, claims Boonen. With the accessibility of digital encouraging more and more people to make movies and with digital access, legal or otherwise, to pretty much any film you want, it's becoming more difficult to be discerning. "A film festival is a kind of gatekeeper," says Boonen. "We see many, many films and select what we think are the best."

In 20 years of programming, Boonen has seen thousands of films and met hundreds of filmmakers. He is enamoured of those who tweak the traditions while still respecting their roots. Films screened at Open Doek through the years have



gone on to become milestones in changing cinema trends. "You have generations of filmmakers reacting

against the previous generation," says Boonen, "and it's very important to be able to show those trends."

## Open Doek to-do list

### 1 Party at the opening (or closing) film

Open Doek's opening and closing films come with talks, a red-carpet atmosphere and receptions in the festival cafe with generous portions of *hors d'oeuvres* and bubbly. The director of the opening film, Michael Winterbottom, can't stop making movies long enough to attend festivals, but the producer of his new film *Trishna*, a modern-day adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* set in India, is here to fill in. The producer happens to be Indian filmmaker Anurag Kashyap, on hand for the duration of the festival, which is screening a retrospective of his work.

At the closing ceremony, meanwhile, Canada-based director Kim Nguyen will talk about his film *Rebelle* (pictured above), a thoughtful look at the experiences of a female child soldier, which won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury and a Silver Bear for actress Rachel Mwanza at Berlin.

### 2 Ask directors some questions

Aside from discovering many films you'll never find in the cinema, the value of festivals is your access to filmmakers. Several have been brought to Turnhout to introduce their movies, including Columbian director Jhonny Hendrix Hinestroza, whose debut *Chocó* was the first film about black Columbians ever accepted to screen at the Berlin Film Festival. Two Belgian directors are at Open Doek, too: **Thierry Michel** (*Congo River*) will talk about his new documentary that investigates the murder of Congolese activist Floribert Chebeya, while Daniel Lambo fills you in on the remarkable story of his fiction-doc fusion *Dry Branches of Iran*. He shot the 60-minute film chronicling the arrest of a young protestor entirely with mobile phones.

### 3 Meet Olivia Rutazibwa: Mo\*docs

MO\* magazine journalist Olivia Rutazibwa selected documentaries for this series and introduces every one. Some of them are followed by talks with the director, including filmmaker-turned-documentarian Emad Burnat, an ordinary Palestinian farmer who recorded the non-violent resistance to Israelis settling in his region in his fascinating *5 Broken Cameras*.

### 4 Have your cake and eat it, too: Ciné Kwadraat

Sometimes a festival of world cinema can get a little heavy, so for this weekday afternoon programme, Open Doek has selected a few of its lighter-hearted variety, which go down even easier with pastries and coffee. Check out Oscar nominee *Monsieur Lazhar* or Japanese director Kore-Eda Hirokazu's charming *I Wish*.

### 5 Take advice of Open Doek director Marc Boonen

Although they usually pretend to love all their children equally, we pried a few film recommendations out of Open Doek's director: *Histórias que só existem quando lembradas* (known in English as *Found Memories*), the first feature by Brazilian director Julia Murat, is a slow-burning but ultimately rewarding film about the sudden arrival of a young photographer in a tiny, remote town (pictured below). In *Just the Wind*, fresh from its Silver Bear win in Berlin ("it should have won the Golden Bear," notes Boonen), Hungarian director Benedek Fliegauf recounts the real-life story of hate-crime murders within a gypsy community. Finally, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* takes the viewer through one long night as police and murder suspects search for a corpse on dry plains of scrub brush. By Turkish director Nur Bilge Ceylan (*Three Monkeys*), the film won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes this year. "It looks like a road movie, but it isn't a road movie. It looks like a western, but it isn't a western," says Boonen. "It's a slow story that takes its time and communicates to you what is not visible. It's a perfect film."



Nearly every film at Open Doek is subtitled in Dutch. Many are also subtitled in English, but you won't see that reflected in the programme, so if you need English subs, feel free to call or email the festival for accurate subtitling information

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► [www.opendoeck.be](http://www.opendoeck.be)

## WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

Foo Fighters have confirmed that they will headline this year's final night of the **Pukkelpop alt rock and pop festival** in Hasselt. The American alt-rock band was meant to play last year when a storm hit the festival site on opening day, collapsing tents and stage equipment. Five people died in the disaster, and the rest of the festival was cancelled. Other bands confirmed for this year are Björk, The Stone Roses, The Black Keys and The Afghan Whigs.

► [www.pukkelpop.be](http://www.pukkelpop.be)

TV station Eén has released a free app for iPhone and iPad to buy and watch the **Flemish television series *FC De Kampioenen***, which finished early last year after 21 seasons. So far, season one through seven are available, but Eén is working on the rest. The pilot episode, which first aired in 1990, is free. All other episodes cost €1.59; a whole season costs €14.99. Each episode comes with extras.

Following last year's *Le Mer Debussy*, the Brussels Philharmonic has released the second CD under its new label, **Brussels Philharmonic Recordings**. *New World Dvorák* includes the Czech composer's *Symphony No 9* and *Slavonic Dances*.

► [www.brusselsphilharmonicrecordings.com](http://www.brusselsphilharmonicrecordings.com)

**Lady Gaga** will make her second stop in Antwerp's Sportpaleis on 29 September for her Born This Way tour. Opening for the mega pop star is British glam rock band The Darkness, and New York DJ Lady Starlight will take the stage as a special guest. Tickets went on sale last Friday and were sold out in less than an hour.

The International Film Festival of Flanders in Ghent is sponsoring a **new monthly film series** at Kinopolis. The cinema chain will premiere a film every month hand-selected by the festival. The first is *Tyrannosaur*, the directorial debut of British actor Paddy Considine, which will screen in Kinopolis cinemas across Flanders on 19 April.

► [www.tinyurl.com/ffgentontour](http://www.tinyurl.com/ffgentontour)

Dilbeek rock duo **Black Box Revelation** have landed a gig playing on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, the hugely popular talk show on the American TV network CBS. The duo recorded their latest album, *My Perception*, in the US and toured the country last year. The Letterman appearance will air in June.

► [www.blackboxrevelation.com](http://www.blackboxrevelation.com)



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# The people's writer

Antwerp province celebrates the life and work of 200-year-old Hendrik Conscience

Cleveland Moffet

There is something undeniably heroic about a man with scant literary talent who persists against the odds in writing 100 books and, in the end, succeeds in creating a lasting place for himself in the affections of his nation's readers. This is the singular case of Antwerp-born Hendrik Conscience (1812-1883), the 200th anniversary of whose birth is being celebrated this year with much fanfare in, primarily, Flanders. Conscience is best known internationally for one novel, *The Lion of Flanders* (*De leeuw van Vlaanderen*), a rousing adventure story loosely based on the famous Battle of the Golden Spurs of 1302 when, to simplify, the Flemish infantry soundly defeated the French cavalry in a muddy field near Kortrijk. The day, 11 July, has been marked ever since as the solemn holiday for all Flemish patriots.

## Inspired the Flemish to read

As the man who came to be credited with inspiring his people to read (*hij leerde zyn volk lezen*), it is a surprising fact that Dutch was not Conscience's first language. His father was from Besançon, and his Flemish mother was an illiterate lace maker who knew a little French when they met in an Antwerp dance hall in 1808.

Baptised Henri, the future author was a sickly child who was not expected to live. Too weak to run around outdoors with the other children, Henri spent most of his time reading. The story goes that his father bought used books by the cartload so that his wife, who by then had opened a small grocery store, could use them for wrapping paper. These were the miscellaneous books the boy read before his mother got a chance to recycle them.

After Henri's mother died when he was eight, his father married a selfless young woman who proceeded to give him nine more children. Finding family life more than a little crowded in their modest country home, Henri first studied and later taught in schools in Antwerp.

Henri's 18th year coincided with the outbreak of the Belgian Revolution of 1830; the future raconteur of military exploits eagerly signed up for a



Hendrik Conscience wrote epic stories about common people

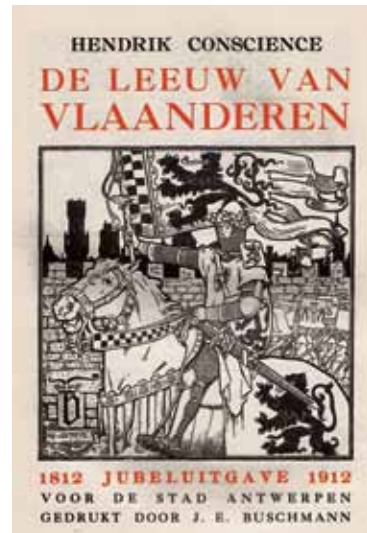
two-year tour of duty, later extended to five. He fought on the barricades in Antwerp and in other skirmishes in the region, was wounded and eventually promoted to sergeant-major. It was out of these experiences that Conscience collected the material for his many novels that recount historical events in Flanders and Wallonia.

## Recording the plight of the poor

"Long before he thought of writing as a way of inspiring Flemish pride, Conscience wrote to earn a living," says Hugo Westdorp, the retired teacher of history and Dutch who showed me round the exhibition devoted to the novelist in the town hall of Schilde, just east of Antwerp,

which was once a small rural community where Conscience lived. On show are several dozen of the early editions of the prolific author's output. "The themes were not all battles and bloodshed," Westdorp assures me. "Many of the stories are terribly sentimental, all about the misfortunes of widows and orphans, the poor and the homeless. There is in his works at least an implied social criticism. A peasant is cheated out of his farm by an unscrupulous landowner. An old woman dies because she is too poor to pay for a doctor. And yet, somehow Conscience usually manages to bring about a happy or optimistic ending. He wants his readers to be moved, but not to despair."

One of the most popular of his novels – and, like *The Lion of Flanders*,



A few of Conscience's books have been translated into English, including *The Lion of Flanders*

one translated into English – is *The Conscript* (*De loteling*). He always claimed he first heard the story from a family of peasants who sheltered him from a storm while he was out hiking in the nearby woods. In fact, he said that many of the adventures he narrated had been told to him by the "humble folk" who meant so much to him.

In *The Conscript*, Trien lives with her widowed mother in one of two thatched cottages; in the other lives the young farmer Jan. Trien and Jan are, needless to say, in love.

It's 1833, and Jan is just old enough to take part in the lottery, a democratic method his rural town uses as conscription into military service. His number is not drawn, but Jan, in need of money to keep the ever-ailing farm afloat, agrees to switch his number with a rich young man who wasn't so lucky. The rich family will pay him to serve their son's time in the military. He goes off to war and is not heard of for several months. Trien writes him a letter which, Westdorp says, has become "a classic" in Flemish literature.

Wounded in battle, Jan is now blind, but Trien finds him and brings him home. On the way, she helps him to ford a stream by carrying him on her back, they meet a doctor who restores Jan's sight, they marry, have three children and live piously ever after.

"It's easy to smile at the naivety of stories like this," Westdorp admits, "but the emotions ring true even when the plot seems thoroughly implausible. And we should



The author's 100th birthday was also not bypassed without celebration

remember that the subject of conscription was a burning issue in the days when Flanders was under French domination." (Interestingly, Flemish filmmaker Roland Verhavert's 1974 film made of *The Conscript* has an altogether different attitude and ending, becoming a dark and gritty fable of moral breakdown and lower-class despair.)

## Cultural hero

Conscience wrote his books in Dutch, though his mastery of the Dutch language was never complete. But then it had never before been used to tell romantic adventure novels after the manner of Walter Scott. His most fervent admirers admit that he makes mistakes of grammar and syntax, which, incidentally, translators into English, French, German and many other languages all carefully correct. But Conscience has achieved the status of cultural hero and nothing can belittle him. In his day, often in debt, he was helped out financially by King Leopold I, and near the end of his days he was given the position of curator of the Wiertz Museum in Brussels, which soon became a salon for the country's artists and intellectuals. He already has his monuments in Antwerp and elsewhere, and a new statue is to be erected in his honour in Schilde next September.

Whatever his novels may lack in subtlety or flair they more than make up for in that essential quality of sheer readability.

## HENDRIK CONSCIENCE JUBILEE

There is plenty of celebrating going on for Hendrik Conscience's 200th birthday, from Conscience-inspired puppet shows to the massive cantata in his honour by Peter Benoit. Both Schilde and nearby Zoersel, where Conscience whiled away many an hour in the forests of the Kempen, have programmes dedicated to the writer. Here are some highlights; for complete programmes, visit the websites.

**Hendrik Conscience en de loting** This cornerstone exhibition of the Hendrik Conscience Jubilee Year is a retrospective of the man and his work, with a special focus on the issue of military conscriptions (*de loting* refers to random number generators). Exhibition information is only in Dutch.

Until 20 May, Museum Albert van Dyck, Town Hall, Brasschaatsebaan 30, Schilde

**Capilla Flamenca: Ach Vlaendren vry** There's no better choice than this Leuven-based polyphonic ensemble to reprise authentic Flemish songs from the early 19th century. The performance helps paint a picture of cultural life of the period.

3 May 20.00, Sint-Guibertus Church, Kerkplein, Schilde

**Kunst Adelt: De loteling** An outdoor theatre performance in Dutch of one of Conscience's most famous works, *De loteling* (*The Conscript*)

5-21 October, Schilde

► [www.baasgansendonck.be](http://www.baasgansendonck.be)

► [www.zoersel.be](http://www.zoersel.be)



*English painter, Flemish school*

# Ford Madox Brown

Ian Mundell

The English painter Ford Madox Brown came to Flanders as a young man to study art, passing through the academies of Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp. In the years that followed, he did his best to rebel against everything he learned, but the influence of his Flemish years can still be seen in a major retrospective of his work at the Fine Arts Museum in Ghent.

Brown was born in Calais in 1821. His parents were English expats, living abroad to maintain a higher standard of living than their means would allow on the other side of the Channel. A similar need for thrift was probably why Brown chose Flanders, rather than London or Paris, for his education.

In 1835, still little more than a child, he registered for classes at the art academy in Bruges. This institution had a good reputation, but it had also gained a strict new director in Albert Gregorius. This, the exhibition notes speculate, may be why Brown left after just one term and moved to the academy in Ghent.

He remained in Ghent until 1838, studying with the portrait painter Pieter Van Hanselaere and exhibiting his work in public for the first time. After Ghent, Brown moved to Antwerp, attracted by the possibility of studying with noted history painter Gustaaf Wappers.

While the location was Flemish, the artistic education Brown received was distinctly French. Teaching was modelled on the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris, with an emphasis on anatomy, composition and technique. Brown's teachers also had significant French connections, with both Gregorius and Van Hanselaere studying under Jacques-Louis David, a master of the neo-classical style.

By 1840 the lure of Paris proved too much, and Brown set out for the French capital. Here he fell under the influence of romantic painters such as Eugène Delacroix and also started to show a debt to the English satirist William Hogarth. Brown's paintings from this period, so far as they survived, are dark and dramatic but also less polished than his training

would have demanded.

After Paris, the newly married Brown set off for Italy. His exposure to Italian Renaissance painting, on top of the Flemish primitives he had seen in Belgium and abroad, decisively shaped his style. This bright, simple, naturalistic approach to everyday subjects would go on to influence Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

The paintings on show in Ghent begin with some of Brown's early work and include a selection from his Flemish teachers and contemporaries that puts his education into perspective. This sets the stage for the later work, with the museum's commentary ticking off the hard-learned conventions of composition and technique that Brown abandoned along the way.

Even so, there is still a heroic flavour to his most famous paintings, "Work" and "The Last of England", that recall his schooling in Flanders. And there's more than a hint of the Flemish primitives in scene paintings such as the marvellous "Chaucer at the Court of Edward III".



© The Irish Girl, 1860, oil on canvas / Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund

Until 3 June

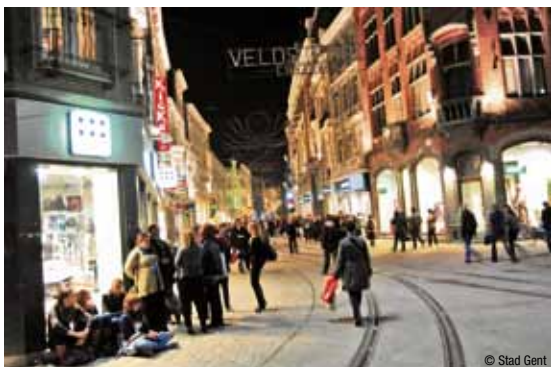
Fine Arts Museum, Fernand Scribdeef 1, Ghent

► [www.mskgent.be](http://www.mskgent.be)

## SPECIAL EVENT

### Night shopping

For the fourth year in a row, the City of Ghent is treating shopaholics to an atmospheric evening of late-night shop openings, plus fun activities across the city. The list of some 300 participating shops and restaurants can be found online; some are open until 20.00, others until 22.00. Aside from shopping, be sure to visit museum Huis van Alijn and enter to win a gorgeous orchid necklace. Take a stroll around Sint-Niklaas Church where a mini-market is selling unique gifts, from essential oils and scented candles to jewellery and more. Artist Annie Gansbeke will exhibit her flower-inspired oil paintings. You can also follow workshops to learn, for example, how to make a vase out of recycled bike tyres or how to get creative with tea light candles. You may by now have noticed this year's edition has a flower theme, and you can pick up your own free azalea – while supplies last – with a minimum purchase of €15 during the event. **Robyn Boyle**



© Stad Gent

19 April, 17.00-22.00 | Across Ghent

► [www.gentverwent.be](http://www.gentverwent.be)

## MORE EVENTS THIS WEEK

### Brussels

**HOPLA!:** Annual circus arts festival featuring hundreds of fun acts and performances (ages six and up)

Until APR 21 at Sint-Katelijneplein

► [www.hopla-cirk.be](http://www.hopla-cirk.be)

### Melle (East Flanders)

**Huyghe Brewery Open Door Day:** Come visit the brewery that made pink elephants famous worldwide (Delirium Tremens) and enjoy a free guided tour

APR 22 at Brouwerij Huyghe, Brusselsesteenweg 282

► [www.delirium.be](http://www.delirium.be)

## JAZZ

### AKA Moon

No other jazz band in the world can say they got their start in the early '90s playing together in the Central African Republic while studying the music of native Aka Pygmies. But AKA Moon can, and the Brussels avant-garde trio has been together ever since. Pronounced ah-kah Moon, the group is led by composer Fabrizio Cassol on alto sax, Michel Hatzigeorgiou on electric bass and Stéphane Galland on drums. The sound of the Pygmy tribe is still detectable, its rhythmic path weaved as it were into an underlying foundation of jazz and rock. But there's also something cosmic and transcendent about their music, a sort of whirling, spiralling vortex that always leads back to where it started. It's a journey to other worlds, the long way around, through Brazilian rainforests, Indian deserts and drum circles in West Africa. Catch them now as they celebrate their 20th anniversary and new (17th!) album, *Unison*. **RB**



► [www.akamoon.com](http://www.akamoon.com)

19 April, 20.00

Vooruit, Ghent

► [www.vooruit.be](http://www.vooruit.be)

21 April, 20.30

De Singer, Rijkevorsel

► [www.desinger.be](http://www.desinger.be)

## MORE JAZZ THIS WEEK

### Brussels

**Janet Seidel Trio:** Australia's "first lady of jazz"

APR 22 17.00 at L'Archiduc, Dansaertstraat 6

► [www.archiduc.net](http://www.archiduc.net)

### Ghent

**Steven De Bruyn & Rodrigo Fuentealba:** De Bruyn, the funky harmonica player from The Rhythm Junks, backed by electric guitar

APR 22 20.00 at De Centrale, Kraankindersstraat 2

► [www.opatuur.be](http://www.opatuur.be)

### Grimbergen

**Pascal Schumacher Quartet:** Rhythmic jazz melodies from the Luxembourg quartet

APR 19 20.00 at CC Strombeek, Gemeenteplein

► [www.ccstrombeek.be](http://www.ccstrombeek.be)



ART FAIR

SLICK Brussels

With the massive Art Brussels fair now in its 30th year at the expo centre, it's about time for the emergence of a fringe festival. This one comes direct from Paris, and its first edition promises to be just as ambitious and passionate as its French counterpart. No fewer than 46 international galleries are taking up post at the Wild Gallery to showcase large-format works and personal projects of contemporary artists: installations, sculptures, paintings, videos and more. The diversity of works allows visitors and collectors to discover exciting, non-traditional formats that reflect the dynamic nature of the current international contemporary art scene. Your eyes will not go hungry, nor will your stomach. Michelin-starred Parisian chef Christophe Pelé will create an ephemeral restaurant especially for the event, with a new menu daily. **RB**



© Gallery Anversville, Antwerp / Bénédicte Deramaux, "Portrait en dialogue"

20-22 April, 11.00-20.00 | Wild Gallery, Gerijstraat 11, Brussels  
► [www.slickartfair.com](http://www.slickartfair.com)

MORE VISUAL ART THIS WEEK

Bornem (Antwerp province)

**Now or Ever:** International group show featuring young artists from Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK  
**Until MAY 5 at cc Ter Dilft, Sint-Amandsesteenweg 41**  
► [www.terdilft.be](http://www.terdilft.be)

Brussels

**The Archaeologist in Action:** Flanders Heritage Agency's travelling photography exhibition about the profession of archaeologist  
**Until APR 30 at Boudewijn Building, Boudewijnlaan 30 MAY 2-SEP 28 alternately in Ghent, Leuven, Tongeren, Ostend and Antwerp**  
► [www.vioe.be/agenda/de-archeoloog-in-actie](http://www.vioe.be/agenda/de-archeoloog-in-actie)

**Poppositions:** Another fringe! This new contemporary art fair staged during Art Brussels showcases emerging artists and galleries working with site-specific exhibitions, featuring a selection of works in interaction with the unique architectural setting of the Brussel-Congres railway station  
**APR 20-22 12.00-21.00 at Brussel-Congres, Pachécolaan 38**  
► [www.poppositions.com](http://www.poppositions.com)

WORLD

Tuur Florizoone

If you are familiar with the wonderfully comical Flemish film *Aanrijding in Moscou*, you may know that the music from the film won the public prize at the 2008 World Soundtrack Awards. There's only one person responsible for that, and it's the multi-talented pianist, accordionist and composer Tuur Florizoone. He's been making jazzy, funky, world-y music for 10 years now and intends to celebrate with this unique concert at AB. He's bringing along the bassist and sax player from his original trio, Tricycle, as well as some musicians from Massot Florizoone Horbaczewski, another of his chromatic outfits, which incorporates tuba and cello into the eclectic mix. **RB**



24 April, 20.00 | Ancienne Belgique, Brussels | ► [www.abconcerts.be](http://www.abconcerts.be)

MORE WORLD MUSIC THIS WEEK

Antwerp

**Tarrus Riley with live band:** The son of reggae master Jimmy Riley is following in his father's footsteps  
**APR 21 21.00-6.00 at Petrol, d'Herbouvillekaai 25**  
► [www.petrolclub.be](http://www.petrolclub.be)

Ghent

**Trio Khoury:** Palestinian brothers Elia (oud), Osama (zither) and Basil (violin) perform music from the Middle East  
**APR 21 20.00 at De Centrale, Kraankindersstraat 2**  
► [www.decentrale.be](http://www.decentrale.be)

**Sarah Ferri:** Gipsy jazz, swing and bossa nova from the Italian singer-songwriter from Ghent  
**APR 22 19.30 at Vooruit, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 23**  
► [www.vooruit.be](http://www.vooruit.be)

DUSK TIL DAWN

Katrien Lindemans

New Wave Classix

28 April  
Vooruit, Ghent

Party calendars are overflowing with the hottest DJs playing at the hippest venues, but that doesn't seem to stop the popularity of retro. Fans of music from the be-bop era can find swinging parties nearly every week, and those keen on the beats from the '90s often don't have to look too far, either.



Not so long ago, new wave fans in the area of Ghent were treated to their first party. Its success led to about four New Wave Classix per year, 100% retro parties with good old nostalgic synthpop by the likes of Front 242, TC Matic, The Cure and Depeche Mode. The next one is on Saturday, 28 April at Vooruit in Ghent. It's a special "ladies edition", meaning you'll hear a lot of 1980s female artists, special guest DJ Sofie will make an appearance and – last but not least – all women get in for free before midnight. If you'd like to make sure your favourite '80s hit will be played, send your request to [info@new-wave-classix.be](mailto:info@new-wave-classix.be). Browse the long list of artists under the A to Z header on the website for inspiration and hear the songs by clicking on the link. To get even more inspired, take a peek at the pictures on the Facebook fan page. Start digging through your wardrobe for those black leather pants and mesh t-shirts, and finish off your look with teased hair, dark eyeliner and a choker. Tickets cost €6, and if you come in a group of 10, you'll get one ticket for free. You could also try your luck at winning a ticket, as there are 10 being given away on the website. A retro party with retro prices. Totally awesome.

► [www.new-wave-classix.be](http://www.new-wave-classix.be)



## BITE

Robyn Boyle

## Comme Chez Moi

Our car is rolling slowly down a back country road somewhere near the coastal town of Oostduinkerke as my companion and I squint at mailbox numbers. We are on our way to have dinner with total strangers. Dressed in our Sunday best, we've remembered to bring along the obligatory bottle of wine, but there are butterflies in our stomachs. This feels very much like a blind date.

Our hosts, Cis and Sarah, open the door of their charming renovated farmhouse with two wide smiles. A fire is crackling away in the living room where we sit down to get to know one another. The conversation starts flowing, as does the Champagne, and we're made to feel comfortable and welcome. We're in for a fun evening.

Comme Chez Moi is a brilliant concept, thought up by Jozefien Van Damme and her Aussie husband. It's a way for international guests to meet locals in their homes while enjoying authentic Belgian food, drinks and hospitality. It's a golden ticket out of hotel-restaurant buffets and tourist trap eateries. And, perhaps most importantly, it's a way for people to connect who otherwise never would.

Seated at the beautifully set table next to our hosts, my dining companion and I can't help but feel we've all been friends for ages. (Or is it that seventh bottle of wine talking). They have laid out the most seductive spread of fresh seafood straight from the North Sea,

only a short walk from here behind the dunes.

We all dig in with our hands, peeling grey shrimp, twisting snails from their shells, slurping oysters and cracking open lobster claws. Some crusty French bread and butter are the only accompaniment you need with a platter this good. Our evening ends with some coffee and delicious apple pie from a local bakery.

We realise there's no need to be nervous about taking part in a Comme Chez Moi experience, for the people who have volunteered to be hosts (they are reimbursed to cover some of their costs) are the type of people who are naturally generous and open, eager to get to know some new and interesting people.

I highly recommend taking a look at the user-friendly website (in English) to seek out a Comme Chez Moi activity that suits you best. At this point, almost all the hosts are located in Brussels and Flanders. Some upcoming activities include a walk around the gardens of the Abbey of Affligem, followed by a tasting of its beers and a typically Belgian home-cooked meal, more beer and cheese tastings at the local markets in Aalst or a simple chat over coffee with jenever and pralines. Signing up is as easy as clicking on the calendar of activities, which you'll find under "Become a guest".

Or are you Belgian and like the idea of receiving international guests in your own home? Then why



not sign up to become a host. I can guarantee you it's an enriching experience, no matter which side of the deal you're on.

► [www.comme-chez-moi.be](http://www.comme-chez-moi.be)

€ Taste €28, Savour €44 or Experience €58

i Booking service matching local hosts with international guests for original get-togethers and exceptional culinary experiences

## TALKING SPORTS

Leo Cendrowicz

## The resurrection of Tom Boonen

His attempts to kick-start his career last year, after years in the doldrums, seemed almost embarrassing to the cycling world. Puffing his way through the Tour of Oman, Tom Boonen seemed to be floundering as he struggled to get back to his peak of almost a decade before.

What a difference a year makes. Triumphs in the E3 Harelbeke, Ghent-Wevelgem, Paris-Roubaix and – most spectacularly – the Tour of Flanders, suggest Boonen is finally enjoying his Indian summer. With the cobblestone and Flemish races now over, it is worth hailing Tommeke's remarkable achievement.

Boonen, from Mol, Antwerp province, showed that there is

life after tearing the sensitive flap of flesh down below known as the perineum. While his three Flemish wins came as a result of routine sprints, the 31-year-old's totally emphatic display at Paris-Roubaix on 8 April 8 – in which he soloed off the front with 55 kilometres remaining – has cemented his place in history as one of the best cobblestone riders of all time. While everyone went on about Boonen's bravery in not wearing any gloves, it was his undercarriage, in fact, that was more sensitive.

Boonen has had his setbacks. A lengthy rehabilitation followed knee surgery in the summer of 2010. In last year's Tour de France – where in 2006 he held the

yellow jersey for four days – he hit the asphalt during one of the rounds. That's not to mention his cocaine scandal in 2008 and 2009; although it is not performance-enhancing like EPO (the drug of choice for the cyclists), it is still banned.

The last two weeks have brought major victories, but Boonen has injured himself again. He did not take part in the Amstel Gold Race on 15 April after suffering a muscle tendon problem in his left foot. He will also miss the Fleche Wallonne this week and the Liège-Bastogne-Liège next week, neither of which he has won.

"The vibrations on the cobblestones on Sunday have worsened it," he said of his perineum injury. "It's nothing serious, but it's better to stop and rest." He is still clear atop the UCI World Tour rankings.

Boonen's spectacular revival comes as another rider, who enjoyed a brilliant 2011, seems to be suffering an equivalent decline. Philippe Gilbert, the third-placed sprinter in last year's Tour De France, also won the Amstel Gold Classic, the Flèche Wallonne, and Liège-Bastogne-Liège, and topped this year's UCI World Tour Ranking. But he has yet to make any impact this year. Who knows if some of Gilbert's karma has flowed over to Boonen. But right now, this is Tommeke's time, and he seems to be enjoying it.

► [www.tomboonen.com](http://www.tomboonen.com)



Tom Boonen of team Omega Pharma-Quick Step crossed the finish line to win the Paris-Roubaix, after a solo of 52km

## The last word...

## Spoilt for choice

"Maybe I would have been better off being accepted by only one university because I've been racking my brain with the decision."

Ghent student Jurgen Goossens received offers from both Harvard and Yale, unheard of according to his doctoral professor, economy minister Johan Vande Lanotte

## Doctoral thesis

"Once the holidays are over, I expect the number of cases to rise again."

A spokesman for the government's health ministry on the epidemic of mumps ravaging through Ghent University

## It's showtime

"We're convinced Flanders is bursting with talent, so let it all come out."

VTM is planning a series of *Belgium's Got Talent* in the autumn

## Thankful

"He broke everything there is to break, but at least he's still alive."

Pascal Claesens' son Matthias, 17, was injured when a driver rammed into a party of cyclists in Sint-Truiden

NEXT WEEK  
IN FLANDERS TODAY

## Business

Davy Kestens is an entrepreneurial whiz-kid who's taking Silicon Valley by storm. We talk to the 23-year old from Limburg about his recent voyages to California and his public appearance with Richard Branson this month in Flanders

## Tourism

Genk has carved a modern community and cultural centre out of its mining heritage: C-Mine is an example of what so many contemporary institutions want to do and have trouble figuring out how. We'll tell you how Genk did it – and why

## Arts

Eugeen van Mieghem painted a generation of workers and travellers in Antwerp's harbour at the turn of the last century. We'll tell you about an exhibition dedicated to the port paintings of Mieghem taking place in French Flanders