

Museum
Leuven



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RODIN, MEUNIER & MINNE

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INTRODUCTION

THREE READINGS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The end of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of a revolution that was to lead to modern sculpture. Increasingly, artists reacted against classical academic sculpture and developed a highly personal artistic idiom. This innovation was inspired partly by the art of the Middle Ages.

As radical innovators, Auguste Rodin (1840 – 1917), Constantin Meunier (1831 – 1905) and George Minne (1866 – 1941) were pioneers of this sculptural revolution. Each in their own way, they borrowed elements from the artistic legacy of the Middle Ages and integrated them into their own artistic idiom. For example, Meunier drew primarily on the religious iconography of the Middle Ages. Minne was likewise influenced by religious faith, but rendered it in works that focus primarily on mystical emotion. Rodin, on the other hand, discovered in medieval art a freedom of expression that he had found nowhere else.

This exhibition was conceived as an essay. Works by Rodin, Meunier and Minne are juxtaposed with sculptures from the Middle Ages, bringing to light remarkable and sometimes unexpected parallels between the two traditions. Furthermore, there are quotations in each room from both art critics and the artists themselves, which reinforce the exhibition's central thesis. They are not intended so much to be mediatory tools but are an essential component of this presentation. You will find these quotations at the end of every section of this press file.

The influence of the Middle Ages is not limited to the artistic idiom. Medieval themes such as mourning, loss and separation also recur in the works of the three artists. A selection of titles from the exhibited works attests to this: 'Grief' by Constantin Meunier, 'Sorrowful Mother with Two Children' by George Minne or the 'Martyr' by Auguste Rodin. This led to the decision to collaborate with a number of Leuven-based poets. Specially for this exhibition, they wrote poems inspired by the sculptures in this exhibition. You can listen to the poems on the audio-guide.

Curators: Peter Carpreau (M Leuven) & Marthje Sagewitz

ACCOMPANYING QUOTATIONS

“It would be impossible to explain my own progress in the study and insight into Gothic art. Of course this research influenced my sculpture, and infused my modelling with flexibility, depth and vivacity. This is evident from my figures, which became more mysterious [...].”

Auguste Rodin, 1905

“Meunier is not associated with the artists of the Renaissance; if he were to need ancestors, one would have to look for them among the Gothics.”

Émile Verhaeren, 1892

“The thing we love above all in even the most ordinary medieval statue is the individual spirit of the artist, which is always or almost always etched deep into the stone. In these innumerable thirteenth-century figures, we find the joy, the hope, the bitterness and the disappointments of life. The artist sculpted as he thought, it was his spirit that directed his chisel; [...].”

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 1854-1868

THE REDISCOVERY OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The rediscovery and fascination with the Middle Ages began in the mid-18th century. Literature and architecture were the most important catalysts of this renewed interest. For example, the English author Horace Walpole (1717 -1797) had his villa 'Strawberry Hill' built to look medieval. His book *The Castle of Otranto, a Gothic Story* launched the genre of the Gothic novel. It was an immensely popular genre in the nineteenth century, as exemplified in Bram Stoker's (1847-1912) *Dracula* or Mary Shelley's (1791-1851) *Frankenstein*.

As a reaction to Rationalism, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Romantic movement sought inspiration in the mysticism of medieval Europe. Books such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Victor Hugo (1802-1885) or *Génie du christianisme* by François-René de Chateaubriand (1768 -1848) fuelled interest in that era all across Europe.

In time, academic books also followed. For example, Emile Mâle (1862 – 1954) and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814 – 1879) published compendia of medieval art. This gave rise to a more objective view of medieval visual language. This in turn inspired 19th-century architects, artists and designers, ushering in the age of Neogothic art. Influenced by Thomas Chippendale, Augustus Pugin, Jean-Baptiste De Béthune and others, a movement emerged that would develop historicizing architectural designs, interiors and artworks.

Visitors will find books that illustrate these trends on tables in the exhibition room.

ACCOMPANYING QUOTATIONS

“Despite its barbaric proportions, the Gothic order has a beauty that is proper to it alone.”

François-René de Chateaubriand, 1802

“If a man who has made masterpieces tells us that cathedrals are sublime, that we should behold them through tears of joy, then we may take him at his word.”

Émile Mâle, 1914

“Undoubtedly, the church of Notre Dame in Paris continues to be a majestic and sublime building [...] there are certainly few architectonic examples more beautiful than this façade [...] with those two massive black towers [...] with their innumerable details of statues, sculpture and carving [...] in a manner of speaking an enormous symphony in stone; a colossal work of one man and one people [...]” “[...] the wondrous result of the efforts of all the powers of an age...”

Victor Hugo, 1831

“I hope that everyone soon turns their attention to earlier and better times, which must be duly valued. Excellence is only to be found between the ruins of the past. By studying the diligence, talents and feelings of these beautiful but reviled times, art can be reformed, or excellence regained.”

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, 1836

“There is nobody who is not surprised, moved or charmed by the fertile imagination of our old masters of the thirteenth century, by the peculiarity and diversity of their designs. Each one found what he sought according to his temperament [...].”

Louis Goussier, 1891

CONSTANTIN MEUNIER BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Constantin Meunier (1831 – 1905) is best remembered today as a socially committed sculptor, even though he spent much of his career painting bourgeois and religious themes in Neogothic and Realist styles. His retreats with the Trappist monks in Westmalle illustrate his attachment to religious spirituality. Due to his experience with monumental religious painting, the Belgian State sent him to Seville in 1882 to copy a Deposition by the 16th-century painter Pedro Campaña. In other words, he was very familiar with the Gothic idiom and Gothic iconography.

Starting in the 1880s, Meunier's artistic practice evolved towards sculpture. He swapped religious subjects for socially inspired themes, often drawing on medieval representations from the history of art. He infused religious motifs and iconography with the concerns of his age, and thus imbued his contemporary sculptures with a lasting relevance.

An example of this is *Firedamp*. The sculpture depicts a mother grieving over her dead son after the mine disaster at La Boule coalmine in the Borinage in 1887. The representation of the mother mourning the loss of her son recalls the traditional representation from the history of art of the Pietà, the mourning of Christ by Mary. The relationship with the latter type of sculpture is emphasized by the loincloth worn by the otherwise naked son and the wounds in his side. The fact that the son is shown in recumbent position likewise harks back to medieval representations of the Pietà and Christ in the tomb. Meunier thus brings tradition and topicality together in the sculpture. As with the traditional Pietà, Meunier asks the viewer to empathize with the mother's suffering at the death of her son.

ACCOMPANYING QUOTATIONS

“Just like the expressiveness of ancient Greek temples and just like the thirteenth-century church portals of Chartres, Amiens, or Bourges, monumental cycles that radiate a common ideal, the work Meunier is not the meticulous representation of a piece of nature, but embodies a widely shared mentality.”

August Vermeylen, 1903

“Who has not admired the Births, the Virgins and Child, the Flights into Egypt, the Crowning with Thorns, the Sacraments, the Journeys of the Apostles, the Depositions from the Cross, and the Women at the Tomb one hundred times!? Can Bacchanalia, Venus Festivals, ecstasies, metamorphoses touch the heart as the images from the Scriptures do?”

François-René de Chateaubriand, 1802

“The study of the art of the Middle Ages is an inexhaustible source full of daring, original ideas that keep the imagination alive; this study obliges us to search incessantly and it consequently develops the intelligence of the artist in a powerful manner. [...]”

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 1854-1868

AUGUSTE RODIN

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In his work *Les Cathédrales de France* (*The Cathedrals of France*, 1914), Auguste Rodin (1840 -1917) referred to medieval sculptors as his real masters. He was particularly interested in the art of the Late Middle Ages. In contrast to the art of the thirteenth century, which only depicted the glorious aspects of Christianity, that of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries took suffering and pain as its main subject.

The Burghers of Calais and *Christ and Mary Magdalene* were high points in Rodin's career. They were made during his tours of France, Belgium and Italy, where he studied late medieval representations of Christ's suffering.

Rodin refused to soften the depiction of suffering in his works. In this respect, his art differs both from the heroic artistic concept of Greek antiquity, which was opposed to jeopardizing the equilibrium of the human body through extreme representations of pain, as well as from the nineteenth-century ideal of beauty promoted by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. In the art of the Middle Ages, Rodin found a freedom of expression that did align with his artistic vision.

Rodin also defended a personal point of view in the discussion of the 'aesthetic of the ugly' that had been proposed by Eugène Delacroix (1789 – 1863), Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) and others in the nineteenth century. According to Rodin, ugliness does not exist in nature; it only appears only in the process of an artistic creation that attempts to idealize nature. For Rodin, just as for medieval artists, the study of nature is the only starting point. In respecting these principles, Rodin created his *Burghers of Calais* and *Monument to Balzac*, which were both criticized for their 'ugly' expression.

ACCOMPANYING QUOTATIONS

“To my contemporaries, I am a bridge that unites the two shores, the past and the present. I have often seen the crowds hesitate when faced with these enormous constructions of Gothic architecture, wondering whether they are genuinely beautiful. May they be in agreement with me, and with Ruskin, and with so many other masters, when they say that this architecture is indeed of a sublime beauty.”

Auguste Rodin, 1914

“Under the chisel of an artist, Christ becomes more vivified in death than a living man. The ingenuity of certain expressions sometimes enhances this effect to such an extent that it causes a shudder of revulsion. I remember a statue of Christ, in a church on Hoogstraat in Brussels: it is no longer the bearer of love, there is only suffering.”

Auguste Rodin, 1914

“Have I not come a little closer to you, Greek masters, Gothic masters, with the statue of Balzac, of which one might say whatever one wills, but which is nevertheless an important step for open-air sculpture?”

Auguste Rodin, 1914

“...the faces are real, ugly, or whatever else. But one idea transforms them. The tragedy of their sacrifice imbues them with a strange sort of grandeur, and they become beautiful because their soul is beautiful.”

Camille Mauclair, undated

GEORGE MINNE

PORTRAIT OF A SPIRITUAL LIFE

Even during his own lifetime, George Minne (1866 – 1941) was described as a ‘Gothic soul’. The influence of the Middle Ages on his work is unmistakable and the relationship between his oeuvre and the Middle Ages manifests itself in various ways.

Minne’s sculptures are reminiscent of the bodies depicted by the Flemish Masters. His figures are frail, ethereal almost, unlike the powerful bodies created by Rodin and Meunier. Minne likewise drew inspiration from the Middle Ages iconographically. For example, the *Man with the Water Sack* derives from the iconography of John the Baptist, while the recurrent theme of the mother and child, which abounds in his work, references illustrations and sculptures of medieval Madonnas.

In addition to working as a sculptor, Minne also illustrated books for the symbolists Maurice Maeterlinck (1862 -1949) and Emile Verhaeren (1855 -1916). Like Minne’s illustrations, the texts also clearly show a nostalgia for the Middle Ages.

ACCOMPANYING QUOTATIONS

“If the sculptors of the Middle Ages celebrated the maternal smile with such ingenuity, it is because they knelt before the Virgin while smiling at her child. Art, to reach great heights, must be sustained by religious passion.”

Paul Gsell, 1923

“Minne is thoroughly Flemish; [...] a Catholic Belgian; [...] But one need not know this personal trait to be able to identify Minne’s Gothic tendencies. As a Flemish, Catholicism is equated for him with Gothic, a style that connects him the most solemn, holiest artistic tradition in the Low Countries.”

Julius Meier-Graefe, 1898

“George Minne is the great depicter of pain. He is descended in a direct line from those admirable Flemish artists of the Burgundian period, of which the most brilliant was the extraordinary Claus Sluter.”

Maurice Maeterlinck, 1923

PLEURANTS MEDIEVAL AND MODERN ICONS

The pleurant – or weeper – is one of the most iconic medieval themes. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, these figures decorated the tombs of the French and Burgundian high nobility.

Pleurants are mourners, usually sunk in prayer as they seemingly accompany the deceased in a funeral cortege. By adding them to the tomb, the deceased could be sure that he or she would be remembered even after death. This idea ties in with the *Ars moriendi* or the art of a good death, an important precept in the late Middle Ages.

The expressive images had a profound influence on nineteenth-century artists. For example, we know that Auguste Rodin not only made studies of pleurants in Parisian museums, but he also had a pleurant from the tomb of the Duc de Berry in his own collection.

There are visible similarities between medieval pleurants and the figures in Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*. Minne's *Three Women at the Tomb* and Meunier's *Sorrow* are likewise clearly based on this motif.

ACCOMPANYING QUOTATIONS

“But I first stop in my little museum, where there are beautiful works from all time periods. [...] These plaster casts, these marbles speak to me, remind me of my pilgrimages to all the cathedrals of France. [...] the souls of the Masters educate and improve my own.”

Auguste Rodin, 1914

“The single figures appear solemn in their simplicity and size. One thinks of Donatello and perhaps even more of the prophets by Claus Sluter in the Charterhouse in Dijon.”

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1903

“In sum, one cannot demand of the sculpture of the Middle Ages models to be imitated, just as one cannot ask this of the Greek arts. It is about the principles on which these arts are based, the truths that they were able to approach, the way in which they represented the ideas and feelings of their age. Let us do as they did, not what they did.”

Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 1854 - 1868

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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PLAN YOUR ROUTE TO THE MUSEUM

→ **By bicycle**

Cyclists are welcome. You can park your bike safely and securely in the bike racks under Rector de Somer Square, only a 2-minute walk from the museum.

→ **By public transport**

The museum is a 10-minute walk from Leuven train station. If you come by bus, the closest stop is Rector de Somer Square. You can find the easiest route via Google maps.

→ **By car**

The new circulation plan will direct you to the car parks in Leuven via various loops. If you would prefer to avoid traffic in the city centre, you can park in one of the car parks on the edge of the city and take the bus to the centre for free. Would you prefer to park nearby? The Ladeuze car park is only a 2-minute walk from the museum.

Click [here](#) for more information about the circulation plan and all the parking options in the city.

→ **By coach**

For all information regarding driving a coach in the city centre of Leuven, [click here](#).

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