

MICHEL COXCIE

The Flemish Raphael

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Michiel Coxcie, right wing *St. Luke Altarpiece*, *Saint John the Evangelist*
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Michiel Coxcie, *Saint Cecilia* © Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

M – Museum Leuven presents the very first retrospective exhibition devoted to the Flemish master Michiel Coxcie (1499 – 1592) from 31st October 2013 until 23rd February 2014. Michiel Coxcie was one of the most influential painters in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. His nickname the ‘*Flemish Raphael*’ illustrates just how highly his talent was rated at that time. During his lifetime he was compared to the greatest Italian renaissance artist Raphael.

Exhibition curators:

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INTRODUCTION

Though few people today are familiar with his name, Michiel Coxcie was probably one of the most important painters in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century. His nickname, the "*Flemish Raphael*", illustrates just how highly his art was rated. He was compared to the greatest renaissance master and regarded by some as his match. The position Coxcie occupied was on a par with that of Rubens and other great masters.

Coxcie was born at the end of the fifteenth century and died in 1592 at the age of 93 following a fall from scaffolding. He was restoring one of his paintings in the Town Hall in Antwerp when he lost his balance. So his career spanned almost the whole of the tumultuous sixteenth century: from the Reformation and the Iconoclasm to the Catholic answer to that. Artistically he was a living link between the Flemish Primitives and the baroque. When he was born, Gerard David was still active and Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516) was at the height of his powers. When Coxcie died, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) was training in Antwerp.

Coxcie trained in Bernard van Orley's studio in Brussels in the 1520s, then moved to Italy where he was to spend about ten years studying the art of classical antiquity and mastering the style of the High Renaissance. During those years in Rome he came into contact with Vasari and Michelangelo and his reputation earned him commissions in the Church of Santa Maria dell'Anima and St Peter's Basilica. Recognition of his work brought him membership of the Compagnia di San Luca in Rome, an honour conferred on no other *Fiamminghi* before him.

In 1539 he returned to the Netherlands, a Messiah of renaissance art. Almost immediately he became the favourite of Charles V and Margaret of Hungary and in that capacity he was given the honour of, for example, working with Titian on tapestries for the Royal Palace in Binche. Coxcie designed many tapestries and stained-glass windows for the Hapsburg dynasty. For Philip II he painted the famous copy of the *Ghent Altarpiece (Adoration of the Mystic Lamb)*. During the first decades of the Dutch Revolt (1568-1648) Coxcie sided resolutely with the Catholics. After the Iconoclasm that decision brought him commissions for scores of new altarpieces in (among other places) Antwerp, Mechelen and Brussels. Few commanded so much respect as Coxcie and few had so much influence on their contemporaries. Even in the seventeenth century, artists – and not least Rubens - reworked his inventions.

And yet ... After his death Michiel Coxcie's reputation gradually went downhill. In his influential '*Schilder-Boeck (Book of Painters)*' published in 1604, Karel van Mander, a Flemish painter who had taken refuge in Haarlem because of his Protestant faith, reproached Coxcie for aping Raphael and not being very creative with the knowledge and skill he had acquired in Italy. After the publication of Van Mander's book, Coxcie's label as a slavish imitator of Raphael stuck. Even in recently published art history reference works those clichés are repeated without critical substantiation.

This exhibition sets out to rectify that historical misconception and to restore the talented artist to his rightful place in the pantheon of the history of art. By bringing back together a selective cross-section of his works, the exhibition curators are looking to put the spotlight back on the master's multifaceted creativity and give visitors some idea of the tremendous impact he had on the visual language of art in the

Netherlands. He laid the foundations on which great masters like Rubens and Van Dyck later built their reputations.

To this end, works by Michiel Coxcie have been brought over to Leuven from (among other places) New York, London, Berlin, Munich, Madrid, Brussels and Antwerp. Museums and private art collectors all over the world have readily cooperated on an exhibition that sets out to give the forgotten master back the place that is rightly his.

MICHIEL COXCIE AND THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The sixteenth century was this region's golden age. Flanders was in the spotlight of political developments and the centre of trade in Northern Europe. It was the place where the new ideas of Erasmus, Lipsius and More came to light. Brussels was the Mecca for tapestry production and achieved a level of excellence that would never again be equalled. The very first international art market developed in Antwerp. But then we arrive at an extraordinary conclusion: these days paintings from sixteenth-century Flanders are almost unknown. The only name the general public is familiar with is Brueghel. Yet the painters in that period were no less talented than the Flemish Primitives or Peter Paul Rubens and his circle.

Despite being one of the most important painters in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, Michiel Coxcie is one of those artists whose name disappeared into the annals of history. Coxcie acquired great fame in the years he spent in Italy, where he had access to the most notable art collections and was a member of Michelangelo's small exclusive circle. In the decade he spent in the Eternal City, he saw and studied so much that he not only fully understood the style of the High Renaissance, but he also became thoroughly acquainted with the classics. This knowledge shaped him as an artist and was to make him one of the great masters of the sixteenth century.

MICHIEL COXCIE THE FLEMISH RAPHAEL

His training in Flanders

Almost nothing is known of the early years of Michiel Coxcie's life. From later sources, the year of his birth can indirectly be deduced as 1499 and we can assume that he was of Mechelen origin. His training is also shrouded in uncertainty. Everything, however, points to the studio of the Brussels master Bernard van Orley. There are several arguments to support this. For example, during their stay in Rome Bernard van Orley and Coxcie enjoyed the favour of the same patron, the powerful Dutch cardinal Willem van Enckevoirt (1464-1534). So when Coxcie was planning to travel to Italy, it is not inconceivable that van Orley recommended his pupil to his former patron. Michiel Coxcie also took over the design commission for the stained-glass windows for the Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula in Brussels from Bernard van Orley. And in 1604 the artists' biographer Karel van Mander mentions in his famous '*Schilder-Boeck*' that Coxcie trained under "Bernard van Brussel".

The call of Italy

In 1516 the design cartoons Raphael had made for a set of ten tapestries arrived in Brussels. Pope Leo X (1475-1521) had commissioned them for the Sistine Chapel. In those days Brussels was home to the best weavers and this important commission went to the workshop of master weaver Pieter van Aelst (ca. 1450-1531). The design cartoons brought the art of the High Renaissance to the Netherlands for the first time, and they were by no lesser an artist than the great Raphael. Artists like Bernard van Orley could now study the new style. But clearly that was not enough, because several artists set off over the Alps to see the classics for themselves. They were not the first. It is assumed that Jan van Eyck made the journey to Italy and Jan van Scorel (1495-1562) spent several months there in 1508. Pieter Coecke van Aelst (in 1525-1526) was also an early visitor to Rome. But Michiel Coxcie was the first to settle in Italy for a long period.

The earliest evidence of Michiel Coxcie dates from his Roman period. The famous artists' biographer Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) knew Coxcie personally and was aware that Coxcie had painted the frescos in the Church of Santa Maria dell'Anima at the request of Cardinal van Enckevoirt. The frescos were probably painted around 1531. The fresco technique was a typical painting technique of the Italian Renaissance. As the damp climate of the North did not lend itself to frescos, Coxcie must have learned this relatively difficult technique south of the Alps, which suggests that he had already been in Italy for some time when he began work on the commission. It signalled his breakthrough in the Eternal City. After that he had the great privilege of being made one of the first Flemish members of the *Compagnia di San Luca*, the guild of painters of the city of the High Renaissance. Coxcie remained in Italy until the end of the 1530s and during that time executed several remarkable commissions. For example, he was involved in decorating the new St Peter's Basilica. Sadly, the frescos he made for Christianity's first Basilica Major did not survive. The walls on which Coxcie had made his frescos had to be sacrificed to the many alterations carried out between 1506 - when building work on the new St Peter's began - and its consecration in 1626. They do, however, show that Coxcie was indeed rated in Rome.

In the exhibition...

The ***Plato's cave*** panel (**Gallery 21**) is an enigmatic work. For a long time it hung unnoticed in a corner of the Musée de la Chartreuse in Douai. The attribution was problematic: the style of a Flemish master, but painted on a thick poplar wood panel. In Flanders the superior Baltic oak was used almost exclusively, while poplar was used in the drier Italy. We can now attribute this work to Michiel Coxcie. The poplar wood provided the first clue, for we know that Coxcie was the first Flemish master to spend an extended period in Italy. But the decisive argument for the attribution is the way the heads are executed. It shouts Coxcie!

This painting can in fact be seen as **Michiel Coxcie's artistic manifesto**. In this work Coxcie plays a game with the observer. In his composition and in the postures of the figures he refers to his models, the classics and contemporaries in Rome. For example, we recognize *Torso Belvédère*, Trajan's Column and the *Dying Gaul* sculpture from classical antiquity. He did not hesitate to borrow poses from Michelangelo either, as he had seen them in the drawing of the *Battle of Cascina* and the statue of the *Rebellious Slave*. With this painting Coxcie shows that he knows his classics and that he has also mastered classical philosophy. It affirms Coxcie as a cultured and humanistic artist, who sensed the spirit of the age and reproduced it well.

Return to the Netherlands

On an artistic level his return to the Netherlands in 1540 was a veritable triumph. Back home Michiel Coxcie painted ***The Holy Kinship (Gallery 21)***, a monumental altarpiece and certainly the most important work of Michiel Coxcie's career. It must have made a tremendous impression on its viewers. Unlike Raphael's cartoons in the weaving workshop in Brussels, the altarpiece could be seen by everyone. For the first time the general public in the Netherlands could view a work that fully reflected the new Italian style. Its hitherto unseen monumentality must have caused a sensation, for it was the general public's first confrontation with the grand, monumental style of the High Renaissance, a style based on a first-hand knowledge of the classics and embodying all the innovations of Raphael, Da Vinci and Michelangelo. People were used to the detailed execution of elegant figures by the Flemish Primitives and altarpieces by mannerists such as Jan Rombouts (ca. 1480-1535): a rather hybrid style which still used the idiom of the generation of Dieric Bouts, yet introduced several decorative elements from the Renaissance. The impact of the altarpiece not only makes it a key work in the history of art in the Netherlands, it also gave Coxcie's career wings.

The altarpiece was made for the chapel of the Antwerp Hosiers' Guild in the Church of Our Lady. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the altarpiece was transferred to Emperor Rudolf II's collections in Austria. Not long after that the triptych was taken to Kremsmunster monastery, where it is preserved to this day. The monumental work *The Holy Kinship* can be admired at M for the duration of the exhibition.

In the exhibition...

The central panel ***The Holy Kinship (Gallery 21)*** shows Mary with her mother Anne, Christ and John the Baptist. The central scene, surrounded by many figures, is set in breath-taking renaissance architecture and is extremely interesting. The group of figures contains several direct references to compositions of paintings by Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael. It is no accident that Coxcie used these compositions. At the time they were well-known images which were often copied, and because they were so recognizable they made a deep impression on the viewer. Coxcie may have reused several compositions, yet they are not literal or gratuitous borrowings. Not only does he succeed in fitting everything into a homogeneous composition, but he also refers, almost *en passant*, to an ancient tradition of profile portraits, borne by amoretti, to emphasize the virtuousness of those portrayed. It illustrates once again the way Coxcie made use of images partly to draw the viewer's attention and partly to add additional layers of meaning.

In the exhibition...

Coxcie was also a graphic artist. The relatively new medium of printing had the advantage that images could easily be produced in large print runs. For example, Coxcie made an important contribution to the spread of the Renaissance in the North by designing the set of prints on the theme of ***Amor and Psyche (Gallery 21)***. This set of 32 prints, engraved by Agostino Veneziano (ca. 1490-ca. 1540) and the Master of the Die, was published by Antonio Salamanca (1479-1562). The series was an inexhaustible source of forms, so that artists all over Europe used them for their compositions. Coxcie himself had based a series on the frescos which Raphael had made in the Loggia of Eros and Psyche at the Villa Farnesina. Coxcie also made other designs, including the erotic series ***The loves of Jupiter***, which will also be on display at M (**Gallery 22**).

Court painter

In 1546 an invoice was drawn up in which Coxcie is referred to as: “*Meester Machiel, schildere des Coninclycke Majesteyt*” – *Master Michael, painter to his Royal Majesty*. We don't know when Coxcie became court painter to the Hapsburg dynasty, but there are clues. Bernard van Orley died in 1541, leaving the position of court painter vacant. At that time van Orley had only just begun work on the prestigious commission of designing the stained-glass windows for the Chapel of the Hapsburgers in the **Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula in Brussels** (see Michiel Coxcie in Brussels).

In the exhibition...

Triptych with the triumph of Christ and the donor's family Morillon (Gallery 25) Coxcie became one of the most respected painters in the Netherlands. He was Charles V's favourite painter and then he became court painter to Philip II. This great honour boosted his career. In that capacity, comparable to the status Peter Paul Rubens was to enjoy a century later, he was granted commissions by leading individuals and institutions. An example is the triptych he made for Guy Morillon from Burgundy. Morillon was one of Leuven's foremost dignitaries. Not only was he Charles V's secretary, he was also professor at the Collegium Trilingue and a friend of Erasmus.

The triptych **from the collection belonging to M – Museum Leuven** was probably commissioned by Maximiliaan Morillon between 1556 and 1567 to commemorate his father, Guy. It was destined for St Peter's Church. The triptych is somewhat hybrid in character. Michiel Coxcie's style in the central panel depicting Christ, Peter and Paul is recognizable. The monumental figure of Christ flanked by two saints dominates the composition. Yet the proportions of the bodies seem to be flawed: the hands are too large in comparison with the heads. The explanation for this can be found in another work in the M collection. In the painting by Wolfgang De Smet (1617-1685) depicting the interior of St Peter's Church, the Morillon triptych can be seen on the first column on the left. The work hangs at a height of just over two metres. So Coxcie had to make a perspective correction in the composition on the central panel. The side panels however follow the tradition of the Flemish donor portraits. For these sorts of paintings serving a commemorative purpose it was important to fulfil the expectations of the viewer, so that he understood what the intention was. For the side panels Coxcie had to conform to tradition.

Coxcie and the old masters

Philip II (1527-1598) inherited his father's confidence in Michiel Coxcie and gave him his most exciting commissions. It is no coincidence that the king of Spain commissioned Coxcie to make a faithful copy of the ***Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (Gallery 26)***. Coxcie, who at the time was 56 years old, had learned both the painting tradition and the techniques of the Flemish Primitives in the studio of Bernard van Orley and won his spurs with his copy of Rogier van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross* for Mary of Hungary. So he was the ideal choice for this commission. Coxcie worked on the copy of the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* in the Vijdt Chapel in Ghent Cathedral from 1556 to 1558. According to the seventeenth-century writer Isaac Bullart (1599-1672), Coxcie had Titian send ultramarine pigment from Venice because Coxcie could not find the right blue in the Netherlands and he was paid the handsome sum of 2,000 ducats for making the copy. That was a fortune in those days and the fact that Coxcie was prepared to take on the challenge also attests to his confidence in his ability. In later centuries the copy of the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* was to become Coxcie's most famous work.

In the exhibition...

In the nineteenth century Coxcie's panels of the ***Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (Gallery 26)*** were dispersed all over Europe. Today there are parts in Berlin, Brussels and Munich. They are being reunited for the first time for this exhibition. When compared to the original, it is clear that it is not a slavish copy. Coxcie smuggled several renaissance elements into the composition. For example, he changed the donor portraits on the outer panels into four grisailles depicting the Evangelists. And though these figures are in keeping with van Eyck's stylistic idiom, Coxcie reproduced them in a contraposto position, a typical renaissance convention.

In the exhibition...

A small panel from a private collection shows the figure of ***Saint John the Baptist (Gallery 21)*** as a young man in a rocky landscape. It is a copy of a work that is attributed to Raphael. A comparison of the two pictures reveals why Coxcie was so highly rated by his contemporaries. The figure of John the Baptist is consistent with the Italian style and shows an artist who has fully understood the basic principles of Italian renaissance painting. But the composition is not purely Italian because Coxcie depicts the saint in a typically Flemish landscape. In terms of perspective and anatomy, sixteenth-century Italian painters led the field. But when it came to painting landscapes, depicting textiles and other matter, the Low Countries were by far the best and their use of colour was unrivalled. This little work by Coxcie shows a master who bridged the gap between the two schools of painting. He uses the best of both worlds and integrates it into his own synthesis of the Renaissance.

The devastation wreaked by the Iconoclasm

In 1566 the Iconoclasm swept across the Netherlands. The beginning of the sixteenth century saw the growth of a general dissatisfaction with the Church as an institution because of the dogmatic attitude to dissenters, the ostentation of the popes, the nepotism and the sale of indulgences. Critical theologians Desiderius Erasmus, Maarten Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) expressed their aversion to such abuses, either diplomatically or confrontationally. The intention of the Church's attempts to reform was not schism, but the revision of ecclesiastical practices. Rome tried aggressively to limit the damage. What followed was one of the most far-reaching propaganda and media wars in European history and it related to the use of images. The second of the Ten Commandments expressly forbids idolatry and the manufacture of graven images of God or any creature. The Protestant reformers, and then Calvin in particular, based their ban on images on that Commandment and they began with a full-blown attack on the use of images of saints in churches. From the 1520s statues and images were regularly damaged or destroyed in Europe. In 1566 it was the turn of the Netherlands.

Coxcie's reaction is noteworthy: "*met eenen deeghe an dlijf enwilde tbeelstromen beletten.*" He literally wanted to take up arms against the heretics and iconoclasts but was prevented from doing so. Many of Coxcie's works were lost in the Iconoclasm.

However, the Iconoclasm also had a silver lining for the artist. The churches were empty and in urgent need of new altarpieces. Though by this time Coxcie was a very old man, he was still the artist invited to carry out these commissions. The quality of Coxcie's work declined in this period and he no longer achieved the artistic standard of his output in the middle of the century. We might also wonder how much of the work he actually did himself and how much he delegated to the studio and his son Raphael.

In the exhibition...

Coxcie witnessed the Reformation and the Iconoclasm from close to. He always remained loyal to Rome and the Hapsburgers and he never made a secret of that. The **Self-portrait as Saint George (Gallery 24)** is a good example. The story of St George derives from the *Legenda Aurea*, a thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives. St George is not a contemplative saint who overcame evil with prayer or meditation, but a chivalrous saint who captures our imagination because of the way he courageously attacked the dragon with lance and sword. St George symbolizes the protector of the true Church and he was held up as a figure to inspire people to follow him in defence of the true faith. In the light of the sixteenth century, it had real significance of course. Coxcie clearly identified with the protector of the Church. But there are other layers of meaning too. St George is depicted with a red scarf over his left shoulder, a sign of the military rank of general. In his hand is a broken lance, the end of which is stuck in the dragon. He is holding the lance as if it was a staff of office. The two symbols refer not to the saint but to the general of the Spanish troops in the Netherlands: the Duke of Alva. This reference must have been obvious to the people, not least because the duke often had himself portrayed with these symbols of military honour and wearing a similar suit of armour. So the person depicted is really an amalgamation of three people: St George, the Duke of Alva and the painter Coxcie. A clear political statement that Coxcie is and will remain loyal to the Catholic Church and the Hapsburgers.

Coxcie sided firmly with the Catholics in the propaganda war between Rome and the reformers. The choice was probably not only an ideological one, but also prompted by the fact that the Hapsburg house was his main source of commissions.

Why we forgot him

In his day Michiel Coxcie was a celebrated painter who was granted the most prestigious commissions, but today the general public and even most art connoisseurs don't even know his name. There are several reasons for this.

In 1604 Karel van Mander published his famous '*Schilder-Boeck*' containing the biographies of all the famous artists. It goes without saying that he devoted a chapter to Michiel Coxcie. That text is one of the most important written about Coxcie, not only because Van Mander lived at the same time as Coxcie and consequently must have gained a great deal of first-hand information about him, but also because many authors based their opinion of Coxcie on Van Mander. The latter writes that Coxcie was furious at the print publisher Hieronymus Cock (1518-1570) for publishing a print of Raphael's *The School of Athens*, for everyone in the Netherlands would see where Coxcie got his ideas for his innovative compositions. We can read in-between the lines that Van Mander did not rate Coxcie very highly. He regarded him as no more than a creditable copyist rather than as an imaginative and original artist. This opinion was later adopted by various authors. But during the *ancien régime* this was not necessarily a negative judgment. For some Coxcie was most definitely a great artist because he had understood the importance of the Italian Renaissance pretty well immediately.

With the rise of cultural nationalism in the nineteenth century, highly critical texts about Coxcie appeared. He was reproached for not remaining loyal to the real Flemish style of the Primitives and for corrupting it with pernicious influences from the south. Along with the other 'Romanists' like Bernard van Orley and Frans Francken, he was portrayed as the generation responsible for the decline of Flemish painting. This view influenced the modern-day attitude to Coxcie. The fact is that in the course of the twentieth century Coxcie was written off as an insensitive mannerist of little consequence.

There are other reasons, too, for the decline of Michiel Coxcie's reputation. For a long time the copy of the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* was his most famous painting. The fact that it was a copy of an iconic work by another artist from a different period meant that there was no image that referred solely to Coxcie, like Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* or Michelangelo's *David*. In other words, there was no logo for the Coxcie brand, no clear identification. This of course reinforced the idea that Coxcie was only a soulless copyist and not an imaginative artist.

A second element is much more prosaic. Most of the works which are accessible to the public give a one-sided picture of the painter's output. In the last quarter of the sixteenth century and particularly after the Fall of Antwerp in 1585, Coxcie received numerous commissions to decorate churches. But by that time the painter was very advanced in years and most of the work was carried out by his studio, probably under the direction of his son Raphael. Neither the painters in the studio nor his son could match the artistic level of the old master. This resulted in several large altarpieces of a dubious quality. But because they were publicly accessible, it is these very works that helped form the picture we have of Coxcie as an artist. His better works were much less accessible, if they had not been destroyed in the 1566 Iconoclasm. Karel van Mander tells us that Coxcie's best works were abroad. It seems it was a lucrative activity to buy Coxcies in the Netherlands and sell them abroad at a great profit. Consequently, numerous masterpieces are found in art collections in Spain and Germany.

Finally, the whole of the sixteenth century has never been regarded as really important in the history of art in our region. Indeed, it is portrayed as an artistic abyss between the milestone of the Flemish Primitives and the century of Peter Paul Rubens. It was a difficult century in the Netherlands when various ideas and movements existed side by side. It was clearly a transition point. For a long time the century had no 'signboard' for painting. Today that gap is filled by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (ca. 1525-1569), but this is a rather recent phenomenon. Of course, the fact that sixteenth-century painting was ignored for so long did nothing to promote Michiel Coxcie's reputation.

The last few decades, however, have seen a renewed interest in Michiel Coxcie's work, thanks to researchers like Raphael De Smedt and Nicole Dacos. The exhibition at M – Museum Leuven presents the artist to the general public as he was in the sixteenth century. The various masterpieces which are returning to Belgium from abroad for the exhibition and the new insights into his work leave us in no doubt about the master's artistic significance.

EXHIBITION CONCEPT AND TRAIL

The monographic exhibition *Michiel Coxcie. The Flemish Raphael* brings together the master's substantial oeuvre in all its diversity. Monumental altarpieces, paintings, drawings, prints and tapestries by Michiel Coxcie and his contemporaries provide a broad overview of this tumultuous period, which bridged a gap between the Flemish Primitives and the baroque. Rather than being a purely chronological trail, the exhibition takes a themed approach.

Kartsen Weber's **exhibition design was inspired by the renaissance architecture seen in the drawing of the *Grand Salle* at the pleasure palace in Binche**. The subtle, architectural set emphasizes the monumentality and architectural qualities of the museum galleries. This gives the exhibition trail a clear structure and also heightens the experience. In various places the designer experimented with the presentation to give an impression of how the works would originally have been experienced. For example, the ***Morillon triptych (Gallery 25)*** hangs at a height of 2 meters so that Coxcie's perspective correction comes into its own.

In the exhibition...

Michiel Coxcie produced the frescos for the magnificent new Hapsburg Castle in Binche, built at the request of **Mary of Hungary** (1505-1558), regent of the Netherlands and sister of Charles V (1500-1558). Like Coxcie, the architect Jacques Dubroecq (ca. 1505-1584) had lived in Italy and for Binche he designed a veritable renaissance palace. Building work began in 1546 and Coxcie painted the frescos, a skill he had learnt in Italy. Five years later the palace was destroyed. On display in the exhibition is the ***Drawing of the Throne Room at Binche (Gallery 25)***, showing what the interior of the palace looked like. It was a dazzling ensemble of mythological scenes. So even before the Iconoclasm struck, Coxcie knew what it felt like to lose a masterpiece.

Drawing of the Throne Room at Binche
Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels

Gallery 21 + 22

David vs. Goliath. Michiel Coxcie's lost reputation

In the first gallery we stop to consider Michiel Coxcie's later years. *David and Goliath* is like a visual metaphor on the decline of the painter's reputation. This exhibition is looking to restore that reputation, so we should first consider why his name is almost unknown today. The exhibition also looks at the perception and historiography of art and the changing opinions about it through the ages. Also on show in this first gallery are **two drawings which confirm that Rubens really did study the sixteenth-century master**.

Michiel Coxcie
David and Goliath
panel
Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid

Michiel Coxcie and Pieter Paul Rubens
Cain cursed by the Lord
drawing
Courtauld Gallery, London

Michiel Coxcie and Pieter Paul Rubens
Abel slain by Cain
drawing
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

To Rome and back

We know very little about Coxcie's life before his departure for Italy. He probably trained in the studio of the Brussels artist Bernard van Orley (ca. 1490–1541). At the end of the 1520s, Coxcie left for Italy where he spent the next ten years. In Rome he met the artists' biographer and architect Giorgio Vasari and Michelangelo. He studied renaissance art and classical antiquity and painted frescoes in the churches of Santa Maria dell'Anima and St Peter's. On returning to the Low Countries, Coxcie introduced the Flemish public to the Renaissance with his impressive *The Holy Kinship*. The altarpiece brought about nothing short of a visual revolution.

Coxcie Michiel
Plato's cave
panel
Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai

Michiel Coxcie
The Kinship (central panel) and scenes from the life of Saint John the Evangelist
panel
Kunstsammlungen des Stiftes Kremsmünster

Printed and diffused

Advances were made in printing and it gained in popularity during the course of the sixteenth century as engraving proved to be a quick and inexpensive way to diffuse compositions. Coxcie also left behind a small graphic oeuvre. One of his most important graphic series tells the story of *Amor and Psyche*. We know from the biographer Giorgio Vasari that Coxcie made the design sketches. The fact that the series was long attributed to Raphael says something about Coxcie's aptitude. Another series is *The loves of Jupiter*. The artist drew inspiration for both series from stories and works of art from classical antiquity, but also from works treating the same subject by Raphael and Michelangelo.

Michiel Coxcie
La favola di Psiche
print
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart

Michiel Coxcie
Jupiter series
drawing
The British Museum, London

Gilles Coignet
Rape of Europe
panel
Jack Kilgore co. Inc., New York

Painted Light

Bernard van Orley, Michiel Coxcie's teacher, was a successful stained-glass designer. When he died in 1541, Coxcie took over Van Orley's commissions, including the design of four stained-glass windows for the Sacraments Chapel in the Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula in Brussels. The stained-glass windows show emperor Charles V kneeling before the consecrated host with members of his family. The stained-glass windows were designed to glorify the Habsburg dynasty. You can still gaze upon four of Coxcie's stained-glass windows in the Brussels Cathedral. Sadly the same cannot be said of the stained-glass windows Coxcie designed for St Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, but several sketches tell us they did exist.

Gallery 23

Painted for wool and silk

Tapestries were highly prized and very prestigious possessions in the sixteenth century. Sovereigns commissioned these mobile frescoes to decorate their castles and keep out the draughts. Brussels was the most important tapestry production centre in Europe in the sixteenth century. The production process was divided into three stages. First a painter would make a design sketch, known as the *petit patron*. Then came the *cartoon*: a fullsize painting on stout paper. The weaver then translated that design into woven form. The various production stages often make it difficult to attribute a tapestry to one particular artist. We know that Michiel Coxcie was paid by the City of Brussels for designing tapestries. We assume from similarities in style and composition that Coxcie was involved in designing the tapestries and cartoons in this gallery.

Michiel Coxcie
Ovid series: The rape of Ganymede
tapestry
Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid

Michiel Coxcie
The landing of Scipio in Africa
cartoon
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Gallery 24

Master of the Counter-Reformation

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century split the Christian Church in Western Europe. Following decisions made by the Council of Trent, the Counter-Reformation was directed towards countering the effects of the Protestant Reformation and solidifying Catholic doctrines. The Netherlands suffered badly in the conflict and the struggle culminated in the Iconoclasm (1566). Michiel Coxcie was a staunch Catholic and favoured the Habsburgs. In his self-portrait as St George he even compared himself to the Duke of Alva, who was sent to the Netherlands to make an end to the Protestant revolt. Coxcie's portrait left no one in any doubt about which camp he belonged to and that he saw himself as a defender

of the “true faith”. Coxcie became the favourite painter of the young Counter-Reformation in the Netherlands. He went on painting large altarpieces right up until the end of his life.

Michiel Coxcie
Saint George triptych
panel (side panel)
Koninklijke Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerp

Gallery 25

Loved by king and emperor

Michiel Coxcie was the favourite artist of the Habsburgs. They put prestigious commissions his way, like designing the windows for the cathedrals in Brussels and Ghent. In 1548 Coxcie was invited to work alongside the Italian painter Titian decorating Mary of Hungary’s castle at Binche. Coxcie’s visual language was a perfect synthesis of the detailed realism of the Flemish Primitives, the balanced compositions of the Italian renaissance masters and the idealized figures of classical antiquity. This new combination of styles lent itself extremely well to promoting the political and dynastic ambitions of the Habsburgs.

Michiel Coxcie
Morillon triptych
panel
M – Museum Leuven

Gallery 26

Out of the shadow of Van Eyck

Working in the studio of Bernard van Orley at the start of his career, the young Coxcie learnt the secrets of the special oil-painting technique used by the Flemish Primitives. Thanks to that training, later on in his career he was regularly asked to make copies of old masters, a common and honourable practice in the sixteenth century. In 1558 Coxcie completed a copy of Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece / Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* at the request of Philip II. It had taken Coxcie two years. Rather than producing a slavish copy of the polyptych, he introduced a number of improvements. Philip had it moved to Spain. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the polyptych was split up and the various panels divided between several European collections. At M all the preserved panels are back together for the first time.

Michiel Coxcie
Adoration of the Mystic Lamb: Mary and John the Baptist
panel
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Michiel Coxcie
Adoration of the Mystic Lamb front: The Pilgrims; back: Saint Mark
panel
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb front: *Angel musicians*; back: *The Annunciation*
panel

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb front: *The Hermits*; back: *Saint Luke*
panel

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb front: *The Just Judges*; back: *Saint John the Evangelist*
panel

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb front: *The singing angels*; back: *The Archangel Gabriel*
panel

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb front: *The Knights of Christ*; back: *Saint Matthew*
panel

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb: The Adoration of the Lamb
panel

Gemäldegalerie - Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Michiel Coxcie

Adoration of the Mystic Lamb: God the Father
panel

Gemäldegalerie - Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Michiel Coxcie

Side panel(s) of the Saint Luke Altarpiece by Jan Gossaert
panel

The Metropolitan Chapter by St Vitus of Prague

LENDERS

State Archives, Brussels

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Alte Pinakothek, München

The British Museum, London

Redemptoristen Vlaanderen

Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig

Jack Kilgore co. Inc., New York

Kerkfabriek Sint-Baafskathedraal, Ghent

Kerkfabriek St-Jacobs, Ghent

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Koninklijk Bibliotheek van België / Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Brussels

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp

Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai

The Metropolitan Chapter by St. Vitus of Prague

Parochie Sint-Jacob-de-Meerdere, Brugge

Museum Plantin-Moretus/Print Room, Antwerp - Unesco World Heritage site

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Patrimonio Nacional, Escorial, Madrid

Patrimonio Nacional, La Granja, Segovia

Patrimonio Nacional, Palacio Real, Madrid

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Gemäldegalerie - Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

Kunstsammlungen des Stiftes Kremsmünster

The Courtauld Gallery, London

The Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Verzamelingen OCMW / Collections du CPAS, Brussels

MICHEL COXCIE IN BRUSSELS

The **Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium** house two very large triptychs by Michiel Coxcie which cannot travel to Leuven. The monumental masterpieces *Triptych with Scenes from the Life of Christ* and *Triptych of the Brussels Crossbow Guild* will be on show by way of exception in a temporary presentation of works from the museums' collection.

Complementing the retrospective exhibition at M, are the **monumental stained-glass windows** and **altarpieces** by **Michiel Coxcie** on show in the Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula in Brussels.

The exhibition focuses attention on four monumental sixteenth-century stained-glass windows commissioned by none other than Charles V. The four windows are from a series of seven and still in their original location in the Chapel of the Miracle of the Holy Sacrament. When Coxcie's teacher Barend Van Orley died and could not complete the commission, it fell to Michiel Coxcie to finish the designs. Though in keeping with the work of his master, the designs bear the unmistakable hallmark of Coxcie's Italianizing style inspired by the High Renaissance.

The stained-glass windows were an excellent pro-Hapsburg propaganda tool for Charles V, who saw the monumental windows in this important cathedral in Brussels as a way of underlining and legitimizing his power in the Flemish region. The windows depict Charles' powerful forebears and family, to whom he owed his great empire. The use of typical renaissance forms like triumphal arches links Charles V with the mighty emperors of classical antiquity, but also reminds us of the sovereign's 'joyful entries'.

The stained-glass window on which Charles V himself was depicted is one of the three windows from the original series of seven that has not survived. The exhibition will shed light on these lost windows as well as on two other stained-glass windows in the church from the same period.

Michiel Coxcie is also represented in the cathedral by three altarpieces by his hand. The monumental *Crucifixion* in the transept has survived in its original context and in terms of composition bears striking resemblances to the large Hosden Triptych in the M collection. The *Legend of St Gudula* featuring Philip II is Coxcie's last known work. There are also references to the Hapsburg house in *The Last Supper* altarpiece.

PUBLICATIONS

As no substantial monograph or exhibition catalogue on Michiel Coxcie has been published to date, the publication accompanying this project will inevitably become the standard work. So the organizers decided to produce two publications, an exhaustive scientific work as the standard reference work for Michiel Coxcie (Brepols Publishing, in English) and an attractive and accessible exhibition catalogue for the general public (Davidsfonds in Dutch).

Michiel Coxcie. De Vlaamse Rafaël, Koenraad Jonckheere - editor Davidsfonds, 2013 – for sale in the M-shop 19,95 € (ISBN: 978-9063066-59-8)

Michiel Coxcie (1499-1592) and the Giants of His Age, Koenraad Jonckheere (ed.) – editor Brepols, 2013, hardback – for sale in the M-shop 49,90 € (ISBN: 978-1-909400-14-6)

WALKING WITH MICHIEL COXCIE IN LEUVEN

During the tumultuous but fascinating 16th century of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Michiel Coxcie resolutely supported the Catholic side. He painted religious scenes commissioned by and to serve as propaganda for the Catholic Church. One can still find numerous traces of this turbulent period in Leuven's city centre. You will discover some remarkable buildings where the new visual language of the Italian Renaissance timidly gained acceptance.

During this walk, an image of the extremely creative yet very chaotic times in which Michiel Coxcie lived and worked is brought to life.

The route takes you along two churches (i.e. Sint-Pieterskerk and Sint-Geertruikerk) where two of his paintings, the *Morillon triptych* and the *Hosden triptych* - now exhibited in the M - Museum Leuven - were originally located, and gives us an idea of the former home of the family of Guy Morillon, for whom one of these triptychs was commissioned.

You walk past several noteworthy buildings that were carefully renovated during Michiel Coxcie's time to reflect the new design language of the Italian Renaissance.

During the first half of the 16th century, the then young University of Leuven was in full development. The university city was the meeting place of the intellectual avant-garde, i.e. scientists and philosophers who drastically changed the views of man and the world that people held at the time, such as Erasmus (1466/69-1536), Juan Luis Vives (ca. 1492-1540), Mercator (1512-1594), Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), Justus Lipsius (1547-1606) and many of Michiel Coxcie's other illustrious contemporaries. We will also see various evidence of these people during the walk.

Map of the Coxcie Walk €1 | available from Tourism Leuven, Naamsestraat 3. Leuven and in M – Museum Leuven, in EN, NL, FR, D and SP

Coxcie Walk for groups accompanied by a guide: reservation +32 (0)16 27 22 76 or visit@leuven.be

ADDRESSES

31 October 2013 >< 23 February 2014

Exhibition Michiel Coxcie. The Flemisch Raphael

M – Museum Leuven

Vanderkelenstraat 28

3000 Leuven

tel. 016 27 29 29

www.coxcie.be

Open: Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, 11:00 till 18:00, Thursday 11:00 till 22:00

Closed: Wednesday

Stained-glass windows and altarpieces by Michiel Coxcie

Cathedral of Saint-Michael and Saint-Gudula

Sint-Goedelevoorplein - Parvis Sainte-Gudule

1000 Brussels

www.cathedralestmichel.be

Open: Monday to Friday, from 7:00 till 18:00, Saturday from 8:00 till 18:00 (visit from 8:00 till 15:30 only),

Sunday from 8:00 till 18:00 (visit from 14:00 only)

Large triptychs by Michiel Coxcie

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium - Oldmasters Museum

Regentschapsstraat 3 rue de la Régence

1000 Brussels

tel. 02 508 32 11

www.fine-arts-museum.be

Open: Tuesday to Sunday from 10:00 till 17:00

Closed: Monday



M VAN
**MUSEUM
LEUVEN**

M - Museum Leuven
L. Vanderkelenstraat 28
3000 Leuven - Belgium
tel. 016 27 29 29
m@leuven.be
www.mleuven.be

OPEN

Monday, Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, 11:00 till 18:00 - Thursday 11:00 till 22:00
Closed: Wednesday

TICKETS

Individual visitors: 12 €* concessions & groups: 10 €* < 26j: 5 € children <13j: free

* **audiotour included** (available in EN, FR, D and G)

B-Excursions: train + entry ticket M

Travel advantageously to Leuven for a visit to the exhibition. The B-Excursion ticket includes your return journey in 2nd class and the admission to the exhibition and to M – Museum Leuven.

On sale in every Belgian train station.

Group excursions: Contact Center NMBS Mobility tel. + (0)2 528 28 28

www.sncb.be



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PRESS IMAGES

Can be downloaded from the online press room of M – Museum Leuven **<http://mleuven.prezly.com>**

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