

CONTEMPORARY ART IN FLANDERS

No art history of the western hemisphere would be complete without Flanders. Or at least it would have looked very different without it, in any event. The Flemish Masters – Jan van Eyck, Peter Brueghel and Peter Paul Rubens – set the ball rolling many centuries ago. Today, their many contemporary successors continue their rich tradition: leading contemporary artists in addition to an amazing array of museums, galleries and festivals, biennial exhibitions and exhibition spaces.

1. A breeding ground for artistic talent

Flanders has exceptional artistic power and appeal. We owe this to our history: a tradition of visual artists spanning the centuries. Artistic figureheads such as van Eyck, Brueghel and Rubens continue to inspire today's artists. And the same applies to their artistic heirs, including Anthony van Dyck and later James Ensor and Léon Spilliaert. As well as twentieth-century artists as Constant Permeke, René Magritte, Marcel Broodthaers, Luc Tuymans and Francis Alÿs.

New artistic talent is born here, generation after generation. And once again, this talent develops into a new generation of leading international artists. Their prowess is not limited to the classic arts, at which the original Flemish Masters excelled. Today's artists experiment with a wide range of materials and media: painting, sculpture, graphic design, film, video, installations, etc.

The first important contemporary art movement emerged shortly after World War II. Masters such as Roger Raveel, Raoul De Keyser, Panamarenko, Guillaume Bijl and Lili Dujourie expressed their critique of modernity and the significance of images in their paintings and sculptures.

Experimentation really took off in the eighties, however. Artists such as Luc Tuymans, Anne-Mie Van Kerckhove, Jan Fabre, Thierry De Cordier and Berlinde De Bruyckere redefined images in painting, photography and contemporary materials. At the same time, artists such as Wim Delvoye reflect on our contemporary industrial society in their unique installations and sculptures.

Subsequent generations pursued this quest. Whereas leading painters such as Michaël Borremans and Koen van den Broeck explore the image as a concept in their preferred discipline, their peers/contemporaries have turned to other media. Ann Veronica Janssens, Jan De Cock and Joëlle Tuerlinckx focus on objects, sculptures and installations. Photography as a medium has also garnered interest thanks to such leading lights as Carl De Keyser, while masters such as David Claerbout and Nicolas Provost concentrate on video and film. Another segment, with such artists as Guy Van Belle and Koen Van Mechelen, transcends interdisciplinary boundaries to work with new media, science and technology.

Summing up an artist in one word is difficult, particularly in Flanders. Our region is famous for its many inter-disciplinary artists. Artists that come to mind include Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus or Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in dance. Ivo Van Hove and Kris Defoort in theatre and Dries Van Noten, Martin Margiela or Ann Demeulemeester in fashion. Or all-rounders, such as Jan Fabre, who wind their way through various different disciplines. In Flanders we don't believe in pigeonholing. Artists move freely between disciplines, making the creative cross-pollination, all the more fertile. Something that is also evidenced in Flanders' museums and theatres: old and contemporary art, music, dance, performance, visual arts, fashion and design all blend in with each other.

2. Flemish art cities: uniquely diverse heritage combined with an offering of contemporary art

Flanders is a bit of an outlier. It is situated at the crossroads of Romanesque and Germanic culture and has traditionally been a meeting point for the Netherlands, Great Britain, France and Germany. It is therefore the perfect place to contribute to the thriving contemporary arts scene, within the heart of Europe. Obviously, we do this in our own, unique way. Our historic art cities and their countless assets take the lead. Each city has its own character, cultural heritage and contemporary art assets: museums of fine arts, contemporary arts, art halls, exhibition spaces, private galleries, arts festivals and biennials, etc.

Brussels has Bozar, Wiels, KANAL, the CENTRALE for contemporary art and Argos, the centre for audiovisual arts. Antwerp has the M HKA, the Middelheim open-air sculpture museum, the Fotomuseum and Extra City. Gent has the S.M.A.K., Kunsthal and Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens. Oostende has Mu.ZEE, whereas Leuven is home to Museum M and STUK. Situated to the east of Flanders there is Z33 in Hasselt and Labiomista in Genk.

Flanders contemporary art heritage is evenly divided between the various art cities, and each one has set its own priorities. Because these cities are so easy to reach between each other – from 30 minutes and two hours by car – it is possible to discover how they work to complement one another, within easy access.

Art lovers are regularly treated to a wide range of biennial and triennial exhibitions or other celebrations of contemporary art in these art cities, and in the lesser-known hidden gems that lie in between them. In 2021, the Province of West Flanders will be buzzing with activities. **The Triennial in Bruges** is perhaps the best example: a unique triennial arts festival, during which, 12 national and international artists and architects present their installations to the public. The Flemish seaside, where **Beaufort** – a triennial for contemporary art by the sea – has become a permanent fixture, is just a short drive from Bruges.

When discussing established values, the **Watou Arts Festival** immediately comes to mind. This year, the tiny village near the French border is hosting the 40th anniversary of this unique festival. Up-and-coming art city Kortrijk, meanwhile, will be organising **Paradise**, an interactive art trail in public space, in 2021. Here, international contemporary artists examine how we can jointly build a better world for the future.

3. A rich tradition of private collections and galleries

Flemish (contemporary) art culture is not just limited to the artists or institutions that promote it. The region's many private and corporate collections are equally important. These have been put together by connoisseurs and have earned quite an international reputation as a result. They play an important role in the development of the careers of emerging young artists and established artists, while also providing support to public museums for exhibitions.

Some of these collectors exhibit their collection themselves and have almost become museums in their own right. The Herbert Foundation, the Van Haerents Art Collection, Deweer Gallery Estate and the Verbeke Foundation are a few excellent examples that come to mind. The Cobra museum owned by businessman/collector Fernand Huts, which is scheduled to open in the near future, ties in with this, as does the collection belonging to art collector, designer and philosopher of the home Axel Vervoordt in Kanaal, Antwerp.

Clearly these collectors, who are passionate about art, wish to share their superb collections with the world. Collector Herman Daled sold his historic collection of works by Marcel Broodthaers to the MoMa in New York. Baron Guy Ullens founded a contemporary art centre in Beijing while the CERA Bank collection is on permanent loan to museum M Leuven.

Besides collectors, galleries also have a great impact on Flanders' interaction with and approach to contemporary art. Thanks to the pioneering work of such art galleries as Wide White Space in the sixties and seventies, this continues to be a fascinating and flourishing business. Flanders has a total of 80 galleries that support and promote their artists around the world. Many of them are located in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent and the seaside resort of Knokke-Heist. Zeno X Gallery, Xavier Hufkens, Galerie Greta Meert and Micheline Szwajcer are just a few of these galleries.

Although Antwerp used to be at the forefront of the gallery scene, Brussels has since become the go-to city for galleries. The capital also holds great appeal for galleries around the world. Barbara Gladstone (New York), Mendes Wood (Sao Paulo), Galerie Templon (Paris) and Dvir Gallery (Tel Aviv) have since opened branches in Brussels.

Flanders has a fascinating gallery scene, which joins forces every year for Art Brussels, one of the leading art fairs in Europe. Here, 150 Flemish and international galleries showcase the work of their artists.

4. Flanders at the head of international art institutions

Flanders' artistic talent is not just contained in the hearts of its artists. It has fanned out across the world. Around the world numerous Flemish curators and museum directors play an influential role in the international art scene, working in leading museums and institutions. An overview.

Jan Hoet (d. 2014, former director of the S.M.A.K.) was the curator of Documenta IX in 1992 after which he became the Artistic Director of the MARTa Herford museum in Germany.

Jan Debbaud was appointed as artistic director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven after which he was employed as the Director of Collections at the Tate in the UK.

Chris Dercon is currently the President of the Association of French National Museums-Grand Palais in Paris, having previously served as artistic director of the Witte de With center for contemporary art and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, Haus der Kunst in Munich, Tate Modern and Volksbühne Berlin.

Catherine de Zegher served as the Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Drawing Center in New York and the director of exhibitions and publications of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. She curated the Biennial of Sydney in 2012 and the Biennial of Moscow in 2013.

Ann Demeester served as director of De Appel in Amsterdam and now holds the same position at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem.

Hilde Teerlinck is the CEO of the Han Nefkens Foundation in Barcelona. She previously served as director of the FRAC Nord-Pas-de-Calais in Dunkirk and the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona.

Philippe Pirotte has been employed as director of the Kunsthalle Bern, senior curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and director of the prestigious Städelshule and Portikus in Frankfurt.

5. Great social commitment

Whereas classical art is all about history, contemporary art also reflects on the world we live in today. Contemporary artists show their great social commitment. But art institutions and festivals are no different in this respect. The coronavirus pandemic has forced everyone to focus on this even more. These institutions and festivals resolutely choose to be locally embedded, fostering an inextricable link between art and society. Beaufort, the art triennial at the Belgian seaside, explicitly engages in a dialogue with politicians and local communities about the relationship between the coastline, art and tourism. The curators of the Bruges Triennial have made the same choice: its 2021 festival focuses on the less visible side of the city, exploring the suburbs in addition to the city's popular tourist centre.

Contemporary institutions such as Middelheim are also addressing this. This summer, the Antwerp museum will be tracing the (post-)colonial history of its site with an exhibition titled 'Congoville'. Various artists of African origin and with an international practice, take the visitor on a journey. The Wiels arts centre in Brussels, on the other hand, focuses explicitly on the neighbourhood in which it is located. Wiels' vegetable garden is a precious place in a densely-populated urban neighbourhood, where life

unfolds and where people can meet. Here the neighbourhood is working to create a better, more cohesive and gentler city.

There is a reason why Flanders likes to call itself state of the art. Over the centuries, our passionate relationship with the arts began with the Flemish Masters, while their innumerable heirs continue to foster an adoration with art, every day. This endless chain of talented artists has found a home in our art cities. Each of these cities has its own assets and character, largely thanks to the rich tradition of private collectors and galleries that are embedded in them. The fact that Flanders produces very solid, accomplished artists in addition to managing art institutions around the world, is yet more proof that art is an inextricable part of our DNA. And therefore, state of the art.

For more information about Flanders' artistic assets: [Flanders Art Institute](#).