



## The most high-profile exhibition of 2016 in Flanders: In Search of Utopia at M - Museum Leuven

Leuven is celebrating a 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. *Utopia*, the iconic work by Thomas More was printed in Leuven in 1516. And the university city is organizing a festive commemoration with a high-profile exhibition, a city festival and a unique social project. *In Search of Utopia* will not only be the biggest Flemish exhibition of 2016, but it will feature works that have never been shown in Flanders before. No fewer than 90 masterpieces from across the world are coming to M - Museum Leuven.

### Highlights

The Flemish masters Quinten Metsys and Jan Gossaert as well as international artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein are only a few of the names that will appeal to a broad audience. The organizers are particularly pleased that the famous *Portrait of Erasmus* by Quinten Metsys has been loaned from the Collection of Queen Elisabeth II of the United Kingdom. In addition, three restored *Enclosed Gardens* from Mechelen will be exhibited for the very first time, and five of the seven authentic Leuven armillary spheres and two of the finest Leuven astrolabes by Gerard Mercator and Adriaan Zeelst are coming home for the first time. The curator Prof. Dr. Jan Van der Stock (KU Leuven) has devised an exhibition concept within which all of these works are shown to their best advantage.

### Thomas More and 500 Years of Utopia: the world comes to Leuven

Type 'Utopia Thomas More' into *Google* and in half a second you will get 9,300,000 hits. It is 2016, and Utopia is clearly not an irrelevant theme; nor is Thomas More an obscure historical figure. There are not many 500-year-old words that still have the same expressive power as utopia or utopian. Fleming, German, Brit, Spaniard or Russian: to each and all, Utopia evokes worlds of hope and desire.

Thomas More's 'golden' little book was first printed 500 years ago in Leuven. Utopia continues to intrigue generation after generation and the theme is as relevant as it ever was. Diversity, human dignity, tolerance and equal opportunities are the order of the day. A concept that has survived 500 turbulent years is undoubtedly a solid foundation for success. It is no coincidence that the theme of the programme celebrating 500 years of Utopia is 'THE FUTURE IS MORE'

So there is all the more reason to celebrate Utopia in Leuven: with a prestigious exhibition at M - Museum Leuven and an ambitious citywide festival.

**M - Museum Leuven welcomes *In Search of Utopia*:  
90 masterpieces from across the world  
20.10.2016 – 17.01.2017**

With *In Search of Utopia*, curator Jan Van der Stock has achieved a veritable *tour de force*. The major loan exhibition brings *Utopia* home, back to the place where printer Dirk Martens took the first copy off the presses in December 1516. M - Museum Leuven presents no fewer than 90 masterpieces; an exceptional collection. *In Search of Utopia* promises to be the most high-profile exhibition in Flanders in 2016. Flemish Masters from the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century will immerse visitors in this exciting and inspiring period.

***In Search of Utopia* has three central focuses: a sample of Flemish Masters, works that have rarely if ever been seen together, and a diversity of artworks**

For *In Search of Utopia*, masterpieces from museums and private collections from across the world are coming to M - Museum Leuven. One of the most fascinating highlights is the *Portrait of a Humanist* by Quinten Metsys from the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. This piece is considered to be one of the central portraits in the history of Flemish art. The Collection of Queen Elisabeth II has loaned the exhibition its world-famous *Portrait of Erasmus*, likewise by Quinten Metsys.

All the leading Flemish Masters of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century are represented. In addition to Quinten Metsys, there will be big names such as Joachim Patinir and Jan Gossaert. Other appealing figures include Simon Bening, Simon Marmion, Herri met de Bles and Conrat Meit. Albrecht Dürer, who spent time travelling around Flanders in this period is likewise represented with one of his finest portraits, an anonymous humanist from the collection of the Berlin Museum of Prints and Drawings. The sublime *Portrait of a Young Princess with an Armillary Sphere* by Jan Gossaert from the National Gallery in London will be one of the focal points of the exhibition, in addition to being the central image in the advertising campaign.

Also worthy of particular attention are the three *Enclosed Gardens* from Mechelen. They have been restored especially for the exhibition, and visitors can see them exhibited here for the very first time. After the exhibition, they will move to the permanent collection of the new museum in Mechelen. The organizers are very proud to present these works for the first time, in part because the *Enclosed Gardens* are listed as official Flemish Masterpieces.

The exhibition is not only bringing unique paintings (back) to Leuven, but Leuven's renowned scientific instruments and unique tapestries are also a perfect match for the utopian theme.

In the sixteenth century, Leuven was world famous for the production of scientific instruments. Great scientists such as Gerard Mercator, Gemma Frisius, Gualterus Arsenius and Adriaan Zeelst were members of the so-called 'Leuven School'. For the first time, ten sixteenth-century instruments that were made in Leuven will be presented in the exhibition. What is more, they have not been exhibited in Flanders for centuries. The armillary spheres,

astrolabes and celestial globes are showpieces of Flanders' rich past. The instruments created by illustrious Flemish masters evince unmatched artistic, technical and scientific skill.

*In Search of Utopia* is also the perfect opportunity to enjoy the Brussels-made tapestry featuring *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. The Escorial in Madrid has loaned it to Museum M. Several other exceptional tapestries are likewise returning to Flanders after five centuries.

### ***In Search of Utopia* takes visitors to the past and back in four storylines: the highlights**

*In Search of Utopia* is a large-scale exhibition with an exceptionally accessible concept. Curator Jan Van der Stock has recreated the universe of Utopia in four storylines. Four chapters that each highlight an aspect of utopian thought and which together sketch a surprising and rich landscape. Discovery and exploration, which are so characteristic of Thomas More's *Utopia*, are also the guiding principles in the exhibition concept at M - Museum Leuven.

#### **1.**

##### ***Utopia* by Thomas More**

##### **A golden little book from Leuven conquers the world**

Leuven, December 1516. On the corner of the current Naamsestraat and Standockstraat, Dirk Martens takes the very first copy of *Utopia* off the presses. '*A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, of a republic's best state and of the new island of Utopia*', as the title states. Thomas More wrote it as an indictment of the corruption and misrule that were rife in England at the time. His response was *Utopia*: an imaginary island where happiness and justice reign. *Utopia* was a makeable society.

*Utopia* was a milestone, heralding a new age in European thought. One of More's good friends, Desiderius Erasmus, was another innovator. Erasmus was the author of the *Praise of Folly* – another influential book from the period, written in More's home and dedicated to him.

In this first thematic part of the exhibition at M - Museum Leuven, you will feel the energy of the period. The innovation, the search for the unknown, the appetite for ideals and dream worlds: they led to the creation of brilliant artworks.

#### **2.**

##### **Beyond Utopia**

##### **Images of Heaven and Hell**

Utopia is not only the story of dreams and ideals. Failure and disappointment are also typical of the search for a new society. The dream remains intact or becomes a nightmare. This duality characterizes the second part of the exhibition.

*Utopia* discusses both aspects. More underscores the importance of harmony: from the redistribution of wealth to equal opportunities for all: rich, poor, man or woman. There is freedom of religion and even themes like euthanasia are not taboo. But the ideal world also has an underside. Some people are excluded and barred from places where life is good. How recognizable! To emphasize this duality, utopia and its dark counterpart, dystopia, are juxtaposed in the exhibition.

### 3.

#### **Beyond the Horizon Imagining the Unknown**

*Utopia* was a clarion call for innovation and the voyages of discovery to utopian worlds beyond the horizon. Artists were nourished by curiosity and their creativity was excited as never before. In this part of the exhibition, visitors will follow in their footsteps and discover the unbridled power of their imaginations.

*Beyond the Horizon* is a colourful collection of mythical unicorns, exotic animals and valuable dyes coming to this region. There are monsters and unknown people from distant lands. The world beyond the horizon became less mysterious after the French cartographer Pierre Descelieres drew his famous *Mappa Mundi* on parchment for the French king. Distant and unknown territories in America, Asia and Africa were profoundly inspiring. Stories and fantasy fed the utopian imagination and resulted in artistic masterpieces. The discovery of the world accelerated at an incredible pace, and this part of the exhibition immerses you in the way artists translated these exciting discoveries into innovative creations.

### 4.

#### **Grasping the Universe Dreams of Space and Time**

The fourth and final part of the exhibition *In Search of Utopia* is a sublime culmination. The desire for a utopian society is given new perspectives and dimensions in art. People seek to grasp and measure the universe and eternity.

Utopia is synonymous with exploring the boundaries of the universe. Scientific inquiry was naturally a profound impulse. In the exhibition, you will discover original scientific measuring instruments made in Leuven in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, Leuven was a leading centre for the production of armillary spheres, astrolabes and heavenly spheres. Gerard Mercator, Gemma Frisius, Gualterus Arsenius and Adrian Zeelst turned these instruments into surprising works of art. *In Search of Utopia* is bringing no fewer than five of the surviving armillary spheres back to Leuven from across the world. This is an exceptional event because it is the first time that they have been exhibited in Leuven together.

## In Search of Utopia: the highlights

### **1. Double portrait of Desiderius Erasmus and Pieter Gillis – Royal Collection, Hampton Court; Palazzo Barberini, Rome & Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp**

Thomas More was close friends with the humanists Desiderius Erasmus and Pieter Gillis. It was thanks to Erasmus that *Utopia* was printed in Leuven. In 1517, Erasmus and Gillis commissioned a double portrait of themselves from Quinten Metsys, as a gift for their good friend Thomas More. In that period, Quinten Metsys was the best portrait painter in the Low Countries. A second version of this portrait of friends is still extant, also painted by Quinten Metsys and dating from the same period. These two studio replicas were presumably made for the collections of Erasmus and Gillis themselves. The portrait of Erasmus that belonged to Thomas More has been part of the British Royal Collection since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Queen Elisabeth II has granted special permission for the masterpiece to be loaned to the exhibition *In Search of Utopia*, so Erasmus is returning to Leuven. All three portraits are being exhibited together in Leuven for the first time in history.

### **2. Enclosed Gardens – Municipal Museums & Heritage, Mechelen**

The seven *Enclosed Gardens* from Mechelen are exceptional remains of Flanders' rich monastic life. The ensemble housed in Mechelen is unique. These sixteenth-century altar boxes were made by nuns who worked in the hospital in Mechelen. In 2011, they were officially recognized as Flemish masterpieces. With extreme precision, the sisters created these gardens with representations of an ideal, spiritual and heavenly world. In addition to painted panels and polychrome statues, they also contain hundreds of handmade silk flowers, bunches of grapes made of glass and pearls, bones, relics and pilgrims' badges. The *Enclosed Gardens* are rare examples of 'anonymous' female art, devotion and spirituality. The diversity of materials makes these gardens highly exceptional, but also fragile and difficult to preserve. The gardens are being restored to their former glory in a large-scale conservation and restoration project. The three largest and most beautiful gardens will be exhibited to the general public for the first time during *In Search of Utopia*. Afterwards, the gardens are moving to the permanent collection of the new museum in Mechelen.

### **3. Mappa Mundi by Pierre Desceliers – British Library, London**

This world map was drawn in 1550 by the Norman cartographer Pierre Desceliers as a gift for the French King Henry II. The enormous map is currently housed in the British Library in London and is intended to be looked at from the sides, horizontally on a table. This beautifully illustrated map of the world or *Mappa Mundi* is the finest example of its type that is extant from the Renaissance. Although the coastlines are relatively accurate, the illustrations of the continental interiors originated entirely in the imaginations of the artists who contributed to it. Of particular note is the fact that Australia is depicted on the map, even though it has not yet been discovered. Shortly afterwards, the Leuven cartographer and instrument builder Gerard Mercator set the standard for contemporary cartography with his wall map of Europe. Mercator is also present in the exhibition with his heavenly sphere dating from 1551, and with the only extant astrolabe signed by him.

#### **4. Leuven's Scientific Instruments**

In the sixteenth century, Leuven was a world famous centre for the production of scientific instruments. The finest instruments from this period are the so-called armillary spheres. An armillary sphere is an astronomical instrument to measure precisely the positions and movements of heavenly bodies relative to the earth, in the centre. Armillary spheres are not only ingenious as instruments, but thanks to their meticulous design in precious metals and beautiful decorations, they are also incredible to look at. Currently, there are seven extant armillary spheres that were made in Leuven in collections spread across the world. *In Search of Utopia* is bringing five of these seven instruments back to the place where they were first created for the first time in 500 years.

The young Danish princess in the sublime portrait by Jan Gossaert from the National Gallery London is also holding an armillary sphere. The princess is intentionally depicted holding the instrument upside down. Jan Gossaert thus ingeniously conveys the message of *Utopia*: turning things upside down and being open to innovation will ensure the transformation of ideas.

#### **Leuven Celebrates Thomas More: a city festival 24.09.2016 - 17.01.2017**

Utopia, Thomas More, the Flemish Masters but also Leuven itself are the protagonists of the *500 Years of Utopia* city festival. Together, we will experience Thomas More and Utopia in the most diverse ways. Starting in September, Leuven is hosting an innovative city festival of which *Utopia* – the discovery and exploration of new horizons – will be the beating heart. Exhibitions, contemporary art, theatre, music, dance, film, literature, performances, city exploration: *500 Years of Utopia* probes all the creative possibilities and actively puts its slogan THE FUTURE IS MORE into practice.

#### **Utopia combo ticket**

Make even More of your visit and buy a discount combo ticket (€16) for the exhibitions at M - Museum Leuven and the Leuven University Library. The following exhibitions are included in the Utopia combo ticket:

- *In Search of Utopia* at M
- *Yto Barrada* at M
- *Eutopia* at M
- *Utopia & More* at Leuven University Library

The University Library is also one of the locations on the contemporary art tour *Tracing the Future* (free).

## **Utopia & More**

**Thomas More, the Low Countries and the utopian tradition**

**20.10.2016 - 17.01.2017**

**KU Leuven University Library**

Are you fascinated by Thomas More and the world he created in his *Utopia*? If so, do not miss *Utopia and More!* The exhibition in the stunning University Library will guide you through More's life, his close relationship with famous humanists from the Low Countries and the utopian literary world. You will discover original manuscripts, letters, incunabula and all kinds of curiosities. It is a unique experience of *Utopia* and Thomas More.

This project is organized by the University Library and the KU Leuven Heritage and Culture Office. It is curated by Demmy Verbeke, Toon Van Houdt, Erik De Bom and Dirk Sacré.

## **Tracing the Future**

**30.09.2016 – 20.11.2016**

**KU Leuven University Library, KADOC Chapel, Leuven City Park, Anatomical Theatre**

**Yto Barrada**

**30.09.2016 – 17.01.2017**

**M - Museum Leuven**

The Yto Barrada retrospective exhibition at M is a twin project with *Tracing the Future*.

Does Thomas More's *Utopia* still inspire artists today? This project addresses the question, showing how artists use the concept of 'utopia' in their work today. Faithful to Thomas More, they show the success but also the failure of the search for an ideal world. Yto Barrada, Ursula Biemann & Paulo Tavares, The Otolith Group, Martin Le Chevallier, Allan Sekula and Adrien Tirtiaux critically explore the ecological, political and social impact of the contemporary Utopia. In short: 500 Years of Utopia in a radically updated form.

*Tracing the Future* is a twin project with the Yto Barrada exhibition at M - Museum Leuven. It is organized by the KU Leuven Committee for Contemporary Art in partnership with the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, Art and Visual Culture at the Faculty of Arts, the Higher Institute for Philosophy and M – Museum Leuven. Its curators are Stéphane Symons, Hilde Van Gelder and Eva Wittcox. The exhibition is supported by the non-profit KU[N]ST Leuven, KADOC, the Central University Library and the KU Leuven Campus Service. The selection of works by Allan Sekula at the Anatomical Theatre, which are loaned from the Collection of MHKA, is curated by Anja Isabel Schneider.

**Yto Barrada****30.09.2016 - 17.01.2017****M - Museum Leuven**

Yto Barrada (°1971, Paris) is a French-Moroccan artist. She grew up in Tangier and Paris. The unique context of Tangier had a profound influence on her work. An investigation of Moroccan identity and the material history and visual culture of her hometown are recurring themes in her photos, films and sculptures.

Barrada's recent work is based on a remarkable theme: the archaeological discovery of dinosaurs in Morocco. This discovery is almost completely unknown among the general population, despite the flourishing trade in fossils.

For *Utopia* at M - Museum Leuven, Yto Barrada is presenting her new film *Faux Départ*. She focuses on the trade in fake fossils and touches on thorny issues such as colonization, tourism, ethnography and consumer society. The exhibition features both older and new work in various media.

This exhibition at M is curated by Eva Wittocx, Hilde Van Gelder and Stéphane Symons.

**EUtopia****Possibility of an Island****20.10.2016 - 17.01.2017****M - Museum Leuven**

Thomas More's *Utopia* stands at the beginning of a long tradition of utopian thought about architecture and society. Although the utopia does not strive for realization – the ideal world existed only in the imagination – it is one of the most effective ways of questioning society and helping new ideas to get a foothold. So-called 'paper architecture', for example, offers a forum in which designers have free rein.

Thomas More located Utopia on an island. This figure is no coincidence. The island is an image of a society that seeks to defend its identity against outside influences. EUtopia – Possibility of an Island questions the critical power of the utopia and architecture as a utopian practice. How can utopian thought still be relevant today? Can we continue to locate the utopia on an unspoilt island? What might a utopia that opens itself up to the other and the foreigner look like? And should good architecture not be a little bit utopian?

The utopian designs in the exhibition are based on Thomas More's book. The 500-year-old *Utopia* contains a number of motifs that are still relevant today, such as the relationship between borders and identity, the debate of surveillance and privacy in public space, the attractive power of collectivism and the expansion of the ideal city through the use of our information technology. Five teams of leading Belgian architects and artists will explore these themes and design the fictitious island of EUtopia. EUtopia is paper architecture. All the installations are created with paper and fragile materials.

All the information about *500 Years of Utopia* is available on the website  
[www.utopialeuven.be](http://www.utopialeuven.be)

## Important dates

- 8 September 2016: press conference – presentation of the *500 Years of Utopia* programme and kick-off
- 24 September 2016: *500 Years of Utopia* kick-off
- 26 September 2016: opening of the academic year & beginning of the citywide programme
- 28 September 2016: press conference *Tracing the Future* and Yto Barrada
- 18 October 2016: international press conference *In Search of Utopia*
- 19 October 2016: press conference exhibition *In Search of Utopia* and exhibition opening
- 20 October 2016: *In Search of Utopia* opens to the public
- 17 January 2017: last day of *500 Years of Utopia* and *In Search of Utopia*

*500 Years of Utopia* is an initiative of the non-profit KU[N]ST Leuven, the collaborative platform between the City of Leuven and KU Leuven.

## *In Search of Utopia* ticket sales open on Thursday 19 May

Immense interest has already been expressed in the exhibition *In Search of Utopia* at M - Museum Leuven and the other events. We therefore recommend that you order your tickets in advance online. Visitors will then be sure that they can visit the exhibition when they want, and avoid queuing at the reception desk. There is a fast lane for pre-booked tickets.

The exhibition *In Search of Utopia* is open every day from 11 am until 6 pm. The museum is closed on Wednesdays and on 25 December and 1 January. Nocturnes will be held on Thursdays until 10 pm.

### Online

<http://www.utopialeuven.be/en/tickets-and-info>

### Reception desk

M - Museum Leuven  
Leopold Vanderkelenstraat 28  
3000 Leuven

### Opening hours

Monday to Sunday from 11 am until 6 pm  
Thursday from 11 am until 10 pm  
Closed on Wednesday

## Ticket prices

### In Search of Utopia

	Reception	Online*
Individual tickets	€ 12	€ 11
Concessions	€ 10	€ 9
13-25 years old	€ 5	€ 3
0-12 years old / ICOM / IKT/	Free	Free

The audio guide is included in the ticket price.

\*Excluding € 1.50 administrative fee per online booking.

### Utopia combo ticket

In Search of Utopia at M - Museum Leuven\*

+ Utopia and More at the Leuven University Library\*\*

+ Yto Barrada exhibition at M - Museum Leuven

+ EUtopia at M - Museum Leuven

€ 16

Excluding € 1.50 administrative fee per online booking.

\* The audio guide is included in the ticket price.

\*\*Entrance to the University Library Tower, the permanent collection and M - Treasury of Saint Peter's are also included. The University Library is also one of the locations on the contemporary art tour Tracing the Future.

## Press Contact

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