



**THE FUTURE IS MORE**  
500 YEARS UTOPIA



**PRESS FILE  
EXHIBITION**

**IN SEARCH OF UTOPIA**

**M – MUSEUM LEUVEN**

**20.10.2016 – 17.01.2017**

**[www.utopialeuven.be](http://www.utopialeuven.be)**

## Exhibition *In Search of Utopia*

M - Museum Leuven

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### 500 YEARS UTOPIA IN LEUVEN

Leuven is celebrating the fifth centenary of *Utopia*. The iconic work by Thomas More was printed in this university town in 1516, and its anniversary is being celebrated with a city festival featuring an extraordinary flagship exhibition at M – Museum Leuven. *In Search of Utopia* is not only the biggest exhibition of 2016, but it also features several works that have never been exhibited in Flanders before. No fewer than 80 masterpieces from museums and private collections across the world are coming to Leuven. This major loan exhibition is bringing *Utopia* home, back to the place where the printer Dirk Martens took the first copy off the press in December 1516.

Curator Jan Van der Stock is the right man for the job. He also curated the tremendously successful Rogier Van der Weyden exhibition in 2009. *In Search of Utopia* features brilliant works by masters such as Quentin Matsys, Hans Holbein, Jan Gossaert and Albrecht Dürer that depict the boundless imagination of an ideal world in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibition has been composed along three central lines: it offers a sample of paintings by Flemish Masters, presents works that have rarely or never been seen together, and contains an enormous diversity of exhibited objects.

### THE EXHIBITION AT M IN SEARCH OF UTOPIA

All the great Flemish Masters from the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century are represented. One fascinating masterpiece is the *Portrait of a Humanist* by Quentin Matsys from the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. This painting is generally considered to be one of the highlights of Flemish portraiture. Furthermore, the world-famous *Portrait of Erasmus*, also by Matsys, has been loaned from the personal collection of Queen Elizabeth II. Other major names include Joachim Patinir, Simon Bening, Simon Marmion, Herri met de Bles and Conrat Meit. Albrecht Dürer, who was traveling in Flanders at that time, is represented by one of his finest portraits, an anonymous humanist, from the collection of the print room at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The sublime *Portrait of a Young Princess with an Armillary Sphere* by Jan Gossaert from the National Gallery in London has been given a central place in the exhibition, and was also chosen to be its campaign image. Finally, the three *Enclosed Gardens* from Mechelen also deserve special note. They have been restored especially for the exhibition, and visitors to *In Search of Utopia* will be the first to see them in their full, restored glory. After the exhibition, they will be moved to their permanent new home at the new Municipal Museum in Mechelen. This is an exclusive premiere of which the organizers are particularly proud, in part because the *Enclosed Gardens* have been included on the Index of Flemish Masterpieces.

It is not only a series of unique paintings that is coming (back) to Leuven. The city's renowned scientific instruments and magnificent tapestries also fit the theme of *Utopia* perfectly. Indeed, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Leuven was world famous for the production of scientific instruments. Famous scholars such as Gerard Mercator, Gemma Frisius, Gualterus Arsenius and Adriaan Zeelst were all members of the 'Leuven School'. Their armillary spheres, astrolabes and celestial globes bear witness to a rich Flemish past. They represent the height of inimitable artistic, technical and scientific skill. For the very first time, ten instruments from this period that were made in Leuven are being brought together for an exhibition. What is more, this is the first time since they were made that they are returning to Flanders. *In Search of Utopia* is also the perfect opportunity to see the famous Brussels

tapestry of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* after Hieronymus Bosch, which has been loaned to the exhibition by the Escorial in Madrid. Several other exceptional tapestries are likewise returning to Flanders after five centuries.

### ***In Search of Utopia* takes you to the past and present in four stories**

The fictional island of Utopia is located 'nowhere', far beyond the horizon. Everything is perfectly organized and everybody is happy. But the island only ever existed in More's imagination. The desire for an ideal world, on the other hand, is real. Hope is a strong impetus that moves people to action, both with the promise of success but also the risk of disappointment and failure.

That is the story of this exhibition. It is about people who dream of Paradise, who are fascinated by the horizon, who long to understand the universe and eternity and who fear Hell. More's *Utopia* not only analyses his own society in critical terms, indicting its greed and envy, but it also formulates a 'utopian' alternative. This alternative lies 'beyond the horizon'. You will never step ashore there, but the island nevertheless inspires you to go on a journey.

'Utopia' is more than the title of a book; it coined a new word and a new literary and artistic genre. Utopia contains the realization that you can strive for a better existence on this earth. That was true five hundred years ago, and it is still true today.

*In Search of Utopia* is organized around four main themes: Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) – A Golden Little Book from Leuven Conquers the World; Beyond Utopia – Images of Paradise and Hell; Beyond the Horizon – Imagining the Unknown; The Universe in Your Hand – Dreams of Space and Time.

### **PART 1: Thomas More's Utopia. A Golden Little Book from Leuven Conquers the World**

The exhibition begins with the little book *Utopia*, a treatise that exudes the humanism of the Low Countries. The first, thematic section of the exhibition at M – Museum Leuven focuses on the intellectual and cultural context within which *Utopia* was written. A number of later editions and translations symbolically highlight the fact that More's ideas soon found their way to a broad international audience. The exhibition palpably conveys the intense energy of this period. The desire for renewal, the search for the unknown, the appeal of ideals and dreams: all are depicted in an absolutely brilliant selection of works.

It was on the corner of the current Naamsestraat and Standockstraat in Leuven that the printer Dirk Martens took the first copy of *Utopia* off the press in 1516. '*A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, of a republic's best state and the new island of Utopia*', as the title proclaimed. Thomas More wrote it as an indictment of the corruption and misgovernment that was rife in England at the time. His response was Utopia: an imaginary island where happiness and justice rule, a makeable society. *Utopia* was a milestone; it marked a new era in European thought. One of More's close friends, Desiderius Erasmus, was a similarly innovative thinker. Erasmus was the author of *In Praise of Folly* – another sixteenth-century literary masterpiece, written in More's house and dedicated to him.

The writing of *Utopia* is likewise the story of a close friendship. The principal figures are all mentioned explicitly: Thomas More himself and his family, Erasmus, and the Antwerp town clerk Pieter Gillis. Their correspondence attests to the fact that the three were very close friends and that all three of them were brilliant minds. This room also features the earliest portrait of Leuven, in which the city is clearly depicted as a cultural and intellectual centre.

### **Thomas More's biography**

7 February 1478. Thomas More is born in the centre of London. In his youth he was a page to John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor. It was Morton who sent him to the University of Oxford. During his studies, his father called him back to London to become a lawyer. It was here that More entered the circles of the English humanists. In London, he met Erasmus. They formed a lifelong friendship. In 1504, More began his parliamentary career as a member of the House of Commons. In 1516, he published his *Utopia*. Thirteen years later, he was appointed Lord Chancellor, the most important advisor to King Henry VIII. When the king declared himself head of the English church, More resigned. He refused to take the Oath of Succession, which stipulated that the children of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn would inherit the crown. The king had Thomas More sent to the Tower of London and on 6 July 1535, he was beheaded. 400 years after his execution, Thomas More was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. It was only in 1980 that More was rehabilitated in the Anglican Communion.

### **PART 2: Beyond Utopia. Images of Paradise and Hell**

The second part of the exhibition juxtaposes utopia with its dark counterpart, the dystopia. Artworks that depict the Garden of Love find their religious counterparts in representations of the Garden of Eden. The wide landscapes and the recognizable human figures make Paradise look like a very real, concrete location. In the early sixteenth century, nuns in Mechelen would recreate this same Paradise in mystical and enigmatic *Enclosed Gardens*. It is difficult to imagine a physical representation that comes closer to the utopian ideal of an Earthly Paradise.

Paradise then transitions into a horrifying place where crime, chaos and inequality rule. The notion of the ideal place is inverted and replaced by a dreadful political and social spectre. This is the negative reversal of everything that is desirable. Hell burning and the Apocalypse are representations of complete dehumanization and the deadly fear of evil. The horrifying torture suffered by sinners in Hell warns viewers not to indulge in the reprehensible behaviour that characterized the dystopia. Artists thus expressed their feverish imaginations that were coloured by contemporary political, religious and social insecurities. The artworks depict divine retribution, eternal damnation and other profound fears. They thus not only refer to sinful human nature, but also to the societal problems of their age.

### **The Enclosed Gardens of Mechelen**

Art is often intended to bring its viewers closer to a paradisiacal and utopian ideal. That is especially true of these *Enclosed Gardens*. They were made in the sixteenth century by Mechelen's Augustinian Hospital Sisters and were officially recognized as Flemish Masterpieces in 2011. These altarpieces look like little boxes and were an integral part of convent life. The central part of the altarpiece contains wooden sculptures, numerous relics from holy places and souvenirs from pilgrimages. Flowers and fruit made of textiles, paper and glass are suggestive of a horticultural environment. As a viewer, there is a little gate that shuts you out of the garden. Nevertheless, you can enter through the little gate in your mind, and allow the relics to whisk you away on an imaginary pilgrimage. The tangible, material objects in the garden symbolize spiritual objectives, and they allow the viewer to attempt, through meditation on the *Enclosed Gardens*, to access the lost Paradise spiritually.

These three enclosed gardens were restored especially for the exhibition by a team of eight experts with the support of the Flemish Government's Masterpieces Fund, the Baillet Latour Fund of the King Boudewijn Foundation, the Friends of the Palace of Busleyden, Mechelen, and the crowd funding initiative 'Save the Enclosed Gardens'.

### **PART 3: Beyond the Horizon. Imagining the Unknown**

In the Middle Ages, you didn't have to travel very far to reach the borders of the known world, and even in Thomas More's day, large parts of the world were still undiscovered. This is the *Terra Incognita*, the 'unknown land' or the seductive and mysterious world 'beyond the horizon'. Imagining the unknown feeds the desire to go in search of it. In the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the contours of the continents and the world's seas were known much more accurately. The interiors of the continents were still being filled out with spectacular and utopian fantasies.

*Utopia* was the starting shot for innovation and voyages of discovery to the utopian world beyond the horizon. Artists were nourished by curiosity and their creativity was stimulated as never before. In this part of the exhibition, visitors can follow in their footsteps and discover the unbridled power of their imaginations. *Beyond the Horizon* is a resplendent collection of mythical unicorns, exotic animals and valuable pigments coming to our region. We encounter monsters and strange, unknown people from distant lands. The world beyond the horizon became less mysterious when the French cartographer Pierre Desceliers drew his famous *Mappa Mundi* on parchment for the French king. Distant and unknown regions in America, Asia and Africa were an enormous source of inspiration. Stories and fantasies fed the utopian imagination and resulted in art-historical masterpieces. The discovery of the world accelerated at an incredible pace.

### **PART 4: The Universe in Your Hand**

#### **The Cosmos**

The fourth and final chapter of *In Search of Utopia* is a sublime finale. The desire for a utopian society was given new dimensions in art. People wanted to understand and measure the universe and eternity. *Utopia* is synonymous with exploring the borders of the universe. Naturally, it was scientific inquiry that provided the greatest impulse. In the exhibition, you will discover original 16<sup>th</sup>-century scientific instruments that were made in Leuven. At that time, Leuven was a leading producer of armillary spheres, astrolabes and celestial globes. Gerard Mercator, Gemma Frisius, Gualterus Arsenius and Adrian Zeelst turned these instruments into astonishing little works of art. Indeed, they managed to strike a perfect balance between new cosmological research, scientific

precision, astronomical information and elegance in production. *In Search of Utopia* is bringing together no fewer than five of the seven extant armillary spheres.

### **Order and Chaos**

Artists used their imaginations to depict abstract concepts like 'time', 'chaos' and the 'universe'. For example, the painting with the representation of *Chaos* is a unique attempt in the European visual arts to depict the 'nothing' from which space and time emerged. Primal matter, chaos and time, which are by definition unrepresentable, are brought together in a subtle composition. The work attests to the enormous imaginative power of the Spanish artist Master Bartolomé, who was profoundly influenced by the Flemish Primitives.

The enormous tapestry from Toledo depicts the movements of the universe before the astronomical discoveries of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The artist arranged various allegorical, mythological and religious figures around an enormous astrolabe. The order of the universe is represented as an act of God that sets all things in motion.

### **Time**

Five hundred years ago, the rhythm of time was determined by the course of the liturgical year, saints' feasts, religious holy days and ecclesiastical holidays. Time was kept according to the eternal cycle of seasons and the passing of the months.

Starting in the late Middle Ages, time was also measured in different ways. By looking at the sun, moon and stars, the hours of the day and night could be measured precisely. Ingenious and elegant mechanical timepieces were created to calculate the (deceptive) celestial movements. The evolution of the concepts of 'time' and 'eternity' were probably best represented both metaphorically and visually by the Dominican Henry Suso in his treatise *Horologium Sapientiae* ('Clock of Wisdom').

## **PUBLICATIONS**

The world of Thomas More and his *Utopia* are exceptionally rich and intriguing. On the occasion of *In Search of Utopia*, two publications are being issued to provide accessible background information to the exhibition. Below, you can read more about the catalogue and the special issue of Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlaanderen (OKV).

### **IN SEARCH OF UTOPIA: A BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED CATALOGUE**

With extensive explanations of the artworks, artists and the age of *Utopia*, this catalogue is unmissable to those who would like to discover more about the masters of this period. The Dutch catalogue is published by Davidsfonds Uitgeverij. The English edition is published by Amsterdam University Press.

The retail price is € 59.99, but you can buy the catalogue from the bookshop at M - Museum Leuven for only € 54.95. Available in Dutch and English.

### **A SPECIAL ISSUE OF OPENBAAR KUNSTBEZIT VLAANDEREN**

On the occasion of *In Search of Utopia*, OKV (Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlaanderen) is publishing a special issue about the exhibition. This special issue will introduce you to several of the masterpieces in the exhibition and will explore the story of Thomas More and the ideal world more deeply. Available in Dutch, English and French for € 7 at the reception desk of M - Museum Leuven.

## LIST OF LOANING COLLECTIONS

A complete list of loaning collections is available via <https://utopia.prezly.com>

## LIST OF WORKS

A complete list of loaned artworks is available via <https://utopia.prezly.com>

## Leuven Celebrates Thomas More: A City Festival

**24.09.2016 - 17.01.2017**

*Utopia*, Thomas More, the Flemish Masters and Leuven itself are the protagonists of the city festival *500 Years Utopia*. Exhibitions, contemporary art, theatre, music, dance, film, literature, performances and city exploration: *500 Years Utopia* explores all the creative possibilities and thus actively puts its tagline into practice: THE FUTURE IS MORE.

### UTOPIA COMBO TICKET

Experience more More and book a reduced € 16 Utopia Combo Ticket for the exhibitions at M - Museum Leuven and at the University Library.

The Utopia Combo Ticket includes the following exhibitions:

- *In Search of Utopia* at M – Museum Leuven
- *Yto Barrada* at M – Museum Leuven
- *EUtopia* at M – Museum Leuven
- *Utopia & More* at the University Library

### Utopia & More. Thomas More, the Low Countries and the Utopian Tradition

**20.10.2016 - 17.01.2017**

**University Library**

### Yto Barrada

**30.09.2016 – 17.01.2017**

**M - Museum Leuven**

### Tracing the Future

**30.09.2016 – 20.11.2016**

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

### EUtopia – Possibility of an Island

**20.10.2016 tot 17.01.2017**

**M - Museum Leuven**

You will find all the information about 500 Years Utopia on the website [www.utopialeuven.be/en](http://www.utopialeuven.be/en)

## Practical information

### OPENING HOURS

The exhibition *In Search of Utopia* is open every day from 11 AM until 6 PM. The museum is closed on Wednesday, on 25 December and on 1 January. On Thursday, the museum is open until 10 PM.

### RECEPTION DESK

M - Museum Leuven  
Leopold Vanderkelenstraat 28  
B - 3000 Leuven

### TICKET PRICES

| <b>In Search of Utopia</b> | <b>Reception</b> | <b>Online*</b> |
|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Individual visitors        | € 12             | € 11           |
| Reduced prices             | € 10             | € 9            |
| 13 – 25 years              | € 5              | € 3            |
| 0 - 12 years / ICOM / IKT  | Free             | Free           |

The audio guide is included in the ticket price

\*Excluding €1.50 administrative fee per online transaction

### Utopia combo ticket:

*In Search of Utopia* at M - Museum Leuven\*

*Utopia & More* at KU Leuven University Library\*\*

*Yto Barrada* at M - Museum Leuven

*EUtopia* at M - Museum Leuven

The audio guide is included in the ticket price

Online: [www.utopialeuven.be/en/tickets-and-info](http://www.utopialeuven.be/en/tickets-and-info)

**€16**

\*Excluding €1.50 administrative fee per online transaction.

\*\*Entrance to the tower of the University Library, the permanent collection at M and the M-Treasury of Saint Peter's are also included

### COLOPHON AND PARTNERS

*In Search of Utopia* is an exhibition organized by KU[N]ST Leuven, a collaborative venture between the City of Leuven and KU Leuven, Illuminare – Study Centre for Medieval Art and M – Museum Leuven. The exhibition is part of the city festival *500 Years Utopia*.

### CURATORS

Jan Van der Stock, Annelies Vogels

### SCENOGRAPHY

FELT architecture & design

## STEERING COMMITTEE

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## PRESS PHOTOS

Via this link <https://utopia.prezly.com> you can access our pressroom where you will find a selection of photos. Other photos can be made available upon request.

