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**ANTWERP AND LEUVEN HAVE A SIXTEENTH CENTURY THEME THIS YEAR**

European thought changed in the sixteenth century. Voyages of discovery, new inventions and the rediscovery of the ancient writers led to new insights and a new understanding of the world. Flanders too experienced these developments.

In Antwerp and Leuven, autumn 2016 is dominated by two outstanding figures from the sixteenth century. In Leuven in 1516, the English humanist Thomas More published his *Utopia*, a book that remains relevant to this day, raising issues with which contemporary societies are still grappling. The exhibition *In Search of Utopia* presents ​​the creative achievements that were partly prompted by the book and reveals the intellectual company in which More moved. The changing spirit of the age is evidenced with paintings, tapestries, maps and the development of scientific instruments. Works by the great masters of More’s time – Quinten Metsys, Jan Gossaert, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein and many others – can be admired. They inimitably display the boundless imaginative conception of an ideal world.

Sixty years after the publication of *Utopia*, in 1576, the Frenchman Christophe Plantin presented the *Biblia Regia* to King Philip II of Spain, and thus acquired exclusive rights to distribute liturgical works throughout the New World. Through his Antwerp publishing business, the ‘Officina Plantiniana’, he spread the new sixteenth-century scientific and humanistic thinking to the overseas territories.

The new Plantin-Moretus Museum opened on 30 September. On the ground floor of the redesigned museum, visitors encounter the versatile Plantin as a family man, manager, businessman and top-quality printer. Plantin was the publisher of choice of scientists and humanists, whose ideas he spread internationally. The exhibition design puts ten major exhibits in the spotlight, real bestsellers that have left their mark on history, such as Ortelius’ atlases and maps or Simon Stevin’s mathematical works.

**THOMAS MORE AND UTOPIA: AN ANTWERP LINK**

In 1515, Thomas More was part of a diplomatic mission that travelled to Flanders to negotiate new trade deals. When the negotiations broke down, he went to Antwerp. There, he started writing his fictional account of the utopian society, based on a fictitious encounter between his friend Peter Giles (Pieter Gillis) and the Portuguese sailor Raphael Hythlodaeus which takes place when leaving the Cathedral of Our Lady. In December 1516, More’s book, *Utopia*, rolled off Dirk Martens’ press in Leuven. More dedicated his work to the Antwerp city clerk, Peter Giles. Giles contributed to the *Utopia* himself, supplementing More’s tale with a ‘utopian’ alphabet of his own devising. Dirk Martens included a utopian poem in his first edition.

Peter Giles lived in De Biecorf, located on what is today known as the Eiermarkt, behind the KBC building; the premises are today home to a shop selling prestigious brands. All the great intellectuals of his day visited the house, including More, Dürer, Erasmus, Metsys, Martens, Grapheus, Colón and Holbein the Younger. In the final years of his life, Peter Giles lived on Heilige-Geeststraat.

On 28 May 2015, alderman for tourism Koen Kennis and museum directors Bart De Baere (M HKA) and Manfred Sellink (Royal Museum of Fine Arts) inaugurated a commemorative stone for Utopia on Handschoenmarkt (in front of the Cathedral). The stone is a permanent reminder of the origins of *Utopia* in Antwerp. On it, the following sentence can be read in Dutch and the five major world languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, Hindi and Spanish): ‘Thomas More claimed to have met a traveller here in 1515 who told him about Utopia.’

This stone is also emblematic of Antwerp’s special attractiveness as a global centre for the economy and the arts, both during the sixteenth century and today. Today, our commercial metropolis still inspires innovation, entrepreneurial spirit, distinctive narratives and innovative ideas, and is a unique habitat where artists, economists, thinkers, entrepreneurs and creative people can develop their full potential.

**FROM MEDIEVAL CITY TO COMMERCIAL METROPOLIS**

In the sixteenth century, Antwerp developed from medieval city to major trading centre. Economic activity shifted from Bruges to Antwerp early in the century. Privileges granted to the city gave traders more freedom and made commerce possible. Antwerp gained in attractiveness by holding annual fairs, and merchants settled in the city. At the time when More was writing *Utopia* and staying there, Antwerp was still presented on maps as a medieval city: the emphasis was on the Scheldt and the roadstead. *Antverpia Mercatorium Emporium* is one of the oldest detailed roadstead views of Antwerp, and dates from 1515, the year More stayed in Antwerp. The picture, which is kept at the Plantin-Moretus Museum, presents a view of the city from the left bank. The main buildings are easily recognisable. More distant buildings such as the Vleeshuis are shown slightly taller than they should be so that they remain visible. Antwerp is under the divine protection of Mercury (trade) and Vertumnus (fertile harvest). The map of Virgil Bononiensis is the most monumental and detailed portrait of Antwerp during the ‘Golden Age’. The public and religious buildings are shown slightly enlarged. Every last detail of the fortifications is complete, with some exaggeration of the heavy Scheldt bastions. The map shows Antwerp as a safe walled city that is a good place to live. Christophe Plantin knew the Antwerp of the map *Urbs Antverpia* (1565), on which the publishing house on Vrijdagmarkt can even be located.

**FROM PRINTING PRESSES TO INTELLECTUAL CENTRES AND INNOVATIVE BUSINESSES**

**Gutenberg Bible**

Johann Gutenberg was the first to use type made of an alloy of lead and antimony. These letters were durable and did not show through the paper. He also improved the printing press and devised an ink that was oil-based so that it would stick to the metal printing forms. His first book was a ‘42-line Bible’: each page has two columns of 42 lines each. The Plantin-Moretus Museum has the so-called ‘36-line Gutenberg Bible’ in its collection. This was the second Bible to be printed in Europe, for which Johann Gutenberg’s original type was used. Only fourteen copies of the 36-line Bible are preserved anywhere in the world.

**The first Belgian printer and friend of Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More**

Dirk Martens from Aalst (1446-1543) learnt the printing trade in Italy. After a stay in Antwerp, he set up his print shop in Leuven. Martens turned his publishing house into an intellectual centre, printing Latin, Greek and Hebrew works, in part as official printer to the University of Leuven. He was the main editor of Desiderius Erasmus and a personal friend of Thomas More. Exactly 500 years ago, the iconic work *Utopia* rolled off the presses at Dirk Martens’ print shop. More wrote *Utopia* out of frustration at rampant corruption and mismanagement in England. His answer was Utopia: an imaginary island where happiness and justice held sway.

**The commercialisation and dissemination of humanistic and scientific thought**

Christophe Plantin brought out his first book in 1555. He became the main printer of the scientists and humanists of his time. He published the works of Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), one of the leading humanists of the second half of the sixteenth century. Justus Lipsius studied – and later also taught – at the University of Leuven. He also taught in Lutheran Jena and Calvinist Leiden. His favourite classic authors were Tacitus and Seneca.

One of the most important works that the museum spotlights in the new presentation is Tacitus, *Historiarum et Annalium libri,…de moribus Germanorum,* ed. J. Lipsius, C. Plantin, 1574.

The Roman historian Tacitus (56-120) wrote a history of Rome in the first century. Lipsius published this work. He also published the *Germania*, describing the manners and customs of the various Germanic tribes. Justus Lipsius sometimes stayed for long periods with Plantin and later with the Moretuses. He even had his own study on the premises, where you can now take your place behind the reading desk, browse through a book and enjoy a photo opportunity.

**Entrepreneurship and an innovative business**

Plantin built his business into the leading typographic company in the second half of the sixteenth century. It was a proto-industrial operation with a rationalised production line, and became the largest of its kind in Europe, with a branch in Leiden, a shop in Paris and annual visits to the Frankfurt Book Fair. Plantin exported his publications to Spain and the Spanish overseas territories, where the books and the newly developed and disseminated sciences were crucial to the establishment of a society on the European model there. Plantin developed new typefaces and introduced refined French fonts, one of which, Garamond, is now found on computers. He switched to copper plates, which allowed illustrations to be printed with far more detail and accuracy.

Until 17 January, visitors can discover the world of Thomas More and its creative highlights at M Leuven; for the life and work of Christophe Plantin, the Plantin-Moretus Museum, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is open to visitors all the year round.