

Press release

Exhibition UTOPIA & MORE. THOMAS MORE, THE LOW COUNTRIES AND THE UTOPIAN TRADITION

(Leuven, October 20 2016 – January 17 2017)

Utopia & More. Both names are intrinsically connected. When hearing 'Utopia', one immediately thinks of Thomas More. Likewise, when Thomas More is mentioned, the title of his most famous work usually follows. Together with Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, More's *Utopia* might very well be the best known example of Neo-Latin literature. Both works are also related in content and approach, since they both treat serious topics in a playful manner. With *Utopia*, Thomas More established his reputation as an author. His book would be read, translated, published and republished – over and over again, until the present day.

But More is so much more than the author of *Utopia*. He was a humanist scholar at heart who could just as well comment on the work of Augustine as produce Latin epigrams in the best possible classical tradition. He mastered Greek – an unusual feat in his day – and maintained a lively correspondence with like-minded humanists on the continent. But his scholarly and literary activities formed only one part of his personality: first and foremost, he was a lawyer. A very gifted one at that, who would climb to the highest political office in England, namely that of Lord Chancellor.

His life was also marked by deep devotion, both to work and religion. Many of his writings are polemical in nature and serve one single purpose: to defend the Catholic faith, regardless of the attacker. This was true even if he was up against the most powerful person in the land, his patron and master, King Henry VIII. It is well known that More's stubborn resistance proved fatal as he was condemned for treason and executed. The way in which he suffered this persecution brought him veneration that would outlive him and last to today.

The University Library of the KU Leuven holds unique material that illuminates various aspects of the life and work of More. It is therefore particularly fitting that the library devotes an exhibition to the English humanist on the five-hundred year anniversary of his most famous work, printed for the first time by Dirk Martens in Louvain in 1516.

Utopia has a central place in this exhibition. But of course, there is much more to More. The exhibition therefore contains early modern copies of several of his other works, both in Latin and English. Special attention is devoted to More's links with the Low Countries, where he wrote the first version of *Utopia*, and met some of his most intimate friends. Naturally, the posthumous fame of Thomas More is also brought to the fore.

Utopia & More. The importance of the publication of *Utopia* in 1516 can hardly be exaggerated. More composed a very ingenious work, combining several genres in a serious philosophical discourse in the tradition of Plato, but with the ironic smile of the satirist Lucian. He presented his work as a tale of a journey of exploration; a clever move in itself since it placed his work in a contemporary, fashionable stream of similar reports – both truthful and fictional – of the discovery of the New World. These related publications are also presented in the exhibition, as are some of the most famous examples of utopian literature produced in the wake of More's work.

Highlights of the exhibition

1. In 1715, Nicholas de Guedeville published a French translation of *Utopia* in Leiden. This is not the first French translation of the text, but it is remarkable for being the first lavishly **illustrated translation**, containing no less than sixteen engravings by Frans van Bleyswyck, heavily inspired by French classicism. The original book is exhibited, and some of the most eye-catching engravings are reproduced in large format, submerging the visitor in the world of Utopia.

2. The exhibition offers various portraits of the author, including a splendid drawing by the Antwerp-born **Anthonio de Succa**. This artist, famous for his portraits of the rulers of the Low Countries, discovered an unknown copy of Holbein's portrait of More, of which he made his own version. The manuscript in which this drawing is preserved, normally held at the Royal Library of Belgium, is one of the very first pieces shown in this exhibition.

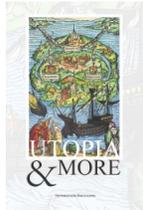
3. Just like most other prominent humanists of his time, Thomas More maintained a large **network of correspondents**. A lot of them were humanists from the Low Countries: his close friend Erasmus, who dedicated his *Praise of Folly* to More; Peter Giles, registrar of the city of Antwerp, who appears as a character in *Utopia*; Hieronymus Busleyden, councilor and master of requests at the Great Council of the Netherlands at Mechelen, a lawyer and politician with similar literary aspirations to More; and the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives who, thanks to More, spent several years in England and acted as councilor to Catharine of Aragon, Queen of England. The exhibition also contains several **original letters**, including letters by More addressed to Frans Cranevelt, a lawyer who studied in Louvain and worked in Bruges. These letters, preserved at the University Library of the KU Leuven, reveal contemporary religious and cultural debates, but also provide a unique glimpse into the personal life of their authors. They sometimes reflect More's humorous side, that is all too often forgotten.

4. Obviously, the exhibition also devotes considerable attention to More's condemnation and subsequent execution on July 6 1535. Following tradition, his severed head was displayed for several weeks after the execution. By bribing the guards, More's devoted daughter Margaret was able to prevent it from being thrown in the River Thames, as was also customary. The descendants of More also preserved **one of his cervical vertebrae** as a relic. Eventually, this piece of More's spine came into the possession of Mother Mary Augustina More, the last direct descendant of the author, who brought it to the continent and donated it to the monastery in Bruges where she lived. It was incorporated in a specifically designed relic shrine in the frame of an eighteenth-century portrait of More, still preserved at the English convent in Bruges, but which has travelled to Louvain for this exhibition. As a result, a small part of More himself will be present!

The exhibition also features one of the most prominent pieces of the collection from the Castle of Blois, a painting of the **execution of More**. This painting dates from the second half of the sixteenth century and shows More being led to the scaffold. It is most likely the work of the French artist Antoine Caron, or an artist directly affiliated to him.

5. *Utopia* inspired an array of other utopian and dystopian works. One of these is the satirical science-fiction story *Niels Klim's Underground Travels*, by the Danish author Ludvig Holberg, originally published in Latin in 1741 and representing **the last great utopian novel in Latin**. We show a particularly appealing copy of this work with a beautiful portrait of the author.

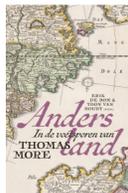
Publications



Catalogue

Dirk Sacré, Erik De Bom, Demmy Verbeke en Gilbert Tournoy (reds.), *Utopia & More. Thomas More, de Nederlanden en de utopische traditie* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016)

In Dutch.



Erik De Bom & Toon Van Houdt (reds.), *Andersland. In de voetsporen van Thomas More* (Antwerpen: Polis, 2016).

In Dutch.

Practical Information

Individual tickets

- Full site including the building, the exhibition Utopia & More, the tower of the University Library and an audioguide:
€ 10
€ 8 (reduction)
- Exhibition 'Utopia & More' including audioguide:
€ 4
€ 3 (reduction)
- Tower of University Library
€ 7
€ 5 (reduction)
- The Library building
€ 2 including audioguide

Opening hours

- Mon - sun: 10 AM - 6 PM
- Thu: 10 AM - 10 PM
- Closed: 25 December and 1 January
- The tickets are obtainable at the desk of the University Library. Open every day from 10 to 18 o'clock (Thursdays until 22 o'clock).
- Do you still have questions? You can send an email to cultuurUB@kuleuven.be or 016 32 46 60.

List of lenders

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