

old masters

October 5—27, 2024

The Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Brussels (Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles / De Koninklijk Museum van Schone Kunsten Brussel) was founded in 1801, thirty years before the existence of Belgium. The museum was founded by decree from Napoleon Bonaparte, as an exhibition space for the works of the First French Republic. After his defeat, Brussels came under the control of the Dutch Crown. Attempts to make the museum into a royal collection at this time failed and the museum remained a municipal institution until after the Belgian revolution of 1830, and the establishment of Belgium as an independent state with Brussels as its capital. In 1835, the institution became a national museum for the new Belgian state, by decree of the new king, Leopold II.

This history of changing hands and waxing and waning interests may account for the museum's peculiar holdings. More meagre in masterpieces than museums in the neighbouring cities of Paris, Amsterdam, Antwerp and Cologne, the museum nonetheless contains many treasures, particularly of the so-called 'Golden Age' of Flemish and Dutch painting. Restoration budgets in the museum are low, and consistent problems with leaks mean several works show visible damage or have been removed from public view. When we first visited the museum together, we mostly spoke about its displays, about how they shed light onto the paradoxes and compromises of the city. As an institution which receives federal funding, all information in the museum is legally required to be available in Dutch and French, though inconsistencies are common between texts in the two languages. Later attempts to incorporate English for foreign visitors often feel awkwardly tacked on; inconsistently present, with no discernable patterns in terms of placement, font choice, or material support.

In *Die Wahrheit der niederländischen Malerie*, art writer Helmut Draxler outlines the different conceptions of space in 16th century painting, as they occurred in Italy vs. the Lowlands (that is, what is now Belgium, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany). Renaissance painting in Italy had concerned itself with trying to resurrect classical ideals of balance and harmony into the religious world order of (then) contemporary Italy. In the Lowlands, however, metropolises like Antwerp and Amsterdam were experimenting with an early incarnation of the private art market. Where Italy had fixed point perspective, a unified system for a unified conception of the world, Niederlandish painters often exploited various perspectival points within a single image, for narrative effect. One pertinent trope of the era is the inclusion of mirrored surfaces in the painting, which reflect the space of the painter or the viewer themselves, often literally incorporating the painter's self portrait in mirror.

In **Panel 3**, The Banker and his Wife (ca. 1514) demonstrates exactly the sense of space that Draxler describes. A mirror on the table reflects a mysterious figure from beyond the pictorial frame. A shifted perspective in the image's right hand side opens onto a deal between two passersby, outside the room in which the money changer counts his coins. The painting in Brussels is not by the Flemish master painter Quentin Massys. It is a diligent, painstaking copy of the original, made by an unknown painter, likely active in Antwerp in the same years as Massys. The original work (translated sometimes as "The Money Changer and his Wife" or "The Money Lender and his Wife") is currently displayed in the duplicate Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi.

In **Panel 1**, Phillippe Van Bree's Atelier of the Women Painters (ca. 1831) depicts a gathering of female artists, all of whom gather to paint another woman dressed in the skin of a bear; an uneasy drag of both predator and prey. Three of the woman painting smoke cigarettes as they work, a long-standing trend among artists, but a remarkable depiction of women at the time. Beside this gathering, Sophie Nys' Artefact (20th century) presents a readymade object in the guise of geometric abstraction. A solid pine, Black Forest toilet

seat, likely belonging to Martin Heidegger. In his notorious final interview with Der Spiegel, the German philosopher claims:

That everything functions, that the functioning propels everything more and more toward further functioning, and that technicity increasingly dislodges man and uproots him from the earth. I don't know if you were shocked, but certainly I was shocked when a short time ago I saw the pictures of the earth taken from the moon. We do not need atomic bombs at all to uproot us -- the uprooting of man is already here.

Below these two paintings, Melchior d'Hondecoeter depicts a dead cock (17th century), hung by its feet.

In **Panel 2**, we see two afterlives of two paintings by Breugel the Elder. These two paintings serve as reminders of how much the circulation of images forms a part of their meaning. The Yawner (ca. 1560), has been cropped, cut down to the shape of an oval to suit its owner so that only half of the artist's signature is visible. The painting was found in the archive of Peter Paul Rubens, after his death, and only later understood to have likely come from a larger set of seven paintings depicting the seven deadly sins. One other sin painting by Breugel exists in Montpellier. The other five were either never painted or have since been lost. Another copy: In The Peasant and the Birdnester (2024), Jannis Marwitz reproduces the two characters from another Breugel painting (with the same title, painted 1568 and now housed in the Old Masters collection in Vienna). The two characters are expertly painted in tempera, but the background has been left out, given over to a surface of non-pictorial painting. The space between the two figures has been compressed, so that they can share space on the tiny panel of this study. The original title for the Breugel work has been attributed to a Dutch saying, "Who studies the nest has the knowledge, who robs it has the nest."

The Old Masters collection in Brussels is supplemented by a series of five connected Royal Museums in the city. One such institution, the Wiertz Museum is particularly beloved by artist friends in the city. This museum, founded by the Belgian painter Anoine Wiertz (1806-1865) as his atelier, and funded by the Belgian state under the promise that it would become a museum after his death, shows the inflationary space of a ballooning ego. As an artist, Wiertz determined the staging of his own practice, consciously blended with a staging of Belgium as a state. A manifesto in the first hall reads: "Brussels is the city, Paris the periphery." Many of the canvasses in the museum's central room are too large to ever leave the building. They are supplemented by an incredibly eclectic collection of other paintings by Wiertz in genre's ranging from social critique, to trompe l'oeil, to fantasias. In **Panel 4**, Fabrice Schneider shows the two front doors of this museum, with their painted mottos, buckling under a fish-eye lens.

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