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Brussels City Museum

The 5 masterpieces

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Maison du Roi

Pierre-Victor Jamaer. 1873-1895

Elements which allow it to be considered as a masterpiece

A neo-Gothic architectural masterpiece

La Maison du Roi is one of the most accomplished examples of the “neo” styles that were cultivated during the 19th century. It is inspired by an idealisation of the building which it replaced, that was built at the turning point between the Gothic and Renaissance styles, after 1515. At the start of the 19th century, this building was damaged and almost fell into ruin. In 1873, the decision was taken to demolish and rebuild it. Three solutions were available to the city councillors - as the building was owned by the City of Brussels. Either erect a modern building in its place, rebuild it as it was at the time with all the disparities resulting from its long and turbulent history, or rebuild it in a perfect state, as its architects *would* have wanted it at the start of the 16th century. The City opted for the last solution, without predicting either the unbelievable length of time it would take to rebuild (22 years! a record for such a project in the 19th century), or the huge expense it would involve (1,800,000 Belgian Francs, a fortune!).

The architect spent two years conducting archaeological surveys of all of the old Maison’s structures. He noticed that the building was probably incomplete because the ribs of the vaults on the facade served

no purpose. They probably point at galleries and balconies that were never built. Along with the balconies and galleries, the idea came to add a tower¹. The reconstruction project became increasingly elaborate as the builders became more and more passionate about the project, intoxicated by their love of the past and the wish to produce something that surpassed perfection.

This desire for perfection, to bring an idealised and adulated past to life, can be seen as much in the overall design as in the details: everything connects the Maison du Roi to a castle straight out of a fairy-tale.

Outside, blue stone dominates, enhanced slightly by the white stone and bricks used for the vaults. Proof of the care taken in the details and the skill with which they were implemented are the balustrade designs, each of which is different, with the eye losing itself in the infinite interlacing. The metal features contributed to this great harmony - fences on the ground level as well as sculptures. These were the subject of a very precise iconographic programme, created from scratch and inspired by the Maison's occupation over the centuries. They contribute to the overall lines and highlight the pinnacles, dormers and bays. Originally golden, they emphasise the building's overall preciousness.

An essential element in a square which itself is a masterpiece

La Maison du Roi resonates with all the other buildings on the Grand-Place. It is the final element of this highly original urban scenography. The rhythm of its bays mirrors those of the Baroque houses next door to it; its tower imposes itself as an elegant and feminine twin to the Town Hall.

¹. The original plans from the 16th century were never found. However, major archive research work was carried out and confirmed that, initially, a tower had been planned without it ever being possible to determine exactly what it might have looked like.



Saluzzo masterpiece

(+/- 1500-1510)

Elements which allow it to be considered as a masterpiece

A complete masterpiece

The altarpiece is the result of close collaboration between many artists and craftsmen who all placed their expertise at the service of a common project. It is precisely this complementarity that helped to achieve the sublime that exceeds individual talents. The various techniques combine to form a harmonious whole: carpentry, painting, sculpture, moulded elements, polychromy, gilding, polished silver, stamping. Everything is important because everything forms part of a unique whole.

An excellent state of conservation

The altarpiece has preserved the vividness of its colours and its gilding. The polychromy has been magnificently well preserved and has hardly ever been retouched.

A double pair of panels at the service of an encounter with the divine

While most Brabant altarpieces have just one pair of panels, the Saluces altarpiece has an additional pair, which means that it can be presented to the public in three different ways according to the liturgical calendar. When there is no ceremony, the altarpiece presents two juxtaposing painted

panels which, together, form a large composition on the theme of the Tree of Jesse, showing the ascendance of Mary and Joseph to King David. Opened a first time during ordinary religious celebrations, it deploys four painted panels which can be read from left to right and which illustrate the major episodes in Joseph's history from his birth to his death. Here, it is no longer a single monumental composition but various descriptive scenes which fit skilfully into the different panels. Opened a second time during the major liturgical celebrations of the year, the altarpiece takes the form of a wooden unit divided up into compartments into which sculpted, painted and gilded scenes are integrated which recount the major episodes in Mary's life, with the nativity as the central theme. The different aspects of the altarpiece correspond to an initiatory path that focuses on the Holy family whilst also leading us into the mystery of the birth of Christ and the encounter with the divine.

Skilful implementation

The painted panels are most probably the work of Valentin Van Orley and his workshop. Although not quite achieving the mastery of his illustrious predecessor, Rogier van der Weyden, the painter nevertheless surprises us with the realism he brings to the scenes which he places within the context of daily life of his time, as well as by the depth of his colour and his meticulous sense of detail. This is extremely perceptible in the finery or accessories, but, above all, in the rendering of the human figures, the beggars every bit as much as the Virgin, down whose cheek a tear flows as she watches her husband being buried.

The sculpted scenes are the work of one of the workshops of the illustrious Borreman family. Their semi-circular composition creates an impression of depth. The sculpture's quality is exceptional. The contribution made by the colour is not limited solely to bringing brilliance but also helps to 'finish' certain faces (pupils, eyebrows, pink cheeks, etc.) for greater realism. The sense of detail is astonishing. One never tires of discovering new elements (human figures, animals, decorations, etc.). The radiance of the matt or polished gold which, for the faithful is associated with the divine light, continues to amaze us today.

ANECDOTES

The baby Jesus is now absent from the nativity scene. It was stolen at the start of the 20th century when, after buying the altarpiece on the art market, the City of Brussels decided to exhibit it at the Town Hall.

Consolation: the absence of the baby Jesus allows us to see the system used to hold the figure in place. The child had been sculpted as a separate piece in a small format. Generally, the blocks of wood used are larger and prepared in order to produce a much larger composition integrating several characters and elements. These are then assembled in the compartments of the altarpiece and slotted in with each other in the same way as a giant *Meccano* construction.



The Wedding Cortège

Attributed to Jan Brueghel the Elder (Brussels 1568 - Antwerp 1628)

Elements which allow it to be considered as a masterpiece

The subject and the way in which it is worked

Subject:

A wedding cortège on its way to the church while in the background, in the village, the wedding feast is being prepared; the scene dates from about 1600 and comes from the region of Pajottenland.

Method

Rendered as a snapshot, produced down to the slightest detail. Thus the work, apart from its artistic qualities, is also of documentary value.

The spectator receives a great deal of information about different elements: what a **village** looked like at the time and how it fitted into the landscape (several large scattered farms, a windmill built on a hill, a marshy pasture with a lake, many trees, etc.)

- the various village buildings and their **architecture**: houses and stables with wattle and daub walls and thatched roofs, a house (maybe an inn) which also has a brick wall, a wooden mill, a stone church
- the **domestic animals** (dogs, sheep, pigs, hens)
- the country **people** and the **ways in which they lived** (in the cortège, the men and women proceed separately)

- how the villagers celebrated a **wedding**, their **festive attire**, including that of the bride and groom (recognisable by their crowns), the importance of **music** at such an event (bagpipe players), how the **wedding feast** was prepared (on the village square in large pots over fires), how the guests who came from far afield travelled (**covered wagons** standing outside what may be an inn)

Technique:

By adopting a view which is slightly above the scene depicted and opting for an elongated shape for his painting, the artist produced a **panoramic view** of the event. The peaceful composition, which is determined by the **horizontal lines**, is presented in such a way that the appearance of the colourful and lively scene in the foreground gradually, over time, slips towards the **middle ground and the background**. There, the spectator discovers elements that complete the story in the foreground. The artist's precision ensures that the background and the scenes there are perfectly legible.

Result

- The spectator is projected, as it were, into the painting and, at the same time, transported back to the end of the 16th century (**a time machine!**)
- The subject and its anecdotal implementation immediately invite the spectator to make **comparisons** between customs in the 16th century and those of the present-day, between those in Brabant and those in other regions; a search for differences and similarities - an automatic reflex.

The quality of the work

- There are currently about **fifteen known paintings** which depict the same scene. These were produced by different painters and, until recently, all were considered to be copies of a lost work by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.
- Experts all agree that the painting conserved at the Museum of the City of Brussels is, without doubt, the **best version** that exists. It is **particularly well painted**. Some even go so far as to attribute the work to Pieter Bruegel the Elder.
- Recent research, relating, in particular to the underlying drawing, appears to indicate that it is an **original work** (and not a copy), and it is now increasingly certain that it can be **attributed to Jan Breughel the Elder**. The painting's attractiveness is partly due to the **opposition** between the painter's refined, but, nevertheless, powerful **technique** and his decision to depict a **mainstream scene** from everyday life.
- **Jan Breughel the Elder** was the younger son of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and was, in the same way as his father (whom he barely knew, because he died when Jan was one year old), an extremely talented painter. Throughout his life, Jan appears to have been as popular as his father had been. He specialised mainly in historical paintings, still lifes with flowers and fruit and landscapes. He also worked as an engraver. Unlike his older brother Peter, he rarely worked in the style of his father.
- Jan learned his trade firstly with his **grandmother Maaïke Coecke**, the widow of **Pieter Coecke van Aelst**, then at other workshops. He quickly became famous as a painter of flowers and fruit. After a trip to Italy, the young painter started to specialise in landscapes, which brought him great success. In 1597, he moved to Antwerp where he played an important role in the corporation of painters. He knew **Pieter Paul Rubens** well and was often asked by him to paint sections (landscapes, fruit, flowers) of his paintings.

Conclusion

This is a very beautiful painting which is particularly attractive. It is hard to stop studying it. The painting holds the viewer's attention because there are always new details to be found.



The bombardment of the Grand-Place in 1695

(late 17th century)

This anonymous work, with its beautiful ochre-red-orange colours, offers an apocalyptic vision of the Grand-Place in Brussels in flames. It is the only painting that shows the monuments and houses of the famous square in flames during the bombing of Brussels from 13 to 15 August 1695 by the troops of Louis XIV, King of France, under the orders of the Duke of Villeroi. Several elements which no longer exist today can be seen, such as the tower of St. Nicolas church or the large fountain in front of the Maison du Roi.

Caught up in a war that pitted him against the “League of Augsburg”, a coalition of European powers - bringing together, among others, the Holy Roman Empire, England, the Dutch Republic and Spain -, Louis XIV intended to show his enemies his firepower with a spectacular example. Brussels, the most important city in the southern Netherlands, placed under the sovereignty of the King of Spain Charles II, was chosen as the target. French cannons and mortars hit the bottom part of the city with a huge amount of bombs and fireballs which completely destroyed it.

The first of these bombs fell at the bottom of Montagne-de-la-Cour causing the first victim. A few defensive salvos of cannonballs were returned by the inhabitants of Brussels, and, finding themselves short of ammunition, the paving stones were torn up but proved to be of no use. Unable to defend themselves, the city's inhabitants gathered on the upper reaches of the city, to helplessly wait and watch the destruction of their city.

Visible many miles away, this huge fire - which actually caused very few victims - destroyed about 4,000 houses, namely about a quarter of the city's built area. On Grand-Place, all that was left was the tower of the Town Hall and its walls, and those of the Maison du Roi. A few houses also preserved parts of their facades, which were used during reconstruction.

Thanks to the temporary measures taken by the municipal authorities, such as opening up to labour from outside the city, the setting of a maximum price for building materials and the duty-free import of these materials, Brussels, thanks to the help of loans granted by other cities in Brabant, rose up from the ashes within the space of just a few years, and rebuilt an even more prestigious Grand-Place than the previous one.

Elements which allow it to be considered as a masterpiece

1. Rarity

This work is the only known painting depicting the Grand-Place in flames during the bombardment of Brussels in 1695.

2. Period

This canvas was painted at the end of the 17th century and is, therefore, contemporary to the events of 1695.

3. The subject

The artist did not choose a place by chance, with the Grand-Place being one of the most prestigious sites in Brussels at the end of the 17th century and the place where the majority of the drama was played out (the town hall spire was used as a target by the gunners).

4. The quality of the work

An extremely accomplished work of its genre, the painting transports us into a Grand-Place which, three centuries later, can still be identified without any difficulty.

This canvas stands out thanks to the splendour of its colours and the implementation and texture of the flames, which appear to leap out of the painting and envelop each visitor who approaches it. The scene is furthermore enhanced by the particularly alarming night time atmosphere.

5. A journalistic painting

The artist immortalised the climax of these three days of horror by capturing the events of a fleeting instant. The few characters (and the dog!) that can be seen on the canvas are in a panic and accentuate even further the feeling of terror experienced by the population at the time.



Manneken-Pis, 1619-1620

Jérôme Duquesnoy the Elder (+/- 1570 - 1641/1642)

Elements which allow it to be considered as a masterpiece

Manneken-Pis does not strictly comply with the definition of a masterpiece. Although it is finely crafted, especially the facial features and hair, it is neither a masterpiece of its sculptor nor an accomplished work of its genre. Yet, it is, without a doubt, one of the best-known statues in the world and therefore, by virtue of this, can be considered to be a masterpiece. It is necessary to look elsewhere for the reasons behind its success.

The theme of a child urinating stems from classical times and is part of the genre of anthropomorphic statues in fashion during Antiquity, which experienced a revival in popularity in the 15th century. In 1452, a source gives an account of the presence of a stone fountain “dManneken pist” on the same site. The creation of a new bronze statue based on this theme already shows a certain attachment to the *Manneken*.

Prior to the installation of Duquesnoy’s model, Manneken-Pis had already become a rather special public fountain because it participated in the city’s festivities, such as the Ommegang, and was adorned with costumes. It is probably the only non-religious statue in the world that has so many outfits, which highlights the importance it has always had. By dressing Manneken-Pis, not only was it made a part of the city’s life, but it was also a way of paying homage to it and, through it, to Brussels.

What makes this small statue so special is its unique character around the world. The fact that it is dressed, the fact that it was chosen by the population to represent the City of Brussels, and also the fact that its history and the history of Brussels are so closely intertwined. The many legends that attempt to explain why this statue has become the symbol of Brussels also bear witness to its grassroots support and its aura which remains shrouded in mystery.

Manneken-Pis personifies the city. When it is under threat, such as during the bombing of 1695, it speaks on behalf of the inhabitants of Brussels in order to denounce the attacker. It symbolised the spirit of the City's resistance when it was used in caricatures during the World Wars and pissed on the occupier. At less dramatic times, its image was used to gently poke fun at the authorities. The inhabitants of Brussels are happy to identify themselves with this mischievous young boy, who shows no sign of pretension and appears to enjoy life.

His natural gesture, deemed by some to be irreverent or trivial, but by others to be ingenuous and endearing, never leaves people indifferent. Whether positively or negatively, Manneken-Pis and his slightly enigmatic smile never fail to make us stop and think. And what if, after all, that was what made it a masterpiece?

ANECDOTES

There is a host of legends and tales surrounding Manneken-Pis which are as old as the statue itself.

Here are a few:

In 1747, French soldiers posted in Brussels attempted to steal the statue. In order to excuse himself for his soldiers' conduct and pacify the inhabitants of Brussels, King Louis XV made Manneken-Pis a Knight of the Order of Saint-Louis and offered him a beautiful court garment. This costume, the oldest one preserved, still belongs to the collections of the City of Brussels.

In 1817, Manneken-Pis was stolen by a man wishing to make use of the bronze. Very quickly denounced, he was arrested and sentenced to public disgrace. A huge crowd gathered around the fountain once the statue had been returned to its rightful place and the date 1817 was engraved on the pedestal.

The statue's life was full of other less famous events up until the fateful day in 1965 when the inhabitants of Brussels discovered with stupefaction that, once again, Manneken-Pis had been stolen during the night, with only its feet and ankles still in place. In next to no time, a copy of the original statue (a mould of which had been made following another theft in 1963), was installed. On 27th June 1966, the statue was brought back to Brussels. It had been found ten days earlier following an anonymous call to a newspaper based in Antwerp. The statue had been thrown into the Charleroi Canal.

The pieces were entrusted to the Museum of the City, which carried out the restoration of the original statue. Since then, it is a copy that can be seen on the corner of Rue du Chêne and Rue de l'Etuve, while the original work by Duquesnoy can be admired in the Museum. It bears "scars" (just below the knees) of this restoration work, but the public is better able to admire the meticulous detail of the child's features here than at the site of the fountain.

Brussels City Museum

Grand-Place, 1000 Brussels

Tuesdays to Sunday from 10 am to 5 pm, on Thursday to 8 pm

Close don Mondays and public holidays 1/1, 1/5, 1/11, 1/15, 25/12

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