

Views on the Collection
Flemish Community

RE FLEC TIONS

PREFACE

It is with particular pride that I introduce this book on the exceptionally rich and diverse Collection Flemish Community. We can all share in that pride. After all, this collection belongs to all of us. And that is precisely why its public accessibility is so important. That is what this work achieves in such a wonderful and original way. It provides an insight into Flanders' rich artistic heritage. In doing so, it is not afraid to look over the border.

The significance and richness of the Collection Flemish Community symbolise the importance that the Flemish government attaches to art and heritage and the resources we are willing to make available for it. That is why in recent years we have invested heavily in increasing the share of contemporary art. The resources of the Masterpieces Fund have also increased exponentially, allowing us to keep precious artworks in Flanders. This has already led to some remarkable and prominent acquisitions that have enriched the collections of our museums. The funding for the Masterpieces Fund will be increased to 1.5 million euros from 2025 (triple the annual funding of 500,000 euros for 2023 and previous years). The rule according to how taxpayers can pay less inheritance tax by donating cultural goods has also been updated and made more accessible. The aim of this rule is the same: to keep valuable works of art and collections in Flanders, thus enriching museum holdings.

Strengthening our Flemish museum and heritage sector fits into a broader framework: from 2024 onwards, the entire sector, and thus also our museums, will receive substantially more resources, an increase the sector has rightly been asking for. This will enable them to focus even more strongly on their core functions: conservation and management, research and (digital) accessibility. Since September 2022, we also have a symbol of this fundamental investment in art and culture made by the Flemish government, a flagship even: the renovated Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA), home to a great many masterpieces. Our finest museum has been widely acclaimed, including far beyond our borders. There will soon be a nice addition to this physical temple of culture in Antwerp: the new virtual museum, which will allow you to discover the rich Flemish heritage from your armchair. The tremendous success of both the book *De canon van Vlaanderen* ('The Canon of Flanders') and the TV series *Het verhaal van Vlaanderen* ('The Story of Flanders') proves that a very wide audience is particularly interested in the history and heritage of our region.

That journey of discovery can begin with this book, which in a special way provides a surprising insight into the diverse and uncommonly large Collection Flemish Community. I am very grateful to the authors, Koenraad Jonckheere and Lien Vandenberghe, and to the publisher Hannibal for this work, as well as to all the contributors.

THE COLLECTION FLEMISH COMMUNITY AND THE COLLECTION OF FLANDERS: A PRESENTATION

Hans Feys

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REFLECTIONS

“To show a glimpse of the multiplicity and diversity of the Collection Flemish Community, we focus on some aspects that over the centuries have had an impact on the production and perception of art: craft skills of course, but also other factors, such as political circumstances, philosophies of life, science, poetry, gender and diversity.”

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INTRODUCTION



Willem van Haecht, *De kunstkamer van Cornelis van der Geest* [*The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*], 1628, oil on panel, 100 × 130 cm (This work is not part of the Collection Flemish Community.)



Paracelsus, detail from *De kunstkamer van Cornelis van der Geest* [*The Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*] (p. 22)



Honoré d'O, *Draaiboek voor de schatbewaarder [Scenario for the Treasurer]*, 1996–97,
mixed media, variable dimensions

1. CRAFT AND CONCEPT



Pierre Alechinsky, *Le rare heureux* [*The Happy Rare*], s.d.,
lithograph, 76 × 62 cm

In the 1950s, when Pierre Alechinsky (b. 1927) thought of transferring drain and sewer covers on to his canvases, he raised a few eyebrows. The artist saw in those heavy, steel discs a fabulous reservoir of ornaments that he could use for relief printing, a technique used in Europe since the late Middle Ages. The method had been known for much longer in Asia. Figures were cut from blocks of wood before being inked and printed. Alechinsky had been looking for a new way to apply this ancient craft and found it in the street. By using such bulky metal covers, he gave the formal idiom of the everyday a new dimension. Suddenly, those insignificant ornaments of unloved things became a metaphor for the beauty of the commonplace. The drain-cover prints are like little gems of oriental calligraphy, another of Alechinsky's hobby horses.

It sounds dreadfully banal, but it is essential for art to be made; for artists to look for ways to represent the unrepresentable. After all, the artistic imagination begins with the materials and techniques available to artists and the new uses they devise for them. For centuries, those methods were strictly standardised. There was painting, there was sculpture and there were the applied arts, such as printmaking, stained-glass windows, tapestry-weaving and pottery. First the Guilds of St Luke, which painters had gathered in since the late Middle Ages, and later the academies of fine arts oversaw the written and unwritten rules that defined form and content and the techniques that could be used for that purpose. That changed abruptly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when academic rules were abandoned. Artists claimed the freedom to experiment fully with new materials and techniques to create new content. Until then, most experiments had never been associated with artistic expression. If in the late sixteenth century the slow shift from panel to canvas had still proved to be a great innovation, in the twentieth the world itself became the canvas on which the artist could work, the clay with which to sculpt. No material or technique was excluded anymore, the range now even including blood and faeces. The distinction between *naturalia* and *artificialia*, or the wonders of nature and the creations of humankind, which Renaissance thinkers loved to make, is a thing of the past. The focus on colour and line that dominated art history for thousands of years vanished in favour of endless curiosity about form, material, texture, technique, action, feeling and so much more. While Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441) further optimised the technique of oil painting by adding siccatives (drying agents) to it, artists now enjoy experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI) using virtual reality (VR) glasses. Artists who innovate do so to represent ideas that would

otherwise remain unrepresentable. Indeed, new techniques and materials generate new applications, as Alechinsky showed. They continually distort our visual experiences and in doing so reshape the way we think.

The Flemish Community owns a lot of artworks by artists who have explored and sometimes pushed the boundaries of their craft. This should come as no surprise. Technical mastery has been a hallmark of art from this region since the fifteenth century, when Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464) set a new course for the history of art. Artists have experimented since time immemorial with the technical and conceptual aspects of art. Documenting that artistic quest in all its diversity is essential: from the studio model to the painter's easel, from brilliant draughtsmanship to uniform colour surfaces, from mass production to unique pieces, it tells the history of tradition and innovation in the art from the Low Countries.

A STUDY IN THE STUDIO

This work by Edgard Tytgat (1879–1957) shows us that for him the painter's craft was not a lonely business. Tytgat's wife is his practical and moral support. She sits in his shadow and passes him his brushes. Faithfully, she waits by his side. It is a silenced idealisation of an old craft with a deeply ingrained gender pattern. Tytgat plays on tradition: a self-portrait in his Sunday best, the artist as creative intellectual. He looks through the window at the world – a classic metaphor – and captures it. Not in an unfeeling manner, like a photographer, but superlatively: creatively. As such, he places himself in the tradition of the great masters, who tried to surpass nature in their work.

While Tytgat's studio is almost absurdly empty, Dries Van den Brande (b. 1965) shows us a real studio. A multitude of objects fill the workplace of sculptor Etienne Desmet (b. 1943). In the foreground lies an amorphous object. It suggests the abstraction that characterises Desmet's sculptures. In the background are spray cans, bottles, chisels and other tools. The realistic depiction of Desmet's sculpture studio contrasts with Tytgat's hushed, romantic depiction of the painter's studio. They are two poles of one and the same reality. There is the artist as craftsman cutting and moulding raw materials, and there is the master surrounded by chaos and multiplicity. And there is the artist-intellectual who records reality in a tidy and refined manner, surrounded by nothing but deep thoughts.



Dries Van den Brande, *Atelier Etienne Desmet [Studio of Etienne Desmet]*, 1985,
black and white photograph, 40 × 49.7 cm



Edgard Tytgat, *De schets* [*The Sketch*], 1929,
oil on canvas, 112 × 139 cm

PAINTING THE ACT OF PAINTING

In his early work, Hugo Duchateau (b. 1938) liked to explore the materiality of painting. Wet brushes, dripping paint and pencils are part of that spectrum, but so are canvases and easels. Here is a panel on an easel. Attached to it is a sheet containing the image of, yes, a panel on an easel, with, attached to it, indeed, a panel... This visual spectacle is a *mise en abyme*, in which an image is itself repeated over and over again, endlessly. In mathematical terms, such *mises en abyme* are called 'fractals'. Dutch artist M.C. Escher (1898–1972) made them immensely popular in the 1950s.

In theory, this repetition could go on indefinitely. Duchateau uses the effect to literally highlight the materiality of painting, in particular the tools used by the painter. Indeed, when a painting hangs in a museum, it is often disconnected from the long process of diligent work that preceded it. In this case, the ongoingness of the repetition makes that impossible. It shows how artists are always revisiting and reworking, how an image haunts the mind, endlessly.

Léon Spilliaert (1881–1946) painted almost all his works at night. The colours are dull, faded, as in old photographs. They lack light. The self-taught artist from Ostend reduces his self-portrait to an unending repetition of strokes. He is mirrored again and again. Like Duchateau, Spilliaert reminds viewers of the imperative context of every artistic creation: endless repetition leads to craft.



Hugo Duchateau, *Schilderij met schilderesezel* [*Painting with Easel*], s.d., mixed media, painting: 138 × 100 cm, easel: 198 × 60 × 60 cm

Léon Spilliaert, *Zelfportret* [*Self-Portrait*], 20th century, watercolour on paper, 75 × 59 cm



COLOUR AND LINE

During the Renaissance (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), there was intense debate in Italy about the foundation of painting: is line and thus drawing (*disegno*) the basis of artistic genius, or is mastery of colour (*colorito*) the true essence? In Florence and Rome, people argued for the line. The line makes it possible to design the subtlest compositions, and so to capture the rational essence of the story. In Venice, in contrast, people advocated colour. After all, in the Floating City they had already introduced oil paint, a technique from the Low Countries, in the late fifteenth century. It allowed painters to apply colours with far greater nuance. Oil paint dries slowly and allows for this nuance. Tempera paint, still used at the time in Florence and Rome, dries quickly and is hard and linear.

When France became the mecca of art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the debate was still raging. The French called it the debate between the Rubenists and the Poussinists, with Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) the champion of the colourists and Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) that of the line lovers. Even when the Impressionists rejected the classical rules of art in the 1860s, the debate was not yet settled. Even though they opted for the unrestrained use of colour, not much later the line raised its head again, this time in art deco and art nouveau.

Heilige Familie met de papegaai [*The Holy Family with a Parrot*] shows why Rubens became the champion of the colourists: bright blues, reds and yellows make this work stand out. The colour transitions are exceptionally soft, almost tangible. More than three centuries later, in the 1980s, Philippe Van Snick (1946–2019) reasserted the importance of colour. Pigment and plywood become an installation. Because even now, 400 years after Rubens, painting is still the application of paint on canvas, whether neatly outlined or not, in search of a balance between ratio and emotion.

Peter Paul Rubens, *Heilige Familie met de papegaai* [*The Holy Family with a Parrot*], c. 1614–33, oil on panel, 207 × 236 cm







Philippe Van Snick, *(0-9) Kleuren en Cijfercode* [(0-9) Colours and Numerical Code], 1983,
installation with paint on plywood, 10 × (120 × 100 cm)



SKETCHING

The Roman sketchbooks of Pieter Verbruggen the Younger (1648–1691) are exceptional. This Flemish sculptor, draughtsman, etcher and dealer in sculptural stone, made a trip to Italy in 1674 to learn about classical antiquity and the work of the best Italian masters, as did many artists of the time. During his trip, he filled sketchbooks with drawings of buildings, sculptures and other sights, which he used as a visual database for his own designs when he returned home. Sketching ornaments, buildings and sculptures was an important part of the craft of painting and sculpture.

Fascinated by the creative process that lay behind a painting or sculpture, Hugo Duchateau (b. 1938) also delved into the sketch. He depicted the process using a small jar with charcoal, a material that also lent itself well to rough sketches and drawings in Verbruggen's time. Starting in the left corner of the painting, Duchateau depicts the application of this material in rudimentary form. He named the work *Koh-i-Noor Chalks*, after an exclusive brand of artists' materials. The manufacturer is proud of its pioneering role in the industrialisation of artists' supplies in the nineteenth century.



Pieter Verbruggen the Younger, *Drie Romeinse schetsboekjes* [Three Roman Sketchbooks], 1674–77, pen and graphite on paper, 15.3/19/20.5 × 12/14/17 cm respectively



Hugo Duchateau, *Koh-i-Noor chalks in een bokaaltje – Kor-i-Noor chalks in de lucht*
[*Koh-i-Noor Chalks in a Goblet – Kor-i-Noor Chalks in the Air*], 1977,
pencil on paper, 112 × 83 cm

THE MATERIALITY OF SOUND

The Fasano Dance Organ was part of the organ collection of Jef Ghysels (b. 1936), acquired by the Flemish Community in 2007. Ghysels was an avid collector of dance and fairground organs. This organ is a unique example of the exceptional craftsmanship to be found in Flanders at the start of the twentieth century, especially in Antwerp. Consisting of metal pipes, numerous solo registers and a richly ornamented front, it was made by Eusèbe Fasano (s.d.), an Italian who worked for a firm called Gavioli before setting up his own company in Antwerp.

An organ maker had to master different media, as the barrel organ lookalike by Camiel Van Breedam (b. 1936) shows. *Het grote orgel [The Big Organ]* is an assemblage of diverse wooden and metal parts. It looks like a large wooden cabinet filled with votive objects drawn from everyday life. There is a pipe, a kind of brush and below it, a large bell that hangs from the artwork. Van Breedam not only experimented with and reflected on the complex materiality of the music organ, but also raised questions about the religious qualities of sound and image. Organs, of course, have a long religious history. Long before they were used for popular entertainment, they filled churches with hallowed sounds *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, 'for the greater glory of God'.



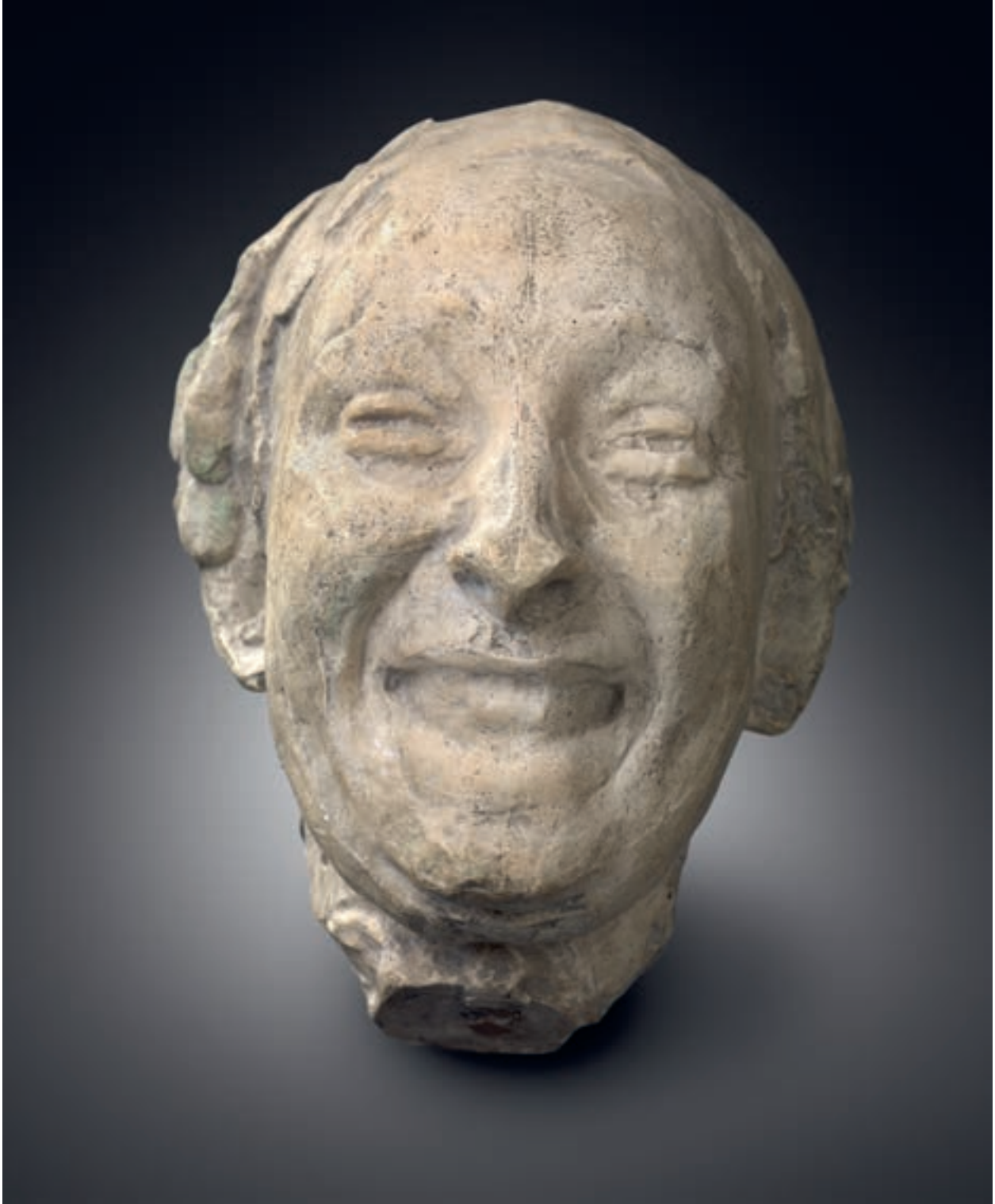
Camiel Van Breedam, *Het grote orgel* [*The Big Organ*], 1968,
mixed media, 162 × 191 × 32 cm



Eusèbe Fasano & Co., Fasano 'Orchestre Moderne' Dance Organ, 1912,
76-key Fasano dance organ, 530 × 720 × 125 cm



CRAFTWORK AND BRAINWORK



Rik Wouters, *Lachend masker [Laughing Mask]*, c. 1910,
plaster, 15.5 × 19.5 × 27 cm



Bruce Nauman, *Untitled (Cross Beams)*, 1986,
cast iron with grit blast finish, 2 × (12.5 × 217.5 × 11.5 cm)

Rik Wouters (1882–1916) went down in history as a painter, but like many of his contemporaries, he liked to make use of a variety of media and materials. As well as a plaster cast, Wouters also made a bronze version of this head, aptly titled *Lachend masker [Laughing Mask]*. To make a cast, you need a mould into which plaster or bronze is poured. The different materials in which the face was moulded generate a range of perceptions. Plaster does not reflect light like bronze. It must have greatly fascinated Wouters, a descendant of Impressionism. Light and colour were essential to him.

Ever since Wouters' contemporary Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) introduced *objets trouvés* into art, any everyday object can become art. Two cross beams normally used in construction can become a sculpture. The craftsmanship of the sculptor has here been drastically reduced, or perhaps conceptualised. The creative process of Bruce Nauman (b. 1941) was seemingly limited to choosing two metal beams that he laid crosswise on top of each other. Nauman's work relates to Wouters' the way line relates to colour, thinking to feeling.

CONCINNITAS

In classical antiquity, artists devoted a lot of their attention to figuring out the right proportions. They did so in part on the basis of mathematical formulas. The bodies in the statues of the Greek sculptor Polykleitos the Elder (480–420 BC), for example, were composed of geometric parts that related to each other in mathematical proportions. This produced a form of art that remains normative to this day – just think of the beauty ideals on social media. Thanks to 'digital enhancement' apps, it is now possible to mould selfies to the ideals of Polykleitos.

That attention to proportions and composition was jettisoned by the avant-garde at the start of the twentieth century. When designing this lithograph, for instance, Pierre Alechinsky (b. 1927) relied on nothing but the spontaneous movement of his wrist. Alechinsky was a member of CoBrA, an avant-garde movement of artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, who met in Paris. They wanted to achieve free, spontaneous expressions, without too much thinking or calculating. They drew inspiration from drawings and paintings by children and the mentally ill as well as from Eastern calligraphy.

The work of Paul Joostens (1889–1960) also has its place among the avant-garde, although almost half a century earlier. This object-collage is a random composition of forms that together form a whole. The synthesis of separate forms produces a new form that is more than the sum of its parts. As early as the fifteenth century, Florentine theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) called this phenomenon *concinnitas*. Sometimes one plus one makes three. In abstract artforms especially, *concinnitas* plays an important role.



Pierre Alechinsky, *Composition II*, s.d.,
lithograph, 33 × 43 cm



Paul Joostens, *Object-collage*, 1922,
mixed media (painted wood, metal, gauze, coloured paper, cardboard and mother-of-pearl ball), 48 × 31.3 × 24.5 cm

BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY



Antoon De Clerck, *Dit ga ik ook schilderen* [*One Day I Am Also Going to Paint This*], 1977,
oil and charcoal on canvas, 175 × 160 cm

Antoon De Clerck (1923–2001) reflects on his ambitions. With the words ‘One Day I Am Also Going to Paint This’, he presents himself as a promising artist. Ironically, the ‘one day’ in the title coincides with the present, as the painting shows how his dreams are being fulfilled. The sketch is already on a finished canvas. This creates a paradox between dream and reality. There is a void there that every artist gets lost in from time to time. Stubborn dreams and naive ambitions are part of every artistic practice.

In the seventeenth century, these were already part of the artistic practice. Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), for example, made this sketch for one of the altarpieces in the Church of St Augustine in Antwerp. Van Dyck learned the craft of painting in the studio of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), at the time an almost unapproachable grandmaster. The work for the main altar in the church was painted by Rubens himself. Van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens the Elder (1593–1678), a fellow painter from Antwerp, were not deterred, however, and each took on a side altar. Designing an altarpiece was a major assignment and the ideal opportunity for Van Dyck to surpass his master. After all, *Heilige Augustinus van Hippo in extase* [*St Augustine in Ecstasy*] was hung close to Rubens’ *Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints*. While Rubens earned 3,000 guilders for the main altar, Van Dyck received only 600 guilders for the side altar. The road was long, but fortunately dreams can depict reality.



Anthony van Dyck, *Heilige Augustinus van Hippo in extase* [*St Augustine in Ecstasy*], c. 1628, oil on panel, 60.3 × 43.8 cm

PHOTO CREDITS

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Jean Fouquet, *Madonna omringd door serafijnen en cherubijnen* [*Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim*] (detail), c. 1450, oil on panel, 112.7 × 104 cm, in custody at KMSKA – Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp. BK010305

Léon Spilliaert, *Zelfportret*

[*Self-Portrait*] (detail), 20th century, watercolour on paper, 75 × 59 cm, in custody at KMSKA – Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp. BK012487

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Ulay & Marina Abramović, *Rest Energy* (detail), 1980, Polaroid from a performance for video (4 min., ROSC '80, Dublin), 68 × 55 cm, in custody at M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp. BK005731

Jan van Scorel, *Portret van een vrouw* [*Portrait of a Woman*] (detail), 16th century, oil on canvas, 57.3 × 45.3 cm, in custody at KMSKA – Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp. BK010881

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