

SHORT



ARTICLES

Digitising the Furniture and Sculpture collection in Belgium's Royal Museums of Art and History

Emile
van
Binnebeke,
Nacha
Van
Steen
Belgium

Belgium's capital of Brussels is home to many fine museums, among which are the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH). They hold a diverse array of collections, from European decorative arts to musical instruments and archaeological collections to artworks from China, Japan and India. These collections are spread over 4 different sites in the city, and are currently being digitised and published on the museum's own website, as well as on Europeana. Here, we'd like to showcase some of the work that has gone into the digitisation of one of our collections, namely the Furniture and Sculpture collection.

Artistic developments in the 13th to 17th century

The art in the 13th to 17th century in Western Europe is closely linked to the developments in architecture and economy at the time. This period encompasses the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque art movements and is very rich in not only sculpture and painting, but furniture and interiors as well.

When Gothic art developed in France in the 12th century AD out of Romanesque art, it

rapidly spread over the rest of Europe. Originally, most artworks were produced to be used in churches, as decoration or, more often, as a visual expression of the liturgy. Like the architecture it was surrounded with, the artworks were big, detailed and expressive. The sculpture on the outside of the churches, often in stone, was complemented by wooden sculptures inside that were normally painted and gilded. Retables were the centrepieces of this religious sculpture and formed veritable walls of sculpture (sometimes painting) that decorated the wall behind the churches' altars in both high and low relief, divided in several registers. Throughout Europe they became very popular in the Catholic areas of Flanders and Spain due to export by Antwerp and Brussels merchants and often depicted the saint to whom the altar was consecrated. Although these retables were created as a whole, a lot of them did not survive the *Beeldenstorm* or *Iconoclastic Fury*, and often only parts of them can be found in museums. Cities like Antwerp and Brussels became known for the excellent works they produced, aided, no doubt, by their favourable economic position in the region. The formation of guilds out of



The Furniture and Sculpture collection is currently under consideration as one of the first collections to be included in a 3D-photography project in partnership with a local university.

A cardboard file from the museum's inventory records. This describes the statue shown above.

N.A.I.		Retakefragment INV. AFDELING nr. 3629 -5-	
Nr. Dossier			
Nr. Foto <i>Alc. naar 10657A.</i>			
Beschrijving <i>Retakefragment: De Betrokking. Links, De H. Maagd staat kant inouden hands en hart en mantel met analoge, maar kleinere bord, als in februartafel. Het. L draagt een sluier. Zy draagt een rood en goudkleurde mantel, die de afbeelding van haar L met rood en goudkleurde mantel met de linkerhand opheft. Zy draagt een verguld perk met met. A bord die juist naa beneden valt op de bruis en ^{Tijdvak} waarna de litten de bord sieren. Haar tuilband wordt met in kindap opbehouden. Deid nauwen chagen dehaeren met rand deugen. traditioneel versphoren pondblad, verguld.</i>			
Opmerkingen <i>Antwerp atelier, 1500-1510. Antwerpse hand of pondblad i't midden. Rechts hand na Maria e. v. Elisabeth afgebroken.</i>			
Verwervingsdatum	Aankoop	Prijs	Afmetingen <i>31,7 x 20 x 7,5</i>
Legaat	Gift	Bruikleen	Materie <i>Eik, verguld, licht gepolierd.</i>
Herkomt	Voormal. eigenaars	Staat van bewaring	<i>behandeld: oktober 1970 i I.R.P.A.</i>
		Laboratoriumonderzoek	
		Dia	

earlier artists' circles meant that quality was guaranteed and the cities' name became a brand name.

Slowly but surely the new developments in art production found their way into the palaces of the nobility, first in the house chapels, later

throughout the rest of the mansions and palaces.

From the 16th century onwards the establishment of the trader class in economy meant that they too began to richly decorate their homes. The focus moved from the religious to

the secular, in life as well as in art, under the influence of the Reformation, Counter-Reformation and the Renaissance art movement, that longed to resurrect the beauty and grace of Classical art. Furniture became more varied, more decorated and more prominent in the interiors of the upper classes. Wall hangings complemented the owners' paintings and served to impress and astonish visitors. In the Low Countries, Doornik, Brussels and Oudenaarde were well respected for the quality of their tapestry, and each was known for having an individual style. Tableware and decorations in precious metals and coloured glass completed the look of luxury in palaces and stately homes.

These changes continued into the Baroque period and became even more outspoken. Tableware now incorporated precious stones and ivory, and furniture was produced out of exotic and often fragrant woods, and decorated with ivory, shells and miniature paintings. More and more the link with religious iconography was lost and replaced with scenes of bucolic luxury and leisure.

The RMAH's Furniture and sculpture collection

With all the great quality works produced in the Low Countries, it should come as no surprise that the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, Belgium (RMAH) house a beautiful collection of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque art, focused not only on sculpture, furniture and wall hangings but tableware and precious decorations as well. Divided over two collections Furniture and Sculpture, and Preciosa these objects aim to give an impression of the art and the ideas behind them in the 13th to 17th century, as well as the context in which these objects would have been used.

The Furniture and sculpture collection was founded shortly after the foundation of the RMAH in 1835 and was able to grow in size considerably thanks to donations and a well thought-out acquisition policy. The Sculpture Department focuses primarily on retables, like the prized complete Retable of Saint George by Jan Borreman, and alabaster from Malines, although all areas of medieval sculpture are well represented, and terra cotta pieces from the Baroque period. In Furniture it is the cabinets and furniture from Liege in rococo-regency style that are the most renowned. These collections can be visited in a chronologically organised circuit that shows off the individual pieces to their full advantage and allows the public to examine them up close and follow the stylistic developments over time.

Popular with the general public visiting our museum, these collections were among the first to be included in the digitisation process. Procedures were put in place to describe how to transfer existing inventory records into the collection management software MuseumPlus that is used in the RMAH and thus digitise the collections within the standards they deserve. These procedures are based on the current international standards and adapted to the specific needs of the collection and the museum as a whole. Of course, they are subject to change should other needs arise or should best practice networks give new and interesting insights in the digitisation process.

Digitising the collection

In spite of these first procedures already laid out to streamline the work when digitisation began, it quickly became clear that more procedures would have to be created along the way to make sure that the digitised catalogue would become a uniform collection to be consulted online.





Most of the existing inventory of the Furniture and Sculpture collection existed only in cardboard files, written in ink by a succession of curators who each used the vocabulary he preferred, and none of the cardboard files were filled out in exactly the same way.

This meant that searches over the entire collection, and by extension the entire

museum's collections, would only result in partial results if left unremedied. Before actual digitisation could take place, a thorough analysis had to be carried out by our digitisation team to determine what information would go where in the database, and if we needed more fields in our database to be able to incorporate all data. Of course, the strength of this analysis depends in large part

This Visitation scene is part of a larger retable from Bassines, of which multiple sculptural fragments remain.

It was made in Antwerp at the beginning of the 16th century.



on the interaction with the curator, who lends his expertise on the collection to the digitisation team to make high quality digitisation possible.

Even more taxing than the different vocabularies, all of the files were not written in the same language. Where the first problem was fairly easily solved by the creation of our own thesaurus, based on already existing thesauri like AAT and in keeping with the most current standards, the second problem proved to be rather more persistent. After all, simple translations do not always comprise all meanings a term can have, which proved especially to be the case in the Furniture collection. Moreover, as a Royal scientific institution, the RMAH is required to offer all its publications in multiple languages. This led to the creation of multilingual thesauri for object names and classifications, created by the RMAH for use in their own collections, available in three languages (French, Dutch and English) with more to follow soon, to be used to create a multilingual online catalogue. These thesauri will in turn be linked with thesauri developed by other institutions in the near future in order to facilitate exchange of data among multiple institutions. It is this part of the digitisation work we are most proud of, and we feel we are well on our way to become a centre of excellence in the field of digitisation, and the creation of thesauri in particular.

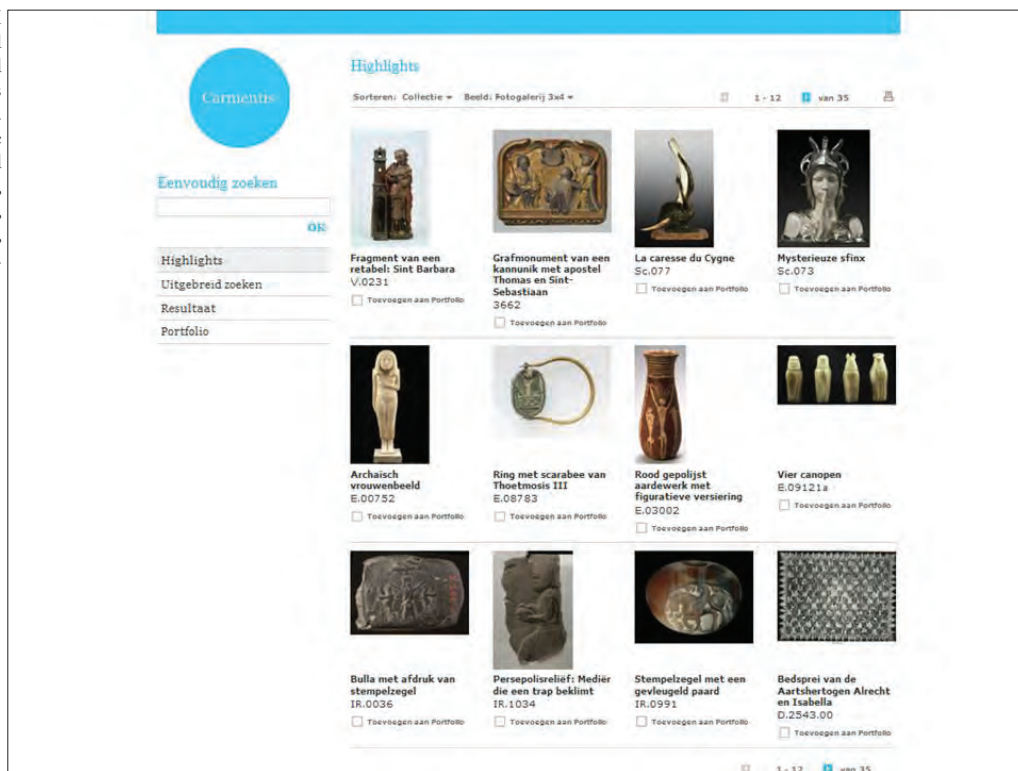
The creation of a thesaurus for author names, materials and techniques was handled in much the same way. Of course, every collection has a certain number of terms that are specific and even unique to that collection. So, in stages, new terms are added when needed and scope notes are added in the thesauri to restrict the use of certain terms when necessary.

Online publication and export

After the creation of the necessary thesauri, all data was collected, analysed and input in our collection management system. The organisation of this system is based on the CIDOC-CRM model and uses events like production (when and where was an object made?) and finding (when and where was it found, who was in charge of the archaeological dig?) to structure the data. When all data was input, new questions arose: what would the public be able to consult, and what information would be kept for internal use only? And, more importantly, how would we achieve this? An export module was developed to capture information in the collection management database and publish a minimum of fields on the Carmentis website for consultation by the general public online. So far, over 45 000 objects over 16 collections can be consulted. The search possibilities have been expanded, allowing visitors to search in the thesauri, and we are currently working on including multiple images, descriptions and bibliographical information.

In order to reach a bigger and more diverse public, the available data in the collection management system and on Carmentis can also be exported in a standard XML format (LIDO) to exchange with and deliver to partner organisations and projects. In this way, one of the RMAH's collections, Egypt, has already been delivered to Europeana through the Athena project, and work continues to deliver the remaining collections in much the same way through other projects. In 2011, the RMAH has expanded their digitisation work and became an aggregator for delivery of data to Europeana, as well as spearhead the best practice network Linked Heritage in work package 3 *Terminology*, which will review different standards in use by museums and try to create an common metadata standard. KMKG

The RMAH will show all of its digitised objects on its Carmentis website. Results can be arranged on collection, object name, geography, material or date.



are also work package leader on terminology in the Europeana Photography project, and are included as partners in several other European projects.

Future projects

And now? Everything we learned in the Athena project will be used to digitise the remainder of the RMAH's collections and publish them online. The knowledge will also be shared and expanded in future projects like Linked Heritage, where we will take up the role of aggregator and preside over certain best practice network work packages. In this way we can stimulate and help other museums and cultural partners to digitise their collections and develop standards to be used in the cultural field. The Furniture and Sculpture collection is

currently under consideration as one of the first collections to be included in a 3D-photography project in partnership with a local university, in order to offer our online visitors not only a frontal view of certain objects, but allowing them to take the whole experience to a new level. After that, it may be social networks, macrophotography or virtual reality. The possibilities are endless and only tempered by the restrictions of software and creativity.

Sources:

Carmentis: <http://carmentis.kmkg-mrah.be>
 RMAH: <http://www.kmkg-mrah.be>
 RMAH contact: infocol@kmkg-mrah.be