

100 TREASURES

FROM THE
BRUSSELS' MUSEUMS

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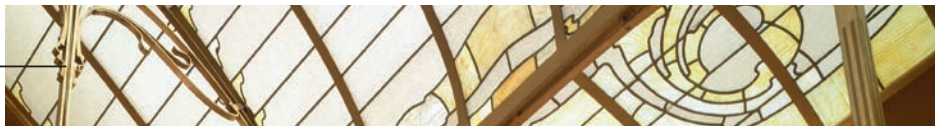
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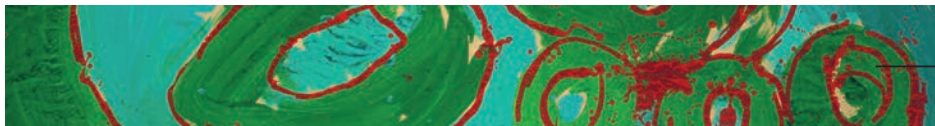
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100 TREASURES, 100 MASTERPIECES

The Winged Victory of Samothrace, Tutankhamun's funerary mask, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*... Associating these titles with the notion of "masterpieces" is immediate, obvious and consensual. Yet, this concept is complex and cannot be defined strictly. Philosophers, art critics, artists or the public may tackle this idea according to various and complementary perspectives, all of which eventually are legitimate.

Even though it is relative, the notion of 'masterpiece' nonetheless includes a few great objectifiable traits. Indeed, a masterpiece can be considered a piece (be it pictorial, musical, literary...) of outstanding quality and of an achievement level reaching perfection as it turns out to be unanimously and lastingly the most representative of a civilisation, a period, a genre or an artist's production and also as it provokes indisputable admiration. Therefore, some pieces are "sanctified" and gain paradigm functions (which is both the most representative and the most exceptional); this situation might isolate them into a status of excellence and even make them unapproachable. If museums usually take part in that classification and hierarchisation process between works of art – reflecting a still vivid academicism – they look to promoting access to their collections and masterpieces for visitors (exhibitions, publications, educational support, even merchandise).

The *100 Masters* promotional campaign developed by the Brussels Museums Council fully contributed to a wide diffusion of Brussels museums masterpieces to a lot of visitors. But it also revived a feeling

of curiosity and pride sometimes too shy from our museum authorities as from visitors and also triggered new interests from groups not yet acquainted with the arts and museums.

Let's hope this book, as a direct continuity of this promotional campaign, will meet the same success!

Claire Leblanc, Secretary of the Brussels Museums Council, Curator of the Ixelles Museum



BRUSSELS AND ITS TREASURES

From 18 May to 27 August 2016, the Brussels Museums Council led a large promotional campaign in close collaboration with its members to put forward the richness of Brussels museums' permanent collections. For 100 days, 100 masterpieces were selected from 41 museums of the capital and were put in the spotlight. This was an incentive to (re-)discover how important Belgian heritage in Brussels is through family-oriented visits, workshops and many other activities. Now that this campaign is over, we would like to give you the opportunity to see all these masterpieces/treasures gathered together in a book. We hope it will tease your curiosity and that you will feel like finding out how diversified and rich this city is with over a hundred cross-discipline museums, featuring unique, priceless and world-famous works of art.

This initiative aims at focusing on the permanent collections of our museums. In parallel, it also highlights the need for Brussels masterpieces policies. We do hope such initiatives as the 100 masterpieces campaign and this book will help to create a Brussels 'masterpieces decree' one day.

Kristien Opstaele, President of the Brussels Museums Council

THE EMPIRE OF LIGHT

"In my opinion, what the painting *The Empire of Light* illustrates is the things I thought of, i.e. a nocturnal landscape and the sky such as we see it in bright day light precisely [...]. This evocation of night and day seems gifted with the power to surprise and enchant us. I call this power: poetry". With this words Magritte described *The Empire of Light*, a painting where day and night meeting depicts the mystery the artist was researching in his work in the purest and most surprising way.

As the leader of Belgian surrealism, René Magritte was one of the most prominent artists of the 20th century. In this piece, which was specifically commissioned for the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium of which various existing versions appear in private Belgian and foreign collections, the artist transforms real objects – trees, lamp-posts, houses, the sky, water – placing them in surroundings or associating them in such a way as to surprise or puzzle onlookers.

Therefore, like a magician, Magritte wished to create a poetic atmosphere, which is so personal to him. Immersing onlookers in dreamy visions emerging from the depths of an enchanted domain but where reverie would seem to be directly perceptible, just like this range of chiaroscuro landscape.

01

Magritte Museum

Royal Museums of Fine Arts
of Belgium



MAISON HORTA

A hotspot for Art Nouveau in Brussels, this building made up of two distinct edifices was the architect's personal dwelling and studio until 1919. Built between 1898 and 1901 by Victor Horta, both parts communicate internally yet have their own character, typical of Art Nouveau at its peak, aiming at asserting the distinction between the professional and private spheres. The house retained most of its interior decoration: mosaics, stained glass windows and murals make up a harmonious whole, refined in every detail.

Horta used the central element of the plan composition (the stairwell) as a light well. A roof light doubled with a glass roof set in the roof's inclination allows for zenithal light to reach all the way down to the ground floor. The delicate metallic structure with stained glass windows boldly hangs thanks to four vertical cords and girders resting on the walls in the space between the roof light and the glass roof. This type of construction is an illustration of the pioneering use Horta made of iron for domestic architecture. He placed two mirrors at the top of the stairwell to sublimate light and endlessly multiply the roof light's shapes and colours.

The House is on the UNESCO world heritage list.

02



CHIMÚ OFFERING BEARER

In 1935, Henri Lavachery, then curator of the Cinquantenaire Museum, brought back a series of objects from his expedition in South America, among which this Peruvian statuette which gained world fame thanks to Hergé's genius, as the latter lived only a few streets away from the museum and regularly came to see art and history collections.

In *The Broken Ear* album, Tintin searches for the statuette amongst the members of the South-American rain forest Arumbaya tribe, a completely unknown Amerindian ethnic group. Besides, the talisman Tintin is running after has one broken ear and two undamaged arms and legs, unlike the original. Cut into tender balsa wood, the original statuette is decorated with painted patterns, carved flowery and its eyes and fingers are embedded with shells.

In fact, this statuette is a Chimú one. The Chimú culture was an important civilisation, which developed from 1100 to 1470 on the northern coast of Peru. This people ruled over a vast empire and wished to extend their territory eastwards, which led them to fight against the Incas who were also seeking to develop their empire. In the middle of the 15th century, the Incas, under Emperor Tupac Yupanqui's rule, eventually defeated the Chimús.

From an artistic viewpoint, the Chimús are mainly famous for their refined metal craft: copper, gold, silver, bronze and tumbaga (a copper and gold alloy). More statuettes were discovered in the heart of their ceremonial buildings. Some of them, depicting hunchbacks, bear a strong similarity to the splendid pre-Columbian 53.5-cm high work of art Tintin made internationally famous.



PARADOX

This strange-looking machine, some sort of hybrid between a plane and a helicopter, is a creation by Panamarenko. This Antwerp creator has been inventing, building and has been passionate about physics since the 1960s, creating odd machines in a playful and utopian imaginary spirit: submarines, planes, flying saucers at the crossroads of art and science.

In this piece, the motor-motivated propeller could lift the machine but the parachute would cause the opposite effect, thus shedding some light on the title: *Paradox*.

The artist's ambition is not to make his invention actually operate. What matters is that his work includes the notion of flight. Cutting loose from the weight and gravity of the world, considering taking off, feeling free and injecting a poetic dimension to life are Panamarenko's main principles.

This piece logically follows a long tradition, that of sciences, technology and the arts interacting. Like a contemporary Leonardo da Vinci, Panamarenko cultivates the prestige inventor-artists have and this undertaking of his (be it his artistic production or his theoretical writings) is a complete success.

There are two explanations as to the origin of this quaint artist pseudonym. According to some, it is the abbreviation of *Pan American Airlines and Company*. Others have it that it is in fact the name of a Russian general the artist randomly heard mentioned on the radio.

04



THE BERNISSART IGUANODONS

05

Museum of Natural Sciences

March 1878 in the Bernissart coal board (Hainaut, Belgium): "Gold! Gold!", a minor cried out discovering a tree trunk filled with the precious ore in a layer of clay some 300 metres underground. In fact, the treasure was a bone encrusted with pyrite, a golden ore nicknamed "fool's gold".

Between 1878 and 1881, some thirty skeletons, more or less complete and still articulated, were found between 322 and 356 metres underground. These were iguanodon fossils, herbivorous dinosaurs, which used to live in our country about 128 to 125 million years ago. This was a world precedent and a crucial discovery for palaeontology.

Indeed, these are the Rosetta Stone of palaeontologists. Back then, only one other almost complete dinosaur had been dug up, a hadrosaurus reconstituted in 1858. The most complete ones were brought back up in a "probable living position" and exhibited as early as 1883. Visitors flocked from the world over to see them. Today, they still are the finest collection of iguanodons in the world due to the quantity and quality of these fossils.

As the gem of the Museum of Natural Sciences and a genuine national treasure, the iguanodon collection even went as far as temporarily allowing two of its skeletons to be exhibited in the land of the Rising Sun in 1988, which attracted some 300,000 Japanese visitors.



POPE WITH OWLS

06

Modern Museum

Royal Museums of Fine Arts
of Belgium

With this dark and misshapen portrait, Francis Bacon forcefully blew away the codes which had been prevailing in representing Church dignitaries for centuries. There is hardly anything left of the majestic, noble, asserted and almost divine figure: here, Pope Innocent X (Bacon was inspired by the famous portrait of that Pope by Vélasquez) has lost all of his presence and is reduced to a mere shadow afraid of itself. He is imprisoned in a line-network, a cage surrounding the throne, thus creating that oppressive cube effect; the throne itself is cold, hard and ornament-free. Two owls, symbols of wisdom yet foreboding, flank the Pope-like guardians.

This portrait is a perfect illustration of how Bacon conceived art: paintings must show what is invisible from the outside and represent the psyche below a character's surface. Despite a potent and self-assured appearance, this image is more like some mysterious X-rays. The spectacles frame is twisted, the face and hands seem like a mass of crushed flesh and his mouth wants to shout without being able to (yet)... That Pope is about to explode internally!

Bacon also had to heed his own multiple inner demons: an authoritarian father, the obligation to leave the family house when he came out of the closet, an addiction to alcohol and gambling... Recognition only came when he turned 35 with *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. From then on, everything accelerated: the topic of crucifixion, misshaped portraits of popes (Bacon made multiple versions), evocations of war monstrosities and human bodies etc., all of which turned self-taught Bacon into one of the main figures of post-war existential fear.





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