

History of Art trip to Belgium

With the uncertainty over border crossing arrangements, we planned a shorter trip this year, based in the pretty town of Bruges. Le Shuttle and our coach saw us into the town by late afternoon with just enough time for a quick art foray. In the Church of Our Lady we admired the world-famous Madonna of Bruges by Michelangelo. It was then a short walk to the wonderful Groeninge Museum. Here, work by the so-called 'Flemish Primitives' was a high point, with notable paintings by Gerard David, Jan Provoost, Memling and Van Eyck.

Visiting Antwerp the following day, my impression of a sprawling industrial city was tempered by the lovely buildings around the Grote Markt, the main square. Following a visit to the Maiden's House Museum (a former orphanage now stuffed with Flemish art), we visited two fantastic churches and the Cathedral, all with paintings by Antwerp's resident Baroque master, Peter Paul Rubens. St. Paul's Church had the added bonus of an imposing Bretonnesque Calvary in its grounds.

Brussels has been in the news a bit recently (!) but we were there to see its art. After a tour of Brussels by coach we spent the afternoon exploring the massive Royal Museums of Fine Arts complex. We first had a guided tour of the Old Masters Museum with works by the Flemish artists Van Der Weyden, Bosch and Petrus Christus plus *Adam and Eve* by the German artist Lucas Cranach. *The Census at Bethlehem* by Pieter Breughel was another rare treat. There were of course, more works by Rubens and the excellent *Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David. By way of a contrast, the Fin-de-Siècle Museum downstairs had some brilliant modern works by the likes of Constantin Meunier, James Ensor, and Léon Spilliaert. Most of us finished the afternoon exploring the adjoining Magritte Museum with its outstanding collection of works by the Belgian Surrealist artist René Magritte. This collection of over 200 works is the largest in the world.

We'd so far escaped most of Belgium's 'liquid sunshine' but Ghent was very, very wet. Ghent's outstanding work of art is the altarpiece 'The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb' by Van Eyck. The altarpiece is considered a masterpiece of European art and one of the world's treasures. We weren't disappointed and were briefed with a forensic examination of it by our guide.

Later, a guided tour of Ghent's Museum of Fine Arts gave us another chance to explore more works by Bosch and Breughel and the Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux. The gallery is currently restoring the panels from the Mystic Lamb and visitors can follow the process behind glass. A website gives macro-images of the work at legacy.closertovaneyck.be/

On our return journey from Flanders we visited the Fine Arts Museum in Lille, the 2nd. largest in France. It features a comprehensive collection, but is understandably focused more on French art, with work by Corot, Courbet and

David plus the Impressionists. I especially enjoyed the display of relief models of fifteen fortified towns in Northern France and Belgium, used by the French Kings during wars. Another successful trip had ended but for next year we may go somewhere warmer and drier!

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