



interview

'Entrepreneurs received privileges in the Middle Ages as well'



Flanders was an economic superpower in the Middle Ages. In the opinion of Fernand Huts and Katharina Van Cauteren, this was due to the innovative force of the first entrepreneurs. Their exhibition 'The Birth of Capitalism' shows how it came about.

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Hands clasped behind his back, walking from one painting to the next, Katoen Natie boss Fernand Huts scrutinises the setup of "The Birth of Capitalism, the Golden Age of Flanders"¹ at the Caermersklooster in Ghent. His curator, art historian Katharina Van Cauteren, occasionally has to call him to order. 'Fernand, stand still for a minute. We're here for the photo!'

By

[Koen Van Boxem](#)

A week before the opening, a scary number of art works are still lying in wooden cases, but Van Cauteren is at ease among them. We stop in front of 't Licht is op den kandelaer' ('The light is on the candlestick'), by an anonymous painter. 'Not a great picture, but it does fit in with the story we want to tell: how religion played a major role in what entrepreneurs did. This work shows the Protestant leaders lighting the candle of the Reformation. It ultimately meant the end of Flemish prosperity, after the fall of Antwerp in 1585.'

Jodocus Aemszoon van der Burch is a 16th century entrepreneur. His portrait by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen is one of the exhibition's highlights, sold at auction by Christie's in April for 2.4 million euros. It was thanks to businessmen like Aemszoon van der Burch that painters were able to tap into a new market in the late 15th century. Katharina Van Cauteren says: 'After the death of Charles the Bold in 1477, the number of orders for art from the nobility plummeted in spectacular fashion. However, the middle class filled the vacuum. It appears from 16th century descriptions of household effects that almost everyone had some representational objects in the home, from masterpieces to simple junk.'

Around 140 works grouped into eleven themes tell the story of Flanders' economic glory in mediaeval times. By no means all of them are from Huts' collection, housed at The Phoebus Foundation where Van Cauteren is Chief of Staff. 'We also have a lot of works on loan from most of the Belgian museums.'

Huts and Van Cauteren freely disclose that they argued quite a lot over the approach. 'There was a bit of conceptual friction to start with. Fernand doesn't think like an exhibition designer. He'd put the content down on paper, with all the themes he felt had to be on display. Do you know the kind of thing: 1.1,

1.2, 2.1 and so on? I was then supposed to illustrate those themes. But you can't make an exhibition that way. You have to start with a visual strategy, which goes further than hanging a few pix on the wall. I hope I've made it into a genuine

experience. We also play with projections: swirling gold dust, water and fire. And at the end there's a spectacular close with a silhouette from Véronique Branquinho's autumn collection in the starring role'.



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There's a book of the same name to go with the exhibition, published by Lannoo. In it, Huts and Van Cauteren both present their own independent takes on the theme. The dual story is absolutely fascinating, though there are inevitable overlaps. Van Cauteren outlines in a broad cultural and historical framework how the classic society of clergy, nobility and farmers was radically changed by the success of trade and industry in the towns. In his essay, Huts focuses more on the role of the entrepreneur. It's about that period, but it has a polemical undertone that extends to the present day. 'My message is: make sure that business thrives, and the rest will take care of itself. That was the case a thousand years ago, and I don't think anything has changed'.

In Huts' view, the success of the Southern Netherlands – the historical Flanders, Brabant and Hainaut – is based on the concept of creative destruction. 'What I mean is: the substitution of old products and services by new and better ones. No one did that better than us in mediaeval times. We were industrially innovative with the invention of the loom, the spinning wheel and so on. We were innovative in art as well. Jan Van Eyck invented oil paint.'

Van Cauteren says: 'That's not true, Fernand. I've been trying to tell you that forever. Van Eyck improved oil paint, he didn't invent it.'

Huts turns to us: 'She really is a purist. In macro-economic terms it's not that important whether Van Eyck invented or improved oil paint. The point is that Flanders saw enormous economic development in every area through inventions and improvements. Given that economic progress, financial innovations followed. The free market, the stock exchange, government bonds, all of them invented here and nowhere else'.



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In your essay, you quote Friedrich Nietzsche: ‘Merchant and pirate were for a long period one and the same person’. Criminals, in other words ...

Huts: ‘You won’t find that word in the book. It is something of that nature. The fact is that some rascals in the 10th, 11th centuries didn’t always come by their seed capital honestly. But that’s how trade and the crafts arose in the towns. In many cases they were men who hadn’t had a clue what they should do next. Their success made them patricians who obtained more and more rights from the nobility’.

Van Cauteren: ‘And the nobility needed these people. The aristocrats themselves didn’t want to work. Someone else had to do it for them’.

Huts: ‘And in exchange the townsmen were given privileges. And in my opinion that’s the way it should be. Even today. An entrepreneur has to receive privileges, because enterprises make the wheels of society go round’.



Isn't that a bit simplistic? Doesn't government have a part to play?

Huts: 'Yes, it has to make sure we can work. But the opposite is happening'.

But there were rules during the prosperous Middle Ages as well? Religion imposed a lot of constraints.

Van Cauterem: 'True. The guilds worked according to strict rules. Sometimes to protect the craft, sometimes for religious reasons. The godly world view favoured stability and continuity. Anything that could interfere with stability was prohibited. Craftsmen were not allowed to compete with one another, because then one would become richer than the other. That was regarded as an infringement of godly stability. Advertising was therefore forbidden, and chair-makers weren't allowed to make chairs at night. Because then one of them might make more chairs than his competitor who only worked during the day. The town-dwellers tried to deal with it pragmatically, because they were terrified of going to hell'.

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Huts: 'Capitalism created the money for them to buy salvation. The Church got very wealthy on that, and Protestantism was the reaction.'

In your epilogue to the book you're very pessimistic about the future.

Huts: 'I call it realistic. The concept of the nation state no longer works. We are governed by 19th century bureaucratic principles. We're feeling the consequences even here at the exhibition, a private-public partnership with the Province of East Flanders. We have an emergency meeting later with the caterer about the opening reception. The Caermersklooster had to put it out to tender. The cheapest gets the contract. Those are the rules.'

'And the result? One glass of Cava and three snacks. You can tell we're going to let that happen. It's so symptomatic of what happens in government services. Everything is bound by rules. It's enough to demoralise you. Fortunately, the Caermersklooster's staff are on board with our enthusiasm.'

'Do you know what the cultural sector in Flanders is suffering from?'

Too little money?

Huts: 'No. The cultural sector is paralysed by regulations. Meetings have to be held about everything and nothing. A committee here, a committee there. Annual plans, budgets. And another meeting. But when does anything get decided?'

'Everything's laid down in directives in Brussels. All the museum directors are trying desperately to comply with them. They'll never complain about it in public, because if you don't play the game life will get difficult. I find that very sad. Because I also see a huge number of talented people running around in the cultural sphere in Flanders. But it doesn't seem as if they can work. What they mainly have to do is to comply with the rules imposed from on high'.

*'The Birth of Capitalism' runs from 17 June to 1 January at the Caermersklooster in Ghent. You'll find a **free ticket for the exhibition** in De Tijd on Saturday, 18 June.*