

‘At one time, Ghent was bigger than Paris’

Reportage on the Exhibition of the Huts Collection

Belgian Fernand Huts is a powerful businessman and an important collector. He is aiming to raise awareness of the shared history of the Netherlands and Flanders with his art.

Claudia Kammer 17 July 2016

Fernand Huts wants to restore the pride of the Flemish people. The owner of Katoen Natie, one of the largest logistical companies in Belgium, operating in the port of Antwerp among other places, is using his art collection to make Flemish people realise that they have an illustrious past, their own “Golden Age” of art and business.

Together with the Province of East Flanders, Huts has organised an exhibition at the old Caermersklooster in Ghent, full of Old Masters which are intended to demonstrate that the area was

once the centre of the world. “Ghent was bigger than Paris and had a larger population than London,” says Huts. “Antwerp and Bruges were also cultural and economic trend-setters at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. It’s a region to be proud of. In this area, a new, enterprising and enquiring man emerged who refused to be controlled by the Church or the nobility”.

Businessman Fernand Huts may be unknown in the Netherlands, but he’s a celebrity in Flanders - not just because of his global empire, but also because of his past as a politician in the liberal VLD party. He’s been collecting art for the past two decades. Starting with the acquisition of an important collection of thousand-year-old textiles from excavations in Egypt, his collection now also includes COBRA art (“I was able to get it for a song in the nineties, when the market collapsed”), modern and contemporary Belgian art and art from South America, where his company has important offices. Katoen Natie’s head office in Antwerp acts as a kind of exhibition space annex depot and is therefore aptly called headquARTers.



Money-counting table

For Huts, the exhibition in Ghent is a good way of finding out how he can use his collection even more. In the long run, it may lead to a museum of his own. Art historian Katharina Van Cauteren has headed The Phoebus Foundation, which manages the art collection, for eighteen months now. Like Huts, she feels that works of art primarily have to tell a story. “Beauty doesn’t interest me so much,” she says. “To me, paintings are mainly a gateway to the past”. Not but what there are beautiful paintings on view in Ghent; Huts owns work by such Old Masters as Jan Gossaert, Gillis Mostaert, Hans Memling and Jan Brueghel the Elder.

In addition to star attractions from Huts’ collection, works on loan from major Belgian museums, libraries, archives and private collections are also on display in Ghent. The objects have been selected so as to tell the story, in eight themed rooms, of the ‘new man’ who moved from the country to the towns at the end of the Middle Ages, the start of the Renaissance in Flanders. Not only paintings, but also practical artefacts such as spinning wheels and a money-counting table illustrate how trade, the textile industry and banking flourished in the Southern Netherlands. “The Dutch word for a stock exchange, ‘beurs’, comes from the Van der Beurze family in Bruges,” says Van Cauteren. “The family ran a hostelry, Ter Beurze, where huge numbers of financial transactions took place, so the name of the inn was transferred to the institution when it was created. The first stock exchange building in the world was built in Antwerp”.

Greed

To expand their trading empire, the townsmen sought new markets. Model ships and seascapes bear witness to their far-flung travels. The burghers also pursued intellectual exploration: science really took off, as demonstrated, for example, by several prints that Johannes Stradanus of Bruges made of twenty inventions.

Among other things, the wealthy burghers spent the money they earned on art. Antwerp witnessed the growth of an enormous output of paintings, prints and retables for the free market. “Many of the works were of a moralising character,” says Van Cauteren, who confesses that the paintings that show what people shouldn’t do are her favourites. “They warn against greed, sloth, adultery and other vices. Because death lies in wait at the end of every life. Uncertainty about what came after terrified the burghers.”

The Church benefited from that, as witness the indulgences and pilgrims’ souvenirs that were sold to the fearful citizens for their salvation. It couldn’t last. The exhibition works its way up to a conclusion showing a bloody conflict between Catholics and Protestants that also split the Netherlands apart.

In 1830, the Southern Netherlands broke away from the kingdom. Fernand Huts acknowledges that he has concealed a message here. “I’m a supporter of the House of Orange”, he says. “I deeply regret the revolt against King Willem I in 1830. I can’t reunify the Netherlands, but hopefully this exhibition will make people aware of the importance of our shared history”.

‘The Birth of Capitalism’, the Golden Age of Flanders. Caermersklooster in Ghent runs until the 1th of January. More information: www.golden-age-of-flanders.be