

FERNAND HUTS' EXHIBITION SHOWS MEDIAEVAL ART FROM ITS MOST ECONOMIC SIDE

## Golden times of money, merriment and mortification

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**Flanders, the home of independent businessmen. That description fitted even in the Middle Ages. Around the year 1200, a new man started to emerge in the area now known as Flanders: innovative, practical and rich. *The Birth of Capitalism* is an exhibition that tells the story of the entrepreneur. Or, in the words of Fernand Huts: “The Dutch *show off* with their hundred-year Golden Age, but *dammit*, we had five centuries of Golden Age”.**

An exhibition seen through economics-tinted spectacles that entrepreneurs, art collectors and *enfant terrible* Fernand Huts have helped to make possible. It was with some reservations that we – art-lovers with no great interest in economics – headed off to the Caermersklooster in Ghent for *The Birth of Capitalism*, a journey through time and the Southern Netherlands, the Flanders of today. In case your thoughts may have been elsewhere during history lessons, the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries were fantastic for entrepreneurship. Trade reached unprecedented levels, and artistic products from Flanders and Brabant conquered the world market. Art from the Low Countries became a quality label, an international standard. In short, this was the Golden Age of the Southern Netherlands. This was where the foundations were laid for the Flanders of today.

“The Dutch *show off* with their hundred-year Golden Age, but *dammit*, we had five centuries of Golden Age,” says Huts proudly. “Flanders discovered capitalism.” That may be debatable, but Flanders and Brabant were indeed immensely powerful.

Of course, works of art have to do more for us than just illustrate somebody’s power, so we’re expecting more than a mediaeval version of “*Vlaanderen boven*”.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, the exhibition does deliver more. It’s unashamedly chauvinistic, but is also a bold combination of famous masterpieces and unknown works both from Huts’ collection and on loan from major museums. Many of the art works are being shown for the first time ever.

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<sup>1</sup> “Flanders on top” or “Flanders rules”, a modern song in praise of Flanders.

“And as is only right, we start the exhibition with a naked woman, to attract men’s attention,” says curator Katharina Van Cauteren with a wink. The naked woman, *Fortuna Marina* by Gillis Coignet, certainly does draw the attention. But even more striking is the gigantic 16<sup>th</sup> century head by Pieter Coucke in the next room. It was used to lead a carnival procession and dominates the entire space. Or, rather, that one room, because instead of structuring the story in chronological order, it was decided to divide the exhibition into eight themes, such as the monetarised economy, the textile trade and serial work in the art market.



The themes illustrate the things that were most important to independent mediaeval businesses large and small. Somewhere right at the top, of course, was money. However, the link is forged in this room to the theme of ‘lewdness’: the fear of God that had kept mediaeval man under the rod of the Church for centuries, with strict, prudish rules about sexuality,

suddenly lost its secure hold as all the new possibilities opened up. And this led at times to debauchery and obscene pictures, as is effectively illustrated by one of the anonymous paintings, *Badhuis (Bathhouse)*. A party is under way. “But if you look closely you’ll see a couple brazenly fornicating in the corner. And what’s more, a monk is standing there with his eyes avidly on the spectacle,” says the curator.

### Brazen chauvinism

Nevertheless, another room makes the most impression: the textiles room. This industry really put our part of the world on the map. The loom in central position draws everyone’s attention.

Even more impressive is the highlight of the exhibition: a 3D presentation of a creation by fashion designer Veronique Branquinho, one of the Antwerp Six, which shows the impact that Flanders still has on textiles and fashion.

It’s a rare occasion when the present day is so beautifully intertwined with – let’s be brazenly chauvinistic – our glorious past.



### INFORMATION

The Birth of Capitalism’ - On till 1 January 2017 - 10 euros