

BePAPER

Belgian Art on Paper in a European Perspective. 1918–1950

Contract – B2/191/P2/BePAPER

SUMMARY

BePAPER – Belgian Art on Paper in a European Perspective (1918–1950) was funded under the BRAIN-be 2.0 programme to study, document, and valorise Belgian avant-garde works on paper held primarily at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (RMFAB).

Context

Belgian avant-garde works on paper (1918–1950) occupy a central position in the history of artistic experimentation, yet they have long remained under-researched, inconsistently catalogued, and insufficiently integrated into European art-historical narratives and digital infrastructures. BePAPER addressed this gap through an interdisciplinary approach combining art history, archival research, digital humanities, and museum practice. The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (RMFAB) hold one of the most significant federal collections of modern works on paper and archives from this period, offering a unique opportunity to reassess the role of this medium within Belgian and European avant-gardes. The BePAPER project was developed within this context, while also addressing broader challenges related to open science, data interoperability, and the sustainable valorisation of federal heritage collections.

Initially structured around four interlocking work packages (data gathering, digital development, scientific study, and outreach), the project had to be adapted substantially over its duration (2020–2025). External factors—including the Covid-19 pandemic, long-term medical leaves, maternity leave, and institutional governance changes—necessitated a re-prioritisation of activities. Rather than compromising scientific standards, the consortium adopted an adaptive strategy focused on data quality, methodological robustness, and long-term sustainability.

Objectives

BePAPER aimed to (1) study why and how Belgian avant-garde artists turned to paper as a key artistic medium between 1918 and 1950; (2) systematically document, analyse, and contextualise works on paper from the RMFAB collection; and (3) enhance the scientific, digital, and public accessibility of these works. An additional objective was to use the project as a test case for integrating research-driven documentation into institutional and open-data strategies.

Conclusions

Despite significant external and institutional challenges during the project's lifetime, BePAPER successfully achieved its core objectives. The project produced a consolidated and standardised corpus of Belgian avant-garde works on paper, advanced new scientific insights into the aesthetic and functional role of paper, and resulted in peer-reviewed publications and a doctoral dissertation. It also generated durable institutional impacts by improving cataloguing practices and informing digital strategy development. BePAPER demonstrates that adaptive project management, combined with methodological rigour, can ensure high-quality scientific outcomes in complex, collection-based research environments.

Key scientific results include:

- a redefinition of paper as a central avant-garde medium,
- a consolidated, standardised corpus of over 700 works,
- peer-reviewed publications and edited volumes,
- a doctoral dissertation grounded in the RMFAB collection,
- durable improvements to cataloguing and metadata practices,
- an exhibition and publication transmitting scientific research results to a broader public.

Dissemination and valorisation were achieved through an international symposium, academic publications, public talks, exhibitions-in-preparation, teaching activities, and digital platforms. While some outreach activities were postponed or reformatted, the project prioritised securing results for future reuse inside institutional infrastructures.

BePAPER concludes as a scientifically robust project that met its core objectives while generating transferable insights for federal heritage institutions regarding research integration, open data strategies, and digital sustainability.

Keywords

Belgian avant-garde; works on paper; modern art; museum collections; digital humanities; open data; federal heritage