



Royal Institute for
Cultural Heritage

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St George comes home: world-famous altarpiece resplendent

Brussels, 23 April 2021, Saint George's day: After three years of research and restoration, Jan II Borman's iconic Saint George Altarpiece (1493) resides resplendently once again in the Art & History Museum in Brussels. The interdisciplinary research, in collaboration with the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels), led to unexpected discoveries and provided answers to age-old mysteries. Thus, after almost two centuries, the magnificently carved sculpture groups were put back in their correct original positions within the meticulously restored monumental masterpiece. This project has been made possible thanks to the King Baudouin Foundation (Fonds René and Karin Jonckheere).

From Saturday 24 April, the Saint George retable can be admired as part of the Gothic-Renaissance-Baroque walking tour of the Art & History Museum. For three weeks, visitors will also be able to discover an original statuette of the late Middle Ages and a message from a 19th-century restorer that were carefully hidden in the work of art.

3D cinema *avant la lettre*

The Saint George retable is one of the most beautifully carved wooden altarpieces in Western European history. It is spectacular in size and scope: no less than 5 metres wide and 1.60 metres high, with more than 80 meticulously detailed figures. It is the masterpiece of Jan II Borman, the greatest master of the Brussels artist dynasty of the same name, described by some as 'the best sculptor of his time'. He signed and dated the altarpiece in 1493.

The late Gothic scenes are timeless and in a class of their own. They draw the viewer in with their cinematographic compositions, lifelike characters brimming with expression and carvings of unparalleled virtuosity. The dynamic characters are depicted frozen in action, as if in a film still. In seven scenes, Borman illustrates the gruesome martyrdom of Saint George; hung above flames by the feet, broken on the wheel and beheaded, among other tortures. This because he refused to abandon his beliefs.

Interdisciplinary research

Inspired by the exhibition *Borman and Sons. The Best Sculptors* in the M – Museum Leuven, Emile van Binnebeke, curator of European sculpture at the RMAH, set out to examine the masterpiece of the Borman dynasty in depth. He joined forces with Emmanuelle Mercier, a wood sculpture expert at KIK-IRPA, and her colleagues in the scientific laboratories at the KIK-IRPA. Emmanuelle Mercier was also in charge of the restoration treatment.

As the only signed work by Jan II Borman, for which a copy of the original written commission still exists, the Saint George Altarpiece is the key to understanding his creative genius. Moreover, the retable has always been shrouded in mystery. Was it originally painted with polychromy, like other Flemish altarpieces? In what context did it come about? And how can the bizarre order of the scenes be explained, which does not correspond to the legend and starts with the saint's death?

Secret hiding places

In order to examine the altarpiece from all angles and clean it completely, all 48 wooden elements were carefully dismantled. During this process, Emmanuelle Mercier and her team found small

fragments that had fallen off over the years, such as fingers, earrings and architectural details. Hidden under the sculpted scenes, they also found a hand-carved praying figure. Through radiocarbon analysis, it was dated to the time of the altarpiece. Borman probably hid this ex-voto as a prayer or a gesture of gratitude. When the central scene was dismantled, KIK-IRPA's conservators also found a piece of parchment from the previous restorer, a certain 'Sohest', stating that he had treated the retable in 1835.

An explanation for the illogical order of the scenes was eventually found by studying the original wooden pegs and nails with which the scenes were secured in the cases. These did not match the existing holes. This shows that Sohest dismantled all the scenes and, for reasons unknown, put them back in the wrong order. During the current restoration, they were put back in their original spots, and now, the sequence corresponds to what the artist intended.

A look back to the nineteenth century

When curator Emile van Binnebeke learned about the parchment by Sohest, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. 'On another retable in our collection, that of Wannabecq (1530), I had already found the same blue-grey paint as behind the window tracery in the Saint George Altarpiece. I was able to link this to a document from 1843 in which a certain Sohest asks for payment for his restoration work on the Wannabecq altarpiece. The discovery of the parchment in the Saint George Altarpiece now finally confirms that he was also involved in that intervention.'

The report, dated 1835, is also surprising because it was thought that the Saint George Altarpiece had only come to the Brussels Cinquantenaire Park in 1848. During the dismantling, Sohest's signature and the date 1832 were also found on four small replacement statues. Van Binnebeke: 'This not only gives us an idea of how long his intervention lasted, but we also learn that investments were made in the altarpiece as early as the 1830s, just after the Belgian struggle for independence. This sheds new light on the burgeoning ambition to create a national Belgian museum.'

Borman's spectacular technique

Emmanuelle Mercier, wood sculpture expert (KIK-IRPA): 'Careful observation and laboratory analyses revealed that, contrary to tradition, the altarpiece had never been covered with polychromy. That also explains the remarkably fine carving of the wood, which would be lost even under the thinnest layer of paint. Jan II Borman also amazed us with his ability to carve complex scenes, with different figures, from a single block of wood. Tree ring analysis showed that he worked with the hard type of oak found in our regions. All these elements indicate exceptional talent.'

The restorers removed dust and dirt from the countless fine reliefs, glued the pieces of wood that over the years had fallen into the case, and consolidated areas weakened by woodworm. The layers of non-original nineteenth century patina in various shades and the black layer of wax that marred several faces were also thinned down and harmonised. Thus, the plasticity of the contours comes into its own again, and all the fine details are visible.

Political intrigues

Archival and art historical research provide a deeper understanding of the Saint George Altarpiece. Conservator Emile van Binnebeke interprets the commissioning of the retable by the Greater Crossbowmen's Guild of the city of Leuven for their chapel as political manoeuvring at the highest level. In order to curry favour with Maximilian of Austria, victor in the revolt of the Brabant and Flemish cities, they deliberately ordered a Saint George retable from Jan II Borman. Borman was



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highly regarded at the court and was, among other things, a member of the Brussels chamber of rhetoric 'De Lelie' under Maximilian's protection. Saint George was chosen as subject because the saint was the archduke's personal patron and used by him for propaganda purposes.

Van Binnebeke: 'It is possible that the Great Guild succeeded in its objective. During the revolt the Guild had not sided with Maximilian, but it was nonetheless spared punitive measures. That victory must have been bittersweet. After all, the city of Leuven was bankrupted by the revolt and the treasury of the Great Guild was almost empty. Thus, after payment of Borman, there would have been no money left to have the altarpiece polychromed.

Thomas Dermine, Belgian State Secretary for Science Policy: *'The importance of intense collaboration is underlined once more by these fascinating finds and visual re-evaluation of the incomparable St George's retable. Congratulations to the Art & History Museum, with its world-class collection, and to the KIK-IRPA, the centre of expertise and restoration for Belgian heritage, for their remarkable achievement.'*

René and Karin Jonckheere Fund. The research project has received support from the King Baudouin Foundation, more specifically the René and Karin Jonckheere Fund, which aims to conserve movable cultural heritage. In particular, the Fund supports the conservation or restoration of works of art that bear witness to the European dimension of Brussels and that are kept in Brussels museums. However, the Fund may also intervene in favor of works from museums and libraries elsewhere in Europe. In this regard, the Fund launches a call for projects every year starting in mid-January. Candidate files for the current call can be submitted until September 23, 2021.

The Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels) is a Belgian scientific institution devoted to the study and conservation of the country's rich cultural heritage. Its interdisciplinary team of art historians, photographers, chemists, archaeologists, engineers and conservator-restorers carries out research on the materials and techniques used, and ensures their sustainable conservation. The KIK-IRPA is a unique resource for scientific, photographic and technical documentation on Belgian heritage. www.kikirpa.be

The collections preserved in the **Art & History Museum (AHM, Brussels)** consist of art and history of mankind from prehistoric times till today; they cover all artistic disciplines with the exception of painting and all five continents with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. The objects can be divided over four groups: Antiquity, national archaeology, non-European civilizations and European applied art. Over 500.000 objects are on show or in the storage rooms spread over 80.000 m².

Practical Information

Art & History Museum

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Opening Hours

The museum is open from Tuesday until Friday, from 9.30 am until 5 pm, and on Saturday and Sunday, from 10am until 5pm. Reservations via kmg-mrah.be