

KUNSTHALLE MÜNCHEN

Press release

FANTASTICALLY REAL BELGIAN MODERN ART FROM ENSOR TO MAGRITTE 15 October 2021 – 6 March 2022

A cooperation with the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA)

The Kunsthalle München is showcasing masterpieces of Belgian modern art from circa 1860 to 1960. With some 130 paintings, graphic works and sculptures, the exhibition illustrates how the art of this period constantly re-explored the boundaries between fantasy and reality. It highlighted both the unpretentious reality of everyday life and the secrets and mysteries that lie beyond the visible world. The exhibition traces the specific path taken by Belgian art, from realistic scenes of ordinary people and atmospheric landscapes to James Ensor's fantastic masquerades, through to the surreal worlds of Paul Delvaux and René Magritte. In addition to major names such as these, the roughly 40 artists in the exhibition include numerous painters whose work is not widely known in this country, like Eugène Laermans, Constant Permeke and Rik Wouters.

Two opposing forces – the Real and the Fantastic – combine to weave the fascinating spell of Belgian art. The supernatural dwells in the back rooms of reality, where fantasy's dreams and mysteries lurk in hidden corners. This phenomenon is based on the lifelike, highly detailed depictions of the Flemish painting tradition by Old Masters such as Hieronymus Bosch or Pieter Brueghel the Elder. In the modern era, the dualism of the Real and the Fantastic emerges as a central characteristic of Belgian art. On the one hand, until the Expressionist movement, it continued to be closely associated with a Realist tradition. On the other hand, taking the real world as its starting point, the Fantastic invariably invoked the mystery of things, over and over again.

In 1887, the influential Brussels writer Edmond Picard introduced "le Fantastique réel" as a new aesthetic in his homeland: it looked "suspiciously at life, at people, at things, all the while plagued by troubling thoughts. Nothing is as simple as it seems. [...] There is more underneath, mysteries." While uniting Naturalists and Symbolists in the fine arts, the phenomenon of the real fantastic also had a political dimension. The aesthetic fusion of both genres was perceived as the expression of the merging of Belgium's two central cultural and political identities: those of French-speaking Wallonia and Dutch-speaking Flanders.

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In reference to this distinctive feature of Belgian modern art, the exhibition is divided into ten sections, tracing the development of art from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, contextualising the works against their cultural and socio-historical backgrounds.

Featuring painters such as Henri Leys and Alfred Stevens, the first section is devoted to historicism and salon painting in the second half of the 19th century. It conveys the artists' fascination with 16th century events, when cities like Antwerp experienced a major economic and cultural boom, and attests to their endeavour to create pictures of a historical past for the young nation. At the same time, their interest in tableaux of modern life and in movements, such as Japonisme, is manifest here, illustrating their focus on the international avant-garde in Paris.

The central theme of the next section is the Belgian artists' take on Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism. First and foremost, the *Les Vingt* group, founded in 1883, helped establish both movements in Belgium. The Belgian Impressionists combined the new influences with regional traditions and remained more faithful to realistic trends. Works by Henry Van de Velde and Theo Van Rysselberghe reveal how Belgian painters applied the new Pointillist technique devised by Georges Seurat to established categories such as portrait painting and genre scenes, thereby developing innovative artistic formats.

Moreover, the socio-political unrest in Belgium is reflected in the art of the period: in 1886, Belgian workers staged large-scale strikes and acts of resistance. After artists such as Charles Degroux – inspired by Gustave Courbet to produce realistic depictions of the urban proletariat and rural poverty – were first fêted in the 1860s, the artistic exploration of the social aspect intensified once again towards the end of the century. Meunier's sculptures and paintings of miners and dockers play a central role in this regard.

Everyday life was dominated by rationalism and materialism, leaving very little personal freedom; this fuelled the desire to withdraw from the estrangement of the outer world and contemplate the inner world. The search for mysteries and secrets beyond the sphere of visible reality was all the rage, particularly among Symbolists. The exhibition features works by artists such as Fernand Khnopff, Xavier Mellery and Leon Spilliaert, who reflect on conditions of the soul or the animation of objects, for example. The œuvre of James Ensor is displayed in a separate room. After early naturalistic interior scenes, his painting became progressively characterised by fantastic elements. Ensor replaced his subjects with animated masks and skeletons, thereby presenting the world as a carnivalesque farce.

The artists settling in Sint-Martens-Latem, a village near Ghent, in 1898, were also driven by a desire for authenticity, spirituality and a retreat from the material world – at the turn of the century, Belgium was the fifth largest industrial nation in the world. The first generation of the artists' colony presented in the following two sections of the exhibition, whose protagonists included George Minne, leaned more towards Symbolism, with religious themes and references to the medieval painting of a group of artists known as the Flemish Primitives. Sint-Martens-Latem soon became an incubator for Expressionism: works by artists such as Gustave De Smet, Frits Van den Berghe and Constant Permeke are notable for their reduced, simplified style. Permeke's monumental figures of farmers and fishermen follow on from the artistic elevation of

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simple labourers and the rural population in the 19th century, while Van den Berghe gradually turned to Surrealism, with his depictions of fantastic shapes and forms, after the First World War.

An entire section is devoted to paintings and sculptures by Rik Wouters. Although his everyday scenes and interiors in the tradition of Ensor are occasionally painted in a less formal, Impressionist style, their vibrant, almost luminous hues also recall les Fauves. Wouters' endeavour to render the transience of single moments in fractured surfaces can be seen in both his paintings and his sculptures.

Another room focuses on the abstract Belgian avant-garde of the First World War era, whose art sought to achieve social goals, laying the foundations for a newly conceived life in a renewed society. Here, artists such as Jules Schmalzigaug and Marthe Donas turned the spotlight onto Italian Futurism and French Cubism in particular.

The exhibition closes by bringing together Surrealist works by Paul Joostens, Paul Delvaux and René Magritte, which re-explore the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, between the Real and the Fantastic, with innovative artistic techniques and strategies (collage, surreal combinations of objects etc.). With their dreams and fantasies, the Symbolists had paved the way for an enhanced reality; the Surrealists subsequently merged them into a sur-reality in which all boundaries are broken down, leaving all categories and concepts to be freely interpreted.

With around 350,000 visitors every year, the **Kunsthalle München** is one of Germany's most prestigious exhibition houses. Located at the heart of Munich, the Kunsthalle stages three large exhibitions a year on a variety of themes. Equipped with state-of-the-art museum technology, the approximately 1,200 m² exhibition space is a respected platform for artworks representing a variety of genres from painting, sculpture, graphic art, photography and crafts, through to design and fashion. The Kunsthalle München's diverse programme alternates monographic exhibitions with thematic projects, yet also includes interdisciplinary concepts.

As of: 20.9.2021

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In cooperation with the
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of Fine Arts
Antwerp



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The Kunsthalle München
is supported by

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OPENING HOURS

daily 10am–8pm | **20.10., 17.11.2021, 19.1. and 16.2.2022:** 10am–10pm

24.12.: closed | **31.12.:** 10am–5pm | **1.3.:** 10–18 Uhr

Special opening hours for school groups:

each wednesday 9am–10am, by appointment only: kontakt@kunsthalle-muc.de

DIRECTOR

Roger Diederer

EXHIBITION CURATOR

Nerina Santorius

Co-Curator: Herwig Todts (KMSKA)

A cooperation with the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA): www.kmska.be

EXHIBITION DESIGN

Martin Kinzmaier (stage and exhibition designer)

PRESS ENQUIRIES

Agnes Trick, T +49 (0)89 / 37 82 81 64, presse@kunsthalle-muc.de

PRESS IMAGES FOR DOWNLOAD

https://www.kunsthalle-muc.de/en/press_area/fantastically-real/

ADMISSION FEE

Standard: € 15 | **Reduced fees:** Senior citizens (60+): € 13 | Students (< 30 years) and unemployed: € 7 | Young people (6–18 years): € 2 | Children under 6: free of charge | school classes: € 2 per pupil (pre-booked) | Family pass for 2 adults and their (grand-)children (< 18 years): € 28 | On tuesdays 50% discount on all admission fees

AUDIO TOUR

A **free audio tour** for the exhibition is available and can be accessed from home and in the exhibition with your own mobile device (www.kunsthalle-muc.de/fantastisch-real-audio).

GUIDED TOURS

Guided tours for groups: guided tours in languages other than German: Mon, Wed–Fri: 10am–8pm, by appointment only: kontakt@kunsthalle-muc.de

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAMME (SUMMARY)

Afterwork^{KH} evenings and **lectures, curator's tours, public tours** and **guided tours** for children.
More information: www.kunsthalle-muc.de

CATALOGUE

Accompanying the exhibition Sandstein Verlag has published an extensive catalogue with over 200 colour illustrations. Edited by Roger Diederer, Nerina Santorius and Herwig Todts. With essays by Jan Dirk Baetens, Jane Block, Xavier Canonne, Adriaan Gonnissen, Denis Laoureux, Sura Levine, Peter Pauwels, Nerina Santorius, Herwig Todts, Estelle Vallender and Cathérine Verleysen.

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