Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

BRUSSELS 1900

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PRESS RELEASE
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Fernand Khnopff, *Art or Caresses*, 1896, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 150 cm.
Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.
© Photo: Jelle Van Seghbroeck

The Petit Palais is proud to present the remarkable exhibition Brussels 1900, plunging the public into the heart of the Belgian capital's vibrant art scene, whose influence would have a lasting mark on European art at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the autumn of 1900, visitors to the World Fair, held in the newly inaugurated Grand Palais in Paris, discovered as part of the exhibition devoted to foreign nations, a Belgian section that sparked unanimous enthusiasm. Featuring almost one hundred-and-fifty paintings and sculptures from Belgium, it proved to be a veritable revelation. Such recognition and admiration from Parisian audiences cemented Brussels' status as a major European arts hub in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The exhibition captures this extraordinary cultural effervescence through over two hundred-and-fifty works, including paintings, sculptures, decorative arts, posters, jewellery, photographs, architectural designs, and the graphic arts. Organized in partnership with the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts (Royal Museums of Fine Arts), Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Royal Museums of Art and History), and the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique (Royal Library of Belgium), it brings together a number of exceptional loans from all three institutions.

CURATORS:
Géraldine David, General Director of the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire
Sara Lammens, General Director of the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique (KBR), Acting Director-General of the Royal Museum for Central Africa
Annick Lemoine, President of the Musées d'Orsay et de l'Orangerie, former director of the Petit Palais
Kim Oosterlinck, General Director of the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique

SPECIALIZED CURATORS:
Anne-Charlotte Cathelineau, Chief Heritage Curator of the Sculpture Department, Petit Palais
Davy Depelchin, Head Curator of the 19th-century Paintings and Sculptures Department at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique
Benjamin Foudral, Director of the Musée Gustave Courbet d'Ornans

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VILLE DE PARIS | PARIS MUSÉES

A young state born of the 1830 revolution, Belgium experienced a spectacular economic boom over the course of the nineteenth century. Brussels rapidly became the showcase of a new modernity: a cosmopolitan, industrial, and intellectual metropolis intertwining French, English, and Germanic influences. Artists, writers, architects, and critics launched new forms of expression there, engaging in a constant dialogue between the aesthetic avant-garde and social transformation.

Organized into seven thematic sections, this exhibition explores the diversity of the various movements and sensibilities that comprised the unique character of the Belgian scene around this time.

The exhibition opens with the artistic circles like *La Libre Esthétique*—veritable laboratories of ideas that shaped the cultural life of Brussels in the late nineteenth century. These avant-garde salons brought together Belgian artists and international creators, merging diverse disciplines in a common pursuit of modernity. Exhibitions, lectures, and concerts provided spaces and opportunities for intellectual exchange, new to Europe, and fostering fruitful collaborations between painters and writers, like those between **Léon Spilliaert** and **Maurice Maeterlinck**, **Émile Verhaeren** and **Théo Van Rysselberghe**, or **Max Elskamp** and **Henry van de Velde**. Symbolism, Social Naturalism, Spiritual Idealism, and decorative experimentation all converged here thanks to the impetus and creative ferment of several key figures, such as **James Ensor**, **Fernand Khnopff**, **Léon Frederic**, and **Jean Delville**.

The following sections explore the major themes underpinning Belgian art around 1900, notably a fascination with mystery, dreams, and the supernatural. Artists created worlds steeped in esotericism, mythology, and explorations of the unconscious. This idealism may best be seen in the work of painter and theorist *Jean Delville*, founder of the *Pour l'art* circle and a pivotal figure in idealist art salons.

The exhibition then focuses on another facet of the "Belgian soul": the exaltation of nature. Landscape painting had diverse forms, influenced by the era's major international trends: the Impressionism of **Anna Boch** and **Juliette Wytsman**; the Pointillism of **Théo Van Rysselberghe**, **Georges Lemmen**, and **Georges Morren**; the Luminism of **Émile Claus**; and the Naturism of **Léon Frederic** and **Firmin Baes**. This idolization of nature and the cycles of life also mirrored an idealization of the rural world, seen as a refuge from industrialization and profound urban change.

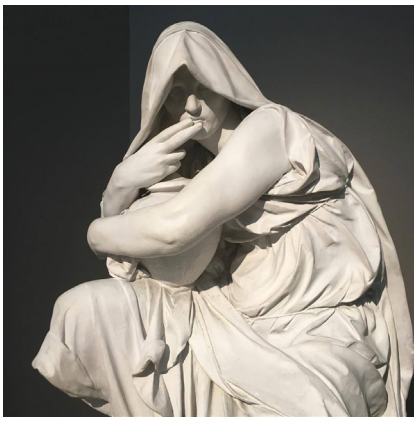
Another section is devoted to the depiction of the working classes—a theme ever-present in a Belgium undergoing rapid industrial transformation. Influenced by the socialist and humanist ideas championed by figures like **Edmond Picard** and **Émile Verhaeren**, artists such as **Constantin Meunier**, **Léon Frederic**, and **Eugène Laermans** emerged as the authors of a socially engaged art that explored the conditions of the working class. Their works attest to the harshness of the labour, but also to the dignity and strength of this group of people grappling



Theo Van Rysselberghe, *Maria Sèthe at the Harmonium*, 1891. Oil on canvas, © KMSKA, Antwerp



Jean Delville, *Orpheus Dead*, 1893. Oil on canvas (fixed on a new canvas). Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.
Acquired from Roland and Anne-Marie Gillion Crowet, Brussels, 2008 © SABAM Belgium



Julien Dillens, *The Silence of the Tomb*, 1896, plaster, 89 x 47 x 44.5 cm, Ixelles, © Musée d'Ixelles

with the upheavals of the modern world.

The exhibition also looks at the relationship with the Flemish tradition, an important element of Belgian identity. All artists, whatever their interests, drew upon this heritage: whether through religious or mystical iconography, the materiality of the works (triptychs and tapestries, etc.), or motifs inspired by Gothic architecture, the Early Netherlandish painters, and fifteenth-century Burgundian sculpture. The modern creators of the 1900s saw themselves as heirs to a prestigious past.

This period also saw the emergence of the concept of "total art", where painting, sculpture, architecture, furniture design, typography, jewellery, and the literary arts all shared a single ambition: to bring art into every aspect of daily life. Therefore, Brussels became one of the cradles of Art Nouveau, spearheaded through the revolutionary architectural designs of **Victor Horta**, **Paul Hankar**, and **Henry van de Velde**.

Finally, the exhibition touches on the complex links between this artistic golden age and the colonial activities carried out by Leopold II in the Congo. The arrival of new materials—notably ivory and exotic woods—fuelled new experiments in terms of form by many Belgian artists, against the backdrop of a political and economic context that is now being critically re-examined. This fundamental historical dimension is woven into the exhibition narrative so as to reflect the tensions and contradictions permeating this new Belgian Modernity.

The exhibition concludes with the notable presence of Belgian artists at the 1900 World Fair in Paris, where their participation earned them enthusiastic critical acclaim and several medals for some of the participating artists.

Organized in partnership with the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, and the Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, this exhibition features several exceptional loans of works from these three institutions.

Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique
Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België

KBR

MUSÉE ART & HISTOIRE

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Musée d'Orsay

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Tuesday to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Late-night opening Fridays and Saturdays until 8pm.

Admission
Full rate: €14
Reduced rate: €12

Booking of a time slot advised on petitpalais.paris.fr

Accessible to visitors with disabilities.



Paul Du Bois, *Minerva or Liberty*, c. 1901, ivory and silver, 53 x 36 x 26 cm.
© Brussels, Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles - Maison du Roi



Wolfers, Birds and Iris, ornate comb, Gold, enamel, Brazilian opal and rock crystal.
Acquisition from the Fonds Courtin-Bouché 2009.
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