

**Mu.
ZEE**

From Coo to art
Once a department store, now Mu.ZEE

Open from June 1



Mu.ZEE: The Collection

Mieke Mels, curator at Mu.ZEE

Mu.ZEE manages a collection of Belgian fine art ranging from 1880 to the present day. With a presentation that extends over the entire first and second floor and the galleries, the museum is decisively changing the layout of its own collection today. To this end, the open space of the SEO department store designed by architect Gaston Eysellinck has been opened up again. The Rotor collective has provided the scenography. The many walls and other spatial interventions of the past thirty-five years have been dismantled and transformed into a new environment. The existing exhibition walls and cabinets have been partly demolished and recovered. Markings on the carpet reveal traces of the many interventions involving the architecture in the past.

The new arrangement is the first of a multi-year cycle that aims to reassess the Mu.ZEE collection. By means of punctual changes, rearrangements and also the addition of documentation, we explore the richness and individuality of our own collection. We will take you with us on this adventure of rediscovery until 2024, when the museum will undergo major renovation.

A chronological order has been chosen for the first arrangement - a principle that is sometimes too quickly associated with style history and the (Western) canon and dismissed as an outdated legacy of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century art museum. In the remit that Mu.ZEE has set itself today, in the first instance a chronological arrangement offers an insight and an overview: it sheds light on the historical character of the collection and makes it possible to map out a walk through the history of art in Belgium from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day.

However, the current presentation does not offer a strict route. The arrangement does not reduce history to an unambiguous narrative but opens up the collection as a field of artistic relationships. Rather than dividing up history on the basis of fracture lines and stylistic terms, the presentation seeks possible continuity between works and practices and explores the connections between overlapping parts of history in the collection.



“There were also ‘Belgian’ artists before 1830!”

Stefaan Vervoort

Mu.ZEE offers an overview of modern art in Belgium, from its origins in the nineteenth century to the present day. This makes the museum the only one in our country that uses this formula, and also the only one with a collection limited to Belgian art. Stefaan Vervoort (postdoctoral researcher, Ghent University) talks about this with Wouter Davidts (head of the research group KB45/Art in Belgium since 1945, Ghent University) and Emmanuel Van de Putte (managing director Sotheby’s Belgium), who were involved as advisers.

Stefaan Vervoort: Mu.ZEE is reopening with a multi-year collection exhibition occupying almost the entire building. How are you involved in the development of that presentation?

Wouter Davidts: Together with Joost Declercq and Zoë Gray, senior curator at Wiels, we were asked to advise on the revitalisation process of the museum. From the outset we asked the following question: what makes Mu.ZEE specific? This is how we arrived at the collection: no other museum in Belgium has devoted itself so clearly to collecting the work of artists from Belgium. We wanted the viewer to rediscover that unique character of the museum. It is a misconception that the public only comes to museums for changing exhibitions. We wanted to put the museum’s most important asset back in the spotlight: its own collection.

Emmanuel Van de Putte: The fascinating thing about Mu.ZEE is that it is an amalgamation of the Provincial Museum of Modern Art (PMMK) - which collected modern and contemporary art from Belgium - and the Museum of Fine Arts in Ostend - that focused on Belgian art from the nineteenth century. The collection presentation starts in that early period, which may have been somewhat forgotten by this museum in recent years. It is crucial to connect the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Artists do not work independently of the past; art is not constantly reinvented. The notion of Belgian art is also important. You want to show the fault lines and continuities. Such a historical overview is nowhere to be seen in Belgian museums today.

SV: What more do you hope to be able to learn from the upcoming presentation?

WD: That a museum collection is just a collection, often created by a handful of people. That collecting is time-related, that it has to do with opportunities and the funds available. There is meaning in the gaps, even in the failure of a collection. I find it fascinating how you can show the richness of a collection without striving for completeness or totality. The PMMK was a provincial museum, including in the literal sense: a lot of work by local artists has been acquired, sometimes of varying quality. But this is what makes the collection so rich. Unlike the major, international museums of modern and contemporary art, which often have canonical but also interchangeable collections, Mu.ZEE can also tell a local story. There are well-known artists such as Evelyne Axell, Marcel Broodthaers, Thierry De Cordier, Raoul De Keyser, Lili Dujourie, Jef Geys, Marie-Jo Lafontaine and Jan Vercruyse, but also

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internationally less acclaimed names such as Mirella Boerjan, Hugo De Clercq, Amedée Cortier and Jacques Verduyn. The work of these artists is definitely worthwhile. They are also dear to the hearts of many people who have visited the museum over the years.

EVdP: Gathering and sharing knowledge about art in Belgium is crucial. In the past, museums have often left such knowledge in the hands of specialists rather than keeping it in-house. However, there is a risk that the knowledge will also disappear together with the specialist. The question is: how can you keep knowledge in-house and at the same time make it widely accessible?

WD: There is still a lot of work to be done to increase appreciation of art made in Belgium. This is mainly to do with awareness. You could therefore also interpret the collection presentation as a plea for more care and attention in relation to the history of art made in our own country.

SV: The collection policy at Mu.ZEE is special. For many years only work by Belgian artists was collected - since 2010 this has been extended to include the work of artists living and working in Belgium who are not Belgian nationals. What do you think of this policy? Is the category "Belgian art" not problematic, especially when it ignores the international network in which artists operate?

EVdP: Before the start of the twentieth century, it is clear. Belgium lies between German Expressionism and French Fauvism. Rik Wouters, a Fauvist, and Constant Permeke, an Expressionist, shared the same subjects and culture but portrayed them differently. When does that go back to? You would think to the time of nation-building in the nineteenth century, but we should look at the bigger picture. There were also 'Belgian' artists before 1830! This is related to the area where they live and work, to the customs and culture they share. Since the inception of the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke in the Middle Ages, a visual language has been disseminated and shared locally. Historically, there is such a thing as Belgian identity and visual language - regardless of how you want to interpret that concept.

WD: I am rather pugnacious about the adjective "Belgian": I prefer not to use it because such adjectives are too often understood as essentialist and affirmative. However, a geographical category like "Belgium" is meaningful in my view. Nationalism is re-emerging everywhere, and national borders are once again jealously guarded today. There is a world of difference between people with or without a passport. You need criteria in order to collect, and if you recognize and dare to question the artificial and potentially problematic nature of those criteria, it will only become more interesting. I do not believe in global, universalist art. There is a shared way of seeing and articulating among artists who live and work in the same regions - because they read the same newspapers, share one or more languages, or even sit on the same bus.

EVdP: It is an interesting but recurrent issue. Take the example of the Netherlands. Marlene Dumas is a Dutch artist but of South African origin. It just depends on how you interpret the term. In Belgium we are not good at showing what we have done in the past and what art has been produced. We prefer to see our Belgian art recognized abroad before recognizing it ourselves. And we are happy to



put on exhibitions in Belgium, while we must also put on the same exhibition abroad. In short: we are not daring enough!

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The building, the 'mamzels' and Gaston Eysselinck

Stefaan Vervoort / Colette Castermans

In 1948, the architect Gaston Eysselinck (1907-1953) was commissioned to design a department store and the headquarters of the consumer cooperative S.E.O. (*Spaarzaamheid Economie Oostende*). S.E.O. had existed since the late nineteenth century and was the largest cooperative ever in West Flanders. The design included the extension of the existing S.E.O. building in Amsterdamstraat, which housed a pharmacy and a beer bottling plant. The first extension was built on the Gentstraat side (now the back of the museum, the former Ensor and Spilliaert wing); the administration was housed in the former Raoul Servais wing and the new 'main store' was in Romestraat where, between 1950 and 1955, a building with a 30-metre-long curved glass wall was built. You could buy just about anything in 'The Co-op' (*De Coö*): food, clothing, coal, shoes, crockery, radios, drinks, furniture, toys, electrical goods, tobacco, petrol, and so on. Tens of thousands of families in Ostend belonged to the cooperative, had a membership number and went shopping there – with money, but with tokens too. Furthermore, hundreds of local residents had jobs there, as 'mamzels' (on the tills or filling the shelves), delivery staff or stock clerks.

However, this success story came to an end in 1981, when the store went bankrupt. Five years later, in 1986, the building opened its doors again - to the Provincial Museum for Modern Art, or **PMMK** for short. After many years of moving round between Bruges and Ieper, it had found a home there. The store and its stories were consigned for good to the history books and made room for a permanent location for the museum. In the 2000s the collection of Ostend's Museum for Fine Arts (OMSK) found its way into the former store as well. At the end of 2008, a new museum called Mu.ZEE was born!

Eysselinck was an important architect in post-war Ostend. His first major commission for a public building was the old post office, *De Grote Post* (1946-1953). The design is the result of a laborious creative process and a vision that diverged from that of the Ostend building administration. During the construction of the Post Office, differences of opinion arose between the architect and the client (the Telegraph and Telephone Administration) about the placement of a copper sculpture by Jozef Cantré, a nude winged goddess, with four female figures representing the races of the world. Eysselinck felt that the round forms of the "Communication Media" or "Unity of the World Through Telephony, Telegraphy and Postal Traffic" (1953), as the sculpture was called, were needed to break up and complement the austere lines of his building. In the end he was denied access to the construction site. Eysselinck took his own life in 1953 — a tragedy that, according to legend, was linked to the problems on the building site (cf. Charlotte Van den Broeck's stories of architects who committed suicide, *Waagstukken* or 'Risky Enterprises'). Ten years after his death, Cantré's sculpture was placed there after all. In 2012 *De Grote Post* was extended and renovated to a design by B-architecten. It is now a cultural centre and event venue.



Rotor design statement

Lionel Devlieger

Rotor has been in existence for about 15 years and during that period has developed a versatile practice which mainly focuses on building up expertise related to circular construction, in particular the reuse of building materials. We study the construction sector and provide advice on how best to make the transition to architectural forms which use fewer raw materials and consume less energy. Gauging the logistical challenges posed by a site environment is crucial in this regard. That is why, even though strictly speaking we are not an architectural firm, Rotor has always retained its own design cell with which we test certain solutions and try out new site forms. The project for Muzee is in line with this approach.

Gaston Eysselinck designed a “department store” for the cooperative SEO with materials and techniques that fully adhere to the modernist idiom. A slender skeleton of reinforced concrete supports the three-storey sales area, bathed in abundant daylight that filtered in through huge glass windows. However, the impressive spaciousness of the double-height lower floors, with the galleries on the sides reminiscent of ocean-liners, was concealed by added walls. During construction, probably due to a lack of money, the glass windows provided by De Eysselinck to complete the galleries were largely replaced by masonry. Later, during the years of operation as a museum of contemporary art (formerly the PMMK, later Mu.ZEE), the monumental concrete staircases and other parts of the originally open skeleton were gradually covered with MDF walls painted in white. The large windows at the rear of the main block were also bricked up when it was put into use as a museum. Other windows, previously crucial for the subtle play of light, were made light-proof. The building, in which space and daylight originally played a leading role, gradually evolved into a light-shy, fragmented white cube.

Rotor was commissioned to tackle the existing layout of the museum and to develop a new scenography for a selection from the permanent collection yet to be made at the time. We were officially appointed at the end of January 2021, 4 months before the opening. There was no time to lose. Our work began with a careful reading of the existing building; a recently conducted historical study was very useful in this regard but was limited to the Eysselinck portion. We had additional drillings made in the subsequently added walls in order to determine their composition; we made careful measurements of elements that were released during the initial dismantling work, such as the discolouration patterns on the carpet that had been covered for years by a now worn plywood floor.

An initial design was created on the basis of a number of core observations, and in permanent consultation with the team from Mu.ZEE. Implementation details were gradually drawn up in accordance with new insights and discoveries which we often only noticed during the works themselves. As is so often the case with Rotor, the design tries to take what already exists as its



departure point: the building, the materials that are released during dismantling; the production capacities of the museum's technical team. We looked for qualities that arise during the removal, rather than the addition of material. The bricked-up "ocean liner galleries" on the first and second floor were opened up again, as well as a staircase that is now completely freestanding in the space.

The freestanding walls on the second floor, on which the 19th and early 20th century works of the collection now hang, are the vestiges of small white cubes previously constructed in that space. These rectangular rooms have been stripped of their ceilings, then sawn vertically into L-shaped segments, and moved to precise locations that were only determined after a long dialogue with the curators - and the works of art. Establishing meaningful lines of sight and natural circulation and quiet moments for the visitor were the guiding principle.

Where possible, all the windows that Eysselinck had provided were opened up again. Concealed, dark spaces were made accessible again to provide space for video and light-sensitive work. A large proportion of the subsequently added walls have also been dismantled, restoring some of the original spaciousness. Seating furniture was designed and produced on site on the basis of these MDF panels which were removed. Only the seating surface of this furniture consists of wood recovered elsewhere (remnants of bonded laminated rafters).

The project tries to find an appropriate answer to a complex design issue through a radical reading of the existing. Not by introducing new elements, new materials, but by subtracting and rearranging. A new working method was employed that met expectations in full: while various scenarios were tested at the office and with the curators using the scale model, walls were moved on site. This resulted in a dynamic site in which the Mu.ZEE team was closely involved. 'Building' did not in fact start after everything had been stripped, but from the moment the first panel was removed.



About (museum)management and a museum ‘ in progress’

Dominique Savelkoul, director of Mu.ZEE

The strange last year has given us a lot of inspiration despite/thanks to corona. The seed for this rethink was sown in the summer months: first the cellars were tidied up, followed by a number of days of reflection, internally with our own team but also externally. The need to write a new story that does justice to the individuality of our collection and building has therefore started to grow rapidly. The requirement for a tighter focus. For a new impetus too.

A delegating and connecting vision

An artist, curator or manager at the head of Mu.ZEE? The challenges remain the same. The tasks of the head of a museum are complex and manifold. Within a small team, a director must offer everyone the opportunity to do what he or she is good at, by making clear agreements and giving them confidence.

Together with the team, focusing on what is good for the museum, on making engaging presentations: only on that sound basis can you develop an institute like Mu.ZEE and allow it to continue to grow and flourish. My decision to introduce a new way of thinking and a radically new approach through the recruitment of external experts was prompted by necessity, but it also proved very instructive for all those concerned. The ability to put things into perspective never does any harm anyway.

Dare to create the momentum yourself

As a newcomer to the Flemish museum sector, I have had the privilege of being able to take a fresh look at the museum landscape and also actually being able to change things. As a Flemish institute, Mu.ZEE must capitalise on its own strengths. I immediately saw a great (but bruised) team, a unique art collection (albeit hidden in the depot), and an iconic (but tired) building. We had therefore better make a virtue of this (corona) necessity. As Mu.ZEE, now more than ever, we must dare to express our ambition and to look to an exciting future with a well-founded vision and a strong identity. In order to restore panache to the museum.

Not taking action until after the major renovation works in 2024 therefore did not seem like an option to me. Instead, we have come up with the plan of recombining the dusted off collection and the pared-down building in a few months’ time using our own resources and by and large our own Mu.ZEE team. *If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It's lethal (Paulo Coelho).*

Slightly different

When you employ ordinary things elsewhere, they quickly become extraordinary. The common thread throughout my career - from the Festival of Flanders, through the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the National Gallery, to the RuhrTriennale, Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, the cabinet of former Flemish Minister of Culture, Sven Gatz, and now Mu.ZEE in Ostend – has always been “slightly different”. Central to this is expanding one’s horizons, looking over the wall, avoiding well-trodden paths and daring to question sacred cows.



Mu.ZEE also wants to cherish the view of the outsider more than ever. The team, building and collection recently received external impulses to start working towards reconnection. Together we are embracing this transition period in order to be able to make better decisions at all levels as we approach the major renovation works in 2024.

Good governance

The fish rots from the head down, they say in Ostend. Proper governance is very important in avoiding this, especially in challenging circumstances. The rebuilding and reassessment of the museum has only been possible thanks to the support of a solid administrative body and hence our subsidising bodies.

For the first time, Mu.ZEE is to have a mixed administrative body of both politically appointed and independent directors. We are also actively striving for diversity. Everyone is expected to use his or her relevant expertise, experience and network to provide the museum with collegial support and to monitor government funding so that the organisation can grow.

Authentic and unique

Don't fool yourself and others. A department store is not a museum building. An old carpet naturally has defects. A presentation is by definition subjective. Don't try to disguise that. Our collection is also an incomplete history of modern and contemporary art in Belgium - dynamic and never finished.

There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in (Leonard Cohen).

That is precisely what creates a sparkling distinction. We do not strive for completeness. Imperfection is more exciting. The gaps in-between tell us something. They invite bridging.

We have restored the Eysselinck building as far as possible in these few months. And we have produced a multiannual collection exhibition that places the collection and the artists who have contributed to the history and development of Belgian art at the heart of the museum again. During our search we realised how much remains to be discovered. We want to make the building and the collection our own again in preparation for the major renovation works in 2024. That is why we want to maintain a permanent dialogue with our neighbourhood, and with the world(s) outside the museum - including the business, institutional and academic worlds.

Mu.ZEE wants to provide peace, but also stimulate looking, feeling and thinking. To be as enlightening as it is enquiring. Showing but also breaking out of the canon. To be authentic and quirky, just like Ostend, the city in which we are located.

Soliquid

Soliquid. A word invented for us. Our own permanent team and many external experts. Our own permanent collection and the fluid exhibitions. The building and the challenges of an unstoppable life. The knowledge and the research. The solid and the stimuli. The Mu and the Zee (Sea) and all the moments and atmospheres in between. An experience between coming home and discovering, overview and immersion, being satisfied and wanting more.

Generous and alert



To fill every visitor with wonder and let them enjoy the fascinating story of art in Belgium, from 1880 to the present day: that is the ambition of Mu.ZEE. Enthusiasts, artists, collectors, gallery owners and patrons from far and wide travel to *their* collection in Ostend. The great collection of ideas, photographs, objects, sculptures, illustrations, drawings, films and paintings is public property and thus belongs to us all. We want to emphasise this by sharing the museum collection, and our growing knowledge about it, with the public as far as possible.

To reach a wide audience, we want to open up Mu.ZEE in a warm, welcoming and generous way. It is therefore my ambition to make the permanent collection really accessible - we are now starting cautiously, with free admission on every third Wednesday of the month. To make more opportunities possible, additional funding is needed - a generous patron or manager who understands the importance of this and supports it. Fundraising will be a new focus in any case. We want to offer our supporters various opportunities to make donations during their lives and/or after death.

At the same time, Mu.ZEE wants to be critical and alert. After all, it is the only museum that has focused on art from Belgium since 1880, which means that by definition we also play a distinct role and will be more internationally visible than ever. We want to research, question and expand the canon of art in Belgium through internal research into the collection and collaborations with academic partners and, where possible, foreign museums. In line with our mission, we want to honour Belgian art - art that is currently in great demand internationally when our recent loans to major exhibitions in Nice, London, Berlin and Paris are considered.

Profoundly human

Research into our artists and their work is always a bit of a search for ourselves, and for anyone who has a connection with our country and our art history. Mu.ZEE aims to be a profoundly human museum, with the sunniest welcome in the country. It is also a female museum - 12 of the current 15 staff members are women - which we can also question, but which probably helps define our identity. Mu.ZEE is a place where you can breeze in to get a breath of fresh air. Full of depth, light and the pleasure of collecting.

How great is that?



Enter#13 : Olivia Hernaiz - 'La Eterna Juventud'

1.6.2021 – 29.8.2021

In the exhibition 'La Eterna Juventud' (The Eternal Youth), Olivia Hernaiz explores the ways in which cultural heritage, national identity and memory influence the individual. Her interest in these themes was awakened while studying her family history, which led her to Russia. She spent three consecutive summers there with a family – her family - she had never previously met. Her grandmother's two younger brothers, Arturo and Pablo, had been shipped to the then Soviet Union in 1937, together with 3,500 other Spanish children. In total, more than 30,000 children left Spain for various European countries for protection against the Franco regime and the civil war. Olivia Hernaiz' grandmother thus arrived in Belgium at the age of thirteen, refugee separated from the rest of her family.

In order to communicate with her family members and document their stories, Olivia Hernaiz learned Russian. During her stay, she visited the orphanages where the children had once lived. Initially, the children were raised in comfortable conditions. The teachers and members of the communist party who had accompanied them from Spain placed an emphasis on the Spanish language and culture during their education. After all, the intention was to eventually repatriate the children as saviors of their homeland. The outbreak of the Second World War derailed this plan, however, and they remained in Russia. Only after Stalin's death in 1956 could the children return to Spain. That they were no longer 'eternal niños' (eternal children), but had grown up in the meantime, was a source of confusion and even disappointment for the families of origin. There were also some young people, such as Olivia Hernaiz' great uncles, who decided to stay in Russia.

Throughout their entire period in exile, they were regarded as Spaniards who would one day find their way home. It was vital that they developed a sentiment of belonging that created a mental bond with the country of origin as well as to their future. The Spanish authorities in exile stimulated that national identity, but not entirely selflessly. 'La Eterna Juventud' refers, furthermore, to the strategies behind the fascism of the 1930s, but also to the rise of nationalism today. Personal involvement in a particular region through, for example, cultural, culinary and recreational benchmarks, often serves an administrative tactic. The political climate is therefore reflected in governmental communication strategies. For example, the presence of Spanish children in Russia was instrumentalized by both the Spanish and Russian authorities. Franco portrayed the children as prisoners to be saved, while Stalin erected them as the embodiment of the communist dream. 'La Eterna Juventud' examines how an individual deals with these forms of political wrangling. Olivia Hernaiz' cousins are still identified as



Spanish, but they are now part of a third generation building a life in Russia. In what way do they still feel connected to a land that has never been their home? And how do they view themselves within a country in which their family tree has only just been planted?

Enter

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Enter #13: Olivia Hernaiz La Eterna Juventud

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PRACTICAL

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Tue-Sun: 10 am-5.30pm
June, July and August - every Thursday 10 am-10pm

Tickets must be reserved via muzee.be

PRESS

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LE SOIR

