

## Wonderful Mechelen

From Burgundian Grandeur to Media Lab and Malt Whisky

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[ FRANK HELLEMANS ]

*Je connais Malines, et, si Malines n'était pas en Belgique, et peuplée de Flamands, j'aimerais y vivre, et surtout y mourir. Combien de carillons, combien de clochers, combien d'herbes dans les rues, combien de béguines!*

*I know Mechelen and, if Mechelen were not in Belgium and populated with Flemings, I'd love to live there and especially to die there. So many carillons, so many bells, so much grass in the streets, so many Beguines!*

*Charles Baudelaire writing to his friend Narcisse Ancelle, Mayor of Neuilly (2 September 1864)*

There is no better way to get to know Mechelen than to gaze on it from on high and then to stroll around it. Within a radius of a square kilometre, the visitor can discover the many different faces of this provincial Flemish town juxtaposed between its big brothers Antwerp and Brussels: from mediaeval and Burgundian to arch-Catholic and modern, nay super-modern.

### Mechelen from on high

But first we will climb the 15th-century tower of St Rumbold's Cathedral, the defining landmark of Mechelen, which can be seen rising towards the heavens long before the visitor arrives in the town. Up we go to the skywalk, a panoramic 'floating' walkway running behind and above a glass wall that lays out the entire landscape at our feet as we gaze around and down from the almost 100 m tall tower, like an all-conquering general. The tower can be climbed every day. And climbing is precisely what it is: five hundred and thirty-eight (538!) steps – no lift – will take you to pole position, from where far to the south you will see the Brussels Atomium glinting in the sunlight and to the north the contours of that other, competing spire of the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp. Looking down, it is immediately obvious, as observed by Baudelaire in the fragment cited above, just how many clock towers adorn



this town. Only Prague may boast more churches. Today, Mechelen is still the official residence of the Belgian Archbishop, André Léonard, who tries to watch over his flock from his palace, with its superb garden that is sometimes open to the public.

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The centre of Mechelen, which lies at your feet, is concentrically ringed by the River Dijle as it flows from Leuven, where it joins the Rupel and Scheldt rivers en route to Antwerp and the sea. Mechelen grew up within that circle as an autonomous administrative and judicial centre (*heerlijkheid*), one of the seventeen provinces of the Habsburg Netherlands. Mechelen was therefore an immediate political neighbour of Holland, Flanders and Brabant. It was to retain that autonomy as a small *heerlijkheid* surrounded by bigger, often hostile neighbours right up until the French Revolution in the late 18th century. The derived meaning of the word *heerlijkheid*, as a place of magnificence or glory, is completely apt: after Bruges, Mechelen contains more listed buildings than anywhere else in Belgium.

Within the radius of the old mediaeval and pre-modern Mechelen, two icons of modernity can be seen on opposite sides of the circle. On the southern edge it is difficult to see beyond the gigantic arms of the cranes towering above the railway station, which is to be completely rebuilt over the next decade. Mechelen, from where the first passenger train on the European continent departed in 1835, is giving its industrial heritage a complete makeover. Looking in the opposite direction, towards the north, a massive pentagonal white block comes into view, next to what was once the old Dossin barracks and the place where 25,484 Belgian Jews and 352 gypsies were assembled during the Second World War in preparation for transportation to the German concentration camps.



Skywalk on the Cathedral  
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The pentagonal block, the Holocaust Museum (closed on Wednesdays), was opened in December 2012 and does indeed document the Holocaust in Belgium and Mechelen, but devotes attention to other excesses of genocide during the 20th century too. If climbing the hundreds of steps up St Rumbold's Tower is too daunting a prospect, taking the lift to the roof terrace at the Holocaust Museum also offers a splendid outlook, not only over Greater Mechelen and beyond, but taking in the nearby inner courtyard of the barracks where the deportees were assembled as well.

### **Eight centuries of history within two hours**

Seeing Mechelen from on high is one thing. However, the only way to really get to know the town is to wander through its streets. Within the space of two hours you will saunter easily through eight centuries of history. At ground level, you immediately find yourself on the Grote Markt, where all the streets of the old town converge. The market square itself dates back to the Middle Ages, when it was used among other things as a stage for executions. The Cloth Hall (*lakenhal*), which previously served as the town jail, and the old Aldermen's Hall (*schepenhuis*), date from the 13th and 14th centuries. At that time, Mechelen was a prosperous town thanks to its textile industry and local artisan trades, including the production of tapestries and the famous Cordovan 'gold leather' (Cuir de Cordoue) which was used by the well-to-do to adorn the interiors of their homes.

But it was in 1473 that the economic boom in Mechelen really began, when the Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold founded the Court of Audit (*Rekenkamer*), the central financial authority of the Low Countries, in Mechelen. The Great Council (*Grote Raad*), the highest court of appeal in the Low Countries, came to Mechelen a year later, being housed in the old Aldermen's Hall. The member councillors of these central institutions built residences befitting their rank and status nearby. The most handsome building is that of Councillor Hieronymus



Holocaust Museum  
© Stijn Bollaert

van Busleyden. In the Merodestraat, another street which gives onto the Grote Markt, you can visit the complex that now does duty among other things as the Municipal Museum (*Stadsmuseum*). Students from the nearby international carillon school are often to be found practising their bell-ringing in one of its charming towers. Mechelen is the undisputed centre of the carillon, something which enchanted Baudelaire – and Victor Hugo too (see below).

Van Busleyden played host to the greatest humanists of his day, including Erasmus. Thomas More made a diversion to Mechelen and wrote a number of verses in praise of the home and hospitality of his friend, to be sung in Latin. By this time, at the start of the 16th century, Mechelen had become the home of the Burgundian Court. Margaret of York, sister of the English Kings Richard III and Edward IV, will undoubtedly have recognised something of her hometown in Mechelen: the same modest scale, the same splendid Gothic cathedral. When Margaret lost her husband and consort Charles the Bold, she travelled with his daughter Mary of Burgundy to Mechelen. Her residence still stands in Keizerstraat, which begins on the Grote Markt next to the neo-Gothic town hall, its use transformed to that of municipal theatre (*Stadsschouwburg*).

## Burgundian Mechelen

It was from here that Margaret arranged the marriage of the (15th) century between Mary and Maximilian of Austria. At a stroke, the Burgundians had become Habsburgs and world citizens. It is for this reason that the coat of arms and flag of Mechelen bear the double-headed Habsburg eagle. When Mary died fairly young, Margaret of York looked after Mary's daughter Margaret of Austria and son Philip the Handsome. Philip, the father of Emperor Charles V, also died very young. By this time, Margaret of York had passed on too: a plaque in the Minderbroederskerk church where she lies buried (now the Cultural Centre) commemorates her death, and above all the Burgundian stamp she placed upon Mechelen. Henceforth, it was Margaret of Austria who called the tune.

Margaret of Austria moved into a palace directly opposite her Yorkist aunt and, following the death of her brother Philip the Handsome, took care of his son Charles. Margaret's palace is today the courthouse. Visitors can wander in freely to enjoy the Renaissance gardens. If you are in luck, you may be invited in by the President of the Bar, whose office is in what was Margaret's bedroom. The downstairs reception room of Margaret's palace is generally freely accessible. It is striking how small in scale, almost intimate, the official rooms appear today. In fact, the same applies for the meeting room in the old Aldermen's Hall, where dozens of dignitaries from the Great Council had to sit side-by-side in a compact space. Not only were people smaller five centuries ago, as we know, but apparently they were content with less space than we are today.

Margaret of Austria was the incarnation of the glory of Burgundian Mechelen. Occasionally she wrote melancholic poetry (in French) and gathered the cream of intellectual and artistic life around her in Keizerstraat. Renowned botanists such as Rembert Dodoens (who wrote the first herbal) and Carolus Clusius (discoverer of the potato plant) were very regular visitors, but Anne Boleyn also spent 18 months there from 1513, learning to be a lady-in-waiting. Janus Secundus wrote the best humanist love poetry there in his *Basia* (Book of Kisses), and can be safely regarded as the predecessor of that other illustrious Mechelen poet, Herman de Coninck, who electrified the Flemish poetry world with his debut, *De lenige liefde* (1969).

The death of Margaret of Austria and Emperor Charles brought a definitive end to the Burgundian grandeur of Mechelen. In the second half of the 16th century, Brussels became the capital of the Low Countries, but the Burgundian heritage of Brussels can only be partially reconstructed and lies underground. By contrast, the visitor wandering around Mechelen can still admire the splendid residences of the humanist councillors and the palaces of the two Margarets.

Dossin barracks where Belgian Jews and gypsies were assembled during the Second World War in preparation for transportation to the German concentration camps © Kazerne Dossin



## Malines Conversations

The religious wars in the last quarter of the 16th century prompted almost everyone of standing to flee Mechelen. The Dutch cities of Amsterdam and Haarlem were the main beneficiaries of the influx of these highly skilled Mechelen expats, such as the father of the painter Frans Hals, as well as Hals himself. Incidentally, the grandfather of Ludwig van Beethoven, likewise a native of Mechelen, would move to Bonn in the 18th century. The only consolation prize granted to Mechelen by the Spanish Catholic Habsburgs was the seat of Belgian Catholicism: Mechelen has been the home of Belgian archbishops from the time of Granvelle, in 1561, to Godfried Danneels and Léonard today. Churches mushroomed. Authentic paintings by Rubens, who owned a small château in Elewijt near Mechelen, can still be seen hanging in the Church of Our Lady-across-the-Dyle (Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk over-de-Dijle) and St. John's Church (*Sint-Janskerk*). More work was carried out on the Gothic St Rumbold's Cathedral in the 16th century. Later, Beghards and Beguines would also come to live in Mechelen. The small beguinage and especially the larger one – also close by St. Rumbold's tower and Grote Markt – are as authentic today as they were in the time of Charles Baudelaire, who disparaged Brussels but embraced the quietude of Mechelen.

Its central location meant that Mechelen was preferred to Brussels and Antwerp as the site for the first passenger railway station on the continent in 1835. Many British railway engineers made their homes in Mechelen, and people came from far and wide to learn about the steam train. Victor Hugo alighted in Mechelen in August 1837, where he was ceremonially received by Leopold I, the first King of the Belgians, along with a massive crowd. Hugo was impressed:

*Il y avait là dans la foule un pauvre cocher de coucou, picard ou normand, lequel regardait piteusement les wagons courir, traînés par la machine qui fume et qui geint. 'Cela va plus vite que vos chevaux', lui dis-je. — 'Beau miracle!' m'a répondu cet homme. "C'est poussé par un efoudre." Le mot m'a paru pittoresque et beau.*

*There was a poor coachman in the crowd, with a crate of an old coach, from Picardy or Normandy, watching pathetically as the wagons ran along behind the smoking, groaning engine pulling them. 'That goes faster than your horses', I told him. 'What a miracle', the man replied. 'It's pushed along by a flash of lightning.' His words seemed picturesque and beautiful.*

Hugo, by no means blind to the dynamic, 'lightning' new age symbolised by the train, was nonetheless more charmed by the two 'admirable' Rubens paintings, and especially by the sounds of the local carillon (to which he devoted an entire poem) and climbing the tower of St. Rumbold's: 'almost twice as many steps as the towers of Notre Dame', as he remarked. In his wake came more French writers, such as Paul Verlaine, who in September 1872 passed through Mechelen on the train in the company of Arthur Rimbaud, and wrote about the experience in a poem dedicated to the town:

*Malines: Les wagons filent en silence / Parmi ces sites apaisés. / Dormez, les vaches! Reposez, / Doux taureaux de la plaine immense, / Sous vous cieux à peine irrisés!*

*Mechelen: The wagons fly by in silence / Through the becalmed landscape. /  
Sleep ye cows! Rest/Gentle bulls of this immense plain, / Beneath your barely  
iridescent skies!*

Like Hugo and Baudelaire before him, Verlaine preferred the quiet, pre-modern Mechelen to the busy, industrial hotspot of its pioneering railway – the Catholic, one might say: the ultra montane Mechelen, train or no train, was still very much alive. The Congresses of Mechelen, in which Catholicism was debated at great length, became a byword. In fact Baudelaire referred to them in the same letter that espoused his conditional love for Mechelen. Later, the Congresses were transformed into ecumenical conversations between the Catholic and Anglican Churches – the Malines Conversations – which were held between 1921 and 1927. Archbishop Désiré Mercier, who has a dedicated chapel in St. Rumbold's, was the initiator, and was also the man who ensured that Catholic Mechelen was noticed in Anglican England. During this same period many English girls came to the boarding school at the Ursuline Institute in the village of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Waver, a few kilometres outside Mechelen. The school fees paid by these well-to-do English students funded the building of the finest (glazed) Jugendstil winter garden in the whole of the Mechelen area.

### **City of media and children**

Mechelen has undergone a radical facelift since 2000, under the stewardship of Mayor Bart Somers. The façades have been cleaned up and water features and parkland have been added. Mechelen has more inhabitants today than ever before – 83,000 in total – and a highly diverse population. The policy has mainly targeted creative double-earners. This has helped Mechelen attract a great many media companies, large and small, in recent years. Sanoma, the Belgian lifestyle magazine publisher, is housed in a site near the station, while Telenet, the Flemish Internet and cable TV distributor, has its headquarters in a former barracks just across the River Dijle. A number of successful smaller TV production houses have also found their way to the city. In collaboration with the town of Vilvoorde, the arrival point for the first train journey from Mechelen, the ambitious Track 25 project has been set up – named after the historic 25 railway line that linked the towns in 1835. This partnership between the two towns' Chambers of Commerce, their media industry and the Thomas More Hogeschool college, is intended to create a 'triple-helix' cross-fertilisation structure from which each of the three partners benefits.

Mechelen is also trying to live up to its image as a child-friendly town. For the last ten years, the Mechelen-Zuid district has hosted Technopolis, a science and technology activity centre for children and teenagers. Long before it became fashionable in most museums, visitors here were able to discover the wondrous world of science and technology in an interactive way: racing against a horse, generating electricity by performing gymnastics on a trapeze bike, or making your own toothpaste. There is also the Toy Museum, near the old Nekerspoel Station, where thematic exhibitions (devoted to Lego or to the artist Bruna, for example) add an extra dimension to the permanent collection of

historical toys – lots of trains and railway stations, naturally, but also depictions of the Battle of Waterloo and Star Wars.

If you've had enough of all that history, there is always the option of taking a boat trip from the station, along the Leuvense Vaart canal to Planckendael open-air zoo with its colonies of bonobos, storks and penguins. But if, like me, you prefer to remain within the centre of Mechelen, when leaving the Groot Begijnhof beguinage you might pop into the Anker brewery, the home of Gouden Carolus, a dark Trappist beer which consistently wins prizes – and sometimes gold medals – at beer festivals all over the world. They recently began distilling their own single malt whisky there too.

Mechelen really is wonderful. ■

Residence of Hieronymus van Busleyden © Layla Aerts

Residence of Margaret of York © Koen Broos



*Translated by Julian Ross*