

BELVUE MUSEUM

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KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING MODERN-DAY BELGIUM

ON 21 JULY 2016, THE BELVUE MUSEUM OPENED ITS NEW PERMANENT EXHIBITION ON BELGIUM AND ITS HISTORY

Eleven years after its opening, the BELvue, managed by the King Baudouin Foundation, has completely renewed its permanent exhibition. Employing a theme-based approach and with a modern, interactive exhibition layout, the museum offers visitors the keys to understanding Belgium and Belgian society.

Seven social themes are addressed in the rooms: democracy, prosperity, solidarity, pluralism, migration, language and Europe. Each theme is firstly presented from the perspective of the present day, then subsequently developed and explained through the history of Belgium. How did Belgium and the Belgians become what they are today? In the BELvue's new exhibition, history is not an end in itself, but rather a means to explain and provide the keys to understanding and interpreting our society.

This overview of Belgium past and present is complemented by a gallery of more than 200 objects. Presented chronologically from the 19th century to today, the pieces embody Belgium's "physical memory". Visitors will find everyday objects, works of art and design, well-known brands, scientific discoveries, references to great sporting achievements as well as objects that recall the richness of our popular culture.

The BELvue museum used the services of experienced exhibition designers and historians from Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée to design and produce the new permanent exhibition. The new exhibition, presented in four languages, is aimed at everyone, but particularly young people. The BELvue worked for two years with a group of young Belgians from all four corners of Belgium. The "BELvue Band" gave its opinion on the concept and suggested changes that have been incorporated into the concept and the design. The exhibition now running is therefore surprising and interactive and well in tune with contemporary times.

EXHIBITION CONCEPT

A contemporary approach to Belgium and its history

The exhibition is organised around seven themes, selected for their relevance and resonance in contemporary society: democracy, prosperity, solidarity, pluralism, migration, language and Europe. Each theme is firstly presented from the perspective of the present day, then subsequently developed and explained through the history of Belgium.

A gallery consisting of more than 200 objects representing Belgium's "physical memory" complements the grand themes, offering a different perspective on our society and its history.

How can the society in which we live be explained? How did Belgium and the Belgians become what they are today? In the new BELvue, history is not an end in itself, but rather a means to better understand Belgium and contemporary society.

Clear and accessible

The theme-based approach enables the seven subjects to be viewed as a single unit. Visitors will therefore obtain a comprehensive, historically-reasoned overview. Starting from contemporary reality - which is therefore familiar to everyone - enables the themes to be better understood while, at the same time, also making the exhibition accessible to a broad audience. Certain subjects, such as culture, gender and the Congo are addressed in different rooms which enables them to be presented from multiple perspectives.

In addition, graphics and diagrams present the latest historical research to visitors in a clear, illustrated form.

In terms of how the space is divided up, each room will be devoted to a single theme. Visitors to the exhibition will therefore be able to clearly identify the seven themes and, in this way, the overall vision.

The gallery of objects is presented chronologically from the 19th century to the present day, thereby enabling the pieces to be situated within their historical context and on the timeline.

Experience facilitates understanding

The new exhibition is aimed at a very broad, diverse audience. To ensure that visits are accessible to as many people as possible, a "learn through experience" approach has been favoured, with a determination to include different types of media and means of conveying information in the exhibition layout.

A "touch tour" aimed at blind and visually-impaired visitors has, in this way, been fully incorporated in the layout of the exhibition. The same objects can be touched by all visitors, and by young children in particular, who can, by so doing, without being able to read, have fun while discovering and learning.

This is also the case for certain elements of the exhibition layout, such as the periscopes, through which visitors can find certain places of memory and which are also used in the tour for children of 9 years and older. The

permanent exhibition therefore enables each person to experience a unique, personal visit.

Complementary cultural outreach activities

The BELvue has also planned different cultural outreach activities for visiting the permanent exhibition. Visitors in groups often want a guided tour which offers them a comprehensive, more lively approach. Different associations of Brussels-based guides were therefore invited to attend training on the content of the exhibition. This training will be regularly renewed, thereby ensuring high-quality guided tours.

For individual visitors, an app with an audio/video guided tour will be available in four languages (Dutch, English, French and German) in the autumn. The app will be free to download.

Children will be able to enjoy an educational, fun programme, with tours adapted to each age range: “Mimi & Momo”, for 3-5-year-olds, “I’m the Minister!”, for 6-8-year-olds, and “On the road with Zeno”, for 9-12-year-olds. These “activity tours” enable children to visit the exhibition by themselves and to learn while having fun. An app aimed at teenagers is also planned for the autumn.

The fruit of close cooperation

The new permanent exhibition is the result of almost three years of close cooperation between multiple actors.

Experienced exhibition designers and historians from the Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée firm were responsible for designing and producing the new permanent exhibition.

The BELvue’s science committee was consulted at each phase of development and issued comments and approved the content for the entire exhibition. This pluralist committee is composed of the following historians: Herman Balthazar - Chairman - (UGent and Honorary Governor of East Flanders), Gita Deneckere (UGent), Gustaaf Janssens (KU Leuven and honorary archivist of the Palais Royal), Ginette Kurgan (ULB), Catherine Lanneau (ULg), Axel Tixhon (UNamur), Leen Van Molle (KU Leuven).

Suggestions from actors in the educational field were also taken into consideration by convening and obtaining the opinion of an educational committee. The BELvue also sought the opinion of its largest target group: young people. In 2014, the BELvue launched an appeal to create the “BELvue Band”, a group composed of around twenty young people from all over the country, who would work with the team from the BELvue and Tijdsbeeld & Pièce Montée on the concept for the museum. In this way, the Band gave its opinion on the concept and made suggestions on how to make the exhibition more accessible to and easier to understand by their peers.

The Band also organised activities aimed at the BELvue’s audience, most notably the closing “festival” for the previous exhibition. It is still as active and as close to the public as ever for the opening of the new exhibition for which it has planned activities and an audioguide for the autumn.

DETAILED PRESENTATION OF THE EXHIBITION

Basic structure of the rooms

At the front of each of the seven rooms, there are two screens displaying “talking heads”: multiple people interviewed on the street who, by way of introduction, give their thoughts on the theme addressed and highlight its importance for today’s citizens.

Next, an introductory text clarifies the link between the theme and its context.

Each room also has its own “monument”, symbolising the theme and one or more modules provide clarification on a sub-theme.

Finally, “periscopes” draw the eye of the visitors to a certain number of “places of memory”, places that are inseparable from Belgium and its history.

Room 1: Democracy

The exhibition begins with a module devoted to the 1830 revolution which led to the birth of Belgium.

The theme in room 1 is democracy and, more specifically, parliamentary constitutional monarchy.

The monument is in the shape of a not yet completed “1830”. It indicates that, while the foundations of Belgium were laid in that year, the country was still very much under construction. Visitors will find the Belgian constitution incorporated into the base of the monument, expressing the values and freedoms of the new country and explaining the form of the state.

Two modules are presented: a module on the Belgian dynasty and a module on the development of the right to vote.

In the first, a complete family tree of the Belgian royal family can be found. Visitors can also, in a multimedia kiosk, consult a host of documents and photos on Belgium’s monarchs and their family.

The second module offers visitors an extremely clear overview of the expansion of the right to vote over the years. It finishes with a game in which visitors can participate in a virtual election.

The periscopes show the parliament, Wetstraat 16 Rue de la Loi and the Law Courts of Brussels as “places of memory”. These three places represent the three powers (legislative, executive and judicial) and symbolise the separation of powers, the basis of democracy.

Room 2: Prosperity

Room 2 is organised around the theme of prosperity and, therefore, the development of the Belgian economy.

A central module shows how Belgium has developed over time, moving from an agricultural society to an economy based on raw materials, an industrialised economy, a consumer society and a services economy. What's more, Belgium's internationally-famed musical festivals and its role as the world's largest exporter of croquettes is not forgotten either.

Another module enables visitors to consult a range of figures and graphs connected with prosperity and the economy.

The monument in room 2 is a huge abacus signifying the growth in GNP over time.

The places presented in the periscopes are Antwerp train station and the Grand-Hornu old industrial coal mining complex.

Room 3: Solidarity

Room 3 shows how the increase in prosperity supported the creation of the social welfare system and, more generally, solidarity.

It recalls how the industrial revolution of the 19th century gave birth to an urban working class that worked in miserable conditions in the factories. These conditions, leading first to individual and then collective responses, themselves led to the creation of unions and community halls. The development of solidarity, its institutionalisation and the creation of the welfare state are also explained.

The new social challenges, such as poverty, quite common in single-parent families, among pensioners and asylum seekers, are also covered.

The monument in room 3 represents a house, in reference to the welfare state.

The periscopes show Blankenberge Pier, the strike by the workers at the Herstal arms factory and the Maison du Peuple/Volkshuis in Brussels.

Room 4: Pluralism

In room 4, the emphasis is on ideological divisions.

In the centre of the room is a small classroom with school benches. Attention is given to the struggle between Catholic education and state education. These "educational wars" had significant political and social consequences in Belgium and illustrate the divisions that continued up to the 1950s.

One wall is dedicated to Catholic Belgium, which existed until the 1960s, when almost all Belgians were baptised, did their communion and got married in a church. On the opposite wall, contemporary society, largely

secular and progressive in terms of ethics, is highlighted; a society that has in particular legalised euthanasia, abortion and gay marriage.

The monument in this room is an installation composed of the main religious signs and ideological symbols currently present in Belgium.

The periscopes show the Fatih mosque in Beringen, the pilgrimage site of Scherpenheuvel and the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

Room 5: Migration

The monument in this room dedicated to immigration and emigration is a “cloud” of suitcases.

On one side of the room, the three major waves of Belgian emigration are presented: in the 19th century and early 20th century to France and America, then during the First World War. The other wall covers the major waves of immigration that have taken place since the 1950s, mainly from Italy, Morocco and Turkey. The presentation enables comparisons to be made between the difficulties experienced by many immigrants today when arriving in Belgium (discrimination, language problems, homesickness, etc.) and those experienced in the past by countless Belgians when they arrived in other countries.

A module also covers the major cultural diversity present in Belgium today. It is composed of a series of small boxes containing a personal item showing an aspect of the life of a famous or anonymous Belgian from an immigrant background.

Room 5 also contains an interactive map of the world on which the waves of migrants entering and leaving the country over the years are presented.

The periscopes shed light on Marcinelle and the Matongé quarter in Ixelles.

Room 6: Language

Room 6 deals with language in Belgium and covers the history of the different communities.

By means of a short film, the history of the reform of the state and the evolution of Belgium from a unitary state to a federal one is told over the course of a few minutes. The question of language is also addressed through specific examples: the pilgrimages to the IJzertoren, the protests against the Unitary Law and the 1995 elections.

The monument in this room is a tree on which all sorts of typically-Belgian expressions are carved, in the three national languages. They refer to the different layers of which the identity of every Belgian is composed and the influence exerted by the languages and the communities on each other, sometimes merging together.

Room 7: Europe

The last room outlines Belgium’s evolution from an international battlefield to a focal point of cooperation between countries.

In the centre of the room is a large meeting table around which numerous historical references are gathered: Belgium as a neutral buffer state; the violation of this neutrality during the First World War; the atrocity of the Second World War, then the turning point with the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 which formed the basis of what we now know as the European Union. The table also contains an overview of numerous organisations and institutions which were founded based on international cooperation and which are today present in Brussels: the European Parliament, the European Commission, NATO, around 150 embassies, 1,400 NGOs, etc.

The monument consists of a globe in which visitors, via an opening through Belgium, can access a large number of photos of Belgian, European and world leaders shaking hands.

The periscopes show the Menin Gate monument in Ypres and Expo 58.

The gallery of objects representing the “physical memory” of Belgium

The “physical memory” of Belgium can be found in the corridors on the 1st and 2nd floors. More than 200 “Belgian” objects as well as photos and clips from films are presented there in chronological order to create a sort of time machine. Visitors will find works of art (Constantin Meunier, George Minne, René Magritte), discoveries and inventions (Bakelite, the saxophone), objects and products from everyday life (different well-known brands, a vegetable mill, an old waffle mould), references to great sporting achievements (one of Eddy Merckx’s bikes, a football signed by the Belgian national football team the Red Devils, etc.) creations and objects relating to design, as well as objects referencing the Belgian monarchy (Leopold II’s trowel, a portrait painted by Prince Charles, the portrait of King Albert II and Queen Paola painted by Dirk Braeckman) as well as symbols of popular culture (Jacques Brel, Spirou, the Carnival of Binche).

Via touchscreens, visitors can access additional information about the subjects presented and their context.

A timeline within the gallery enables visitors to place the objects within their historical context and their time.

BELVue, MORE THAN JUST A MUSEUM: THE PLACE TO EXPERIENCE HISTORY AND DEMOCRACY IN BRUSSELS

The BELvue is both the museum of Belgium and its history as well as a centre for democracy.

Managed by the King Baudouin Foundation, the BELvue was created as a place where visitors, and especially young people, can learn about and better understand Belgium, its history, its socio-economic development and the workings of its institutions.

Alongside the permanent exhibition, the BELvue also hosts temporary exhibitions and organises workshops on the themes of democracy, citizenship, politics and justice.

With these activities, the BELvue wishes to contribute to improving trust in democratic values, by developing an awareness of history and by encouraging critical reflection on the major issues of democracy.

www.belvue.be - www.kbs-frb.be



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