

# Museums of the Book

RALPH STANTON continues his tour of Europe with visits to some of Belgium's key museums showcasing the history of the book arts.

IN THIS OCCASIONAL SERIES, I have described a number of museums that specialize in printing and other book-related topics. While travelling in Belgium, Holland, Germany and France, the heartland of early printing, my wife and I also encountered institutions, businesses and people involved in more specialized aspects of the book and graphic arts. Here is a roundup of some of these encounters.

## BIBLIOTHÈQUE ROYALE DE BELGIQUE, BRUSSELS

This, the national library of Belgium, is located in the heart of Brussels. The library is strong on outreach, with an extensive public program ranging from literary debates, musical events and children's stories to lectures on bookish topics.

Two areas of the library are of special interest and easily accessible. One is an exhibition of old printing presses, which line the library's hallways. The other is the Librarium, a high-tech discovery space devoted to the history of the book, writing and libraries. It features a dazzling and large-scale audiovisual presentation that is the best I have seen.

There are, of course, fine books on display—these change every few months for reasons of conservation. The library is located in a very beautiful section of Brussels and maintained with a great deal of pride and competence. [www.kbr.be](http://www.kbr.be)

## BIBLIOTHECA WITTOCKIANA, BRUSSELS

Bibliotheca Wittockiana describes itself as a bookbinding and book arts museum, and is indeed the only museum devoted exclusively to the art of bookbinding. It is also my favourite place in Brussels.

A private museum founded by the Belgian industrialist Michel Wittock in 1983, it houses Wittock's outstanding personal collection of books, with notable bindings ranging from

the Renaissance to the present. The quality of book collecting displayed at the Wittockiana is exceptional in every way, and the holdings are unbelievably rich. The guidance of the librarian, or Wittock himself (he is a regular visitor to his collection, and if you are very lucky will show you some of its gems), will add immensely to the experience.

The building houses a reference library that holds an extensive collection on the history and practice of bookbinding. There is also a workshop, which offers courses on—you guessed it—bookbinding. Incidentally, the collection also includes more than 500 baby's rattles!

The museum occupies a purpose-built structure that is a fine example of contemporary architecture. On my last visit I encountered an extensive retrospective of the work of Iceland-born artist Erró (Gudmundur Gudmundsson, b. 1932). It followed a recent exhibition titled *Les lettres du désir: Correspondance et création en Belgique*, featuring the intimate letters of various couples from Belgium.

Previous exhibitions have featured a wide range of artists and binders, including Philip Smith, whose bookbinding on Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis* is to me the most stunning binding of the 20th century.

On permanent display were works by 20th-century masters including Robert Bonfils, Jean de Gonet, and a name I did not know, Edgard Claes, whose work features exceptional design using powerful geometry, exotic wood, polycarbonate and many colours, including automobile paint.

The tastefully designed museum features outstanding artworks, including a 3,600-kilogram marble "book" sculpture at the entrance, made by the German sculptors Anna-Maria and Wolfgang Kubach. The Wittockiana has a vigorous publishing program and some of its publications are at UBC Library. [www.wittockiana.org](http://www.wittockiana.org)



Book Sculpture at Bibliotheca Wittockiana.



FOR MORE ON THE WITTOCKIANA, SEE:

Paul Culot. *Bibliotheca Wittockiana*.

Musea Nostra series.

Anvers: Crédit Communal, 1996.

*Le Fonds Michel Wittock: de la passion au don.*

Brussels: Fondation Roi Baudouin /  
Bibliotheca Wittockiana, 2011.

*Une Vie: une collection cinq siècles d'art et  
d'histoire à travers le livre et sa reliure.*

Dijon: Art & Metiers du Livre /  
Éditions Faton, 2008.

ON EDGAR CLAES, SEE:

*Edgar Claes Reliures.*

Paris: Librairie Blaziot;

Brussels: Bibliotheca Wittockiana, 2002.

#### CENTRE BELGE DE LA BANDE DESSINÉE, BRUSSELS

In the French-speaking world, the comic book has made a substantial step up from Marvel Comics. This museum chronicles the development and growth of the fine art of storytelling through illustration accompanied by text rather than text accompanied by illustration.

A light-filled art nouveau department store in the heart of Brussels' downtown serves as this museum's building, featuring both permanent and temporary exhibitions. The presentation starts with the invention of the comic strip and has a section that explains why Belgium came to have a dominant role in this art; the temporary exhibition featuring the British cartoonist "Posy" Simmons (especially her graphic novel *Gemma Boverly*) was brilliant. [www.cbbd.be](http://www.cbbd.be)

#### LE TYPOGRAPHE, BRUSSELS

Travel does not always go according to plan. Sometimes you just get lucky and find a very interesting place or person by chance. In Brussels at Rue Américaine 67 you will find le typographe, which advertises QUALITÉ TYPO PLOMB HANDMADE IN BRUSSELS. This is a letterpress studio offering relief printing from lead and wood as well as *pochoir* designs.

The products are postcards, envelopes, bloc-notes, copybooks, writing sets, letterheads, portfolios and covers produced on a wide variety of coloured papers. A well-stocked shop is filled with writing and paper-related things as well as products of the print shop. Behind the store is a battery of Heidelberg presses. The shop sells its products as far away as Japan and New Zealand. [www.typographe.be](http://www.typographe.be)

#### MUSÉE HERGÉ, LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE

A fine modern museum located in Louvain-la-Neuve, about 30 minutes from Brussels by train, Musée Hergé is devoted to the creator of the Tintin series of cartoon books. If you have not met the boy detective Tintin, his dog Snowy, and his friend the Scotch whiskey specialist Captain Haddock, you have a treat in store. [www.museeherge.com](http://www.museeherge.com)

MUSÉE FÉLICIEN ROPS, NAMUR  
Farther afield, in Namur, is an unexpected museum capable of shocking and enlightening. It is the Musée Félicien Rops (1833–1898). As the name suggests, it is devoted to the life and works of the 19th-century artist, caricaturist and book designer.

Félicien Rops was a fierce critic of the European political and social system. His most famous painting, *Pornocrates*, portrays a blindfolded and naked prostitute led by a large pig with three putti flying overhead. The title's literal meaning is "rule by harlots" but more broadly it refers to a political system where corrupt courtiers dominate legitimate power and rule by corruption and deceit.

After 1866 Rops worked with French writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, frequently as a book illustrator. Since Baudelaire's famous poetry book *Les fleurs du mal* faced censorship in France, his poetry found a publisher in Belgium, with title pages designed by Rops.

The museum is located in a fine old house in the city centre, and its events explore different graphic techniques. Our guide was a native of the city, and after touring the museum she

took us to the largest pastry shop we have ever seen. Incredible goodies! [www.museerops.be](http://www.museerops.be)

VLADIMIR TCHÉKÉROUL, RIXENSART

In the small town of Rixensart, we met the nephew of the important Belgian bookbinder Vladimir Tchékéroul (1899–1992). A refugee from the Russian Revolution, he came to Brussels and took up bookbinding. His work shows perfection in all aspects of binding, and most especially in the use of gilding.

After developing his skills, he became a teacher of the art and a writer on the subject. His book *La reliure: une approche spirituelle: manuel pratique* (Paris: Art & Metiers du Livre, 1997) includes an important section dealing with the quality of materials and technique, aesthetics, elegance and personality. We were able to photograph his beautifully crafted set of bookbinding tools. The exhibition catalogue *Hommage à Vladimir Tchekeroul (1899–1992)* (Brussels: Musée Charlier, 1993) is a fascinating tribute to the man.

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~ Ralph Stanton is Administrative Librarian Emeritus at the University of British Columbia Library and a long-time Alcuin Society board member.



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*Binding tools of Vladimir Tchékéroul.*