SNIJDERS ROCKOX HUIS

MUSEUM VLEESHUIS
KLANK VAN DE STAD

Press Release

Keyboard Instruments

Virginals, harpsichords and organs depicted in the 16th and 17th centuries

26 March – 26 June 2022

The Snijders&Rockox House and the Vleeshuis | Sound of the City Museum in Antwerp are jointly presenting the ***Keyboard Instruments*** exhibition. This exhibition, which has a separate section in each of the two museums, consists of paintings with iconography depicting harpsichords, virginals and organs, as well as painted lids from harpsichords and virginals. A number of historic Antwerp harpsichords and virginals are also in the spotlight. There will also be opportunities to hear harpsichord music at concerts in both historic houses.

The Duarte family in Antwerp

The Snijders&Rockox House and Vleeshuis Museums have joined forces once before, in 2018, when the Music Room was created at the Snijders&Rockox House. It is this Music Room that has inspired both houses to embark on this new project. The starting-point for the Music Room and also for the *Keyboard Instruments* exhibition is the Portuguese Duarte family. Founding father Gaspar Duarte (I), who was originally from a Jewish background, moved in about 1570 from Portugal to Antwerp, fleeing from the Inquisition and attracted by the business opportunities provided by the city on the river Scheldt. In the 17th century the Duarte family was living in a patrician mansion on the Meir. The relatively simple exterior of this property stood in stark contrast to the baroque experience in the family's reception hall: expensive furnishings, thick tapestries, books and musical scores. The walls were adorned with dozens of paintings by Italian, Dutch and most of all Flemish masters, from Titian and Tintoretto to Quinten Massijs, Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck. One of these paintings was Johannes Vermeer's *A Young Woman seated at the Virginal*. In the midst of all this splendour and display, the Duartes gave concerts, with their collection of Antwerp harpsichords, built by the famous Ruckers-Couchet dynasty, as a central highlight.

Andreas Ruckers, Harpsichord, ca. 1605, Vleeshuis Museum

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Antwerp, world capital of keyboard instruments in the 16th and 17th centuries

The first references to harpsichord builders in Antwerp date from the beginning of the 16th century. It was between 16 and 1560, however, that the city was known as the undisputed world capital of harpsichord production. Every year, workshops in Antwerp delivered hundreds of harpsichords and virginals. Contemporaries praised these instruments for their rich sound and reliability. The members of the Ruckers-Couchet family were particularly well known for producing instruments of exceptional quality. Antwerp's instrument building tradition also extended to organs for domestic and church use. Dozens of organ builders were active in the 16th century alone, including the Moors and Brebos families. The Ruckers-Couchet family also built organs and maintained the organs in both Antwerp Cathedral and St. James's Church in the city.

Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667)
Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans from Beuningen, inv. VdV 49

Jan Steen (1616-1679)
London, The National Gallery) purchased 1871, inv. NG856

Theodoor van Thulden (1606-1669
's Hertogenbosch, Het Noordbrabants Museum, acquired with support from the Rembrandt Association, with thanks also to the Prince Bernhard Cultural Fund, inv. 10914

Keyboard instruments in paintings

After the successful creation of the Music Room, the Snijders&Rockox House and Vleeshuis Museum have gone one step further, bringing together historic harpsichords from Antwerp and famous and less well known painted portrayals of keyboard instruments. Painters from the Southern Netherlands including Frans Floris, Maerten de Vos, the Francken family, Jacques Jordaens, Gonzales Coques and Jacob van Oost, and painters from the Northern Netherlands including Jan Miense Molenaer, Jan Steen, Gerard Dou, Joannes Vermeer, Gabriël Metsu and Jacob Ochtervelt painted keyboard instruments in striking interiors and settings. The organ, which dates from the third century before Christ, received a new impetus during the Renaissance, and was used in both religious and secular contexts. In the Southern Netherlands the virginal and harpsichord often created opportunities to present a humanistic theme, allegory or mythological story. In the Northern Netherlands, keyboard instruments mainly begin to appear in genre art from the mid-17th century. In the splendid salons of bourgeois families in the Northern Netherlands it was usually women who were seen seated at the

keyboard, quite often in the company of a richly dressed man. The suggestion of love is never far away. Here the keyboard instrument serves as an item of display furniture, with no real symbolic value other than to literally paint a picture of the material wealth enjoyed by this class. Keyboard instruments were used to present universal themes such as (in)fidelity, harmony and vanity in paintings in both the Northern and Southern Netherlands. It is striking, however, that the majority of the virginals and harpsichords seen in paintings are inspired by instruments built in the workshops of Antwerp. That is also evidence of the significant and widely appreciated talent of the city's harpsichord builders.

The exhibitions

The Snyders&Rockox House consists of the historic city palaces of Burgomaster Nicolaas Rockox and the painter Frans Snyders, which means the instruments and paintings are exhibited in the upper middle class domestic context for which they were created. The National Gallery in London (Jan Steen and Jacob Ochtervelt), the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Jan Miense Molenaer and Francesco Traballesi), the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam (Gabriel Metsu and Eglon van der Meer), the Teylers Museum in Haarlem (Hendrick Goltzius), the SKD in Dresden (Gerard Dou), the Staten Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen (Hieronymus Francken), the Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna (Jacob van Oost), museums in Belgium and other countries, and collectors in Belgium and abroad are sending their paintings to the Snijders&Rockox House. There they can be viewed in dialogue with a number of superb instruments from the Vleeshuis Museum.

Floris (1519/20 – 1570)
Lier, Stadsmuseum, inv. 52

A number of paintings and painted harpsichord lids will be on display at the Vleeshuis Museum. It is not always easy to unmask a framed painting to reveal that is in fact the lid of a harpsichord. When instruments fall into disuse, their painted lids often begin a second life as a decorative painting on a wall. The Vleeshuis Museum will be highlighting these astonishing discoveries, along with a number of historic scores and of course the harpsichords and virginals themselves. An encounter with original keyboard instruments built in Antwerp is a unique experience.

Frans Francken II, Harpsichord lid, Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation
No, not a painting but a recently discovered harpsichord lid

A musical experience

Keyboard Instruments is accompanied by a new CD from young Belgian harpsichordist Mario Sarrechia, who has recorded 16th and 17the century music played on copies of Antwerp harpsichords and virginals (the originals can be seen in the Snijders&Rockox House and Vleeshuis Museum). Organist Bart Rodyns has also made a series of recordings on the historic organ in St. Paul's Church, Antwerp.

Johannes Couchet, 1650
Virginal (muselar)
Antwerp, Vleeshuis Museum, Sound of the City, AV.1967.006.1-2

The exhibition is also accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, published in Dutch and English by BAI. Visitor information will be provided on Ipads, using image recognition or QR codes.

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Hildegard Van de Velde, Curator, Snijders&Rockox House Museum,
Hildegard.vandevelde@kbc.be
03 201 92 71
0499 96 53 34
Dr. Timothy De Paepe, Director, Vleeshuis Museum,
Timothy.depaepe@antwerpen.be
03 292 61 03
0477 72 69 21

Museum Snijders&Rockoxhuis, Keizerstraat 10, 2000 Antwerpen, (www.snijdersrockoxhuis.be)
Vleeshuis | Sound of the City Museum, Vleeshouwersstraat 38, 2000 Antwerpen
(www.museumvleeshuis.be)