



The Middelheim Museum. The story of a special place, the museum and its collection

The History. Middelheim Park is already mentioned in the 14th century as 'a city called Middelheim' ('een stede geheten Middelheim'), and since the 16th century, Antwerp families enjoy having it as a summer, country estate. At the beginning of the 20th century, a number of such summer residences are around Antwerp. In 1910, the city purchases three domains—De Brandt, Vogelzang and Middelheim—though numerous others have disappeared in the meantime due to the expansion of the city. The three domains now form the Nachtegalen Park. During the Second World War, the Germans and the Allies use the park as a storage place, which causes a great deal of damage.

1950. In the Middelheim Park, after the repairs of the damage from the war, a successful international sculpture exhibition takes place. For Mayor Lode Craeybeckx, that is an occasion for establishing an open-air museum for sculpture in the same year, being at the time the only museum in Flanders for contemporary art. Reportedly it was the famous sculptor Ossip Zadkine who suggested the idea to him. The 'Middelheim Open-air Sculpture Museum' is a reality. In 1948 and 1949, highly successful open-air exhibitions already took place in Battersea Park in London and Sonsbeek Park in Arnhem respectively.

1950-1989. Between 1950 and 1989, twenty Biennales, bi-annual summer exhibitions, take place in the 'Middelheim-Laag' (northern) section. Up until the 15th edition in 1979, visitors receive an overview of sculpture from a certain country or group of countries, and after each exhibition the museum purchases works for the 'Middelheim-Hoog' (southern) section (12 ha). As such, the purchases after the third biennale form the core of the collection of French sculpture beginning with Rodin. Figurative sculpture dominates the first ten exhibitions, but the American biennale in 1971 brings a change to this, and the 'art of the moment' receives full attention. In 1983, the seventeenth biennale presents nearly all trends in art between 1973 and 1983.

The biennales attract numerous visitors: from 100,000 in 1950 to 70,000 in other years. The event receives great acclaim at home and abroad. The biennales are also determining for the formation of the permanent collection: their international character ensures for maintaining an international direction, though Belgian and Flemish artists are also well represented. In the 1980's, the museum no longer has a monopoly position and the visual arts broaden their horizons with performances and video installations. In 1989, the twentieth and final biennale takes place.

In **1971**, the museum receives a permanent exhibitions' pavilion after a design by Renaat Braem (1910-2001), an important representative of the post-War Belgian architecture that was involved with the Middelheim Museum from its founding. Since then, visitors are able to see small sculptures and images that cannot be left to the elements outdoors, which was also the objective of the pavilion. The pavilion is also used for temporary exhibitions.

1993. The year that Antwerp is the European Capital of Culture signifies a new beginning and turning point for the museum. As a consequence of Bart Cassiman's proposal to not have the 1991 Middelheim Biennale take place, the budgets of the two Biennales are utilised. The temporary organisation of Antwerp '93 doubled this amount with funds from its own budget. This composition made it possible that both the interest and the acquisition policy of the Middelheim Museum moved evermore in the direction of contemporary art. The driving force behind this radical change of course was Bart Cassiman, supported by Mayor Bob Cools, Antwerp '93 administrator Eric Antonis and Conservator of the art-historical museums of Antwerp, Hans Nieuwdorp. Ten artists at the international level received an invitation to create a new work for the museum. In this way, the collection of the Middelheim Museum was enriched with works by Richard Deacon, Isa Genzken, Per Kirkeby, Harald Klinkelhöller, Bernd Lohaus, Matt Mullica, Juan Muñoz, Panamarenko, Thomas Schütte and Didier Vermeiren. They created an image for a specific place in Middelheim-Laag. That artists engage in a dialogue

with the natural surroundings and also with the permanent collection happens systematically from then on. The decision to transition to this important 'reboot' of the collection activity and expansion of the collection had far-reaching consequences for the infrastructure of the museum and the presentation of the collection. After all, the museum was expanded de facto with a new 'wing' for contemporary sculpture, through which it received a new élan. Both the organisation of Antwerp '93 and the efforts of Bart Cassiman and his team led by Barbara Vanderlinden, which also included Menno Meewis and Willemien Ippel, have been decisive for the future of the Middelheim Museum. The tone was set. In 1994, a new advisory committee was implemented in which in addition to Bart Cassiman, Jan Hoet, Laurent Busine, Alexander van Grevenstein, Hans Nieuwdorp and Menno Meewis had seats, amongst others. At this time, Meewis assisted Conservator Hans Nieuwdorp as scientific colleague, as well as later while being Director, adding to the collection of contemporary art.

From 1994, solo exhibitions are organised, which in many cases lead to the purchase of an artwork that is made for the Middelheim Museum. As such, the museum acquires works by Guillaume Bijl, Luciano Fabro, Henk Visch and Carl André, among others. The collaboration with one artist each time leads to new reflections over the pros and cons of an open-air museum, art within a park, the difference between art in public space and in a museum... Middelheim Museum acquires an excellent reputation within the Low Countries with respect to the collection and presentation of contemporary art.

2000. Through the organising of more exhibitions per year, among other things, it was clear for some time that the Middelheim Museum lacked important museum facilities (and space). In 2000, the park receives an additional seven hectares. The French landscape architect Michel Desvigne and visual artist Luc Deleu conceive of a landscaping plan for this expansion. Two buildings are built: a depot/workplace by Stéphane Beel and a multi-functional space—or 'Franchise Unit'—by the Dutch artist Joep Van Lieshout. The latter offers the opportunity to organise concerts, lectures, small exhibitions and receptions. A conservatory was refashioned into a studio for workshops. Finally, there is the new Museum and later Heritage Decree by the Flemish Community: the Middelheim Museum is recognised in 1999 at the national level, which leads to an expansion of the personnel and more resources.

Beginning in 2006 the Middelheim Museum enjoys an expanded operation and also organises activities beyond the museum. With the advisory council 'Beeld in de Stad', young artists and the project 'Bij-buurt op het Kiel', the Middelheim Museum receives a new, youthful network with diversified artistic and social contacts. In 2011, this operation is taken over by the arts' policy coordinator of the City of Antwerp.

2012. In May, the renewed Middelheim Museum opens for the public. For this opening, the Middelheim Museum works with guest curator Paul Robbrecht (1950). The transformation is spectacular: the museum terrain is significantly expanded with the flower garden 'Hortiflora' of the Nachtegalen Park and the museum's infrastructure is modernised. The old castle is renovated and acquires a museum shop with reception on the ground floor as well as a museum cafe with terrace. The first floor houses the museum administration. The documentation centre remains established in the Orangerie.

Central within the exhibitions' policy from this point on is the new semi-open pavilion Het Huis (The House), realised by Robbrecht and Daem architects and inaugurated by a prestigious exhibition by Thomas Schütte. The exhibitions in The House can expand over the plant garden or even the entire museum. In the Braem Pavilion collections' presentations are also organised after this time. Visitors can (re)discover internationally important pieces from the Middelheim collection, works that were purchased especially for the Braem Pavilion, or that are too vulnerable to be displayed outdoors. The Middelheim collection is revisited and renowned artists such as Ai Weiwei, Roman Signer and Philippe Van Snick produce new work customised for the museum.

The museum unfolds an intense public operation, as well as catering to the inhabitants in its environs (namely on the Kiel), and plays an active role in the presence of visual art in the public space. An important trump card is that it possesses modern and contemporary art: aside from the interruptions, it can also show the continuity within 20th-century art.

On 26 and 27 May, a festive opening weekend places the renewed Middelheim Museum in the spotlight. The programme is made possible in collaboration with deSingel, CC De Kern and Antwerpen Boekenstad (Antwerp Book City). A highpoint is the performance of the Swiss artist Roman Signer. Other live performances are spread throughout the park. City Poet Bernard Dewulf reveals his new city poem about the Middelheim

Museum. That event and much more allow young and old, art and nature lover to festively discover the restyled art park.

17 October 2012. Director Menno Meeuwis, who since 1993 stood at the helm of the Middelheim Museum, dies unexpectedly.

In **January 2014**, Sara Weyns is appointed as the new Director. With solo and group exhibitions by Kader Attia, Folkert de Jong, Andrea Zittel, Leon Vranken, Christian Jankowski and David Altmejd, and others, she invites the museum public to explore beyond the boundaries and partial collections of the visual arts. In addition to this, she focuses on a new dynamic within the collections' policy, and special attention goes towards sustainable and forward-thinking initiatives. Lastly, the Middelheim Museum looks with great attention at the interaction between art and daily–urban–life.