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ARTICLE

‘Beauty Has Ever a Healing Touch’: Visible Internationalism at the 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art in London

Ilaria Scaglia

Department of Politics, History, and International Relations, Aston University, Birmingham B4 7ET, United Kingdom
i.scaglia@aston.ac.uk

This article examines the Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art, 1300 to 1900, which was hosted by the London Royal Academy in 1927. Based on materials from multiple archives, it demonstrates that this event showcased both artefacts and the internationalist policies that had led to their preservation and display. This exhibition constitutes a leading example of a new kind of political performance, which expanded after 1945 and still affects international gatherings and cultural diplomacy to this day.

The 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art, 1300 to 1900, in London looked like an unprecedented international blockbuster, a show that was not to be missed. Over the span of two months, from 8 January to 5 March, more than 150,000 people walked through the turnstiles of Burlington House – the Royal Academy’s lavish home in the fashionable district of Piccadilly – to marvel at hundreds of masterpieces sent on loan for the occasion. Visitors began their journey with ‘Flemish Primitives’: painters such as Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, Rogier van der Weiden and Gerard David. Further afield they encountered the seventeenth-century ‘Flemish Baroque’: Anthony van Dyck (dominating the scene was his *The Three Eldest Children of Charles I*, lent by King George V from his permanent collection at Windsor Castle) and Peter Paul Rubens (among others: the *Portrait of Isabella Brant*, also courtesy of the king). In the last section, nineteenth-century artists such as Henri de Braekeleer and François Simoneau represented the distinctive tradition of the Belgian nation. A side trip took spectators through dozens of drawings, miniatures and engravings by the likes of Jan and Pieter Brueghel, Rubens, van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens and Lambert Suavius. Finally, as a dramatic backdrop to the entire show, large tapestries sent especially from Vienna were hung throughout the galleries.[1] In the introduction to the *Illustrated Souvenir* of the exhibition, art collector Robert Witt (1872–1952) celebrated the cooperation among ‘no less than five foreign Governments: the Belgian, the Austrian, the French, the Danish and the Hungarian’, all of which had made this wondrous display possible; ‘Beauty has ever a healing touch, and the love of art is common to nearly all’, he proclaimed.[2] The exhibition’s accompanying events, speeches and media coverage would buttress his points, making the event not only an international but also an internationalist sensation.

The 1927 Flemish exhibition in London, so far unexplored by historians, exemplifies a new kind of political performance that shaped cultural diplomacy in the interwar period and beyond.[3] ‘Political

[1] See *Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art, 1300–1900* and *Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art (1300–1900) Illustrated Souvenir* (London: Country Life Ltd. and The Anglo-Belgian Union, 1927). A detailed description of each of the galleries is in *The Times* (London), 7 Jan. 1927, 13.

[2] Robert Witt, ‘Introduction’, *Illustrated Souvenir*, v–vi.

[3] I thank Daan Van Heesch of the Royal Library of Belgium for double-checking that there is no secondary literature on this exhibition. On cultural diplomacy, and also on its relationship with ‘public diplomacy’, see Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht,

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performances', in Shirin Rai's theorisation, served as a means to 'communicate to an audience meaning-making related to state institutions, policies and discourses'.[4] In concrete terms, they showcased not only artefacts but also the people, institutions and policies that led to their preservation and display. A few scholars have already noted the internationalist tone of art shows in this period. Art historian Keith Holz, for instance, pointed out the importance of the notion that 'the exhibition of one nation's art to another could improve the relationship between the two countries' since it constituted the 'fundamental and guiding assumption to underpin officially sponsored art exhibitions sent abroad between European countries during the thirties'.[5] Yet the same art historian rapidly discounted this notion as a 'wish-laden' hope, a set of ideas based on 1930s assumptions whose 'banality' is self-evident.[6] This article maintains, instead, that we should take it seriously, and scrutinise carefully the influence that such notions had in their time and in subsequent decades.

The 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art – though itself relevant as a key moment in art history and in the development of British-Belgian relations – is examined here as a leading example of a new genre of large-scale events which served a public culture of internationalism in this period and beyond. With the rise of mass media, it illuminates the dynamics of international relations in a much broader sense than its title might imply. As a political performance, the 1927 Flemish exhibition presented the interplay of art and international cooperation as an innovative and effective tool for managing international relations in the post-1919 world.[7] Akin to the League of Nations, it legitimised the nation-state as the only viable organising unit by recognising its sole right to handle national artefacts. It promoted a brand of internationalism which was not antithetical to nationalism but sought to reconcile national differences with universalist rhetoric and values. It also solidified the assumption that events of the same kind would engage individuals and institutions from various countries and sway public opinion, developing relationships and feelings whose positive effect would extend from the cultural to the political realm. Tellingly, the state and non-state actors involved in the organisation of the 1927 Flemish exhibition emphasised the political significance of international cooperation in the field of culture, evoking art and beauty as means of uniting people and of maintaining peace and security, while using aesthetics and emotions to achieve their political goals.[8] Crucially, they devoted great resources to 'visibility' – the practice of organising public exercises of power – thus contributing to the establishment of a key feature of cultural international relations in the twentieth century.[9]

'The Anomaly of the Cold War: Cultural Diplomacy and Civil Society since 1850', in Kenneth Alan Osgood and Brian Craig Etheridge, eds., *The United States and Public Diplomacy: New Directions in Cultural and International History* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2010), 32; and Nicholas J. Cull, 'Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 1 (2008), 31–54.

4 Shirin M. Rai, 'Political Performance: A Framework for Analysing Democratic Politics', *Political Studies*, 63, 5 (2014), 1179–80.

5 Keith Holz, *Modern German Art for Thirties Paris, Prague and London* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 143; 145–6.

6 Ibid.

7 On the broader role of exhibitions and culture in this context, see Michael L. Krenn, *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy: 1770 to the Present Day* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) and *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). On this set of dynamics, see also Andreas W. Daum, *Kennedy in Berlin*, trans. Dona Geyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Sound Diplomacy: Music and Emotions in Transatlantic Relations, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). On the broader role of culture, see Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Frank Schumacher, eds., *Culture and International History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).

8 Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 43–4. See also Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Ilaria Scaglia, 'Branding Internationalism: Displaying Art and International Cooperation in the Interwar Period', in Carolin Viktorin, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, Annika Estner and Marcel K. Will, eds., *Nation Branding in Modern History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 79–100.

9 On visibility, politics and power, see Brian Creech, 'Exploring the Politics of Visibility: Technology, Digital Representation, and the Mediated Workings of Power', *Semiotica*, 236–7 (2020), 123–39. For an interdisciplinary analysis of 'politics of

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Readers of and contributors to the present journal have long noted the continuities between the interwar and the post-1945 periods. They have also helped to capture the breadth and influence of many 'agents of internationalism'.[10] Art, however, has long been left out of the story, as have the public performances of international cooperation implicit in its display.[11] A recent *Contemporary European History* special issue on 'European Cultural Diplomacy and the Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939' has done much to bring attention to these neglected aspects.[12] By emphasising the unprecedented 'expansion' of 'cultural diplomacy' in the interwar period, and the effervescence of Europe as a 'laboratory' in which to test new practices, it challenged historians to look more closely into such complex transnational interactions.[13] This article aims to answer this call by drawing attention to the inordinate amount of energy devoted to exhibiting the laboratory itself through highly-visible symbolic acts. It adopts a broader lens to the study of exhibitions to include in its scope the accompanying events, speeches, texts and media coverage produced before, during and after the occasion, and by taking into account the organisers' previous activities and later recollections.

Without contradicting former interpretations, which have emphasised the role of exhibitions in fostering nationalism and imperialism,[14] such an approach reveals that what organisers and observers said overtly, repeated continuously, and displayed through multiple forms and media persisted regardless of its accuracy or success. It explains why organisational matters were often conducted publicly, and also why preoccupations with potential repercussions often guided decision-making processes more than other concerns. As Carolyn Biltoft recently pointed out, performances of this kind influenced perceptions and became reality. For this reason, in an age of mass politics and communication, and at a time when public opinion increasingly mattered, state and non-state entities across the political spectrum devoted great energy to moulding them.[15]

This line of enquiry complicates our definition of cultural diplomacy and our understanding of the various actors who engaged in it during the interwar period. Exhibitions are often framed as forms of cultural diplomacy emanating from the centre outwards, with non-state actors playing an important role in shaping them;[16] instead, the Flemish exhibition was spearheaded by a political non-state organisation, the Anglo-Belgian Union, with states serving as patrons.[17] When examined more broadly to include the array of deliberate visible, symbolic actions that accompanied it (e.g. staging public

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visibility' and exhibitions, see Zeena Feldman, ed., *Art and the Politics of Visibility: Contesting the Global, Local and the In-Between* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); and Sönke Kunkel, *Empire of Pictures: Global Media and the 1960s Remaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016).

[10] See the special issues on 'Continuity and Change in European Cooperation during the Twentieth Century', *Contemporary European History*, 27, 2 (2018), and on 'Agents of Internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 25, 2 (2016).

[11] Before the 2021 special issue, perusing the table of contents of the last ten years I could not find a single article dedicated entirely to an art exhibition. Keyword searches did not yield any result for the previous issues as well.

[12] 'European Cultural Diplomacy and the Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939', *Contemporary European History*, 30, special issue 2 (2021).

[13] Benjamin G. Martin and Elisabeth Marie Piller, 'Cultural Diplomacy and Europe's Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: Introduction', *Contemporary European History*, 30, special issue 2 (2021), 149–63.

[14] See Francis Haskell, 'Botticelli, Fascism and Burlington House – The "Italian Exhibition" of 1930', *The Burlington Magazine*, 141, 1157 (1999), 472. See also Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Masters' Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). There are, however, some exceptions, such as Pierre-Gerlier Forest and Brigitte Schroeder-Gudehus, 'L'internationalisme et les Expositions Universelles dans les années trente', in Régine Robin, ed., *Masse et culture de masse dans les années trente* (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1991), 205–23. For an overview of this literature, see Alexander C. T. Geppert, Jean Coffey and Tammy Lau, 'International Exhibitions, Expositions Universelles and World's Fairs, 1851–2005: A Bibliography', available at http://www.lib.csufresno.edu/subjectresources/specialcollections/worldfairs/ExpoBibliography3ed.pdf (last visited 18 July 2019).

[15] Carolyn N. Biltoft, *A Violent Peace: Media, Truth, and Power at the League of Nations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[16] See for instance Ewa Berard, 'The "First Exhibition of Russian Art" in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921–1922', *Contemporary European History*, 30, special issue 2 (2021), 164–80.

[17] Such association still exists, though in 1982 the Anglo-Belgian Union and the Cercle Royal Belge de Londres merged into the Anglo-Belgian Society. See https://belgianball.com/anglo-belgian-society/ (last visited 20 Sept. 2021).

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performances of international cooperation, charging with meaning the choice of displaying a piece or not, creating and disseminating texts to guide the audience's perceptions and interpretations), this exhibition involved an even wider spectrum of actors such as foreign offices, media and political organisations. These did not act in concert but participated in the staging of a collective performance which was imbued in aesthetics and emotions. This article places the spotlight on the visible display they produced, shedding light on both the show and the people who made it happen, and emphasising the long-standing effects of their work.

Staging Visible Displays of Internationalism

The 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art, 1300 to 1900, was part of a broader set of initiatives by the Anglo-Belgian Union, an openly political organisation devoted to supporting the young and vulnerable country of Belgium. It was only in 1839 that all European powers had recognised an independent Kingdom of Belgium by signing the Treaty of London. Even after 1839, Belgium's nation-building process remained difficult, as strong local identities challenged the central authority and powerful neighbours questioned its territorial integrity. Because of the brutality of the German occupation during the First World War, Belgium and its history were synonymous with the horrors of war and the imperative of maintaining peace.

The Anglo-Belgian Union's involvement in the 1927 exhibition stemmed from this history and especially from the First World War, when some of its future founders volunteered to help thousands of Belgian refugees by setting up a National Food Fund to provide them with basic necessities. In time, this project evolved into a holistic entity, promoting a recipe of food economy, thriftiness and a return to fundamental values as a way of surviving dire war conditions. In July 1918, twelve British and twelve Belgian men from this volunteer group formally created an organisation to 'develop sentiments of friendship' (*sentiments d'amitié*) between the British and the Belgian people, to promote 'closer relations' (*relations plus intime*) and to 'commemorate' the 'brotherhood of arms' (*fraternité d'armes*) born out of their reciprocal 'loyalty' (*fidélité*) to the 1839 treaty.[18] Their strategy for fulfilling their political purpose was to engender a set of feelings.

Along similar lines, through the 1927 exhibition, as well as through its other activities, the Anglo-Belgian Union navigated what its president and sponsor – Liberal politician and *Daily Telegraph* proprietor Viscount Burnham (1862–1933) – called a 'happy combination of friendship and patriotism'.[19] In practical terms, this meant that, on the one hand, it supported the 1922 proposal for an Anglo-Belgian Defensive Treaty to ensure British intervention in case of an unprovoked German attack, countering British scepticism towards future military entanglements;[20] on the other, it adopted an overall pro-Geneva stance and rhetoric. Tellingly, in a 1930 article proposing a set of banquets, artist Dulcie Sassoon (1892–1968) noted how a 'chance of getting to know interesting people must appeal to a number of lonely souls, intent on League of Nations ideals, and might induce them to

[18] L'Union Anglo-Belge, *Statuts*, Article 1. One copy is preserved at the National Library of Belgium, Henri Pirenne collection, box 284, folder on the Anglo-Belgian Union. The members of the British committee were the Archbishop of Westminster Cardinal Bourne, General Carton de Wiart, Sir Thomas Elliott, British Liberal politicians Lord Emmott and Viscount (Herbert) Gladstone, Union leader and League supporter Arthur Henderson, Consul General of Great Britain in Great Britain Sir Cecil Hertslet, H. A. Leggett, A. Maudsley, E. Newton, Herbert Samuel and Lord Edmund Talbot. The Belgian committee was composed of E. Cammaerts, Chevalier E. Carton de Wiart, Vicomte Davignon, L. de Brouckere, Comte de Lalaing, M. de Smet de Naeyer, P. Hamelius, the first president of the League of Nations (1920–1) Paul Hymans, W. Koch de Gooreynd, P. Lambotte, Maurice Maeterlinck and le Duc d'Ursel. *History and Achievements of the Anglo-Belgian Society* (1996), 8, 6. See also Anglo-Belgian Union, Proceedings at First Meeting of the Foundation Members, 20 July 1918, held at the Savoy Hotel, London. One copy is held at the Senate House Library, University of London, Cammaerts papers, MS800/II/1286.

[19] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 2, 14 (1924), 287–9. 'Harry Lawson Webster Levy-Lawson, Viscount Burnham', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), doi.org/10/1093/ref:odnb/34446.

[20] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 1, 4 (1922), 65.

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join the Anglo-Belgian Union'.[21] Such texts drew a direct line between the Union's activities and the desired political outcomes, framing them and interpreting them for their readers.

The Anglo-Belgian Union used a variety of methods to steer public opinion in favour of the causes it championed, presenting its own blend of nationalism and internationalism in the years leading up to the exhibition and during the 1927 show itself. Starting in 1921, it produced a quarterly publication, *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, to publicise a wide range of initiatives meant to fortify relations between Belgium and the United Kingdom.[22] Each issue commented on political affairs, with particular attention to bills under consideration in parliament and to involvement in international organisations (Viscount Burnham himself chaired international labour conferences at Geneva in 1921, 1922 and 1926, public health conferences in 1924 and 1927 and the first World Press Conference at Geneva in 1927).[23] The same publication also provided figures related to post-war economic recovery, described labour conditions in mines and factories, and chronicled strikes taking place in both countries. Additional pieces presented important naturalistic, historic and cultural sites, reviewed recent publications, concerts and exhibitions, and summarised activities by both its British and Belgian committees. These latter contributions made explicit their symbolic and political meaning in nationalist and internationalist terms.

Reaching a mass public was one of the Union's key priorities: it organised a large number of lectures, recruiting speakers to discuss a broad range of issues. In 1921 alone, it held eighty such lectures on art, literature, history, politics and economics. Only fourteen of these events took place in London, while the majority were staged in other regions. According to the *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, each was attended by 200 to 500 people. Sixteen were held in public places, thirty-four in private institutions (which, for the most part, opened their doors to the public as well) and a significant number in schools and universities.[24] Notwithstanding the limitations of self-generated figures, there is no doubt that, while the group in 1921 counted only 300 members, its activities reached thousands of people from different classes and areas.

Politics and culture were linked in the Anglo-Belgian Union's efforts at establishing visible forms of intellectual cooperation akin to the 1927 exhibition. The British committee created a Chair of Belgian Studies and Institutions at the University of London, a post eventually occupied by poet and writer Émile Cammaerts (1878–1953), and attracted personalities of the calibre of Henri Pirenne (1862–1935). One of the most eminent historians of his generation, Pirenne was a chief promoter of the idea of a Belgian cultural identity and was also an internationalist – most notably, he was president of the International Academic Union from 1921–5. Meanwhile, the Belgian committee organised a number of student and faculty exchanges and also opened a Circulating Library of English Books holding around 3,000 volumes and attracting between twenty-five and thirty patrons a day. This library would later be looted by the Nazi army, transported to the Austrian city of Tanzenberg, and its volumes would be either returned or sold. The Library of the Belgian branch of the Anglo-Belgian Union would also be seized but its fate remains unknown. If these records are now lost to history, it is nonetheless clear that the occupying German army knew of their existence and considered them important enough to take.[25]

Both the British and the Belgian committees organised trips to First World War sites, sponsored memorials to warn of future threats, and advocated for internationalist policies. They built on existing

[21] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 7, 3 (1930), 78.

[22] A copy of this publication, which ran from 1921 to 1931, is available at the British Library.

[23] 'Harry Lawson Webster Levy-Lawson, Viscount Burnham', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

[24] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 1, 1 (1921), 6–8.

[25] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 1, 1 (1921), 8. I thank Dr. Patricia Kennedy Grimsted and Dr. Michel Vermote for tracing these collections for me. ERR archive in Kyiv (TsDAVO) Union Anglo Belge: 3674/1/1; 3676/1/161 and English Circulating Library: 3676/1/170). An internal report of the ORE, the official Belgian restitution organisation, mentions the discovery in Tanzenberg of the Library of the English Circulating Library. Ref.: Baudouin to Lemaire, Munich, 27 Feb. 1947: 'Ma Mission en Autriche (du 11 au 23 février 1947)', ARA2/AGR2, I 21/378, digital 31. Email dated 27 Sept. 2021, from Michel Vermote to the author.

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support for the idea of Belgium as a result of a long-standing fascination for Belgium as a site of 'loss', as well as on the established customs of building Belgian-themed panoramas and conducting visits to Belgian battlefields that stretched back to the days of Waterloo.[26] A 1926 article published in the liberal newspaper *L'Indépendance Belge* made clear the intent of these initiatives in the eyes of those who promoted them; the piece warned about raising a generation without ties to the power that had guaranteed Belgian territorial integrity and represented its main economic partner, and pinpointed 'intellectual' relations as a key factor in this respect.[27] The fact that Cammaert took the time to copy the piece in its entirety and to send it by post to Pirenne, and that both men became especially active in fostering such relations, confirms the link they and the Anglo-Belgian Union – through which they both operated – saw between politics and culture.[28]

Art constituted one of the Anglo-Belgian Union's preferred forms of political communication. Its first initiative was to sponsor the crafting of an artefact – a 'Belgian Memorial of Gratitude to Great Britain in London', which still stands on Victoria Embankment – to express the appreciation of the Belgian refugees who found shelter during the war. The monument features a white, circular wall bearing the words 'Justice' and 'Honour', while in the centre stands the bronze figure of a Belgian woman, with her arms curved around a young boy and a little girl, each holding garlands in their hands. Large crowds attended the unveiling ceremony with Princess Clémentine of Belgium in 1920, and more watched the British Pathé footage of this occasion.[29] Building on this success, in 1925, the Anglo-Belgian Union participated in the unveiling of a memorial at Zeebrugge to commemorate a pivotal British victory against Germany in the presence of King Albert I; here too crowds and media coverage abounded.[30] Meanwhile, it continued to organise concerts and events of all kinds to create deeper links between the United Kingdom and Belgium, putting forth the message that despite its vulnerability Belgium did not approach the United Kingdom as a 'protectorate' but as a 'sovereign state which has, at last, conquered the right to act according to its interest and to show freely its gratitude and its sympathy'.[31]

The Union presented its internationalist spirit in highly aestheticised and emotionalised terms. While discussing a performance of English folk dances in Brussels, the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* observed: 'an atmosphere of simplicity, peace and happiness was created which made one think of days long gone by, when people had time to dream and admire nature, when art was an expression of sentiment and did not merely appeal to the brain'.[32] It was through such intangible yet highly visible elements that the Union proposed to foster peace and security; and, it was through the 1927 Flemish and Belgian Art Exhibition in London that it would make its greatest effort in this respect.

Though the 1927 exhibition was presented as a production by the Anglo-Belgian Union, other actors played important roles throughout the process of its staging. In October 1925, art historian and Commissar for the Foreign Exhibitions of the Kingdom of Belgium, Paul Lambotte (1862–1939), approached the Royal Academy of London, asking them to host an art exhibition to be organised by the Anglo-Belgian Union. The idea was to reunite the greatest works of Flemish (and now 'Belgian') art in a blockbuster international show at Burlington House. The Academy readily accepted: in November 1925, its council approved the proposal, and by the end of the year, the Academy's

[26] Paul Beliën, *A Throne in Brussels: Britain, the Saxe-Coburgs and the Belgianization of Europe* (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2005); Philip Shaw, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

[27] *L'Indépendance Belge*, 23 Jan. 1926, 2.

[28] National Library of Belgium, Henri Pirenne collection, box 284, folder on the Anglo-Belgian Union, letter sent on 16 Jan. 1926 from Cammaerts to Pirenne, and addendum with re-typed version of the article.

[29] 'Unveiling of Memorial Statue by Princess Clementine', 14/10/1920, Film ID: VLVAAI8FW3TZ4WGPMC5WY88GCIRPZ, available at https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVAAI8FW3TZ4WGPMC5WY88GCIRPZ-UNVEILING-OF-MEMORIAL-STATUE-BY-PRINCESS-CLEMENTINE (last visited 20 Jan. 2022).

[30] 'Zeebrugge Memorial Unveiled by King of Belgium', 27/04/1925, Film ID: VLVAPS86XJP2XUHIECCGUERU1L93, available at https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVAPS86XJP2XUHIECCGUERU1L93-ZEEBRUGGE-MEMORIAL-UNVEILED-BY-KING-OF-BELGIUM (last visited 20 Jan. 2022).

[31] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 1, 4 (1922), 67.

[32] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 3, 1 (1925), 24.

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General Assembly had resolved to continue.[33] Similarly, the British and Belgian organising committees included a large number of artists, museum directors, diplomats and businessmen in addition to representatives from the Royal Academy and the Union itself.[34]

In the aforementioned introduction to the *Illustrated Souvenir*, art collector Robert Witt articulated the arguments that accompanied this collective endeavour. On the one hand, the aesthetic and the artistic value of the objects exhibited constituted a universal language understandable to all spectators; on the other, the collaboration necessary to put these treasures on display improved relations among the peoples and the governments involved. Witt emphasised the 'deep significance' of various states and actors participating in this endeavour, and he especially commended the generosity of the Austrian government, which had sent a series of tapestries from the Imperial Collection at Schönbrunn never before shown to the public.[35] Strikingly, the correspondence preserved at the Austrian State Archives includes detailed exchanges on insurance, packaging and transportation costs, arrangements for the personnel required to accompany the precious artefacts, but no hint of prejudice or tension.[36] Similarly, the papers related to the loans from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna do not contain any reference to either past or ongoing conflicts.[37] Yet, in Witt's text, the fact that Austria – a former multinational empire and an enemy – was now a friendly nation and partner proved that the international language of art had successfully promoted international relations.[38] The archives of the Kunsthistorisches Museum do contain a letter, dated 27 March 1927, sent jointly from the Anglo-Belgian Union president and the Exhibition chairman thanking them for the loan and expressing how 'we feel that a dual purpose has been fulfilled, not only has the Exhibition been a source of delight to all lovers of art but it also had an excellent effect on the friendly relations between England and Belgium, the strengthening of which has always been our cherished purpose'.[39]

In his 1939 autobiography, the Austrian diplomat who had facilitated the loan, Sir George Franckenstein (1878–1953), espoused similar rhetoric. Referencing Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, he presented the role of ambassadors such as himself as 'Merchants of Lights' in charge of promoting 'culture and learning' – rather than as mere 'Merchants of Credits and Loans' doing their best under difficult financial circumstances. 'Humanity's common language – the language of art – seemed to me best suited to restore the troubled harmony between the peoples of Great Britain and Austria', he noted while recalling the Austrian loans to the international exhibitions of art hosted by the Royal Academy in the 1920s and 1930s as the culmination of his efforts.[40]

[33] RAA/PC/1/25, Council Meeting, Minutes. 'Exhibition of Belgian Art', typewritten sheet inserted between ff. 159–60, containing minutes of a meeting held at the Royal Academy on 23 Oct. 1925. *Annual Report for the Year 1925*, 'General Proceedings', 12. See also RAA/GA/1/10, General Assembly, Minutes. According to the Academic regular procedures, the decision was carried out on 17 Nov. 1925 (vol. X, ff. 281–2); and confirmed on 5 Dec. 1925 (vol. X, ff. 285–6).

[34] The British committee included Miss A. Alma-Tadema, R. Anning Bell, Mrs. R. Anning Bell, The Rt. Hon. Viscount Burnham, Sir Martin Conway, Lionel Cust, Sir Frank Dicksee, Campbell Dodgson, Sir Joseph Duveen, Sir Lionel Earle, the late Lord Emmott, Lady Emmott, Sir George Frampton, Sir Cecil Harcourt Smith, Sir Cecil Hertslet, Sir Robert Kindersley, W. R. M. Lamb, Paul Lambotte, Algernon Maudsley, Mrs. Emile Mond, Lady Newnes, Lady Swaythling, Sir Charles Walston and Sir Robert Witt, with Maurice W. Brockwell acting as General Secretary and H. W. Maxwell and Alfred Yockney as Joint Secretaries. The Belgian committee included Hulin de Loo, H. Fierens-Gevaert, A. Cornette, O. Gilbart, G. van Zijpe, M. Vermeylen, M. L. Reckelbus, M. Laurent, M. le Comte Carton de Wiart, A. Daxhelet, J. Destrée, I. Opsomer and A. Rassenfosse, with Paul Lambotte in charge of Direction and Organisation, Jacques Verreyt acting as Secretary General, and J. Fransquim as Joint Secretary.

[35] Robert Witt, 'Introduction', *Illustrated Souvenir*, v–vi.

[36] Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, AVA, U-Allg. Ktn. 3312, Zl. 7734/1927, 7735/1927, 31.572/1926, 21.510/1926, 22.189/1926. I thank Maria Massarotto and Thorsten Hauschildt for their help with German translations.

[37] I thank Susanne Hehenberger and Dominik Cobanoglu, who identified and scanned this correspondence for me. Neither the Central Archive nor the archives of the Kunstkammer contained any document hinting at problems or hesitation regarding this loan.

[38] Robert Witt, 'Introduction', *Illustrated Souvenir*, v–vi.

[39] Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien Archives, KKAR1926, 26, letter dated March 1927 from President of the Anglo-Belgian Union Burnham and Chairman of the Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art Algernon Maudslay.

[40] Sir George Franckenstein, *Facts and Features of My Life* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1939), 238–9; 270–1; 305–7.

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His words constitute but one example of how 1920s perceptions and representations would continue to reverberate in the following decades.

The Visible, Internationalist Non-display of the 'Mystic Lamb'

Not all public displays would unfold as smoothly as later narratives would imply. To be sure, Baron Franckenstein would later reminisce how in the 1920s and 1930s 'portions of triptychs, separated perhaps for centuries, have been temporarily reunited at Burlington House like scattered members of a family'.[41] Yet, as shown by the case of the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* – the magnificent fifteenth-century polyptych by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck housed in the Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent – domestic and international tensions sometimes prevented such reunions. Regardless, because of the way in which these tensions were managed and made visible to the public, they paradoxically reinforced internationalist arguments.

The Lamb's long and troubled history made it a national symbol.[42] Paul Lambotte had contributed to its construction and popularisation with an article published in the 1925 issue of the magazine *Apollo*, which told the story of how, after countless hurdles, this artefact had finally found its rightful place in Ghent.[43] In the late fifteenth century, shortly after the polyptych was completed, the canons of Ghent innocently sold some of its panels to Brussels and some to Berlin for a very low sum.[44] When the First World War broke out, the cathedral's clergy – who had knowledge of the looting and destruction of works of art that had accompanied the German advance – concealed the remaining part of the piece despite risking German retaliation. Enduring months of questioning, Canon Van den Gheyn convinced the German authorities that the altar, like many other artefacts, had been moved to the United Kingdom.[45]

After the end of the war, the Treaty of Versailles mandated the return of all pieces of the altar in German custody, and the implementation of these measures took place in a very public manner.[46] As Lambotte recalled, when the missing panels arrived in Brussels, 'everyone felt that the dignity of Art, and the fame of Belgium's early masters, had been exalted'. Crowds gathered to admire the pieces, bells rang, and in 'patriotic gladness' the altar was reunited: 'it was then solemnly sworn that never again should this immortal masterpiece be dismembered'.[47]

Because these developments had been highly publicised, when the Chairman of the British Committee of the 1927 Exhibition and Honorary Secretary of the Anglo-Belgian Union, Algernon Maudsley (1873–1948), contacted the British Foreign Office for support in obtaining the loan of the Ghent altarpiece from the Belgian government, his request was met with a mixture of astonishment and scepticism. Librarian and Keeper of the Papers at the Foreign Office Stephen Gaselee (1882–1943) remarked that he 'shall be surprised if permission is given'; 'I could hardly believe my ears', commented the Foreign Office diplomat who met with art critic Martin Conway (1856–1937) – a member of the British Committee for the Exhibition – when he paid a visit in person to the Foreign Office to confirm that the Belgian government was on board with the plan.[48]

The Foreign Office was well aware that the loan of such a symbolic artefact could easily be employed as a political football by various parties and that this would be at odds with the desired internationalist performance. In a letter marked 'private and confidential', British Ambassador to

41 Ibid., 305.

42 On the multiple appropriations of the Ghent altarpiece to foster national agendas, see Lisa Deam, 'Flemish vs. Netherlandish: A Discourse of Nationalism', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 51, 1 (1998), 1–33.

43 Paul Lambotte, 'The Altar-Piece of St. Bavon, at Ghent', *Apollo*, 1, 1 (1925), 1–5.

44 Ibid., 1.

45 Ibid., 3.

46 See *The Treaties of Peace 1919–1923* (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924). See also *The Versailles Treaty*, part VIII, available at https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partviii.asp (last visited 15 July 2019).

47 Lambotte, 'The Altar-Piece', 5.

48 The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew (TNA), FO 370/236, L 5221/5221/405, written comments related to Algernon Maudsley's letter, dated 7 Aug. 1926, and attached documents.

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Brussels Sir George Grahame (1873–1940) explained to the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, William Tyrrell (1866–1947), how he thought the subsequent steps would have likely played out in the antagonistic arena of Belgian domestic politics. He predicted that the clergy would oppose the plan, while Lambotte ('a Liberal') and the Minister of Science and Arts, Camille Huysmans – 'a Socialist, and therefore out of sympathy with Catholic susceptibilities' – might support it. Protests would arise, and the situation would become difficult to manage.[49]

As plans became known, protests did indeed arise. In the Belgian press, articles opposing the scheme appeared in quick succession, raising issues of both ownership and safety. It soon became clear that for all sides the 'Lamb' represented all that was worth defending, and no effort would be spared to show care towards it. Unsurprisingly, the Catholic-leaning *La Libre Belgique* printed a long column on the conflict between the Minister of Art and Sciences who had agreed to loan the picture and the people of Ghent – including the chapter of monks in charge of the altarpiece – who were firm in their resolve not to allow the masterpiece to leave their city.[50]

Against Grahame's predictions, the strongest critics included the liberal newspaper *Etoile Belge*, which lamented that 'the chapter of Saint-Bavon had not hidden the invaluable masterpiece with such protective care under the occupation just to have it exposed now to all the risks of a far journey', and that the value of the altarpiece was such that 'those who wish to see it can bother to come to see it *chez lui*'.[51] The socialist newspaper *Le Peuple* opined that it did not matter whether the friars in charge of the altarpiece opposed the idea (after all, the masterpiece 'belongs to the State'), but conceded that for safety reasons the plan should be reconsidered.[52] In light of these developments, the 1927 exhibition's prospects soon dimmed. To quote one of the Foreign Office's private notes, 'If the socialists, as well as the Catholics, are inclined to object, the Committee's chances of success are sinking very low'.[53] Witt's wish for a peaceful, universalist, celebratory event looked even more unlikely. However, the scheme was not quite dead yet. *Le Peuple* was right about the issue of ownership and jurisdiction. According to the Versailles Treaty, decisions regarding national masterpieces had nothing to do with the clergy and had to be left entirely up to the Belgian government. Besides, as Grahame had conveyed to Tyrrell in early October, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Emile Vandervelde (1866–1938), was 'evidently anxious for the picture to be sent'.[54] Without a doubt, the quintessential internationalist institution – the League of Nations – gave nations unprecedented legitimacy and authority over their art, and nothing could be done about it.

This fact helps to explain why, throughout this delicate phase of negotiation, the main concern of both the British and the Belgian governments revolved around issues of performance and visibility in front of domestic and international audiences. For the British, the priority was to protect Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (1867–1947) from accusations of trying to force the Belgians to do something they did not want to do. For this reason, the Foreign Office insisted on avoiding written commitments and on finding ways 'to do the business verbally'.[55] Grahame had personally told Vandervelde that 'we [the Foreign Office] felt that it would not be right to urge the Belgian Government to the extent of causing them embarrassment, and perhaps to bring attacks upon them, part of which would be directed upon ourselves'.[56] In turn, the Belgian Prime Minister, Henri Jaspar (1870–1939), asked for a written request 'to cover him'. This was promptly refused since, according to Grahame, 'a written communication "to cover him" means of course that he would make full use thereof if attacked in Parliament or in

[49] TNA, FO 370/236, L 5431/5221/405, George Grahame to William Tyrrell, 5 Aug. 1926.

[50] *La Libre Belgique*, 30 Sept. 1926 (newspaper clipping in TNA, FO 370/236, L 6337/5221/405).

[51] *Etoile Belge*, 26 Sept. 1926 (newspaper clipping in TNA, FO 370/236, L 6109/5221/405).

[52] *Le Peuple*, 'Faut-il que l'Agneau mystique traverse la Mer du Nord?', undated (probably mid-Oct. 1926) (newspaper clipping in TNA, FO 370/236, L 6745/5221/405).

[53] TNA, FO 370/236, L 6745/5221/405, handwritten comments.

[54] TNA, FO 370/236, L 6337/5221/405, Grahame to Tyrrell, 1 Oct. 1926.

[55] TNA, FO 370/236, L 5875/5221/405, Grahame to Tyrrell, 7 Sept. 1926.

[56] TNA, FO 370/236, L 6337/5221/405, Grahame to Tyrrell, 1 Oct. 1926.

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the Press'.[57] From both sides, the public message of the exhibition was to be that Belgium, as an independent and legitimate state, had the right to determine if and how its national treasures were to be lent in art exhibitions, and no other institution could override its authority.

The request for the loan of the Ghent altarpiece was eventually withdrawn – once again, with much publicity – and the news that the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* would not be included in the upcoming Flemish exhibition was greeted in the United Kingdom with widespread approval.[58] After announcing that it would not be displayed at Burlington House, the editors of the *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* congratulated the Belgian government on having made the right decision. Although it would have been an 'invaluable experience' to admire the altarpiece, the risks would have been too high. Those disappointed – the editors suggested – should think about how they would have felt 'if we had to return "the Adoration of the Lamb" to our Belgian friends with a split panel – or worse'. Internationalism in practice meant that it was better to leave in Belgium what after so many vicissitudes belonged to Belgium.[59]

The media supported the notion that the absence of 'the Lamb' signified the deeper internationalist meaning of the 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art, one that expanded well beyond the scope of bilateral Anglo-Belgian relations. A few days before the official opening, a *Times* article entitled 'Pictures from Many Lands' presented the event as 'the most interesting' ever held in the United Kingdom; although the idea of showing the Ghent altarpiece had to be abandoned because of understandable objections on the Belgian side, the exhibition promised other extraordinary sights. Particularly impressive were those artefacts whose different components had previously been separated and scattered in different countries. Thanks to the collaboration of many foreign governments and collectors, the public would be able to see these masterpieces reunited for the first time.[60] The main message from all sides was that international cooperation had made such reunions possible.

Throughout, the motif remained that bilateral Anglo-Belgian relations would be reinforced in an internationalist framework. In a radio broadcast on the exhibition, Royal Academy President Sir Frank Dicksee (1853–1928) spoke of Belgium as 'an Ally with whom we [the British] stood shoulder to shoulder in a desperate resolve'.[61] At the official dinner at the Savoy, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Emile Vandervelde, hailed the exhibition as marking 'in a splendid manner the intimate and indissoluble bonds which existed between the two countries'. Referring to a storied past of commercial ties, he emphasised how a relationship that had begun with trade had later expanded into friendship, as the United Kingdom had never hesitated to defend the independence of its Belgian friend.[62] No mention was made of the tensions that had recently arisen over the handling of German reparations and the subsequent occupation of the Ruhr.[63] Public debates over the use of the labels Flemish and Belgian, or the absence of any reference to Walloons, were also downplayed.[64] Instead, Vandervelde's main message was that despite the ongoing tensions among various national groups and the continuous debates over the issues of defining borders, Belgium was united in its support of the League of Nations and of the international cooperation that it fostered.[65]

[57] TNA, FO 370/236, L 6337/5221/405, Grahame to Tyrrell, 1 Oct. 1926.

[58] The exact date when the request was withdrawn is unknown. It is certain, however, that due to these protests, many Belgian ministers who had initially supported the plan later opposed it. See TNA, FO 370/236, L 6524/5221/405, Grahame to Tyrrell, 11 Oct. 1926.

[59] 'The Adoration of the Lamb', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 49, 285 (1926), 316.

[60] *The Times*, 16 Dec. 1926, 9.

[61] RAA/PRA/5/1. Typescript of Broadcast by Sir F. Dicksee on the Exhibition of Flemish Art, 1927, 1–2.

[62] *The Times*, 29 Jan. 1927, 9.

[63] See Conan Fischer, *The Ruhr Crisis, 1923–1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[64] See for instance Jules Destrée in *Le Soir*, 5 Mar. 1927, 1; *La Meuse*, 4 Dec. 1927, 2; *La Libre Belgique*, 21 Jan. 1927, 1; *Vlaanderen*, 5 Feb. 1927, 5. The controversy was also addressed by the *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, though in conciliatory terms. *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 1, 9 (1923), 195–203.

[65] Tensions among French and German-speaking groups continued throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, especially in the two districts of Eupen and Malmédy. See Manfred J. Enssle, *Stresemann's Territorial Revisionism: Germany, Belgium, and the Eupen-Malmédy Question 1919–1929* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980).

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Both the press and the Union's own publications stressed that this exhibition was for everyone and that its effect would spread well beyond elite audiences. On 29 January the newspaper *Le Soir* made room on its front page for a notice dispelling the rumour that a visit would cost as much as a sterling or a guinea, and emphasising instead low cost and various options for fare reduction.[66] After the exhibition's closure, the *Anglo-Belgian Notes* reflected on the event's broad cultural impact: 'during two months it was hardly possible to take up any good class periodical without finding a reference to the Exhibition'; while conceding that not all comments had been positive, it insisted on the overall impression: 'It would be amusing to count the numbers of letters written to "The Times" about it, some laudatory, some critical of this detail or that, some making suggestions but mostly clamouring for longer hours, longer period of opening, or reduced train fares for the provinces'; nevertheless, the 1927 exhibition was now the 'most important event in the artistic world in modern times'.[67]

Any question concerning the accuracy of this statement might matter less than the fact that it was made, repeated, and used as evidence to propose future events of the same kind. In May 1927, the Royal Academy began deliberations on a Dutch exhibition 'equal in importance to the Flemish and Belgian Exhibition', and preliminary plans were approved by the end of June.[68] As in 1927, this show was promoted by a private association: the Anglo-Batavian Society. Founded in 1920 with the purpose of promoting 'the social, artistic, literary, educational, scientific and other interests that the Dutch and the British have in common', this organisation represented another agent of internationalism that sprang from the ashes of the First World War with the explicit goal of encouraging friendly relations amongst nations.[69] As in the Flemish case, conflicts were to be avoided, while the spotlight was to remain on the international cooperation and the mutual goodwill that had made the exhibition possible. This was easier said than done, and evidence suggests that pre-existing and ongoing political tensions affected the world of Burlington House deeply. Few 'Primitives' were included in the Dutch exhibition: as art critic C. J. Holmes pointed out, many had been destroyed as a result of iconoclasm in 1566.[70] Instead, each gallery was devoted to individual painters active between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries with works by Rembrandt and Vermeer occupying the most prominent spots.[71]

In much the same vein as the 1927 exhibition, between 4 January and 9 March 1929, the Royal Academy sought to celebrate the Dutch independent and national artistic traditions; yet defining these national traditions proved tricky. What was Flemish and what was Dutch in a time preceding the two independent kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands? Ironically, at the outset of the organisational process of the 1927 Flemish and Belgian Exhibition, Algernon Maudsley had referred to the

[66] *Le Soir*, 29 Jan. 1927, 1.

[67] *Anglo-Belgian Notes*, 4, 2 (1927), 58.

[68] The Council of the Royal Academy approved the plan on 27 May 1927 (RAA/PC/1/25, Council Meeting, Minutes, 27 May 1927, f. 308) and recommended the proposal to the General Assembly on 7 June (ff. 313–14); the General Assembly approved the plan on the same day and confirmed the decision on 28 June 1927 (RAA/GA/1/10, General Assembly, Minutes, 7 June 1927 and 28 June 1928, vol. x: ff. 316–7; 318–20). The Dutch exhibition was announced in *The Times* on 27 Apr. 1928 (see *The Times*, 27 Apr. 1928, 14). As in 1927, the Royal Academy played a limited role by merely renting out its galleries. This time around, however, Sir Walter R.M. Lamb (Secretary of the Royal Academy) accepted to serve on the general committee of the exhibition. RAA/SEC/ 9/1/36, Records of the Secretary, Letter Books, general, vol. 38, f. 263. Letter, dated 13 Feb. 1928, from Secretary (Lamb) to Sir Walter Townley (British Executive Committee).

[69] In 1944, the association changed its name to Anglo-Netherlands Society. See *Anglo-Netherlands Society*, available at http://www.anglo-netherlands.org.uk/ (last visited 15 July 2019). See also *Off the Shelf: A 75th Anniversary Voyage through the Papers of the Anglo-Netherlands Society* (1995), unpublished, courtesy of the Anglo-Netherlands Society.

[70] C. J. Holmes, 'Introduction', *Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of Dutch Art Held in the Galleries of the Royal Academy, Burlington House, London, January–March, 1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), xviii.

[71] Among the most notable pieces were Rembrandt's *Bridal Couple* (lent by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam), the *View of Delft* and *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Vermeer (both lent by the Mauritshuis at the Hague), and *The Man with the Bandaged Ear* by Vincent Van Gogh (lent by British businessman and art collector Samuel Courtauld). See *Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of Dutch Art*; *Exhibition of Dutch Art, 1450–1900* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1929); and *An Illustrated Souvenir of the Exhibition of Dutch Art* (London: The Anglo-Batavian Society and Country Life Ltd., 1929).

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quintessential Flemish artefact, the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, as 'the chef-d'oeuvre of Early Netherlandish Art'.[72] In 1927, subtle references to the 'joint yoke' that for centuries had united Holland and Belgium had made their way into lectures and introductions to the various exhibition catalogues. The need for that double adjective, 'Flemish and Belgian', in the title of the first exhibition disclosed, in itself, the complexity of the endeavour.[73] In the case of the Dutch exhibition, the same problem emerged.

In order to avoid controversies, the organisers decided to emphasise the period after 1581, when the signing of the 'Act of Abjuration' marked the end of the Spanish domination over the Low Countries and the birth of the independent Dutch Republic, and when 'Dutch art as we know it became truly differentiated and national'.[74] Previous rivalries and conflicts were downplayed as relics of the past. Instead, in the words of a Dutch minister quoted in *The Times*, 'The exhibition . . . was the greatest invasion that any country has ever made of the heart of the British Empire, but it was in harmony with the spirit of our day – the spirit of peace, mutual understanding, and culture'.[75] This 'spirit' would later be both remembered and condemned.[76] The ideas and practices that had led to its construction, in contrast, never ceased to grow – the Dutch exhibition attracted more than 230,000 visitors, exceeding the success of its predecessor. Other – even larger – blockbuster exhibitions followed the Flemish and Dutch shows: these included the 1930 Exhibition of Italian Art 1200–1900, which attracted a record 539,000 visitors; the 1931 International Exhibition of Persian Art and the 1932 Exhibition of French Art 1200–1900, which proved worthy successors, though never equalled the 1930 numbers; and the 1935–6 International Exhibition of Chinese Art, whose 422,000 tally was stunted only by the death of King George V on 20 January 1936, and by concerns about safety in the galleries.[77] These events drew an explicit link with the Flemish exhibition and the series that followed it, and became landmark occasions in both an artistic and a political, internationalist sense.[78]

To be sure – and notwithstanding a nationalist component inherently present within internationalism, the contemporary existence of fascist internationalism, and a steady fascist presence in internationalist organisations of various kinds and political orientations – these exhibitions sometimes included nationalistic elements seemingly at odds with their internationalist tone.[79] Art historian Kenneth Clark, who himself had participated in the staging of the 1930 Italian exhibition, later bemoaned it as 'basically a piece of Fascist propaganda'.[80] He had a point. The idea had come from Ivy Chamberlain, the wife of Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain and an ardent supporter of Benito Mussolini and fascism in Italy; it was thanks to her personal connections with high-ranking

[72] TNA, FO 370/236, L 5221/5221/405, Algernon Maudsley to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 7 Aug. 1926.

[73] Robert Witt, 'Introduction', *Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of Dutch Art*, 7.

[74] Ibid., 3.

[75] *The Times*, 2 Jan. 1929, 10.

[76] Most notably and influentially in E. H. Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1939).

[77] The 1927 Flemish exhibition totalled 151,806 paying visitors; the 1929 Dutch: 230,400; the 1930 Italian: 537,968; and the 1931 Persian: 255,724. I thank Mark Pomeroy for providing me with figures from the Royal Academy of Arts' internal database. The 1932 French exhibition sold 298,201 single tickets and 5,444 season tickets. See *Annual Report for the Year 1932*, 32–3. The 1935–6 Chinese exhibition: 401,768 paying visitors and 2,531 season tickets. *Annual Report for the Year 1936*, 23. The figure of over 422,000, reported by the press, included the private views and the non-paying visitors.

[78] See Ilaria Scaglia, 'The Aesthetics of Internationalism: Culture and Politics on Display at the 1935–1936 International Exhibition of Chinese Art', *Journal of World History*, 26, 1 (2015), 105–37.

[79] See Elisabetta Tollardo, *Fascist Italy and the League of Nations, 1922–1935* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Madelaine Herren, 'Fascist Internationalism', in Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, eds., *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 191–212; and Ilaria Scaglia, *The Emotions of Internationalism: Feeling International Cooperation in the Alps in the Interwar Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 14–15; 98–102.

[80] Quoted in Francis Haskell, 'Botticelli, Fascism and Burlington House – The "Italian Exhibition" of 1930', *The Burlington Magazine*, 141, 1157 (1999), 471.

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fascist leaders that the loan of masterpieces such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* had been secured.[81] Mussolini used the opportunity to improve the international standing of the regime, and the Italian press often presented the show in unmistakably fascist terms: for instance, an article originally published in the *Corriere della Sera*, later translated and re-published in *The Times*, described the exhibition 'as a portentous sign of the eternal vitality of the Italian race which enabled it to be always and everywhere in the vanguard, leaving to others only the freedom to imitate'.[82] Taken in isolation, comments of this kind seem to contradict internationalist rhetoric.

Opinions such as these, however, were buried in small newspaper columns, while the headlines went to talks of friendship and collaboration. The same Robert Witt who had written about internationalism in the context of the Flemish exhibition now made it a point to frame the generosity of the Italian government, and of the *Duce* in particular, as an act to be understood within the context of international cooperation. Penning once again the introduction to the official catalogue of the exhibition, and thus emphasising the continuity of the series, he praised the special bond that united the Italian and the British people by recalling the 'spoils, not of war, but of peace' brought back by the British travellers that had undertaken a Grand Tour of Europe, and of Italy in particular.[83] Even in the media coverage of the event, the adjective 'fascist' or the term 'dictatorship' rarely appeared in contemporary references to the Italian government. In fact, Mussolini's name did not appear on the letterhead of any of the official correspondence relating to the exhibition.[84] When 'Signor Mussolini' was mentioned, it was usually to talk about his kindness to the British government; a telegram of his, whose text was translated and published in its entirety in *The Times* on 18 January 1930, only confirmed that he cherished 'the feelings' (*sentimenti*) with which Italian art had been welcomed in London in the context of 'the traditional friendship between Italy and Britain' (*tradizionale amicizia italo britannica*).[85] If, as Haskell noted, the exhibition had 'flaunted' Italy's 'national prestige', it had done so by presenting it as a country that had never been at war against the United Kingdom and as a participant in an art-exhibition series whose tone had been set by the 1927 Flemish show.[86]

The notion that the Flemish exhibition and the others that had followed it had succeeded in achieving their internationalist objectives shaped how other events of the same kind would unfold. It made its way into private conversations between governments. For instance, the Memorandum that the British Foreign Office sent to the Chinese government to invite them to participate in the joint organisation of the 1935–6 show cited the previous exhibitions, starting from the 1927 Flemish one, asserting that 'these have succeeded in fostering closer cultural relations between those countries and Britain than would otherwise have been possible'.[87] The carefully-staged public performance that accompanied the Chinese exhibition also emphasised its cooperative, internationalist aspects.[88] To this day, the event is remembered as 'the largest Chinese cultural event ever mounted', and, 'despite mainly

[81] On her role as a mediator more generally, see also David Faber, *Munich, 1938: Appeasement and World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 88–9.

[82] *The Times*, 3 Jan. 1930, 9.

[83] Robert Witt, 'Introduction', *Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200–1900* (London: Royal Academy of Art, 1930), xi.

[84] The official letterhead of the Exhibition of Italian Art, Royal Academy, 1930 listed as 'Patrons' 'His Majesty the King – His Majesty the King of Italy' and 'Her Majesty the Queen – Her Majesty the Queen of Italy'. On the following line, in the centre, was 'Lady Chamberlain, G.B.E., Chairman'[*sic*]; on the left: 'General Commissioner for Italy [*sic*] Dott. Ettore Modigliani, Brera Gall., Milan'; on the right: 'Secretary-General [*sic*] Major A.A. Longden'. See for instance official letterhead in RAA/SEC/24/19/1, Records of the Secretary, Records of loan exhibitions, Correspondence relating to the Exhibition of Italian Art. Letter dated 24 June 1929 from Major Longden to Walter Lamb.

[85] *The Times*, 18 Jan. 1930, 7.

[86] Haskell, 'Botticelli, Fascism and Burlington House', 472.

[87] RAA/SEC/24/25/1, 'Memorandum on an International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London', dated 3 Feb. 1934, signed by Sir George Hill, Sir Neill Malcom, Sir Percival David, Mr. George Eumorfopoulos, Mr. R.L. Hobson.

[88] Scaglia, 'The Aesthetics of Internationalism', 105–37.

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reflecting a Western (and English) view of Chinese art. . . the first truely [*sic*] global exhibition of its type'.[89]

Mentions of the Flemish exhibition also appear in relation to events that never came to fruition but were nonetheless proposed, discussed and carefully considered. In mid-March 1939, as Nazi troops were on the move in Czechoslovakia, *The Times* published a letter to the editor by British painter and member of the London Royal Academy of Arts Philip Connard (1875–1958), recalling 'the exhibitions of Dutch, Flemish, Italian, French, and Chinese works of art' and suggesting a German exhibition as 'the means of encouraging more friendly relations' that 'might lead to better things'.[90] In January 1950, Royal Academy President Sir Gerald Kelly wrote to the High Commissioner at the Allied High Commission for Germany, Sir Brian Robertson (1896–1974), to ask for support in generating a proposal for an exhibition of German art in London. He explicitly mentioned the 'important and special series' of 'international events' organised through 'the whole-hearted co-operation of the Governments and peoples concerned', maintaining that such a show would 'do much for the improvement of our mutual understanding'.[91]

As in the case of the non-display of 'The Lamb', the fact that the initial goal – obtaining a loan, staging an exhibition or securing peace – had not been attained did not change the overall narrative about internationalism's past successes and future promises. Witt's notion that 'beauty has ever a healing touch' informed the staging of a wide range of shared aesthetic experiences from international art exhibitions to concerts and to travel, and affected fields as diverse as education, business and politics. Regardless of the questions one might rightfully raise in terms of the genuineness, inclusivity or actual effectiveness of these notions, these internationalist performances had made a lasting mark.

Conclusion

This study of the 1927 Exhibition of Flemish and Belgian Art in London demonstrates that even though events such as this have not always been of central interest to historians they have long mattered to a wide range of state and non-state actors. In addition to museums, political organisations like the Anglo-Belgian Union, foreign offices and news media all devoted vast resources to shaping this exhibition, commenting on it before, during and after it took place, and used it to further their agendas. For scholars interested in cultural diplomacy and international relations this argument carries multiple implications. It broadens their field by incorporating activities spearheaded by non-state actors yet moulded by the state in important ways. It challenges them to acknowledge their relevance apart from their success at achieving their stated goals (e.g. securing peace among nations), and to separate immediate results from later appropriations and representations, fully acknowledging the influence of the latter regardless of their accuracy. Also, since exhibitions extended well beyond the galleries, visible political performances – such as accompanying texts and events, representations and recollections – might be included in future examinations and enrich narratives on cultural and international relations in the interwar period and beyond.

This article demonstrated that events such as the 1927 exhibition influenced subsequent initiatives, as people, institutions and governments cited them as precedents to bolster their proposals and often took them into account throughout their decision-making processes. Expanding the study of other landmark occasions to include their predecessors and tracing how these were used in different instances might add a further layer to what we know about cultural and political developments and their changes over time.

Crucially, this study has shown how art exhibitions can serve as a unique window onto the time in which they took place and beyond. As the result of the collaboration among numerous state and non-

[89] Jason Steuber, 'The Exhibition of Chinese Art at Burlington House, London, 1935–36', *The Burlington Magazine*, 148, 1241 (2006), 536; Robert Bradlow, 'Article 8, 1935–36 Exhibition of Chinese Art at the RA', 16 May 2020, available at https://www.robertbradlowfineart.com/article-8-1935-36-exhibition-of-chinese-art-at-the-ra (last visited 18 Jan. 2022).

[90] *The Times*, 2 Mar. 1939, 15.

[91] RAA/SEC/27/2/3, Letter dated 3 Jan. 1950, from Sir Gerald Kelly to Sir Brian Robertson.

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state actors, they allow historians to observe how these interacted in a concrete setting. Given the highly symbolic cultural and political value of art, they reveal what mattered the most to people and to institutions, unveiling mechanics connected to aesthetics and emotions that have just begun to be explored by scholars in various fields. Moreover, because of their mediatic value and the involvements of fast-evolving technologies, they shed light on how public spectacles were constructed and consumed over time.

Indeed, with the rise of visual and digital cultures, images and symbols gained further currency as meaningful, immediate and unmediated vehicles for political communication in the twentieth century. The idea that international cultural events provide an important platform for political performances has become commonplace, as has the role of art as signifier of larger political meanings and messages. Against this backdrop, the interwar chapter examined in this article assumes new importance, as it shows the dynamics through which individuals, institutions and governments tried to manage conflicting messages in highly visible ways, and how art served – and still serves – as a vehicle for them to achieve their goals.

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