

Looking Back and Ahead. Edmond Sacré, Armand Heins and the Transformation of Ghent

Abstract

Between 1870 and World War I the city centre of Ghent (Belgium) underwent thorough changes. Medieval buildings were cleared from the surrounding urban tissue, creating space for through-city traffic. For the world exhibition of 1913, new viewpoints and restored monuments satisfied the needs of the modern tourist and offered an easily legible image of the city centre. In the years preceding the exhibition, many buildings and façades were brought back to (often an interpretation of) their original state. Edmond Sacré (1851-1921, photographer) and Armand Heins (1856-1938, historian/artist) both documented the transformation of the city. For the Commission of Monuments and Sites, Sacré visualized all stages of the transformation process. Heins' bird eye's views of the future city centre familiarized the inhabitants of Ghent with the plans of the city council. At the same time, he produced albums filled with nostalgic drawings of the old corners of Ghent.

While the drawings of Heins enable to visualize objects, constructions and city views that do no longer or not yet exist, the photographs of Sacré seem to be restrained to a reality on the exact moment of making the image. However, a close reading of a number of publications in which Heins uses photographic illustrations reveals that the distinction between photography as pure registration of a historical fact and drawing as an interpretation of history becomes blurred. The images of Sacré and Heins stimulate reflection on historiography and historical awareness at the end of the nineteenth century and on the role of drawing and photography in it. The paper argues that different attitudes towards history were simultaneously at stake – attitudes that seem contradictory from a current-day perspective: a well-informed historiography with scientific aspirations; an eclectic cut-and-paste strategy and a longing for the sensory experience of the city of the past.

Keywords

City, representation, photography, drawing, historiography.

Between 1870 and the First World War the city centre of Ghent (Belgium) underwent extensive changes.¹ As was the case in most European cities, public and religious buildings were cleared from the surrounding urban tissue and broad boulevards created space for through-city traffic, promenading and window-shopping. New viewpoints satisfied the needs of the tourist and offered an easily legible image of the city centre. Two developments allowed this transformation of the city to gain momentum. First, the creation of Haussmannian boulevards in the 1880s linked the area of the railway station with the city centre. This project resulted in the isolation of Ghent's three central landmarks: the Saint-Nicolas Church, the Belfry and the Saint-Bavo Cathedral. Second, the transformation of the city centre was completed for the occasion of the World Exhibition in 1913. In the years preceding the exhibition, many buildings and façades were brought back to (often an interpretation of) their original state. The central thoroughfare was continued by creating the bridge of Saint Michael, a broad elevated bridge that allowed the ever-growing traffic streams to cross the city and acted as a elevated balcony with a view on the new urban panorama.

In this period of transformation, Edmond Sacré (1851-1921, photographer) and Armand Heins (1856-1938, historian/artist) both played an important role in both documenting and imagining the transformation of the city.² This paper investigates the role of the representation of the temporal in a city in continuous transformation. Visual media, such as photography and drawings, played an important role in the imagination of the future, the documentation of the past and the visualization of different phases of transformation between past and future.

Looking back and ahead

Armand Heins was a man with many occupations: he was an artist as well as a commercial printer, publisher and a self-made historian/archaeologist.³ Heins was part of a network of organizations and persons who fulfilled the role of urban planners in an era in which a professional planning apparatus did not yet exist as such. As one of the founding members of the Ghent Historical and Archeological Circle and adjunct-secretary of the Ghent Monument Commission, Heins' impact on the city's restoration and reconstruction politics during the early twentieth century should not be underestimated.

In many of his lithographs and etches he re-evoked picturesque sights of a Ghent on the verge of disappearance. These drawings were edited by the Heins publishing house in a number of artist's albums between 1894 and 1914. One of the most extensive of these albums was *Les vieux coins de Gand* ('The old corners of Ghent'), a series of 124 lithos published in several episodes in 1898 and 1899.⁴ (Fig. 1) The introductory text expresses the feeling of regret that the transformation of the city evoked with many of its inhabitants:

The rearrangement of our streets and public spaces in the new style causes the disappearance of one or another interesting corner of our old neighbourhoods on a daily basis. Houses, courtyards and alleys, thousands of small things we are sweetly used to gazing upon are definitively destined for demolition, for irretrievable demolition. The destruction is slow but sure. However much we suffer from this idea, we have nevertheless to acknowledge that we are seeing the end of these painterly, touching scenes. The winding alleys, the slumbering corners and the ancient streets; old walls, cracked façades, tumbling roofs, so many witnesses of the life of our ancestors, all these stones that refresh the past in our memory, are disappearing forever.⁵

However, Heins concludes his lamentation about the disappearance of old Ghent rather pragmatically by stating that 'complaint and opposition is superfluous because these current changes are mostly necessary.'⁶ Heins' twofold attitude towards the transformation of Ghent – a feeling of regret for the disappearance of the old combined with a belief that change is necessary – is reflected in the whole of his production. Apart from the sights of the disappearing city, Heins produced drawings to envision the city of the future as well. In 1896, the newspaper *La Flandre Libérale* published a drawing made by Heins that familiarized the inhabitants of Ghent with the image of the new city centre with the main monuments as freestanding objects, linked by a series of squares. In the decades preceding the world exhibition, Heins again produced a number of bird's eye views of the new layout of the site around the Saint-Michael bridge. In the work of Heins the drawing was the medium that enabled looking back – by depicting corners of the city that had disappeared or were about to – and looking forward in time – by simulating a vision of the city of the future.

Photography, the medium of Edmond Sacré, has a different relationship with temporality. At the end of the nineteenth century, photography was considered by many to be the medium that represented reality as such – the camera was a scientific instrument that, in contrast to the drawing, would produce a faithful image of the world.⁷ Sacré was in the first place a commercial photographer who worked on commission. One of his most frequent clients was the Ghent Monument Commission, which used the photographic images as a documentation of construction and of city quarters that would disappear, transform or be restored. The photographic production of Sacré – spanning almost half a century – displays all stages of transformation of the city. The constantly repeated photography of the same urban views allows the reconstruction of an almost cinematic image of the city changing over time. An aspect of temporality can be detected, however, not only in Sacré's series of repeated photographs. Sacré mostly worked with series of images when documenting a building or site for one moment in time as well, circling around an object or moving through space. These series suggest a temporality that is linked with movement instead of with the succession of views of a transforming object in time, as was the case in repeated photography. Sacré sometimes succeeded in including a temporal narrative in one image as well, by showing traces or indications of past or future changes. For example, in a series on the Ter Platen hamlet in the south of the city centre, temporality is suggested by a gradual movement through space in the series, but in each image in itself as well as by signs of transformation in time, such as the groundworks for new infrastructure or the new townhouses on the background that seem ready to overrun the area. (Fig. 2)

The picturesque and historical interest

Although both drawing and photography allow the insertion of a notion of temporality in urban imagery, in the images of Edmond Sacré and Armand Heins these two media seem to do this each in a different way. While the drawings of Heins enable the visualization of objects, constructions and city views that no longer exist or do not yet exist, the photographs of Sacré seem to be restrained to a reality at the exact moment the image is made. In *Notes et croquis d'archéologie pittoresque* Heins himself explicitly opposed both media. According to Heins, the balance between an archeological and

picturesque interest in the drawing is replaced by the pure registration of a historical fact in photography.⁸ The distinction between the ‘picturesque’ and the ‘historical’ way of looking Heins is alluding to is closely linked to the different relationship between the medium and temporality described above. The photograph can only register the world at a specific moment in time, while the world in the picturesque drawings seems timeless.

One of the most ambitious projects about the city of Ghent that Heins was involved with was the *Inventaire archéologique de Gand* (‘Archaeological inventory of Ghent’), initiated in 1896 by the Historical and Archaeological Society of Ghent and edited by the Heins publishing house.⁹ With its ambition to treat architecture and all kinds of objects dating from before 1830 in illustrated file sheets, it can be situated in the line of similar historicizing inventories that were set up all over Europe.¹⁰ Although photography was used as well, most of the objects described in this inventory were illustrated by means of drawings, most of them from the hand of Heins himself. Here as well the medium of the drawing allowed the combination of scientific data-gathering and artistic interpretation.¹¹

While the *Inventaire archéologique de Gand* was an inventory in which the objects under study were interpreted through the medium of the drawing, *L’Habitation ancienne en Belgique*, a photographic inventory Heins collected for his own documentation, seems to show a less interpreted image of the city. This inventory of photographs of old dwellings – many of them shot by Sacré – served as the basis for the drawings Heins produced for several publications on this subject.¹² In contrast to the drawings in the *Inventaire archéologique de Gand* or *Les Vieux Coins de Gand*, which filter information to construct a timeless picturesque scene or a schematic or idealized version of a façade, the photographs of *L’Habitation ancienne en Belgique* cannot erase the context of the documented dwellings: posing figures, tramlines or neighbouring modern houses unambiguously situate the object in the reality of the contemporary city.

However, the distinction between photography as ‘pure registration of a historical fact’ and drawing as an interpretation which can be read in the inventories becomes blurred when studying other publications of Heins. One of the most remarkable albums is the *Album du vieux Gand* (‘Album of old Ghent’), composed by Paul Bergmans and Armand Heins in 1913 for the occasion of the world exhibition.¹³ (Fig. 2) According to the authors its ambition was to provide the historical information that the average tourist guide failed to mention.¹⁴ The 56 illustrated plates of the album - apart from some water colours all photographic images - served as the illustration for Heins’ text. However, the images have their own – visual – narrative, running parallel to the text. As the album is conceived as a guided walk through the historical city centre, the framing and the order of the images is carefully chosen. The first plate is a photo of the entrance gate of the restored Gravensteen castle. The castle was one of the main attractions of the world exhibition, and the image was in 1913 an archetypical opener for a photo album on Ghent. However, the images immediately skip to the ruins of the Saint-Bavo abbey, then functioning as a stone museum. The image shows the octagonal lavatory, seen from the refectory. The third image displays the columns of the former cellar of the abbey, while the following image brings us back to the cellar of the Gravensteen. The images as well as their captions establish both a visual and a textual link between the two sites.

The visual strategy of the first plates sets the tone for the rest of the album. This album is clearly not intended for those who want to visit the historical city centre as a series of façades of well-known monuments. Instead, it serves the visitor who wants to understand the city from a historical awareness. Once we pass through the façade of the Gravensteen, Heins takes us on a tour in a labyrinth of fragments, a trajectory that can only be understood by subtle visual links and by a knowledge of history. As a consequence, the role of photography is in this album more than a registration. By a clever juxtaposition and succession of photographic images the historical awareness of the viewer is manipulated in a different, but equally effective way as is done in his drawings of the *Inventaire archéologique de Gand* or in *Vieux Coins de Gand*. The fragmented, almost cinematic montage of the city in *Album du Vieux Gand* creates an image of the city that crosses all temporal layers of the city, an image that is at once rooted in history and timeless.

Cut-and-paste

The images and publications discussed in this paper are produced in an era in which the city itself looked simultaneously back and forward in time. In the decades preceding the world exhibition, the modernization of the city on the level of urban planning was accompanied by a return to history as far as architecture was concerned.¹⁵ New constructions, such as the post office and the adjacent houses were constructed in a neo-gothic/renaissance style and many historical buildings were restored to re-evoked the atmosphere of old Ghent. As was the case in other cities, Heins and his fellow citizens were involved in fierce debates on how to deal with the past. Heins became one of the protagonists of a vision on restoration that respected the past, rather than ‘reconstructing’ an – often fictitious – past state¹⁶. However, Heins also took part in the historicizing operation that took place in the city as his images of old street views, and façades became a model for future ones. The re-assembly of history reached its peak in the construction of Old Flanders on the premises of the world exhibition itself.¹⁷ Following the example of ‘Old Antwerp’, ‘Vieux-Paris’ and ‘Vieux Liège’ at previous world exhibitions, Old Flanders was a collage of (mostly sixteenth and seventeenth century) buildings from cities from all over Flanders, reconstructed in plaster. The design of architect Valentin Vaerwyck was largely based on the archive and publications of Armand Heins, who assisted Vaerwyck with the design. Although the buildings in Old Flanders were a relatively faithful reconstruction of the original architecture in comparison with previous similar villages, historicism was in the first place used to create a picturesque experience.¹⁸ It is not difficult to see some similarities between Old Flanders and the transformation of the city centre. Both environments utilize a cut-and-paste strategy to create a décor of a – mostly medieval – city. In the process, photographic images and drawings played a crucial role and established a complex relationship between past and present. In Old Flanders as well as in the city centre drawings and photographs were used as a source to create a ‘historical’ collage, that in its turn acted as a model for the restoration and reconstruction of urban environments in later decades.

In the run-up to the world exhibition, diverging ambitions came together: the modernization of the city centre and the re-evocation of the past. Different attitudes towards history were simultaneously at stake – attitudes that seem contradictory from a current-day perspective: a well-informed historiography with scientific aspirations; an eclectic cut-and-paste strategy and a longing for the sensory experience of the city of the past. The use of photography and drawings produced by Armand Heins and Edmond Sacré raise some questions about the complex relationship between these media and the representation of the temporal. Although photography was considered by many – among which Armand Heins – as the pure registration of a moment in time, while the drawing would enable the interpretation of the city both for an archaeological and picturesque interest, publications such as the *Album du Vieux Gand* and constructions such as Old Flanders indicate that this relationship was far more complex.

References

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Figures



Schokkenbroersvestje.

Rempart des Alexiens.

Fig. 1: Armand Heins, view of the Schokkenbroersvestje: Source: Armand Heins *Les Vieux Coins de Gand*, 1898-1899.

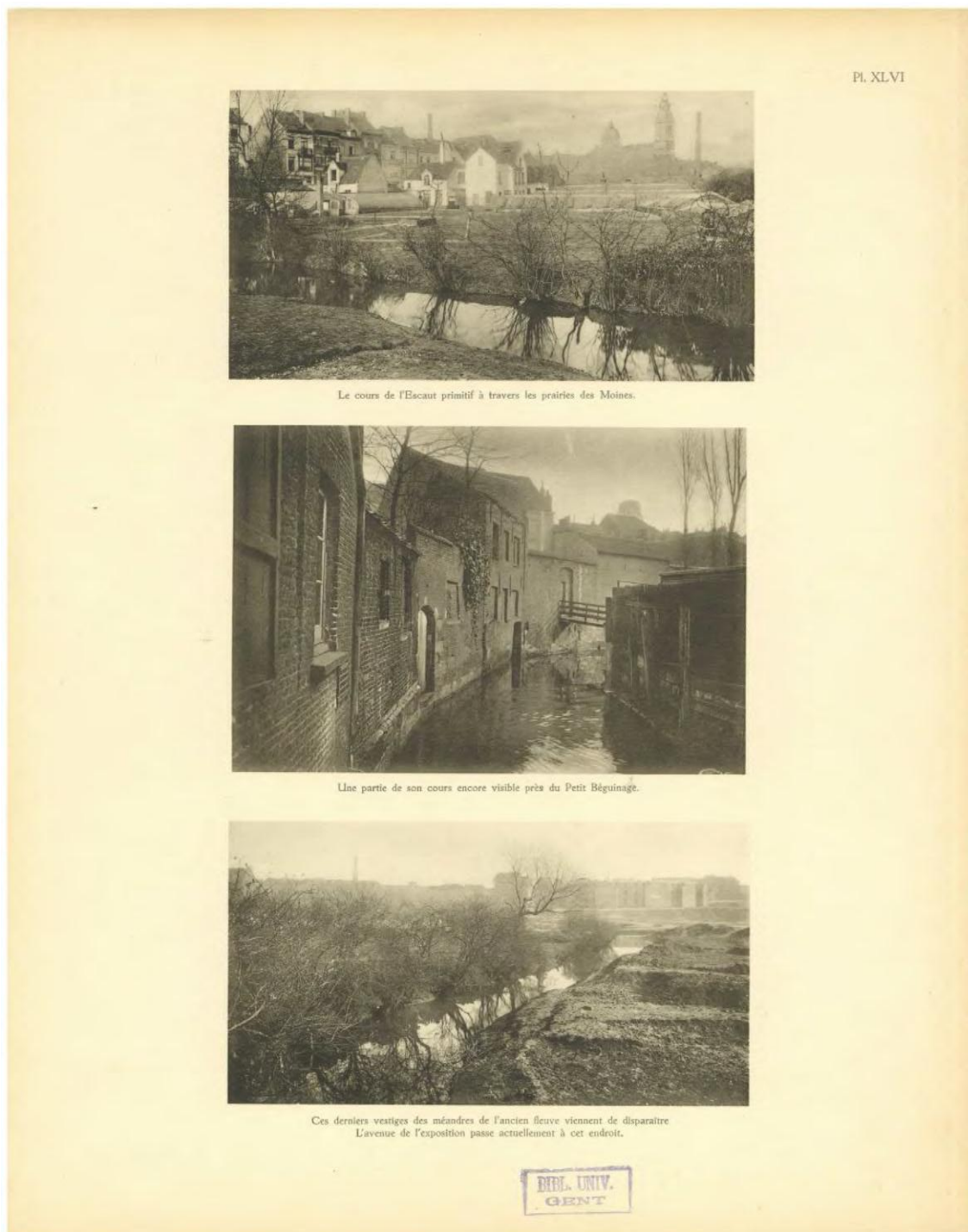


Fig.2: Edmond Sacré, Ter Plaeten, 1908. From Armand Heins' collection *L'Habitation ancienne en Belgique*. Source: Paul Bergmans and Armand Heins, *Album du vieux Gand*, 1913.

Notes

¹ Birgit Cleppe and Pieter Uyttenhove, “Infrastructure and urbanism,” in Marc Boone and Gita Deneckere (eds.), *Ghent. A city of all times* (Ghent: Mercatorfonds/STAM, 2010), 200-249.

² Bruno Notteboom, “Portretten van een stad” and “Portraits of a city” (English summary) in Bruno Notteboom and Dirk Lauwaert, *Edmond Sacré. Portret van een stad* (Brussels/Ghent: Mercatorfonds/STAM, 2011, 82-101 and 243).

³ René De Herdt (ed.), *Armand Heins. Etser, lithograaf en drukker* (Ghent: VIATvzw, 2009); Etienne Dhont, “Armand Heins, kunstenaar en esteet (1856-1938),” in *Kultureel Jaarboek voor de Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen* (Ghent: Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen, 1973): 217-232.

⁴ Armand Heins, *Les vieux coins de Gand/De oude hoekjes van Gent* (Ghent : Maison d'éditions d'art N. Heins, 1898-1899), re-edited as Armand Heins and Anne-Marie Vanden Abeele, *Oude hoekjes van Gent* (Nazareth: De Klaroen, 1995).

⁵ *Ibidem*, Introduction.

⁶ *Ibidem*, Introduction.

⁷ André Rouillé, *La photographie. Entre document et art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005).

⁸ Armand Heins, *Coups d'oeil et coups de plume. Notes et croquis d'archéologie pittoresque*, Extract of *Bulletin de l'Académie royale d'Archéologie de Belgique* (Antwerp : 1907-1908), vol. 1, 4-5. Cited in Maarten Delbeke, «De ‘sprekende stenen’ van Sint-Baafs ,» in Bruno Notteboom and Dirk Lauwaert, *Edmond Sacré. Portret van een stad* (Brussels/Ghent: Mercatorfonds/STAM, 2011, 62-73).

⁹ Paul Bergmans et al. (ed.), *Inventaire archéologique de Gand. Catalogue descriptif et illustré des monuments, oeuvres d'art et documents antérieurs à 1830* (Ghent : N. Heins / Société d'histoire et d'archéologie de Gand, 1897).

¹⁰ On a similar inventory on Brussels , see : Annelies Cousserier, “Het verleden gefixeerd. De fotografische inventaris van het Comité d'études du Vieux Bruxelles,” in Steven Humblet and Dirk Lauwaert, *Citygraphy #02* (Brussels: Efemera, 2009) 20-39.

¹¹ Often Heins decorated his drawings with a frivolous frame or ‘medieval’ banners and he interpreted some of his subjects by altering details, as was the case in some of the re-editions of maps of the historical city centre edited by the Heins publishing house. See: Marie-Christine Laleman, “Armand Heins: een 'artiste peintre' met archeologische blik,” in René De Herdt (ed.), *Armand Heins. Etser, lithograaf en drukker* (Ghent: VIATvzw, 2009), 196-215.

¹² For example Armand Heins, *Contribution à l'habitation privée en Belgique. Restes d'anciennes constructions pittoresques dans notre pays et dans les contrées limitrophes* (Ghent: N. Heins, 1908).

¹³ Paul Bergmans and Armand Heins, *Album du Vieux Gand. Vues monumentales et pittoresques de la ville de Gand à travers les âges accompagnées de notices historiques* (Brussels : Van Oest, 1913).

¹⁴ This was also the goal of a tourist guide written by Bergmans and Heins in 1904: Paul Bergmans and Armand Heins, *Promenade pittoresque à Gand* (Ghent: Vander Haeghen, 1904).

¹⁵ On the transformation of the city for the world exhibition: André Capiteyn, *Gent in weelde herboren. Wereldtentoonstelling 1913* (Ghent: Stadsarchief, 1988).

¹⁶ This was an ongoing discussion in Brussels under mayor Charles Buls as well.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 153-158 and Tim Dickel, *Wereldtentoonstelling Gent 1913. Oud Vlaendren en het Moderne Dorp: schijnbare tegenpolen?* (Ghent, Ghent University, 2004) (masterthesis).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 56.