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A ceiling of gods and a toilet of books: Hofkamer reopens after grand restoration

by Dan Smith,

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SUMMARY

The grand 18th-century residence is one of Antwerp's treasure trove of secret spaces, and it's a spectacular juxtaposition of new and old

Chamber of secrets

Wander along the streets of Antwerp's inner city and you're struck by how close the buildings are. Built side by side and right to the edge of the pavement, it seems like there was no place for open space in these once-grand residences.



But step behind the front doors and there's a treasure trove of secret spaces where *Antwerpenaars* of old (and now) entertained and took the air.

At Oude Beurs 27 you will find

Den Wolsack, a complex of buildings that is home to one of Antwerp's best-known hidden spaces – [the Hofkamer](#).

Den Wolsack was owned by Adrien van den Bogaert, a councillor and merchant, who redeveloped the Hofkamer with the help of architect Engelbert Baets. Although parts of the building date back to the mid-15th century, the Hofkamer's present form was completed in 1772 according to Baets' design.

Europe's largest

Following a fire and years of neglect during the 20th century, Den

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Wolsack came under the control of the Flemish Heritage Foundation (later Erfgoed Vlaanderen, now Herita). In 2012, Herita decided to restore the building to how it would have looked in 1772.

“*From a distance you can still make out parts of the original decoration dating from the 1400s and later*

- ELS DERYCKE

Renovation work had already started in 2008 with the removal of the massive “Gods on Mount Olympus” canvas, which covers the entire ceiling of the ground-floor space. At 65 square metres, it’s the largest ceiling painting on canvas in Western Europe.

The restoration of this monumental work wasn’t without difficulties. At one point in the process the painting fell over, leaving a large rip in the canvas and delaying the work by several years. The gods are now back in their rightful place.

Once the facade and roof were repaired, work began on the interior. Here the restorers faced a major dilemma, as parts of the decoration dated from before 1772. In keeping with modern restoration practice in Flanders, the decision was made to keep the walls as they were found.

“A slightly transparent fabric has been secured about 10 centimetres from the surface of the wall to give the room cohesion,” Els Derycke, manager of restoration and conservation for Herita, explains. “From a distance you can still make out parts of the original decoration dating from the 1400s and later behind the fabric. However, this fabric layer protects and preserves the paintwork for future generations of historians and restorers. The result gives the visitor a connection to both the past and the future.”

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Smallest room

From the ground level, a staircase winds up to the first floor with the two undoubted gems of the Hofkamer. The first is the Book Toilet.

Though it's the "smallest room in the house", this is a space that you could explore for hours.

The Book Toilet (*pictured*) is said to have been van den Bogaert's idea. While hiding a porcelain bowl behind fake book fronts was a relatively common style in French castles, van den Bogaert went even further.

The bowl itself is housed in a stack of books on the floor. Two walls are lined with fake bookshelves made from wood and leather, while a third is a large window with a view of the garden and the cathedral spire.

And that's the second gem. The view of the cathedral tower is spectacular from the enormous first-floor windows. As we tour the building, we're serenaded by the bell ringers at their regular Wednesday morning practice session in the cathedral's carillon. The effect takes you back in time immediately.

“*As we tour the building, we're serenaded by the bell ringers at their regular Wednesday morning practice session in the cathedral's carillon*”

The paintings and decoration on the Hofkamer's top floor were too badly damaged for restoration. Instead, artist Koen van den Broek was commissioned to decorate the space. Inspired by the work of film director Stanley Kubrick, van den Broek has gone for a startling

modern style he describes as “landscapes that portray the gloomy state of the world”.

That sense of gloom is emphasised by the two black beams painted up the wall and along part of the ceiling, echoing the images of 9/11. They seem to threaten the viewer as well as the external world beyond the room’s beautiful windows.

Adding to the modernity of this room is the large contemporary heating device set into the ornamented fireplace. Like with van den Broek’s art, the juxtaposition between old and new couldn’t be any starker.

Although the Hofkamer was officially reopened on 30 August by Flemish minister-president Geert Bourgeois, the first chance the public will have to see it is during Open Monument Day on 10 September. After that, the building will be available for hire for meetings and small events.

Pilgrims of art

[Public Art of Flanders \(OKV\)](#) is planning one of the most ambitious events ever to showcase the Flemish Masters. To be run over two years, Flemish Masters in Situ will give the public a chance to see major artworks in the chapels, churches, cathedrals, monasteries and castles they were painted for. Many of these sites are not normally open to the public.

From June to September next year, eight venues in Antwerp, including the Hofkamer, will house works that were specifically painted for those locations. The event is part of the wider Antwerp Baroque City promotion planned for 2018.

“The locations include a small church in Zaventem which has a painting created by a very young Antoon Van Dyck based on a design by Rubens,” says Mark Vanvaeck of OKV. “When Van Dyck went to the church he realised that the light was coming from the wrong

side, so he had to rearrange Rubens' composition. It's a great example of how the location influenced the artwork."

In 2019, the Flemish Masters in Situ project will spread to 60 sites across Flanders, including the eight original ones in Antwerp. From 1 June to 31 September, the public will be able to visit all 60. After presenting their "Pilgrims' Guide" at each site, visitors will get a stamp. Everyone who makes it to all 60 will receive a book celebrating the project.

There are plans for a multilingual information panel at each site which will provide more information about the painting, the artist and the artwork's relationship to the building.

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