

THE ART OF LAW: THREE CENTURIES OF JUSTICE DEPICTED AT THE GROENINGEMUSEUM: A NEW AND IMPROVED PRESENTATION FOR THE JUDGEMENT OF CAMBYSES BY GERARD DAVID (1498)

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The 2016 fall exhibition 'The Art of Law: Three Centuries of Justice Depicted' at the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, Belgium, was initially conceived of as a small project composed of mainly works from the Bruges collections. Ultimately it resulted in a major international, cultural-historical exhibition, covering half the exhibition space at the museum. Curators Vanessa Paumen and Tine Van Poucke brought together objects from the Bruges municipal collections, with loans from all over Europe and the United States, resulting in an exhibition containing over 120 artworks (paintings, sculptures, drawings, old prints, manuscripts and objects) in the context of their original functions related to justice and jurisprudence. Together, the artefacts provided a fascinating overview of how artists and their patrons were inspired by law and its practice from around 1450 up to 1750 in the Netherlands and surrounding areas. The exhibition also extended outside of the museum's walls and into the city centre. In collaboration with the guide associations, a themed city walk - 'On the Right Track' - was developed. In addition, a lecture series and an academic conference were also part of the exhibition program, as well as a major catalogue.

One of the main themes of the exhibition, the function of *exempla iustitiae* paintings, focuses on one specific masterpiece: Gerard David's *The Judgement of Cambyses*. This large, two-paneled painting for the city hall of Bruges, is now in the collection of the Groeningemuseum. David finished this diptych in 1498, at the height of his career, having been commissioned to paint it by the aldermen of Bruges for their council chamber. The painting depicts the legendary tale of the Persian king Cambyses (6th century B.C.), first chronicled by the Greek historian Herodotus, and later disseminated throughout Flanders through various medieval versions of the text based on the Latin works of Valerius Maximus. Sisamnes, one of the supreme judges of the king, allowed himself to be bribed and therefore did not judge fairly. The king sentenced him to a terrible punishment: to be flayed alive. His skin was then used to cover the judge's chair of his successor and son, Otanés.

Gerard David was probably inspired by a miniature by Loyset Liédet, who worked in Bruges as an illuminator for the Burgundian court. In the manuscript *La Sale* (1461), Liédet executed a total of 37 miniatures of predominantly historical and legendary scenes, including *The Judgement of Cambyses*. This precious manuscript was generously lent to the exhibition by the Royal Library of Belgium. It is not the earliest known depiction of the Cambyses story, but it is the first version that portrays the flaying in such gruesome detail. David copied (almost literally) a number

of these details: the executioner holding his knife between his teeth, the standing Cambyses counting on his fingers the arguments against the judge, and the crowd that gathers around the scene. During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Cambyses story continued to be used repeatedly in paintings and prints. In these later depictions, the scene in which Otanés is seated on the skin-covered chair became the focal point of the works – unlike in David's painting, where it is reduced to the upper-right section of the second panel. At the same time, the flaying scene – so prominently depicted by David and Liédet – disappeared altogether. In some instances, the entire story was reduced to the depiction of the judge's chair covered with the flayed skin. This gruesome image alone, sufficing as an ultimate and constant reminder of the consequences of judicial corruption.

Prior to this exhibition, *The Judgement of Cambyses*, one of the most important set of paintings at the Groeningemuseum, had been on permanent display. Now the exhibition has been dismantled, it has been installed again in the first gallery of the museum. Any alterations in presentation of the diptych for the exhibition had to be reversible and low in cost, taking into account that design of the permanent presentation was to be restored after the exhibition project. This was professionally dealt with by the department of collections and documentation of Musea Brugge (which is responsible for the Groeningemuseum collections of as well as 13 other museums), together with the exhibit design firm PK Projects (Kurt Casteleyn and Peter Hollez). Another issue that the designers faced was the lighting in the galleries. Diffuse, natural light was present in some, but not all the rooms, resulting in a lack of unity in the exhibition design. Moreover, the desire to change lighting schemes in the permanent exhibition halls had been expressed for some time. The armoured glazing that had been used to protect the artwork did not prove to be the best choice in regards to reflection and colour perception (Fig. 1).

Fig 1



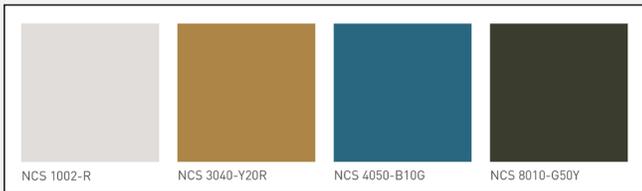
Since the paintings were an important focal point for the exhibition, the designers based the colour scheme of the walls on colours present in the paintings. They also positioned the works lower than they had been in the permanent set-up (Fig. 2-3) as seen in a design drawing of how the presentation would look in the exhibition (Fig. 4).

Fig 2



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Fig 3



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Fig 4



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Even though the lighting would be altered, we were convinced that replacing the glazing would be a major benefit, both in terms of the protection of the artworks and improving the visitors' viewing experience. There were limitations, however, on how to install the glazing given that the same hanging mechanisms employed throughout the permanent collection had to be used. These L-shaped bars at the top of the panels offer support for the glazing several centimetres away from the face of the painting. Due to this distance and the paintings' dark colours, it became clear that in addition to being anti-reflective, the glazing required rigidity and strength as to not suffer deflection. As a result, the decision to use Tru Vue® UltraVue® Laminated Glass was made, allowing for a clear colour scheme with reduced reflection, resulting in a viewing experience close to one without protective glazing (Fig. 5).

Fig 5



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Nadia Vangampelaere (ed.) studied art history at the University of Ghent and has been working at Musea Brugge since 2004, initially as a registrar responsible for the municipal collection of applied arts, and from 2009 in the collection and documentation department of Musea Brugge.