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**10. Paul Coremans, Edgar Richardson and the 1960 Flemish Art Show:  
A Transatlantic Friendship Forged by a Transatlantic Exhibition**

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# Artist — Expert To Be Honored At Convocation

Paul Coremans will receive an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from President Hilberry, at 10:30 a. m., Saturday, November 26, in the Community Arts Auditorium.

Coremans, world authority on the restoration of precious art who was instrumental in bringing the current exhibit of Flemish masterpieces to the Detroit Institute of Arts, is the director of the Royal Institute of Artistic Patronomy in Brussels, Belgium.

\* \* \*

**HIS WORK** in the Institute, which he founded, has made him a leader of a world-wide movement which employs new techniques in combining scientific knowledge with the traditional methods of the restorer to preserve paintings, sculptures, buildings and architectural sites.

**Presiding at the convocation will be Dr. Winfred Harbison, academic administration vice president. The forword will be delivered by Dr. William M. Birnbaum, University vice president. Assisting with the ceremony will be: Dr. Arthur Neef, University vice president and provost, and Dr. Randall M. Whaley, vice president for graduate studies and research.**



**PAUL COREMANS**  
Art Authority

## om State To Gather

# 10

## Paul Coremans, Edgar Richardson and the 1960 Flemish Art Show: A Transatlantic Friendship Forged by a Transatlantic Exhibition

Yao-Fen You

In the autumn of 1960 Paul Coremans was awarded an honorary doctorate by Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan (fig. 10.1). The award was conferred during a special convocation ceremony on the 26th of November. He was the sole honoree and delivered a lecture on the scientific examination of the *Ghent Altarpiece* (fig. 10.2). In honoring this “leading citizen of Belgium”, the university cited his international reputation as a protector of artistic heritage worldwide, his creation of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage – described as “an international model of a scientific and scholarly organization devoted to the care and restoration of art objects, and to the study and publication of the Belgium heritage of art” – and his “invaluable assistance in bringing the great masterpieces of Flemish Art before a large American public through the brilliant exhibit now at the Detroit Institute of Arts”<sup>1</sup> (fig. 10.3).

The “brilliant exhibit” was *Masterpieces of Flemish Art: Van Eyck to Bosch* (fig. 10.4), which had officially opened in Detroit at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) on 18 October 1960 after being on view at the Groeningemuseum, Bruges from 26 June to 11 September 1960, under the title *De eeuw der Vlaamse primitieven*. Officially sponsored by His Majesty, Baudouin, King of the Belgians, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States, who ordered the United States Navy to move the entire show across the ocean, *Masterpieces of Flemish Art* was the first international loan exhibition of European art to have venues on both sides of the Atlantic.

The exhibition’s comprehensive scope, celebrating the full spectrum of fifteenth-century Netherlandish art, was among its greatest virtues. It comprised over two hundred objects, including metalwork, sculpture, ecclesiastical vestments, tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, drawings, and, of course, paintings. Courtly goldsmith’s work was displayed alongside more functional objects such as waffle irons. There were also historical documents such as privileges bearing the seals of the dukes of Burgundy and account books.

Highlights included unprecedented loans from Belgian churches, many of which had never left Belgium, such as Gerard Loyer’s *Votive Reliquary of Charles*

Fig. 10.1 Announcement, Wayne State University student newspaper



10.2

*Citation: Leading citizen of Belgium, Paul Coremans is honored in all countries of the world where people are concerned with preserving their artistic heritage. He created the Royal Institute of Artistic Patrimony, an international model of a scientific and scholarly organization devoted to the care and restoration of art objects, and to the study and publication of the Belgium heritage of art; he is the distinguished leader of a world-wide movement which employs new techniques in combining the knowledge of the scientist with the traditional methods of the restorer to preserve paintings, sculptures, buildings, and architectural sites.*

*Concerned primarily with preserving the best from earlier centuries, he also lends his wisdom and energy to transmitting this heritage as exemplified by invaluable assistance in bringing the great masterpieces of Flemish Art before a large American public through the brilliant exhibit now at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and for which the people of our city and country are deeply grateful. With these, the University joins in reaffirming the high importance of cultural continuity, and in honoring Paul Coremans: friend, distinguished scholar and scientist, and world authority on the care and restoration of precious art.*

For the degree  
*Doctor of Humane Letters*

Wayne State University  
November 26, 1960

**Fig. 10.2** Paul Coremans receiving his Wayne State University doctor's hood, 26 November 1960

**Fig. 10.3** Convocation Ceremony Program. Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015



10.4



10.5

*the Bold* from the Cathedral of St Paul in Liege, the tapestry depicting the story of St Eleuthere from the Cathedral of Our Lady in Tournai (fig. 10.5), and the gothic brass lectern from the Church of St Germain in Tienen. Important panel paintings, such as the wings from Dirk Bouts' *Triptych of the Last Supper* and Hans Memling's *Diptych of Martin van Nieuwenhove*, travelled across the Atlantic for the first time. Detroit contributed ten works to the show – two millefleurs tapestry fragments (fig. 10.6) and eight paintings, including Jan van Eyck's *St Jerome in His Study* (fig. 10.7) – all of which were on display at both venues.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was also an occasion to discover treasures in private hands, such as Hugo van der Goes's *Descent from the Cross*, painted in tempera

**Fig. 10.4** Entry Way, *Masterpieces of Flemish Art: Van Eyck to Bosch*. Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015

**Fig. 10.5** Gallery View, *Masterpieces of Flemish Art*. Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015



10.6

on linen, and the *Crib of the Infant Jesus* from the Ruth and Leopold Blumka collection<sup>3</sup> (fig. 10.8).

The show received extraordinary coverage. It was written up in *Life Magazine*, *The Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *New Republic*, among others. The review in the *New York Times* hailed it as the “rarest art exhibition this country has seen in several years”.<sup>4</sup> Between Bruges and Detroit, the show attracted almost 300,000 visitors in total. In Bruges the exhibition had over 177,000 visitors, about “110,000 more [...] than any previous summer show at the Bruges Museum”.<sup>5</sup> In Detroit 105,000 people came through the show, including the Prince and Princess of Liège (later King Albert II of the Belgians and Queen Paola), who joined the crush of over 6,000 guests on opening night<sup>6</sup> (fig. 10.9, 10.10). About a week before the exhibition closed in Detroit on 31 December 1960, twelve trustees from the Minneapolis Art Museum chartered a plane to see it.<sup>7</sup> *Masterpieces of Flemish Art* was the DIA’s first ticketed exhibition and it remains one of the most important exhibitions in the institution’s history.<sup>8</sup>

Originally the exhibition was meant to travel to New York and Philadelphia as well, and to include more painting loans from US museums. As many of the important early Netherlandish panels in American public collections were already acquired by the 1930s, the exhibition sought to be “the most important exhibit of Flemish fifteenth-century painting” since the 1902 Flemish Primitives show

**Fig. 10.6** Gallery View, *Masterpieces of Flemish Art*. Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015





10.7

at Bruges.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the show was an opportunity to see works from lesser-known collections of European art as far west as San Diego and Los Angeles and as far south as Greenville, South Carolina. But three months before the Bruges opening, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art abruptly pulled out as venues, leaving Detroit alone to sustain the costs on the American side. For about two weeks, from 3 to 25 March 1960, the show was considered dead in the water until Bruges managed to convince Detroit to proceed with an exhibition with only two venues and a modified checklist.<sup>10</sup>

Though it was neither as large nor as grand as originally envisioned, the exhibition was a milestone in the field. In spite of the absence of key works for the study of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting, such as a panel from the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the *Merode Triptych* and the Philadelphia Van Eyck, no

**Fig. 10.7** Jan Van Eyck, *St Jerome in His Study*, c. 1435, oil on linen on oak panel 20.6 x 3.3 cm (unframed), Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts (inv. 25.4)



10.8



10.9

**Fig. 10.8** Gallery View, *Masterpieces of Flemish Art*. Research Library & Archives, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015  
**Fig. 10.9** Opening Night, *Masterpieces of Flemish Art*. Research Library & Archives, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015

exhibition on early Netherlandish art to date has matched its scale, range, and ambition.<sup>11</sup> *From Van Eyck to Bruegel* mounted in 1998 by the Metropolitan Museum was a significant achievement, but it was devoted entirely to the study of early Netherlandish painting.<sup>12</sup> *Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych* (2006–2007) was also seminal, but limited in scope. With the exception of a 1971 exhibition in Leuven, *Aspecten van de Laatgotiek*



10.10

*in Brabant*, few shows have equally championed paintings and decorative arts.<sup>13</sup>

Edgar P. Richardson (fig. 10.11), then director of the DIA, is widely regarded as the “inspiration which led to the Detroit-Bruges exhibition”.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, Richardson’s initiative, perseverance, and resourcefulness were crucial to the exhibition –after all it was he who secured the Navy to move the exhibition across the ocean for only \$43,866.20.<sup>15</sup> But a lengthy journal entry from 25 June 1960, written the day of the exhibition’s opening in Bruges, suggests that his Belgian collaborator Paul Coremans might have been the show’s true inspiration. In his reflections on the complicated genesis of the exhibition, Richardson writes:

When Franklin Page [curator of modern art] came back from his summer at the Belgium American seminar, he said that when he left, Coremans had said to him that the time had come for a great Flemish show and that Detroit should do it. I don’t even remember when that was –years ago, between 1950 and 1955. We had no exhibition fund at that time and I thought no more of it than one does of such ideas = a good idea for an exhibition sometime...<sup>16</sup>

The conferral of Coremans’ honorary degree coincided with his visit to Detroit to participate in the Flemish Art Seminar, a three-day colloquium jointly organized by the two men and planned in conjunction with the exhibition. In fact, Richardson had arranged for Coremans to be nominated for the honor (fig. 10.12). It was Detroit’s way of acknowledging the immense service of their valued Belgian colleague and friend to the exhibition. In tribute to the remarkable contributions and legacy of Paul Coremans, it is particularly fitting to highlight the critical ways in which Coremans –as a conservator, protector of heritage, and as a cultural leader– supported the landmark 1960 Flemish art exhibition. It was Coremans, for example, who suggested they make use of

**Fig. 10.10** Prince and Princess of Liège, Albert and Paola, at the opening of *Masterpieces of Flemish Art*. Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015. Research Library & Archives, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2015

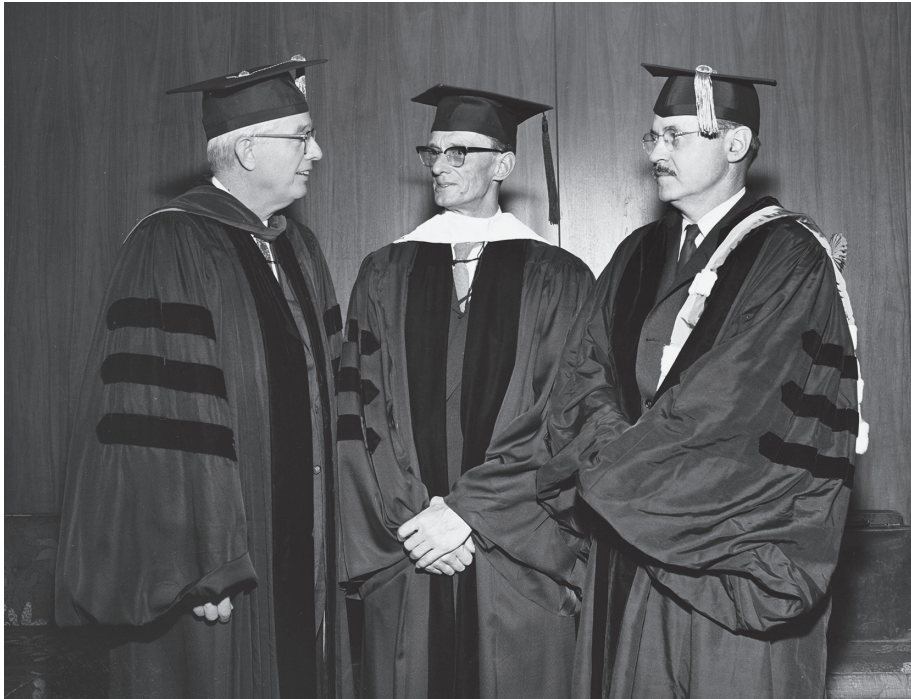


10.11

air-conditioned vans under development to move the works, making it all the more possible to send many fragile but important panel paintings from Belgium across the Atlantic for the first time.<sup>17</sup> The successful transatlantic shipment represented a breakthrough in controlled environments for the transit of works of art, which were housed in double-sealed cases, with the air-conditioned vans acting as the outer insulation. *Masterpieces* is repeatedly cited as an early case study of the successful transport of artworks by sea, as well of the application of the dunnage principle: the packing of cases to effectively control or buffer the relative humidity.<sup>18</sup> As such, the exhibition was a turning point in the international movement of fragile works of art.

Coremans also mobilized his staff at the National Research Centre “Flemish Primitives” (now the Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives) to produce the award-winning exhibition catalogue that accompanied the Detroit venue.<sup>19</sup> It was published in both English and French. The title of the English-language version, *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization*, reflects the exhibition’s original title, before it was changed to *Masterpieces of Flemish Art: Van Eyck to Bosch* per the recommendations of an outside public relations firm retained by Detroit especially for the show.<sup>20</sup> Though the catalogue was technically a joint publication between Detroit and the Centre, the bulk of the work was done by the Centre, with Detroit paying for the publication costs. The catalogue was widely recognized for its rigorous scholarship and design: The

**Fig. 10.11** Edgar P. Richardson, in front of the *Adoration of the Magi* triptych by Joos van Cleve. Research Library & Archives, Detroit Institute of Arts



10.12

American Institute of Graphic Arts named it one of the *Fifty Books of the Year* for 1960 and Harry Bober called it “a considerable work of enormous value” and “the best modern compilation of its kind”.<sup>21</sup> Until recently, the catalogue was one of the few publications produced by the Centre addressing media other than panel painting.<sup>22</sup> Although Richardson was ultimately disappointed with the final form of the exhibition, he was very pleased with the catalogue. Shortly after the exhibition opened in Detroit, Richardson confided in Coremans that:

On the scholarly level, I am always aware that it [the exhibition] is not what we had hoped for. Your catalogue, however, is the kind of catalogue that I had hoped for. I hope, too, that the Seminar will reach the people that we ought to reach in this country. It seems very important that the intellectual goal of the exhibit be achieved and I rely on you and Mlle Folie very heavily. And the catalogue at least is on the most distinguished level!<sup>23</sup>

He did not hesitate to regard it as “the best modern publication in English on the subject”.<sup>24</sup> The catalogue reaffirmed the high regard in which the Detroit director held the Centre and by extension, Coremans. From the outset, Richardson was adamant that the catalogue would be “a great work of reference”, reiterating to Coremans midway through production that it should represent “the standard of scholarship of the Centre and the latest and best knowledge you have”. He could not have made his intentions more explicit when he continues, “If you do not want to express an opinion, not having seen the picture, do not even wish to list it, unseen, that is a very scholarly decision. Leave it out”.<sup>25</sup> Richardson would have been gratified to hear that the catalog functioned as a textbook for many Northern Renaissance classes, and regarded as “kind of bible” by those in graduate school in the 60s and 70s.<sup>26</sup>

More importantly, it was Coremans’ constant encouragement, intellectual

**Fig. 10.12** Paul Coremans (at center), with Wayne State University President Clarence Hilberry (to his right) and Richardson (to his left), 26 November 1960

guidance, and professional cooperation that kept Richardson afloat during the exhibition's darkest moments – one can only imagine the challenges and obstacles such an ambitious exhibition encountered both in Belgium and the United States. By 1960 almost every piece of correspondence between Coremans and Richardson, which was fairly regular and almost daily by then, begins with the salutation “Mon Cher Richardson” or “My dear Coremans”. Richardson typically closed letters with the standard “Sincerely yours”, but Coremans was fond of ending his letters with more warmth and affection. He commonly used “bien vôtre”, but did not shy away from more heartfelt expressions such as “affectueusement”, “amicalement de toute la bande” and “bien à vous et aux vôtres”.<sup>27</sup>

Richardson and Coremans only started working out a general plan of the exhibition together in earnest in 1957.<sup>28</sup> They were almost always on the same page, with Coremans writing almost always in French and Richardson in English. They could be frank and honest with one another, although Coremans was the more pragmatic one. Upon hearing of Richardson's decision to cancel the show on 3 March 1960, the main thrust of Coremans' response to Richardson was how the two of them might “sauver la face”.<sup>29</sup>

One should note that their professional association had begun as early as 1951, with their first face-to-face meeting taking place on 21 April 1953. Coremans visited Detroit while in the Midwest giving a seminar on the restoration of the *Ghent Altarpiece* at Oberlin College in Ohio.<sup>30</sup> It was presumably during those initial years of their acquaintance that Coremans asked Richardson, who is principally regarded as a specialist on American art, to write the Detroit volume for the *Corpus*. Apart from his enduring commitment to American art, Richardson was devoted to Netherlandish art.<sup>31</sup> As early as 1936, he had authored a short piece addressing the fifteen South Netherlandish paintings on view in the museum and published under the title *Flemish Painting of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Taking as his bookends Van Eyck's *St Jerome* and Pieter Bruegel's *Wedding Dance* – both of which had entered the collection by 1930 – Richardson successfully sketched out a short history of the period, offering a trenchant and concise analysis of the problems and issues in early Netherlandish art while limiting himself to the Detroit works. This publication, as well as others on Northern European art, would have recommended Richardson for the job.<sup>32</sup> To the present day, the Detroit *Corpus* volume remains unwritten.<sup>33</sup>

Coremans and Richardson were very well matched in their commitment to scholarship at the highest level and the value they placed on systematic documentation. Neither was trained as an art historian, which was most likely a contributing factor to their innovative and influential approaches to the study of art. Coremans was trained as a chemist. Richardson studied painting at the University of Pennsylvania (1920-1921) before attending Williams College, from which he was graduated summa cum laude in 1925. He continued at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts before he realized he was more adept with the pen than brush, eventually finding his way to Detroit, where he spent almost thirty-two fruitful years, first as educational secretary (1930-1934), then as assistant director under Wilhelm Valentiner (1934-1945), and as director from 1945 to 1962.<sup>34</sup>

Both favored an interdisciplinary approach to the study of works of art. Both were founders of centres of documentation and both established them with the conviction of promoting the growth of their chosen fields. Coremans founded the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) in 1946 and with Jacques Lavalleye, established the National Research Centre “Flemish Primitives” in 1949.<sup>35</sup> Six years later, in 1954, Richardson, with Lawrence Fleischman, co-founded the Archives of American Art at the DIA. Although it has never been articulated, I would posit that Richardson’s vision for the Archives was inspired by the example of the Centre.

Richardson’s desire to create a centralized body of knowledge of American art was prompted by the research challenges he experienced in writing *American Art: the Story of 450 Years* (1956), which was the first synthetic account of American art.<sup>36</sup> Acutely aware of the centralized bodies of knowledge that existed for the study of European art, he was frustrated by how resources were scattered all over the vast country that is America. Now housed at the Smithsonian, the Archives was the first research centre in the States to bring together basic research documents for the study of American art, then a fledgling field. What started out as a few boxes of letters has now grown exponentially to become the world’s largest collection of primary resources documenting the history of the visual arts in America.

Just as the Centre, as described by Coremans, “is devoted to the systematic study of the Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century preserved in Belgium and abroad, from a historical, an iconographic and a stylistic point of view, as well as in relation to their physical and chemical structure”, the Archives sought to study and preserve American artistic heritage by the systematic collection of primary resources in one place.<sup>37</sup> According to the purposes and objectives laid out by Richardson in 1961, it “has been established for the purpose of collecting in one place original records of American painters, sculptors, print-makers, and craftsmen, from the earliest artists known to the present. This material may be original letters, manuscripts, notebooks, sketchbooks”. He also emphasized that “a national plan to collect these research materials, carefully and systematically, has never been attempted. As a result, records are scattered or lost, excessive costs for research discourage scholarship, and proper attention is not given [to] our artistic heritage”.<sup>38</sup>

The resonances between the Centre and the Archives certainly informed the working relationship and friendship between the two men. Indeed, their mutual respect and high regard for one another, as well as their shared convictions concerning interdisciplinary scholarship underlay their commitment to the Flemish exhibition, as well as to one another professionally. When the show was on the verge of falling apart at the end of February 1960, Coremans urged Richardson to keep up his spirits, even offering to fly over to the States at his own expense to be at Richardson’s disposal for a week if necessary. He reminded Richardson of their responsibility to one another, for the exhibition was a “job that we began together and that – together – we will complete it well and to a successful end”.<sup>39</sup>

Richardson, likewise, considered the exhibition a joint intellectual venture between himself and Coremans. In his professional correspondence and his

personal writings, Richardson consistently used “Coremans and I” or “we” when discussing the exhibition. This sense of unity, of a shared vision, is particularly evident in the description of a troubling meeting that took place in Belgium in October 1959 – a turning point when the organizers finally accept that they would only be able to get “token loans from the other Belgian museums”. Richardson recalls the stark contrast between the reality that Émile Langui, the Director General of Fine Arts and Letters at the Department of Public Education in Belgium, was forcing upon them and the original vision he and Coremans shared:

On the last day we drove over to Coremans’ fishing shack on the old Scheldt and had a final conference. A sharp difference appeared in the last hour, Coremans and I had from the beginning planned that the exhibition should be the same in Belgium + the US – the first exhibition shown jointly by museums on both sides of the Atlantic. As this last moment Langui announced that the exhibit in Bruges would contain only token loans from the other Belgian museums: the real exhibition would be only in the USA. He said it was politically impossible to get the other museums to lend their best pictures to Bruges for a whole summer.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, when, in the summer of 1959, Coremans almost withdrew his support of the show because he felt so defeated by regional Belgium politics, Richardson would not allow it. The Centre was a crucial and equal partner in the venture and he convinced Coremans, and by extension, the Centre, to remain on board. In a status update prepared for the secretary of the Belgian American Educational Foundation (BAEF) shortly after the Centre almost backed out, Richardson very methodically enumerated all the reasons why he “could not allow the withdrawal of the Centre from this exhibition:”

The major purpose has been, in my mind, from the beginning (1) to revive the lagging study of Flemish art in the United States; (2) to bring to a new focus the studies of scholars in both countries on the perplexing questions of fifteenth-century Flemish art, in the light of the best and most recent research; (3) [to] familiarize Belgian and other European scholars with the major works of art in the United States; (4) to establish this as a new and more serious kind of old master exhibition; aimed at solving intellectual problems rather than to serve only the interests of tourism. How can we do this without the participation of the Centre?<sup>41</sup>

Richardson implies here that without the Centre, the project had no legs and could not continue.

Richardson was extremely loyal to Coremans, even protective of him. In one piece of correspondence with Richard Buck, the conservator they employed as the technician/courier for the transatlantic boat trips, he relays:

I have also written to Coremans to ask for his opinion about the pictures from other sources than Bruges, especially those from Antwerp, Brussels, and Louvain. You and I know only too well what troubles would descend upon him if anything should happen to any of these pictures. I want at all costs to protect the pictures and to protect Coremans.<sup>42</sup>

Might it be that Coremans’ steadfast cooperation, intellectual guidance, and warm empathy had earned Richardson’s fierce loyalty?



Detroit's friendly gesture of arranging for Coremans' honorary doctorate was duly reciprocated by Coremans. He arranged for both Richardson and curator of ancient and medieval art Francis W. Robinson to be knighted shortly after *Masterpieces* closed. Robinson worked closely with them as the curator in charge of the exhibition. Richardson was made a knight of the Order of Leopold on 3 January 1961, and Robinson a knight of the Order of the Crown of Belgium on 3 March 1961.<sup>43</sup> While Richardson appreciated the gesture very much, the true lasting source of gratification for him was the exhibition catalogue and Coremans' friendship. In a letter to Coremans discussing whether or not the symposium papers should be published, Richardson underscores the value and esteem in which he held their bond:

The really vital papers are those of the Centre. If you[r] paper and those of Mlles Folie and Ninane should be published, I should feel well rewarded. That and your catalog mean more to me than the Order of Leopold, but I am nonetheless grateful as always to your friendship, as the power that moved your government.<sup>44</sup>

When Coremans heard of Richardson's decision to assume the helm of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Delaware in early 1962, he responded with mixed emotions. His primary concern was that the Detroit Institute of Arts would be left to drift about without Richardson's strong and steady leadership:

I really don't know what to say apropos of your big decision. On the one hand, I completely approve, if not envy you (finally the time to work!); on the other hand, I can only regret your departure from a grand and wonderful museum in a corner of the United States where, without a figurehead, the museum might well quickly fall into anonymity or be misled in its direction. All that I can do, above all, is to respect your decision, and wish you success at Winterthur: to you first, the museum second. It is unfortunate that you couldn't accept the invitation of Craig Smyth to come [to Brussels] this summer, but we'll meet again here, that is certain.<sup>45</sup>

Coremans' heartfelt words testify to the admiration and respect he felt for Richardson, who, when nominating Coremans for the honorary doctorate, claimed that "he may very well be one of the great Belgians of our time".<sup>46</sup>

Coremans' vital assistance in bringing about this groundbreaking transatlantic exhibition and its eventual success was also acknowledged by other collaborators. As Robinson wrote in answer to a query about the exhibition some years later:

Those that saw the Flemish Art Exhibition in Bruges or Detroit in 1960 or worked on it in any capacity do not seem to forget it. It was, indeed, a milestone in international and interurban relationships, for it was really an exhibition arranged between the cities of Bruges and Detroit with much help from Mr. Coremans and his colleagues in Brussels.<sup>47</sup>

## Summary

In 1960 a landmark exhibition celebrating early Netherlandish art took place in Bruges and Detroit. Titled *Masterpieces of Flemish Art: Van Eyck to Bosch* for the US venue and *De eeuw der Vlaamse Primitieven* for the Belgian one, it was the first international loan show of European art to have been shown on both sides of the Atlantic. Comprising over 200 objects, it showcased the full spectrum of fifteenth-century Netherlandish art, from metalwork, sculpture, ecclesiastical vestments, and tapestries to illuminated manuscripts, drawings, and paintings. There were unprecedented loans from Belgian religious institutions and many important panel paintings travelled across the Atlantic for the first time, making the exhibition a turning point in the movement of art.

*Masterpieces* attracted almost 300,000 visitors in total. No exhibition on early Netherlandish art to date has attempted to match its scale, range, and ambition. Yet, it was almost cancelled when three months leading up to the Bruges opening, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art abruptly pulled out, leaving Detroit to sustain the costs. The exhibition ultimately prevailed owing to the vision, resolve, and perseverance of two figures deeply committed to the interdisciplinary study of fifteenth-century South Netherlandish art: Edgar Richardson, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) from 1945-1962, and Paul Coremans, founding director of the KIK-IRPA.

This paper discusses Coremans' vital contributions to the transatlantic exhibition, which helped forge a transatlantic friendship. Without his unfailing encouragement and professional cooperation, the show would never have happened. The idea for the exhibition, in fact, originated with Coremans and under his leadership, the accompanying catalogue was produced by the Study Centre of the Flemish Primitives, then referred to as the National Research Centre "Flemish Primitives" (Centre national de Recherches "Primitifs flamands"). Richardson depended on his Belgian counterpart's intellectual guidance, administrative and diplomatic skills, and his candor and acumen every step of the way. In Coremans, Richardson found a scholarly and professional equal, as well as a kindred soul. Both were generous in spirit, keen on professional cooperation and exchange, and shared the conviction that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

## Notes

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Unless indicated otherwise, the archival collections cited are located in the Research Library & Archives of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.

Abbreviations: RCH = Edgar P. Richardson Records, 1930-1962; CUR/ROB = Francis Waring Robinson Records, 1950-1971.

1 A copy of the official programme is held in RCH 72/2.

- 2 The Detroit objects were as follows [in order of inventory (accession) number, followed by the exhibition catalogue number in DETROIT/BRUSSELS 1960]: Jan van Eyck, *St Jerome in His Study*, oil on paper on panel, inv. 25.4 [No. 5]; Master of the St Lucy Legend, *Virgin of the Rose Garden*, oil on panel, inv. 26.387 [No. 41]; Attrib. Gerard David, *The Annunciation*, oil on panel, inv. 27.201 [No. 46]; Michael Sittow, *Catherine of Aragon as the Magdalene*, oil on panel, inv. 40.50 [No. 52]; Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl, *Crucifixion*, oil on panel, inv. 58.383 [No. 53]; Rogier van der Weyden (workshop), *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, oil on panel, inv. 46.359 [No. 9]; Michael Sittow, *A Young Man in a Red Cap*, oil on panel, inv. 58.383 [No. 53]; Master of the St Ursula Legend, *Nativity*, oil on panel, inv. 59.122 [No. 40]; *Millefleurs Fragments: Neptune, God of the Waters and Jupiter, King of the Gods*, silk and wool, inv. 58.414-415 [Nos. 154-155].
- 3 The *Crib of Infant Jesus* is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. No. 1974.121a-d.
- 4 CANADAY 1960; for the other reviews and write-ups, see *The Glory of Flanders* 1960; GETLEIN 1960; *Flemish Art Shown in Brussels Exhibit*, in *The New York Times*, 26 June 1960, p. 2; *From Flanders to Detroit*, in *The New York Times*, 16 October 1960, p. X15; *Superb Exhibition of Flemish Primitives at Bruges*, in *The Times* (London, England), 29 June 1960, p. 4.
- 5 Richard Buck to E.P. Richardson, 16 September 1960, RCH 72/6; see also Richardson to E. Clark Stillman, 23 September 1960, RCH 72/8.
- 6 Other Belgian dignitaries in attendance included the Belgian ambassador to the United States, Louis Sheyven (and his wife); the burgomaster of Bruges, Pierre Van Damme (and his wife); the governor of West Flanders, Pierre van Outryve d'Ydewalle; and the minister of Public Instruction, Charles Moureaux. The bishop of Bruges, Monsignor Emiel Jozef De Smedt, also made the trip to Detroit for the opening festivities.
- 7 Carl Weinhardt to Richardson, 21 December 1960, RCH 72/3.
- 8 PECK 1991, p. 121. See also William Bostick to Jacqueline Folie, 18 October 1960, RCH 72/6.
- 9 Richardson to Robert Thayer, 13 October 1959, CUR/ROB 8/21. For an overview of the collecting of early Netherlandish paintings in the United States, see BORCHERT 2005, p. 204 ff., Coremans' foreword in DETROIT/BRUSSELS 1960, p. 23, FAHY 1998, and RICHARDSON 1960b.
- 10 By January 1960, Detroit was already keenly aware of the possibility they might have to cancel the show. Director Edgar P. Richardson confided to one of the museum trustees that "we are in trouble on the Flemish show and it looks as if I will have to go back to Brussels in the near future to see whether we have an exhibit or don't have one". Richardson to Alan Joslyn, 18 January 1960, CUR/ROB 8/18. On 3 March 1960, Richardson announced to Paul Coremans: "I have to tell you the great exhibition FLANDERS IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY is dead". Richardson to Coremans, 3 March 1960, CUR/ROB 9/16. As Richardson explained to his contact at the State Department, the withdrawal of the Metropolitan and the Philadelphia Museum of Art left "Detroit alone to sustain the American side with important contributions and I decided to cancel". Richardson to Thayer, 6 March 1960, CUR/ROB 8/20.
- 11 Up until the show finally opened in Detroit, Richardson remained optimistic that Belgium might be able to send *Adam* from the *Ghent Altarpiece*. He finally received word from Coremans on 22 August 1960 that due to the Congo crisis, there would be no chance to send either panel across the Atlantic: "Oui, Adam ne viendra pas et la seule raison en est la situation congolaise". Coremans to Richardson, 22 August 1960, RCH 72/6. A short entry journal from 10 August 1960 indicates that Richardson already had a premonition of this: "The only thing that hadn't happened to this exhibition was an international crisis with Belgium in the middle, and made at the United States. Now the Congo has produced that. This will end the last chance of getting the Adam from the Ghent altar". Richardson, 10 August 1960 [169v-170r], Diary, E.P. (Edgar Preston) Richardson Papers, 1893-1994, SI, AAA (Washington, D.C.) (henceforth cited as Richardson Papers).
- 12 Peter Barnet has brought to my attention that the exhibition is surprisingly omitted in Julien Chapuis' historiographic treatment of the study of Netherlandish painting in CHAPUIS 1998. Barnet attributes the omission to the "current low profile" of the museum at the time of Chapuis' essay. See note 30 in BARNET 2008.
- 13 See WASHINGTON /ANTWERP 2006 and LEUVEN 1971.
- 14 BOBER 1962, p. 118. For an overview of Richardson's tenure as director, see ABT 2001, p. 145-151, and PECK 1991, p. 102-121.
- 15 The amount of \$43,866.20 included marine and general insurance, as well as packing costs. Of that total, Bruges paid \$21,696.24 and Detroit \$22,169.96.
- Bruges paid less as they were not charged for objects only on view in the American venue. See Carl Tiedemans to Aquilin Janssens de Bisthoven, 28 April 1961, RCH 72/2, and *Memorandum of Agreement between the City of Bruges and the Detroit Museum of Art Founders Society*, 26 March 1960, RCH 72/2. Through his wife Constance, Richardson was acquainted with David W. Kendall, Special Counsel to the President and a childhood friend of Constance. Richardson initiated contact in December 1958 (Richardson to Kendall, 15 December 1958, CUR/ROB 8/20). By July 1959, Kendall, on behalf of the White House, had confirmed the Navy's availability (Kendall to Richardson, 10 July 1959, CUR/ROB 8/20). Certainly, Richardson deserves much credit for arranging the transportation, the complexity and logistics of which required as much diplomacy, tact, and coordination as securing the loans.
- 16 Richardson, 25 June 1960 [164b], Diary, Richardson Papers. Franklin Page attended the Brussels Art Seminar in 1951. Coremans to Richardson, 22 June 1951, No. 2009, Correspondance extérieure, Detroit – Dr E.P. Richardson and Dr F.W. Robinson, Exposition Detroit, Archives of the Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives, KIK-IRPA, Brussels (henceforth cited as KIK-IRPA Exposition Detroit). My thanks to Robrecht Janssen for scans of this letter and other KIK-IRPA archival documents cited. On 9 June 2015 he stumbled upon the uninventoried Detroit exhibition files at the KIK-IRPA and has graciously shared with me a sampling of the documents.
- 17 In a long letter to Richardson dated 9 March 1959, Coremans attached notes on a prototype of an air-conditioned van developed by the Ministry of Public Instruction of Belgium (*Note sur le transport en atmosphère conditionnée*). Coremans to Richardson, 9 March 1959, KIK-IRPA Exposition Detroit.
- 18 The exhibition is first cited by Nathan Stolow in STOLOW 1966, p. 37-39, and thereafter, in subsequent publications such as STOLOW 1979, p. 98-99, and STOLOW 1986, p. 130-132; 187-188.
- 19 Bruges published its own Dutch-language exhibition catalogue (*De Eeuw van de Vlaamse Primitieven*) independently.
- 20 The DIA hired New York-based publicist Peter Pollack to "undertake a promotion and publicity campaign on behalf of the exhibition [...]". Richardson to Pollack, 4 April 1960, RCH 72/7. The French version of the catalogue was published under the title, *Le siècle des Primitifs flamands*.
- 21 BOBER 1962, p. 117.
- 22 In 2013 the Centre produced a publication

- on illuminated manuscripts. See VANWIJNSBERGHE 2013.
- 23 Richardson to Coremans, 21 October 1960, RCH 72/2. Jacqueline Folie was researcher in the Centre national de Recherches “Primitifs flamands”.
- 24 Richardson to William Birenbaum, memorandum, 1 November 1960, CUR/ROB 9/15.
- 25 Richardson to Coremans, 28 July 1960, CUR/ROB 9/15.
- 26 Joseph Rishel to Yao-Fen You, email, 1 March 2013. Rishel and his late wife Anne d’Harnoncourt were friendly with the Richardsons, having met them in 1972 when he and Anne moved to Philadelphia, where the Richardsons had subsequently moved. The full quote reads: “I was just getting interested in Flemish things when the Bruges show was on but never saw it. When I got to graduate school (Chicago) two years later the cat. was a kind of bible”. Amy Golahny also recalls that the exhibition was considered “mythical” when she was in graduate school in the 70s. Amy Golahny, conversation with author, 26 April 2015. I am grateful to George Keyes for suggesting that I be in touch with Rishel.
- 27 Coremans to Richardson, 1 August 1960 and 20 July 1960, CUR/ROB 9/15; Coremans to Richardson, 25 October 1960, RCH 72/2.
- 28 Richardson, 25 June 1960 [165], Diary, Richardson Papers.
- 29 Coremans to Richardson, 10 March 1960, CUR/ROB 9/16. See note 10 for discussion of Richardson’s decision to cancel the show on 3 March 1960.
- 30 Coremans to Richardson, 14 April 1953, Richardson Papers; Richardson to Coremans, 16 April 1953, No. 2008, KIK-IRPA Exposition Detroit.
- 31 For Richardson’s many contributions to American art, see Woolfenden’s tribute in WOOLFENDEN 1977.
- 32 RICHARDSON 1936 and RICHARDSON 1939. Richardson’s publications from the 30s and early 40s were duly cited in Julius Held’s 1942 *Art Bulletin* literature review. See HELD 1942, p. 393.
- 33 I have not been able to ascertain exactly when Coremans asked Richardson to write the Detroit volume for the *Corpus*, but we know that in the winter of 1956 he initiated cleaning and documenting the Van Eyck “in preparation for making new photographs for a Detroit volume of the Belgian corpus, *Les Primitifs Flamands*, which I had been asked to prepare”. RICHARDSON 1956a, p. 230. We can also establish that he remained committed to the project as late as 1961, when he wrote to the State Department asking for a grant-in-aid to bring Lucie Ninane to the United States to assist on the volume. As he explained, “the director of the Centre asked me years ago if I would prepare the Detroit volume [...] I was delighted to undertake the volume but, being the chief administrative office of a great, complicated and busy city museum, I found it impossible to pursue the work in the detail that is necessary [...] The material has been lying for four or five years on my table and I see no possibility of completing the project at this rate. Would it be possible for us to have the assistance of your program of cultural exchange to bring to this country a young Belgian scholar to help me?” Richardson to Reid Bird, 14 July 1961, Richardson Papers. Ninane was an assistant curator at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels, who had worked on the Flemish exhibition catalogue. She had taken a leave of absence (one year) from her job to devote herself fully to the catalogue as an affiliate of the Centre. See KIK-IRPA, Archives I, 110, Lucie Ninane to Coremans, 19 December 1958.
- 34 See the obituaries published in the *New York Times* (MCGILL 1985) and the *American Art Journal (In Memoriam)* 1985) for further biographical information on Richardson.
- 35 See PAUWELS 2005 for further discussion.
- 36 RICHARDSON 1956b.
- 37 Quoted in PAUWELS 2005, p. 331.
- 38 RICHARDSON 1960, p. 1-2. For an overview of the history of the Archives, see WOOLFENDON, BOWMAN and NATHAN 1983. The parallels between the Centre and the Archives were not lost on contemporary observers. When Nicole Verhaegen of the Centre in 1955 acknowledged receipt of literature on the Archives of American Art from Richardson, she noted the parallels in their missions: “Dear Mr. Richardson [...] We have carefully read the brochure which is quite interesting for us on more than one aspect. Particularly as the purpose and method of the Archives are, though concerning another field of Art History, to a certain extent [*sic*] similar to those of our own Centre”. Verhaegen to Richardson, 2 August 1955, Richardson Papers.
- 39 “[...] qu’au job que nous avons entrepris ensemble et que – ensemble – nous mènerons à bien et à bonne fin”. Coremans to Richardson, 22 February 1960, CUR/ROB 9/17.
- 40 Richardson, 25 June 1960 [166b], Diary, Richardson Papers. While Langui provided the project with the necessary political support on behalf of Belgium, Richardson was not always convinced of Langui’s efficacy.
- 41 Richardson to Stillman, 25 August 1959, CUR/ROB 8/18.
- 42 Richardson to Buck, 5 December 1960, RCH 72/2. Buck, who was the founding director of the Intermuseum Conservation Laboratory at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, was instrumental to the successful move of the works of art across the ocean, in particular the return trip of objects back to Belgium in blistering January. He made many useful and practical recommendations, including loading “the Belgian containers in a heated area” to “make the best use of the available insulation in preventing condensation” and breaking the trip up and letting “the vans be allowed to warm up in a heated garage for an hour or so” should the weather during the drive to Brooklyn [where the vans were loaded on to the ship] be severely cold. For the full list of recommendations, see Buck to Richardson, *Recommendation relating to the return of the Belgian owned objects to Bruges*, n.d., RCH 72/3.
- 43 For Richardson’s knighting, see Coremans to Richardson, telegram, 27 December 1960, and copy of letter from the minister of Foreign Affairs to Coremans, 5 January 1961, both in CUR/ROB 9/15; for discussion of Robinson’s knighting, see Robinson to Coremans, 9 August 1962, CUR/ROB 9/15; for the official knighthood dates, Rita Vander Zwalm [Embassy of Belgium] to Yao-Fen You, email, 4 June 2015.
- 44 Richardson to Coremans, 16 January 1961, RCH 72/2.
- 45 “Je ne sais trop que dire à propos de votre grande décision. D’un côté, je l’approuve complètement, allant même jusqu’à vous jalouser (enfin du temps pour travailler!); d’un autre côté, je ne puis que regretter votre départ d’un grand et bon musée dans un coin des États-Unis où, sans figure de proue, un musée peut bien vite tomber dans l’anonymat ou se tromper de direction. Tout ce que je puis faire c’est d’abord respecter votre décision, puis vous souhaiter le meilleur des succès à Winterthur: à vous deux d’abord, au Musée ensuite. Il est dommage que pour l’été à venir, vous n’ayez pas pu accepter l’invitation de Craig Smyth, mais on se reverra ici, cela est certain”. Coremans to Richardson, 7 February 1962, Richardson Papers. Coremans is referring to Smyth’s invitation to Richardson to teach the NYU seminar course in Brussels. Richardson to Craig Hugh Smyth, 15 December 1961, RCH 46/12 (N1961).
- 46 Richardson to William Birenbaum, memorandum, 1 November 1960, CUR/ROB 9/15.
- 47 Robinson to Mrs Keith Davis, 2 October 1967, CUR/ROB 9/3.