



# Sympathy or strategy? A close look at the Belgian exhibitions of modern and contemporary art organized in Argentina in 1946 and 1948

Laurens Dhaenens

## How to Cite:

DHAENENS, L. Sympathy or strategy? A close look at the Belgian exhibitions of modern and contemporary art organized in Argentina in 1946 and 1948. *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, Campinas, SP, v. 7, n. 3, 95-116, sept.2023. DOI: 10.20396/modos.v7i3.8673725. Disponível em: <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/mod/article/view/8673725>.

**Image** [modified]: The Revenge [detail], René Magritte, 1938, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp. [editors' selection].

# Sympathy or strategy? A close look at the Belgian exhibitions of modern and contemporary art organized in Argentina in 1946 and 1948

Simpatia ou estratégia? Uma análise detalhada das exposições belgas de arte moderna e contemporânea organizadas na Argentina em 1946 e 1948

Laurens Dhaenens\*

## ABSTRACT

The paper explores two Belgian art exhibitions that took place in Buenos Aires in 1946 and 1948: the *Exposición de arte belga moderno* and the *Exposición de arte belga contemporáneo*. Although these exhibitions appear to be part of the same cultural initiative showcasing Belgian art in Argentina after World War II, a closer examination reveals that they were distinct endeavors with differing institutional frameworks and objectives. The study offers a detailed analysis of the institutional context and discourse surrounding both exhibitions from a Belgian viewpoint. Specifically, it delves into the roles of Louis Piérard, the Argentine Commission for Intellectual Cooperation, the Belgian community in Buenos Aires, and the Belgian ministries of Foreign Affairs and Public Education. As such, it unravels the meaning and impact of the exhibitions in a post-war context. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how these exhibitions reflect Belgium's evolving approach to international cultural diplomacy.

## KEYWORDS

Exhibition Studies. Belgian Art History. Argentina. Cultural Diplomacy.

## RESUMO

O artigo explora duas exposições de arte belga que ocorreram em Buenos Aires em 1946 e 1948: a *Exposición de arte belga moderna* e a *Exposición de arte belga contemporáneo*. Embora essas exposições pareçam fazer parte da mesma iniciativa cultural de difundir a arte belga na Argentina após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, um exame mais detalhado revela que foram empreendimentos distintos, com estruturas e objetivos institucionais diferentes. O artigo oferece uma análise detalhada do contexto institucional e do discurso que envolveu as duas exposições do ponto de vista belga. Especificamente,

ele investiga os papéis de Louis Piérard, da Comissão Argentina de Cooperação Intelectual, da comunidade belga em Buenos Aires e dos ministérios belgas das Relações Exteriores e da Educação Pública. Dessa forma, ele revela o significado e o impacto das exposições no contexto pós-guerra. Por fim, o artigo demonstra como essas exposições refletem os avanços da Bélgica em relação à diplomacia cultural internacional.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Estudos de Exposições. História da Arte Belga. Argentina. Diplomacia Cultural.

On the fifth of October 1946, the *Exposición de arte belga moderno* opened its doors at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Buenos Aires. Roughly 350 artworks were on display, including artworks by (well-known) artists such as Emile Claus, Henri de Braekeleer, De Gouves de Nuncques, Félicien Rops, Gustave De Smet, Constantin Meunier, James Ensor, René Magritte and Louis Van Lint. The objective of the exhibition was to represent the development of Belgian modern art from the nineteenth century to the contemporary experiments of the Groupe de Jeune Peinture Belge. Exactly two years later, a second large-scale Belgian art exhibition took over the halls of the national museum. The *Exposición de arte belga contemporáneo* focused on contemporary art but as the museum director Juan Zucchi specified, it represented “all the schools and tendencies of modern art”, including nineteenth-century movements (Zucchi, 1948: 14). The result was a strikingly similar exhibition as the one of 1946, with multiple artists present in both shows<sup>1</sup>. However, with 108 artworks, the 1948 exhibition was smaller in scale.

Although the two exhibitions have not yet been subject of scholarship, they raise all sorts of questions about the cultural, economic and political relationship that they represented in a post-War context. Paul-Henri Spaak, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that moment, was well aware of the role art could play in rebuilding Belgium's international image and position. In 1946, he lowered the budget for political propaganda while asking for the "necessary funding" to send "our artists or their artworks abroad to enhance the country's prestige"<sup>2</sup>. In 1947, the Commission of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade echoed Spaak's concerns in the Chamber of Representatives and looked in his direction to act:

Several members of the Commission once again emphasized the need to ensure our cultural and artistic influence throughout the world. Today, no country is indifferent to this form of expansion. Pre-war England, for example, had no such concern, but has now considerably expanded the British Council. France, which, despite its momentary difficulties, has never shone brighter in the world of the thought [and] beauty, has a department at the Quai d'Orsay, specialized in the work of intellectual and artistic expansion. Likewise, we believe that our Minister of Foreign Affairs should be in charge of disseminating our books and artworks around the world, and presiding over the intellectual exchanges that will intensify under the aegis of Unesco (Piérard, 1947: 22-23).

By 1948, Belgium, a member of UNESCO, had signed an agreement with Luxembourg and the United States of America (the Fulbright Commission) to promote educational exchange, and had established bilateral cultural agreements with France (February 22 1946), the United Kingdom (April 17 1946), the Netherlands (May 16 1946), Czechoslovakia (March 6, 1947), Norway (February 20, 1948), Luxembourg (March 27, 1948), Italy (November 29, 1948) and Egypt (November 28, 1949) (Deleixhe, 1959: 3-14). In addition, the Minister of Public Education, Herman Vos, increased the budget for independent theatres, literary awards, the prix de Rome and travel grants for artists and writers<sup>3</sup>. While these agreements were intended to promote

cooperation and cultural and intellectual exchange, and to prevent future conflict, they often continued to enact colonial and imperialist ideas and practices, which is obvious from the discourse of the Commission of Foreign Affairs and Foreign that highlights the importance of 'expansion' and 'influence' abroad.

Exhibitions have played a significant role in international politics since the nineteenth century, and more specifically 1851, when the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London was organized, and major international exhibitions emerged as prominent vehicles for advancing national propaganda. The phenomenon of international expositions and world's fairs reached its peak at the turn of the century but continued after the world wars (Geppert, 2013: 7-8). Following the disruption by World War II, Western nations used the exhibition format, accompanied by various forms of cultural diplomacy, to project positive narratives about Western and European culture. It gave rise to cultural agreements, but also to all sorts of national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations that had to facilitate this. In Belgium, the Service de la Propagande Artistique (SPA) and the Comité Belge des Expositions, des Foires et d'Expansion Nationale were important actors (cf. *infra*) were created. In other words, the exhibitions were entangled in political relations and express (explicitly or implicitly) power structures (Guevara, 2021: 295; McDonald, 1999: 40-61).

Despite the organisation of two Belgian art exhibitions in Buenos Aires, there was no cultural agreement between Belgium and Argentina. The main reason was that Argentina had an ambiguous reputation in Belgium. Argentina was considered an unreliable international partner, plagued by political corruption and overt Nazi and Fascist sympathies. Belgium voted together with seven other nations, including the U.S.S.R., against Argentina's admission to the United Nations at the San Francisco Conference of 1945<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, however, it viewed the South American country as a potential

economic world power in a time when significant resources for a Western world were in ruins. The Flemish newspaper *De Nieuwe Standaard* described the country as “the supplier of the future”, the upcoming “‘States’ of the South”, and urged the government to start trade negotiations<sup>5</sup>. In December 1945, the newspaper sighted with relief: “Finally a financial mission to South America”<sup>6</sup>. The absence of Belgian diplomatic representation between September 1945 and September 1946 – a tumultuous period in Argentina that saw Juan Perón rise to power – had also complicated the relationship. When Marcel-Henri Jaspar left for Buenos Aires to take up the vacant position of Belgian ambassador, Walter Loridan, Chief of Staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, informed him that the most pressing issues were the safeguarding of millions of Belgian investments from nationalization, and ensuring the supply of corn and meat at prices affordable for Belgium’s still unsteady economy (Duerloo, 1998: 88-89; Jaspar, 1972: 239)<sup>7</sup>. Briefly put, there was a need to rebuild the international relationship, which raises questions whether the exhibitions played a role in this process.

There is very little information available about the exhibitions. To reconstruct their meaning, this paper studies the discourse about the exhibitions and the actors involved in newspaper articles, exhibitions catalogues, governmental reports, and documents related to specific institutions and persons. Among the politicians and governmental organisations, one person stands out: Louis Piérard, a Belgian writer and socialist politician who devoted a large part of his career to promoting Belgian art. Piérard was the mayor of Bougnies, a small town in the South of Belgium, Deputy for the district of Mons, chairman of the Franco-Belgian parliamentary group and vice-chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission. He travelled extensively, including to Egypt, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Brasil, and detailed many of his travel experiences in articles and books. Cultural political topics dominated his career, more specifically Belgium’s community issue, works’ leisure time, the significance of artists’ rights,



and the importance of art in historical and contemporary international relations. Paul Fierens, then director of the Royal Fine Arts Museums of Belgium, remember him as a “missionary” of Belgian art, who spoke with “faith, fervor and devotion” in the “Old and New World” (Fierens, 1951: 986-987). Piérard's involvement in the *Exposición de arte moderno* in Buenos Aires is particularly interesting, not only because it highlights his role in Belgium's international cultural promotion, but also because it enables us to categorize the two exhibitions as distinct types of cultural diplomacy. The first is grounded in a pre-war era, while the second embodies a post-war approach.

### **The Belgian Modern Art Exhibition of 1946**

According to the newspaper *Le Soir*, the idea of organizing the Belgian modern art exhibition emerged during a meeting between Louis Piérard and Carlos Ibarguren, an Argentine writer and politician who was president of the Academia Argentina de Letras, member of the Comisión Nacional de Cultura and director of the Argentine Comisión Nacional de Cooperación Intelectual. The two men met in Buenos Aires in the margins of the P.E.N. conference in 1936 (Gheude, 1951)<sup>8</sup>. Piérard, who founded the Belgian P.E.N. division, was an inexhaustible promotor of Belgian art abroad. He gave lectures, made exhibitions and wrote numerous texts about art<sup>9</sup>. One of his most effective institutional instruments to bring Belgian art on an international stage was the Association de Propagande Artistique Belge à l'Étranger (APABE) that was founded in 1926 as a division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade. Although Piérard was never the president nor vice-president of the association, he was the person in charge (De Potter, 2008). During its five years of existence, the APABE organized and supported many international Belgian art exhibitions, including in

Luxembourg, France, Germany, Algeria, Poland, the United States of America and Argentina<sup>10</sup>. The association was discontinued in 1931 due to a lack of government funding. In a final report, Piérard lamented how the Belgian State had failed to understand the importance of association's mission, despite the successful events that it had organized abroad. Recurrent calls for more budget fell on deaf ears<sup>11</sup>. Still, the end of the association did not stop Piérard from promoting Belgian art abroad before and after the War, the *Exposición de arte belga moderno* being a case in point.

Argentine art critic Julio Payró described the Belgian Modern Art Exhibition as an initiative by Piérard, supported by the Argentine Commission for Intellectual Cooperation but, surprisingly, with almost no help of the Belgian government<sup>12</sup>. *Le Soir* also highlighted the absence of government support, referring to the government's opposition towards the project<sup>13</sup>. As Payró put it, Piérard realized the project at a difficult time, "when his homeland [wa]s barely recovered from the wounds of the great world conflict"<sup>14</sup>. As a result, the Argentinian critic – who had worked and lived in Belgium – was not convinced by the result. He thought the selection was arbitrary and many important artists were missing:

If Belgium was not still troubled by the aftermath of the dreadful war to which it fell victim, if the public authorities of that country had given effective help, if the Museums of Brussels, Ghent, Antwerp and Liège had lent significant works from their collections, the exhibition would have been more complete and substantial, for the greater glory of Belgian art. In the circumstances in which it was held, it is understandable that the exhibition did not live up to the real value of what the artists of Belgium have given to the world<sup>15</sup>.

The narrative in Belgian newspapers slightly differs from the one offered by Payró. They unanimously praised the project that, as they claimed, cost the Belgian State nothing. The exhibition is described as an initiative of the Argentinian Commission for Intellectual Cooperation. Piérard acted upon invitation. It was "an opportunity" for Belgium, "a gesture of



sympathy” from Argentina that would open up new markets for Belgian art<sup>16</sup>. In the heydays of cultural diplomacy, “sympathy” and “opportunity” were not neutral concepts. They suggest that the exhibition was an instrument to reinforce relations between both countries. However, it remains unclear what advantages Argentina gained from funding a Belgian art exhibition. Moreover, considering the Belgian government's initial opposition to the 1946 exhibition, it is puzzling why a second exhibition was held in 1948 under the auspices of the Belgian Ministry of Economy.

The Argentine Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (CNIC) was created in 1936 during the so called *Década Infame* (1930-1943)<sup>17</sup>. The goal was to promote Argentine culture abroad, stimulate international exchange in science, literature, philosophy, education and the fine arts, and collaborate with the International Commission of Intellectual Collaboration that was based in Paris and the International Office of Education based in Genève<sup>18</sup>. In practice however, the CNIC was a political instrument used to strengthen control on the arts and to promote Argentina as a dynamic nation that fosters traditions and maintains strong cultural ties with Europe<sup>19</sup>. The Belgian art exhibition also functioned this way: it shed light on the “spiritual development of Argentina”, producing a positive image of the nation abroad. This becomes clear from Piérard’s exposé in the Chamber of Representatives in 1946. The politician praised the exhibition as an example of good foreign cultural policy. Unlike the Belgian Commission of Intellectual Collaboration, it demonstrated how national commissions for intellectual cooperation should work:

(...) I would like to point out to the House that the country I come from, Argentina, has organized an exhibition of modern Belgian art. I was told: "We know that Belgium has a great school of painting. We just don't know about it. Is it possible to see it and organize an exhibition here?" (...). This curiosity must be the basis of all intellectual activity, not only of U.N.E.S.C.O., but also of the national commissions that will depend on it. I hope that in Belgium there will be a national commission for intellectual cooperation, a sort of higher council for the arts and letters. We need it<sup>20</sup>.

Piérard argued for Belgium's admission to UNESCO, pointing out the importance of a "constant connection" between "different cultures" as a means to make and preserve peace, and create "a common ideal of civilization". He paraphrased Ernest Renan, stating that civilization is not born from scientific progress but from culture; "science without conscience (...) is nothing but 'a lure'"<sup>21</sup>. Piérard openly privileged European culture, even though he also recognized the values of individual cultures and cultural diversity in the world. The War had shown European culture was indestructible and superior. Hence, he called for a European direction of UNESCO, adding that from an intellectual point of view Europe stretches beyond the Atlantic Ocean to Latin America:

Europe, gentlemen, as unfortunate as it is, as despised as it is by certain ungrateful sons, Europe is nonetheless a part of the world, this little peninsula of Asia, as Valérie used to say, which gave the world the Acropolis, Chartres Cathedral and Saint Peter's in Rome, which also gave Racine and Beethoven, which finally, I would add, gave Christianity, Tolstoy and Dostoievsky, who belong to the European community. All this is something, and that's why, Mr. Minister, I'm asking you to instruct your delegation at the Paris Conference to speak out in favor of a European direction for UNESCO. I might also add (...)that Europe, from an intellectual point of view (...) extends beyond the Continent, as far as Latin America. You're closer to Paris or Rome when you're in Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro than you are to New York, although the distance in kilometers is the same. In this respect, Latin America is Europe's extension; it's Europe beyond the seas<sup>22</sup>.

Piérard was a francophone hardliner who believed in a unity between Europe and Latin America, based on the idea of a common Latin culture. He saw in this identification the possibility to create a new world order in which Europe and Latin America stand together as a cultural stronghold against the growing influence of the United States of America.

The cultural affinity that Piérard personally experienced in Argentina

- and that was shared by many of his fellow countrymen - was shaped by the country's colonial history and European migration flows<sup>23</sup>. Argentina is a nation shaped by Spanish, Italian, French, German and English migration but was also the home of an important Belgian community that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and grew well into the twentieth century (Vloeberghs, 2016: 6-8)<sup>24</sup>. This community played an important role in the exhibition of 1946. According to Juan Zocchi, the director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Buenos Aires, the Belgian community in Buenos Aires "practically subsidized the exhibition" and donated 19 paintings and 3 sculptures to the museum, which facilitated a Belgian contemporary art room on the ground floor (Zucchi, 1948: 13). Some Belgian newspapers also referred to the donation. *Le Peuple* wrote:

The Belgian colony of Buenos-Aires, which is the most powerful in the world, has made a magnificent gesture that has had a great impact here. As soon as the exhibition opened, it bought some of the works on display for almost half a million francs and donated them to the National Museum of Buenos-Aires<sup>25</sup>.

*La Nation Belge* and *La Dernière Heure* mentioned the donation before the exhibition opened, reinforcing the idea that the Belgian community indeed played a major role in organizing the event<sup>26</sup>. Piérard recurrently highlighted that the costs of the exhibition were not covered by the Belgian government but by Argentina and by a "modest" fee on the sale of the artworks<sup>27</sup>. In other words, the investment of the Belgian community took away the risk of the venture and reveals another dimension of the exhibition: it was a cultural manifestation of the Belgian community living in Argentina. Belgian art became part of the art historical narrative represented in the National Museum of Fine Arts, the heart of the art scene of Buenos Aires. Through the involvement of this community, Belgian art referred not only to a country far away, but also to a community active in the country and the cultural connection that existed.

In summary, the exhibition was an Argentine initiative in the sense that it was a collaboration between Louis Piérard, the CNIC and the Belgian community in Buenos Aires. The involvement of the three stakeholders reveals the multifaceted significance of the exhibition. It functioned as a diplomatic tool for both Argentina and Belgium, primarily fostering a positive perception of Argentina in Belgium. As Piérard stated, it was an example of good international cultural policy, and it reinforced the idea of Argentina as a strong emerging economic nation. Moreover, the exhibition served as a means to fortify the cultural ties between the two countries and reinforce the notion of a broader cultural linkage between Europe and Latin America. At the same time, Piérard's discourse reveals a neocolonial attitude that grants Europe and European culture a superior position. Latin America is represented as an extension of Europe and an international body such as UNESCO needs above all a European direction. The Eurocentric vision also returns in the patriotic actions of the Belgian community. The active participation of the Belgian community in the process exemplified their desire to establish a cultural presence within the capital. Through their generous donation, they firmly embedded Belgian art within the permanent collection of the national museum, which had predominantly featured artworks from Spanish, French, Italian, and other national "schools"<sup>28</sup>.

### **The Economic Mission of 1948**

In terms of institutional framework, the *Exposición de Arte Belga Contemporáneo* diverged significantly from the *Exposición de Arte Belga Moderno*. The former exhibition was an integral component of a comprehensive economic mission to Argentina, orchestrated by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the Ministry of Economy, and the Ministry of Public Instruction<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, it was part of a propaganda initiative led by the Trade Expansion Division of the Ministry

of Economy and the Comité Belge des Expositions, des Foires et d'Expansion Nationale (COBELEXFO), which represented Belgian commerce and industries at international fairs. The mission consisted of an industrial exhibition and a fine art exhibition. The industrial exhibition displayed a wide range of objects, including heavy machinery and delicate products such as lace and chasubles<sup>30</sup>. The *Exposición de arte contemporáneo* took place at the National Museum of Fine Arts of Buenos Aires and showed 108 Belgian paintings, sculptures, engravings and drawings. Juan Zucchi highlighted in the catalog the unity of the industrial and fine art exhibitions. Craftsmanship was the common element of all Belgian production:

Yes, there's no doubt about it, the hand that forged and precisely filigreed the machines, appliances and objects featured in the Belgian Products Exhibition in the "Ambassadors" pavilions is the same hand that gave shape and color to the works of art in the Contemporary Belgian Art Exhibition on display in our Museum (Zucchi, 1958: 15).

The economic mission received a lot of attention in the Belgian press, mostly because economic relations between both countries radically changed in the months before the inauguration. In early 1946, economic traffic between both countries flourished. Yet, by the time the event started, the National Bank of Belgium had suspended all export to Argentina because the country lacked the credit to cover import costs. *Le Soir* described the economic shift as: “First we were debtors. Then we became creditors”<sup>31</sup>. According to the newspaper *Het Volk* “a commercial propaganda exhibition had rarely opened under such bad omens”<sup>32</sup>. The situation rendered the project almost pointless since many of the products could not be traded. In addition, other economic issues were troubling Belgo-Argentinian relations, such as high prices, late deliveries, and frozen investor funds<sup>33</sup>. Jean Duvieusart, the Belgian minister of economy who joined the Argentinian mission, returned home with the message that “once the issue [of the lack of credit] is resolved – and I can already reveal that we have made good progress

– great possibilities will emerge in Argentina”<sup>34</sup>. Briefly put, Duvieusart was optimistic. The exhibition and the meetings with political figures, including the Argentine president, were successful. He told the Belgian press that a “sympathy” existed among the Argentine people for Belgium which would benefit future economic trade and that the Belgian community, a “Belgian colony of quality”, played an important role<sup>35</sup>. The idea of ‘sympathy’, that there exists a friendly relationship between both nations, and the presence of compatriots in the Argentine capital had to reassure the Belgian public that the situation would be resolved.

There are few articles about the contemporary art exhibition and most of them are short and descriptive. Louis Piérard, who was not involved in the organization, was the only critical voice. He considered the event disorganized and too expensive—it cost the treasury between 10 and 12 million francs. It was an example of why the government needed to bring back the responsibility of international propaganda of the arts to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ideally by creating a position of Director General for Artistic and Cultural Affairs<sup>36</sup>. In 1945, national and international artistic propaganda became the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Instruction. Emil Langui, a socialist art critic and art historian, headed the Service de la Propagande Artistique (SPA) and organized many exhibitions in Belgium and abroad<sup>37</sup>. The SPA proposed a new approach to artistic propaganda, different from Piérard’s and the APABE’s. At the start, it was a direct instrument of the Belgian government to promote Belgian art nationally and internationally. It mostly answered to the demands of foreign governments and mainly functioned in the framework of bilateral and multilateral cultural agreements<sup>38</sup>. This worked in both ways. In 1948, for example, a Turner exhibition was organized in Brussels as part of the bilateral Anglo-Belgian cultural agreement<sup>39</sup>. In other words, the SPA did not operate like the APABE that was much more independent. The APABE even subsidized artists’ initiatives if they contributed to the dissemination of Belgian art abroad<sup>40</sup>.



The contemporary art exhibition, just like the 1946 exhibition, represented Belgium as a modern nation with strong cultural traditions. It displayed various art schools and movements from the nineteenth century to the emergence of the artist group *La Jeune Peinture Belge* in 1945, including realism, impressionism, expressionism and surrealism. Although some artworks move towards abstraction, pure abstract art was absent. Sixteen artists, such as James Ensor, René Guiette, René Magritte, Constantin Meunier, Isidore Opsomer, and Rik Wouters, featured in both exhibitions. However, the quality of the exhibitions differed. The 1948 exhibition had fewer but better works. Out of a total of one hundred and eighty artworks, thirty-six came from national museums and twenty-one from Belgian private collections (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948). In other words, Payró's criticism of the 1946 exhibition for its lack of great masters and masterpieces does not apply here. The presence of pieces, including masterpieces by Magritte (*La Vengeance*, 1938, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp), Jacob Smits (*Le Cortège des Rois Mages*, 1925, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp), Ensor (*Squelettes volant se chauffer*, 1889, Private Collection of baron R. Gendebien), and Delvaux (*La Visite*, 1939, Private Collection of Carlo van den Bosch), shows that the exhibition was not primarily a commercial venture, but a cultural diplomacy organized in the framework of trade negotiations.

## Two Types of Cultural Diplomacy?

The two exhibitions in Argentina did not travel to any other country but were part of a wave of Belgian cultural diplomacy after WWII. The 1946 exhibition in Buenos Aires was followed by a similar exhibition in Cairo, also coordinated by Piérard. In 1948, after the trade mission, a large-scale project, supported by the SPA, *Cent ans d'art belge* travelled from Helsinki to Oslo and (in 1949) Prague<sup>41</sup>. In addition to survey exhibitions, many other

types of Belgian art exhibitions were organized abroad, most importantly the series of exhibitions of the Jeune Peinture belge (The Young Belgian Painters). The Young Belgian Painters that united a heterogeneous group of artists, was a non-profit organization, founded in 1945 with the goal of “representing in Belgium and abroad, young Belgian painters and sculptors of quality, to support and encourage them by all means, in particular by the organization of artistic events of all kinds, exhibitions, trips, publications, creation of prizes, grants, loans, etc”<sup>42</sup>. It was a private initiative aimed at developing and internationalizing the contemporary Belgian art scene. In three years, the group exhibited in at least seven countries. To this end, they collaborated with numerous actors and (governmental) organizations. The group fell apart in 1948, when René Lust, founder and patron died. (Mertens, 1975). As mentioned above, both exhibitions in Buenos Aires included a section dedicated to the Young Belgian Painters.

As a result, the 1946 and 1948 appear as twin exhibitions that came in fact from very different families. They signify a shift in Belgium’s international art propaganda policy, transferring the responsibility from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Public Instruction. In addition, considering the institutional frameworks, the 1946 and 1948 exhibitions represent two types of cultural diplomacy: one driven by a myriad of stakeholders, acting semi-independently of the Belgian government, and one in which the government was in charge. The former was rooted in interbellum cultural politics and the work and strategies of the APABE. The latter was a post-War approach that suited the international framework of bilateral and multilateral agreements, and centralized the national and international promotion of Belgian art. The first one generated a strong discourse, was a commercial success and resulted in the foundation of a Belgian art gallery in the National Museum of Fine Arts of Buenos Aires. Briefly put, it was successful although it didn't have the long-term result that Piérard was aiming for. It did not lead to a continuation

of his project nor to the reestablishment of the APABE or a similar kind of organization. The 1948 exhibition, on the other hand, was part of an economic mission that had a clear goal: to reestablish the trade relationship. As with international expositions, there were many companies involved and a wide range of products were on display. In other words, the fine art section that represented the cultural facets of the “Belgian spirit” was part of a larger whole. As a result, the exhibition was less commercial than the 1946 exhibition that relied on the sale of artworks. For the travelling exhibition *Cent ans d'art belge*, the government even went further and selected one hundred masterworks. The focus was on quality. The exhibitions had to stage the cultural power of the nation that had suffered during the War.

The discourse of both exhibitions highlights a good relation between the two countries, despite the complicating political and economic issues that prevailed at the time. The exhibitions are presented as expressions of “curiosity” and “sympathy” that would benefit future cultural and economic cooperation. Interestingly, there is no mention of Argentine art or Argentine culture. The focus lies on the presence of Belgian art and culture in Argentina. When the Belgian press discusses the creation of a Belgian gallery in the National Museum of Buenos Aires, it refers only to the presence of other European nations in the museum. Additionally, the importance of the Belgian colony in Buenos Aires is repeatedly praised. In other words, the discourse of “curiosity” and “sympathy” did not imply an equal relationship between the two nations. Rather, it expressed a neocolonial Eurocentric worldview. When Piérard stated, “[y]ou are closer to Paris or Rome when you are in Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro than when you are in New York,” he not only depicted Latin America as an extension of Europe but also as a continent where Europe, and Belgium in particular, should hold a more prominent presence. In the aftermath of WWII, Fine Art Exhibitions that supported the idea of European art as indestructible and superior, were seen as a means to this end.

## References

- DHAENENS, L. Peculiar Relationships on Display. Belgian Art Exhibitions in Philadelphia and Buenos Aires in 1882 and 1887. *Revista de História da Arte. Revista Anual do Instituto de História da Arte/ Nova FCSH*, 14, 2019, pp. 158-175. [https://institutodehistoriadaarte.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/rha\\_14-158-175.pdf](https://institutodehistoriadaarte.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/rha_14-158-175.pdf).
- DE POTTER, C. Du temps où les artistes étaient nos “meilleurs” ambassadeurs : art et politique étrangère dans les relations Belgique – France de 1919 à 1939. *Pyramides*, 15, 2008, online since December 07 2011: <http://journals.openedition.org/pyramides/221>.
- DELEIXHE, G. Les accords culturels signés par la Belgique. *Association des Amis de l'Université de Liège Bulletin Trimestriel*, 31, 4, 1959, p. 3-14.
- DEVOTO, F. *Historia de La inmigración en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2009.
- DUERLOO, L. Perón y la diplomacia belga. In: DE GROOF, B. et al. (eds.). *En los deltas de la memoria. Bélgica y Argentina en los siglos XIX y XX*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998.
- FIERENS, P. L'ami des arts et des artistes. *Savoir et Beauté*. Hommage à Louis Piérard, 12 & 13, 1951, p. 986-987.
- FIORUCCI, F. Reflexiones sobre la gestión cultural bajo el Peronismo. *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, online since February 10 2008, <http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/24372> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.24372>.
- GHEUDE, C. et al. (eds.). *Savoir et Beauté. Art – Lettres – Education – Tourisme*, 11 & 12 (Issue in honor of Louis Piérard), 1951.
- GEPPERT, A. C. T. *Fleeting cities: imperial expositions in fin-de-siècle Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- GUEVARA, P. Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War. In: FRANKE, A. et al. (eds.), *ParaPolitics. Cultural Freedom and the Cold War*, Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt & Sternberg Press, 2021.
- JASPAR, M-H. *Changements de décors*. Paris: Fayard, 1972.
- MCDONALD, G. R. The Launching of American Art in Postwar France: Jean Cassou and the Musée National d'Art Moderne. *American Art*, 1, 1999, p. 40-61.
- MERTENS, P. *La jeune peinture belge 1945-1948*, Brussels: Laconti, 1975.
- MUSEO NACIONAL DE BELLAS ARTES. *Exposición de Arte Belga Contemporáneo*. Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948.
- PIÉRARD, L. Budget du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et du Commerce Extérieur pour l'exercice. In: *Chambre des représentants, Annales parlementaires*, January 23 1947, p. 22-23.
- STOLS, E. Presencia belga en la República Argentina: Emigrantes y expatriados, comerciantes y empresarios (siglos XIX y XX). In: De GROFF, B. et al. (eds.). *En*

*Los Deltas de La Memoria. Bélgica y Argentina En Los Siglos XIX y XX.* Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998.

VAN EETVELT, J. *De kwestie Jaspar. Het einde van een politieke carrière.* Licentiaatsthesis. Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2002.

VLOEBERGHES, L. De Belgische emigratie naar Argentinië 1888-1889. *Brood en Rozen*, n. 3, 2016, p. 6-8.

VERBRUGGEN, C. Hoe literair internationalisme organiseren? De ‘vervlochten’ geschiedenis van de Belgische PEN-club (1922-1931). *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 16, 2011. [https://dbnl.org/tekst/\\_nedo21201101\\_01/\\_nedo21201101\\_01\\_0011.php](https://dbnl.org/tekst/_nedo21201101_01/_nedo21201101_01_0011.php)

ZUCCHI, J. Introducción. *Exposición de Arte Belga Contemporáneo.* Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1948.

## Notes

- \* Laurens Dhaenens is a postdoctoral fellow of the Flemish Research Foundation – FWO at the University of Leuven. E-mail: laurens.dhaenens@arts.kuleuven.be. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8922-8586>.
- 1 For instance: Willem Paerels, Rik Wouters, René Guiette, Marc Meldesohn, René Magritte, James Ensor and Louis Thevenet.
  - 2 S.n. M. Spaak fait un large exposé de la politique étrangère du gouvernement. *Le Soir*, May 5 1946, p. 3.
  - 3 S.n. Au Sénat. Séance du mardi 15 octobre. *Le Soir*, October 16 1946, p.2. I would like to point out that Auguste Buisseret who was the minister of public education before Herman Vos from February 1945 until February 1946, took the first steps in the development of a postwar cultural policy and made a valuable contribution to the creation of UNESCO and the foundation of Belgium’s National Theatre.
  - 4 S.n. België te San Francisco. *De Nieuwe Standaard*, May 6 1945, p. 1.
  - 5 S.n. Argentinië, Leverancier der Toekomst. *De Nieuwe Standaard*, April 4 1945, p. 1; S.n. De onbekwaamdheid der administratie. *De Nieuwe Standaard*, November 12 1945, p. 4.
  - 6 S.n. Eindelijk een [sic.] financieele zending naar Zuid-Amerika. *De Nieuwe Standaard*, December 7 1945, p. 6. Belgium followed the example of the French government who signed a trade agreement with Argentina in October 1945. S.n. Een Fransch-Argentijnsch Handelsakkoord. *De Nieuwe Standaard*, October 26 1945, p. 3.
  - 7 Walter Henri Jaspar (1901-1982) was a liberal politician who ended his career as a diplomat. He was ambassador in Buenos Aires (1946-1951), Rio de Janeiro (1951-1954), Stockholm (1954-1959) and Paris (1959-1966). Buenos Aires was an important post in 1945. The Argentine economy was booming, and many Belgians had investments. Argentina was also an important supplier of food, which Europe could use for its reconstruction. In addition, Jaspar had great admiration for Peron and established a good relationship with him during his stay. See: (Van Eetvelt, 2002, Epiloog). Online: <http://www.ethesis.net/jaspar/jaspar.htm#Epiloog:%20Jaspar%20in%20zijn%20nieuwe%20carri%C3%A8re>.

- 8 S.n. Une exposition d'art belge en Amérique du Sud. *Le Soir*, September 3 1946, s.p.
- 9 About the foundation of the Belgian PEN Club see: (Verbruggen, 2011).
- 10 The diplomatic Archive of Belgium holds the official notebook of the Association belge de propagande artistique à l'étranger that contains the statutes and the minutes of the meetings. Archives diplomatiques de Belgique, Bruxelles, 11 818 bis. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of information available about the Argentine exhibitions, except that Guillaume Carels organized two of them in 1928 (one in Buenos Aires and one in Azul), and that the artist Victor Delhez who moved to Buenos Aires in 1926 organized one in Buenos Aires in 1929. The first one was rather successful since the President of Argentina, Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear inaugurated the exhibition and 81 of the 250 paintings and sculptures were sold.
- 11 Rapport de M. Luis Piérard, Secrétaire de l'Association. Archives diplomatiques de Belgique, Bruxelles, 11 818 bis
- 12 Payró, J. Exposición de arte belga moderno. *Sur*, 146, December 1946, p. 105-106.
- 13 S.n. La Belgique à l'honneur à Buenos-Aires. *Le Soir*, October 19 1946, p. 4.
- 14 Payró, J. Exposición de arte belga moderno. *Sur*, 146, December 1946, p. 105.
- 15 Payró who lived in Belgium until 1927 was familiar with Belgian art history. He studied art at the Academy of Saint Gilles and the Royal Fine Art Academy of Brussels. He frequented Constant Montald's studio and became a life-long friend of Paul Delvaux. As a result, his text about the Belgian exhibition shows his affection towards Belgian modern art that was, in his words, one of the most interesting schools to emerge in Europe in the "contemporary era". Payró, J. Exposición de arte belga moderno. *Sur*, 146, December 1946, p. 105.
- 16 S.n. Tentoonstelling van Belgische kunstwerken in Zuid-Amerika. *De Gentenaar*, July 13 1946, p. 3; S.n. Belgische schilders en beeldhouwers in het buitenland. *Vooruit*, July 18, 1946, n.p.; S.n. Une exposition d'art belge en Amérique du Sud. *Le Soir*, September 3 1946, p. 3; S.n. Une exposition d'art belge à Buenos-Ayres. *La Dernière Heure*, July 14 1946, p. 1.
- 17 The *Infamous Decade* refers to the period between 1930 and 1943 that witnessed the coup d'état by José Felix Uriburu, the rise of Juan Perón, and many political and economic scandals.
- 18 S.n. Nuevas leyes y decretos nacionales: comisión de cooperación intelectual. *El monitor de la educación común*, 763, July 1936, p. 154.
- 19 The course of the CNIC did not alter radically after the first years of the 1943 revolution that put Juan Perón into power. Major changes arrived in 1948. See: (Fiorucci, 2008).
- 20 Séance du mercredi 13 novembre 1946, in *Chambre des représentants - Annales Parlementaires*, 2, 1946, p. 4.
- 21 Séance du mercredi 13 novembre 1946, in *Chambre des représentants - Annales Parlementaires*, 2, 1946, p. 3.
- 22 Séance du mercredi 13 novembre 1946, in *Chambre des représentants - Annales Parlementaires*, 2, 1946, p. 3.
- 23 Marcel-Henri Jaspar also claimed to a friend that he felt much closer to ancient Western Europe in Buenos Aires than he had in Prague. See: (Van Eetvelt, 2002, Epiloog).
- 24 For a general introduction on migration and travel in Argentina see: (Devoto, 2009).
- 25 S.n. Quand la Belgique triomphe en Argentine. *Le Peuple*, October 19 1946, p. 2. Other newspapers,



- such as *La Lanterne* mentioned it as well. S.n. Nos artistes en Amérique du Sud. *La Lanterne*, November 7 1946, p. 4.
- 26 S.n. Une exposition d'art belge en Argentine. *La Nation Belge*, September 27 1946, p. 2; S.n. Une exposition d'art belge à Buenos-Aires. *La Dernière Heure*, September 28 1946, p. 1.
- 27 Piérard also explained that he could count an interesting shipping rates of the Antwerp company Deppe et Worms. S.n. Indrukken van Louis Piérard over Zuid-Amerika. *De Volksgazet*, November 6, 1946, p. 7.
- 28 It was not the first time the Belgian community sought cultural representation in the capital through the fine arts. The first Belgian art exhibition was organized in 1887 by the Belgian consul Ernest Van Bruyssel. However, at that time there was not yet a national museum. In 1910, Belgium participated in the Centennial Celebrations and the painting *Friendship* by Jef Leempoels won the *Grand prix* and entered the collection of the National Museum of Fine Arts of Buenos Aires. For more information see: (Dhaenens, 2019; Stols, 1998: 11).
- 29 S.n. Belgische handelsmissie in Buenos-Aires. *Het Volk*, April 11 1947, p. 3.
- 30 S.n. Onze handelsexpansie: groot succes van Belgische tentoonstelling te Buenos-Ayres. *De Nieuwe Gids*, October 3 1948, p. 5.
- 31 S.n. L'effort commercial belge à l'étranger. M. Duvieusart nous parle de l'exposition de Buenos-Aires. *Le Soir*, October 1 1948, p. 3.
- 32 S.n. 'De Belg. Handelstentoonstelling te Buenos Aires. Deviezenbesparing houdt beurzen gesloten. *Het Volk*, October 9 1948, p. 2.
- 33 Since Perón took power, Belgian investors were no longer allowed to transfer their profits to Belgium. Searching for ways to get access to their funds, they wanted the government to negotiate a solution in the framework of the large-scale international trade agreements of grain, meat and butter. S.n. De financiële moeilijkheden met Argentinië. De verantwoordelijkheden van de Belgische regering. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, November 16 1948, p. 1; S.n. 'De Belg. Handelstentoonstelling te Buenos Aires. Deviezenbesparing houdt beurzen gesloten. *Het Volk*, October 9 1948, p. 2; S.n. Onze handelsbetrekkingen met Argentinië. De Standaard, August 14 1948, p. 1; S.n. Onze handelsbetrekkingen met Argentinië. *De Standaard*, August 8 1948, p. 1; S.n. Une déception... in extremis. *La Libre Belgique*, November 20 1948, p. 2.
- 34 S.n. Grote "mogelijkheden" voor België in Argentinië. *Het Nieuws van de Dag*, September 26 1948, p. 2.
- 35 Exactly what role the Belgian community played is left open. S.n. L'effort commercial belge à l'étranger. *Le Soir*, October 1 1948, p. 3.
- 36 S.n. Onze buitenlandse politiek. Debat in de bevoegde Kamercommissie. *De Standaard*, December 3 1948, n.p.; S.n. Le coût d'une exposition. *La Libre Belgique*, August 28, 1948, n.p..
- 37 In contrast with Piérard, Emil Langui (1903-1980) was first of all an art historian. He graduated from the State University of Ghent and taught art history. He worked for the Museum of Fine Arts of Ghent and became in 1938 cabinet secretary to the Ghent Minister of Public Works. During World War II, he joined the Independence Front, was arrested in 1943 on suspicion of belonging to the Resistance but was released. He immediately began to publish articles advocating the return to Belgium of works of art stolen by the Nazis. In 1946 he became an official (1956 Director General) of the Fine Arts Department within the Belgian Ministry of Education.
- 38 Van Den Berghe, A. Budget du Ministère de l'Instruction Publique et Budget de l'Enseignement pour

l'exercice'. *Chambre des représentants, Annales parlementaires*, March 23 1948, p. 356-357. Piérard criticized this shift of responsibilities from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Public Instruction until the end of his life. S.n. Rue de la loi. *La Dernière Heure*, February 25, 1950, p. 4.

39 S.n. La rétrospective Turner. *Le Soir*, March 3, 1948, p. 2.

40 Notebook of the Association belge de propagande artistique à l'étranger, Archives diplomatiques de Belgique, Bruxelles, 11 818 bis.

41 S.n. Cent ans d'art belge! Cent chefs d'oeuvre! *La Dernière Heure*, August 8 1948, p. 2.

42 "L'association a pour objet de présenter en Belgique et à l'étranger, les jeunes peintres et sculpteurs belges de qualité, de les soutenir et de les encourager par tous moyens, notamment par l'organisation de manifestations artistiques de tous genres, expositions, voyages, publications, création de prix, bourses, prêts, etc". Extrait des statuts de l'asbl La Jeune Peinture Belge, publiés au *Moniteur Belge* du 4 août 1945.

Article received in June 2023. Accepted in August 2023.

[Artigo recebido em Junho de 2023. Aprovado em Agosto de 2023]