

## Batman in Mons

### Saint George and the European Capital of Culture 2015

The historic city of Mons, situated in the French-language region of Belgium, is the European Capital of Culture in 2015. The ambitious programme developed by the city includes numerous exhibitions, all linked in some way to the city and its rich history. An example is the exhibition focusing on Saint George – *l'Homme, le Dragon et la Mort* – which will be on display from the autumn in MAC's Museum of Contemporary Art at the Grand Hornusite in nearby Boussu.

MAC's is the most important museum of contemporary art in French-speaking Belgium. It is situated in an impressive UNESCO-listed former industrial (mining) facility in the Borinage area. The museum's curator (and founder) is Laurent Busine, one of the most authoritative voices on contemporary art in the world of French and Francophone culture, but also a name of note in Flanders, and to a slightly lesser extent in the Netherlands. So, despite its somewhat eccentric and isolated geographical location, MAC's attracts a large number of Flemish and Dutch visitors.

Busine had for many years been intrigued by the legend of Saint George and the innumerable depictions in European art of this saint whose legendary fight with a dragon is re-enacted every year on Trinity Sunday in Mons. The city's candidacy for European Capital of Culture proved to be the perfect moment to dedicate what is thought to be the first ever exhibition to the way in which Saint George was portrayed from the late Middle Ages up to and including the 17th century. Laurent Busine chose to organise the exhibition in collaboration with the museums in Bruges and with myself – until recently curator there – as co-curator, a result of the intense collaboration that began when Bruges was European Capital of Culture, in 2002. This confirms once again the importance of systematic collaboration across language and geographical boundaries in the cultural sector.

Although he may have faded somewhat into obscurity today, for centuries Saint George was one of the most popular and widely portrayed saints not just throughout Europe, but also in Russia and countries with Orthodox Christian traditions and in regions populated by Coptic Christians. Any number of cities – from Freiburg to Ferrara, from Beirut to Amersfoort – and many countries, such as England, Malta, Lithuania and Portugal, chose Saint George as their patron saint – as did the international scout movement. The appeal is not difficult to explain. The entire mythical account – there is not even a shred of historical reality to the legend – is one of the eternal and heroic struggle between good and evil. The legend did not acquire tangible form until the Middle Ages, in the *Legenda aurea*, or 'Golden Legend', the famous 13th-century collection of hagiographies. The legend has it that he was a man from a well-to-do family background who served as an officer in the Imperial Roman armies in the Near East in the third century A.D. His conversion to Christianity is said to have led to his death as a martyr. However, George owes his popularity principally to his role as the saviour of a city that was being terrorised by a dragon which continually demanded human sacrifices. When the daughter of the king is about to offer herself for sacrifice due to a lack of other victims, George offers to fight the dragon on condition that the city converts to the Christian faith. And so it went. Good triumphed over evil, naturally. Notable and characteristic here is that an intrinsically traditional theme – think of Perseus and Andromeda, for example – was revived and given new meaning in a Christian context. A clever strategic choice.

It is not hard to understand why the battle between George and the Dragon continues to appeal to the fantasy and imagination to this day. As stated, the battle between good and evil is an eternal one. In reality, George is no different from Batman or Spiderman – a 'human' with superhuman gifts who fights and above all

defeats the ever-present evil. The fact that at the same time he rescues a beautiful young woman, a symbol of innocence, is also an eternal theme. But there are more elements that have helped ensure that this theme has been portrayed so often. It is unbelievably attractive for an artist to portray this topic: the battle between good and evil, the drama of a fight, the imagination that is needed to depict the mythical but so threatening subject of a dragon, and the contrast between the beautiful (at least we assume so) princess and the abhorrent monster – Beauty and the Beast. And all that in an open landscape – a theme that was of great significance anyway in the 15th and 16th centuries. It could all be the script for a Walt Disney blockbuster. It is in any event a proven success in the visual arts. And it

is precisely this that the exhibition in Mons aims to show: the interaction between and mutual influence of artists in the fields of painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, and the sharing of forms and compositions between artists from all regions of Europe.

A nice measure of this appeal is the fact that one of the most recent and most popular attractions in the Efteling theme park in the Netherlands – nominated time and again as the best entertainment park in Europe – is a roller coaster with the name 'George and the Dragon'. Perhaps a harbinger of the appeal that the MAC's exhibition could have?

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*Translated by Julian Ross*

*The Legend of Saint George (1535-1540) by Lancelot Blondeel*  
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