

EXHIBITION

# ORIGINS

*Imagining the Universe*

22.10.2021 - 16.01.2022 | M Leuven



# INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2021, the exhibition *Origins. Imagining the Universe* opens in M Leuven, the museum of Leuven. This exhibition spearheads an ambitious cultural city festival entitled *Big Bang 2021*, the central theme of which is mankind's inquisitive awe about the origins of the cosmos.



People instinctively wonder about their links to the heavenly bodies. That was already the case thousands of years ago, long before we had any notion of the chemical composition of the stars, long before we could link those heavenly bodies to the building blocks of our own bodies. For countless centuries – through mythology, religion, art, literature and science – we have projected our great questions into the starry skies: How did our world come into being? Where did we come from? What is our place in the cosmos? What does our future hold in store?

Across time, space and cultures, the most diverse answers to these fundamental questions have been devised, expressed, depicted, embraced and rejected. But what always remains unchanging is our abiding wonder at that unfathomable phenomenon we call ‘the universe’, and our questions about the role of that insignificant but conscious part of the universe: the human being, standing here on Earth.

It is no coincidence that Leuven has chosen humanity’s fascination for the cosmos as the theme of a major cultural city festival such as *Big Bang 2021*. For nearly six centuries, this university city has helped in various ways to direct our fascinating quest for answers: a quest for insights into the origin of the universe and into mankind’s place in that immeasurable system.

The research of Leuven professor Georges Lemaître – internationally renowned today as the proposer of the Big Bang theory – was pioneering. From the 1920s on, Lemaître conducted the cosmological and physics research that led to the groundbreaking study he published in 1927. Starting from Einstein’s theory of relativity, Lemaître argued that the recession of nearby galaxies could be explained by an ever-expanding universe. Later, in 1931,

he formulated his ‘hypothesis of the primeval atom’, which later became known as the Big Bang theory.

Nowadays, the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) still plays a leading role in the search for the origin of the universe. In this context, professor Thomas Hertog – who worked closely with renowned British physicist, cosmologist and mathematician Stephen Hawking – immediately springs to mind.

*Big Bang 2021* is based on the personalities and significance of Lemaître and his successors. Its aim is to realise an ambitious cultural programme that intertwines the scientific and the metaphorical discourse. In their own unique way science and art both give shape to our human wonderment. It is that wonderment that compels us to uncover and explore the secrets of the cosmos and of life.

*Big Bang 2021* will reveal how certain ideas and images are part of our ever-increasing knowledge of the cosmos and humanity. This will be done via exhibitions, installations, performances, happenings and lectures, conceived with the gravity of a scientist and the wonder of a child.

# EXHIBITION

M Leuven is planning a prestigious exhibition about the imagining of the universe in the visual arts and the processes of thinking from Antiquity up to the 19th century. Its focus is on the European Middle Ages and the early modern period.

## Wonderment

The exhibition begins with the ongoing amazement of humanity, who look up at the stars and ask profound questions about the origin, form and meaning of the immeasurable universe. Under the title *Origins. Imagining the Universe*, curator Jan Van der Stock and a team of art historians (Illuminare, KU Leuven) give us a fascinating overview of the various answers that have been given to these crucial questions over the centuries.

## Genesis: the Judeo-Christian tradition

In the Book of Genesis, the Judeo-Christian tradition depicts that search. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' is the time-honoured translation of the first sentence of this first book of the Bible. That short passage, formulated more than 3,000 years ago, has been passed down to us through the ages. It inspired sublime miniatures, painted on fragile parchment and cherished for centuries in rich monastery libraries.

## The Greco-Roman tradition

The Greco-Roman tradition sets the origin and meaning of the universe in ancient myths. These depict the unparalleled forces that marked the beginning of the 'All' in glorious images, full of divine battles and heroism. From Antiquity until well into the seventeenth century, the gods and demigods were an inexhaustible source of inspiration for painters, sculptors and tapestry weavers. In this intergalactic saga, Hercules and Atlas played a leading role.



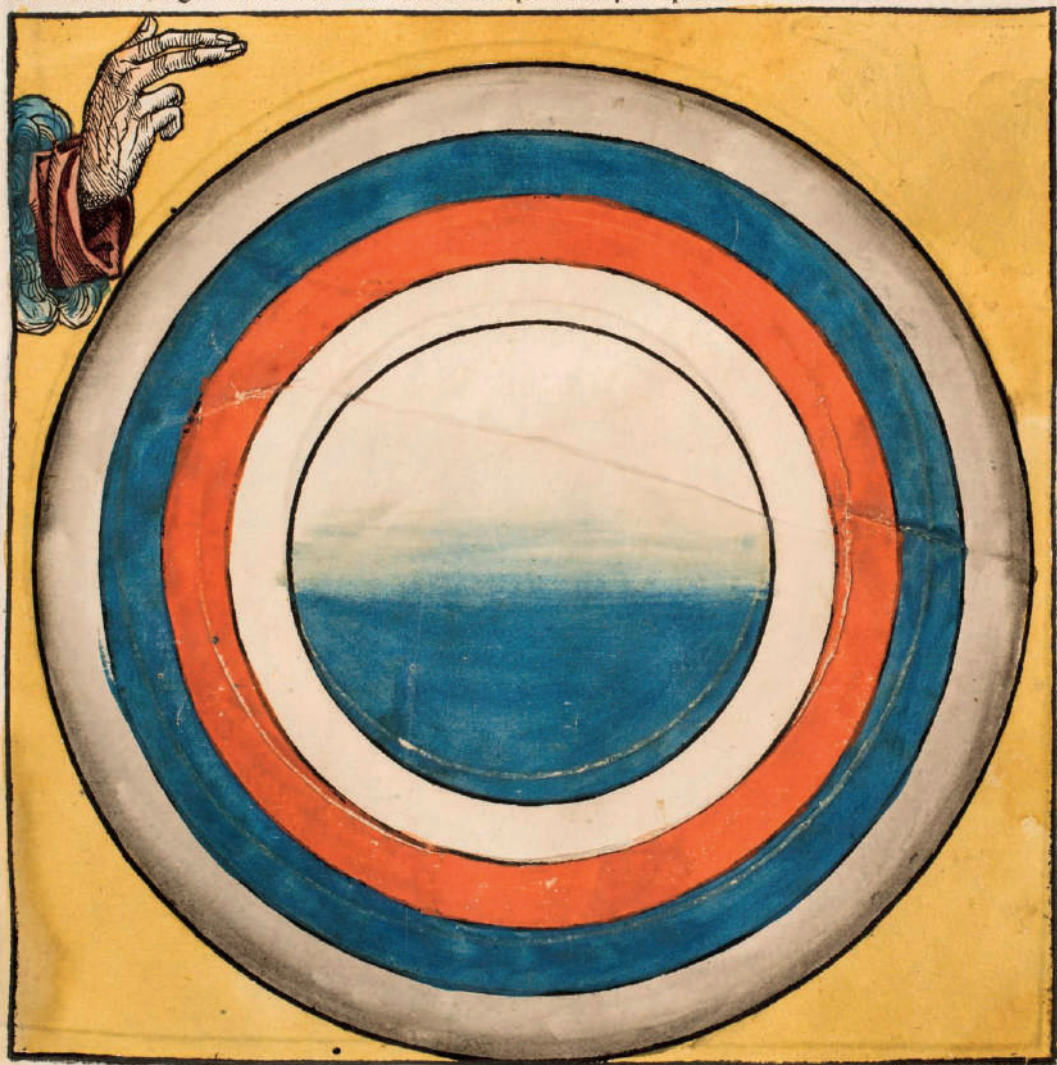








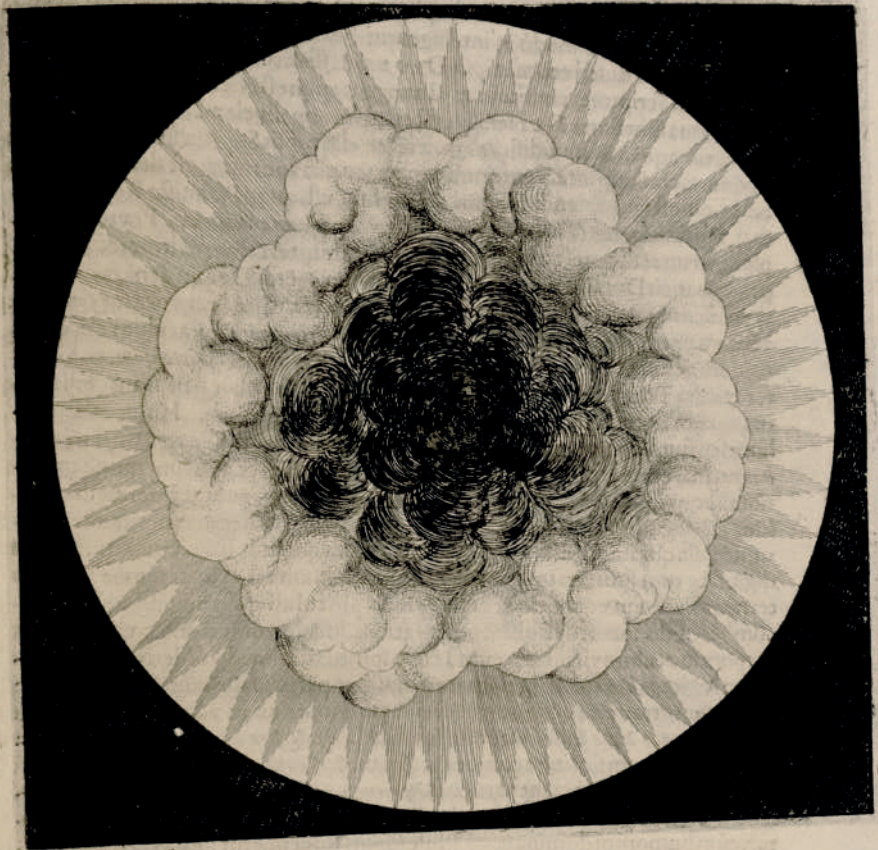
**S**ecundo die dixit deus. Fiat firmamentum in medio aquarū: et diuidat aquas ab aquis: vocauitq; firmamentum celum. Prophetam de celestibus misteriis loquentem audiamus. Fecit enī deus firmamentum rotundum mobile cetera sensibilia continens. Et ex aquis congelatis in modū cristallī solidauit: et in eo fixa sidera. Spera autē celi cū sideribus in ea fixis duob; axis voluit. Quorū alter septētrionalis boreas: Alter australis notus dictus voluit ab oriēte in occidentē tāta celeritate: vt nisi plane te contra cursum eam tardarent mundi ruitinas faceret. Et artifex mundi: celi naturam aquis temperauit: ne conflagratōne ignis superioris: elementa inferiora succenderet. Supra nouem celoz orbis id est septem planetas: et speram octauam quam vocant inerrantem nonūq; orbem qui ratione non sensu deprehensus est: primūq; est inter corpora que mouentur: creditum est decimū celum fixum manens et quietum: quod motu nullo participet. Neq; hoc tantum creditum a nostris: maxime iunioribus Strabo et Beda: s; a pluribus etiam hebreozum: pretereaq; a philosophis et mathematicis quibusdam: Equibus satis duos sit attulisse: Abraam hispanum astrologum maximū et ysaac philosophū: quoz vterq; hoc attestatur: quin et hic ysaac decimū orbem ab Ezechiele designatum intelligit per zaphirū in similitudinē throni: vt color sapientie lucis nitorem: throni similitudo immobilitatem significet. Sed redeamus ad Moysem diuidentem aquā ab aquis medio firmamēto. Triplex enī particio corporū sublunariū. Alia sup̄ mediam regionem aeris sunt: suprema. s. pars eiusdem elementi et purissimus ignis quod totum etheris nomine designatur ibi pura inmixta et legitima elemēta. Alia infra ipam aeris medietatē: que apud nos sunt vbi elementū purum nullum (neq; enī purum elementum sensibile) sed mixta omnia ex feculenta crassiozeq; parte mundant corporis consistūt. Intercedens regio aeris que etiam dicitur firmamētum. vnde et aues sub firmamento celi ab eo volantes introducuntur: ea est regio in qua sublimes ille impressiones apparent: pluuie: nubes: fulgura: fulmina: tonitrua: comete et cetera id genus. Recte igitur nō solum fitur: sed et nature p̄prietate hoc firmamentum superiora elementa ab inferioribus: quasi aquas ab aquis discriminat et distinguit. Sup̄ eum pura sunt elementa: infra eam perfecta mixtione ab elementalī simplicitate discedunt. Vocauitq; firmamentum celum: cum tegat omnia sensibilia et inuisibilia quod a koylon quod est concavū deducit.





DE MACROCOSMI PRINCIPIIS.

37



CAPUT IX.

*Quod universa caelorum tam spiritualis, quam corporaliū substantia  
sit aut elementum aut ex elementis compositum.*

**P**OST hujus igitur divini opificii complementum omnis cujuslibet ejus regionis substantiae portio aut elementum aut elementatum esse comperta est; quarum, quae elementum vocatur est prima, minima, & simplicissima pars, ex qua cujuslibet caeli elementatum immediate constituitur. Et quia cujuslibet caeli substantia propter majorem vel minorem lucis praesentiam crassior, impurior, & imperfectior habetur, igitur elementi simplicitas vel absolute intelligitur, tantummodo elementorum caeli spiritualis, vel respective consideratur: Nam si ad ea caeli inferioris comparentur,

E 3

simplicitas

## The Great Inheritance

Arab scientists brought great leaps forward in the study of the universe, the stars and the planets. They preserved and disseminated knowledge amassed by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and Ptolemy, but also acquired fundamental new insights by closely observing the movements of the heavens. The lion's share of this section is composed of Islamic measuring instruments, depictions of the heavens and illuminated medieval manuscripts.

## Microcosmos— Macrocosmos

The apparent movements of the sun and the perpetual cycle of changes in the stars have always fascinated humanity. Since time immemorial, we have depicted a supposedly divine quest for perfect harmony in the universe. That the infinitely large has a great influence on the infinitely small has been expressed for centuries, in depictions of the zodiac, for example. There, particular significance is given to the constellations. They are, after all, the backdrop against which the sun, the moon and the planets all seem to move. They are depicted in magnificent calendars and fantastic worldviews.

## Observation and verification

Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton tested the old beliefs and notions against fresh ideas and observations. Telescopes and accurate calculations provided new insights and triggered a fundamental shift in humanity's thinking. That transition was not abrupt, but gradual.



Aries est signū mensis martii. Malū est mederi in capite & tūc que in capite percutitur: aut moritur aut remanet leſus.

Taurus est signum mensis aprilis. Malum est mederi oculis collo & gutturi: ac gargarismū facere.

Gemini ē signū mēſis mai  
malū ē mederi ſpatibz  
chūs: & manibz ſomniag

Cancer est signū mēſis Iunij.  
Malū ē mederi pectori. ſp le  
ni pulmoui & oculis.

Leo ē signū mēſis Iu  
li. Malū est mederi:  
ſtomacho: cordis ner  
uis: lumbis & dorſo

Virgo est signū mensis  
auguſti. malū ē mederi  
uētri: coſt. & diafragma

Libra ē signū mēſis ſeptē.  
malū ē mederi iſterioribz  
uētris. ſic femori achiſ &  
yluiſ & q ſūt iſeri ad pu.

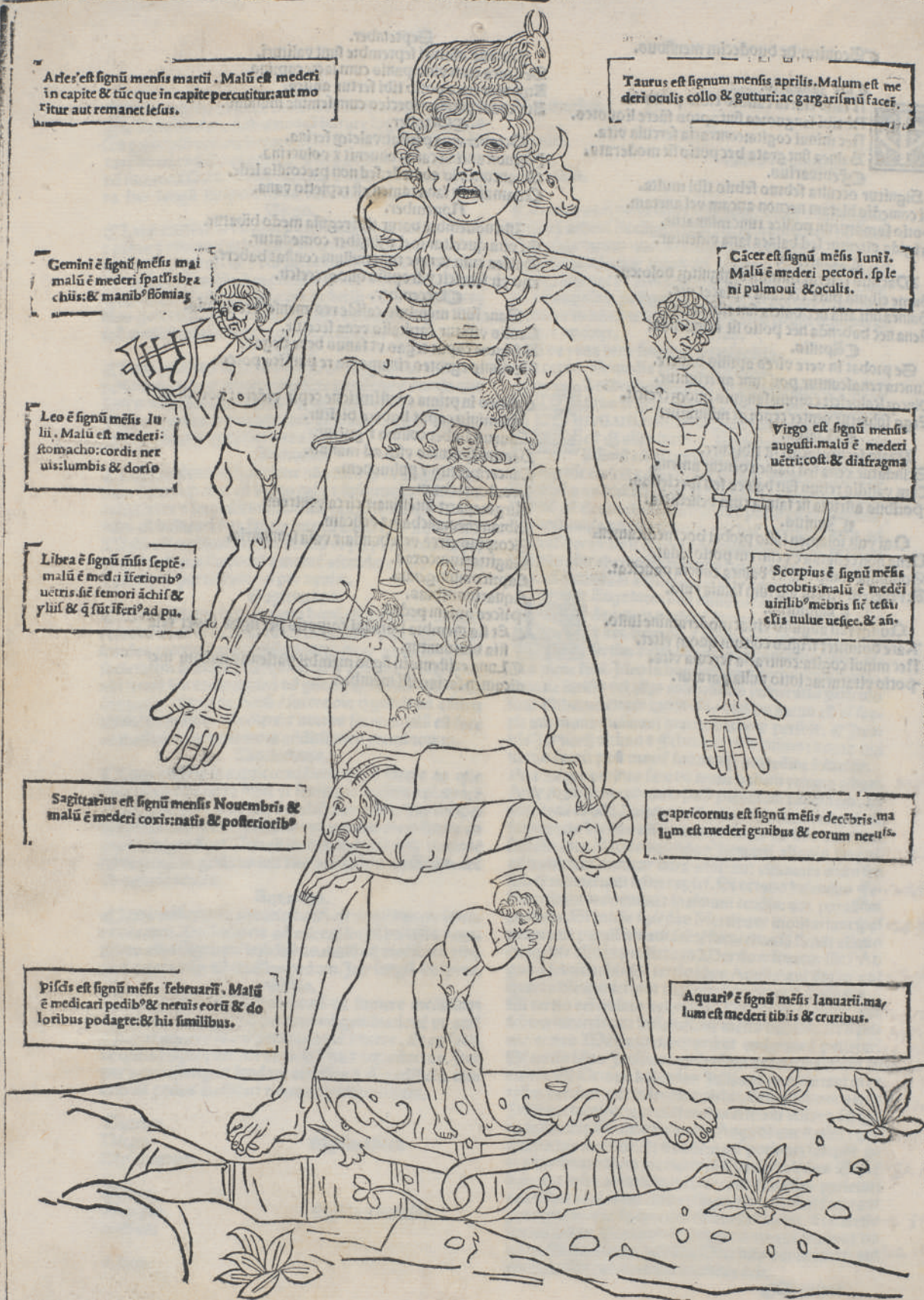
Scorpius ē signū mēſis  
octobris. malū ē mederi  
uiriſibz mēbris ſic teſtā  
cū ſis uulue ueſice. & an.

Sagittarius est signū mensis Nouembris &  
malū ē mederi coris: natis & poſterioribz

Capricornus est signū mēſis decēbris. ma  
lum est mederi genibus & eorum neuis.

Piſcis est signū mēſis februarij. Malū  
ē mederi pedibz & neruis eorū & do  
loribus podagre: & his ſimilibus.

Aquari⁹ ē signū mēſis Ianuarij. ma  
lum est mederi tibis & cruribus.





# ORGANISATION

*Big Bang 2021* is an initiative of KU[N]ST Leuven, a collaboration between the city of Leuven and the University of Leuven (KU Leuven). Together with players from the fields of culture, science and tourism, KU[N]ST Leuven organises major cultural projects. These festivals bring together heritage and science in a fresh and innovative way and put Leuven on the domestic and international map as a cultural hub and a centre of science and innovation.

The exhibition *Origins. Imagining the Universe* is organised in collaboration with Illuminare – Centre for the Study of Medieval Art (KU Leuven) and M Leuven. The curator is Jan Van der Stock, who previously curated the prestigious exhibition *In Search of Utopia* in M Leuven (2016).

# M Leuven

With its mix of old masters and contemporary art, M Leuven in the historic centre of Leuven is a 'must see' destination. Celebrated architect Stéphane Beel designed a new museum complex around the old Vanderkelen - Mertens municipal museum. In addition to its permanent historical collection, M mounts special exhibitions of old masters and contemporary artists under one and the same roof. These cover the whole gamut of disciplines from painting and sculpture to photography, video design and architecture, making a visit to the museum a very exciting experience.

[www.mleuven.be](http://www.mleuven.be)



## Rogier van der Weyden

*Master of Passions*

20.09.2009 - 06.12.2009

Curator: Jan Van der Stock

This exhibition showcased the innovative power and influence of Rogier van der Weyden, an unrivalled master when it came to depicting restrained passion and emotion. The exhibition brought together over a hundred masterpieces by Rogier van der Weyden and his contemporaries from fifty-eight European and North American collections.

## Hieronymus Cock

*The Renaissance in Print*

14.03.2013 - 09.06.2013

Curator: Joris Van Grieken, Ger Luijten & Jan Van der Stock

Hieronymus Cock was unquestionably the most successful print publisher of his day. The copperplate engravings he brought to the market travelled the world and ensured the name and fame of artists such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Raphael, Frans Floris and many others. Based on more than 200 rare prints, the exhibition in M gave visitors a broad overview of the activities of the 'In de Vier Winden' (At the Sign of the Four Winds) publishing house.

## Michiel Coxcie

*The Flemish Raphael*

14.03.2013 - 09.06.2013

Curator: Koenraad Jonckheere & Peter Carpreau

M paid tribute to this rather unknown but talented master. This retrospective covered the various aspects of Coxcie's life and work, from his youth and his stay in Italy through to his greatest achievements in the Netherlands. Paintings by Coxcie from the M collection were juxtaposed with European loans.



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## In Search of Utopia

20.10.2016 - 17.01.2017

Curator: Jan Van der Stock & Annelies Vogels

A prestigious exhibition was mounted to mark the fifth centenary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* in Leuven. More than eighty masterpieces provided an impressive overview of art and science in Thomas More's time.

## Power and Beauty. The Arenbergs

26.10.2018 – 20.01.2019

Curator: Peter Carpreau, Mark Derez & Anne Verbrugge

At its peak the Arenberg family's impressive art collection was one of the finest in Europe. Works by Rubens, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Jordaens and Dürer once adorned the living quarters of this noble family. The exhibition *Power and Beauty. The Arenbergs* brought many masterpieces from the now scattered Arenberg collection together in a one-off, not-to-be-missed reunion in M Leuven.

## Borman and Sons

*The Best Sculptors*

20.09.2019 – 26.01.2020

Curator: Marjan Debaene

"The best sculptor in Brabant": that is how Jan II Borman was known in the early 16th century. Surprisingly, the exhibition *Borman and Sons* was the ever first retrospective of the works and lives of this master woodcarver and his family. Of the more than 280 known Borman sculptures, around 100 were exhibited in M, alongside some thirty works by contemporaries.



# COLOPHON

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**Layout & design:** Wouter Jaspers

**Responsible publisher:** Lien De Keukelaere

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3000 Leuven**



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