

## DECEMBER 2024 MONTHLY BLOG/ 168

### ANTWERP DIAMONDS: THREE BEAUTIFUL ASPECTS OF ANTWERP - DIAMOND CAPITAL OF THE WORLD



**Fig.1 An Antwerp diamond ring -  
symbol of the great City of Diamonds**

Well, I didn't get my diamond ring. But, better still, I became acquainted with a great and enchanting city- which I'd never visited before. (Even though it is quite near to my home-town of London - 196 miles (315km) as the crow flies - and readily accessible by the Eurostar train network).

The Conference that I attended in Antwerp on 'Time and Prophecies' was productive and stimulating (see BLOG/167 November 2024). And my partner Tony and I extended our stay in order to have some extra time to enjoy the city life. Here are my three personal diamonds.

Firstly, Antwerp has a number of superb art museums - commemorating the Flemish artistic tradition, which dates back to the sixteenth century. If you like any combination of the works of Rubens, Van Dyck, and the Pieter Breugels (Elder & Younger), plus many others, then Antwerp is the art-capital for you.

My personal favourite is the Printing-House Museum (Plantin-Moretus Museum) in the Friday Market.<sup>1</sup> It is housed in the former residence-cum-

printing establishment of two sixteenth-century printers. The exhibits take visitors through all the stages of printing, from setting the type, to printing the text, to viewing priceless historic books, and admiring handsome libraries with wooden shelves from floor to ceiling - crammed with yet more books. And all these exhibits are accompanied by the heavy creaking of the house's original wooden floors. One cannot glide around this Museum in silence. Instead, all the visitors make and share the creaks and groans of the wooden flooring, as it has creaked and groaned since the sixteenth century.

Next, my second diamond must be the criss-crossing streets and squares in the centre of old Antwerp.<sup>2</sup> These are surrounded by town houses of all eras, which co-exist harmoniously together in a veritable architectural historian's delight. And, most importantly, city planning policy has ensured that the central residential area is dominated by town houses of five or six storeys - rather than by twentieth-century tower blocks. Churches and the impressive Cathedral thus rise above the dense town housing in an intimate, neighbourly way.

Added to that, many of the central streets are semi-pedestrianised. Consequently, they are chaotically crammed with a hotch-potch of walkers, cyclists, scooters, trams, buses, a few slow-moving cars, and a rare but highly artistic horse-drawn carriage.

Antwerp pedestrians therefore get a really good impression of what it must have been like to walk the streets of a sixteenth-century city centre. Admittedly, the transport technology has changed somewhat over the intervening years. Admittedly, too, there are no ubiquitous piles of horse manure as might have been expected in the days when transport was all horse-drawn. Nonetheless, the hustle and bustle of city life, on an intimate and accessible scale, is excellently well-conveyed by central Antwerp. Top spot in all this urban beauty? Walking round the busy GroenPlaats square, gazing up at the soaring Cathedral nearby, listening to the street buskers and their accordions, dodging the traffic, and

patting the nose of a large, handsome and patient black horse, awaiting passengers seeking a ride in his antique carriage.

So what then is my third diamond? Reference might justly be made at this point to Antwerp's shops and markets; to its huge variety of bars and restaurants; as well as its many monuments; and to its riverside walk (in process of upgrading) by the broad expanse of the River Scheldt.

But my third diamond is awarded to a rare gesture of social recognition. It is a sculpture in the heart of the city - located at the foot of Antwerp's impressive Gothic Cathedral - close to its main entrance. That great building's construction began in 1352; and since then, the church has undergone numerous repairs and reconstructions.<sup>3</sup> And the unusual sculpture shows four men at work. The gesticulating figure is the architect; and the others represent the unsung builders who raised the immense edifice. Well done to the Belgian sculptor Jef Lambeaux! Very well done, to the Cathedral authorities who presumably commissioned the piece! And excellently well done to the entire building workforce! Respect! Diamonds all round!



**Fig.2 Statue Commemorating Achievements of Antwerp Cathedral Workforce (1935): located at foot of Cathedral, close to Main Entrance - photo © Tony Belton October 2024**

## ENDNOTES:

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- <sup>1</sup> Since 2005, this Museum has been listed by UNESCO as a World-Heritage site. For its own website, see <https://museumpplantinmoretus.be/en>; plus the survey in Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantin%20%93Moretus\\_Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantin%20%93Moretus_Museum) (viewed 30 Nov. 2024).
  - <sup>2</sup> See e.g. C. Stahl (ed.), *The Flaneur: Walking through Antwerp* (2019) - multi-lingual edition.
  - <sup>3</sup> See P. Rynck, *The Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp* (Ghent, 2005).