

Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove's
*La guerre et les oeuvres d'art en
Belgique* (1917)

Although the historical complexity of the Great War is staggering, a few simple images continue to define the memory of this first modern war. This memory is only partly shared internationally; it consists mainly of national and mutually conflicting memories.¹ The dominant images are also often closely intertwined with deeply entrenched myths. Sometimes these myths originate with the official post-war construction of a national memory in the warring countries, and sometimes these myths were created during the propaganda war that the Great War also was. The destruction and preservation of monuments and works of art was a subject central to legitimizing the war as one of cultures. One of the complex images that emerged in the first months of the war—as both a national Belgian image and as an international image—is that of “poor little Belgium” and its *villes-martyres*, martyred cities.² In this image, a powerful mythology is grafted onto the geopolitical relations, the “urban devastation,” and the German brutalities of those early months of war.³ In a chain of personifications, the suffering of civilians and the violation of international law are linked to the material and cultural sufferings of Belgian cities and their heritage, opposing civilization with barbarism.

One publication in a corpus of nationalist-propagandist publications from the first years of the war that both celebrated and lamented the martyred cities of Belgium is the book *La guerre et les oeuvres d'art en Belgique 1914–1916*, published in Paris in 1917. *La guerre* largely follows the topoi of that broader “martyrological” corpus about Belgium’s destroyed historic art cities.⁴ However, the author, the Bruges baron Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove (1856–1928), also rhetorically mobilizes a multifaceted museum metaphor that is stronger in this book than in any other publication: Belgium as a battered museum. A rhetorical use of successive illustrations also marks this publication. Through a close reading, this chapter examines Kervyn’s denunciation rhetoric and its museum metaphor, within the context of the book’s production.

Martyrologies of Belgium

In six chapters of twenty pages each, Kervyn follows the wake of the German army, the reader in tow, through Belgium from east to west, from chapter 2, “Les premiers pas et les premiers dévastations des armées allemandes en Belgique,” to chapters 6 and 7, in which he describes the area of the front along the Yser where the German advance had come to a standstill and the war had turned into trench warfare. In these final chapters, the author discusses the devastation of such medieval towns as Ypres, Nieuwpoort, and Diksmuide. This journey is therefore also an account of the successive destruction. At each site of devastation, the author points out the importance of the lost heritage and denounces a German intention, and also often refutes German accounts of the facts. Before this tour in six chapters begins, Kervyn provides an introduction and then a first chapter in which he lists some German accusations against Belgium and refutes them as counterfactual propaganda. To the final chapter Kervyn also adds a concluding reflection, in which he takes stock of the extent of the devastation and calls on the international community to hold Germany accountable for this injustice. He also calls on Belgians to learn

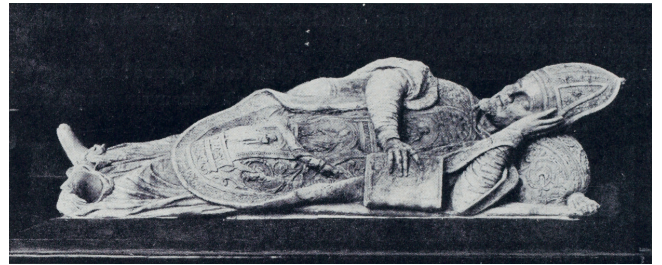


fig. 1 The opening illustration of *La guerre et les œuvres d'art en Belgique* (Brussels and Paris: Van Oest, 1917) showing a photograph of a recumbent effigy of Bishop Jean Visschere [Johannes de Visschere / Visscherius] in the St. Martin's Church in Ypres, heavily damaged in the bombing.



fig. 2 Photograph of the bodies of hostages shot in Tamines. *La guerre*, 2 (photograph originally from Davignon).

figs. 3–5 The international proliferation of the notions of the martyrdom of Belgium and of martyred towns can be traced across different publication genres.



fig. 3 Theme issue of French periodical *L'Art et les artistes*, 1915.

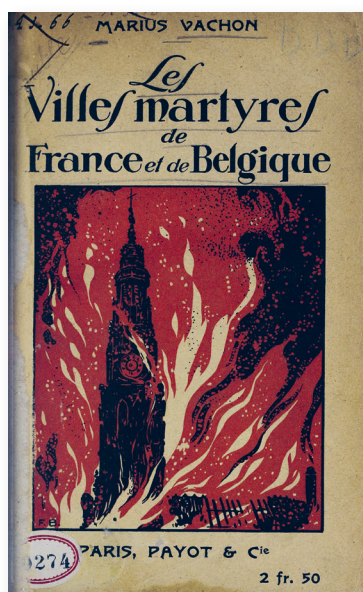


fig. 4 The collected lectures delivered in Switzerland by Marius Vachon, heritage specialist associated to the French Touring Club, published in 1915.

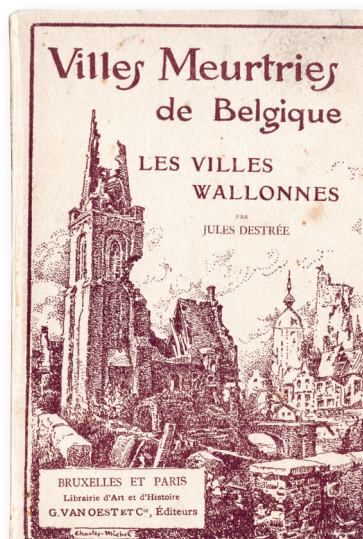


fig. 5 Jules Destrée's 1917 booklet concluding the *Villes meurtries* series.

from it and to preserve at least some of the ruins as evidence and as mementos of the injustice and suffering.

The title, *La guerre et les œuvres d'art en Belgique 1914–1916*, and the structure of the book might raise the expectation that it is an investigative report after two years of warfare, perhaps a report that the Belgian or German governments or neutral observers might have published.⁵ In the opening sequence of the book, however, the affective charge that gives the entire publication a particular ambivalence immediately appears.⁶ The title page is followed by a page where Kervyn dedicates the book to his gloriously fallen son and all the others who died, like him, “for the honour and the freedom of the Belgian fatherland, heroically defending the holiness and the beauty of our altars and our hearths.”⁷ On the next spread, a beautiful horizontal cutout from a black-and-white photograph of an early-seventeenth-century marble tomb statue connects the theme of death and glorious remembrance with that of a loss of heritage: the tomb statue of Bishop Jean Visschere that once adorned Ypres’ St. Martin’s Cathedral was destroyed in the bombings. On the next two pages, the decorum of this opening image gives way to shock: on the lefthand page, a photograph shows the bodies of civilians shot by German troops, while a photograph on the right depicts burned-out houses, both accompanied by accusatory captions: “The corpses of the hostages they shot are lying on the ruins that marked the entry of the Germans into Tamines (August 1914)” and “What the Germans had done to the homes of the people they took as captives in Germany (August 1914).”⁸ A fourth image shows refugees on the run, and then the gaze turns from human suffering toward the destruction suffered by Belgium’s heritage, with two photographs of Ypres evoking the destruction of “nos villes” and of “nos monuments.”⁹

On that point, Kervyn states, with a characterization of the enemy steeped in hatred, that the war on things has always accompanied the war on men among the Germanic people.¹⁰ Kervyn introduces the recently destroyed buildings and towns that appear again and again in 73 of the book’s 123 illustrations, not only as the tragic backdrop of the human suffering at and behind the front, but also as an index of an alleged deliberate cultural destruction by the Germans:

Comme fond à ce lugubre tableau, des ruines, toujours des ruines, de nouvelles ruines; car les gros canons allemands cherchent au loin, ainsi que nous le verrons, tout ce qui a un caractère monumental pour le détruire; et lorsqu’ils ne peuvent y parvenir, leurs avions les y aident!¹¹

The experience of the towns he then lists—“Herve, Visé, Tamines, Dinant, Aarschot, Leuven, Lier, Mechelen, Dendermonde, ... Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide, and Ypres”—is then both a suffering of a civilian population and a violation of body and soul of the historic towns.¹² On the next page, the topos of martyrdom is explicitly brought into play, immediately applied to the whole country. Belgium, according to the author, has suffered all martyrdoms: its territory has been violated in defiance of international treaties; its people have been murdered; cities have been looted and burned; monuments and works of art have been destroyed; and the country’s honor has been besmirched by a propagandistic “defamation campaign” that blamed civil suffering on the myth of Belgian *francs-tireurs* (guerilla-troopers) and that later also accused Belgians of having neglected or destroyed their heritage themselves.¹³

In similar publications by Belgian and French authors, the notion of *villes-martyres* had already taken hold during the first months of the war, and the dimensions of innocent civilian victims and destroyed heritage had been united as one heroic-tragic martyrdom.¹⁴ Perhaps the best-known Belgian publications are the 1915 issue, entitled *La Belgique héroïque et martyre: 1914–1915*, of the French journal *L’art et les artistes* and the series of four booklets, entitled *Villes meurtries de Belgique*, published

fig.1

fig.2

figs. 3–5

in 1916 and 1917 by prominent Belgian authors whose political orientations reflected the composition of the unity government De Broqueville II, in which the long-reigning Belgian Catholic party was now sharing power with the liberal and the socialist parties.¹⁵ The poet and *auteur d'art* Emile Verhaeren wrote *Villes meurtries de Belgique: Anvers, Malines et Lierre*. At the outbreak of the war, Verhaeren, a European internationalist to that point, became the pre-eminent Belgian nationalist war poet, having published several war collections, such as *La Belgique Sanglante* (1915), that were also translated into English.¹⁶ The liberal journalist-critic Louis Dumont-Wilden published the volume *Bruxelles et Louvain*. The socialist writer-politician—and future Minister of Education and Culture—Jules Destrée wrote *Les villes wallonnes*. The Catholic writer-politician Pierre Nothomb, who had previously published *Les barbares en Belgique* and *La Belgique martyre*, wrote *Villes de Flandre*.¹⁷ The prominent Brussels-Paris art book publisher G. Van Oest et Cie produced both this series of booklets and *La guerre* by Catholic writer-curator Kervyn.¹⁸

What Kervyn mentions as Belgium's first martyrdom, the violation of a neutral territory guaranteed by treaties, requires some explanation. As an independent state less than a century old at the outbreak of World War I, Belgium had a special status within the geopolitical constellation on the continent. The nineteenth-century post-Napoleonic diplomatic chessboard had, in fact, provided tight chalk lines within which the existence of a Belgian state was possible, and which also determined Belgium's self-image at the outbreak of the war. In 1815, after the battle of Waterloo, one of the outcomes of the Congress of Vienna had been the creation of a neutral buffer state between France and the German Empire: by merging the Netherlands with the Belgian regions, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was created. After the Belgian Revolution in 1830, the breakaway Belgian state "inherited" the neutrality condition imposed on the former United Kingdom of the Netherlands. One of the implications was that Belgium was not allowed to build up any military capacity; in exchange, the European powers were to protect little Belgium against incursions from the other states, the newly caged France in particular.

Although Belgian neutrality was enshrined in international treaties, in 1914 it appeared to be interpreted in different ways. At 7 p.m. on August 2, 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II presented Belgium with an ultimatum: to provide German troops safe conduct for their attack on France within twelve hours.¹⁹ Germany claimed that neutral Belgium was obliged to do so. Belgium, on the basis of its neutrality, refused to cooperate with the German attack through Belgian territory, and decided to defend its territory. This is the basis for the idea of "brave little Belgium" on the Allied side: bravely, little Belgium casts itself as a defender of the international legal order against the "belligerent aggressor" Germany. The "poor little Belgium" variant emphasizes the human cost that Belgium paid. Indeed, the German invasion of Belgium was immediately accompanied by a strategy of terror, designed to break down resistance in Belgium, but also to set a deterrent example for the other neutral countries. In those first months of war, 5,517 civilians were killed.²⁰ The provinces of Liège and Brabant in particular were scenes of arson and the murder of civilians. In Tamines, between Namur and Charleroi, on August 22, 1914, a mass execution took place that cost the lives of 315 men and made the town known throughout the world as an example of extreme violence against civilians. It is therefore no coincidence that the first photo of rubble and human victims in *La guerre*, referred to above, concerns Tamines.²¹ The towns of Andenne, Dinant, Aarschot, and Leuven also counted hundreds of civilian casualties.

However, Leuven became internationally known above all as the site of a cultural war crime, which is also discussed extensively in *La guerre* as "le sac de Louvain." On the evening of August 25, 1914, three days of looting and arson began in occupied Leuven,

during which the medieval cloth hall, with its precious historical collection of the university library, went up in flames. The “Louvain scandal” aroused widespread indignation in the international press, and became the prime example in any account of the cultural war atrocities Germany committed in Belgium, just as Reims quickly became the *pars pro toto* for heritage losses in France. Leuven thus perhaps embodies most strongly the heritage dimension of Belgium’s martyred cities—though the shelling, by both sides, of Ypres and other smaller historic towns on the stalled Western Front stripped Leuven of that dubious honor in the following years.²² The brutality of the invasion of Belgium was explicitly seized upon in, for example, British domestic propaganda to mobilize soldiers. The broad international repercussions of the destruction of the Leuven university library embarrassed Germany. It led to German initiatives for a centralized international propaganda, and to a form of *Kunstschutz* in occupied Belgium and the occupied part of France, which was also played out in the propaganda to which Kervyn responds with his indictment.²³

Kervyn in exile

In his introduction to *Villes meurtries de Belgique: Villes de Flandres*, Pierre Nothomb refers to the paradoxical position of the writer-in-exile who reports on devastation in his homeland in the narrative form of an imaginary journey. He addresses the towns he is now separated from:

Ce n’est point en voyageur que je vous ai vues, villes de l’Escaut, villes de la Lys, villes de l’Yser. Je n’ai pas fait, de l’une à l’autre d’entre vous, la promenade du touriste. J’ai vécu et grandi parmi vous. Et si aujourd’hui séparé par l’exil de vos ruines et de vos splendeurs, j’impose un itinéraire à ma réminiscence, c’est une discipline littéraire, et non le souvenir d’un voyage fait le guide à la main.²⁴

Kervyn shares with Nothomb, and with most other writers on the Belgian martyred cities, not only a point of view as an exile but also a pathos swelled by nationalism. His profile as an exhibition maker and cultural diplomat is rather unique. On the cover of *La guerre*, Kervyn mentions his (corresponding) membership in the Commission royale des monuments et des sites and of the Conseil supérieur des beaux-arts de Belgique. As the son of the Catholic statesman and historian Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove, and trained as a lawyer, Kervyn, a Bruges native, indeed held successive positions in these and other art and archaeological institutions throughout his career. Nevertheless, in the *Biographie nationale* he is posthumously characterized as an enthusiastic and eloquent dilettant-publicist-curator rather than an erudite scholar.²⁵ He made a name for himself as the organizer of several important exhibitions—the most famous one on the Flemish Primitives in 1902 in Bruges. Kervyn was appointed as the conservator of Bruges’ archaeological museum, a post he held until 1912, when internal and public discussions—one about an excessively invasive restoration of paintings in the city’s collection that he had supervised—had led to his resignation. In 1907, on the occasion of the inauguration of the new Bruges seaport, an exhibition of the art of the Order of the Golden Fleece took place. Among his Brussels exhibitions, mention should be made of his presentation, “Les trésors de l’art belge au xviii^e siècle,” in 1910 as part of the *Exposition Universelle et Internationale* in Brussels. In 1912, the dismissed conservator was appointed artistic advisor to three ministries: Railways, Post, and Telegraph; Agriculture and Public Works; and Industry and Labor.²⁶

In the spring of 1915, and at that time still without news of his already deceased son, Kervyn reached Paris, where he would spend the rest of the war years. He was thus one of the more than 600,000 Belgian refugees who settled abroad, mainly in

assurément les sentiments que nous éprouvions pour nos trésors
bien ceux d'une véritable piété filiale. Nos monuments n'évoqu
la mémoire de nos pères ? Ceux-ci ne les avaient-ils pas élevés si



Cliché de la Mission du Ministère des Sciences et des Arts.

12. — Les beffrois en Flandre (Furnes).

nous laisser un frappant et indestructible témoignage de leur
sme ? Ces édifices, altiers et superbes, n'attestaient-ils pas, en
nous l'avons dit, leur culte généreux pour la liberté et leurs

fig. 7 A photograph of the belfry of Veurne (Furnes) realized by the "Mission Dhuicque." *La guerre*, 19.



fig. 9 Penitents' Procession in Veurne, ca. 1908. Postcard.

fig. 6

fig. 7

fig. 8

fig. 9

France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.²⁷ Amounting to about eight percent of the population, they formed "a second Belgium" outside the almost completely occupied territory.²⁸ The Belgian extraterritorial government of Charles de Broqueville established itself in the seaside town of Sainte-Adresse near Le Havre, from where it also coordinated the preparation of the reconstruction of the country, which began during the war, in dialogue with experts and working groups in London, Paris, and the Netherlands.²⁹ The Belgian minister of science and arts, Prosper Poullet, entrusted Kervyn with the task of rescuing artifacts and archives from the front lines that had not yet been destroyed.³⁰ That initiative led to the Mission du Ministère des sciences et des arts, which documented, with drawings and photographs, the threatened historical monuments in the corner of Belgium that was unoccupied. It encased some altars and other fixed sculptures, made moulages, and dismantled others, bringing them to safety, along with mobile works of art, to locations behind the front, often in France. However, this mission soon came to be known as the Mission Dhuicque, named after the Brussels-based liberal architect Eugène Dhuicque who, unlike Kervyn, remained in Belgium and was in charge of a five-person team.³¹ In 1915, Kervyn organized an exhibition of Belgian artworks rescued from the front at the Petit Palais in Paris. In April 1916, he was also included in the Commission exécutive d'organisation de la participation belge à l'exposition de la cité reconstituée, a committee of Belgian and French architects, technicians, and industrialists who prepared the exhibition material for the Belgian participation in the 1916 exhibition in Paris on rebuilding cities.³² Later that year, Kervyn was also appointed to the special study committee that advised the city council of Ypres on the preparation of the city's reconstruction.

Kervyn signed the manuscript of *La guerre* on October 24, 1916. Surprisingly, his involvement—the degree of which is unclear—in the monument rescue mission and also in the preparation of the reconstruction is scarcely evident in the book: the credits of some six photographs of devastations refer to the "Mission du Ministère des Sciences et des Arts"; a photograph is included of a damaged sculpture from the choir screen in the ruined Ypres cathedral, presumably displayed at the Paris exhibition of rescued Belgian art; and a map, released by the coordinator of the rebuilding preparations, Raphaël Verwilghen, an engineer and also the secretary of the above-mentioned exhibition committee, shows the degree of devastation of the Belgian territory in May 1916. As a factual "infograph," the map is one of the exceptions among the illustrations in Kervyn's book.

Processions, plunderings, pilgrimages

When Nothomb broaches the discussion of the historic town of Veurne (Furnes) in *Villes meurtries de Belgique: Les villes de Flandre*, he plays out a contrast between two movements that took place on the eve of war, in the summer of 1914: the annual Penitents' Procession, which the West Flemish town has been staging since the Counter-Reformation, and the military equipment that the Germans set in motion.³³ Two movements, but the procession represents a peaceful order in which everything remains in place—religious sculptural scenes have been carried through the town annually for centuries as part of a living religious heritage practice—while the mobile cannons come to threaten this order, and the unobtrusive continuity of the heritage within it. Kervyn, too, contrasts different forms of heritage circulation in *La guerre*.

La guerre, as mentioned, takes the reader along the places in Belgium where the German armies had previously passed and caused devastation. Kervyn does not trace the logistical and war-technical stratego of the German military movements through Belgian territory with its "villes ouvertes"³⁴—urban fortifications had been largely dismantled by the end of the nineteenth

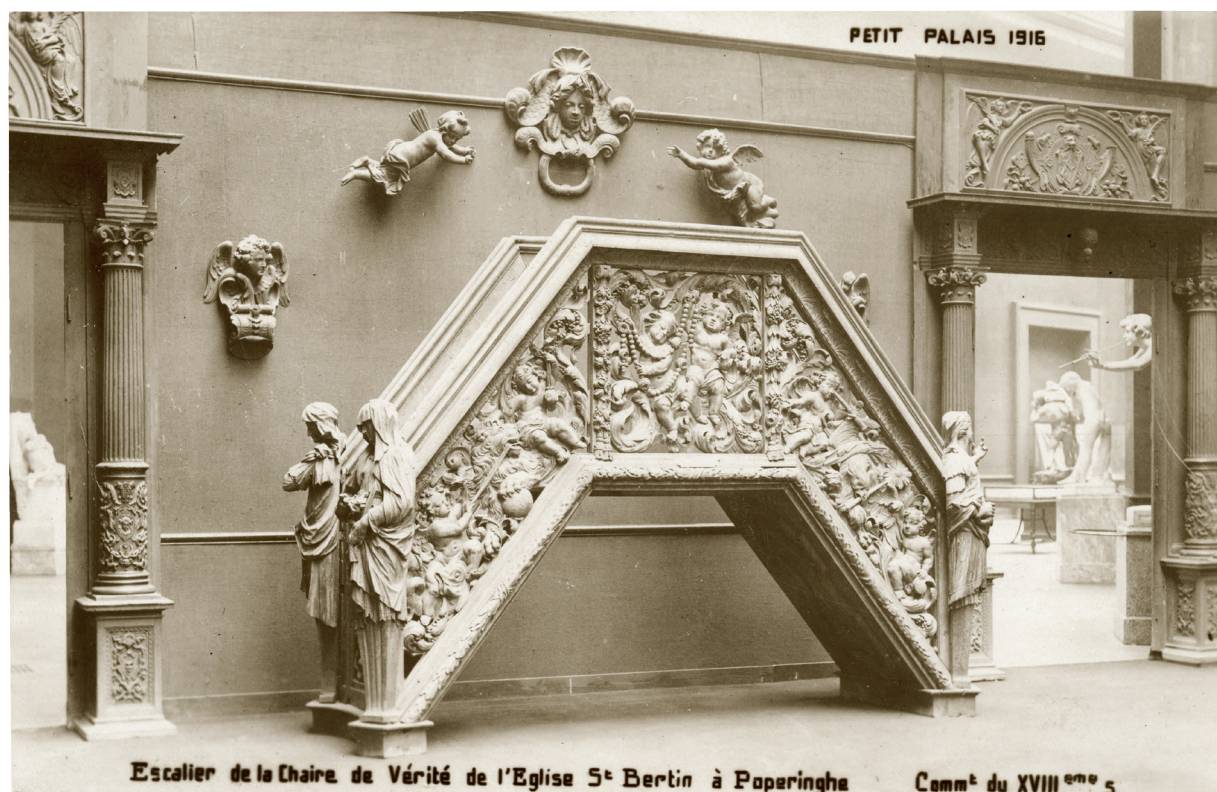


fig. 6 Pulpit staircase from the St. Bertinus in Poperinghe, exhibited in the Petit Palais, 1916. Postcard.

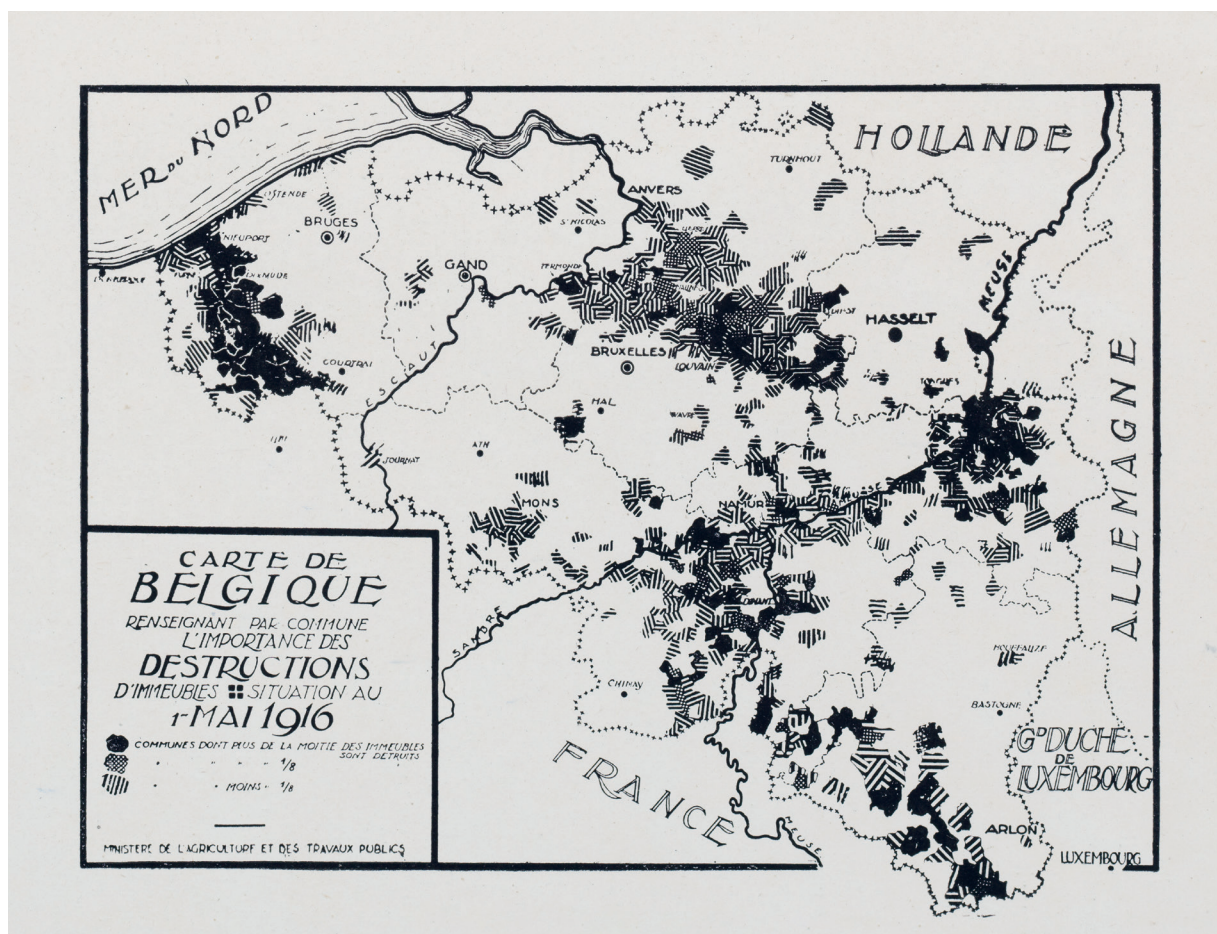


fig. 8 Map of Belgium inventorying the degree of destructions of buildings in May 1916. *La guerre*, 109.

century—but rather follows the lead of the broader Allied propaganda in portraying the German armies as destructive Huns who set fires and plunder: this war is “la guerre des Vandales, la guerre des Huns, la guerre aux choses de l’art, aux trésors d’érudition, à la beauté des monuments!”³⁵ A few pages later, Kervyn goes so far as to interpret this strategy of terror racially, as a Germanic characteristic. He refers to a passage his father wrote about the medieval Norman raids on the Flemish coastal region: “La race n’a pas changé. Le temps n’a pas modifié sa barbarie et son vandalisme. Si une pensée la guide, elle est toujours pareille: s’imposer par la terreur et marquer sa venue par l’horreur, la cruauté et les destructions!”³⁶ Indeed, in the five pages that follow, Kervyn attempts to prove, with numerous quotes from German officers and army leaders, that terrorizing with murder and material destruction is a deliberately demoralizing war strategy.

A second “tour” of heritage in *La guerre* is that conducted by the indignant armchair-reporter himself. Kervyn casts himself not so much as a journalist but as a compatriot of the Belgians, whom he addresses as imaginary pilgrims of “notre patrimoine.” Indeed, for Kervyn, the value of heritage destroyed or threatened with destruction lies not only in its archaeological (documentary) importance and artistic interest, but also in what he calls its historical importance, by which he means the inscription of monuments in a national cult of remembrance,

le culte filial que nous avons pour ces précieux vestiges légués par nos ancêtres. ... [C]hacun de ces monuments et toutes les oeuvres d’art—aujourd’hui anéantis—représentaient un passé glorieux, avaient une histoire, évoquaient des traditions, possédaient une âme et ... tous, par des liens étroits, tenaient à nos fibres les plus intimes, à notre fierté, à notre génie et à notre amour patrial.³⁷

This perceived existential attachment to heritage is why the devastation affects him so much, Kervyn explains, even though he is also surrounded by so much other human grief and injustice. This explains “pourquoi ... j’ai des larmes aussi pour de pauvres pierres brisées, des statues mutilées, des tableaux brûlés ou troués par la mitraille!”³⁸ Then he refers to Petrarch’s *deploratio urbis*: “sunt lacrimae rerum!”—a reminder that things can have tears.³⁹ The sobbing of the ruins of Dinant, Leuven, or Ypres is infectious, makes one weep. While he seems to outline a possible universal response to cultural destruction, Kervyn nevertheless emphasizes how the affective bonds of historic monuments are constructed by the national histories into which they are woven: “Comme l’a écrit avec émotion et vérité, le député belge Jules Destrée, ‘ces monuments racontaient notre histoire, ligne par ligne, et célébraient tous nos héros.’”⁴⁰

In particular, the belfries, the old cathedrals, and the historic town halls possess, according to Kervyn, an “eloquence that still moves us.”⁴¹ And following the appearance of two historical drawings of medieval architecture and two photographs of the belfries of Veurne and Ypres, Kervyn also raises the Hugolian topos of the competition between buildings and books as carriers for a society’s shared memory: “C’est pourquoi il n’était pas une pierre de ces édifices qui ne portât des enseignements bien supérieurs à ceux des livres: tout notre histoire se lisait sur nos beffrois.”⁴² What the stones speak of above all, for Kervyn, is the Belgian nation’s ancient attachment to law and justice, the very values that the German invasion brought into play. In referring to the national significance of belfries and town halls, Kervyn taps into the romantic-national self-image that, for the new liberal Belgian state of 1830, projected a national origin into the free medieval cities of Flanders and Brabant⁴³:

Quant à nos hôtels de ville ... ils marquaient pour nous la vitalité de nos institutions. Et en les voyant s’élever partout en Flandre, nous pouvions nous souvenir aussi, avec fierté, que “notre pays avait été la source des libertés de l’Europe.”⁴⁴

In that nineteenth-century discourse, Flemish history was typically not set against Belgian national-identity discourse but simply provided a basis for distinguishing Belgian culture from French culture and from French centralism. When Kervyn refers to *la patrie*, it is to this Belgian homeland with Flemish ancestors, and he frequently switches from “notre chère Belgique” to historical Flanders, and back again.⁴⁵ Indications of a conflictual relationship between a Belgian sense of identity and a Flemish or Walloon one are not to be found in *La guerre*, unlike, for example, with Nothomb, who opens his booklet with the sentence, “Wallon, il m’est doux de parler de la Flandre.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Jules Destrée, the socialist representative of the people who, in 1912, in the debate on Belgian language policy, had stated in a famous open letter to the king that there were no Belgians but only Flemings and Walloons. He writes in *Villes meurtries de Belgique: Les villes Wallonnes* that he is not surprised to recognize the Walloon people in the Walloon cities and municipalities, the people who in the motley tableau of the “Western races” have their distinct nuance, “not Germanic at all, for sure, but not entirely Latin either.”⁴⁷ This echoes the established (self-)image of Belgians as a hybrid of Germanic and Latin cultural characteristics. That cliché, like the cliché of the Belgian region as an ancient crossroads of trade and cultures, had been confirmed by national historian Henri Pirenne just before the war. However, this national psychology of being both Latin and Germanic suddenly was put under pressure in the wake of the German invasion.⁴⁸

Kervyn does not address this problem. And just as *La guerre*—unlike the four volumes of *Villes meurtries de Belgique*—takes the national territory together in one volume and steps over regional cultural differences, so Kervyn’s romantic celebration of the Flemish heartland as a pilgrimage site uniting a transgenerational heritage community fits within a Belgian-nationalist discursive framework:

Ypres, Nieuport, Dixmude, quelle trilogie! ... Oui, le cœur de notre vieille Flandre semblait dormir dans ces cités antiques, à l’ombre de leurs hautes tours, ainsi que dans des reliquaires. Aussi, aimions-nous à aller vers elles, en un pieux pèlerinage, pour nous y recueillir et nous y unir, dans une sorte de communion spirituelle, à ceux qui avaient tant aimé cette même patrie et ces mêmes cités, à ceux qui les avaient toujours héroïquement défendues et les avaient si magnifiquement glorifiées.⁴⁹

Kervyn argues repeatedly that the violation and suffering of the old urban monuments because of the war makes them even more sacred, and as a national pilgrimage destination even more pressing.⁵⁰

The third march in the book is the procession of heritage itself emerging from the background of everyday life—the historic cities and monuments that have come acutely into focus through threat and destruction, staged image after image. In the Belgium issue of *L’Art et les artistes*, the French editor Armand Dayot referred to this flux of images as a procession of cities, perhaps even a funeral procession: “le douloureux cortège des villes et des villettes détruites, des campagnes saccagées et aussi quelques-uns de ces coins calmes et tranquilles particuliers à ce bon pays de Flandre”⁵¹—injustice that haunts photographic reproductions. Images were reproduced on two out of three pages of *La guerre*, a total of 123, of which 114 were photographs. Fixed in the middle of the pages, they flicker through the book almost like a film. Credits are given for the greater half of the photographs: nineteen were made before the war by the Ypres photographer Maurice Antony; of the war photographs, eleven were taken from (publications by) de Gerlache, ten from de Thoran. Four photographs of the destruction in Louvain are by the Swiss businessman, amateur photographer and “anti-propagandist” Albert Fuglister.⁵² Some photographs were made available by publisher Van Oest and by

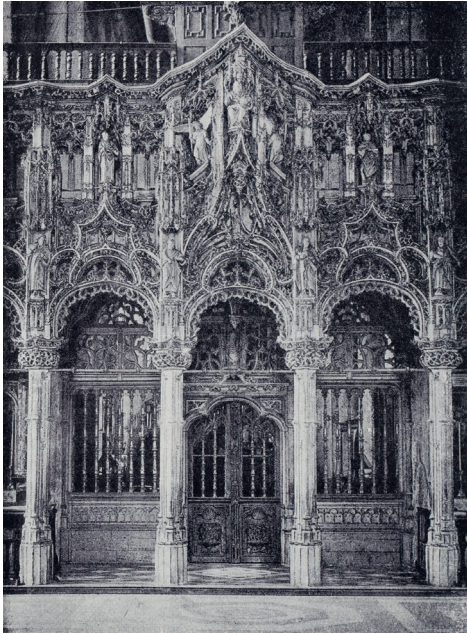


fig. 10 The photograph from the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, reprinted in *La guerre*, 163.



fig. 11 Photograph by Auguste Van Gele, 1895.

the French magazines *La Gazette des beaux-arts* and *L'Illustration*. The Mission Dhuicque provided only six photographs. The majority of the photographs, however, were printed anonymously. Kervyn points out the ban on photography imposed by the German occupying forces.⁵³ The book, published as it was in 1916, mentions nothing about the German heritage photography campaign that was to take place in occupied Belgium in 1917 and 1918 as part of the *Kunstschutz* policy, under the leadership of the Bonn architectural historian and monuments inspector Paul Clemen, and which was to result in more than 10,000 photographs.⁵⁴ Two-thirds of the 123 images in *La guerre* show damage and destruction in the Belgian (urban) landscape. Contrary to what one might expect, in the entire book there are only seven before-and-after pairs of photographs combined on one page or within one spread. Indeed, Kervyn's image rhetoric appears to be far more varied than suggesting the catastrophic destruction through those events that lie between two images.⁵⁵

An unequalled museum

The denunciation of destruction blamed on the Germans only works to full effect when combined with an emphasis on the artistic, archaeological, and historical importance of what was destroyed. To this end, Kervyn uses the hyperbole of Belgium as a country encompassing an “incomparable musée,” an “unequaled museum,” because of the importance of its artists and the density in which masterpieces are sown across its territory.⁵⁶ In discussing the village churches destroyed in Brabant, Kervyn mentions that in the little church of Beigem, four paintings that had been on display at the 1902 *Exposition des primitifs flamands* went up in flames.⁵⁷ Kervyn launches this overarching museum image, which distinguishes the publication from most other *villes-martyres* publications, in his introduction:

La Belgique tout entière ... constituait un vaste et précieux musée, musée national avant tout, mais aussi musée mondial. Car de telles créations artistiques ne sont-elles pas le patrimoine commun du monde entier? Et s'il en est ainsi, comme nous l'estimons, les œuvres qui constituent ce trésor universel, ne sont-elles pas sacrées, intangibles? Car que devient la civilisation, s'il est permis de détruire à plaisir ce que les plus grands génies ont légué à toute l'humanité?⁵⁸

That artistic heritage of museum value belongs to a nation, but also to humanity, is a familiar argument with which Kervyn appeals to the ideal of a cosmopolitan art community. We find it in variations throughout modern museum and heritage history, from Quatremère de Quincy's *Lettres à Miranda*, which assigns Rome's classical heritage to a European, transnational “*République des lettres*,” to the (world) heritage discourse of the League of Nations after World War I and UNESCO after World War II.⁵⁹

However, Kervyn barely conceptualizes the central idea of a “museum Belgium.” He invariably employs, for example, “museum” and “territory” over and through each other without distinction or contradiction. *La guerre* thus eludes any debate that problematizes the museum as a place of destructive uprooting of artworks, in contrast to a situation of being scattered in the historical sites of the territory where they would remain more culturally embedded. Belgium as a peerless museum is a flexible image that easily allows Kervyn to interweave a topographic-cultural-historical narrative in the tradition of illustrated descriptions of picturesque or monumental Belgium, with quotes from authoritative admirers of “museum Belgium,” and to contrast these admiring statements with the destruction of war.

In the very first sentence of his *Villes meurtries* booklet, Verhaeren too compares Belgium to a museum. He evokes a museum hall in which Belgian cities compete like works of art

for the places of honor. But then he also discusses those cities themselves as repositories of art treasures and as places of display:

La Belgique historique est comme un musée: Bruges et Anvers tiennent les places d'honneur sur ses deux murs principaux qui se regardent. ... Bruges et Anvers sont l'une au xv^e siècle, l'autre au xvi^e siècle, commerciaux et artistiques, Ils ramassent et serrent autour d'eux—comme on recueille telles choses précieuses entre les plis d'un grand manteau—l'or et le chef-d'œuvre. Ils sont opulents et même ostentatoires. Tout au long de leur vie civique, ils ont voulu que des cortèges célèbrent leur gloire. Ils se sont donnés en spectacle certes au monde, mais surtout à eux-mêmes. Ils ont vécu pour être beau.⁶⁰

With Kervyn, too, Belgium as museum becomes a set of Russian dolls. When he characterizes, for example, Ypres, Nieuwpoort, and Diksmuide as precious (relic) shrines of different size,⁶¹ museum and museum object become interchangeable.⁶² Such diffuse discursive musealization of the territory corresponds to the breadth that the notion of “art and historical monuments” had acquired in the early twentieth century, including in institutionalized heritage conservation in Belgium. After all, in 1912 the Commission royale des monuments had only just changed its name to Commission royale des monuments et des sites, to reflect the fact that from now on it would also work to protect and monitor valuable landscapes and town and villagescapes. The endangered heritage whose value Kervyn identifies and describes includes artifacts and archives, as well as historic towns and villages, which are presented interchangeably in the geographically structured publication. Similarly, *La guerre* contains images of isolated artifacts framed as autonomous objects and photographs that just barely betray situatedness, such as the photograph of the renowned late Gothic choir screen of Diksmuide, “une vraie dentelle de pierre,” true stone lacework. But there are also townscape photographs with captions such as “Un village de l'Yser (Loo),” a village of the Yser river (Lo).

figs. 10–11

fig. 12

While a writer like Verhaeren shows himself to be aware of the characteristic dialectic between (war) threat and appreciation (also in his own writings)—“Tout en effet nous est plus cher à mesure que tout est attaqué ou menacé.”⁶³—Kervyn rather presents heritage values as intrinsic. Kervyn claims the “incomparability” of the Belgian (world) museum on the authority of numerous authors, both contemporary ones and, especially, nineteenth-century historians and writers who visited and sang the praises of the Belgian regions in a “pèlerinage esthétique.”⁶⁴ They appear in a montage of quotations that make *La guerre* not only a *musée imaginaire* of Belgian endangered or lost heritage, but also a selective echo chamber of a century of reception of that heritage. In the ten or so pages in which Kervyn illuminates the various heritage values of Ypres's Cloth Hall and belfry, for example, in two pages Kervyn suddenly has as many as six voices speaking. Kervyn substantiates the historical importance—as a document but especially as a speaking monument—first with a quote from his father's *Histoire de Flandre*: “Sur le Beffroi et les Halles d'Ypres ... se trouvent écrites en caractères ineffaçables ... la grandeur et la puissance des corps de métiers de cette ville autrefois si florissante.”⁶⁵ Just before the war, the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne had also read the communal spirit of the Flemish cities in the Ypres Cloth Hall. The urban scene—market square plus Cloth Hall with belfry plus cathedral—together receives praise from the contemporary Belgian poet Maurice Maeterlinck, whom Kervyn also quotes, and the French writer-globetrotter Pierre Loti describes it as “un groupe à peu près unique au monde.”⁶⁶ Kervyn also echoes the enthusiasm of the French historian Jules Michelet, who describes the ensemble of monuments around the square as an urban “art object” that is located prominently in the European imaginary museum:



fig. 12 View of “an old bridge in Diksmuide.” *La guerre*, 159.



fig. 13 Lost painting, *The Adoration of the Magi* (1644) by Jacob Jordaens. Photograph presumably by Paul Becker, 1910.

La place d'Ypres, avec d'autres éléments et sous des cieux plus austères, mérite d'être aussi précieuse aux hommes, *aussi sacrée et aussi intangible* que la place Saint-Marc de Venise, la seigneurie de Florence ou la place du Dôme de Pise. Elle forme un objet d'art unique, irréprochable.⁶⁷

Through Michelet, Kervyn also emphasizes the exceptional stylistic uniformity of the Cloth Hall, which allegedly distinguishes the building from the Notre-Dame in Paris or any other prominent medieval building. On the historical importance of the Cloth Hall architecturally, however, Kervyn cites the Belgian nineteenth-century archeologist and architectural historian Antoine Schayes. Schayes points to the monument as the most perfect and noble application in a civil building of the “style ogival primaire,” the earliest stylistic phase in the development of Gothic architecture in Belgium.⁶⁸

In the chapter on Ypres and the Yser, Kervyn contrasts the barbarity of German destruction against this internationally recognized importance of heritage, which he also does in the other chapters but with somewhat more force here. In previous sieges of Ypres, the city's monuments were always spared, Kervyn reminds the reader, just as in 1870 the cathedral of Strasbourg, as well as Notre-Dame and the Louvre in Paris, were spared by the Prussian armies. Since the summer of 1914, however, heritage was attacked for the first time: “[I]l fallut la haute “Kultur” allemande pour détruire tant de gloire et de beauté.”⁶⁹ The heritage superlatives bring the issue to the level of humanity, from which the German savagery detaches itself by supposedly wantonly destroying this heritage that is discursively elevated to the rank of world heritage: “La rage allemande s'acharne ainsi sur les Halles d'Ypres, le plus beau monument civil du moyen âge, comme elle s'acharne sur la cathédrale de Reims, le plus beau monument religieux!”⁷⁰

The museum between *Kultur* and barbarism

Three other rhetorical figures that Kervyn relates to the museum metaphor outline broader cultural practices. Each of them allows Kervyn to thematize a different instance of *Kultur* turning into barbarism. Kervyn clearly uses these contrast reversals to disenchant Germany and not the museum, but it is nevertheless possible to detect in his discourse, as an unintended or suppressed theme, the cultural ambiguity of museum and heritage. After all, 1917 marked a century of modern museum reflection and museum criticism, and from the turn of the century it revived, especially in Germany, in the form of a museum reform movement.⁷¹

The first rhetorical figure typifies museum exhibitions as meeting places and events in which, before the war, a cosmopolitan art community could still gather across borders. Kervyn conveys an anecdote about Kaiser Wilhelm II paying a cultural diplomatic visit in 1910 to the exhibition *L'art belge au xvii^e siècle*, which Kervyn had curated. The emperor's visit then embodies the earlier German endorsement of that fraternal, internationalist logic, and even of Belgium's special place in it. At that exhibition visit, the German emperor allegedly spoke to one of the members of the Académie des beaux-arts about the role of neutral Belgium for international exchange in art and science: “votre pays *paisible et neutre* a une mission tout indiquée: être l'arène pacifique de toutes nos recherches et rencontres artistiques.”⁷² It is uncertain whether the emperor labeled this mission with these exact words, but Kervyn's paraphrasing does express the self-image of Belgium at the turn of the century and its actual role as a pioneer and the seat of international organizations and initiatives. Kervyn goes on to point out that three of the masterpieces the emperor had admired at the exhibition had already been destroyed, threatened, or damaged by his armies: Jordaens' *Adoration of the Magi*, from the Church of

St. Nicholas in Diksmuide, was lost after the school building into which the painting had been stowed away was also damaged; Van Dyck's *Christ on the Cross* [*Calvary with St. Francis*], from the Church of Our Lady in Dendermonde, had escaped German arson, as had the second Van Dyck in that town, according to Kervyn, only because they were stored away in cellars; and Rubens' triptych *The Miraculous Draught of Fish*, from the Our Lady across the Dijle Church of Mechelen, was damaged, he says, by German artillery fire.⁷³ The exhibition anecdote and the destruction cited must, of course, illustrate not only the emperor's treachery but also the disenchantment of the supposed superiority of the German *Kultur* and the collapse of an international understanding.

German states had also participated in the 1874 Brussels conference on laws and customs of warfare, the Paris conference of 1889, and the two Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907, from which the Hague Convention of 1907 resulted, consisting of thirteen treaties and one declaration.⁷⁴ Like the other signatory countries, Germany had thereby committed itself to spare historical heritage to the maximum extent in the event of war. Kervyn refers in particular to the article of the Hague Convention respecting the laws and customs of war on land, which forbids the bombing of towns and villages that are not defended—this is article 25 but Kervyn mistakenly refers to it as article 23—and to article 27 which dictates that in sieges and bombardments all monuments be spared that are devoted to religion, art, and science, including historic monuments, insofar as they are not used for military purposes.⁷⁵ Kervyn discusses the actual violation of this as a break with the international legal order, but especially with the civilized principle that artistic heritage and science, as the moral property of humanity, should be spared in war. Kervyn speaks of a regression in the history of human progress over two thousand years: “la force remplaçant le droit, c'est la banqueroute de l'honneur, de la liberté et du progrès; c'est un recul de vingt siècles, nous ramenant aux heures si cruelles qui précédèrent le christianisme; c'est le triomphe des bestiaires du cirque.”⁷⁶

A second rhetorical figure concerns German academic art historians. Kervyn emphasizes with mocking irony the typically German academic titles: “tous leurs ‘Doctors’ et ‘Professors.’”⁷⁷ This goes beyond his allusion to the “haughtiness” with which *Kultur* was claimed in Germany.⁷⁸ Kervyn expresses indignation at the way in which German art historians and intellectuals put themselves at the service of the official German denials and relativizations of the wartime destruction of Belgium's heritage. Kervyn particularly denounces the unreliable studies and reports from academics like Clemen who, from 1914 onward, minimized the war damage for German and international audiences⁷⁹: Wilhelm von Bode, the director of the royal museums of Berlin; the architect Bodo Ebhardt; Otto von Falke, the director of the Berlin *Kunstgewerbemuseum*, who had been appointed German inspector for Belgian monuments in September 1914; Otto Grautoff; and the urban planner Heinrich Stübgen.⁸⁰ Kervyn also refers to the infamous manifesto of the ninety-three intellectuals, *An die Kulturwelt!*, which had been published in September 1914 in several languages, and which claimed “qu'il n'est pas vrai que les troupes allemandes aient détruit ou aient mis le feu à un seul monument ou aient porté atteinte aux biens d'un seul citoyen belge.”⁸¹ On the same pages where Kervyn laconically cites numerous other denials by German officials and in German media, the photographs of destroyed inner cities contradict these denials.

While Kervyn accuses German art historians of intellectual dishonesty and of subordinating the cause of art and artistic heritage to that of the nation and the war, Nothomb in *Villes meurtries de Belgique: Villes de Flandre* makes a characterization that may be even more damning. Nothomb depicts the German heritage experts who would avoid and measure heritage damage as administrators with a diluted understanding of heritage. The picturesque

beauty of Diksmuide-as-artwork has escaped them, but it cannot be captured in inventories and transcends the museum object:

L'expert allemand qui suit méthodiquement l'incendiaire et qui fait son rapport sur les œuvres d'art détruites certifiera qu'en dehors du Jordaens, chef-d'œuvre dûment catalogué, d'une toile de Jouvenet et d'une cuve baptismale qui avait son numéro dans les répertoires, il n'y a rien à regretter à Dixmude, ville que les professeurs d'architecture n'ont pas classée, et dont les monuments ne sont pas figurés par des cotes dans des manuels.⁸²

This ridiculing of inventories and ratings may explain the lack of an inventory of Belgian monuments covering the entire territory, a fact that was eagerly cited by the German side.⁸³ More generally, a distrust of professional heritage management, as a superficial musealization practice that dries up a real cultural experience, is echoed here.

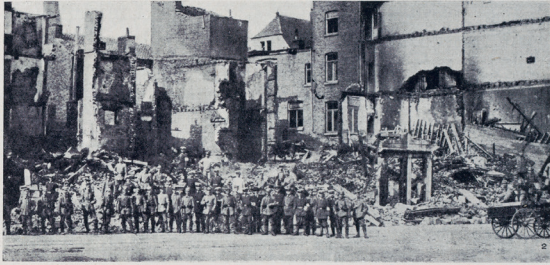
In addition to German initiatives to refute the barbarism accusations, Germans occasionally reclaimed the sobriquet “barbarians,” as Christina Kott points out.⁸⁴ This tied in with modern discourses of disdain for a museumized culture and with a vitalism that praised the destruction of war as an opportunity for cultural regeneration—most aptly formulated in Europe in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s futuristic call to set fire to museums that burdened culture with the history of art. Such destructive vitalism sometimes resonates in Kervyn’s characterizations of the destructive barbarians, but Kervyn never connects the gleeful wanton destruction with more complex, avant-garde conceptions: German soldiers experienced the attack on St. Rumbold’s Cathedral in Mechelen, according to Kervyn, as a high point in “cette guerre ‘fraîche et joyeuse’”; in the village of Houtem near Vilvoorde, the military chapel is said to have played its most compelling music and soldiers to have danced while the village church was on fire; at the recapture of Dendermonde from the Belgian army, a German commander, like a modern Nero, Kervyn says, would have had an armchair placed in the market square in front of the burning town hall to better enjoy the fire he had commanded.⁸⁵

figs. 14–16

These anecdotes of gleeful destruction seem merely extreme variants of the deliberately performed acts of destruction raised by Kervyn. The third rhetorical figure, then, is the repetition of a specific image-and-caption topos throughout *La guerre*: a handful of images of German soldiers posing in front of wrecked buildings, and more frequent image captions that designate destruction as the “work” of the Germans. For example, in one photograph about forty German soldiers pose in front of a half-burned city block, while the caption for image 16, “Les incendiaires devant leur oeuvre,” “the arsonists in front of their work,” makes explicit the double auctorial relationship of maker and work and of perpetrator (“arsonist”) and crime.⁸⁶ This also echoes in the caption for image 26, “Un soldat allemand se fait photographier dans l’église de Visé qu’il a incendiée,” and in the photographs and captions of images 34, 55, 61.⁸⁷ Kervyn discusses this posing and photographing practice in the main text only in passing: “Il est curieux de remarquer en passant, que c’est dans les monuments incendiés ou pillés par eux, ou devant les ruines plus lugubres encore, que les Allemands affectent de se faire photographier!”⁸⁸ Yet the group portraits of offenders are perhaps the crux of Kervyn’s rhetorical imagery. Indeed, throughout the book these images with their captions convey that the rubble depicted is not the work of disaster but was deliberately accomplished and claimed “work.” In captions such as the one for image 7, “L’oeuvre allemande en Belgique,” “oeuvre” as a work of destruction sounds not only like an ironic reversal of artistic work but also of charitable work, such as that deployed by all kinds of foreign organizations during the war years.

des mutilations que ses monuments et ses trésors d'art ont subies !

Il lui semble que si la neutralité est à la rigueur possible en face de belligérants, « elle ne peut s'expliquer dans la guerre entre l'Allemagne et la bibliothèque de Louvain ou les halles d'Ypres ! ».



Cliché de M. de Thoran.

16. — Les incendiaires devant leur œuvre.

Il lui paraît, enfin, que l'indifférence des opinions n'est pas possible en face

richesses qu'il remémorait.

Il y avait là d'excellents tableaux, de beaux autels et de très précieux objets

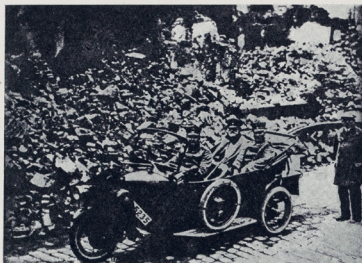


Cliché de M. de Thoran.

24. — Les Allemands dans l'église ruinée de Visé ont remis le feu à la tour.

eux, ces barbares en revinrent vers ce berceau, pénétrèrent de nouveau dans le sanctuaire, y formèrent trois grands bûchers auxquels ils mirent le feu.

Dans un faubourg de Dinant, à Leffe, « leur fureur ne se manifesta pas seulement par la destruction de toute cette agglomération, mais, ainsi que



Cliché de M. Massart.

34. — Le général allemand qui a ordonné les massacres et l'incendie de Dinant se fait photographier au milieu de ses ruines rougies du sang de ses victimes (d'après une carte postale allemande).

figs. 14, 15, 16 Photographs of German military posing in front of destruction, with accusatory captions. *La guerre*, 27, 47, 62.

A lasting indictment

Kervyn thus largely builds the rhetoric of *La guerre* upon a characterization of the German invasion of Belgium as a deliberate vandalism of a territory full of heritage, but the former museum conservator does not develop this “museum Belgium” with conceptual consistency. The idea can be found to encompass in turns a picturesque country, a collection of universally cherished masterpieces, and a memorial landscape to national history. In the indignant and accusatory discourse of *La guerre*, the differences and tensions between these three museum modes remain beneath the surface, much like in the publishing tradition of picturesque accounts of Belgium. There is also no place in *La guerre* for critical problematizations of the museum and of the musealization of the territory. Perhaps in the same way that Belgium, in the face of the pressure of war, closed ranks when installing a coalition government of national unity and in its national war propaganda, Kervyn contrasts a seemingly problem-free territory-spanning museum with German barbarism. However, the numerous cracks in Kervyn’s “museum Belgium” become particularly evident in his conclusion, where he attempts to make this vague and shifting metaphor operational, envisioning how Belgium is to deal with its ravaged heritage once the war is over (and the Central powers defeated).

In the end, Kervyn argues that the losses are irreparable. Any possible reconstruction of the destroyed historical buildings, villages, and cities can never really restore the architectural heritage that punctuated picturesque Belgium. Quoting the Belgian Queen Elisabeth in a Ruskinian vein, Kervyn asserts “si on peut reconstruire un monument, ‘on ne peut lui rendre ... ni sa poésie, ni son âme.’”⁸⁹ The only envisionable form of recovery, according to Kervyn, is a recovery of justice. Since no money could return what was lost or undo the evil done, Kervyn suggests that Belgians henceforth permanently stop their cultural exchange with Germany, as a symbolic yet vengeful way to right the wrong. He calls for a perpetuation of the “thick wall” between Germany and Belgium that the Germans brought forth,

un mur noirci par le feu, un mur épais, formé de ruines de nos œuvres d'art et de nos plus beaux monuments, un mur que nul des nôtres ne pourra franchir sans commettre une vraie trahison, et qui, en même temps, interdira à jamais aux assassins et aux vandales, l'accès des lieux où reposent leurs innocentes victimes!⁹⁰

After the war, however, physical and geopolitical repair was to take a very different form. Not only was Germany obliged to financially pay a war debt for the destruction in Belgium, and in other countries, that helped Belgium in its idealizing reconstruction project of the damaged historical areas, but the Treaty of Versailles also obliged Germany to return to Belgium the side panels of *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, the Ghent Altarpiece painted by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, from the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin. The panels, which the Prussian king had legitimately acquired in the early nineteenth century, would make it possible to again complete the spectacular retable of the Flemish Primitives in Ghent. After the war, Kervyn led a futile campaign for the Belgian government to “recover” from Austria the treasure of the Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece as another compensation for Belgium’s heritage losses.⁹¹ These restitution cases imply a “museum Belgium” as a collection of masterpieces, anchored in localities through their histories, but at the same time constituting movable heritage that can be replenished in the event of loss through repatriation of foreign pieces, with Germany (and Austria) in this case having to shoulder the debt and the price of a symbolic loss.

In the closing pages of *La guerre* Kervyn argues for the preservation of at least some of “nos ruines ... impitoyables et vengeresses,” “our pitiless and vengeful ruins.”⁹² He projects a future memorial landscape over the Belgian territory, one that should both commemorate Belgian wartime suffering and preserve the telling evidence of German injustice in Belgium for the international community: “la vue de tant de chefs-d’œuvre d’architecture, odieusement profanés constitue le réquisitoire le plus éloquent que l’on pourra jamais dresser contre le vandalisme.”⁹³ The photographs of a ruined Belgium in *La guerre* and numerous other publications, however, would prove to be more enduring witnesses to the devastation than the ruins themselves. The ruins of monuments and historic towns had become more numerous—but also much more devastating and less picturesque—by the end of the war than in 1916 when Kervyn was writing, especially in the west-Flemish front area, due to not only German but also to Belgian and English artillery. Nearly all these ruins would be reconstructed or replaced with new buildings in the interwar period. Yet, more than a lasting indictment against wartime heritage vandalism, *La guerre et les œuvres d’art en Belgique* is a lasting testimony to the discursive constructions of *la Belgique martyre* and of Belgium as a vandalized museum. In this historical juncture of mass warfare and mass media, national and international mobilization, it is an ultimate illustration of the modern ways in which print and threat produced notions of heritage, its embattled objects, and their societal meanings.

1 In France and Belgium, for example, the image of the German soldier-destroyer-looter persisted, in contrast to the memory of art experts in the service of an exemplary *Kunstschutz* in Germany and the United States. Christina Kott, *Préserver l’art de l’ennemi? le patrimoine artistique en Belgique et en France occupées, 1914–1918*, *Comparatisme et société* 4 (Brussels: Lang, 2006), 17–29.

2 As far as the Belgian war memory is concerned, Sophie de Schaepdrijver refers to a shift during the war from an initial international discourse on Belgium’s brave sacrifice in the name of civilization, which also included the idea of “villes martyres,” to a dominant post-war national discourse on “régions dévastées” or “verwoeste gewesten,” while internationally Belgium’s wartime suffering was minimized because of the country’s small percentage of casualties. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, “Gemartelde steden en verwoeste gewesten: Twee legaten van 1914–1918,” in *België, een parcours van herinnering*, ed. Jo Tollebeek, Geert Buelens, Gita Deneckere, Chantal Kesteloot, and Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2008), 197–199.

3 Pierre Purseigle, “Catastrophe and Reconstruction in Western Europe: The Urban Aftermath of the First World War,” in *Revival after the Great War: Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform*, ed. Luc Verpoest, Leen Engelen, Rajesh Heyninckx, Jan Schmidt, Pieter Uyttenhove, and Pieter Verstraete (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 16.

4 Marius Vachon presents his book as a “martyrological essay.” Marius Vachon, *Les villes martyres de France et de Belgique: Statistiques des villes et villages détruits par les Allemands dans les deux pays, avec 41 vues de villes et de monuments historiques avant et après leur incendie* (Paris: Payot, 1915), 176.

5 Kervyn refers to some of these reports, including Henri Davignon, *La Belgique et l’Allemagne: textes et documents* (Paris: Hachette, 1915) and *Livre gris belge. Correspondance diplomatique du Ministère des Affaires étrangères du Royaume de Belgique,*

relative à la guerre de 1914. 24 juillet–29 août (Bern: K.-J. Wyss, 1914).

6 “Dans cet écrit de polémique gâté par beaucoup de rhétorique, le baron Kervyn répond, avec une passion mal contenue, à d’autres écrits de propagande.” Nicholas-Norbert Huyghebaert, “Kervyn de Lettenhove (Henri),” in *Biographie Nationale* (Brussels: Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique, 1976), 527.

7 Henri Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre et les œuvres d’art en Belgique 1914–1916* (Brussels and Paris: Van Oest, 1917), unpaginated dedication page.

8 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 2, 3.

9 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 6, 7.

10 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 7.

11 “As a background to this gloomy picture, ruins, always ruins, new ruins; for the big German guns are looking in the distance, as we shall see, for anything of monumental character to destroy it; and when they cannot do it, their planes help them to do it!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 8.

12 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 7.

13 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 8.

14 “[E]nhanced modern firepower vastly intensified the destruction, and the heightened modern sensibility of ‘living’ heritage elevated the places affected to a martyr-like status.” Miles Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: a History of Architectural Preservation, Antiquity to Modernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 189.

15 Armand Dayot, P. [Paul] Delannoy, Jean De Mot, Louis Dumont-Wilden, Paul Lambotte, Maurice Maeterlinck, Pierre Nothomb, Emile Verhaeren, and Maurice Wilmotte, *La Belgique héroïque et martyre: 1914–1915*, special issue of *L’Art et les artistes*, 1915; Jules Destrée, *Les villes wallonnes. Villes meurtries de Belgique* (Brussels and Paris: Van Oest, 1917); Louis Dumont-Wilden, *Bruxelles et Louvain. Villes meurtries de Belgique* (Brussels and Paris: Van Oest, 1916); Pierre Nothomb, *Villes de Flandre. Villes meurtries de Belgique* (Brussels and Paris: Van Oest, 1917); Maurice Maeterlinck, *Anvers, Malines et Lierre. Villes*

meurtries de Belgique (Brussels and Paris: Van Oest, 1916).

16 Jacques Marx, *Verhaeren, biographie d’une œuvre* (Brussels: Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique, 1996), 171; Rik Hemmerijckx, “Émile Verhaeren, un poète dans la Grande Guerre,” *Nord* 64, no. 2 (2014): 93–107.

17 Pierre Nothomb, *Les barbares en Belgique* (Paris: Perrin, 1914); Pierre Nothomb, *La Belgique martyre* (Paris: Perrin, 1915).

18 François Stockmans, “Oest (Gérard Van),” in *Biographie Nationale*, 631–640 (Brussels: Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique, 1976).

19 Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog: Het koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Antwerp: Houtekiet, 2013), 60–63.

20 Benoît Majerus, “War Losses (Belgium),” in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2016). DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10812; John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

21 De Schaepdrijver, “Gemartelde steden,” 194–203.

22 On the German side, after the war, Paul Clemen also put into perspective the destruction during the German passage through Belgium by comparing it to the devastation on the Western Front during the later years of the war. Paul Clemen, *Kunstschutz im Kriege: Berichte über den Zustand der Kunstdenkmäler auf den verschiedenen Kriegsschauplätzen und über die deutschen und österreichischen Massnahmen zu ihrer Erhaltung, Rettung, Erforschung* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1919), 16. The British remembrance focus on Ypres after the war also contributed to the rise of Ypres as a Belgian *lieu de mémoire* for the First World War. De Schaepdrijver, “Gemartelde steden,” 204–207.

23 Clemen, *Kunstschutz*; Kott, *Préserver*; Marnix Beyen, “Art and Architectural

History as Substitutes for Preservation. German Heritage Policy in Belgium after the First World War,” in *Living with History 1914–1964: Rebuilding Europe after the First and Second World War and the Role of Heritage Preservation*, ed. Nicholas Bullock and Luc Verpoest (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2011).

24 “It is not as a traveler that I have seen you, towns of the Scheldt, towns of the Lys, towns of the Yser. I have not made the tourist’s walk, from one of you to the other. I lived and grew up among you. And if today, separated by exile from your ruins and your splendors, I impose an itinerary on my reminiscence, it is a matter of literary discipline, and not the memory of a journey made with a guide in my hands.” Nothomb, *Villes de Flandre*, 6–7.

25 Huyghebaert, “Kervyn de Lettenhove,” 528.

26 Herman Stynen, *De onvoltooid verleden tijd: een geschiedenis van de monumenten- en landschapszorg in België 1835–1940* (Brussels: Stichting Vlaams Erfgoed, 1998), 368.

27 More than 1.5 million Belgian civilians fled after the German invasion in 1914, but ‘only’ 600,000 refugees settled abroad. Michael Amara, “Refugees (Belgium),” in *1914–1918-online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2016). DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10751.

28 Characterization by Henri Pirenne in *La Belgique et la guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1928), as quoted in Pieter Uyttenhove, “Internationale inspanningen voor een modern België,” in *Resurgam: de Belgische wederopbouw na 1914*, ed. Marcel Smets (Brussels: Gemeentekrediet van België, 1985), 33.

29 Uyttenhove, “Internationale inspanningen.”

30 Huyghebaert, “Kervyn de Lettenhove,” 527; Eric Hennaut and Liliane Liesens; Henry Lacoste: *architecte 1885–1968* (Brussels: Archives d’architecture moderne, 2008), 28–31.

31 Stynen, *De onvoltooid verleden tijd*, 242–244; Herman Stynen, Georges Charlier, and An Beullens, *Het verwoeste gewest 15/18: Mission Dhuicque, The Devastated Region* (Bruges: M. Van de Wiele, 1985).

32 Uyttenhove, “Internationale inspanningen,” 54.

33 Nothomb, *Villes de Flandre*, 55.

34 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 35.

35 “[T]he war of the Vandals, the war of the Huns, the war for the things of art, for the treasures of erudition, for the beauty of monuments!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 43.

36 “The race has not changed. Time has not changed its barbarity and vandalism. If a thought guides it, it is always the same one: to impose oneself by terror and to mark one’s arrival by horror, cruelty and destruction!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 49.

37 “[T]he filial cult we had for these precious vestiges bequeathed by our ancestors.... [E]ach of these monuments and all the works of art—now destroyed—represented a glorious past, had a history, evoked traditions, possessed a soul and ... all of them, through close ties, were attached to our most intimate fibers, our pride, our genius and our patriotic love.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 16.

38 “[W]hy ... I have tears also for poor broken stones, mutilated statues, paintings burned or pierced by the machine gun!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 16.

39 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 16.

40 “As the Belgian deputy Jules Destrée wrote with emotion and truth, ‘these monuments told our history, line by line, and celebrated all our heroes.’” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 18.

41 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 19.

42 “That’s why there wasn’t a stone in these buildings that didn’t carry lessons far superior to those in books: all our history could be read on our belfries.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 19. On the buildings versus books topos, see Maarten Delbeke, “A Book Accessible to All,” *AA Files*, no. 69 (2014): 118–122.

43 The symbolic centrality of the belfry in the Belgian and Flemish cultural identity construction since the middle of the nineteenth century is also evident in several cultural journals that carry the belfry in their titles. Three significant ones are *Le Belfroi—Arts héraldique archéologie*, published in Bruges, beginning in 1863, at the initiative of archaeologist-art historian James Weale; the Catholic *Belfort*, which began in Ghent in 1886, in Dutch; and *Der Belfried. Eine Monatsschrift für Gegenwart und Geschichte der belgischen Lande*, which was published from July 1916 to October 1918 by the German occupying forces as a tool of *Flamenpolitik*, under the direction of art historians Wilhelm Hausenstein and then August Grisebach. Kott, *Préserver*, 118–120.

44 “As for our town halls ... they marked for us the vitality of our institutions. And seeing them rising up all over Flanders, we could also remember with pride that ‘our country had been the source of Europe’s freedoms.’” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 21–22.

45 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 22.

46 “[As a] Walloon, it’s sweet for me to talk about Flanders.” Nothomb, *Villes de Flandre*, 5.

47 Destrée, *Les villes wallonnes*, 10.

48 Olivier Boehme, *Europa, een geschiedenis van grensnaties* (Antwerp: Uitgeverij Polis, 2016), 227–228.

49 “Ypres, Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide, what a trilogy! ... Yes, the heart of our old Flanders seemed to sleep in these ancient cities, in the shade of their high towers, as well as in reliquaries. Also, we liked to go towards them, in a pious pilgrimage, to gather ourselves there and to unite us there, in a kind of spiritual communion, with those who had loved so much this same fatherland and these same cities, with those who had always heroically defended them and had so magnificently glorified them.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 123.

50 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 175–176.

51 “[T]he painful procession of destroyed towns and small cities, ransacked countryside and also some of those calm and quiet corners peculiar to this good country of Flanders.” Dayot et al., *La Belgique héroïque et martyre*, 4.

52 Fuglister published the book *Louvain, ville-martyre* in 1916 in Paris and London,

with numerous photographs of his own. Jan Baetens, “Albert Fuglister: The Photographer as Anti-Propagandist,” *Image & Narrative* 1, no. 1, June 2000.

53 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 112–113.

54 Kott, *Préserver*, 174–195.

55 Eyal Weizman and Ines Weizman, *Before and After: Documenting the Architecture of Disaster* (Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013), 7–18.

56 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 23.

57 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 105. Today, it is assumed that the four paintings had been brought in safety before the church burnt down, but were then stolen or got lost otherwise. In 2014 the municipality of Grimbergen issued an international search notice.

58 “The whole of Belgium ... was a vast and precious museum, a national museum above all, but also a world museum. For are not such artistic creations the common heritage of the whole world? And if this is so, as we believe, the works that constitute this universal treasure, are they not sacred, intangible? For what becomes of civilization, if it is permitted to destroy at pleasure what the greatest geniuses have bequeathed to all mankind?” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 22. Kervyn also compares village churches to museums and describes the private art collections in the looted civilian houses of Leuven as “petit musée.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 42, 72.

59 Lucia Allais, *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 33–47; Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 198–202; 390–414.

60 “Historic Belgium is like a museum: Bruges and Antwerp hold the places of honor on its two main walls that look at each other. ... Bruges and Antwerp are one in the fifteenth century, the other in the sixteenth century, commercial and artistic. They gather and keep close—as one collects such precious things between the folds of a big coat—gold and masterpiece. They are opulent and even ostentatious. Throughout their civic life, they have wanted processions to celebrate their glory. They have made a spectacle of themselves to the world, but above all to themselves. They lived to be beautiful.” Verhaeren, *Anvers, Malines et Lierre*, 5. In the volume *La Belgique sanglante*, Verhaeren had also compared the sight, in November 1914, of the village Pervijze, right behind the war front, with a natural history museum: “It is on entering Pervijze that we get the first sight of real horror. The main street is like a great museum of prehistoric fauna. The house—roofs, denuded of tiles and the joists left naked, have tilted forward on to the side walks, so that they hang in mid air like giant vertebrae. Behind them the ruins of walls and gables suggest huge skeletons shattered and broken.” Emile Verhaeren, “Pervyse,” in the English translation of *La Belgique sanglante, Belgium’s Agony* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), 68.

61 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 123.

62 Similarly, the characterization of the church treasures in the beguinage church of the sleepy town of Diksmuide, “semblable elle-même à un vaste cloître.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 161.

63 “Everything is more dear to us the more everything is attacked or threatened.” Emile Verhaeren, “Lettre au graveur Delstanges, évêque des petites villes de Flandre,” in Emile Verhaeren, *Parmi les cendres: La Belgique dévastée* (Paris: Crès, 1916), 8.

64 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 123.

65 “On the Belfry and the Halls of Ypres ... are written in indelible characters ... the grandeur and power of the craft guilds of this once flourishing city.” Joseph M.B.C. Kervyn de Lettenhove, *Histoire de Flandre*, vol. 1 274, as quoted in Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 135.

66 “An ensemble that is almost unique in the world.” Pierre Loti, “Un soir d’Ypres,” as quoted in Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 124.

67 “The square of Ypres, with other elements and under more austere skies, deserves to be as precious to mankind, as *sacred* and as *intangible* as St. Mark’s Square in Venice, the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, or the square in

front of the Duomo of Pisa. It forms a unique, irreproachable work of art.” Michelet, *Sur les chemins d’Europe*, with the italics as quoted in Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 136.

68 Kervyn writes Schayes’ name as “Schaeys.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 135.

69 “[I]t took the German high ‘Kultur’ to destroy so much glory and beauty.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 125.

70 “The German rage thus seizes the Ypres Halles, the most beautiful civil monument of the Middle Ages, just as it seizes the cathedral of Rheims, the most beautiful religious monument!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 129.

71 Alexis Joachimides, *Die Museumsreformbewegung in Deutschland und die Entstehung des modernen Museums 1880–1940* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 2001).

72 “[Y]our *peaceful* and *neutral* country has a clear mission: to be the peaceful arena for all our artistic investigations and encounters.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 33 (italics in original).

73 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 33, 118. Kervyn also compares the damage, done by German shelling, to the image of Christ on the canvas to a second Judas kiss by the German emperor. Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 102. Clemen attributes the loss of the Diksmuide Jordaeus to Belgian impetuosity. Clemen, *Kunstschutz*, 22. Rubens’s *The Miraculous Draught of Fish* from the Our Lady across the Dijle Church was not destroyed, but together with the Rubens from St. John’s Church, it was brought to safety in Antwerp after the first bombardment of Mechelen by the Commissie voor Kunst en Wetenschap of Antwerp. Geert Clerbout, *Oorlog aan de Dijle. Mechelen tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Kessel-Lo: Van Halewyck, 2012), 45.

74 Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 188–189.

75 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 35.

76 “[F]orce replacing law is the bankruptcy of honor, freedom and progress; it is a regression of twenty centuries, taking us back to the cruel hours that preceded Christianity; it is the triumph of the circus bestiaries.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 11.

77 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 25.

78 “[C]e que les Allemands chez eux, appelaient orgueilleusement leur ‘Kultur.’” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 11.

79 However, further on Kervyn also cites Clemen as a German source who acknowledges the unmitigated devastation at the front. Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 123.

80 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 13. On von Falke, Clemen, and Grautoff, see Kott, *Préserver*, 71–74, 78–79, and 81–85. Kott also points to a Belgian experience of German art historical research in occupied Belgium as cultural imperialism, and possibly as a competition that was already experienced before the war. Kott, *Préserver*, 131–132. It is possible that these resentments also play into Kervyn’s sarcastic emphasis on academic titles.

81 “[T]hat it is not true that German troops destroyed or set fire to a single monument or damaged the property of a single Belgian citizen.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 14.

82 “The German expert who methodically follows the arsonist and who reports on the destroyed works of art will certify that apart from the Jordaeus, a duly catalogued masterpiece, a painting by Jouvenet and a baptismal font that had its number in the repertoires, there is nothing to regret in Diksmuide, a city that the professors of architecture have not classified, and whose monuments are not listed with ratings in handbooks.” Nothomb, *Villes de Flandre*, 49–50.

83 Paul Clemen and Gerhard Bersu, “Kunstdenkmäler und Kunstpflege in Belgien,” in *Kunstschutz im Kriege: Berichte über den Zustand der Kunstdenkmäler auf den verschiedenen Kriegsschauplätzen und über die deutschen und österreichischen Massnahmen zu ihrer Erhaltung, Rettung, Erforschung*, ed. Paul Clemen (Leipzig: Seemann, 1919), 34.

84 Kott, *Préserver*, 48–50.

85 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 100, 105, 117.

86 Michel Foucault has pointed out the punitive legal origins of modern authorship.

Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” in *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 827.

87 “A German soldier is photographed in the church of Visé that he has burned down.”

88 “It is curious to note in passing, that the Germans pose to have their photographs taken in the monuments burned or looted by them, or in front of the even gloomier ruins!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 48.

89 “[I]f one can rebuild a monument, ‘one cannot bring back to it ... neither its poetry nor its soul.’” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 173.

90 “[A] wall blackened by the fire, a thick wall formed by the rubble of our destroyed works of art and of our most beautiful monuments and which no one of our people will be allowed to cross without committing real treason, and which will, at the same time, forever forbid the murderers and vandals access to the places where their innocent victims lie at rest!” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 175.

91 Gilles Docquier, “The Gold of the Vanquished: Belgian Claims on the Order of the Golden Fleece’s Treasure in the Aftermath of the First World War,” *Dutch Crossing* 43, no. 1 (2019): 78–95.

92 Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 175.

93 “The sight of so many odiously desecrated masterpieces of architecture is the most eloquent indictment against the vandalism that can ever be made.” Kervyn de Lettenhove, *La guerre*, 178.

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