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THE JEWELS PAGEANT

a mini-exhibition



POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE IN ANTWERP

“The Jewels Pageant, which will take place in Antwerp on August 12th, 15th and 19th 1923, is intended as a gift from the Diamond Trade to the City-on-the-Scheldt.”

This first sentence from the programme booklet bearing the English title ‘Antwerp Festivals Jewels Pageant’ alongside the Dutch and French, already tells us quite a lot. It is a hundred years since the pageant was staged in Antwerp. It was organised by the diamond sector itself to draw attention to Antwerp’s important role as the diamond city of the world.

By 1923 Antwerp had recovered from a difficult period through the First World War and from the shortage of rough diamonds and the city flourished and dazzled as never before. With more than 10,000 workers spread across 160 cutting shops, the diamond industry was Antwerp’s largest industry. And that was something to celebrate - with a Jewellery Pageant!

According to the organisers and (inter)national press, the procession was a spectacle on a grand scale.

It was a whopping 2.5 kilometres long and made up of 2,000 extras from home and abroad, 15 floats, elephants from the circus, and camels from Antwerp Zoo. As the extras in the procession sported real jewellery, the insurance value of just one float was calculated to be 37 million francs (60 million euros).

Over the three days, an estimated 1.5 million people came to watch. The city was teeming with visitors and tourists. Extra trains to and from Antwerp were even laid on. On August 12th 1923, the first day of the procession, the number of visitors was estimated at 250,000 plus the royal family. August 15th 1923, the second day, was the busiest. Newspapers reported that more than one million people witnessed the procession. At the time, no more than

roughly 300,000 people lived in the Antwerp region so the city really was packed to the gunnels.

The committee organising the procession consisted of diamond merchants, manufacturers, the General Diamond Workers’ Union of Belgium (ADB) and several diamond bourses. In their determination to do justice to Antwerp’s fame as the ‘City of Parades’, they raised several million francs and succeeded in drawing attention to ‘the diamond capital’ from around the world.

The floats were designed by Antwerp artists, whose brief was not just to make them look spectacular, but also to inform visitors about the diamond trade and diamond processing. Indeed, tribute was paid to the whole sector: from diamond miners to cutters and dealers and the various countries involved in the sector. The diamond trade had always been an international and multicultural affair and this was reflected in the colourful and lavish procession in which many countries and cultures were represented and together paid tribute to Antwerp as the diamond city.

“The Jewels Pageant will thus be an unparalleled event in the history of Antwerp, the memory of which will never fade.”

This mini-exhibition revives that memory. It recreates the magnificence of the elaborate floats, and follows the routes taken by the procession through the city. But the event was not without its blunders... All will be revealed!

ANTWERP INUNDATED WITH VISITORS

(Newspaper wall)

The national and international press described the Jewellery Pageant as an unprecedented spectacle, a marvel of beauty and organisation.

According to foreign newspapers, some 1.5 million people from home and abroad saw the procession over the three days.

Exactly how many people attended each procession is, however, difficult to evaluate. Various journalists reported seas of people and rows of spectators standing side by side to catch a glimpse of the procession. Even making one's way through the city on procession days appears to have been very difficult.

ROUTES AND BLUNDERS

(Wall with map of Antwerp)

The Jewellery Pageant was staged on three separate days, following a different route each day. These maps show the various routes through the city. The dimensions of the floats were taken into account when working out the route. Given that the largest pageant wagons were up to 6 metres wide and 8 metres high, preparations had to be made to ensure the streets could accommodate them.

Slight panic set in in the final weeks of preparation. On August 2nd, the court in Brussels informed the organisers that the royal family would be attending the event on August 12th instead of August 19th. The route was immediately amended so that the procession would pass the royal palace on the Meir on that first day. When amending the route, the organisers endeavoured to stay as close to the original plan as possible. However, this led to great confusion and in the end the route included several streets that were too small for the largest floats to pass, particularly when lined with large numbers of spectators.

To make matters worse, at the last minute the tram company changed its mind about removing the overhead wires and cables in streets along which the procession would pass. These included the Meir and Keyserlei. If the cables were not removed, those streets would pose a problem for the tall floats.

Senator L. Van Berckelaer, a member of the organising committee, was displeased by the tram company's attitude and even expressed this in the newspaper: "It is not the town council, but the tram company running the city."

Be sure, too, to read the old newspaper articles on the wall about

these blunders.

FILM

(Wall with map of Antwerp)

The film shows original images of the Jewellery Pageant on August 12th 1923, the day the royal family was present. We see the floats, extras and police pass by over the Grote Markt. Note, too, the rows of spectators lining the street and the people looking on from their balconies and out of windows.

The final scenes give an impression of the bustle of activity on the street.

POSTER

The poster shows a gigantic Lodewijk van Bercken, the legendary inventor of diamond-cutting, holding a diamond. Next to him is the Antwerp coat of arms and in the background the unmistakable tower of Antwerp cathedral.

A WORLD OF POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

(Showcase with programme)

Fifteen floats took part in the Jewellery Pageant. The route was 2.5 kilometres long and made up of four parts, each headed up by banderole bearers – a banderole is a long, narrow flag usually bearing an inscription – and men on horseback who announced the programme and the participating countries. Behind them came floats on the theme of 'Mining', represented by South Africa and the Belgian Congo (now the Republic of Congo).

The procession was divided into two main parts: the West and the East. In the first part, historical stories about diamonds in several Western countries were recreated on and around the floats. For example, there was a float commemorating Lodewijk Van Bercken who, according to several myths, invented diamond-cutting. As so many diamonds were sold in the United States of America and in Poland, an American and a Polish float were included in the procession, but there were also Dutch, French, Italian and Brazilian

floats. Precious stones delineated the American flag and the Dutch coat of arms on their respective floats. A dazzling float on the theme of 'The earth, the bearer of precious stones' rounded off this representation of the West.

In the second main part, the East was portrayed in fabulous scenes featuring a shah from Persia and camels from Antwerp Zoo, the Rajah of Panna (India) with elephants from the De Jongh circus, a Chinese float flaunting antique objects (including a used executioner sword) and a Japanese Samurai.

Bringing up the rear of the procession and underlining multicultural cooperation in the sector was the float titled the 'Foreign Peoples pay tribute to Antwerp's Diamond Trade'. It expressed the admiration of countries for Antwerp and their gratitude to the diamond city.

GRAND DESIGN, MAMMOTH BUDGET

(Wall with floats)

The fifteen floats, the costumes and the attributes were designed by three Antwerp artists: Piet van Engelen, Jos Ratinckx and Edmond van Offel. Great attention was paid even to the smallest details and no expense was spared. The budget for executing the design was several million Belgian francs.

Antwerp's diamond sector was very involved in the event. Even entire families helped with the preparations and took part in the procession as extras.

THE FIRST FLOAT IN THE PROCESSION: SOUTH AFRICAN WAGON

"Mining diamonds in the Cape Colony"

In 1923 most diamonds came to Antwerp from diamond mines in South Africa. So this South-African float illustrating diamond mining was given pride of place at the front of the procession. It shows, for example, rocky earth being hacked away and then sieved and washed for the first time. The work was carried out by local South Africans under the supervision of prospectors. Walking

in front of the wagon were several extras dressed as miners and carrying the tool of their trade.

TRIBUTE TO LODEWIJK VAN BERCKEN

"The inventor of diamond-cutting in his workshop in Antwerp"

Legend has it that the Fleming Lodewijk Van Bercken from Bruges invented diamond-cutting, so he merited a special float acknowledging the important contribution he allegedly made to the diamond sector.

Van Bercken lived under the rule of the dukes of Burgundy in the second half of the 15th century. The story goes that he worked in Antwerp and was commissioned by Charles the Bold to cut a diamond belonging to the duke. Van Bercken is said to have been the first to be able to cut very precise and symmetrical facets on a diamond with the aid of a scaife – a revolving polishing wheel –, which was infused with oil and diamond dust.

In the centre of the wagon, which displays the architectural style typical of the time, we see Lodewijk Van Bercken, handing his cut diamond to Charles the Bold. Van Bercken is also shown at work in his house in Antwerp, helped in the background by his family: his wife turns the mill wheel while his children blow into the charcoal fire.

THE LAST WESTERN WAGON: THE EARTH, SOURCE OF PRECIOUS STONES

"The Earth pours all the precious stones out of the horn of plenty"

The Western part of the procession culminated in this float on the theme of the earth and its treasures. Its design reflected the elaborate style of Louis XV with its sinuous lines and flowing curves. According to the press, it was a truly resplendent spectacle.

A gold female figure symbolises the earth. She is shown blowing into the horn of plenty, from which precious stones cascade. Around the earth are 'living' gemstones, represented by women and girls wearing a gown in the colour of their particular stone. Diamond is dressed in dazzling white, ruby in blood-red, opal greyish-blue, turquoise dark green, emerald bright green,

tourmaline deep brown, topaz gold, and amethyst purple. The women on the float are family members of well-known figures in the diamond industry like Tolkowsky, Hartveld, Elbaum and Bamdas. In the procession they wore genuine items of jewellery set with the precious stones they represent. The jewels were insured for 37 million francs, around 60 million euros.

AN EXTRAVAGANT (FANTASY) IMAGE OF INDIA: HINDU WAGON

"Selling diamonds from the Panna mine by a rajah in the 18th century"

This float derives its splendour from its light colours, but above all its abundance of gold and silver. We see a golden temple borne by four silver elephants and encircled by Hindu gods. The float shows the ruler or rajah of Panna, the owner of the diamond mines in the Panna district of India. He is surrounded by ministers and servants as he offers diamonds for sale to inquisitive European merchants in the 18th century.

A whole host of accessories on the float evoke the sumptuous (fantasy) image of India at the time of the Mogul empire: gold seats, parasols, richly decorated cushions, etc. The sense of extravagance is heightened by the group of extras in front of the wagon: noblemen carried in gold palanquins, Indian diamond traders, flag-bearing Indians on horseback armed with spears, and elephants from the circus.

Ten riders with flags bring up the rear of this breathtaking float. The Indian 'delegation' consisted of a staggering 78 men on horseback, 4 draught horses, 2 ponies, 2 elephants, 12 women and 175 men on foot.

THE FINALE OF THE JEWELLERY PAGEANT: FOREIGN PEOPLES PAY HOMAGE TO ANTWERP'S DIAMOND TRADE

"All nations come to the diamond city of Antwerp to pay their respects"

The procession culminates in foreign peoples paying homage to

the city. The diamond sector had always been multicultural and in 1923 Antwerp's diamond sector is even believed to have consisted mainly of non-Belgian dealers. This float emphasises this international aspect and the spirit of cooperation between the different countries and nationalities.

At the front of the wagon we see the Antwerp Virgin. Her sceptre is a scaife, a diamond-polishing wheel. Behind her a large royal crown sits atop a richly decorated plinth. Around the plinth are five gold figures denoting the five parts of the world. The different countries are represented by men, women and children dressed in a colourful costume typifying their particular country. Coats of arms and flags of the different nationalities brought this extraordinary procession to a colourful close.

WHAT ELSE HAPPENED DURING THE JEWELLERY PAGEANT?

(Showcase)

On the morning of August 12th 1923, the first day of the Jewellery Pageant, Louis Coettermans, honorary president of Antwerp's diamond community and consul-general to Persia, hosted a sumptuous breakfast for a select gathering in his magnificent town house on Italiëlei. After the breakfast, all the guests were driven by car to the tiered seating area. Few people had a car in the 1920s, so this journey was an event in itself.

If you are curious to know more about this story and the role of Louis Coettermans and his family in reviving the diamond trade, be sure to watch the short film in the Trading Room of our main exhibition.

On the morning of August 15th 1923, the second day of the pageant, another important procession set off from the church: the famous Procession of Our Lady commemorating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.