

Royal  
Museum of  
Fine Arts  
Antwerp

# KMSKA

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Fine Arts  
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# THE FINEST MUSEUM

HANNIBAL





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# Foreword

Luk Lemmens,  
Chair of the Board  
of Directors KMSKA vzw

It is with great pride that I write the foreword to this book, which documents the creation process of our *very* fine art museum. After 11 years of construction and renovation, our doors opened to the public once again on 24 September 2022.

This book provides an impression of the energy, enthusiasm, expertise and ideas that so many people have contributed to the new KMSKA. You can feel the love and passion for the museum in everything.

It is my great privilege to be Chair of the Board of Directors at this key moment in time.

The starting signal for the preparation of a masterplan for a new museum came in 2004. That plan was developed by KAAN Architecten from Rotterdam. No fewer than five successive Flemish Ministers of Culture made the necessary resources available. This is how the masterplan was eventually completed in its entirety. Prime Minister Jan Jambon opened the museum with a suitable sense of pride.

It has been an exercise in patience, but also in perseverance. All parties involved deserve praise for this. In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to all the designers and contractors who participated in this enormous project. The entire KMSKA team also has put in a phenomenal effort to finally be able to share “their” museum with you, in all its glory.

Thanks to all these combined forces, the KMSKA is entering a new era. As a truly open house, where everyone is welcome.

Visitors who knew the old museum will hopefully soon feel at home in the new museum too. A beautiful symbiosis has been achieved between the old and the new. Justice has been done to a story that is more than 200 years old, while at the same time we have embarked on a new story.

The new KMSKA will undoubtedly connect with the general public, who were invited to be actively involved in the roll-out of the new concept. Our “finest hundred”, an apt name for the KMSKA trial audience, tested everything in advance and gave it their nod of approval.

In the period leading up to the reopening, it was heartwarming to see enthusiasm for the museum growing: in the city of Antwerp, across Flanders, internationally and also, especially, in the business world. It is partly thanks to their support that we were able to realise the book you are holding.

Finally, I would like to thank Patrick De Rynck and everyone who worked on this finest book about The Finest Museum. Photographer Karin Borghouts followed the entire construction period and captured the metamorphosis on film. This book includes a selection of her beautiful photos.

I am convinced that the KMSKA has a bright future ahead of it, as befits the finest museum in the finest city in the country.







# An enterprising museum

Conversation with Carmen Willems,  
KMSKA Managing Director

As Director of the KMSKA, Carmen Willems has led the final stage of the museum's metamorphosis. We are, of course, talking about the renovated building and the new museum volume, but also about so much more: the entire museum has been transformed, including the parts behind the scenes. How does she see the KMSKA in the 21st century?

"The most visible metamorphosis is the building itself, there's no getting around it. I am very pleased that the Flemish Government committed itself to such an ambitious masterplan. Having the vision to work with a masterplan was vital. You may have a museum collection with fantastic art, but if you don't have a home for it with a good roof and solid walls, you're nowhere."

"The architect, Dikkie Scipio of KAAN Architecten, created a very ingenious plan using the existing structure of the 19th-century building. It had really become very dilapidated. She made the choice to restore the historic building to its former splendour by removing all later additions. And she then dropped the new structure in, right into the historic patios, as it were. Four legs and a tabletop, as she calls it. She has managed to create two worlds in one structure: the old building is symmetrical, horizontal and offers an enfilade of rooms, while the new building is designed to amaze, and is a mainly vertical entity. Scipio chose to have the new building speak to the old one on equal terms. The two parts shouldn't be in competition with each other. I think she succeeded incredibly well. For this successful integration we've actually already received a significant European prize: the European Award for Architectural Heritage Intervention 2020."

## Flexible

If a museum has been closed for a long time, does it mean it's reopening its doors to a different world, especially considering our rapidly changing times? To ask the question is to answer it. Carmen Willems: "I am convinced of it. The world has changed drastically, especially with the added and lasting impact of the coronavirus crisis in 2020–21. There's no denying it. Just think of the rapidly accelerating developments in digital and multimedia. A museum like ours needs to move with the times – and it does. Visitors' expectations are also growing, partly due to competition from novel initiatives appearing in fields approximate to museums. As a contemporary museum, it would be foolish to ignore the fact that people increasingly look at their visit as an 'experience', and that new technologies can help to realise such expectations. So we make good use of them."

"At the same time, our main focus remains firmly on viewing the artworks, and how you can guide, support and inspire people in doing so. This can be done in many ways, but really looking at art always lies at the heart of things. At first glance, the KMSKA's approach may still seem very traditional. Our artworks are our central focus because they deserve all that attention. But visitors will quickly discover that we are inviting them to engage in a dialogue in many different ways and actively encouraging participation."

"I'll tell you about another aspect: when you consider our organisation chart, you can see far-reaching changes. Here too there's been a complete change of structure. We have positions and roles that you'd never have heard of 15 years or so ago – for example, roles relating to participation. All this is necessary if a museum is to keep up with the times. A lot of flexibility is being asked of museum employees."

### **Silver lining**

“Every cloud has a silver lining: the lengthy closure allowed an intensive restoration of the collection’s pieces that are on show in the galleries. Our collection is now in top condition, and for works that still need it, there are plans to treat them on site, in the gallery. I know of no other museum that has achieved a programme of this kind and scale in such a short time, and with a collection of this quality. This was possible thanks to our own conservation studio, and also through collaborations with museums abroad. Government support is very important in this regard, but so is private funding. We had to get up to speed very quickly, which was possible partly because of the closure: when the museum is up and running, there are always daily tasks to attend to and you can forget to look after more long-term issues. We were able to fully focus on our role as a cultural enterprise, to meet the expectations currently being made of a large and contemporary museum, and rightly so. We have an obligation to society. The government has a role to play as owner of the collection and of this extraordinary building – it has, accordingly, invested heavily in it. It seems logical to me that a museum should also be able to support its own programming with various sources of income – tickets, concessions, partnerships. Although that remains a major challenge in these uncertain times, I must admit.”

“Being a cultural entrepreneur is a mental shift that we have been able to make in recent years, despite the postponements due to the coronavirus pandemic. It’s also very interesting to become more enterprising, because you’re continually expanding your support base in this way. Partners include you in their communications, for example. In the run-up to the reopening in September 2022, it was great to see how enthusiasm for the museum has grown – which is also a token of hope in these bizarre times.”

### **Visible**

Presenting top-notch exhibitions is impossible for a museum nowadays unless it is part of a larger network of museums. Carmen Willems: “If you are closed for a long time and have a collection like ours, it’s an excellent opportunity to provide international art loans and thus forge bonds. This has been ongoing since 2011. It’s all done by gentleman’s agreement, without having to be written down. That’s how the sector operates. We are now enjoying the goodwill this generated, in our loan requests for our projects. Another important point is the series of national and international exhibitions, which we largely conceived ourselves, in which we have been able to highlight certain artists in our collection. The KMSKA has remained very visible. We will reap the benefits of that, I’m sure. However, there is also a concern here: networks often rely on personal contacts. How will that evolve, if you see that jobs in the museum world are becoming increasingly volatile, much more so than in the past. How can you then sustainably maintain your network of relationships?”

### **Up-to-date**

A theme that has come to the fore while we were closed is the pursuit of inclusion, diversity and participation: art museums need to appeal to a more diverse audience, be more accessible, allow the population and visitors to be involved... Also, of course, they have their past, and that past is – let’s say it – rather masculine, white and elitist. Carmen Willems: “You have to bring about this

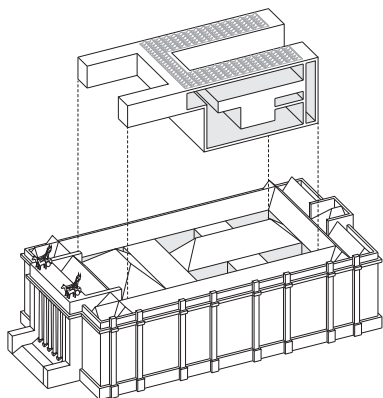
change, but the essence will always be there in our DNA. You don’t have to rid yourself of your past entirely, but of course you can improve your values and bring it up to date. In this respect too, the closure helped us to take the right steps, after much consultation. A lot of thought and effort has gone into encouraging inclusivity and diversifying our offering. Our Artists in Residence programme is one example. When you compare the composition of that group in 2022 with the first one, in 2016, you can see how much more diverse it has become. It’s a great change, and it also leads to new crossovers between disciplines. Art museums are also up to this change. I must say that we’ve been aided in this by the businesses that support us: they too are encouraging inclusion in their own work as businesses, and allow vulnerable people to gain hope through art, to feel awe and to experience that they are part of our shared society.”

“It is still a work in progress for a museum like ours – and for all museums. We’ve come a long way and we shouldn’t be ashamed of where we are. Now we’re going to find out whether the steps we have taken and the things we are trying out actually work. Ultimately, that’s for our visitors to judge.”



# 1.

# A MASTERLY MASTERPLAN



A new, vertical structure was 'dropped' into the existing patio spaces. Two museums in one.

The story of the new KMSKA began on 6 June 2003. That is when Flemish master builder bOb Van Reeth put out an international open call, at the behest of the Flemish government, asking applicants to design a masterplan for the KMSKA. For the first time, the museum building dating from 1890 was going to undergo radical reassessment and expansion. The call yielded 95 proposals, five of which were selected for the next round. The following year, the decision was made: the Dutch firm Claus en Kaan Architecten – now KAAN Architecten – was chosen to further develop the masterplan. In its recommendation, the jury expressed particular appreciation for the concept to 'infill' the existing building; a new 'volume' would be added that would give the museum extra usable floor space without expanding beyond the perimeter of the existing building.

## Poor condition

Dikkie Scipio (who we'll be hearing from in these pages) is the only person who has been involved from the beginning to the end. She is the Lead Architect of the masterplan. That means she has worked on this mega project for almost 20 years. In 2004, a phase of researching, designing, discussing, drafting and calculating began; this also involved starting again from scratch, and finally producing a plan that was approved. In November 2011, the renovation proper began, a historic moment for the museum.

In the initial plan, the KMSKA was to remain open during the renovation. Dikkie Scipio discussed this in the autumn of 2012, in the very first issue of the new museum magazine, *ZAAL Z*: "What we did not know at the time was that the building was in a much worse condition than had been expected. Large amounts of asbestos were found and the climate-control system had to be replaced in its entirety, so we were forced to include as a requirement in the masterplan that the museum would have to close after all. That was a major setback, of course, both financially and for the staff, who quite naturally wanted the museum to stay open."

## Two worlds

The big idea behind the masterplan did not change. Dikkie Scipio, again in 2012: "The basic concept is that we want to restore the 19th-century museum and its characteristic enfilade as much as possible. The quality of the monumental building's interior is defined by the route that visitors follow through the galleries, like a promenade through a park. But over the years, this historic route had been completely disrupted by various newly added functions. The twofold nature of building and collection was important to me from the start; the building is an intrinsic part of the collection, and vice versa. We have concealed the new extension in a vertical museum in the four courtyards with a large gallery on top. The new museum will not be visible from the old museum. They will actually be two completely different worlds housed within one building. The new vertical museum will overawe through its experience of space. You will be focused on the art and the airiness, not on the materiality. In the old museum, we are returning the stately historic galleries to their original colours. Here the materials are more important. They give you different ways to view the art. That interaction is interesting."

The masterplan in short: offering a new and additional spatial experience as well as restoring the grandeur and eminence of the 19th-century building, inside and out. Combining verticality with horizontality. And what's more: maintaining an unchanged exterior elevation on all sides. In the underlying concept, the building, the garden and the surrounding neighbourhood all come together as one whole. Another crucial element of the masterplan was the restoration and renovation of the façade, which was realised by PERSPECTIV architecten.



The archaeological remains of the citadel of Alva were documented during the renovation works.

### Stacks of history

For Dikkie Scipio, KMSKA's ties to the neighbourhood, connection with the city and role in history all play a very important role: "The 19th-century building claims its place in the city. This is unmistakably the treasury of Antwerp, its treasure trove of art. The building stands in the city with a clear sense of pride. Everything surrounding it shares in that pride. I would like people to enter into a dialogue with their environment again. We have forgotten how." As for the history of the place: "It is bizarre that the museum is standing on the ruins of a citadel, which was built to subjugate Antwerp. The city tore down the citadel in 1874, as it was not a monument anyone wanted to cherish. It's insane to think that a temple to art has risen in a place of so much oppression and combat – so much history stacked on top of history."

### Closely intertwined

Back to the new/old museum. In which the 'old' and the 'new' world very deliberately do not crossover into each other. Dikkie Scipio: "As an architect, you can choose to display your design very visibly, or to delay the amazement. I believe in the delayed moment, in many layers that slowly reveal themselves. That way, the visitor is drawn to places that have no functionality whatsoever. The spacious quality is a pure gift. Then there are little curves and doors everywhere in the design that introduce humour and playfulness. This invites the visitor to really engage with the building."

And yet the two parts of the renovated KMSKA are also closely intertwined. This is not a monument on to which an extension has been added: "The new and the old need each other: they rely on each other and support each other, functionally, technically and materially. In the new part, for example, there are two technical towers, which provide air-conditioning, heating and the necessary cooling for the whole building."

### A long-term project

Dikkie Scipio: "Our basic concept was powerful and had widespread support. At the same time, we were able to adapt it as new developments emerged during the many years of the project. This often happens, in many different ways. We were able to improve the concept, but always within the existing framework and in line with the basic premises of the masterplan. One example of something that changed gradually is the public facilities. We redesigned them. The restaurant, shop and reception area are more generous than originally planned. This came about because of advancing insights into what public comfort should be in a museum. The library's reading room is also more prominent now. But it all remained within the zone we had designated from the start, at the front of the building."

### DIKKIE SCIPIO: THE BEAUTY WE ARE CAPABLE OF

"As an architect, you don't want to be fashionable. You have a social responsibility, especially with projects of this scale. Your building must be capable of keeping step with changing times. For me, that is the ultimate form of sustainability."

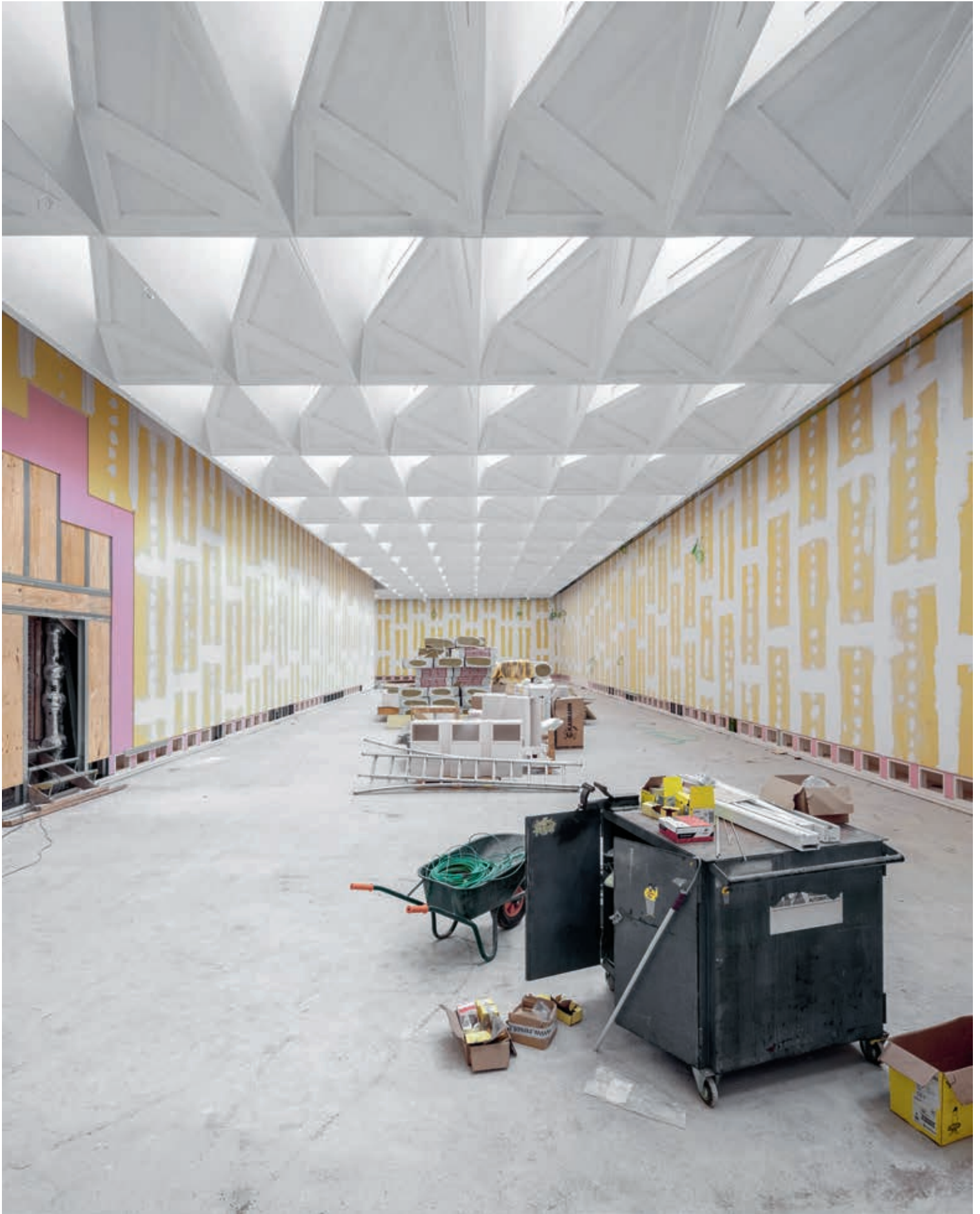
"The original design is a revelation of high standard quality, and I hope we've made that visible again. By adding something new, the building continues to evolve. So that all that knowledge and that beautiful collection can grow towards the future. It's great to be able to do that with a building."

"Making something that has the same level of impact, but does not diminish the strength of the old building: that's what our intention was. To let the old and the new play together. People will naturally have a preference for one or the other. But the new part gives the museum ways of

dealing with the collection that are different, without in any way implying there is anything wrong with the old. It's all about mutual respect."

"The museum is more than a house in which art is stored, it is also a place that says something about who we are. About what we are capable of as humans. When you open a newspaper, you almost feel like cowering in a corner from shame. It helps us to sometimes see what beauty we are – also and equally – capable of."

"I think that is what's so fantastic about all those people who made their contributions here, with all their knowledge and expertise. You may be the initiator, but it's all the people involved who believe in your ideas who make it a success. Ultimately, this project is owned by many people."



The new Colour gallery on the top floor, the so-called 'tabletop'.





The patios were cleared out to make space for the new vertical museum.





The concrete winding staircase in the entrance hall was cast in one piece.





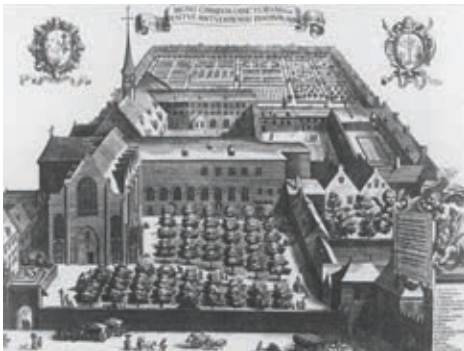
Ornamental columns were discovered behind false walls.



The two doorways to the Jordaens Gallery were replaced by one central doorway, returning it to its original state.

## 2.

# RECOVERED GRANDEUR: THE RENOVATION OF THE HISTORIC MUSEUM



The museum, founded by imperial decree in 1810, was located in the former Recollects Convent.

We know it's a concern of visitors who knew all the ins and outs of 'their' museum: will we still recognise 'our' favourite venue after the massive and endless renovation and construction project has been completed? Will we still feel at home? To which the KMSKA confidently says, yes! But, of course, these visitors will also be surprised when they encounter the new elements. We walked through the historic building with collection researcher Siska Beele. She knows the countless nooks and crannies behind the many magnificent doors, like no other. And she knows the history of the complex.

### **To the South!**

Starting in 1810 – the year in which the museum was created by an imperial decree from Napoleon – what we now know as the KMSKA was housed in the Royal Academy, the old Recollects Convent on Mutsaardstraat (formerly Mutsaertstraat). The city of Antwerp decided to build a new home for the museum in 1873. The location was pinpointed in 1875 and it also became clear that the state would lend its support to the construction. Leopold de Wael was mayor of Antwerp at the time. One of the motivations for the new building was a fire in August 1873, which threatened to destroy the Academy Museum. The South district ('t Zuid) was chosen as the new site: after the razing of the infamous citadel of Alva, space had become available there to build a new city district as well as modern port infrastructure. The museum was given a central place in the ambitious building plans for 'the South'. How exactly central is immediately visible when you look at the neighbourhood on a map or from the sky.

Two still quite young architects – Jean-Jacques Winders and Frans Van Dijk – won the architectural competition in 1879 and were commissioned to work together to achieve a compromise of their two plans. The duo went on study trips to gather inspiration from other museums, in the Netherlands and Germany. The Alte Pinakothek in Munich made a particular impression with its classical temple splendour. Construction started in 1884 and six years later, on 11 August 1890, the new museum was ceremoniously inaugurated. The commemorative plaque in the entrance hall bears testimony to the occasion.

The old masters and modern masters were allocated 23 painting galleries on the top floor, each designated a letter. The scenography was typical for art museums of the time: paintings hung in rows next to and above one another, covering the walls from top to bottom, without much consideration for size, colour or theme. One distinction was that the old and modern masters were hung separately from one another. The galleries on the ground floor – two longitudinal, two transverse – were used for sculptures, engravings and... photographs of paintings by the world-famous local hero, Rubens.

### **Call for expansion**

1925. The building soon became too small for the collection it was intended to house. To solve the problem, architect Van Dijk designed an extension with two side wings – but his proposal was rejected. Instead, the four patios were covered and converted into large galleries. The long galleries became smaller museum halls, and all the rooms on the upper floor were redecorated. These changes, made in 1927, Rubens' 350th birthday, lasted until 2011. The style of presentation also became more modern: fewer works were hung in each



The De Keyserzaal was provided with a new gable roof but not renovated. The space was sealed and pressurised to keep it free of dust.



The iconic red velvet benches have been restored.

room and they were kept at eye level, art-historical and aesthetic criteria were brought to bear, and old and modern works were exhibited on two different floors.

The director at the time, Cornette, pointed out that the expanded space “in the near future will no longer be sufficient to accommodate the new works appropriately”. His call for expansion was repeated frequently by his successors – after the modernisation following the Rubens Year of 1977 (when record visitor numbers topped 625,000), and after the renovation marking the museum’s 100th anniversary in 1990. It was 2003 when the Flemish state architect issued the open call that led to the new KMSKA masterplan. That year also saw the publication of ‘The Museum Book’, which, after a summary of everything that had been achieved in the meantime (climate control, storage depot, fire protection, office spaces and so on), contains the following circumspect phrase: “Necessary changes do not always turn out to be improvements.” And: “We are still awaiting a suitable solution for the required infrastructure (restoration, workshops for children).” That solution has now finally been found.

### De Keyser and Rubens

Feeling at home starts at the point where one enters the museum. After the new entrance area with all its mod cons, for many the KMSKA’s true entrance is still the De Keyserzaal, which was always intended as an overture, as the ringing first chord of the symphony that follows. A museum today would call it a ‘wow space’, a space that impresses and welcomes at the same time.

The De Keyserzaal is one of the few places in the new KMSKA where nothing has changed during the renovation, apart from the new glass gable roof. The 39 paintings – a proud parade that tells the story of the Antwerp painting school and celebrates its famous members – did not need restoration either; that had already happened in 1999. The hall itself contains almost every type of Belgian marble. And it’s worth remembering that Nicaise De Keyser designed the entire series of paintings for the old museum on Mutsaardstraat (1862–1872). As director of the academy, he was also curator of the Antwerp Academy Museum. His work in the gallery named after him is a kind of visual aperitif to what is the highlight of the museum: the Rubens Gallery, dedicated to the local hero – and world-famous star – Peter Paul Rubens.

### Pompeiiian red and olive green

In the De Keyserzaal, you can choose between going to the first floor or up the stairs to explore the top floor. In the latter case, in the fabled Rubens Gallery – which has retained its name and purpose – you will encounter the bulk of the recent renovation work in the historic museum: the restoration of the original 1890 design. This showcase gallery has walls in antique red, and gilded decoration on the ceiling. The other rooms are painted in Pompeiiian red and olive green. The historic panelling has been restored – replaced if necessary, but always faithfully copying the original (much of the woodwork had been removed in the past in a push for modernisation). The familiar, even iconic seating, is still there: the old benches were retained if possible and newly copied if necessary. (They still hide the radiator heating too.) The same goes for the impressive doors in the old museum, the panelling, the parquet floors and so on.

The pedestrian route through the renovated old museum is as flawless as when it was conceived: symmetrical, easy to follow, with good sightlines and surprising perspectives. Quite a few spaces had been repurposed over the decades – as a restoration studio, storage depot, office space, warehouse – which led to a lack of clarity and a sometimes labyrinthine experience for visitors. In the first phase of the masterplan, all the additions were removed, the original route was restored with the same sightlines as in 1890 and, as a bonus, original, forgotten columns reappeared unexpectedly from behind false walls. Everything looks ‘pure’ again too, because the new technical installations are invisible to those who do not try too hard to find them. Here, they have been built into the ceilings. You have to remember that the KMSKA always was a daylight museum, since its very inception. It was only in 1976 – not until 1976! – that artificial light was added. Before then, the museum sometimes closed at 3pm on a winter’s day.

### Space!

The renovation has finally solved a problem that the KMSKA had been struggling with for decades: a shortage of space. The new KMSKA now has 11 galleries for temporary exhibitions in the 19th-century museum, totalling a generous 1,500 square metres and alternating pleasingly between larger and smaller spaces. The rooms are located on the first floor and are easily accessible for all visitors. They are organised as an enfilade of spaces adjacent to the new museum volume, with daylight entering through the windows of the outer façade. This creates an entire floor that, depending on the type of exhibition,











## PETER PAUL RUBENS IN DEPTH

After four centuries of art history, you would expect researchers to start running out of things to say about the work of Peter Paul Rubens – but nothing could be further from the truth. Art historians are still diligently studying the artist's catalogue raisonné, which encompasses many thousands of works. Traditionally, art-history research focuses on iconography, the visual language of the paintings. The mythological, biblical and historical narratives depicted by the scholarly Rubens are often complex and frequently misunderstood. Centuries later, some works are even given new titles. It's only since the late 20th century that researchers have begun the material-technical study of Rubens' paintings and to research the creative process that preceded the works of art.

The KMSKA has in its care a famous collection of 27 Rubens paintings and nearly 700 engravings reproducing the artist's compositions. It's true that the collection is not representative of his amazingly diverse output, but with a number of undisputed masterpieces it

does occupy a leading position. For a long time, Rubens' panels and canvases at the KMSKA slumbered under thick layers of yellowed varnish that made them difficult to 'read', and to research. A turning point came when the museum established a new conservation studio and embarked on an accelerated campaign to improve the condition of the collection pieces. Starting in 2000, the smaller Rubens works were all given restoration treatments that brought the master's richly varied colour palette to the fore again. *The Prodigal Son*, *The Holy Family with the Parrot*, the oil sketches for *The Arch of the Mint*, the Rockox triptych and the Michielsen triptych were all restored in 2019. *Venus Frigida* was restored at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna in 2016, and the portrait of *Jan Gaspard Gevartius* and *The Holy Trinity* were treated at the Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles in 2021–22. As part of these restorations, the condition of each painting was documented. This was done with the help of ultraviolet and infrared refraction, with X-rays, and by taking samples.

In collaboration with the University of Antwerp, the artworks were also examined using state-of-the-art techniques that provide information about the materials used (FTIR, SEM EDX) and about ageing due to environmental factors (MA-XRPD).

As well as the research undertaken in the course of the restorations, a Getty-funded Rubens Research Project was established in 2007. This aims to screen the KMSKA's entire Rubens collection in order to learn more about the creation process and painting techniques, working towards an online research catalogue. Some of the art-historical and material-technical research were made available online in editions of the *Rubensbulletin* between 2008 and 2014. As the closure of the KMSKA caused an interruption to the project, so the reopening in 2022 marks the restart of the research. The KMSKA is actively collaborating with academic and museum partners at home and abroad on the project. The museum hopes to complete this research by 2027, the year in which we will commemorate Rubens' 450th birthday.

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Holy Family with the Parrot*, 1614–1633, oil on panel, 164 × 190 cm, inv. 312



## JAMES ENSOR: RESEARCH DOWN TO THE BONE



James Ensor, *Bathing Hut on the Beach*, 1876, oil on cardboard, 17.5 × 22.5 cm, inv. 2972

With 39 paintings and more than 600 drawings, the KMSKA has the largest collection of work by James Ensor in the world. The museum aims not only to cherish and exhibit this collection, but also to be the leading reference centre for research on the oeuvre of this Belgian modernist. James Ensor (1860–1949) is famed for his paintings of masks, macabre scenes with skeletons, and satirical works depicting crowds of people.

### Game changer

In 2013, the Ensor Research Project was established within the warm embrace of the KMSKA. Mapping out the artist's creation process using state-of-the-art technology, the project is investigating how Ensor made his works.

Ensor was chosen partly because the KMSKA has a veritable gold mine of his paintings, drawings and etchings, but also because he's one of the most important Belgian artists of modern times – a linchpin, an innovator, a game changer. As the end of the 19th century approached, he switched from a naturalistic representation of reality to works in which he started to freely use light, colour and form. Ensor was in good company, alongside other innovators such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch. He never ventured into the field of abstraction, but experimented constantly and explored all the new paths that art took in the 20th century, without doggedly pursuing one direction.

### State-of-the-art

The Ensor Research Project combines classical stylistic and art-historical research of letters, manuscripts, sources, preliminary studies and designs with high-tech, material-technical research. The project is led by Dr Herwig Todts, KMSKA Conservator of Ensor and Modern Art, and Annelies Rios-Casier, a PhD student researcher (conservation and restoration master) at the KMSKA and the University of Antwerp (UA).

Ensor's paintings are examined using classic technologies including ultraviolet, infrared and X-ray. These provide information about, respectively, the varnish layer, the charcoal underdrawings and any paint containing heavy metals, such as lead

white. In addition, UA has two state-of-the-art scanners to thoroughly examine the paint layers. These macro-XRF and macro-XRPD scanners provide new information about overpaints and paint pigments.

"This is not a project that an art historian can do alone," explains Todts. "The material-technical findings must be interpreted by a specialist, one who also knows what it's like to work with paint and canvas. Initially, I was working with Karen Bonne, now with Annelies Rios-Casier. We're combining our research results to come to a conclusion."

### Mapping Ensor

What have they learned so far? Research has shown that the young Ensor did indeed paint his *Bathing Hut on the Beach* (1876) on the beach: grains of sand can be found in the paint. Also, it's been argued for a long time that Ensor used very poor quality material. *Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889* (1888), for example, is said to have been painted with the kind of paint used on walls. This turns out to be completely wrong: on the contrary, Ensor used expensive and precious paints that he bought from, among others, Blockx, a company that also supplied Monet.

The researchers have found that in his early academic period, Ensor was still building up his paintings in a very classical style with different layers of paint. When he started making his mask paintings, he stopped using this technique: he began to put colours next to each other and used pure, unmixed paint. He borrowed this approach from the Impressionists after having seen works by Monet and Renoir in 1886.

The Ensor Research Project aims, first of all, to map the Ensor paintings in the KMSKA collection, then those in the Mu.ZEE Ostend collection and preferably all important public and private collections in the Benelux, as completely as possible. For her PhD dissertation, Annelies Rios-Casier is researching whether a number of findings are confirmed in 12 key works, including *The Intrigue* (KMSKA), *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), *Still life in the Studio* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich) and *Skeletons in the Studio* (National Gallery Canada, Ottawa).

















Monumental artworks are hoisted down from the Rubens Gallery to the new storage depot.



The patios are given a load-bearing steel structure weighing a million kilos.

## 2013

### The storage depot

The new art storage depot was completed in April 2013. It fully meets today's requirements in terms of security and climate control. It has 152 picture racks and can accommodate approximately 1,800 paintings. There is also room for climate-sensitive sculptures and works on paper.

## 2014

### The great demolition

Things started moving forward on the building site. The first phase of the renovations – demolition mostly – was complete by autumn. Workmen had stripped the historic museum building and cleared space in the original patios. New museum galleries and two technology towers were destined to be built there, in steel and concrete. A comprehensive renovation programme was planned to restore the 19th-century galleries to their original grandeur. After removing false walls, the workmen discovered old decorative columns. They were kept. In this way, three old museum galleries regained their original aspect.

Phase 2 of the masterplan was complete. From December 2014 onwards, Artes Roegiers and Artes Woudenberg were jointly responsible for the works. These also encompassed the installation of a public area with a library, shop, café, cloakroom, sanitary facilities and reception, and the realisation of a conservation studio.

## 2015

### Museum on columns

After three years of demolition, the time had come to rebuild. Instead of an extension outwards into the garden, KAAN Architecten opted for an extension inwards – a new museum volume housed within the 19th-century museum. This volume completely fills the former patios, but is separate from the original building. It's essential to drive in 147 piles to provide a proper foundation. Contractor Artes Roegiers built a structure of 1 million kilos of steel on top of the concrete foundation slabs.

## 2016

### Hard as steel

The steel construction for the new building was completed in 2016. The architects deliberately didn't create a visual connection between the old and the new museum in their design. The finish of the new museum galleries will be given a finish that contrasts with that of the historic rooms. They are white and sleek and have a glossy, cast-resin floor. A passage cutting right through the 19th-century building connects the two parts of the new museum.

Directly under the museum lies Hernandez Bastion, one of the five bastions of the 16th-century Spanish citadel. A team of archaeologists uncovered remnants of the fortress during excavations in the patios and the garden. They are preserved in situ, but are not open to the public.



Interior finishing of the skylights.



Ceiling mouldings were carefully stored and returned to their proper position later.



The Mosaico di Due studio team lays a new art mosaic in the portico, following a design by artist Marie Zolamian.

## 2017

### Masterpieces

Light is of crucial importance to a museum. In the 19th-century building, which was designed as a daylight museum, sunlight entered the old halls through a *velum*, a glass ceiling. A blind regulated the strength of the light. The architects have extended the concept of the daylight museum to the new galleries. The roof of the new museum has 198 skylights that catch the daylight. All face north. Four large open spaces, 23 metres high, distribute the light over all the floors of the new museum.

Plenty of architectural triumphs can be found here. The staircases are veritable masterpieces. In the new museum, a 37-metre long staircase connects the lowest exhibition gallery with the top floor, while a winding staircase plays games with perspective. The striking spiral staircase in the reception hall was cast on site in one piece.

## 2018

### Restored glory

After a thorough preliminary investigation, PERSPECTIV architects, together with contractor Artes Woudenberg, started on the restoration of the façades. Not only were they cleaned and restored, but the statues on the façade, the copper statues on the roof by Thomas Vinçotte, the exterior woodwork and the mosaic floors were also treated. The Mosaico di Due studio restored the historic floors and installed a new art mosaic, designed by Marie Zolamian, outside in the loggia.

## 2019

### 19th-century museum galleries

In the historic galleries, the workmen continued with their full restoration and renovation. For example, the air-conditioning system needed to be integrated into the ceilings. No sign of white is to be found here: the ceilings are dark brown, the walls Pompeiian red, antique red and olive green. Professionals also restored the old woodwork and the historic parquet floors. Where possible they made repairs, otherwise they restored the original timber with new wood.

## 2020

### Climate-control test run

After another year of restoration, renovation and polishing, the contractor completed the second phase of the master-plan in December. The new KMSKA is finished.

The antiquated climate-control system had been one of the primary reasons for renovating the museum building. Royal HaskoningDHV designed a climate system tailor-made for the museum in close collaboration with KAAN Architecten. To guarantee the perfect internal climate in every season, the new system had to undergo a long-term test period.



*Vulture Protecting Its Prey*, by Josué Dupon, regains its place in the garden. The installation of the sculptures turns the garden into the first museum gallery.



The honorary rooms of Rubens, Jordaens and Van Dyck are given back their gilded ornamental frames.

## 2021

### The first museum gallery

The reconstruction of the museum garden started in March 2021. Team van Meer! looked to the historic garden designs from the late 19th century for inspiration. This led to an open design with a succession of parterre gardens providing pleasant spaces to socialise. Outdoor sculptures transformed the garden into the museum's 'first gallery'.

The honorary galleries of Rubens, Jordaens and Van Dyck were restored to their original lush richness. The decorative mouldings were gilded with a combination of aluminium foil and varnish with gold pigment.

On 17 June, the KMSKA and KAAAN Architecten jointly won the European Award for Architectural Heritage – Intervention in the Built Heritage, for the renovation of the museum.

On 25 September, the museum announced the reopening of the new KMSKA: Saturday 24 September, 2022!

## 2022

### The finishing touches

The last of the minor projects are being completed: the renovation of the office wing, the new roof for the De Keyserzaal, the installation of the loading platform for the delivery of large works of art. The final steps are to rehouse the artworks and the presentation of the collection in a scenography designed by Robbrecht en Daem architects & Aslı Çiçek, with multimedia productions by MoCHI and interventions by visual artist Christophe Coppens.

Saturday 24 September 2022. The Finest Moment has arrived. After all these years, the festive reopening of the KMSKA is about to happen. New visitors and familiar visitors, art lovers and other curious spirits are welcomed in to (re)discover the new KMSKA.











Alejandro Vergara  
Prado, Madrid

“On one occasion, when trying to secure a commission, Rubens wrote the following: ‘I confess that I am, by natural instinct, better suited to executing very large works than small curiosities... My talent is such that no undertaking, however vast in size or diversified in subject, has ever surpassed my courage.’ It is not hyperbole to say that no museum space demonstrates the grand ambition of Rubens’ art as well as the monumental Rubens Gallery at the KMSKA.”

Ralph Gleis  
Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin

“I have been following the fortunes of the KMSKA with the greatest interest for a very long time. As a research fellow in 2007, I was able to see for myself the outstanding collection, the inspiring building and the wonderful team. Most recently, the Royal Museum was an important and reliable partner for *Decadence and Dark Dreams*, our exhibition on Belgian Symbolism. I wish the institution and its team a successful start in its fantastic new building, and am sure it will continue to occupy the high rank that it deserves in both Belgium and Europe.”



**Jenny Reynaerts**  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

“Some works of art travel with you throughout your life. As a young student, Memling’s angels and Ingres’ self-portrait made an indelible impression on me. And now that I can see them again after a long time, they are even dearer to me. In the reborn KMSKA, I rediscover not only them, but also a part of myself.”

**Gerlinde Gruber**  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

“Rubens’ *Venus Frigida* – the goddess of love with the most beautiful face is defenceless against hunger and cold. This is one of the most touching depictions of Venus that Rubens ever painted.”

**Bart De Baere**  
M HKA, Antwerp

“The centre of Antwerp is, for me, the central point in the composition of Rubens’ *The Adoration of the Magi* in the KMSKA – the green-velvet belly of the black king. The KMSKA is the Borobudur of Flanders, our most important museum for the visual arts that are our world heritage.”