

## Abstract

The present paper studies two exhibitions that are virtually unknown in the field: the Belgian art expositions in Philadelphia and Buenos Aires in 1882 and 1887. The exhibitions took place outside the contexts of universal expositions and world fairs but they were not private commercial ventures. They were government projects, driven by consuls and by the King Leopold II. For this reason, I consider these exhibitions as results of economic, political and colonial endeavors rather than artistic products. The focus is not on the artworks, but on the dynamics underlying, and generated by, the exhibitions. As this study demonstrates, these art shows were not just instruments to open new markets for Belgian art abroad, but also constituted a medium to negotiate and shape relationships and narratives with and in foreign countries. ●

## Resumo

O presente artigo estuda duas exposições praticamente desconhecidas: as exposições de Arte Belga em Filadélfia e Buenos Aires, realizadas em 1882 e 1887 respectivamente. Nenhuma das exposições se enquadra no contexto das exposições universais e das feiras mundiais, nem representa empreendimentos comerciais privados. Porém, ambas configuram projetos governamentais, promovidos por cônsules e pelo próprio rei Leopoldo II. Por essa razão, estas exposições são aqui consideradas mais como resultados de esforços econômicos, políticos e coloniais, do que como produtos artísticos. O foco de interesse não se centra nas obras de arte, mas na dinâmica subjacente às exposições, e por elas gerada. Como este estudo demonstra, estas mostras artísticas não serviam apenas como dispositivos para abrir novos mercados para a arte Belga no exterior; elas constituíam também um meio ideal para negociar e moldar relações e narrativas feitas com, e em, países estrangeiros. ●

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# PECULIAR RELATIONSHIPS ON DISPLAY

## BELGIAN ART EXHIBITIONS IN PHILADELPHIA AND BUENOS AIRES IN 1882 AND 1887

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### Introduction

Exhibition studies came into being as a research field roughly in 1990s when a series of key publications including *Exhibition Cultures*, *Thinking About Exhibitions* and *The Power of Display* introduced new perspectives on the social, political, economic and artistic dimensions of exhibitions in history (Greenberg et al. 1996; Karp and Lavine 1991; Staniszewski 1998). Exhibitions were exposed as ideological constructs, embedded in identity politics, economic interests and multiple social, political and artistic discourses. In the same period, seminars and studies such as *Los estudios de arte desde América Latina* and *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* opened new perspectives on art, especially revealing the biased discourse of US exhibitions of Latin American art.<sup>1</sup> The last decade saw the field of exhibition studies expand exponentially primarily because of the vogue of curatorial studies and cultural economics (Boersma and Van Rossem 2015; Myers 2011). Much of the recent scholarship is steeped in post-colonial theory and global art history, addressing issues of center-periphery relationships and the impact of cultural traffic. In this vein, Marta Filipová advocates in *Cultures of International Exhibition 1840-1940* to look beyond the world fairs organized in major sites of capitalist culture and to direct attention to shows in smaller cities, such as Glasgow (1888) and Brussels (1910). In other words, she directs the attention to exhibitions

<sup>1</sup> Between 1996 and 2003, a group of historians, art critics, artists, writers and curators met seven times in different countries to present papers and discuss new methodological and critical perspectives within the framework of the project *Los estudios de arte desde América Latina*, coordinated by Rita Eder. The seminar resulted in multiple articles and books. For more information see: <http://www.esteticas.unam.mx/edartedal/PDF/inicio.html> (accessed April 2019) and Mosquera, 1995.

in “the margin”, i.e. “on the borders of monarchies and empires, where cultural and ethnic tensions were strong and where new centers were created” (Filipová 2015, 4). The publication, that brings together the work of fifteen scholars, draws a map of exhibitions that is invisible in the established art historical canon, thus raising a wide range of interesting questions about cultural politics and exhibition-making. The present paper contributes to the expanding map of new narratives by analyzing two expositions that are virtually unknown in the field: the Belgian art expositions in Philadelphia and Buenos Aires in 1882 and 1887.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Belgium participated at several international exhibitions, including the *Exposición Internacional de Santiago de Chile* (1875), the *Centennial Exhibition of Philadelphia* (1876), the *Sydney International Exhibition* (1879), the *Melbourne International Exhibition* (1880-1881), the *Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition* (1887), the *World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago* (1893) and the *Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (1904) (Balcers and Jaumain 2010, 11-37). The Belgian art expositions in Philadelphia and Buenos Aires of 1882 and 1887 were part of this global cultural movement but took place outside of the contexts of universal exhibitions and world fairs (Fig. 1). This does not imply that they were private commercial ventures. The exhibitions were government projects, driven by consuls and by the King Leopold II. For this reason, the focus of the present paper is not on the artworks, but on the political, economic and colonial dynamics underlying, and generated by, the exhibitions. As it demonstrates, the art shows were not just instruments to open new markets for Belgian art abroad, but also constituted a medium to negotiate and shape relationships and narratives with and in foreign countries.<sup>2</sup> The exhibitions are hardly known, because information about them is scant and difficult to access. The most important sources are press reviews, published in Belgian, Argentinian and North-American newspapers and a handful of documents, preserved in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Methodologically, the article combines historical research with a discourse analysis. It maps for the first time the exhibitions, including the actors, artists and artworks, and examines the projects’ discourse and reception. In this way, it reveals an essential moment in the burgeoning practice of organizing Belgian art exhibitions outside of Europe, and yields new insights into the intricate role of art in international economic, political and colonial relationships.

## Exhibiting Belgian Art in *centres extra-européennes*

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1882, a small note appeared in the Argentinian newspaper *El Diario* announcing that the King of Belgium, Leopold II, had approached the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asking for the support of the government to organize

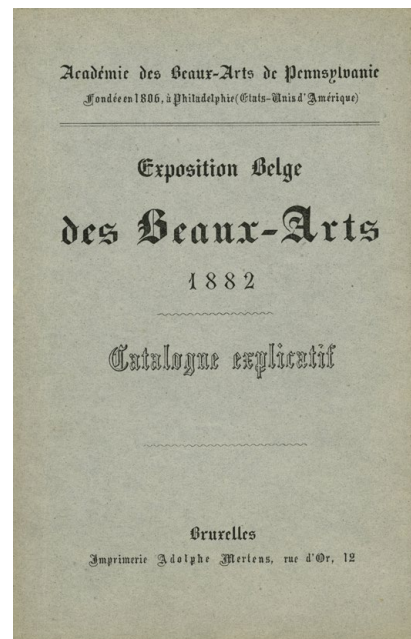


Fig. 1 – *Exposition Belge des Beaux-Arts, Catalogue explicatif*, 1882 - front cover.  
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<sup>2</sup> An in-depth study of the selection of artworks and their reception falls outside of the scope of the present paper but will be addressed in the near future in the context of a broader postdoctoral research project on Belgian art exhibitions overseas.

<sup>3</sup> S.n., “Exposición de Arte Belga”, *El Diario*, November 30, 1882.

<sup>4</sup> Pincel, “Bellas Artes: La Escuela de Pintura Inglesa Contemporánea”, *Sud-América*, March 24, 1886.

<sup>5</sup> The official act was republished in *L'Indépendance Belge*, January 6, 1882.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Strahan, “The Belgian ‘Salon’ at Philadelphia. I”, *The Art Amateur* 6 (1882): 122.

<sup>7</sup> Edouard Sève responded to the *New York Tribune* article, explaining the rivalry and jealousies between the art centers in New York, Boston and Philadelphia (Sève 1882a, 10-14).

a Belgian art exhibition in Buenos Aires. The exhibition would serve “the same purposes as the one produced a little while ago [in April 1882] in Philadelphia” and was “a means” to counter the “false criticism” that the Belgian school was in decline.<sup>3</sup> It is important to bear in mind that in 1882, Buenos Aires did not yet have a well-established art circuit. There were no fine art museums, official academies or modern art galleries. The main places to see art were small shops that sold all sort of goods, ranging from painters’ tools to books, photography, music instruments, antiquities and curiosities. However, because of a booming agro-export industry and a growing bourgeoisie class, the 1880s witnessed a huge influx of artworks and artistic objects from Europe that were exhibited in the shop windows of the commercial venues and in temporary exhibition spaces (Balasarre 2006, 26-56). For instance, in March 1886, the London Fine Arts Society organized the *Exposición de arte contemporáneo de Inglaterra*, showing 150 artworks at Avenida Florida 81.<sup>4</sup> In 1888, a committee supported by the French Minister of Public Education, the director of the Fine Arts department, the director of the national museums, and the merchant J. Delpech, produced an ambitious exhibition of French art in the Jardín Florida (Balasarre 2006, 46). The same year, a Spanish exhibition took place at the Cámara de Comercio Española in Buenos Aires (Fernández García 1997, 120-24). The request of Leopold II, however, preceded this wave of national exhibitions in Argentina. As the announcement in *El Diario* highlights, the idea was informed by the Belgian art exhibition, organized at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. According to the Royal Decree, published in *Le Moniteur*, the objective of the latter was to expand and increase the Belgian art market.<sup>5</sup> According to North American critic Edward Strahan, Belgian Consul-General Edouard Sève created the project after seeing the commercial success of two expositions of American artists that were studying in Europe (Fig. 2). Yet, what could have been a magnificent survey of Belgian art in the United States was according to the critic a failed presentation of art *pour l’exportation*:

His object, beyond a doubt, was commercial; to open a new conduit for the sale of Belgian pictures – a class of art market by the most terrific fecundity – would be a work worthy the best efforts of a patriotic representative. A scheme, however artistically managed, always smacks of its true motive, and the discerning eye plainly sees the fingers of a man’s hand writing the fatal words, “commercial, commercial, job lots, dealers’ remnants,” all over the exhibition. This feature, by the bye, does not prevent many of the canvases from being admirable. But the show, taken as a whole, has that fatal dealer’s wareroom look which distinguished the French, the German and the Dutch rooms in the Centennial Exhibition.<sup>6</sup>

The criticism published in the *New York Tribune* went even further, claiming that only a few still-lives by Mr. Hubert Bellis “show artistic feeling”.<sup>7</sup> Belgian newspapers by contrast gave a different impression of the exhibition. According to *Le Courrier de l’Escaut* it was a great success: Belgian artists that had lost their reputation because of mediocre copies and false attributions had won back the sympathy of the



Fig. 2 – L. F. Rojas – Portrait of Eduardo Sève, cónsul general y encargado de negocios de Bélgica en Chile. Engraving published in *Correo de la Exposición 1875-1876* (30 September 1875), 77. Copyright: Memoria Chilena.

North-American people.<sup>8</sup> *L’Echo du Parlement* translated fragments from American newspapers *The North American*, *The Times* and *Progress* that highlighted the triumph of the opening night and praised the selection and quality of the artworks. The exhibition was “representative in the best sense of the word”, a comment that stands in sharp contrast with Strahan’s text that questions whether it is at all possible to make an Belgian art exhibition without artworks by Louis Gallait, Henri Leys and Paul-Jean Clays.<sup>9</sup> Only on one issue all critics agreed, the project achieved its goal of commercial success, selling about forty-three artworks.

The Belgian art exhibition opened in Buenos Aires on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1887, five years after Leopold had approached the Argentinian government. Why it was not realized earlier is unknown. Ernest Van Bruyssel, who was the Consul-General of Argentina from 1883 until 1899, headed the project together with a commission, appointed

<sup>8</sup> S.n., “L’exposition des Beaux-Arts organisée à Philadelphie”, *Le Courrier De L’Escaut*, July 23, 1882.

<sup>9</sup> S.n., “Exposition Belge de Philadelphie”, *L’Echo Du Parlement*, May 28, 1882; Edward Strahan, “The Belgian ‘Salon’ at Philadelphia. I”, *The Art Amateur* 6 (1882): 122.



<sup>10</sup> Charles Verlat, director of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp was the president of the commission, Alex Robert Coosemans and Mr. De Groot were members and M. Van Bree, attaché at the Agricultural Department was the secretary. S.n., “Exposition de Buenos-Ayres,” *La Meuse*, July 4, 1887. A similar committee managed the Philadelphia exposition. S.n., “No Title”, *De Koophandel van Antwerpen*, January 17, 1882.

<sup>11</sup> Emphasis as in the original text. S.n., “La Exposición Belga”, *La Gaceta Musical* (Buenos Aires), October 9, 1887: 2.

<sup>12</sup> S.n., “La Exposición Belga”, *La Gaceta Musical* (Buenos Aires), October 9, 1887: 2.

<sup>13</sup> Fernando Carvalho, “La Exposición Belga”, *El Nacional*, October 13, 1887.

<sup>14</sup> Marcial, “Concurso Artístico. Croquis I”, *El Diario*, October 5, 1887; Marcial, “Concurso Artístico. Croquis II”, *El Diario*, October 6, 1887; Marcial, “Concurso Artístico. Croquis III”, *El Diario*, October 7, 1887.

<sup>15</sup> S.n., “El Arte En Buenos Aires”, *El Diario*, December 11, 1887.

<sup>16</sup> S.n., “Exposition Des Beaux-Arts à Buenos-Ayres”, *La Meuse*, June 20, 1887.

<sup>17</sup> The newspaper mentions the following sales: *Le portrait of S.S. le Pape* by Alexandre Thomas (bought by the Argentinian President as a present for the archbishop of Buenos Aires), *En temps de paix* by Rosiers (bought by M. Pellegrini, Vice-President), *Vue de Spa* by Van Luppen (bought by Dr. Quintina, former President of the Chamber of Deputies, Rector of the University), *L’hiver* by Comeyn (bought by Christophersen, Representative of the *Compagnie de Chargeurs Réunis de Havre*), *Petite mère* and *Réprimande* by Comeyn, *Le printemps* by Mlle Triest, *Après la parade* by Vanden Eycken, *Fleur de thé* by Mlle Emma de Vigne (bought by banker Lisandro Bellinghunst), *Manola au balcon* and *Moine lisant* by Robert (bought by Cramwell, President of the Municipal Council of Buenos Aires), *Vue*

by the government, that coordinated the selection and shipping process in Belgium. Based on the Royal Decree published in *Le Moniteur*, the exposition’s objective was the same as the one in Philadelphia: to introduce contemporary Belgian art and expand its market.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, like in Philadelphia, the result was a commercial success, that drew fierce criticism in the foreign press and praise in Belgian newspapers. The Argentinian *La Gaceta Musical* speaks of an exhibition with “artworks made *pour l’exportation*, artworks that had not found a home in Europe and had been sent to the young and inexperienced America that will pay them *dearly*, convinced that it got a *good prize*.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the organizers were unaware that in Argentina “pictorial art is finding its way and quality begins to be properly appreciated”.<sup>12</sup> Critic and painter Fernando Carvalho claimed in *El Nacional* that if he had to judge Belgium’s artistic development based on the exhibition, the conclusion would be that the country is “in the field of pictorial art still in its diapers”.<sup>13</sup> Only *El Diario* was more positive. The critic that signed as ‘Marcial’ praised the institutions and people behind the project, highlighting the importance of organizing national exhibitions in Buenos Aires. Not everything was good. The sculptures and watercolors were insignificant. However, overall the artworks were of “good quality”.<sup>14</sup> The article reads as a propaganda piece, masked as criticism, which it most probably was, considering that two months later, in a more reflective article, Marcial described the exhibition as “feeble” and an example of how “good taste in Buenos Aires can still get lost”.<sup>15</sup>

In Belgium, magazines and newspapers unequivocally celebrated the exhibition. *La Meuse* echoed the official discourse, describing it as a good opportunity for painters and sculptors. The event showed Argentina the high quality of contemporary Belgian art and created new economic possibilities.<sup>16</sup> The *Journal de Bruxelles* focused on the magnificent opening and the commercial success. The exhibition was organized in two salons of the foyer of the prestigious Colon Theatre, lit by electric lights, and was officially inaugurated by the President of Argentina, Miguel Ángel Juárez Celman and Vice-President Carlos Pellegrini. In the first five days twenty-four artworks were sold.<sup>17</sup> The author of the article congratulated Ernest Van Brussel and called on other consuls to continue the expansion of Belgian art outside of Europe:

En présence de tels résultats, de vifs éloges sont dus à M. le consul général Van Bruyssel qui a pris l’initiative de cette exposition d’accord avec MM. les ministres des affaires étrangères et des beaux-arts. Il est à espérer que dans l’intérêt de nos artistes l’exemple des exposition de Port Adelaide et de Buenos-Ayres sera suivi par nos consuls dans les principaux centres extra[-]européen[ne]s.<sup>18</sup> The article brings a third exhibition into the picture: the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition that was organized in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne and the fiftieth anniversary of the Proclamation of South Australia. The scale of the Adelaide Jubilee was distinct from the Philadelphia and Buenos Aires exhibitions since it comprised several sections in which many countries participated. Curiously, the fine arts section only had an Australian, British and Belgian “picture gallery”, which means that the Belgium government had decided to take part in an exhibition that primarily displayed a colonial cultural relationship (S.n. 1887).

The economic motivation behind Belgium's participation in the exhibition in Port Adelaide is obvious from the discourse. As one anonymous Australian critic remarked:

The King of the Belgians is well known for the keen interest which he takes in all that affects the commercial development of his country. Especially is he interested in its foreign trade, and it is therefore not surprising to find that a number of valuable and representative exhibits are on view in the Belgian court whose existence is largely due to his energy.<sup>19</sup>

Belgium and Australia already had strong economic ties: "The trade between Belgium and South Australia and her Northern Territory is already very extensive, being second only to that with Great Britain, and it is in the desire of Leopold II to do everything which may encourage it," including investing in the fine arts exhibition.<sup>20</sup> Multiple articles highlighted the efforts made by Leopold II. He personally lent out his own full-length portrait and that of King Leopold I, assured the presence of busts depicting the King and Queen, and "gave other aid in connection with the Belgian gallery".<sup>21</sup> In this way, the King ensured that the fine arts section demonstrated Belgium's political power and highlighted the political lineage between Belgium, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and South Australia, which was even stronger – as most critics pointed out – by the fact that Leopold I was the uncle of Queen Victoria.

In the present state of the investigation, it is impossible to reconstruct the Buenos Aires exhibition since the catalog is lost. From the press reviews one can infer that it presented a mixture of (studies of) history paintings, genre paintings, portraits and landscapes by salon artists and museum directors, such as Francois Bossuet, Emile Claus, Jacques Carabain, Edgar Farasyn, Léon Herbo, Joseph Stallaert, Charles Verlat and Emile Wauters. There is no mention of royal or explicit political imagery as in the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition.<sup>22</sup> The same holds true for the Philadelphia exposition. The catalogue lists artworks representing Belgian landscapes and vernacular culture, still lives, portraits, medieval scenes and orientalist subjects (De Winter et al. 1882). However, the involvement of Leopold II that connects the expositions raises questions about the political motivations, besides the economic expansion of the Belgian art market and the "correction" of how contemporary Belgian art was perceived. In other words, were the projects only artistically commercial or was there a hidden agenda?

## Politics at play: art, commerce and colonization

The Philadelphia exhibition was framed by a series of five lectures that portrayed (the history of) Belgium from different angles. The first focused on political institutions, the second on public education, the third on science, the fourth on the

à Pailhe by Van Luppen (bought by M. Tornhuis of the Provincial Bank), *Scène campinoise* by Van Leemputten (bought by M. Harning, General-Consul of Argentina in Belgium). The exhibition's committee bought *La châtelaine* by Herbo for the tombola. Other sales of which the buyers remain unknown are: *Rue à Mont-Rose (Italie)* by Carabin, *Paysanne flamande* by Claus, *Retour du troupeau* by De Beul, *Portrait de Rubens* by Dans, *Clara la rousse* by Degeeter, *Les pecheurs en priere* by Aloïs Boudry, *Lecon de dessin* and *Printemps de la vie* by Farasyn, *Coin de lagune* by Rul, *Repos du modèle* by Keirsbeelk, *Chemin des bouleaux* by Auten, *La Marocaine* by Mellery and a work by Mme Ronner. S.n., "Nos Artistes à Buenos-Ayres", *Journal De Bruxelles*, November 13, 1887.

<sup>18</sup> S.n., "Nos Artistes à Buenos-Ayres", *Journal De Bruxelles*, November 13, 1887.

<sup>19</sup> S.n., "The Jubilee Exhibition. The Belgian Court," *The South Australian Advertiser*, June 30, 1887.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> S.n., "The Jubilee Exhibition", *The South Australian Register*, June 20, 1887; S.n., "The Adelaide Jubilee Exhibition. The Art Galleries", *The South Australian Advertiser*, June 21, 1887; S.n., "Nos Artistes à Buenos-Ayres et a Port Adelaide", *Journal De Bruxelles*, October 25, 1887.

<sup>22</sup> For a selection of the artists, represented at the Buenos Aires exhibition see note 18.

<sup>23</sup> Italics added.

fine arts and the fifth on the economic situation. Interestingly, the publication that reproduced the fine arts lecture and summarized the other talks framed the exhibition differently than the press did. The over-all message of the speakers was that “[t]he future [of Belgium] was safe and bright” (Sève 1882a, 6). In every respect, the country was moving forward, making progress. Belgium appeared as a model to be followed. Edouard Sève also highlighted the nation’s superiority over the United States of America: “At the end of prof. Van Daeli’s lecture [on public education], I expressed the hope that one day the United States would also come and learn something in Belgium upon the question of public instruction and teaching” (Sève 1882b, 7). About the fine arts, he wrote: “To speak of the fine arts is to speak of the progress of mankind, of works of genius, of the good, the true, the beautiful; of everything that polishes, purifies and sweetens the manners of nations” (Sève 1882b, 7). In the context of the United States, where the fine arts were still in their incipient phase, this type of discourse subtly reinforced the hegemonic relationship and the importance of international exchange. This motif becomes explicit when Sève quoted the commentaries made by French artist Frédéric Auguste Bartholi at the International Exhibition of Philadelphia in 1876:

The Centennial Exhibition [...] has been glorious for the Americans, in showing all they have been able to produce so rapidly. They have the natural ambition to shift for themselves, and they will certainly succeed. It is a warning to the manufacturers of the old world. Fortunately, each people keeps as his own some leading qualities in certain products, hence there will always be a need for international exchange. The United States succeeding in making almost everything at home, can see also that if they do not wish to remain stationary in works in which taste is the principle feature, *they must open their doors wider than they do now to foreign countries*, if not, by using only their own products, a few manufacturers would be the only ones to benefit themselves; the entire nation being no longer stirred by the sight of possession of better, would forcibly cease to develop itself. *When the United States will reduce their custom duties to a moderate tariff, the consumers of the country will gain by it* (Sève 1882b, 8-9).<sup>23</sup>

The phrasing here makes it very clear that the objective of the Philadelphia exhibition of 1882 was not merely to show the development of Belgian art and expand its markets, but also to promote the nation and negotiate the economic relationship with the United States of America. It raised a matter that had already been addressed during the Centennial Celebrations but that had not been changed drastically. Moreover, as Sève’s discourse shows, the fine arts were the perfect instrument to demand more “openness” because they reveal the difference in “civilization” between both countries. “The exhibition,” according to the consul, would “cause serious progress to be made in the Fine Arts in the United States” (Sève 1882b, 9). It would put an end once and for all to the idea of inferiority of Belgian contemporary art and inspire local artistic development. Belgian art would conquer its place in American museums and collections. He suggested that other (European) countries



should follow the example so “the Americans will be enabled to study successively [...] all foreign schools” (Sève 1882b, 9).

Thus, we see how the exhibition was the start of a cultural colonization and the demonstration of a hegemonic relationship, with the underlying motivation to negotiate the economic exchanges between both countries. Tellingly, Edouard Sève was the founder of the American-Belgium Chamber of Commerce, an institute that was responsible for much of the commercial activity between the ports of the United States of America and Antwerp. The Chamber was also the main sponsor of the project.<sup>24</sup> Most texts portray Sève as a *libre-échangiste*, who is convinced that “the principle cause of our [Belgium’s] prosperity lies in the enjoyment of an almost complete political and commercial liberty”.<sup>25</sup> His brief history of Belgian art published in 1894 in the *British Journal of the Society of Arts*, was a plea for deregulated commerce and trade. The consul again used the arts as an alibi to promote a liberal Belgium. Sève, who was a consul in Chile, the United States of America, Spain and the United Kingdom, dedicated most of his career to this issue.<sup>26</sup> For instance, in Philadelphia, he participated in the debate on import taxes on foreign artworks. He managed to receive special treatment for the importation of the Belgian artworks. The critic Strahan wrote:

A capital idea has been inaugurated, to combine the privileges of a museum and of a possible salesroom; the Academy has been constituted a bonded warehouse for the reception of these canvases. The bulk of pictures therefore pay no duty, the customs being collected only from such as are sold.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, for Sève exceptions were not enough. Custom duties were responsible for the nation’s artistic poverty and had to end. His battle and that of many others was, however, in vain. The Tariff Act of 1883 raised the taxes for all objects, except for the works of American artists that remained on the free list (Barber 1999, 215-22). In Buenos Aires of the 1880s, art taxes were part of the public debate on the lack of official infrastructure, institutions and support. In 1883, Eduardo Schiaffino, a critic, artist and pioneer in the institutionalization of art in Argentina, famously demanded the government to take up its responsibility and support the incipient art scene. He wanted the State to commission national artists for the construction of monuments, the decoration of public buildings, the representation of historical events and meritorious persons, and to reduce or eliminate the import taxes on artworks. In addition, he asked for a national public gallery and official protection to national artists and foreign artists who were based in Buenos Aires.<sup>28</sup> Schiaffino, together with many other artists and critics, argued for a European model that would bridge the distance with the “Old Continent” by facilitating cultural traffic. The Belgian art exhibition, like any other foreign exhibition in this period, was used to continue the debate. In his scathing review, Fernando Carvalho wondered whether “it would be necessary to say something about the artworks’ prices?” In his view, the quality of the artworks was mediocre to bad, but the importation tax of forty-eight percent “explains and justifies everything”.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> A.M., “Les Chambres de Commerce à l’Étranger”, *La Revue Diplomatique et Le Moniteur Des Consulats* 13, no. 9 (February 1891): 6; and Barber 1999, 215-16.

<sup>25</sup> S.n., “Nécrologie. Mort de M. Édouard Sève”, *La Flandre Libérale*, February 12, 1912; A.M., “Les Chambres de Commerce à l’Étranger”, *La Revue Diplomatique et Le Moniteur Des Consulats* 13, no. 9 (February 1891): 6; and Barber 1999, 215-16.

<sup>26</sup> Edouard Sève, “The Arts and Industries of Belgium and the Antwerp Exhibition, 1894”, *The Journal of the Society of Arts* 42, no. 2 (1894): 283-98.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Strahan, “The Belgian Salon at Philadelphia. Conclusion”, *The Art Amateur* 1 (1882): 4.

<sup>28</sup> Schiaffino formulated these demands under the pseudonym Zigzag in the essay *Apuntes sobre el arte en Buenos Aires. Falta de protección para su desenvolvimiento* that appeared in *El Diario* in the course of September 1883. The complete essay can be found in his unpublished notebook, preserved at the Archivo General de la Nación, Folder Schiaffino. Zigzag, “Apuntes Sobre El Arte En Buenos Aires. Falta de Protección Para Su Desenvolvimiento”, in *E.J.S. Traducciones y Artículos, Buenos Aires 83-84 (Unpublished Notebook)*, ed. Eduardo Schiaffino (Buenos Aires, n.d.), 42-60.

<sup>29</sup> Fernando Carvalho, “La Exposición Belga”, *El Nacional*, October 13, 1887.

<sup>30</sup> As scholar Robert R. Ansiaux remarks, the law of 1856 that forbade the government from intervening in migration did not prevent Leopold I or anyone else to pursue imperialist adventures (Ansiaux 2006, 150).

There is considerably less information available about the exposition in Buenos Aires than about the one in Philadelphia, which makes it difficult to identify the exact political motivations that had informed and shaped the project. However, here it is important to look at the context. What is clear is that Leopold II's request to organize the exhibition in Argentina came at an important moment. From 1880 onwards, Belgian emigration to Argentina substantially increased. The year 1881 signaled the start of the colonization project by Eugène Schepens, a physicist from Welden. The agricultural community in Villaguay, Entre Rios – that was called “a colony” – would become a model to promote emigration to Argentina in Belgium. Other private colonization initiatives followed, and in 1888 and 1889 the migration stream peaked (Stols 1998, 15; Vloeberghs 2016, 6–8). The Belgian migration was part of an international migration: between 1880 and 1914 more than 4 200 000 persons arrived in Buenos Aires, the majority of which came from Europe, more specifically Italy, Spain, France, Germany and England. The agrarian export boom and the strong industrial growth had turned the country into one of the wealthiest of the world (Devoto 2009, 13–16, 247–48).

Argentinian migration became a political issue in Europe, including in Belgium where the failed colonization of Santo Tomás in Guatemala – Belgium's first official colony by Royal Decree (1841–1856) – was still fresh in the memory of many. As a result, the government neither supported nor advised against the colonization projects, adopting a non-interventionist position until the scale of the Argentinian migration forced the government to act. But even then, it diplomatically took small measures, such as regulating the migration transportation, and establishing a network of information offices that had to prevent people from crossing the ocean uninformed or misinformed (Vloeberghs 2016, 11–13; Ansiaux 2006, 150). At the same time, ideas to colonize foreign territories or set up small agricultural communities overseas were very much alive amongst Belgian investors, entrepreneurs, politicians, diplomats and members of the Royal family.<sup>30</sup>

Both Leopold I and Leopold II inquired into the possibilities of establishing a Belgian community in the fertile land of the pampas (Ansiaux 2006, 3; Vandersmissen 2009, 358). Charles-François d'Hane-Steenhuysse, before becoming a politician, headed an expedition in the region as early as the 1850s. A firm believer of the economic potential of colonization and emigration, he published the pamphlet *Société de Colonisation et de Commerce belges. Etablissements à former sur les rives de la Plata, du Parana, de l'Uruguay ou du Rio Salado*. He could count on the support of the Belgian King but his ideas were too radical for the government, and were never realized (Vandersmissen 2009, 194–97). Ernest van Bruyssel, the consul behind the Belgian art exposition of 1887, was part of this group of fervent advocates of colonization of, and emigration to, Argentina. He was a historian and paleographer, who in 1862, because of his work on the Belgium's history of international commerce, became the assistant of Alexis Brialmont, head of Leopold II's documentation network known as “the Arsenal”. The network focused on gathering information and creating discourse about international political and economic

relationships and colonization, and was an essential tool in the development of the King's colonial doctrine (Vandersmissen 2009, 380-88). In 1868, Leopold II promoted Van Bruyssel to consul in Washington. His diplomatic career brought him from 1884 until 1899 to Buenos Aires, where he was the Belgian consul for Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay.<sup>31</sup> In 1886, the government ordered him to write a report about the social, economic and political conditions of Argentina. The document that was published two years later shows his opinion about emigration and private colonization projects:

Si l'on veut éviter, en Belgique, une période de crise commerciale et industrielle déjà commencée, et qui deviendra de jour en jour plus intense, on doit s'attacher à en faire disparaître les causes. L'émigration, avec sa puissance expansive; l'extension de nos relations actuelles vers les contrées d'outre-mer, contribueront à les neutraliser. [...] Nous avons voulu y prendre part, et nous offrons aujourd'hui à nos compatriotes les renseignements qu'un long séjour dans la République Argentine nous a permis de recueillir sur ce pays, concernant les avantages qu'il présente aux émigrants européens. Ses marchés commerciaux sont déjà connus, car la Belgique fait avec l'État argentin, chaque année, pour plus de 100 millions de francs d'échanges. Nous souhaitons vivement les succès qu'elle y a obtenus donnent plus de poids à nos remarques précédentes sur l'utilité des expéditions lointaines, en faisant mieux comprendre les bénéfices qu'on retire, et la possibilité de les réaliser (Van Bruyssel 1888, 32-33).

Consequently, Van Bruyssel committed to expanding and maintaining the Belgian community in Argentina. He wrote several publications that, as a critic remarked, could serve as a guide for anyone who wanted to migrate to the region.<sup>32</sup> He co-founded a Belgian association in Argentina that "help[ed] newcomers to overcome the difficulties of a new language, customs and habits" and that functioned as "a sort of scholarship to find work". It solved an issue that was considered a barrier for many volunteers to migrate: it brought the immigrants in contact with owners of colonies, industrialists and "anyone in need of manpower".<sup>33</sup> Together with his wife, the French writer Jeanne de Tallenay, he also supported several philanthropic initiatives, organized for and by the Belgian residents. In a banquet in his honor, a spokesman of the "elite of the Buenos Aires Belgian colony" praised him for his patriotism: He was "the excellent patriot that took as a motto: 'I am Belgian and I am foreign to what is not Belgian'". In addition, the text highlighted his efforts to create "union or cohesion in our [Belgians residing in Argentina] patriotism."<sup>34</sup>

The fragmented sources about Van Bruyssel's stay in Argentina portray him as a vital figure in the "Belgian colony" that was growing exponentially and posed many problems at the time. He understood that for the colonization/ emigration project to succeed, it was important to create a community. All his efforts reinforce the hypothesis that the exposition was not only an economic venture, it was also a patriotic deed that had to strengthen the cultural fabric of the "Belgian colony". It was a way to make Belgium visible in the Argentinian capital, like

<sup>31</sup> Folder "Ernest van Bruyssel", Diplomatic Archive, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belgium.

<sup>32</sup> H.C., "La République Argentine", *L'Indépendance Belge*, January 2, 1887.

<sup>33</sup> S.n., "Les Belges Dans La République Argentine", *Gazette De Charleroi*, March 30, 1889.

<sup>34</sup> S.n., "Un Banquet", *Le Courrier De La Plata*, June 28, 1892. Unfortunately, the text does not detail which were the philanthropic initiatives that he and his wife supported.

<sup>35</sup> One of the colonization projects of that year was called *Nueva Flandres* and had the objective to create an agricultural community of 125 families on Península Valdés. Florimond Van Varenbergh was in charge of the colonization. S.n., “Colonisation Belge”, *Courrier de l’Escaut*, September 23, 1887; S.n., “Colonisation Belge”, *Journal De Bruxelles*, September 22, 1887. One of the many informative notes about emigration: S.n., “Émigration”, *Gazette De Charleroi*, September 10, 1887.

<sup>36</sup> A critic from *Le Soir* considered Van Bruyssel’s publication about Argentina a propaganda brochure that did not mention anything about the slave-like conditions of migrants in the country. D.A., “La Traite Des Blancs”, *Le Soir*, July 24, 1889. A lecture by the traveller M. Peterken about Argentina had “the nature of advertisement for emigration” although it was based on official figures and facts. The critic advised everyone to pass by the Argentinian consulate that provides free information. S.n., “Société Des Conférences de l’Ecole Industrielle”, *Gazette De Charlerois*, October 31, 1887. See also: Vloeberghs 2016.

<sup>37</sup> See note 18.

<sup>38</sup> Van Bruyssel was involved in the foundation of the *Société Chorale Belge*. S.n., “Dans Une Lettre”, *Le Soir*, June 5, 1892.

<sup>39</sup> S.n., “Belgian Art”, *The Critic*, no. 34 (1882): 120; S.n., “A Ridiculous and Disgraceful Quarrel”, *Quiz, a Weekly Journal of Society, Literature and Art*, no. 36 (1882): 3-4.

the British, French and Spanish exhibitions had done. Through art, Van Bruyssel wanted to generate a positive image of his home country in Argentina. Interestingly, he only partially succeeded: the sales were good but the criticism was severe. He did produce a positive image about migration and cultural exchange in Belgium. As mentioned above, in 1887, migration to Argentina was a dominant issue. The press elaborately informed the public about colonization projects and emigration, reporting good and bad experiences.<sup>35</sup> Van Bruyssel’s work, like that of other writers, travelers, businessmen and politicians, was often subject to fierce criticism. It was considered biased, promoting an uncertain future that in reality frequently involved exploitation or failure.<sup>36</sup> Viewed in the context of the migration discourse in the Belgian press, the positive commercial outcome of the first Belgian art exposition in South America confirmed the idea of Argentina’s wealth and demonstrated the country’s openness to Belgian art and culture. The artworks could not end up in museums – as in Philadelphia – because of the lack of institutions. However, the official support was obvious from the list of buyers that was published in the press and that included the president, the vice-president and the president of the Municipal Council of Buenos Aires.<sup>37</sup> Van Bruyssel achieved something similar when he organized a benefit concert in Buenos Aires with the Choral Association for the victims of the mine catastrophe in Anderlues, a village in the South of Belgium.<sup>38</sup> Just like the exhibition, the charitable act showed how the Belgian presence in Argentina could contribute to the development of the home country.

## Concluding remarks

The discourse produced by the exhibitions shows artworks and exhibitions as instruments of civilization, used with certain objectives and from a particular perspective that was centered on Belgium. The tensions generated by the hegemonic relationship are reflected in the criticism and discordant reception. The expositions testified to the unequal relationship by incorporating a large quantity of “mediocre artworks” that were sold for high prices. Both in Philadelphia and Buenos Aires, critics reacted to the arrogance of the exhibition makers. In the US, they even raised the question whether it was necessary to show Belgian art at all, considering the superiority of French art. Some liked to see more American artists on display.<sup>39</sup> However, this critique was not transmitted at home by the Belgian press, and it was marginalized by the booming industry of international expositions and world fairs. The expositions were part of an international movement that was expansive. In both countries, other (types of) Belgian art exhibitions followed. Organized inside and outside of the framework of international group expositions, they continued the cultural diplomacy, implicitly endorsing Leopold II’s colonial project. For instance, in 1905, the year of Belgium’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

Independence, the Belgian colony in Buenos Aires ordered a bronze medal from the artist engraver Paul Fisch that shows on the front side the effigies of Leopold I and Leopold II with the inscription “75ième Anniversaire de l’Indépendance de la Belgique 1830-1905”. The back displays a lion standing upright surrounded by the inscription “Colonie Belge de Buenos-Ayres, Septembre 1905” (Laloire 1907, 49-50) (Figs. 3 and 4). The medals that were distributed among the participants of the celebrations and the local authorities of Buenos Aires expressed the patriotic sense of community that reigned in the port capital of South America and that five years later would be staged again for a world audience at the International Centennial Celebrations of Argentina.<sup>40</sup>

The paradox of a country promoting its superiority through artworks that were considered “mediocre” by art critics inevitably raises questions about the artistic quality of the exhibitions. The artworks on display were not the ones that had received awards at European salons and/or were already known in the United States or Argentina through the circulation of magazines and newspapers. Several critics explicitly wondered who were the artists on display? The magazine *The Critic* argued that at the Philadelphia exhibition “[s]o few of the names are known that it is not worth while retailing them at any length”.<sup>41</sup> Edward Strahan

<sup>40</sup> I am currently preparing a paper on the Belgian participation at the Centennial Celebrations of Argentina in 1910.

<sup>41</sup> S.n., “Belgian Art”, *The Critic* 34 (1882): 120

<sup>42</sup> Edward Strahan, “The Belgian Salon at Philadelphia. Conclusion”, *The Art Amateur* 6 (1882): 6



Figs. 3 and 4 – Paul Fisch – Leopold II and the Colonie Belge de Buenos-Ayres, 1905. Medallion, front and back. Copyright: Royal Library of Belgium, KBR.



<sup>43</sup> S.n., "Belgian Art", *The Critic* 34 (1882): 120.

<sup>44</sup> S.n., "Le Salon de 1880", *La Presse*, June 1, 1880: 2.



from *The Art Amateur* looked forward to another kind of Belgian exhibition "without any panel paintings of little stuffed birds and with the signatures of those artists who have been heard of in the world at large".<sup>42</sup> The lack in quality was associated with the absence of "Masters" such as Lawrence Alma Tadema, Henri Leys, Louis Gallait or Alfred Stevens. At the same time, the exhibition boosted the popularity of some Belgian artists, such as Evariste Carpentier. *The Critic* considered his painting *Les Réfugiés* (1880), that represents an episode from the French War in the Vendée, as good as a work by Meissonier. He (or she) added that "[a] country that boasts an artist so good need not to be ashamed of a large body of second and third-rate painters".<sup>43</sup> The work was, however, one of the few that came with credentials. It had been shown at the Paris Salon of 1880 and had received positive criticism in the French press. The newspaper *La Presse* described it as "un grand drame dans un petit cadre", which indirectly points out another characteristic of the Philadelphia and Buenos Aires exhibitions: the dominance of artworks of smaller size.<sup>44</sup>

In order to fully grasp the artistic meaning of the exhibitions, a more elaborate study would be necessary. Additional archive research might yield further insights into the selection of artworks and a more thorough analysis of the works would

allow us to specify the notion of “mediocrity” in and outside the context of the exhibitions. The present paper viewed the exhibitions through the lens of cultural diplomacy, in order to reveal the underlying political and commercial motives. These elements must also be taken into account by a global art history that seeks to understand how cultural exchange not only occurred in great networks but also through seemingly minor events and mediocre artworks that did have an effect on the status of artists and artworks, as well as the artistic scenes and discourse at home and abroad, by building networks.

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