



Exploring History: Medieval to Modern 1400 – 1900

Exploring imperial Brussels

Narrator

Like many other cities in the 19th century. Brussels was a warren of medieval streets and houses. During the reign of Leopold the First, Brussels underwent a period of reconstruction. The main square of the upper town became the Place Royale, or Royal Square. Surrounded by government buildings and close to the Royal Palace. Leopold the First was sworn in here, on the steps of the church St Jacques Sur Coudenburg.

In the centre of the Place is the statue of Godfrey, an 11th century nobleman, from what is now Belgium. He was briefly ruler of Jerusalem during the crusades. Plaques on the sides the monument were later added, depicting the scenes from the capture of Jerusalem and Godfrey's court.

Wide avenues were created leading out from the square. Allowing views of the grand architecture. Nearby the Royal Palace, which was started under Dutch rule, was extended and embellished with royal emblems. It was within this context of nation building that Leopold the Second developed his grandiose plans for Brussels.

The Parc du Cinquantenaire was originally planned for an 1880 exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of Belgium. The Cinquantenaire buildings are in different styles. The two exhibition rooms, which flank the arch, are built using metal and glass. These were built in a period when Leopold had little control over construction. They were erected as a showcase for Belgium's growing industrial might. For the new Cinquantenaire Arch, Leopold the Second chose a more imperial style. This was similar to that used in other European imperial capitals. But contrasted sharply with the range of styles preferred by Brussels bourgeoisie.

At the end of the 19th century, Brussels was at the forefront of the art nouveau style. The Palais Stoclet completed in 1911 was in the very latest style, Viennese succession, and was seen at the time as a symbol of modern architecture. But Leopold preferred far more traditional styles for his monumental projects. His plans didn't stop with the Parc du Cinquantenaire.

He had a five-mile long Boulevard built, linking the Parc with Tervuren, the site of his next grand plan, the Africa Museum.

Screen caption: Belgium brings Civilisation to the Congo

Narrator

Statues and panels in the museum celebrated Belgium's contribution to the development of the Congo. And those Belgian's who died in its conquest and in suppressing the slave trade. Large wall paintings and maps displayed Belgium's new colony.

M Gryseels, Director of the Africa Museum

We remained then since the time of Belgian Congo, as sort of instrument of propaganda as you may say as a sort of the showroom of the Belgian activities in Congo, so our museum from the start had the role to make people take an interest in the Congo. Take an interest in life there. Encourage people to go and work there. And so to sell it to the public at large that really the colonial activities in Congo were a good thing for Belgium.

Narrator:

Although plans for more buildings at Tervuren were abandoned, this was not the end of commemorations of Leopold's rule. In 1912, a monument of the Congo was commissioned from one of Belgium's leading sculptors, Tomas Velsort, for the Cinquantenaire Parc.

The monument took nine years to complete and commemorated Leopold's conquest of the Congo. The central panel shows missionaries leading Africans to the seated Leopold the Second. Inscribed across the top of the monument in French and Flemish, are the words 'I undertook the Congo project in the interests of civilisation and for the good of Belgium'. Leopold the Second 3rd June 1906.

In 2005, the Africa Museum staged an exhibition called 'Memories of Congo'. It was a way of addressing Belgium's colonial history.

M Gryseels

The colonial parts of Congo is very rich and very broad. So you have to make a lot of decisions what will you show and what will you not show? It's a historical exhibit. So that's never very easy. It's not that you have a lot of objects to show, or a lot of things to show. Or to illustrate. Also things that happened hundred years ago, there is often no photographic record or no films about it. But the most difficult part was of course how to treat the more controversial aspects. Was a sort of very emotional to even start with this exhibit. We have to be very careful. It was working on a tight rope. It sort of released a lot of emotions. It's very hard to look at the past with the moral standards of today. But, if you look at it as a sign of the times in the context of the times, then I think Leopold the Second was a visionary, even though even for those days he was megalomaniac. And I think even though there is no evidence that he was personally responsible for the violence, he did get a lot of signals that things were going wrong, and he waited far too long to do something about it. If Belgium wouldn't have sort of rubbed off the international protest movement that came mainly from England. If they would have taken that criticism seriously and done something about it, I think we could have been much more prouder of our history than really we can be today.