

At the Sign of the Golden Compass

RALPH STANTON gets a bearing on the achievements of Flemish printer and publisher Christophe Plantin.

IF YOU VISIT just one printing museum in your life, it should be the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, Belgium. The museum combines, in their original buildings, a patrician residence exhibiting original decor with great art, and an industrial workshop holding all the diverse and necessary artifacts from earlier centuries of typographic printing.

A FRENCHMAN ABROAD

The museum's name comes from its founder Christophe Plantin and his most beloved son-in-law, employee, heir, and husband of his second daughter, Martine, Jan Moerentor—a name rendered in Latin as *Moretus*. Plantin was born poor near Tours in France around 1520 and died in 1589 at his adopted city, Antwerp, a man of immense wealth and prestige. From 1555 the publishing house he founded at Antwerp grew

to be the greatest in the world, before a long and slow decline resulted in its transfer to the city in 1876 and its establishment as a splendid museum.

The details of Plantin's youth are few and discouraging. His mother died of the plague and his father vanished about 1540. An apprenticeship to an important bookbinder in Normandy followed by his marriage in 1545 set him on course for a life as a tradesman. After a few years in Paris he moved to Antwerp in the Duchy of Brabant, then under Spanish rule, which proved to be an astute relocation. This bustling port with its markets in sugar, pepper, silver and textiles, its moneylenders and bankers, was the centre of the international economy, accounting for as much as 40 percent of world trade. No wonder Plantin later commented on how everything he required was available to him except for the scholars he needed; but they were not far away, at the famous University of Leuven.

Setting himself up as a bookbinder and leather-dresser, Plantin might have spent his life in relative obscurity were it not for some drunken thugs who attacked him one evening, stabbing him in the shoulder. The attack ended his days of physical labour but launched his career as a publisher.

PRINTING AS A HIGH-RISK OCCUPATION

Together with printers and publishers across northern Europe, Plantin sympathized with the Continent's growing Protestant movements and opposed Spanish rule. From 1549 Plantin had associated with a secret Anabaptist sect, the Family of Love, from whom he likely derived start-up capital. He had two partners who were likewise unorthodox in their religious beliefs, and he went so far as to help set up an anti-Spanish printing press in a strongly Calvinist town near Utrecht. Plantin came under pressure from judicial authorities and the Inquisition—yes, the Spanish Inquisition—



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Facade of Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, Belgium.

which led to the breakup of his partnership and possibly threatened his life. Luckily, he was adept at navigating the treacherous waters.

To allay suspicions he proclaimed his devotion to the Catholic Church and proposed the production of a Bible in five languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Syriac and Chaldaic), which was to include vocabularies, grammars and other scholarly elements. Philip II, king of Spain, agreed to finance the project. Plantin also acquired a monopoly on the sale of liturgical works to Spain and its far-flung colonies. So the books shipped in barrels from his plant near the Scheldt River port ended up as far away as the Philippines. Plantin effectively became the official printer to Europe's most powerful monarch: a tribute to his skill and capabilities, and what we might today call the first large corporation devoted to information technology.

During his life in Antwerp, Plantin moved a number of times but he finally settled in the present location, on a square near the river called the Vrijdagmarkt (Friday Market), in 1576. As he bought nearby houses he named them in his manner as: The Iron, Wooden, Brass, Silver and Golden Compasses. His printer's mark was a gilded compass and his device *Labore et Constantia* (Labour and Perseverance).

His establishment came under dire threat when Spanish soldiers mutinied in November 1576 (the Spanish Fury), but Plantin had the means to bribe them to go away, not once but three times. While remaining outwardly loyal to the Catholic Church, Plantin went on supporting anti-Spanish forces and printing their propaganda. In 1578 he became the official printer to the States General, the body that successfully led the anti-Spanish revolt.

A WALK BACK IN TIME

Having sketched a few details of Plantin's life, I'll now take a look at what the city of Antwerp has done with his legacy. The museum is an accretion of buildings constructed over three centuries. You enter through a facade built in Louis XV style and completed in 1763. Despite the cloudy November day of our visit, most of the rooms were well lit because of the large central courtyard. The courtyard gives an aura of privacy and seclusion



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Plantin's printer's mark.

which no doubt benefited the tradesmen, editors and scholars who once worked here.

The richness of the art on view will come as a surprise to some. There are splendid portraits by the greatest artist of 16th-century Antwerp, Peter Paul Rubens. One is a posthumous portrait of Plantin, another of Plantin's wife Jeanne Rivière as an old woman. Another couple portrayed by the master painter is Jean 1st Moretus and his wife Martine Plantin. Other works show leading humanists or theologians who worked with Plantin, and there is a stunning *Death of Seneca*, depicting the suicide of the Roman philosopher on the orders of Emperor Nero in 65 CE.

Many of the rooms are quite small, and each offers its own surprises. Some rooms display fine tapestries, and others are lined with richly tooled and gilt leather panels from Spain, a craft invented in Ghadames, Libya, and widely adopted in Spain during the Moorish occupation. Both are evidence of the family's wealth. There are rooms devoted to cooking, dining, sleeping, bookselling, metal founding, type-casting, editing, text correction, administration and map engraving, plus there are several libraries and an archive. So here you can view both the technical processes of book manufacturing as well as domestic life between the 1500s and the 1800s.

WITHIN THE NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

While the whole museum provides a strong impression of being in direct contact with the Northern Renaissance, this effect is amplified when entering the largest space on the ground floor. This is devoted to the composing room/



The composing room and printing shop.

printing shop, a long room with windows on both sides and a central aisle that separates the presses on one side from the type cases on the other. At the height of its activity the business operated 22 presses, making it one of the greatest industrial concerns of Europe.

The room that most impressed me was the type foundry on the second floor. Here are punches and matrices for types of great beauty. These include “Grande musique,” cut in 1577 and one of seven music faces ordered from Hendrik van den Kerre (Plantin’s principal punch cutter), and a Hebrew fount also of the 16th century cut by the Parisian Guillaume Le Bé, perhaps the greatest exponent of Hebrew type the world has known. The fine work of other French type designers such as Claude Garamond and Robert Granjon are likewise present. Also of interest are the huge copper plates used to print maps as well as book illustrations and even text pages.

Unlike in some other European museums, the spaces were not overcrowded and so even more enjoyable. You can end your tour in the elegant two-storey vestibule with its curved stairway, or spend some time in the museum shop to find interesting souvenirs or museum publications, which as you might expect are of extremely high quality. Good restaurants are located within a short walk, and you may well be hungry after absorbing the riches of this outstanding place.

For further information on Plantin and the museum, see:

- Francine de Nave, *The Plantin-Moretus Museum: Printing and Publishing before 1800* (2004)
- Francine de Nave & Leon Voet, *Musée Plantin-Moretus, Anvers* (1989)
- Leon Voet, *The Golden Compasses: A History and Evaluation of the Printing and Publishing Activities of the Officina Plantiniana at Antwerp* (2 vols., 1969)
- Museum Plantin-Moretus website, www.museumplantinmoretus.be (click on EN for the English site)

~ Ralph Stanton is Administrative Librarian Emeritus at the University of British Columbia Library and a long-time Alcuin Society board member.

ANTWERP’S OTHER DELIGHTS

Antwerp is the second-largest port in Europe after Rotterdam, so motorways leading to and from the city are filled with truck traffic. This being so, it is advisable to plan a night’s stay in the city, especially if you are coming from Amsterdam or Brussels.

- Adjacent to the Plantin Museum is its sister institution the **Municipal Print Room**, with its huge collection of 77,000 prints.
- The **Rubenshuis** (Rubens House) Museum is devoted to the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, who designed his Italian-style house about 1609.
- The **Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library** is a depository library with an emphasis on the humanities in general and the cultural heritage of Flanders in particular. Of special note here is the beautiful Nottebohm Room, with its celestial and terrestrial globes of Willem Jansz and Joannes Blaeu and the Egyptian cabinet featuring the illustrations of the German scholar Richard Lepsius, a founder of Egyptology. Write ahead for access to the Nottebohm Room.