

P.LACE.S — Looking Through Antwerp Lace,
Exhibition by Romy Cockx and Wim Mertens, Antwerp,
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Taking into consideration the insufficient representation of Antwerp's lace heritage in important publications on lace, the exhibition *P.LACE.S — Looking Through Antwerp Lace* was ideated to emphasize the historically crucial role that the city played in lace production and trading processes. Furthermore, the exhibition concept by Frieda Sorber presents itself as a ground for drawing parallelisms between the rich tradition and the maverick computer-controlled design processes. Curated by Romy Cockx and Wim Mertens in collaboration with Kaat Debo, and inaugurated on September 25th, the exhibition highlights five historical locations in Antwerp, combining the diverse narratives into a unique and comprehensive thread.

A good point to start the unwinding of this thread is St Charles Borromeo Church. The church's extensive collection serves as an introduction to the stylistic evolution of lace production in Southern Netherlands while providing an insight into the material externalization of the Counter-Reformation. As presented in this part of the exhibition, the analysis of the lace usage for secular garments and the lace that embellished albs and rochets showed a parallel evolution, marking a progression from geometric grids, circle and points motives, characteristic of the sixteenth and the early-seventeenth centuries, towards more complex, floral-inspired lace designs.¹ These stylistic developments could be seen in Room 3 (fig. 1), divided into chronological sections.

No matter the circumstances, secular or religious, the lace was used as a statement of affluence and power. Initially limited in size and designed to decorate edges and seams, lace was in practice redundant and unnecessary; the lace related products required laborious engagement, which led to the expected limited availability, thus the status of luxury goods.² The Snijders&Rockox House prestigious ambience

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1. St Charles Borromeo Church, *P.lace.s — Looking Through Antwerp Lace* exhibition brochure, Antwerp: Momu, 2021, 43–44.
2. Snijders&Rockox House, *P.lace.s — Looking Through Antwerp Lace* exhibition brochure, Antwerp: Momu, 2021, 63.

acts as the perfect exposition background for the distinguishable lace masterpieces of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries while offering visual parallels between the artistic and artisanal heritage and the contemporary fashion design. Creations by Sarah Burton for Alexander McQueen, Prada, Simone Rocha, Noir Kei Ninomiya and others provide insight into the contemporary experimentation dynamics and lace elaborations.

Opposed to the opulence and luxury is the story told through the Maidens' House exhibition space — a homage to the hundreds of orphan girls who hardworkingly pushed forward the lace production over the course of the centuries. Presumably opened in the mid-sixteenth century, the original Maagdenhuis was active until 1882. During the active period, it was a place where the orphan girls had to spend long days working in deep concentration and silence,³ producing lace that was then sold to the lace merchants.⁴ Room 1 (fig. 2), with its rich exposition of needle lace fragments, patterns, drawings, pins, hooks, bobbins, and lace-making pillows, is a window to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century tools and techniques. In the Maiden's House Chapel, the visitors can watch the ten-minutes *Homage to the Orphan Girls* — a short movie directed by Rei Nadal.

The importance of Antwerp in the lace narrative is linked, not so much to the lace production, which, although present, was not on a level of 'lace city branding', but to the lace trade characteristic for this port city. The Plantin-Moretus Museum houses one of the world's oldest archives related to the lace trade.⁵ The available documentation recounts the trade relations with many European trade cities and the flexibility of the lace industry, production tailored to specific markets — a feature that positioned Antwerp at the crossroads of the lace trade. Aside from the historical lace pieces, this location is significant for its extensive correspondence archive. The letters by the merchants from all around Europe are proof of the flourishing international trade of the seventeenth century. More importantly, they give insight into the commercial capacities of the young, highest social circles women of the time, educated in both languages and arithmetic.

After the visit of all of the historic locations, the exhibition comes to a logical closure in the temporary arranged spaces of MoMu — Antwerp Fashion Museum. It is the ultimate meeting point between the past and the present. The visitor can admire the detailed lace handworks, also represented in the precious artworks (fig. 3), while the exposition setting invites them to draw visual parallels between chronologically distant periods. The exhibition's final section is dedicated to the most advanced computer-controlled design techniques featuring a selection of avant-garde pieces by Iris Van Herpen and Azzedine Alaïa (fig. 4).

P.LACE.S - Looking Through Antwerp Lace will be open to the public until January 2nd, 2022.

3. Maidens' House, *P.lace.s — Looking Through Antwerp Lace* exhibition brochure, Antwerp: Momu, 2021, 79.

4. Ibid.

5. Plantin-Moretus Museum, *P.lace.s — Looking Through Antwerp Lace* exhibition brochure, Antwerp: Momu, 2021, 27.



Figura 1: St Charles Borromeo Church. A: Fragment of the *High Baroque* exposition section with cap lappets in bobbin lace, bands of both bobbin and mixed lace, and a detail of an altar cloth with bobbin lace. B: View on Room 3, *Precursors* and *Early needle and bobbin lace* sections.



Figura 2: Maidens' house. A: Azzedine Alaïa, dress in laser-cut cotton, couture, 2014. B: View on the exposition space.



Figura 3: MoMu — Antwerp Fashion Museum. A: Cornelis de Vos, *Portrait of Frans Vakemans*, oil on panel, ca. 1625. B: Collar with open and white embroidery, reticella and needle lace, France (?), 1610–20.

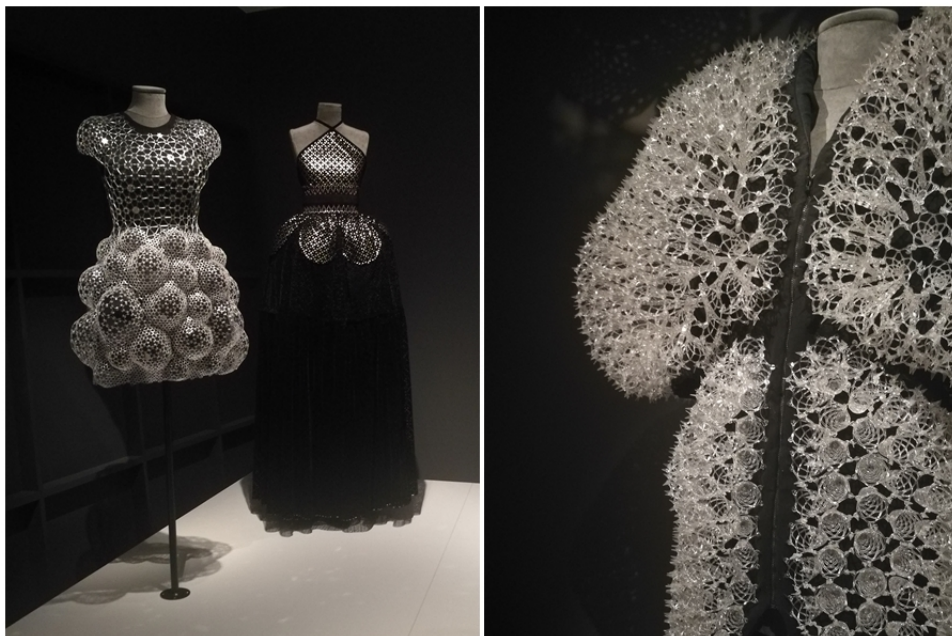


Figura 4: MoMu — Antwerp Fashion Museum. A: Iris van Herpen, in collaboration with Philip Beesley, *Lucid Geodesic dress* in laser-cut transparent acrylic, *Lucid* collection, A/W 2016–17 and *Azzedine Alaïa*, dress in laser-cut velvet over lamé, haute couture, A/W 2011–12. B: Detail of Iris van Herpen, in collaboration with Philip Beesley and Johan van der Wiel, dress in thermoformed acrylate with silicone joints, *Magnetic Motion* collection, S/S 2015.

Bibliography

Place.s — Looking Through Antwerp Lace exhibition brochure, Antwerp: Momu, 2021.