

The South and KMSKA, an entwined history

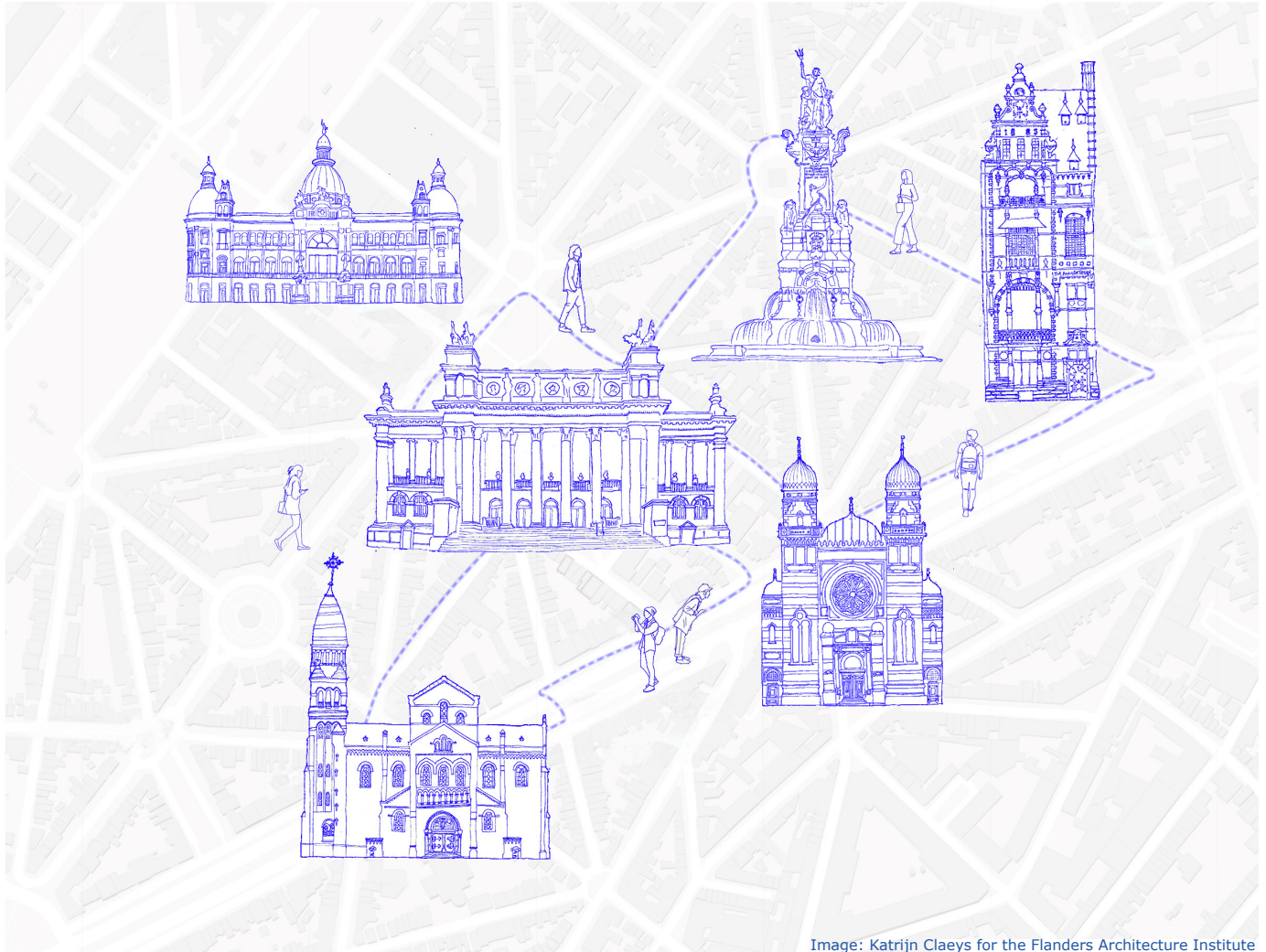


Image: Katrijn Claeys for the Flanders Architecture Institute

Hey!

I'm Katrijn and I'm going to take you on a walk through the South district of Antwerp.

I developed this walk during my internship at the Flanders Architecture Institute (VAi) in the summer of 2024. After studying architecture, I took a postgraduate degree in cultural heritage at KU Leuven.

My fascination with KMSKA arose during my first visit to the museum after it reopened in 2023. I find the combination of the new contemporary architecture with the old building truly impressive.

Stefaan Grieten is a collection manager at the VAI. He told me about the history of the museum and why it ended up at the South. I'd like to share this story with you. Will you walk with me?



STOP 1 The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA)

The tour around KMSKA

On the previous page you will find the walk you will take.

You will get to see old photos and prints.

The tour is 2.5 kilometres long and takes about an hour and a half.

The tour begins at KMSKA, the heart of the South district. Let me take you on a journey through the history and architecture of this district.

Find out how the museum came to be and why this particular location was chosen.



Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Community

From citadel to prestigious district

Until 1874, the South was occupied by a large citadel and a castle square. As the city's economy boomed, a plan arose to demolish the old city walls and expand the city. The city authorities and the Compagnie Immobilière de Belgique founded the Société Anonyme du Sud d'Anvers (Société Anonyme) to bring this plan to fruition.

KMSKA was built in 1884 to raise the prestige of this district. Several other buildings were also erected to stimulate urban development. You will get to discover these too during your tour of the South.



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Take a moment to take in the façade

When the new museum opened its doors in 1890, the façades were still bare. The sculptures had yet to be made. The architects, Jean-Jacques Winders and Frans Van Dijk, designed them all. For six years, twenty-two sculptors worked on the busts, medallions and other works.

The four female figures on the façade above the cornice represent the main artistic disciplines: architecture, painting, sculpture and graphics.



Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Community



KMSKA
Public Domain



Walk to the left side of the museum, via Schildersstraat.

STOP 2 KMSKA - left façade -

Two young talents

In 1877 the city issued a competition for the design of the museum. Although the competition failed to produce a winner, six participants were selected. Among them were Jean-Jacques Winders and Frans Van Dijk, two young architects. The city authorities then asked them to make a joint design.

Jean-Jacques Winders 1849-1936



Jean-Jacques Winders started studying architecture at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp at the age of 13. He trained at about the same time as Frans Van Dijk. He then joined the firm of his father, who, like his grandfather, was a contractor-architect. He started working as an independent architect from 1870. In the early years, Winders designed town houses and commercial properties. He often provided these with an abundance of richly decorated elements. Winders designed in an eclectic style. That means that he used a mix of different elements from historical architectural styles.



Frans Van Dijk 1853-1939

Frans Van Dijk started his studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp in 1864. He would study from the age of 11 to 21. At the end of his career, he was a teacher here himself.

Van Dijk set himself up as an independent architect in 1880. He designed town houses, country estates and trading houses for the Antwerp aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Van Dijk made use of a monumental and richly decorated formal language.

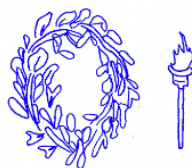
Explore the art periods in the museum through the left façade

On the left façade, between the round-arch windows you can see female figures depicted. They symbolize periods in art history: from Egyptian, Greek and Roman, through Islamic and Byzantine, to Gothic, Flemish and contemporary art.

Can you tell which woman represents which art period?
These tips may help. The correct answers can be found on page 12.



Roman art



Greek art



Islamic art



Egyptian art

STOP 3 Scheldt Free monument - Marnixplaats -

Homage to the Scheldt being made toll-free

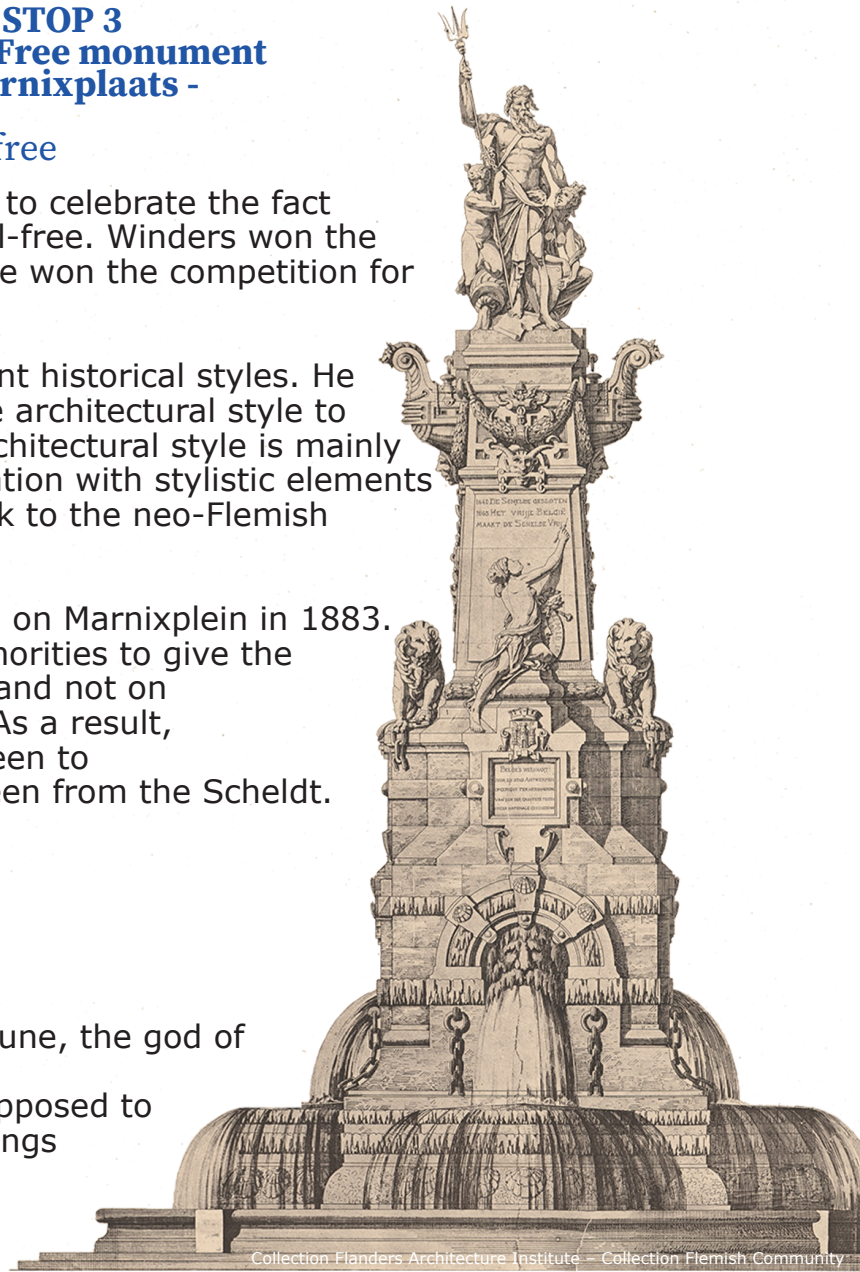
The city authorities wanted a monument to celebrate the fact that the river Scheldt had been made toll-free. Winders won the design competition, a few years before he won the competition for KMSKA.

Winders combined elements from different historical styles. He designed in the neo-Flemish Renaissance architectural style to emphasize Belgium's singularity. That architectural style is mainly characterized by an abundance of decoration with stylistic elements from the sixteenth century. I'll come back to the neo-Flemish Renaissance.

The Scheldt Free monument was erected on Marnixplein in 1883. The Société Anonyme urged the city authorities to give the monument a place in the South district, and not on the Scheldt as Winders himself wanted. As a result, Winders had to raise his design from fifteen to twenty metres, so that it could still be seen from the Scheldt.

Neptune and the dry waterfall

Walk around the roundabout to see Neptune, the god of the sea with his bronze trident. Did you know that water was actually supposed to flow out of the plinth? Instead, the openings were filled with a sandstone waterfall.



Lithographic

This lithographic drawing shows a preliminary design by Winders for the Scheldt Free monument. In the background, he added façade drawings of several buildings he realized in Antwerp, including his own house in Tolstraat.



STOP 4

House Jean-Jacques Winders - Tolstraat 85 -

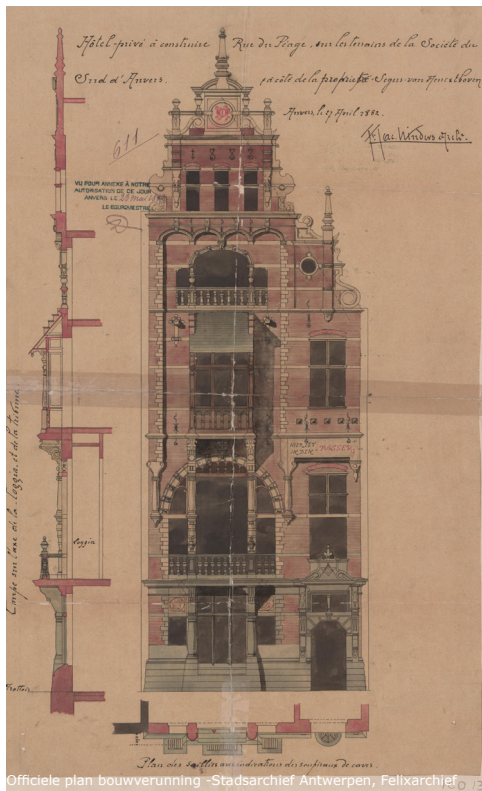
Winders' masterpiece: his own home and studio.

The home and studio of Jean-Jacques Winders immediately stands out in the streetscape. It was built in 1882 in a decorative neo-Flemish Renaissance style. With his own house, Winders wanted to show that this style was the ideal building style for Belgium. *Dit huis is De Passer genaamd* means 'This house is called The Compass'.

The building features rich decorations typical of the neo-Flemish Renaissance style.

As promised, I will return briefly to the neo-Flemish Renaissance style. As a proponent of this style, the façade of Winders' residence lends itself perfectly to showing you its characteristics.

Admire the façade details



The most detailed part of the façade is the window on the ground floor. Winders divided the window into three sections with bluestone elements. To the left and right, you can see portraits of important Flemish Renaissance masters of the period.

The window on the second floor, is called a bay window with a round arch and a balcony. The balcony is decorated with masks and rough stone blocks.

On the third floor, you can see a detailed wooden bay window painted red with stained-glass windows and a slate roof.

The top floor has a loggia, a kind of covered balcony.

The façade is ornamented with what we call quoining, with the long and short sides of stone blocks alternating.

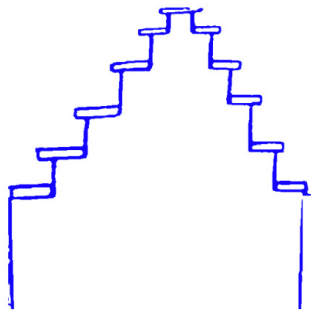
Discover the neo-Flemish Renaissance style through the façade

Can you guess who is pictured at the top? The answers can be found on page 12.

Anchor plates: Anchor plates connect the beams supporting the floor and the façade.

Stylized anchor plates bearing the year of construction (1883) and the architect's initials (JJ) are visible at the top of the gable.

Crow-stepped gable: The crow-stepped gable is typical of the neo-Flemish Renaissance style. This type of façade is characterized by a stepped crown.



Cross window: Another defining feature is the cross window, a window divided into four parts.

Diamond-shaped decorations: Can you see more diamond-shaped decorations?



Quoining: To create the corner, the long and short sides of stone blocks alternate.



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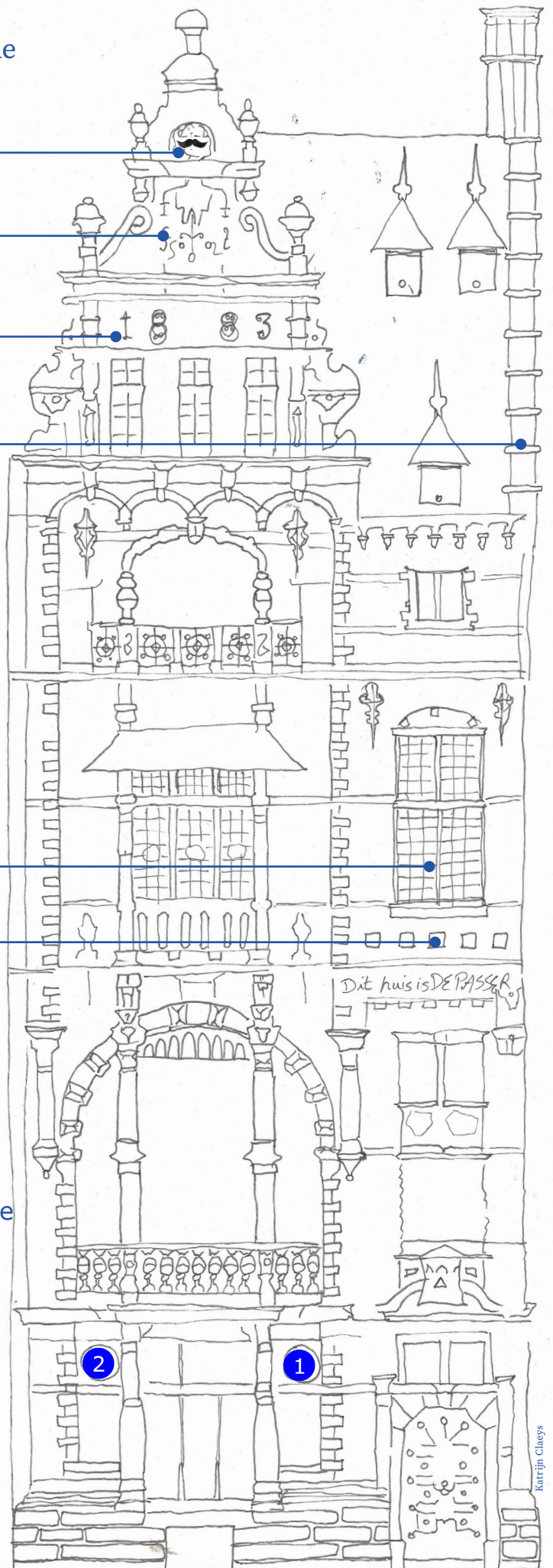
Portraits of important Renaissance masters:

Vredeman de Vries was a Dutch architect, art theorist, draughtsman and painter.



2

Cornelis Floris was a sculptor, architect and designer from the southern Netherlands.



Katrijn Claeys



Walk along Amerikalei towards De Vrièrestraat, turn back into Schildersstraat and turn left into Plaatsnijdersstraat.

STOP 5 **KMSKA** **- Rear façade KMSKA -**

Museum typology

In the nineteenth century, the museum emerged as an architectural type, whose key features were a symmetrical design, central hall, monumental staircase and domes.

In the nineteenth century, museums were built as temples of culture, with large columns and a grand staircase.

The city authorities of Antwerp collected documentation on what were then considered successful museums. Those designs met the requirements of a museum building and also constituted a visual enrichment of the cityscape. At the instigation of the city authorities, Winders and Van Dijk visited museums across Europe for inspiration. They used the museums of Dresden, Munich and Leipzig as models for the construction of KMSKA.

Do you see any similarities between KMSKA and the Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig?



Eclectic style

To build KMSKA, Jean-Jacques Winders and Frans Van Dijk combined different architectural styles. This is also known as an eclectic style.

The neo-Flemish Renaissance

The neo-Flemish Renaissance spread throughout Belgium, becoming a national style.

Projects in this style often carried political significance. They looked back to local building traditions and glorious periods in history, thereby reinforcing Flemish identity.

Belgium became an independent state in 1830. The neo-Flemish Renaissance reflected the desire to give the new nation a face of its own. This style was popular among the wealthy classes in the second half of the nineteenth century.

You are now halfway through the walk.

Turn your back to KMSKA and walk down Bouwmeesterstraat.

The sixth stop is the Shomre Hadas synagogue.



STOP 6

The Shomre Hadas synagogue - Bouwmeesterstraat -

Admire the islamic and christian artistic elements of the synagogue façade



Collection Flanders Architecture Institute – Collection Flemish Co

The city authorities asked the Société Anonyme to create a striking eye-catcher on this site. As with the construction of KMSKA, they wanted to lend prestige to the new district.

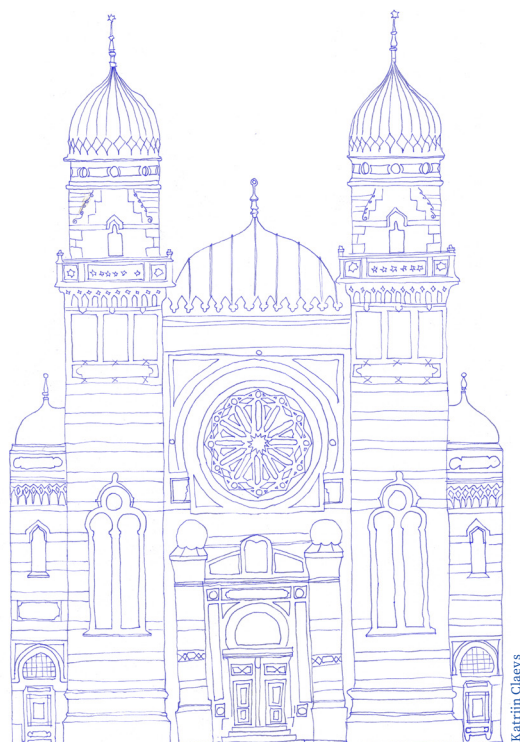
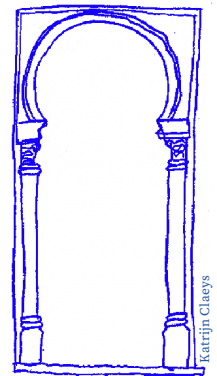
Since 1933, the Jewish building tradition has evolved from Byzantine and Moorish influences to an international modern style with local elements.

Here you can see a first preliminary design of the Shomre Hadas synagogue.

An Oriental masterpiece

Architect Ernest Stordiau designed a synagogue in oriental style. This style is characterized by elements from Moorish architecture, such as horseshoe arches and onion domes.

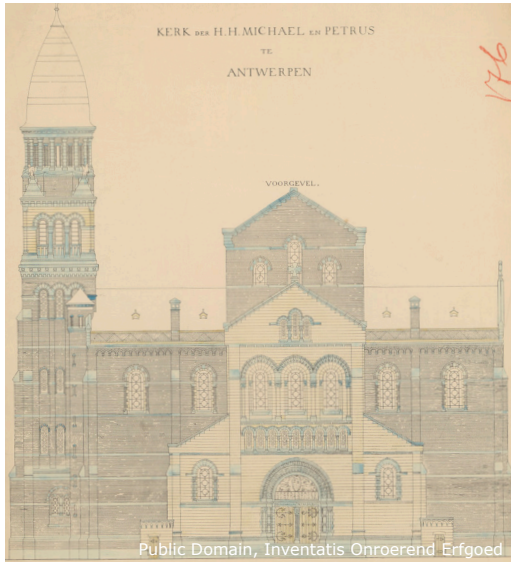
Stordiau chose a typical nineteenth-century façade of a synagogue. The most striking elements are the two round minarets (towers) with onion domes. Openings in the façade that let light in (à jour) and façade ornamentations with rhythmic patterns of spirals and flowing lines (arabesques) refer to the Spanish-Arabic Mudéjar style. This style of art interwove Islamic and Christian art forms.



 Turn right into Amerikalei and walk to number 165.

You have reached stop seven, the Church of Sts Michael and Peter.

STOP 7 Church of Sts Michael and Peter - Amerikalei 165-

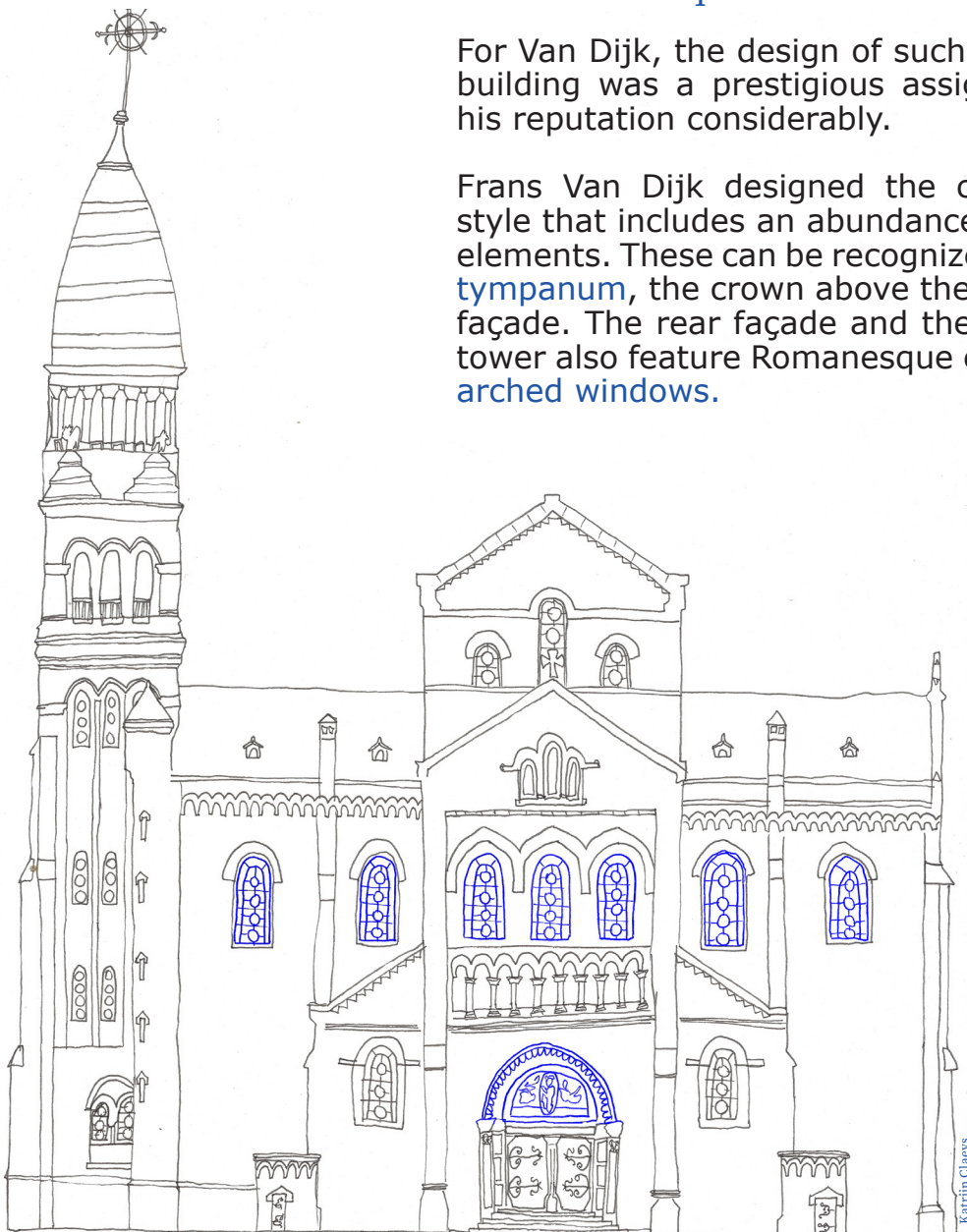


Early plans for the South included a railway station, docks and a bridge in the urban landscape. The Société Anonyme also felt that the district should not be lacking such an essential element as a church. The church was not only a place of religious gathering, but also a symbol of social connection. The presence of a church would strengthen the identity and character of the district. The site was donated to the Diocese of Antwerp by the Société Anonyme in 1883.

Neo-Romanesque elements

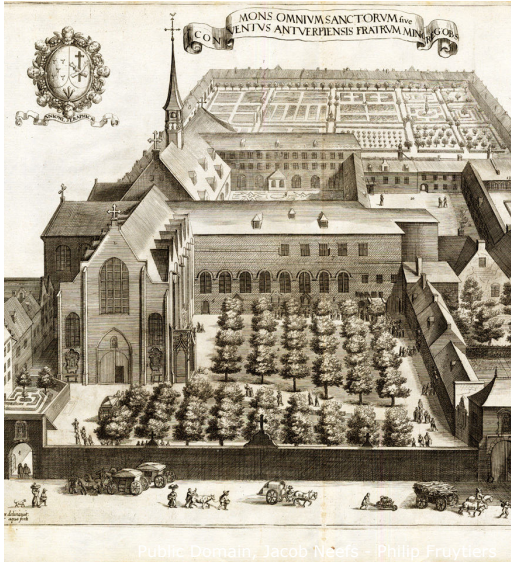
For Van Dijk, the design of such an important type of building was a prestigious assignment that boosted his reputation considerably.

Frans Van Dijk designed the church in an eclectic style that includes an abundance of neo-Romanesque elements. These can be recognized by the semicircular **tympanum**, the crown above the entrance in the front façade. The rear façade and the seventy-metre brick tower also feature Romanesque elements, such as the **arched windows**.



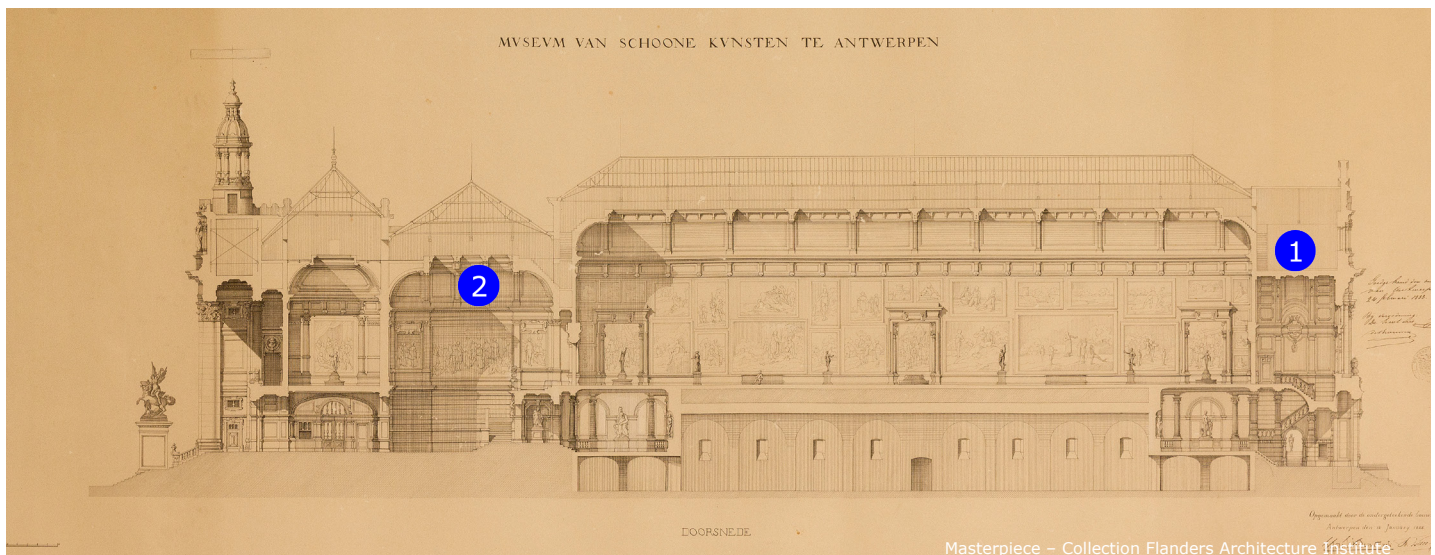
STOP 8 KMSKA - right façade -

Discover the history of the KMSKA collection



The Academy of Fine Arts used to be housed in the former Recollects Convent on Mutsaardstraat in the centre of Antwerp. Before the construction of KMSKA on the South, this is where the art collection was housed.

In 1875 the decision was made to build the museum in the South. This allowed the city authorities to benefit from the financial support the state was providing for the urban development of the district.



Frans Van Dijk and Jean-Jacques Winders,
Design for the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp – Cross section

1 Royal Academy of Fine Arts- KMSKA

A winged bull holding a crest is the historical symbol of the Guild of Saint Luke. The sculpture was adopted by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

The bull's head was given a place in the stairwell at the back of KMSKA. It refers to the academy, which is where the first collection was located before it moved to the new KMSKA.

2 Nicaise De Keyser

Nicaise De Keyser, the director of the academy, made a series of works depicting the glory of Flemish painting. His paintings were given a place on the walls and in the vaults of the stairwell in the old academy museum.

The academy museum became too small for the collection. After a fire almost destroyed the collection, the need for a new museum building grew.

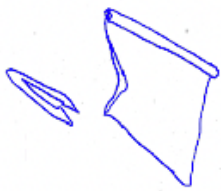
One of the conditions for building a new museum was a stairwell where De Keyser's paintings could be hung.

Explore the museum's art periods through the right façade.

The female figures symbolize periods in art history, from Egyptian, Greek and Roman, through Islamic and Byzantine to Gothic, Flemish and contemporary art.

Can you tell which woman represents which art period?

These tips may help you.



Gothic art



Contemporary art



Byzantine art



Flemish Renaissance

The correct answers

pg. 4 en 12 The women represent these art periods:



Islamic art



Roman Renaissance



Greek art



Egyptian art



Contemporary art



Flemish Renaissance



Gothic art



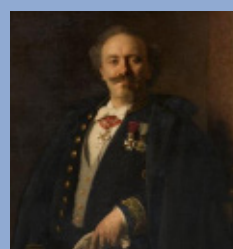
Byzantine art

Images: Collection KMSKA - Flemish Community. Photographer Hugo Maertens

pg. 7

It is the architect himself, Jean Jacques Winders, pictured at the very top.

Did you recognize him by his moustache?



Walk to the front. Turn around and explore the place where the Hippodrome used to be.

STOP 9 The Hippodrome Palace - Leopold de Waelplaats -

A new attraction pool in the Zuidwijk

Sales of plots around the South were difficult. After prices were reduced, the district attracted a new public. The Hippodrome Palace was a pole of attraction in Antwerp's entertainment scene in the early twentieth century. Between 1903 and 1959, a range of shows took place there, from circus, variety and opera to boxing and operetta. The construction of the Hippodrome Palace confirmed the Société Anonyme's failure to subdivide the district.



The Building Inspection Department rejected the building, sealing the fate of the Hippodrome. It closed in 1959.

After years of vacancy, the building was razed in 1973 to make way for a new building with flats, shops and a supermarket.



STOP 10 KMSKA - front façade -

Opening party

End your tour at the front façade of KMSKA. After six years of construction, the doors of KMSKA opened on 11 August 1890. Mayor Leopold De Wael and the city authorities made sure the opening was a festive occasion.

In 1894 the square in front of the museum was named Leopold de Waelplaats in honour of the late mayor. It was under his liberal rule that the Société Anonyme could realize their plans for the promising projects such as the museum, church and synagogue in the city's new district.



We have now reached the end of the tour. I
hope you enjoyed it as much as I did!

Now that you know the whole story, do you look
at the museum differently?

Care for some more architecture? Visit www.vai.be and discover our calendar of exhibitions,
lectures and other activities.

Translation: Patrick Lennon

