

Belgium king's day

Witnessing a remarkable year for relations with Japan

Johan Maricou
AMBASSADOR OF BELGIUM TO JAPAN

Four years ago to the day, I presented my credentials to His Majesty the Emperor Akihito and together we evoked the warm friendship between our Imperial and Royal families, which over many years has been of crucial importance for the development of the current excellent relations between our two countries in almost all areas. Relations between Japan and Belgium are void of any problems, meaning that being Belgium's ambassador in Tokyo is a much rewarding task.

The present year has been a remarkable one for bilateral relations. April 8 saw the grand opening of the new embassy building in the presence of Prime Minister Yves Leterme, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Steven Vanackere, and of many representatives of the Japanese and local authorities, including State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Tetsuro Fukuyama and Chiyoda Ward Mayor Masami Ishikawa. The grand opening and reception were concluded at Kioi Hall with a recital by pianist Ikuyo Kamiya and violinist Yayoi Toda, who were a finalist and a first prize winner of the Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition, respectively, in 1972 and 1993. Their Imperial Highnesses Prince and Princess Hitachi honored this concert with their gracious presence.

On the occasion of his visit to Japan, Prime Minister Leterme met with then Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama for high-level talks on a wide range of issues of global and bilateral interest while Foreign Minister Vanackere's agenda included meetings with his then Japanese counterpart, Katsuya Okada, and then Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Masayuki Naoshima. During their three-day visit to Japan, the prime and foreign ministers had meetings with more than a dozen CEOs and chairmen of major Japanese companies in Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, almost all of them well present in

Belgium for several decades with important investments.

On that same occasion, Foreign Minister Vanackere participated at a well-attended seminar on business and investment opportunities in Belgium. A recent comparative study about the business environment in Belgium carried out by KPMG and looking at the four areas of global attractiveness, headquarters and holding companies, logistics and research and development, shows that Belgium is often ranked top when it comes to real performance. Reality easily overcomes perception. Belgium therefore remains a favorite destination for investment by Japanese companies and this for many reasons, such as the existence of a highly educated and efficient workforce, the excellent quality of life, the availability of world-class harbors with easy links to a strongly developed hinterland, a low effective tax rate on paid-up capital, and, of course, also because of the presence of major European institutions in Brussels, Belgium's capital. It is no wonder then that over the last 40 years, close to 200 Japanese companies have selected Belgium for securing part of their activities in Europe by establishing production units, European headquarters, business offices, banks, facilities for logistics and distribution, R&D centers, etc., in my country. This trend has been confirmed in the present year with an important number of acquisitions by Japanese companies in particular in highly specialized, innovative and future-oriented sectors of economic activity.



Anniversary: King Albert II of Belgium (right) and his wife, Queen Paola (center), appear in Brussels on Belgium National Day on July 21. AP

From July 1 until the end of this year, Belgium is holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. This is the first Belgian presidency under the Treaty of Lisbon, which in terms of external representation of the EU started to be fully applicable in Tokyo on April 29, i.e. the day following the last Japan-EU summit. In its capacity of rotating president, Belgium hosted the ASEM 8 Summit in Brussels from Oct. 4 to 5, gathering the heads of state or government of Asia-Europe Meeting member states, including Prime Minister Naoto Kan. On the occasion of this ASEM summit, an exhibition of Asian art — "A passage to Asia" — was staged in Brussels, highlighting the history of exchanges and interaction

between Europe and Asia across the ages. We are extremely grateful to Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs and to the Tokyo National Museum for having lent out a large number of works of art and documents for that event. At the high-level segment of the COP10 biodiversity conference in Nagoya from Oct. 27 to 29, Belgium was in the chair of the EU Council of Environment's delegation with Flemish Minister Joke Schauvliege heading the Belgian and EU delegation. Thanks to tremendous efforts and the commit-

ment of all parties and in particular of Japan as the host country, this conference arrived at an agreement securing the future of the world's biodiversity. Listing all major cultural events of the past year would lead me too far, but I need to mention three major art exhibitions that are touring Japan during Belgium's rotating presidency of the EU Council. They are "The World of Bruegel in Black & White" (engravings from the collection of the Royal Library in Brussels), "From Ensor to Magritte" (paintings

from the collection of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp) and "The Light of Flanders" (showing works of the three generations of the famous Latem School of painters).

I am also happy to announce that Korean-Japanese citizen Kim Seikyo has taken up only a few weeks ago his position as the new conductor of the Flemish Symphonic Orchestra.

Finally, on Nov. 4, the embassy staged again a recital with the renowned Brussels String Quartet, which was joined by Japanese pianist Musica Miyazawa. Her Imperial Majesty Michiko accepted the invitation to honor this recital with her most gracious presence.

Finally, I would like to recall Salvatore Adamo's comeback to Japan with full-house concerts and standing ovations last October in Tokyo, Sapporo, Nagoya and Osaka.

A last word. It is my sincere wish that the new embassy building will, just like the previous one, prove an attractive place for homely get-togethers for Japanese and Belgian friends of all walks of life. Our old embassy enjoyed a rich tradition of pleasant functions, concerts, seminars and receptions. Be assured that I, together with my successors in Tokyo, will be eager to continue this tradition, thereby contributing to further shape the very friendly relations between our countries and peoples.

Brussels has much to offer visitors

Brussels, with its numerous parks, is the greenest capital in Europe. As capital of the European Union, it is also a cosmopolitan city at a cultural and linguistic crossroads, a city of the arts with many famous museums. Its lively atmosphere coupled with a gastronomic reputation make an essential contribution to the local lifestyle. A multicultural city with a thousand faces, Brussels has surprises in store at every street corner. A majestic historical center, a unique ambience, a huge array of activities for both younger and older people, and moderate prices — the capital of Belgium and Europe holds all the trump cards!

Brussels won't disappoint you, for this city is a veritable chameleon where you can slip directly from one universe to another! You only need to walk a few meters from the working-class Marolles to the aristocratic Sablon in the same way you can pass from the medieval Grand Place full of tourists to the very trendy St. Gery district! In the same sort of contrasts, the sophisticated futurism of glass-fronted office buildings often sits next door to stylish neoclassical or modern-style houses! Wallonia, the southern region of Belgium, is one of Europe's best-preserved natural areas. It is a convivial region and as a travel destination the south of Belgium certainly measures up to the rest of the

country. The provinces of Wallonia all have particular identities: Hainaut has art, renowned UNESCO festivals and transformed industrial venues; Liege has exclusive belle epoque trappings and former monasteries; Namur has plenty of activities in and around rocky river valleys; Walloon Brabant benefits from its rustic tranquillity and its closeness to Brussels; Luxembourg has castles, small villages and wild, green nature. For more information: visit <http://www.belgium-travel.jp> With information provided by the Belgian Tourist Office Wallonia-Brussels



Royalty: King Albert II and Queen Paola sit for a family portrait. © FPS CHANCERY PRIME MINISTER-DGCE / WIM ROBBERECHTS



"Tapis de Fleurs": The Grand Place in Brussels is covered by a flower carpet from Aug. 12-15. © WWW.OPT.BE / J.P. REMY

Brussels' biennial flower carpet

As the biennial tradition requires, Brussels' Grand Place was covered with a carpet of flowers in August. This year, however, the theme of the traditional flower carpet was the Belgian presidency of the Council of the European Union, a rotating post the country is holding until the end of the year.

Visitors who went to the Grand Place via one of the seven roads leading to it were treated to a dazzling spectacle on a surface area of over 2,000 sq. meters. This magnificent flower composition demanded months of preparation. About a million begonias were needed for it, placed close to each other to create motifs and provide contrasts and tones for the design of the artwork, which has no equal anywhere in the world. The task was carried out by 120 volunteers. They created a microclimate with a constant level of humidity to ensure the freshness and color of these typically Belgian flowers. All the work was done in a period of 48 hours.

So what images did the flower carpet show this year? First, in two diagonally opposite corners, visitors saw St. Michael felling the dragon, the symbol of the city of Brussels, which was established over 1,000 years ago. In the other two corners they saw a stylized yellow and blue iris, the emblem of the Brussels Capital Region. Between the two there was a synthesis of the Gothic architecture of the buildings surrounding the carpet of flowers. In the middle the three different versions of the logo of the presidency of the Council of the European Union were portrayed - the "eu," a creation of Antoine Durieux, a young Belgian designer. Finally, 12 fountains rounded the whole thing off.

The opening ceremony took place on Aug. 12 at 8:30 p.m. This fleeting masterpiece could be admired for just three days. In keeping with tradition, visitors were able to look at the flower carpet from the balcony of the City Hall.

To add luster to the opening ceremony, six young singers, The Brussels Vocal Project, interpreted a repertoire of Belgian composers written especially for them. The project developed from the vocal ensemble lessons led by David Linx at the Royal Conservatory in Brussels. Each piece has its own universe, from jazz to contemporary, ballads and groove. Surprising harmonies and rhythms were passed in review, all constructed around one central theme, a composition by the great Belgian composer Pierre Van Dormael, "The Art of Love."

Text provided by FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation



Tradition: The Binche Carnival, with participants dressed as Gilles, is one of most ancient in Wallonia. © OPT / ALEX KOUPIRIANOFF

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Belgium king's

Strong support improves, expands activities

Takao Kusakari
PRESIDENT, JAPAN-BELGIUM SOCIETY

On the occasion of the Kingdom of Belgium's King's Day, I extend my heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the Japan-Belgium Society. It is indeed a matter for rejoicing that His Majesty King Albert II, Her Majesty Queen Paola and the Royal Family of Bel-



gium are in good health. I am pleased to note that Japan and Belgium have long enjoyed very close relations not only in the realm of economics, politics and diplomacy, but also in cultural and social spheres. It goes without saying that this excellent relationship is based on more than 80 years of good, stable exchange between Japan's Imperial Family and the Royal Family of Belgium.

This year marks the 41st anniversary of the Japan-Belgium Society since its revival

in 1969. Amid the close relationship between Japan and Belgium, the activities of the Japan-Belgium Society have steadily improved and expanded over the years, thanks to the strong support of the Belgian Embassy, Belgian organizations in Japan, local authorities and above all, the 92 corporate and 340 individual members.

The festive April inauguration of the new Embassy of Belgium in Tokyo will certainly be remembered as a milestone of our bilateral rela-

tions. I was extremely honored to have participated in the grand opening ceremony together with the Belgian prime minister, deputy prime minister, Ambassador Johan Maricou and other VIPs. This was certainly a delightful event.

I sincerely pray for the greater prosperity of the Kingdom of Belgium, which is playing an increasingly more important role in the European Union. I also pray for the everlasting bonds of friendship between Japan and Belgium.

Flanders showcases region's wide variety of art

Antwerp

The new Museum Aan de Stroom — Museum on the River — or MAS for short, is an innovative and ambitious project. It is being built on the Hanzestedenplaats, in the center of "Het Eilandje" ("Little Island") where city and port meet and will open in 2011. The building is designed as a warehouse with exhibition spaces, a cafe, a panoramic restaurant and a vertical promenade. MAS will tell the story of the city and of its inhabitants, of the river, the port and the world. The core of the offerings will be provided by the collections from the National Maritime Museum, the Folklore Museum, the collection of port-related maritime and industrial-archaeological objects and some part of the Vleeshuis Museum. The collections will include paintings, drawings, posters, ceramics, silverware, wood carvings, tapestries, jewelry, archaeological finds, utility objects, weaponry, home furnishings and ornaments, delftware and ships, dating from prehistory to the present day. Photographic and film collections are essential, and the museum also recognizes oral history as an important part of modern-day collecting and collection management.

Bruges

Bruges continues to build on its image as a dynamic city of culture in Flanders, Europe and the world, planning another large-scale cultural event: Bruges Central.

"From Van Eyck to Durer" (until Jan. 30, 2011) at Groeninge Museum is central to the event. Jan van Eyck and Albrecht Durer were two titans who lived during a key period in



Port city: Antwerp has a beautiful 17th-century market square. BELGIAN EMBASSY

Western art history between the 14th and the 16th centuries. The Groeninge Museum brings them together and for the first time examines the tremendous influence the Flemish Primitives had on their eastern neighbors in Central Europe. Apart from Van Eyck and Durer, it also looks at Campin, Van der Weyden, Van der Goes and Memling, as well as Schongauer, Lochner, Altdorfer and Holbein, and lesser-known masters from Germany, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Estonia. Besides paintings, the exhibition will comprise sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, drawings and engravings.

Ghent

"Hareng-Saur: Ensor and Contemporary Art" (until mid-February 2011) at the Museum of

Fine Arts and S.M.A.K. examines the relationship between Ensor and the work of contemporary artists. The exhibition is based on 15 works by Ensor and works by other artists from 1949, the year of Ensor's death. Besides the question of which contemporary artists have been inspired by Ensor, an associative selection is made based on the question of which important aspects of Ensor's work as a whole play a crucial role in the work of contemporary artists. Names like Pierre Alechinsky, Asger Jorn, Jean Dubuffet, Philip Guston, Jo-

seph Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Arnulf Rainer, Jannis Kounellis, Guillaume Bijl, Louise Bourgeois, Paul McCarthy, the Chapman brothers, Jonathan Meese and Javier come to the fore. Within the context of this exhibition, both museums also present a catalog in which both perspectives — contemporary art from Ensor's perspective and vice versa — are dealt with in depth.

With information provided by the Tourist Office for Flanders, Belgium



Sightseeing spots: Bruges (left), with its canals and waterways, is sometimes referred to as "The Venice of the North." In nearby Ghent (right), the Graslei in the old city center is lit up at night. © D. DE KIEVTH / TOERISME VLAANDEREN



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