

The Future is More: 500 Years of Utopia

Going to town on an ideal. Five centuries of Utopia remembered in Belgium. The Future is More: 500 Years of Utopia. THE UNIVERSITY AND CITY OF LEUVEN



ENCLOSED GARDEN:
With St Elisabeth, S Ursula and Catharine; Mechelen, c.1520–30

If you are English you may be unaware that 2016 is the quincentenary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*. In More's native London, the anniversary has passed almost unnoticed, apart from a few low-key events at Somerset House. But the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Flanders has gone to town on it, with a programme of no less than 78 *Utopia*-themed projects.

Flanders can claim to be the birthplace of *Utopia*, as More started the book while on a diplomatic mission to Antwerp in 1515 and it was published in Leuven a year later with the help of his humanist friend, Erasmus, who coined the title from the Greek words *ou* and *topos*, meaning "not-place". The book's opening has since become a topos of travel fiction: the chance meeting with a voyager from a distant land. The voyager in this case is Raphael Hythlodæus – Greek for "purveyor of nonsense" – who after sailing to the New World with Amerigo Vespucci has discovered an island with a unique system of government. More is introduced to this old sea dog after Mass at the Church of Our Lady, now Antwerp Cathedral, by the town clerk Pieter Gillis, a humanist friend of Erasmus.

They get talking, More's curiosity is pricked and the three of them repair to a turf-covered bench in Gillis' garden to pursue the conversation. At this point, any self-respecting humanist of the period will have picked up an echo of Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the dialogue takes place in a pleasant shady spot outside Athens, and twigged that beneath this sailor's yarn of a fantasy island lurks a serious philosophical debate. Given its dual nature, More's book calls for more than one exhibition, and

Leuven has organised two: “Utopia and More” at the University Library, focusing on the book, and “In Search of Utopia” at Museum Leuven, exploring its historical context (both until 17 January).

At the library, More’s original correspondence about Utopia is displayed beneath a portrait with a relic of one of his vertebrae, the gift of his descendant Mary More to the Cloister of Nazareth in Bruges where she became prioress in 1766. There are cases full of foreign editions of the best-seller More never wanted translated from the Latin – he feared uneducated readers would take it at face value – including the deluxe gold-tooled volume issued by William Morris’ Kelmscott Press in 1893, three years after Morris published his own *News from Nowhere*. And in the last room there’s a parade of literary descendants, from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Jules Verne’s *Voyages Imaginaires* to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s 1984. More did not invent the travel adventure genre: he took his cue from the tall tales told by Vespucci, whose embellished accounts of his discoveries he had read. “The Age of Exploration” is the setting for the exhibition at Museum Leuven, which weaves together the themes of discovery, humanism and Christian faith through a selection of 90 contemporary works of art. The themes come together in the common ground of the garden.

“The Utopians are very fond of their gardens,” Hythlodæus tells More, a taste they shared with ancient philosophers and Christian contemplatives. The locus amoenus where Socrates withdraws to philosophise is not so far from the hortus conclusus where the Virgin Mary retires to pray. Since the old Persian word *paridaiza* was transliterated into the Greek words *peri* and *teichos*, meaning “around” and “wall”, we have imagined paradise as enclosed. Among the show’s most fascinating exhibits are three Enclosed Gardens made by the Augustinian Hospital Sisters of Mechelen in the early sixteenth century.

Part altarpiece, part reliquary, these traditional glass-fronted boxes are crammed with reverentially wrapped relics from Jerusalem – including, in one case, the foot of the cock who crowed at St Peter – and enshrine figures of saints in beds of everlasting silk flowers. Painstakingly restored for the exhibition, they were produced by the prayerful fingers of women who rarely ventured beyond their convent walls.

In the next gallery, we meet the male explorers who dared to venture beyond the horizon and we watch *terra incognita* coming into focus as maps become more accurate and travellers’ tales less tall. In the sixteenth century, Leuven was a centre of production for state-of-the-art navigational and astronomical instruments; an astrolabe designed by the famous cartographer Gerardus Mercator is on display.

GRADUALLY, SCIENTIFIC advances rationalised the movements of the universe. In a fabulous late-fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry, an angel cranks a handle to turn an astrolabe-shaped Earth supported by Atlas – a perfect meeting of biblical and classical cosmology. By 1530, when Jan Gossaert painted Princess Dorothea of Denmark with an armillary sphere, a child could imagine holding the world in her hands. On his final voyage to the New World in 1502, Columbus thought he had found the site of the Garden of Eden. More’s island Utopia, situated somewhere in the New World – conveniently, he forgets to ask Hythlodæus its precise location – is a sort of Eden. But the English statesman was too worldly wise to believe in a return to an age of innocence, or even the possibility of a commonwealth where wealth could be held in common.

More's Utopia is an imaginative leap, not a leap of faith. At the end of the book, he expresses regret that its model of an ideal society contains features "which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realised".

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