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Walk 1 - Historical Highlights

Length: +/- 2 km

Time: 2-2½ hours
(longer if you visit the
municipal museum)

Start and finishing point:
Grote Markt

"Urbs delitiosa... Urbs celeberrima... Ubi palatia surgunt"

**"An exquisite city... A city famed far and wide...
Where palaces surge forth from the ground"**

Johannes Secundus, 16th century poet

INTRODUCTION The modern city of Mechelen is the inheritor of an illustrious and eventful history. Clues to the glories of its past can be found in almost every street, alleyway and square. Yet to the occasional visitor – or even to natives of the town itself – it might prove difficult to trace the legacy that generations of inhabitants have left on today's townscape. The aim of this walk is to open your mind to the city's past. Behind the bricks, stone and mortar you will be introduced to the emperors and peasants, statesmen and stateswomen who have helped to build Mechelen over the past millennium.

You will also discover just how general trends in European and Netherlandish history have affected the townscape. From Gothic to Renaissance, Baroque to Rococo, Neo-Classicism to Art Deco... Mechelen's centre features several glittering examples of the architectural styles of the past six centuries. You will also learn a few things that are peculiar to the town itself: the things that make Mechelen so different from its Flemish neighbours. And remember, if you ever get tired of walking, feel free to stop awhile and relax. Browse one of the city's curiosity-stuffed boutiques. Sip a refreshing local brew at one of the many cafés. Write a postcard back home. Then start right back where you left off.



THE GROTE MARKT Your journey through Mechelen's past begins on the Grote Markt (Dutch for 'Main Square'). This elegant square – today a bustling agglomeration of banks, cafés and restaurants – was in medieval times an important crossroads on the roads between Brussels, Antwerp, and other Flemish towns. The square was first mentioned as the 'Forum Machlinense' in an Alderman's Act of 1286. It grew to become an important economic centre and home to numerous inns and hosteleries ('Mechelen' probably derives from the Old Frankish 'mahl', meaning 'meeting place'). In the early 1300s, the square was enlarged when a row of houses was demolished to make way for a new Cloth Hall. Only in 1486 did the square earn its name of Grote Markt. To this day, the square is the site of a weekly market. On Saturday mornings, you will find today's traders plying their wares just as their ancestors have done for centuries. **Note: In 2002-2003, the Grote Markt is undergoing a major overhaul. An underground car park is being built, and the square relaid.**

MEET MARGARET Almost dead centre in the middle of the Grote Markt is a statue by Jozef Tuerlinckx, erected in 1849. It commemorates one of Mechelen's most famous residents: Margaret of Austria. At the bottom of her robe are a number of sculpted marguerite flowers, one of her identifying emblems. Circling the statue you will find white cobbles in the form of roman numerals. This circle is identical in size to the former iron clock dial on the Cathedral Tower, destroyed during World War I.



MARGARET OF AUSTRIA (1480-1530) was the aunt of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain. When Philip the Handsome died in 1506, he left his possessions to his son Charles, then only six years old. The task of governing the Low Countries (which covered most of modern day Belgium and Holland) – and also of supervising the education of the young Charles – fell to the woman standing in front of you, Margaret. For nine years until Charles came of age in 1515, Margaret held the reins of one of the richest territories in Europe.

Under Margaret's rule, Mechelen became capital of the Low Countries at a time when the arts, science, education and crafts were flourishing. Margaret's court attracted many of the leading artistic and intellectual personalities of the day, including Albrecht Dürer, Barend van Orley and Erasmus, and leading politicians such as Willem van Croy, Carondelet and Antoine de Lalaing. Her court played a major role in the development of Renaissance music, particularly in the area of polyphony: key composers included Josquin Desprez and Pierre de la Rue. English visitors will be interested to hear that one of the diplomats at the court was Thomas Boleyn. His stay in Mechelen from 1514 exposed his two daughters, Mary and Anne, to the Imperial children and the most cultivated court in Europe. Anne's education here, and later at the French court, imbued her with a coquettishness potent enough to arouse the passions of King Henry VIII.

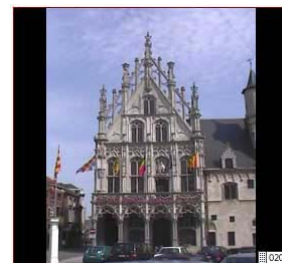
A few years later, when Charles V (now King of Spain) was busy fighting wars against the Ottomans and the French, Margaret again took on the role of governing the Spanish Netherlands, the northernmost section of the huge Hapsburg Empire. She continued to play a pro-active political role until her death in 1530, in 1529 brokering the Peace of Cambrai between France and Spain.

Margaret was herself an accomplished musician and writer of poetry. Interestingly, one of the many treatises written for her court by leading intellectuals was one on *The Superiority of the Female Sex*, by the 'sublime theologian, excellent jurisconsult, able physician and successful alchemist' Cornelius Agrippa. A woman with attitude: to this day she remains one of the only women to have a statue on a main square in Belgium.



THE STADHUIS (CITY HALL) Stretching across one side of the square behind Margaret's back is Mechelen's City Hall ('Stadhuis'). Today, the facade of the building can be divided into three sections. The more sober middle and right sections date from the first phase of the building, built from the early to mid 14th century. At that time, Mechelen was – like other Flemish towns – an important and wealthy centre for the cloth trade. It was planned to top the town hall with a belfry modelled on the Cloth Hall tower in Bruges. Sadly, the cloth trade suffered severely during the 100 Years War (which ended in 1452). Funds ran out and the tower was never built. The central part of the town hall was later used as a town prison, hence the bars in front of the first floor windows.

On the left stands the most recent part of the building. You might be surprised to learn that this flamboyant Gothic building was nearly four hundred years late! Around 1525, part of the medieval Cloth Hall was demolished by order of the town magistrates and the Emperor Charles. Rombout Keldermans II – one of the renowned family of Mechelen architects – was commissioned to design a sumptuous palace for the 'Grote Raad' (the Great Council), then the highest law court in the Low Countries. The project hit a problem: five years later, at Margaret of Austria's death, the seat of power was transferred to Brussels, radically reducing Mechelen's status and wealth. To add to the problems, in 1546 'de Zandpoort,' a gate that also served as a gunpowder magazine, was severely damaged in an explosion. Finally, a year later in 1547, when only the ground floor and part of the first floor had been completed, work on the new palace was halted. Money was partly to blame: Charles V was busy waging wars. Only in 1911 did the authorities realise Rombout Keldermans II's original plans. Better late than never! A statue of Charles V sits solemnly on the first floor façade, overlooking the Grote Markt.



The Keldermans wing of the town hall is today used for wedding ceremonies and similar civic events. It can be visited by appointment with a tour guide. Inside you will find fine neo-gothic ceilings, staircases, murals and furniture. There is a famous 16th century tapestry by Brussels artist Willem De Pannemaecker, depicting scenes from The Battle of Tunis, in a room at the rear. Charles V fought the Tunis campaign in 1535 against the famous corsair Barbarossa and the Turkish Sultan, Suleyman the Magnificent. The Mechelen tapestry is interesting in that it portrays the multiple events in the Battle, effectively providing a synopsis of the famous series of 12 tapestries on the same subject, 10 of which are now housed in the Royal Palace in Madrid.

OPSIGNOORKE In front of the town hall is a sculpture of a male figure being tossed in a blanket. The figure is 'Op-Signoorke', Mechelen's mascot. Mechelen's most finely chiselled citizen is now housed in the town museum and a replica is kept in the tourist office (immediately behind the sculpture). The doll - and its predecessors - served as a symbol of male irresponsibility, being tossed by women during municipal processions. Incidentally, similar items were common in European folklore: a famous tapestry cartoon by Goya features exactly the same subject. The doll has held a number of names, including *vuilen bras* (dirty drunkard), *sotscoep* (dunderhead) and *vuilen bruidegom* (wayward husband).



The doll's current name derives from an 18th century event, which serves to illustrate the fierce rivalry between Mechelen and nearby Antwerp. Antwerp residents were traditionally called 'signoren' (from the Spanish 'señor') because of their allegedly seignorial pretensions. In 1775 during a town pageant, locals were throwing the doll about in the customary fashion. Suddenly the crowd surged forward. A man from Antwerp, Jacobus De Leeuw, ended up directly beneath its flight path. He put up his arms to protect his face (and also his spanking new hat). The locals interpreted this act of self-defence as an attempt by the rascally 'signoor' to steal their beloved mascot. The supposed miscreant received a sound beating from the soldiers present, returning to Antwerp black and blue. He later wrote a candid letter of complaint to the town authorities, complaining, amongst others, about his arms 'which ached for six weeks', 'two wounds to my head', 'numerous cudgellings with the blunts of swords', and the poverty of his children 'who must live from the fruits of my labour'. Yet did the burghers of Mechelen award the poor Antwerpenaar damages? No. They found the story so amusing that the doll became known thereafter as 'Op-Signoorke' ('he that fell on the signoor')! There have since been numerous attempts by students of Antwerp to steal the doll. In 1949 one such dollnapping succeeded. It took a month of discussions and the brokerage of both cities' mayors to secure the mascot's safe return.

THE INNER COURTYARD There are two doorways leading to the inner courtyard of the town hall. Enter from the Grote Markt side (to the left of the tourist office). You will see a statue in the centre of the courtyard, 'Mother and Child', by Ernest Wijnants, a 20th century Mechelen sculptor. You will also see the controversial town hall extension of the 1970s on your right. Leave the court by the doorway on the far left. Above this doorway is a statue of Margaret of York, widow of Charles the Bold and step-grandmother to Margaret of Austria. As you walk into the Befferstraat (which flanks the Keldermans wing of the Town Hall) be sure not to miss the tiny sculpture of Saint Rombout, the town's patron saint, on the heavy oak doors. Turn left and walk through the colonnade back on to the Grote Markt. On the outside of the colonnade, there is a series of 36 medallions depicting the various monarchs that ruled Mechelen from the 6th century onwards.



SOME HOUSES ON THE GROTEMARKT Before crossing the square to the cathedral, it is worth stopping awhile to look at the various houses of the Grote Markt. Dating from various periods, they combine to form a wholly harmonious enclosure. Some houses give clues as to their historic function. No. 13, 'De Kat' (The Cat) was in the 17th century home to an apothecary (a sort of doctor-cum-chemist): the reliefs on the wall depict biblical scenes on the subject of cures – Jesus healing the blind and the lepers. No. 27, 'De Kraan' has been a tavern since the 16th century, and was renovated in 1781 and 1870 ('De Kraan' means 'tap/faucet'... you'll be glad to hear that they serve more than just water inside!). No. 34, 't

Verken' (The Pig) has a statue of a pig at the top of its gable, so it comes as no surprise that this was once a butcher's. The site of the present-day 'Royale' café was where the young Charles V once watched a fully-fledged hunt, staged especially for his birthday on the Grote Markt. Wild boar, stags and other game were brought from far and wide for the young emperor's amusement.

A POST OFFICE WITH A LONG HISTORY We will head now towards the Cathedral. On the right hand side as you walk to the Cathedral is the Post Office, 'Den Beyaert' (Grote Markt number 1). This is our next stop. If you were wondering earlier why the statue of Margaret faces the Cathedral – and not, as could be expected, the Town Hall behind her – this is because the former town hall used to be housed here. The name of the house means 'the carillon'. In the 13th century, this was the site of a stopover point for pilgrims as they came to visit the tomb of St. Rombout. You can see the remnants of this structure in the brick wall on the Cathedral side of the building.



In the mid-fifteenth century the building was enlarged, and in 1474 became Mechelen's town hall. In 1715, the house was renovated according to prevailing taste, and sadly there is little to see of how the late medieval structure looked. At the start of the 20th century, efforts were made to restore the building to trace the broad lines of its pre-1715 state. Happily, the renovators kept the fine Louis-XVI style entrance of 1773. Note also the four niches on the front of the building, only one of which contains a statue (of a smith with hammer and anvil). There is a wrought iron pump on the Grote Markt side, decorated with a single carrot motif and topped with an ornamental vase. As to the Post Office,

Mechelen has a reputation for a good postal system. The De Tassis family ran its famous international post coach service from the Grote Markt from 1489 onwards. Now might be a good opportunity to buy some stamps for your postcards.

MECHELEN TRIVIA FOR YOUR POSTCARDS Few cities can claim to have spawned the name of a breed of dog ('Malinut') and chicken ('Mechelen cuckoo'), a type of lace ('Mechlin'), and a word in the Russian language ('Malinovi Svon' is the Russian word for 'carillon'). Mechelen was also home to Beethoven's grandfather, is the birthplace of painter Frans Hals, and was the departure point for the first train journey in continental Europe.



ST. ROMBOUT'S CATHEDRAL No visit to Mechelen is complete without a visit to the monument that makes the city famous: St. Rombout's Cathedral. Work on the present day church started in the 13th century, on the site of a previous church dating from circa 1000. It is built according to a classic cruciform floorplan, and is a shining example of the transition from Early to Late Gothic church-building.



ST. ROMBOUT (also referred to as St. Rumbold and Rumoldus), an 8th century saint, is referred to as the son of David, King of the Scots (the 'Scoti' were the Irish). He became bishop of Dublin in 746. A Benedictine, he came to the marshland around the River Dijle in 754. His aim was to convert the locals to Christianity, and he probably founded an abbey here. There are two legends surrounding his martyrdom, which occurred in 775. The first mentions that two bricklayers saw St. Rombout pulling gold coins out of a purse. This purse was holy, and was refilled by God to enable the saint to carry out his missionary work. To obtain the purse, the two workmen murdered St. Rombout. Of course, for the two foul

villains the purse produced no gold. The second legend is that the saint was rebuking two men about the errors of their ways. They retaliated by killing the saint in the marshland around the abbey. His dead body issued a miraculous glow, which enabled the saint's companions to find it amid the marsh. What is certain is that the relics of St. Rombout were stored in a church erected nearby, and have been held in the Cathedral since its creation. The relics attracted pilgrimages from the 11th century.

THE CATHEDRAL TOWER Built between 1452 and 1520, the enormous cathedral tower dominates the city centre... indeed the entire landscape around Mechelen. On a clear day you can see the Atomium in Brussels to the South and Antwerp Cathedral to the North. The tower is 97.30 metres high. The original plans were to build the tower two thirds higher, to 167 metres including a spire. As was the case with Mechelen's Town Hall, a drying up of funds was to blame for the work being stopped. The date of the discontinuation of work coincides neatly with a decline in power of Margaret of Austria's court, and contemporary criticism of the selling of indulgences (the financial fuel behind medieval church-building). The staircase to the top has 514 steps. The tower contains two carillons, each of which comprise 49 bells. The older of the two carillons, housed 60 metres up the tower, contains 27 bells cast in Amsterdam by P. Hemony in 1674. The oldest bell, 'Jhesus', dates from 1480, the heaviest, 'Salvator', weighs a massive 8884 kilos. The newer carillon, about 75 metres up, was fitted in 1981.



A TOWER LEGEND On January 27 1687, a local man – returning from what must have been a marathon drinking session – looked up at the cathedral tower. It was a foggy winter's night. The tower was obscured by a shroud of greyish smog. Suddenly the moon appeared from the gloom. Its rays shimmered through the vents in the cathedral tower. Our hero refocused his inebriated eyes. He mistook the moon's ethereal glow for flames flickering within the tower. The low clouds were transformed in his mind into a voracious outflow of church-consuming smoke. He ran through the streets screaming 'Fire! Fire!' Soon the entire population was mobilised, buckets of water in hand ready to extinguish the lunar inferno. Of course, the fire didn't exist. Despite an attempted cover-up, word about the event spread fast. And this embarrassing episode in Mechelen's history gave the city's inhabitants their nickname: 'Maneblussers' (The Moon Dousers).



INSIDE THE CATHEDRAL Enter the Cathedral from a side door on the South Side (alongside the Post Office). On the right hand side as you enter is one of the most famous works of art in the Cathedral: Van Dyck's 'Crucifixion' of 1627, originally in the church of the Friars Minor in Mechelen. Above the entrance is a stained glass window dating from 1936 by V. Ladon depicting the 'Exaltation of Mary Our Intercessor'. Turn left as you enter the nave, and head towards the main entrance on the tower side. The towering space will give you a lasting impression of the sheer verticality of Flemish architecture in the Gothic period. The main entrance is covered by cross vaults supported by pilasters with leaf-

decorated capitals: these hold the weight of the ceiling, floors and two carillons above your head. A 19th century neo-Gothic rood loft contains the organ, a marvel of mid-20th century organ construction containing no less than 6606 pipes. Be sure to look at the model at the side of the entrance: this shows the original plans for the tower. It would have been 70 metres higher, with a slender octagonal superstructure bristling with gothic decoration, reminiscent of that of Antwerp Cathedral. Had it been completed, it would have been the tallest building in the world at the time. The present tower looks rather stunted in comparison.

Look now towards the altar. The 13th-14th century nave is 28m high, and is divided from its side aisles by two parallel rows of gothic arches. Each arch is divided from the next by a pillar with a 17th century sculpture of one of the Twelve Apostles or Four Evangelists. The high altar is the work of Mechelen's most famous sculptor and student of Rubens, Lucas Fayd'herbe. It is topped by a twice life-size sculpture of St. Rombout and also houses the saint's relics, behind a grill. Mid-way down the nave is a flamboyant oak pulpit that ripples with decoration. This depicts the conversion of St. Norbert – who according to legend was knocked off his horse (similar to the Biblical conversion of Paul). The pulpit was originally made for the Norbertine monastery of Leliëndaal in Mechelen's 'Bruul', to a design by Michiel Van der Voort de Oude. Take care to study the exotic zoological and botanical details. The pulpit was transferred to the Cathedral by Jan Frans Van Geel in 1810.



We'll now make a tour of the side chapels. The first on the left-hand side is the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, with a 'Circumcision of Christ' of 1589 by Mechelen artist Michiel Coxie the Elder, and a communion rail in white marble by Artus Quellin the Younger (also taken from Leliëndaal). Further along is the chapel of Our Lady of the Miracle, containing a painting locally known as 'the black madonna' (for obvious reasons), and a polychromed sculpture named 'Christ on the cold stone' by Nikolaas Van der Veken. Next to this stands the burial chapel of Cardinal Mercier.



CARDINAL MERCIER (†1926) is famous for his tacit resistance to German occupation during World War I. His pastoral letter 'Patriotism and Endurance' decried German excesses during the years 1914-1918, and advised Belgians on how to treat the invader. Such was his fame that when visiting the United States after the war, he was welcomed with a tickertape parade. His 'Appeal to all Christian peoples' led to the Malines Conversations (1921-26), an attempt at reconciling the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches: a plaque in the chapel commemorates these conversations. A much-discussed figure, Mercier is also

remembered for his attitude to the Dutch language spoken in Flanders, which he viewed with contempt.

We arrive at the North transept, which features a stained glass window depicting the 'Proclamation of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception' by Frans Pluys, and an 'Adoration of the Shepherds' by Jan Erasmus Quellin. Note also a painting of the interior of the Cathedral in 1755. Artworks lost since this time include Rubens paintings, requisitioned by Napoleonic authorities in the early 19th century (now on display in Dijon and Toulouse, France) and a medieval reliquary. Above the North entrance to the

ambulatory (left of the altar) is a 'Mater Dolorosa' by Fayd'herbe. Walk beneath this into the ambulatory. The ambulatory has nine chapels, containing artworks and the tombs of distinguished townfolk, including Igramus van Achelen, president of the Mechelen-based Grand Council (†1604). The 'Resurrection of Christ' is depicted in a triptych after Jan Snellinck; beyond these is 'The Martyrdom of St. George' by Michiel Coxie. Behind the choir is a recently restored series of 25 wood panels by different artists representing scenes from the life of St. Rombout. The last chapel contains a series of hatchments with the coats-of-arms of the Knights of the Golden Fleece: these were hung over the seats of the knights when they took part in a famous chapter meeting in the Cathedral in 1491. On the wall of the sacristy is a triptych of the 'Martyrdom of St. Sebastian' by Michiel Coxie.

Leave the ambulatory near where we entered the Cathedral. Admire the 16th century copper candlesticks (1595) and choir lectern (1591) designed by J. Cauthals II. Now imagine visiting the Cathedral during a mass, the aisles resonating with the divine harmonies of the choir and organ, the incense burning at the altar, the priest evangelising from the pulpit, the candlelight reflecting off the sculptures and paintings and altar and vestments, the congregation rapt in transcendent thoughts. Multimedia is not a modern invention. Time to leave the Cathedral.



THE CATHEDRAL YARD Turn right as you leave the Cathedral, and follow its walls around the front of the tower to reach the other side. You arrive on the St. Rombout's Cathedral Yard (Sint-Romboutskerkhof) on the North side of the Cathedral, to the left of the main entrance. In the middle



of the yard stands the War Memorial, a testament to the considerable suffering endured by the city during the two World Wars. At the corner of the yard, on the corner of the Schoolstraat (School Street) that circles around the back of the Cathedral, is the shuttered 'Koraalhuis' (Choirmaster's House), built in the 15th century for the choir school of the Cathedral (that dwarfs it). This is the best spot to view the many gargoyles that leap out from the ambulatory of the Cathedral. On the corner with the Sint-Katelijnestraat (St. Catherine's Street, no. 5) is a house that bears the names 'Concordia' and 'Priesterkelder' (the Priest's

Cellar). Built in 1482, and fully restored in 1925-6, this was the wine cellar that housed not the communion wine, but the 'tax free' wine allowance of Mechelen's priesthood. Priests then enjoyed the sort of tax breaks now reserved for diplomats and European Commissioners. Look at the Tudor-style door and cellar entrance; inside is a beautiful cross-vaulted cellar. A stone on the façade reads 'Our Lady of Concord - 1926'.

THE WOLLEMARKT AND ARCHBISHOP'S PALACE Cross the square to the North East and walk to the Wollemarkt (Wool Market) – stop off at one of the cafés on the right-hand side if you fancy a break from all the history. The Grooten Wolsack hotel is on the site of the former music conservatory: its arched doorway is made of Belgian blue stone. We arrive in front of an impressive white neo-classical building: the Archbishop's Palace.



Formerly part of the diocese of Cambrai, Mechelen was made an archbishopric in 1559 during a reshuffle in the church in the Low Countries. The first archbishop was Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, the French adviser of Philip II of Spain. It remains home to the archbishop of Belgium today (at the time of writing, Cardinal Daneels). In 1596, Archbishop Hovius bought the house 'Hof van Lillo' and the former 'Refuge of Affligem' that stood on this spot to serve as an archbishop's palace. In 1717, Archbishop Thomas Philippus D'Alsace commissioned an Italian architect to design a new, purpose-built palace in the neo-classical style.



In 1794, French Revolutionaries confiscated the palace and its library, and sold that building 'for the national good' – a brewery was installed. What remained of the palace and its grounds was repurchased in 1818 by the Antwerp Province and restored by Cardinal de Méan; work began on the present structure largely under the authority of Cardinal Sterckx. The present building has a long white neo-classical façade with very little decoration, punctuated by a central ensemble featuring a pediment, an arched main door and Ionic pilasters.

The palace – which unfortunately cannot be visited except on rare open monument days – features a U-shaped floorplan, which encloses a majestic garden with pavilion. The interior contains a central hallway supported by four Doric columns, with a grand staircase that leads to the chapel. The chapel itself features a barrel vault decorated with flowers and stucco. The West

wing contains a salon with an Empire-style marble chimney, the throne room and the private apartments of the archbishop.

THE GROEN WATERKE AND GOSWIN DE STASSARTSTRAAT

Leaving behind the palace, we reach the 'Groen Waterke' – a rare, and beautiful, exposed part of the canal network that once ran everywhere in Mechelen. In the 16th century, the northern part of Mechelen's city centre comprised 13 islands connected by 43 bridges. The canals provided a practical way to ship goods between local businesses such as breweries, wool mills and butchers. Today, the Groen Waterke is one of the few indicators of how Renaissance Mechelen's canals might have looked: the duckweed that covers its surface gives the pond its name, which translates as the 'Little Green Pond'.



The building flanking the canal on the right is part of the recently restored Abbey of Sint-Truiden. This elegant Renaissance building, with a rocket-shaped turret poking above stepped gables, is now a conference centre for the Archbishopric. We now enter the Goswin der Stassartstraat, named after the baron, man of letters and Belgian statesman. The bridge that crosses the Groen Waterke is the 'Ankerbrug' (Anchor Bridge) after the house (formerly at nos. 2 and 4) of the medieval architect Hendrik Meys uten Ankere, builder of the St. Gummarus church in Lier and the Schepenhuis in Mechelen.



The house at numbers 6 to 8 was formerly called the 'Hotel Douglas dict Scott', after a Scottish family that bought the house in 1643 and inhabited it until the early 19th century. The house served as a wool dyeing works. Number 6 has a Neo-Gothic façade in brick and stone that fronts an older building behind; its U-shaped floorplan is completed on the Southern side by a curtain wall. Other features of note include a gothic-arched window and door, and a turret on the corner. Further

along on the left is the recently restored former convent of the Poor Clares, rebuilt in 1845 when a large chapel was added. Note the heavily-hinged oak door, and sculptures of a 'Madonna and Child' and 'Sacred Heart' on the facade. Further along on the right but sadly not on this walk is the former Braquenié Royal Tapestry Factory, recently restored and now a solicitor's office.

Retrace your steps a little. Roughly opposite the Groen Waterke is the door to a small alley called the 'Klapgat' (the chatterbox's corner). Walk along this. There is a sculpture group at the end of the alley depicting 'Jesus on the Mount of Olives.' Until the late 19th century parishioners deposited alms here for the poor. The alley earned its nickname because it proved a convenient spot for exchanging the latest parish gossip ('klappen' means 'to chatter' in local dialect). At the end of the alley, turn left below the castle-like tower of the Church of St. John. Look at the arrow slits in the tower and the robust stones used to build the tower: on the outside, the church has a military feel.

THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN The current Church of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist dates from the 15th century, when the church evolved into its current High Gothic form. The present structure, built in white sandstone, features a square tower on the West side, a basilica with a nave, two side aisles and transept, and a similarly tripartite apse. There is a small spire on the roof above the altar. The building replaced a 13th century chapel of St. John the Baptist, which was later that century made a parish church. The church has over the centuries suffered at the hands of, amongst others, Protestant iconoclasts, and was damaged when de Zandpoort, the city powder magazine, exploded in 1546.



Entering the church (in the summer, the church is open most mornings and afternoons), we see that the nave is divided from the side-aisles by a simple arcade of Gothic arches that reveal parallel baroque barrel vaults. Where the transept crosses the nave is an arch with the year 1722 written on it, the year when the vault gained its stucco ceiling and decoration. A stucco-plastered gothic-arched vault elegantly straddles the choir and the transept.



Amongst the many Baroque treasures of the church is the famous 'Adoration of the Magi' (1619) by Rubens. The artist returned to this subject numerous times in the course of his career (versions can be seen in Cambridge, The Wallace Collection, The Prado, Lyon and Antwerp). However, he is recorded as having been particularly proud of the St. Janskerk version - alongside his Antwerp Deposition, the painting effectively served as a calling card for his ability as a painter of religious subjects. A triptych, the painting imbues the altar with a full-bodied

grace: the central panel depicts the 'Adoration' itself. The figure of the Virgin was modelled on Rubens' young first wife Isabella Brandt. The left panel depicts the 'Baptism of Christ', backed by a 'Beheading of John the Baptist' on the rear. The right panel features 'St. John on Patmos,' with a 'Martyrdom of St. John' on the rear. It is worth noting the 18th century altarpiece that surrounds it, crafted by Pieter Valckx to a design by Theodoor Verhaegen.

A triptych by Gaspar de Crayer is comprised of a central panel depicting 'The veil of St. Veronica,' a left panel depicting 'St. Norbert choosing his successor' and a right panel featuring 'The Vision of St. Norbert.' Further on can be seen a number of other paintings by Lucas II Franchois the Younger, Willem Herreyns and other members of the Flemish School. The pulpit, rood loft and churchwarden's stools are also designed by Verhaegen. The confessionals are by Nicolaas Van der Veken. Other treasures of the church include a series of sculptures: 'A Virgin with Child' also by Van der Veken, the disciples 'St. Peter and St. Paul' by Jacob Voorspoel (17th c.), two 'kneeling slaves' in polychromed wood (17 c.), 'John the Evangelist and John the Baptist' by F. Wynants.

THE BUSLEYDEN PALACE Leave the church and turn right. Enter the St. Jansstraat and walk alongside the North of the church. Through an iron gate on your left, look at the gardens of the 'Hof van Busleyden' (Busleyden Palace). This compact brick and sandstone palace now houses the main branch of the city museum (entrance is via the Merodestraat), and is one of Mechelen's keystone Renaissance buildings.



The palace was built in the sixteenth century for Hiëronymus van Busleyden, one of the principal humanists in the Low Countries (his name is written in cobbles in the courtyard). Busleyden was the patron of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, a close friend of Erasmus; and a co-founder of the Collegium Trilingue in Leuven. The Collegium was created to further studies of the Bible in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Busleyden's commitment to scholarship and Italianate tastes are reflected in the *loggia* that skirts the garden, and in the much-worn frescos within several rooms of the palace.



The palace has had a turbulent history. From 1620 to 1925 the palace became the Mons Pietas, a sort of civic-level pawn shop. The interbellum years saw a top-to-bottom refit of the palace, and the most important city art treasures were brought to the house for display. Today, the museum forms part of a 'museum axis' together with the Schepenhuis (medieval and Renaissance sculpture) and Brusselpoort (medieval archaeology). Exhibits of furniture and sculptures by Baroque sculptor Fayd'herbe represent the highlights of the collection, though sadly there are precious few of the masterpieces produced at Margaret of Austria's court.

THE CARILLON SCHOOL On the corner of the Merodestraat stands an 18th century house known as 'Het Schipke' (The Ship), on the site of a house that in 1647 was recorded as 'De Barge' (The Barge). Since 1947 this has housed the world-renowned school of carillon playing, the *Koninklijke Beiaardschool Jef Denyn* (*Jef Denyn Royal Carillon School*), founded in 1922 by the famous carillon player of the same name. A carillon used for practising by the students - with 49 bells - was installed in the tower of the Hof van Busleyden in 1953. An extended programme of recitals is organised throughout the year.



A CARILLON is an instrument that comprises a series of bells, each of which plays a different note. A single player operates a keyboard by striking it with clenched fists: these keys are attached to hammers that strike the bells. It is thus an instrument that requires significant physical ardour to play. Bells were traditionally associated with religious places from early times – for example Celtic saints, including in all probability St. Rombout himself, used musical hand bells to draw attention to their presence. In Flanders, the construction of church and cloth hall towers in the late Middle Ages, coupled with technological advances in metalwork, led to a flowering of bell music in the region. The carillon was developed as a method of playing melodies in these church towers. Mechelen is particularly renowned for its carillons, and hosts an internationally acclaimed competition for the world's leading players. Indeed, when Russia's Peter the Great visited the city, his interest in the instruments led to their introduction to St. Petersburg. When French writer Victor Hugo stayed in Mechelen in 1837, he scratched with the diamond of his ring the following words in his hotel window 'J'aime le carillon dans tes cités antiques.'

TOWARDS THE VEEEMARKT The two houses opposite the carillon school (St. Jansstraat nos. 3 and 5) date from 1923. The name of the house on the corner 'In de Vier Winden' (The Four Winds) might seem strange, given that there are five huffing-and-puffing faces on the façade. We cross the Merodestraat and enter a street called Biest. The Biest formed part of the Veemarkt (Cattle Market) until the 19th century, when the calced Carmelite order built a monastery here (now destroyed). A number of interesting houses remain, including 'Den Slypsteen' (Grinding Stone, no. 4), Het Moleken (Mill, no. 6) and 'Herentals' (no. 7). We arrive at the Veemarkt.



On the Veemarkt, to our left we see the handsome façade of the former 'Hof van Prant' (Prant Mansion), now the St. Rombout's College. The house was built in the early 17th century for Cosmas van Prant, an alderman of Mechelen and baron of Blaesveld. It was bought by Cardinal Sterckx in 1863 to house the archbishop's college. Of the original building, only the town house remains, featuring baroque and renaissance elements. The front, tripartite, façade has decorative volutes, restored in modern sandstone. The late renaissance arched doorway is in Belgian limestone and decorated with raised diamonds. In the middle is the coat of arms of Cosmas van Prant and his wife Margaretha van Horne. In the small park in front of the building is the old town fountain by F. Langhemans, depicting Neptune. Neptune is flanked by dolphins, and stands atop a high pedestal. The statue earned the nickname 'Vadderik' in local dialect (meaning 'lazy slob'): to replace the Roman mythical reference, local legend has it that this character died because he was too indolent to drink from his jug or eat the 'loaves' that form his pedestal. A warning to all couch potatoes out there!

THE CHURCH OF ST. PETER AND PAUL The baroque church of St. Peter and Paul dominates the Veemarkt. Formerly called the St. Francis Xavier church, it stands opposite the site of the former Gothic parish church on St. Peter's Hill (the street on the other side). The architect of this Jesuit church was Antoon Losson, who built it with funds inherited from his mother Maria Losson. The cornerstone was laid in 1670, though the gable at the top was only completed in 1709. Above the main entrance is a niche containing a statue of St. Peter. Dead centre on the façade are the letters IHS (Jesus), contained in a sunburst decoration. The groundplan imitates an early Christian basilica, with a central nave and two side aisles and a semicircular apse.



Entering the church via the arched doorway, one cannot but be impressed by the height of the church, the delicately coloured interior, ornate stucco decoration and wood sculpture. Note the painted Corinthian pilasters dividing the side aisles from the nave, topped by statues of the apostles on supports. The decoration of the church is flamboyantly baroque: an 18th century marble altar, side altars by Lucas Fayd'herbe, a magnificent oak pulpit depicting the 'Four Continents' by H.F. Verbruggen. The fourteen oak confessionals lining the sides of the church are the real showstoppers: almost kinetic in their execution, allegorical figures emerge from the walls with a choreographed grace

worthy of the Bolshoi (the work of master sculptor Nicolaas Van der Veken). Finally, be sure to study the rich collection of baroque paintings on the walls.

MARGARET OF YORK'S PALACE Next to the church stands the present City Theatre, once the palace of Margaret of York. In 1477, the city bought the 'Hof van Kamerijk' (Cambrai Mansion) that was the residence of Bishop John of Burgundy and gave it as a gift to Margaret of York. After the town council had bought the enlarged property from Margaret in 1487, the palace was given to Maximilian of Austria and his son Philip the Handsome. It would later become known as 'Keizershof' (the Emperor's Palace). In 1614 the Archdukes Albrecht and Isabella gave the property to the Jesuits to use as a convent and college. They had the former reception hall adapted and converted into a theatre. The city council restored the property (or what was left of it) in 1893. The interior of the theatre is decorated with elegant neo-rococo stuccowork with scallop shell and rocaille motifs.



MARGARET OF AUSTRIA'S PALACE Across the street at no. 20 is the former Palace of Margaret of Austria, also called the 'Hof van Savoye' (Savoy Mansion). This now houses the Law Courts. In 1501 Margaret married Philibert II of Savoy, who died in 1504. She lived in his castle in Pont d'Ain near Bourg-en-Bresse until the end of 1506. Her father suggested that, after the death of her brother

Philip the Handsome, she leave this country retreat to live in Mechelen and to supervise the education of Philip's children, Eleanor, Ysabeau, Maria and Charles (the future Charles V).

In 1507 she became governess of the Netherlands and held the reins of power until Charles came of age. In the first few years, she resided in the palace of Margaret of York. Soon she ordered Rombout Keldermans II to design a new palace for her court. The façade now in front of you was built in the second phase of construction from 1517 to 1530, when the Renaissance gatehouse and wing were built. The corner wing between the Korte Maagdenstraat and Voochtstraat dates back to the first phase of building, and conforms to the Late Gothic Style.



Margaret was conscious about her own comfort. In a letter to the city council, she requested that the fish market be moved further away from the palace. It was not, so perhaps the court was not so fragrant as she would have liked. In 1546 the building was badly damaged by the explosion of the Zandpoort: Mary of Hungary then sold the complex to the town. From 1561 onward, Cardinal de Granvelle resided at the palace. From 1616 until 1695 the Great Council of the Netherlands sat here. In the 19th century, the building underwent several restorations. On the Keizerstraat and Korte Maagdenstraat the corner building was replaced by a neo-renaissance building, designed to blend in with the rest of the palace.



We will now enter the courtyard of the palace. On the left-hand side we see the porter's lodge, on the right a door that leads to the offices of the Law Courts. The building is not accessible to tourists, but we will describe the interior anyway. On the first floor is the throne room and Granvelle's chambers, with an original cast iron door and neo-Gothic wood panelling. The library has a stucco ceiling with paintings dated 1687, and the coat of arms of the city. Leave the courtyard via the gate that leads to the Voochtstraat and turn right.

We pass the Korte Maagdenstraat on the right hand side: this street was known in the 18th century as 'Onder de Gaelderij' (Under the Gallery), because a covered footbridge led from the first floor of Margaret's palace to the St. Peter's parish church on the other side of the street. The remains of this footbridge can be seen on house no. 2. Follow the Gerechstraat, at the end of which is a statue of the Virgin on the left, to a street called de Leegheid. There are interesting houses at nos. 22 and 24, the former a 16th-17th century house, the latter an Empire style corniced façade. At the end of the street, turn right into the Rik Woutersstraat, named after a famous Mechelen Fauvist sculptor and painter, born in 1882.



A FEW FACADES TO FINISH Continue and turn left down the Befferstraat in the direction of the Grote Markt. As you return to the starting point of you walk, be sure not to miss the interesting houses in the street. The houses date from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, and give a pleasant overview of many of the architectural styles we have already seen. As is typical in Flemish towns, each house has a name, which is typically symbolised on the façade, for example the four buckets on the baroque façade of the 'Vier Emmers' at no. 26, or the Sea Knight and Horseshoe at nos. 33-35.

Once back on the Grote Markt, we have reached the end of our tour. I hope you have found it interesting, and informative. Time to rest your legs (and mind) and relax in one of the many cafés in front of you.

LUNCH TIPS: If your budget stretches to a true gastronomic experience, try a lunch menu at the Michelin-starred *D'Hoogh* on the Grote Markt (you'll get a great view of the Stadhuis façade). If you are looking for a simple good feed, I recommend the following cafés: savoury pancakes ('flensjes') at *De Graspoort* (a 5 minute walk down the Begijnenstraat); foccaccias at *Den Akker* on the Vismarkt; salads in the summer at *De Cirque* (also on the Vismarkt, 5 minutes away); steaks at *t'Nieuwwerk* (tucked away in a small square behind the Cathedral ambulatory). The cafés on the Grote Markt also offer good, hearty tourist fare - most will serve a decent beef stew (stoofvlees) with chips and a Gouden Carolus, and, of course, mussels when in season.