

Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts

(originally published ALLEA Biennial Yearbook 2004; updated October 2009)

History

Maria Theresia, the Empress of Austria founded the first Academy in Belgium in 1772. The 'Imperial and Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters of Brussels' was the appropriate instrument for the Austrian authorities to organise and control intellectual life in the Southern Low Countries. This institution did not survive the French occupation of the Belgian regions and was dissolved. William I, King of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands since 1815, reinstated the academy in 1816 although its place in the establishment was hardly recognised before Belgium's independence in 1830. In 1845, it acquired the title Royal Academy of Science, Humanities and Arts of Belgium and originally consisted of three classes: science, humanities, arts and recently expanded with a fourth class, that of the technical sciences.

From its independence, Belgium was officially bilingual (Dutch/French), although French was preponderant in grammar school and higher education. The Academy was therefore primarily a French-speaking institution. Gradually, Dutch became more important and in Flanders – the northern part of Belgium – Dutch replaced French in higher education from 1930. The logical outcome was the creation in 1938, confirmed in 1971, of the Dutch-speaking 'Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België' next to the French-speaking 'Académie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique'. From then on, the Academy's function was to encourage science and the arts in the Flemish part of the country while the 'Académie royale' continued to fulfil the same function in the French-speaking part of the country.

The early years of the new academy were difficult since its activities were slowed down by the outbreak of World War II. In 1945, however, a new start could be made towards achieving its aim at the service of the Flemish community in Belgium.

Organisation

Members

The Academy has **four classes**: natural science, humanities and social sciences, arts and technical sciences. Each class has a maximum of **forty full members**. They are the backbone of the Academy and dispose of full authority to make decisions and to govern the Academy.

The Academy also numbers **honorary members** who retain their academic prerogatives but are not allowed to hold administrative office. Each class elects its new members whose appointments must be confirmed by the Sovereign. Candidates for memberships must be proposed by at least three members. Each class elects up to fifty **foreign members** who cannot hold administrative office. All four classes meet monthly except in July and August.

Committees and Commissions

The Academy hosts a large number of learned committees and commissions, some of which are discussed below. Some were created by joint action of several academies, while others were instituted by the Academy alone.

The Classes of Natural Science of the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking academies have formed **National Committees**, which are active in the various fields of pure and applied science covered by member unions of the International Council for Science (ICSU). These committees represent Belgium in these international unions.

Nine **Scientific Committees** have responsibility for different research projects, such as general linguistics, economic history, reconstruction of the national accounts of Belgium from 1795 until 1953, history of religion, humanism in the Low Countries, classical studies, maritime history, history of law, sources of the history of science, sources of art in the Low Countries.

The **Commission for Belgian Diplomatic Documents** was established in 1988 at the request of the Minister for Foreign Relations, jointly by the classes of the humanities of the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgian Academies. It is concerned with the publication of Belgian diplomatic documents during the 1941-1960 period. Four volumes have been published since 1988 and six others are in preparation.

The **Royal Commission for Toponymy and Dialectology**, founded in 1926, is the advisory organ for the government on new place names. It has a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking section, each with fifteen members.

The **Royal Commission for History**, established in 1834, has sixteen members (eight Dutch-speaking and eight French-speaking). It works autonomously under the patronage of the French- and Dutch-speaking Belgian academies. Its task is to find, collate, analyse and publish sources for the study of Belgian history.

Activities

The Academy is an autonomous, independent and multidisciplinary learned society for the practice and promotion of science and culture. H.M. the King is patron of the institution. At the request of the legislative or the executive power or on its own initiative, the Academy advises on matters of social importance. The Academy contributes to the dissemination of science and culture of the Flemish Community on a national and international level. It is a focus for scholars desirous of scientific co-operation and exchange, it awards prizes, it promotes the Flemish Knowledge and Culture Forum and it favours co-operation with Belgian and foreign sister academies.

VIGES

2007 the Academy has created the Flemish Institute for History (VIGES). Its key task is the edition of the National Biographic Dictionary (NBW). Together with the Institute of Dutch History VIGES is compiling a repertory of personalities who between 1815 and 1830, the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, have been significant to both the Netherlands and Flanders.

CAWET

The **Academy Committee for Science and Technology** (CAWET) was instituted in 1988. It has recently been dissolved, in order to experience its rebirth as the fourth class of technical sciences.

Centre for European Culture

The **Centre for European Culture (CEC)** occupies an important place within the Academy. It was founded in 1993 under the auspices of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium, which was convinced that the European unifying process is too focused on financial and economic aspects and therefore tends to overlook Europe's cultural contribution to the world. The **Centre for European Culture** is meant to act as a scientific centre for the organisation of projects, colloquia and lectures and the publication of documents, which illustrate Europe's cultural affluence and influence. It is therefore logical that the **CEC**, considering its specific mission, be composed of members from all three classes of the Academy. When culture is considered as the sum of developments and products of the human mind, the projects put forward by the **CEC** have to deal not only with arts, but also with science, history, religion, philosophy, economics, politics and social developments. European culture reaches beyond European territorial borders. Its philosophical thinking, its religion and its history are linked to the Middle East. Apart from Christianity, Jewish and Moorish influences have impregnated its culture. On the other

hand, Europe has scattered its cultural realisations to the four winds of heaven. This gives the **CEC** the opportunity of tapping an inexhaustible source of inspiration and of putting forward subjects of high scientific or current value. Preference is given to a thematic and interdisciplinary approach to these issues.

Spring Conferences

A special place within the activities of the Academy is occupied by the Spring Conferences (Lentecyclus), a series of symposia and lectures dealing with issues of considerable scientific, social or cultural impact. The Academy calls on eminent experts in the field to give their views on the matter. When possible a front-rank politician or a minister is invited to give an opinion. The symposia conclusions often provide useful guidelines for decision-makers.

Flemish Academic Centre for Science and the Arts

The Flemish Academic Centre for Science and the Arts – VLAC – is a sabbatical centre meant to stimulate, support and publicize scientific and artistic research by providing unique research conditions in an ideal setting. It was established in 1999 after the example of the many successful institutes for advanced study as the IAS in Princeton, New Jersey USA, and the NIAS in Wassenaar, The Netherlands.

Between ten and twenty fellowships are awarded annually to top-ranking scholars from home and abroad allowing them in-depth research in their field of art or science, far away from their day-to-day academic duties and within an agreed span of time. In addition to a monthly honorarium and a travel allowance, all fellows get an apartment in downtown Brussels and a fully equipped office in the Academy's Throne Building at their disposal. Flemish universities are entitled to an allowance enabling them to replace the professor who is on sabbatical in the VLAC. PhD students also receive an appropriate payment.

Flemish researchers and artists may apply for a project on a particular issue that requires a joint approach of several, maximum ten scholars. Young researchers too can be involved in the cluster.

On May 3rd 2006 the Academy's board of management has appointed professor Marc De Mey as director of the VLAC. He is a member of the Humanities Class and was professor of cognitive science at the philosophy department of Gent University until he was given emeritus status in 2005

Contact Fora

Each year the Academy coordinates and finances tens of scientific meetings in the fields of science, humanities, fine arts and technical sciences. They aim at bringing together specialists of different branches of science in study groups. Any Flemish researcher appointed to an institution of higher education or research may propose for the organisation of a contact forum. The applying organization has the premises of the Academy freely at its disposal. In addition it can rely on a financial incentive of 2500 € together with publication facilities of the papers.

Applications can be submitted thrice a year by the first of January, April and September. For further inquiries – such as brochures and forms – you may consult the Academy's website (www.kvab.be) or contact Mrs Inez Dua (inez.dua@kvab.be)

Prizes

The Academy awards annual prizes as a mean of highlighting major advances in science and the arts. They are financed both from Academy funds and from private foundations.

The **Gold Medal of the Academy** is bestowed annually on a Flemish personality who, by his or her activities in science and culture or by his or her social and political merits, has promoted Flanders internationally.

The triennial **Prize of the Flemish Minister of Science** is awarded to a Fleming, group or organisation that has made a major contribution to the popularisation of science.

A series of other endowed prizes encourages the work of young and promising researchers in various fields of science and the humanities.

Publications

The Academy publishes a number of series covering the work of research projects carried out under its aegis. These include publications issuing from long term projects, such as:

- Sources of the arts in the Netherlands (*Fontes Historiae Artis Neerlandicae*)
- *Juris Scripta Historica* (including the bibliography of law history in Belgium)
- The letters of Justus Lipsius (*Iusti Lipsi Epistolae*)
- The maritime history of Belgium (*Collectanea Maritima*)
- The national accounts since 1795 (*Studies in Belgian Economic History*)
- Religious history (*Collectanae Biblica et Religiosa Antiqua*)
- Papyrus archives (*Collectanea Hellenistica*)

There are also publications resulting from meetings and colloquia and 'contact fora' organised by the Academy.

Finally, there is the Yearbook showing a survey of the activities of the previous year. The catalogue of these publications can be found on the website www.kvab.be.

International Cooperation

The Academy organises meetings, symposia and colloquia, provides opportunities for publication to young scholars and promotes international relations with the help of foreign academies. To achieve this goal, the Academy has passed bilateral agreements with several foreign Academies, including those of Hungary, Italy, Kosowo, Macedonia, Austria, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, for the exchange of scholars on the principle of returning visits (whereby visits are balanced in both directions). All researchers appointed to a Flemish university may submit proposals to the Academy.

Collaborations with organisations such as ALLEA (All European Academies), the European Academies Advisory Council (EASAC), the Interacademy Panel (IAP), the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Academic Union (UIA) also contribute to the establishment of fruitful international relations. The Academy also carries out long-term publication projects.

In Flanders, the Academy is on close terms with its Dutch speaking sister academies, such as the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium and the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature. In Belgium, it also maintains close relations with its French-speaking sister academies as well with the bilingual Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences.