



Bruges at Christmas

And the ancient cities of Flanders

20–27 December 2024 (MK 600)

8 days • £4,010

Lecturer: Dr Sophie Oosterwijk

Immersion in the paintings of the Flemish Golden Age in the beautiful, unspoilt cities in which they were created.

The main centres of Flemish art: Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels.

Led by Dr Sophie Oosterwijk, expert on the Middle Ages, Flemish and Dutch art.

Based for all seven nights in the 5-star Hotel Dukes' Palace in Bruges.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the cities of Flanders (an area now divided between France, Belgium and the Netherlands) were the most prosperous and progressive in northern Europe. Though ruled successively by two of the most illustrious of European dynasties — the Valois Dukes of Burgundy and the House of Habsburg — these great cities were virtually independent states. Each was able to sustain a cultural life which, taken together, comprise one of the most brilliant episodes in the history of art.

Now, with their enchanting dark brick buildings, cobbled streets and network of canals, their great squares formed by splendid guild houses and town halls, their soaring Gothic churches and richly filled museums, they are among the most beautiful of the smaller cities of Europe. Centuries of stagnation and decline subsequent to their period of greatness has resulted in the preservation of much of their ancient fabric.

We have chosen Bruges as the base for this tour. With its extensive unspoilt streetscape, and as the scene of the leading Early Netherlandish school of painting, it is the loveliest city of them all. In December, in the absence of the high-season crowds, Bruges regains some of the affecting tranquillity immortalised in the art of its heyday.

The Golden Age of Flemish painting was inaugurated at the beginning of the fifteenth century by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck, whose consummate skill with the art of oil painting resulted in pictures which have never been surpassed for their jewel-like brilliance and breathtaking naturalism. Among their successors were Hans Memling and Gerard David, while an alternative tradition with greater emotional power was



Bruges, watercolour by W.L. Bruckman, publ. 1900

pursued by Rogier van der Weyden and Hugo van der Goes. Hieronymus Bosch was an individualist who specialized in hell scenes full of imaginative demons.

The sixteenth century saw Mannerist displays of virtuoso skill and spiritual tension, though the outstanding painter of the century was another individualist, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. A magnificent culmination was reached in the seventeenth century with Peter Paul Rubens, the greatest painter of the Baroque age, consummate master of bravura technique, vitality, passion and tenderness.

Itinerary

Day 1: Lille, Bruges. Leave by Eurostar from London St Pancras at c. 11.00am for Lille, whose Palais des Beaux-Arts is an impressively large collection dedicated to fine arts, modern art, and antiquities. The building, completed in the late 1800s, is typical of the monumental architecture of the late 19th century. Continue to Bruges where all seven nights are spent.

Day 2: Bruges. A walk passes the market square, soaring civic belfry, exquisite Gothic town hall, guild houses and palaces of some of the most prosperous merchants of mediaeval Europe. The medieval Hospital of St John is

now a museum devoted to Hans Memling and contains many of his best paintings. In the afternoon visit the The Church of Our Lady, which houses the sumptuous tombs of two Valois dukes and Michelangelo's marble Madonna and Child. Continue to the Gruuthusemuseum, the 15th-century palace of the lords containing a diverse collection of artefacts from the 15th to 19th centuries, including tapestries, stained glass, sculpture and paintings.

Day 3: Antwerp. This great port on the Scheldt has an abundance of historic buildings in the old centre and possesses museums and churches of the highest interest. Visit the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, with its impressive collection of works by Jan van Eyck, Roger van der Weyden and Hans Memling. In the afternoon, visit the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe Kathedraal, the vast gothic cathedral where three of Rubens's most powerful paintings are found. Visit also the house and studio Rubens built for himself and the Mayer van der Bergh Museum, which has a small but outstanding collection including works by Bruegel.

Day 4: Bruges. In the morning visit the Groeninge Museum with a wonderful collection of paintings by Van Eyck and other Bruges painters. Continue on to the Sint

Bruges at Christmas
continued

Salvator Cathedral containing a triptych by Dirk Bouts. The afternoon is free.

Day 5: Brussels. Having risen to prominence later than the other cities and thriving in the 19th and 20th centuries, Brussels nevertheless retains splendid palaces and guildhouses around the Grand Place. The Fine Arts Museum is one of the best in Europe, and presents the most comprehensive of all collections of Netherlandish painting as well as international works.

Day 6, Christmas Day: Bruges, Lissewege, Damme. The morning is free, opportunity to attend a church service or for independent exploration. In the afternoon visit the Basilica of the Holy Blood, followed by two lovely villages in the evocative polder countryside around Bruges. Lissewege has a fine church with a tall tower and a huge Gothic barn while Damme, strategically sited on the canal between Bruges and the sea, has a delightful late-medieval town hall.

Day 7: Ghent. Walk around the highly attractive historic centre passing churches, canals, magnificent guild halls and fairytale castle. The altarpiece in the cathedral of St. Bavo, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* by the Van Eyck brothers, is one of the outstanding achievements of western art, and the first and greatest masterpiece of the Netherlandish school (some panels are currently undergoing restoration). The Museum of Fine Arts has a representative collection of Flemish paintings to the present day, including *Christ Carrying the Cross* formerly attributed to Bosch and the *Mystic Lamb* panels being restored.

Day 8: Bruges, Brussels. Return to Brussels by coach and take the Eurostar from Brussels, arriving at London St Pancras c. 4.00pm.

Lecturer

Dr Sophie Oosterwijk. Researcher and lecturer with degrees in Art History, Mediaeval Studies and English Literature. She is an expert on the Middle Ages, Netherlandish and Dutch art, with a special interest in portraiture, death and commemoration. She has taught at the universities of Leicester, Manchester and St Andrews, where she is an Honorary Research Fellow. She regularly lectures at Cambridge and the Royal Academy, and is Vice President of the Church Monuments Society. Her many publications include edited volumes on 14th century sculpture and on the late-medieval Dance of Death.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £ 4,010 or £3,730 without rail travel by Eurostar. **Single occupancy:** £4,660 or £4,380 without rail travel by Eurostar.

Included: Rail travel (standard premier) on Eurostar; London to Lille, Brussels to London; private coach travel for the excursions; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts and five dinners with wine, water and coffee; light meals and drinks on the Eurostar; all admissions; all tips; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel Dukes Palace (hoteldukespalace.com): 5-star hotel in the historic centre. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? There is quite a lot of standing in museums and walking on this tour, often on cobbled or roughly paved streets. It should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. You will need to be able to carry (wheel) your own luggage on and off the train and within stations. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 53 miles.

Weather: crisp, cold weather is to be expected, with rain or even snow not out of the question.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.