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# THE UNUSUAL OBJECTS No. 4

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## “Honour the Eternal with your possessions”: Dressed wax figures – objects of private devotion

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The practice of dressing devotional images arose in France in the 18th century. Certain items in particular, called *cires habillées* or dressed wax images and figures, were extremely popular at the time. Making them was complex, requiring the help of a large number of specialised craftspeople, such as a wax worker, wig maker, and tailor. The figures in these frames – sometimes forming miniature theatrical scenes – could be the patron saints of a place, trade, or family, or even biblical characters. These dressed wax creations, whether precious objects, embellished with gilding and trims, or pious images for private devotion, invited themselves into the bourgeois and aristocratic homes of the Enlightenment.



### From the origins of dressed wax images...

Such works were produced by nuns in Germany, where they were called “cloister work”, well before the 18th century. Dressed statuettes were also made in our region starting in the 16th century, albeit in a style different from those of the municipal museums of Anderlecht. They can be seen in the figures in the enclosed gardens of Mechelen. Some of the “Mechelen dolls” displayed in the Hof van Busleyden Museum were designed to be dressed. The Infant Jesus with his hand raised in blessing is one such example.

The practice of dressed wax figures was then taken up by the brothers Nicolas and François Guillot, who launched their production in the city of Nancy, in Meurthe-et-Moselle Department, France. Nicolas Guillot, born in 1701, began his career selling “dressed prints”,<sup>1</sup> in which each item of clothing was printed on fabrics of various colours, cut out, and glued onto a paper image. These illustrations, which were produced as of the 17th century, are kept in the National Library of France, amongst other places. A good example is a *Christ bearing his Cross* published by Nicolas de Mathonière in 1600. Nicolas Guillot then went on to make dressed wax figures similar to those in the Municipal Museums of Anderlecht’s collections. They made his reputation. His younger brother, François Guillot, who was also described as a “merchant of wax works”, subsequently joined his brother’s business.

1. Also known as over-dressed prints, dressed plates, *découpés* prints, adorned prints, Spickelbilder, Stoffklebebilder, and gusseted pictures – the terminology in English is variable (Ref.: [graphicarts.princeton.edu/2020/09/22/over-dressed-prints](http://graphicarts.princeton.edu/2020/09/22/over-dressed-prints)).

### Suggested reading

Claire APTEL, Brigitte HOCHART & Jaques CHOUX, *Les cires habillées nancéiennes: tableaux de cire et d'étoffes*, Nancy: Éditions du Musée Lorrain, 1989, 72 pages.

Pascale CUGY, Georgina LETOURMY-BORDIER & Vanessa SELBACH, "Les 'estampes habillées': acteurs, pratiques et publics en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles", *Perspective* 1, 2016, pp. 163-170.

Hannah ITERBEKE and Lieve WATTEEUW (eds.), *Enclosed Gardens of Mechelen. Late Medieval Paradise Gardens Revealed*, Amsterdam, 2018.

Georgina LETOURMY & José DE LOS LLANOS, *Le siècle d'or de l'éventail: du Roi-Soleil à Marie-Antoinette*, Dijon: Éditions Faton, 2013.

Anne MALHERBE, "La Vierge au voile", *Labyrinthe* 4, 1999, pp. 59-72.

[Alice Dolan, An adorned print: Print culture, female leisure and the dissemination of fashion in France and England, around 1660-1779, RCA/V&A MA in History of Design (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-03/an-adorned-print-print-culture,-female-leisure-and-the-dissemination-of-fashion-in-france-and-england,-c.-1660-1779/>)]

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The dressed wax fashion quickly spread and these images were put on new backings. So, fans displaying figures onto which clothing was sewn came on the market. One such fan, called *Joies de la campagne* (Country Pleasures), was displayed during an exhibition in the Cognacq-Jay Museum in Paris in 2013. The figures are fully clothed in coloured silks highlighted with gouache.

### ... to their international production

Dressed wax images met with such success that the Guillot brothers began making them for export; some were even sold as “do-it-yourself” kits. They were disseminated by door-to-door salesmen and itinerant merchants. They were intended for buyers who had a certain level of instruction as well as the financial means necessary to order such refined objects; they thus were not within country folk’s reach. Some of their output made it as far as Belgium and can be admired in our museums, notably in Saint Loup’s Church in Namur.

Whilst the Guillot brothers were the best known in the trade, they were not the only manufacturers of dressed wax figures and images. Other workshops, as well as some convents, also made such items. The stylistic differences between the French pieces and those in Anderlecht’s municipal holdings – discernable in particular in the dolls’ faces and the quality of their manufacture – are indicative of the latter’s probable local origins. What is more, the Municipal Museums of Anderlecht have about a dozen similar works in their reserves that appear to support this hypothesis. These objects might date back to the first half of the 20th century, as the materials used to make them would seem to indicate, and certain fresher-looking elements may have been touched up or replaced in the interim.

### The characteristics of dressed wax figures

As wax is a fragile material, these sculptures are always protected by a glass frame. The dolls’ heads and hands are made of hard wax and their bodies are stuffed with rags.

The first object portrays the Christ Child wearing a sunburst crown and standing above a sign that reads “My child, give me your heart”. This sentence refers to Proverbs 23:26 in the Bible, in which a father addresses his son and exhorts him to keep to the straight and narrow of the Lord’s ways. The inside of the box is lined with a piece of fabric and the wax doll is sewn to the bottom to stay in place. The small size of the object indicates that it could be moved about.

The other two each show a Madonna and Child. Both figures are crowned and wear long lace-adorned veils that go down to the hems of their gowns and envelop the infant Christ, seeming to protect him from the outside world. This iconographic motif, which arose in the 16th century, unites the two figures in the scene and evokes Mary’s immaculate conception of Jesus. What is more, one of the dolls holds a bouquet of white lilies, the traditional symbol of the Mother of God’s purity and virginity. The gowns of both figures of the Virgin figures are decorated with flowers and the infants in their arms are clothed in similar fashion.

These dolls were not dressed out of modesty; they were designed to be dressed from the very start. This procedure did not reflect any need to drape the statue in order to affirm its sacred nature, unlike other creations that were covered in the wake of the Council of Trent, which began in 1545 and ended in 1563. (To counter the Protestant Reform, which made great inroads in the population, the cardinals and prelates tried to restore the morals of the Roman Catholic Church by, amongst other things, covering the naked genitals of statutes and those depicted in paintings.) Nor were the wax figures’ clothes intended to illustrate the clothing

fashions of the times, a great many examples of which subsist on magazine covers of the period. These objects were devotional; they presented pious images dressed for aesthetic purposes. They are unique when it comes to their design and originality and might provide some clues as to Anderlecht society at the time.

### 1 Dressed wax figure under glass representing Jesus as a child

Cloth-lined wooden box sealed with a glass pane and containing a wax doll wearing a gold-hemmed, pink cloth gown and standing over the inscription “My child, give me your heart”. Garland decorated with gilt plant motifs. Figurine flanked by two gilt leaves.

Belgium, ca. 1800-1850

Wood, glass, cardboard, paper, cloth, wax

17,7 x 11,8 x 3,7 cm

inv. n° BEG 5644

### 2 Dressed wax figures under glass representing the Madonna and Child

Cloth-lined wooden box sealed with a pane of glass and containing a wax doll wearing a flowered white robe and carrying a second smaller doll and a bouquet of flowers. Gilt belt, lace-lined veil, and lace hem and collar accenting the gown. Garland of blue flowers surrounds the figures. Frame edged with a guimp braid trim.

Belgium, ca. 1850-1900

Wood, glass, cardboard, paper, cloth, wax

24,5 x 19 x 7,8 cm

inv. n° BEG 5986

### 3 Dressed wax figures under glass representing the Madonna and Child

Cloth-lined wooden box sealed with a pane of glass and containing a wax doll wearing a gold-coloured gown with a strip of embroidered flowers and carrying a second smaller doll. Lace-lined veil. A series of three leaves on the right side of the frame. Frame edged with a guimp braid trim.

Belgium, ca. 1800-1850

Wood, glass, cardboard, paper, cloth, wax

28 x 20 x 7,5 cm

inv. n° BEG 5984