

# VISITORS GUIDE

TO THE  
BEGUINAGE MUSEUM  
TURNHOUT



Welcome in the Beguinage Museum of Turnhout.

This beguinage was founded around the year 1300 AD, and is a World Heritage site of UNESCO. At the end of the 17th century some 360 beguines lived here. This unique museum in its authentic surrounding opened in 1953. At that time, three beguines still lived in the building. The last beguine died in 2002.

Come and have a look at the normal daily, yet special, life of the beguines...

This guide leads the visitor through all chambers in the museum. Special attention is paid to eight objects, one space (the kitchen) and the garden. To go to the rear room please go past the reception desk.



---

## CHAMBER 1 BEGGA CHAMBER

Here you can watch an introfilm about the beguinage (9 minutes, English version). The attendant will start this for you.

---

## CHAMBER 2 MERMANS CHAMBER



### 1 *PROFESSION CROWN*

Beguines are independent, religiously inspired women, who devote their life to God and live together in beguine houses. Beguines had to provide for their own upkeep. They are unmarried women, or widows, both poor and also wealthy, having property. After a probationary period of one year as a novice, they made a vow of chastity and obedience, but not of poverty, in a solemn rite. At this profession ceremony, they wore a decorative profession crown and a white scarf as sign of the "bride of Christ". Beguines could leave the beguine house, for example, if they wished to marry.

To continue, please go back past the reception desk and through the entrance area.

---

## CHAMBER 3 & 4



### 2 *SCULLERY (SMALL KITCHEN) & KITCHEN*

This authentic room, the "kitchen", reflects the daily life of the beguine: furniture, a small charcoal stove to bake the Communion hosts and handwork. Notice to the right, the ovens and the irons for baking the hosts, the oil lamp, the 18th century chimney with tiles, the extinguisher pot to extinguish the last of the glowing coal and the shopping basket on the chair. Lace was produced in the beguinage from early times. You can also look through the oldest window glass of Turnhout.

Plates were stored in the kitchen cabinet. It was not unusual for a wealthy beguine to have a maid-servant living with her in her own house. The less well-off lived together in a house called a convent.

Under the table you can see foot stoves that were placed under the wide skirt of the beguines to keep them warm.

---

## CHAMBER 5 INFIRMARY



### 3 *painting depicting SAINT BEGGA / (first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century)*

Heaping praise on your family is not anything new. Noble dynasties in the Middle Ages and 16<sup>th</sup> century were very proud of saints in the family which greatly increased their standing in society. Saint Begga is presented as an ancestor of Charlemagne and it is suggested that Begga of Andenne (or 'of Brabant', 7<sup>th</sup> century) was the founder of the beguine movement. Begga comes from a prominent family. When her adoptive son kills her husband and she has to flee from him, a deer shows her a ford which allows her to escape. Grateful and as a widow, she undertakes a pilgrimage to Rome and decides to found a monastery and seven churches (in the background on the right hand side of the painting). Begga is portrayed in beguine clothing with a crown and coat of arms on the table. This coat of arms suggests wrongly that she was Duchess of Brabant.

---

## CHAMBER 6 CHAPEL

Canopy with altar (ca. 1700)

## CHAMBER 7 VALUABLES ROOM



### *MODEL OF THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE - 1684*

This model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is one of the most interesting objects in the collection. It is like a box of building blocks which can be assembled like Lego. It is however, an expensive building box with precious materials like cedar wood, ivory and mother-of-pearl being used. It was actually the Franciscan monks who specialised in producing these beautiful and valuable miniatures. Most unusual is that the corresponding pilgrim's letter of authentication has been preserved. Today, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem remains an important Christian pilgrimage destination, even though it is administered by six differing Christian denominations.



### **5** *RELIQUARIES / 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century*

These two small purses have a unique way of being fastened closed and is evidence of their age. These small purses made of silk and velvet are among the most valuable objects in the museum. The need for relics of saints arose because believers were afraid to address God directly. These relics are often kept in the most splendid containers. During the restoration of these purses the original biological dyes have been identified: rare winged insects from distant lands.



### **6** *SALT CELLAR / 1581*

In earlier times, salt wasn't always easily available and was thus a costly commodity. A person's status can be determined by his place at the table and their distance from the salt cellar. Salt was a luxury, and this emphasises why not a simple salt cellar is shown, but a masterpiece of the silversmith's trade: a cylindrical salt cellar standing on three eagles with spread wings. The outside is decorated with a relief with hills in the background showing the biblical scene of the sacrifice of Abraham, the dramatic story of a father asked to sacrifice his own son. This salt cellar is the only item made by the Antwerp silversmith Geeraert De Rasier known to exist in the south of the Netherlands.

## CHAMBER 8 COUNCIL CHAMBER

This is probably the most beautiful room in the museum. It was used by the beguines to receive visitors and to hold feasts. It was also here that the beguines were reprimanded by the Prioress for wrongdoings, great or small.

## CHAMBER 9 LADY DE BOER CHAMBER



### *PROCESSIONAL HYMN / ca. 1550*

Another main feature in this collection is this 16th century 'processional hymn'. This music score contains Gregorian chants sung by beguines during processions on Sunday and on saints' feast days. The processional hymn is a unique object as it reflects the local rituals and was actively used by the beguines of Turnhout for almost four centuries. The manuscript is bound in leather and contains handwritten music scores on parchment. It appears to be made specifically for the beguinage in Turnhout because of a miniature beside the psalm for the feast of the Holy Cross: the official name of the beguinage's church is the Holy Cross church. The long-standing September procession is the only remaining example of this old tradition.

## CHAMBER 10 PRIORRESS CHAMBER



### 8 PANEGYRIC / 1763

Starting at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century panegyrics or hymns of praise were written for beguine feasts. This poem was written in honour of Maria Anna Gerardi and refers to her profession: the most important moment of a beguine's life. The text also refers to the mystical union typical of the beguines: "Cometh bride in my garden". This panegyric is made with great care and richly decorated. At the top, Saint Begga is seen, portrayed with crown and book. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Begga was made patron saint of the beguines. These panegyrics and other joyful songs often describe the good points of the beguine being honoured. Panegyrics were also written for beguine's and parish priest's jubilees.



### 9 SAINT CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA / 16<sup>th</sup> century

She is known as a very scholarly lady who lived in around 300 A.D. Aged 15, she has learned Plato's texts by heart. She converts to Christianity and makes a vow of chastity. Emperor Maxentius falls in love with her, but Catharine refuse his proposals. When the emperor wants her seen crushed to death under a spiked wheel it is struck by lightning and broken. Other attempts to murder her fail. Finally, she is beheaded. To demonstrate her spiritual victory over the emperor, she is portrayed with Maxentius at her feet. Because Catherine sees herself as the mystic bride of Christ, she becomes the first patron saint of the beguines. She also is the patron saint of the beguinage of Turnhout.

## THE BEGUINAGE GARDEN



### 10 HERB GARDEN (at museum entrance) AND INNER GARDEN

Like many convents, the beguines have both a herb and flower garden. The oldest known convent garden in Europe is found in Sankt Gallen (Switzerland). The herbs were used for cooking or preparation of medicines. In the garden flowers have symbolic significance: white refers to purity while strongly scented flowers repel evil. Fruit trees, with their branches reaching to the sky, are a sign of the presence of God. The fountain symbolises water, source of all life and of faith, and as the spiritual source of the beguine's life. The evergreen boxwood is a symbol of tenacity.

In the inner garden some historical elements deserve attention:

1. the tombstone in the wall to the left (beguine Elisabeth Oyen, who died in 1480) is the oldest known tombstone of the city
2. two pillars, originally part of the fence of the Sint-Pieterskerk on the Markt in Turnhout
3. the arch in the rear wall of the house of Pastor Mermans (former entrance porch for horse and cart)
4. a white cross on the peak of the roof of the rear building (protection against evil: devils, witches, and natural phenomena like thunder and lightning).

The herbal garden and inner garden are enclosed. In a religious context such enclosure is a mystic garden, a place for meditation, for aspiring to higher things, where beguines are closer to their "heavenly bridegroom".