



EN / Catalog in large print

Exhibition :

Small history of a big idea



mundaneum

The Mundaneum and the Henri La Fontaine Foundation

The Mundaneum

The Mundaneum is currently an archive centre and exhibition space for the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. During the first half of the 20th century, it gave rise to international institutions dedicated to knowledge and universal fraternity, and became a universal documentation centre. After being held at several locations in Brussels, including the Palais du Cinquantenaire, its collections are now held in Mons. The documentary heritage contained within its walls consists of the founders' personal archives, books, small documents, posters, postcards, glass plates, newspapers, photographs and archives essentially relating to pacifism, feminism and anarchism.

The Henri La Fontaine Foundation

In 2008, the Mundaneum initiated a working group that would go on to establish the Henri La Fontaine Foundation in 2011, presided by Jean-Pol Baras and vice-presided by Pierre Galand. The foundation works to disseminate and put into practice the values promoted by Henri La Fontaine in favour of universal knowledge, international law and democracy, such as humanism, social justice, pacifism, feminism and free enquiry. Every two years, it also awards the “Henri La Fontaine International Prize for Humanism”, which was set up to reward living people or active private institutions or bodies that make a significant contribution to the defence and perpetuation of these values.

Who is Paul Otlet ?

Paul Otlet (1868-1944) is a prominent figure in the industrial history of Brussels. His father, Édouard Otlet, made a fortune from trams, and to ensure the continued prosperity of the family business, he studied law. However, it was in bibliography where his interests mainly resided. It was a passion marked by his interests in encyclopædias and positivism, and it would eventually drive him to transform this discipline into a science. In 1895, he created the International Office of Bibliography (Office international de bibliographie), with Henri La Fontaine (1854-1943), a socialist senator and future Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Numerous initiatives and collections resulted from their fruitful collaboration: the Universal Decimal Classification, as a method of

classification, the Universal Bibliographic Repertory, the Belgian International Photography Institute, the Universal Repertory of Documentation, the International Newspaper Museum, the Brussels Book Museum and the Collective Library of Learned Societies (Bibliothèque collective des sociétés savantes). Between 1895 and 1910, these institutions gave rise to a vast enterprise of intellectual cooperation through the Union of International Associations. Gradually, Paul Otlet came to devise a theory of documentation – a subject to which he devoted a masterful work published in 1934, the *Traité de documentation*, the book about books. In it, he studies all of the forms that information may take, while alluding to certain future advances, such as books printed on microfilm or even the avant-garde theory of information networks. Greatly interested in architecture and urban

development, he designed the seaside resort of Westende (1905) and he also envisioned a world city (1910-1944), a project for a moral and intellectual capital for humanity, famously designed by Le Corbusier.

Who is Henri La Fontaine ?

Although he was one of Belgium's Nobel Prize winners, the name of Henri La Fontaine has somewhat fallen into obscurity. At the time of his Nobel Peace Prize award in 1913, however, he was a fundamental figure in the pacifist movement. The prize was a reward for his activities at the International Peace Bureau (IPB), of which he had been president since 1907, as well as his major contribution to various associations working to promote peace. Henri La Fontaine was born in Brussels in 1854, to a wealthy family. From childhood, he was influenced by his parents' progressive ideas. Whilst studying law at the Free University of Brussels, he developed a passion for international law, which he saw as the best way to ensure peace in the world. After graduating in 1877, he began a

career as a lawyer in parallel to numerous other activities centred around peace, equality and democracy. Over the course of his career, he was able to promote these ideas within the Belgian Senate, where he held a seat between 1895 and 1935; the League of Nations, where he represented Belgium in 1920 and 1921; and the International Institute of Bibliography, or the Mundaneum, which he founded along with Paul Otlet (1868-1944) in 1895, as well as in Masonic lodges. In these circles, Henri La Fontaine vigorously defended arbitration between nations, the creation of a League of Nations, the emancipation of women, the expansion of democracy and access to knowledge for all, because he believed that peace could only be achieved in a democratic, egalitarian society.

Henri La Fontaine and the Mundaneum

Henri La Fontaine's first forays into bibliography, which date back to 1889 and 1891, were closely connected to two of his passions: mountaineering and peace. Henri La Fontaine thought that different peoples' ignorance of each other was an obstacle to the establishment of sustainable peace. This idea underpinned the projects he developed with Paul Otlet in the spheres of bibliography, documentation and access to information. In 1895, the two men created the International Institute of Bibliography (IIB), whose activities and developments gave rise to the Mundaneum. The IIB's first mission was to establish the Universal Bibliographic Repertory, which was intended to bring together the bibliographical details of every publication in the world.

Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine later expanded their scope to cover not just books, but also other information sources. Within the IIB, they created specialised sections that worked on a particular medium (the press, posters, and so on) and collected countless documents. This expansion also resulted in the creation of the Union of International Associations (UIA) in 1907 and the International Museum in 1910. These institutions were brought together at the Palais du Cinquantenaire in Brussels under the name of the “Palais Mondial” or “Mundaneum”, which was destined to be an international centre dedicated to sharing knowledge and tools for the transmission of knowledge. In 1934, the Belgian government decided to close the Palais Mondial. Work continued at other locations, but the collections remained inaccessible until they were transferred to a building in Leopold Park in 1941. After

moving several times within Brussels, the Mundaneum's collections were moved to Mons, where they have been housed since 1993.

The documentation organization

Extract from a letter from Henri La Fontaine to Charles Lefébure, 22 October 1909.

“In the first stage, it is important to know what has been published and to be able to say where a given text can be found. The documentary stage consists of the collection of the texts themselves, either through a central governmental library or a collective library operated by the learned societies, or through the creation of dossiers. Finally, the objective of the encyclopaedic stage is to extract the useful and essential elements from the mass of documents, eliminating repetitions and reiterations: this equates to the formation of the paragraphs and chapters of the great unique, universal book.”

The Universal Bibliographic Repertory

The first mission of the International Institute of Bibliography (IIB) consisted in developing the Universal Bibliographic Repertory (UBR). Designed as a vast bibliographic database, the UBR was intended to bring together details of all the books published in the world since the invention of printing, in all fields. Its general structure made it possible to answer two questions: “Which works have been written by a given author?” and “What has been written on a given subject?”. The repertory grew rapidly, helped greatly by international cooperation. Around 18 million entries were written between 1895 and 1934, making the system like a “paper Google” and a precursor to our current search engines. This classification work was complemented by a

standardisation process. The norms proposed by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine regarding format, classification and physical storage were adopted in libraries all around the world. Since 2013, the UBR has been listed on UNESCO's "Memory of the World" Register.

A universal classification system

In order to classify the Universal Bibliographic Repertory, Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine developed the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) on the basis of the decimal classification system developed by American librarian Melvil Dewey (1851-1931). This system was based on dividing knowledge into ten classes, numbered from 0 to 9. Each class is divided into ten groups, each group contains 10 divisions and each division has 10 subdivisions. The use of numbers rather than keywords for the thematic classification of publications made it possible to overcome two obstacles: the choice of an appropriate word, on one hand, and the choice of language, as numbers are universal. The UDC is not a fixed system. The numbers can be subdivided and combined

thanks to a very elaborate system of punctuation making it possible to define a subject very precisely. This classification system would undergo numerous developments in connection with technological and scientific advances, and would be adopted by a great many libraries all around the world.

The Mundaneum

In 1895, the International Office of Bibliography was expanded, and in the aftermath of the First World War it became an international intellectual centre, the World Palace (Palais Mondial), later called the Mundaneum. Initially focusing on developments in bibliography, the aim of the organisation was to exchange and share information relating to books. Over the four decades of its existence, the association continually promoted intellectual cooperation at an international scale and promoted peace through knowledge. From 1905 onwards, the documentary approach took the form of a new breed of encyclopædia. Ideas are not solely conveyed through books – they grow through image support and more efficient modes of production such as the popular

press. An international museum was then built in the Parc du Cinquantaire in Brussels, giving prominence to a visual language through the Encyclopædia Universalis Mundaneum. The creation of the Union of International Associations in 1907 saw a more political turning point in its activities. “Internationalism” corresponded to the democratic development of international relations. After the creation of the League of Nations, the Mundaneum became a passionate defender of international intellectual cooperation that would have a decisive effect in shaping the future of international relations.

The Mundaneum (video)

The Mundaneum is a breathtaking thing. It gave us enormous pleasure as storytellers. To discover real lives, often more wonderful than we could imagine.

The Mundaneum is in fact the utopia of two Belgians who, at the end of the last century, imagined a way of classifying the world and cataloguing all the world's culture. There is something quite magnificent about this project. They accumulated over decades and tried to classify a whole series of elements with directories in order to structure this knowledge. It is now Mons that will receive this remarkable collection and Benoit and I will tell this story.

I think that above all we are at the heart of the vertigo of the Mundaneum. In particular because of this extraordinary accumulation of millions of records that has been catalogued for many decades. Because of this man, Paul Otlet, who, right up to the end, will continue to make these files and the emotion of this ageing man who feels that he has missed his appointment with his history and with history itself, and who continues to write tirelessly by hand, in the end, not even typing.

There's something exciting about this, because a few decades before the computer would have been there, this accumulation has an extraordinary meaning.

All these files were a revelation for us. We said to ourselves, this is the most extraordinary scenography there is, and moreover, out of respect for Paul Otlet, this is going to be the strong element of the Mundaneum. This is going to be the basis of the scenography and this will give us the opportunity to stage these cards but also to tell the story and to show, because we're going to try to put everything in, to show the excessiveness of the project.

The first thing was to create a globe as a strong sign, a globe which will be the thing you see when you enter here. It will be right below us. This globe will be a little bit like this evolution of the world. These two maps will in fact move and change and will show that the vision that Paul Otlet had in 1880-1890 is of course totally different from the world that he

discovered, that he saw and that he knew in 1930-1940. And so it's also this very rapid transformation that will cause the project to lose some of its relevance.

We have all the elements that are there to make us understand the internet. This is really the genesis. The Americans have recognised that if there was one element at the origin of the Internet, it was the Mundaneum.

The ceiling that is going to be sealed off here will give us the opportunity for a scenography where we will grasp all the computer networks, all the communication networks and of course the internet and we will put the archaism of the Otlet files in parallel with the future and the communication of the future with the internet.

Souvenirs from the archives / François Schuiten (video)

François Schuiten is a comic book artist and set designer. Together with the scriptwriter Benoît Peeters, he has been responsible for many projects, including the fantasy comic book series "Les Cités obscures" and the original scenography of the Mundaneum.

A few years ago, Jean-François Fuëg, the first director of the Mundaneum, came to look for me and he had in his hands 'The Archivist'. For him, the work of Paul Otlet and this book had an unavoidable link.

It's true that I was very disturbed by it. It was an album that was a bit out of the ordinary, out of format, very particular with large images, which obviously spoke of this notion of archives which was something that had

fascinated Benoit and me for a long time. And so, when we started to explore the subject, there was an opportunity to extend this book a little further, to go further into the exploration of archiving.

With Otlet, it was a fascinating, vertiginous dimension, and he embodied it. It still remains today as something extremely disturbing because he archived everything. And besides, the complexity of managing a work like that also lies in its diversity. There were many singular things.

To be honest, the Mundaneum is deeply rooted in the history of Brussels. So it was very strange to put it in Mons. At the same time, what was very strong was that Mons was ready to receive these archives, whereas Brussels had obviously let them rot.

And then, it was that the location was remarkable because there was an opportunity to find a match between the proposed location for the Mundaneum and the archives themselves. There was a very strong place.

The job of a scenographer is to try to find a way to make the container and the content appropriate, to make it obvious, to give the feeling that the Mundaneum would have been created there, would have been conceived with this place.

That's what we were aiming for, to find out how the place could accommodate, integrate and embody all the dimensions of the Mundaneum.

For me, Otlet is a rather extraordinary case of someone who missed the boat by a few years. We are not far from saying that he died and that a few years later the computer would allow us to envisage the world we know.

He had an extraordinary premonition at the time about the future, about how we were going to deal with culture, how this culture was going to feed our world, how we were going to communicate.

It was a premonition that was indeed embryonic, that was imperfect, but he had an extraordinary intuition. He missed out on history.

So it's very strange to reveal this story because we have to do real educational work to show to what extent it is the genesis of the world we know. There is always a difficulty, and this is what I see the

Mundaneum with today, it is that it must always do an enormous amount of pedagogical work to try to show how visionary it was, the need to continue to be visionary, even if, like Otlet, it means making mistakes, even if it means not being in phase with the times, even if it means going astray, and we know that there were times when he didn't know how to revive his project.

That's what is extremely touching and that's what makes the character for me continue to haunt me, because he is very romantic, because he is extraordinarily endearing in his convictions and also in his mistakes. That's what makes him so interesting for me today is to talk about utopia like that because today we tend to summarise utopia, to talk

about utopias that have succeeded, to talk about geniuses who had utopias that became reality.

For Otlet, it's more complicated. This complexity is really interesting to take into account. It is really a real lesson, except that perhaps the wealth of mistakes and failures is at the same time the right premonitions.

A scenography is never finished. You have to reinvent it all the time, revisit it in the light of the visitors' gaze, in the light of the history, of the context, and that's what makes this job so exciting, it's that you can never be totally satisfied or stop. A scenography is a tool that has to move constantly.

Souvenirs from the archives / Benoit Peeters (video)

Benoît Peeters is a scriptwriter who, together with François Schuiten, designed the original scenography of the Mundaneum, which was unveiled in June 1998. He has also dedicated several projects to the founder of the Mundaneum, Paul Otlet, including the re-edition of his "Traité de Documentation" in 2015.

I don't remember when I first heard about the Mundaneum and Otlet. I remember seeing signs at the Rogier metro station that said Mundaneum.

When I went to the end of a corridor the door was closed and there was nothing there for a long time. But the name spoke to me... And when François and I made the album "L'Archiviste", which came out in 1987, we were already fascinated by these worlds of paper, accumulation and

the secrecy of documents. And so, when we started to document ourselves on Paul Otlet and to hear about him, and to talk about him around us, trying to get information from the left and the right, people thought we had invented this character.

When we first started talking about Paul Otlet and the Mundaneum and talking about this idea of a universal archive, of a generalized filing system, a lot of people thought that Otlet was a fictional character. Too good to be true. We really tried to find out more. We had made a small TV subject, and then we had followed the tribulations of these archives that had met a terrible fate. It was a story that touched us a lot.

When we learned that the city of Mons, thanks to Elio Di Rupo, had decided to save these archives, we were immediately very enthusiastic and we tried to see what was there. Obviously, when François and I were

asked to think about a scenography, a staging of the history of the Mundaneum, we were immediately interested.

First of all, the location on rue de Nimy is magnificent, very attractive, there was something of the colour of the period. And above all, it was an opportunity to tell this story. Today, Otlet is known all over the world and particularly in the English-speaking world. But at the time of the scenography with François, Otlet was forgotten and this story was largely unknown and people knew two or three details about him.

It almost felt like a collector of old newspapers. We had to discover many aspects of this history ourselves, the incredible adventure of these files, of this desire to gather information on publications from all times and all countries, and then the desolation that eventually occurred. The tribulations of these archives. The Mundaneum had become the

wandering Jew of world documentation. All this history with its good and sad sides.

First we had to understand it. And then we had to stage it, relying mainly on these files, which we were very happy to have been able to recover, showing that each card was an opening onto a world, a treasure, and also showing how the dream of bibliography and that of internationalism and pacifism were linked. How they integrated the most unexpected dimensions, on the card, on caricature, on anarchy, on feminism, of which Léonie La Fontaine was a pioneer. All the incursions into the old world, 1900 society, music, Wagner's society, all the richness of this universe, I think it is very important, beyond the documentation gathered, because that is what gives the human side to this adventure.

It gives a utopian dimension that we don't always see anymore and that we tried to restore. And what is touching, what is extraordinary is the magnificent coincidence between the installation of the Mundaneum in Mons and the rediscovery of Otlet. What happened was that the progress of computers, the progress of the Internet, the progress of Google, all these things meant that Otlet's intuitions, which seemed old-fashioned, outdated, utopian in the wrong sense of the word, suddenly became prophetic, premonitory and contemporary.

And we saw, of course, the greatness of Otlet's name, the growth of his reputation over the years, as Otlet became more useful. That is to say, at the beginning, he was a man who collected old papers, documents of all kinds, who had invented the card index, who had invented a filing method, OK, but that still belonged to an old world, and suddenly in this history of the Internet that was being written, Otlet's name appeared

more and more often and he appeared to be that of a true visionary who did not have the technical means to realise his intuitions.

The irony of history is to think that Otlet, who was a pioneer in the 19th century, was carried by everyone and considered as an obsolete character in the 20th century, and that it is in the 21st century that he will express all his modernity and all the strength of his intuitions.

Souvenirs from the archives / Françoise Levie (video)

Françoise Levie is a film director and writer. She dedicates to Paul Otlet, founder of the Mundaneum, the only documentary film made to date on his life and a biography both entitled "The man who wanted to classify the world".

My name is Françoise Levie. I am a documentary filmmaker and I had the great fortune to make a film about Paul Otlet in 2001.

My first memory is a smell of paper. An extremely strong smell of paper, which takes you by the throat. With your eyes closed, you knew we were in this place.

At the time, the researcher and I had hired a student to help us with the research.

There were a hundred banana boxes that had never been opened. They came straight from Leopold Park and contained all of Otlet's privacy. What he called "the Otletaneum". We started to open these boxes but everything was mixed up.

There was a tie knitted by his girlfriend, a hair bow from his children, postcards, extremely complicated texts, a postcard from Le Corbusier... Everything was very mixed up.

At one point, I said to myself "we'll never make it! In these boxes, we had the whole life of a man who died at the age of 76. We had to order and arrange these boxes and tell a story.

We proceeded as follows: on each box we wrote numbers or letters and made a list by box content. We listed what we thought was interesting and what was not.

I didn't want to touch anything. Even if everything was completely mixed up, I wanted to respect this disorder and not to rearrange it. So we made lists, lists by banana box.

Obviously, when we made the film, we could be reproached for the two researchers finding the documents in chronological order. This was not at all the case. But it was impossible to film because we found so many things. We even found this famous blue notebook in which Paul Otlet talks about himself and which we used for his voice-over in the documentary.

The most striking discovery among all these papers was this 35 mm nitrate film. When we put it on a viewing table, we realised that it was a film that Paul Otlet had commissioned in 1913 from Alphonse Neuters.

It is the only film that exists of Paul Otlet and La Fontaine receiving Andrew Carnegie.

Andrew Carnegie was a Scottish man who made his fortune in the United States and was a patron of libraries. After his visit to the World Palace he decided to give Otlet a grant. This film was the most extraordinary thing we found.

Our documentary quickly crossed borders. We made an English version and thanks to Boyd Rayward, who is an Otlet specialist, we were able to show the film in Philadelphia. The film continued to be shown in universities. The film is now being distributed through the Film Makers Library.

The Mondotheque

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Belgian bibliographer Paul Otlet, founder of the Mundaneum, imagined a device that combined the various tools for transmitting knowledge: the World Library. A multimedia office well before the advent of the digital world, integrating the atlas, the encyclopaedia, the telegraph, the radio, the Universal Bibliographic Directory and any other media that could produce and disseminate knowledge!