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Mundaneum guided tour



mundaneum

Welcome to the Mundaneum!

It was created in Brussels at the end of the 19th century by the Belgian Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine. Long before the Internet and search engines, their goal was to organize and share all knowledge globally for the sake of peace. Called "the Google of paper", the Mundaneum is today an archive center and a cultural space where new technologies meet their archeology! The city of Mons has hosted the Mundaneum since the early 1990s in this former department store called "Independence".

The founders

Paul Otlet (1868-1944)

Father of documentation, Paul Otlet (1868-1944) has accomplished an original work in fields as diverse as bibliography, photography, schematic, encyclopedia or museography. Precursor, he anticipates at the beginning of the 20th century the arrival of the Internet and is today recognized as the father of the concept (World Science Festival, New York, 2012)

Henri La Fontaine (1854-1943)

Socialist Senator Henri La Fontaine (1854-1943) is a key figure in pacifism. He advocates for the development of international law and anticipates the proposed League of Nations (future United Nations

Organization), to which he will be associated when it was created in 1919. In 1913, the various actions he led on the pacifist level were awarded by the Nobel Peace Prize. A passionate bibliographer, he founded the Mundaneum with Paul Otlet.

The sphere

In front of you is an imposing sphere. An important scenographic element in the scenography of François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters, it has become one of the major symbols of the Mundaneum. You also find the sphere as an emblem on the facade of the museum.

The sphere represents universalism, the idea of the circulation of knowledge. Goal: to build world peace! As the international telecommunications and transport network is gradually being established, the concept of globalization, a culture that inhabits the founders of the Mundaneum, is emerging at the beginning of the 20th century.

The planisphere

Look up at the ceiling: a planisphere overlooks the museum space. Linking the continents, building the "world bridge", weaving the network of knowledge: this was the ambition of Otlet and La Fontaine represented here in the form of "information highways", a notion that appeared from the beginning of the Internet. At the time of the Web of data, this representation evokes today more the "sky" or "cloud" in English, described by Paul Otlet in the 1930s as "an immense building where all the information would be"!

The Universal Bibliography Repertory

Entering the Mundaneum is entering the heart of the very first search engine of history! Around you unfolds the "Bibliographic Universal Repertory": hundreds of furniture files that contain millions of bibliographic records. These are organized according to the principle of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) invented by Otlet and La Fontaine. Designed in 1895, the UDC is an innovative indexing language for the time, which organizes this large database: a little like the large virtual libraries that preceded the arrival of the World Wide Web invented in 1989. Recorded in Unesco's "Memory of the World" Register, it is a fragile and valuable heritage that you can admire without being able to touch it.

Small history of a big idea!

Head to the interactive terminal at the left entrance on the ground floor. Who were Otlet and La Fontaine? How did they create the Mundaneum 100 years before the Internet? How is a bibliographic record composed? What was the extent of the international network of employees? Touch the screen to start the experiment!

The Mondothenque

Always on the ground floor is the Mondothenque. Designed by Paul Otlet in 1936: it's an office giving access to the world! This project, designed but never realized, was intended to encourage access to information by as many people as possible. Otlet imagined it, moreover, installed in schools, in homes. A compilation of documentation on all subjects, transmitted by various interposed sources: maps, telephone, didactic boards, microscope, discs and radio, and of course bibliographical notes. The Mondothenque of Otlet is the multimedia tablet before the letter!

The Utopia space

You are now leaving the museum space by heading backwards: this is the Utopia space. This glazed room located on the ground floor was inaugurated in 2015 for Mons, European Capital of Culture. There are conferences, workshops, debates and meetings in tribute to the pacifist project of its founders. The Mundaneum offers a program of activities that revisits the utopia of its founders: Peace through culture, sharing knowledge in the service of living together!

1st floor: the educational space

An educational tool par excellence, the Mundaneum welcomes many groups of children and young people who come to discover "the cradle of the Web".

Let's go out now in the courtyard of the museum ...

The work "Oculus" (Richard Venlet)

In its center, the work "Oculus" (Richard Venlet) hints at the archives in the basement. Representing the Universal Decimal Classification, "Oculus" offers the visitor to discover the physical reality of the Mundaneum: 6 linear kms of archives.

The Mundaneum Archives

6 km of archives composed of thousands of newspapers, posters, postcards, glass plates or still photographs. Located in the basement for conservation reasons, these are now the foundations of the 21st century Mundaneum project.

The Atrium

Let's get closer to the second building and the balustrade. In front of you, below, is the reading room of the archives center.

André Canonne reading room

A space frequented by researchers from all over the world (Australia, Japan, United States, Brazil, Russia, ...) for whom the Mundaneum archives constitute an inexhaustible source of information. The international dimension composes the DNA of the collections of the Mundaneum since its creation. A richness unceasingly rediscovered by the archivists who work for the conservation, the restoration, the digitization and the valorization of the heritage bequeathed by the founders.