

The world within reach

Aids for the education of the blind from Spermalie

Exhibition 21.05 - 29.08 Arentshuis Brugge | 03.05 - 29.08 KADOK-KU Leuven

The world within reach: the Spermalie collection on the road

Between May and August 2021, the public in both Bruges and Leuven can discover the rich heritage of the Spermalie Institute (now De Kade vzw). The Spermalie Institute is a household name in Bruges. Founded in 1836 by Canon Charles-Louis Carton, it played an important role in (amongst other things) the development of education for blind and visually impaired children.

In both exhibitions, attention will be devoted first and foremost to the sub-collection of more than 300 aids and other resources for people with a visual impairment. This includes a number of remarkable objects that illustrate the fascinating history of education for the blind and in some cases quite literally make it tangible. De Kade vzw and the Bruges Heritage Cell have already taken steps to draw up an inventory and carry out a value assessment for

this collection.

This new project aims to take this process a stage further. With this in mind, we asked Piet Devos and Tonia In den Kleef to join us as curators for the exhibitions. Both are experience experts who are active in the fields of heritage and accessibility. Tonia and Piet have made their own personal selections from the collection. These selections will be put on display in Bruges (Museum Brugge, Arentshuis) and in Leuven (KADOC). The displays will be arranged so that people with and without a visual impairment can both enjoy and learn from their visit. This possibility to experience the exhibitions together, in a multi-sensory manner, is a main priority. Both presentations have received support from the Licht en Liefde organisation.

2

BRUGES

Arentshuis, 21 May to 29 August

The Bruges presentation takes 'emancipation' as its central theme. School subjects such as language, mathematics, geography, etc. were amended and taught in different ways over the decades, often in a process of trial and error. Several 'ambassadors', former pupils and teachers at Spermalie and elsewhere, share their experiences of these matters with the visitors via audio or film. Reading and writing machines, geographical maps, stuffed animals, counting aids and (last but not least!) a huge globe illustrate how, as a result of these many efforts, the world was put at the fingertips of visually impaired pupils. Aroma artist Peter De Cupere has been inspired by the search to develop a shared system of writing for the blind to create (in collaboration with a number of visually impaired assistants) an aroma alphabet. This ties in with the Triennial for Contemporary Art, which also starts in Bruges in May.

Practical info: please see further in this press folder.

LEUVEN

KADOC, 3 May to 29 August

Educational material from the Spermalie Institute and the stories of the 'ambassadors' are also making the journey to KADOC in Leuven. In dialogue with old photographs and film fragments, these elements will highlight aspects from the history of education for blind and visually impaired children. Attention is also devoted to the role of priests and nuns in the development of this form of education and in the operation of the Licht en Liefde organisation. The historical film Katutu allows visitors to travel back to the colonial period in Congo. This film has also been shown at the DisABILITY Film Festival (3-8 May).

The total project places a strong emphasis on public engagement and public activities: in addition to the showing of films, there are also a number of lectures and (if further relaxation of the corona measures allows) guided tours for a broad public.

Practical

Open: Monday to Friday: 09.00 to 17.00

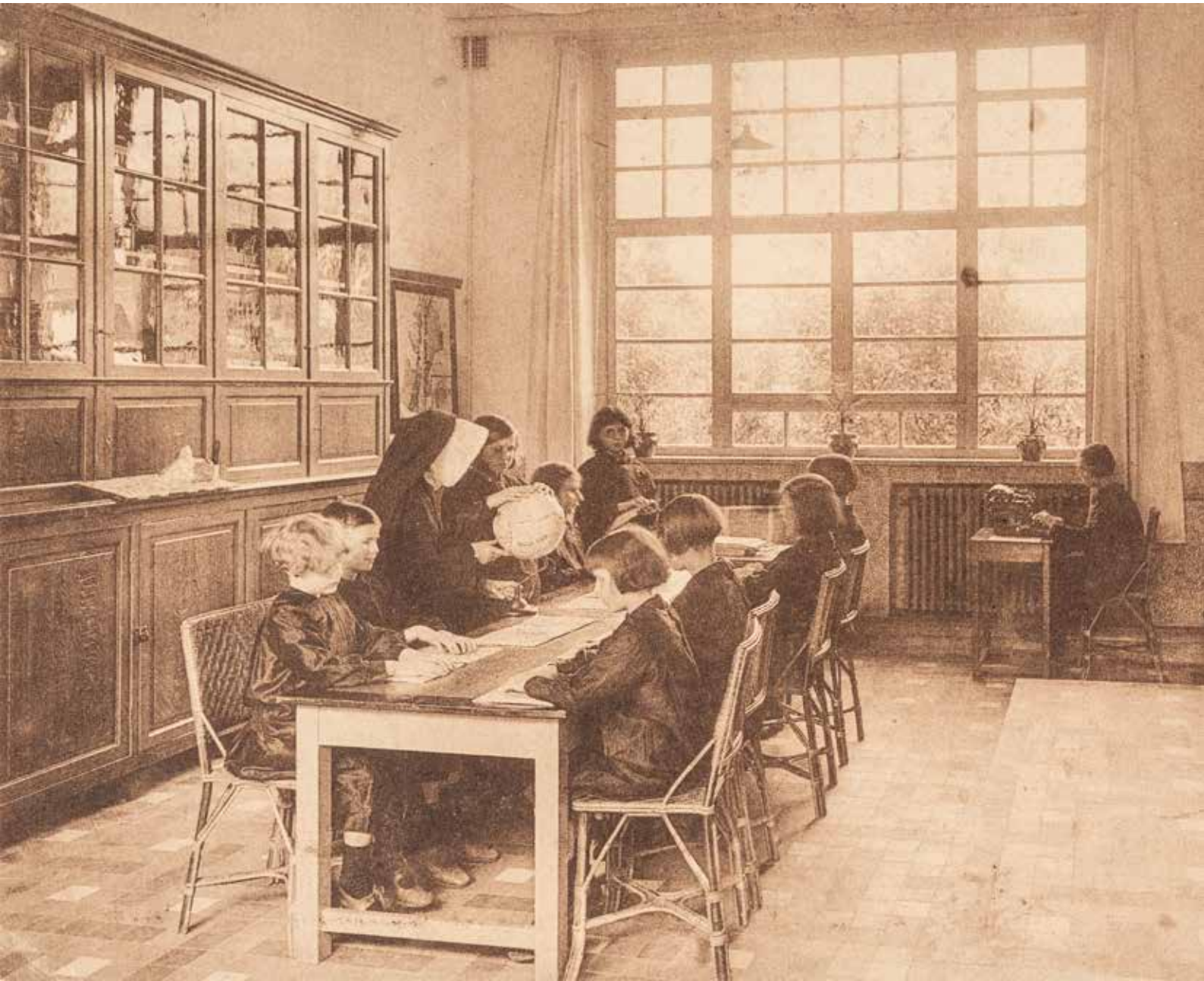
Sunday: 13.00 to 17.00

Closed: 13, 14, 23 and 24 May, 11 and 21 July, and 15 August

Free admission

<https://kadoc.kuleuven.be/>

NB. The corona regulations mean that it is currently not possible to visit the exhibition in groups. You can only visit the exhibition individually or as a family.



Important: Sound commentary plays a crucial role in both collection displays. Bringing your own smartphone and earpieces will ensure that you miss none of the fascinating explanations and testimonies.

In search of a form of writing for the blind: the road to fully-fledge education and emancipation

In 1836, Canon Charles-Louis Carton took the initiative for the setting up of an institute for the deaf and the blind in Bruges. For the practical implementation and running of the institute he founded a new religious order: the Sisters of the Childhood of the Virgin Mary, to the name of which the suffix 'ter Spermalie' was later added.

Carton quickly developed a national and international network. In 1837, he travelled to France, England and Scotland. He visited existing institutions for the blind, which inspired him in his search to find suitable methods and aids for the education of his pupils. One of the greatest challenges was how to teach blind children to read and write.

When he returned to Bruges, he brought with him many different kinds of blind scripts. Most were based on the standard Latin alphabet, but then printed in raised letters on the page, so that they could be followed with the fingers. This was known as 'relief script'. The most well-known example was the relief system developed by Valentin Haüy, the director of the first school for the blind in Paris. This special printing technique was later further refined in Germany and England.

During his visit to France, Carton also met Louis Braille, a blind young man who had devised a clever alternative for letters in relief. His script was based on a series of six dots. Depending on the manner in which these dots are arranged, it is possible form all 26 letters and 10 numbers, and even musical notes! Braille is a very simple system and therefore easy to learn. A Braille letter is much smaller than a relief letter and is just the right size for being felt by the sensitive tip of an index finger. As a result, Braille can be read much more quickly than relief texts.

Even so, the use of Braille initially met with resistance. Carton and many of his fellow pedagogues thought that it was not a good idea to let blind people use their own specialised form of writing. In contrast to relief letters, Braille had no connection with the sighted alphabet. So how would blind people and sighted people communicate with each other in writing? The discussion 'relief or Braille' dragged on for decades, but the benefits of Braille eventually won the day. At an international congress in 1878, teachers of the blind from various countries agreed that henceforth Braille should be regarded as the standard script.

Unlike relief letters, Braille does not require the use of complicated printing techniques. A simple writing board or slate and a stylus are all that is necessary. The Spermalie collection contains various old examples of this kind. Many blind and visually impaired people still make use of the Braille script today, although now in a computerised form. You can learn more about this in a film in which your host is Inge Piotrowski, a fervent advocate of Braille

During the early years of the 19th century, pioneers like Canon Carton and Louis Braille could never have imagined, even in their wildest dreams, that in the future most blind children would be able to follow the ordinary education system. But that is now the case today. Modern technology means that the visually impaired no longer need to attend special schools. This marks the start of a truly inclusive society, in which children with and without limitations grow up together. But without the foresight of educational innovators such as Carton and Braille this would never have been possible. They paved the way for the gradual emancipation of people with a visual handicap.



A school for the senses

The exhibition 'The world within reach' recently opened at KADOC in Leuven and will now be followed by a parallel exhibition in the Arentshuis in Bruges.

This is the very first exhibition about the history of education for blind and visually impaired children in Belgium. Using pedagogic aids and resources from the distant and not-so-distant past, the exhibition tells a fascinating story of gradual emancipation: from the foundation of special institutes for the blind and the search for suitable educational methods in the early 19th century, right through to 'our' inclusion in ordinary society in the first decades of the 21st century.

Tonia In den Kleef and Piet Devos

'Our', because as experience experts we, Tonia In den Kleef and Piet Devos, were given the privilege of curating this exhibition, which allows us to write part of our common history, a history that has so far remained largely unwritten. Tonia was visually impaired from an early age but only became fully blind in adulthood; Piet lost his sight suddenly when he was five years old as a result of a rare retinal disease. But equally important is the fact that we have both given advice over many years to museums and other cultural institutions about ways in which they can be made more accessible to people with a (visual) limitation. At the same time, during our collaboration it has become increasingly noticeable how well we complement each other. Whereas Tonia draws primarily on her experience as an artist and organiser of target-group oriented museum visits throughout Flanders, Piet is a writer and researcher who is more familiar with the cultural-historical background of our subject. This explains why in the following texts we will take it in turns to highlight different aspects of the exhibition.

Be that as it may, our main aim was to make 'The world within reach' as inclusive as possible. In the exhibition it is therefore not only the various 'ambassadors' - former pupils and teachers at schools for the visually impaired - who will have their say. In dialogue with the scenographers

for the exhibition, we also opted to create a multi-sensory presentation, so that a highly diverse public will hopefully be able both to enjoy and to learn from their visit.

The Spermalie collection as valued heritage (Piet Devos)

The starting point for this exhibition is the unique collection of writing, reading, arithmetical and other teaching aids of the Bruges-based Spermalie Institute (now De Kade vzw). This collection, dates back to the foundation of the school in 1836 by Canon Charles-Louis Carton. Like his fellow cleric, Petrus Jozef Triest, who founded similar institutions at roughly the same time in Ghent and Brussels, Carton was an important pioneer in education for the blind and the deaf in Belgium.

One of the most striking things about the Spermalie collection, which not only contains Carton's personal collection but also a number of later items, is its experimental nature. Although inspiration from abroad was welcome and sometimes used, it was often a question of finding the best home-grown, practical and non-visual solution for the transmission of certain kinds of knowledge. How, for example, can you teach geography to a blind or visually impaired pupil? The oldest tactile maps in wood or fabric, the plaster models, the raised relief globes and the plasticised atlases from circa 1970, all of which are found in the collection, sketch a clear picture of the long and often difficult road that the teaching of this subject has had to follow.

Fortunately for us, the 300 or so artefacts in the Spermalie collection have already been studied in some detail. In 2009, the De Kade volunteer Bart Demuyne compiled and published the instructive photo-book 'Teaching aids with a history', in which the author provided a first summary of the complete collection with an explanation of the historical background. This was followed in 2018-2019 by a value assessment, as part of which the aids specifically used in blind education were inventoried, described in an online databank, and assessed for their different types of value (as

cultural-historical objects and as utilitarian objects). This intense assessment project was carried out by Ina Verrept of the Bruges Heritage Cell and Jasmien Van Tieghem of De Kade vzw. However, they also made use of a soundboard group of experience experts (one of whom was Tonia) for assessing the utility value of the objects.

Feeling and smelling language (Tonia In den Kleef)

In the early 19th century, efforts were made to find a way to teach blind people how to read and write. Different methods were devised to make letters 'feelable'. One of the finest pieces in the exhibition is the so-called raphigraph, developed by Pierre Foucault, who was himself blind. This writing machine was intended to allow blind people to communicate with sighted people. By pressing a combination of the different keys, letters of the standard Latin alphabet were formed in raised relief. This meant that the letters were tangible for the blind readers, but also visible for the sighted ones.

Foucault's contemporary and compatriot, Louis Braille, who was also blind, devised a script that was much easier to learn and to use. Because a Braille letter consists of a maximum of six dots, it is the ideal size for being felt by the tip of an index finger. This meant that Braille could be read more quickly. Nevertheless, there was initial resistance to the use of Braille's system, not least from Canon Carton, because it no longer had any connection with the alphabet used by sighted people.

Eventually, the advantages of Braille proved decisive and from roughly 1880 onwards it became the standard means of communication for the blind. Since then, Braille tools have undergone a massive evolution, from simple stylus boards via Braille typewriters to the present-day Braille displays for computers.

The 19th century search for a shared writing system for the blind has inspired contemporary artist Peter de Cupere to create a remarkable and sense-stimulating installation especially for 'The world within reach'. This installation does not appeal to



the senses of touch or hearing, but makes use of the sense of smell. He has developed an aroma-alphabet, which he has called the Olfabet. At Peter's request, seven people with a visual impairment chose from fifty or so different aromas, assigning an aroma to each letter of the alphabet. On the basis of their choices, Peter developed his Olfabet, which all visitors to the exhibition can now discover and experience.

Peter's fascinating Olfabet is something between poetry, a game and an experiment. By using the right aromas, it is possible to make a word or a sentence. After a number of 'practice lessons' with your nose, you can form word pictures, just like with the standard alphabet, and also recognise words, rather than reading the letters separately. This is a work of art that offers numerous opportunities for further experimentation. But in the context of the exhibition, it is, above all, a fitting

ode to the inventiveness of pioneers like Foucault and Braille.

Historical lacunae and a colonial film (Piet Devos)

Obviously, the above-mentioned value assessment made our task as guest curators of selecting the items to be exhibited much simpler. The historical and pedagogic representativity of the various objects was our most important criterion. To what extent did a piece illustrate an advance in education for the blind and the range of lessons it was possible to offer? An institute like Spermalie taught not only traditional school subjects, but also other skills that could be useful for blind and visually impaired people. For example, children learnt how to find their way around using a white stick or became skilled in music or basket-weaving, in the hope that they would later be able to live independent lives as adults. In addition to representativity, we

also took account of aesthetic value. This not only means how good the artefacts look, but also – for our visitors with a visual limitation – how good and how easily they feel. The maps in fabric are a good example of this, as are a number of miniature agricultural machines, used for the lessons in geography and world orientation.

Even so, during the preparatory phase of the exhibition we frequently encountered a fundamental lack of historical source material. In contrast to neighbouring countries, there is no usable standard work in Belgian literature that documents over time the evolution of education for and the changing social position of people with a visual limitation. For this reason, Roeland Hermans of KADOC (the second location for our exhibition) went to see what he could find in various archives. He focused in particular on the records of the religious congregations that

played such a prominent role in the early days of education for the blind.

This yielded (amongst other things) a number of illustrative photographs and even an LP with a recording of the chimes of the Brussels Institute for the Blind in Woluwe. But perhaps the most surprising find of all was an intriguing film made by the White Fathers in Congo in 1953. In this film, entitled *Katutu*, a blind Congolese man is rejected by society because of his limitation, but thanks to the Catholic faith he eventually discovers 'the light'. Although the film presents a number of serious problems in terms of its negative and stereotypical depiction of both the Congolese and blind people, it is a historical document that says much about its time. For this reason, we decided to give *Katutu*, as well as the other worthwhile archive pieces, a place in the exhibition in Leuven. These relatively limited research efforts suggest that there is a wealth of information waiting for any historians who wish to further explore our history.

Strokable fjords and audible paintings (Tonia In den Kleef)

To impart knowledge to a child about its environment, it is not always enough simply to describe it. How do you explain to a blind youngster what a mountain or a volcano looks like? In the collection of educational aids for teaching geography there are small plaster models of both a volcano and a river bed. Because of their small scale, they cannot really convey the true size of a mountain, but at least they help. However, both models have seen better days: plaster begins to disintegrate after a number of decades.

This gave me the idea to make a fjord in ceramics. It is larger than the plaster models, so that its various details can be felt. Fjords form rugged coastlines with deeply-cut valleys and steep slopes, scoured by the glaciers of the Ice Age. With this touchable fjord, we would also like to invite sighted visitors to explore the tactile richness of this kind of rough and uneven landscape.

Visually impaired people tend to enjoy art either by touching it or by listening to a description of it.

Touching a work of art allows you to form a good impression of the way it looks. You can even discover things that you normally cannot see, such as the material it is made of, its temperature, its roughness, etc. You can feel the things that the eye fails to observe. You can also 'see' the front and the back at the same time. If a particular sculpture is too fragile or too inaccessible to be touched, a model or a 3D-print is a good substitute.

A painting, photograph or film can be brought to life through a good verbal description (audio-description). Appropriate music and aromas can also help us to imagine the atmosphere that a painting or photograph wishes to convey. It goes without saying that we have integrated all the visual material in the exhibition into the audio-guide or have provided it with a separate audio-description, including the film *Katutu*. In this way, the exhibits that can no longer be touched remain accessible for visitors with a visual impairment.

Towards inclusion in education and museums (Piet)

Institutes like *Spermalie* and *Woluwe* have played a very important role in the progressive emancipation of the blind and the visually impaired. Over the years, the pupils were not only given an excellent education, but were also taught professional skills that could lead to employment.

For most of the 20th century, job opportunities for our target group were fairly limited. Their choices were largely confined to basket weavers, music teachers, piano tuners or telephonists. However, this situation increasingly improved from the 1980s onwards. By this time, more and more visually impaired pupils only spent part of their school career in special educational facilities. They learnt Braille and walking with a stick at schools for the blind, before transferring to ordinary schools. That is what happened to me. Above all, this transfer process was made possible by improving technology. In the classroom at my state secondary school, I worked at my desk with a computer fitted with a Braille display and speech software.

This meant that there was no need for my teachers to learn Braille; they could simply follow on the screen what I noted down. This digital revolution means that it is now much easier than ever before for blind and visually impaired young people to follow higher education, which in turn further increases the range of professional options in later life.

Nowadays, most children with a visual limitation start their education in ordinary pre-school (kindergarten) classes. This is what we call 'inclusive education' and it works well, for so far the pupils are provided with suitably adjusted study material and additional support from an ambulatory assistant teacher. Sadly, this support is sometimes lacking, but greater inclusion remains the objective. This is the best way for children both with and without a limitation to grow up, so that they can appreciate and value the diversity of the society in which they live.

'The world within reach' exhibition also attaches great importance to inclusion. A museum or exhibition is not inclusive simply because the building and the information offered is accessible for a physically diverse audience, although that is obviously an essential first step. An inclusive exhibition means that people from the target group in question are involved in both the development process and the implementation of the final presentation. For this reason, it is of crucial importance that Tonia and myself were asked to curate this exhibition, just as it is equally important that our 'ambassadors' are allowed to tell their own stories about the artefacts on display. In short, our motto is and remains: 'Nothing about us without us!'

The world within reach

KADOC (Leuven) and Arentshuis (Bruges)

Until 29 August 2021

In the margins of the exhibition

June:

- Round Table on the subject of the inclusive museum, on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition.
- Digital screening of *Katutu*, a niche film made by the White Fathers in 1953 during the colonial period and intended for a Congolese public.

During the summer months

- Various guided tours by our curators and experience experts.
- Various workshops by the artist Peter de Cupere, who introduces participants to his *Olfabet*, a new aroma language especially developed for the exhibition by and for blind and visually impaired aroma-ambassadors.
- Lecture by Piet De Vos, co-curator of 'The world within reach', on the subject of museums and inclusion

**Dates and times will be dependent on the evolution of the current COVID regulations:
see www.museabrugge.be**



Practical information for the exhibition

- Title The world within reach.
Aids for the education of the blind from Spermalie
- Location Arentshuis, Dijver 16, 8000 Bruges
- Date from 21 May to 29 August 2021
- Hours of opening Tuesday to Sunday, from 09.30 to 17.00.
Closed on Mondays, with the exception of Whit Monday.
- Tickets € 7 | € 6 (reduced rate) [including permanent collection] -
via www.museabrugge.be/tickets
Free for children aged 12 years and younger, for those assisting a person with a (visual) limitation and for residents of Bruges. Please reserve your tickets in advance via www.museabrugge.be/tickets
- Extra guide dogs are welcome.
- TIP! The accompanying sound commentary plays a key role in this exhibition. Please bring your own smartphone and earpieces, so that you can listen to this commentary.
- Groups At the present time, group visits are prohibited by the current corona regulations. You can find the most up-to-date information on our website.
- Info www.museabrugge.be

Inclusion is important for Musea Brugge. To make our collections accessible to as wide a public as possible, we have recently integrated new initiatives into both the Gruuthusemuseum and the O.L.V.-kerk Museum to provide additional support and facilities for visitors with a (visual) limitation. This exhibition is a further instance of this policy in action.

9

IMAGES IN HIGH RESOLUTION

Images to promote this exhibition/museum can be downloaded via the following link:
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/museabrugge/albums>

Please mention the correct credits to be found with each photo.

More info

All arrangements can be made via the press officer of Musea Brugge, sarah.bauwens@brugge.be or t +32 50 44 87 08.

Press visits to the exhibition are possible with an appointment, see. www.museabrugge.be/en/pers. The press file can be consulted there and texts can be copied.

REQUEST

We collect every possible review of our museums and events. Therefore we would like to ask you to send a copy of any article you publish to sarah.bauwens@brugge.be

Thank you for your cooperation and interest.

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HThe 'olfabet' was developed in cooperation with



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Colophon of the exhibition

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Artistic project 'Olfabet': Peter de Cupere

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Project coordinator: Filip L. Demeyer

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Ambassadors: Jan De fauw, Mireille Duhén, Jan Gosselin, Tonia In den Kleef, Leticia Larangé, Geert Maeckelbergh, Mei Lan Ng, Inge Piotrowski, Francky Van Onacker

Aroma-ambassadors: Piet Devos, Timmy De Waele, Jan Gosselin, Tonia In den Kleef, Leticia Larangé, Mei Lan Ng, Francky Van Onacker

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Partners: vzw De Kade, KU Leuven-KADOC, Licht & Liefde

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Inspired by Triennial Bruges 2021

