Exotic hidden world of the Jesuits

Down a narrow path, through a small gateway and into a pitch-dark corridor: such is the unpleasing entrance to a wonderworld lying concealed in a limestone quarry near Maastricht. Here, visitors come face to face with the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II and Assyrian cherubs acting as palace guards. They walk through the entrance of the Buddhist shrine Borobudur in Java and ascend the steps of the Moorish palace Alhambra in Granada. The more than 400 works of art, including reliefs, frescoes and charcoal drawings, are a delight to the eye.

The Jezuietenberg (Jesuit Cave) comprises the exotic results of more than one hundred years of diligent chiselling, painting and drawing on the part of Jesuit fathers. These include Flemish priests such as Father Anton van Emelen, who painted the Bruges scene Rozehoedkaai met Vismarkt van Brugge, and Wim Oomens, who depicted the fairy tales and also created a sculpture group of the steed Beiaard and the Vier Heemskinderen, characters in a Flemish legend.

At the beginning of a guided tour lasting more than an hour and a half, our guide, Huub Mommers, tells us: “About 60 to 120 million years ago, the limestone or marlstone was formed from compressed shells and skeletons of large animals. Layer upon layer was formed by an inland sea which dried up time after time, and as this process continued, the layer of marlstone became 25 to 35 metres thick. The Romans extracted the substance by opencast mining and hewed out bricks to make the walls around their settlements.”

Mommers is one of the 10 volunteers who act as guide in the museological maze. The Jezuietenberg was officially declared a National Cultural Monument in 1996, and it might well qualify for a place on the Unesco list of Protected World Heritages before very long. This is because out of the hundred thousand-odd quarries all over the world, only a few contain frescoes and sculptures, and most of this work can be found right here.

Our group, consisting of 20 people and two lanterns, descends to a depth of 45 metres. Mommers keeps up a more or less running commentary because, as he says, “there’s a story behind each and every work”.

Galleries
These high subterranean galleries make us human beings feel insignificant. Despite the fact that it is cold (a constant temperature of 9.8 degrees) and damp (98%), this unusual collection of amateur art gives us a nice warm feeling inside. As a result of exploitation, a system of galleries totalling 18 kilometres came into being during the course of the years. Although there are five different routes, many of the works of art remain unseen.

In the year 1860, the Jesuits first set foot in the quarry which forms part of the Cannerberg. They were students from all over the world, who were spending 4 to 6 years in training at the Theological College founded by the Order in Maastricht. Part of the training programme was the day off on Wednesdays, which the students had to spend in the countryside.

Mommers explains: “They built a house in the country, known as Campagne, near a water mill an hour’s walk away from the south side of Maastricht. Here, they read and sketched, and possibly even played football as a diversion. Be that as it may, a number of these students went looking for fossils in the abandoned marlstone quarry at the
Cannerberg, where they discovered that they could write and draw on the walls. And that was the start of what is now the Jezuietenberg.”

We stop to admire a copy of Frans Hals’ *De Nar* (The Fool). “Jesuits were past masters in copying world-famous paintings and sculptures. About ninety per cent of everything we see here is not original, but a pastime for amateur artists – some of whom were very talented. They carried out this work between 1860 and 1962, with a hammer and chisel or a paintbrush – and the patience of a saint.” Further on, we can see Picasso’s *Old Woman* and the *Woman with a red cap* by the French impressionist Pissaro.

Many Dutch Jesuits were missionaries in Indonesia, and visited the Borobudur in Java as their study centre was nearby. One of these was Wim van Brederode, whose father, an engineer, was involved in the restoration of the Borobudur, which had been completely covered by jungle. Between 1952 and 1959, three Jesuits, under the guidance of the young Van Brederode, created a replica of a gateway to the Buddhist shrine using blocks of marlstone.

Shadow puppets or *Wayang* are also depicted on the walls of this so-called Javanese gallery in the quarry. The Jesuits’ global network was charted by Pieter Smulders, who first drew a map of Java as a ‘mission territory’ on the wall. This map was followed later on by more maps of Europe and the whole world.

**Rembrandt**

We also come across a Buddha and a Hindu temple. In the chapel, with its altar and font, Mommers explains: “Although the Jesuits were broad-minded, they didn’t deny their own faith. Besides a great many pictures of the Virgin Mary and Jesus on the cross, they drew quite a number of biblical scenes: the flight to Egypt, the calling of St. Matthew, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, as well as copies of Rembrandt’s *Emmaïsgangers* (Men of Emmaus) and Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. Father Ligthart made a pastel drawing of the text *Adveniat Regnum Tuum* (Thy Kingdom Come), translated into 39 languages. This chapel is still used now and again for the solemnisation of a marriage or a baptism.”

Secular scenes predominate in the quarry, however. In the Romantic Corner, Juliet looks down out of her window to where her Romeo is standing. The balcony scene from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is by the German Father George Wüst. Mommers recounts a piece of background history: “Some of his colleagues caused a commotion by putting Peter Pan right next to the balcony scene. A character in a children’s book, of all things! This was regarded as sacrilege vis-à-vis the great playwright. In the end, a wall was built around the castle garden, so that Peter was out of Juliet’s sight.”

The ‘fairy-tale gallery’ reveals that piety has its limits as well. Here, one of the Seven Dwarfs is depicted looking roguishly under Snow White’s long dress. It transpires from cartoons that some of the priests enjoyed a good joke; one of these cartoons shows a doctor saying to a woman, “Your husband must give up smoking. But this needs plenty of willpower.” To which the lady replies, “I’ve certainly got that!”

Students from overseas often left recollections of their native land: the Hungarian royal coat of arms, as well as the national emblems of Indonesia, Congo and Bohemia are all depicted, whilst one Czech priest carved out a relief map of his country.

A colourful townscape catches our eye; this is a watercolour of Bruges town centre. “The *Rozenhoedkaai*, the *Vismarkt*, the *Belfort* (belfry tower), painted by Father Anton van Emelen, who has immortalised the town where he was born. He projected a copy of a watercolour by Ferdinand Coenraets on to the wall and coloured it in.

Another couple of steps take us back to ancient times at the *Heksenpoortje* (Witches’ Gate), which used to be an entrance to the quarry. Here we gaze wide-eyed and open-
mouthed at two gigantic cherubs who have been standing guard since 1905. Mommers explains: “These are copies of the guards as they used to stand at the palace of Sargon II, King of Assyria, in 700 B.C. They have the body of a bull and the tail of a lion, which denote power. The eagle’s wings represent agility, while the king’s head is a sign of wisdom. The originals are in the Louvre in Paris.”

After turning the corner, we enter the Alhambra, the museum’s *pièce de résistance*. This is a beautiful example of Islamic art: gateways and windows with decorated arches and colourful carpet motifs painted on the walls. And there’s even a fountain playing in a pond. “About 35 Jesuits spent three years working on this”, says our guide with unconcealed pride.

**Mr Bumble**

The Jesuits were of an extremely practical turn of mind. They installed a kitchen in the quarry next to the refectory, where the priests ate their simple meals together at a table measuring several metres in length during their creative Wednesdays. Many of the best-loved characters from Marten Toonder’s famous comic strip “Mr Bumble” look on from the walls: Tom Puss, Mr Bumble and his faithful servant Joost. And there’s also the cloakroom where the priests changed their clothes. Mommers: “They used to put on an old pair of trousers, since working with marlstone in a black cassock was not really practical. And they kept their charcoal and tools dry by storing them in tin boxes.”

The activities which went on in the *Jezuïetenberg* were well-documented. A so-called cave leader was appointed, who kept a register during the course of one year. From these handwritten chronicles, it transpires that on occasion, no activities at all took place for a number of years. The silhouette profiles of more than two hundred priests who worked in the quarry for longer than one year have been sketched in charcoal on the wall.

Mommers: “Not only Jesuits came to the quarry and then left again. It has also housed soldiers: the front part of this underground hiding-place was commandeered by the Germans during the second world war. And the NATO headquarters was situated in the southern part of the Cannerberg between 1954 and 1992. At one time there was even a mushroom farm here. But it was the Jesuits who succeeded in creating a timeless monument with their artistic efforts.”

You may only visit the *Jezuïetenberg* after making an appointment by telephone with Peter Houben, of *De Jezuïetenberg* Foundation, tel/fax: +31.43.3213488 – For more information, please surf to [www.jezuïetenberg.nl](http://www.jezuïetenberg.nl) – A book has been published on the Jesuits’ works in the quarry, entitled *De Jezuïetenberg* – Monument in Mergel, written by Pierre Rousseau and published by the Maastricht Rotary Club.

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