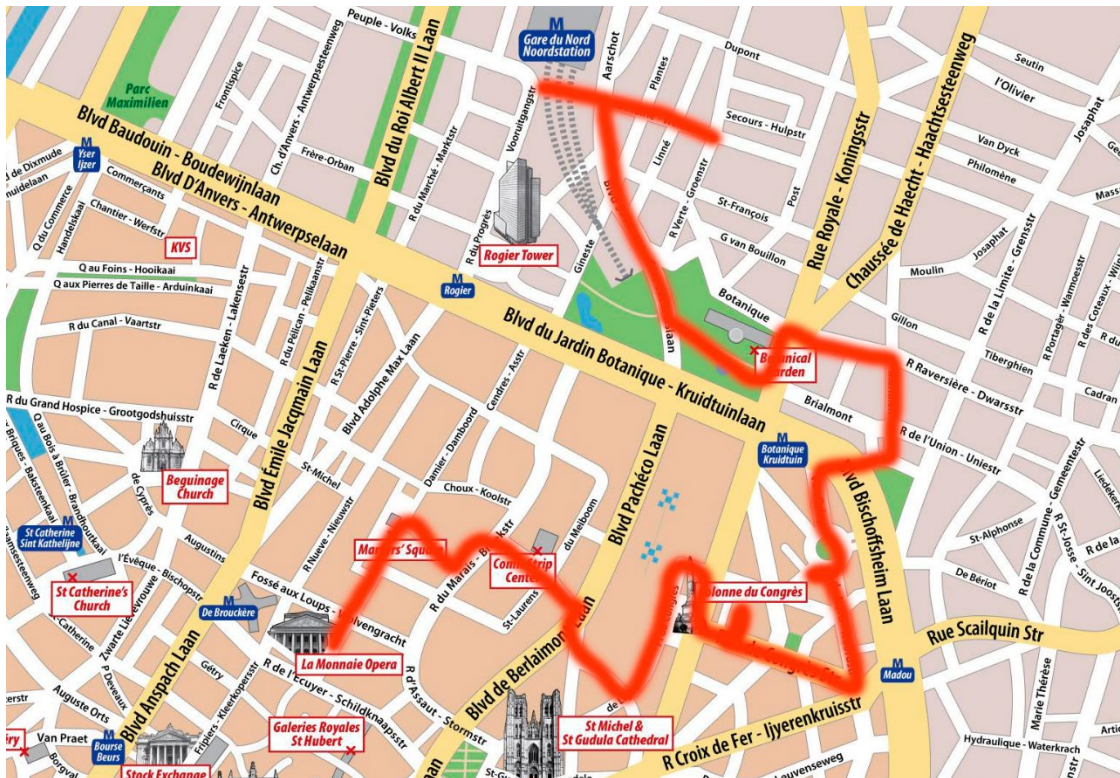




Walks around the Belgian revolution



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La gare du Nord	2
Le jardin Botanique	3
L'église de St Marie	6
Hotel de van Gogh (1880-1881)	8
The astronomical observatory	9
Monument of the 1st WW	10
About the neighbourhood Sint Josse ten Noode	11
Le quartier de la revolution	12
Place de barricades	12
La brabançonne	14
La colonne du congres.....	16
Le caberdouche	17
Square of the Martyrs	18
Frederic de Merode.....	19
L'opera.....	20

La gare du Nord



The train stations have always had a bad reputation. This is the case of the Gare du Nord. In the two years I lived in Brussels, I think I went there only a couple of times, and only to leave as soon as possible. Here is the red-light district of Brussels, nothing comparable to Amsterdam, but similar in shop windows where prostitutes are exhibited. When I returned to Brussels, it was the gateway to the city.

If at any time, the decision of choosing the right path (the good) or the left path (the bad) made any sense, it was at this time. The airport train dropped me off at this station, and I had to get to Rue de Méridien which was not very far from the station, about a kilometer or so walking, I had looked at it on the map. As I had just few money, I preferred not to take a taxi and walk. And here came the time of my choice, either I was going right by the rue du Progres or left to the unknown but in the right direction according to my sense of orientation. As I am a bit adventurous, I took the second option. Thus I passed by the rue de la prairie so-called because before there were meadows there and then by the *rue de l'ascension* that more than an ascent was a calvary uphill dragging two suitcases by cobblestone streets. It started to rain, and the walk was beginning to be torture. It was then that I looked up and saw my first shop window in the red district of Brussels with a fat black woman looking at me with a funny face... "Where I am going" I thought myself, and continued climbing up the *rue de l'ascension*. This neighborhood was truly multicultural, black, Moroccan, Turkish and no Belgian... This is also Brussels, or part of it.

But this is not one of the historical walks that I want to tell in this book so that we will take the right (the good) way, and from the north square we will cross the rue du progres towards the place Rogier. On many occasions' things are not as they seem and the primitive north station was not where it is now but in front of Place Rogier. Later it was moved. The place is also historic because from this place left the first train from the European continent to Mechelen. King Leopold I attended the inauguration of the railway, but it seems that he decided at the last moment not to board in it. Later, when it became too small, this station would be moved to what we know today as Gare du Nord. The first attempt to install a railway began years earlier, in 1830, when the present Kingdom of Belgium was still under Dutch sovereignty. The attempt was the work, among others, of John Cockerill who, nevertheless, would have the honour of building the first Belgian locomotive in 1835 called La Belge in the prestigious factory that bore his name Cockerill & Company.



Le jardín Botanique



From Rogier Square turn left and take St-lazare street until you cross Gineste street. The names of the streets have a lot to say in our walks. Gineste, for example, was one of the architects of the Botanique park that we are right in front of, where it also has a commemorative plaque.

This place is very special, and I would like to pause a little on it and its origins. Victor Hugo¹, in 1852 wrote Brussels has two wonders unique in the world: The Grand Place and the panorama of the botanical garden. I agree with this sentence because the place has a very special charm.



The history of the garden begins in 1795 after the annexation of Belgium by France. It was at this time that the idea of a botanical garden to house indigenous and exotic plants near the former Coudenberg palace came into being. Later in 1826, after ten years of Dutch occupation, five notable botanists acquired a plot of land on the outskirts of the large, well-stocked city to house

¹ « Bruxelles possède deux merveilles uniques au monde : la Grand Place et le panorama du Jardin Botanique »

the existing plant collections. The future of the botanical garden was complicated as monumental ambitions faced economic problems. The need for money was so great that they were forced to start selling plants to cover the costs. Curiously enough, this need for money gave rise to chicón or endibia (chicón in the north of France and endive in the rest of the world). According to the story of a peasant hidden in his basement, a kind of chicory (it was a troubled time when troops stole everything they could) and this plant grew in the dark in a way similar to mushrooms. It was the head gardener of the Franciscus Bresiers botanical garden who created a system of cultivating chicory roots protected from light and ice. In this way, white leaves grow from which the Flemish name of the plant witlook (white leaf) has emerged. All an example of marketing of a new product. In 1873, Heri de Vilmorin presented it at the international horticultural exhibition in Ghent, as well as at the national horticultural society in France in 1875. And in 1879 he sold his first box in Paris under the name of Brussels endive.



The Brussels symbol is also a plant (not the chicón of course), I mean the Iris. In the same park of Botanique, we find a small garden called iris garden. This plant grew on the marshy edges of the Senne, the river that once crossed the whole of Brussels and is now buried. In fact, the Iris is the flag of the Brussels Region (one of the four communities of Belgium next to the Flemish Region, the Walloon and the German-speaking area, which also exists even if one hardly speaks of it).

We could say that Brussels has two flags, the traditional one of Saint George killing the dragon and the new one of the iris (with a European inspiration I would say by the colour blue) which is much more recent. On 18 June 1989, for the first time, the people of Brussels directly elected their regional representatives. Since then, Brussels has been an autonomous Region, comparable to the Regions of Flanders and the Walloon Region.

The language issue is also very much on the agenda. This region, which is bilingual according to the municipal statutes, is inhabited by Belgians who belong to the country's two main linguistic communities: the French community and the Flemish community. It is estimated that 50% of the Brussels population is French-speaking because of the origin of their mother tongue, 10% are Flemish, and 40% speak other languages (using French almost exclusively as a lingua franca), while French as a whole is used by 95.55% of the population on a regular basis. Due to the presence on its territory of numerous international institutions, it is also among the most important concentrations of inhabitants born in other countries of the European Union. Besides, there are many immigrants from the Maghreb (especially Morocco), Turkey, America, Africa (especially the Democratic Republic of Congo, a former Belgian colony) and Central Europe, making the Region a cosmopolitan and multicultural whole.



We will continue our walk through the botanical garden that is divided by the boulevard of St Lazare (not to be confused with the street of St Lazare that we take when leaving the square of Rogier). We already commented that the garden was quite bigger before and that the building fever, not only the

skyscrapers but also the transfer a few hundred meters of the old Gare du Nord, caused it to lose ground and that today it is separated into two parts.

This area is undoubtedly the most spectacular of the entire garden because of the statues it has. It was a time when the government cared about public art. Due to this, it was decided to endow the garden with a set of 52 sculptures. The project was commissioned to Constantin Meunier and Charles Van Der Stappen. These two people were in charge of making the models that were later built by their collaborators. The sculptural groups evoke the seasons, the plants, exotic animals in forced positions with style a little gothic to my way of seeing. They also included chandeliers that worked with electricity — a touch of modernity for the time when they were created, from 1894 to 1898.

These sculptures give a magical and strange air to the garden that is almost reminiscent of Pompeii after the eruption of the volcano. Walking around this place makes us enter another dream world with tortured figures and almost mythical animals in strange positions. the names of some of these sculptures are: The crocodile and the snake, Fontana with condor, The winter or the old killerife, The worries, etc...



L'église de St Marie

Leaving Botanique, we come across the rue royale, which is one of the most important axes of the city. I intended to stick to the central pentagon of Brussels, the ancient walled city, in my walks, but I am obliged to look to the north and find the church of Santa Maria. Its style is Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine (from the middle of the 19th century). The imposing octagonal structure and the dome crown reveal the perspective of the Rue Royale. It was one of the dreams of Leopold II who wanted to make Brussels an imperial capital, with monuments comparable to those of Berlin, London or Paris.



There is a lot of controversy about this because Leopold II was a bit special, to put it mildly. His commitment and political maneuvers led him to be awarded the Congo at the Berlin conference, an immense territory that he managed to administer and exploit. He was on the verge of ruin several times, but the Belgian state always came to his aid and lent him money. He was also interested in helping them because in this way he left them in peace in their political games because the main obsession of this king was the overseas colonial adventures. Few people know that he sent troops to Mexico to protect the wife of Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg imposed by French troops. He also tried to create a colony in Guatemala that failed. Belgian soldiers were also in China to destroy the boxer revolution. But where it triumphed was in the Congo. In 1885, the Berlin Conference established in the area, the so-called Free State of Congo, an African colonial domain, privately owned by King Leopold II of Belgium. King Leopold privately administered the Congo until 1908, when the territory was ceded to Belgium. During the period in which the king administered it, the territory was subject to systematic and indiscriminate exploitation of its natural resources (especially ivory and rubber), using exclusively indigenous labor under conditions of slavery. These were undoubtedly other times. Europe was in a rampant colonial race while Spain lost its last colonies, Cuba and the Philippines. Leopold II and the Belgian businessmen did not want to lose the opportunity of succulent businesses with raw materials

at almost free prices. And this has a lot to do with Brussels because (and I quote the article of the newspaper Le soir in an August 22nd 2009)²

The church of Santa Maria was built thanks to the exploitation of the Congo: "A colony that allowed Leopold II to build the largest palace of justice in the world, the Church of Santa Catarina, the Church of Santa Maria, the Avenue Luisa, the Avenue of Tervueren... and all this with the money of the colonies and the fruit of the copper mines of Katanga.

The truth is that the church of St. Mary was started in 1845 and completed in 1874, before the Berlin conference of 1885. But they are all half-truths. Leopold II was imbued with an air of greatness and his construction fever went hand in hand with his imperial dreams. The bourgeoisie and politicians financed these delusions in exchange for a free hand in business. In these years Belgium was the second industrial power in the world, behind only England. And all this based on the exploitation of white workers, who were free but did not vote (nor did they pay taxes, it must be said). An interesting little fact. In 1881 there were only 116,000 people who could vote because they paid taxes among a population of 5,500,000. Curiously, when Leopold II got his private colony, the Congo, the Belgian worker's party also emerged, and the class struggle began in Belgium (a euphemism because there was always class struggle in Brussels between bourgeois and nobles, between guilds and rulers, etc.). The mind of Leopold II was not always in the colonial adventures, and he also wanted to embellish his capital, Brussels. He built a Japanese tower in his Laeken palace. He also created the Fiftieth Anniversary Gate with an undeniable imperial touch. And how did he pay for it? Part of it came out of pocket and part of contributions from societies created on purpose... To be honest like today, because politics is very similar in all eras.

But let's get back to our tour. We have left Botanique, looking to our left we see in the distance the Church of Santa Maria with all its controversy. To the right, we can glimpse in the distance a statue, the first king of Jerusalem. There are a lot of contradictions about this point. It was not the first, but if the first Belgian. And who was not Belgian either because it seems that he was born in the lower Lorraine. And to be more exact, he was not technically king either. The Kingdom of Jerusalem had its origin in the First Crusade, when Godfrey of Bouillon took the title of *Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri* in 1099 and was crowned in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The following year, his brother Baldwin I of Jerusalem was the first to use the title of "king" and the first to be crowned in the church of the Holy Sepulchre on his own Jerusalem.



² L'église Sainte-Marie aurait été construite grâce à l'exploitation du Congo4: « une colonie, qui a permis à Léopold II de construire le plus grand palais de justice du monde, l'église Sainte-Catherine, l'église Sainte-Marie, l'avenue Louise, l'avenue de Tervuren... Tout cela avec l'argent des colonies et le fruit de nos exploitations du cuivre du Katanga », en un mot l'église Sainte-Marie aurait été construit avec le sang du Congo...



But if we look right in front, we find the Church of Gesù. The Jesuit fathers had it built-in 1860 in a neo-Gothic style according to the plans of the architect Luis Pavot. But it was demystified. It was a place of exhibitions and concerts. Today it is occupied by a group of squatters who defend the right to a home. A group of homeless vagrants usually sleep in its doors.

If we look up, we see a graffiti that says **No problem**³ with what looks like one person hanging another. Undoubtedly very allegorical after talking about imperial dreams, exploitation of colonies and workers in Belgium in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth.

In November 2013, the police expelled the squatters from the centre, 119 of whom 38 were children. A rather violent expulsion that used 40 vans and more than 200 policemen. It was the mayor of Sint-Joost-ten-Noode (Emir Kir) who ordered this expulsion saying there can be no zones of no right in our streets.⁴

Hotel de van Gogh (1880-1881)

We are going to advance right in front of the rue Traversier to find a youth hostel that has as a peculiarity that Van Gogh lived here during his stay in Brussels and there is a plaque that attests it. There's nothing special about it, but it's the perfect excuse to get to Rue du Meriden (Middaglijn straat) which is where I live now, and so it's very important to me.



³ Pas de probleme

⁴ « Il ne peut y avoir de zones de non droit dans nos rues »,

In this area, many streets have astronomical names, and this is because the first observatory in Brussels was built in this area. If we walk along El Meridiane street we will find ourselves on the right to Rue de l'Union (Uniestraat). This has been a particularly sensitive topic in Belgium for more than a century. I don't know what to say, and I think it's an issue that politicians use to manipulate Belgians and justify their importance. The truth is that it was difficult for me to discover the name of the street because it had been covered up as indicating that there was no such union. It is the small details that say a lot about the current reality of this country. However do not forget that the Belgian slogan is “L’union fait la force”

The astronomical observatory



If we continue moving forward, we will arrive at the Place de Quetelet, which was the director of the first observatory in Brussels. Quetelet received a doctorate in mathematics in 1819 from the University of Ghent. After achieving this, he convinced government officials and private sponsors of the need to build an astronomical observatory, which could be built-in 1828. He founded and directed the Royal Observatory of Belgium. He was also criticized for the application of statistical methods to the social sciences. It was quite ahead of its time, at the very time when the Belgian state was created.

In the same square of Quetelet we find a monument to the fallen in the two wars. Something that the Belgians still have very much in mind. And in 2014 it will be 100 years since the First World War, the Great War or the War of Wars. For many, the worst war was the Second, but for the Belgians, it was undoubtedly the first. The allegory of the image is clear, the lion symbol of Belgium and Flanders wounded next to a soldier. And victory rising above them. The great miseries of the First World War are still marked in the collective imaginary of this country that does not reach two centuries of its own entity as an independent nation. If 1914 was the year of the invasion, 1830 was the year of liberation.

About the neighbourhood Sint Josse ten Noode

it's time to talk a little about this neighborhood with two names like all Brussels: Sint-Joost or Saint Josse. It extends from the Gare du Nord to the church of Santa Maria. Its Centre, so to speak, would be St Joseph's Square, where there was a modest oratory as early as 1361. For centuries it was a small village outside the walls because Brussels ended in the pentagon that today is called the petite ceinture (the small belt).

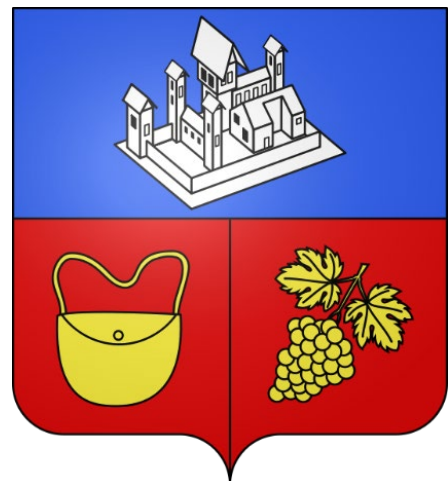
One left Brussels through the Louvain Gate (now disappeared) and the first village to be reached was Sint-Joost. It was a land with



small hills and many lagoons where the iris grew (those of the coat of arms of the Brussels region). An idyllic landscape often ravaged by war, because the history of Brussels has much to do with foreign troops that either besieged it or occupied it. In fact, Ten-Noode could mean in a state of need. During the wars of religion, the chapel was burned down by the Calvinists (like many other churches in

Brussels).

In 1556 it was inhabited by 400 people. At the time of Joseph II, the village already had 700 inhabitants. In 1830 it had 2380 souls and 849 houses. By 1913 it had grown to 32,359. On 1 January 2007, the municipality had a total population of 23,785 inhabitants. A large majority of the inhabitants are of foreign origin: Turks, Moroccans, Africans, which gives it a very international appearance. As a curiosity, it seems that the third most spoken language in Brussels is Arabic.



Le quartier de la revolution

The independence of Belgium is also related to this district. When the insurrection against the Dutch broke out in Brussels on August 1830, Rogier went to the fight with a militia of 300 liègeans. The inhabitants of Saint Josse cheered him on his arrival. And here he lived until his death in 1885. The events that took place in September 1830 deserve to be told because they happened in the lands that we have just visited. Fifty Liege fighters held a fierce siege on the buildings of the observatory that had just been built. The terraces of the botanical garden had Dutch cannons that forced the barricades and penetrated the city. The elite of the Dutch troops under the orders of Prince Frederick concentrated their efforts on the Louvain Gate and all the houses around it were turned into ruins. The Dutch managed to pass through the Louvain Gate, and the fighting intensified in the city

On September 27, the defeated Dutch troops again crossed the same gates of Louvain and Schaerbeek not to return. The hardest fights for independence took place here.

Place des barricades



If we imagine the ancient walls of the city, these form a pentagon that surrounds Brussels. We are in the upper right corner, where the old astronomical observatory used to be. Today it is the park of Henry Frick, former mayor of the commune of Sint Josse.

We will continue our walk through these ancient walls that today are wide boulevards (heritage of the French who after the revolution demolished the walls and replaced them by these avenues). We will cross just where the avenue of Galileo and the bishop's (Galilee laan and Bishoffheim laan) converge.

The first square we come across is called the square of the barricades. If we finish the previous chapter talking about the revolution of 1830, the first thing we will do in this one is to talk about the same thing. These popular revolts lasted several years and exploded in different countries of Europe. When I went to school, I never understood very well why they happened, but now I have it a little clearer... You can't go against the times. After the French revolution and the defeat of Napoleon, the imperial powers sought to restore the old absolutist regime. They restored the king in France and pretended that nothing had happened here... But if it had happened, and liberal ideas cannot be buried so easily.



The first liberal revolution occurred in Spain in 1820, with the pronouncement of Riego. In Cadiz, a constitution had been promulgated in 1812 called the Pepa because it seems to have been born on the day of St. Joseph. Pepe is the short name of Joseph in Spanish.

Without a doubt, this constitution was the most advanced in its time. But the lousy King Ferdinand VII refused to sign it until an army uprising (where there were so many liberals) forced him to swear it, with the famous phrase, let's go together, and I'll go first on the constitutional path...

Thus, began the liberal triennium that lasted just, three years, until the invasion of the one hundred thousand sons of St. Louis (almost all French by the way) ended with this liberal ideal that had changed a lot in the history of Spain. What a paradox, the Spaniards fought to expel the French and bring back a king. And this same king imposed his absolutism with the help of a French army...

The revolutionary flame not only caught fire in Spain, but there were also revolts in Italy, Portugal and Greece. It was the first revolutionary cycle called the Mediterranean.

The 1830s was the second cycle called the Atlantic. It was a process that began in France (Paris) with the so-called July Revolution of the Three Glorious (Trois Glorieuses). It spread throughout much of the European continent, especially in Belgium, which gained independence from Holland. In August 1830, stimulated the Belgian by news from France, a revolutionary process begins in Brussels that could not be suffocated by the intervention of the army (September 12). On 4 October independence

was declared, which received decisive support from the United Kingdom and Prussia at an international conference convened for this purpose in London (20 December).

As we can see, the month of September 1830 was key to the history of Belgium, and the main stage took place in Brussels. We will come back to these facts later in our walks. For the moment imagine the Dutch troops trying to enter the city and the Brussels village defending themselves behind barricades and shooting from the balconies of the adjacent buildings in this square.

All the names of the squares and streets have their history. And this is no exception. In fact this character has a lot to do with the struggle between several pretenders to the throne of Belgium Erasmio Luis, baron of Surlet de Chokier, was appointed baron in 1816. After the revolution of 1830, he was



chosen to preside over the National Congress. Shortly afterwards, King Louis Philippe of France opposed totally against his son's accession to the throne of Belgium (not because he did not want to, but by political calculation, a king of French origin in Belgium would have meant war with England and Germany), which led to the fall of the provisional government. The National Congress then appointed Erasmus Louis regent of the Kingdom of Belgium, a position he held until 1831 when he acceded to the Leopold I throne. He was a controversial character, and today would not be too appreciated. His foreign policy was based solely on the alliance with France, which is why Erasmus Louis supported the candidacy of Louis de Orleans to the

throne of Belgium, facing Joseph Lebeau and Paul Devaux. After Luis Felipe's rejection, Erasmio Luis was unable to determine the policy to follow. He created a government that quickly dissolved and then withdrew to his domains of Gingelom, where he held the position of mayor until his death. He was part of that linguistic minority, in Flanders, of those who were called Franquillons, something like afrancesados. Represent the opposition to the rebirth of the culture of Flanders (with the language as a standard) of the later century. Today he would be considered a traitor by his Flemish compatriots.

La brabançonne

In this square we find a monument to the Brabançonne, which is not a person but a song, in reality, the national anthem of Belgium the original version is in French, but there are versions in Dutch and German, the three official languages of the country. It was written in 1830 by the French actor Dechet, known as Jenneval, born in Lyon in 1801, who performed in a theatre in Brussels. He took part in the struggle for Belgian independence and fell in Lierre in 1830.



Oh Belgium, oh dear mother,

To you our hearts, to you our arms,

To you our blood, oh fatherland!

We all swear, you will live!

You will always live great and beautiful!

And your invincible unity

His motto will be immortal:

The King, the Law, Freedom!

His motto will be immortal:

The King, the Law, Freedom!

The King, the Law, Freedom!

La colonne du congres



From the same square, if we look to the right along the Rue du Congres (as we see everything very related to the new political institutions of the newly created Belgium of 1830), we will see in the distance the column of the congress. We don't have to go near it, just look at it in the distance. It commemorates the formation of the Belgian State and the constitution by the National Congress in 1830. It was erected on the initiative of Charles Rogier (the same one we saw in the previous chapter fighting against the Dutch with their volunteers in Liège) with a design by Joseph Poelaert between 1850 and 1859. It was inspired by Trajan's column in Rome... it will not be for lack of imperial pretensions for the newly born kingdom of Belgium.

The column with the statue of King Leopold I of Belgium included has a total height of 47 m. A 193-step spiral staircase inside the column leads to a platform surrounding the pedestal of the statue of King Leopold I, the first king of the Belgians.

If we continue along the rue du Nord we will come across history again, symbolised by the Flemish parliament. It may seem strange that the Flemish parliament is in Brussels, a mostly French-speaking city, but it all makes sense. In fact the parliament is not only regional but also communitarian and also exercises its powers over the territory of the 19 communes of Brussels capital, recognised as a bilingual linguistic region by the Belgian constitution. The parliament of the French-speaking community is also located in Brussels. I do not intend to explain in this guide the Belgian institutional gibberish that costs taxpayers so much money and sustains a whole caste of politicians and civil servants who make a living from it. To give just a couple of historical brushes. In 1971 the Cultural Council for the Flemish Cultural Community met for the first time. Since then Flanders has become an autonomous state within the Belgian Federal State. In 1996 the Flemish Parliament was installed in a completely renovated building, which is what we are dealing with. I am going to finish talking about politics with a little joke in French:

Que dire d'un Parlement à part qu'il parle et qu'il ment ? (What can we say about a parliament other than that it speaks, and lies?).

Le caberdouche

We stopped our walk for a beer in this typical Belgian café



Square of the Martyrs

The history of this square is quite complex. In 1773 the city of Brussels acquired a piece of land belonging to laundry and built a square called saint-Michele, protector of the city. In 1776 the director of the theatre de la monnai (which we will visit later) named Ignaz Vitzthumb obtained permission to build a portable theatre (a small, light and removable iron building) where plays were offered in Dutch. In 1795 under French rule the square changed its name and was called laundry square (to remember its humble origins). But its current name has to do with the revolution of 1830. After the fighting, it took a place to bury the fallen and an administrative commission, in the absence of government at the time, chose this square as a mass grave. On October 2, 1830, the square was renamed Place des Martyrs. The idea of building a memorial soon arose. In 1832 the chamber approved a budget of 15000 guilders to which was added a sum of 16000 guilders more offered by Felix de Merode. The project was entrusted to Guillaume Geefs.



The monument above all very allegorical. It consists of a statue representing freedom with an inscription of 23, 24, 25 and 26 September 1830. At its feet, a Belgian lion is lying on the broken chains of slavery. Four angels surround the central podium and represent combat, victory, burial and prayer. The four facades of the monument have bas-reliefs depicting scenes of the Belgian revolution: Belgium crowning its heroes, the blessing of the tombs of the heroes by the deacon of Saint Gudula, the oath of the patriots in the Grand Place and the attack on the park led by Van Halen. The monument is surrounded by a crypt where there are 27 black marble panels with the 467 names of the fallen revolutionaries.

What strikes me most is the name **PATRIA** written in Latin (not in Spanish, the Spaniards were only one of the occupants in the history of this city).



A concept that is currently very much in dispute with two opposing communities: the Flemish and the Walloon. And Brussels as an island nestled in Flemish territory and capital of a strange country (a drôle pays).



Frederic de Merode

Count Frédéric de Merode (born in Maastricht on 9 June 1792, died in Mechelen on 4 November 1830) was a volunteer for the Belgian Revolution, brother of Félix de Merode, member of the Provisional Government.

A member of the Maison de Merode and involved from September 1830 in the bourgeois guard, which he helped to finance, he left Brussels in mid-October with Charles Niellon's troop when the Dutch army attacked the city on the run. Their determination forced the Dutch to withdraw to Antwerp, without taking Lierre. Seriously wounded on October 24th at the battle of Berchem, near Antwerp, he died in Mechelen at the house of Madame Op de Beeck ten days later after having been amputated of a leg,

hit by several impacts. The painter Ferdinand de Braekeleer painted *Death of Frederick de Merode*. This painting is in the Museum of Antwerp.

The first member of the Belgian high nobility to fall victim to the fighting, he is considered a national hero by the new authorities. A mausoleum in white marble, the work of the sculptor Guillaume Geefs, which depicts him wounded, is erected for him in one of the side chapels of the Cathedral of Saints Michael and Gudule.



L'opera

There's no waste in the history of this Theatre. The first building was built in 1700 by the Venetians Paolo and Pietro Bezzi, on a piece of land where coins were minted. During the 18th century, it was considered the second opera house in French repertoire after Paris, especially during the government of Prince Alexander of Lorraine, patron of the arts.

By 1795 during the occupation of the forces of the French Revolution, the theatre became a governmental institution, the dance corps was abolished and its importance diminished considerably. When Napoleon visited, he ordered the old building to be replaced by a monumental one built in 1818 by the Frenchman Louis Damesme.

It was here that the Belgian Revolution began on August 25, 1830. It all began during a performance of the opera "*La Mlada de Portici*" (by Daniel-François Auber) forbidden by King William III. The

audience, moved by the duet "Amour Sacré de la Patrie" (Sacred Love of the Homeland), took to the streets to push the Dutch out of the city, triggering the beginning of a movement that would lead to Belgium's independence from Holland.

Rarely in history has an opera been the spark that provokes a revolution, so it is interesting to tell a little about the plot of this work. The opera is loosely based on Masaniello's historic uprising against the Spanish government in Naples in 1647. A historical wink, as the Spaniards also occupied Belgium and in 1830 it was the Dutch who did the same.



It was in Act II that the spirits rose. The story that was represented was the following one: The Neapolitan fishermen had lamented the tyranny in silence. Masaniello is furious because of Fenella's seduction by the Spanish governor of the city and swears to take revenge. Then Masaniello incites the fishermen to take up arms and swear the doom of their country's enemy. The words of the opera that provoked the revolution were:

Amour sacré de la patrie

Rends-nous l'audace et la fierté

A mon pays je dois la vie

Il me devra sa liberté

Mieux vaut mourir

Que rester misérable.

Pour un esclave est-il quelque danger ?

Tombe le joug que nos accable.

Et sous nos coups

Périssent l'étranger

Amour Sacré de la Patrie

Give us boldness and pride

To my country I owe my life

And he will owe me his freedom

It's better to die

That to live miserable

Is there any danger to a slave?

May the yoke that overwhelms us fall

And under our blows

Die the foreigner.

On January 21, 1855, a fire destroyed the theatre, leaving only the portico and the exterior walls intact. The new building built by José Poelaert was inaugurated in 1856. In 1985, the room was modernised and restored its original colours.

