

COREMANS, Paul Bernard Joseph Maria
Born: April 29, 1908 – Borgerhout (near Antwerp)
Died: June 11, 1965 – Noorden (NL)

At the start of the First World War his father, postmaster of Borgerhout (near Antwerp) flees with his wife and five children to England. Paul, the eldest, picks up his first notions of English at a primary school in Wales (Abergele); the next stop of the family is Le Havre (France), seat of the Belgian government in exile. On their return to Belgium in 1918, Paul starts his secondary studies at the Koninklijk Atheneum of Antwerp and enrolls at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB – The Free University of Brussels) where he obtains his bachelor's degree of chemistry in 1927. He becomes research assistant and in 1932 he promotes as PhD Science; his mentor is Professor Alexander Pinkus (1891-1945), head of the department of analytical chemistry at the ULB.

After spending a year at the *Carbochimique de Tertre* plant, he accepts the proposal of the egyptologist Jean Capart (1877-1947), curator of the *Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis* (Royal Museum of Art and History) who intends to set up a laboratory to trace archaeological falsifications. Capart welcomes Paul Coremans who not only is fluent in English, French, Dutch and slightly less in German but who idealistically prefers a less remunerated appointment to a well paid job at a factory. In 1934 Coremans becomes head of the photographic laboratory which checks the authenticity and condition of the conservation of the Egyptian collections.

As more and more museums and churches seek his advice a central laboratory is set up. In 1935 he publishes a study on the control of the humidity in musea.

With Capart he undertakes a trip to the USA as members of the “Commission for Relief in Belgium” and as “Special Advanced Fellow of the Belgian American Educational Foundation”. He shows interest in the laboratory of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, led by Rutherford J. Gettens (1900-1947) and George Stout, respectively a pioneer in the conservation of the art heritage and conservator and lecturer later to become a leading figure in the MFAA-section (Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives) created for the restitution of looted treasures in WWII; in 1946 Coremans becomes a member of the MFAA.

Between 1936 and 1939 Paul Coremans studies metallography and technology of metals at the ULB (professor Warnant), spectrography at the University of Liège (professor Pol Swings) and the history of Flemish paintings in the 15th century (professor emeritus George Hulin de Loo).

As part of the initiative to promote higher education for the people he lectures on the role of the laboratory in tracing falsifications. This lecture partly sets out the task and the program of the in 1957 created “*Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium*” (KIK).

Since 1928 he is an associated member of the “*Société Chimique de Belgique*” and becomes an active member in 1932. Since the founding in 1939 Coremans is member of the “*Vlaamse Chemische Vereniging*”. In 1943 he delivers a lecture on the metallographic analysis of a medieval silver shrine that was severely damaged during the bombardments and fire of the church in Nijvel in May 1940. In cooperation with Eduard Bontinck (1909-1996) he publishes a paper on the study of paintings.

In 1942 Paul is appointed to the board of the “*Koninklijke Musea*” and becomes its head together with the ethnologist Henri Lavachery (1885-1972).

During the Second World War, professor Stan Leurs requests Coremans to organize a campaign to make a photographic record of the Belgian monuments and works of art. The Gevaert Company supplies the necessary sensitive materials. A number of young people are

kept away from obligatory work in Germany by contributing to the registration between 1940 and 1945 of roughly 160.000 photographs.

Already in 1940 Coremans and his future wife Maria Janssens organize a safe house for escaped British flyers and students of the ULB. He is active in rescue operations after the bombardments of Tournai and Nijvel. He is officially recognized as an active member of the Resistance.

After the Second world War Coremans and Emile Langui (1903-1980) are appointed by the government to track down the masterpieces looted by the Germans in Bruges and Leuven. This leads to cooperation between Harold J. Plenderleith (1898-1997) and Ian G. Rawlins (1895-1969), respectively in charge of the departments of conservation at the British Museum and the National Gallery. Coremans becomes member of the MFAA under the general direction of an army officer George Stout. Other Belgians are: Paul Baudouin, Paul Broerman, Raymond Lemaire and Leo Van Puyvelde.

On January 1, 1946 Coremans becomes head of the Central Iconographic Archive of National Art and the Central Laboratory of the Belgian Museums.

In 1949 Coremans, professor Herman Bouchery (1912-1959) and Jacques Lavalley (1900-1974) establish the *Nationaal Centrum voor Navorsing van de Vlaamse Primitieven*. Coremans delivers a lecture about the restoration of Van Eyck's famous Ghent altarpiece "*Lam Gods*" (The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb) in New York and at the Oberlin College in Ohio (Incidentally, this painting was also looted by Hermann Göring, discovered by the MFAA-team at the Altaussee salt mine and carefully wrapped returned to Belgium).

The Van Meegeren Affair

In the Austrian salt mine of Aussee, among the collection of works of art stolen by the Nazi marshal Herman Göring, an unknown painting presumed by J. Vermeer (1632-1675) is discovered: the Dutch painter Han Van Meegeren (1889-1947) admits having forged and even created "*The Emmaüsangers*". The painting is so masterly forged that most specialists are deceived. The Dutch government sets up an enquiry led by Coremans. Van Meegeren is questioned and condemned to a prison sentence preferring a short stay in jail for forging "an artist's signature" to the death penalty for dealing with the enemy; however, he dies before purging his sentence.

The Dutch ship-owner Daniel Van Beuningen owns a number of Vermeers, purchased at exuberant prices. When Coremans publishes in 1949 "*Van Meegeren's faked Vermeers and De Hooghs: a Scientific Examination*", the art dealer Jean Decoen of Knokke (Belgium) who is also implicated in dealings with Van Beuningen, takes legal proceedings against Coremans. After seven years, the judges pronounce the accusations of Decoen/Van Beuningen unfounded but the controversy and the mud-slinging against Coremans remain. In 1964 the Secretary for Education Victor Larock (1904-1977) decrees to convene a new jury to settle the dispute Coremans/Decoen. Due to the death of Coremans in 1965 the jury must not take further actions because it concerns a lawsuit against a deceased person. The final verdict falls in 1968 after tests of radioactive dating of the lead pigments show a still measurable radioactivity proving that the pigments in Van Meegeren's paintings are only a few decennia and certainly not 200 years old! (The half-life of $^{82}\text{Pb}^{210}$ is 21 years)

Before the outcome of the legal proceedings Coremans already has planned a series of lectures in the USA about the techniques used in tracing how Van Meegeren proceeds.

Coremans is appointed professor in 1948 at the H.I.K.O., the Higher Institute of the History of Art and Archaeology of the University of Ghent to lecture about the techniques of visual arts. The creation of and the interest for this new branch as a useful scientific support and help in

judging the niceties of the creation of visual art open new perspectives about the conservation, restoration and possible falsifications. His lectures include the principles of chemistry and what X-rays and photography (IR, UV and the incidence of light) reveal.

The ACL and the KIK

Coremans restructures the ACL (Central Archives of the national Art Treasures and Central Laboratories the Belgian Museums.... abridged "ACL"!). He creates three departments: a physical and microchemical laboratory (staffed by scientists), a photographic archive (with archaeologists and art historians) and a department of conservation. In August 1947 the ACL becomes the KIK/IRPA (Institute for the Art Patrimony). It brings together art historians, photographers, chemists, physicists and restorers to coordinate the inventory, the study and the conservation of the Belgian art treasures and is also open to foreign students (Brussels Art Seminars). The first *Bulletin* of the KIK is published in 1958. After the first stone is laid in May 1959, the new building is inaugurated on December 20, 1952. One of the first tasks is the restoration of Rubens' "*Descent from the Cross*".

The international authority of Coremans

Within the scope of the newly founded UNESCO (1945), Coremans becomes the instigator of the International Council of Museums and remains its secretary-general from 1955 till 1958.

In 1950 he launches with Plenderleith, Rawlins and Stout the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (ICC), where from 1955 till his death he plays a leading role. Under the auspices of the UNESCO, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) is established (The Rome Centre) and Coremans becomes its president in 1965. In 1964 Coremans is associated with the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

Within those organizations, Coremans strives to involve the Third World and its cultural heritage. In 1956 he becomes a consultant for the cultural heritage of Indonesia; as a result the Belgian government grants a scholarship to an Indonesian student.

Coremans travels all over the world. His reports draw the attention to the decay of monuments due to the materials and the climate (the rainfall, the relative humidity, wind, sandstorms and salt). In 1967 a manual is published posthumously: "*The Conservation of Cultural Property: with special Reference to Tropical Conditions*". The deterioration of pieces of art is a specific problem in function of the climate, the insects and the lack of an experienced staff. Therefore a schedule is started to train the local specialists locally. A first test for English and French-speaking trainees is set up in Jos in northern Nigeria, because there is a fine museum.

Coremans is showered with honours. He is an honorary member of the British Museum Association. Mexico has a *Centro de Estudios para la Conservacion de Bienes Culturales 'Paul Coremans'*. The University of Delaware has a special institution for the schooling of art curators.

He publishes 130 papers, including 5 books.

Coremans is due to present his last article about the formation and revaluation of restorers on the occasion of the three-yearly meeting of ICOM. Unfortunately, he succumbs to a fatal heart-attack in Netherland.

Janssens de Bisthoven, a co-worker of Paul Coremans is forever grateful for what he taught him: to be an unselfish person in the service of the community to strive to bring art to a higher level.