

wallonia and brussels

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SWEET SUCCESS

**PIERRE MARCOLINI IS NAMED
THE WORLD'S BEST PASTRY CHEF**

- Ludus makes presentations perfect
- Meet the digital companies having a global impact

© Jean-Louis Wertz



Editorial

Neurobiologist Sophie Laguesse (pictured above) drew on academic experience in the US to extend her research into the brain and the effects of alcohol addiction. Now, as the beneficiary of two grants – from home and abroad – she is focused on understanding how early binge-drinking impacts adult behaviour.

Gaining experience on the international stage is key for many companies in the region, which is why the Wallonia Export-Investment Agency (AWEX) supports and encourages local firms to grow globally. In this issue we meet some of the success stories in the digital sector who are pitching their diverse products and services abroad, along with some of Wallonia’s pharma, biotech and IT specialists who share their investment and innovation news.

With the Covid-19 pandemic affecting every area of our lives, WAB looks at how tourism and cultural associations are adapting. The restaurant sector has also been particularly hard hit. Nevertheless, a clutch of local chefs have been awarded for their culinary skills, including world-renowned chocolate maestro Pierre Marcolini, who tells us what his latest prize means to him. On that positive note and looking ahead to 2021, we would like to wish all our readers a happy and healthy new year.

Wallonia and Brussels - Contact

www.wallonia.be
www.wbi.be



Editor Sarah Crew

Deputy editor Sally Tipper

Reporters Nick Amies, Lisa Bradshaw, Andy Furniere, Tomáš Miklica, Ian Mundell, Sarah Schug

Art director Liesbet Jacobs

Managing director Hans De Loore

AWEX/WBI and Ackroyd Publications

Pascale Delcomminette – AWEX/WBI

Marie-Catherine Duchêne

AWEX, Place Saintelette 2, 1080 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: 00.32(0)2.421.85.76 **Fax:** 00.32(0)2.421.83.93

Email: mc.duchene@awex.be

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Cover: Macaroons by Pierre Marcolini

LIÈGE COMPANY SET TO MAKE COVID-19 VACCINE FOR US BIOTECH GROUP

Wallonia's biotech, pharmaceutical and medical sector continues to make a significant contribution to the global fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. Liège biomedicine specialist Eurogentec – a subsidiary of the Japanese firm Kaneka – signed an agreement in December with US group Inovio to manufacture its Covid-19 candidate vaccine at its state-of-the-art production unit.

Inovio has assembled a global coalition of partners and funders to rapidly advance the development of the DNA vaccine. President and CEO Dr J Joseph Kim said: "Our partnership with Kaneka Eurogentec, one of the world's largest and most experienced plasmid manufacturers, provides additional scale to our growing global manufacturing coalition. Kaneka Eurogentec will be a crucial member of Inovio's global manufacturing consortium, supporting our plans to produce, manufacture and scale our Covid-19 candidate, INO-4800."

In 2010, former Liège University spin-off Eurogentec became part of Kaneka Corporation, a large Japanese chemical company focusing on technology and innovation. As the world leader in DNA plasmid, it has been developing and manufacturing gene and cell therapies for 15 years. DNA plasmid is the active pharmaceutical ingredient of DNA vaccines and is the key starting material of mRNA, which is among the new generation of vaccines.

To boost vaccine production, Kaneka Eurogentec plans to recruit 80 new employees for its unit at the Sart-Tilman Science Park in Seraing, near Liège. Eurogentec also recently joined forces with the Duve Institute department at UCLouvain to develop a joint research group on bacteria. The partnership aims to improve the treatment of cancers, infectious diseases, diabetes and genetic diseases using biopharmaceuticals.

eurogentec.com



Tournai style seen on Paris streets

Tournai design firm UrbaStyle counts Paris's La Défense business district among its growing portfolio of public space projects. Large planters surrounded by seating stand at the entrance to its underground car park. The company is also responsible for the storm wall protecting the Belgian resort of Blankenberge and numerous urban structures, from play areas to tactile paving tiles that aid visually impaired people using public transport.

urbastyle.com

FOUR-STAR HOTEL AND TOP RESTAURANT OPEN IN HAN-SUR-LESSE CAVES DOMAIN

Visitors to one of Wallonia's prime tourist sites, the Domain of the caves of Han – scheduled to reopen on 13 February – now have the option of an overnight stay with the autumn opening of the adjacent 117-room four-star Mercure hotel.

A tourist train links the hotel with the domain in the village of Han-sur-Lesse in the Ardennes in Luxembourg province. The project is a collaboration between Unibricks and franchise partner Accor. Michelin-star chef Benoît Dewitte and his brother Bernard have opened a restaurant, Merlesse, in the hotel.



© Idrisse Hidara



GAULT & MILLAU AWARDS FOR LOCAL CHEFS

Liège artisan Benoît Nihant has been named Wallonia’s chocolatier of the year 2021 by gastronomic bible Gault & Millau. Nihant, a former engineer, launched his business from a garage at his parents’ home 15 years ago.

Christophe Pauly of Les Coq aux Champs (pictured above) was awarded the accolade of chef of the year 2021. The Michelin-star chef has managed his restaurant in the Liège province village of Soheit-Tinlot for the past 17 years. “Christophe Pauly works with the best ingredients, frequently from the Walloon region, and as a NorthSeaChef, he opts for our fishermen’s best catch,” said Gault & Millau’s Belux director, Marc Declerck. “Like all the best chefs, he attests to his creativity and technical skills by surprising us with exceptional desserts, light, airy or fun. Finesse and a perfect balance in his dishes are two recurring characteristics of his style.”

Other notable mentions included Bon Bon in Woluwe-Saint-Pierre, which retained the best restaurant in Brussels award. Among the young chefs of the year were Stefan Jacobs (Hors Champs, Gembloux) for Wallonia and Kevin Lejeune (La Canne en Ville) for Brussels.

FIRST FREIGHT TRAIN FROM CHINESE HUB ARRIVES IN LIÈGE AFTER 17-DAY JOURNEY

The first freight train from Yiwu in eastern China arrived at Liège’s Triligiport on 8 December after a 17-day journey. Creating a new link with the Chinese small commodities hub, one of the largest in the world, the service will run four trains per week. Travelling 12,000km through Central Asia along the mythical Silk Route, the 600m train transported various e-commerce

goods – textiles, hi-fi and spare parts – destined for the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and the UK as well as Belgium.

The new route confirms Liège’s Triligiport as a fully trimodal rail, water and road hub, and links the city’s autonomous port with the global rail network. Transporting goods by train offers a sustainable alternative to air travel. The next challenge is to fill the returning trains to China with European goods and to create 2,000 jobs, direct and indirect, in the next five years.

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BRIEFS

The prestigious **Francqui-Col-len prize** – known as the Belgian Nobel – has been awarded to Cédric Blanpain, laboratory director for cancer and stem cell research and professor of medicine at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. He is the 25th researcher at the university to receive the award. Blanpain has previously received three ERC grants and was named as a researcher to watch by the journal Nature in 2012.

Liège Airport has been named best cargo airport in the world. The Air Cargo News Awards announced the winner via videoconference from a ceremony in London in December. The airport, which specialises in freight, beat Amsterdam Schiphol, Brussels Airport, Anchorage and Hong Kong International Airport.

French electrical equipment distribution company CEBEQ has announced the establishment of a **new 12-hectare distribution centre in Tournai**. Staff currently employed at its current site in Mouscron will move to Tournai, which offers more space for the new sustainable building, in 2023.

Ghent transport company Tailormade Logistics is **increasing its investments in Wallonia** by moving into a 50,000m² space in Gosselies, near Charleroi, on the site of the former Caterpillar factory. The new site will enable the company to diversify its activities to B2C deliveries.

IT specialist **Odoo plans to recruit 1,000 people** worldwide in 2021, following the success of the latest version of its management software launched in the autumn. The Walloon Brabant firm currently employs 500 people in Belgium and the new recruitment drive will double this figure.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT Sophie Laguesse

Neurobiologist Sophie Laguesse is fascinated by the effect drinking alcohol may have on brain development in young people. Her research at the University of Liège recently received a boost with grants from the Fondation Francqui in Belgium and the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation in the US



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Binge drinking in adolescence has an insidious impact on adult behaviour

What attracted you to studying alcohol, addiction and the brain?

I did my PhD on the development of the cortex, the area of the brain responsible for all higher functions, such as thinking and talking. That was OK, but afterwards I wanted to work on something a bit closer to human reality. I've always been interested in addiction, and the idea that a small molecule such as alcohol or nicotine can make you behave recklessly, so when I went to the University of California San Francisco for my post-doc, I chose a lab that worked on alcohol addiction. When I came back to Belgium, I decided to combine the two, and now I work on the effect alcohol has on the maturation of the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the cortex that controls emotion and impulsivity.

How do you go about this?

I've developed a model in which genetically identical mice drink voluntarily. And they drink a lot, the equivalent of binge drinking in humans. It's as if they were drinking five beers in two hours. They drink during their adolescence, which is the equivalent of humans drinking between 13 and 18 years of age. We analyse their behaviour, then look again in late adolescence and in adulthood, so at the human equivalent of 25 and 40.

What have you found so far?

In late adolescence, the mice show no defects in behaviour, but in adulthood there is an increase in anxiety and depressive behaviour, and a decrease in cognitive performance and the ability to adapt to changes in the environment. And there is a huge increase in alcohol addiction. So, while you cannot see an effect at the time, binge drinking alcohol in adolescence has an insidious impact on adult behaviour.

What questions will these grants help you answer?

Now we are trying to understand how alcohol acts on the maturing brain to produce these defects in behaviour. Maturation involves changing the connections between neurons, so we are recording specific subtypes of neurons and looking at their morphology, to better understand how alcohol perturbs this process.

How might your work change how we approach alcohol addiction?

First of all, it helps with prevention. If we can show teenagers that binge drinking will affect them later in life, maybe this will help change their behaviour. Then, if we find out more about the mechanisms of alcohol addiction, maybe we can develop new, better therapies to treat adults.

© Jean-Louis Wertz

Biotech boom

iTeos Therapeutics scales new heights in financial and clinical developments

By Andy Furniere

2020 was an extraordinary year to say the least, but for iTeos Therapeutics it was also an extraordinarily successful one. The Gosselies-founded biotech company, headquartered in Massachusetts in the US, raised a whopping \$335 million, securing the necessary financial resources for the next three years.

iTeos Therapeutics, established in 2012, develops immunotherapy treatments against cancer. Such medical solutions are capable

of boosting the body's natural defences in such a way that they become better at finding and destroying cancer cells. For the moment, the company is working to fine-tune and test two specific treatments. In the next five years, one of those two products should be fully ready to be commercialised, opening it up to a large number of cancer patients."

2020 started very well for iTeos Therapeutics, as the Walloon government provided a recoverable cash advance of €15 million in

January. "The Walloon government has believed in us from the very beginning," says Michel Detheux, CEO of iTeos Therapeutics, from his home in Boston. "Its support has been instrumental in our development throughout the years." In total, the government has offered the company €37 million in subsidies since its start.

At the end of March, the company pulled off an impressive investment round, raising \$125 million. The lead investors were two American investment funds, RA Capital Management and Boxer Capital, but there was also a significant Belgian contribution, amounting to about €18 million. Participating investment funds from Belgium included Fund+ , VIVES Louvain Technology Fund and the public investment funds SRIW and SFPI.

This investment round was the company's preparation for its initial public offering on the American Nasdaq stock market in the summer. At the time, the Covid-19 pandemic was in full force, but that didn't diminish Detheux's confidence. "Of course, the coronavirus crisis caused extra stress and some minor delays, but we were convinced of the interest of investors. We also believed that the healthcare sector in general was a safe haven for investors during this crisis. Many of them decreased their investments in other sectors and turned to, among others, the biotech sector."

Detheux's judgement proved to be right. After its launch on Nasdaq at the end of July, iTeos Therapeutics raised about \$210 million after expenses. "With all our in-



• Michel Detheux



vestments raised in 2020, we have assured the company's financial health for around three additional years."

This funding will to a large extent continue the clinical development of its two major immunotherapy treatments. The first, called EOS-850, is a treatment for patients with solid tumours, which shows promise against melanoma and breast and prostate cancers. In clinical tests, the medication already helped to improve the situation of some cancer patients for whom other treatments didn't work. "We are now organising further clinical trials in different countries, like France, Spain,

the US and South Korea, to ensure we can continue our testing during this pandemic," Detheux says.

Its second product in development, EOS-448, is an innovative immunotherapy treatment that revolves around the TIGIT. This is a kind of built-in brake in the human immune system; by turning off that brake, tumours can be treated better. The American pharmaceutical company Genentech recently confirmed the huge potential of this kind of therapy with positive results in clinical trials of its own product. "This could really be the start of a whole new generation of immu-

notherapy treatments against cancer," says Detheux.

He sees iTeos Therapeutics as part of an entire biotech eco-system in Wallonia that has blossomed in the last decade. "It's thanks to the visionary approach of the Walloon government, with important initiatives such as BioWin, the region's health cluster, and ever more high-profile investors and business angels," he says. "It's fantastic to see that more and more young Walloon biotech companies can harbour the realistic ambition from the start to become world-class players."

iteostherapeutics.com

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This could be the start of a whole new generation of immunotherapy treatments against cancer

Slide rules

A cloud presentation tool by Charleroi start-up Ludus has gained friends in high places

By Tomáš Miklica



• Vincent Battaglia and Lionel Cordier

How many Belgians does it take to create a product interesting enough to catch the eye of a Fortune 500 company? In the case of Ludus the answer is two. CEO Lionel Cordier and CTO Vincent Battaglia built a cloud-based presentation tool that is now integrated with Adobe Creative Cloud Libraries. The collaboration with the American software

giant was announced during the annual Adobe MAX conference in October and it means Ludus joins top IT tools including Google Workspace and Microsoft Teams.

“We’re very honoured that a prominent company like Adobe has decided to work with us,” says Battaglia, a UMONS computer science graduate. “It was incredible to

collaborate with them on this feature and have a behind-the-scenes look at how a major tech conference like Adobe MAX is organised. This collaboration puts us on the map and helps us be taken more seriously. It brought some traction from investors and journalists but, more importantly, it brought traction from potential customers.”



Since 2017 when Ludus was established, more than 2.5 million presentation slides have been created using the tool. With some marketing and engineering help from two local companies, Namur's La niche and Leuven's madewithlove, the cloud tool has amassed thousands of active users with pricing starting at \$14.99 a month. The users are mainly people working in creative agencies, with the rest split between start-ups, freelancers, teachers and students.

"Ludus is more oriented toward creative audiences," Battaglia says. "We wanted to provide a tool that allows limitless possibilities in terms of creation. It has features that you won't usually find in a presentation tool but that you'll find in design tools, like the possibility to build to the pixel, rulers, blend modes, font management or video uploads. This allows designers and non-designers to work together seamlessly. Ludus has everything that both parties need, and the collaboration between them is key for us."

That Ludus is a cloud tool and not a desktop application is also important as it prevents problems with file incompatibility. And with everything accessible online, sending files back and forth or email attachment size limits are not a concern. New and upcoming features include live collaboration, with people working on the same presentation at the same time, or channels – adding the possibility to create subgroups of people with special rights and permissions. By summer 2021, Ludus should also feature Google Drive integration, versioning and animations.



"We have a good idea as to where we want to go ultimately, but our users help us prioritise the steps to get there," says Battaglia. "Their feedback is very important for us. We receive a lot of requests from our support tools but we also have a page where our users can vote on the features they want next."

The integration with Creative Cloud Libraries is in line with the focus on sharing and collaboration as it allows access to different creative elements across the Creative Cloud – Adobe's set of applications and services that includes Photoshop and Illustrator. Thus, for example, the inte-

gration makes it easier to apply brand colours, character styles and graphics to a Ludus presentation.

"The cool thing is that we don't plan to stop here," Battaglia says. "You can expect more collaboration between Ludus and Adobe in the future. We are very ambitious so I would say that only the sky is the limit. Our vision is to help people create great content together. It's not about taking the crown from Microsoft PowerPoint anymore. It's about what presentations will become in the future."

ludus.one

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We are very ambitious so I would say that only the sky is the limit

Cooking with gas

Xylowatt converts biomass into clean gas and green power

By Andy Furniere



Photos courtesy Xylowatt

• The Notar industrial gasifier at Mont-Godinne

With its pioneering technology, Xylowatt turns wood chips into clean gas to generate electricity, heat and cold. The company's innovative biomass gasifier is already working its magic at various locations in Belgium and France, with plans to set up installations in other parts of Europe and in Asia as well. The sustainable energy solution is

well-suited to remote locations, like rural areas and islands.

Xylowatt, based at the scientific park of Louvain-la-Neuve, takes the production of energy from biomass to another level, one that's greener and more efficient. "Gas produced from wood chips is normally quite dirty, as it contains the

chemical compound tar, and requires thorough cleaning," says spokesperson Pierre-David Poskin. "But our gas contains no tar, hence the name Notar."

The company only uses sustainable biomass as a resource. That currently includes natural wood waste, such as branches and highway clean-up waste, and recycled wood from unusable pallets and packaging. "This way, we also solve a waste problem and thus offer a truly circular economy solution," Poskin says. Xylowatt is also looking into the possibility of using other resources, such as plastic waste and sewage sludge.

With its gasifiers, the company can provide electricity, heating and air-conditioning. The technology can provide energy 24 hours a day, seven days a week, unlike renewable energy applications that rely on the natural elements – such as wind and solar power. It also delivers valuable by-products such as biochar, a kind of charcoal that can be used as a fertiliser and in asphalt for road-building. "It's also our ambition to extract hydrogen from our gas, which can be used for mobility and energy storage purposes, for instance."

Thanks to its excellence regarding eco-friendliness and economic viability, Xylowatt's innovation has been selected by the international Solar Impulse Foundation as one of 1,000 solutions worldwide that can protect the environment in a profitable way. The company received the foundation's prestigious quality label for clean and sustainable initiatives in December 2019.



For several years, the Notar technology has been taking care of most of the energy needs of the CHU UCL Mont-Godinne hospital in the Namur province town of Yvoir. In Tournai, meanwhile, Xylowatt set up an installation that is currently being used as a pilot plant on an industrial scale.

The company has also conducted a project in the French Champagne region, where it helped to make Champagne bottles, using wood waste from the grapevines to power a local bottle manufacturer's oven.

These successful projects have raised the interest of companies and local governments in other European countries but also further away, especially in Asia. "Our technology is particularly interesting for remote locations, such as rural areas and islands, which often can't rely on a national energy grid but have local biomass resources in the form of woods," says Poskin.

The company is currently engaged in negotiations with potential clients in Croatia, Slovenia, Indonesia and Japan. "Unfortunately, the Covid crisis has delayed those discussions," Poskin says.



• Natural wood waste is converted into green energy

"Sometimes it's absolutely necessary to visit the locations where installations will be set up, and face-to-face meetings can also make a big difference. For the most part that's not possible at the moment, sadly."

Apart from the pandemic, the company also faces another major challenge on a

global scale. "Natural gas is currently so cheap that it's extremely difficult for us to compete with it," says Poskin. "Thankfully, we receive support from the Walloon government and EU projects, but we hope the EU's Green Deal will help us to really break down this financial barrier."

xylowatt.com

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We solve a waste problem and thus offer a truly circular economy solution

Vital signs

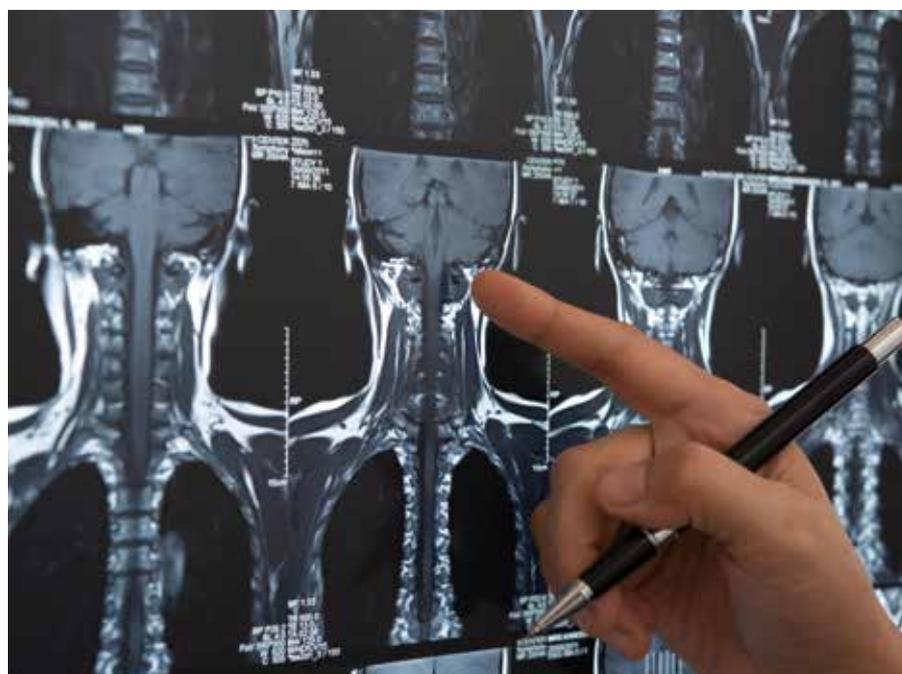
French biotech company Op2Lysis to expand stroke treatment development in Liège

By Nick Amies

Vital work in the future prevention and treatment of cerebrovascular accidents or CVAs – commonly known as strokes – could soon be undertaken in Wallonia. French biotech company Op2Lysis announced plans at the end of 2020 to launch research and development activities in the Liège region within the next six to 12 months.

Strokes remain the second most common cause of death and the predominant cause of disability worldwide. About 20% of all strokes are haemorrhagic, caused by a blood vessel in the brain rupturing and resulting in bleeding either within the brain or between the brain and the skull. In 75% of haemorrhagic stroke cases, the most severe form of CVA, the victim dies or becomes severely disabled.

To date, no treatment exists that can eliminate the bleeding in haemorrhagic stroke cases, and surgery has shown no benefit, which is why company founders Christophe Gaudin and Jérôme Parcq created Op2Lysis in 2016. The French biotechnology start-up, whose main research facility is in the Normandy city of Caen, is currently developing the first drug treatment for haemorrhagic stroke. It intends to expand its activities into Wallonia to connect with other companies and increase its chances of success. Op2Lysis has already subcontracted certain activities to companies in Liège.



© Getty Images/Utah778

“Regarding our plans in Wallonia, we will settle down in the Liège area to establish our development activities and extend our team and resources to prepare for the clinical phase,” said CEO Gaudin. “The research activity will remain in France, which allows us to be closely linked with the INSERM public research unit where the treatment was originally developed. We will, in this way, optimise our progress by benefitting from the two ecosystems in both countries and regions.”

Op2Lysis recently announced that it had raised more than €1 million to help move O2L-001, the drug treatment it is developing, closer to the clinical phase. The

funding was raised in association with Noshaq, a Liège-based investment company, and BeAngels, a Belgian start-up support organisation.

Op2Lysis is already preparing an ‘A-series’ first venture capital fund-raising campaign to carry out the actual clinical trials that will establish the efficacy, safety and clinical benefits of O2L-001, a thrombolytic which liquefies the intracerebral haematoma efficiently and safely. The company hopes to be able to launch clinical trials within 18 months.

op2lysis.com



Global players

From swimming pools and wine dispensers to sports and voice technology, Wallonia's digital pioneers are at home abroad

By Ian Mundell

• Blue Connect by Riio Labs

© Aurelien Lacroix

Some of Wallonia's digital companies are born global, while others have made a conscious decision to move onto the world stage. For those who make the leap, new horizons open up, with greatly expanded possibilities for growth and development.

Thinking of taking a business abroad can involve a major step outside a company's comfort zone. "Sometimes our companies, and in particular our start-ups, don't have enough self-confidence," says Guy Vanpaesschen, digital and media expert at the Wallonia Export-Investment Agency (AWEX). "They are unsure what they can

demonstrate at a trade show in Shenzhen or Las Vegas, they think it isn't interesting, but they should trust in their products or services."

It is AWEX's job to support them. "We try to offer them a toolkit that will help them succeed in the market abroad." This can mean coaching them in how best to pitch their products and services to potential international partners, or offering more tangible aid. "We also have financial incentives to help them establish themselves in a market, for example to set up an office in the US, in Canada or in China."

Specifically for digital companies, the agency

works with partners in the region on Digital Wallonia International. Vanpaesschen: "The goal of this project is to expand exports by developing more trade shows, and by developing the Digital Wallonia Hub network."

This network comprises contact points in the 10 most interesting digital ecosystems around the world, from San Francisco to Shenzhen, from Tel Aviv to Singapore. "These hubs are there to help our companies get into the local markets, a door they can pass through," Vanpaesschen explains.

The move into export can be particularly daunting for companies making consumer products, or serving markets where the



• Invineo

consumer is just a step away. Trade shows such as the CES (formerly the Consumer Electronics Show) in Las Vegas offer them a chance to test the market and find important media coverage.

Invineo, from Andenne, made the journey in 2020 with its smart wine dispenser, designed for restaurants, bars and hotels. This can serve several wines at the same time, keeping each at the ideal temperature, elegantly serving pre-defined measures to bar staff or directly to customers. “It might look like a simple product, but in fact it’s a connected object, with a lot of advanced technology inside,” says Vanpaesschen.

The device collects data on the wine consumed and makes sure that stocks are maintained. Meanwhile the company curates

a list of 40-60 wines, varying according to market, season and consumer patterns. Attending CES announced the company to the large American market and attracted the interest of a number of potential investors.

Another company conceived in Wallonia that made its mark at CES is Linedock, which has developed docking stations for Apple laptops. These sleek units sit under the laptop, providing additional battery power and all the ports and connections you could possibly want.

Co-founders Nancy De Fays and Quentin Malgaud first attended CES in 2019 as complete neophytes. “We knew no one and very few people knew about Linedock,” says Malgaud. “But distributors from all around the world came to our booth and requested



• IntoPIX

price lists and spec sheets to bring Linedock to their local markets.” They also met all the big players for the first time.

The young entrepreneurs returned to CES in 2020 with new products and more experience. They met with more contacts, including people who had backed the company with crowdfunding, and talked to the press.

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Sometimes companies, in particular start-ups, don’t have enough self-confidence



Along the way they picked up two Best in Show awards from influential online media covering the event.

CES also helped Riio Labs, which attended the show in 2017 and was nominated for one of the event's innovation awards for its Blue swimming pool monitoring system. A sensor collects data on the water quality, telling owners or maintenance companies the temperature, acidity, saltiness and chlorine levels. This information is delivered directly to an app, letting them know when something needs to be done to keep the pool in top condition.

Later that year, following an appearance at the Piscine Global trade fair in Lyon,

Riio Labs was taken over by the Spanish pool company Fluidra. Its Blue system has subsequently been sold across Europe, in Australia and the US. A dedicated research and development unit continues to operate in Liège.

In some sectors of the economy, a company can only exist if it is present on the global stage. This is the case for broadcast technology, where Wallonia has a number of highly successful companies. These include EVS Group, headquartered in Seraing, which specialises in live video technology, such as slow-motion and instant replay for sports broadcasting. It also makes a video assistant referee system that has been adopted by football leagues in Spain, Brazil, Korea and

Denmark, and is used around the world in other sports such as rugby and basketball.

Then there is IntoPIX of Mont-Saint-Guibert, which provides video processing and image compression technology to the broadcast and cinema industries. "In the broadcast sector IntoPIX is widely recognised for its technology, but it has a much lower profile in Wallonia," says Vanpaesschen. "Like a number of companies, it had to go abroad to win recognition."

Another sector that naturally looks abroad is health, and Wallonia's thriving biomedical sector has nurtured a number of innovative e-health companies. Oncomfort, based in Wavre, has developed a virtual reality method for relieving patients' pain and anxiety before, during and after medical procedures. This is done by a combination of hypnotherapeutic scripts and immersive sounds that play through a virtual reality headset, dissociating patients from their pain and anxiety.

The method was launched in the Benelux and France in 2019. Since then some 30,000 patients have used it, for procedures in oncology, cardiology, radiology and paediatrics.



atrics (it can be used by children as young as six). It is also designed to be international, with sessions already available in 12 languages.

Oncomfort's international career sped up during 2020, with a funding round that brought in €10 million in new investment, followed by a distribution deal with medical equipment company Vygon. This will see the product widely distributed in France, the UK, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Italy during 2021.

"We are at a tipping point in our digital therapy," said chief executive Mario Huyghe, after the investment round was announced. "With this funding, we will accelerate our product

development with a broader engineering team and invest in international expansion."

A digital health company with applications outside the clinic is Phasya, a spin-off from the University of Liège that specialises in detecting an individual's physiological and cognitive state. This can be applied in products that check car drivers and airline pilots for drowsiness, or that monitor the fitness of workers operating heavy machinery.

At the beginning of 2019 Phasya raised €1 million to expand its business, and in the summer of the same year won a vote of confidence from the European Association of Automotive Suppliers, which gave it an innovation award. While the pandemic has

slowed down research and development, its international plans got a boost recently with an invitation to return to the Plug and Play Japan accelerator programme in 2021.

Artificial intelligence (AI) will certainly inform Phasya's future development, and is already driving some of the region's most internationally focused digital companies. It is the core business of AerospaceLab, based in Mont-Saint-Guibert, which raised €11 million during 2019 to develop a constellation of Earth observation satellites and the AI systems to turn their data into commercial applications.

Meanwhile, the Acapela Group has started to employ AI in its business designing dig-

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These hubs are there to help our companies get into the local markets



• Acapela



• Oncomfort

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Distributors from all around the world came to our booth

ital voices, for example for public address systems or devices that need to speak. This business is already international, including voices in more than 30 languages and increasingly reflecting the regional and ethnic diversity in each market.

AI has been particularly useful in My-own-voice, the company’s online service that offers individuals diagnosed with speech or language disorders the possibility to create their own digital voice. The digital voice retains the timbre, accent and intonation that makes up their vocal identity, allowing them to keep speaking as themselves as their natural voice deteriorates.

Initially launched in 2015, the use of AI in the latest version means that only 50 sentences of someone’s voice are needed to create a digital version, rather than 350 sentences previously. This dramatically decreases the burden for people who may already have trouble speaking or concentrating for long periods of time.

Another example is EVS, which has built AI into its video referee system. This automatically calibrates the field of play in football matches and produces a virtual offside line in real-time. Its system was recently accredited by Fifa, football’s governing body.

AI is also high on the agenda of the Wallonia Export-Investment Agency. “We want to encourage the artificial intelligence sector to go abroad after the pandemic is over,” says Vanpaesschen, “so we are explaining to them what happens in other ecosystems abroad, and where they might fit in.”

This means approaching markets such as the US and China that are investing immense amounts in AI. “That makes it harder, but there are opportunities, for example by developing projects together, by combining the strengths of our companies with theirs.”



• Preview of the film *Calamity, une enfance de Martha Hane Canary* with director Rémi Chaye.

Eye on the world

Non-profit Les Grignoux looks to the future of arthouse cinema beyond the current crisis

By Sarah Crew

While mainstream movies don't always lack artistry or intelligence, arthouse films represent some of the finest ever made. In Wallonia, the non-profit Les Grignoux has been a tireless promoter of the genre for the past 40 years.

As cinemas across the country end a disastrous year with yet more closures due to Covid-19, it is poignant to look at how the Liège association fulfils a key role in the region's cultural and social economy, champions local cinema and community life and defends independent cinema.

Les Grignoux positions cinema as a powerful vehicle for culture and education. The association consists of the Parc, Churchill and Sauvenière cinemas in Liège and the Caméo in Namur – a total of 13 screens. It shows world cinema in the original language with subtitles in French and Dutch, offering cinemagoers an unparalleled view of the world, with the focus on quality new releases.

These screenings are the focus for a rich programme that highlights the region's flourishing film industry, community associations and schools, as well as local

artists and musicians. The collective experience of watching a film is harnessed as a positive event beyond the benefits to mental health. Cafes at the Parc and Caméo cinemas and a brasserie at Sauvenière, serving locally sourced artisan food and drink, enhance the experience.

Rebuilding Les Grignoux's relationship with its audience is one of the main challenges for 2021, says programmer Catherine Lemaire. "We need to give them the desire to return to cinemas, screening films that fit our mission, and continuing to animate our venues with director talks,



© Les Grignoux

invited guests and debates; everything that adds spice to a place like ours.”

Maintaining a steady financial course is another priority after the closures and losses in 2020. Though support packages have been available, financial losses have been important and the association has been drawing on its 2019 profits to weather the crisis. “We can cope with a difficult year because the non-profit has been well-managed since its start, but the consequences will be felt for a number of years and that’s the challenge,” Lemaire says.

She is concerned about the future of

cinema and the arts sector as a whole. “Culture has been badly damaged by the crisis, relegated to the background at best, although it is an economic sector that employs more than 200,000 people.” She points out that it has an essential role in society, essential to the development of critical thinking and of individuals. “The crisis within the cultural sector should push us to question ourselves in the long term about the type of society we want,” she adds.

The backing of audiences and film fans has helped Lemaire and her colleagues through this dark period. “We’ve received

an enormous amount of support from the public, which has been extremely encouraging,” she says. “Over the summer, we offered our lowest prices, plus a voluntary higher rate. A quarter of all tickets were sold at this higher solidarity price.”

Looking ahead, she thinks it will take two or three years to return to the same audience figures as before the crisis. “And to do that, we must also reinvent ourselves, because the balance between producers, distributors and cinema theatres has been considerably weakened.”

grignoux.be

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The consequences will be felt for a number of years and that’s the challenge



Rural retreat

Escape the crowds and head to a hideaway in Wallonia's spectacular countryside

By Sarah Crew

As winter draws in, what could be more appealing than running away for a few days or more to an idyllic spot in the south of Belgium?

For a slice of country life – whatever the weather – Gîtes et Chambres d'hôtes de Wallonie offers a selection of more than 900 homes to rent all year round. With its portfolio of cottages, B&Bs, cosy cabins and quirky retreats, the site will help you find the perfect base for frosty rambles through rolling hills, river valleys, leaf-strewn woodlands or wild forests.

With travel abroad remaining largely off-limits, many Belgians are exploring life in the slow lane and opting for a back-to-nature break. "It's possible to get away close to home and discover or rediscover the country," says Khevyn Torres, spokesperson for the site.

"We always think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence and that we know our own region, but we're often less familiar with it than some tourists from abroad."

The welcome provided by owners and the personal tips they pass on are among the major selling points for the accommodation platform, he says. "They serve as ambassadors for the region and share many off-the-beaten path local addresses and highlights." While restrictions on the number of guests – a family bubble plus one other close contact – have meant some owners of large self-catering properties have had to cancel reservations, the sector has otherwise reported good business in 2020. Guests can also be reassured by the Covid safety measures in place. "We guarantee the safety protocols; there's no contact with other people," Torres says.

Set up as an association in 1989, its website was modernised before the arrival of the pandemic. Proposing accommodation according to categories and classifications of comfort, it also facilitates the search by suggesting themed stays. These include wellness, ecological, child- and pet-friendly, waterside, farm and woodland stays, as well as fishing and cycling destinations. Rural homes dominate the offer, but there are some more urban addresses, principally in cities with a tradition of tourism, like Liège, Namur, Mons or Tournai, plus picturesque towns and villages such as Durbuy and Rochefort.

While some people may be looking for a digital detox, the site's latest theme – reflecting the unexpected 2020 trend – is places for homeworking that remain definitely on-grid.



© Vivian Hertz



© Marie Christine Levaux

One of the biggest draws to the site is that visitors can be confident of the quality and high standards of each property and inspections by expert teams. Property owners are subject to strict selection criteria, explains Torres. These include authorisation from Wallonia's tourism commission, receiving site visits to obtain a classification – ranging from basic to exceptional comfort – agreeing to welcome guests in person and signing up to a charter.

“No properties can be part of our quality label and be promoted by our network without meeting these conditions,” he says. Since the site's latest makeover, owners have also been given a higher profile to personalise each property, “showing how the people behind them have a story”.

The emergence of unregulated sites such as Airbnb has brought competition. Torres:

“Not all the accommodation on those platforms are in order, particularly in terms of fire safety, and they do not pay taxes or declare rental income.” But on the upside, “we attract a different audience and we offer a quality experience that comes with a price,” he says.

gitesdewallonie.be

- ❶ La Cabine, Bioul (Anhée)
- ❷ Welcoming breakfast at Dimensions M, Corbais (Mont-Saint-Guibert)
- ❸ Villa Balat, Namur
- ❹ Le Jardin des Secrets, Namur
- ❺ Au Plaisir, Hastière
- ❻ Wooden staircase, Villa Thérèse, Soignies
- ❼ Au Bouquet de Somme, near Durbuy

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It's possible to get away close to home and discover or rediscover the country

Best bar none

We meet chocolatier Pierre Marcolini, officially the world's best pastry chef

By Tomáš Miklica



© Nicolas Buisson

• Charleroi-born chocolatier Pierre Marcolini



Pierre Marcolini today is as much a brand as he is a person. He was born in 1964 in Charleroi. And his patisserie empire was born 31 years later when the first atelier opened in Kraainem. The Maison now has more than 40 stores around the world, it employs 250 people and, under normal circumstances, 60 artisans would be busy at the Haren atelier in northern Brussels, creating chocolate tablets, truffles, macarons, jams and other sweet treats. Marcolini himself remains the chief artisan, always pushing for the highest quality and being widely recognised for it. His latest accolade came during the virtual World Pastry Stars event in October, when he was named the Best Pastry Chef in the World.



“To receive such a tribute from independent journalists as well as from the greatest chefs and confectioners is a real honour,” he says. “It’s a reward for the whole Maison and for the committed effort of all my co-workers. This award means a lot to me, especially in the time of Covid.”

Like many other businesses, his company had to close stores in spring, focusing solely on the e-shop. When Belgium’s second lockdown came later in the year, some shops remained open but without the usual demand from tourists. Despite the tough year, Marcolini is set on exploring the craft further, looking for ways of making it even more enticing to customers. Recent projects include La Manufacture des Biscuits at Place du Grand Sablon in Brussels with an artisan on site creating biscuits and chocolate coatings. And then there is a boutique atelier in Antwerp, focusing on new chocolate tablets.

“We will be working with new cocoa beans, organic beans from Madagascar, Sao Tome, India, Bali and China exclusively at this store,” Marcolini says. “Our customers will be able to see the entire production ‘from bean to bar’ in the presence of a master chocolatier.”

Marcolini decided to make his own chocolate directly from raw cocoa beans in 2001, after a new European directive came into force. The Chocolate Directive allowed the addition of up to 5-10% of vegetable fats other than cocoa butter in chocolate. Marcolini found this inconceivable, and since then he has been working with plantations all around the world.



Aware of their significance, Maison Pierre Marcolini pays the growers up to three times the market price so that they can send their children to school and invest in their plantation. Since 2019, both sides have also been bound by an eco-ethical charter – the agreement prohibits child labour, bans the use of glyphosate-based herbicides and excludes

beans from the CCN-51 cocoa tree. To Marcolini, gathering exceptional raw materials and mastering the bean-to-bar process are the key steps in making a perfect chocolate.

“It is also important to master the different stages of production, such as the roasting stage,” he says. “Your cocoa beans can be the best in the world but the result won’t be of the best quality unless you have complete control over all the stages.” Marcolini’s plan is to one day open a school and pass his knowledge on to future generations. Not only would he teach the complexities of bean-to-bar chocolate making, but the school would also be about cultivating one’s taste in order to recognise a good product and encouraging the audacity to pursue new flavours.

“Chocolate must cause an explosion of flavours,” Marcolini says. “Perfect chocolate is the chocolate that leaves a long-lasting taste in your mouth. It transports you and makes you dream.”

eu.marcolini.com



“ This award means a lot to me, especially in the time of Covid

The future of fashion

Brussels-based brand communications expert Vaya Sigmas outlines the effects of Covid on the industry

By Sarah Schug



• Vaya Sigmas

Vaya Sigmas manages her own advisory office and creative studio in the fields of fashion, luxury, lifestyle and design. Her job is somewhere between creative director, brand communications strategist and digital marketing advisor, helping her clients develop digital strategies, strengthen their image and, ultimately, grow their brand equity. In May, Brussels-based Sigmas published a white paper offering advice on how to get through the pandemic, which has had an impact on the fashion industry as a whole.

In the fashion industry there is talk of an existential crisis – do you agree?

Yes, as the second most polluting sector of activity, there is a need for fashion companies and the industry at large to reconsider how they do everything, from A to Z. This year, the pandemic has shed more light on the unsustainability of the speed-to-market strategy, on the waste of material, on the high pollution impact of garment production and on the high environmental costs of the fashion industry lifestyle, flying around the world from meeting to event. The virus is not the trigger, it has only been an accelerator for global change, a catalyst. When everything shut down last March, all these aspects of the industry came under scrutiny. Everything is being questioned and new approaches are being tested.



So the pandemic could have a positive impact on the fashion world?

There's a bright side to it. There are now fundamental shifts taking place, which can turn into new habits. The crisis has indeed emphasised the need to move towards more responsible ways of working at all levels of the value chain. Most fashion shows were broadcast live on the internet this year and many brands have questioned the unsustainability of the fashion calendar. Gucci, for instance, decided to downsize from five to two seasonless shows per year. Trade shows are now taking place on virtual platforms, using 360° video technology, as well as 3D models. The resale market also rose as a major 2020 trend among all players, from luxury to mass-market. So, one way and another, it is an exciting time.

How are local designers faring?

Fortunately, none of my clients have had

to close down. There have been issues of access to production lines, especially when located outside Europe. Obviously, those who had already undergone digitalisation were more resilient and better prepared when the first lockdown occurred. Yet I tend to observe that Belgian brands, especially designer brands, are already pretty resilient because of their business model that requires flexibility, creativity and smaller stocks. Since early spring, I have also received a lot more questions regarding digital communications and being more efficient online. Many also told me they were using this period of cancelled events to rethink their brand identity and their value proposition. So another bright side might well be a boost in creativity.

What is the white paper about?

This white paper is part of our Insights & Recommendations studies that we publish and present. This particular paper

aimed to make fashion and luxury businesses more resilient in the face of the Covid disruption. It consists of digest insights, highlighting shifts in consumer behaviour, and advice on responding to them from a marketing and communication perspective.

The idea of producing it, and distributing it freely, came to me after calls with clients who wanted to shift the topic of the coaching sessions to dealing with the Covid crisis. The answer was easy: "stick to the plan". Going digital isn't an option anymore, it's a must.

Digitalisation, omni-channel marketing or online brand experience have become even more essential in order to survive, exist and ultimately thrive as a fashion, lifestyle or luxury enterprise.

vayasigmas.com

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There are now fundamental shifts taking place, which can turn into new habits

MY CORONA!

Photographer Harry Fayt loves the surrealism of images shot underwater. In this striking photo inspired by the pandemic, he plays with gravity and special effects such as smoke rising eerily to the surface where the model and props appear in a distorted reflection. Each element of the image, AB Extra Corona, is meticulously staged, but humour accompanies his inspiration, as does a desire to question the role of citizen and government in managing the crisis.

Though the pandemic provoked a drop in sales of Corona beer, it resulted in increased sales for the alcohol and tobacco industry in general. As Fayt points out, “at the beginning of the pandemic, smokers were said to be less at risk.” If viewers look carefully, they can spot the bat logo on the Bacardi bottle, and a toy pangolin alongside it. “The poor creature was wrongly accused of infecting humans,” he says. The old master in the background shows a doctor during the Great Plague of Marseille, the last major outbreak of the Bubonic plague in western Europe, which started in the French mediterranean city in 1720. The model wears washing up gloves and a mask upcycled from a bra; an allusion to the potential danger of a shortage of personal protection equipment. The discarded masks represent “the tonnes of plastic pollution in nature”.

Fayt was born in Charleroi, has a photography degree from Namur and has been based in Liège since 2006. His Covid-themed images follow other series on the female figure in water. Drawing on his extensive experience as a music and fashion photographer, they include modern icons – personal reinterpretations of Renaissance art works – and a series of nudes, the subject of his book, Rebirth.

harryfayt.com





© Harry Fayt



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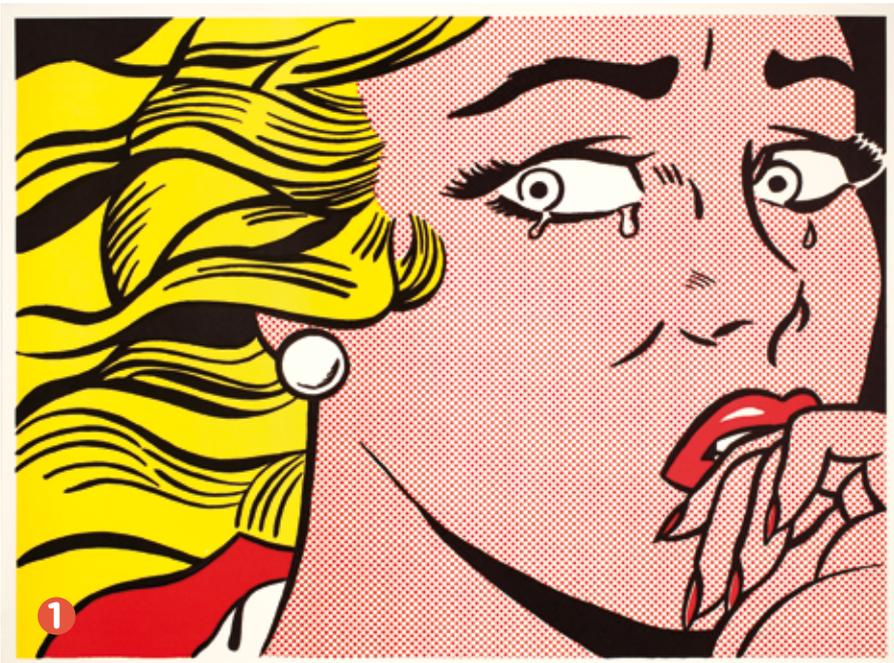
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© Dominique Houcquant Goldo

© Vincent Fifi/Belga



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© Estate of Roy Lichtenstein / SABAM 2020

POP ART

1

**ROY LICHTENSTEIN:
VISIONS MULTIPLES**

Acclaimed New York artist Roy Lichtenstein was behind some of Pop Art's most iconic images – comic-strip scenes inspired by post-war popular culture. But there was much more to his oeuvre, as this long-awaited retrospective at Mons's modern art museum unveils. It reveals the full diversity and skill of the pioneering artist's technique via some 100 works, including prints, sculptures and tapestries. Arranged by theme rather than chronologically, the exhibition is a captivating and illuminating exploration of Lichtenstein's prolific and tireless experimentation of print techniques, which incorporated 19th-century practices as well as modern-day ones.

UNTIL 18 APRIL
bam.mons.be



FILM ANIMA

2

Brussels' festival dedicated to animated film is pushing ahead with its 40th edition, virus or no virus. While organisers will programme movies in cinemas if possible, they will also put everything online. However you experience it, it is the place to see the best animation of recent years – from gritty dramas to simple animal stories for the littlest kids. For this anniversary edition, the festival is looking back at the history of animation, so expect classics as well as documentaries on the subject. And in celebration of a new Belgian book on stop-motion animation, a special section will be devoted to the style.

12-21 FEBRUARY
animafestival.be

SCULPTURE FOLON: SCULPTURES

3

The beautiful ruins of Villers Abbey are the backdrop for this open-air exhibition, staged in and around the site. The 20 modern sculptures add a quirky touch to the mystical Gothic atmosphere of the former Cistercian abbey. Twentieth-century artist Jean-Michel Folon began his career as an illustrator, travelling from his birthplace of Brussels to Paris and the US to develop and expand his career. Adding watercolours to his repertoire, his work was regularly featured in books, magazines and on the cover of The New Yorker. He took to sculpture in the 1980s, creating uniquely fanciful figures.

UNTIL 21 FEBRUARY
villers.be

ART & NATURE SART TILMAN MUSEUM

4

For an outdoor cultural escape, head to this open-air museum on the outskirts of Liège that combines nature and contemporary art. Discover a collection of monumental sculptures and paintings that illustrate the diversity of contemporary art in French-speaking Belgium. Artists include Pierre Alechinsky, Jo Delahaut and Peter Downsborough. Located on the campus of the city's university, the site focuses on the experience of viewing art in nature, without physical barriers or ticket office. Pick up a brochure and map with a walking tour from the welcome pavilion at the Simone David-Constant roundabout. Socially distanced guided tours available by appointment for up to four people. Admission free.

OPEN DAILY
museepla.uliege.be

THE POSITIVE POWER OF ART

Xavier Roland is the director of Mons' modern art museum, BAM, which is staging the retrospective Roy Lichtenstein: Visions Multiples, a highlight of the disrupted cultural season

"This exhibition's ambition is to reveal the extent to which Roy Lichtenstein would constantly search for new creative media - Rowlux film, steel, metal, bronze, plexiglass, tapestry - as well as new printing techniques. He was the last master of print in the 20th century and this is the first exhibition of his work in Belgium. We all think we know his work, but we wanted to show here three dimensions that provide another perspective. So you will have a chance to see the man, the artist and the artisan. Before arriving at the final image, the artist dedicates a considerable amount of work and we wanted to reveal this process.

The exhibition is presented thematically rather than chronologically. You will discover all the themes he developed during his career: ordinary objects, iconic images of a hot dog, tapestries, and the various technical supports for his images. The formats he used – taking in all printing processes – allowed him complete control of his technique. This reveals a continuity from 19th-century printing processes to those of the 1960s and 1970s.

Lichtenstein opposed the Expressionist artists of his day, but was never tied down by the Pop Art movement. As a multi-dimensional artist, he was always inventing and researching and this is what we wanted to focus on.

Visitors will arrive in groups with families and friends and we have made a video to help prepare visits; a digital experience which enables them to interact with a mediator. We have also set up a printing laboratory with video clips of artist studios that explain printing techniques, as well as a presentation of works from our own collection of Pop Art to help decode the movement.

It was complicated to stage this exhibition and we had to delay the opening because of the pandemic, but the result is a show that engages positive emotions during what is a sad period. It's exactly what we need now for the good of our mental health."

bam.mons.be



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He was the last
master of print
in the 20th
century

© Oswald Tr.

Feel inspired



Wallonia, a world of opportunities

1,602 FOREIGN INVESTMENTS
_____ in 18 years

400 M CONSUMERS
reachable
WITHIN ONE DAY _____

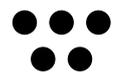
 Very high density
Of **UNIVERSITIES**
and **HIGH SCHOOLS**

6 COMPETITIVENESS
_____ CLUSTERS in
LEADING-EDGE sectors

an exceptional
QUALITY
OF LIFE 

Highly skilled
AVAILABLE
WORKFORCE 

70% of business
turnover comes
from **EXPORTS**



Wallonia.be