

Internal

PRESS FILE

VAN HEMESSEN & FATHER

JAN AND CATHARINA VAN HEMESSEN AS ARTISTIC
PIONEERS IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ANTWERP

ANTWERP, MUSEUM SNIJDERS&ROCKOXHUIS
15.10.2026 – 01.02.2027

SNIJDERS
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THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY



In the winter of 2026–2027, the Museum Snijders&Rockoxhuis will present an exhibition of international standing: the very first retrospective ever devoted to the 16th-century artistic family **Van Hemessen**. This exhibition brings a forgotten family of artistic pioneers back into the spotlight, thereby rewriting the story of the Antwerp Renaissance. At its core is a surprising perspective: that of a painters' workshop in which father Jan and daughter Catharina collaborated, experimented, and left a lasting mark on art history.



JAN VAN HEMESSEN
Portrait of a Nobleman, 1543
Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation

In Each Other's Footsteps: Rockox and Van Hemessen

That the first exhibition devoted to the Van Hemessen family is taking place in the former residence of Mayor Nicholas Rockox (1560–1640) is no coincidence. A painting by Frans Francken II, depicting a festive banquet in his patrician home, offers a fascinating glimpse into his art chamber and collecting practices. Among masterpieces such as *Samson and Delilah* by Peter Paul Rubens, religious panels by Quinten Massijs, and a series of antique busts, a depiction of Saint Jerome also stands out. The creator of this expressive painting? None other than Jan Sanders van Hemessen—compelling proof of the presence and appreciation of his work within one of the most important art collections of seventeenth-century Antwerp.



FRANS FRANCKEN II

Diner in the Home of Nicholas Rockox, c.1630-35

Munich, Bayerische Staatssamlungen, Alte Pinakothek

Moreover, Nicholas Rockox was not the first in his family to collect works by Jan van Hemessen. Already a century earlier, around 1540, his grandparents Adriaen Rockox and Catharina Van Overhoff commissioned a monumental triptych of the *Last Judgment* for their private chapel in Saint James's Church in Antwerp. The side panels depict the richly dressed patrons together with their thirteen children, among whom was also the father of Nicholas Rockox.



JAN VAN HEMESSEN & PIETER AERTSEN (AND STUDIO)
The Last Judgement (Adriaen Rockox & Catharina van Overhoff), c.1536-37
Antwerp, Saint James's Church

This impressive altarpiece, which has remained in situ for centuries, will exceptionally return to the Snijders&Rockoxhuis for the occasion of the exhibition. It undoubtedly forms one of the absolute highlights of the show and tangibly connects the story of the Van Hemessen family with that of the Rockox family.

Even today, the connection between the two families remains visible. In the museum display of the Snijders&Rockoxhuis, two remarkable works by Catharina van Hemessen are featured: a poignant *Lamentation of Christ* from the museum's own collection and a refined *Portrait of a Lady with a Little Dog*, on long-term loan from the Flemish Community. Together, they underscore the enduring presence and significance of the Van Hemessen family within the historical context of Rockox's residence.



Right:

CATHARINA VAN HEMESSEN

Woman with Dog, c.1550

Antwerp, Museum Snijders&Rockoxhuis (long-term loan of the Flemish Government Collection)

Left:

CATHARINA VAN HEMESSEN (attributed to)

Lamentation, s.d.

Antwerp, Museum Snijders&Rockoxhuis

Cultural Hub of Antwerp

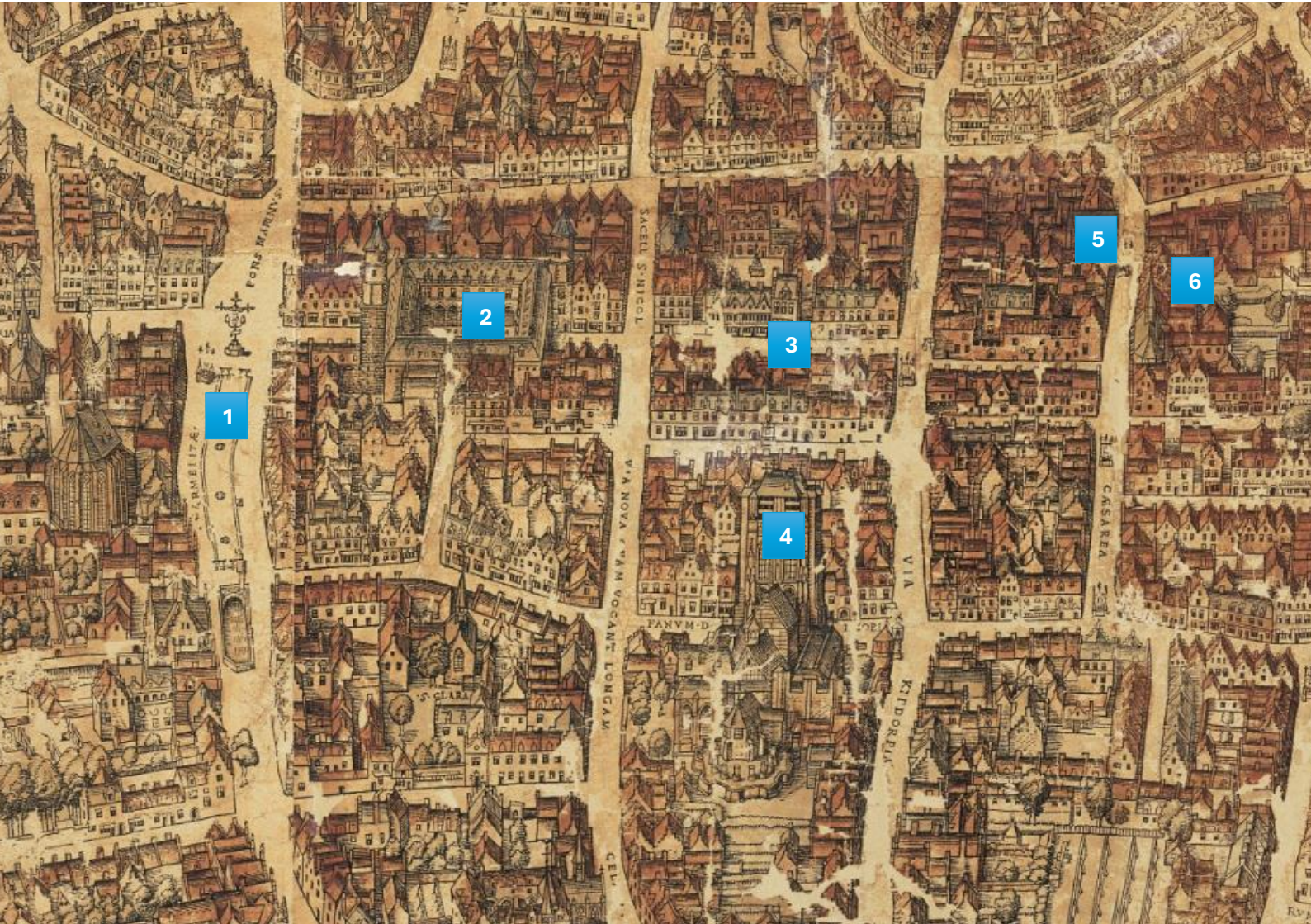
Within the broad contours of international art history—where Antwerp naturally occupies a prominent place—the story of the Van Hemessen family reveals itself in a remarkably concrete, almost tangible way at the scale of a single city district. What may at first appear to be widely disparate worlds turns out, in this account, to be closely intertwined. In the already vibrant urban area between the Meir and the Paardenmarkt, today's university district, a dense network of artists, patrons, and ideas took shape. When Albrecht Dürer stayed there in 1520–1521, he found himself in an environment that was not only receptive to new impulses but actively absorbed and disseminated them—a dynamic in which Jan van Hemessen also found his place. With the establishment of the Exchange in 1531, this urban energy moreover acquired an international dimension, and Antwerp developed into a crossroads of economic and cultural exchange.

Against this background, the proximity of individual actors takes on particular significance. Catharina Van Overhoff and Adriaen Rockox resided in their houses Het Schild van Frankrijk and De Zonnewijzer at the beginning of Keizerstraat, while the Van Hemessen family's workshop was located literally just a few steps away, in Hochstetterstraat, present-day Borzestraat.

Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this area developed further into a distinctly defined cultural core zone. Artists such as Quinten Massijs and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and later Frans Snijders and Peter Paul Rubens, did not settle there by chance. The proximity of affluent networks and influential families such as the Rockoxes created a climate in which artistic production, intellectual exchange, and social ambition continually reinforced one another. What emerged here was not an isolated flourishing, but an urban dynamic in which innovation seemed to unfold almost naturally.

Legend:

1. *Meir*
2. *Antwerp Stock Exchange*
3. *Van Hemessen workshop*
4. *Saint James's Church*
5. *Snijders&Rockoxhuis*
6. *Home of Adriaen Rockox*



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Jan van Hemessen: Overlooked, Yet Unmistakably Influential

The exhibition opens with the intriguing, yet still insufficiently illuminated story of Jan Sanders van Hemessen. As a pivotal figure between Quinten Massijs and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, he occupies a key position in the artistic transition from the early to the High sixteenth century. His oeuvre operates at the intersection of tradition and innovation, where late medieval devotion gradually gives way to a more humanist and observant realism.



JAN VAN HEMESSEN
Portrait of a Girl, c.1528-29
Berlin, SMB. Gemäldegalerie



JAN VAN HEMESSEN
Vanitas -angel, c.1541
Lille, Musée des Beaux-Arts

In the dynamic Antwerp of his time—a city where international trade, intellectual impulses, and artistic ambition continuously intersected—Van Hemessen succeeded in establishing himself as a sought-after and successful master. His workshop functioned as a flexible and productive center, responding to the diverse expectations of a wide-ranging clientele. Within this framework, he developed a remarkable versatility: from restrained portraits and monumental altarpieces to expressive images of saints and moralizing genre scenes, each imbued with a keen sensitivity to human behavior and contemporary themes.

Although his name may resonate less with a broader public today, the quality and significance of his work are beyond dispute. For this exhibition, the Snijders&Rockoxhuis brings together an exceptional selection, featuring key works from private collections and leading international institutions, including the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa. Many of these panels rarely, if ever, leave their usual locations, making this gathering a rare opportunity to experience Van Hemessen's oeuvre in its broader context.



JAN VAN HEMESSEN
The Tearful Bride, c.1540
Prague, Narodni Galerie

Like Father, Like Daughter

The story of Van Hemessen is not that of an isolated artist, but unfolds as that of an exceptional family workshop. Within this context, Catharina van Hemessen occupies an increasingly prominent place. Although her name is now more widely recognized than that of her father, an exhibition devoted to her life and work has so far been lacking. In this exhibition, her oeuvre is presented to the general public for the very first time.



Left:

CATHARINA VAN HEMESSEN

Christina van Hemessen (?) at a Virginal, 1548

Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum



Right:

CATHARINA VAN HEMESSEN

Catharina van Hemessen at an Easel, 1548

Basel, Kunstmuseum

Catharina thus emerges as a remarkable figure within a predominantly male art world. She consciously and confidently signed her works and succeeded in gaining international recognition during her own lifetime. Her painting demonstrates not only technical refinement but also a pronounced intellectual autonomy. Her self-portrait of 1548—the earliest known signed self-portrait by a female artist north of the Alps—stands as a powerful statement of artistic self-awareness.



CATHARINA VAN HEMESSEN

Rest on the Flight into Egypt, c.1556

Private collection

In addition, Catharina also moved decisively beyond the confines of the workshop. From 1556 onward, her husband, the master organist Christiaen de Morien, entered the service of the former regent Mary of Hungary. In her wake, Christiaen and Catharina joined the court in Valladolid. Although Catharina herself did not serve as a court artist, these years likely brought her into direct contact with the cultural and social networks of the European elite. After the death of Mary of Hungary, the couple returned to the Low Countries, first to Antwerp and later to 's-Hertogenbosch. These travels position Catharina not only as an artist, but also as a mobile and cosmopolitan figure within a broader European context.

To date, the oeuvre of Catharina van Hemessen has largely been delineated on the basis of a relatively narrow corpus, founded on the limited group of works she explicitly signed herself. Understandable as this approach may be, it has partly restricted our view of her artistic range. The exhibition breaks through this framework by broadening the perspective and including a substantial number of convincingly attributed paintings.

Crucial here is not only the expansion of the corpus, but above all the context in which this work is presented. The exhibition creates a direct dialogue with the oeuvre of her father, Jan van Hemessen. This confrontation sheds sharper light on the functioning of the workshop as a shared space of production and exchange. Within this setting, Catharina appears not as a peripheral or derivative figure, but as an active and co-directing force. Father and daughter thus emerge as a close artistic unit, in which technical skill, inventive solutions, and pictorial ideas developed in constant interaction—a rare opportunity to experience her hand, and her signature, at close range.

Groundbreaking Findings

The exhibition *Van Hemessen & Father* has given a powerful impulse to research into the lives and works of both Jan and Catharina van Hemessen. For the first time, extensive biographical and material-technical research was combined on this scale, resulting in a series of new and often groundbreaking insights. Intensive archival research made it possible to chart the lives of father and daughter with greater precision and to correct longstanding historical errors.



JAN VAN HEMESSEN AND STUDIO
The Expulsion from the Temple, 1556
Nancy, Musée des Beaux-Arts



JAN VAN HEMESSEN
Vanitas - Cherub, c.1535-40
Private collection

Intensive archival research made it possible to reconstruct their life trajectories with greater accuracy and to correct persistent historical misconceptions. In addition, advanced analytical techniques such as infrared reflectography (IRR) and X-ray fluorescence (XRF) allowed scholars to look literally beneath the paint surface. These findings shed new light on the artistic process and the division of labor within the workshop, and enable more nuanced attributions. The research also led to a remarkable discovery: a painting long thought lost from the estate of Nicholas Rockox was identified and, after centuries of absence, is returning to Antwerp for the first time.

The results of this extensive research are not only presented in the exhibition, but are also permanently recorded in a richly illustrated, scholarly catalogue, published by Lannoo Publishers (ISBN 9789059962514). This publication appears in both a Dutch and an English edition and will be distributed internationally, ensuring that these new insights reach a broad global audience and secure a lasting place within art-historical research on the Van Hemessen family.

An Exhibition as a Journey of Discovery

Van Hemessen & Father is more than a classic monographic exhibition. It is a story about artistic innovation, about family as a creative ecosystem, about the role of women in art, and about Antwerp as a cradle of pioneering ideas. This exhibition project brings together masterpieces and new insights, inviting reflection on how a love of art emerges, is passed on, and in turn gives rise to new beauty.

In total, 34 unique artworks are presented, assembled from 24 international collections, including the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Brussels), the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa, the Národní galerie in Prague, the Landesmuseum Linz, and the Musées des Beaux-Arts of Lille and Nancy. Paintings from private collections—never before shown to the general public—will also travel especially to Antwerp for this exhibition.

Subject to confirmation, Catharina van Hemessen's self-portrait from Basel—one of the earliest and most compelling expressions of artistic self-awareness by a woman—will be on view in the exhibition. After its conclusion, a selection of her works will travel on to the National Gallery in London, where her oeuvre will once again be placed in the spotlight in a subsequent presentation.





Internal

Exhibition

VAN HEMESSEN & FATHER

**Jan & Catharina van Hemessen as Artistic
Pioneers in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp**

Museum Snijders&Rockoxhuis
15.10.2026 – 01.02.2027

In collaboration with the National Gallery, London

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