



## Art and Politics

### The XX (1884-1894) and their transboundary cultural networks

**Noémie Goldman**

Aspirante FRS-FNRS

ULB GRAM

Collaboratrice scientifique, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique

This presentation addresses the question of how transcending boundaries contributed to the development of Modern Art in the period of the Belle Époque.

In the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century a change occurred in the European art system under the initiative of a new generation of artists who wanted to give art a more prominent place in society. In Brussels, a group of young Belgian artists called the XX ("les Vingt", 1884-1894), organized annual exhibitions (Les Salons des XX) where they showed modern art to the public. Octave Maus, the group's secretary, organized concerts and lectures during these exhibitions in order to attract the intellectual elite to the Salons. Octave Maus invited well known speakers to talk about art, music and literature, thus creating a structure for the Salons des XX for the exchange of cultural information and artistic views. At the same time, he also used of the journal *L'Art Moderne*, to publish articles about the artists and movements presented at the Salons. This journal not only published definitions and theoretical models about modern art but also information about cultural events in Europe. Maus cleverly used these two communication tools - the lectures and the journal - to spread information he wanted to see associated with the artists he supported and to monitor the different ideas about this new form of art.

Furthermore, Octave Maus set up different networks to reach other audiences and to increase the impact of the XX's artistic production on the national and international cultural scene.

Firstly, he became acquainted with the circles of the avant-garde in various European capitals, thus creating an international network which allowed him to closely follow the latest developments and cultural events in Paris and London. This network also enabled him to invite to the Salons des XX the most modern artists of the time such as, for example, Monet, Rodin and Whistler. Moreover, this network helped him to spread the influence of the XX throughout Europe and enabled him to increase the recognition of Belgium art on the international scene.

Secondly, Maus set up a influential network in political circles. This explains how Maus and the XX became involved in the creation of the Section d'Art of the Maison du Peuple in Brussels where they gave lectures about art, music and literature to a public of workers who were also invited to guided visits of the exhibitions by Octave Maus himself.

As such, the XX were transcending not only geographical boundaries but also social boundaries. They spread artistic information among the Belgian elites, across the European avant-garde, and also among the working class in Brussels. Exactly how could an Art Salon become a legitimate source of widely spread knowledge on modern art? How did cultural knowledge ultimately become a vector for esthetic, national and political issues? These questions are addressed through the analysis of Octave Maus's position and activities at the boundary of various worlds and at the intersection of multiple networks.



**Transcending Boundaries in Europe in the Period of  
the Belle Époque: Organizing Knowledge,  
Mobilizing Networks, and Effecting Social Change**

Mundaneum, Mons (Belgium), 20-21 May 2010

**Biography**

Noémie Goldman works since 2008 at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels. She is preparing a PhD thesis entitled « Study of Octave Maus and the Groupe des XX in their social and political context » under the direction of Michel Draguet. Specialist of Belgian and European art in the late XIX<sup>th</sup> century, she explores Maus's correspondence and various archives related to the political life in Belgium at that time in order to answer these questions: what is the place of political ideologies in an artistic Salon? How do politicians and artists define a "national art", and what is, according to them, the place of art in the construction of a Belgian identity? She participated to several symposiums about Belgian and French art and wrote an exhibition catalogue entitled *De l'Impressionnisme au Fauvisme en Belgique* in 2009.