

Press Release: International Symposium Paul Coremans

Exactly 50 years ago, on 11 June 1965, the announcement of the death of the Belgian researcher Paul Coremans was received worldwide as a great loss for art heritage. This first director of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels) and renowned UNESCO expert travelled the world, from Borobudur to Kraków, from Bali to Abou Simbel, from Bonampak to Palmyra, to keep his finger on the pulse of humanity's greatest masterworks. An international symposium is organised in his honour on 15 until 17 June by the KIK-IRPA. This will shed light on the numerous facets of this exceptional Belgian savant and humanist who is still largely underestimated in our country.

Appointed as head of the Service of Belgian Documentation in the Royal Museums of Art and History, this 26-year old doctor in chemistry was also given the task of founding a laboratory for the study of art works. From the beginning, he applied the most recent imaging techniques (ultraviolet, infrared...) to detect art forgeries and in 1946 he was involved in the lawsuit against the famous art forger Han van Meegeren. Van Meegeren's false Vermeers had been sold to the Nazi Reichsmarchall Goering.

During the Second World War he coordinated the taking of 160,000 photographs of endangered art works and monuments and drew up guidelines for the protection of cultural heritage in times of conflict. He also became one of the *Monuments Men* with the mission to recover masterpieces stolen by the Nazis.

It is he who developed the innovative concept of the interdisciplinary approach in the treatment and study of works of art: the coming together – with equal status – of experts in the humanities and in science, in collaboration with photographers and technicians. This approach led to the foundation of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, of which Coremans became the first director in 1948. This pioneering centre of expertise would set an international example.

In 1950-51 Coremans led the conservation treatment of the *Ghent Altarpiece* by the Van Eyck brothers, for which he solicited the counsel of the greatest international specialists. His work is an inevitable source of inspiration for the present restoration campaign, where the methods he developed are still successfully applied.

Coremans was one of the key figures in the creation of two institutions for the preservation of global heritage: the ICOMOS (Conseil international des Monuments et Sites) and the ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property).

The Director-General of the ICCROM, Dr Stefano di Caro, will give a keynote lecture at the symposium in honour of Paul Coremans. This conference promises to be highly interesting: Belgian and foreign researchers have drawn upon the archives of Coremans that were inventoried some years ago at the KIK-IRPA as well as on those of numerous institutions that have maintained relations with the KIK-IRPA for more than half a century. The result of their research will shed a new light on the fascinating personality and scientific vision of Paul Coremans.

Today, while cultural heritage is suffering massive destruction in countries at war and negligence and budgetary restrictions pose even greater danger in peacetime, his accomplishments and vision are more relevant than ever.

International Symposium Paul Coremans: A Belgian “Monuments Man” and His Impact on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage Worldwide – 15-17 June 2015 –
<http://org.kikirpa.be/coremans2015/>

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Photos for publication can be found on our press page.

The **Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA)** is a federal scientific institution responsible for the documentation, study and conservation-restoration of the cultural and artistic heritage of our country. Art historians, photographers, chemists, archaeologists, engineers and conservator-restorers carry out interdisciplinary research on the materials and techniques used in works of art and cultural artefacts and on the materials and methods used in conservation-restoration. The KIK-IRPA is a unique resource for scientific, photographic and technical documentation of the cultural heritage of the country. www.kikirpa.be

