

# **The patrimonialisation of private artworks: from individuality to collective memory.**

## **The case of the collection of the municipal Museum of Fine Arts of Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium)<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The paper shares selected preliminary results of an ongoing doctoral research project in anthropology carried out at the Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium). The research observe the mechanisms of the construction of collective memory through the practice of donation of artworks to public museums in Europe today, taking the specific case of the Museum of Fine Arts of Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium) as a starting point and privileged field of investigations, set to be extended to other Belgian and French museums.

At the crossroads of the disciplinary fields of anthropology, museology and cultural history, from which it borrows methodologies and theoretical frameworks, the research project uses complementary methodologies in order to identify the present-day characteristics of the phenomenon. The research uses museum archives analysis to compare current observations with past cases, field surveys such as semi-directive interviews with today's donors and the participant observation at the Museum of Ixelles as the researcher was part of the museum team from 2021 to September 2025 as Head of Development and Partnerships.

In the context of the 12th ERNOP Conference, the paper shares the first results that illustrate the trend of this specific form of philanthropy and the typical motivations that drive specific individuals to donate artworks to public museums. Consistent with the questions articulated by the conference, particular emphasis will be placed on presenting the elements in a manner that elucidates the ways in which philanthropy contributes to democratic processes and foster social cohesion, while considering the duality of private interests versus public good and bridging research and practice.

**Keywords:** Donation, artworks, museums, patrimonialisation, anthropology, memory.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presented as part of the 12th International Conference of the European Research Network on Philanthropy (ERNOP), discusses preliminary findings from an ongoing doctoral research project in anthropology, initiated in September 2022 at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), focusing on the practice of donation of private artworks to public museums in Europe, with particular attention to Belgium and France. In France, museum collections are enriched each year by several hundred thousand objects, 60% of which enter museums through donations or bequests.<sup>2</sup>

Grounded in an anthropological epistemological approach, the project aims to enhance the understanding of the processes through which individuals contribute to the construction of collective memory, and to examine the motivations of donors who take part in building public museum collections, considered as *collective material memory*.

The methodology combines three approaches from the social sciences: archival research, qualitative enquiry with semi-structured interviews, and participant observation.

The phenomenon of the practice of donating private artworks to museums, seldom studied and often underestimated, is explored through the hypothesis that such non-market transactions arise from complex social interactions and a will to make memory that go beyond traditional conceptions based on social class or economic status.

### 1.1. Overall research question of the ongoing doctoral research

The research project seeks to unravel a “heritage mechanism” by examining the process through which objects are transmitted from the private to the public sphere. On the one hand, it analyses the motivations of individuals who choose this specific form of transmission. Why opting for patrimonialisation rather than intra-family transfer or sale, at a time when selling an artwork on the art market has never been so easy? Why select one museum over another? On the other hand, the research examines the dynamics of patrimonialisation and the decision-making process employed by museum professionals when deciding to integrate specific private objects into public collections. Together, these two approaches provide an up-to-date view of the dynamics of patrimonialisation, enabling us to better understand how collective memory is constructed in today's societies.

The donation of artworks to public museums constitutes a specific form of philanthropy. Within the framework of the present conference and its central questions, this paper presents the theoretical framework and methodology of the research, focusing particularly on its first findings. Special attention is given to the motivations expressed by philanthropists when they choose to transmit their often intimate possessions into the public domain. The paper also highlights the ambivalence of philanthropy : on the one hand, it can be seen as an enrichment of the collective heritage in the service of the general interest. On the other, it may be

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<sup>2</sup> French National Report of the Regional Scientific Acquisition Committees, CSRA, year 2024. Published on 30 Jul. 2025. URL (accessed on August 27, 2025): <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/thematiques/musees/pour-les-professionnels/conserver-et-gerer-les-collections/gerer-les-collections/bilan-national-des-commissions-scientifiques-regionales-d-acquisitions-csra>

perceived as a privilege reserved for economically endowed individuals, capable of “acting on the collective” in order, consciously or unconsciously, to influence shared decisions and, in doing so, exert a degree of control over the collective future (Duvoux, 2023).

### 1.2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this doctoral research lies at the intersection of three branches of anthropology: social, cultural, and economic. It draws first on the anthropology of memory, which examines the transmission and interactions between individual and collective memory within the cultural and social contexts that shape them. Secondly, museum anthropology considers the museum as a social and cultural space, analysing the collection and circulation of objects as well as the power relations, memory, and identity dynamics that crystallise within it. Finally, the anthropology of gift studies how members of a society use gifting to create and maintain social relationships, beyond the purely economic logic of the art market.

Within the anthropology of memory, “transmission and its *modus operandi* are rarely a starting point, a subject of study in themselves” (Berliner, 2010, p. 6). Researchers have tended to describe the results of transmission rather than the act of transmitting itself. While the concepts of “collective memory” and “cultural memory” are now widely used in anthropology, only few studies explore the processes through which culture and memory are produced and transmitted. Furthermore, the notions of “individual memory” and “collective memory,” theorised by Emile Durkheim (1898), Henri Bergson (1896), Maurice Halbwachs (1924), Paul Ricoeur (2000), or Wertsch (2008), have recently been revisited, notably in cognitive sciences (Gagnepain *et al.*, 2020), offering new insights into their interrelation.

The museum is here regarded as an instrument of “collective memory,” part of the “arsenal necessary for transmission” (Nora, 1997, p. XX), alongside schools, ceremonies, commemorations, historical monuments, or street names. “The nationalisation of collective memory and the significant role of the State in its transmission are major developments in its history over the past two centuries” (Pomian, 1998, p. 107–108). What, then, is the role of individuals in shaping collective memory through the museum institution?

Museum anthropology and museum studies, relatively recent disciplines, focus on the circulation and provenance of objects. Their development was encouraged by the adoption of the Washington Principles in the United States in 1998, concerning the restitution of artworks looted during World War II, and by the publication in France in 2018 of the Sarr-Savoy Report on the restitution of African cultural heritage<sup>3</sup>, related to objects pillaged during the colonial period. Research examining the role of donors in the formation of public collections remains scarce and seldom adopts a fully anthropological perspective.

The French philosopher and director of the Culture and Creation Department at the Centre

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<sup>3</sup> Sarr, F., & Savoy, B. (2018). *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*. (Report commissioned by the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, published in November 2018 and authored by the Senegalese scholar and writer Felwine Sarr and the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy)

Pompidou in Paris (France), Mathieu Potte-Bonneville describes “the immense number of non-market transactions that organises itself around a collection such as that of the Musée National d’Art Moderne<sup>4</sup>, the second largest modern and contemporary art collection in the world<sup>5</sup> and the largest in Europe. These transactions take the form of gifts, bequests, loans, and donations, creating a fascinating universe of interactions, social relations, and relationships between objects.”<sup>6</sup> He notes that these interactions have been largely neglected by ethnographic research, and that the proliferation of gifting activity has received little attention. Museums rarely publish quantitative data on the composition of their collections, and scholarly literature has largely focused on the histories of major national museum collections and on social elites, often through prosopographical studies of major collectors or museum patrons (Long, 2007).

The museum phenomenon and the history of social elites, notably business magnates, attract significant research in all countries. Yet the intersection of these two themes (collections and museum donations) has only been the subject of scattered and pioneering monographs, without a comprehensive analytical framework (Long, 2007, p. 10). Moreover, not all collectors are museum donors<sup>7</sup>. The research provides an updated view of the types of donors in museums, with a particular focus on “amateur” donors.

This paper does not examine the nature of the donated object, the status of the artwork, or its role within the current exchange system, nor the various values it may carry (affective, museal, market, symbolic, etc.). Likewise, the fiscal benefits associated with donating or bequeathing artworks in Belgium and France are not discussed here but are perspectives integrated into the overall study.

This paper is primarily positioned within the field of the anthropology of gift, drawing on the foundational work of Marcel Mauss. Mauss, the founder of social anthropology and a pioneer of French ethnography, nephew and successor of Émile Durkheim, published in 1925 his *Essai sur le don* (translated into English in 1954 as *The Gift*). His work has influenced numerous scholars, including the French anthropologist Maurice Godelier (1996, *L’Énigme du don*), the French sociologist Alain Caillé (2007, *Anthropologie du don*), the Québécois sociologist Jacques Godbout (2007, *L’Esprit du don*), the German philosopher Georg Simmel (1987, *Philosophie de l’argent*), the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1976, *Culture and Practical Reason*), and more recently, the French sociologist and anthropologist Florence Weber (2023, *La nouvelle anthropologie économique*).

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<sup>4</sup> The collection of the Musée national d’Art moderne—Centre Pompidou holds 140,000 works. URL (accessed September 1, 2025): <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/collection/les-chefs-doeuvre>

<sup>5</sup> The largest collection of modern and contemporary art is that of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which holds 200,000 works. URL (accessed September 1, 2025): <https://www.moma.org/collection/>

<sup>6</sup> Private interview with Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, June 13, 2025, Paris (France); and in Boucheron, P. (2024, November 24). *Au théâtre des valeurs de l’art* [Radio broadcast]. In the series *Allons-y voir!*, France Culture, 58 min. URL (accessed August 17, 2025): <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/allons-y-voir/au-theatre-des-valeurs-de-l-art-8647201>

<sup>7</sup> Patrons of the Louvre represented less than 6% of Parisian collectors in the interwar period (Long 2007: 10). The case of the Goncourt brothers’ collection is a telling example: in 1896, Edmond de Goncourt’s will specified that his collection should be “scattered under the blows of the auctioneer’s hammer, so that the pleasure I derived from acquiring each item might be returned, through each sale, to an heir of my tastes.” (Poulot, 2022, p. 20).

### 1.2.1. The “Total Man” versus *Homo Economicus*

Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) considers the gift as a “total social fact,” defined as a complex set of concrete phenomena that “set in motion [...] the entirety of society and its institutions” (Mauss, 1925, p. 159).

Based on careful readings of ethnographies, Mauss develops a general conception of the gift and human behaviour that goes beyond the model of *homo œconomicus*. The representation of *homo œconomicus*, as formulated by Max Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1904), depicts humans as perfectly rational, profit-maximising economic agents, whose every choice is guided by rational calculation, devoid of emotion, and socially isolated.

For Mauss, humans are not merely “economic animals.” He describes a “total man” embedded in a complete social life, taking into account “a variety of aesthetic, moral, religious, and economic motives, as well as various material and demographic factors, all of which constitute society and collective life” (Mauss, 1925, p. 165).

Through his essay in comparative sociology, Mauss seeks to highlight the nature of the social bonds that enable societies to exist, exploring the full range of possible prestation in which the personal relationship carried by the given object is central. He considers the gift to be “in theory voluntary, in reality obligatorily given and returned” (Mauss, 1925, p. 61), within a system involving giving, receiving, and repaying (the so-called *maussian gift*). The essay goes beyond a purely economic view of interests to describe non-market exchanges that sustain social cohesion and reveal “the fleeting moment when the society emerge” (Mauss, 1925, p. 160).

For Mauss, the gift signifies membership in society: the donor’s motivation is to participate in the broader circle of exchange, affirming their status as a social actor, and the symbolic value of the gift rests on solidarity and trust. In this sense, the *Essai sur le don* represents a key milestone in the development of the French welfare state, which emerged after the Second World War (Weber, 2023, p. 7).

### 1.2.2. Museum Context: *The Donation of Works of Art*

The donation of private objects and artworks to public museums is rooted in a long-standing tradition, dating back to the creation of modern museums as we know them today. Through their roles and missions – disseminating knowledge, fostering critical thinking, and preserving local, national, or “universal” material memory – museums present themselves as instruments of modernity and social cohesion.

Emerging from the Enlightenment in the 18th century (*Aufklärung*, *Les Lumières*), first in Italy, then in the Germanic world, and formalised by the French Revolution in 1789 with the creation of Napoleon’s universal museum (today’s Louvre), the museum is a multifaceted institution in constant evolution, shaped by successive societal challenges. As such, it is here preserved as a privileged observation point for social transformations, a kind of stethoscope

to take the pulse of a society. Observing the practice of art donation by individuals to a public museum over the long term allows us to examine the relational dynamics between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, the intimate and the institutional. The ongoing doctoral research focuses on memory “in the making” and describes how contemporary societies “make memory.”

The museum is defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) as ‘*a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.*’<sup>8</sup> As such, in its core missions, a museum supports the democratic values. But this definition, adopted by the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM in 2022, sparked significant debate within the museum community, highlighting the difficulty of providing an encompassing definition for the diverse range of 21st-century museums: fine arts museums, natural history museums, history museums, community museums, and both public and private museums across the world. For the French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, Professor at the Technical University of Berlin and at the Collège de France, “the museum is a European concept - untranslatable, as there is no conceptual equivalent of the ‘museum’ in many languages (Wozny and Cassin, 2014) - which has been the most successfully exported since the 18th century<sup>9</sup>”.

As a multifaceted object, the museum must be approached critically. First, it can be an institution that promotes democratic values (equity, freedom of thought, speech and expression, tolerance, and respect for fundamental rights) but it can also be used for political propaganda, shaping people’s imagination under totalitarian regimes<sup>10</sup>, or for cultivating taste and consumption habits (as the universal exhibitions since 1851). Second, despite its ambition to reach the widest possible audience, inclusion remains a major challenge: museum visitors are still most often university-educated and affluent, representing the majority group. Third, objects displayed as material witnesses of a glorious past may also reflect power asymmetries, considering the vast accumulation of goods obtained through spoliation, plunder, theft, or cultural appropriation. Museums are therefore public institutions embedded in social and political contexts, which must be acknowledged, yet careful analysis can reveal much about these contexts.

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<sup>8</sup> Definition of the museum adopted by the Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Prague, August 24, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Savoy, B. (2018, 14 février). *Histoire culturelle des patrimoines artistiques en Europe, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Lecture at the Collège de France. URL (accessed August 17, 2025) : <https://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/agenda/cours/histoire-transnationale-des-musees-en-europe/introduction>.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the Führermuseum, Hitler’s projected museum in Linz (Austria), which was never realized but intended to exhibit “true art,” the only kind recognized as legitimate under the Reich; the Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren (Belgium), designed by Leopold II to legitimize his colony in Congo; or the Museo Coloniale in Rome (Italy), inaugurated in 1923 under Mussolini’s fascist regime, which aimed to generate adherence to the Italian colonial project, foster social cohesion, inspire patriotic fervor, and encourage nationalist and communitarian sentiment. Falcucci, B. (2022). « Les « martyrs » dans les collections coloniales italiennes pendant le fascisme ». In Poulot, D. (Ed.). (2022). *L’Effet musée. Objets, pratiques et cultures. Travaux de l’École doctorale « Histoire de l’art »*. Éditions de la Sorbonne, pp. 107-127.

While it is often assumed that states are the main agents behind these massive assemblages, many of the masterpieces seen in museums today entered collections thanks to the initiatives of individual collectors, artists, and curators, through a variety of means.

### *1.2.3. Donations in Museum Acquisition Policies*

The donation of private objects and artworks to public museums represents a specific form of philanthropy. It's part of a broader philanthropic landscape that structure the so-called museum 'alternative resources' (incomes coming from the ticketing, rental spaces for private events, friends membership, restaurant or bookshop, etc.), alongside with financial donations from philanthropists, corporate sponsorship and patronage, specific foundation financial supports, and other specific public fundings. While all these actors come together to support the museum's activities, the museum's structural budget continues to be covered predominantly by its public supervisory authority.

One of the main missions of the museum is to enrich its collection. Yet, its structural acquisition budget are largely insufficient to allow them to be competitive on the art market (representing in most cases less than 1% of their annual operating budget)<sup>11</sup>. Donations of artworks by private individuals to public museums are then considered as "a necessity, an essential" means of enriching museum's collections<sup>12</sup>. Today, the two main modes of acquisition are the purchases on the one hand, and donations or bequests on the other<sup>13</sup>, which represent two distinct dynamics. Purchases follow a proactive patrimonial strategy, seeking works to fill gaps in a collection or to integrate today's contemporary art. Donations and bequests, in contrast, constitute "incoming" proposals of works that museums must decide whether to retain, according to the logic of the existing collection. Beyond mere proposals, numerous examples illustrate the desire of some donors to "force open the doors of the museum" in order to introduce artists or artistic movements that are underrepresented or absent into the collective heritage<sup>14</sup>, for better or for worse. In the worst case scenario, the museum becomes a tool to influence or even oppose democratic values by imposing a certain type of art, or even an ideology, or as shown by Nicolas Duvoux, a place where philanthropists is in 'capacity to act' on the collective, as a mechanism of reproduction and legitimization of

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<sup>11</sup> The annual acquisition budget of the Museum of Ixelles amounts to €90,000. The annual acquisition budget of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium is €50,000.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with Claire Leblanc, Director-Curator of the Museum of Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium), on October 9, 2024, and with Kim Oosterlinck, Director of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Brussels, Belgium), on July 9, 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Long-term deposits are also practiced; however, since ownership of the object is not transferred to the museum, such works cannot be considered as strictly part of its collection.

<sup>14</sup> The Caillebotte bequest (1894): The collector and painter Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894) attempted to circumvent the French legislation then in force by bequeathing to the French State 67 Impressionist paintings (Millet, Degas, etc.), in an effort to accelerate the official recognition of the Impressionist movement, which was still disparaged by museums at the time. See Pierre Vaisse, "L'impressionnisme au musée: l'affaire Caillebotte," *L'Histoire*, no. 158, September 1992, pp. 6–14. The Doucet bequest (1921): The collector and couturier Jacques Doucet (1853–1929) proposed bequeathing to the Louvre 21 modern paintings (Sisley, Monet, Degas, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso, etc.), but the French State accepted only two (Douanier Rousseau, Seurat). The State refused Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), considering it scandalous: "At the Louvre, at the Luxembourg, no one wanted to hear about Picasso - he was despised." In 1937, the French State again refused the bequest offered by Doucet's widow. She eventually sold the painting to the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), where it remains on display today.

social inequalities through an ability to shape collective choices and to take control of the collective future (Duvoux, 2023).

Given the limited objective data available from both literature and museums, the research seeks to address the following questions: what proportion of public collections consists of works donated or bequeathed by private individuals? How visible are these works? Can we observe the evolution of collections and the share represented by donations over time? Who are these donors, and what motivates them to give to museums?

### 1.3. Methodology

#### *Methodology and epistemological positioning*

The study aims to answer the research questions by employing three complementary mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) from the social sciences:

1. Analysis of museum archives relating to donations since the late 19th century, to trace the evolution of the practice and identify any contemporary specificities;
2. Ethnographic survey, based on semi-structured interviews with donors, wealth management professionals, and museum staff;
3. Participant observation at the Museum of Ixelles, Brussels (Belgium), in the role of Head of Development and Partnerships from March 2021 to September 2025. This position allows for a close integration of research and practice.

To date, over 500 archival documents of the Museum of Ixelles related to donations have been analysed, enriching the digital inventory of the collection with sociological data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 museum donors, 6 professionals connected to donors (auction houses, foundations, wealth managers), and 12 museum professionals. These interviews focused on donor trajectories, the motivations behind their decision to donate to a museum (rather than through family inheritance or sale), the choice of one museum over another, and the emotional and symbolic relationship with the donated object.

#### *1.3.1. Fieldwork*

The researcher's position at the Museum of Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium), defined a specific and privileged field of study, allowing for a participant-observer approach and a detailed analysis of the subject thanks to several advantages: access to donation and bequest archives since the museum's founding in 1892, providing an in-depth understanding of the collection's and institution's history; observation of the types and number of incoming donation proposals; insight into the museum's internal decision-making process regarding acceptance or refusal of donations; and easy access to meet donors.

The Museum of Ixelles is a fine arts museum founded in 1892 by the municipality of Ixelles (one of the nineteen municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region, Belgium), following the donation of the private collection of the Belgian painter (Edmond de Prater, 1826–1888). Today, the museum preserves over 15,000 artworks, representing the third-largest collection of modern and contemporary art in Belgium. The collection offers a panorama of Belgian art from the 19th century to the present day, featuring major artists such as René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, James Ensor or Léon Spilliaert. The initial donation paved the way for numerous



subsequent contributions.

The museum is known for its various educational and social projects for all kind of visitors (schools, hospitals, neighbours, local associations) and its “human scale approach,” which fosters close relationships with visitors, partners, and donors.

The specific case of the Museum of Ixelles is also considered in relation to other Belgian and French museums, which share common cultural, legal, and fiscal frameworks.

### *1.3.2. The Legal Status of Museums and the Inalienability of Collections*

The cultural and legal definition of a museum is of particular importance in comparative analyses of museum status. As highlighted by ICOM, the concept of the museum encompasses a wide variety of institutional realities, with legal applications that vary across countries, thereby generating contrasting legal frameworks (Cornu *et al.*, 2021).

In both Belgium and France, a museum is primarily defined by its collections, which constitute its material and symbolic foundation (Cornu *et al.*, 2021, pp. 454, 501). In France, the “museum” label may only be granted to an institution that conserves a collection<sup>15</sup>. Although less explicitly codified, a similar logic applies in Belgium. It is worth noting that the first Belgian museums were established under French administration between 1795 and 1814<sup>16</sup>, prior to Belgium’s independence in 1831. Local museums, such as the Museum of Ixelles, implicitly follow this untouchable principle. Legally, museums are considered as ‘public’, since their collections belong to the public domain, thereby rendering them inalienable.

The principle of inalienability prohibits the sale, exchange, transfer, or expropriation of public assets. In both Belgium and France, this principle applies to all public collections, as they are dedicated to public service. In France, inalienability also extends to the objects of private museums when they derive from donations, legacies, or acquisitions supported by public authorities (Cornu *et al.*, 2021, p. 367). This legal framework, inherited from Roman law (Civil law), is common to most continental European countries, where it is upheld either by statutory law or jurisprudence, including France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany<sup>17</sup>, Italy, Spain, Greece<sup>18</sup>, etc. This rule does not apply to *Common law* countries (such as the United States, United Kingdom, etc.) where deaccessioning is allowed under certain conditions.

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<sup>15</sup> Under the terms of the present law, a museum is defined as any permanent collection of objects whose conservation and display are of public interest, and which is organized for the purposes of knowledge, education, and the enjoyment of the public. (Law 2002-5 of January 4, 2002, as amended, relating to the Museums of France, Article 1).

<sup>16</sup> The current Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium were established by the *Arrêté Chaptal* of 1801, which inaugurated the opening of museums in 15 cities outside Paris, intended to receive the “surplus of the Central Museum of the Arts” (the present-day Louvre). This initiative followed the French Revolution of 1789 and the subsequent nationalization of ecclesiastical, dynastic, and aristocratic property. The Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent was created in 1803 (*Arrêté Chaptal* of 1801), while the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp was established in 1810 by Napoleonic imperial decree.

<sup>17</sup> In Germany, no law defines the very notion of “museum,” nor its missions or functions (Cornu *et al.*, 2021, p. 405).

<sup>18</sup> In Greece, it is the functions and purposes of the institution (notably public accessibility) that determine its accreditation as a “museum” (Cornu *et al.*, 2021, p. 454).

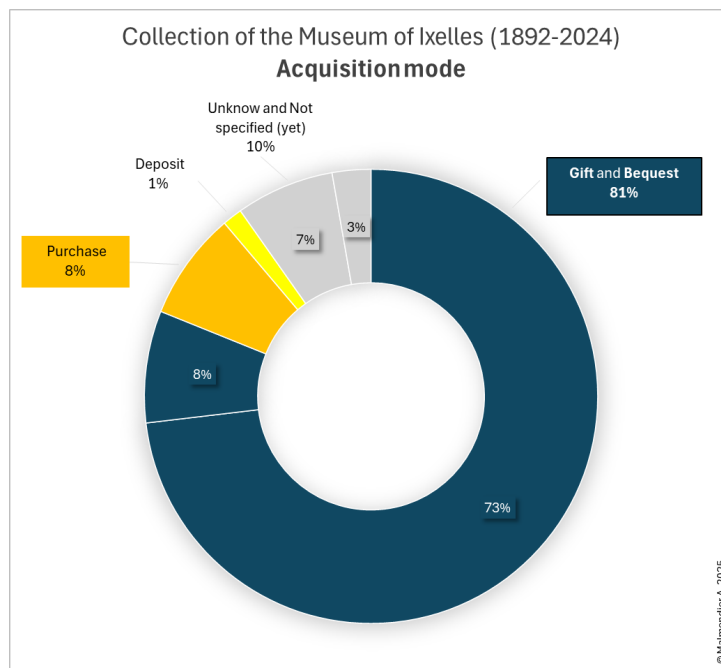
## 1.4. Results and Analysis

### 1.4.1. The Share of Donated or Bequeathed Works

#### 1.4.1.1. Within the Collection

What do the initial results reveal regarding the share of donated or bequeathed works in the collection of the Ixelles Museum, which in 2024 preserves nearly 15,000 artworks? The inventory, enriched with the museum's archival data (as of 16 February 2025) and covering the period from 1892 (the year of the museum's foundation) to 2024, shows that 81% of the collection (11,877 items) entered through donations and bequests from private individuals. Acquisitions account for 8%, corresponding to 1,129 works purchased by the museum thanks to the municipal acquisition budget and the financial support of the Friends of the Museum association. Deposits make up 1% of the total. The mode of acquisition of 10% of the objects (1,028 items) remains unknown or undetermined (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution by mode of acquisition (Number of objects), Museum of Ixelles (Belgium), 1892–2024.



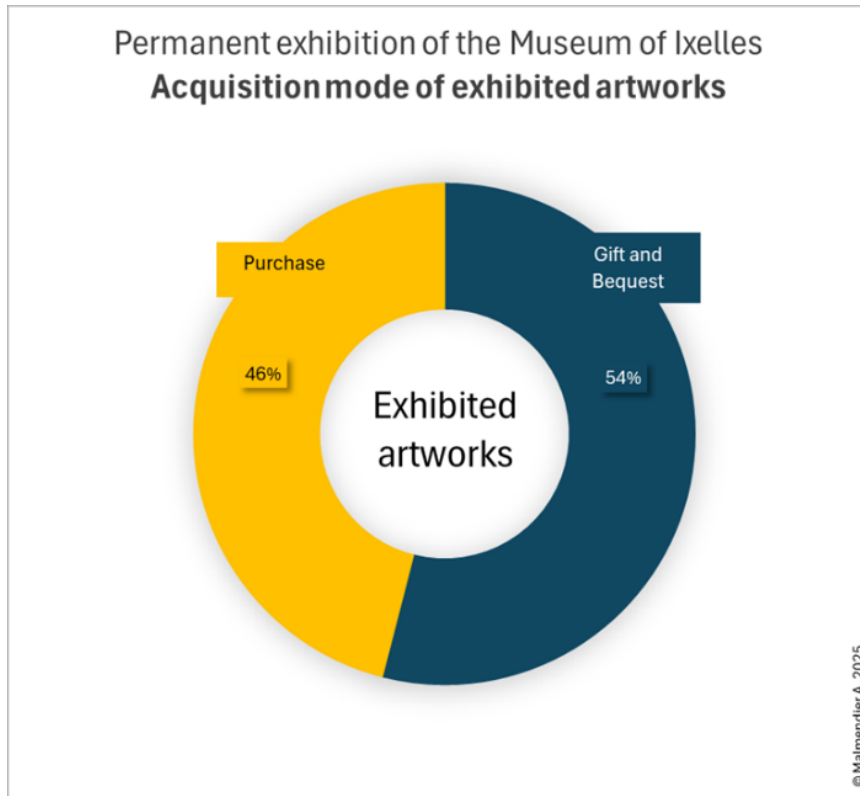
#### 1.4.1.2. Within the Permanent Exhibition

If 81% of the museum's overall collection consists of donated or bequeathed objects, what proportion is actually accessible to the public? The museum's permanent exhibition shows to the public approximately 250 to 300 works, the 'masterpieces'. The exhibited objects represent approximately 2% of the total items recorded in the inventory<sup>19</sup>. An analysis of

<sup>19</sup> This observation is consistent with the findings of the international survey conducted by ICCROM and UNESCO in 2011 on collections stored in museum reserves worldwide: only 5% of collections are accessible to the public, while 95% remain in

the acquisition modes of these exhibited works reveals that 54% originated from donations or bequests (Figure 2). In other words, during their visit to the permanent exhibition, visitors encounter as many works acquired directly by the museum as works stemming from the generosity of donors.

Figure 2. Distribution of Works in the Museum of Ixelles' permanent exhibition by mode of acquisition (Number of Objects).



#### 1.4.1.3. Formation of the Collection since 1892

The initial analyses also make it possible to trace the development of the collection over time. Figure 3 shows that two-thirds (66%) of the collection were formed before 1940, amounting to nearly 10,000 objects accumulated within 50 years. Of these, 95% entered through donations and bequests (9,421 objects), 4% through purchases (384 objects), and 1% as deposits. The remaining third (33%), corresponding to about 5,000 items, was added to the inventory over the following 84 years.

Figure 3. Overall Collection Growth by Mode of Acquisition (Number of Objects). Museum of Ixelles, 1892-2024.

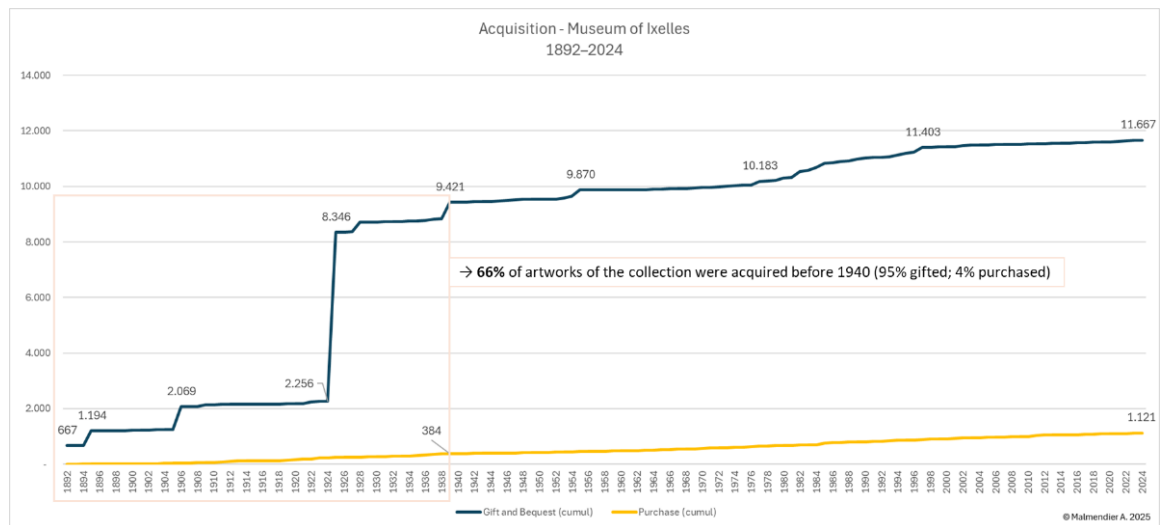


Figure 4 more clearly illustrates the decreasing trend in the number of works entering the collection through donations and bequests.

Figure 4. Trend of Donated and Bequeathed Works at the Museum of Ixelles, 1892–2024. (For reasons of clarity, the donation of 6,000 drawings from 1925 has been removed from the graph)



A closer analysis shows, however, that while the number of donated works has decreased, the number of donors has, conversely, increased. The following figures present the evolution of the average annual number (by decade) of works donated to the museum (Figure 5) as well as the average annual number (by decade) of donors (Figure 6). These observations indicate that, over time, fewer artworks have been donated, but the number of individual donors has gradually increased.

Figure 5. Average Annual Number (by Decade) of Donated Works at the Museum of Ixelles, 1892–2023.

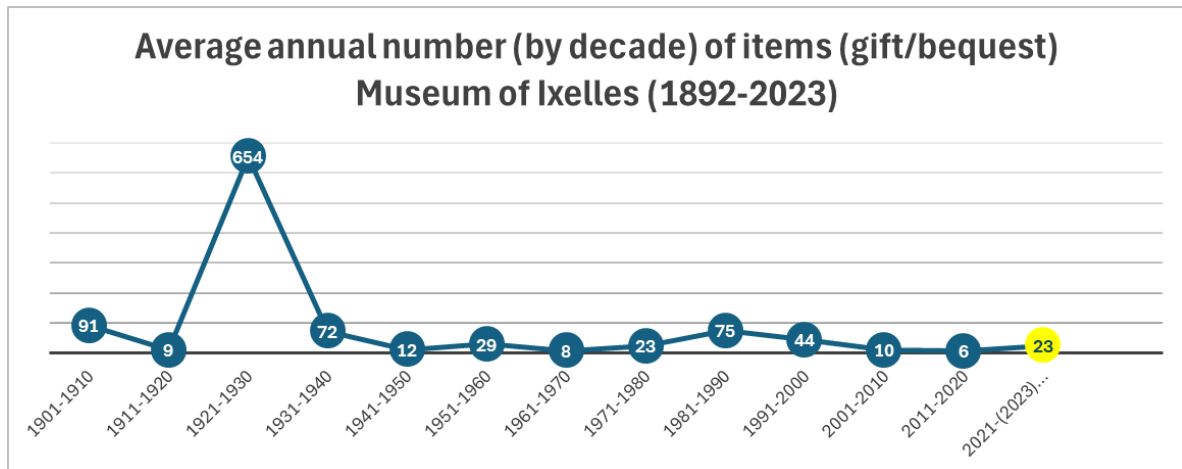
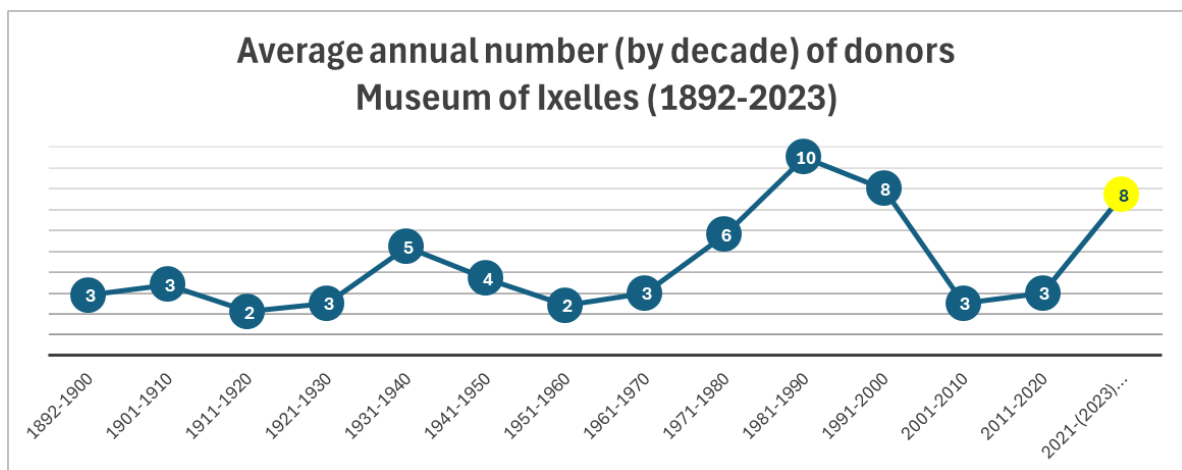


Figure 6. Average Annual Number (by Decade) of Donors at the Museum of Ixelles, 1892–2023.



A caveat must nevertheless be added to these observations. The decrease in the number of donated objects could suggest that donors are indeed offering fewer items than before. However, an alternative interpretation is possible: the museum itself may be accepting fewer proposals, as suggested by the analysis of incoming donation offers at the Museum of Ixelles during the years 2021, 2022, and 2023 (participant observation). Table 1 shows that, out of 43 donation offers (from individual donors) received between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2023, only 53% were accepted (23 donors). Furthermore, of a total of 473 objects proposed, only 15% were ultimately accepted (69 objects).

Table 1. Number of Donation and Bequest Proposals Received by the Museum of Ixelles in 2021, 2022, and 2023.

Year	Number of proposal (gift/bequest)	Number of accepted proposal (gift/bequest)	Number of items proposed (gift/bequest)	Number of items accepted (gift/bequest)
2021	17	7	332	25
2022	14	9	103	25
2023	12	7	38	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>69</b>
% accepted		53%		15%
Annual average		8		23

Whereas the archives from the early 20th century show that the museum readily accepted entire collections as they were proposed (including libraries and personal artistic productions), today the institution adopts a more selective and cautious approach, accepting only those items deemed most relevant.

This shift can be explained by several factors: the increasing constraints of limited storage space (saturated reserves), the economic and environmental challenges related to the conservation of artworks, and the gradual decline in public funding.

The research considers that these conditions are leading to a shift in the acquisition policy compared to the last century, when unlimited accumulation was the norm. The research suggests that, due to these constraints, the museum now applies a more reasoned acquisition policy and makes more selective patrimonial choices, thereby fostering a way of “making memory” that differs significantly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 1.4.2. Donors

##### 1.4.2.1. Typology of museum's donors

After analysing the evolution of the collection and noting the growing number of donors, is it possible to establish a typology of 21st-century donors? A collective volume published on the occasion of the exhibition *Les donateurs du Louvre* (Musée du Louvre, 1989), under the direction of Michel Laclotte, then President-Director of the Louvre (1987–1994), proposes such a typology. Nine categories of donors are distinguished:

1. Philanthropists, heirs of the Enlightenment, driven by ideals of public utility;
2. Literary and artistic figures committed to fostering cultural life;
3. passionate collectors (notably of contemporary art), eager to prevent the dispersal of their collections;
4. Artists and their families (or heirs), concerned with securing the posterity of their name and work;
5. Models and their descendants, who seek to reunite model and painter (often renowned) before the visitor's gaze in a quest for immortality;
6. Local families and personalities (notables), wishing to preserve the memory of their relatives by donating portraits and self-portraits;
7. Support groups for the museum, such as associations of “Friends of the Museum”;
8. Curators themselves, acting as donors;
9. Collectors of antiquities, learned societies, and amateur archaeologists, serving as suppliers of archaeological material.

Based on the provenance analysis of works in the Museum of Ixelles' collection (Table 2),

a tenth category can be added:

10. galleries, intent on having the artists they represent consecrated by a museum, with the explicit or implicit goal of enhancing their market value<sup>20</sup>.

Table 2. Provenance of Donations and Bequests at the Museum of Ixelles, 1892–2024.

Provenance	Acquisition mode			
	Gift and Bequest		Purchase	
Private collection	9.653	81%	151	13%
Artist's family	1.028	9%	3	0%
Artist	811	7%	321	29%
Other (org., foundation, assoc.)	21	0%	10	1%
Collection d'entreprise	5	0%	-	0%
Gallery	7	0%	71	6%
Auction house	-	0%	2	0%
Unknown	352	3%	563	50%
Total	11.877	100%	1.121	100%

Table 2 also shows that the vast majority (81%) of donated and bequeathed objects come from private collections. Museum archives indicate that these collections were formed by individuals, collectors, or art amateurs, and often transmitted to their heirs, who then chose to donate them to the museum.

The typology established by Michel Laclotte in 1989 provides a synthetic overview of the various motivations underlying the act of donation. However, one dimension seems absent. In France, rooted in the revolutionary legacy of appropriated patrimony from the Church, the monarchy, and the aristocracy, what role does civic consciousness play, along with the desire to share beauty with the widest possible audience? What about this aspiration to “perform an act of citizenship”<sup>21</sup>? It is precisely these “amateur” donors which do not seem to meet strictly the motivations mentioned above that constitute a central focus of the present research.

Just as the study focuses on “amateur” donors - who appear to make up the majority of the museum’s benefactors - it also seeks to examine this specific motivation that drives private individuals to contribute to the common good embodied in a patrimonial collection.

In order to better assess the practice of donating artworks to public museums, greater quantitative transparency should be encouraged - for instance, through the systematic recording, centralization, and public disclosure of donation and bequest proposals. Such a mechanism would facilitate the submission of donations and bequests by philanthropists, the management of proposals, and the allocation of objects and artworks to the most relevant museums. From a conservation perspective, this process would also help to avoid redundancies, much as libraries and archival centres already do.

<sup>20</sup> The “gallery” category could be extended to include estates (artists’ estates), as well as foundations and institutes whose purpose is to promote the artists they represent.

<sup>21</sup> Ingrid Jurzak, Director of the Musée de Valence (France) and curator of the exhibition *Histoires de collections. Deux siècles de donations au musée* (December 16, 2023 – May 19, 2024, Musée de Valence, Valence, France). Private interview conducted on February 14, 2024.

### 1.4.3. Donors' motivations

Interviews conducted with the category of “amateur” donors - generally from the upper middle class, educated, relatively affluent individuals belonging to majority groups (similar to the museums visitors) - reveal particularly insightful elements with respect to the questions at stake. At this stage of the research, the aim is not to make sweeping generalizations.

From a general philanthropic perspective, based on the ‘Eight Mechanisms That Drive Charitable Giving’ article published by Bekkers and Wiepking (2011), some observations can be made. Based on the review of 500 academic studies, Bekkers and Wiepking identified eight mechanisms that encourage giving in general: awareness of need, solicitation, costs and benefits, altruism, reputation, psychological benefits, values, and efficacy (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). If all those mechanisms can be identified in donors’ motivation, yet it does not provide a completely satisfactory understanding for the decision-making process that leads a donor to donate their artworks to public museums. By the authors' own admission, the quality of the academic studies on which the development of the eight mechanisms was based and the replicability of the results call into question this list of motivations: *‘Of the eight mechanisms, research on efficacy, material costs, solicitation, and psychological benefits tends to replicate better than research on awareness of need, reputation, values, and altruism.’*<sup>22</sup> The awareness of need and the solicitation are embedded into the museum internal discourses but there is no formal strategy for soliciting donations of artworks. The mechanism seems both simpler and more complex. That is why an anthropological approach with detailed field analyses can teach us more.

At this stage of the research, several reflections can be shared concerning the stated motivations of philanthropists and how their motivations can be interpreted from an anthropological research perspective.

At the root of the decision to donate an artwork to a museum lies, invariably, a sensitivity to art: an affective bond with the museal institution, positive visiting experiences, memories, emotions, an attachment to the public mission of museums, a recognition of something of oneself within the museum, and an awareness of its social and memorial role. For all donors interviewed, the museum is perceived as a place accessible to all - or at least to those who share a taste for beauty and for objects of the past. They unanimously express a deeply held conviction that the museum is a site of preservation and transmission of memory to future generations. Their choice is therefore motivated, sometimes unconsciously or without explicit articulation, by the certainty that the museum will outlive them, that it will endure “beyond them” and almost “despite them.”

The principle of the inalienability of collections, though implicit, is understood as self-evident: without question, the museum will survive them. In their desire to “leave a trace,”

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<sup>22</sup> Bekkers, R., 2024. *Eight Mechanisms, Seventeen Years Later* [WordPress personal blog]. URL : <https://renebekkers.wordpress.com/2024/11/07/eight-mechanisms-seventeen-years-later/>



the museum appears as the most appropriate institution. While the demands and conditions attached to donations have become increasingly modest, one requirement remains constant: the donor's name must appear on the label of the work. One donor, after several hours of interview, even called the researcher the following day to emphasize that this detail should not be forgotten. In reference to Marcel Mauss's theory of gift and counter-gift (1925), the perpetuation of the donor's name may today be considered the museum's principal counter-gift: the assurance that the donor's name will remain eternally inscribed in the memory of the institution and its visitors.

Undeniably, there is a strong desire to share with the museum and its public an intimate object, materializing an affective or familial bond - an item carefully acquired or inherited after having hung for years on the walls of the family home. Donated objects often carry an identity and a history (Weiner, 1985). Their affective value is independent of their market or aesthetic value, although the latter may reinforce their symbolic weight. The decision to donate a René Magritte worth several hundred thousand euros involves far more complex considerations than that of donating works by a great-uncle, once an artist of modest renown whose name has not been retained in the canon of art history.

Several testimonies illustrate this intimate dimension, such as a donor in her forties recounted that, together with her brother, they had "given away the things they cared about the most."<sup>23</sup> Prematurely made heirs after the sudden death of their parents, Manon (pseudonym), a social worker, and Thomas, an actor, were obliged to empty the family home:

*"For every object, for everything that passed through my hands since the death of my parents, I asked myself: Do I keep it? Do we keep it? Do we give it away? We gave many things to our parents' friends, many others to charities. We also sold a lot of things. But for the two artworks we gave to the museum, it was obvious that we had to donate them."* (Interview with Ms. Dupont. 10 August 2023)

It had all begun a few months earlier with an email sent to the museum's general address:

*"We have decided to return to the public domain. It makes sense for us to offer them to the Museum of Ixelles, not only because these two artists seem to fall within the scope of your collections, but also because I greatly appreciate the activities organized by the museum."*<sup>24</sup>

This excerpt illustrates both the sense of attachment to the museum - despite the absence of any direct connection - and a recurrent theme found in other testimonies: the idea of a "return to the public domain." It reflects a desire to control the destiny of the work, to place

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<sup>23</sup> Interview on 10 August 2023 with Ms. Dupont (pseudonym), donor to the Museum of Ixelles. Works donated: Émile Claus, *Evening Mist*, 1898. Lucien Levy Dhurmer, *Young Girl with a Cherry Branch*, 1890. Public acknowledgement: Donations from Mr. and Ms. Dupont. In tribute to their father and mother, Catheline and Pierre Dupont (1950-2021). ©Museum of Ixelles (Inv. CC 4474 and CC 4475)

<sup>24</sup> Donation proposal. Email from Ms. Dupont dated 15 February 2023.

it permanently under the museum's protection and beyond the speculative anonymity of the art market<sup>25</sup>, in accordance with the principle of inalienability.

As the donor herself expressed:

*"To turn to a public museum is to render public that which is truly beautiful. And since it is a public museum, and by definition these two works will belong to everyone, they will also continue to belong to me. Because yes, I think this work is much more at home in a museum than in a private residence, where it will now be seen by the greatest number. But the day they came to take it away, yes, I cried. It was a real emotional tear. Because we were attached to these two works. And when I say 'we,' I mean the entire family, both the living and the dead."*<sup>26</sup>

In this case, the donation of an intimate object to the museum resembles a symbolic funerary ritual<sup>27</sup>, whereby the placement of a beloved object within the museum can be seen as a funerary ex-voto, embodying both the memory of the deceased and the recognition of the living. As Mauss noted in his *Essai sur le don* (1925, p. 73), "Even when abandoned by the donor, the object is still something of him." Building on this, Annette Weiner (1985) emphasized the notion of "inalienable possessions," objects that cannot be sold and which compel us to reconsider how value is created in things destined to remain outside of circulation. She demonstrated how such possessions are fundamentally linked to the ways in which objects embody personal and collective histories, spiritual powers, and an appearance of immortality. In dialogue with Mauss and Weiner, French anthropologist Maurice Godelier (1996) further developed the theory of inalienability, arguing that every object retains a personal trace that forbids it from being discarded or sold, and showing how one can simultaneously give an object away and keep it.

Finally, the concept of a "return to the public domain," echoed in several interviews as a desire to "share with the greatest number," resonates with the idea of "mutualisation" mentioned by Florence Weber in her 2023 introduction to Mauss's *Essai* and illustrated by French sociologist Christian Baudelot (2008) through his account of donating a kidney to his ill wife: "It was not a gift, but a kind of mutualisation, where in the couple everything had always been shared; I could not fail to put into the common pot an organ that was of no use to me."<sup>28</sup> Following Mauss, who sought to conceptualize a form of giving outside the constraining cycle of gift and counter-gift - a generosity that avoids humiliating charity and endless dependence (Mauss, 1925, p. 47) - mutualisation may provide a specific way of conceiving the patrimonialisation of private objects and of understanding a museum collection as a collective asset, or even as a "common good" to be managed collectively (Ostrom, 1990).

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<sup>25</sup> Interview on 19 July 2023 with Ms. Nicole d'Huart, Director-Curator of the Museum of Ixelles from 1987 to 2007, Deputy Director-Curator of the Museum of Ixelles from 1967 to 1987. Donor to the Museum of Ixelles (Inv. CC 4235, AMIS 82). Member of the Board of Directors of the non-profit organisation of the Friends of the Museum since 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Interview on 10 August 2023 with Ms. Dupont, donor to the Museum of Ixelles.

<sup>27</sup> Interview on 23 May 2024 (New York, USA) with Fred R. Myers, Anthropologist, Professor of Anthropology (retired), New York University, USA.

<sup>28</sup> Baudelot, C., intervention in Bourmeau, S., 2008 (1 July). Marcel Mauss, savant et politique [émission radiophonique]. In *La suite dans les idées*, Radio France, France Culture. URL (accessed August 17, 2025) : <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-suite-dans-les-idees/marcel-mauss-savant-et-politique-7268222>

#### 1.4.4. Gender analysis

Within the framework of this “Gender, Power & Philanthropy” session, it could be worth highlighting the results of a gender-based analysis of the collection. The examination of the gender of donors and artists represented in the collection reveals that, among the 546 donors identified at the Museum of Ixelles, 56% are men and 39% are women (some acting as executors of estates). The remaining percentages represent donations from galleries, companies or organizations.

Furthermore, among the nearly 3,000 artists represented in the entire collection, only 6% are women (176 female artists). Beyond this numerical underrepresentation, the disparity is even more pronounced when considering the number of works: artworks made by male artists account for 94% of the artworks in the collection, each of them represented by an average of five works, whereas artworks made by female artists account for only 3% of the artworks in the collection, each of them represented by an average of two works.

Cross-referencing data on female donors and female artists shows that 62% of the artworks made by women artists (255 pieces) entered the collection through donations or bequests, and that two-thirds of these works (169 pieces) were given or bequeathed by female donors<sup>29</sup>. This observation points to the presence of a gender-related dimension in processes of transmission, an hypothesis currently being pursued in ongoing research<sup>30</sup>.

#### 1.5. Conclusion

The analysis of art donations made by “amateur” donors to the Museum of Ixelles sheds new light on this practice, from the late 19th century to the present day. It reveals the decisive role played by private individuals, whose contribution proves to be far more significant than previously assumed.

Today, the collection of the Museum of Ixelles is composed by 81% of objects coming from donations (73%) and bequests (8%). In its permanent exhibition - representing only 2% of the total collection - the masterpieces on display are almost equally divided between works acquired by the museum and those donated or bequeathed by private individuals (54%). A historical study of the collection’s formation since 1892 shows that two-thirds of it was assembled before 1940, almost entirely through donations and bequests (95%). Since then, while the number of objects acquired in this way has steadily declined, the number of unique donors has tended to increase.

This decline, however, does not reflect a decrease in offers. An examination of the years 2021, 2022, and 2023 shows that only 53% of donation proposals were accepted, representing

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<sup>29</sup> The same observation can be made at the Musée d’Orsay: “works by women were more often donated or bequeathed than purchased: of the 1,501 works by women in the Musée d’Orsay’s collections, 902 came from donations and bequests, representing 60%” (source: *France Culture, Morning News, March 8, 2024*).

<sup>30</sup> Lyse Vancampenhoudt, PhD candidate in Art History at the Université catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, whose research focuses on four Belgian women artists represented in the collections of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.

just 15% of the objects proposed. Whereas in the early 20th century the museum could accept entire huge private collections, it now applies a much stricter selection process. This shift can be explained by contemporary constraints: storage facilities are already overcrowded, rising conservation costs (energy), and dwindling public funding. Within this context, the museum must make careful choices, directly shaping the way it “makes memory” today and placing it in a situation of “limits,” both spatial and temporal.

Donors’ motivations often stem from a desire to “leave a trace” within collective memory. This dynamic can be likened to a form of funerary ritual: the object, placed under the protection of the museum and its principle of inalienability (which prohibits any sale or disposal of object from the museum collection), functions as a funerary ex-voto, carrying the memory of the donor. It retains part of the donor’s identity and history, echoing the theories of Marcel Mauss, Annette Weiner, and Maurice Godelier on the inseparable link between the gift and the person. At the same time, the gesture reflects a will to “give something beautiful” back to the community, opening the way for an understanding of donations not only as gifts but as acts of mutualisation - transforming the museum collection into a shared common good.

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