



Kunstvrienden

Onderzoekers en verzamelaars van Belgische kunst 1830-1950

II



Rose Houyoux, Allegory, "To those Who gave us the Joy to be grateful", Auderghem, 1915, flour sack Castle, Maple Leaf Milling Coy., Ontario, Canada - Canada's Gift, 94 x 107 cm. Col. HHPLM 62.4.215, USA, Photos: author

Flour sacks. The art of war.

The slide show *2023 Friends of Art: Exhibition of painted flour sacks 1915* screened at the Second Meeting Day of the Belgian Friends of Art marked a turning point in the research into art works painted on flour sacks during World War I.¹ Throughout the years the flour sack art had emerged piece by piece, each time from different artists in various collections. By bringing the works together in images, zooming in on their cotton and jute canvas, awareness was raised about unique works of art that, in their own way, individually and collectively, occupy a place in cultural history.

Photos of around a hundred art works, found in Belgian and American collections, moved rhythmically across the screen. There were paintings on flour sacks by professional and amateur artists. Many paintings were recognized and could be attributed to renowned Belgian artists by their signature or painting style. Others needed further explanation for attribution or remained of unknown origin.

Background

During the German occupation in 1914-1918, food relief for the Belgian population was partly supplied from North America. American and Canadian sacks of bread flour were emptied at Belgian bakeries and attracted public attention. This led, on the one hand, to the collection of empty sacks and, on the other, to the creative reuse of the sacks. Belgian exhibitions of the decorated sacks attracted thousands of visitors in 1915; after the Armistice, the flour sacks fell into oblivion.

¹ October 14, 2023, I was invited to give a lecture for the Belgian Friends of Art, Researchers, and Collectors of Belgian Art 1830-1950 during their Second Meeting Day at MuZee in Ostend, Belgium.
<https://meelzak.annelienvankempen.nl/blog/show-kunstvrienden-beschilderde-bloemzakken/>



Marie Durand, *Les Cloches d'Epeghem (The Bells of Epeghem)*, 1915, 61 x 41 cm, Col. and photo M. Moulckers, USA.



Anonymous, "Ze zullen hem niet temmen, zolang een Vlaming leeft (They will not tame him as long as a Fleming lives)", 1916, flour sack, American Commission, 76 x 36 cm. G. Hollaert Collection, Belgium. Photos: author

The centenary commemoration of the Great War brought to light several painted examples “that bear witness to a fully-fledged artistic talent” by well-known Belgian artists Godefroid Devreese, Joseph Dierickx, Jules Van Cromphout, Philibert Cockx, Jos Albert, Jean Brusselmans, and Piet van Engelen, as “textile witnesses of World War I”.² Only one exhibition of “painted meal sacks” at the Georges Giroux Gallery in Brussels in 1915 was noteworthy as a charity event.³

Research

Research into the WWI decorated flour sacks began in 2018.⁴ As the study progressed, distinctions emerged in categories: the sacks were reused for making clothes, for needlework, and for painting. Each category has its own characteristics: the painted flour sacks stand out because of their makers, who were painters of renown or became so later in life.

The painted flour sack - definition

The lack of familiarity with the history of painted flour sacks prompted the creation of a definition to facilitate recognition of the phenomenon. The creation of the sacks can be determined in terms of place, time, and material, and therefore leads to a fairly narrow description:

“A painted flour sack is a painting on the canvas of a used American or Canadian flour sack originating from food supplies in the period between November 1914 and April 1915, by an artist living in Belgium occupied by German troops, created for a charitable purpose, either an exhibition, sale, or raffle, held in Belgium in the period between summer 1915 - Easter 1916.”⁵

Exhibitions

The flour sack exhibitions gave rise to news reports. The newspaper articles appeared in the censored press, as well as in newspapers published outside Belgium. In addition, an archived catalog has been found.⁶ The following organizations initiated the painting of empty sacks and involved at least a hundred artists in their initiative.

² DELMARCEL, G., *Pride of Niagara. Best Winter Wheat. Amerikaanse Meelzakken als textiele getuigen van Wereldoorlog I (American Flour Sacks as textile witnesses of World War I)*. Brussels, Parc Cinquenaire: Bulletin of the Museum Art and History, volume 84, 2013, p. 97-126.

³ ADRIAENSSENS, W., *Belgian Art During the First World War: Exhibitions and Salons in Brussels*. In: Rossi-Schrimpf, Inga, Kollwelter, Laura, 14/18 - Rupture or Continuity. Belgian Art around World War I. Louvain: Louvain University Press, 2018.

⁴ VAN KEMPEN, A., *Geborduurde meelzakken in WOI: Aardige herinneringen, zeer dienstig als geschenk; het overschot is het spreken waard (Embroidered flour sacks from WWI: Nice souvenirs, serve well as gifts; the profits are worth talking about)*. Furnes: Bakery Museum, Patakon, tijdschrift voor bakerfgoed (magazine for bakery heritage), number 1, September 2019, p. 3-23

⁵ “Painting” in the broadest sense, the artists worked with oil paint, red chalk, pastel chalk, lithography, and more.

⁶ State Archives of Belgium, Archives de la Guerre, Brussels. CNSA/NHVC (I 446) 1117 “Utilisation des Sacs Vides”.



Philibert Cockx, "Nieuport, Bruxelles", 1915, flour sack Flour. Canada's Gift, 48 x 94 cm. Col. HHPLM 62.4.254, USA. Photos: author.



Henri Thomas, "Jeune femme au manchon (Young woman with a muff)", 1915, flour sack White Fawn, Duncombe Bros, Waterford, Ontario, Canada. Col. KBR Print Room, Belgium. Photos: author

Organization	Location	Exhibition dates
Les Artistes Liègeois sous le patronage de l'Administration Communale de Liège	Académie des Beaux Arts, Liège (67 items)	July 4-11, 1915
Le Comité de Secours et d'Alimentation d'Auderghem	City Hall Auderghem (47 items)	July 25 – August 1, 1915
La Fédération Professionnelle des Beaux Arts – Cercle Artistique in Brussels	Gallery Georges Giroux, “sketches and studies”, Brussels	August 14-30, 1915
Antwerpsch Komiteit van Hulp, Middenkomiteit in Antwerp	Harmonie Maatschappij, Antwerp	End of 1915, beginning of 1916

The organizations provided the artists with empty flour sacks. The request was to paint three flour sacks with themes such as: “(...) the favorite places in the Forêt de Soignes (...), containing a thought about the circumstances of the present time (...), a special token of gratitude to America.”

Collections and artists

To date, 111 preserved works have been found in Belgium and the USA. Their data have been compiled in a database.⁷ 30% are located in Belgium in four public collections and a dozen private collections. The remaining 70% in the USA are located in five public and five private collections.

Number of preserved painted flour sacks	Public	Private	Total
Belgium	7	25	32
USA	57	22	79
Total	64	47	111

Eighty percent of the retrieved flour sacks are signed or can be attributed to an artist who resided in occupied Belgium, while twenty percent are unsigned or unattributed. The artworks are the expression of seventy artists, including fifteen women; some have painted multiple sacks. A few amateur painters are also mentioned. The youngest artist is 20 years old, the oldest 65, with most artists between 40 and 60 years old.

Identification of the flour sack

The flour sacks used for food supplies came from mills and aid organizations in the USA and Canada. They had the cotton and jute sacks printed with logos, the names of the mills, and encouraging messages for the Belgian public. The Belgian food committees used stamps to mark the empty sacks. In American vernacular, the flour sacks were known as “Belgian relief flour sacks”, in Canada as “Belgian Relief flour bags” or “sacs de farine de secours belges”. The Belgian population referred to them as “Amerikaansche bloemzakken” or “sacs américains”. From the painted flour sacks that have been retrieved today, 50% originally came from the USA, 20% originated from Canadian mills, and the origin of 30% has not been determined.

⁷ The Belgian Friends of Art initiated this project. Mr. Hubert Bovens is a Belgian expert in researching biographical information about Belgian artists, 1830-1950. His contributions enabled the creation of a database of flour sack painters.



Armand Rassenfosse, "Nu. Imprimé à Liège en 1915 sur sac américain (Nude. Printed in Liège in 1915 on a Belgian relief flour sack)", flour sack James River Falls, The Dunlop Mills, Richmond, Virginia, USA. Private col. Belgium, photos N. de Rassenfosse.

Unique pieces

The painted flour sacks belong in cultural history in their own unique way, both individually and collectively. They are trench art created by artists in occupied Belgium. The underlying motivation was “*la charité*” (charity): the artists donated their art as gifts so that the artworks could be sold to help those affected by the war.

But flour sack art harbors contradictions.

Trench art

The painted flour sacks are full of conflict resonance. They can be classified as trench art, within the broad concept defined by British archaeologist and anthropologist Nicholas Saunders. They are: “items made by civilians, directly from material associated temporally and/or spatially with armed conflict and its consequences”.⁸

The approach of viewing the war *matériel*, the sacks and their paintings, first and foremost through the lens of the conflict, examining their creators from the perspective of the confusion in which they and the people around them lived, and seeing the paradox captured in the objects, provides focus for the study of the objects.

Occupied Belgium

Belgian art history from the period 1914-1918 highlights three categories of artists: soldier-artists working on the Belgian military front, Belgian artists refugees who fled mainly to Great Britain, France and the Netherlands, and artists who stayed at home and lived under the repression of the German military occupiers for more than four years.⁹ The painted flour sacks belong to the third category. They are art works by artists who stayed at home and lived under the pressure of the occupiers.

Charity¹⁰

“Patriotic culture defined solidarity as a central duty of citizens. (...) An entire culture developed around this central principle of the patriotic message. Charity generated a great deal of (semi-)artistic output (...)”, according to Belgian historian Sophie de Schaepdrijver.¹¹

In occupied Belgium, therefore, “a large field was open for the benefit of charity”. The assumption was that “those who practice some form of art would, in the current circumstances, consider themselves fortunate to be able to contribute to charitable work (...)”. The isolation of occupied Belgium made normal life impossible, a situation that “(...) would give most of them free time, which they could certainly not use for any nobler purpose”.¹²

Contributing to charity meant putting artistic talent at the service of patriotic and humanitarian work.

⁸ SAUNDERS, N., *Trench art: Objects and people in conflict. War & Art: A visual history of modern conflict*. Ed. Joanna Bourke, 2017, p. 212-218.

⁹ DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, S., *Occupation, propaganda and the idea of Belgium*, in *European Culture in the Great War. The arts, entertainment and propaganda 1914-1918*. Edited by Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 267-294.

¹⁰ VAN KEMPEN, A., *De weldaad van de meelzak. Flour sacks. The art of charity*. Ieper: vzw In Flanders Fields Museum, Yearbook 2020, pages 4-25. English translation pages 123-131

¹¹ DE SCHAEPDRIJVER, S., *Shaping the Experience of Military Occupation: Ten Images*. In: Rossi-Schrimpf, I., Kollwelter, L., 14/18 - Rupture or Continuity. Belgian Art around World War I. Louvain: Louvain University Press, 2018, p. 43-58.

¹² Felixarchief Antwerp, Het Beschermings Komiteit, July 22, 1915, inv.nr. 729#262



Léon Houyoux, "Fillette revenant de la distribution de pain (Little girl returning from the bread distribution)", Auderghem, (Belgium), 1915, 84 x 31 cm. Col. and photo M. Moulckers, USA.

The proceeds from visitor admission fees to the exhibitions were donated to local charities. The plan was then to send the painted flour sacks to America. “*Sur ces toiles, (...) proposait à nos artistes de peindre les sites favoris de la Forêt et de faire cadeau de leurs chefs d’œuvre à nos bienfaiteurs.*”¹³ However, although they were gifts from the artists, the sacks were not gifts for the benefactors: “These works of art will be sent to America to be sold there for the benefit of the Belgian Food Relief effort.”¹⁴

Contradictions

The art of the flour sack is full of paradoxes.

1. Preserved flour sacks help to keep up appearances of successful food aid, donated entirely by (citizens of) the USA. The propaganda about the food supply to occupied Belgium has always been so strong that even today it is difficult to grasp the reality.

Viewed as a whole, the aid provided to occupied Belgium failed in terms of food aid, local food production, and distribution. Food imports covered a maximum of 25% of needs; in 1915, it helped to control prices; in the years 1916-1918, famine prevailed.¹⁵ Only a few percent of food imports were donated by “America”.¹⁶

2. Citizens in occupied Belgium were completely isolated and lived under censorship. This also applied to the painters of flour sacks. “(...) The Germans came to view the art works in the exhibition halls of the Harmonie Maatschappij in Antwerp (...) They exercised “censorship” on the sacks and removed various examples that they considered too patriotic.”¹⁷

The renowned painters seized the opportunity to organize their patriotism into heroic images and symbolism of the American nation, combining it with patriotic symbolism as much as possible. Painting the sacks in 1915 gave the artists the opportunity to engage in patriotic propaganda. In 2025, their propaganda is interpreted as “gratitude for American food aid that saved them from starvation”. From a cultural-historical perspective, the artists painted “Belgian and American symbolism out of duty to their homeland in order to alleviate their own hardship and that of their compatriots”.

3. In 1914/15, the flour sacks were used on two continents for the same charitable purpose—to help the needy part of the occupied Belgian population. But on both continents, the sacks proved inefficient. The American and Canadian flour sacks were not efficient for supplying occupied Belgium in 1914: “(...) the purchase and sending to us of food in small quantities gave us much trouble and was necessarily a very uneconomical way of handling the matter.”¹⁸

¹³ La Belgique: journal publié pendant l’occupation sous la censure ennemie, April 11, 1915

¹⁴ Het Vlaamsche Nieuws, August 8, 1915

¹⁵ SCHOLLIERS, P., DAELEMANS, F., *Standards of living and standards of health in wartime Belgium*. In: The Upheaval of War. Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918. Edited by Richard Wall and Jay Winter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

NATH, G., *Brood willen we hebben! Honger, sociale politiek en protest tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in België*. (Bread, we want! Hunger, social politics, and protest during the First World War in Belgium.) Antwerp: Manteau, 2013.

¹⁶ WILLIAMS, JEFFERSON and MAYFAIR, *The Voluntary Aid of America*. New York, London: 1918.

¹⁷ L’Indépendance Belge (Edité en Angleterre), March 4, 1916; De Stem uit België, March 31, 1916 (published in London 1916-1919).

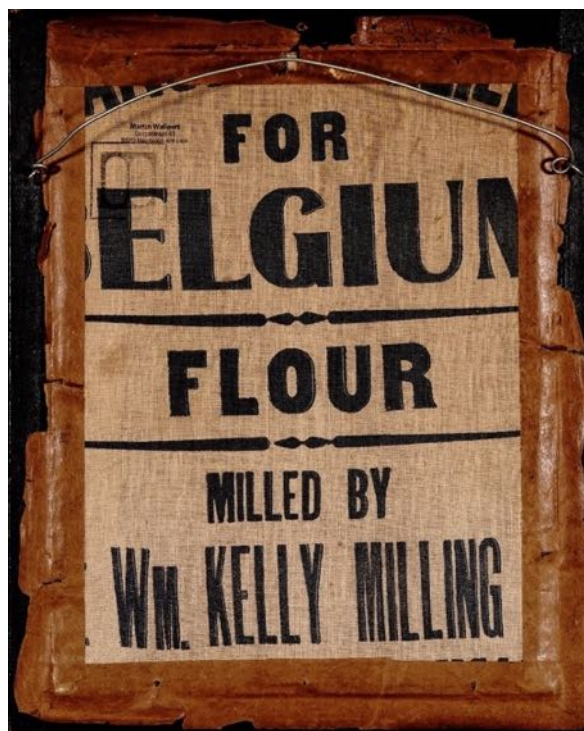
¹⁸ KELLOGG, V., *Fighting Starvation in Belgium*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, Garden City, 1918.



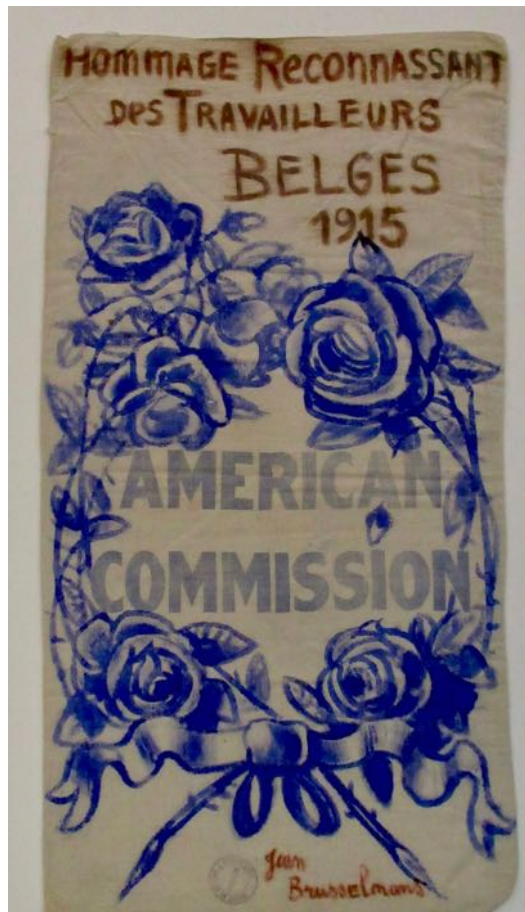
Josué Dupon, "Grateful Belgium", JD, 1915, flour sack American Commission, lithography. Col. and photo National WWI Museum and Memorial, USA.



Guillaume Van Strydonck, "Washington's Spirit Does Flourish in USA", 1914-1915 (New York 1908), flour sack Washington Flour A.B.C., Col. St. Edward's University, USA Photo L. Kull McCray.



Louis Thevenet, "Stilleven" (Still life), 1915, flour sack, American Relief for Belgium Flour milled by Wm. Kelly Milling Company, Hutchinson, Kansas, USA'. Col. Atelier Martin Wallaert © den AST Halle, Belgium, photo R.Cosaert.



Jean Brusselmans, "Fleurs. Hommage Reconnassant des Travailleurs Belges (Flowers. A Grateful Tribute from Belgian Workers)", 1915, flour sack American Commission, 75 x 39 cm. Col. HHPLM 62.4.231, USA. Photo: author.



Paul Jean Martel, "The Return of King Albert, 22-11-1918, Bruxelles", flour sack Madame Vandervelde Fund, 53 x 88 cm. Col. and photo: Maclovio Martel, USA.

The Belgians' initiative to ship the painted flour sacks to the USA, announced with great enthusiasm, only took place after the Armistice, except for a shipment sent to New York in 1915 for propaganda purposes.¹⁹ The artworks were sold and given away in the USA from 1920 onwards, and the remaining items were stored in archives at the Hoover Institution Archives, Palo Alto, California, after 1924. In 1962, the archive of painted flour sacks was transferred to the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library-Museum, West Branch, Iowa.

Cercle Artistique et Littéraire

The artworks of the painters of the Cercle Artistique were not sent to the USA during the occupation either. A sale was held in Brussels in April/May 1919: "(...) *exposition de sacs américains décorés par les meilleurs et les plus fantaisistes de nos peintres. Ces sacs sont vendus au profit de la caisse d'assistance des artistes au prix uniforme (...).* (An exhibition of Belgian relief flour sacks decorated by our finest and most imaginative painters. These sacks are sold at a fixed price to benefit the artists' assistance fund.)"²⁰ The exhibition was classified as a cultural event because after all the cloth of the flour sacks was unsuitable for painting and therefore these were not masterpieces.²¹

The managing director of the Cercle Artistique had built up a large collection of painted flour sacks. Around 1950 this collection was shipped to the USA with the permission of the Belgian Minister of Arts and Sciences. This so-called Moulckers Collection comprises half of all painted flour sacks that have been found to date and is now partly housed in the St. Edward's University Archives, Austin, Texas, and in private collections belonging to the family.²²

The flour sack's iconography

In Belgian paintings related to World War I, ruins are a common symbol used to depict the tragedy and trauma of war and occupation. Healthy and courageous soldiers are among the images that were part of war propaganda. Escapism is a third phenomenon in wartime artworks, with depictions that suggest everything has remained the same, idealizing landscapes, cityscapes, and portraits.²³

What images did the artists paint on the flour sacks, working for charity on reused American flour sacks that were destined to be sent overseas? Feeding children is central to the images: from baby portraits to contented schoolchildren with bread and sandwiches; women in their own homes preparing meals or doing needlework. There are allegories of food supply: Lady Belgica receives bundles of grain from Lady Columbia; Lady Columbia breastfeeds a Belgian baby and is handed another child. Ruins, brave soldiers, and escapism also feature in the iconography of the flour sacks, as does the symbolism of flowers in bouquets, wreaths, and arrangements.

¹⁹ *America Feeding Belgian Children*, Literary Digest, February 12, 1916.

²⁰ *La Libre Belgique*, May 3, 1919, and *La Nation Belge*, May 5, 1919.

²¹ *L'Indépendance Belge*, April 21, 1919.

²² Edouard Feuillien (Brussels, December 18, 1885 - Sint-Agatha-Berchem, June 3, 1966) and his father Célestin Feuillien were successive managing directors of the Cercle Artistique. Edouard's only daughter Julienne married Albert Moulckers, the couple emigrated to the USA.

²³ ROSSI-SCHRIMPF, I. and KOLLWELTER, L., *14/18 - Rupture or Continuity. Belgian Art around World War I*, Louvain: Louvain University Press, 2018, p. 22.



Godefroid Devreese, "Au bénéfice d'alimentation (For the benefit of food), 1914-1915", flour sack Perfect, Gem State Roller Mill & Ele. Co., Ucon, Idaho. Col. KMKG/MRAH, Belgium. Photo: author.

It would be misleading to take a superficial look at the artworks, because “they are just sacks and certainly not masterpieces.” The works deserve careful consideration, requiring knowledge of biographical data, insights into the artists' œuvre before, during, and after '14/18, as well as understanding of the then-familiarity with the people, lifestyle, and history of the United States and Canada.

Only then can the viewer penetrate the deeper layers of the iconography.²⁴ For example, that the artists used their own children, wives, and close friends as models for their expressions.

Food shortages and starvation, “the ruins,” are absent from the iconography.²⁵ Analogous to the WWI symbolism of courageous soldiers and escapism, the flour sack iconography depicts healthy and courageous women and children. The artists in occupied Belgium, through patriotic propaganda, expressed themselves against the foreign occupying force. Their profound escapism can be seen in the idealization of sufficient availability and delicious food, praise, and expressions of gratitude for a foreign nation overseas. In 1915, the first year of the war, the artists believed that the high Belgian standard of living would be maintained no matter what, thanks to their creative contributions by painting reused flour sacks.

Conclusion

The fact that the artworks were destined for the USA has meant that so far, most painted flour sacks have been found in the United States; painted sacks are only gradually coming to light in Belgium. The presence of young Americans involved in food distribution in occupied Belgium will have influenced the Belgian artists.

The art of the flour sack bears witness to an intriguing cultural transmission during the occupation, contributing to the internationalization of art.

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Genealogical information about the Belgian artists

Jean BRUSSELMANS (Brussels, June 13, 1884 - Dilbeek, January 9, 1953)
Philibert COCKX (Ixelles, April 29, 1879 - Uccle, September 2, 1949)
Godefroid DEVREESE (Courtrai, August 19, 1861 - Brussels, August 31, 1941)
Josué DUPON (Ichtegem, May 22, 1864 - Berchem, October 13, 1935)
Marie DURAND (Saint-Croix, September 1, 1866 - Marcourt, August 12, 1957)
Léon HOUYOUX (Brussels, November 24, 1856 - Auderghem, October 10, 1940)
Rose HOUYOUX (Brussels, July 30, 1895 - Ixelles, September 2, 1970)
Paul Jean MARTEL (Laeken, August 4, 1879 - Philadelphia, USA, September 26, 1944)
Armand RASSENFOSSE (Liège, August 6, 1862 - Liège, January 28, 1934)
Louis THEVENET (Bruges, February 12, 1874 - Halle, Fl.-Br., August 16, 1930)
Henri THOMAS (Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, June 22, 1878 - Brussels, November 22, 1972)
Guillaume VAN STRYDONCK (Namsos, Norway, December 10, 1861 - Saint-Gilles, July 2, 1937)

²⁴ For example, Louis Thevenet's painting on flour sack: MERCKX, J., *Thevenet en Uncle Sam*, in: FRANÇOIS, P., EKONOMIDÈS, C., SERVELLO, S., *Louis Thevenet. Een leven in kleur*. (A life in color). Hannibal Books, 2024.

²⁵ What images exist of food shortages and starvation in occupied Belgium during the first year of the war, 1914/15? Black-and-white photos show tough men actively delivering supplies with full bags, long lines of patient people outside the Belgian CNSA-centers, and contented children with sandwiches. Belgian children are always photographed orderly, cheerful, and well-dressed, within the structure of their classroom or school; even their eating utensils look well-maintained. But photos from other European countries show a mix of children with grim faces and various eating utensils, pushing to receive food. Meanwhile, historians are using such photos to illustrate the hunger of Belgian children...