

Art and History Blend in key New York Exhibition

By: Turlough McConnell



New York's South Street Seaport Museum can rightly claim that its stellar exhibition, "Antwerp-America: Eugeen Van Mieghem and the Emigrants of the Red Star Line," is the only large-scale depiction of the mass migration of Jews from Europe between 1873 and 1935. This critically acclaimed show is not to be missed.

On display through October, the exhibition evokes the atmosphere of Antwerp at the time when the city became an important point of embarkation for more than 3 million European emigrants. They were mostly Germans, Russian and Austro-Hungarian Jews of Eastern Europe and some native-born Belgians. Ten percent of these passengers sailed on ships of the Red Star Line.

However, it is the exquisite drawings and paintings of the Antwerp artist Eugeen Van Mieghem that are the heart of this historic exhibition in New York. "Van Mieghem lived and worked near the city docks, and his favorite subjects were those individuals about to embark on the greatest adventure of their lives," says Erwin Joos, curator of the Eugeen Van Mieghem Museum in Antwerp. "The artist saw them leave for the New World from his doorstep and he left a record that is stunning." In addition to the works on loan from the Antwerp museum, Joos has brought works from private collections to show the range of this remarkable artist.

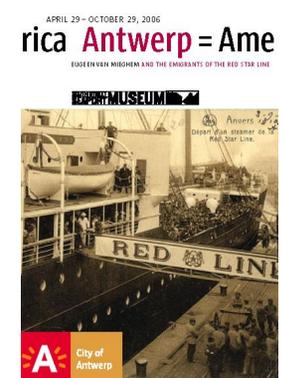
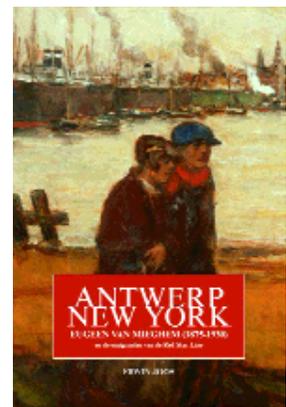
Van Mieghem grew up by the docks where the Red Star Line ships berthed. His powerful works depict the daily life of Antwerp's residents, dockworkers, and above all, the flow of emigrants arriving by train from all over Europe--so many that the rail line became known as the Iron Rhine. The bold lines of his masterly drawings capture the emotions of the people, while the rich palette of colors reflects the subtle aspects of port life: the steely hues of winter over a panoramic harbor to the soft blush on a child's face. Van Mieghem's work depicts the desires and the anxieties of the emigrants, along with the colorful mix of harbor characters. What makes this exhibition so rare is its blend of art and history: coupled with the portraits of people are the posters, photographs and a wonderful display of artifacts. Curated by Mandy Nauwelaerts and designed by Hendrik de Leeuw (City of Antwerp Museum), the exhibition provides a fully textured history of the city, the ships and the time.

"The exhibition will raise awareness of the Red Star Line as an extraordinary dimension of the American immigration story," says Richard Stepler, director of exhibitions at the Museum. "Of the three major ports that served as gateways for European emigration—Antwerp, Hamburg, and Bremerhaven—only Antwerp retains its original architecture." Still standing are the three original Red Star Line buildings where the emigrants received their last medical examination prior to departure. Though vacant for years, in the memory of emigrants and their descendants they remain a beacon. In collaboration with the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration, the City of Antwerp plans to convert them into a place of remembrance with a modern design.

Following an open call by the Flemish Government for a high-quality restoration, the New York based firm Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners was selected as the project architect for the Red Star Line Place of Memory, planned to open in 2009. Among the firm's notable projects are the rebuilt South Street Seaport Museum, the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration; Grand Central Terminal; Rockefeller Center; and the Pierpont Morgan Library & Museum (with Renzo Piano Building Workshop). Having contributed so much to New York's historic landscape Beyer Blinder Belle will now honor migration heritage on the other side of the Atlantic.

According to John Belle, lead designer, "Part of our goal in designing this Place of Memory is to retain the rawness of the simple, modest structures put up by the private entrepreneurs of the Red Star Line. It's a way to keep the emotional tie to the buildings without faking history—to help modern visitors understand the feelings of emigrants as people in upheaval."

Until the new home for this exhibition is finished, New York's South Street Seaport Museum is the perfect setting for the artwork and artifacts of this show. Visit, uncover history, and discover a major artist who demands to be recognized. "As a child of the port, Eugeen Van Mieghem did not need to go search for inspiration. The world came to him," says Joos. "He left us a unique and enduring visual legacy about the lives of ordinary people compelled to seek their fortunes elsewhere."



The exhibition runs through October 31, 2006, in South Street Seaport Museum's Schermerhorn Row Galleries 12 Fulton Street New York, NY 10038
Hours: Tuesday through Sunday 10a.m. to 6p.m.
Adults \$8, seniors/students \$6, children 5-12 \$4, children under 5 are free