

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHEL VAEREWIJCK

KLOOSTERSTRAAT ANTWERP

Walking along the banks of the Scheldt, you may be struck by the distinct sense of something missing. Looking out across the water the eye roams an unrestricted view down the river's length and that's when it hits you. Because, unlike most other fluvial cities, there are no bridges to connect Antwerp's residential left bank to the more commercial city side of the river.

Instead of building over the river, Antwerp's engineers built under it, and in Sint Jans Vliet square stands the entrance to an elevator that transports pedestrians down to a tunnel that

runs beneath the river over to the other side. The 600m white-tiled tunnel is the route to the tranquil greenery of the other side, but Sint Jans Vliet contains pleasures of its own, especially on a Sunday afternoon when the square is filled with the eclectic entertainments of a small but vibrant flea market.

Every stall has its own peculiar speciality, some of questionable taste and legality. Where else could you find, for example, old crocodile skins, creepy elephant feet or a 19th-century leopard-skin rug, complete with head, eyeing you accusingly? Other stalls specialise in historical engravings, exotic masks or military

memorabilia, and stallholders selling even the most pedestrian living room furniture will be more than happy to provide a story connected to the object of your desire.

Such adventures in retail can wear out even the hardiest shopper, especially if you're toting around a set of genuine elk antlers, so keep your energy levels up by taking a break in one of the many cafés around the square. Grab a delicious bite in la Piada or find a sunny spot on the terrace of café Het Zand to enjoy some of the richly diverse Belgian beers and watch the world go by. Those who need something more substantial should try for a table in the

trendy Zuiderterras on the waterfront, where you can fill up with quality food to fuel you through an afternoon on the antique trail.

South of the Sint Jans Vliet and down the short street Den Oever, you'll find the Kloosterstraat, the jugular of the antiques district. It is here that you'll find the truly unique shops, a treasure trove of antiques hidden behind an impressive 17th century door, or next to them a so-called wholesaler in antiques who will gladly sell to anyone offering the right price. Across the street stands the fashion designer shop Taille, residing behind a wonderful art-deco tiled façade, and a little

further down Nexus Six Again, a toyshop that appears to be stuck in time, selling collectable fragments of your childhood.

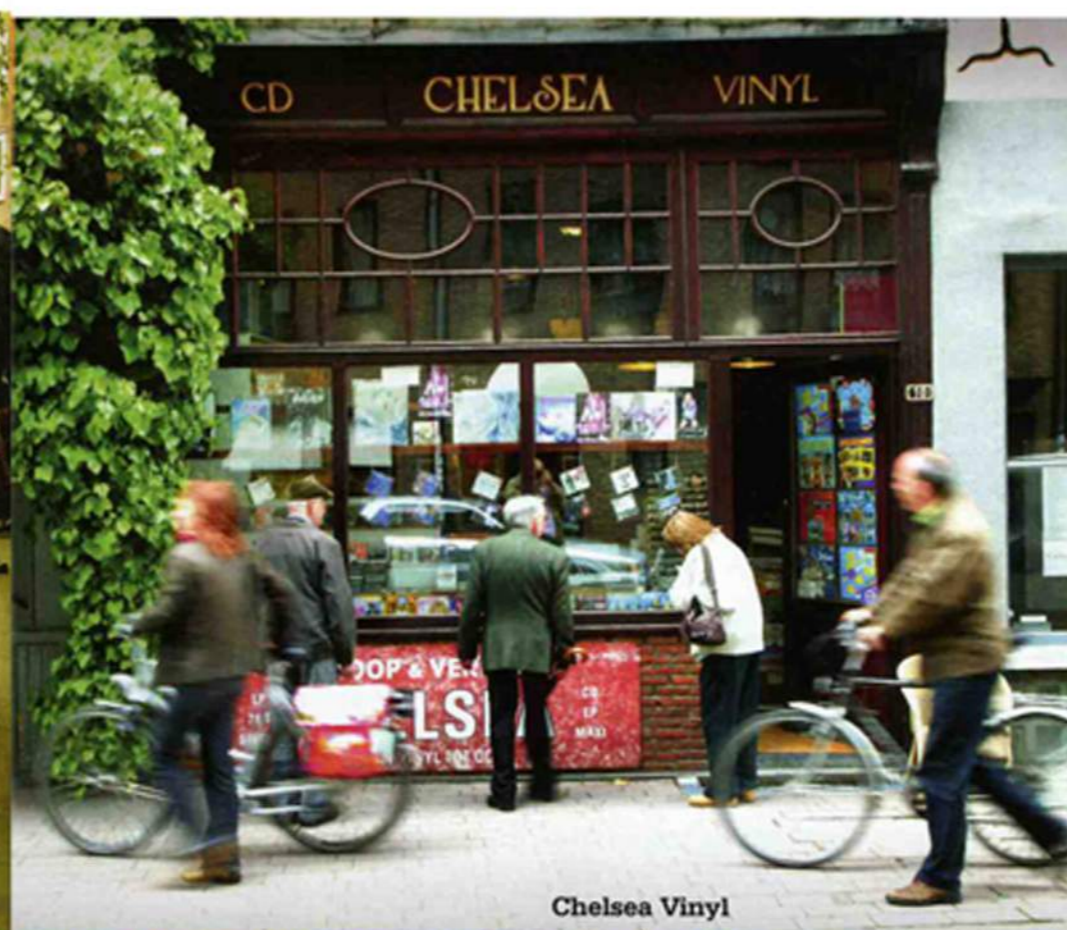
Walk on past a few shop windows littered with old ship's instruments and antique boat models, and you'll find Chelsea, quite simply the only place to go for dusty old vinyl. Towering stacks of records teeter from every available space and surface, and visitors must pick their precarious route through narrow paths. From a practical point of view I simply can't imagine anyone browsing all these piles of records, but the boss tells me that international stars often make their pilgrimage

to the shop when they are in Belgium, and local hero and dEUS front man Tom Barman spends hours looking for inspiration in the collection of sounds from the past.

Next door houses Blue Fonz, selling a mixture of curiosities and antiques that are generally very good quality, while Den 18 transports visitors into early '60s Paris, smooth French jazz filling the air of the vintage designer furniture shop. More of this vintage design can be found in Expo 54 and Viar, but be aware that both are conscious of the money some people will part with to get their hands on quality vintage pieces: expensive, but at the top



Full Effect



Chelsea Vinyl



Het Zand



Cru



Dancing Chocola



Akanthos



Loft Styles



L. David

of their field. Fiftie-Fiftie, Akanthos-Modern and Full Effect can offer better bargains, but with more wear and tear.

Older – and more expensive – artefacts can be found in the classic, vintage and country-style collections of L. David, Noble Objects or in the antiquarians Annaert Barbara, Christiane de Bot and 't Koetshuis to name but a few. The Kloosterstraat is home to specialist dealers renowned for their expertise, so find a reputable shop and you'll have instant access to a wealth of knowledge. Erik Tonen, for example, is a world authority on antique print work and his shop contains some fine examples of the craft, while Paul Dumont's shop of music instruments is boosted by his good reputation.

The Kloosterstraat is much more than a random collection of antiques, curios and vintage shops. The excitement and vibrancy of the street comes from the people that populate it. Eclectic in style, nationality and interests, the inquisitive crowd fills this semi-pedestrian street with one common goal: to find the hidden treasure that will enhance their home or workplace and reflect their very individual tastes. From the Marxist student in search of a political poster to the wealthy mansion owner looking for a Louis XIV chair set, the essential aim is the same.

As a part of the St Andries parish, the Kloosterstraat is also a border, parallel to the Nationalestraat which houses the area internationally renowned as the Milan of the North. This small enclave owes its renaissance to the success of the various young avant-garde fashion designers who have set up shop here, with some spilling out onto the Kloosterstraat itself, for example, Nadine Wijnants' jewellery studio. Such a ready mix creates a truly bohemian atmosphere, which is best observed from one of the street's many terraces. Halfway down the Kloosterstraat you'll

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stumble upon a small boat-like terrace in front of the Take 5 Minutes In Paris, a long name for a small tavern offering budget meals and home-cooked flavours like the huge bowls of tomato soup, served with a giant piece of crunchy baguette.

Next door, Fez offers an à la carte choice of Arabian specialities, but the more adventurous gourmet will prefer the refined kitchen of wine bar and restaurant Hecker, which can easily set you back €60 (£40) for a top quality three-course meal with some experimental Scandinavian accents. C-Food offers fish dishes and is just around the corner, while 'T Heilig Huiske occupies an historical building and is considered a prime example of Belgium's rich collection of cafés.

The terrace of this most traditional café almost fuses with that of its neighbour Dancing Chocola, a more modern establishment, which is the ideal place to enjoy a late breakfast on a lazy morning. They will serve you croissants, chocolate and all that makes the French breakfast so enjoyable, so don't be afraid to dunk your crispy bread in the hot coco en-publique as you watch the trendy designers, creative local youth and wannabes pass by. It is this diversity that makes the Kloosterstraat so appealing, an ever-changing neighbourhood where the dusty old fuses with the brand new to constantly surprise and confound expectations.