

# Iron and Steel Construction Workshops in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Belgium: Retrieving their Oeuvre via Company Catalogues

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## ABSTRACT



Figure 1: The company catalogue of the Belgian workplace 'La Brugeoise' depicts assembled bridges ready to be exported to Brazil (left) and China (right) [City Archives of Bruges]

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century iron and steel were worldwide applied to construct halls, markets, stations and bridges. Depending on the resources and the industrialisation of the country the elements were locally produced or imported. Belgium, being an early industrialised country on the European mainland, was famous for its iron and steel plants and the export of iron and steel rolled sections. [1] Many iron and steel workshops set up, grew fast and merged into ever-expanding companies until their decline in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. [2-3] Some of the iron and steel factories and workplaces have been the subject of a book publication such as 'Cockerill', 'Forges de la Providence' and 'Usines Baume & Merpent'. Yet, the majority of the early Belgian construction workplaces is hardly studied. [1, 5, 6]

As company archives of Belgian construction workplaces are seldom preserved we studied **company catalogues** of Belgian firms involved in the construction of iron and steel buildings and bridges in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Several company catalogues, which are often printed on the occasion of a participation in a (world) exhibition, are preserved in museums, libraries and archives. The catalogues, published to promote the company, give an overview of the workplaces, products and realisations. It is quite remarkable that the Belgian companies that are considered as leading within the construction industry present the construction market only as a small segment of their total production. Indeed, their main market is often the transport industry resulting in the production of locomotives and wagons as main activity. Nonetheless huge bridges, domes and stations ready to be disassembled and exported to Europe, Brazil, China, Egypt, etc. are depicted in company catalogues of 'Société Anonyme des ateliers de la Dyle à Louvain (ca 1875)', 'La Brugeoise (ca 1902)', 'Ateliers Nicaise & Delcuve (1906)' and 'Société Anonyme Compagnie Centrale de Construction Haine St Pierre'.

By focusing on the catalogues of Belgian companies that built and exported metal buildings and bridges, we offer insight into the oeuvre of these companies on the one hand, and on the other hand, we provide a broader context for the individual built structures worldwide.

## REFERENCES

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