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**In search of a national (s)cul(p)ture.
The local, national and international
identities of sculptors in Belgium
(1830-1916)**

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This dissertation elaborates on the social and cultural phenomenon of ‘national schools’ during the 19th century in relation to sculpture, and with Belgium as a case. The role of and emphasis on ‘national identity’ evolved throughout the century, while different criteria were indicated by commissioners, art critics, or artists, that supposedly constituted a ‘national sculpture’. Through the study of the trajectories of Belgian sculptors abroad, and the presence and reception of foreign sculptors in Belgium, the impact of nationality and national culture in the creation of a ‘Belgian sculpture school’ is revealed in four chronological parts.

Part I, comprising the period between 1830 and 1850, focusses on the creation of statues of national heroes. A study of the careers of G. Geefs and E. Simonis, who executed a substantial part of these ‘national heroes’, demonstrates that discussions about sculpture and national culture mainly tackled iconography and the matter of ‘who’ was depicted, rather than the artist or style.

Part II proves how the question of who sculpted the works and these artists’ nationality and national identity moved to the centre of the focus from the 1850 on, culminating in the disputed contributions by foreign sculptors at the Bourse of Brussels, or the lack of foreigners at the Palace of Justice. The comparison of these two cases pinpoints the presence of

French sculptors in Belgium, and explains the role of an artists’ nationality and the raised questions about national culture and identity.

In part III the focus is back on the development of Belgian sculpture, and the creation of a ‘national style’ in sculpture from the 1880s on. Sculptors such as C. Van der Stappen, J. Dillens or P. Devigne were supposedly involved in a ‘renaissance of Belgian sculpture’, but at the same time often criticised because of their affiliations with the French school and style. These cases therefore point to a prominent discrepancy between art theory and artistic reality, while local identity and the locality of style became increasingly important.

Part IV comprises the careers of C. Meunier and G. Minne, and demonstrates how their international fame and stylistic innovations affected their ‘image’ as representatives of Belgian sculpture and contributed to their coexisting local, regional, national and international identities.

Throughout this dissertation, special attention is paid to the ‘imaging’ of national sculptors by fellow-artists and contemporary press, and the contradictions between the discourse and practice of national schools. The national identity of sculptors in relation to the style, medium, and iconography of their work created, exhibited or commissioned in Belgium is scrutinized. With questions of national identity as a red thread, this research sheds a new light on the development of sculpture, and the different criteria that supposedly constituted a ‘national sculpture’ in Belgium throughout the 19th century.