

# Guillaume Geefs

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Guillaume Geefs (1805-1883) was the most foremost Belgian sculptor of the mid-19th century. The son of a baker and the eldest of six brothers, who would eventually all become professional sculptors, Geefs was trained in the neo-classical mode at the Academy of Antwerp by Jean-François Van Geel (1756-1830); in the private studio of Matthijs Van Bree, the Academy's director (1773-1839), and at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris in the sculpture class led by Etienne-Jules Ramey jr. (1796-1852). An Italian tour (1829) further enhanced his knowledge of the classic tradition and contemporary neo-classical sculpture. The submission of his first statue at the Antwerp Fine Arts Salon in 1828 marked the start of a successful career, with official recognition marked by public commissions. In 1832 Geefs was appointed *statuaire du Roi*; in 1833 he became professor of sculpture at the Antwerp Academy. After resigning his teaching position in 1840, he established a successful private studio in the Brussels suburb of Schaerbeek, where he developed a new educational programme. Many of his students collaborated in the important commissions and public monuments which became Geefs' core business and his claim to fame.

In 1835 the government of newly independent Belgium ordered the creation of statues honouring the heroes of the national past. As part of a prolific historical culture, answering both to national enthusiasm and to the need to legitimize the country's sovereignty, monuments were erected on many squares throughout the country. Geefs obtained the commission for the first one: that of Augustin Belliard, a French general and diplomat who, by providing French support during the Dutch 1831 offensive, had contributed to the country's independence. Further statues by Geefs were erected in honour of Peter Paul Rubens (Antwerp, 1842), the composer Ernest Modeste Grétry (Liège, 1842) and the printing pioneer Dirk Martens (Aalst, 1856). He also created funeral monuments for Frédéric de Mérode, the best known martyr of the Belgian Revolution (in Brussels cathedral, 1833-37) and for the international opera star Maria Malibran (at the Cemetery of Laeken).

More prestigious, state-commissioned sculptures included the statue of King Leopold I surmounting the Congress Column in Brussels (1859, the monument honouring the birth of the Belgian state), and the most comprehensive of all national monuments, the complex on the Martyrs' Square in Brussels (1848) honouring the 446 volunteers who fell during the hostilities of the Belgian Revolution. A crypt designed by Geefs and the architect Louis Roelandt (1786-1864) lists their names; from it rises a large allegorical statue. The reliefs on the plinth represent four scenes from the Revolution, the statue itself is allegorical: a young woman personifying the Fatherland, with a lion resting at her feet, its shackles broken. The female figure was modelled on the Venus de Milo and on the central figure of Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), illustrating Geefs' development from neo-classicism to a more Romantic style.

## Visual arts

Belgian (francophone) Dutch  
Flemish



Geefs's nationally-themed Romanticism in sculpture is considered the counterpart to the pictorial style of Gustaaf Wappers (1803-1874), his colleague at the Academy of Antwerp and close friend. Both worked for a revival and renovation of the Fine Arts in Belgium; their development towards a Romantic style made Antwerp the centre of that trend, as opposed to the neo-classical style which was maintained in the Brussels art scene under François-Joseph Navez (1787-1869) as a leading artist. However, it should be noted that this opposition mainly concerned painting, and was never as clearly distinguishable in sculpture. Geefs never fully relinquished the neo-classical tradition he had adopted during his training and, while embracing certain romantic elements, created an eclectic style, which eventually paved the way for realism in the development of the Belgian sculpture school.



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