INDUSTRIE MUSEUM

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# MAIN EXHIBITION ABOUT PEOPLE AND MACHINERY

# fifth floor

**Introduction**

Welcome to the Museum of Industry.

The Desmet-Guequier cotton spinning mill operated here until 1975. Noisy machines, hard-working workers and carts carrying yarn reels filled this production hall. The old floor, the typical saw-tooth roof and the smell of machine oil are silent witnesses to this vibrant textile legacy.

This exhibition explores an eventful history, focused on the textiles industry. Twelve accounts from entrepreneurs, traders and workers take you on a journey through time, from 1650 to the present. Three centuries of working, living and surviving. A universal story of people and machinery and how they changed the world around us.

**Box 1: from 1650 to 1800**

Farmers, farmers, and even more farmers. This was a time when most of the population lived off the land. In Flanders and the western part of Brabant, these were mainly poor small farmers who rented and worked small pieces of land. Survival was the key concern of most families.

In the evenings and winter months, farming families worked at home on their spinning wheels and looms. Mothers and daughters would spin the flax into thread, often for hours at a time, after which fathers and sons would weave it into linen. The farmers produced metres and metres of linen to be sold to merchants. The Vrijdagmarkt of Ghent was the centre of the Flemish textile trade, whose products were particularly popular in Spain and its colonies.

Entrepreneurs set up huge workshops in the city to centralise the manufacturing process, but everything was still made by hand. The only source of power to operate the machines was that provided by nature: wind, water or the muscle power of human beings and animals.

**Box 2: from 1800 to 1870**

Cotton was king. Before this period people used to wear clothes made of wool and linen. But Indian cotton fabrics became immensely popular. British entrepreneurs dominated the worldwide cotton trade and manufacturing sector. Output and profits were boosted by steam power, technical improvements and new machinery.

The industrial revolution began spreading to other parts of Europe. Lieven Bauwens from Ghent managed to smuggle machinery to the Continent to set up textile factories there. In no time at all, Ghent, too, became an industrial city filled with smoking chimney stacks and noisy factories.

A place where carts and steam trains could be seen moving around carrying coal from Wallonia and an untold number of workers. Many families saw their lives change.

Migration was the only way for many unemployed farming people to survive. Industry was gaining momentum. Women and children went to work in factories. The more family members were in work, the more food there was on the table. Workers lived packed together in cramped, damp alley dwellings. People were living in grinding poverty. The workers' resistance movement was on the rise.

**Selfactor**

The impressive self-acting spinning mule takes us back to the textile factories of 100 years ago. Succeeding the Mule Jenny, the self-acting machine could spin even more bobbins at the same time, fully automatically.

The self-acting spinning mule became famous once again in 1992 thanks to the film Daens by Stijn Coninx. At some point little Milleke is crushed by the machine. Production had to run at full capacity. Every piece of cotton counted. That is why children had to go under the self-acting machines to pick up the cotton fluff.

**Box 3: from 1870 to 1950**

Industry was booming. Belgium became the world's fifth largest economic power. Textiles and machinery from Ghent became world-famous. Science and industry joined forces and new inventions emerged. The world was becoming increasingly smaller through improved means of communication and transport. It became easier for capital, goods and people to move back and forth across borders.

Time is money. Productivity was an open sesame as far as factory owners were concerned. Strict working hours, strict rules and fast machines increased the pace as much as possible. The workers began fighting for more rights. The machines were too dangerous, the wages too low, the working days too long. The workers organised themselves into trade unions. They slaved together, celebrated together, went on strike together.

The first social laws helped to place restrictions on women's and child labour. The new laws and measures introduced in the early twentieth century sought to reduce working hours, create better safety conditions in factories and provide holiday pay for the first time. Wages were also rising. Life for workers' families was gradually improving.

**Box 4: After 1950**

The textile industry lost its pre-eminence after the Second World War, struggling to cope with fierce competition from abroad. Pressure of work, fear of job losses and low wages now made the textile industry less attractive. The brand-new steel company SIDMAR and the Swedish car manufacturer Volvo chose the port of Ghent for their bases. Many textile workers began to think about looking for better jobs elsewhere.

Immigrant workers from Turkey and North Africa were brought in to offset the labour shortage. The textile industry still managed to enjoy a short-lived period of prosperity during the nineteen-sixties but was sent reeling by the 1973 world oil crisis. Investments in automated machinery and government measures did not help. Companies closed down one after the other. Unemployed workers had to start looking for other options, with lots of ups and downs.

The services sector was becoming increasingly important. More and more people were taking up employment as nurses, IT specialists, teachers, shopkeepers or lawyers. The Belgian textile industry was now turning out high-tech textiles. Clothes were being made by cheap labourers in low-wage economies, especially in Asia. Where cotton production first began.