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Metaphorical Journeys Through 29 Nations,
Clusters of Nations, Continents, and Diversity

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CHAPTER 22



Belgian Lace

It is clear that while the diversity of the cultures alive in Belgium may sometimes be a source of friction, this same diversity can and must also be above all a source of spiritual and material enrichment. For this very reason, and because Belgium is the common ground where two great European cultures meet, we must continue to be what we have always been in the past: Pioneers in the construction of a united Europe.

—The late King Baudouin, 1986
Christmas radio/TV message

Belgium is a small country slightly larger than the state of Maryland, with just over 10.3 million people. The distance between its farthest points is 175 miles. Given its size and population, the casual observer should be careful not to underestimate its high degree of importance and interrelatedness in Europe and the world. The bitter tensions between the two major ethnic groups, the Wallonians (French-speaking) and Flemings (Dutch-speaking), are considerable, and the manner in which they address and resolve them may well reflect in many ways the ethnic and national cultural tensions in the European Union (EU) considered as one entity. But just as the gifted lacemaker takes fine threads from many spindles and weaves them into a fabric with a beautiful but strong pattern, so too history, geographic position, and religion have woven the Belgian culture into a diverse and complicated design, similar to all of Europe. To understand Belgium and even some of the tensions within the EU, it is helpful to describe it in terms of the metaphor of lace.

Before doing so, however, let us explore its turbulent and fascinating history. For hundreds of years the people of Belgium, both the Flemish (of Dutch ancestry) in the north and the Wallonians (of French ancestry) in the south, were ruled by a number

of other nations. Over the last 500 years Austria, Spain, France, and the Netherlands ruled, at one time or another, the area that is now Belgium. Although there were indigenous nationalistic movements that sought to create the nation of Belgium, it was finally established in 1830 thanks to the machinations of Lord Palmerston, arguably the most influential foreign affairs minister that Britain has ever produced. He wanted to create a buffer zone between the Germans and the French in the event of war between these two nations and in the process to provide England with some breathing space before she was forced to enter any conflict. Lord Palmerston's instincts were unerringly correct, as Belgium was the site of some of the bloodiest battles in both World War I and II, and without this buffer zone it is conceivable and even probable that Germany would have overwhelmed both the French and the English (Tuchman, 1962).

The Flemish and Wallonian cultures, existing side by side, have given birth to a sense of Belgian pride. At multinational or world-class competitions, a Belgian is a Belgian and the entire country unites to watch the performance, regardless of the side of the language border on which the participant or team originated (Schrack, 2008).

Wallonian Versus Flemish

Still, it cannot be denied that there are conflicts and tensions between the Wallonians and the Flemish. Unlike many other cultural groups living in one nation or area who escalate these differences into bloody confrontations and war—for example, the fighting between the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or that among the Croats, Bosnians, and Serbians in the former Yugoslavia—the Wallonians and the Flemish have patiently addressed their differences in a systematic way since 1968. Today Belgium is a federation of states in which the central government has relinquished almost all of its power except in such areas as finance, defense, and international relations. There are, in fact, a bewildering number of parliaments: One is for the nation in its entirety; one for Brussels (an international city in the middle of Flemish-speaking Flanders, in which 80% of the residents nevertheless speak French); one for Wallonia; one for Flanders; one for the tiny German-speaking community; and one even for French speakers regardless of location.

Following national elections in June 2007, the country was without a federal government for a record 195 days because the prime minister-elect failed several times to form a coalition government that represented all interests. In 2006, when a French-language television program was interrupted with a spoof news flash announcing that the Flemish parliament had declared independence, the king had fled and parliament had been dissolved, it was widely believed.

Admittedly, this solution to ethnic and regional tensions is complex and has also led to some bewildering outcomes. In Brussels, the capital, some streets receive only

Flemish-language cable TV, while adjoining streets only French. Belgium's embassies abroad have three separate commercial attachés. Although this solution to governing amid ethnic tension may seem contrived and unduly complicated, it is far preferable than the alternative of war and destruction. As *The Economist* aptly pointed out ("Belgium: Fading Away," 1992), Belgium "deserves a clap" for avoiding the mindless ethnic wars and destruction from which other nations so grievously suffer. Protests are relatively civil and even tinged with some humor. One Belgian posted the country for sale on eBay but the listing was pulled after attracting a bid of \$13 million. Flemish protesters slashed signs with names in both Dutch and French and paraded coffins symbolizing Belgium's demise.

Still, there is a serious movement among some prominent Wallonians to argue for national disintegration so that the Flemish region can unite with the Netherlands and possibly parts of France and Germany ("Could Flanders," 1997). This has caused concern in other European nations where there are also secessionist movements (e.g., Spain). Whatever the eventual outcome, Belgium serves as a useful model that other nations—and even groupings of nations such as the EU—with diverse cultural groups can study and at least partially follow to avoid such alternatives, and this model closely resembles our metaphor of Belgian lace.

History of Lace

Lace first appeared in the late 15th century in Flanders and Italy. It was originally used as a modest ornament for undergarments. By 1600, lace had become a fabric of utmost luxury and a key article of trade and commerce. Nobility from all over Europe began to enhance their clothing with lappets and cuffs of lace. Dresses were soon adorned with lace overlays and shawls. Beyond clothing, lace began to drape tables, windows, and bed linens. Lace was a sign of social status and wealth. As a lace-making center, Flanders established itself as a prominent industrial region within Europe.

Bobbin lace, first introduced in Flanders, requires the weaver to manage hundreds of bobbins in creating a single piece of lace. Systematically and rhythmically the threads from the 10 to 20 sets of bobbins are braided around brass pins skillfully affixed to a cardboard pattern to form a geometric or pictorial design. The design incorporates a delicate balance of lace and space that is best exhibited when the lace is placed on a dark background fabric such as deep-colored velvet or satin. During the Renaissance, lace-making emerged as both an industry and an art form, as the following passage confirms:

Form became more important than color; instead of intricate effects of limitless expansion, designers stressed clarity, symmetry, and stability. In the decorative arts, the new spirit was most noticeably expressed in sharp distinctions between pattern, background, and frame. No minor art form embodied Renaissance ideals more fully than lace. (Benton, 1970, Vol. 13, p. 85)

Traditionally, the best lace makers were cloistered nuns. Emperor Charles V decreed that lace-making should be a compulsory skill for girls in convents throughout Flanders during the Renaissance. To create a square foot of lace with an intricate design may require hundreds or even thousands of hours. Legend has it that some nuns would spend their entire lives producing lace for the pope's robes. Although lace is no longer a predominant industry in Belgium, and machine-produced lace is the norm, the Belgians still take great pride in this traditional art form; most homes have at least one piece of handwoven lace on a table or displayed in a frame.

Many Belgians can hold up a piece of lace and tell if it was handwoven or machine made, what the relative retail value of the piece should be, and the region of the country where the piece was produced. The texture and pattern of the lace have regional characteristics. For instance, in Brugge and Turnhout the texture is delicate and the patterns are ornate, whereas in St. Hubert the thread is coarse and the design simpler. Hence lace from Brugge might typically be used as a table runner between meals, and lace from St. Hubert might adorn the edge of the tablecloth used during a meal.

We selected the famous Belgian lace as a metaphor for this country because it encapsulates the beauty of this land of contrasts where different cultures coexist in relative harmony, where individualism is compatible with the control of very strong family values, and where cooperation and harmony win out over competition and the people are quietly proud of their traditions and heritage.

A Land of Contrasts

The beauty of lace can be fully appreciated only when the contrast of woven cloth and dark background are recognized within the overall form. Just as lace interweaves contrasting elements of a complex design into a single structure, so too there are many contrasting elements interwoven in Belgium, a small country that includes three recognized languages, two major cultures, three separate official regions, three flags, two major economic centers with separate industries, and three unique geographic landscapes. The starkest contrasts for Belgium are linguistic and political. In addition, other areas of contrast include the following:

- The struggle between individualism and the need to belong to a group, conform to societal rules, and have strong family ties
- The dichotomy between working and social welfare
- The stark difference between urban and rural areas
- The desire for art and beauty, but also practicality

Still, just as a lace maker integrates contrasting designs in the masterpiece, the Belgian government attempts to integrate separate cultures into a unified republic, even when there are three separate parliaments in each of the three major regions.

A Land of Three Languages

Linguistically the Belgian government recognizes three native languages through regulations regarding the conduct of education and commerce within the areas populated primarily by native speakers. In Flanders, the northern portion of the country bordering the Netherlands, business and education are primarily conducted in Dutch, the native language of the Flemish people, who represent about 58% of the Belgian population. In Wallonia, the southern portion of the country bordering France, business and education are primarily conducted in French, the native language of the Wallonian people, who constitute about 31% of the Belgian population. In Limburg, a very small area bordering Germany with about 1% of the population, German is the native language. To be impartial and economically viable, merchants, educators, government officials, and others in the capital city of Brussels conduct business in Dutch, French, or English, at the mutual preference of the participants.

Brussels is at the crossroads of Europe, and many multinational firms have established European offices there in recent years because of the unification of the European Community in 1992. At any given time about 5% of the population of Belgium is foreigners.

In Belgian schools, children are first required to study the native language of the region in which they live for at least 8 years. They are also required to study a second language, which could be Dutch, French, English, or German, for at least 4 years. It is not uncommon to meet a Belgian, usually a Fleming, who is proficient in each of the four languages as well as others. However, Belgians are proud of their native languages and cultures. If two headstrong Belgians, a Fleming and a Wallonian, have to communicate, they will usually defer to English because the Wallonian will probably not be able or want to speak Dutch and the Fleming will not condescend to speak French to a Wallonian if it can be avoided.

In everyday life the impact of these linguistic differences varies significantly and may not be encountered at all by those who reside deep within Flanders or Wallonia. By contrast, Belgians living closer to the language border or in Brussels must deal with language differences daily. For instance, new regulations in some municipalities near NATO headquarters require that public land can be sold only to Dutch speakers or those who show a willingness to speak the language. One man reported that police failed to respond to his French-language request to investigate a disturbance. Belgians tend to appreciate the use of their languages and will generally warm up to outsiders more quickly if an attempt is made to learn at least one of them. Although many Belgians deal with the language differences every day, it is in poor taste for a foreigner to point out the differences or to wonder aloud why the differences cannot be resolved through diplomacy.

The oldest Catholic university in the world, the University of Leuven, located 20 miles east of Brussels in Flanders, illustrates the consequences of the language conflict. For hundreds of years the university served both Flemish and Wallonian

students and scholars, using French as the official language on campus. After World War II linguistic tensions began to mount, causing tensions between student groups and sporadic scuffles in cafés around the university. For more than 20 years the hostility evolved to the point that the university was divided into two campuses: one in Leuven (Flanders) and one on the other side of the language border in Wallonia. This separation divided not only students and faculty but also resources such as the library collection. Books were literally divided by title, with those in the first half of the alphabet staying in Leuven and those in the second half going to the new campus. Conducting research now necessitates visiting two campuses, but this cumbersome and inefficient solution is preferable to a long-standing linguistic conflict.

Region Versus Nation

As an extension of the dual languages and cultures of the Flemish and Wallonians, the country has three prominent flags: the tricolor of black, yellow, and red, representing the Belgian country; the Flemish lion; and the Wallonian rooster. Most Belgians identify more emotionally with the flag of their respective cultures than with the tricolor flag of the nation. The Flemish lion is the symbol of the Flemish resistance to French domination over hundreds of years.

While regional and ethnic identification is clearly important, Belgians do identify themselves as Belgian when outside the nation and come together on critical social issues. For example, 300,000 Belgians—as a proportion of the total population, the equivalent of 7.7 million U.S. Americans—rallied against the seemingly careless and perhaps corrupt manner in which the judiciary handled a chilling case involving a pedophile ring that had killed four young girls.

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy, divided into three republics: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. Each republic has its own representatives in the central government or national parliament and its own divisions of the national political parties, which are also divided into subparties by language. Each subparty operates autonomously yet generally follows the same political agenda as the parent party.

The two largest political parties are the Christian People's Party, whose members are primarily Flemish and Catholic, and the Socialist Party, whose members are less strict Catholics and non-Catholics and more likely to be Wallonian. These two parties are also responsible for publishing most of the major newspapers in Belgium (five of seven) and supervising social facilities for youth, sports confederations, care of the aged, hospitals, savings banks, and unions. Much of the workforce is unionized. The successful administration of the trade unions and other social programs is heavily dependent on social stability. Due to the extensive influence of these two political parties in the life of the average Belgian, other political parties have not gained a significant foothold. Although all Belgians are required to vote in every election, they are free to vote for candidates of any political group.

However, a right-wing, anti-immigration, secessionist political party, the Vlaams Blok, created in 1978, started gaining popularity in the 1990s. On November 14, 2004, the party changed its name to *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest). In several European nations (e.g., France and Spain) similar political parties have been campaigning against the free entry of immigrants into their nations.

Individual Versus Group

Furthermore, Belgians tend to be very individualistic. Hofstede's (1991) cross-cultural study ranked Belgians as eighth out of 53 nations on this dimension. It is considered a major accomplishment for young adults to become established in their own houses, apart from the family. Hard work is also valued, as it is seen as providing an incentive for individuals to get away from the home. Still, even when the young leave the immediate family, they do not venture far geographically, usually living within 30 miles of their parents' home. This practice creates a strong family/community tie, essentially enhancing the family orientation of the Belgians.

Belgian individualism is also displayed in their preference for owning their homes. Despite the great expense, about 65% of Belgians own the place where they live, residences that range from condominiums to suburban-country homes. A person's home is his castle, and Belgians tend to take great pride in the cleanliness of their homes. Early in the morning it is common to see people sweeping their porches and walkways. While a U.S. American might use a garden hose to wash down a sidewalk, a Belgian would typically use a bucket and a scrub brush. This preference may be traceable to the historical shortage and high cost of fresh water. Belgians also tend to take short baths; use soapy water to wash the dishes and then wipe the soap off with a towel, rather than rinsing them with water; and drink soda water, juice, beer, or wine rather than tap water or anything made with tap water.

Just as each region of Belgium has a distinctive style and texture to its lace, so too are condominiums and row houses often organized and decorated distinctively, reflecting the tastes of their owners. Unlike the case of England's traditional houses (see Chapter 17), the interior layout of a Belgian row house cannot be assumed from its exterior appearance. In Flanders it is common for extended families to gather together to construct the exterior brick walls of a new or remodeled home.

While Belgians tend to be individualistic, their family orientation is strong. The family plays a central role in daily life. Family activities and meals are highly cherished. Most Belgian children go home after a long day at school, do their homework, eat dinner, help with chores, and spend time with their families. Family time often includes reading or watching television. On TV they can see programs broadcast in French, Dutch, German, and English, usually with subtitles in a second language. Because the state owns the Belgian television stations, there are few commercials.

Family Life

On the weekends many Belgian children participate in scouting programs. Sunday lunch is usually the biggest meal of the week. The meal will normally take place at the same relative's house every Sunday, and family from the immediate area will all attend. If a husband and wife live close to both in-laws, they will frequently rotate Sundays between the two families.

Mothers often work. Out of a total workforce of 4.4 million, 1.9 million are women; however, women typically are found in traditionally "non-male" occupations such as nursing and secretarial jobs. Few have completed a university education or occupy top management positions. Day care is heavily subsidized by the state.

Families often spend weekends and vacations together, traveling to the Belgian coast for short stays and to Spain or the Riviera for longer stays. In the warm months camping in the Ardennes (mountains in southeast Belgium) is a frequent pastime.

When a couple marries, the woman takes the name of the man and connects it with her maiden name, so that if she was a Smith and married a Jones, her married name would be Mrs. Jones-Smith. Especially in Wallonia, it is not uncommon for a couple to live together until the woman becomes pregnant with their first child, at which time the couple will revert to Catholic tradition and get married in church. Due to the Catholic influence divorce is rare and only recognized after years of separation. However, the economy, more than the Catholic Church, has influenced the size of families. The socially correct family size is two children, and a family has received a perfect gift from God if the two children are a boy and a girl.

In the family it is typical for the father and the eldest son to be the ultimate decision makers. Mothers usually administer discipline and rule household matters. Since about 1970, much has been done to emancipate women through legislation and political decision making. Although legal equality has been mostly achieved, it will take time to eradicate the convictions and prejudices that have been nurtured for so many years. Moreover, the gender-based segregation of half of the country's elementary classes (primarily in parochial schools) reinforces the traditional view of women's role (Verleyen, 1987, pp. 189–192) although this is changing.

Aside from family, over their lifetimes Belgians will have only a few truly close friendships. Unlike the United States, where people tend to be quick to establish friendships, the Belgians generally require a great deal of time before relationships mature. Most people with whom Belgians interact regularly will remain simply acquaintances, although they may have known each other for years (see also Chapter 12, "The German Symphony").

Consensus and Compromise

Belgians normally hold their right to privacy and their own opinions sacred. As lace makers have a range of motions with which they pull from their bobbins and

weave their threads around the brass pins, so too the Belgians seem to have similar ranges in their varied activities. Still, rarely does a Belgian stray far from the group by taking an extreme position. Belgium is generally a country of consensus, compromise, and cooperation. However, eccentric artists are revered as the embodiment of the eternal voice of protest, as long as they are not hostile or confrontational. For the individual, however, exclusion from the group can entail loneliness, pain, and more often than not, material poverty (Verleyen, 1987, p. 119).

Overarching the individualism of each Belgian is a set of common political rules that have governed public policy and conduct for decades. This set includes the following:

- The monarchy and Brussels are untouchable; in other words, all else could change, but there should still be a monarchy and Brussels should still be the capital.
- European unification and the EU are to be advocated without any reservation. As noted above, however, the political party, Vlaams Belang, now advocates the breakup of the EU.
- The authority of NATO and the American ally may be the subject of frequent criticism, but they also enjoy the privilege of inviolability.
- Prosperity is to be shared and not to be used as a justification for confrontation or class struggle.
- Labor strikes should not be allowed to jeopardize the existing economic order.
- Privacy and personal liberty are not to be impeded in any serious ways (Verleyen, 1987, pp. 147–150).

The varied types of occupations and pastimes enjoyed by the Belgian population present yet another area of contrast. Belgium has a long tradition of agricultural activity. The central area around Brussels has rich soil and flat terrain conducive to farming, yet only 2% of the workforce is agricultural and only 1% of the Gross National Product comes from farming, while the population is increasingly concentrated in urban areas and engaged in industrial and service activities. Nonetheless, Belgians vigorously defend and subsidize their traditional agricultural base. Although Belgium has the 17th-highest population density among nations at 337.5 per square kilometer, urban planning has helped to ensure that most urban areas are pleasant.

Industry and Business

In the past few years a great debate has raged over national subsidies to the mining and steel industries located particularly in the Wallonian region. Many believe there is no prospect of these industries ever regaining their former status or profitability. Many assert that governmental support should be rechanneled to help expanding industries where Belgium can compete in the EU and worldwide.

The contrasting fortunes of the north and south of Belgium have undergone a dramatic change over the last century. In 1830 French was the official language of the

Belgian kingdom. The nobility spoke French, government proceedings and church services were conducted in French, and the wealthiest citizens, Wallonians, spoke French. Therefore French came to be perceived as the cultured language. Conversely, the Flemish were perceived as the uncultured and poorer members of Belgian society. Some Flemish families remain embittered over stories that their ancestors fighting as foot soldiers in World War I died simply because they could not understand the commands of their French-speaking superiors. As fortunes shifted from the coal and steel industries in Wallonia to the shipping and international trade industries of Flanders, the Flemish found themselves in a position to demand recognition of their language and cultural heritage.

Over the last decade Flanders has continued to prosper, while most of Wallonia has been devastated by unemployment averaging over 15% and by depression. Today, as *The New York Times* observes in the Belgium country profile, old factories dominate the gray landscape where once "a kind of provincial snobbery was polished to a fine sheen" ("Belgium," 2009).

Belgians must attend school from age 6 to 18. Programs are rigorous, and most children have at least 2 hours of homework every night after 8 hours of school. To pass from one level of education to the next, each student must take an exam. The results of the exams determine what schools the student may attend and what vocation the student may undertake. As in Germany, students begin studying for a vocation in their early teens. By the time they come out of secondary school, most begin internships in their chosen vocations or go straight into college. Belgians are highly educated and skilled craftspeople. Thus, the high rates of unemployment are disconcerting and depressing for many of them.

Immigration Issues

In general, Belgians are hard-working people, just like lace makers, who may work nearly 1,000 hours on an intricate piece of lace that measures only 1 square foot, investing not only time but pride in the quality of their work. Because of the great pride that they take in their work and craftsmanship, regardless of how depressing the prospects of long-term unemployment might be, many Belgians would prefer to draw unemployment over doing menial work below their level of training or skill. Therefore immigrants from third-world countries are viewed as necessary to correct a temporary labor imbalance.

Typically immigrants are brought in from North Africa and Turkey to work in the mines and other menial jobs that Belgians reject. These immigrants are given access to many of the social programs such as medicine and government welfare, but they are ineligible to vote and are rarely allowed to become citizens. Although Belgians tend not to warmly welcome third-world foreigners, antiracism legislation makes discriminatory public expressions against immigrants punishable by law. Furthermore, although the Belgians feel that third-world immigrants are only temporarily needed, long-range forecasts show that the Belgian population is shrinking because of low

birth rates and emigration while the immigrant population is increasing. As mentioned earlier, social tradition has led most Belgian families to have two or fewer children despite the fact that the Catholic-influenced legal system prohibits abortion and most forms of birth control.

Overall, Belgians believe that people have a need and desire to work. In an effort to minimize unemployment there has been an effort to reduce the workweek, thus allowing a few more workers into industry. Retirement age is already set at 60 years, and all Belgians have at least 4 weeks of annual vacation paid by the government. The call to reduce working hours further, and even radically, is related to a strong belief in trade union circles that the redistribution of available work will help force down unemployment rates (Verleyen, 1987, p. 231).

Today, most Belgians are forward thinking in their economic activities and are moving heavily into service and diplomatic industries in response to their native skills and worldwide economic demands.

Urban Versus Rural

Another sharp and abrupt contrast is between urban and rural settings. The Belgian countryside is green and lush due to the abundant rainfall and high humidity throughout the year. As one drives through Belgium, long stretches of rolling green hills with little white farmhouses can be seen. The older farmhouses have the barn on the first floor and the family lives upstairs; the farmer with his large workhorse plowing his field is a frequent sight. At times like these, it is hard to imagine that Belgium ever entered the 20th century.

The cities typically look like medieval fortresses, many with a wall surrounding them, interrupting the gentle slope from urban to suburban to rural. There are no U.S.-style suburbs in Belgium. An aerial view at night would show roughly circular areas of dense lights surrounded by thin networks of lights along major highways and a few spots of light in rural areas. This view might resemble the contrasting lace made around Brussels, which has densely woven patches that are delicately connected by threads to other densely woven patches.

Inside the cities, one finds further contrasts between the modern industrial facilities and the grandeur of the older architecture. In Brussels, the Atomium, a large structure built during a recent world's fair, resembles a giant silver atom. It has elevators that take visitors up for a view around the city. The NATO buildings, among others, are modern and efficient. By contrast, the Brussels town square, the Grand Place, is surrounded by cobblestone streets and buildings with ornately carved facades, and it draws the visitor back to the city's origins in the 16th century.

In recent times, there has been an active movement by more than two dozen groups to reenact life in the Middle Ages. It is so strong that, "juvenile delinquents in Flanders have been allowed to atone for their misdeeds by making the Chaucerian pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, in northern Spain, 1,250 miles, on foot, carrying

backpacks and accompanied by a guard" (Bilefsky, 2007a). According to Herman Konings, a Belgian behavioral psychologist who studies national trends, the medieval craze can be attributed to a strong desire to return to a more glorious past. The country, divided between Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and French-speaking Wallonia in the south, is experiencing anxiety about its identity.

Beauty Versus Practicality

A final area of contrast in Belgian culture is that between their love for art and beauty and their sense of practicality. Obviously most lace is beautiful and artistic, but it is also designed to adorn clothing and linens rather than to be simply admired. The artistic history of the country is evidenced by the prominence of museums, theaters, and artistic venues. In Belgium there seems to be a museum for everything. The largest is the open-air museum at Bokrijk. Rural buildings from various centuries have been excavated from all over the Belgian area and painstakingly rebuilt here. Many retirees dress up in the authentic costumes of the times and display the tools and crafts of the era from which the buildings come.

The Rijksmuseum in Antwerp has one of the finest collections of Flemish art in the world. Flemish art was the world standard from the 16th through the early 18th centuries. Exemplified by Brueghel, the van Eycks, and Rubens, Flemish art started with the vivid colors and figures of the Italian Renaissance but made the people less elongated, plumper, and more realistic. Typical signs that a painting comes from the Flemish era are rosy red cheeks and the presence of lace on the clothing in portraits or on the table in a still life.

Inside many of the oldest churches in Belgium, one can find wonderful works of art, most with no apparent security systems attached. For example, it is not uncommon to locate a work by Rubens, van Eyck, or van Dyck hanging in an obscure village church where the doors are never locked. Some of these churches appear old and worn on the outside, but inside they have beautifully carved vestries and pedestals for the priests to stand on while preaching. Hung around the inside walls of the church are artworks representing the 12 Stations of the Cross. Most of the churches were constructed so that the lighting is primarily natural and from candles. The art here was created to inspire the worshipper rather than simply to be admired, so the concept that someone might steal these works from the churches is absurd to the average Belgian. The oldest churches are all Catholic, each having a statue of the Virgin Mary with blazing little white candles all around her. When Belgians, even non-practicing Catholics, are troubled by work or family matters, one will frequently hear them tell how many candles they have lit for Mary.

The study of artistic history is strongly supported by the school system. School children flood the museums throughout the school year for lectures and sightseeing. Early lessons stress the importance of Belgian artists, nearly to the exclusion of others. This emphasis on art is initiated at a young age and is carried forward throughout

most Belgians' lives. The people of Belgium do seem to have painting "in their blood" and seem to like hearing themselves described as a nation of painters. Belgium is proud of its artistic past, and not without reason.

Another example of Belgian practicality is the site where the Battle of the Bulge was waged in World War II. This battle was a major victory for the Allied forces and has been a major tourist attraction for many years. The site is marked by a large circular monument with pillars listing the names of the dead in that battle, resembling a modern Stonehenge. The monument is surrounded by rolling hills that, during tourist season, are meticulously covered with rows of white crosses to mark the resting places of the dead. After tourist season (September through April), the crosses are removed and cows are pastured on the hills.

Control

Lace production requires strict and complex controls to avoid needless flaws. In addition, there must be balance between the spindles and the thread and between the patterns in the cloth. This emphasis on controls and balance is similarly found in the Belgian preference for controlling behavior, interacting with friends and colleagues in familiar situations and surroundings, and leading balanced lives. In Hofstede's (2001) cross-cultural study of 53 nations, Belgium ranked sixth in terms of avoiding uncertainty. There are several areas where Belgians tend to exhibit this high degree of control and uncertainty avoidance, including lifestyle, transportation, social conventions, rules and procedures, and stress management. Belgians are regulated and suspicious of anyone who would change their adopted schedule or routine. Most Belgians have a deep-rooted attachment to what is called a "3 × 8" time schedule: 8 hours for work, 8 hours for play, and 8 hours for sleep. Modern management proposals to change the organization of work so as to increase industrial output are frequently opposed. Many who own small businesses work longer hours, but they also tend to live over their shops so they are never far from home and family. Most shops and businesses are closed on Sunday, although since the Catholic Church changed its policy to allow parishioners to attend High Mass on Saturday evening, more Belgian businesses have Sunday hours.

Transportation

To avoid uncertainty, the political and linguistic borders are well-defined and mapped. Savvy travelers can usually determine which region they are in by the first reference on the city and street signs. However, this can all be very confusing to the visitor, as a sign may list two or more names for the same place, for example, Antwerpen (Dutch), Anvers (French), and Antwerp (English). In the city most maps and signs will say Antwerpen. However, if the map consulted came from Wallonia or France, the city would be marked Anvers.

Belgium has several large ports, including Antwerp, which is the second-largest port in Europe. To accommodate the huge amount of trade from its port cities, Belgium has designed the most immense transportation system in the world for a country its size. Like the threads in a piece of lace, the highways, railways, and canals in this system connect every city and village in the country, allowing goods to flow efficiently all over Belgium and into the rest of Europe.

Major roads are constructed in a hub-and-spoke fashion. There are usually roads encircling larger cities with spokes extending out toward other major cities. These highways have many signs and directions in various languages designed to accommodate industry and travelers. As one drives along the spokes from one city to another, the name of the road will change halfway between the cities. Should one take the Mechelen road from Brussels to get to Mechelen, halfway along the route the name of the road will change to the Brussels road, indicating that the traveler is now closer to Mechelen than Brussels. Changing road signs can severely complicate the trip of inexperienced travelers, especially when the languages change. However, this practice is orderly to the Belgian mind, just as the pattern and texture of a piece of lace is set by its origin.

As one drives over the cobblestone roads of the inner city and the occasional dirt roads in the country, there are no stop signs. It is assumed at every intersection that the driver to the right has the right of way, no matter what the circumstances. Therefore, technically at every intersection drivers need look only to the right before proceeding, and Belgians will sometimes grow quite impatient with travelers who stop to look in all directions before proceeding.

One of the most interesting jobs keeping some Belgians away from the unemployment office is that of road worker. Many of the city streets are paved with cobblestones. To maintain these streets, road crews can be seen working on a small area at the side of the road, digging up the cobblestones, placing them in a pile, cleaning them carefully, and then relaying them. However, the stones are not simply replaced in a haphazard fashion. Rather, they are laid in an orderly pattern similar to the manner in which lace is arranged, often with some artistic, geometric design. Hence this job, although seemingly menial, appeals to the Belgian sense of industry, beauty, and practicality.

Social Rules

In social settings, Belgians are generally formal in their interactions with others and employ a number of explicit rules. For instance, when greeting others, the surname is the proper way to address all but close friends. The casual manner in which first names are used in many countries would probably offend most Belgians. This formality is common in business and social settings, even with neighbors and acquaintances.

Formal titles are used in many business and social settings in lieu of the full name; for example, *Monsieur* or *Mijneer* for a man, *Madame* or *Mevrouw* for a married woman, and *Mademoiselle* or *Jevrouw* for a single woman. It is important not to use

Monsieur or *Madame* with a Flemish speaker; instead, Mr., Ms., Miss, or Mrs. is the preferred form. Titles are also used in many subordinate-superior relationships, such as student to professor or employee to boss. Both the French and Dutch languages incorporate formal and informal manners in which a person can be addressed. Informal address is used when addressing a child, but adults generally need to know one another well before communicating in this way. Among younger people and in business with English-speaking partners there is, however, much less formality and it is common to use first names.

Greetings are also an extremely important part of the social ritual. Handshakes are the norm unless the two parties are good friends. A person will typically shake hands with everyone during the greeting and again before leaving the meeting or event. Belgians will often lament if they do not have a chance to shake hands before parting. In addition, women greeting either men or women in an informal manner will generally kiss three times on alternating cheeks.

Belgians are conscious of social rituals such as gift giving. Gifts are given at any type of social visit, and not to do so is seen as rude. However, gifts are normally not a part of business relationships. A typical gift when one is invited to dinner is flowers (except chrysanthemums, which signify death), a small box of chocolates, or an unusual fruit such as a pineapple. If the visit extends to a number of days, it is common practice to offer a gift for each day spent. Acknowledgments and thanks are made in writing for any gift received, even birthday and holiday cards. In Belgium, New Year's cards are sent in lieu of Christmas cards.

Almost all social gatherings are somewhat formal. When alcoholic beverages are served, it is customary to wait until everyone is served and then, with some ceremony, to raise one's glass to each person in turn, catching his or her eyes and wishing him or her *gezondhiet*, *santé*, or the like. Likewise, it is customary to wait for everyone at the table to be served before eating. Just before taking the first bite of food, everyone says *smaaklijk* or *bon appétit* or, in other words, wishes everyone else a tasty meal. Invitations are frequently sent to dinner guests, even to close friends, and a formal four-course meal is normally prepared. Afternoon tea can also be a formal event.

People, including close friends and family, seldom drop by another's house without first telephoning. Neighbors also observe this protocol, maintaining a high level of formality when interacting. All this formality, however, does not keep Belgians from visiting each other. They normally love to socialize; they just like to plan ahead when someone is coming. Their plans often include going to the bakery on the corner to get a special dessert to serve with tea, which may be traditional tea or herbal tea.

When one enters a Belgian home, there is generally an unheated entryway with stone or linoleum flooring where coats are hung and wet shoes are kept. By contrast, the living area of the house is generally warm and cozy. Thoughts of putting on a cold coat and wet shoes may explain why guests stay so long on winter nights.

Belgians tend to require certainty and privacy in social settings as well as in everyday life. In Belgium almost every door has a lock. In a home or a business this means that

even cabinets and closets can be locked. In business settings, it is appropriate to knock on a door and wait for an answer and also to keep doors closed in the office. A homeowner may need 50 keys to guarantee privacy and security. In the older buildings of some universities, there is a light above the professor's closed office door. When a student wants to see the professor, he or she must ring a bell, in response to which the professor activates the light's color to indicate whether the student should come in (green), wait a few minutes (yellow), or go away (red). While this may seem extreme, it appeals to the Belgian sense of practicality and, in fact, the same system is used in some northern European nations to some extent.

Public Gatherings

Certainty is also highly desirable in social agreements. For Belgians, their word is their bond and promises must be kept. However, beneath all the formal rituals and procedures, the Belgian people tend to be quite friendly, laid back, and good-natured. To see this side of their personality, one can go to a local pub and observe the closeness of the relationships and abundant consumption of beer. Beer is not only a cherished drink but a source of pride for Belgians. Most Belgian cities have at least one brewery, and the smell of the hops hangs in the damp winter air. Belgians will make beer out of most any grain and wine out of most any fruit.

Another place where Belgians are sure to congregate is at the local *frituur* or french-fry maker's shop. In most neighborhoods it is a place to escape from the cold weather and to learn all the latest gossip. Belgian french fries, *frits* (pronounced "frets"), are thickly sliced and fried once at low heat long enough to soften them. Then they are allowed to cool completely before being fried again in very hot lard. The result is a crispy outside with a soft inside, much like the bread in the bakeries. Frits are served in a paper cone with a choice of 20 or more toppings, including stew meat (usually horse meat with a beer gravy), curry sauce, and "sauce American," which is ketchup. They are as popular in Belgium as hamburgers are in America.

Before lace makers arrange the spindles and thread to begin weaving a piece of lace, they first design the pattern on cardboard and carefully punch brass pins in the cardboard pattern to guide the thread during weaving. Similarly one manifestation of high uncertainty avoidance is that Belgians have regulations and customs that act as brass pins to guide behavior in most situations. They tend to dislike the government and police officers but to love order, so they tolerate the intrusion. Dealing with government offices is tedious. There are specific papers and experts for everything. First one must figure out what paper to fill out for the needed service, and then the trick is to figure out what building and what window has the expert who can process the paperwork.

A foreigner moving to Belgium has 30 days to register and get a resident visa from the city that governs the area where the foreigner will be living. Then the visa must be renewed every 3 months, and a new one must be issued whenever the foreigner changes addresses. Citizens of the EU are not required to carry visas, but most

Belgians carry personal cards or business cards with their family name, home address, and telephone number, which they can exchange or leave with a note on the back if they missed someone on whom they came to call.

As noted earlier, the complex federated governing structure of the nation causes confusion, especially for the newly arrived foreigner. The city of Brussels, one of the two capitals of the European Parliament, is technically not equivalent to the Brussels region, although geographically they are the same. It is understandable why some visitors call Brussels the capital of confusion (Waxman, 1993).

Living With Stress

Hofstede (2001) demonstrated a strong correlation between high uncertainty avoidance and high anxiety and stress. This characteristic is manifested in Belgians in several ways. One is that they are a "doing" society: busy all day long, typically rising early. Many Belgian sayings refer to the judicious use of time, such as "Time is money"; "Make hay while the sun shines"; and "Time heals all, so get back to business" (Verleyen, 1987, p. 55). They try to prepare for everything so that nothing can go wrong. Much of this feeling may be attributed to their geographical location and historical lack of control over invading armies. As noted earlier, modern Belgium has been a country since 1830. The North Sea on the west is Belgium's only natural boundary. Therefore any emperor conquering the continent generally started in Belgium (the Low Countries) and moved on from there, as did Bismarck in the 19th and Hitler in the 20th century.

The religious orientation of the Belgians also contributes to their need to be constantly busy. Catholic doctrine places high importance on good works and personal industry in this life to assure a comfortable station in the next. About 75% of Belgians are Catholic. Historically, Belgium produced more nuns and priests per capita than any other nation in the world. Although religious intensity has declined since World War II and most Belgians do not attend church regularly, a majority are still educated in Catholic schools.

Because Catholicism is the official religion of Belgium, Catholic parishes, priests, and schools are heavily subsidized by the state. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Belgian constitution, and most major religions can be found somewhere in Brussels. But for most Belgians, religions other than Catholic are for foreigners.

One result of the great effort that Belgians make to follow tradition and avoid uncertainty is that they frequently have minor breakdowns. It's not uncommon to call on them for an appointment and be put off, because today they are having a *zenuw inspanning*, a Dutch phrase translated as a nervous strain. Typically this means they overslept, overexerted themselves, or generally aren't prepared to face the world for a while.

When they feel a breakdown coming on, Belgians will call a doctor who will routinely prescribe tranquilizers and bed rest. In Belgium medicine is socialized

and easily obtainable, although quality is often questionable. The health care infrastructure is immense, given the size of the population. Home visits by doctors and nurses are common, and paramedic support is widespread.

Cooperation and Harmony

The lace maker's primary thoughts while weaving a strand of lace must always focus on the balance and symmetry of the design. A careful balance is maintained to ensure that neither the lace nor the linen overpowers the other. The overall effect should be one of harmony, with no stray ends or spaces to mar the unity of the structure. Each movement of the lace maker may be quick and concise but always within a small range of motion. There are no extreme movements.

Furthermore, lace itself is a subtle and unobtrusive material. Traditional lace, being all white or ivory, is used to neutralize the bold colors of background material, to soften the hardness of wooden tables, or to balance an object visually. The carefully balanced nature of lace with its neutralizing and non-extreme tone is reflected in the Belgian approach to the world, especially in continuity, statesmanship, and modesty.

Belgians exert a great deal of energy maintaining continuity, the status quo, balance, and a set standard of living for all. They normally work to ensure that their internal cultural and linguistic differences do not disrupt daily life, squelching conflicts by remaining neutral or by reaching mutual consensus among the involved parties. Throughout its existence Belgium has had linguistic tensions of varying intensity. Yet these tensions have never mounted to violence or bloodshed. When necessary, concessions were made and tempers were defused so that tensions would be carefully balanced. In lace making, this means the threads are held tightly to reduce both the slack and the potential for unnecessary gaps or holes that might weaken the durability and quality of the cloth.

The Middle Road

Although Belgians can do little to control the weather in their country, the moderate climate seems to reflect their approach to life: the middle road between extremes. Due to the gulf streams off the coast, the climate is mild, ranging from about 35°F in the winter to about 75°F in the heat of the summer. The weather is frequently cloudy and/or rainy, with little snow and few fully sunny days. However, a winter day with clouds is preferable to a cloudless day because the clouds tend to insulate the land.

The middle road between extremes is also where Belgian managers can usually be found. Subordinates will refer to managers using formal titles and last names; however, managers will seldom stand out because of appearance, conspicuous consumption, or attitudes that might separate management from line workers, as frequently happens in the United States. Again, to Belgians wealth is to be shared rather than flaunted.

Furthermore, the Belgian balancing and peace-making approach to life is replicated in their competitive (or not-so-competitive) nature. Belgians tend to be cooperative to a greater extent than they are competitive. Their social and economic structure was designed in a fashion that actually lessens the competitive drive. For instance, the socialized system for health and welfare provides full health care and monetary subsistence for all citizens. Furthermore, there is no time limit on eligibility for unemployment, as long as the person appears at the appointed time each week at the unemployment (labor bureau) office and regularly applies for openings in her or his stated occupation. The appointed time changes each week to prevent working around the appointment. There are, however, proportional benefits with an upper limit.

Recently there has been discussion of limiting the unemployment allowance to 5 years, but as long as the government can afford it, Belgians will probably not limit this subsidy. Most citizens feel it is a social right to have a certain standard of living regardless of a person's ability to find a job for which he or she is suited. Needless to say, the unemployment subsidy, social security/health care system, and other socialized services in Belgium are largely responsible for one of the highest tax rates in Western Europe. Although Belgian workers tend to be highly skilled and hard working, thus creating a situation in which there is high productivity per worker, the tax rates are so high that the cost of labor almost offsets the productivity.

Another factor of Belgian society that induces a less competitive nature is that the salary earned in many jobs does not vary to reflect effort and performance. For instance, a professor who instructs classes, devotes an inordinate amount of time to research, and publishes regularly will not be paid any more than a professor who maintains a much more relaxed lifestyle. Other than personal achievement, which is not necessarily highly valued, there is little reward for working harder than the average professor or coworker. There is a greater emphasis on cooperation between colleagues rather than climbing over one another to get to the top.

Born Negotiators

Furthermore, Belgians share a great tradition of statesmanship and the ability to negotiate on behalf of others. Peter Paul Rubens, the Flemish painter, was a legendary statesman whose greatest efforts were in fostering international cooperation. He was hired by royalty and wealthy merchants to paint portraits of others. While he had the subject seated for long periods of time, he was paid to put forth the philosophy or argument of his benefactor. For example, he was sent by Philip IV, king of Spain, to paint Charles I, king of England, all the while negotiating a trade agreement between the two nations. This is one reason why Rubens painted about 1,600 royal portraits.

Modern Belgians have carried forward this tradition. The cooperative nature of the Belgians is again apparent in their approach to the European Community and the world. Belgium's linguistic and cultural diversity made it an ideal model for the "EU 92"

negotiations. Due in part to this unique status, Brussels was selected as one of the two capitals of the EU. In 1967, for many of the same reasons, NATO moved its headquarters from Paris to Brussels. Belgians are also joiners and there is an association for every kind of need. Due to Belgium's cultural traditions and unqualified acceptance of these international organizations, its balanced nature, and its central location, Brussels has become one of the most important international areas in the world.

In addition, international corporations seeking expansion into European markets have flooded the Belgian borders over the past 30 years. About 40% of Belgian industries are foreign owned. In an interesting twist, the maker of the King of Beers in America, Anheuser Busch (Budweiser and Bud light), agreed in 2008 to a \$52 billion takeover by the Belgian brewer InBev SA (Stella Artois, Beck's and Bass) in a merger that will create the world's largest brewery. The Belgian government offers international groups major tax incentives to bring central offices or high-tech activities into the country. Despite generous wages, high manufacturing costs, and exorbitant personal tax rates, companies have sought out manufacturing facilities in Belgium to take advantage of the transportation infrastructure and friendly economic climate. Thus, another element that the Belgians seemingly balance effortlessly is the internationalization of their small country while maintaining their own identity.

A Proud People

Finally, although there are obviously many reasons for the Belgians to be proud and boastful, people outside the country are rarely aware of Belgian accomplishments. For instance, many readers may not have been aware of the importance of Belgium to lace and vice versa before reading this chapter. Also, it is not generally known that Belgians produce some of the best beer and chocolates in the world. Belgium has the 16th-highest per capita gross domestic product among the world's nations (\$34,210).

Despite Belgian prominence in international circles, many people are still unfamiliar with the country. Most people struggle to name prominent Belgians after fictional detective Hercule Poirot and comic strip hero Tintin! The reason underlying this lack of international recognition seems to be primarily the result of the Belgian approach to life. Belgians are not generally boastful, tending not to expound about their capabilities and accomplishments. In contrast, they act much like a small piece of lace on the collar of a garment; they bring out the best qualities of those with whom they work without being flashy or calling attention to themselves. Some view this approach as an inferiority complex of sorts, but this idea is contradicted by the definite pride that Belgians feel toward different characteristics of their country. Belgians do not feel they are less important or worthy of praise, as an inferiority complex would suggest; in fact, quite the opposite. Belgians tend to believe that the country can and will be an integral player in the EU and the world. The typical Belgian emphasizes the role of coordinator and peacemaker among international markets, sometimes sacrificing publicity and worldwide recognition.

In short, Belgium is as complex as its renowned lace, and its citizens have learned to meet the challenges posed by the interactions that must occur among its cultural and linguistic groups. While this country has been internationally recognized as an independent state for less than 200 years, its past has been rich. Its future is bright but complicated, just like the lace for which the nation is well known. Belgium adds character and richness to the EU, just as a small piece of lace adds beauty and depth to a well-crafted garment.