

## **Special wishes for the members of Antwerp Zoo; 65 years of history in pictures (1850-1914)**

### **Besondere Glückwünsche für die Mitglieder des Zoos Antwerpen; 65 Jahre Geschichte in Bildern (1850-1914)**

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#### **Abstract**

Antwerp Zoo in Belgium was founded in 1843 and is one of the oldest zoos in the world. It is part of the Royal Zoological Society of Antwerp (RZSA) which also manages Planckendael Wild Animal Park, De Zegge Nature Reserve, Flanders Congress and Concert Center and – since 2009 – Blankenberge Serpentarium - a reptile collection.

During its almost 175 years existence the RZSA and Antwerp Zoo in particular went through periods with many highlights but also years with great difficulties. The early years till the start of World War I Antwerp Zoo went through a period that was important for the present zoological garden. The expansion and lay out of the park, the construction of buildings for visitors or to house animals, the offer for visitors to welcome them: much of it still exists or can still be noticed in the park or as part of the day to day operations of Antwerp Zoo and RZSA.

For the young society, it was important to have a significant and satisfied membership. Members gave the RZSA not only a key appearance but their financial contributions were also needed for the further development of the gardens. To pamper the members from 1850 on a special annual wishing card was offered to them. This initiative came to an end in 1914. With a few exceptions all of them were very nicely illustrated with pictures of the animals, new constructions or other illustrations which illustrate the development of the zoological garden.

The article describes in detail 62 (of 65) known wishing cards, analyzing the relevance of the illustrations for each year. Very often newly arrived species or new constructions are shown. As far as possible more details of these species were gathered. And the future existence of buildings and enclosures and the development of the gardens were also examined.

We can conclude that the period before World War I was one with many highlights for Antwerp Zoo. The special wishing cards are very important historical documents and they continue to illustrate the evolution the Zoo went through during the first seventy years.

**Keywords:** Royal Zoological Society of Antwerp; Antwerp Zoo; zoo history; porcelain cards; nineteenth century

## Introduction

The Antwerp Zoo, one of the oldest zoos in the world, celebrates its 175th anniversary within a few years. In 1993, following the 150th anniversary a book about its history was published. The extensive archives of the Zoo were an important source of information for this publication. But there are also other opportunities to learn about the history of the Antwerp Zoo.

For examples the extensive photographic archive that can be consulted online ([www.beeldbankzoo.be](http://www.beeldbankzoo.be)). This archive provides interested parties the opportunity to become acquainted with the expansion and the history the zoo went through during the last century. One limitation is however that this website is in Dutch. When we want to explore the period further back in the past we are able to do so by other documents which are present in the archives and which illustrate a significant part of the expansion and the history of Antwerp Zoo.

In 1850, several years after the opening of the zoo in 1843, the society begins to distribute “wishing cards” to its members. These members are usually the richer - and French-speaking - Antwerp bourgeoisie because workers did not get access to the zoo in the early period. Other zoos like Artis (Amsterdam, Netherlands) and the lost zoo in Ghent (Belgium) had a similar access policy. In Antwerp these “wishes” to the members were not made on the occasion of a new calendar year but at the start of a new “fiscal year”. In the 19th century, it was common for staff to offer such an illustrated card to members at the start of a new year. It is unclear whether this happened as a result of extending the membership or for some other reason. With the first cards wishes to the members were still present but after a few years this part of the text was left out. This form of communication with members of the RZSA lasted 65 years and forms the basis of this historical survey which also focuses on the changes that the zoo went through and special events that took place between 1850 and 1915.

Initially members were offered porcelain cards. Porcelain cards are so named not because they were porcelain, but because they resemble porcelain and whatever their age they not lose their beauty. They were usually used for business cards, menus, awards, concert programs, etc. They were in fact business cards from stores, factories, professionals, societies. It is obvious that those porcelain cards were distributed by people of upper class (in terms of richer) origin because the price must have been quite high. The earliest porcelain cards were created around 1825 and in the 1870s they gradually disappeared because it was realized that working with color powders and lead oxides was a health hazard to the printers. Curiously porcelain cards were almost exclusively manufactured in Belgium with Ghent, Brussels and Bruges as the main centres. Porcelain cards are printed matter based on lithography.

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