



ESU-Information

Science at the Fair (SciFair): Collaborating with the Fairground Community to Preserve a Shared European Heritage

Guest article by Prof. Nele Wynants (University of Antwerp)

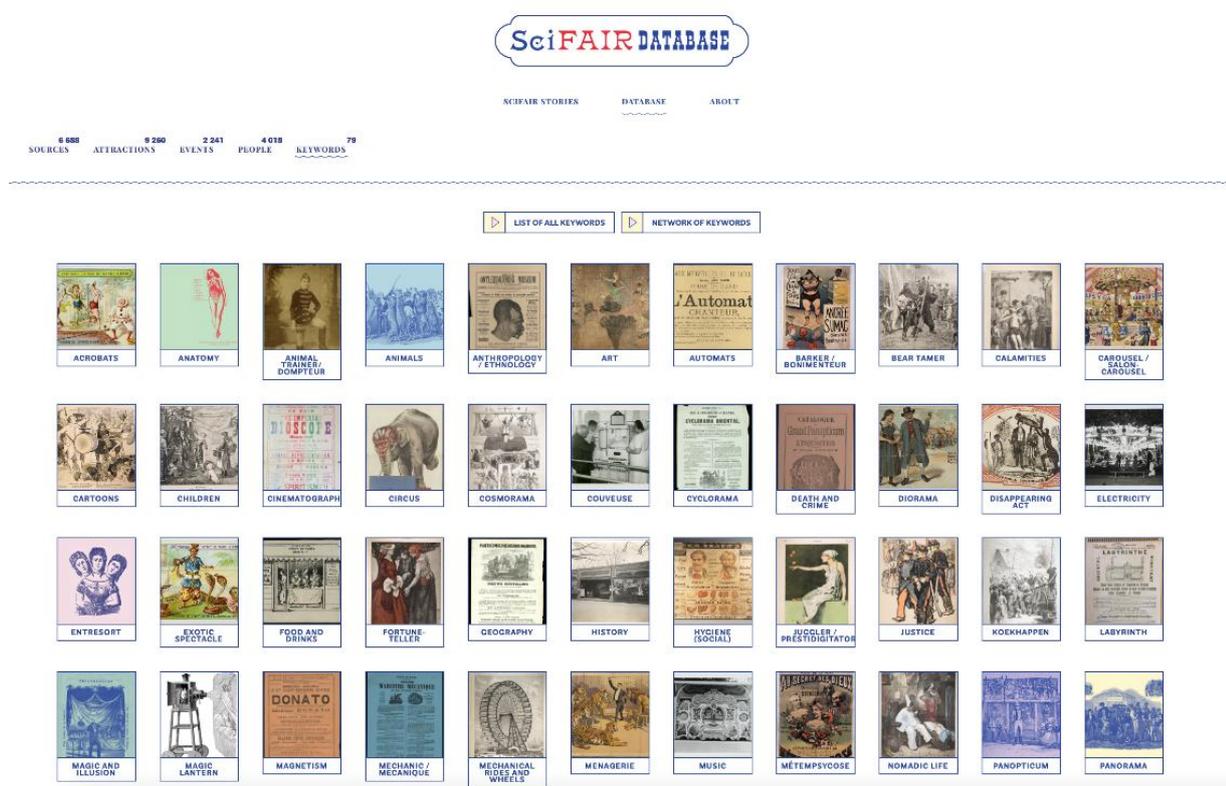


ESU General Secretary Steve Severyns and Nele Wynants at the Interschau in Kassel in January 2023, which took place as part of the DSB Delegates' Conference. Photo: Science at the Fair

Since 2021, the European-funded research project Science at the Fair (SciFair) at the University of Antwerp has been working closely with fairground communities across Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands to document, preserve and make visible the history of travelling showpeople. The project focuses on the period 1850–1914, a time when fairs were key places where new technologies, scientific demonstrations and popular entertainment reached mass audiences, often long before they entered museums, theatres or schools.

From the outset, SciFair has been conceived as a project about the fairground history, and as a cultural heritage initiative developed together with the community. One of its central outcomes is a public online database that brings together dispersed historical material: photographs, posters, press reports, journals, archival documents, and biographical information on showpeople, attractions and events (scifair.uantwerpen.be). The platform continues to grow through partnerships with families, collectors, museums and associations. Its goal is simple: to reconnect scattered traces of the past and make the history of the fair visible again, not only for researchers, but also for the community itself.

Over the past years, this work has led to a series of concrete heritage initiatives carried out in close collaboration with the fairground community and partners in the sector.



SciFair’s public online database contains unique historical material, such as photographs, posters, press reports, magazines, archive documents and biographical information on the history of the European fairground industry. Photo: Science at the Fair

UNESCO recognition

In Belgium and France, SciFair contributed historical expertise to the preparation of the UNESCO nomination dossier on fairground culture, helping to document its historical roots, its mobility, and the strength of family networks that cross national borders. The recognition of fairground culture as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in December 2024 marked an important milestone and confirmed the significance of this living tradition and the communities that sustain it. This work was only possible thanks to the trust and active involvement of showpeople, associations, researchers and heritage professionals who shared their knowledge, stories, and collections.

Preservation of Precarious Sources

A central concern of SciFair has been the preservation of fragile and often privately held materials that are at risk of being lost. Over the past years, we have digitized and helped safeguard key collections, many of which were previously inaccessible or even unknown. Highlights include the digitization of over 1,300 engravings and 750 postcards from the late Erich Knocke's extensive graphic collection in the former Markt- und Schaustellermuseum in Essen, in close collaboration with his relatives. Knocke's library and archival holdings, a collection built up over decades and consisting of thousands of books, prints and documents, were secured and transferred to the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung at the University of Cologne, where they can be preserved and made accessible for the future. ([Link to blog article](#))



In Pirmasens, there are bound copies of “Der Komet” that were digitised using SciFair’s mobile digitisation kit. Photo: Science at the Fair

Professional trade journals: the “roadmap” of fairground life

Historical professional journals have formed another key focus. These trade papers offer a unique window onto everyday life in the sector: routes, new attractions, suppliers, fairs, and family names. They are invaluable sources that allow present-day families to rediscover networks and histories spanning generations. We have digitized and documented extensive runs of important titles, including *Le Voyageur Forain* in France (1883), which was the very first of its kind, *Le Voyageur Forain Belge* (1885) in Belgium, and *La Bussola* (1889) in Italy, helping to make these rich historical records accessible once again.

Der Komet digital

A particularly meaningful collaboration began in 2023 during the Interschau in Kassel (DSB Delegiertentag), where SciFair coordinator Nele Wynants met Mr. Knerr, then editor of *Der Komet*. This meeting opened a constructive dialogue about the possibility of digitizing the journal,

founded in 1883. In close exchange with Mr. Knerr, we explored practical ways to support the project, including options for co-financing. While the funds available through our research project could not cover the full costs, we helped map out possible solutions, contacted specialized scanning companies, and advised on technical aspects such as handling the material, OCR quality, and long-term accessibility.

Mr. Knerr generously welcomed both Dr. Sabine Lenk (University of Marburg) and Dr. Bart Moens (University of Antwerp) to Pirmasens, where they were able to examine the collection on site. During these visits, the material condition and digitization requirements were carefully assessed, and the earliest volumes were partly photographed as preparation for further research and preservation work. Working together with colleagues from the University of Marburg, this collaborative effort helped lay the groundwork for the successful preservation and digitization of this unique journal. ([Link to blog article](#))

Today, we are genuinely pleased to see Der Komet successfully digitized and made publicly accessible, an important achievement for the fairground community and a remarkable resource for rediscovering shared histories, names, routes and networks across generations. As with many long-term projects, people have different memories of the individual steps; what matters most to us is that the archive is now permanently preserved and accessible.



June 2025: Exhibition opening and book launch for 'Foorwonder' at the Huis van Alijn in Ghent, attended by the late Belgian showman François Delforge, Astrid De Bruycker, Ghent's alderwoman for culture, and Nele Wynants from the University of Antwerp. Photo: Michiel Devijver (Huis van Alijn)

Many voices: from research to shared ownership

None of this would have been possible without the openness and trust of the fairground community and their constructive collaboration with researchers and the heritage sector. Families, collectors and showpeople across Europe have shared photographs, archives and personal memories, helping to safeguard fragile heritage that might otherwise have been lost. This spirit of collaboration was also central to the Foorwonder exhibition in Ghent and accompanying book, which brought research and community knowledge together for a broad public audience. The

interview with the late François Delforge, and his live act during the exhibition opening and book launch, beautifully captured this collaboration in practice, showing how fairground heritage lives through performance, storytelling and the continued presence of those who carry it forward. ([Link to blog article](#))

SciFair will continue this work in the coming years, building further partnerships and expanding the digital platform. Our goal is to study the past, and to help safeguard and pass on the history, knowledge and identity of the fairground world to future generations, together with the people who have carried it forward for so long.

As part of these efforts, we launched a short survey on 27 February 2026 in Leuven, during the ‘Sector dag Kermiscultuur – Journée sectorielle Culture Foraine’, organised by the Belgian Fairground Association. The aim of the survey ([Link to the survey](#)) is to identify the sector’s needs and priorities regarding fairground heritage and to support future research and development initiatives aimed at safeguarding, preserving and ensuring access to this culture.

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