



# Shall we dance

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## How the Flemish became Los Flamencos

In the 16th century, Flemish artists were in a class of their own. Their talent was demanded in royal courts across Europe, notably in Spain because they had developed a popular form of polychrome painting. "It looked like the light was shining out of their paintings," says Hermans.

One of the most famous artists was Juan de Flandes (Jan of Flanders), who was a court painter during the reign of Isabella I of Castille. His sitters also included her daughters Joanna of Castile (also known as Joanna the Mad) and Catherine of Aragon, who became the Queen

who had been born in Belgium. Their son Charles became not only King of Spain but emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, dubbed the land where the sun never sets because at any given moment somewhere over this vast realm, there was daylight.

Charles was born in Ghent and brought many Flemings with him into the Spanish court, giving them influential positions. He also brought a whole army of archers from his hometown. These men became known as *Los Flamencos* and developed a reputation for being wild and rough, womanising and drinking too much.



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of England through her marriage to Henry VIII. (The first of his six wives.)

Joanna the Mad married Philip the Handsome, Duke of Burgundy,

At the same time, Hindus of Indian descent arrived in Spain, having been driven out of Rajasthan by the Muslims. After spending some time in North Africa, they named

themselves Egyptians, the origins of the English word "gypsy".

"The Flemish had white skin, and these gypsies had dark skin. But the one thing they had in common was that they liked women, they liked fighting and they made a lot of noise," says Hermans. People likened the two races, and, given the royal connections of the Flemings, the gypsies took this as a badge of honour.

Despite the connections, the following three centuries saw horrific persecution of the gypsies, culminating in Black Wednesday in July 1749 when King Ferdinand VI launched a police action to capture all the men and women and separate them into concentration camps – a form of "soft" genocide, says Hermans.

It was only during the reign of Charles III that the gypsies were to see an end to such levels of persecution. He promised their release on the grounds that they became Catholic, spoke Spanish, lived in houses, paid taxes and did military service. Ninety percent of them acquiesced to these demands.

Eventually, the term "gypsy" had only negative connotations. According to Hermans, they asked to change it to the name they had shared with the Flemings during the time of Charles I: *Los Flamencos*. And from that point on, their music and dance became known as *Flamenco*.

While this all sounds very convincing, it's just one of the many theories to be found about the origins of the word "flamenco" and just one theory about how the Flemish connection came into play.

So I ask Hermans just why the flamingo theory doesn't fly.

on the many internet pages devoted to the topic, postulates that the Flemish were themselves named after flamingos, owing to their ruddy complexions compared to the gypsies.

Hermans' response is close to a guffaw, and he mutters something about how you can find anything on the internet these days. The name of Spain's ubiquitous dish paella, he notes, is said to be a contraction of the Spanish phrase *para ella*, meaning for her. He winks that many Valentine lovers have been fooled by this one.

Apparently, and here Hermans demonstrates his broader knowledge of etymology, the word comes from patella, the Latin word for a knee-cap. Paella was cooked in enormous flat dishes, known back then as *patellas*.

He does go on *Naturalis Historia* to offer up a more substantial theory of the flamingo connection. The Roman philosopher Pliny, author, is said to have observed Andalusian youth courtships and found them similar to that of flamingos. A female flamingo permitting four approaches from a male must mate, says Hermans.

"This is similar to what the kids were doing," says Hermans. "The girls had bells on their ankles that made noise when they hit the floor with their feet. This was said to be a symbol to wake up new life or to procreate."

While it's a nice theory, Hermans says it comes too late and that what is more likely is that the youthful dance was incorporated at a later stage into what we now know as flamenco.

### Arabs and knives

Another theory, which has been widely discredited, but to which Hermans adds his few cents, is

that the word "flamenco" derived from the Arab term *falah-menkoum*, meaning the suffering of the peasant. Another similar theory is that it comes from the word for "peasant", *falah*, and *mengu*, meaning "banished".

Hermans explains: "If it was the case, then we would have seen historical evidence of the contraction of the Arab words."

He also dismisses a theory, which at one point was very popular, that flamenco was named after a 17th-century knife. Soldiers from the Spanish special forces were said to have come back from Flanders with knives made in workshops in 's-Hertogenbosch on the Dutch border.

These soldiers, so the story goes, included gypsies who were possibly in the military to secure citizens' rights for themselves. They brought back the flamenco knives to prove that they had been in Flanders. After that, the gypsies of Andalusia were said to carry these knives.

Hermans says the main problem with this story is that the blade of this knife was oriental in its style. He talked to experts from the Royal Palace of Madrid, who said the knives were of Moorish origin.

I can't resist a couple of last niggling questions about his theory before tottering out of his flamenco-style bar: How can we really believe there was ever such a link between the hot, unbridled flamenco dancers and the Flemish, known more for suppressing their passions?

"This only explains the Flamenco name, not the Flamenco mentality," he firmly states.

"The temperament is so different. The mentality of Flamenco is in Andalusia," he tells me, before gazing off wistfully into the distance. ♦

## Tears of liberation

Amid a row of nondescript town houses on the edges of Leuven's city centre lies De Koerier van Navarra, whose doors are a portal into a world of Spanish food, sensual music and dramatic dancing.

Run by Ivo Hermans, who has devoted his life to bringing flamenco to the Flemish, the bar is something of a calling card for those who want a taste of the fiery culture.

Hermans love affair began as a child when he was captivated by the landscape, rich colours and music of Spain. He hosts evenings in which guests can savour a giant paella, sink a glass of his fine selection of Rioja and be pulled in to a world of flamenco.

The bar, tagged as "a place for passion and hunger", is lit by candles, giving it a romantic, mysterious air. On the walls are pictures of Flamenco singers, dancers and musicians. Hermans, who says that the word "flamenco" is linked to soldiers from Flanders known as *Los Flamencos*, has aptly named the bar after a postal service that existed between the Spanish city of Burgos and Brussels (crossing through Navarra) during the time of Carlos I who reigned over both regions.

"I don't know any stronger expression in popular repertoire than I find in flamenco." Explains Hermans. Those who love it cry, he says, "not tears of sorrow but tears of liberation." ♦

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### Pink birds

One alternative doing the rounds