

CÉCILE DUBOIS

BRUSSELS
ART NOUVEAU

PHOTOS | SOPHIE VOITURON

WALKS
IN THE CITY CENTER

BRUSSELS

CÉCILE DUBOIS

ART NOUVEAU

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BRUSSELS, THE BEST CITY FOR ART NOUVEAU

While other cities could probably also lay claim to this title, it is true that Brussels is probably one of the few European cities where the Art Nouveau style has such a prominent presence. This is where the first Art Nouveau buildings were built. That said, things might have been very different. After World War II, several of the innovative masterpieces of architects such as Victor Horta and Paul Hankar were demolished or even thoroughly altered, much like the work of several lesser known architects. Fortunately, people gradually rediscovered Art Nouveau over the years. At the same time, we must remain vigilant! While the interest of Art Nouveau is almost unanimously recognised, many minor heritage elements may potentially disappear, either because of negligence or ignorance. A guide like this one therefore continues to be crucial for raising public awareness about the richness, diversity, and relevance of Art Nouveau as a creative movement, in early twentieth-century society.

This publication contains nine walks, during which you can discover the many facets of Art Nouveau in architecture in various Brussels neighbourhoods. It discusses the personalities of several key architects and decorative techniques used to introduce art into the streetscape. The book also contains several portraits/interviews of owners, conservators, and restorers, who help safeguard this exceptional heritage.

INTRODUCTION



▲ Sgraffito, home of the architect Paul Hankar,
Rue Defacqz 71, 1060 Saint-Gilles

At the end of the nineteenth century, Brussels architects reacted against academicism, which inevitably led them down the path of Art Nouveau. Victor Horta, with his organic style, and Paul Hankar, whose style was more geometric, created a style of architecture that would soon become internationally famous. In just fifteen years, from 1893 onwards, hundreds of Art Nouveau buildings were built across the capital; initially by the great innovators, and subsequently by their pupils and followers, who were also inspired, in the early twentieth century, by the Viennese Secession and by other trends in European Art Nouveau.

Some of these architects designed *gesamtkunstwerke*, overseeing every aspect of the design, from the architecture to the technical features of a modern edifice (heating, electricity, pipes...) down to the interior decoration and the furnishings. The concept of the 'portrait house' was also developed, designing a house entirely to the specifications of a client.

Initially, Art Nouveau perfectly fulfilled the ambitions of the industrial, often progressive, and free-thinking bourgeoisie. At the time, Belgium was the second industrial power of the world. These clients wished to assert their influence in the city with this new and often exuberant architecture, with its clearly visible metallic structure and with rooms that invited light into the house. Gradually, the style became more democratic, culminating in the construction of Art Nouveau school buildings, social housing, town

houses, warehouses, community centres, and so on. While Art Nouveau incorporated industrial materials such as iron and cast iron, it also relied heavily on the artisanal tradition for stonework, woodwork and joinery and ironwork, stained glass windows, sgraffito and colourful ceramic decorations.

In the early twentieth century, Horta already moved away from Art Nouveau, revisiting more classic styles of architecture. Paul Hankar died prematurely in 1901 whereas Henry van de Velde and Octave Van Rysselberghe, two other pioneering architects, pursued international careers. The 'second generation', comprising Ernest Blerot and Gustave Strauven, whose style was more floral, or Léon Sneyers and Paul Hamesse, who developed a more rational architecture, in the vein of Paul Hankar, took over at the helm from the innovators. And finally, there were other notable architects such as Jean-Baptiste Dewin, Paul Cauchie, and Victor Taelmans, who developed their own very personal styles.

The construction of the Stoclet Palace, between 1905 and 1911, by the Austrian architect Josef Hoffman, marked the end of the history of the Art Nouveau movement in Brussels with a masterful flourish. The geometric shape of the Stoclet Palace ushered in the architecture of the interwar period, and would go on to influence several Brussels and international architects. World War I signified the demise of this architecture, which at times was outrageously decorative. Sometimes people even forgot that the pioneers sought first and foremost to rethink spaces. A long period followed, during which Art Nouveau was maligned and forgotten. Some major buildings were demolished, such as Horta's *Maison du Peuple*, which was built in 1895, in spite of international protests. Fortunately, some buildings were listed and restored ... slowly the tide turned thanks to the visionary insight of people such as Jean Delhaye and Guy and Léo Dessicy. The Horta Museum opened in 1969, just four years after the demolition of the *Maison du Peuple*.

Nowadays, the style is widely appreciated, garnering the interest of Belgian and international visitors alike.

We must remain vigilant however. The avidity of real estate developers and ignorance can cause irreversible losses. In Brussels, residential Art Nouveau buildings can be found in the bourgeois communes of the first tier—Forest, Saint-Gilles, Ixelles, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Schaerbeek, which extend the city of Brussels to the northeast—, which grew exponentially in the early twentieth century. The city seemed to be perpetually evolving. New neighbourhoods were built and the architects who also served as real estate developers and even contractors did not have to go far to find clients for their buildings. In the city centre, where people went for retail and leisure, the programmes were more diverse, but the buildings were also more scattered. They were built in places where there was still some space left in the early twentieth century, or where the town planners decided to create space.

Art Nouveau is never the only style in a specific neighbourhood. It always exists alongside other contemporary styles such as neoclassicism, the first architectural style used when the city expanded to the suburbs, in the 1860s, as well as other ‘neo’ styles

(neo-Renaissance, neo-Gothic, etc.) and eclecticism, which drew heavily on various styles. Art Nouveau also existed alongside the first Beaux-Arts style buildings, which became a prominent feature in Belgian cities from 1905 onwards, and which referred to the French eighteenth-century styles.

It would have been interesting to add an Art Nouveau trail for the communes in the second tier, but this would have been a very long trail, which would have been impossible to cover on foot. When you leave the city centre for Uccle, Watermael-Boitsfort, or Berchem-Sainte-Agathe, you run into several surprising Art Nouveau buildings, which we decided not to include here, as they are often isolated and are sometimes not even visible from the street.

- ▼ Stoclet Palace, avenue de Tervuren 279-281, Woluwe-Saint-Pierre (Josef Hoffmann, 1905–1911, listed on 13 October 2005). Added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2009.



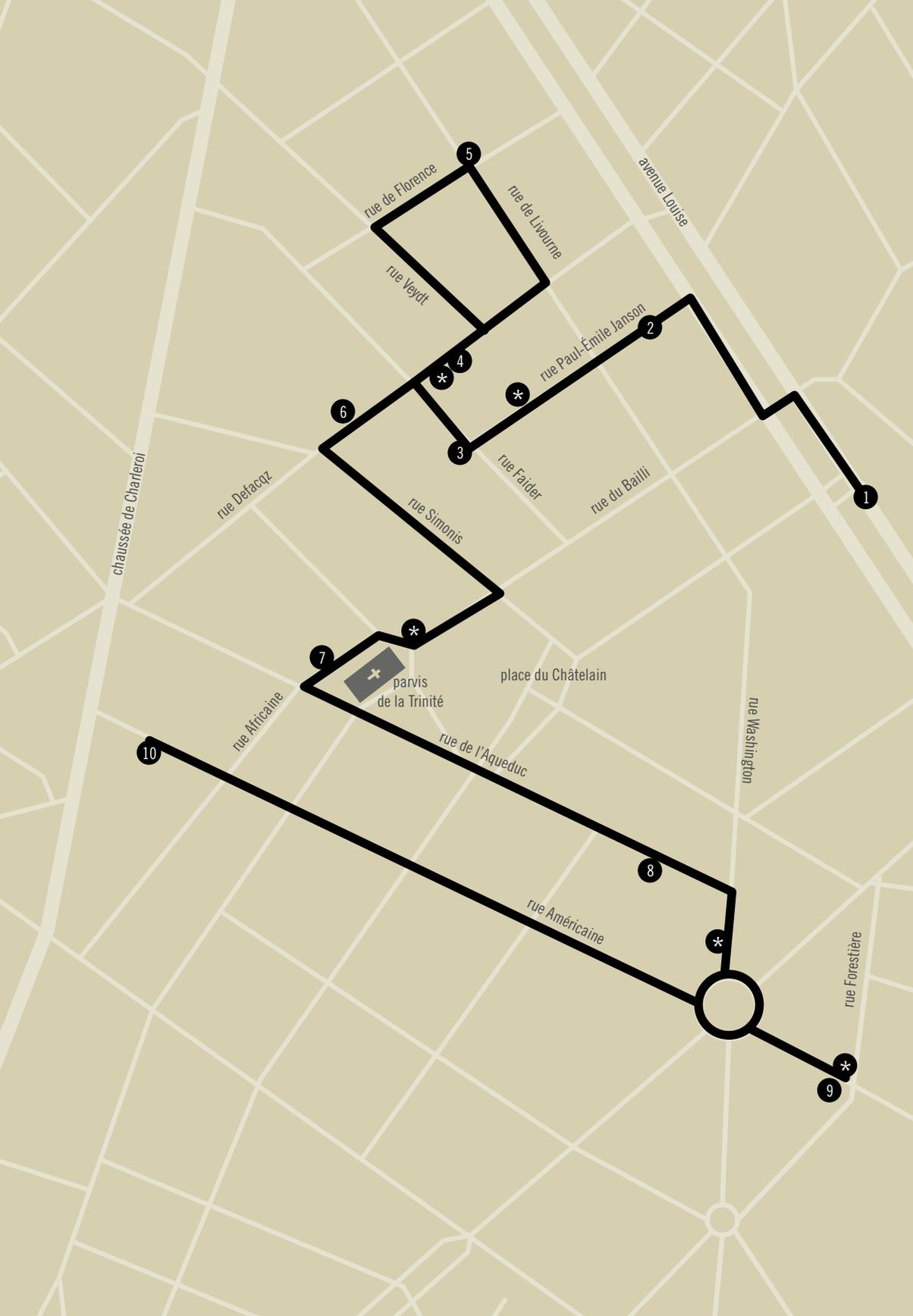


FIRST WALK

THE ORIGINS OF ART NOUVEAU FROM HÔTEL SOLVAY TO THE HORTA MUSEUM

Avenue Louise, which was built in 1864 and which constitutes the starting point of this walk, fulfilled a double ambition: to create a new and elegant avenue, which connected the city centre with La Cambre forest and promote a new upper middle class neighbourhood.

A progressive bourgeoisie, drawn to the Art Nouveau buildings in the surrounding area, relied on such innovators as Victor Horta and Paul Hankar for the design of their homes. This walk focuses on the 'manifesto' houses of the Brussels Art Nouveau style and includes three Horta buildings, which were added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000.



chaussée de Charleroi

rue de Florence

rue de Livourne

avenue Louise

rue Veydt

rue Paul-Émile Janson

*

*

6

rue Defacqz

rue Simonis

rue Faider

rue du Bailli

1

*

7



parvis de la Trinité

place du Châtelain

rue Africaine

rue de l'Aqueduc

rue Washington

10

8

rue Américaine

*

rue Forestière

9

*

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- 01 HÔTEL SOLVAY**
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 - 02 HÔTEL TASSEL**
RUE PAUL-ÉMILE JANSON 6, 1000 BRUSSELS
 - 03 HOUSE**
RUE FAIDER 83, 1050 IXELLES
 - 04 HÔTEL CIAMBERLANI**
RUE DEFACQZ 48, 1050 IXELLES
 - 05 HÔTEL OTLET**
RUE DE FLORENCE 13, 1000 BRUSSELS
 - 06 HOUSE AND STUDIO OF THE ARCHITECT
PAUL HANKAR**
RUE DEFACQZ 71, 1060 SAINT-GILLES
 - 07 HOUSE**
RUE AFRICAINE 92, 1060 SAINT-GILLES
 - 08 HOUSE OF SANDER PIERRON**
RUE DE L'AQUEDUC 157, 1050 IXELLES
 - 09 HOUSE AND STUDIO OF THE ARCHITECT
ADRIEN BLOMME**
RUE AMÉRICAINNE 205, 1050 IXELLES
 - 10 HOME AND STUDIO OF VICTOR HORTA /
HORTA MUSEUM**
RUE AMÉRICAINNE 23-25, 1060 SAINT-GILLES

1/ HÔTEL SOLVAY

AVENUE LOUISE 224, 1050 BRUSSELS

Architect: Victor Horta

1895-1898

Listed: 7 avril 1977 et 22 avril 1999

Added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000



▲ Dining Room of the Hôtel Solvay

Around the 1890s, Armand Solvay (1865–1930) took over at the helm of the family company which his father, Ernest Solvay, founded in 1863. Solvay invented the industrial process for the manufacture of soda. In 1894, Armand Solvay tasked Victor Horta with the design of his mansion. Horta, who had shot to fame after building Hôtel Tassel, would go on to write in his *Mémoires*: 'In effect, I was welcomed in this environment because in being so bold as to choose me, a sign of energy and independence, Solvay's choice contained, albeit in a different form, the energy that the Solvay brothers needed to invent their soda.'¹The architect had an almost unlimited budget at his disposal and his relationship with his clients was remarkable, as 'this was an amicable relationship, underscored by the intelligence and charm of his wife, who fortunately was more open to modernism than her husband',² even though there were some signs of impatience by the end of the project. Construction

commenced in 1895, and while the structural work was completed in 1898, the Solvays ended up having to wait until 1903 before the last furniture was delivered. But the result was unparalleled: this was Horta's masterpiece, the pinnacle of his architectural ideas.

The mansion's design is revealed in the organisation of the façade, which is fifteen metres wide. Horta used white and blue stone, interrupted by lateral oriels on the various floors, enlivening the façade's design and creating the illusion that the central span is hollow. The ground floor is on the street level 'so the master of the

house has an office where he can conduct private business and large cloakrooms that connect with the entrance hall and the utility rooms.'³ A monumental double staircase, with a massive stained glass skylight made of American glass and a painting by Théo Van Rysselberghe, titled 'La lecture dans un parc' (1902) provides access to the reception rooms on the first floor. There are no load bearing walls here. Instead the visible metal structure allows the architect to create wide-open spaces that open out onto one another. On the street side, the reception rooms run across the entire width of the house. At the back of the house, on the garden side, Horta created a dining room and study. All the spaces interconnect, with glazed partitions that can be opened or closed. A second stairwell, also with a stained glass skylight, leads to the second floor, where the parents sleep. The landing has been converted into a veritable conservatory, in the heart of the house. The third floor is where the children

and the governess sleep. The servants' quarters are located in the attic, which can only be accessed by the service staircase. Before World War I, the Solvay family employed about a dozen servants.

Horta pushes the principle of *gesamtkunstwerk* to its limits here, designing every aspect of the interior decoration and the furnishings, using only the most valuable and noble materials, including twenty-three different types of marble and seventeen varieties of wood, including several types of African wood. The house is one of the few Horta designs where the original furniture was preserved. If we were to merely limit ourselves to discussing the interior, this would not

do justice to the architect, who incorporated it into an original structure, while also seeing to all the technical details: a forced air heating system, electric lighting, and so on. In 1944, the stained glass window on the first floor was destroyed by the impact of the explosion of a V1 bomb. In 1957, the Wittamer-De Camps family acquired the mansion from the Solvay family, transforming it into a sewing workshop and exhibition gallery. Since then, the window and the mansion have undergone several restorations, a process that continues today. The building is only exceptionally open to visitors and is also used for the organisation of smaller events, for conservation purposes.



2/ HÔTEL TASSEL

RUE PAUL-ÉMILE JANSON 6, 1000 BRUSSELS

Architect: Victor Horta

1893-1894

Listed: 18 novembre 1976

Added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2000

The year 1893 is an important date in the history of Art Nouveau. This was the year in which Victor Horta built Hôtel Tassel, the manifesto of his organic Art Nouveau style and in which Paul Hankar launched the geometric Art Nouveau style when he built his own house. Emile Tassel, who was employed as an engineer at Solvay, lived with his grandmother and enjoyed receiving friends. He liked to conduct scientific research at home, and was a professor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. He asked Horta, whom he knew from the Masonic lodge les Amis Philanthropes, to design him a house for a single man. The very balanced façade gives a hint as to the edifice's interior organisation. It is made of blocks of white stone, from Euville and Savonnières, both in the Lorraine region in France, which the Art Nouveau architects preferred to use. By positioning the entrance door in the middle of the façade, Horta already gave a hint of what was to come. Here nothing would resemble anything people had seen to date. In traditional Brussels houses, the entrance

door was on the side of the house, in a narrow span. On the upper floor, the salon, dining room and veranda were all located in the main span. On the right and left of the entrance, two small windows light up a parlour and a small hall, which led to the service corridor that gave out into the kitchens in the cellar on the garden side of the house. In the mezzanine, small windows with stained glass panels, which are separated by five slender stone columns with bases and capitals that have been carved to resemble claws, gripping an iron lintel, allow light into the smoking room. On the first floor, light flows into the office through the large window of the bow window with its distinctive iron structure. Finally, the house also had a large study on the uppermost floor.

The façade was divided vertically into three sections. The central spans gradually opens up to the light, while the windows of the two lateral spans become narrower. The small openings on the upper floor are



▲ Stairwell of Hôtel Tassel

even reminiscent of loopholes. The bow window, which protrudes from the façade, has a very organic shape. The house was very deep (more than twenty metres) and is subdivided into three parts: an area for intellectual life, in the front of house, a rear part, and a central part with a conservatory in the heart of the house on the left, with a skylight and the stairwell on the right, which led to the upper floors, and which had a stained glass skylight above it. The edifice folds back unto itself on this central section, which bathes in natural light and which is the heart of the house. At the back, the upper floor comprises a succession of rooms, including the sitting room and the dining room. The bedrooms of Tassel and his grandmother were located at the back of the other floors. In the interior, the decoration blended in seamlessly with the structure, as part of the house's general concept. The

heart of the house, on the ground floor, was completely open and the metal structure clearly visible, which anchored the interior. The capitals of the cast iron columns extend into tendrils and twists at the crown, creating a whiplash motif that is also used elsewhere in the interior. The floor is decorated with marble mosaics, in white, orange, and green, in organic flame and scroll shapes. The doors and some of the windows have stained glass panels, featuring marine scenes or flowering bulbs. Finally, the wall of the stairwell features a large mural, in gradients of green and orange, with stylised arabesques and plants, attributed to Henri Baes.

After Tassel died in 1920, Norine Couture occupied the premises, after which it was renovated several times. The house was acquired in 1976 by Jean Delhaye, who admired Horta and restored it. Soon after, it was listed. Nowadays it is used as office premises.

Victor Horta (1861–1947) was born in Ghent. He first studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in his city of birth, then spent a year in Paris, and finally ended up at the Academy in Brussels. He then acquired extended work experience in the practice of Alphonse Balat (1818–1895), the architect of Leopold II, who was a figurehead of the classic style, at the time when Balat was tasked with the construction of the greenhouses of the Palace at Laeken. His early projects already bear testimony to his skill in designing classic compositions (the pavilion of the Human Passions, 1890–1899). In 1893, he created his first Art Nouveau style building, building *Maison Autrique*, followed by *Hôtel Tassel*. From then on, Horta would develop his own original spatial concept and a new decorative language, drawing on plants for inspiration. Until 1914, he created several *gesamtkunstwerke*, for a progressive clientele. He also built department stores, *Brugmann Hospital* (1906), the *House of the People* (1895), and so on. In 1913, he was appointed as Director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, where he proceeded to reorganise the educational programmes. After World War I, he gave his spatial expression even more free rein,

designing the complex structure of the Centre for Fine Arts (1922–1928). During this period, he mainly accepted public commissions, evolving from Art Deco into a simpler more functional architectural style (Central Station, 1937–1952). In 1939 and 1945, he burnt most of his archives. He did leave *Mémoires*⁴, but never completed them. Four of his

buildings have been added to the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Hôtel José Ciamberlani at 23–25, Rue Paul-Émile Janson, is currently undergoing restoration. It was built by Paul Hankar in 1897 for the brother of Albert Ciamberlani (listed on 7 June 2001).

3/ HOUSE RUE FAIDER 83, 1050 IXELLES

Architect: Albert Roosenboom

1900

Listed: 7 December 1981

After working in the practice of Victor Horta, Albert Roosenboom (1871–1943) built several Art Nouveau buildings before becoming one of the greatest champions of the Beaux-Arts aesthetic, which was so similar to eighteenth-century French architecture.

This façade, built in white Silesian bricks, accentuated by white stone from Savonnières and metal elements, rests on a tapered blue stone base. The scraper has been installed in the base, into an interlacing moulding, which connects to the letterbox. The moulding extends upwards, transforming into the console for the bow window. The curved bow window is very similar to that of Hôtel Tassel, with its visible metal structure. A small balcony sits on top of it, its wrought iron railing curving outwards and its shape reminiscent of a fish trap.

On the top floor, the windows are surrounded by an exceptional sgraffito, which is in dire need of restoration, and which is attributed to Privat Livemont. In the centre of the composition, a woman's face, eyes closed, the index finger resting on her lips, invites the spectator to be silent as the owners of the house sleep behind these windows. Two chubby putti, on either side, hold poppies, flowers that are known among others for their sleep-inducing properties.

Golden stars twinkle higher up.



4/ HÔTEL CIAMBERLANI RUE DEFACQZ 48, 1050 IXELLES

Architect: Paul Hankar

1897

Listed: 12 janvier 1983



This striking geometric Art Nouveau façade has two large horseshoe-shaped windows on the first floor and some extraordinary examples of sgraffito. The entire building was restored in 2006 and is among the best-preserved houses designed by Paul Hankar.

It was built by Paul Hankar for the Widow Ciamberlani, who commissioned it for her son, the Symbolist painter Albert Ciamberlani (1864–1956). In 1927,

the architect Adrien Blomme radically redesigned it, adding a garage.

The twelve-metre wide façade, made of white brick from Silesia, with bands of white stone from Euville, demonstrates great freedom in the distribution of the windows. There are four openings on the ground floor, two on the first floor, and seven on the upper floor.

On the first floor, in front of the horseshoe-shaped bay windows, with wooden frames (with several divisions) a balcony extends across the entire façade. It is supported by five consoles, the central one being the most expressive. The wrought iron railing repeats the same floral motif seven times, a reference also to the shape of the large bays.

Sgraffito plays a crucial role in the façade's composition. Here the work was done by Adolphe Crespin, Hankar's associate, after a drawing by Ciamberlani. Claire Fontaine restored the sgraffiti in 2006, which by then were very degraded. The composition centres on a large pear tree, throughout the seasons, whose branches fan out across the entire width of the façade. This tree is associated with allegorical characters, symbolising the stages of life. Spring to the right, during which the pear tree blossoms provide a joyous sight for the small child held by its parents. Summer can be found in the centre, where a child picks flowers while a man lights a torch with another torch, the symbol of transmission. A couple of peacocks sit in the tree, symbolising immortality and renewal. To the left, a bearded old man symbolises winter, caught in the northern wind, turning his back to the tree which has lost its leaves.

The medallions of the entablature frieze, under the cornice, feature hunting scenes—Ciamberlani was a hunter—, symbolising modern times and the expulsion of archaic forces.

The entrance opens onto a staircase, which leads to the upper floor, which is well above the ground floor. To the right, several rooms succeed each other: the sitting room, the dining room, and the veranda.

Unlike Horta, Hankar chose to respect the traditional floor plan of Brussels houses, seeking to draw in natural light at the back of the house instead. His verandas generally featured a large bay window, and were partly covered by a glass skylight, to let in the light. While the sitting room has a distinct Louis XVI feel to it, the dining room is all Art Nouveau and has been restored to its former style.

The furniture, which was designed by Hankar, is now exhibited in the Design Museum in Ghent.

The monumental square stairwell has a glass skylight. On the first floor, at the front of the house, a huge sitting room extends along the entire width of the building, letting in the light through two horse-shoe-shaped bays in the façade.

At 50, Rue Defacqz, the appearance of Hôtel Janssens, which was built in 1898 by Paul Hankar for a painter friend of his, has been thoroughly altered. Originally, the right span, which was the widest, did not extend above the imposing bay window, with a glass skylight above it, letting the light into the painter's studio. In 1904 and 1908, the building was raised (by Maurice Van Ysendyck and subsequently Adrien Blomme). As a result, the height of the spans was reversed (listed on 12 November 1998).

PORTRAIT: CLAIRE FONTAINE

Claire Fontaine conserves and restores murals and is a decorative painter, specialising in the study and restoration of decoration and ancient techniques. She graduated from the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG) and the Van Der Kelen Institute, as well as studying at the École d'Avignon and the Centre for Conservation of Architectural Heritage of San Servolo in Venice. For eight years, she studied the restoration of the painted interiors of Venetian villas and historical dwellings in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. From

1997 onwards, she dedicated herself exclusively to the restoration of murals in Belgium.

Cécile Dubois: You seem to prefer Art Nouveau buildings, intervening on various levels. Can you give us some examples of your work?

Claire Fontaine: In the Horta Museum, I restored oil glazes and the gilding of the railing of the stairwell. In Maison Autrique, I restored the floral decorations of the linoleum, as well as reconstructing old Japanese wallpapers in the main salon of the Quaker House.

CD: Ultimately, when one does finally get to visit these interiors, it is not immediately evident that you have worked there.

CF: That's right! A restoration effort above all is about conservation. We spent four months cleaning and fixing the murals and ceiling paintings of Hôtel Max Hallet, without really being able to show what we did.

CD: How do you go about restoring an element that no longer exists?

CF: If the element is sufficiently documented with archive photos or there are sufficient traces of the original, I try to reproduce the figurative elements, as well as the intention, the instant of creation. You must focus on the technique, the gesture, and time it took to create this, and the matter and original colours, which you must try to reconstruct.

CD: Another aspect of your work is the restoration of sgraffito works. One of your most striking interventions is the restoration of the sgraffiti of Hôtel Ciamberlani. But you have also worked on Hôtel Otlet, on houses built by the architect Blerot and on the sgraffiti of Privat Livemont. How is the restoration of sgraffito different from the restoration of murals in interiors?

CF: The sgraffito on the façade can be seen from a distance and are part of a set of unique and irreplaceable elements that enhance each other, like the ironwork and the stained glass windows.

When I stand on the scaffolds between the sky and the street, I can see all these elements close



▲ Claire Fontaine restoring a sgraffito at 76, Avenue Sleeckx in Schaerbeek

up, and most of the time, I can see a lot, at least when it's not raining! The sgraffiti are permanently exposed to the elements. So my efforts will be more far-reaching than for an interior.

CD: What is the main thing you concentrate on when undertaking conservation or restoration?

CF: I think that a building's aesthetic is mainly determined by its coherence. The most intelligible, the most harmonious polychromy is the original one, of the building and its decoration, from the outset. So you must often undertake historical and stratigraphical research to find the original under 100 years of layers of paint. The analyses and studies I conduct before any restoration project are crucial in this framework. An intervention is never neutral. It leaves a new and datable material trace, which is related to the time of the job and the profession of restorer, which constantly evolves. As a specialist, I must limit my intervention to the strict minimum, avoid any irreversible interventions and must not

compromise future treatments and analyses. When working in monuments that people live in, I must sometimes try to strike a fine balance, facilitating the daily life of the building's occupants while adhering to restorer's code of conduct. While the conservator/restorer has a great responsibility vis-à-vis the creator and the public, I often think of the owners as the custodians of the artwork. We share the same task, namely to hand down these masterpieces to future generations and must do everything necessary so they can enjoy these works and feel the emotions that these works inspire as long as possible. It pains me to see historical buildings that are not maintained or have been altered.

The authors wish to thank their entourage for their support during this project including Editions Racine, in particular Mrs Brutsaert and Mrs Poskin, for their trust and assistance, as well as Catherine Meeüs for her attentive proofreading and Catherine Chronopoulou for the graphic design. They also wish to thank those individuals who graciously accepted to be interviewed for their portrait in this book, i.e., Mrs Aubry, Mrs Dessicy and Mrs Fontaine, as well as Mr Berckmans, Mr Metzger and Mr Schuiten.

Thanks also go to Tania Maamary (Edificio), Alexandra Rolland (Maison Autrique), Isabelle Bastaits (Museum of Fine Arts), Caroline Berckmans (APEB), Simone De Boeck (GERPM-SC), Anne-Cécile Maréchal (Commune of Schaerbeek), Geneviève van Tichelen, Dominique de Thibault and Michel Wittamer (Hôtel Solvay), Anne-Sophie Buffat (Réseau Art Nouveau Network), Philippe Bovy (Urban planning department of the Commune of Ixelles), Tom Verhofstadt (Monuments and Sites Directorate), Olga and Michel Gilbert, Claude Delhaye, Werner Adriaenssens and Denis Perrin (KMKG-MRAH). Thank you finally to all those who contribute daily to the conservation of our very fragile and valuable Art Nouveau heritage.

Cover caption:

Top: Nursery, Rue Saint-Ghislain 40, 1000 Brussels, Victor Horta, 1895

Bottom: Sgraffito of Maison Cauchie, Rue des Francs 5, 1040 Etterbeek, Paul Cauchie, 1904–1905

Text: Cécile Dubois

Translation from French: Sandy Logan

Proofreading: Jonathan Michaelson

Photos: Sophie Voituren

Layout and maps: Aikaterini Chronopoulou • www.aika-design.com

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Tour et Taxis, Entrepôt royal

86C, avenue du Port, BP 104A • B - 1000 Brussels

D. 2018. 6852.3

Legal deposit: March 2018

ISBN 978-2-39025-045-6

Printed in Poland