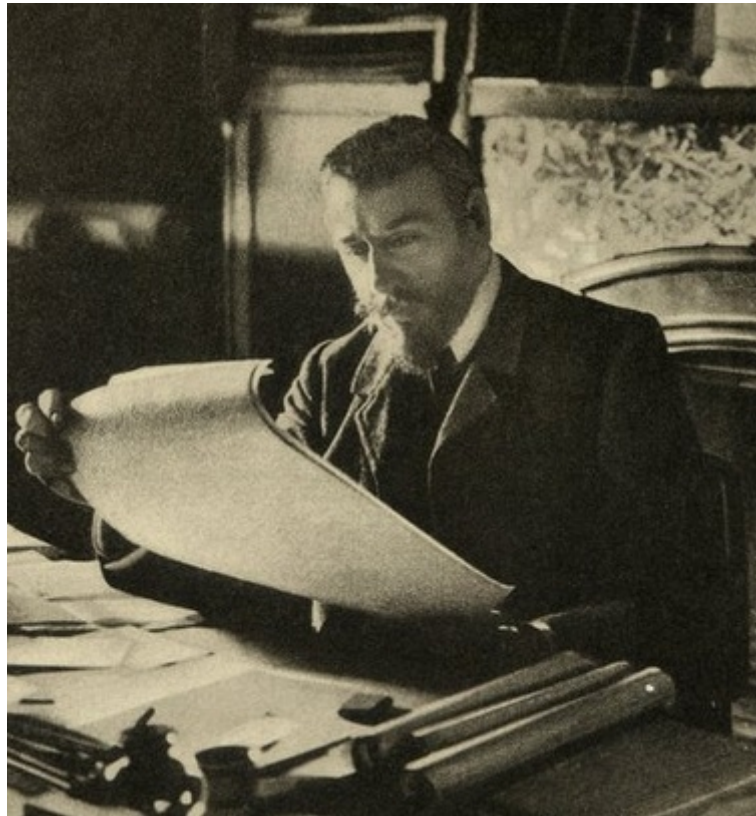


Rediscovery of an exceptional set of paneling and furniture by Victor Horta

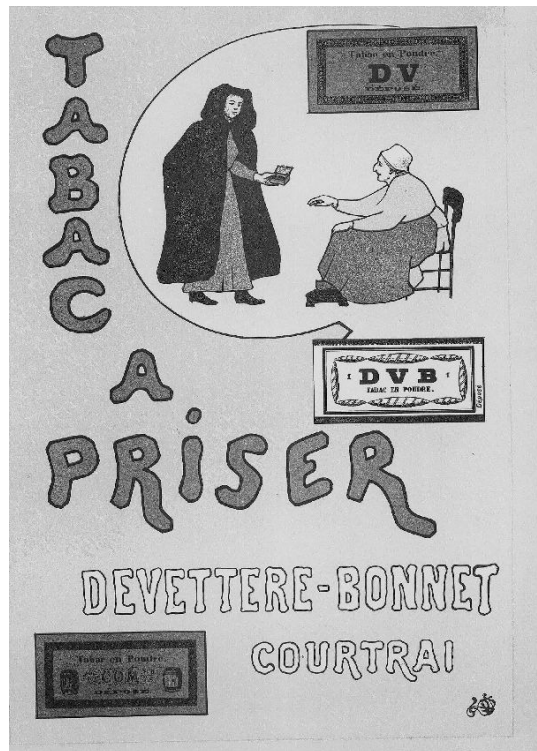
Introduction to Victor Horta, and more specifically to this moment in his career:

Victor Horta was born in Ghent in 1861 and died in Brussels in 1947. He is one of the most famous Belgian architects of his time. At a time when art, and especially European architecture, was in search of a new style and was looking for renewal in historicism and eclecticism, he conceived a truly innovative style that did not draw inspiration from forms inherited from the past but rather emerged from his own imagination and more personal inspirations drawn from nature. Thus, he is considered as the founding father of Art Nouveau, which flourished in Belgium between the 1890s and the beginning of World War I, after a gradual decline from 1905.



Victor Horta c. 1900

Indeed, he created the Hôtel Tassel, a house built in Brussels for the engineer Émile Tassel in 1893, which is considered as the first Art Nouveau residence in the capital. In his creations, Victor Horta implements a rational architecture. Initially an architect, he is an all-round artist who also designs interior decoration and layout, both in terms of decor and furniture, meticulously attending to every detail of his work. He employs modern materials and techniques to construct with an emphasis on optimal comfort, always selecting high-quality raw materials. He built his reputation with "middle-class residences created for a new affluent class" (Michèle Goslar, *Victor Horta (1861-1947) : L'Homme - L'Architecte - L'Art Nouveau*, 2012, p. 13). The Devettere-Bonnet family, the sponsor of this decor, precisely belongs to the industrial middle-class of Kortrijk, specializing in the production of snuff tobacco and cigars. The architect is committed to respecting the wishes of his sponsors and reflecting their personality in his architecture, to the extent that it can be considered a true portrait of their personality.



Advertisement for Devettere-Bonnet snuff tobacco and cigars (© KIK-IRPA, Brussels, photograph M262620)

Technical Presentation of the set of paneling and furniture by Victor Horta

There are three sets of paneling. The first one, with three windows overlooking the street, is a living room. The woodwork is made of Cuban and African mahogany. The room measures 5.57 yards by 5.54. The second one, in oak and flame maple, is a dining room. It measures 6.60 yards on each side because a corridor, running alongside the first room, opened into the second, thus expanding its width. The purpose of the third adjoining room, with woodwork in oak and another beautiful wood species currently undergoing expert analysis, is unknown to us. It might have been a smoking room or a library. The combined area of the three rooms covered approximately 95 square yards.



View of a portion of the living room reconstructed by Marc Maison

In addition to the paneling, a substantial collection of bronze lights with an as-yet-unknown design was found, along with an exceptional mantelpiece in red Belgian Griotte marble and bronze, a pair of bronze radiator covers, a pair of oak and flame maple sideboards topped with four gilded plaster statuettes by Pierre Braecke, an oak and flame maple bench with a leather seat, another mantelpiece entirely in Belgian Griotte marble, stained-glass windows, doors, a stained-glass window roof, etc.



Detail of a light



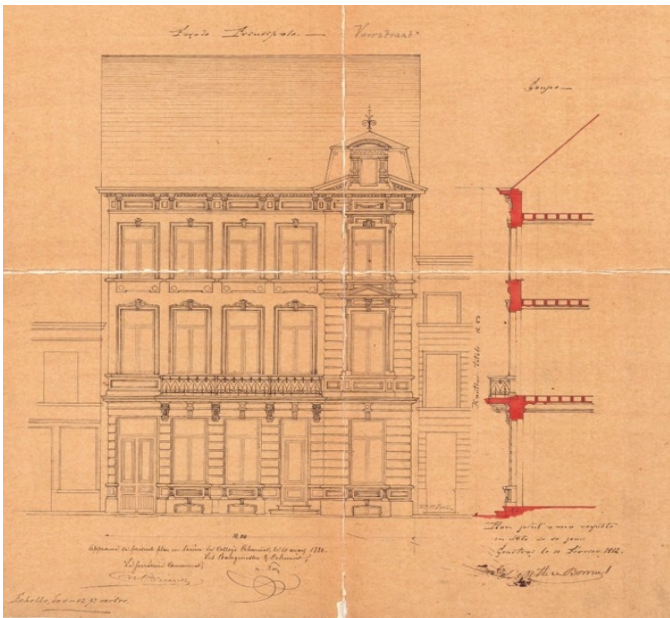
The stained-glass window roof of the living room

History of the set of paneling and furniture and reasons for its dating:

- History of the building and of the set within the building

Even as he had gathered them to write his memoirs, Victor Horta sold about 800 kilograms of drawings, sketches, and archives as old papers in August 1945, nearly annihilating the entire graphic documentation of his work. Furthermore, the building that the set of woodwork adorned, in the Louis XVI style and from the Napoleon III era, was not created by Victor Horta himself. For these reasons, this exceptional commission had never been identified by the architect's specialists: our set is not documented and had remained unknown to both the public and experts until now. However, it is possible to recount its history from the time of its conception to the present.

This decorative set was designed to furnish the ground floor of a building constructed in 1885, at number 22 Voorstraat, in Kortrijk, Belgium. Period plan informs us that originally, the ground floor level of the main frontage of this building had, on the left, a carriage entrance, which perhaps led to stables, then two windows, a slightly elevated front door and a last window identical to the previous ones. In 1902, new plans were drawn up to modify this façade. After this alteration, the carriage entrance was replaced by a fourth window.



The main frontage of the building before 1902



The alteration of the main frontage in 1902

*This change undoubtedly coincided with the commissioning of our three rooms from Victor Horta. Indeed, he precisely designed the paneling to incorporate the three windows placed at the left of the front door into the decor. The woodwork was dismantled in 1975, when the ground floor was converted into a store due to the evolution of Voorstraat into a shopping street. This change in purpose resulted in a new and profound modification of the façade, and the inside of the building was completely altered. The decor was then preserved and partially reassembled on the first floor (including the mantelpiece and the overmantel, as well as one of the radiator covers). Since the ceiling height of this floor was lower than that of the ground floor, the overmantel and the posts of the radiator cover were shortened by a few dozen centimeters. However, all the pieces of the decor were carefully preserved. When Marc Maison acquired it in 2002, the set was definitively disassembled. However, as an additional indication of this decor's belonging to the Voorstraat

building, the staircase designed by Horta was still in place between the ground floor and the first floor at that time.

Thus, the history of the building for which the paneling was intended allows for a precise dating of Horta's decor. Indeed, the building permit granted for the façade transformation was approved on 13 December, 1902, suggesting that the furniture set for these rooms was likely executed in 1903, and perhaps also in 1904.

- Stylistic Dating

Numerous stylistic elements support this conclusion. The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked the zenith of the architect's career and saw his most accomplished period of production; during this time, he practiced the most liberated form of Art Nouveau. It is in these years that he worked on significant projects such as the Hôtel Van Eetvelde (1895-1899), the Hôtel Aubecq (1899-1903) and his own house and studio (1898-1901). These projects allowed him to achieve both the synthesis and the archetype of his ideas on architecture and his construction methods. In general, the years 1899-1914 were extremely rich and marked by numerous achievements.

The woodwork, as reassembled in the workshops of Marc Maison, exhibits numerous stylistic characteristics of Victor Horta. Gentle horizontal curves alternate with slender straight lines. The naturalistic inspiration that defines Art Nouveau and Horta's work is evident in the details of the ornamentation, incorporating foliage patterns. The architect's inventiveness shines through in every element: even the smallest piece of furniture, such as the radiator covers, bears the hallmark of the "Art Nouveau" line. Horta's conception of light is reflected in the large pastel-colored stained-glass window roof that covered the living room, as well as in the flower-shaped lights with intricately cut petals. This interplay between natural and electric light is characteristic of his work. Lastly, the staircase of the Voorstraat building is a beautiful expression of the whiplash line, invented and developed by him, which has become the distinctive hallmark of this movement. The variety of worked materials and meticulously designed forms places this decoration among the most beautiful creations of Victor Horta.

- Some comparisons

In addition to stylistic analysis, other concrete elements support the dating of this decorative set. Indeed, numerous details belonging to Horta's world can be compared with other projects, contemporary to the one in Kortrijk.

Following the discovery of a period fabric in the woodwork of the living room, the original of which is preserved between the two radiator covers in the reassembled room, Marc Maison approached the Prelle manufacture with the intention of replicating it identically.

"Prelle Manufacture is the last silk factory in Lyon exclusively producing in Lyon since 1752. It designs luxurious fabrics in small series, working on prestigious decoration projects and heritage restorations. As an ambassador of French luxury and refinement, Prelle takes pride in perpetuating the great Lyon tradition of silk craftsmanship for a clientele in search of the exceptional. Thanks to numerous technical advancements and the continued use of hand-operated looms, the manufacture continues to evolve.

It is with this perspective that Marc Maison entrusted the project to Prelle to reproduce the 'Horta' fabric, a moiré green silk damask. The design, from the Art Nouveau period, existed already in the archives, and the color had to be matched precisely to be reproduced identically. It is in the recesses of the fabric that the original color has been preserved and identified."

The original sample featured a mirror moiré, achieved through calendering the fabric, pressing it edge to edge and creating symmetrical patterns. Thus, through this compression, contrasting effects of shine and matt aspect emerge, and a vibration is formed, reflecting at the center where the moiré expresses itself. Alongside the pattern, the undulations of the moiré mirror each other on either side of the silk, creating a unique effect.

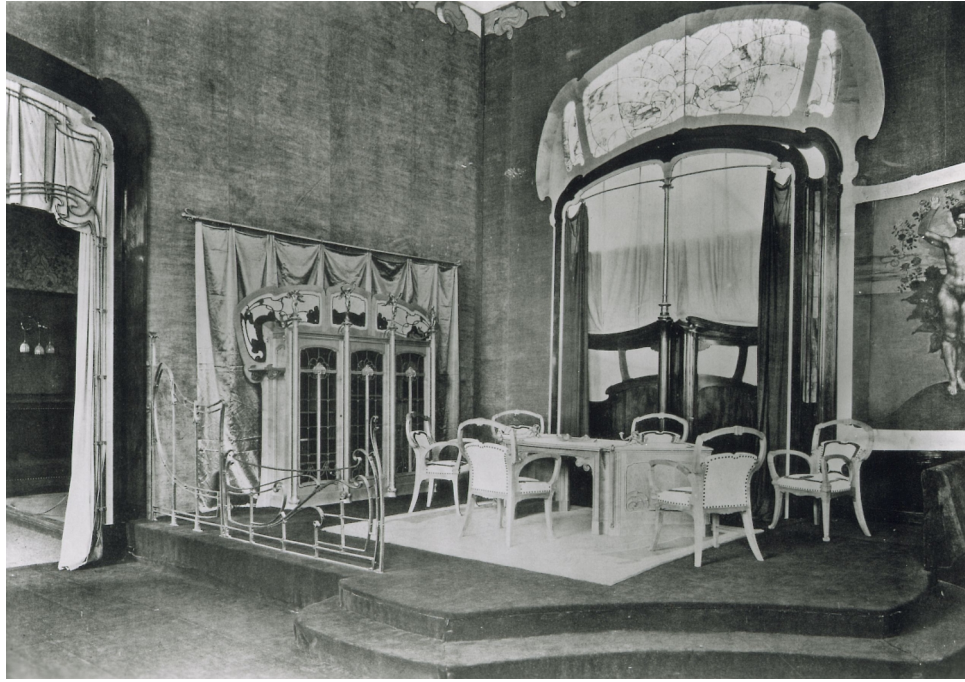
In this way, from this small sample, like a discreet testament of the past, this decor regains its splendor and allows us to appreciate the set imagined and desired by the architect Victor Horta, through noble materials such as wood and silk."

The same fabric, albeit in a different color (pink), also exists at the Hôtel Hallet, whose construction and decoration, carried out between 1904 and 1906, is almost contemporary with the creation of the Voorstraat street set.



The fabric of the living room, recreated by the Prelle manufacture in Lyon

The gilded plaster statuettes that crown the two identical sideboards of the dining room, created by the sculptor and friend of Horta, Pierre Braecke, are also among these significant details. Indeed, they were probably shown only once in his career, during the architect's participation in the Turin Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1902. There, he presented furniture sets, including his personal dining room. It was a huge success for him; he received the diploma of honor and was appointed an officer of the Order of the Crown of Italy after the event. A photograph from the exhibition provides a glimpse of the dining room he had set up; atop the sideboard, two identical statuettes can be precisely distinguished, similar to those found with the sideboards in the Voorstraat building. A similar room was also presented again at the Salon de la Libre Esthétique the following year, undoubtedly following the success of the first exhibition. Thus, Victor Horta incorporated these figurines into our sideboards, probably soon after the Turin Exhibition, due to its success, and perhaps even at the request of the sponsor himself. These statuettes have never been documented in any other circumstances; even the sideboard from the architect's personal dining room, now in the Horta Museum, has lost them.



Old photograph of the room presented at the Turin Exhibition of Decorative Arts in 1902

The examination of these elements, both individually and as a whole, is evidence of Victor Horta's attention to detail and perpetual innovation. Each element perfectly aligns with his taste, his idea of architecture and decorative arts, and can be compared to another one of his creations; however, the architect never reproduced any formula identically, and each object remains absolutely unique.

This set of paneling and furniture, with its definite origin and dating, is therefore an exceptional example of Victor Horta's art in the early 20th century. Art Nouveau was then at its peak, and the architect experienced the richest years of his career: drawing on his previous experiences, he enjoyed greater freedom in his creations and was very much in demand. The presentation of such a significant and valuable decorative set on the market is unique, especially since the decor, even though it fits perfectly into the interior for which it was intended, was not intrinsically linked to it, as it is neither contemporary nor in the same style as the architecture of its building. Its value thus lies solely in its own self. Finally, the richness of the materials used and the attention to detail that runs through Victor Horta's career elevate this ensemble to the level of his most beautiful achievements, alongside the Hôtel Solvay and his own studio and house.