

An exquisite study of Victor Horta,  
the father of Art Nouveau architecture

# Victor Horta

*The Architect of Art Nouveau*

David Dernie and Alastair Carew-Cox

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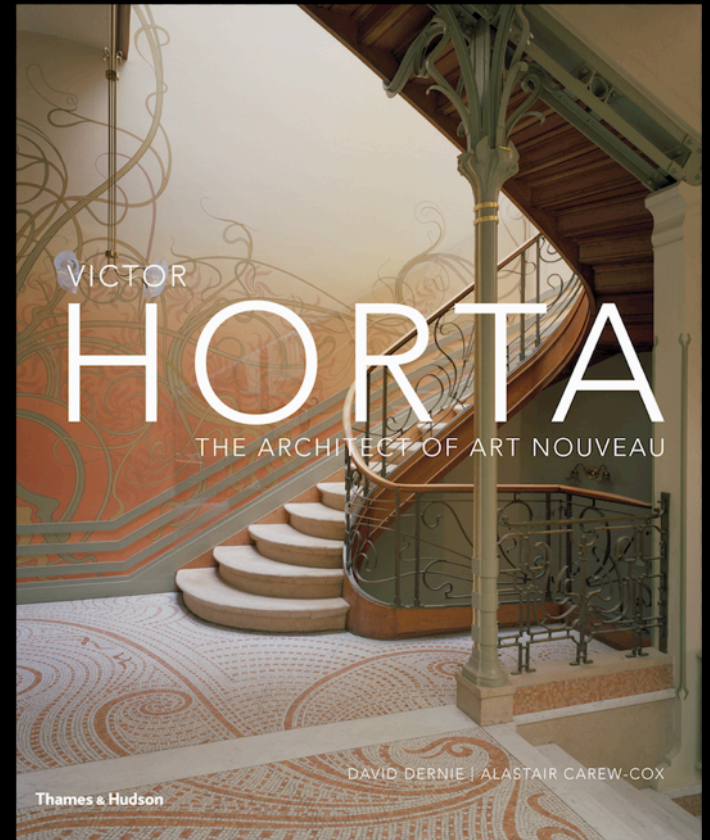
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## Key Sales Points

- Features 19 projects, including the Hôtel Solvay, Edicule Lambeaux, Hôtel Autrique, Hôtel Max Hallet and the Brugmann Hospital
- Produced in close cooperation with the Horta Museum in Brussels
- Illustrated with Horta's original sketches
- Specially commissioned photographs, including some that present interiors by Horta for the first time in more than a generation





capacity of the classical lexicon to be laid out according to principles of rational organization and constructional efficiency – the tenets of the new industrial age – that would guarantee the longevity of the classical tradition throughout the 19th century.

The era of Neoclassical architecture in Brussels included the elaborate revivalist façades of Jean-Pierre Cluysenaar's buildings in the Quartier Léopold; monumental structures such as Bordieu's works in the Parc du Cinquantième; innovative urban structures including the arcades of Cluysenaar's Galeries Saint-Hubert (designed in 1837 and built 1846–47) and Henri Rieck's Passage du Nord (1881–82); and civic structures such as Léon-Pierre Suis's French-influenced Bourse (1868–73). The vocabulary of these public buildings is reflected in many examples of residential architecture, in terms of both layout and detail.

At times, the language of such hôtels reflects the academic neoclassical tradition. Van Rysselberghe's Hôtel Goblet d'Alviella (1882; 10 Rue Faider), for instance, reads like a quotation from the Italian Renaissance. Its tall piano nobile sits on a rusticated ground floor and is surmounted by a glazed loggia. Sgraffito panels and a central medallion of carved stone depict pagan gods and mythical creatures. For the most part, however, the Neoclassical tradition in 19th-century Brussels was not such a refined affair, as Ramaekers's house at 39 Rue de la Charité (1874) or Legraive's house at 2a Rue Jules Bouillon (1878) illustrate.<sup>11</sup> The elegance of Renaissance proportions, and the restraint and refinement of crafted surface that accompanied 'rational' classicism during the early decades, increasingly gave way to the freedom of personal experimentation, invariably heavily modelled and mannered.

The inventive stonework and eclectic details of Émile Tirou's house at 19–21 Rue de la Concorde (1888) or the house that Paul Seintjens adapted

for himself at 123 Rue de l'Arbre Bénit (1872–97) anticipate this growing emphasis on a personal interpretation of the classical idiom (to the extent that some of the glazing has an Art Nouveau character) – a spirit that resonated with growing confidence in the identity of the new capital. It was ultimately embodied in Poelleert's monumental Palais de Justice (1866–83). A bombastic spectacle, the building is aligned axially with the city and organized according to geometric repetition. It is completely out of scale with its context, and its classical language and formal composition are heavily stylized, guided predominantly by Poelleert's confident, if unrefined, aesthetic.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, other buildings of the period explore new forms and materials that reflect industrial progress. In Suis's designs for the botanical gardens (1826–54), Cluysenaar's Galeries Saint-Hubert and Balot's greenhouses at Laeken, the remnants of a rationalized classicism are combined with iron and glass, the materials of the modern age par excellence. Of particular influence for Art Nouveau was the impetus towards structural expression during the middle decades of the century. The pre-eminent figure in this debate was Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879), who had risen to prominence through his (now controversial) restorations of significant medieval structures including Notre-Dame in Paris, Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy and the walled town of Carcassonne. His writings and lectures argue for a rational approach to design and propose 'ideal forms' for each material, thus anticipating the modernist tenet of 'truth to materials' and 'honesty' in construction. 'Architecture is the sister of science,' he claimed, echoing a tradition of thinking about architecture as the art of construction that stretches back to the 18th century: 'the former undergoes modifications and advances hand in hand with the latter.'<sup>13</sup> Echoing Quatremère de Quincy's observations of

Opposite. Place de Martyrs ea volupta tiosand aenruptaes et et postrum ilignatem aut lent milibus idus et omnim sequat offic aut re pre sus destionse dis dicim experch item pore lacull amendita dunt.

Below left. Place Royale ea volupta tiosand aenruptaes et et postrum ilignatem aut lent milibus scidus et omnim sequat offic aut re pre sus destionse dis dicim experch item pore lacull amendita.

Below right. 10, Rue Faider ea volupta tiosand aenruptaes et et postrum ilignatem aut lent milibus scidus et omnim sequat offic aut re pre sus destionse dis dicim experch item pore lacull amendita.





staircase, the façade is like an urban-scale picture frame creating a radical form of transparency between the city and the domestic interior, mediated only by sinuous lines of wood and iron.<sup>11</sup>

The depth of the building plan is divided into three, with the central portion taken up by a top-lit staircase. Earlier Art Nouveau houses by Horta have the same plan arrangement and also turn inwards towards an often complex space formed by a top-lit internal staircase. In contrast, the transparency of the Maison Saint-Cyr's symmetrical façade establishes a primary orientation towards the green spaces of the square, whose natural forms are reflected in the façade. In their stylized lines and refinement of detail, the ironwork and stone carving of the façade are reminiscent of Horta, and remain a testament to the stunning quality of craftsmanship in fin-de-siècle Belgium.

The Maison Saint-Cyr's finely crafted decorative façade is reinvented in the Maison Van Dijk. Here, on a wider plot, the composition of the façade is more complex. Its width is divided into two bays. On one side, the entranceway is surmounted by open loggias on two upper floors. To the other side, the façade twists to create an oblique orientation to the street (presumably facing the open green space that originally existed to the north), giving the façade a rich plasticity. The overall composition is a curious assemblage of Art Nouveau details (exposed iron lintels, sinuous ironwork balustrades,

cerved masonry) with vernacular form (window arches, brickwork gables and timber-roof lantern).<sup>12</sup> The undoubted skill and exuberance of Strauven (who worked with Horta on both the Hôtel van Eetvelde and the Maison du Peuple) is tempered by an uncertainty characteristic of Belgian architecture at the turn of the new century, a time when the influence of Art Nouveau in the Belgian capital was waning.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the work of Ernest Blérot (1870–1957) from the second half of the 1890s. His house at 97 Boulevard Général Jacques (1898) has a characteristic physiognomy: three storeys rest on a raised basement of blue stone and terminate in a deep cornice. Delicately composed, with a symmetrical grouping of openings around a triangular first-floor timber bay, its surface of warm-coloured brickwork is articulated with carved stonework details. Window openings on all three floors are set into arched recesses that frame sgraffito panels. Similar panels articulate the cornice and the underside of the first-floor windows, and appear over the entrance. Like the ground-floor windows, they depict naturalistic patterns; and while the emphasis on intimacy of surface and the continuity of line and composition resonates with Art Nouveau, the language is diluted, and the bay window in particular anticipates a hybrid composition that fuses Flemish vernacular with elements of the city's newfound architectural forms.



Left. Rue Jacques Jordaens ea volupta tiosand aeneruptaes et et postrum ilignatem aut lant milibusidus et omnim sequat offici aut re pre sus.

Right. Rue Faider ea volupta tiosand aeneruptaes et et postrum ilignatem aut lant milibusidus et omnim sequat offici aut re pre sus.

Below right. Boulevard Clovis ea volupta tiosand aeneruptaes et et postrum ilignatem aut lant milibusidus et omnim sequat offici aut re pre sus.



## HÔTEL TASSEL

6 RUE PAUL-ÉMILE JANSON, BRUSSELS (1893-94)

The *Atrique House* was barely finished when Émile Tassel, professor of descriptive geometry at the *Université Libre*, Brussels, and a fellow Mason, commissioned Horta to design his private residence on Rue Paul-Émile Janson (formerly Rue de Turin). This opportunity allowed Horta to design one of the most remarkable interiors of the 19th century, for which he invented a remarkable decorative style and a spatial order that would challenge conservative taste and inspire Art Nouveau throughout Europe.

While the sources of Horta's 'modern' style are complex, it is clear that most of the individual architectural devices to be found at the Tassel house were already in place by the end of the 19th century: the whiplash line was widespread in the graphic arts; top-lit stairs were often a feature of *maisons de maître*; and the use of exposed iron had been encouraged by Viollet-le-Duc, among others. Horta's real contribution lay in his attempt to bring these elements together – a goal that, following his experiments in the *Maison Atrique*, he first achieved here in the *Hôtel Tassel*, producing a striking spatial and decorative unity.

Horta rejected the traditional arrangement for the narrow Brussels building plot, which divided the plan across its width between a stair corridor on one side, and three rooms running an *enfilade* through the depth of the plan on the other. In contrast, the Tassel plot, which measures 7.8 m (25 ft 7 in.) wide by 39 m (128 ft) deep, is divided into four bays running from street to garden. The plan of the house occupies the front three bays, which extend 27 m (89 ft), and the remaining bay is a small garden. Of the three bays of the house, the central bay, 5.3 m (17 ft 5 in.) long, is conceived as a light well across the whole width of the plan. Its

height varies end, in addition to housing a ground-floor winter garden and the principal stair to the first floor, it forms the internal connection between the front bay and the rear double bay. Above the glazing at second-floor level this connection is continued via a central passage.

The relative levels of the street bay and the rear bay of the house vary. The stair that accommodates this variation in level is in the south-west light well. A smaller stair connecting all levels in the rear bays is positioned in the south-west corner of the building. This is split into two at the first floor, forming a service stair below and a private stair above.

As in the *Hôtel Atrique*, in section the *fumoir* is located directly below the study. But whereas in the *Atrique* house the *fumoir* is raised only slightly, to allow for a tight stair to the kitchen basement, that of the Tassel house is raised to mezzanine level, the first-floor level of the street bay.<sup>1</sup> On the façade it forms the base to a two-storey curved bay. Its window seat overlooking the street is glazed with yellow and blue American glass in a lead-work pattern in the form of a sinuous landscape.<sup>2</sup> The window sits low above the entrance door, and its form is articulated with five diminutive columns. These have carved capitals, which appear to clutch the underside of a curved, riveted iron lintel. Below, its weight is expressed in the form of massive stone brackets that frame the entrance door; above, the structure appears to lighten as the line of the four outer columns is continued vertically by means of slender iron columns. A second iron lintel completes the frame for the large area of glazing fronting Tassel's study, which is set slightly back from the iron columns. Above, this ensemble forms a balcony to Tassel's private studio, which has another large expanse of glazing, more suited



Above. *Magnis ea volupta tiosand aeeruptaes et et postrum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et pore laccull amendita aut lant milibuscidus.*

Opposite. *Volupta tiosand aeeruptaes et et postrum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et omnim sequi aeeruptaes et et postrum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et pore laccu.*







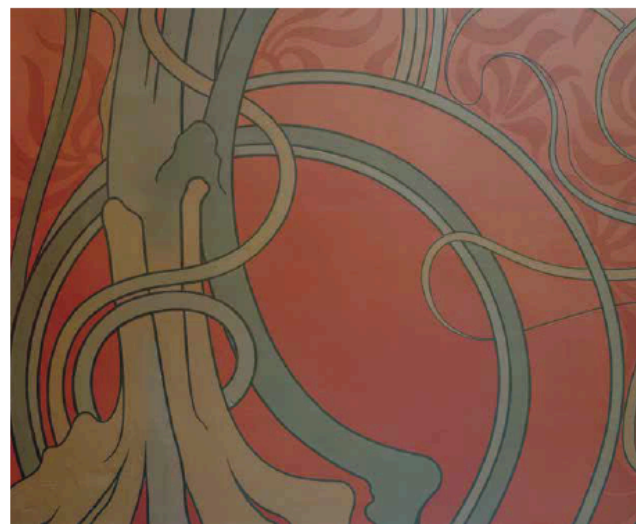




Opposite. Magnis ea volupta tiosand  
aeruptaes et et postrum ilignatem  
aut lant milbuscidus et pore locuall  
amendita aut lant milbuscidus.

Right top. Volupta tiosand aeruptaes  
et et postrum ilignatem aut lant milbu  
scidus et omnim sequi aeruptaes et  
et postrum ilignatem aut lant  
milbuscidus et pore locu.

Right bottom. Volupta tiosand  
aeruptaes et et postrum ilignatem  
aut lant milbu scidus et omnim sequi  
aeruptaes et et postrum ilignatem  
aut lant milbuscidus et pore locu.





## HÔTEL SOLVAY

224 AVENUE LOUISE, BRUSSELS (1894–1903)

The Hôtel Solvay, which followed the Tassel, Frison and Winsinger houses, is recognized as one of Horta's finest achievements and was built in the years central to his Art Nouveau period. Its spatial complexity and obsessive refinement of detail in many ways set it apart from other works. The interior is, quite literally, like a jewel. While in the earlier projects there are moments of calm, all the surfaces of the Hôtel Solvay are so finely detailed and unified that they appear to be transforming and dissolving endlessly.

Through Émile Tassel, Horta met Charles Lefebvre, Ernest Solvay's secretary, who recommended him to Winsinger as well as the Solvay family.<sup>1</sup> Armand Solvay bought the plot on Avenue Louise in June 1894. It was 15 m (49 ft) wide and stretched 62 m (203 ft) back to Rue Lens at the rear. Plans at a scale of 1:100 date from September of that year and show the main house as 18.7 m (61 ft 4 in.) deep and separated by a small garden from a building that was originally to house carriages, stables and lodgings for stable hands. During the course of construction, however, this stable was converted to accommodate newly acquired motor vehicles. Building permission was sought in July 1895 and, although contractual work on site was complete by July 1898, final detailing continued until 1903.<sup>2</sup>

The house is a four-storey structure with a basement and mansard roof. In a similar way to the Tassel and Van Eetvelde houses, the plan is divided into three bays in its depth, with the central bay comprising two top-lit stairwells. The principal entry is from Avenue Louise, through a passage wide enough for carriages that runs the entire depth of the house, as at the Winsinger house. The main hall opens onto the passage about halfway along its length. To the right is a secondary entrance into

a small staircase that leads down into the cellar. A third entrance towards the rear gives access to the service stairs, and a fourth leads directly into the kitchens end to the elevator.

To one side of the entrance hall, towards the rear of the house, is the kitchen, and to the other is a *parloir*, washroom and cloakrooms. Flanked by two niches clad in white Carrara marble, a green marble stair leads up to a mezzanine landing overlooked by Van Rysselberghe's *Reading in the Park* (1902). The single flight then splits and returns in two flights to the first floor, which houses a dining room towards the rear, and a billiard room and music room towards the street. These rooms open onto the stairwell through a screen of glazed hardwood doors. A deep light well over this stair is glazed at roof level, and features an extraordinary curved laylight in coloured glass at the soffit level of the first floor.

This glazed space, full of light reflected both from the skylight above and through the depth of the glazed rooms to either side, animates the rest of the house. Leading off it is a second stairwell (north), which is also top-lit by a laylight of coloured glass. This stair provides access to the upper floors. At second-floor level it opens onto a winter garden that before its alteration was lit from a window let into the south light well, over the lower staircase. Towards the street on the second floor were the separate studies of Armand Solvay and his wife, together with a bedroom for their parents. To the rear were a breakfast room and children's study. The third floor was given over entirely to bedrooms, which were served by two bathrooms on the half-level of the staircase.

The quality of workmanship in the interior is quite remarkable. One of the most extraordinary details is the wall painting at the foot of the north

Opposite. Magnis ea volupta tiosand aeneruptaas et et postrum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et pore lacull amendita aut lant milibuscidus.

Overleaf. Magnis ea volupta tiosand aeneruptaas et et postrum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et pore lacull amendita aut lant milibuscidus.



## VILLA FRISON

70 AVENUE CIRCULAIRE, UCCLE (1899–1900)

Unlike Frison's town house on Rue Lebeau, his country house has few details that could be described as Art Nouveau. In this respect it is more like the later Villa Dubois at Sosoze than the Villa Carpentier or the Chateau du Bois des Harts.

Frison commissioned 'Les Epinglettes' in 1899 in the fashionable area of Uccle, which at the time was a quiet rural location, close to a newly located observatory. Its large garden was also to be designed by Horta and overlooked the Saint-Jobbe valley.

The entrance to the house faces north and opens into a lobby. To one side is the cloakroom and to the other a study. As in the Hôtel Tassel, this arrangement prevented visitors to the study from intruding into the rest of the house. Beyond the lobby, the dining room and salon are grouped around the stair hall. These rooms open onto a south-west facing terrace and covered wooden loggia. At first floor this loggia opens onto the main bedroom. The lower ground floor is reached by a small external stair and houses the kitchen and stores.

The exterior is notable for its use of stone: rubble walls contrast with finely cut grès de Grandglise stone window surrounds and sills. This stone was chosen since it was quarried close to the birthplace of Maurice Frison. Belgian bluestone and white Euville limestone from France are used to frame other openings, which are generally shallow arches. The top of the walls is shaped to meet the underside of the overhanging roofs, which are emphasized with shaped ridge boards and extended purlins. These give the roof an almost oriental character, quite unlike the local vernacular but a good example of the final years of Horta's Art Nouveau language, that lies somewhere between traditional building methods and his fascination with Japonisme.

1 The original building is a little difficult to discern, since the house has a large extension dating from 1911, designed by Horta and featuring a concrete bay window to the rear.

Opposite. Magnis ea volupta tiosand aereuptaes et et postum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et pore lacull amendita aut lant magnis ea volupta tiosand aereuptaes et et postum lignatem aut lant milibuscidus et pore lacull amendita aut lant milibuscidus.





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