



23. Horta: Staircase, 12 Rue de Turin, Brussels.
1893



24. Horta: 12 Rue de Turin, Brussels, 1893

The artistic style that is usually called Art Nouveau originated in Brussels in the year 1895. It appeared with surprising suddenness and without any visible architectural premisses, complete and perfect in the very first building designed to be a deliberate departure from previous styles. This first building is the house, No. 12 rue de Turin, built by the young architect Victor Horta (born in 1861) (figs. 23, 24). In consistency of character, this earliest example of the new style has hardly been surpassed since. The decoration is based wholly upon one motive, a long, sensitive curve. No compromise with any other more familiar motives is attempted. Melodious lines call each other and reply, sprouting from corners and covering, in a free and irregular fashion, all the surfaces available. They are reminiscent of the stalks of lilies, of insects' feelers, of the filaments of blossoms,

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The photographic view on the staircase of House Tassel by Victor Horta has become an iconic image of Victor Horta's work and of European Art Nouveau in general. This contribution will investigate the genesis of this image, its canonization in the historiography of Art Nouveau and of modern architecture, and its multiple readings. In order to do so, I will dive into the context of the early reception of Horta's work in the illustrated journals and architectural albums during the decade 1895-1905, firstly. Subsequently, I will explore its place in the major writings that established the canon of 20th-century modern architecture and address its multiple interpretations as explicated in the text and image discourses of these publications.

keywords Victor Horta, Interior, Art Nouveau, Historiography

introduction

The use of the full-page color photograph of the main interior staircase of House Tassel, 6 rue Paul Emile Janson in Brussels, to introduce the final chapter “The Crisis of Historicism, 1870-93” of Barry Bergdoll’s *European Architecture 1750-1890* in the manual series “Oxford History of Art” illustrates the iconic position of this image; as a *pars pro toto* it evokes not only Horta’s work, but a whole era, even a style (Art Nouveau)¹. This contribution will concentrate on some major moments in its history and reception of this image. After a discussion of its ‘double genesis’ (firstly within the photographic reception of House Tassel at the moment when Horta’s reputation skyrocketed ca. 1895-1905, secondly by Pevner’s crucial use of them in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, 1936), the paper will focus on the instrumental interpretation of this image in three key texts in the historiography of modern architecture (Pevsner, Giedion and Zevi), and will finally address the topic of the color version of the original, black-and-white shoot.

a double genesis

The place in modern historiography of the view on the staircase of House Tassel goes back to Nikolaus Pevsner’s (1902-1983) ostentive use of it at the beginning of chapter 4 dedicated to Art Nouveau in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, from William Morris to Walter Gropius (1936)². After turning the chapter’s title page, two images quite expressively illustrate the principal message of the chapter evoked in its first lines: “The artistic style that is usually called Art Nouveau originated in Brussels in the year 1893. It appeared with surprising suddenness and without any visible architectural premisses, complete and perfect in the very first building designed to be a deliberate departure from previous styles. This first building is the house, No. 12 rue de Turin, built by the young architect Victor Horta (born in 1861)”³. A general view on the start of the staircase occupies the whole left page; an horizontal image on the upper half of the right page details the play of lines of the iron railing and decorative wall treatment. Pevsner, who corresponded with the architect in January 1936⁴ and who would have been aware as a german art historian of Hans Vollmer’s (1878-1969) 1924 entry on Horta and accompanying bibliography in the *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, borrowed these images from the plates numbered respectively “Tafel 10” and “Tafel 12” of *Neubauten in Brüssel* issued by Ernst Wasmuth Verlag in 1899/1900.

The printed reception of Horta in the decade 1895-1905 occurred especially in decorative art journals, architectural plate albums and only secondarily in architectural journals; it has a discontinuous character with long periods of silence mainly due to the architect disinterest in and limited collaboration to the publishing of his work⁵. Horta’s reception started late 1895 with the publication in the Brussels architectural journal *L’Emulation*, the printed medium of the Société central des Architectes Belges, of N.12 rue de Turin (now rue Janson) as House Tassel was called, as plates 39 to 43. From January 1897 till March 1902 four well-illustrated monograph articles on Horta were published in the leading and competing illustrated decorative arts journals *Art et décoration*, *Revue mensuelle d’art moderne* (1897-), *Revue des Arts décoratifs*, *L’Art dans la vie contemporaine* (1880-1902) and *L’Art décoratif*, *Revue mensuelle d’art contemporain* (1898-); in 1903 followed another in the new Berlin architectural journal *Der Baumeister* (1902-1944)⁶. The incorporation of Horta’s work in specialised architecture plate albums with photographs that focused on turn-of-the-century innovative architecture by the specialised editors Ernst Wasmuth Verlag in Berlin, Baumgärtner’s Buchhandlung in Leipzig and Charles Schmid in Paris, chronologically overlapped these monograph articles⁷. The fierce competition among editors fueled by their desire to bring new, exclusive images translated into a quite systematic coverage of Horta’s oeuvre (private houses in Brussels and the Maison du Peuple), that kept pace with his production, even if the images of House Tassel and Maison du Peuple clearly dominate. In absolute figures, the photographic depiction of the façade of house Tassel became the architect’s most publicised image of that period.

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Since three interior photographs had accompanied the façade and all floor plans at the first publication in *L'Emulation*, the interior of House Tassel remained a popular subject of photographic reception. Some of these *L'Emulation* images were republished on the illustration pages of the *American architect and building news* (New York 1876-1909) of April 1896. Hector Guimard (1867-1942) probably copied them for his contribution to the 1896 Salon du Champs de Mars in Paris. And Thiébauld-Sisson's article on Horta in the first issue of *Art et décoration* (January 1897) reused these photographic images, this time in a redrawn version⁸. The mentioned decorative arts magazines privileged illustrations of interiors and furniture. Among the limited number of published images of Horta's early reception, the Wasmuth Verlag photographs of *Neubauten in Brüssel* (1899-1900) occupy a special place as almost half of the album was dedicated to Horta's work, or eighteen out of thirty-seven in-folio plates contained Horta's work. Seven plates were dedicated to house Tassel, five contained new takes never published before. The republishing of some of these images also testimony of their exceptional quality: Tafel 10, chosen later on by Pevsner as his full-page illustration to open his Art Nouveau chapter, had already been republished in two Horta monograph articles, one published in 1900 by *L'Art décoratif*, the other in 1903 by *Der Baumeister*. Note that the French architectural publisher Charles Schmid furnished some other photographs of the iron railing of the main staircase of House Tassel in *Ferronnerie de style moderne. Motifs exécutés en France et à l'étranger*⁹. As they were taken with the photographer's back to the wall, they depict the ironwork without the distraction of the painted wall decoration.

different readings

Pevsner's full page view of the Tassel staircase reappeared in major publications on modern architecture by Giedion and Zevi to name only some of the more important authors. The different conceptions of architectural modernity by their authors and the specific focus of their books resulted however in different readings of this image, quite in harmony with their respective convictions¹⁰. It is important also to stress the engagement of these authors towards Horta's work as the position it received in their narrative as, both in the case of Pevsner and Giedion, signified a decisive break with an historiographic tradition. Pevsner, for instance, stepped outside the German Art Nouveau historiography that privileged Van de Velde's role; the CIAM-secretary Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968) broke with the CIAM ban on the former president of the Palais des Nations competition in which Le Corbusier had been defeated by 'Beaux-Arts architects'.

Contrary to Pevsner, Giedion was not interested in form, nor in what Art Nouveau signified around 1900. In the part on Horta in *Space, time and architecture: the growth of a new tradition* (1941), the author concentrates on a 'more architectural' reading that investigates the role of structural innovations as metal and its liberating effects on the plan, prefiguring Le Corbusier's *plan libre*. In the image discourse of the book, this is reflected in the publication of the ground plans and façade of House Tassel (both absent in Pevsner's *Pioneers*). However, Giedion also included the general image of the Tassel staircase, present in Pevsner's *Pioneers*. As if in an attempt to erase from the readers memory Pevsner's formalist interpretation of this image, Giedion draws the attention of the reader to the metal structural system by explicitly putting next to it an engraved technical detail of a 19th-century greenhouse construction at Laeken by Horta's master, Balat (derived from a german specialised publication on metal architecture)¹¹. With this graphical parallel, Giedion also suggests indirectly 19th-century metal constructions as a source for Horta's formal language.

Bruno Zevi's (1918-2000) explicit support of organic architecture sets him apart from Pevsner and Giedion, as also becomes clear in the sections on Horta and Art Nouveau in *Storia dell'architettura moderna* (1950). He advocated an appreciation of this period and

Horta's work *in sui generis* not limited by a reductive teleological. Zevi balanced Giedion's strong emphasis on rational aspects of Horta's architecture (plan and structure) with a positive attitude towards its formal expressions, and these of Art Nouveau more in general. In dialogue with, or, better even, in refutation of Giedion, Zevi's re-visitation of the famous Brussels' staircase, rue de Turin, did recognize its 'artistical value', which he distincts from a 'courageous exposure' of an iron column. In Zevi's opinion, Horta's architecture transcends the purely structural and stresses the poetry of the work and its 'stylistic coherence'.

Giedion's devise to visually confront the image of Horta's staircase with other buildings was also applied by Pevsner in the completely revised Art Nouveau chapter of the second edition of *Pioneers* (1949), with the changed title *Pioneers of modern design*, realised at the occasion of a design exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art and explicitly addressing an American audience. Pevsner confronted here Horta's House Tassel staircase with Sullivan's bar at the Auditorium building (1888)¹². In line with earlier American opinions on continental Art Nouveau, such as the one formulated by Alfred Dwight Foster Hamlin's (1855-1926) in his 1902 article "L'Art Nouveau, its origin and development"¹³, Sullivan became here the American precursor of Horta, equivalent to Horta in structural contribution, but, in Hamlin's view, without loosing his moral integrity. The following years, the view of House Tassel's main staircase popped-up more systematically in the subsequent publications on architectural history; with its use along the masterpieces of other architects, the iconic status of the view on Horta's staircase became generally accepted.

the colored image

In the 1950s, Stephan Tschudi Madsen's (1923-2007) monograph article on Horta (1954 and 1955) and Vittoria Girardi's well-illustrated article series on Horta for *L'Architettura* (1957-1958), Horta scholarship entered a new phase. (The link with earlier scholarship explains to a degree the line of research, appreciation and interpretation of Horta's work by these authors: Tschudi Madsen's research of Art Nouveau had been approved of by Pevsner; Girardi realised her article series on Horta in Zevi's architectural periodical.) For the first time since the early reception new images of Horta's turn-of-the-century-work were produced; also some new interior photographs of House Tassel and its staircase became available. A decisive characteristic of these new images of the Tassel interior was the absence in them of any traces of decorative wall treatment. In those years, house Tassel had been subdivided in rental units, and the owner had repainted the interior in a shade of green, allegedly to prevent visitors dropping in to come and see the staircase. Tschudi Madsen's shots focus therefore on details of the iron structure of columns and curving metal supports. Another way to cope with this loss was the republication of the aforementioned historical photographs from *Neubauten aus Brüssel*, for instance as an small inset in a larger new photograph¹⁴.

Following its acquisition in 1976, the former student-collaborator of Victor Horta, and great admiror and collector of architect's papers, furniture and buildings, Jean Delhaye (1908-1993), started the restauration of House Tassel¹⁵. Not only did he "recreate the winter garden and light-well and re-established the original plan by freeing it from the conventional partitioning into rooms"¹⁶; also latex paint was removed from the the decorative wall paintings, the tracings and colors recorded, and the whole was repainted as it was considered impossible to obtain a satisfying solution for repairing the lacunae without loosing the special color-degrading effect of the ensemble¹⁷.

After this restauration it became possible to recreate the iconic historical image of the Tassel staircase in color. Different photographers realised their version of it, both with natural and artificial light. Publications on Horta, Art Nouveau and 19th-century architecture embraced them eagerly, Bergdoll's *European architecture 1750-1890* was one of them. However, contrary to the historic Wasmuth photograph, these color images contain a late

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20th-century reconstruction/recreated/restituted of the wall treatment. In a choice between the color and original decor, only available in black-and-white, the color image proved highly attractive. The problem lays however not in the use of this color image *in se*, but in the fact that, with the exception of some very few specialised publications, most texts do not even hint upon the 'reconstructive nature' of the represented wall treatment. This lack of an explicit mentioning of the nature of what is represented, even in specialised publications on Horta, suggests the image as a neutral 'mis-en-couleur' of the original, which strictly put it is not. In the recent boom of restaurations of Horta buildings, this problem of understanding (and documenting) of the nature of what one is looking at (untouched, repaired, restored or reconstructed) gradually becomes an immanent part of the modern condition of Horta scholarship.

conclusion

This case-study of the iconic interior photograph of the staircase of house Tassel permitted to shed light on different stages of its 'life' (genesis, reception, usage, interpretation): from establishing its 'double' genesis –its origin in the photographic reception of the house by the architectural editor Ernst Wasmuth Verlag (Tafel 10 of Wasmuth's *Neubauten in Brüssel*) and its carefully staged and highly successful reintroduction by Nikolaus Pevsner through *Pioneers of the modern movement* in the historiography of modern architecture and decorative arts–, the distinct interpretations of the image, to its modern recreation in color. All four different stages contribute interesting aspects of the image, which relate to more fundamental questions. First, it became clear that the original, contemporary photographs of Horta's oeuvre resulted from fierce competition among decorative art journals and architectural editors alike, and that the image right of the author-architect resulted in images officially approved by the architect. Second, Pevsner chose from older available images two Wasmuth plates. It permitted him to magisterially demonstrate through the image the intermediary position of Art Nouveau in his account on the origin of the modern movement from Morris to Gropius, that is between English arts-and-crafts and German modernism. Third, it was possible also to demonstrate how the same image was instrumental to Horta's reinstalment as a leading figure of the 1890s, decisively defying historiographic tendencies which privileged the role of Van de Velde or which discarded Horta altogether because of the results of the Palais des Nations competition. It permitted leading modernist historiographers also their ideosyncratic interpretation and positioning of Horta's work in the history of modern architecture. In an equal masterly way, Giedion's mis-en-parallel of Horta's staircase with a detail of an iron element of Balat's greenhouse in Laeken permitted to wipe of Pevsner earlier concentration on ornament and to refocus the reading of this image to Horta's "courageous" introduction of the use of visible iron in the bourgeois house and its spatial repercussions, which he interprets as prefiguring Le Corbusier's *plan libre*; suggesting at the same time that the origin of his forms was to be found in earlier iron constructions. Zevi's organic reading in line of Wright's organicism challenged Giedion's functionalist reduction of Horta's architecture. In Zevi's eyes Horta was a real master, with which right merited the ultimate epithet "poetic" as well as the label the "Mies von der Rohe of Art Nouveau". Fourth and last, the numerous photographic reshoots in color of the Wasmuth's 'Neubauten in Brüssel-plate-10' confirmed its continuing iconic value in the age of colour photography. However, as the original had been overpainted and subsequently had been reconstructed in a post 1976-restoration by Jean Delhaye, these new images add colour but lost the veracity of Horta's oeuvre of the black-and-white image. However, with the exception of a very limited number of detailed publications, explicitly concerned with this 'restoration'-aspect, this precision is omitted in Horta-monographs or specialised Art Nouveau publications alike. While the ambition and creative success of Pevsner's attempt to resume in one black-and-white image continental Art Nouveau still amazes, its transition into colour certainly requires supplementary information. In our opinion, scholarly use of the image should clearly mention the reconstructed nature of the wall painting.

endnotes

1. Barry Bergdoll, *European Architecture 1750-1890* ("Oxford History of Art") (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 268.
2. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement. From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 98-99 and fig. 23-24.
3. Ibidem, 99.
4. Ibidem, 217 note 1.
5. The author prepares a book that focusses extensively on the reception and historiography of Victor Horta. See also *Victor Horta Mémoires* edited by Cécile Dulière (Brussels: Ministère de la Communauté Française, Administration du Patrimoine culturel, 1985), 142-151.
6. Thiébault-Sisson, "L'Art décoratif en Belgique. Un novateur: Victor Horta", *Art et Décoration; Revue mensuelle d'art moderne* I/1 (January 1897), 11-18; Sander Pierron, "L'évolution de l'architecture en Belgique; M. Victor Horta", *Revue des Arts décoratifs. L'art dans la vie contemporaine* XIX (September 1899), 273-289; G.M. Jacques, "Deux façades de Horta", *L'Art décoratif. Revue internationale d'art industriel et de décoration* II/1 (February 1900), 209-213; Emile Sedeyn, "Victor Horta", *L'Art Décoratif. Revue mensuelle d'art contemporain* IV/1 (March 1902), 230-242 ; Fernand Symons, "Horta", *Der Baumeister* I (1903), 133-135.
7. Wilhelm Rehme, *Die Architektur der neuen freien Schule* (Leipzig: Baumgärtner's Buchhandlung [1902]); *Intérieurs d'architecture moderne. Choix de documents recueillis en France et à l'étranger. Vestibules, escaliers, appartements* (Paris: Ch. Schmid, s.d.): pl. 14-16; *Ferronnerie de style moderne. Motifs exécutés en France et à l'étranger* (Paris: Ch. Schmid, s.d.): pl. I and III-IX.
8. Thiébault-Sisson, "L'Art décoratif", 14-15.
9. *Ferronnerie de style moderne*, pl. V.1 and VIII.1 and 3.
10. On modernist historiography, see: Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The historiography of modern architecture*. (Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press, 1999).
11. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture. The growth of a new tradition* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1941), 225 fig. 127-128. In casu: Alfred Gotthold Meyer and Wilhelm Freiherr von Tettau, *Eisenbauten. Ihre Geschichte und Aesthetik* (Esslingenn a. N., Paul Neff Verlag (Max Schreiber), 1907).
12. Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius* (New-York, Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 60-61 figures 40 (Sullivan)-41 (Horta).
13. A.D.F. Hamlin, "L'Art Nouveau, its origin and development", *The Craftsman: an illustrated monthly magazine in the interest of better art, better work, and a better and more reasonable way of living* 3 (December 1902), 129-143.
14. Stephan Tschudi-Madsen, "Horta; works and style of Victor Horta before 1900", *The Architectural Review* 118/708 (December 1955), 389.
15. On Delhayé's restauration of House Tassel: Maurice Culot and Anne Van Loo, "The restoration of the Hotel Tassel. An interview with architect Jean Delhayé", in: *Victor Horta: Hôtel Tassel 1893-1895*, ed. François Loyer and Jean Delhayé 1986, 131-148. For Jean Delhayé see for instance: Maurice Culot, "A Jean Delhayé", in: *Victor Horta: Hôtel Tassel 1893-1895*, ed. François Loyer and Jean Delhayé 1986, vii-xi; *Victor Horta Hôtel Aubecq*, ed. by Guy Conde-Reis (Brussels, Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, 2011), 23 ("Jean Delhayé").
16. Culot and Van Loo, "The restoration", 132.
17. Ibidem, 141-142.

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