

# In Search of Horta: On-Site Examinations and Results

Wivine Wailliez

Plaidoyer pour les études préalables in situ, cet article démontre comment les examens des finitions du second œuvre du patrimoine bâti constituent un outil indispensable pour « connaître, comprendre et restaurer » les intérieurs Art nouveau. L'examen matériel est un moyen unique de caractériser l'œuvre et ses finitions, d'en comprendre l'exécution et l'histoire, voire de formuler des choix en vue de sa restauration.

# V

ictor Horta's work is assumed to be known from top to bottom, making him seem a hackneyed topic. However, many of his interiors have been transformed or overpainted over the years; their original appearance was often uncertain at the time of their protection as listed monuments, and may still be uncertain today.

What materials are architecture historians dealing with, and how can they improve their knowledge and understanding of Art Nouveau interiors? In the *Call for papers* for the 20<sup>th</sup> Réseau Art Nouveau Network (RANN) anniversary conference, the "plans, photographs, descriptions, articles, drawings" were cited — without any mention of the archaeological findings — as sources. Even though archives, plans and period pictures are valuable historic material, the pieces of information concealed in the *object itself* provide the most reliable evidence. This very progressive aspect of the current research on Art Nouveau architecture and interiors had to be addressed. This paper illustrates the essential contribution of archaeological examinations to the history of Art Nouveau through the presentation of some case studies excerpts, following the RANN's claimed aims to "know, understand, restore, live and open the Art Nouveau interiors".

## "WE EXAMINE TO RESTORE"

In Brussels, in-depth on-site prospecting generally takes place in connection with a restoration project and its results constitute the working basis for drawing up an action plan, well in advance of the restoration itself. A very important question about the restoration of a listed building concerns the *state to be restored*. The pristine scheme and the first decorative scheme applied to the architecture are often retained as the very testimony of the architect's creativity, or at least of the *Zeitgeist*. But if the architecture has been modified over the years, the modifications belong to the object's history, and so another state could be chosen as the baseline period. Based on the rigorous methodology of historical and archaeological studies, on-site examinations are an essential aspect of the study of the building and its finishes: the results reveal parts of the interior scheme(s) and history.

At the [Hôtel Frison](#) (V. Horta, 1894–95), in the [entrance hall](#), large parts of the then unknown decorative composition were discovered in autumn 2018.<sup>1</sup> Before the initial archaeological examination in 2001,<sup>2</sup> nothing was known about any decoration: the only picture, published a hundred years earlier, showed merely the marble steps and the beautiful bronze handrail. The uncovered decorative scheme unfolds largely along the four parts of the hall.

At the end of five consecutive study phases in the house (2001–05), the different paint interventions at Hôtel Frison were summed up and distributed according to the time of their occurrence in a period-chart, based on stratigraphic exposures. The assessment of the numerous results allows us to conclude that the house's original decorative scheme only corresponds to the paintwork of the first decorative campaign in the lawyer's office, while in the rest of the house the paintwork was applied during a second decorating campaign, some years later. The ceiling paintworks in the lawyer's office remained visible at the time of the second campaign, whereas on the [dining-room ceiling](#) the first decorations were overlaid by the second colour scheme (see [picture on line](#)). So, in that case, the first scheme must be considered as a *pentimento*, though it remains as a testimony to Horta's iterative creative process.<sup>3</sup>

This shows how a thorough assessment of archaeological findings is crucial for a true understanding and right apprehension of the building's history. If no painstaking research had been carried out at Hôtel Frison, every first

- 1 The team was composed of E. Job, head of the monumental decoration unit (IRPA), M.-H. Ghisdal (freelance conservator) and the author.
- 2 At that time, the team was composed of A.-S. Augustyniak (IRPA) and the author.
- 3 Wailliez, W., "Looking for Vanished Decorations in Victor Horta's *Hôtel Frison*: An Assessment of Puzzling Archaeological Findings", in Bregnhøi, L., Hughes, H. et al., eds, *Paint Research in Building Conservation*, proceedings, Copenhagen, 8–11 May 2005, London: Archetype Publications, 2006, pp. 123–130 and Wailliez, W., "L'hôtel Frison (1894–95) de Victor Horta : Recherche et appréciation des décors peints dans le cadre de l'étude préalable à la restauration / *Het Huis Frison (1894–1895) van Victor Horta: Onderzoek en evaluatie van de geschilderde decors in het kader van het vooronderzoek voor de restauratie*", in *Bulletin de l'IRPA*, n° 32 (2006–2008), 2010, pp. 287–310.



**FIG. 1** Hôtel van Eetvelde, winter garden, western wall, ca. 1897–98 © IRPA-KIK.



decorative layer would have been considered as Horta's original scheme: it would have led to misinterpretation and a wrongful restoration.

### "WE EXAMINE TO KNOW"

Moreover, apart from their pragmatic applications, the on-site examinations give access to the material history of the work and provide an insight into states lost forever. At the time of an on-site study, there are precise targets or questions: we have *known unknowns* to clear, such as the original colour scheme or the dating of a substrate. But there are probably *unknown unknowns*,<sup>4</sup> and, considering this, any new architectural object must be approached without pre-judgements or blinders. The screening must be dispassionate, not only seeking for specific pieces of information, or for a confirmation, but open-minded enough to catch any unforeseen or even disruptive information.

On the one hand, the original colour palette is discovered, which was not known or only from a brief mention in period publications, or assumed by a hazardous extrapolation from black-and-white photos. For example, at Hôtel Frison art historians had no certainties till 2001 about what colours or motifs the staircase had originally displayed. Yet Octave Maus described it in *L'Art moderne* in 1900 as "*Une ouverture ménagée au centre permet de jouir, tout en faisant l'ascension, des jeux de lumière qu'offre une cage d'escalier décorée de tons chauds avec la verve et la fantaisie que sait y mettre le remarquable artiste*".<sup>5</sup> Amateurs and specialists could have bet on orange, but, as long as objective proof was lacking (see [picture on line](#)), it was at best a hypothesis (or rather a speculation), but not a fact.

At the [Hôtel van Eetvelde](#) with its winter garden, the comparison of black-and-white period pictures reveals at first glance that the currently visible paintings on marouflaged canvas are not the original ones. Not only have the paintings changed, but the mansion was built in three phases: in 1895–97 the core building, in 1899–1900 the left wing — and the rental property at the street corner — and in 1901 the right wing. A fourth event was the closing of the passage between the core building and the left wing after 1919. Meticulous observation of the pictures enabled us to sort them and to deduce the number of repaints, but, at that point, the colours displayed at the different periods were still unknown.

In 1897 there was still no opening in the western wall [FIG. 1](#); the paintwork shows elegant pilasters and capitals and low contrasted borders. At the time of the second construction phase, the new west wing was connected to the main building via a large arch in the winter garden, walled up after Mrs van Eetvelde's death and the sale of both the west wing and the residential rental property in 1919. Just after the wing construction, electric fittings replaced gas lighting and the original glass plates in the octagon gave way to green marble plates, but the paintwork still remained the same at that time. Shortly after (c.1900) [FIG. 2](#), but still before the opening of the east wing, the mural decoration was overpainted with the second decorative scheme, displaying a higher contrasted border. After the building of the new wing (after 1901) [FIG. 3](#), the decoration changed again, and the third decorative scheme returned to lower contrasted borders. The early motifs and palette followed by the second and third ones constitute successive "original" schemes, responding to the extensions of the building by Horta himself.

The on-site examinations aimed to identify the different paintworks and to characterize their palette. The east wing has received two coats of paint, the original one from 1901 and a faithful overpainting from c.1918, the currently visible paintwork. On the western wall the area directly over the arch has been examined. However, instead of uncovering three historical paint jobs under the 1918 overpainting, stratigraphic exposures have only revealed two; moreover, the

4 See Bergeon Langle, S., "L'Éloge du doute en Restauration des œuvres d'art", in *CeROArt* [Online], HS | June 2015, Online since 31 May 2015, accessed 13 January 2020. URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ceroart/4627>.

5 Author's translation: "An opening made in the centre allows one, while climbing the stairs, to enjoy the games played by the light on a stairwell decorated in the warm, vivacious and imaginative tones created by this remarkable artist."



FIG. 2 Hôtel van Eetvelde, winter garden, eastern wall, ca. 1900 © IRPA-KIK.



FIG. 3 Hôtel van Eetvelde, winter garden taken from the western wing, ca. 1917–18, Paula Deetjen © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.

first paintwork at that place was applied as part of the second decorative scheme, as evidenced by the fact that it is underlining the arch [FIG. 4](#). On the eastern winter garden wall, in oblique light we can make out a slightly shifted underlying decoration. On that spot, there are four paint systems on top of each other: colour-wise, the first one matches the second decorative scheme, just like on the opposite wall; the next two belong to the scheme of 1901 and a local undated overpainting (a repair); and the current visible layer from 1918. It means that there too the original scheme has vanished. Horta's very first scheme for the winter garden may well not have been uncovered/recovered so far: it may lie under the canvas glued to the wall. Nevertheless, the discovery, albeit partial, of the 1899 and 1901 palettes is a very valuable contribution to the history of Art Nouveau.

#### "WE EXAMINE TO UNDERSTAND"

Why is this the way it is? What do the results mean: what sequence of events could have left these traces? The conservator must elaborate a scenario that fits the present aspect and the stratigraphic results.

Stratigraphic examinations can reveal the work execution schedule, with possible interruptions and resummptions. The successive transformations, some of which were carried out under Horta's own direction, have been decoded. The correlation of the results of microscopic stratigraphic exposures — sometimes coupled with laboratory analyses — with other sources, thus allows a comprehensive reading.

In the winter garden of the Hôtel Max Hallet, extensive examination of the original ironwork gildings (smothered under many overpaintings) shows that they consist of a systematic alternation of gold leaf and brass leaf. The stratigraphic exposures, level exposures and numerous laboratory cross-sections left no doubt: it is the

result of Horta's deliberate choice, and not merely a contractor's scam. As surprising as it may be, remarks like "Horta would never have done that!" or "It's way too complicated!" are irrelevant, because it is a matter of facts. After all, what do we know as "Horta"? What is claimed as Horta? What have we learned to call Horta? It is crucial for research to verify and re-evaluate the proclaimed truths and hypotheses. Since evidence exists of a reasoned choice, the appropriate reaction would surely be: "Why did Horta do that?". And we find an answer in Horta's *Mementos*: "*Quant à la couleur des fers, elle devait 'naturellement' être noire, ce fut une risée quand j'opposai sur les deux faces une couleur bleue à une couleur gris clair, séparée par un filet d'or sur le champ de l'épaisseur.*"<sup>6</sup> This small excerpt makes clear that Horta did not shy away from a certain "complication" of his work in the service of a well-defined aesthetic vision.

Not only the finishes but the architectural volume itself is an issue to be considered.

At the Hôtel Saint Cyr, by Gustave Strauven,<sup>7</sup> the private dining room (in the half-basement) was turned into a dance studio in the 1950s by the last "historic" owner, the dancer Chamie Lee. The macro-structural examination of the room, later coupled with small probes, stratigraphic or otherwise, revealed that this large room had been originally divided by a wooden partition to form a service corridor. Around 1935, the then owner removed the corridor to enlarge the room. On the wooden frame of the glassed bay, the remains of the mortice and tenon joint, destroyed during the removal of the wooden wall, is still visible under the paint layers.<sup>8</sup> As for the volumes of this dining-room, a counterpart of the conserved stained-glass doors isolated the room from the service stairs too, as evidenced for example by the *paint burrs* on the steel beam.

Back to Horta's Hôtel van Eetvelde, in the first-floor gallery around the winter garden's light shaft, where our investigation had revealed an unknown, walled-up bay on the western side. All the staircase and first-floor corridors are hung with a floral Lincrusta wallcovering,<sup>9</sup> except for a single *patch* of another pattern, at first sight a repair, on the western wall [FIG. 5]. Stratigraphic exposures of the paint layers on both Lincrustas at their boundary show clearly that the repairing patch is already old. Trying to understand, we put forward the hypothesis of a passageway leading to the left wing on the first floor, that had to be bricked up in 1919, just like the arch in the winter garden. Horta specialists had no inkling of this passageway, and the archives and plans did not give any clue on this subject. Of course, deeper examination — up to the plaster and the masonry — should allow us to verify our hypothesis, but the conservation of ancient elements prevented further examination.

## CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, the impediments specific to our task are that a well-preserved decor — especially if it is not established that it is *not* original — is limiting destructive examinations.

On the other hand, since things are rarely as simple as imagined, it is not uncommon for the results of one study to lead to more questions than answers and call for a second, more focused study. It may also be a sign that the object has been approached with a bias, in which case care should be taken to re-evaluate the raw results as open-mindedly as possible. Impartiality is the golden rule. What we think we know is not a certainty unless it has been taught to us by the object itself. ◆

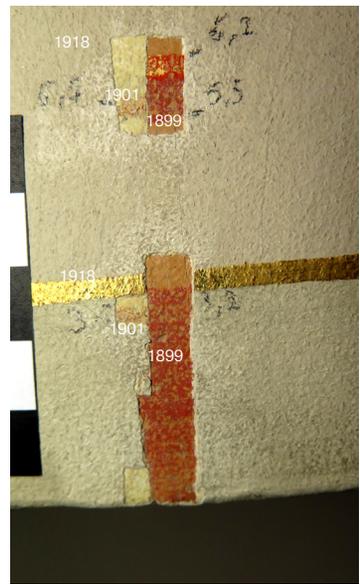


FIG. 4 Hôtel van Eetvelde, winter garden, western wall, stratigraphic exposure, 2017 © Cellule Décors de Monuments — IRPA.

6 Author's translation: "As for the painting of the ironwork, it had 'naturally' to be black, everyone laughed when I opposed on both sides a blue shade to a light grey, separated by a golden stripe on the edges." Horta, V., *Mémoires*, Duijère, C., ed., Brussels, 1985, p. 306.

7 Gustave Strauven (1878–1919) was Victor Horta's pupil. The Hôtel Saint Cyr was designed in 1900 and built in 1903. See: [www.gustavestrauven.brussels](http://www.gustavestrauven.brussels).

8 O. and C. Berckmans, authors of the building-archaeological study of the Hôtel Saint Cyr, formulated in 2003 the first observations about the original division of the room. Their hypotheses were confirmed by our in-depth examination of the finishes in 2014.

9 Lincrusta is a linoleum wallcovering with raised patterns. The linoleum paste, a blend of linseed oil, resin, wood flour, cork powder and pigments, is pressed between two cylinders, one of which is engraved. The embossed pattern in the Lincrusta is not hollow but solid and permanent. Lincrustas are generally sold unpainted.



Hotel van Eetvelde, BXL.  
V. Horta, 1895  
Localisation: *Stijl*  
Context: *architect*  
Element: *Passage - site ouest*  
Date: *07-07-17* sondage n° *M3*

FIG. 5 Hôtel van Eetvelde, first floor, western side, 2017 © Cellule Décors de Monuments — IRPA.