

Hierarchies of fantasy in the fin de siècle total artwork: When Belgian Art Nouveau encountered the African colony

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This study interrogates the total artworks of Belgian Art Nouveau (±1890 - 1910) as phantasmagoria fashioned in the shadow of King Leopold II's colonial regime in the Congo Free State (1885 - 1908). It maps out how the "modern" style developed in tandem to, and sometimes in collusion with, the "red rubber regime" in Central Africa. I will be addressing the extent to which the design movement might be seen as complicit in the fact of violence in the colony. My intention is to analyze how the distinctive language of curvilinear ornament that was the "Belgian-line" articulated an immersive fantasy which, at the same time as renegotiating the parameters of European form and laying foundations for 20th century modernist architecture, lent itself to being used in the service of colonial ideology. In looking at classic total artworks by Victor Horta, Paul Hankar and Henry Van de Velde, as well as individual pieces of applied art by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy and Philippe Wolfers, I seek to understand the logic of their immersive environments and, accordingly, the changing meaning they have acquired since they were first made.

Art Nouveau's brief flowering in Belgium took place from approximately 1890 to 1910. During this period, Brussels became known as an important centre of artistic innovations and a pioneer of the "new" art. It is not unusual for art historians to see Belgium's capital as the birthing place of what was, at the time, considered a shockingly modern new trend in architecture and the applied arts (Aubry, 1994, p. 9; Madsen, 1967, p. 156; Schmutzler, 1962, p. 125).¹ Conditions

¹ My area of interest lies in the "classic" birthing period from approx. 1893 – 1902, after which point the main Belgian figures moved on and the style degenerated (Madsen, 1967, p. 156; Sembach, 2007, p. 38).

in Belgium, the most rapidly industrialized city in continental Europe at the time, provoked an upsurge of one of art's early answers to the perceived ugliness of modern urbanity. Artists turned to producing hand-made utilitarian objects, furniture and buildings, rendered in a language of organic ornamentation. In a continuation of Romantic thinking earlier in the century, the passionate Art Nouveau embrace of natural form stemmed from an aversion to industrialization and the ever-increasing proliferation of that which was machine-made and mass produced. Accordingly, a typical effect of Art Nouveau is a sense of thrusting, budding dynamism bursting forth from the surface of the object; an abstraction of exuberant natural growth bound up in a rhythmic counter-movement. The fundamental language is what Van de Velde identified as a "cosmic life-energy"; the sources and power of life to transform itself eternally (Van de Velde in Jacobs, 2005, p. 16). Lines and sinuous forms converge to create an object conceived as an organic entirety. Its decorative, vegetal ornament may be seen to mass, surge and nestle in strategic places to accentuate the function of the object as well as to ensure structural integrity (*See Figment 1*).

As Art Nouveau strove to forge an appropriate style for the new era, it set itself up in opposition to 19th century traditions of eclecticism and historical revivalism which the avant-garde had come to deplore as bombastic and lacking overriding unity.² In Belgium, nature-drives were fused with the strong influence of older European traditions, especially Medieval Gothic, Baroque and Flemish vernacular. Instead of producing modernized approximations of past aesthetics, various borrowed structural elements and motifs were woven into new forms and overall environments. Within these enclosures, Eastern influence pervaded various facets of structure and aesthetics, from the proliferation of asymmetrical shape compositions and flattened colour fields with dark outlines to its emphasis

² Eclecticism was the tradition of combining many different styles in one place and also piling objects from different periods and styles next to each other within interiors. Historicism is a series of revivals of the styles of previous eras.

on total space and, within this, negative space. Accordingly, every detail that made up the Art Nouveau gesamtkunstwerk was deliberately conceived in relation to space as a whole. The Belgian branch absorbed this variety of influences to develop a line-language that was not only of its time, but also distinctly Belgian. During the early period of the style, the fledgling nation — formed in 1831 as a buffer zone between its warring neighbours— was fraught with tensions enhanced by rapid mechanization as well as conflict between Flemish and Walloon factions. Artists and their patrons followed a nationalistic calling to forge a cultural identity for the recently-constructed country (Block, 1997, p. 3; Ogata, 2001, p. 8). Where the binding unity of Art Nouveau’s total artworks offered sanctuaries of reprieve from the stresses of Belgian modernity, these were encased in shells that characterised the region. Initially drawing on Belgian vernacular techniques and motifs, the movement developed into a particular articulation of discernable national form-language. While different designers had their particular signature styles, the sinuous, “Belgian” line came to characterize this branch of the international movement (*See Figment 2*).³

It is in the Art Nouveau infatuation with all-encompassing unity that its primary claim to influencing 20th century architecture was forged. Over the course of the 20th century, the style came to be recognized by the art canon as one of the foundations of the modernist movement, and is usually introduced as such today.⁴ These claims to modernism, alongside a drive towards patriotic solidarity, are celebrated in contemporary Belgium. Brussels, “the capital of Art Nouveau”, has a flourishing tourist industry around the design movement. Remaining examples are celebrated as historic cultural attractions, with and a

³ The idea of this line was fixed by 1900 as taut and serpentine, with areas of thickness and thinness carefully weighted to suggest potential, inner dynamism (Sternier, 1982, p. 80).

⁴ Nikolaus Pevsner’s influential *Pioneers of Modern Design*, first published in 1936, initiated this view. Pevsner was highly critical of the style (as was the fashion during his time), but identified it as an influence on what was to come.

variety of tours of areas rich in the style on offer all year round. Buildings by Victor Horta, Paul Hankar and others are available to the public as museums and regular commemorative exhibitions to major Belgian Art Nouveau artists are held.⁵ What is never openly advertised is the fact that the period of artistic effervescence that nurtured Art Nouveau was hugely enabled by money pouring into Belgium by means of imperial activity in the Congo (Fraiture, 2009, p. 44; Lagae, 2007, p. 82; Silverman, 2011, p. 737).

Entangled Timelines: The African Origins of Art Nouveau Raw Materials

King Leopold II's private corporation, the Congo Free State, existed from 1885 to 1908, before being handed over to the Belgian government. The monarch's colonial episode was one of the most notorious of the African imperial endeavours, widely perceived to be excessively brutal and violent in its pillaging of natural resources.⁶ Historians have noted that it was during the time of King Leopold's initial inroads —posed as a humanitarian, anti-slavery mission— that the population of the Congo was drastically depleted, some say even halved (Dunn, 2003, p. 45; Flynn, 1998, p. 190. Hochschild, 1999, p. 592). This was in no small part due to extreme measures of exploitation being employed in extracting raw materials. Excessive violence and war were necessary in order for the Belgian colonial regime to maintain control over the vast region initially demarcated by Henry Morton Stanley and then claimed by the King of the Belgians as his private company (Anstey, 1966, p. 12; Courtenier, 2005, p.

⁵ For example's last year's tribute to Henry Van de Velde at the *Musée Cinquantenaire*. Further, an Art Nouveau/Deco biennale is held every second year and A new *fin de siècle* wing of the Royal Museum, heavily featuring Art Nouveau pieces will be opening in the near future.

⁶ During the later Art Nouveau period, international awareness regarding atrocities in the Congo were initiated by the British-aligned Congo Reform Association, founded in 1904 by Edmond Morel and Roger Casement. In his sensationalist exposé, *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild suggests that vilification of the Belgian monarch distracted attention away from similar atrocities in neighbouring colonies (1999, p. 740)

104).⁷ The means by which the colony was then reaped for profit involved degrading forced labour and widespread human rights abuses.

Traffic in ivory was rendered profitable by exchanging cheap trinkets for local stocks of the precious material as well as outright raiding and looting. Congolese people who offered any resistance were flogged or killed and their villages burned (Clerbois, 2011, p. 239; Courtenier, 2005, p. 108).⁸ Such practice also wreaked havoc on pre-existing trade conditions in the area, exacerbating inter-tribal rivalries and disrupting local economics (Anstey, 1966, p. 128; Flynn, 1997, p. 191). All raw materials, like precious woods, were extracted via methods of transportation that exacted a further toll on the Congolese population. The harsh working conditions under which the Matadi-Leopoldville line (completed in 1898) was constructed and the system of foot porters that went before it claimed the lives of thousands of African people (Clerbois, 2011, p. 239; Courtenier, 2005, p. 110; Hochschild, 1991, p. 321). It may be said that affiliation with any enterprise in the Congo Free State, whether openly commercial or under the guise of “anti-slavery” missions and “scientific exploration”, was related to systematic plundering of the Congo by the king’s regime, leading to the devastation of its people.

That the personal gain of the “Red Rubber King” from the colony that he, like most Belgians, never visited was immense was well known and cause for international scandal in his lifetime (Hochschild, 1999, p. 565).⁹ Royal enterprise

⁷ The area of diverse tribes and ethnic groups that became the “Congo” was not naturally one entity and the people who became “Congolese” were not homogenous (Dunn, 2003, p. 172).

⁸ By the late 1890s, Antwerp markets in Belgium were the main centre. At this time, the colonial administration was almost entirely funded by ivory revenue (Flynn, 1997, p. 191).

⁹ Some of this fortune was funnelled into public works in Brussels which still define the public face of the city today. These include the massive edifices of *Palais de Justice* and *Cinquantenaire* triumphal arch, as well as the complete renovation of central Brussels in order to install a railway network.

spilled over into a lucrative market in the processing, export and sale of African raw materials, enriching the country as a whole and helping to create a booming climate in which the creative arts flourished (Fraiture, 2009, p. 44; Jacobs, 2005, p. 47). Even as the increasingly industrialized nation suffered turbulent worker unrest throughout the 1880s and 1890s, an elite of newly wealthy businessmen and entrepreneurs emerged. Due to a particular climate engendered by the newness of the recently constructed nation, this burgeoning bourgeoisie supported the avant-garde style of the moment (Block, 1998, p. 182; Ogata, p. 1; Sembach, 2007, p. 43; Watelet, 1981, p. 33).¹⁰ Consequently, many patrons of Belgian Art Nouveau were directly or indirectly involved with the plunder of the Congo. During this time, many liberal Belgians, including Art Nouveau figures like Henry Van de Velde, saw the king's manoeuvres in Africa as a daring and thrilling venture that endowed the Belgian nation with powerful international prestige (Silverman, 2011, p. 761).¹¹

It is possible to identify factual links to the colony from a web of interpersonal and political association to the very core of the style; it's foundational materials. Use of Congolese raw materials were characteristic of the Belgian movement. From the opulent interiors of Victor Horta's homes for wealthy patrons, to the more egalitarian furniture of Serrurier-Bovy and Van de Velde's William Morris-inspired interiors, rare and exotic Congolese woods like padouk and bilinga were a feature (Beeckman, 1996, p. 141; Clerbois, 2011, p. 243; p. 61; Watelet, 1987, p.

¹⁰ By contrast, in neighbouring countries like France and Austria, Art Nouveau avant-garde was a separate, often decadent element (Silverman, 2011, p. 741).

¹¹ In the 1890s and early years of the 20th century, nationalism often went hand in hand with colonial fervour. As was stressed in an onslaught of colonial propaganda, *Petit Belge*, supposedly the smallest country in Europe, so often subjugated by marauding Spanish, Flemish and French armies over the ages now had a colony in Africa one thirteenth of the entire continent (Dunn, 2003, p. 37; Silverman, 2011, p. 144).

31).¹² Ivory was also a common material. Particularly found in jewellery and the revival of chryselephantine sculpture, its presence was ubiquitous across all aspects of Belgian production, in the detailing on furniture and everyday objects like letter holders, lids, teacup handles and teaspoons. (Escritt, 2011, 1896; Madsen, 1967, p. 162).

In Horta's first total artwork, the very walls were embellished with ivory. *Hôtel Solvay* (1894) gave the architect his first opportunity to control all aspects of design, from hand-crafted furniture, cabinetry, carpeting and fittings in a harmonious interior encrusted with precious materials (Aubry, 1996, p. 67; Sembach, 2007, p. 60; Vandenbreeden, 1994, p. 82). In a sumptuous celebration of organic form, Congolese woods and ivory mingle with slabs of onyx, alabaster and ormolu fittings as forms dissolve into each other via tinted panes of coloured glass (*see Figment 3*).¹³ The seemingly limitless purse that fuelled this vision of unbridled opulence was not without its connections to the African colony. The Solvay family was a proud benefactor of several Congolese expeditions, with Ernest Solvay —the father of Armand, for whom *Hôtel Solvay* was built— being an active member of the *Societe d'Etudes Coloniales* (Courtenier, 2005, p. 123).¹⁴ On the Brussels Congo Monument at *Trône*, the family name may be found engraved in the list of benefactors of the colonial endeavour.

¹² Serrurier-Bovy, for example, under the influence of the British Arts and Crafts figurehead William Morris, pursued a quest for a renewal of traditional national craft using Congolese woods. He found these to be “an inspiration” due to their “springy” qualities, able to correspond to the supple curves of his objects, and employed them throughout his life (Serrurier-Bovy in Watelet, 1987, p. 32).

¹³ Ormolu is a kind of gilding made of finely ground, high carat gold.

¹⁴ A group set up to educate the public regarding various aspects of the imperial enterprise, which was responsible for the training of soldiers and so-called explorers on their way to the colony (ibid).

Incorporation of Congolese raw materials was not employed in displays of wealth. Across the range of Art Nouveau expressions, they may also be located in environments that cultivated nostalgia for an imagined Belgian past. Away from the giddy excesses of Horta's urban monuments to opulence, the rustic gesamtkunstwerk of Henry Van de Velde's *Villa Bloemenwerf* (1895) provides a sobering example. The painter-turned-artisan went to great lengths to ensure that the furniture and utilities in his family home—including the heating system, hearth and clothes worn by his wife and children—were a component of the overall plan; in their methods of construction and sense of materiality, as much as binding aesthetic unity. At the heart of such works was a utopian drive towards encapsulating the humble morality of the “innocent” Flemish peasant (Ogata, 2001, 31; Vandenbreeden, 1994, p. 128; Jacobs, 2005, p. 63). Traditional regional crafts were employed, as is evident in the example of Van de Velde's padouk chairs. Here, a characteristic curving Art Nouveau framework, whose ornamentation is located in functional line movement, has been fashioned from Congolese wood. The basketry of the seat introduces an element of traditional Belgian cottage craft to the modern piece of furniture (*see Figure 4*).

Congolese raw materials become part of a melding of vernacular elements with modern sensibilities in an attempt to set up a new Belgian tradition. From the furniture to the gabled cottage referencing features of Flemish vernacular architecture, Van de Velde's conceptualizing of a country idyll evokes a nostalgic aesthetic of peasant life, in blissful avoidance of growing worker unrest from an industry based on declining natural resources (Ogata, 2001, p. 2).

Ivory, a rare and precious commodity since antiquity, had a more visible role in the Belgian movement than tropical woods. The revival of 17th century Flemish tradition of religious ivory carving was wilfully encouraged by the colonial regime (Clerbois, 2011, p. 232). This early fruit of King Leopold II's colonial adventurism was donated to Belgian artists from the early 1890s, in an effort to promote the possibilities of the wealth of raw materials available in the colony

(Flynn, 1998, p. 192). These were displayed at international trade fairs, representing Belgian craft, as well as colonial exhibitions, where they were known “chryselephantine sculpture”, a homage to the Ancient Greek tradition of combining ivory with materials like gold in cult statues. In small *objects d’art*, the resulting works were often allegorical representations of the “civilising” colonial mission. The example of Phillipe Wolfers’ domestic sculpture *Civilisation et Barbarie* (1897) depicts a Congolese ivory tusk, intended to represent the Congo, being held in a silver grasp of grotesque intertwining snakes, birds and bats, symbolic of the sinister hold of both slavery and witchcraft (Adriaenssens, 2002, p. 39). Such heavy-handed moralising supports colonial rhetoric of the time (Dunn, 2003, p. 36; Flynn, 1997, p. 202; Silverman, 2012, p. 29). Unlike the wood in Van de Velde’s padouk chairs, the material of ivory is employed as a symbol of power. Raw Congolese matter (the ivory tusk) is visibly crafted into a refined object by a cultured European hand (*See Figment 5*).

A Backdrop to Colonial Manoeuvres: Seductive form at the roots of Modernism

The chryselephantine commissions provide an obvious alignment with the imperial administration. Use of simplistic figurative metaphor contrasts to the more complex symbolism found in the abstracted vegetal forms of Art Nouveau applied arts. In the iconic example of Victor Horta’s *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1898), whose winter garden housed Wolfers’ *Civilisation et Barbarie*, allusion to the colony is more subtle.¹⁵ Sophistication and innovation were expected as Horta was invited to build the home of Baron Van Eetvelde, the Chief Administrator of the Congo Free State, in his capacity as the leading avant-garde architect of the time (Aubry, 1996, p. 55) (*See Figment 6*). His lavish construction was

¹⁵ The piece was part of a gift presented to Edmond Van Eetvelde by a group of Belgian industrialists who wished to thank him for the business opportunities he had made available for them via the Congolese market (Adriaenssens, 2002, p. 33).

specifically made for entertaining as Van Eetvelde's home was one of the locations from which the business of the Congo was managed. Accordingly, Art Nouveau extravagances became the backdrop for meetings with businessmen who worked in the Congo and various upper echelons of the colony administration, with King Leopold II as one of the regular visitors (Vandenbreeden, 1996, p. 46).

Guests to the Van Eetvelde home began at the front door, inlaid with an intricate mosaic pattern of undulating plant-like tendrils, insulated with wall panels of dark Congolese wood. They were then led up a broad, gradually spiralling marble staircase in a serpentine movement, circling the glass-domed winter garden to pass through heavy, high doors inlaid with stained glass landscape of blues and violets to enter a sumptuous dining room, encased in warm orange and red hued woods, enlivened by engraved and painted patterns suggestive of exuberant frondescence. Or, instead of stopping, they might have been swept along the balcony circling the octagonal glass-topped enclosure of deeply veined marble adorned with real foliage, hand-crafted, plant-like furniture and *objects d'art*, passing beneath the thrusting network of iron branches holding up the glass cupola, into the second entertainment area, held together with a crisscrossing network of brass fittings whose sinuous endings clasp slabs of onyx and quartz below floral William Morris wallpaper. The journey in its entirety would have been suffused with light, thanks to the shaft of the central dome as well as the open plan, aided by glass panes and windows lining partitions between different rooms, making the space interconnected and airy. Plastic form was manipulated to shape both light and space in a manner that showed off the quality of such materials to their best advantage, with reflected luminescence playing across the different surfaces and textures. The visitor would not only be dazzled by the abundance of opulent materials, but also immersed in the merging of line, form, colour and illumination that defined a successful Art Nouveau gesamtkunstwerk.

All the core characteristics of the style's modernist evolution are apparent in *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*. The then cutting edge materials of glass and metal are visible in dynamic profusion. At the time, they would have been understood as the industrialized materials of the future (De Couter, 1996, p. 14). Iron, combined with wood and stone, is sculpted into echoing flowing contours that ignore innate natural qualities. Unlike the 20th century drive towards truth to materials, raw components are transformed into homogenous wave-formations, fused together to create an underwater-like environment of vegetal ur-forms. Negative space has been strategically manipulated to create an airy atmosphere via open plan space and transparent glass panes between interconnected rooms. To add to the effect, furniture and objects were perfectly coordinated in consideration of each other, so that they became ornaments in themselves, augmenting and highlighting the space (Schmutzler, 1962, p. 11). "High" mediums of painting and sculpture are subordinate to the greater artwork; the entire building. Exterior facades delineate inner arrangement, with lines of decorative framework and structural contours outlining the different levels and compartments within. Further, when viewed from a side angle, it is possible to discern in the structural silhouette the same undulating line formations that are repeated in the interior. The spiralling superstructure of walkways, which echo the clasping formation of Wolfers' sculpture in the winter garden, is a demonstration of the Belgian line. Botanical ornamentation encompasses the spirit of the artwork, as object and decoration are fused into an organic entity. Supple forms were sensitive to the different environments in which they were put to work, ensuring that no single gesamtkunstwerk was exactly like the other.

Horta saw his townhouses as portraits of his clients, incorporating details that alluded to the distinguishing characteristics of their lifestyles (Mortens, 1996, p.

117; Vandenbreeden, 1996, p. 44).¹⁶ In Hôtel Van Eetvelde, he paid tribute to Van Eetvelde by alluding to tropical fauna and flora in the swirling, grass-like fronds of its stained glass windows and wall murals. (Aubry, 2013, p. 64; Silverman, 2011, p. 25). In the dining room, the mahogany fittings above the hearth bears engravings of orchid-like flowers, one of which has a star in its centre; a representation of the Congo Free State via its flag. On the opposite wall, an unmistakable outline of an elephant with tusks has been painted into the corner panelling. Pulsating form and colour reverberate across the decoration in an interlocking rhythmic pattern that connects with the fertile environment of the room as the motifs representing the colony are merged with a language of electric verdant abundance. Thus, distant African makes a fleeting appearance as part of an apparition of sumptuous natural profusion, denuded of people.¹⁷

Hôtel Van Eetvelde may be seen as a seductive performance of the financial possibilities available in the African colony. The suggestion of immense untapped wealth is made clear via the sheer sensual titillation of opulent materials. Horta sculpts both luxuriant Congolese woods and shining metals alike in sinuous, budding plant-forms which vibrate throughout the building and may be found echoed in the structure of the furniture and tiny details of wallpaper motifs and door handles. Not only are Congolese raw materials put to work as luxury furnishings, but consumption is made obvious via inlays of precious stones, marble and expensive imported glass.¹⁸ From the spiralling movement starting at the hallway, pulling upwards to the centrifugal winter garden and detailed

¹⁶ One could view such practice an extension of the sigils and heraldry of the aristocracy, which were incorporated into all manner of decoration in their homes. For the new elite, without ancient lineage and their accompanying crests, symbolism referred to business enterprises.

¹⁷ As demonstrated in Paul Hankar's buildings, Belgian Art Nouveau was not without representation of people. Horta's buildings also sometimes included figurative murals by other artists, as seen in *Hôtel Hannon* (1904).

¹⁸ The glass was ordered from Tiffany & Co. in America; a huge expense at the time (Van der Wee, 2012, p. 18).

curvature of light fittings, *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* employs expressive use of structural form in order to entice and enclose.

Standing outside such an edifice and looking in from a contemporary perspective, with retrospective awareness of violence in the colony, it is the overreaching argument of Horta's gesamtkunstwerk —it's compelling allure— that disturbs the contemporary viewer. Its sensual appeal and virtuosity of sculpted materiality immerses those inside in transcendental fantasy. Moreover, this beguiling vision was considered the style of modernity in its own time; a conjuring of future Utopian space. Unlike the modernist urges of the 20th century, Art Nouveau looked to the distant past to capture a spirit of the present. Eastern cultures, whose influence infused all aspects of Art Nouveau form, may be seen to have been delegated to the category bygone eras.

Hierarchies of Style in the Dreamscape: Art Nouveau and the Orient

At the cusp of the 20th century, Europe considered the great civilizations of Asia and North Africa to be in a state of decline, no longer able to fulfil the promise of their previous aesthetic and architectural achievements. The cultural production of contemporary communities were deemed inconsiderable compared to the colossal heights reached in their ancient, traditional arts. Such ideas were made visible by British architect Owen Jones in *The Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856 and perpetuated by Art Nouveau decades later. The book can, in many ways, be seen as a bible of the Belgian style and is constantly referred to in its literature; both that generated by its artists as well as art historians. Jones describes cultures such as Egyptian, Arabic, Moorish, Indian, Chinese and Persian as being in a state of slow and lingering decline, having passed through countless ages, culminating in a point of perfection before deteriorating and feeding off its own elements (1997, p. 1). He further urges designers of the time to draw on these examples as a way of invigorating European art. An array of detailed

patterns and motifs from various exotic cultures are laid out as a smorgasbord of possibilities for rejuvenating tired European décor, rendered ugly and decadent at the onset of mechanized mass production. At all points, other cultures are invoked for their reliance on natural principle —untainted by industrialized western civilisation— is stressed, with ornament poised as an intrinsic artistic impulse. Belgian Art Nouveau unequivocally took this message as gospel.¹⁹

In art history, the extensive influence of the Orient on Art Nouveau is chronicled as a defining characteristic. Dipesh Chakrabarty, discussing the Western version of history in general, points out that non-western styles tend to be utilized only as a means to tell the story of western cultural hegemony (2000, p. 27). The composite organic visual language developed in Art Nouveau may be seen to work in a similar manner. In each total artwork, all stylistic influence is seamlessly incorporated into the greater whole of the design. While a general impression of an “Oriental-like” asymmetrical line or abstract form may be discerned, a particular regional feature, artist or definitive motif may not be named, only guessed at. Accordingly, entire cultures become flattened into the smooth contours of the Art Nouveau whole. This superficial treatment of the decorative forms of the non-west may be seen to illustrate thinking about the people of the Orient at the time. As initially delineated by Edward Said, what was known as “the Orient” covered a vast area of the globe, including India, Egypt, Asia and the Middle East (Said, 1994, p. 50). Furthermore, the culture of this homogenous conglomerate of other peoples was presented in Europe as being passive and available for “the taking”, in terms of literary reference and

¹⁹ Such notions of the superiority of the European race may be found in another pivotal influence on Belgian Art Nouveau, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, a mentor of Horta and Hankar. Within the French architect’s overarching practice of merging a proto-functionalist aesthetic with the Neo-Gothic movements of the Romantic era, he also places Northern European culture at the forefront of civilisation. This idea is explicitly drawn out in his writings, especially *Habitations of Man in All Ages* (1878), where man’s built environments are seen to reflect the physical and racial circumstances of culture.

otherwise (ibid). Moving into the world of aesthetics, by appropriating visual ideas from the class of foreign objects classified as “primitive” or “exotic”, and by projecting western fantasies onto the meaning of the objects, imagery and people who created them, these practitioners are party to the erasure of the self-representation of those people, in favour of western representation (Hiller, 1991, p. 2).²⁰ In the Art Nouveau gesamtkunstwerk, Oriental ornament is interpreted as an aesthetically pleasing lexicon of foreign forms that may be solicited in forging fresh visual ideas.

In an Art Nouveau gesamtkunstwerk, overall immersion relies on an adroit merging of various exotic influences with vegetal form into the fantastical dreamscape of each individual European artist’s vision. Adherence to plant-like formations in line and elemental unity of form was employed as a symbol of organic power. That is, in the process of the function of an object or structure being emphasized, ornament comes to represent the abstract idea of vegetal dynamism (Schmutzler, 1962, p. 263). Employment of natural form as a symbol of power was not uncommon in the late 19th century. Hannah Arendt explains that botanical and zoological jargon came to emerge in *fin de siècle* politics due to a proliferation of Darwin’s evolutionary theory (Arendt, 1960, p. 178). This was used as an ideological weapon for race as well as class discrimination (ibid). Evolutionary imagery and theories of superiority pervaded Belgium at the time. As colonial expansionism progressed, local experiments in physical anthropology, involving the measuring of skulls to determine how “evolved” the given person had been, developed alongside it (Courtenier, 2005, p. 78).²¹

²⁰ The historical precedent of post-Renaissance Central European artistic reference to the non-West starts with Napoleon’s Egyptian colonial excursions and, accordingly, may be seen to be bound up in the spoils of war (Coutts-Smith, 1991, p. 23).

²¹ Prior to turning to other races, experiments on skulls in Belgium by anthropologists like Emile Houzé concluded that Flemish people, criminals and women were less evolved than Francophone men (Courtenier, 2005. p. 45).

Notions of other cultures and peasant people being lower on the evolutionary scale and, accordingly, closer to the natural world, had seeped into popular thought at the time. Such association made those peoples more appealing to Art Nouveau sensibilities, desperate to locate further sources of “untainted” inspiration that could be employed as an antidote to the vulgarities of industrialization. In connecting supposedly ancient Eastern cultures and imagined European pasts via verdant aesthetic immersion, these peoples were woven into a mythology of interconnectedness with nature by the sophisticated, disenchanted European hand.

Walter Benjamin identified that the purpose of Art Nouveau’s “contrived cocoons of undiluted fantasy” was to block out the harsh realities of modern urban life for its bourgeois clients (1997, p. 36). From the otherworldly winter garden of *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* to the homely country hearth of the Van de Velde’s first family home, the all-encompassing total environments immerse the viewer in a state where time stands still. Gilded, cushioned and exotic barriers may easily be seen as art “held up in the face” of an onslaught of technology (ibid). While the harsh realities of everyday life are shut out, along with the messy business of real people and their hardships, non-western cultures as they are appropriated for aesthetic consumption. As such the Other is rendered timeless within envelopes of sequestered space that, in themselves, seek to float alongside the modern city, eschewing its jarring rhythms.

The manner in which Art Nouveau bears late 19th century evolutionary thinking is as complex as it is coercive. At the same time as stylistic imperialism emerges, a genuine quest to change art practice at its core is consciously developed. Despite being unable to break the devastatingly limited confines of Western patterns of thought, Art Nouveau presents a *fin de siècle* rendering of what 20th century modernist architecture might have looked like (had it not died out by 1910). That this vision was riddled with reference to other cultures, mirroring the direction avant-garde painting and sculpture would take, presents an

interesting proposition. In their claiming of the space as a whole —what Walter Benjamin pertinently describes as an immersive painting— the resulting development of three dimensional form may, potentially, have led to more evenly proportioned fusions of styles or even early models of collaboration between west and non-west.²² Similarly, when Art Nouveau was employed as cladding for colonial propaganda, at the 1897 *Congo Pavilion*, there are fleeting moments when the suggestion of intercultural influence almost seems possible. Disappointingly, these are buried under the terms of art in the service of colonial rhetoric.

Looking for the Congo in *Congo Style*: Introducing Art Nouveau via the colonial pavilion

The “modern” style was already mired in fascination for exotic foreign cultures when given the task of representing the Congo Free State. In 1897, Art Nouveau’s innate tendency to appropriate the aesthetics of other cultures in an ensorcelling total environment was employed to invent a fictive timeless haven of opportunity in Africa. Its organic line-forms were well suited to framing a vision of fecund and robust natural resource, populated by innocent savages in need of civilizing European mediation. In the colonial pavilion, characteristic curvilinear flourishes not only nestle and mass around integral structural features, but also hold Congolese objects and representations of its people in place. As items of African material culture were enveloped in elaborate architectural embellishment, the Congo Free State itself was designed as a propitious ornament in Belgium’s national pride.

King Leopold II needed Belgian public support for his colony. From the late 1880s, he was seen to neglect the Belgian workforce in favour of pursuing imperial expansionism and public building projects (Courtenier, 2005, p. 93).

²² As seen in Byzantine architecture of the late Roman empire, for example.

By 1897, he had hosted two World's Fairs; Brussels in 1880 and Antwerp in 1885. The latter had a prominent component of colonial propaganda, with a Congolese section and accompanying human zoo to entertain the public at the same time as introduce them to the commercial benefits of the king's anti-slavery mission in Africa. Whereas 1895 saw the first public meeting of Art Nouveau with colonial enterprise, largely via the display of isolated ivory commissions mentioned earlier, the interior of the 1897 *Congo Pavilion* was posed as an art exhibition. The result was an Art Nouveau gesamtkunstwerk.²³

In its denouement, the colonial pavilion at the 1897 Brussels *World's Fair* served to introduce the Belgian public to the new style as much as an imaginary of Africa that was the public face of the monarch's enterprise. After perusing resurrected traditional Belgian cottage crafts like lace-making and pottery at the grand stalls of Cinquantenaire Park —originally built for a 50th anniversary celebrations in 1880— visitors then caught a newly-built railway to the village of Tervuren on the outskirts of the city for colonial-orientated festivities. The necessary travel has been interpreted as symbolic of the geographic separation between the European metropole and its African colony in real life (Dunn, 2001, p. 35; Flynn, 1997, p. 199). To enlarge on this theme, the impressive new rail system could be seen as an advertisement for new colonial technologies; demonstrating how Belgian industrial prowess and progress was penetrating the depths of the dark continent, connecting it to civilising forces.²⁴ As immortalized by Joseph Conrad, travel to Africa at that time was seen to be a journey back in time, to the primordial roots of mankind.²⁵ On arrival, spectators were invited to

²³ The artists involved in 1895 felt that the association with the Congo rendered their work as product and not refined artwork. They therefore staged a separate exhibition in a Brussels gallery after the fair. In 1897, Van Eetvelde and the monarch corrected this, consciously setting out to make an art exhibition (Flynn, 1997, p. 194).

²⁴ By that time, construction on the Matadi-Leopoldville line was in full swing and constantly in need of manpower and financial backing (Anstey, 1966, p. 91).

²⁵ From his novella *Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1899 (Conrad, 1987, 35).

“ ... a tour of the Congo ... ” in a matter of hours (Masui, 1897, p. 2). Once inside the exhibition space, their means of transportation was Art Nouveau furniture, displays and flourishes.

In the foundational exhibition of what has in contemporary times been dubbed as another time capsule, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Congolese culture was laid before the Belgian public as a source of untapped opportunity (*See Figment 7*).²⁶ Under the guise of an educational display, a fantasy of raw tropical wealth,

written into being via colonial propaganda, was rendered experiential. The exhibition began with Paul Hankar’s *Hall of Honour*, which displayed various European *objects d’art*, including new chryselephantine commissions, alongside Congolese utilitarian objects, predominantly weapons intermingled with textiles and figurines. In Hankar’s lengthily adjoining *Ethnographic Hall*, a phantasmagoria of the colonial subject was generated, via a “scientific” exposition of the different tribes in the region annexed by the Belgian monarch. This led on to a parade of the natural fauna and flora of the region, complete with a dazzling underwater aquarium and fantastically melded circular display arches by Serrurier-Bovy, passing through a Military Hall, celebrating sophisticated European weaponry and strategy, ending in the *Hall of Great Cultures*, showing imports from the colony. Here, Georges Hobé melded dense Congolese woods — as opposed to characteristic Art Nouveau iron— to form a structural framework containing exhibits of the various lucrative products pouring out of Africa, including overflowing sacks of cocoa beans and specimens of all-important rubber plants, with useful signage explaining how these products may be put to good use. The final space contained Henry Van de Velde’s neatly arranged Hall of

²⁶ Such a perception has dogged the museum in the 21st century due to its outmoded forms of display which may be seen to represent what colonial museums used to look like in unconsciously making colonial ideology visible (Courtenier, 2005, p. 9). The institution is currently under renovation and general revision.

Exports, where elegantly curling tables and wall-hugging cabinets of springy Congolese woods offered up a panorama of cheap trinkets, crockery, beads, clothing and cosmetics destined to be flogged on the Congolese market.²⁷

In this procession of modulating Art Nouveau frames, stands, vitrines, cabinets and furniture, Congolese people are defined through a selective display of their material culture. At the same time, the totalizing Art Nouveau gaze was revealed to the Belgian masses via its most prominent artists.²⁸ The general public would henceforth commonly refer to Art Nouveau as “*Style Congo*” (Aubry, 1994, p. 180; Courtenier, 2005, p. 159; Lagae, 2007, p. 83). That this Art Nouveau vision was sheathed in a Neoclassical skin (designed by Albert-Philippe Aldophe) rounded off the overall message. Not only was the more conservative style the one most associated with Leopold II’s public works, but it was also familiar, serving as an mediator between the masses, avant-garde design and its enchanting promise of African riches brought to the European doorstep. In a further bid for public approval in more titillating form, the surrounding grounds housed villages where Congolese people were on display. In an imaginary of “authentic” village life, African people were forced to enact a real-life diorama of their seemingly backward way of life. Proof of their “evolution” was made through the inclusion of a “civilised” counterpoint, an organized village largely made up of African soldiers marching in step (Dunn, 2003, p. 35).²⁹ At all points throughout the

²⁷ All information here is based on photographic documentation of the expo as well as its catalogue and that of the exhibition *Tervuren 1897*, edited by M Luwel and M Bruneel-Hye de Crom (1967).

²⁸ Horta did not participate. Correspondence with Van Eetvelde reveal that he was both running behind on his work on *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* at the time, as well as that his initial proposal for the pavilion was refused (Aubry, 1994, p. 152; Ogata, 2001, p. 52).

²⁹ Two-hundred-and-sixty-seven men and women were exhibited under degrading conditions and those that did not survive exposure to the cold were buried in a mass grave (Hochschild, 1998, p. 172). In contemporary times, this has been well documented and, rightfully, protested against; for example, in Francis Dujardin’s 1999 documentary *Boma Tervuren - Le Voyage*.

Tervuren exhibition, Africans were presented as being in a state of prehistory prior to European intervention.

Portraying the Congo as virgin territory, inhabited by uncivilised peoples reinforced “breakthroughs” in anthropology enabled by accelerated colonial expansionism. By 1897, with fresh samples of the body parts of deceased African people obtained by the explorer Émile Pierre Joseph Storms in the Congo, Belgian anthropologist Émile Houzé was in the process of developing his theory of polygenism (Courtenier, 2005, p. 78).³⁰ This purported that the “negro” race was a separate species to Europeans that had evolved in a different direction.³¹ Not only were African people considered the least developed of all peoples, but their very humanity was in question. If the theories of Houzé were not common knowledge, notions of European superiority were assumed in any literature concerning the Congo, its explorations and descriptions of its people. The *Congo Pavilion* was saturated with hierarchical mythology across the exhibition halls and according to each artist's individual lexicon of Art Nouveau tools. Figurative wall murals encased in Van de Velde's salon as well as in the Ethnographic Hall, portrayed representations of the Congo that strongly resembled that in colonial propaganda at the time, in style as much as content (Aubry, 1994, p. 163). These included journals like *Le Mouvement Géographique* and *Le Congo Illustré* which sought to document colonial progress in general, from the railway to encountering different kinds of people. With regards to the latter, lurid focus was always placed on elements that accentuated the “savage” nature of African people, from cannibalism to tattooing, scarification and elaborate hairstyles.³²

Whereas such retrospective actions and investigations into the human tragedy of colonial times are hugely important, my project is to address the visual accompaniments to these indignities, with the idea of viewing the Art Nouveau displays from a contemporary African perspective.

³⁰ Storms also helped to collect many of the African objects on display at the colonial exhibition.

³¹ The word “negro” is the closest term to what Houzé et al employed at the time.

³² For example, the lengthy article *Le Cannibalisme* in the inaugural edition of *Le Congo Illustré* (1892, pp. 73 - 77)

Similarly, in the Ethnographic Hall, depictions of witchcraft were prominent. The extensive exhibition catalogue continued both Art Nouveau aesthetic and misinformed opinion chronicled as fact, with detailed descriptions that lay claim to particularities of Congolese fauna, flora and tribes. That the catalogue and paintings within the exhibition, as well as the popular journals and periodicals, were all decorated with serpentine Art Nouveau flourishes may be seen to warrant the movement's rights to the title of *Style Congo* (**See Figment 9**).

Curation of African objects in Hankar's spaces further set up enduring myths concerning Congolese people. Seemingly primitive weapons in the form of spears, bows and arrows and all manner of knives were the most common objects. This encouraged the dual construction of tribal Africans to be violent and warlike, while at the same time undeveloped and not sufficiently adapted to protect themselves against marauding Arab slave-traders. An impression of war trophies being on display was heightened by the incorporation of the flags of Arab slavers in the nearby Military Hall. Within this celebratory atmosphere, the public was instructed to judge Congolese culture by means of a scattered collection of a small portion of their objects. Riotous displays of African goods were set up via aesthetic logics in that types (for example, different knives or figurines) appear to have been grouped according to their plastic and visual qualities. Thus, interesting patterns that merge with the Art Nouveau decoration, are set up in an ahistorical hang and de-contextualised African objects incorporated as part of a stylistic whole. The installation playfully experiments with the display of such objects for their aesthetic values and not as craft pieces / artworks in their own right, with no thought towards crediting their unknown maker.³³

³³ James Clifford describes later 20th century exhibitions as setting up a greater context of general ignorance and misunderstanding about the objects' original function (2003, p. 380). The seeds for the future display of African art in European spaces may be located in such colonial extravaganzas.

In the Hall of Honour, Hankar arranged European art works — including Wolfers’ sentimental allegories of civilization overcoming savage barbarism and similar parables emblazoned across the tapestries of Hélène de Rudder— alongside Congolese pieces, all set in cases designed by Van de Velde and himself. Utility objects of fabrics, bowls, jewellery and figurines labelled as fetish were therefore held up against recognizable figurative High Art, inviting unfavourable comparison of refinement and artistic sophistication (Flynn, 1997, p. 198). The stands, structures and design of the space in its entirety was wrought in what, to the public, was the unfamiliar visual language of Art Nouveau.

An underlying theme of the colonial pavilion was that the style being introduced was one that was intrinsically commercial. As an increasingly growing number of glass and iron facades of stores, malls and arcades across Belgium and the rest of the continent were to further emphasize, Art Nouveau’s modish public face, outside of the domestic interior, was one of retail and trade. Its inventiveness created curiosity, encouraging people to buy in an age of economic fluctuations (Sembach, 2007, p. 36).³⁴ Governments in France and Germany had recognized the strategic potential for national economies and employed local Art Nouveau artisans to help revive flagging industries and languishing craft in a style that was new and modern.³⁵ With this in mind, Van de Velde, Hankar, Serrurier-Bovy et al being selected for selling an idea of Africa seems a logical choice. Moreover, the Art Nouveau stands and objects made for the exhibition were also for sale and most of the individual pieces went to private owners (Flynn, 1997, p. 198). Despite its claims to high art, the underlying spirit of the exhibition was that of a

³⁴ Even its demise was wrought via its “sell-ability”, in that it is perceived to have degenerated into cheap, marketable products; kitsch knick-knacks that were a weak approximation of the “pure” total styles of Horta, Serrurier-Bovy et al (Madsen, 1967, p. 156; Sembach, 2007, p. 37).

³⁵ For details of German government commissions, see: Ogata, 2001, pp. 17 – 25; for France: Silverman, 1989, pp. 51 – 62.

trade fair, displaying the products of the Congo to their most desirable advantage. The flared wooden structures of Hobé not only serves to frame displays of raw African commodities, but also manipulates Congolese Bilonga wood to enhance its appealing qualities of being both sturdy and malleable as well as possessing a rich natural colouring and creamy texture. Similarly, Serrurier-Bovy's sweeping circular-arches cum seating system, based on a sun motif, could be read as the optimum way to view the botanical specimens on offer. In the Hall of Honour, Wolfers' craftsmanship had been hard won. The techniques that enabled his ivory wings to unfurl, arms to encircle and leaf-tendrils to cling had taken a great deal of research and his jewellers' sensibilities to perfect (Adriaenssens, 2011, p. 63). The enticing array may be seen as a celebration of Art Nouveau virtuosity as it led viewers through its African fantasy-land; an opportunity for the artist-artisans to reveal themselves to the general public in their most skilfully inventive guise.

At first glance, Hankar's Ethnographic Hall does not appear to be very different from his shop-front displays. Fairly conventional wooden stands, podiums and furniture are embellished with ornamentation that flattens and flames up according to how best its wares, in this case exotic African curiosities, may be viewed. As in his stores and barber shops, central motifs and rhythmic forms are repeated across greater structural constructions and in the details of decorative flourishes. In the heart of the colonial pavilion, these forms are taken from the Congolese objects on display (*See Figment 8*). Photographic documentation of the Ethnographic Hall, as well as Hankar's preparatory sketches, bear witness to a daring attempt at incorporating African aesthetics. Motifs and shape-formations from the material culture on display are repeated in the decorative arrangements of the Art Nouveau scaffolding, with motifs and patterns from Bangalese textiles directly quoted in Hankar's carpets. Further, small fetish-like figurines are seen to have been originally destined for the tips of the exhibition archways. Amongst the petal-like formations that make up the crests of screens

and stands —commonly understood to be Neo-Gothic— we find thorny protrusions. This, along with the spiky silhouette of the central doorway, crowned with a headdress-like tiara, goes against the grain of the encompassing logic of Art Nouveau form, where the binding principle of the style is to enclose. The spear-like motif (more evident in the drawings than actual realization) reaches outwards, piercing the negative space around it. While one could argue that such form reverts back to Baroque sensibilities, the fact remains that elements of African aesthetics have been thematically integrated into Hankar's fairground décor, predating Picasso's supposedly seminal intervention into modern art by ten years. In so doing, he is the only obviously discernible member of the Art Nouveau group seen here to partially take up the challenge of exhibition curator. In the catalogue, Theodore Masui describes Congolese ethnographic objects as follows:

"These models of absolute sincerity and purity may offer an unforeseen aid for the development of modern aesthetic sensibilities." (Masui, 1897, p. 3)

In Hankar's pursuit of aesthetic unity, he ensured that elements of the alien objects on display —portrayed as being from another time zone as much as another race— were incorporated into his design scheme. As is also evident in his absorption of Oriental culture in his other works, such reference is not merely superficial decoration but affects an additional layer of structural contour. According to the terms of Art Nouveau reference, a generalized vision of another culture is concocted. In Hankar's primitivist fantasy, the atmosphere of essentialized "Africanness" is based on aesthetic impressions of a random accumulation of objects gathered together for the exhibition according to what

self-proclaimed explorers and military men saw fit to bring back and what a handful of private collectors were prepared to loan.³⁶

Furthermore, amongst the pervading Art Nouveau philosophy of celebrating organicism, the effect of Congolese culture being bound up in nature —and therefore moving in the opposite direction to European civilisation— is subtly encouraged. Within the context of a colonial exhibition, the trope of a tropical haven of botanic abundance ripe for harvesting, is brought to the fore.

Outside of the phantasmagoria of Tervuren, Hankar and other Art Nouveau architects did not pursue Masui's suggestion of seeking inspiration from African aesthetics. While use of Congolese raw materials persisted, only possible allusions and a momentary reference to the tropical vegetation of the African colony may be located. It is highly likely that, after prolonged exposure via colonial propaganda and close encounter at the colonial pavilions, imagery of sinuous rubber vines, twisting creepers and suchlike reverberated through the line-formations of the nature style as much as other plant-forms.³⁷ However, given the logic of Art Nouveau abstraction, these would have been merged with numerous other sources, all drawn together and distilled into stylistic wholes. Reference to Congolese nature is not obviously apparent, unless explicitly stated by the artist, as in the case of *Hôtel Van Eetvelde*. While Art Nouveau form mutates across different artists, there is little visible evidence to suggest that the aesthetics of Congolese objects were appropriated. In a recent article, Deborah Silverman makes a case for Van de Velde's decorative embellishments being rooted in forms from Congolese tattooing and scarification practices documented in colonial propaganda (2012; pp. 176 – 86). While Van de Velde

³⁶ Choice of objects relied heavily on what military men on the inside chose to send home (Cannizzo, 1997, p. 155). For more details on the gathering of objects for the exhibition see: Courtenier, 2005, pp. 151 – 5.

³⁷ Deborah Silverman interprets various Art Nouveau forms as containing the outline of elephant heads (2012, pp. 16 - 22) as well as the *chicotte* of the colonial oppressor as part of a fascination with the exotic, wealth-bringing colony and a celebration of the regime (2013, pp. 28 -34).

declared his admiration for African body art as a demonstration of the vital, “primitive” urge to ornament, he never named “tribal” art as an influence on his work in the wealth of aesthetic theory he generated.³⁸ If any Congolese motifs or imagery emerged in Art Nouveau décor outside of the *Congo Pavilion*, it is elusive, especially when compared to a rich and well documented tradition of Art Nouveau borrowing from the art of cultures that were supposedly more civilised in Asia and the Middle East.

Whereas acceptable influences of the art of Japan, China and other eastern art-forms are repeatedly flattened into the sensuous embrace of the Art Nouveau dreamscape, rendered timeless and immobile in their de-contextualization, exclusion of Congolese imagery perpetuated the colonial myth of the inferior tribal subject, whose motifs were only deemed suitable for the bawdy fictions of the public fairground.³⁹ It could well be the case that it was the freedom engendered by the spectacle of the *Congo Pavilion* that led Hankar to briefly experiment with African form.⁴⁰

While Hankar’s fleeting manifestation of “tribal” primitivism has been introduced as setting a patronizing tone towards African culture, its articulation of form is fundamentally different to what the 20th century would witness in primitivist painters such as Pablo Picasso, Maurice de Vlaminck et al. At the core of 20th century avant-garde primitivism was the desire to shock bourgeois society, creating chaos in the ivory tower by drawing in the most exotic and bizarre figurative imagery of the Other they could find (Clifford, 2003, p. 355).

³⁸ Silverman identifies two short quotes to this effect, one in the article, *Une prédication d’art*, published in *La Société Nouvelle* (1895) and a single line in his unpublished notes, “... ornament is the scarring of the object.” (Van de Velde in Silverman, 2012, pp. 183 -185).

³⁹ This may be seen as a forerunner for the same phenomenon in 1930s Paris, as described by Patricia Morton in *Hybrid Modernities* (2000).

⁴⁰ Contemporary scholarship seems to back this theory up, with Francois Aubry describing Hankar’s African ensemble as “fun” and “playful” (1994, p. 153).

Art Nouveau, by contrast, set out to seduce the viewer, coercing him/her along a path that ultimately led to support the patron at hand. Its challenge to the art world was an attempt to topple the elevation of painting and sculpture above utilitarian objects. Accordingly, the 1897 *Congo Pavilion* may be seen to present a lost opportunity in that, in one of its first meaningful public encounters with African objects, the art movement that sought to break down traditional hierarchies between art and craft was unable to credit Congolese utilitarian objects with their own sophisticated visual language. While certain pieces were admired for their fine craftsmanship (Masui in Courtenier, 2005, p. 87), there was no attempt to view the “ethnographic” exhibits as an art form. The potential to consider a completely new way of engaging with natural form and material via functional objects was not recognized.

To be sure, almost nothing was known about the original context of the African objects on display, except the general region and category of tribe they originated from (much of which was inaccurate).⁴¹ Nevertheless, had the artists found the African work visually appealing, it would have been studied more closely for aesthetic logics. What is highlighted in this encounter between Art Nouveau and Congolese cultural production is that, outside of Hankar’s fairground showmanship, an “African” aesthetic was not deemed stylistically appropriate for quotation or perceived to be easily absorbed within the totalizing containers of the Art Nouveau gesamtkunstwerk. It is here that serious fault lines in the movement’s stylistic language are revealed. In their referencing of other cultures, they were only interested in superficial aesthetics; means by which their worlds of ornament could be enhanced. The fundamental purpose

⁴¹ Haphazard information and vague references to areas, geographic features and tribes are evident in the information logged in the Ancienne Collection file at the Royal Museum for Central Africa archives. As items were accumulated in Africa at that time, discovering the means by which they were conceived and produced or the role they played in their original societies was not a priority (Fabian, 2000, p. 108). Such thinking would only emerge in the early 20th century with Leo Frobenius.

and significance of objects within the community was not interrogated. A lack of curiosity regarding the function of objects in other cultures suggests that Art Nouveau was not equipped to live up to its own aims of shifting hierarchies within the arts. The immersive principle relied on total aesthetics, entrancing the viewer in a sensory experience without raising questions regarding the role of art in a rapidly-changing society, where all manner of societal structures were being broken down, fractured and probed, while new ones emerged.

Caught on the cusp between two eras, never fully part of either, and occupying a tenuous position between high-minded craft and commercially-minded art, Art Nouveau may be seen as a failed style in many respects. In its impractical and expensive solutions to the age of mass-production, it was unable to breach the necessary divide between historicist embellishment and an industrialized 20th century (Madsen, 1967, p. 46; Wolf, 2011, p. 72). The isolating enclosures of true Art Nouveau, fashioned to create pockets of unreal time, may be seen as time capsules stuck between epochs. Even in its illustration of Belgian colonial rhetoric, it's language quickly became obsolete. Horta's proposal for the Belgian *Congo Pavilion* at the Paris *World's Fair* of 1900 was turned down on the grounds of being too "showy" in the face of international criticism of the king's activities (Aubry, 1996, p. 64). His suggestion of an apparition of glass and iron employed to advertise Congolese wood products trumpeted an expression of excess that was felt to convey the wrong impression (***See Figment 9***). Horta's unfeasible proposal had included his portable gesamtkunstwerk being packed up on completion of the exhibition and sent to the Congo for the administration to use; a preposterous idea when factors such as the equatorial climate are taken into account (Lagae, 2007, p. 82). In this proposal, we find Belgian Art Nouveau's figurehead demonstrating a complete inability to imagine or come to terms with the African colony in any real way. In his Art Nouveau dreamscape, the Congo was an imaginary of experimentation and wild schemes, which products could

be sent to and raw materials extracted from without real people having to inhabit his light-filled spirit worlds of immersive fantasy.

The overwhelming feature of Art Nouveau enclosures was an artificial glossing over of contemporary realities, piling expressive ornamentation against questions of the role of the individual and his/her objects in a mechanized society. Materials were shaped into harmonious contours, regardless of their consistency or innate qualities, creating synthetic eco-systems of vegetal symbolism. Representations of the dynamism of organic growth were underpinned by an unnatural adherence to the fictions of racist ideology. In the development of a Utopian stylistic language of contrivance, masking and annexing, the perfect aesthetic vehicle for the flowery rhetoric of a colonial enterprise that suppressed horrific realities was born. The artifice of immersive Art Nouveau fantasy initially thrived in Belgium; itself a fairly recent invention where numerous cultural constructions, including the fiction of a distant African paradise of natural wealth, were easily proliferated. From the clenched twists of its gilded inner enclosures to the labyrinthine unfolding of a totalizing organic language, Belgian Art Nouveau may be seen to not only lack the ability to capture the spirit of the era to come, but also fail to recognize humanity in the African colony.

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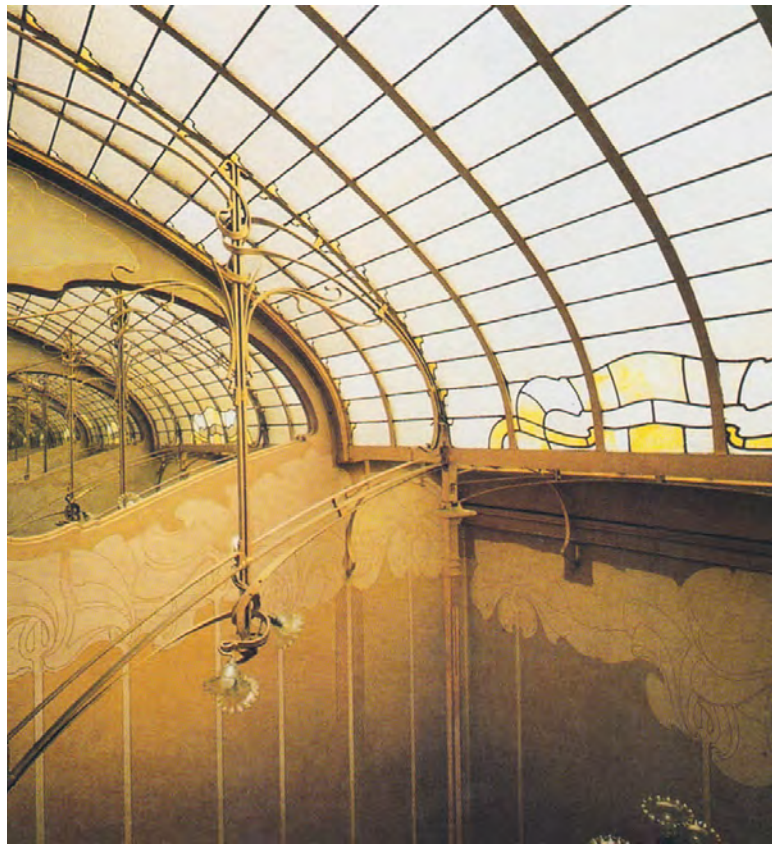
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Hierarchies of fantasy in the fin de siècle total artwork: When Belgian Art Nouveau encountered the African colony



FIGMENT 1: Henry Van de Velde, n.t (1899); Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, cabinet-vitrine (1899); Victor Horta, Musée Horta, exterior and interior (1898)

In these iconic works, the formal language of decoration employed to accentuate function is evident. The stems of Van de Velde's candelabra clasp the cups and stand in a dynamic embrace. In Serrurier-Bovy's piece, wooden flourishes link different compartments and cabinets. Similarly, Horta's metal work playfully entwines with structure, providing visual and structural support.



FIGMENT 2: Henry Van de Velde, Reception Dress (c. 1902); Paul Hankar, Ancienne Chemiserie (1896) & Mural from Hôtel Ciamberlani (1897); Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, n. t. (c. 1891); Victor Horta, Hôtel Tassel (1893)

In all of these example, Oriental influence such as asymmetrical composition and bold graphic outlines are evident. So too is the proliferation of the sinuous Belgian whiplash line.





FIGMENT 3: Victor Horta, Hôtel Solvay (1894)

In Horta's first total artwork, he oversaw the design of every aspect of the opulent edifice, from furniture and carpets to the undulating form of the exterior.



FIGMENT 4: Henry Van de Velde, Villa Bloemenwerf (1895) & Writing Desk (1899)

Van de Velde's rustic home maintains aesthetic unity via pared down decoration and reference to the plain lines of Flemish vernacular. His writing desk (below) further demonstrates his weighting of mass in order for ornamental form to accentuate functionalism.

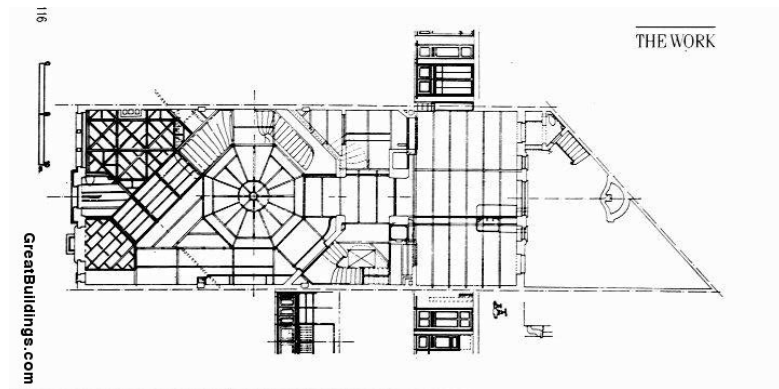




FIGMENT 5: Philippe Wolfers, *Civilisation et Barbarie* (1897); Hall of Honour, Congo Pavilion (1897); Victor Horta, *Hôtel Van Eetvelde* (1899)

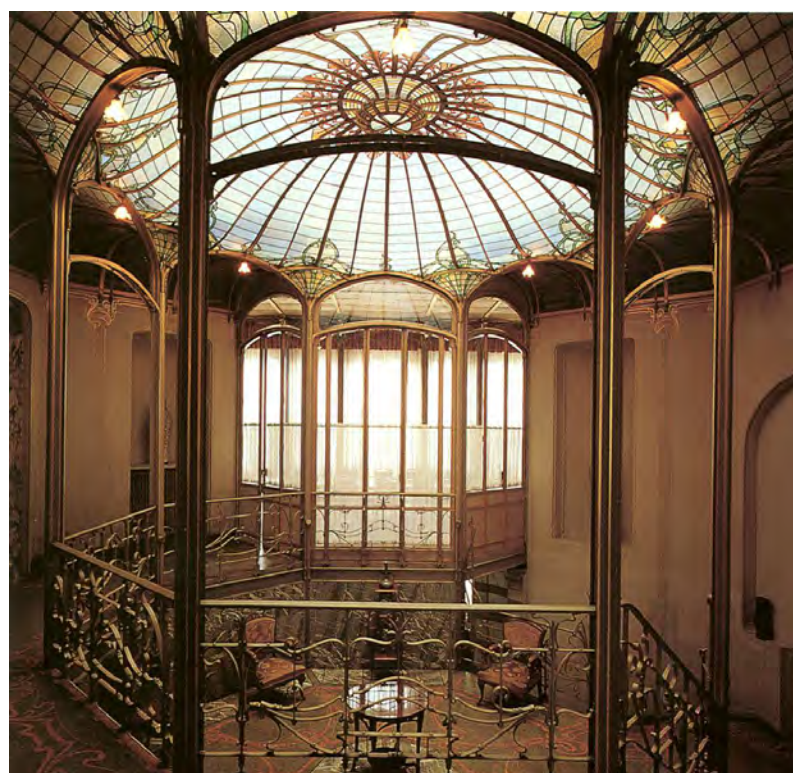
Wolfers' sculpture was part of the ongoing chryselephantine commissions. Further examples were on display at the colonial exhibition of the 1897 Brussels World's Fair. *Civilisation et Barbarie* was commissioned as a gift for Baron Van Eetvelde and was housed in the winter garden of his family home (below).

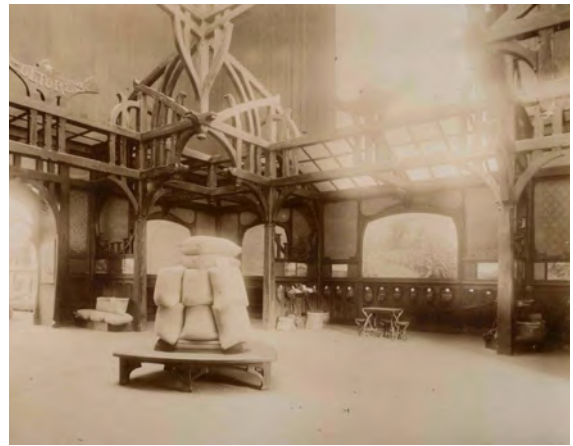




FIGMENT 6: Victor Horta, Hôtel Van Eetvelde (1899) ground plan, interior details & winter garden

Spiral movement is echoed in the overall shell-like structure and small embellishments

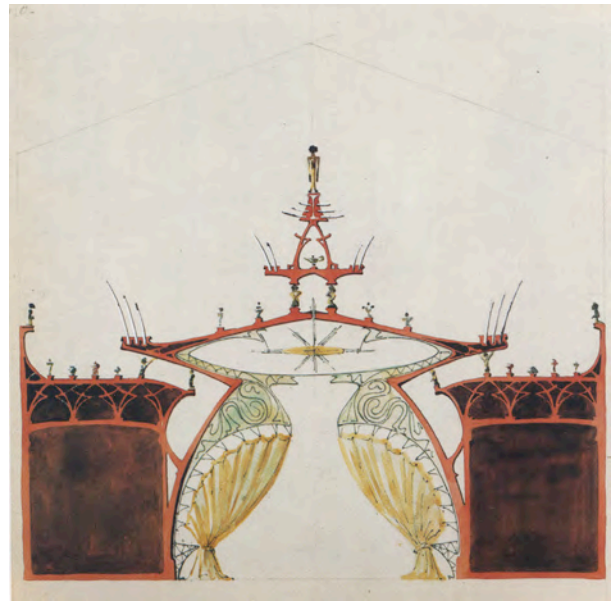
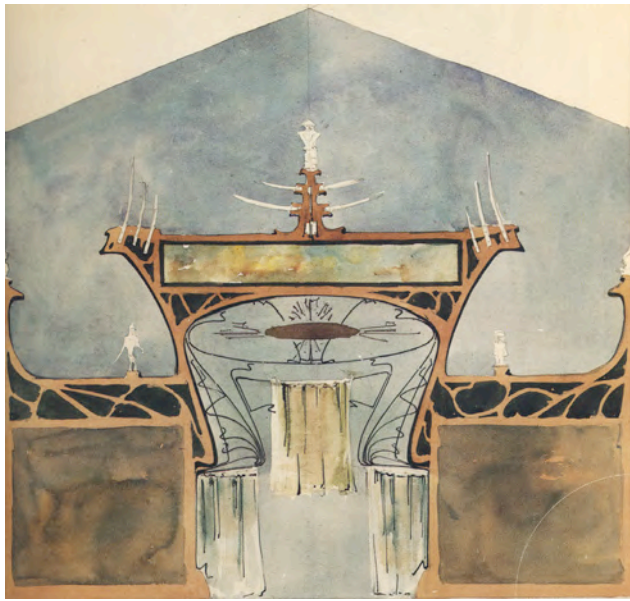




FIGMENT 7: The 1897 Congo Pavilion: Henry Van de Velde, Hall of Exports; Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, Botanic Hall; Georges Hobé, Hall of Great Cultures; Paul Hankar, Ethnigraphic Hall & Hall of Honour

In each salon, different elements of the colony are displayed for the Belgian public according to Art Nouveau design logic.





FIGMENT 8: Paul Hankar, Preparatory sketches for Ethnographic Hall (1897) & Ethnographic Hall Interior

In Hankar's "scientific" exhibition demonstrating Congolese material culture, African motifs are incorporated into the exhibition scaffolding.



FIGMENT 9: Cover for 1897 Congo Pavilion Catalogue; Illustrations and Front Page of L'Congo Illustre; Victor Horta, Plans for 1900 Congo Pavilion (1898)

Art Nouveau aesthetic sensibilities are evident in colonial propaganda, with a fascination for botanical form and also distinctive line formations. Horta's proposal for a Congo Pavilion at the 1900 Paris World's Fair (below) was never realised.

