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## Domestic and Interior Space in Nineteenth-Century Belgium

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## Introduction:

### Domestic and Interior Space in Nineteenth-Century Belgium

Dominique Bauer and Claire Moran

The interior has, over the last few decades, attracted scholars from a variety of disciplines, all seeking to understand its place in the history of modernity. From art history, cultural studies, design history, to architecture and literature, scholars have been questioning the role of the domestic interior and interior space in the formation of modern art and modern identity. A large body of recent criticism has thus enhanced our understanding of the importance of the nineteenth-century domestic interior from perspectives such as gender, aesthetics, modern design and social practice and the operation and influence of spatial imageries.<sup>1</sup> Drawing upon well-known aesthetic and philosophical treatises on the interior from Baudelaire and Duranty to Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, this scholarship has emphasized the significance of the domestic interior in terms of both the creation of the modern world (in particular, its tensions

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<sup>1</sup> Pivotal works include Sparke and McKellar's, *Interior design and identity*.(2011); Diane Fuss's, *The Sense of An Interior* (2004); *Intimus*: edited by Taylor and Preston (2006), Reed's *Not at home: The suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (1996), Charles Rice's *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, domesticity* (2006); Hilde Heynen's *Negotiating Domesticity* (2005); Anne Massey's, *The Modern Interior* (2008) and Anne Massey and Penny Sparke's, *Biography and the Modern Interior* (2013). Equally important are works which draw attention to the representation of the domestic interior in art and literature, such as Downey's *Domestic Interiors: Representing Homes from the Victorians to the Moderns* (2013) and Aynsley and Grant's *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior since the Renaissance* (2006). In terms of literature and the interior, Marcus's *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (1999) highlighted the important function of literature, specifically the novels by Balzac and Zola in understanding the nineteenth-century Parisian interior, while Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2008) and Temma Balducci's edited book, *Interior Portraiture and Masculine Identity in France, 1789-1914* (2017) have also been important in arguing for the interior as expression of modernist identity and interiority. *Impressionist Interiors* edited by Janet Mclean (2008) was one of the first books to offer a full engagement with late nineteenth-century art and interiors, with essays by Clayson and Singletry showing how painters were challenging not only the subject matter, but also the formal language of modern art through the motif of the interior. *Visualising the Interior* edited by Lasc (2016) also engaged with a series of different artistic media to show how nineteenth-century private interiors were central to the development of modern art. Articles in the journals, *Interiors: Design, Architecture, Culture* and *Home Cultures*, have also added to debates on the domestic interior, although the principle focus has been on twentieth and twenty-first century design history. Most recently, Moran's edited volume *Domestic Space in France and Belgium* (2018), has shifted the debate towards the specific cultural contexts of nineteenth-century France and Belgium in the emergence of the modern interior.

between inside and out, private and public, self and other, male and female), but also how the formal language and subjects of modern art is indebted to the domestic interior, in which it was conceived.

Yet critical gaps remain. On the one hand, very little of this research makes links between architecture, design history and literary analysis. In relation to Belgian culture, very little work has been done in connecting literary analysis with the contemporary understanding of domestic space or with insights from art history, material culture studies and research on phototype (or heliotype) or photography. This does not only concern the ‘great three’ of Belgian fin-de-siècle literature, Rodenbach, Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, but also neglected authors who were at their time influential, such as Octave Pirmez with his anthropomorphised architecture. In this respect, noteworthy examples include the interdisciplinary work on the photographs in *Bruges-la-Morte*, by Edwards (2000), Jacobs (2005) and Newman (2011), or research that combines architectural developments and spatial imagery in literature and art (e.g. Boraczek (1999)), which constitute templates for further establishing this connection between text, image, objects, décor and concepts of space and domesticity.

On the other hand, when critics discuss the nineteenth-century interior in the French-speaking world, the cases of Paris and France are privileged over Brussels and Belgium. Yet late nineteenth-century Belgium equaled France in its tumultuousness and upheaval, and underwent a profound metamorphosis that saw an unbridled dynamism of the arts against a backdrop of societal unrest, colonial expansion and social progress. The domestic interior was both a material manifestation and emblem of this dynamism, becoming a focal point for a new national identity in the recently founded state (1860). Under King Leopold II, the city of Brussels was constructed in the image of Paris, with impressive avenues, monumental buildings and most significantly, luxurious private homes. As in France, representations of the interior and its complexities infiltrated a series of artistic works: from texts such as

Maeterlinck's *Interior* and Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* to the popular genre paintings of Alfred Stevens and Gustave de Jonghe, as well as the provocative works of Ensor, and the Symbolist interiors of Khnopff and Degouve de Nuncques. The relationship between these artists and the nascent architectural style of Art Nouveau, led by Horta, Serrurier-Bovy and Van de Velde, and the work of the artistic groups Les XX, La Libre Esthétique and L'Association de l'art in promoting the decorative arts, together with the success of socialist parties such as the POB and the links between collecting, decoration and nationalist identity created however a very different social and artistic context in which the interior emerged as a key site for cultural innovation.

This special issue aims to show that, rather than being a mere part of French fin-de-siècle cultural and literary developments, Belgian domestic space, in literature, art and design, takes an original position between the particularly French context and its own situation. This included the reality of being a new state that needed to establish an identity, together with a past that could also inspire the future, as well including as its pre-modern legacy of mysticism, and its connection with the revival of German Romanticism, as emphasized by Gorceix (1992), (2005) and Friedman (1990) and with Schopenhauerian thought (Berg, 1982; 1989). In this respect, Maeterlinck's translations of Ruusbroeck's *Die gheestelike brulocht* and of Novalis' *Die Lehrlinge zu Saïs* and the *Fragmente*, (1891; 1914; 1895), are important in that they profoundly influenced his own work, and, through him, other writers, such as Rodenbach. The cases of Maeterlinck and Rodenbach, addressed in this special issue, clearly show this aspect of Belgian fin-de-siècle literature and the way in which this particular context is related to their treatment of enclosure and interiority. In Dominique Bauer's *Ce glauque aquarium de mes pensées. Pastness and enclosed space as a disruptive subtext in the work of Georges Rodenbach*, the sense of pastness and absence that pervades Rodenbach's work and that inscribes itself into a broader European context, is also intimately connected with the writer's

own disconnection, his own 'exile' from Flanders and Belgium while staying in Paris. From a French point of view, this disconnection is also linked with the 'exoticist' iconology of stagnant canals and enclosed, moribund and dormant cities and convents of a medieval Flanders that has not entered the modern world. In her contribution *Growing Pains. Interior and Exterior in Maeterlinck's Decadent Nature Writing*, Natasha Ryan argues that, seen from Maeterlinck's later nature writing in *La vie des abeilles* (1901), the notion of entrapment in his earlier work *Serres Chaudes* (1889) also emerges as a linguistic and cultural entrapment, that of the latin 'allégorie' against the Germanic 'symbole.' The mystical 'symbole', in contrast with the 'allégorie' embodies an unconscious, unmediated connection with the universe. It is precisely through this tension that Maeterlinck takes a disruptive stance to the (French) decadent movement.

As with Rodenbach, notwithstanding the latter's different position on enclosure, the particular Belgian context is also one that catalyzes metadiscourses and critical subtexts. While Ryan underlines the reproduction of critical metalanguage in Maeterlinck's *Serres Chaudes*, Bauer stresses how Rodenbach's literary imagery of interior and domestic spaces constitutes a disruptive discourse on (literary) representation in favour of a world, which like Flanders itself, is 'absent.' The Belgian context in this way contributes *par excellence* to the typically modernist context of self-reflexivity, of metadiscourses and critical subtexts, whether these concern the self, the consciousness, literary style, as in the case of decadence, or literary representation itself.

In this context, interiority, subjectivity and imagination, society and political identity are negotiated in new and often radical ways, which strike at the essence of modernity. Taking into account the specific and 'hybrid' socio-cultural context of Belgium, and its representativity of the more globally nineteenth-century awareness of domestic space, of interiority and enclosure, of (national) identity and the new public space, our focus brings together different,

yet surprisingly interconnected aspects. This issue unites literary scholars, art historians and historians of design in order to address the multifaceted and ambiguous nature of domestic space in nineteenth century Belgium. Throughout the contributions, domestic space emerges as a cultural reality in which many layers of significance interconnect, overlap or paraphrase each other. Together, these contributions show, through the analysis of domestic space, a culture that was highly self-reflexive and one which was caught up in a paradoxical dynamics of subjectivity and objectification; of intimacy, distancing, representing and staging; of enclosure, viewing and publicity; of the home and the nation; of private and public; of the fringes of society and of society's bourgeois dimension. Private, psychological, subjective, and turned in on itself, domestic space eventually proves to be a liminal space, a space in which moments of transgression, of blurring boundaries are negotiated on gendered, socio-political, artistic, aesthetic and epistemological levels.

The contributions to this special issue unearth a domestic space that is inherently ambiguous, even seemingly contradictory, in various ways. As a gendered space, the home traditionally articulates the strict opposition between interiority and exteriority, an opposition that in the modern state with its personal home versus the increasingly abstract and economic public space, is rendered more striking. In this context, the home is also intimately and increasingly connected with the role of women, as decorators, embroiders or artists-painters depicting the home or the private residence. As Wendy Wiertz however shows in *Crossing gender expectations? Nineteenth-Century Belgian Aristocratic Woman and the Embellishment of the Home*, specific aristocratic woman could, through their involvement in construction and renovation works to the exteriors of buildings, break through the strict boundaries of interiority and exteriority that were imposed upon them. Wiertz's article is also important in that it is entirely based on fresh archival materials, bringing to the fore the hitherto critically overlooked

cases of Belgian aristocratic woman and their circles, such as Countess Jeanne de Merode or Louise Goubau, Baroness de Fraye de Schiplaeken.

The collection of interior objects is also an important part of the Belgian context. In *Decorative Art Objects as 'Documents.'* *The Historical Interior in J.J. Van Ysendyck's Documents classés de l'Art dans les Pays-Bas du Xe au XVIIe siècle (1880-1889)*, Zsuzsanna Böröcz looks at the increasing importance of the domestic interior and its objects for display. She does so by focusing on the career and work, especially the *Documents classés*, of the architect-archeologist and important representative of the Flemish neo-Renaissance, Jules-Jacques van Ysendyck. Also here, an ambiguity or overlap comes to the fore between private and public, subjective and representative dimensions of domestic place. On the one hand, around the 1870s, the collector becomes a figure of social importance. His scientific collection is ideally accessible to the public in order to educate a new nation, the identity of which is linked to or inspired by a vivified past. On the other hand, collections and their objects become at the same time also more subjectively charged. They are connected with the stories and the histories of the inhabitants that lived amidst them. They remain therefore as palpable remnants of these individuals' presence, constituting 'un véritable poème domestique', (Fumière 1880, 50-51) as the Belgian architect Théophile Fumière wrote regarding the auction of Victor Hugo's household effects. These two dimensions of collections and their catalogues appear in Van Ysendyck's *Documents classés* and bind national identity with ancestral private life.

Private collections and the material aspects of the Belgian domestic interior also inspire Nathalie Aubert's article on the poet Max Elskamp. For Aubert, it is the materiality of Elskamp's private collection of objects in his refuge-like home that serves as the basis for his poetry and unlike other nineteenth-century writers such as Huysmans or the Goncourt, for whom collections were about fashioning personal taste and creating a private universe, Elskamp uses the objects in his domestic space to bring the outside world in. It is significant

also, that it is the physicality and the phenomenological aspects of objects, of which many were discarded or ‘forgotten’, that attracts Elskamp, and which rather than create a sense of identity, are instead part of a philosophy of ‘self-dissolution’ and a quest to turn back time. His retreat from life and immersion into philosophy, literature and art is paradoxically thus created via his collection of disparate, everyday objects.

Nineteenth century domestic space is unique in that it brought together a very strong sense of subjectivity, authenticity and intimacy with its seeming contrary modes of theatricality, staging, performance and representation. Also here, boundaries between interiority and exteriority are crossed and blurred, between the self, the exploration of the self and self-staging, and therefore also not surprisingly between the domestic space and the artist’s studio. Different contributions point out this fundamental feature of domestic space, domestic space as an artist’s studio, the house as an aesthetic temple involving the observer and the observed, or the atelier as a place where subjectivity is explored through posing and performance. In *Between the Studio and the Salon: the Intimate Theatre of James Ensor’s Interior*, Susan Canning argues, against the dual background of Baudelaire’s *dédoublement* and Picard and Maeterlinck’s emphasis on performance, artifice, gesture and suggestion in theater, that Ensor moved between the interiors of the studio and salon, and from a realist depiction of bourgeois life, leisure and pleasure to scenes of arranged artifice, in order to fashion his own modernist intimate theater. Canning shows how, like Strindberg and the Symbolists, Ensor sought through his representation of the interior to ‘make visible the personal, social and symbolic meanings’ (REF) hidden within the mundane circumstances of everyday life. Through detailed visual analysis, the article suggests that Ensor’s home and studio are places of subjectivity, intimacy and performance where interiority and imagination are given free play and the critical, expressive and social narratives of modern experience are revealed.

In *De l'intérieur d'artiste à l'intérieur artiste: l'atelier d'artiste, entre pierre et papier, dans le Bruxelles fin de siècle*, Laurence Brogniez analyses how, in a context of interconnected social, architectural and commercial practices in late nineteenth-century Brussels, the artist's studio becomes a paradigm of the esthete's house. Again, the ambiguity between interiority and exposure, private and public is underlined, an ambiguity that interconnects with the problematic relationship between the artist and the socio-political establishment in which that very artist asserts himself through his atelier. The example of Picard's *Maison d'art* is a case in point in this respect, which, as a hybrid space, 'se propose de présenter œuvres et objets dans un intérieur familial, domestique.' (REF) An increasingly subjectivist 'castel de rêve', the studio, like other private places, especially in the context of *Les XX* and *La Libre Esthétique*, also becomes an important setting for the organisation of exhibitions. The *atelier*, which in literature 'devient métonyme d'une intériorité', (REF) as in *Mona Lisa* by Prosper-Henri Devos or in *Jeunesse Inquiète* by Léon Paschal (1900), not surprisingly becomes the literary setting for denouncing the dangers of the *rapprochement* between the artist, the bourgeois and the market.

The ambiguity that underscores the fusion of intimacy, staging, performing and exposing, may become itself the explicit rationale of domestic space as an aesthetic temple, embodying a self-reflexive, meta-architectural discourse through the performance of intimacy. In her interpretation of Fernand Khnopff's Villa in *Fernand Khnopff and the Aesthetics of Intimacy*, Claire Moran in this respect points out that, 'actively engaging the visitor in the spatial dynamics of the Villa, 'the effect of intimacy', rather than actual intimacy is created.' (REF) Rather than being about intimacy itself, Villa Khnopff is about 'the performance of intimacy', about its suggestion, about in this sense initiating the viewer in 'an artistic philosophy of inwardness.' (REF) It is this process of revelation and suggestion, which in this

context translates as a fusion between spectatorship and the ‘animate’ domestic object, so typical of the fin-de-siècle, which pervades Villa Knoppf.

Finally, as a space of representation and staging, domestic space also displays the collective, national identity of the nation. The case of the Flemish Neo-Renaissance style, in literature, art and the decorative arts, is highly revealing in this respect. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, this neo-style, emerging in the golden age of Flemish craftsmanship, was particularly important in the decorative arts and in interior and domestic space projects. As to the latter, special attention was given to the dining room because of its symbolic connotations of hospitality and moral values. This subject is treated by Daniela Prina in *La Néo-Renaissance Flamande et la recherche d’une culture de l’habiter moderne et rationnelle des dernières décennies du 19ème siècle*. A number of significant projects are addressed, such as the *Vlaamse Huis* (1887), the private home of the architect Charles Albert which harboured a variety of styles from the late Gothic to the Baroque, ‘dont l’invention et les formes reconnaissables de la tradition servent d’instruments à la recherche de modèles pour la production industrielle et artistique nationale’. (REF) The public interior of Jean Baes’ *Théâtre Flamand* (1887) offers a synthesis for Prina: ‘[c]et intérieur devient ainsi une vitrine prestigieuse pour les productions de l’art décoratif belge contemporain... où tout ...concourt à la création d’une unité qui devient une métaphore de l’identité belge’. (REF) These projects exemplify expressions of unity, of arts and industries, of the subsequent historical styles and of national identity that that are exemplified in the interior space as a space of synthesis, of exhaustive representation, of vivification of the past in the construction of a national present. The relationship between private collections, exhibits and the emerging museums also play a fundamental role in this dual evolution of national identity and the private interior.

Together, these articles reveal the extent to which nineteenth century Belgium is a key site in the history of the modern domestic interior. From the multifold perspectives of material

culture, gender, aesthetics, literature and visual art, Belgium of the fin-de-siècle is replete with examples, each of which interrogates the relationship between the nascent modern citizen and his or her domestic space. While this special issue draws attention to some of these and highlights, in particular, the interconnections between self, home, state and artistic expression in nineteenth-century Belgium, other cases and individuals merit attention and it is hoped that through the prism of the domestic interior a more complete, richer history of modernity and the agents and actors which formed it, may emerge.

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