

*Henri Van de Velde and
the Struggle of Belgian Modernism
Between the Wars*

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It has often been said that in terms of modern design Belgium is Europe's best-kept secret. In an attempt to explain this situation I will analyse the international exhibitions held in Brussels in 1935 and Paris in 1937. The 1935 exhibition left visible traces on the map of the Belgian capital. Its main characteristics were prestigious displays of industrial products and processes, and a global survey of human activities, including the Fine Arts. In Paris two years later, Art and Science were brought into close proximity, the Belgians this time charging Henri Van de Velde with responsibility for their pavilion. On this occasion the attempt was made to present production methods of manufactured goods with the specific aim of teaching the general public about the rôle of aesthetics in objects of daily use. I will compare and contrast the two exhibitions.

In order to give a fuller picture of Belgian design during the 1930s, I will also outline some of the political, socio-economic and aesthetic features of the period. Although the negative consequences of the worldwide economic crisis of 1929 were a heavy burden on the small country's economy and political structure, various strategies were evolved to get it through the worst of the crisis.

The situation of Belgium in the 1920s and 1930s

The design landscape immediately after the First World War is best characterised by the negative attitude towards Modernism, not only because the international avant-garde at that time was strongly associated with Germany and the Soviet Union, but also because a traditional regionalism, mixed with a mannered Art Nouveau, had prevailed in Belgium since the end of the nineteenth century. In general, the architects, designers and artists who had already established a strong artistic reputation before the First World War still had a dominant influence on aesthetics after it. A long time before 1914, Victor Horta (1861–1947)



Victor Horta, Belgian Pavilion, Paris Exposition Universelle, 1925.

had undeniably been one of the leading designers of his generation, and he also seemed to possess a very strong will. Since becoming director of the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts of Brussels after the First World War, he dominated the Belgian design scene, and frequently tried to impose on his colleagues his views concerning public buildings. He also derived profit from the fact that his only real competitor, Henri Van de Velde, had been working in Germany since 1901.

Horta's personality influenced an entire generation of idealistic architects, urbanists and designers who were preparing themselves for the reconstruction of their badly damaged country. Few groups resisted his personality, which was virtually synonymous with Belgian style. Amongst those who did was a small group of Flemish architects, designers and artists who were influenced by the rise of the Flemish Movement. Many of these had fled to the neutrality of the Netherlands when the Germans invaded in 1914. There they participated in the cultural life of Holland, facilitated by the fact that they shared a common language with the Dutch. Not insignificantly, Henri Van de Velde had always found hospitality in Holland. After the war, when the émigrés returned, they brought the ideas they had developed with them. Suffice it to say here that such groups have usually been depicted as part of a broad, negative, nationalistic upsurge. Belgian ethnicity, especially out-

side the country, was widely thought to lead to little more than folkloristic tribal war, rather than to a healthy growth of self-consciousness amongst the Flemish-speaking peoples. Sadly, both this phenomenon and the personality of Victor Horta are mostly beyond the scope of this essay.

Overall, in fact, there were three different nationalistic attitudes, the first two of which were essentially reactionary. One group, of so-called traditionalists, favoured a nostalgic reconstruction of the demolished historic cities like Ieper, Leuven, etc. In the construction of '*vieux neuf*' the Belgians already had enough experience, as had been demonstrated at various Expositions Universelles. A second group of traditionalists was openly in favour of nineteenth-century eclecticism and aimed at the reproduction of rich showpieces in the historic centres of cities. A third group was internationally orientated and was associated with the international avant-garde in design. This included a generation of younger urban architects and interior designers like Bourgeois, De Coninck, Eggerickx, Hoste, Hoeben and Pompe, and planners such as Van der Swaelmen and Verwilgen. Through their strong social commitment they could have brought Belgium to the fore as a 'modern' country. Influential people had other ideas, however.

Immediately after the war 'poor little Belgium' was frequently considered as a victim by the rather paternal victors of the violent conflict and a romantic patriotism was frequently attributed to the 'brave Belgians'. During the traumatic aftermath of the war a climate of confusion generally dominated the country. Citizens mourned their dead compatriots and were absorbed by such basic activities as providing shelter for themselves in their devastated towns and villages. Although there existed a generally optimistic mood, helped by the accession of the sympathetic young Leopold III in 1934, the country was still in deep economic crisis. Many Belgians were still unemployed, designers, craftsmen and artists were barely able to survive.

Understandably, governmental plans to organise an international exhibition in Belgium to celebrate the centenary of Belgian independence (1830-1930) were beset by internal disagreements caused, among other things, by differences of opinion between political and linguistic groups. The issues were so intensely connected that it became impossible for the government to find a solution without at the same time turning the situation into a farce. It was finally decided, therefore, that the Exposition Universelle of 1930 should take place in two cities at the same time: in Antwerp, where stress was laid upon international trade and colonial

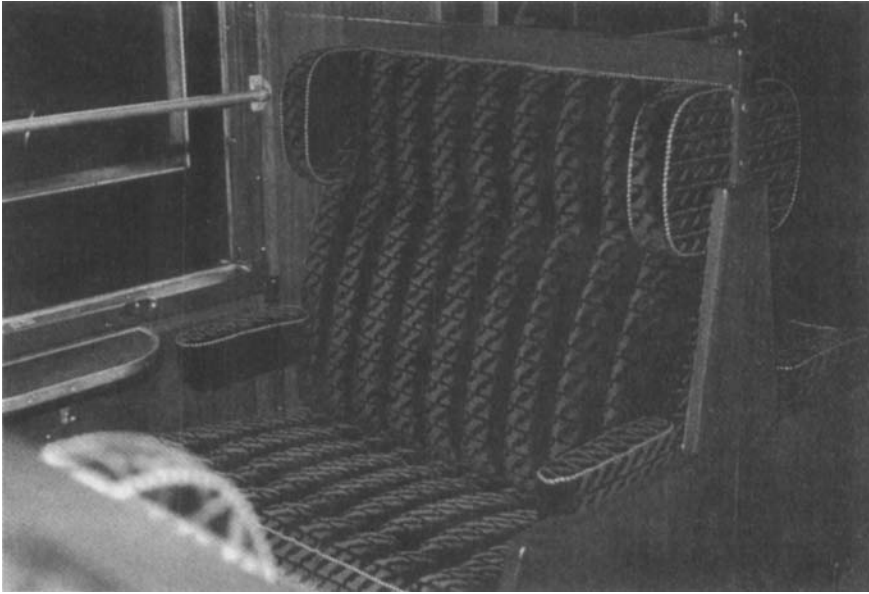
relations with Africa, and in Liège where the emphasis was on industrial activities, namely coal, iron, steel and machine construction. In Brussels, in the meantime, a new, permanent infrastructure, the 'Palais des Beaux Arts', designed by Victor Horta, was built not far from the historic centre. As part of the same sequence of events, architect Jozef Van Neck was given the task of building a new sports stadium in the north of the capital, on land owned by the Société de l'Exposition. Actually begun in 1928, this was the (now infamous) Heyzel Stadium. As with many of his colleagues at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts, Van Neck was an admirer of French Beaux-Arts architecture. He was also influenced by more functionalist tendencies, which he first encountered at the Paris exhibition of 1925. Both traits were visible in his design for the Heyzel.

In general, those who received commissions for public buildings during the 1920s and 1930s were the traditionalist architects and designers. Only in private building did Modernist architects get commissions, from enlightened patrons who appreciated experimentation. These designers looked up to Henri Van de Velde, respecting him as their spiritual father even whilst he was living away from Belgium. His controversial appointment as professor at Ghent University in 1926 caused an upheaval in some architectural circles. When he was also offered the chance – after the intervention of King Albert and Camille Huysmans – to lead the new design school in Brussels in 1927–8, the Institut des Arts Décoratifs, his enemies fulminated. The broadly influential positions enjoyed by his opponents tend to explain why Van de Velde was effectively 'banned' from many official manifestations.

The Universal and International Exhibition in Brussels, 1935

Whenever mention is made of the Brussels exhibition of 1935 it is often represented as a challenge to the prevailing economic crisis of the time. This is only partly true because the initiatives behind the exhibition had been taken a long time before. There existed in Belgium a specific and permanent committee that had been in operation since 1922 for the purpose of organising large-scale exhibitions. And before this, Belgium had enjoyed an impressive tradition in the organisation of major Expositions Universelles.

Nevertheless, the staging of the Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles was a real challenge at a time when many European countries were similarly facing economic crises. A new government, under the young prime minister Paul Van Zeeland, was appointed and in March 1935 the Belgian franc was devalued. This measure was



Interior of first-class compartments designed by Henri Van de Velde, 1935.

introduced deliberately on the eve of the Exposition, as it was anticipated that foreign tourists would bring money into the country. The measure proved successful, as the Exposition did help to bring about the stabilisation of the economy for which the Belgians had been hoping for so long.

In order to counter the prevailing economic difficulties, the official policy of the 1935 exhibition was to emphasise Belgium's progress as a modern developed country. The Belgian contingent was therefore focused on the following:

(1) The Centennial of Railway Communication in Belgium. This was commemorated inside the central building, which was designed by Victor Bourgeois as a model railway station. Inside the huge hall the different Belgian railway engines in use since 1835 were exhibited; the focus, however, was on electric locomotion. A range of European electric trains was on show, including the latest Belgian electric train, designed by the engineers of the company in collaboration with Henri Van de Velde, who had been appointed '*adviseur artistique*' with the help of Hendrik de Man. The railway station's interior was dominated by a majestic vault of parabolic concrete beams and the walls were decorated with murals by contemporary artists such as Jespers and

Minne. A restaurant, waiting rooms, a cinema, shops, etc., illustrated how the crisis could be pushed to one side with industrial effort.

(2) Electricity was celebrated in a special pavilion but also in the infrastructure of the exhibition itself. Electric light was placed beneath artificial waterfalls and in fountains. The hillside parkland was in the immediate neighbourhood of the bucolic royal residence of Laeken. The pleasantness of the location undoubtedly made the exhibition more popular.

(3) Radio was emphasised in a Modernistic building by J. Diongre (1878–1963), who had been commissioned in 1933 to design the Belgian Broadcasting Company INR/NIR building in Brussels.

(4) The efforts of the Belgian dynasty to enrich the country with a colony in Central Africa were also celebrated. The Congo colony was therefore exhaustively presented in a group of vernacular pavilions.

The ‘battle of the styles’ already mentioned was not only strongly visible in the design of the Belgian contingent but also in those of the foreign nations. From a numerical point of view, the traditionalists were the winners. This was due mainly to the very conservative organising committee, some members of which had organised the previous Exposition in Brussels in 1910, and who undoubtedly had a nostalgic vision of ‘the good old days’ before the First World War. Shortly afterwards changes would take place as a new generation of officials was appointed.

As far as good design was concerned, what did Belgium show to the world? Unfortunately, one has to conclude that she did not show a great deal, due to the underlying emphases of the exhibition. One can outline these in general terms. Heavy industry and raw materials, including those from the Congo, and semi-finished materials such as those from the glass and iron industries were put on show as products of a modern, industrialised country. Despite the fact that a large number of people in Belgium worked in agriculture, it was widely understood that the economic survival of the country depended on the ability to export industrial goods. In reflecting these concerns, the exhibition was not the ideal place for Belgian designers to show off their talents.

The desire for stability was implicit in the extent to which ‘traditional’ themes were integrated into the Belgian sections, notably the insistence on ‘old’ art, and the way that the whole suggested an unreal affluence. The Belgian Pavillon des Arts Décoratifs consisted of fashionable high-style *objets de luxe*, designed for the happy few of the time. One of the

main palaces housed 'Five Centuries of Art from Brussels', including many fourteenth-century masterpieces. In general the public was very enthusiastic about it, but perhaps was even more enchanted by another traditional feature: 'Vieux Bruxelles 1750'. A recreation area designed by architects Blockx and de Lange, this was a reconstruction of Belgium in the eighteenth century, a time of stability and peace. When the exhibition closed at night, this authentically reconstructed sentimental oasis of the past remained open and the good life could be obtained by drinking Belgian beer.

The central buildings of the exhibition – designed by Jozef Van Neck – contained the majority of the Belgian official sections and were intended to remain as permanent buildings in which commercial fairs could be staged in the future. The principal building, which became the virtual trademark of the exhibition, was characterised by the verticalism of its gigantic pillars crowned with symbolic statues representing modes of transport (p. 152). These were sculpted by Egide Rombaux. The building covered fourteen thousand square metres and was built on a rectangular plan; the height under the vault was thirty-one metres and was constructed with twelve parabolic arcs of reinforced concrete. Many of the technical problems were overcome through the use of recent innovations, such as tubular pillars in the foundations, fast-hardening cement, and autogene welding with electricity. As can still be seen today, much attention was paid to the surroundings of the buildings, with the strategic placing of many works by Belgian sculptors representing modern allegories. These served to heighten the representational character of the building itself.

The official Belgian sections were in the tradition of the great nineteenth-century exhibitions and featured the following themes: sciences and arts, raw materials and ore, transformation industries, energy, civil engineering and transport, building, general economy, sport and tourism. As already mentioned, one of the main emphases in the principal building was transport. The first electrified line – between Brussels and Antwerp – was inaugurated on the same day as the Exposition opened by the popular Belgian royal couple. The trains which came into use then were the only mark that Henri Van de Velde was permitted to make on the whole event.

The Exposition's Official Guidebook shows that the organising committee regarded the main exhibition building as a worthy showpiece for Belgium. They praised themselves for the 'moderate modernity' of the architecture, which was characterised by 'straight and simple lines



General view of the Brussels Exhibition Centre, now the Heyzel Stadium, 1987.



View of the façade of the Grand Palais, designed by Jozef Van Neck (1880–1957), Brussels Exhibition, 1935.

without any superfluous decoration'. For many years afterwards, however, the building would be criticised for the ambiguity caused by its inner horizontality and its outer verticality.

As already suggested, the general public was not given much opportunity to sample modern design, though the organising committee did

make an effort to give some of the young modern architects commissions on the site. Victor Bourgeois not only designed the model railway station in a very functional style, but was also the architect of the beautifully situated restaurant 'Leopold III', in which he could more freely express his Modernist views. Georges Minne created a new house style for this environment and other artists got commissions for monumental artworks. As an architect-planner and a Modernist, Raphael Verwilgen whose contribution to the Exposition was the Pavillon de Gaz, defended the views of Van de Velde on architecture. Not every Modernist was lucky enough to have his project presented without alterations. L. H. De Coninck's design for the Pavillon du Tourisme was entirely spoiled by the tourist authority which decided to decorate the outside of the building with large posters and flags without permission from the architect. The general rule, as far as Belgian design and architecture went, was that traditionalists had the largest impact on the exhibition. The influence of the Paris Exposition of 1925 (the Art Deco Show) was still omnipresent in Brussels a decade later. Modernism was the exception, not the rule. Despite the fact that the second meeting of CIAM (Congrès Internationales des Architectes Modernes) had taken place in Brussels in 1930, when important statements were made by leading members of the international Modern Movement, the Belgian architectural establishment was still influenced by the 'Beaux-Arts' and by regional historical styles.

Not only did Belgium as host show few signs of being Modernist, neither did her guests. Even countries with a strong avant-garde reputation didn't allow this to feature prominently in architectural and design terms. The French republic was the ally par excellence of Belgium and due to this political relationship she was present in force with eight large pavilions. This French 'settlement' included the colonies and a broad traditionalist panorama of her manifold industrial, artistic and intellectual activities. The French gained their effect mainly through heavy use of decoration. A very remarked-upon architectural presence was the Padiglione del Littorio Italiano by A. Libera (1903-63). Although the Fascists were in power Italy was still a kingdom, the Italian presence being mainly due to family ties between the two Royal Families. This was one of the last occasions when the authoritarian states would wear a friendly mask. Although Britain was as important to Belgium as France had been in the First World War, the United Kingdom was very self-effacing at the 1935 Exposition Universelle, for reasons unknown. The Scandinavian democracies excelled with an architecture that was characterised by a very human functionalism and integration of nature.

The Swedish and the Finnish sections also included displays of vernacular products for daily use.

The question needs to be asked whether Belgium, by organising the exhibition of 1935, succeeded in presenting a clearly defined image of itself and of the quality of its design. Was the French correspondent for *Figaro* correct in asserting that 'La Belgique qui donne au monde, une fois de plus l'exemple de l'initiative courageuse de la perseverance, de la confiance en soi'? As far as I can determine, the image which Belgium presented to the world was characterised by self-assurance concerning its capacities as an industrialised nation that still had a civilising rôle to play in Africa as a colonial power.

Belgium and the 1937 Paris Exposition Universelle des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne

Even before the opening of the Brussels exhibition, the French Commissaire-Générale, in the form of a M. Labbe, had been busy preparing the thematic Exposition Universelle of 1937. Henri Van de Velde recorded that as early as 1934 he had assisted at a presentation in which it was stressed by M. Labbe that a 'pseudo-civilisation' was advancing, which was spoiling the taste of the general public without being concerned about their education. He also made it clear that the proposals he was expecting for the Exposition would be geared towards the determination of the future evolution of good taste in general. The exhibition should demonstrate that people's lives should be designed more harmoniously, so that there would be no contradiction between beauty and utility, with art and technics insolvably joined to each other. Later, in 1936, concrete form was given to this theme with the Exposition's title, 'Art et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne'. In his autobiography, *Geschichte meines Lebens*, Van de Velde himself admitted how pleased he was by the choice of theme for the Paris exhibition of 1937, because it echoed ideas very close to his heart and which he had already put forward for the Werkbund Exhibition of 1914.

By the end of 1935 the Belgian Minister for Economic Affairs appointed Van de Velde president of the technical commission of the Commissaire-Générale. This was an excellent chance to show appropriate Belgian design to an international public, he wrote in his introduction to the Belgian *Livre d'Or*, and he openly criticised the quality of the design at the Brussels Exposition of 1935. He regretted that a small country that possessed rich traditions, and promised much for the future, had not taken advantage of the political and economic situation it found

itself in. He also regretted that the opportunity to educate the taste of the general public was not taken, although he accepted that 'quality' could only be realised when technical perfection and good taste were combined with artistic merit. Van de Velde was himself aware of these difficulties because manufacturers did not favour themes for exhibitions. He remained optimistic, however, that a number of them would be inclined to follow his guidelines for the 1937 show in order to increase their chances of commercial success. Finally, he regretted that at the Brussels exhibition of 1935 the manufactured goods showed a lack of cohesion between technics and art.

Van de Velde was aware of the fact that the theme of the Paris Exposition was inexhaustible and could therefore lead to a variety of approaches, depending on how the different participating countries chose to interpret it. As things turned out, many of them made no effort



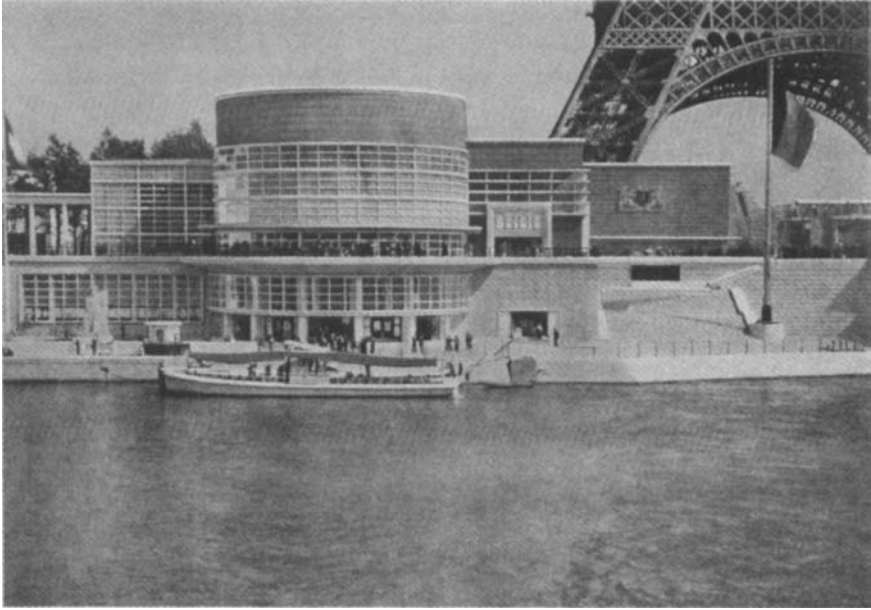
Cover of the commemorative book edited by the Commissariat-Générale of Belgium on the occasion of Belgian participation at the Paris Exposition Universelle, 1937.

to follow the proposed theme of the exhibition, and others interpreted it according to their internal political situations. In the opinion of Van de Velde, only Sweden, Norway, Finland and Belgium made an effort to comply with M. Labbe's guidelines by presenting displays of their respective national industrial arts. In Belgium, one of the forerunners of the Industrial Revolution of the European continent, there was a strong

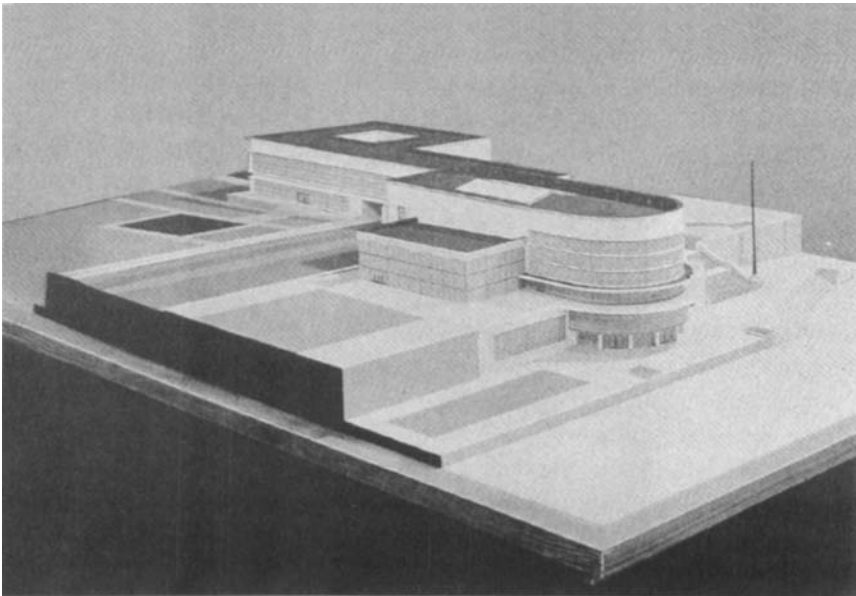
opposition between art and technics, although the mechanical production of manufactured goods was only introduced gradually and diffidently.

A large piece of land at the northern foot of the famous Eiffel Tower, on the left bank of the Seine near to the Pont d'Iena, was allocated to Belgium. The pavilion was designed by Van de Velde and his collaborators Jean Eggerickx and Raphael Verwilgen. The terraces leading down to the river made it possible to add an element of playfulness to the Modernistic outlook. The front of the pavilion, which faced the river, was dominated by a magnificent glass rotunda that covered the different levels of the building. From the terrace of the main level visitors could enjoy a splendid view of the Champs de Mars. A special emphasis was placed on gardening since cultivated flowers were an important export item at the time. The landscape designer, BuysSENS, who was responsible for the gardens at the Brussels exhibition, was employed again at the Paris Exposition. To enhance the vernacular tradition of Belgian bricks, Van de Velde ordered a very special type of hand-made building brick from the firm Comptoir Tuillier de Courtrai. Not only did these bricks have symbolic qualities as they were moulded out of pure Flemish soil, but their use provided the manufacturers with an opportunity to show their material at work. In the large and quiet building the industrial and artistic renovation of Belgium was on show throughout the different floors, as a symbolic invitation to the visitor to penetrate into the inner halls. These portrayed the daily life of the different industrial classes. The selection of exhibits was made in such a way that visitors could feel 'at home' while looking at complete interiors where familiar things like toys, utensils and even small household objects created an atmosphere of joy, health and work.

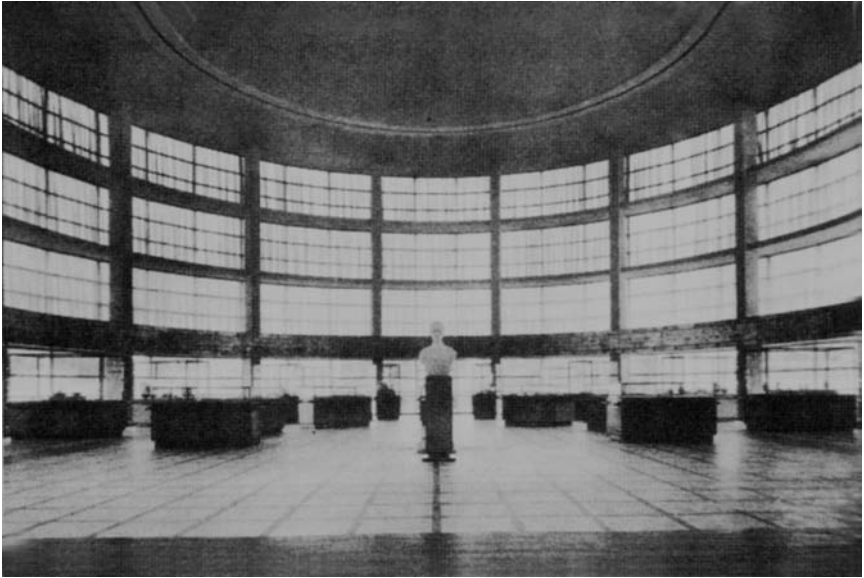
On the main floor of the pavilion the visitor was confronted with a profusion of indoor flowers, and on entering the rotunda, with more conventional showpieces, works of art in lacquer, lace, ceramic, glass, etc. Next one passed into the Hall of Fame, built out of finest Belgian marble and decorated with fine contemporary tapestries designed by Floris Jaspers, Edgard Tytgat and Rodolphe Strebelle and produced by arts and crafts studios in Brussels and Malines/Mechelen. The circuit gave access to a section of cut diamonds, the product which had made Antwerp world famous, and lace craftsmanship from several towns. There were also sections dedicated to specific materials. Textiles, for example, were exhibited in a very creative way, accompanied by photographs which explained the manufacturing processes. Also on



General view of the Belgian Pavilion, designed by Henri Van de Velde, Paris Exposition Universelle, 1937.



Scale model of the Belgian pavilion, 1937, designed by Henri Van de Velde, Jean Eggerickx, Raphael Verwilgen (architects), Paul Celis (engineer), René Moulaert (interior architect) and René Pechère (garden architect).



Inside view of the *rotonde d'honneur* in the Belgian pavilion,
Paris Exposition Universelle, 1937.



The *mobilier de luxe* by Ateliers d'Art de Courtrai/de Coene Frères (B).



Dining room produced/designed by SA Magasins, Au Bon Marché, Brussels.



Artisan bedroom by Ateliers d'Art de Courtrai/de Coene Frères (B).

ground level there was a more conventional display devoted to tourism. As Gisele Freund mentioned some time afterwards, a remarkable use of photography in this section enabled Belgium to be revealed in all its variety. The photomontages of graphic designer Jos Leonard were particularly impressive, as were the individual posters designed by former students of Van de Velde from the Institut des Arts Décoratifs.

The interiors mentioned above were designed by various manufacturers for different social classes, without any sense of competition. The upper, middle and working classes were divided up, but care was taken that the quality of the design and living conditions was not seen to deteriorate in the lower orders. Only the price of the goods provided evidence as to the class it belonged to. Van de Velde had control over the choice of exhibits; he was very selective, including manufactured products from big stores such as Bon Marché in Brussels and the produce of small companies, such as the arts and crafts firms in Malines, as well as products from such progressive design studios as Marcel Baugniet from Brussels. Everywhere, the rigour of the selection revealed the eye of the master himself.

As we can see from the Belgian section of the *Livre d'Or*, Van de Velde and his collaborators succeeded in showing austere 'good design' in the official part of the Belgian show, unlike at the 1935 Brussels exhibition where a profusion of traditional, academic design was displayed in the Belgian sections. In 1937 Van de Velde showed all kinds of products from daily life in the interiors for the three different classes, keeping in mind that '*art et technique*' should harmonise in 'modern life'. Fine craftsmanship and good use of materials were important criteria for their choice. Of course, a number of unique crafts products were made especially for this exhibition by artists or craftsmen. Since the economic crisis still made it very difficult to get official artistic commissions, this was a unique opportunity for professors and students of the Institut des Arts Décoratifs in Brussels to show what they were able to produce. They chose not to display superfluous luxury, but rather put emphasis on simplicity. The mass-produced items on show, such as ceramics and textiles, were chosen using the same criteria, even if many of the products had not just arrived on the market.

Conclusion

It is striking how many of the nations in their presentations at the 1937 Paris Exposition deviated from the programme established by M. Labbe based on the theme of '*Art et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*'. Belgium,

thanks to the commitment of Henri Van de Velde, was one of the few countries which tried to respond faithfully to the original goal of the Exposition. Yet even in the large commemorative exhibitions held in 1987, there was practically no stress on the serious efforts made by one of the most famous designers of the twentieth century for his tiny democratic country. Perhaps the political polarisation of the late 1930s caused the widespread deviation from the Labbe programme; it is striking that those countries which respected its aims, the small democratic nations, had hitherto escaped notice.

Belgium's economic situation, after a brief recovery in 1935-7, deteriorated again so that the design solutions presented by Van de Velde in Paris were not acted upon. In fact, a lot of the objects on display were not even available in Belgium, as it was difficult to find manufacturers to produce them. The fact that Belgian manufacturers were never very daring at least partly explains the difficult situation of the time.

In retrospect, we can see that within Belgian Modernism between the wars there were two tendencies. There was a moderate, romantic Modernism and a far stricter international form. Van de Velde, in his own person, managed to reconcile these two strands, as can be witnessed in the successive stages of his busy professional life. As head of the Institut des Arts Décoratifs in Brussels he appointed, from the start, representatives of the two strands and so created a breeding-ground for a broad Modernism across all the arts.

His teaching staff belonged to the Belgian avant-garde and in times of economic and political crisis this alarmed conservative observers. Even so, before 1937 the prevailing attitude seemed to be that as long as these Modernist eccentrics didn't capture the attention of the general public, they were harmless enough. The Belgian pavilion at the Paris exhibition, however, attracted wide attention, and consequently there was a considerable furore in the Belgian press. In real terms, Modernistic design was not accepted by the Belgian general public until after the Second World War.

Van de Velde was unfortunate enough to return to Belgium in 1926 when the country was trying to cope with various crises. There was severe political strife, with successive unstable governments attempting to resolve the demands for equal treatment for the Flemish-speaking parts of Belgium. Such a fundamental struggle obviously claimed the national attention and made innovation in design difficult to achieve. There was also serious monetary inflation and an unemployment rate which climbed steadily between 1926 and 1935. Opportunities for designers

were few and far between, the national focus being on large-scale works, such as the modernisation of the mines and the building of the Albert Canal (1939). The only opportunities for innovative design work tended to be in the department stores and in some of the larger interior design offices. Van de Velde was right in the middle of the tensions caused by politico-economic unrest and the constant antagonism of the musty academicism which still effectively reigned in Belgium. Eventually the stresses told on him and, in 1947, he emigrated for a second time.

Swedish design, as with so many aspects of Swedish society, came to be held as a paradigm amongst Modernists across much of Europe after 1930. Especially in Britain the Swedes enjoyed a reputation for being leaders in the field, their pure forms and rational structures contrasting starkly with standard practices here. It was with admiration and not a little envy that British Modernists walked around the site of the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930, and with a sense of resignation that British critics acknowledged the superiority of the Swedish pavilion over the British at the Paris Exposition Universelle seven years later. The story was not quite as simple as it may seem, however; it would be more than a bland generalisation to suggest that Swedish designers got it right when others did not. Equally it would be wrong to assume that there was a seamless continuum in the flow of ideas from Pioneer Modernist thinkers into the studios of eager Swedish designers. Rather, there were particular conditions at work in Sweden which led, on the one hand, to social policies impinging directly on design, and on the other to a fruitful relationship forming between design and the crafts.

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