



## Writing Visual Culture

### Making Room for Design History in Belgium

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#### **Abstract**

In Belgium industrial design officially gained recognition relatively late. The national government recognised the potential of the 'new' discipline around 1955. The first proper training in industrial design arrived in 1957 in Belgium with the *Section d'esthétique industrielle* at the La Cambre school and it took until 1964 until the Brussels Design Centre was established. In the meantime things have changed. In the context of the federalisation of the 1990s design became an item of regional economic politics, resulting in such institutions as *Design Vlaanderen* (Design Flanders). In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the former Ghent Museum of Decorative Arts (founded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) changed its name in Design museum Ghent. While these and other developments demonstrate the official acceptance of design as a full-blown cultural discipline, the related discipline of design history is still 'under construction'. This article makes a first tentative attempt at reflecting on the design history research in Belgian academia of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on the role of transnational research communities in the emancipation of design history in Belgium and on the question where to go from here.



## Introduction

In Belgium, industrial design gained official recognition relatively late. The national government recognised the potential of the 'new' discipline around 1955. Proper training in industrial design only arrived in 1957 in Belgium with the *Section d'esthétique industrielle* at the La Cambre school (originally initiated in 1954 as a 240-hour course) followed by the *Section d'esthétique industrielle* at the Institut Saint-Luc in Liège of 1962 (originally initiated in 1958 as a non-autonomous course), the course in Product development at the *Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Bouwkunst en Stedebouw in Antwerp* (1967) and the course *Industriële Vormgeving* at the Stedelijk Hoger Instituut voor Visuele Communicatie en Vormgeving in Genk (1969) (Laurent 2004: 45, 49-51; *Design in België 1940/84*, n.p.). The Brussels Design Centre was established in 1964.

In the meantime, things have changed. In the context of the federalisation of the 1990s, design became an issue of regional economic politics, resulting in such institutions as Design Vlaanderen (Design Flanders). In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the former Ghent Museum of Decorative Arts (founded in 1903) changed its name in Design museum Ghent. While these and other developments demonstrate the official acceptance of design as a full-blown cultural discipline, the related discipline of design history is still 'under construction.'

This does not mean that the historiography of design in Belgium started from scratch in the last few decades. Early historiography both in Belgium and abroad chiefly studied well-known episodes of Belgian design such as art nouveau and its representatives, especially Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde. Furthermore, especially the above-mentioned Design Museum Ghent and other institutions such as the Provincial Departments for the Crafts (founded around 1946) have contributed with their exhibitions to the development of a design historiography. Also trade fairs and institutions such as the Brussels Design Centre facilitated historical overviews, launching publications to celebrate their anniversaries.

In the past few decades, inspired by international developments in design history, a handful of Belgian scholars contributed to the discipline within the context of academia. However, to realise this work they had to make room within other disciplinary fields such as architectural history, art history or the history of interior architecture. While this trajectory of emancipation is not uncommon, it is still far from finalised within the Belgian context.

## Early design historiography

As noted above, early historiography of design in Belgium chiefly studied well-known episodes of Belgian design such as art nouveau and its representatives, especially Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde, whose work is also included in Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers*



of the Modern Movement (Pevsner 1936). Van de Velde was first studied primarily as an architect in Karl Ernst Osthaus' book *Van de Velde: Leben und Schaffen des Künstlers* within the monographs series 'Die Neue Baukunst' (Osthaus 1920). His buildings and interiors were analysed in length. His book covers, silver and ceramic sets were shown with little commentary (Osthaus 1920: 142-152). [Fig. 1]



**Figure 1 - Osthaus, Karl Ernst. 1920. *Van de Velde: Leben und Schaffen des Künstlers*. Hagen: Folkwang: 144-145.**

Van de Velde's architecture was also the main topic of Maurice Casteels' book of 1932 with photographs of his buildings between 1925 and 1931. This time, the book was considerably thinner but published in Belgium (Casteels 1932). Important monographs on both Horta and Van de Velde were published in 1958 and 1959 respectively. Both were included in the series 'Belgische Kunstmonografieën'. The former was written by art historian Robert Delevoy and the latter by playwright Herman Teirlinck (Delevoy 1958; Teirlinck 1959). Both authors were directors of the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs in La Cambre. Teirlinck followed Van de Velde and was director between 1936 and 1950 and Delevoy, who lectured at the school since 1946, was director between 1965 and 1979.



Also, the earlier mentioned Ghent Museum of Decorative Arts and other institutions such as the Provinciale Diensten voor Kunstambachten (Provincial Departments for the Crafts), founded around 1946, contributed with their exhibitions to the development of a design historiography. For example, in September 1956 the East Flanders Provincial Department for Crafts organized an exhibition on 'Contemporary East-Flemish Crafts' at the Ghent Museum for Decorative Arts ('Oostvlaamse Kunstambachten te Gent' 1956: 3). Two years later the West Flanders Provincial Department for Crafts organised the exhibition 'Creative Crafts in West-Flanders' at its own exhibition gallery in Bruges. The exhibition displayed glass, ceramics, metal, bookbinding and textiles ('Bestendig Expositiecentrum voor toegepaste kunst te Brugge geopend' 1958: 3-4). The provincial departments were charged with the promotion of the crafts, which at that time included the already mentioned disciplines, but also photography, film and architecture, something that would seem out of place in our current understanding of the term 'crafts'.

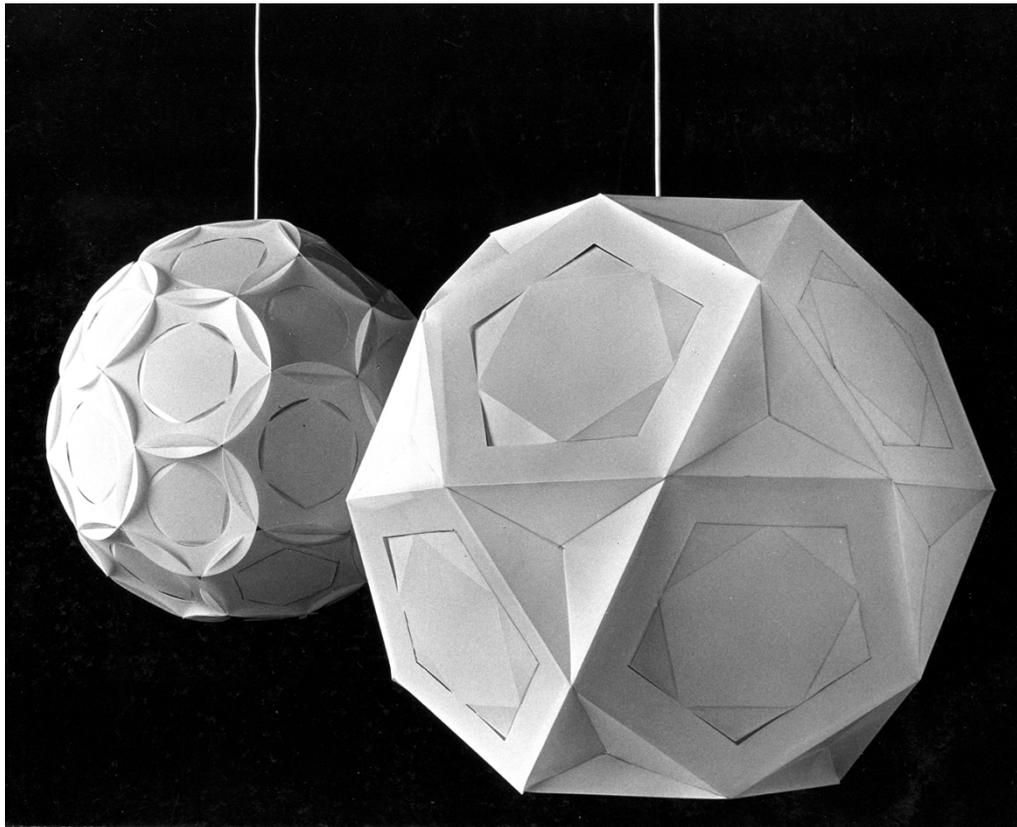
However, it must be noted that rather than developing a historical revision, the exhibitions of the provincial departments first and foremost aimed at promoting the activity of craftsmen. This attitude contrasts with the situation in the Netherlands, where a first overview of Dutch applied artists between 1884 and 1909, written by Karel Sluyterman, was published in 1909 to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Association *Arti et Industriae*. A second survey was published twenty years later written by textile designer Jo de Jong. It provided a short history of the applied arts of the Netherlands between 1890 and 1929 and was likewise commissioned to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of a professional society of applied artists: the Dutch Society for Trades and Applied Arts (Meroz and Gimeno-Martínez 2016: 215).

From the 1970s onwards in Belgium also trade fairs and institutions such as the Brussels Design Centre facilitated historical overviews, launching publications to celebrate their anniversaries. For example, Frans Defour's 1977 book on the history of furniture in Belgium ranged from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was written to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Brussels Furniture Trade Fair. The same author published a continuation in 1979, this time dealing only with the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this last book, Defour develops his personal interpretation of design made in Belgium stating that '[c]ontemporary Belgian design is practical, as it should be. It is free of bright colours; it is straight-lined and has a sobriety of an object from everyday life, free of superficialities' (Defour 1979, 180). He classified Belgian designers into four categories: designers, furniture designers (*meubelontwerper*), interior architects (*binnenhuisarchitect*) and *anti-designers*. Rather predictably, for him the last category had a very negative connotation. According to the author, the *anti-designers* 'grant furniture the status of sculpture or object for admiration, an



object without a specific functionality' (Defour 1979, 179). This emerging diversity within design was nonetheless incorporated in this and subsequent accounts.

The twentieth anniversary of the Brussels Design Centre in 1984 similarly occasioned a historical approach to recent design, this time embodied in what was initially planned as permanent exhibition on Belgian design since 1940 for the opening of the Brussels Museum of Modern Art. The catalogue pointed out that 'industrial design in general has only recently been experienced as a cultural phenomenon', which makes this introduction in the museum symptomatic of a wider cultural recognition for design (*Design in België 1940/84*, n.p.). Conversely, in the Netherlands Pieter Brattinga had published his book *Industrial Design in the Netherlands* in 1964 and by the late 1970s the study of industrial design had entered academia with remarkable studies such as Elinoor Bergvelt's publication on the Stichting Goed Wonen (Good Living Foundation) (Bergvelt 1979). Conversely, the accompanying catalogue of the Brussels exhibition was not more than a 46-page booklet, remarkable nevertheless in its attempt to create a history of recent industrial design. It elaborated a timeline of the main developments related to industrial design internationally, starting in 1850, and linked it to the main events in Belgium. Unlike Defour's books, there was no substantial reflection but rather a list of events. Its scope extended beyond furniture to embrace seven categories including architecture and furniture, ceramics and glass, textile and wallpaper, technical products, transport, sport and graphics. It initiated a canon of industrial design in Belgium that was clearly dictated by the Design Centre annual selection of products and the award-winners of the Golden Signet. Thus, this catalogue included some 30 objects including technical products such as the milking machine of Fabrique National d'Armes de Guerre (1948), Roger Tallon's turning lathe 'Gallic 16' (1959), and Philippe Neerman's metro wagons for Brussels (1969-1973), along with Willy van der Meeren armchair in tube (1950), Charles Dethier's 'Ove' lamp (1968) **[Fig. 2]** and Pieter de Bruyne's 'Double chair' (1974), which was characterized in the catalogue as a 'sculpture-furniture' (*Design in België 1940/84*, n.p.).



**Figure 2 - Charles Dethier's 'Ove' lamp (1968) © Charles Déthier.**

In 1994 the 14th Biennial 'Interieur' exhibition in Kortrijk showed an exhibition entitled 'Design Made in Belgium 1900-1994.' It provided an overview of national production from the beginning of the century, generating that historiographic reflexion that had been present for furniture but less so for industrial design (Bekaert et al. 1994). The exhibition catalogue incorporated the Design Centre canon and echoing the 1984 selection, it included the usual sections of furniture, lighting, accessories, objects, and textiles, as well as a section on graphic design and transport. [Fig. 3] Nevertheless, if the 1984 selection had a predominantly technical character, this one reflected the selection criteria of the 'Interieur' fair, which more inclined towards aesthetic excellence rather than technical improvements.



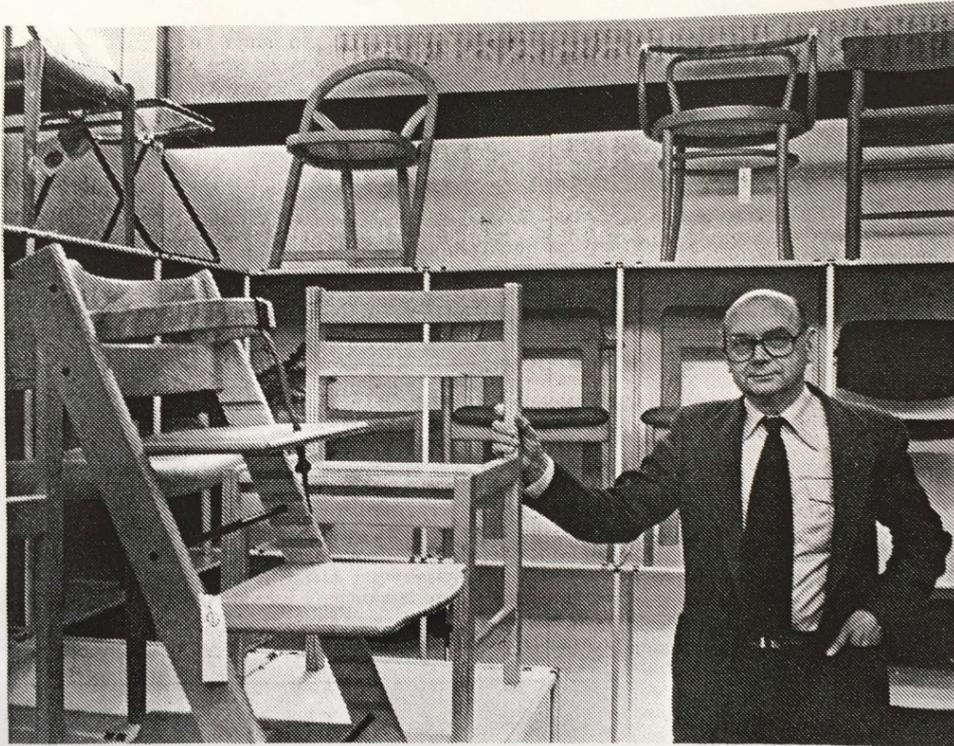
**Figure 3 - View of the exhibition 'Design Made in Belgium 1900-1994' (1994) displaying a sofa, chairs and a cupboard in the foreground by designer Huib Hoste (1881-1957) © Interieur Foundation.**

### **Entering academia**

So when and how did design history enter Belgian academia? Let us first sketch a quick picture of the existing Belgian universities. Belgium counts five Flemish and six Francophone universities: Université de Liège, Université de Namur, Université de Mons, Université Saint-Louis, Université Catholique de Louvain, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, KU Leuven University, Ghent University, University of Antwerp and Hasselt University. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century several of these universities devoted scholarly attention to the history of crafts, applied arts and design. For example, an interesting pioneering personality is Adelbert Van de Walle (1922-2006), an art historian and architect who was appointed as a researcher in 1951, and as professor art history and archaeology at Ghent University in 1961. [Fig. 4] While a considerable part of his research focused on urban archaeology and medieval heritage, he also developed a keen interest in the history of furniture design, crafts and, later, industrial design. This translated into his professional career. From 1951 to 1974 he combined his work at the university with a job as director of the Ghent Museum of Decorative Arts, where he launched a (for Belgium) new exhibition formula, titled the 'National Salon for Modern Social Furniture': an aesthetically controlled furniture fair located in the museum building (Floré 2004, 451-454).



Dinsdag 28 april 1981 - DS



*Prof. A. Van de Walle: „Winstbejag leidt tot industriële zonde”. (foto Firmin De Maitre)*

**Figure 4 - Prof. Adelbert van de Walle in *De Standaard*, 28 April, 1981.**

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarly research at Flemish and Francophone universities has produced a considerable amount of studies of the crafts or design production from a rich diversity of artists and architects, including Victor Horta, Henry Van de Velde, Willy Van Der Meeren, Pieter De Bruyne, etc. Not surprisingly, the contexts in which these studies were produced was predominantly those of art or architectural history. Over time this situation has not changed much. While in Britain, in the late 1970s, the Design History Society was founded and in the following decades different methodologies for approaching design history were being developed and discussed (Fallan 2010, 5), in Belgium the discipline remained a rather small niche of art and architectural history, without a postgraduate or master's degree of its own.

However, this does not imply that there have been no significant developments in the field of design history in Belgium. In fact, in the past few decades, inspired by the activities of the Design History Society and the International Conferences on Design History and Studies, a handful of scholars have been exploring different strategies of addressing design history within the context of academia in Belgium. They have done so by making room for



design history within other disciplinary fields such as architectural history, art history or the history of interior architecture, as mentioned above. The universities involved have been predominantly Flemish: Ghent University, University of Antwerp, KU Leuven University, Hasselt University, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The faculties or departments involved include those of art history, engineering and architecture and design sciences.

Since 2000, explorations in design history resulted in several PhDs, of which the content has been discussed in national and international fora and of which the quality has been broadly recognised. Yet, the emancipation of the discipline within the Belgian context is still far from complete. There is no master or PhD program in design history. The FWO – the Flemish section of the national research fund – now recognises design as part of the subcategory 'architecture and design', but while the website explains this subcategory also includes architectural history, no mention is made of design history.

Given the fragmented nature of the practice of design history in Belgium, design historians in Belgium have felt the need to invest or participate in trans-university events or collaborations. In the past ten years several initiatives have been undertaken which facilitated moments of contact and exchange. For example, from 2009 to 2012 the several design historians in Belgium collaborated on an educational project funded by the KU Leuven association aiming at the development of a Dutch-language reader in design theory, history and criticism. In 2010 a joint conference of the Design History Society and the International Conferences on Design History and Design Studies was organised in Brussels and Belgian design scholars of different universities and schools were invited to co-chair a series of strands. [Fig. 5] In 2017, colleagues from Ghent University took the initiative to redevelop a Dutch language journal on the history of interiors into a journal on the history of interiors and design, titled *Tijdschrift voor Interieurgeschiedenis en Design*. The editorial board was renewed and currently also includes several specialists in design and fashion history.



**Figure 5 - 'Design and Craft: A History of Convergences and Divergences', a joint conference of the Design History Society and the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies, Brussels, 2010. Photograph courtesy of the authors.**

## **Conclusions**

We hope it is clear by now that the community of design historians in Belgium – if we can call it a community – is a group of strongly motivated individuals operating within different related disciplinary fields within the context of a series of universities and, some of them, outside these universities. At the moment, on a national or regional level, there is no long-term overarching structure or foundation that systematically brings scholars together or promotes the discipline in Belgium, such as the Stichting Designgeschiedenis (Design History Foundation) in the Netherlands. Collaborations are mostly of an ad hoc and temporary nature and are largely based on personal contacts or friendships.

This situation is not a priori a bad one. The absence of a national or regional research foundation or structure stimulates each one of us to search for creative solutions and to actively participate in international or transnational networks and events. Meanwhile, within the context of our universities we are continuously challenged – and again: this is not a bad thing – to articulate or negotiate a place for design history as a valuable ally of a related, more consolidated discipline, be it art history, architectural history or the history of interior architecture.



The downside of this situation is that it is vulnerable. Without proper nationally or regionally embedded stimuli we believe the continuation or development of design history in Belgian academia is uncertain. The question is what kind of stimulus does this small but complex country with eleven universities need? In our opinion, the model of an interuniversity master's degree would be worthwhile investigating. The successful MA in gender and diversity – a collaboration between the five Flemish universities – could be studied as an example. In any case the professional and personal contacts for exploring such an option are there. Wouldn't it be a beautiful way of making but also consolidating room for design history in Belgium?

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