

# Art Nouveau in Belgium

The Art Nouveau style enjoyed great success all over Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is vastly represented in museum collections, archives, libraries, photo archives, and architectural buildings throughout Europe, although perhaps the style's greatest successes can be found in Brussels, Belgium.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Brussels was a vibrant and modern city, with an upper middle class eager to show off its wealth and good taste - all essential elements for artistic creativity to flourish. It is at that point that Art Nouveau (or "New style") came into being in Brussels when two architects, Victor Horta and Paul Hankar, developed a style that introduced industrial materials like iron castings into the homes of the bourgeoisie in Brussels. The use of metal structures made it possible to open up spaces, allowing air and light to circulate throughout the rooms. The decorative architectural motives in iron, mural paintings and mosaics expressed vitality in representing life and nature.

While Brussels is best known for these architectural masterpieces, the decorative arts influenced by the Art Nouveau movement are often forgotten. Unlike anywhere else in the world, the use of ivory for the creation of sculptures, vases, centrepieces etc, defined the decorative arts of the Art Nouveau period in Belgium. This had much to do with the colonial politics of the time and the policy of King Leopold II of Belgium who, in 1885, took control over the Congo and considered it as his private colony. Strangely, this colonial policy is strongly connected with the use of ivory in the artistic scene of the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After 15 years of continuous investments in infrastructure to exploit the natural wealth of the Congo, the personal colony of Leopold II was heading for bankruptcy. This was at this time that free trade was replaced by a system that was more lucrative for Leopold II, but unfortunately even less humane than before. After a devastating report on the maltreatment and enslavement of the locals, Leopold II was eventually forced to hand over the Congo to the Belgian state in 1908. During this colonial time, Leopold II continuously faced harsh criticism. Without getting into too much detail on the colonial history of Belgium, this brief summary gives an idea of the problems that were faced and explains why the use of ivory became so popular and so excellently represented in the decorative arts of the Art Nouveau period in Belgium. However, as beautiful as these little jewels of craftsmanship from this period are, the history and symbolism that surrounds them is perhaps the most interesting of all.

The ivory trade thrived in Belgium in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Antwerp as the central spill for the arrival and further shipment of ivory to Europe and the rest of the world. To counter criticism that the large investments in Congo wouldn't pay off, but also to ward off criticism resulting from the stories of cruelties taking place in the colony, the state secretary of the Congo Free State, Edmond van Eetvelde, started promoting the artistic use of ivory as a way of also promoting colonial policy and the advantages of keeping the colony in Belgium's power for the Belgian people.

In 1893 artists and sculptors were offered the best and largest ivory teeth to create artwork



Around the turn of the 20th century Brussels was a vibrant and modern city, well supplied with an upper middle class eager to show off their wealth and good taste, all essential elements for the flourishing of artistic creativity.

of their own design, so that they could present it at the world exhibition in Antwerp in 1894. This initiative was the start of the success of ivory sculpture in the Art Nouveau period which eventually scaled new heights at the international exhibition organised in 1897 in Brussels (Parc du Cinquantenaire), with a colonial section at Tervuren (Colonial palace).

In the Colonial palace over 80 ivory sculptures, created by 39 individual artists, were presented to the Belgian and international public. Here,

total artistic freedom and ownership of their work. The exhibition was an immense success and the quality and diversity of the sculptures received international attention.

What made these sculptures so special was that for the first time artists didn't try to create counterparts of their sculptures in bronze and marble, but exploited the uniqueness of the material, often in combination with bronze or silver, which lent itself perfectly to the natural and flowing style of the Art Nouveau movement.

Of the many artworks presented at the colonial exhibition of 1897 and the accompanying festivities, those created by Philippe Wolfers (1858 - 1929) are perhaps the most representative and most impressive examples of the decorative arts of the Art Nouveau period in Belgium. Artworks like *La Caresse du Cygne* (Caress of the Swan), *L'Album Congolais* (Album of Congo), and *Civilisation et Barbarie* (Civilisation and Barbarism) are probably the most exceptional examples of his oeuvre.

Of the three works, *Civilisation et Barbarie* is the most interesting because of the symbolism it encompasses. While the object itself was meant to be functional - as a document holder to present a manifest on trade and industry to Edmond van Eetvelde, state secretary of the Congo Free State, Wolfers succeeded in turning a utilitarian object into a work of art. It is this combination of functional use and art that is so typical for the decorative arts in Art Nouveau.

When looking at the object, one sees a swan and a dragon fighting each other, using the ivory tooth - the document holder decorated with flowers and plants as a shield. The swan spreads its wings upwards to heaven and bra-



*La Caresse du Cygne*,  
1897  
Philippe Wolfers  
(1858 - 1929)  
Ivory, Bronze, Marble ;  
173 x 129 x 76

even more so than in 1894 in Antwerp, the display of the natural wealth of the Congo was seen as the ideal opportunity to propagandize the economic benefits of the exploitation of the Congo, as well as to soften criticism of the effects of colonisation. Like before, the artists were offered the best quality ivory and had



2

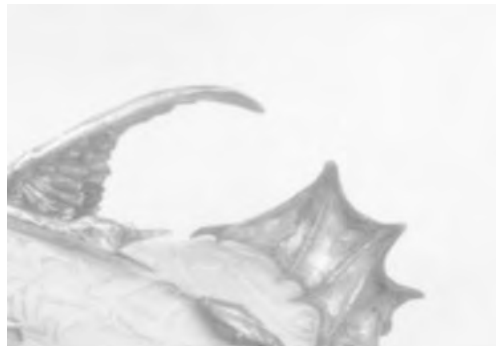
*L'Album Congolais*,  
1898  
Philippe Wolfers  
(1858 - 1929)  
Ivory, silver, vermeil,  
bronze, enamel, gold leaf,  
baroque pearls, emerald,  
rubies, white moiré,  
white peccary

vely faces the dragon, which seems to be cowering. In the original assignment Wolfers was supposed to create a document holder in white ivory supported by two figures, one white, and the other black. The artist used this original idea, but presented the two races allegorically: the swan as a symbol for the white people - for civilisation and progress, the dragon for the ignorant, superstitious and pagan African population living in darkness. The use of a dragon to represent the African population clearly reveals how European societies saw Africa and interpreted their own intervention as the enlightenment of a dark continent.

Wolfers went even further to express the difference between the swan and the dragon by applying a patina on the surface of the silver. For the swan, the light shine of the silver was mostly kept naturally, while the dragon was given a dark patina to emphasize the symbolism behind it: the fight of civilisation against barbarism. The objects mentioned in this article are all presented to the public in the Royal Museums for Art and History in Brussels (KM KG/MRAH), together with treasures from many other artists like Henri Van de Velde and Charles Van der Stappen. One of the highlights of the Art Nouveau exhibition spa-



*Civilisation et Barbarie*,  
1897 - 1898  
Philippe Wolfers  
(1858 - 1929)  
Ivory, silver, onyx



ce in the museum is the complete interior of the Wolfers showroom, originally designed by Victor Horta in pure Art Nouveau style.

In Belgium you can find not only one of the largest but also one of the most exceptional collections of architectural buildings, books, prints, and decorative arts from the Art Nou-

veau period. Although some of these treasures have already been made available on the Internet for the public, it is just a small fraction of what is there. Since the growing interest in this particular period is higher than ever, creating high quality Art Nouveau data has become one of the main digitisation priorities in Belgium for the coming years.

### Illustrations:

1 *La Caresse du Cygne*, 1897, Philippe Wolfers (1858 - 1929)  
Ivory, Bronze, Marble ; 173 x 129 x 76 ; Inv. n° Sc.0077  
Property of the Royal Museums of Art and History

2 *L'Album Congolais*, 1898, Philippe Wolfers (1858 - 1929), Ordered by the Congo Free State as a gift for Baron Edmond van Eetvelde - state secretary of Congo Free State - on the 28th of February 1898. Ivory, silver, vermeil, bronze, enamel, gold leaf, baroque pearls, emerald, rubies, white moiré, white peccary ; Inv. n° Sc.188.1.1. Property of the Royal Museums of Art and History

3 *Civilisation et Barbarie*, 1897 - 1898, Philippe Wolfers (1858 - 1929), Ordered by the Belgian industrials as a gift for Baron Edmond van Eetvelde - state secretary of Congo Free State. Ivory, silver, onyx. Property of the King Baudouin Foundation, in care of the Royal Museums of Art and History