



Maison Phos,
boulevard du Roi Albert 130,
Tournai,
ca. 1905,
unknown architect.

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Henry Van de Velde, Art Nouveau and Intellectual Anarchism

The conception of Art Nouveau in Belgium as a kind of bourgeois art should be seen in a broader social context, because most of the early Art Nouveau artists were heavily influenced by the socialist and anarchist ideas of their time, notwithstanding the fact that almost all of them were indeed of bourgeois origins. Especially in the case of Henry van de Velde, these influences would shape his life and career.

Henry van de Velde was born in 1863 into a fairly wealthy pharmacist family in Antwerp. At the Athenaeum he befriended Max Elskamp, who later would become a well-known writer. This friendship would last a lifetime and exemplifies the important connection van de Velde had with the literary world. Despite his father's hope for him to study for some high ranking position and in the midst of a family tragedy - his sister-in-law died in childbirth - less attention was given to the plans of the young Henry, so he enrolled secretly in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp in 1881. He studied drawing and painting in the atelier of the director Charles Verlat, who was influenced by the realist painting of Gustave Courbet. Not only was he a friend of the French anarchist thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, but Courbet (1986) shared also some of his anarchist ideas.

1. Gustave Courbet,
*Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
et ses enfants en 1853*,
1865 (Paris,
musée du Petit Palais).
[Wikimedia Commons]



It was on the request by Courbet for a pamphlet that Proudhon (1865) wrote the very lengthy *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, posthumously published, only months after the death of the writer [Ill. 1]. Courbet himself was also very active during the Paris Commune, but after the

Semaine sanglante in which this anarchist-like revolt was crushed and thousands of Parisian insurrectionists were killed, he was imprisoned for six months and afterwards fled France for Switzerland where he died in poverty in 1877.

Of interest for van de Velde's founding of the *Kunstgewerbliche Seminar* in Weimar in 1902, the precursor of the *Großherzoglich-Sächsische Kunstgewerbeschule Weimar* and of course later the most important Bauhaus, we may note that Verlat had been director of the Academy of Weimar from 1869 to 1874. Van de Velde's father eventually accepted an artistic career for his son, and a few years later, when in 1884 Manet's *Bar aux Folies-Bergères* was exhibited in Antwerp, van de Velde, deeply impressed by this painting, was allowed to study in Paris. There he wanted to join the atelier of Bastien-Lepage, but the unfortunate early death of this painter, made him go to the then in vogue portrait painter Carolus-Duran who accepted him as a student. Two years later he returned to Belgium where from 1886 to 1890 he lived in the small countryside village of Wechelderzande, popular among the young modern landscape painters for short trips of landscape painting. Van de Velde on the other hand was attracted by the loneliness of the region.

À Paris, j'avais appris à m'adapter à la solitude, ici, à Wechelderzande, j'allais apprendre à l'aimer.

(Ploegaerts, 1999: 17)

Here, after quiet hours of painting, he read books by the anarchists Bakunin, *God and the State*, and Kropotkin, *Paroles d'un révolté*, but also the small *Communist Manifesto* by Marx, much easier to digest than *Das Kapital* of course, and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. Next to those the writings of Saint-Francis and *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of Dostojewski's masterpieces, stood side by side on his bookshelves. As many other artists of that fin-de-siècle period he felt a deep need for societal change.

N'avais-je pas puisé dans tous ces livres, dans ces revues qui se trouvaient encore entassées, pêle-mêle, une et même substance : celle de la révolte contre l'égoïsme du régime social de la fin du XIXe siècle, et contre les privilèges âprement défendus par les classes dirigeantes de la Société ? (Ploegaerts, 1999: 32)

Van de Velde got together with several young avant-garde writers and artists in Antwerp where they created the artistic circle *L'Art Indépendant* (1887-1892), later followed by the *Association pour l'Art* (1892-1893), both with a similar artistic avant-garde program as *Les XX* in Brussels. His old school friend Max Elskamp was also involved in these groups. The *Association pour l'Art* organised two exhibitions in which, among others, works by Seurat, Walter Crane, Toorop, van Gogh, van Rysselberghe and of course van de Velde himself, were shown. In this period he not only discovered the new painting style of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, but also befriended both. This resulted in some beautifully executed pointillist or divisionist works. In 1889 he was accepted as a member of *Les XX* (1883-1893) in Brussels. Several artists of this group, and its successor *La Libre Esthétique* (1894-1914), played an important role in the avant-garde art of Europe, and the acceptance of decorative arts in particular.

By 1892 van de Velde had already abandoned painting. Most likely some views on the role of art in society, as developed in England, influenced his decision. Not for the same reason, but significant for this striving to liberty in life and in art, one of his painter friends, the older impressionist Camille Pissarro, who remained to the end of his life a convinced anarchist, wrote on the 27th of March 1896 to van de Velde that he “*couldn't work with the rigid constraints of pointillist painting*” (Pissarro and Bailly-Herzberg, 1989: 179-181).

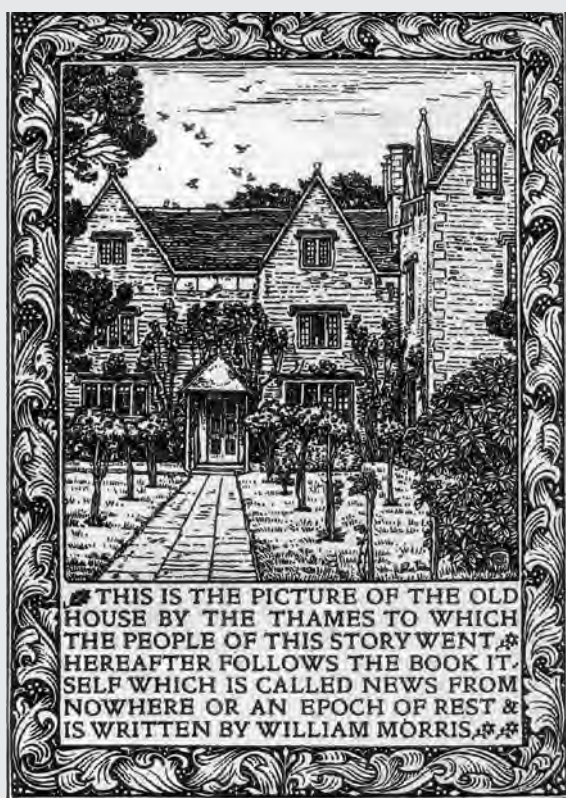




2. Théo van Rysselberghe, *Maria Sèthe, afterwards Mrs. Henry van de Velde*, 1891 (Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts). [© KIK-IRPA, Brussels (Belgium), cliché KN2434]

In his autobiography van de Velde mentions a passionate, although clumsy, speech he made instead of casual conversation when he first met his future wife Maria Sèthe [Ill. 2]. He told her how some important artists from the English *Art & Crafts Movement*, like William Morris [Ill. 3] shaped his ideas, alongside some anarchist radical thinkers:

(...) les deux grandes figures, celles de Ruskin et de William Morris ; je lui révélai l'impression profonde qu'avait produit sur moi la lecture de leurs écrits autant que celles des œuvres des précurseurs du socialisme et de l'anarchie : de Stirner, Bakounine, Kropotkine et Elisée Reclus. Je lui confessai que j'étais décidé à suivre les uns et les autres sur la voie au bout de laquelle s'accomplirait la prophétie du retour sur terre du règne de la Beauté et d'un régime social juste et humain. (Ploegaerts, 1999: 44)



3. William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1892. [Wikimedia Commons]

Henry van de Velde felt the need to spread his ideas and theories on art, and accepted teaching jobs, in 1893 at the Art Academy of Antwerp and in 1894 at the *Université Nouvelle* in Brussels, with courses on industrial arts and ornament. In 1889 and 1890 he published his first articles, on the Belgian painters Adrien-Joseph Heymans and his earlier teacher Charles Verlat. He was involved in the creation of the first series (1893-1894) of the Flemish-Dutch avant-garde magazine *Van Nu en Straks* which was devoted predominantly to literature and the fine arts and counted among its editors the Flemish writers August Vermeylen, Emmanuel de Bom and Prosper van Langendonck, and next to van de Velde, the Belgian artists James Ensor and Georges Minne, and, joining them from Holland, Jan Toorop. In this magazine literature and visual arts were treated side-by-side and on equal terms. Van de Velde was responsible for the design of journal [Ill. 4], and from his correspondence with the printer we learn that he was extremely demanding with regard to the quality of typography, design and reproductions.





4. Henry van de Velde, *Van Nu en Straks*, Nieuwe reeks, Jaargang 1, nr. 1, 1896.

Van Nu en Straks served also as a connection between the *Arts and Crafts* ideas from England, the symbolists in Holland - and of course not to forget the third issue in 1893, a special on the recently (1890) deceased Vincent van Gogh - and the French speaking intellectual and artistic avant-garde circles in Brussels and Paris. Van de Velde mainly incorporated this important link together with the painters Théo van Rysselberghe and Georges Lemmen, and through the work and relations of the anarchist writer and art historian Jacques Mesnil (pseudonym of Jean-Jacques Dwelshauvers). In a critique of the final exhibition of *Les XX*, translated from the French magazine *Floréal*, van de Velde referred to another *Arts and Crafts* artist, Walter Crane, who was

(...) already past us and showing us the way with authority. The English master puts the truth, which Kropotkin taught us, into practice: 'The Art, to develop, must be connected with industry/craft by thousand intermediary gradations, as such that they almost melt into each other'. (Van de Velde, 1893a: 22, Van de Velde, 1893b: 55)

Crane expressed several times his sympathies for the anarchist cause in words and illustrations, for instance with graphics for the Paris Commune and the case of the Chicago anarchists [Ill. 5].



5. Walter Crane,
The Anarchists of Chicago.
Portraits of the Haymarket Martyrs,
London: Liberty, November 1892.
[Wikimedia Commons]

The second series of *Van Nu en Straks* was more political with articles by the Dutch anarchist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, and other texts on anarchist theories, politics and intellectuals like Peter Kropotkin and Michael Bakunin. The anarchist historian Max Nettlau (1897: 276) listed it in his important bibliography of anarchist publications. Especially Kropotkin's call *Aux jeunes gens* may have appealed to van de Velde and his friends and this magazine showed how they saw their artistic activities to further the anarchist cause:

Vous, poètes, peintres, sculpteurs, musiciens, si vous avez compris votre vraie mission et les intérêts de l'art lui-même, venez donc mettre votre plume, votre pinceau, votre burin, au service de la révolution. Racontez-nous dans votre style imagé ou dans vos tableaux: saisissants les luttes titaniques des peuples contre leurs oppresseurs; enflammez les jeunes cœurs de ce beau souffle révolutionnaire qui inspirait nos ancêtres (...).

(Kropotkin, 1885: 66)

It was also in this spirit that earlier, in the first series, Vermeylen (1893, 1894) had published the essay *The Arts in the free Community* in which one of the basic ideas of anarchism is touched, the importance of individual freedom coupled with the solidarity of the community. Van de Velde didn't write much for the journal but in the first issue of the second series, his article about the need also to give attention to decorative arts, *Variations and Conclusions*, followed a long essay by Jacques Mesnil (1896b) about the flaws of the socialist party and its limitative influence on the freedom of the individual. In later issues Mesnil would publish multiple articles about anarchism as well as art historical critiques (1896a, 1896c, 1897).



Henry van de Velde collaborated with other journals like *L'Art moderne* and *La Société Nouvelle*. *L'Art moderne* was Brussels-based and edited by leading intellectuals and prominent figures in the Belgian Working Men's party Octave Maus and Edmond Picard, together with the writer Émile Verhaeren, who was also known to have had anarchist sympathies (Buelinckx, 2005). Linked closely with *Les XX* and *La Libre Esthétique*, it played an important role in making Brussels the centre of avant-garde art. It should be understood that in this Belgian socialist party, anarchist influences or leanings, especially regarding the arts, were not uncommon. *La Société Nouvelle*, first edited in Brussels and later in Paris, was less literary and more open to all kinds of contemporary socio-political ideas, especially about anarchism. In *La Société Nouvelle*, van de Velde published his important article *Déblaiement d'art*, which means the clearing or cleaning of art, explaining his theories and describing the new style (van de Velde, 1894b). According to his own words, but with a failing memory, he was proud to see his article published between articles by William Morris and Elisée Reclus (Ploegaerts, 1999: 50). It was indeed published right after the Reclus article, but he was wrong with Morris, whose translated *News from Nowhere* had already been published in 1892 in *La Société Nouvelle*. In the first version of his text van de Velde wrote some very disturbing anti-Semitic lines, which were only dropped in the second edition when published as a book (1894a, 1895a). In their time such rants could fall under what Bernard Lazare (1894), anarchist and Jew, described as economic anti-Semitism. Even worse however was the prolonged anti-Semitism of Edmond Picard, a fact far too rarely mentioned in Belgian socialist history. Surprisingly Lazare was also one of the teachers, together with van de Velde, at the *Université Nouvelle* in Brussels, of which Picard (1894, 1895) was one of the founders. This *New University* project started as a reaction to the censorship of the course on geography by the anarchist Elisée Reclus at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* in 1894. Van de Velde remained in contact with Elisée Reclus as shown by a letter from the latter, dated April 1898:

My dear friend, -- I have just read your noble review on William Morris and I have to tell you how it has interested me. If you have a great number of copies, do not fail to give them to all Workingmen's Societies of the French language, and to all important Public Libraries. (Ishill, 1927)

In *Déblaiement d'art* van de Velde also expressed his belief in the machine as a creator of a new kind of beauty against the machine used by the industrial. His influence, through other articles in journals as *L'Art Moderne* or *La Société Nouvelle*, sometimes based on the courses he gave, made his ideas also known in France, including in libertarian circles, as in a conference about Art and Society, where the French anarchist Charles-Albert quotes some lines from the article *Prédication d'Art*:

Telle est d'ailleurs la signification que prend ce mouvement d'art aux yeux de ceux-là même qui le tentent. « Le mouvement, dit M. Henry Van de Velde, un de ses plus fervents adeptes, le mouvement est révolutionnaire (...) C'est que nous avons choisi la beauté pour amener la société vers du meilleur. La beauté n'est pas le rameau d'olivier, c'est le glaive ! Nous avons choisi la beauté pour combattre, parce que son aspect beurte la société, la blesse d'une permanente injure. » (Charles-Albert, 1896: 49)

However, Charles-Albert omitted some even sharper sentences van de Velde had written in this article, which initially would serve as an introduction for his classes on industrial and decorative arts at the *Université Nouvelle*:

C'est que nous avons choisi la Beauté comme moyen d'amener la société vers du meilleur. Serait-ce que nous voulons précautionneusement n'user que de moyens légaux, inoffensifs et comme il faut ?

Je proteste et j'affirme que la Beauté est une arme et que le moyen est révolutionnaire !

Je ne connais ni arme, ni moyen plus sûrs !

La Beauté n'est pas le rameau d'olivier, c'est le glaive ! (Van de Velde, 1895b: 744)

How all this was to be transformed into real life is shown by van de Velde designing in 1895 his own house, *Bloemenwerf*, in Uccle, Brussels, a complete work of art from top to bottom, furniture and wallpaper, even dresses for his wife, all inspired by similar lines and curves. Art and beauty would invade every aspect of life. Before *Bloemenwerf* was finished he made an important contribution to the acceptance of this new art in other countries by designing the interior of and furniture for Samuel Bing's art gallery *L'Art Nouveau* in Paris in 1895. What once was considered avant-garde art and design was consolidated and found its way into the houses of broadminded members of the bourgeoisie. Van de Velde was well aware of the central role Brussels played during this period and mentioned the influences going from Brussels to Paris and from Paris to Germany and Holland in his memoirs (Ploegaerts, 1999: 73).

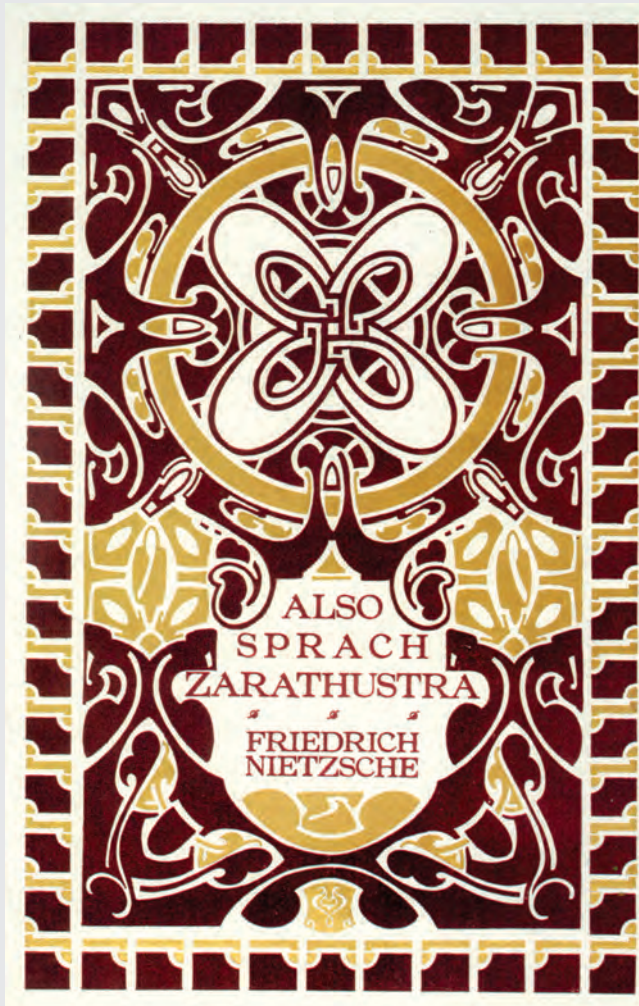
In 1896 *Bloemenwerf* was ready to move in with his wife Maria Sèthe. A year later his participation to the Dresden arts and crafts exhibition started to make his fame in Germany. His first Brussels workshop *Société Van de Velde* was thus soon to be followed by setting up a second firm in Germany in 1898, and in 1901 the family van de Velde moved to Berlin. After being asked by Grand Duke Willem Ernst von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach, through mediation by his friend Count Harry Kessler, for whom he decorated his Berlin flat in 1897, to become an official advisor for industrial design and crafts, the family settled in Weimar in 1902.

In 1903 Nietzsche's sister approached van de Velde to redesign the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century Friedrich Nietzsche was for many anarchist intellectuals a source of inspiration. This may seem strange nowadays because of Nietzsche's recuperation by fascist and Nazi ideologists, but for his contemporaries the destruction of old values, the hate for mass mentality and Christianity, and even the idea of the so-called *Übermensch* as a new kind of man, was seen as similar to the anarchist longing for a new beginning in which everybody would be a better man, and not just the chosen few. Although Nietzsche himself was not anarchist, and even expressed disdain for the rebel or revolutionary, the intellectual avant-garde thought it had found a kindred spirit in him (Moore and Sunshine, 2004).

From 1882 to 1885 Nietzsche worked on the four parts of his groundbreaking *Also sprach Zarathustra*, published in its entirety in 1892, and reprinted by Insel Verlag in 1908 with a very fine book design [ill. 6] by van de Velde (Nietzsche, 1908a). He also crafted another superb layout for Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, published the same year by the same editor (Nietzsche, 1908b).

This importance of the individual creativity, even in an industrial setting, was typical for the works van de Velde made throughout his career. With the combination of artistic individuality and larger scale manufacturing he was following and expanding the path laid out by Proudhon, Kropotkin, Reclus and other anarchists. Even when he started to leave Art Nouveau behind him





6. Friedrich Nietzsche,
Also sprach Zarathustra,
 Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1908.
 Bookdesign by Henry van de Velde.

for a more modernist approach, but always based on the power of the (curved) line, the same basic ideas were the foundation of his work. This is exemplified by the famous discussion with Hermann Muthesius [ill. 7] about the future of the *Werkbund*, where van de Velde, always faithful to his earlier views, defended the importance of the artistic creative freedom and the individuality of the designer, even in industrial production. And he adds what could be read as an anarchist credo:

Der Künstler ist seiner innersten Essenz nach glühender Individualist, freier spontaner Schöpfer; aus freien Stücken wird er niemals einer Disziplin sich unterordnen, die ihm einen Typ, einen Kanon aufzwingt. Instinktiv mißtraut er allem, was seine Handlungen sterilisieren könnte, und jedem, der eine Regel predigt, die ihn verhindern könnte, seine Gedanken bis zu ihrem eigenen freien Ende durchzudenken (...). (Van de Velde, 1962: 365)



7. Karl Arnold,
Von der Werkbund-Ausstellung,
 in: *Simplicissimus*,
 19. Jahrgang,
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ca. 1904, unknown artist