MARTIN EIDELBERG and SUZANNE HENRION-GIELE

# Horta and Bing: An Unwritten Episode of L'Art Nouveau

A major event in the history of the Art Nouveau movement occurred on 26th December 1895, when the noted Parisian dealer, S. Bing, officially opened his newly decorated gallery at 22 rue de Provence. He created a minor scandal by turning his back on the relatively staid field of Oriental antiquities for the more adventurous world of modern art. The decorative arts formed a major part of his exhibition, and the Belgian section, with its startling simplicity of structure and rhythmic, linear decoration, especially irked the refined taste of the Parisian critics. At this moment the style still had no official designation but it was soon to be identified by the very name which Bing had chosen for his new gallery: 'L'Art Nouveau.'

The Belgian artist whom Bing championed was the designer Henry Van de Velde, and the results of their association are well documented. There are photographs and descriptions of the three model rooms by Van de Velde that caused all the furore; also, Van de Velde's memoirs have a brief account of the visit Bing first made to Brussels, the subsequent commission, and the designer's attendance at the opening of Bing's new store.[1]

What we never knew is that at the very same time Bing was also in contact with the other leading Belgian exponent of the Art Nouveau style – Victor Horta. As we shall see, there are unpublished documents in the archives of the Horta Museum which not only shed light on a fascinating exchange between the two men, but also allow us to chart more precisely the building history of Bing's store.

Our narrative begins with a small agenda book Horta used in 1895 and which for some unknown reason escaped the destruction suffered by many of his other personal papers. Among the several entries that Horta made in this journal for Saturday, 20th July, is the important notation: 'Saw Mr Bing at Tassel's house.' Perhaps we should have anticipated this rendezvous since we already knew from Van de Velde's memoirs that Bing, together with Meier-Graefe, had travelled to Brussels and had visited with Van de Velde. How could Bing and Meier-Graefe have gone to Brussels and not also met Horta or seen his great masterpiece, the Tassel mansion? They were, after all, searching for the most advanced artistic developments and certainly there was nothing more *avant garde* at the time in Brussels (or anywhere else in Europe, for that matter) than this first architectural expression of the Art Nouveau style. Indeed, a meeting with Van de Velde almost implied a meeting with Horta since these two artists, despite their later enmity, were then closely allied. It had been Van de Velde who supplied Horta with samples of English fabrics and wallpapers for the Tassel mansion[2] and, conversely, Horta had been the architect charged with rebuilding rooms in the home of Van de Velde's mother-in-law, the very same house in which Van de Velde first received Bing.[3] In essence, it was a close circle and it was inevitable that Bing would have been drawn into it fully.

If all we could do was document that Bing and Horta viewed the Tassel mansion together, this alone would be of sufficient historical importance; it links two major personalities at a crucial time in the formation of the Art Nouveau style. Fortunately, though, our story continues beyond this point and, if anything, becomes more intriguing.

Horta's memoir also includes the notation: 'decided to go to Paris Saturday.' As can be inferred from subsequent events, Bing must have discussed his new store and the possibility of engaging Horta's service. As he had done with Van de Velde,[4] Bing must have extended Horta an invitation to visit the French capital. Horta carried through on his decision to go to Paris; his agenda for Monday, 29th July, has a listing of the Brussels-Paris trains as well as the explicit notation '22 rue de Provence – Bing' and the marginal note '9 1/2' which designates the time of his appointment.

When the two met in Paris, work was already under way at transforming Bing's property.[5] In addition to the gallery Bing had at 19 rue Chauchat, he also had the adjoining building, a converted Louis XVI mansion at 22 rue de Provence. He evidently wanted to harmonize the two separate structures and at the same time create a façade whose modern style would proclaim something of the nature of his art gallery. Bing had already charged the Parisian architect Louis Bonnier with the architectural and functional aspects of the remodelling, although these had to be kept to a minimum because Bing merely rented but did not actually own the buildings.[6] The greater effort was to be

[1] H. VAN DE VELDE: *Geschichte meines Lebens*, Munich [1962], pp.102–08.

[2] See M. EIDELBERG: 'British Floral Designs and Continental Art Nouveau, *The Connoisseur* (to appear), n.16. See also Horta's agenda book for 8th December 1894: '*visite chez Tassel avec Van de Velde.*'

[3] Although Horta's participation is suppressed in Van de Velde's memoirs, it is recorded in Horta's 1894 agenda book for 1st and 14th October: '*propriété de M^de^ Sethe à Uccle – transformations des salons plans et calques.*' The plans were prepared by Horta's draughtsman Coismans and were registered with the municipal authorities by Van de Velde on 11th April 1895.

[4] VAN DE VELDE: *Geschichte meines Lebens*, pp.103–04.

[5] Work must have been begun on at least the cupola since Bing's letter of 11th August reminds Horta: '. . . *la question est d'une urgence extrême . . . la cupole . . . est toute prête à être montée . . .*" It does not seem probable that work could have started after 29th July and already be in an advanced state of completion by 11th August. Moreover, the conception of the cupola must have been accompanied by architectural rearrangements on the interior.

[6] See 'Moderne Kunstgewerbliche Ausstellungen,' *Dekorative Kunst*, I [1898], p.30: '*Das Gebaüde war ursprünglich ein Miethaus und, da es sich nicht in dem festen Besitz Bing's befindet, musste man sich mit Modifikationen behelfen.*'

concentrated upon the façade and the design for this had been entrusted to the English painter Frank Brangwyn – probably even before Horta met with Bing.[7] Because of these already existing commitments all Bing asked of Horta was to look over Brangwyn's design once it was completed. And, as we shall see, Horta agreed.

In the meanwhile Brangwyn was busy at work in London on his project for the façade; on 7th August he submitted it to Bing. Although his drawings have not survived, the letter he sent with them has, and from this and other documents we can gather something of what Brangwyn proposed. The commission had been given to him because Bing wanted a 'pictorial' façade[8] and, consequently, the most notable feature of the façade was two painted friezes. The remainder of the façade was to be 'nearly all tiles, but if these are too expensive it could be done in plaster – coloured.' The ground floor had some sort of panels, there was to be a mosaic over the main doorway, and the upper floors were accented with horizontal lines. There were to be elaborate mouldings, particularly around the windows, and tiled pillars.[9] Brangwyn's only reservation about his project had to do with its rendering (the assistant who had coloured the drawing had made the reds insufficiently warm and golden) but, on the whole, he was satisfied with what he had created: '. . . my drawing is the best I can do in the time, if I had more time I could perhaps have done better, but at any rate I think it is unlike anything in Paris.'

Bing, on the other hand, had fundamental reservations about Brangwyn's design and immediately turned to Horta. On 11th August, a scant four days after Brangwyn submitted his project, Bing wrote to Horta.[10] He enclosed Brangwyn's drawings and letter, and reminded the Belgian architect of his earlier agreement 'to examine the project . . . and to propose modifications that seem useful . . .' Bing's brief critique is backed up by a two-and-a-half page memorandum written by one of his staff which discusses specific problems in more detail. In essence Bing questioned the basic idea of tiling the entire façade, proposing instead to paint it in tones related to the friezes. Also, Bing felt it necessary to enlarge the doorway, suppress the excessive number of parallel lines, eliminate the mouldings around the windows, and in general soften the overall effect of Brangwyn's design.[11] The only restriction he imposed was that Horta respect the already existing openings in the structure and that he keep the two friezes for Brangwyn to paint.

In a letter written on the 17th Horta accepted Bing's proposal. Although all we have to guide us is the correspondence sent from Paris, still, we can follow what transpired. Bing acknowledged Horta's acceptance on 20th August and in response to the architect's request sent him additional plans of the building drawn by Bonnier. A week later, on 28th August, Bing sent a telegram asking for the date by which Horta would send his plans. Having got no response Bing sent a second telegram on 30th August (now with a prepaid reply): 'Can you say what day you will send your ideas [for] façade? Work is suspended.' This time Horta responded with both a telegram and a letter, as can be gathered from Bing's acknowledgement of the following day. On 3rd September Bing asked for the return of the Bonnier plans and while Horta may have returned them, he still did not submit his own project. Thus another entreating telegram from Bing arrived six days later with an all too familiar message: 'All work suspended. When do you send?' This time Horta may have fixed a date, since the next letter from Bing's office, dated 13th September, presumes the drawing to be finished and asks that it be given to Van de Velde (presumably Van de Velde was going to Paris about his own commission and could thus act as messenger).[12] Horta must then have submitted his drawing, for on 23rd September Bing's deputy, H. M. Jaeger, wrote a letter thanking Horta for 'the interesting drawing of the façade.'

While the factual aspects of this account may seem satisfying, still, we lack the crucial element: Horta's final drawing. It presumably disappeared with all the other papers of Bing's establishment. Fortunately, though, Horta retained six of his preliminary drawings and these give us a glimpse of what he may have proposed.[13] Their sequence is not marked but some idea of their order can be gauged.

What we believe to be the first of the drawings shows the rue de Provence side of Bing's building (Fig.17).[14] It is on heavy paper and is the most measured and carefully finished of the series. The sober rectilinearity of its bay system may reflect something of Brangwyn's plan, but Horta's distinctive approach is clearly revealed. First of all, each of the wall sections was to be decorated and, as can be seen in the more fully delineated sections close to the doorway, there was to be rhythmic, linear decoration of the sort he had introduced

[7] According to VAN DE VELDE (*Geschichte meines Lebens*, p.102), Bing and Meier-Graefe were going to England after their stay in Belgium but since these memoirs were written late in the author's life (and with certain prejudices as well), they often are inaccurate. For example, Van de Velde also reports that Bing was planning to go from England to Denmark and then on to Germany but, as we can tell from Bing's correspondence, after Brussels he returned to Paris and then left for Germany. Thus it is quite possible that Bing had already been to England before his arrival in Brussels and had already commissioned Brangwyn. Even if Van de Velde went to England immediately after his trip to Brussels, he must have commissioned Brangwyn before his 29th July meeting with Horta since his letter of 11th August specifies that Horta had agreed in Paris to look over Brangwyn's plans.

[8] See Bing's letter to Horta of 11th August: '*Brangwyn . . . me paraît très bien comprendre le rôle de la décoration picturale que je lui ai demandé.*'

[9] The mouldings were evidently an integral and major part of Brangwyn's conception. He wrote of his façade: '. . . and with the proper mouldings it will look dignified and rich'; also: 'If you do not like so much color all the parts except the porch can be plain plaster with light mouldings.'

[10] The letter was written from Munich where Bing was staying at the Hotel zu den vier Jahreszeiten. He did not return to Paris until the morning of 20th August.

[11] Bing's phraseology would be easier to understand if only we had Brangwyn's drawing: '*La chose essentielle . . . est la supression . . . du grand nombre de lignes parallèles; . . . quant à l'abus de la vivacité des angles, je connais trop bien vos idées à cet égard.*'

[12] This reminds us once again of the closeness between the two Brussels artists at this point in their careers.

[13] These drawings afford one of the rare instances where we can watch the architect's creative processes at work. But one wonders why he chose to preserve these drawings and related correspondence, while throwing out in the early 1940's his drawings for his more famous projects such as the Tassel mansion.

[14] Curiously, none of the drawings Horta preserved have any indication of the other side of the building or the adjoining building on the rue Chauchat. Are we to presume that he made a separate set of studies for the rue Chauchat façade and that his final drawing (which is spoken of in the singular) was a composite of both views?

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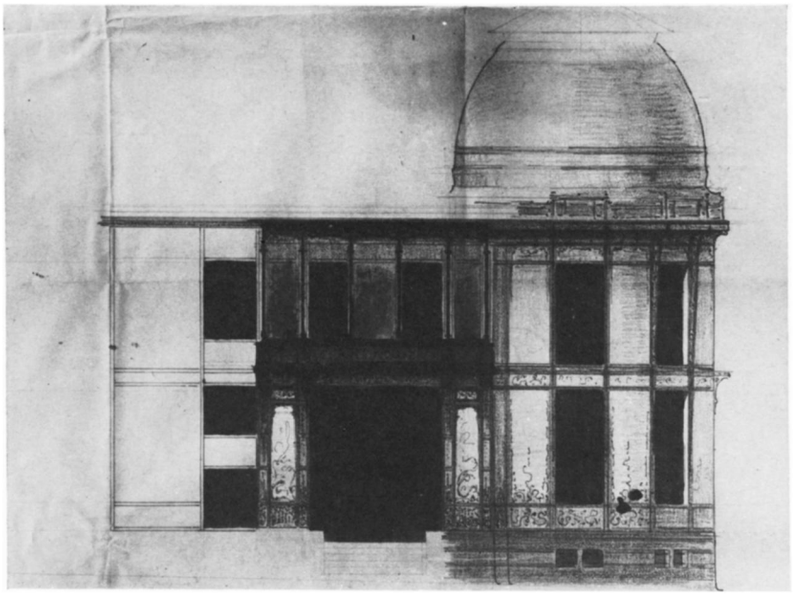

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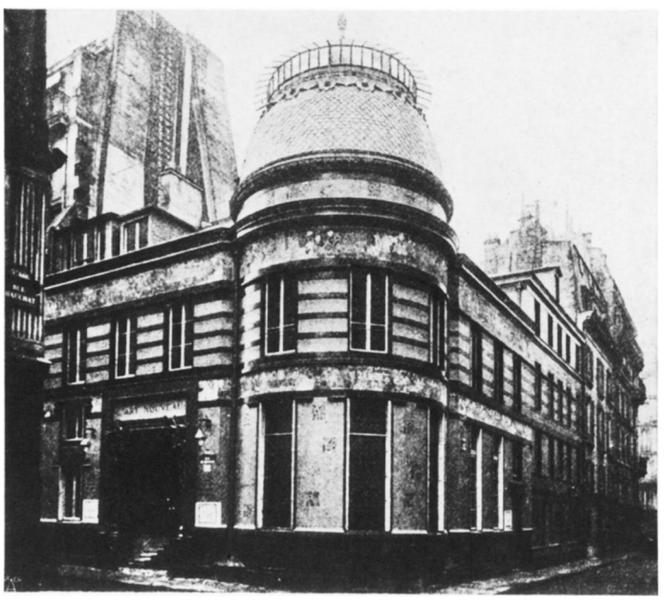

17. Study for L'Art Nouveau, rue de Provence façade, by Victor Horta. 1895. (Musée Horta, Brussels).

18. Hôtel Van Eetvelde, Brussels, by Victor Horta. 1895. *Copyright A. C. L. Brussels.*

19. Sketch, *c.*1898, of the rue de Provence entrance to L'Art Nouveau, designed by Louis Bonnier, executed by Camille Lefevre. From *Revue des Arts Décoratifs*, 1899.

20. L'Art Nouveau, rue Chauchát and rue de Provence, Paris, by Frank Brangwyn, Louis Bonnier *et al.* From *Dekorative Kunst*, 1898.

21. L'Art Nouveau, section of façade along the rue Chauchát, by Frank Brangwyn, Louis Bonnier *et al.* From *Dekorative Kunst*, 1898.

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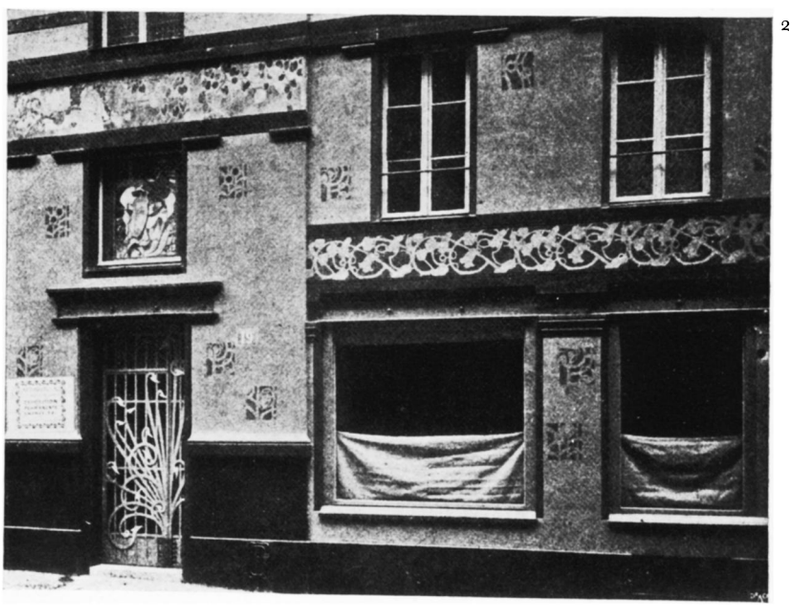

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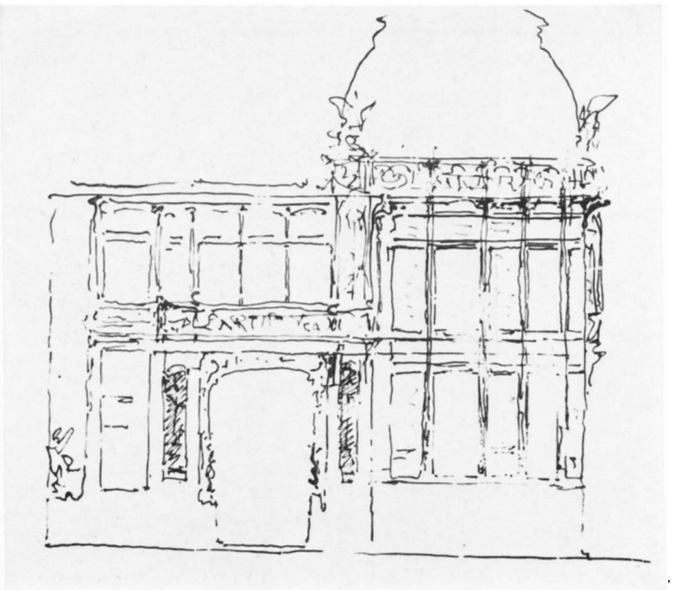

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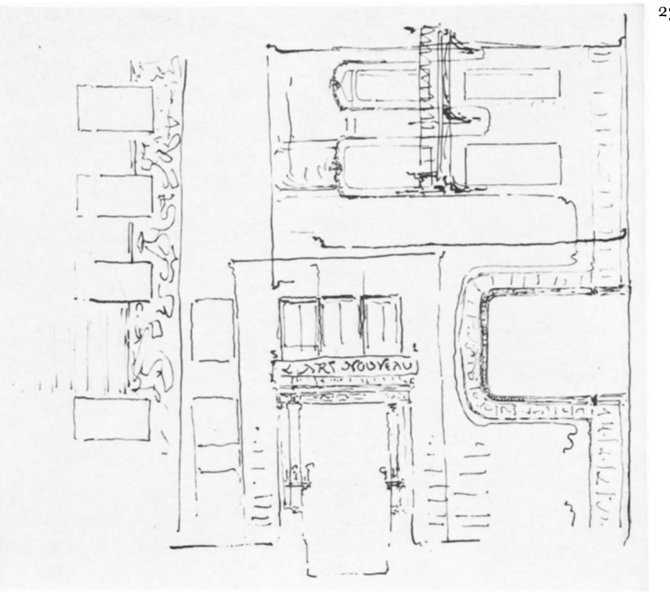

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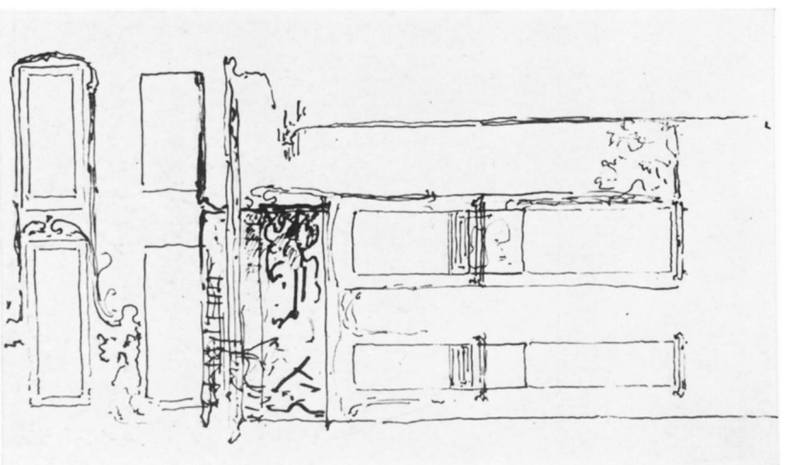

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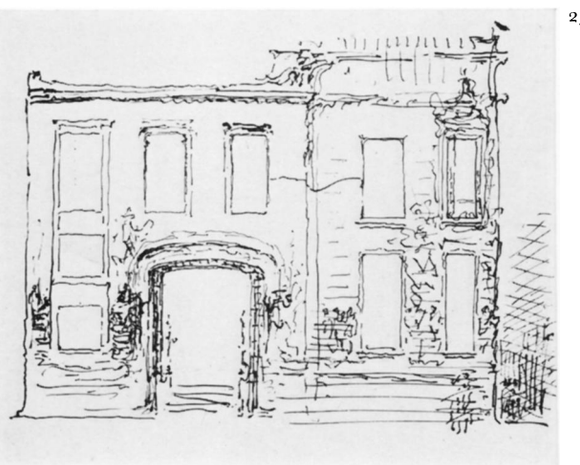

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22. Study for L'Art Nouveau, rue de Provence façade, by Victor Horta. 1895. (Musée Horta, Brussels).

23. Studies for L'Art Nouveau façade, by Victor Horta. 1895. (Musée Horta, Brussels).

24. Studies for L'Art Nouveau façade, by Victor Horta. 1895. (Musée Horta, Brussels).

25. Study for L'Art Nouveau façade, by Victor Horta. 1895. (Musée Horta, Brussels).

26. Study for L'Art Nouveau, rue de Provence façade, by Victor Horta. 1895. (Musée Horta, Brussels).

in the interior of the Tassel mansion. Horta's decision to employ this on a broad scale on the exterior of a building is unusual but not without parallel in his *œuvre*. In fact, at just this very moment he was also working on the Van Eetvelde house, whose façade has a remarkably similar system of bays decorated with linear ornamentation executed in mosaic (Fig.18).[15] It is difficult to say precisely which of the two projects preceded the other but, in any event, they represent a brief moment in the overall development of Horta's architecture. As we shall see, he soon abandoned this type of exterior decoration.

Another prominent feature of Horta's first study is the exposed iron structure of the façade. The thin colonettes above the entrance portico and their tendril-like capitals (only lightly indicated by a flourish of the pen) can be related to those he introduced in the Tassel mansion. Moreover, they are envisaged here as part of an iron frame that extends over the whole of the façade. At the sides, above the level of the first floor, the framework gradually rises outward from the wall surface to support the overhanging cornice; this can be seen most clearly at the right side where the normal head-on view has been modified to show a more lateral aspect of the framework.

Following in sequence, then, are five quick ink sketches done on thin tracing paper.[16] Three are of the entire façade (Figs.22, 25, 26) and the other two are subsidiary studies of the main door and the tower windows (Figs.23, 24).

The first of the three major sketches (Fig.22) is essentially a continuation of the preceding study save that the decorative scheme has been suppressed (or is this merely the vagueness of the rendering?). The slightly arched form of the door and some squiggly lines at the base of the dome suggest ideas which Horta will elaborate in his subsequent studies.

The two subsidiary sketches (Figs.23, 24) are more difficult to read because each contains two separate studies, one placed at a right angle to the other. One of the pages shows alternate ideas for the rue de Provence entrance (Fig.23). The square-headed doorway with the 'L'Art Nouveau' sign overhead follows closely what Horta had proposed in his first study, while the alternate version with its arched form looks ahead to the solution which will be adopted. Significantly, mouldings around the door continue across the wall and link up with those around the tower windows, thus unifying the façade in a fashion similar to what Horta had tried the previous year on the façade of the Wissinger mansion. The other page (Fig.24) with its two different schemes for the tower windows shows, moreover, that this moulding was to have been an intricate play of whiplash lines – not flat, surface decoration but, rather, carved and three-dimensional. This attempt to create a unifying bond between the separate elements (the grills across the windows should also be understood in this light) and the drive to a more sculptural solution were apparently chief concerns of Horta. While they are responses to specific problems set by Bing's building, they also adumbrate solutions typical of Horta's mature Art Nouveau architecture. These studies thus take on an added lustre for they reveal an important transition in Horta's way of thinking; we are almost looking over the architect's shoulder, watching his style evolve.

This drive toward fusion and three-dimensionality is certainly apparent in the remaining two studies (Figs.25, 26). Both show an elaboration of sculptural decoration which in addition to enriching the entrance is used either to create pediments over the tower windows (Fig.25) or to project out boldly from the ground floor level of the tower (Fig.26). Similarly, Horta's desire to join the windows organically is registered in one drawing (Fig.25) by the vertical fusion of the three windows at the far left, and in the other drawing (Fig.26) by a comparable scheme of joining the tower windows under quasi-Gothic arches.[17] Other sketches may have followed in this series and, of course, we lack the final drawing sent to Bing. Still, though, we have at least some indication of what Horta's plan may have been.

Inevitably we must ask what effect Horta had on the actual architecture of the L'Art Nouveau store. Bing's buildings have long since been demolished but there are photographs of the exterior taken soon after 1895 (Figs.20, 21). And, as these photographs show, the façade bears no relation to what Horta must have proposed. Rather, the essential ideas are still closely allied to the original scheme submitted by Brangwyn: the dominant note is supplied by the horizontal bandings and the artist's two painted friezes.

Jaeger's letter with its description of Horta's design as merely 'interesting' suggests the somewhat cool reception that the Belgian project was accorded. This reaction was perhaps to be expected since, curiously, Horta disregarded most of Bing's earlier guidelines. Horta called for an elaborate architectural programme in carved stone that would have been far more expensive than a painted façade; also it would have taken longer to execute and speed, after all, was a major consideration for Bing. Nor did Horta's project provide for Brangwyn's two painted friezes even though Bing had clearly stipulated this.[18] Indeed, some of the ultimate features of Bing's building – such as the elimination of the stripes on the second floor and the substitution of painted plaster for tiling – could have been anticipated from Bing's comments and suggest how deeply Bing was involved with the ultimate design.[19]

[15] Horta's plans for the Van Eetvelde house were registered with the municipal authorities on 2nd July 1895 but work on the project continued in his atelier until at least September as is indicated by entries in his agenda book.

[16] They were apparently laid over Horta's first study so that the basic measurements of the building were easily maintained. This is in accord with the general working procedures in Horta's atelier; see the unpublished manuscript in the Musée Horta, *Rapport de l'architecte André Dautzchberg, architecte chez Horta* [1963], p.26: '*Les premières études étaient réalisées sur calque, c'est à dire: tracé des grand axes et des niveaux; ensuite crayonnez* [*sic*] *au gré de sa fantaisie, sans souci de la construction puis, sans se préoccuper de sa 1ère étude, recherchait la décoration et les proportions.*'

[17] Horta had used a pointed arch over the doorway on his earlier Autrique mansion in Schaerbeck.

[18] It is easy to understand why Horta did not approve of Brangwyn's design. He had himself used such painted friezes earlier in his career, as on his 1885 Geenens house in Ghent, but in the intervening decade came to repudiate the concept, as can be seen in his disdain for Hankar's use of painted friezes (HORTA: *Memoires inédites*, Musée Horta, p.49).

[19] Was it a compromise with Bing's idea (recorded in the letter of 11th August) that there be a single colour, perhaps broken or shaded, that the bands were painted in muted tones of a greyish-yellow ochre, brown and olive green (see L. C. BOILEAU: 'La maison de l' "Art Nouveau",' *L'Architecture*, IX [1896], p.14)?

In rejecting Horta's scheme Bing chose the expedient course but was it necessarily the wisest aesthetically speaking? Brangwyn's use of painted friezes, and Bonnier's columns with their sunflower capitals (Fig.19),[20] hark back to the English Aesthetic movement of the 1880's; they cannot be considered as progressive a statement of the mid-1890's as the scheme Horta must have proposed. Even small details, like the conservative Roman letters proclaiming the store's name, are uninspired when compared with the rhythmic alphabet Horta was planning for his sign.[21]

[20] The sculpture was executed only in plaster and was coloured naturalistically; see BOILEAU: *L'Architecture*, p.14. According to the catalogue issued by Bing for his first exhibition, Camille Lefevre executed the sculpture around the door but generally Bonnier was credited with the design of the columns (e.g., *Revue des arts décoratifs*, XIX [1899], p.343) and, indeed, Bonnier used such sunflower motifs in several of his interiors (e.g., *Dekorative Kunst*, I [1898], pp.216, 221).
[21] Bing ultimately did use this type of alphabet but the impetus for it may have come from Van de Velde or Lemmen. Likewise, Bonnier's use of rhythmic, curved iron grilles for the door and windows (Fig.21) seems to be a generalized reflection of the Belgian style; it would be difficult to say which of the Belgian artists prompted this.

However, this is not yet the end of the story. In Jaeger's letter which acknowledged the receipt of Horta's 'interesting' drawing, still a new project was offered to the Belgian architect:

'[M. Bing] would like to know if he can count on your precious help for the execution of a project for the grand hall. M. Bing has spoken to you . . ., I believe, about what would have to be done about the lighting.'

Since Horta at this time was very much concerned with creating central, domed halls that opened the interiors of his buildings, one wonders what his response to Bing was, but it would seem that nothing came of this project.

Despite all the data we have been able to gather or infer, many questions remain unresolved and might stay so even if we were to find more of the original drawings or correspondence. Not the least interesting speculation is what effect Horta's façade might have had if it had been erected in Paris. Would it have made critics more favourably disposed to Bing's venture (there were few admirers of the Brangwyn-Bonnier-Bing collaboration) and might it have had a positive effect on the development of the French Art Nouveau style? As with all unrealized projects, the saddest words are 'it might have been'.

LEONEE ORMOND

# The Soames Forsyte Collection: A Study in Fictional Taste

JOHN GALSWORTHY's novel sequence, *The Forsyte Saga*, is a goldmine for the social historian, but its relevance to the history of aesthetic taste has not been recognised. Soames Forsyte, the central figure of the *Saga*, has always fascinated Galsworthy's readers. Thirty-one when the series opens in 1886, seventy-one when it closes in 1926, he is a cautious solicitor, who scarcely opens his mouth without mentioning a financial transaction, or passing some unfavourable comment on the changing times. Not the kind of figure, one might think, to be interested in art, or to show much aesthetic discernment. But Soames is from the beginning a collector of pictures, and by the end of the book he is buying the great names of modern art, including Matisse and Picasso, when hardly a single work by either of these artists can be documented in a British collection. The quiet and money-conscious Soames becomes, in fact, the most enterprising and intelligent collector in the whole range of the English novel.

Few English novelists have ever attempted a study of a collector. One exception is Disraeli in his novel, *Coningsby*, of 1844, where he characterizes a mill-owner, Mr Millbank, through a short account of Millbank's collection of modern British paintings. We know that Millbank is an up-to-date businessman, with a sense of responsibility because he buys Etty, Landseer, Wilkie and Danby. Fuller accounts of collecting can be found in the novels of Henry James, some of whose characters, like Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* or Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, have given up their lives to the pursuit and purchase of works of art. James, however, rarely descends to giving the details, being deliberately vague about most of the actual objects, where Galsworthy is quite prepared to give us a name and often a price.

Among contemporary continental novelists, Proust is perhaps most directly comparable,[1] although in *A la Recherche du Temps perdu*, it is not the narrator who collects paintings, but the aristocratic and philistine Duc de Guermantes. The Guermantes collection is famous for its Elstirs, Elstir being a fictional artist whose work is an amalgam of the painting of Turner with that of a number of impressionist artists who include Manet, Monet and Degas.

[1] See D. F. WAKEFIELD: 'Proust and the Visual Arts', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE, CII [May 1970], 291–96 and JOHN COCKING: 'Proust and Painting' in *French Nineteenth Century Painting and Literature*, ed. U. FINKE, Manchester [1972], pp.305–24.