

*Strand 4. Research and Doctoral Thesis in Progress*

**From the Luxurious to the Rustic. Belgian Art Nouveau Ceramics Between Industry and Craftmanship**

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Abstract

Thanks to the lawyer Edmond Picard, who founded the ground breaking art gallery La Maison d'Art in Brussels, applied arts received a lot of attention in Belgium from the 1890s onwards. As a result, many leading figures from the art nouveau movement - including Henry van de Velde, Alfred William Finch, Omer Coppens, Arthur Craco and Isidore De Rudder - became interested in ceramics. Their work, often strongly influenced by the old Flemish rustic production, received a lot of attention at world exhibitions and in the avant-garde art magazines. Poterie Flamande pottery from the Céramiques de Courtrai (1898-1926), led by the engineer Pieter-Jozef Laigneil, also occupied an important position and was sold in the famous luxury store Liberty in London and even in New York. We discuss Belgian art nouveau ceramics for the years 1890-1914 as shown at ground breaking exhibitions of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique.

**Keywords:** art nouveau ceramics, arts & crafts movement, William Morris, decorative arts in Belgium, Les XX, La Libre Esthétique, Alfred William Finch, Omer Coppens, Arthur Craco, Poterie Flamande

## The art ceramics at Les XX and La Libre Esthétique in Brussels

In the 1890s in Belgium applied arts and the so-called *arts industriels* - long only presented at world exhibitions - gradually gained more attention and appreciation as well in art circles as from a growing number of buyers, initially mainly at temporary exhibitions such as those of the internationally renowned artists' group *Les XX* and later *La Libre Esthétique*<sup>1</sup>. From 1891 onwards, a growing interest in art ceramics was to be seen, with often impressive entries from leading French avant-garde ceramists<sup>2</sup>, in addition to broadly discussed work by the Belgian painter and ceramist Alfred William Finch (1854-1930)<sup>3</sup>. The reactions of art critics to the exhibited objects make clear that the ceramics shown there were considered as objects that are situated between such opposite poles as originality versus beauty, uniqueness versus affordability, refinement versus 'primitivism' or craft tradition versus innovation. The great appeal of the popular, authentic and picturesque character of the work of Finch and similar work of other artists is also evident<sup>4</sup>.

The great breakthrough of the art pottery in Belgium was due to the initiative of the progressive socialist Brussels lawyer and art patron Edmond Picard (1836-1924)<sup>5</sup>. He founded, together with a few like-minded friends, on 7 March 1894 the *S.A. L'Art*. The aim of this association was: "the application of the arts to industry in general and their adaptation to the uses of life". This goal was to be realized by, among other things, bringing objects on the market that responded to this aim. A few months later, the establishment of *La Maison d'Art* followed, for which Picard transformed his own house on the Avenue de la Toison d'Or 56 in

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed overview of the expositions of both groups see: Madeleine Octave MAUS, *Trente années de lutte pour l'art. Les XX. La Libre Esthétique 1884-1914*, Brussel, Lebeer Hossmann, 1980/2 and Gisèle OLLINGER-ZINQUE, *Les XX – La Libre Esthétique. Honderd jaar later: Cent ans après*, Bruxelles/Brussel, KMKG/MRAH, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Recent overviews of the French ceramic production around 1900 in: Paul ARTHUR, *French Art Nouveau Ceramics: An Illustrated Dictionary*, Paris, Editions Norma, 2015; Horst MAKUS, *Französische Kunst-Keramik 1860-1920. Ein Handbuch*, Tübingen, Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, 2015 and Marc LAMBRECHTS, *L'objet sublime. Franse ceramiek 1875-1945*, Antwerpen, Pandora Publishers, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Danielle DEREY-CAPON (ed.) e.a., *A.W. Finch 1854-1930*, Brussel, Gemeentekrediet, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the presentations of ceramics over the years see: Mario BAECK & Marc LOGGHE, *Tegels in Poterie Flamande (1890-1940)*, Torhout, Stadsbestuur/Museum Torhouts Aardewerk, 2006, p. 51-65.

<sup>5</sup> Paul ARON & Cécile VANDERPELEN-DIAGRE, *Edmond Picard. Un bourgeois socialiste belge à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, Essai d'histoire culturelle*, Bruxelles, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 2013 (Thèses & Essays).

Brussels into an art gallery. Here art and art objects were shown on a permanent basis and in excellent conditions. The opening exhibition ran from December 29, 1894. This innovative initiative - in which, in addition to paintings, sculptures and decorative objects in other materials, work by progressive Belgian and foreign ceramists was regularly shown - received international attention. It is now considered as one of the key initiatives that laid to the definitive breakthrough of modern applied arts<sup>6</sup>. This Brussels initiative soon found imitation in almost all major European cities, where similar galleries were opened, such as *L'Art Nouveau* by Siegfried Bing (from 1895) or *La Maison Moderne* by Julius Meier-Graefe (from 1898) in Paris or the galleries of Hirschwald, Cassirer or Keller & Reiner in Berlin, where also art ceramics were regularly shown<sup>7</sup>.

This international circuit for high-quality applied art in the new art nouveau style was – as is well known - strongly supported by a growing number of specialized art magazines with, in addition to the famous English magazine *The Studio* (founded in 1893), the Berlin magazine *Pan* (1895), the French *Art et Décoration* (1897) and the German-French initiative *Dekorative Kunst* (1897) and its French counterpart *L'Art Décoratif*, also the Belgian *L'Art Appliqué* (1897)<sup>8</sup>. In these magazines, art theories were developed and discussions launched about the role of the applied arts in society and the important contribution they could make to the democratization of art. A debate that was intensively held internationally by a great variety of artist groups<sup>9</sup>. Through these magazines the new ideas, together with the art objects which were the result of the new inspiration it awoke, became known to a wide audience.

As a result of all this, the interest in ceramics as applied art grew considerably among the Belgian artistic avant-garde in the 1890s. Many leading figures from the art nouveau

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<sup>6</sup> Jane BLOCK, « La Maison d'Art. Edmond Picard's Asylum of Beauty », in : Michel DRAGUET (ed.), *Irréalisme et Art moderne Mélanges Ph. Roberts-Jones*, Bruxelles, ULB, (1991), pp. 145 vv. and « *L'Art et l'idée* » un centenaire fin de siècle. 1ère partie. Vente publique 26.10.1992, Bruxelles, La Librairie Pascal de Sadeleer.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel P. WEISBERG, *Art Nouveau Bing. Paris Style 1900*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1986 and Gabriel P. WEISBERG, Edwin BECKER, Evelyn POSSEME, *The Origins of L'art Nouveau: The Bing Empire*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Hans BRILL, "The Fin de Siècle", in : Trevor FAWCETT & Clive PHILLPOT, *The Art Press. Two centuries of Art Magazines*, London, The Art Book Company, 1976, p. 23-32 and Maria RENNHOFFER, *Kunstzeitschriften der Jahrhundertwende in Deutschland und Österreich 1895-1914*, Wien, Christian Brandstaetter, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> Rossella FROISSART-PEZONE, *L'art dans tout - Les arts décoratifs en France et l'utopie d'un Art nouveau*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2004.

movement - including Henry van de Velde (1863-1957)<sup>10</sup>, Gisbert Combaz (1869-1941)<sup>11</sup>, Georges Lemmen (1865-1916)<sup>12</sup>, Isidore De Rudder (1855-1943)<sup>13</sup>, Alfred William Finch and various other lesser-known Belgian art nouveau artists<sup>14</sup> - made designs for art pottery<sup>15</sup> and various forms of architectural ceramics and tiles<sup>16</sup> that were presented at exhibitions and in art books.

By far the most important Belgian pioneer in the field of art pottery around 1900 was the already mentioned Alfred William Finch. As a painter and founding member, Finch was already part of the internationally influential artists' group *Les XX* from 1883 onwards. He introduced neo-impressionism in Belgium and resolutely devoted himself to applied arts from 1890 onwards, inspired by Ruskin and Morris. He made his debut as a ceramist at the eighth exhibition of *Les XX* in 1891 with controversial tile panels made at *Boch Frères* in La Louvière<sup>17</sup>. These tile panels were controversial, mainly because this was the first time the neo-impressionistic theory of divisionism was applied to ceramics<sup>18</sup>.

At the same exhibition, the French impressionist Paul Gauguin was also present with ceramics. He showed a few vases and a sculpture in stoneware in which the influence of folk art and primitive art - which some people considered to be synonymous - are clearly visible<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive study on the ceramics of Van de Velde see :Thomas FÖHL, Antje NEUMANN (ed.), *Henry van de Velde. Raumkunst und Kunsthandwerk : Interior Design and Decorative Arts. Ein Werkverzeichnis in sechs Bänden : A catalogue raisonné in six volumes. Band III: Keramik : Volume III: Ceramics*, Weimar/Leipzig, Klassik Stiftung Weimar/E.A. Seemann Verlag, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Jane BLOCK, *Gisbert Combaz (1869-1941). Fin de siècle Artist*, S.l., Pandora, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Roger CARDON, *Georges Lemmen (1865-1916). Monographie générale suivie du Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre*, Antwerpen, Pandora, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Jean MORJAN, « Isidore De Rudder », in: *L'Académie et l'Art Nouveau. 50 artistes autour de Victor Horta*, Bruxelles, 1996, tome I, p. 108–111.

<sup>14</sup> Benoît SCHOONBROODT, *Artistes belges de l'Art nouveau 1890-1914*, Bruxelles, Editions Racine, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Sébastien CLERBOIS (ed.), *Céramistes de l'Art Nouveau*, Anvers, Pandora, 1999 & Anne PLUYMAEKERS & Marc LOGGHE (ed.), *Céramiques de l'Art nouveau en Belgique*, Andenne/Torhout, Musée de la Céramique/Museum Torhouts Aardewerk, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Mario BAECK, "The Flourishing of Belgian Ornamental Tiles & Tile Panels in the Art Nouveau Period", in: Lluís BOSCH & Mireia FREIXA, *coupDefouet International Congress Barcelona Jun.2013. Proceedings-Actes-Actas-Actes*, (Col.leccio Singularitats), electronic edition, p. 694-709 and Mario BAECK, *Splendeurs domestiques. Les carrelages de sol et de mur en céramique et en ciment en Belgique*, (Les dossiers de l'IPW, 11), Namur, Institut du Patrimoine wallon, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> M. O. MAUS, *Trente années de lutte pour l'art*, p. 114-115 en D. DEREY-CAPON, *Finch*, p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> For a critical discussion of these panels see : Emile VERHAEREN, *Ecrits sur l'Art, 1881-1892, 1893-1916, édités et présentés par Paul Aron*, Bruxelles, Editions Labor, 1997, 2 dl. (Collection Archives du futur), p. 394.

<sup>19</sup> Carole ANDREANI, *Les Céramiques de Gauguin*, Paris, Éditions de l'Amateur, 2003, p. 67 vv.

Just like Finch's tile panels, these objects were also far removed from the often over-refined realizations made by the reputed and more industrial oriented ceramics factories. Finch's and Gauguin's ceramics were the first decorative art objects that were shown at *Les XX* and the criticism was strongly dismissive because of the rustic and primitive character of the realizations of both artists. In the following years, this 'primitivism' appeared to gain acceptance within the artistic avant-garde because of its popular, authentic and picturesque character, as we will discuss further below.

The great breakthrough of the artistically highly valued decorative arts in Belgium followed - as already stated - around 1894, when in Brussels the first artistic pottery of Finch from his Virginal period is presented in the art gallery *La Maison d'Art*. Afterwards, between 1895 and 1897, Finch worked in his own workshop in Forges with the white clay of the region. Characteristic is than the rather abstract decoration of the pieces with patterns of dots, stripes, streaks and arabesques.

The rustic character of Finch's production, together with the 'honesty' of the use of materials and the typical decoration, at that time, according to the art critic Octave Maus, met with a deep need of taste (Fig. 1). With his sober utilitarian art, Finch placed himself in the long tradition of rustic lead glazed pottery in Flanders, with production centres such as Torhout and Poperinge, and in Northern France<sup>20</sup>. As a result, Finch gave this traditional local pottery, with which he had probably already been familiar since his youth in Ostend, a greater prestige and thus laid the foundation for its artistic revival<sup>21</sup>.

A second impulse was given by the painter Omer Coppens (1864-1926) who also made art pottery between 1894-1897<sup>22</sup>. His work was noticed next to that of Finch during the second exhibition of *La Libre Esthétique* in 1895. With his "poteries lustrées et flambées (sic!)" or pottery with metallic lustre he achieved a well-deserved success. Coppens, like Finch, used old techniques for his ceramics. The warm tones, together with the varied surface finish and

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<sup>20</sup> Werner DE BAERE, Piet SWIMBERGHE, Stefan VANDENBERGHE, *Volksaardewerk in Vlaanderen*, Brugge, Mark van de Wiele, 1987.

<sup>21</sup> As acknowledged by Richard BORRMANN, *MODERNE KERAMIK*, Leipzig, Hermann Seemann Nachfolger, z.j. (ca. 1902), (Monographien des Kunstgewerbes V), p. 66-67.

<sup>22</sup> Claire LEBLANC, « Omer Coppens. Les arts appliqués », in: Sébastien CLERBOIS e.a., *Omer Coppens (1864-1926) ou le rêve de l'Art Nouveau*, S.I., Pandora, 2001, p. 57-69.

simple decorations - engraved, painted or applied - testify to "une volonté de retour aux campagnes flamandes, lieux authentiques épargnés par l'industrialization massive" – “a desire to return to the Flemish countries, authentic places spared by massive industrialization”. It is therefore not considered impossible that Coppens - like Finch - was influenced by the folk pottery from Bredene and Torhout.

After Finch's departure to Finland in September 1897 and the reorientation of artistic activities from Coppens, the torch within the avant-garde was taken over by the sculptor Arthur Craco (1869-1955)<sup>23</sup> from 1898 onwards. At the beginning of 1898 Craco showed his first pottery at an exhibition in the foyer of the *Nouveau Théâtre* and then in March 1898 he took part in the third *Salon d'Art Idéaliste*, also with ceramics. During his first periods Craco collaborated intensively with experienced potters such as Emile Declercq from Rebaix and Frédéric or Fritz Horta in Ledeborg near Ghent. Later he had a more independent career.

At the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1897 it became clear that both the larger and industrially organized ceramics factories - such as *Boch Frères* from La Louvière under the artistic direction of the painter Georges De Geetere (1859-1929) and with the cooperation of ceramists and artists such as Ernest Tondeur (1865-1933), Emile Diffloth (1856-1933), Isidore De Rudder, Théo Van Rysselberghe (1862-1926) and others<sup>24</sup> - as a few more recently established and still small companies successfully picked up these new trends. Exemplary is the *S.A. La Majolique*, only founded on 18 April 1896<sup>25</sup>, and already obtaining a gold medal at the world exhibition of 1897 although the results of this company clearly lagged behind those of another recently established company, the *Céramiques Décoratives de Hasselt*, a firm that in its turn received a 'diplôme d'honneur' in 1897<sup>26</sup>. The driving force behind *La Majolique* was the sculptor and ceramist Jean Tancredi Parentani (1863-?) who, according to

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<sup>23</sup> Jan DE PAEPE & Mark LOGGHE, *Arthur Craco céramiste Art Nouveau keramist*, Bruxelles, Archives d'Art Nouveau, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> -, *150 Ans de création et de tradition faïencières. Boch-Kéramis La Louvière 1841-1991*, La Louvière, s.n., 1991 and Ludovic RECCHIA, *Collection Boch. Le souffle de Prométhée*, Morlanwelz, Kéramis-Centre de la Céramique/Musée Royal de Mariemont, 2010

<sup>25</sup> Mario BAECK, « S.A. La Majolique, Bruxelles et Emptinne et l'usine Parentani & Champagne à Tubize », in: -, *Céramiques de l'Art nouveau en Belgique. Catalogue d'exposition*, Andenne/Torhout, 2009, p. 45-48

<sup>26</sup> Mario BAECK, *Ravissant. Hasseltse bouwkeramiek uit de belle époque 1895-1954*, Hasselt, VUHK, 2005.

its own adverts<sup>27</sup>, was open to all modern tendencies. However, the products of *La Majolique* clearly appealed much less to the aesthetic level of the refined avant garde. This becomes evident in two reviews of the firms products presented at the *La Libre Esthétique* exhibition of 1898 written by the reputed art critics Octave Maus and Gisbert Combaz<sup>28</sup>.

### **A new vision on decorative arts and art ceramics influenced by Morris, Ruskin and the Arts & Crafts Movement**

In her research into the ideas of Belgian artists in the fields of art nouveau, social change and modern life, Amy F. Ogata summarized the evolution outlined above and the role and significance of decorative arts in the 1890s in Belgium in particular in a concise way as follows: “Linked ideologically to socialism and to a romantic idea of the vernacular, the decorative objects exhibited at Les XX and La Libre Esthétique during the 1890s nourished an image of the past, celebrated the “primitive”, and fed a fantasy of popular rural culture and handicraft.”<sup>29</sup> In this synthetic sentence we find several important aspects that provide more insight into the relative success of artisanal produced art ceramics in Belgium and beyond, as well with the artistic avant-garde as with the more conservative citizen, the countryman and even the workman.

The ideas of Ruskin and Morris to make art accessible for all people were greeted with enthusiasm in Belgium. *L'art social* found many adepts, among others in the group around the magazine *L'Art Moderne*, founded in 1881, with Octave Maus and Edmond Picard. Based on the idea that a closer bond between the artist and the people was possible, the Belgian Workmen's Party - the Belgian Socialist party founded in 1885 - even started a 'Section d'Art'

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<sup>27</sup> *Exposition internationale de Bruxelles 1897. Catalogue officiel de la section belge*, 1897 and *Annuaire de commerce et de l'industrie*, Brussel, Adolphe Mertens, 1898.

<sup>28</sup> Octave Maus qualified *La Majolique d'Emptinne* as "Une collectivité belge ... de fondation récente, (qui) nous paraît marcher avec trop peu de réserve sur les plates-bandes de la fabrique de Rozenburg." in *Art et Décoration*, 1898, p. 102. Combaz is as critical in his article 'Les arts décoratifs au salon de La Libre Esthétique', *L'Art Appliqué*, 1897, 1re année, n° 4, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Amy F. OGATA, "The Decorative “Arts & Crafts” at Les XX and La Libre Esthétique”, in: Jane BLOCK (ed.), *Belgium, The Golden Decades 1880-1914*, New York, Peter Lang, 1997, (Belgian Francophone Library, 3), p. 68 and Amy F. OGATA, *Art Nouveau and the Social Vision of Modern Living. Belgian Artists in a European Context*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, (Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity).

in 1891, which aimed at informing the workers about all the important developments in contemporary intellectual life and art.

These ideas about popular education led also to a sharp resistance against the cult of the unique. Among many others, the important avant-garde designer Henry van de Velde was opposed to this. This becomes evident in his *Première prédication d'art* he wrote as opening text of his course in applied and applied arts at the Antwerp Academy in the autumn of 1893. For him, the craftsman was equal to the artist: "l'artisan vaut l'artiste". He illustrated this by showing, among other things, original ceramics by William Morris that were available in larger numbers<sup>30</sup>.

The reason for this resistance is clear. The unique object or objects made in small series - as ironically a lot of work by Henry van de Velde himself could be qualified as such - was only affordable for a small minority. Even the artistic high-quality object in slightly larger series remained unaffordable for many. The only alternative for making art for all was therefore the industrial manufacture of objects and decorative elements that met high artistic standards. Honesty in the use of material, simplicity and functionality of the decoration were essential characteristics to be met. Van de Velde's later work would evolve more and more in this sense.

The innovative English decorative art was not only associated with radicalism but also with folk traditions and craftsmanship. Critics appreciated a certain pre-industrial innocence that was also highly valued in Belgium during the fin-de-siècle and with which one wanted to compete. In the first two exhibitions of *La Libre Esthétique*, the presence of members of the Arts & Crafts Movement is therefore significant. They succeeded - through the simplicity of their designs - to evoke something of the domestic life of bygone times, which at that time was very attractive and influenced many Belgian designers directly. We find this rural aspect, for example, both in the furniture for the Bloemenwerf villa of Henry van de Velde from the

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie Anvers – Bruxelles – Paris – Berlin I 1863-1900. Texte établi et commenté par Anne Van Loo avec la collaboration de Fabrice Van de Kerckhove*, Bruxelles, Versa-Flammarion, 1992, p. 221.



1895s and in the 'Chambre d'Artisan' by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy (1858-1910) which was shown at La *Libre Esthétique* in 1895<sup>31</sup>.

This strong interest in the 'rural' is easy to explain. At the end of the 19th century, a major part of the bourgeoisie feared that by the strong industrialization, exploding urbanization and growing cosmopolitanism all regional and national characteristics would gradually disappear. In response, almost everywhere in Europe, associations started to work actively to preserve their own characteristic and picturesque heritage elements. They also turned against the tasteless industrial mass production and were therefore charmed by a craftsmanship that ensured continuity with the pre-industrial past. In Belgium, the ideas of this 'picturesque movement', according to recent research, can be found in the Belgian magazine *Le Cottage*, founded in 1903, and his successor *Le Home* that appeared from 1907 onwards<sup>32</sup>. In both architectural journals a return to the 'simplicity' of the country was advocated. Folk art was thereby stripped of its vulgar and primitive image. One saw - inspired by the ideas of Ruskin and Morris - the solution for most problems in modern society in the elimination of the problematic division between art and industry. This could be realized through a return to more craftsmanship or through the reconciliation of art and industry: industrialization and technology did not necessarily exclude artistry. This resulted in a belief in a form of modernity that harked back to the roots of the own local culture.

But not only the own culture was important for the realization of a new, more social art. In addition to the rural, the primitive and exotic also impressed deeply the minds of the new art theorists. After all, in primitive and rural societies there were no objects without function: there were indeed no paintings or sculptures. Art was organically connected with utensils and through the design of the utensils the people as a whole participated in that form of art. The Belgian art avant-garde sought the restoration of contact with beauty thought lost through a new, aesthetically pleasing design of objects of use.

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques-Grégoire WATELET, *Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, architecte et décorateur liégeois 1858-1910*, Liège, Éditions du Perron, 1975 ; Jacques-Grégoire WATELET, *Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, l'oeuvre d'une vie*, Liège, Éditions du Perron, 2002 ; Françoise BIGOT DU MESNIL DU BUISSON, *Gustave Serrurier (1858-1910), parcours d'un architecte à l'aube du XXe siècle, rationalisme, art social, symbolisation, thèse de doctorat en histoire de l'architecture*, Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 2008 and Françoise & Étienne BIGOT DU MESNIL DU BUISSON, *Serrurier-Bovy, un créateur précurseur, 1858-1910*, Dijon, Éditions Faton, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Seth VAN HOOLAND, "Het erfgoeddebat in historisch perspectief. De pittoreske beweging in België eind 19de, begin 20e eeuw", *Mores*, jrg. 5 (2004), nr. 1, p. 22.

All these new - for many people confusing - ideas were broadly spread, explained and defended by articles in newspapers and magazines, but also by lectures or courses at peoples universities and art academies.

### **The Kortrijksche Kunstpotterij - Céramiques de Courtrai of P.J. Laigneil**

De kunstvernieuwingsbeweging in de jaren 1890 vond niet alleen in Brussel weerklank. In Antwerpen en Gent, of in Wallonië in Luik, ontstonden eveneens zeer actieve kunstenaarsgroepen. Ook daar werd druk informatie uitgewisseld en gediscussieerd en werden tentoonstellingen met werken in de nieuwe stijl georganiseerd. De vernieuwingsbeweging ging ook aan Kortrijk niet voorbij.

The art renewal movement in the 1890s was not only developing in Brussels. In Antwerp and Ghent, or in Wallonia in Liège, other artists' groups also became very active. There, too, information was exchanged, new ideas were discussed and exhibitions with works in the new style were organized. The movement also reached Kortrijk, a small city in Western Flanders, not far from the French border.

A group of like-minded architects and painters and decorative artists – inspired by the English Arts & Crafts Movement - founded the Kortrijk Art Guild to stimulate a renewal of the home environment with respect for the local traditions. In addition to Pieter Jozef Laigneil (1870-1950), an engineer, the architects Jozef Viérin (1872-1949) and Richard Acke (1873-1934), the painter Emmanuel Viérin (1869-1954) and the furniture makers Jozef De Coene (1875-1950), Victor Acke (1864-1953) and Jozef Lelan-De Clerck (1868-1953) were part of the group. They had good contacts with the Antwerp avant-garde and the Ghent artists of the first Latem School of Artists.

Although they were clearly influenced by the ideas of Ruskin and Morris, they took some distance. In contrast to Morris who advocated socialism, they promoted explicitly the Flemish identity and Christian-democratic ideas. In their work many of them attempted to link the principles and style characteristics of the neogothic tradition of the Saint Luke's Schools with

those of the Arts & Crafts Movement. In addition, they also integrated outspoken style characteristics of the continental art nouveau<sup>33</sup>.

The concretisation of the ideas of this Kortrijk Art Guild can be seen more in detail in the work made at the art potter's workshops inspired and run by the engineer Pieter Jozef Laigneil.

Laigneil received a rational functionalist training as a civil engineer at the university in Leuven. His education fully met with the utilitarian needs of modern entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, after his studies he initially opted for a completely different route. In the years 1895-1896 - exactly the years of the definitive breakthrough of art pottery in Belgium - he opened his own decorative arts shop in Brussels. With that initiative, he followed his strong interest in art.

In order to be able to offer unique decorative art objects in the new taste, Laigneil contacted the potter Leo Maes in Torhout and concluded an exclusivity contract with him in June 1897. Laigneil delivered the designs and guaranteed Maes a fixed purchase amounting to 500 fr. per month in exchange for the exclusive sale of his wares. The innovative designs themselves were made by Laigneil's relatives Emmanuel and Jozef Viérin and artists such as Victor Acke, Josué Dupon and Karel Noppe, which all shared his ideas, and became Laigneil's personal property<sup>34</sup>. In that way Laigneil showed himself to be an excellent businessman who could perfectly spot new trends.

However, the collaboration with Maes was short-lived. In July 1898 the Kortrijk City Council granted Laigneil permission to establish a completely new pottery in their city (Fig. 2). His training as an engineer will undoubtedly have been of great service to him. There was also no problem with the designs as all the designs executed at the Torhout pottery were, as already mentioned, all his.

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<sup>33</sup> Jan DE MAYER, "Kunst en Politiek. De Sint-Lucasscholen tussen ultramontaanse orthodoxie en drang naar maatschappelijk-culturele vernieuwing", in: *De Sint-Lucasscholen en de neogotiek 1862-1914*, Leuven Universitaire pers, 1988, (Kadoc-studies 5), p. 120 and Ellen VAN IMPE, "Een blinde vlek in de studie van de Belgische Arts-and-Craftsreceptie. Morris en Ruskin in katholieke tijdschriften", in: Raf DE BONT e.a. (ed.), *Niet onder één vlag. Van Nu en Straks en de paradoxen van het Fin de siècle*, Gent, KANTL, 2005, p. 301.

<sup>34</sup> Paul PEREMANS, Marc LOGGHE & Roger VERHELLE, *Torhouts aardewerk Art Nouveau*, Torhout, Vrienden Museum Torhouts Aardewerk, z.j., p. 27.

Just as the Torhout pottery, the wares made at Kortrijk also met for the most part with the general arts & craft principles for pottery as they were set by William Morris himself in his lecture *The Lesser Arts of Life* in 1882<sup>35</sup>: 1 ° the form must be adapted to the function; 2 ° the shape must be adapted to the material, in this case clay. The contours must therefore be smooth without becoming over-elegant; 3 ° the ceramist's hand must be recognizable over the entire surface of the pieces; 4 ° smoothness and surface finish of the pieces may contribute to the special elegance of the decoration but may not become an end in itself; The coarser the material, the rougher and more abundant the decoration had to be, the finer the materials the more modest the ornamentation needed to be; 6 ° the hand of the ceramist must also be visible in the ornamentation.

From 1898 onwards Laigneil produced - in accordance with Morris' principles - a substantial and high-quality production in his Kortrijk Art Pottery, with in addition to art pottery<sup>36</sup> and figurines<sup>37</sup> also architectural ceramics and tiles<sup>38</sup>. This production was highly appreciated in Flanders, both by prominent artists - as the Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels in whose books rural life is a central theme and the Flemish composer Lode Ontrop -, as well as by the Catholic nobility and bourgeoisie.

The appreciation was clearly shared by international specialists as Richard Borrmann author of the German reference work *Moderne Keramik*, the most complete contemporary overview of the modern tendencies in European art pottery. In this book, published in 1902, Borrmann gave the pottery produced in Kortrijk a positive appreciation: "Under the name poteries campagnarde de Flandre or Finch-pottery, after the name of the manufacturer A. Willy Finch, appeared in the mid-nineties of the last century in Belgium modern peasant products on the market that have quickly become popular. Soon a kind of home industry had developed. It

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<sup>35</sup> William MORRIS, "The Lesser Arts of Life. An Address delivered in support of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings", held on 23 January 1882 in Birmingham and published in 1883 in *Lectures on Art Delivered in Support of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings*. Full text available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/life1.htm> or <http://kovaya.com/pages/the-lesser-arts-of-life.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Mario BAECK & Marc LOGGHE, *Laigneil Decoratief. Sieraardewerk van de Kortrijksche Kunstpotterij - Céramiques de Courtrai (1898-1926)*, Torhout, Stadsbestuur - Museum Torhouts Aardewerk, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Mario BAECK & Marc LOGGHE, *Laigneil Figuratief. Kortrijksche Kunstpotterij - Céramiques de Courtrai (1898-1926)*, Torhout, Stadsbestuur - Museum Torhouts Aardewerk, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> M. BAECK & M. LOGGHE, *Tegels in Poterie Flamande*.

shows the same means of expression as the better earthenware, i.e. engraved in the bodies (poteries sgraffitées) or applied with the nozzle, finally also applied with freely formed ornaments; only in the combination of the tones and in the application of matt glazes we see the modern taste from France. The designs for the simple line ornamentation of this work is partly in the line of Van de Velde "<sup>39</sup>.

The Kortrijk Art Pottery was indeed in line with the most important modern movements in Belgian and European ceramics (Fig. 3). This becomes evident, when we study the reception of the pottery production of Kortrijk outside Belgium.

### ***An international sales network of high quality***

From the earlier literature on Laigneil's pottery activities it had long been known that about half of the production was exported to Great Britain and colonies. The rest was sold both domestically - particularly in Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp, Ghent, Liège, Mons and in sea side resorts along the Belgian coast - and abroad. The sales abroad took further place in Germany (Berlin, Cologne and Leipzig), France (Paris and Lille), the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Dordrecht) and also the United States (New York)<sup>40</sup>. The fairly limited data on all these activities were taken directly from Laigneil's personal notes and were not supported by specific research.

New research involving magazine publications and advertisements, some external archives and sales indications on the objects themselves, meanwhile, yielded a lot of interesting new data. Although it is clear that extensive further research in this area will offer undoubtedly more, the information that has hitherto been retrieved points to a international trade network of high quality.

In the Netherlands we could document a close cooperation with Anton Mak jr., one of the business leaders of *A. Mak Art and Antiques Auctions*, the oldest private auction house in the

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<sup>39</sup> R. BORRMANN, *Moderne Keramik*, p. 66-67.

<sup>40</sup> E. VAN HOONACKER, "Kortrijks Aardewerk in de 19de en 20ste eeuw", *De Leiegouw*, XVI, 1974, p. 12.

Benelux<sup>41</sup>. Mak sold handcrafted art pottery and porcelain – including ceramics from the prestigious firm *Rozenburg* (1883-1916) from The Hague, *De Distel* (1895-1923) from Amsterdam and the *Faïence and tile factory Holland* (1893-1920) from Utrecht and the own art pottery factory, the *Dortsche Art Pottery DKP*<sup>42</sup>. Laigneil’s pottery is also well represented in the showrooms of this rather prestigious company.

More significant is the fact that products from the Kortrijk Art Pottery were sold in England via the well-known department store of Liberty & Co in London.

The fact that Laigneil was allowed to offer its Flemish pottery through this renowned English shop indicates that the Kortrijk production aesthetically and qualitatively met with the high standards of this company. If we look at the entire range of ceramics at Liberty and compare the Laigneil production with the multitude of art pottery products of various factories that were offered to the London public, it then becomes clear that in addition to similarities in style, ornamentation and decorative technique, the work of the Kortrijk Art Pottery also radiates a large amount of individuality<sup>43</sup>. Poterie Flamande pottery not only brought back the medieval atmosphere of the heyday of the Flemish Primitives to the art-sensitive public, it was at the same time connected to the modern avant-garde art pottery of Belgian innovators such as Willy Finch, Omer Coppens or Arthur Craco. In addition, the relative cost-effectiveness of the pieces offered was also an important asset for a prestigious department store such as Liberty's of London, which had also to make profit. A brief mention of Laigneil’s production in 1903 in the prestigious magazine 'The Studio' - following the entry of the wares

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<sup>41</sup> Marianne HESLENFELD, *De Collectie Holland – art nouveau keramiek van de NV Faïence en Tegelfabriek 'Holland' te Utrecht / 1894-1918*, Zwolle, Waanders Uitgevers, 2006, p. 111. More information on the history of the auction house at [www.makveilingen.nl](http://www.makveilingen.nl).

<sup>42</sup> Evert J. VAN STRAATEN, *Dubbelgebakken. Aardewerknijverheid in Nederland 1876-1940*, S.I., Vereniging van Vrienden van de Ceramiek, 1979, (Mededelingenblad, nr. 94/95, 1979, nr. 2-3); Eugène LANGENDIJK en Mienke SIMON THOMAS, *Nederlandse Art Nouveau en Art Deco Keramiek 1880-1940. Collectie Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen*, Rotterdam, NAI Uitgevers, 2001 and J. M. de Groot, “De Dortsche Kunstpotterij 1903-1908”, *Antiek : tijdschrift voor liefhebbers en kenners van oude kunst en kunstnijverheid*, jrg. 8 (1974), nr. 10 (mei), p. 821-840.

<sup>43</sup> S. CALLOWAY (ed.), *The house of Liberty. Masters of style & decoration*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1992, chapters “Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau. Ceramics”, p. 100-109 & “The Twenties and Thirties. Ceramics and Glass”, p. 156-165 by Malcolm HASLAM; B. MORRIS, *Liberty design 1874-1914*, London, Pyramid Books, 1989, chapter “Ceramics and glass”, p. 60-73; M. LEVY, *Liberty style. The classic years 1898-1910*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986, chapter “Directory of Liberty Manufacturers”, p. 131-143 and Victor ARWAS, *Liberty Style*, Tokyo, Parco, 1983, p. 20 and chapter “Ceramics”, p. 47-53. The Laigneil production remains unmentioned in all of these publications.

at the world exhibition for decorative arts of 1902 in Turin - can only have contributed to the success of sales in England<sup>44</sup>.

The results of new research into the export of Poterie Flamande pottery to the United States fully confirm the international appreciation of this production from within arts & crafts circles.

From 1899 onwards, the Flemish press made very frequent references of export to America by Maes from Torhout<sup>45</sup>. In 1904, at the World Fair in Saint-Louis - known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition - "a beautiful collection of Flemish pottery, including pieces of great value" was shown<sup>46</sup>.

These limited data indicated that Flemish pottery also received a fairly good reception in the United States. However, there were no precise details known about exact trade relations. The systematic exploring of some of the major American arts & crafts journals, notably *The Craftsman* and *The Philistine* who, like their respective publishers Gustav Stickley (1858-1942) and Elbert Hubbard (1856-1915), played an important role in the dissemination from the ideas of the Arts & Crafts Movement in America, yielded surprising new data<sup>47</sup>.

In February 1905, in the section 'Open door' of *The Craftsman*, an announcement was published of an exhibition of art pottery at 403 Fifth Avenue in New York under the title 'Novelties in Flemish Pottery'<sup>48</sup>. The organizer of the exhibition, Edwin A. Denham, is presented as the 'sole importer and representative' of the 'Céramiques de Flandres' produced by the 'Belgium Potteries'.

The Flemish art pottery itself is praised because, although inexpensive, it is gracious, original in shape and warm in colour: "In rare gracefulness and originality of form and design, beauty and depth of coloring, these comparatively inexpensive potteries are surpassed by few of

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<sup>44</sup> Enrico THOVEZ, "The Turin exhibition. The Belgian section", *The Studio*, Vol. XXVII, nr. 118, january 1903, p. 281: "pottery by Laigneul" (sic!).

<sup>45</sup> As mentioned by L. CUVELIER, *Torhouts aardewerk (1885-1939). Het meerkleurig versierd aardewerk uit de pottenbakkerij Maes, Brugge Sint-Andries, Heemkundige Kring M. Van Coppenolle*, 1978, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> Hendrik DE MAREZ, "Brugge te St. Louis", *Onze Kunst*, jrg. 3 (1904), dl. I, p. 112.

<sup>47</sup> E. BORIS, "'Dreams of Brotherhood and Beauty': The Social Ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement", in: W. KAPLAN e.a., *"The Art that is Life": The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, Boston, Little, Brown and C°, 1987, p. 216-218.

<sup>48</sup> *The Craftsman*, February 1905, p. 630.

American and English products.“ We also learn that this pottery is then completely new on the American market. Finally, the individual, manual character of each piece is emphasized: “Each piece is made by Flemish artists and craftsmen and is turned, inlaid and decorated by hand, no moulds or mechanical contrivances being used”.

Additional information was provided the following month in a new, more detailed presentation, again in the section 'Open door', under the title 'Flemish Art Pottery (Céramiques de Flandres)<sup>49</sup>. Now it is stated that the pottery is made entirely by use of old manual techniques and that no gypsum moulds are used in the production, except for the statuettes, bas reliefs and similar items from the offer. All this contributes to the artistic individuality of the production: “Each piece is thus endowed with a certain individuality of its own, not only as regards its coloring but, to a certain extent, its design and form as well.” Furthermore, it is stated that the complete range of almost 2000 different models (Fig. 4), "practically all that have been turned out up to the present", is available in New York, and that sight shipments are also possible.

Two months later, in the May issue of *The Craftsman*, once again in the section 'Open door' and under the title 'Flemish Art Pottery' the production processes are discussed in detail<sup>50</sup>: “The brush is never used in applying the colors, and the model (which by the way is made entirely by hand, without moulds) is simply dipped into the coloring solution. The chemical action which takes place during the firing does the rest. When a design in color is to be applied, a thin layer of clay, which has been treated so as to produce the desired color, is spread over the portion which is to be decorated. The design is then etched upon this inlaid or superimposed surface and de superfluous clay is carefully cut away. This process must be repeated as many times as there are different colors in the design – in some floral or landscape decorations four or five different colors are employed, and pieces of this nature require a number of weeks before they are ready for the firing. But, luckily for the purchasers, time counts but little in Belgium and the cost of labor is a still less important item.

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<sup>49</sup> *The Craftsman*, March 1905, p. 760-761.

<sup>50</sup> *The Craftsman*, May 1905, p. 268.



Pieces made by still another process are known as “*Emaux Superposées*”, and are, as the name implies, produced by successive immersions in different glazing solutions. After each solution the piece is burned – not in the ovens, as in all other cases, but *directly in the flames themselves*. And the immersing process is continued until it is decided that the piece can not further improved upon. By this process some veritable *sang de boeuf* and *rouge flambée* effects are produced – color effects which have eluded the researches of experts for nearly two hundred years, since the ability to produce them became one of the lost arts of Japan and China. A couple of genuine and very valuable antique Japanese pieces in these colorings are displayed at the Exhibition on the same shelf as the Flemish pieces, for purposes of comparison”.

Certainty about the exact origin of this Flemish pottery is finally given in an illustrated advertisement that Denham had included in the monthly arts & crafts magazine *The Philistine : a periodical of protest* in the second half of 1905<sup>51</sup>. This magazine was published from 1895 by the *Society of the Philistines*, a group of influential artists and art lovers around Elbert Green Hubbard<sup>52</sup>. The choice for this magazine was clearly well considered by Denham. In 1902 *The Philistine* had achieved a top circulation of no less than 102,000 subscribers. With this advertisement Denham reached not only an interested, but also a fairly large audience. The accompanying photo showed seven objects, neatly presented on two levels and all from the Kortrijk Art Pottery of Laigneil.

The American marketing approach is apparent from the name of the manufacturer given in the advertisement. Instead of using the correct name 'Céramiques de Courtrai - Kortrijksche Kunstpotterij - P.J. Laigneil' Denham chose without much doubt very deliberately for the more appealing 'Association of Flemish Craftsmen', a name completely in line with the success of the Arts & Crafts Movement in the United States.

All this makes clear that Laigneil's trade partner in New York, Edwin A. Denham, took a great deal of effort in the years 1904-1905 to give the work of the Kortrijk Art Pottery a place alongside the wide range of related art pottery of American origin, such as that of George E. Ohr from Biloxi in Mississippi with its bizarre forms, that from the Newcomb College Pottery

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<sup>51</sup> *The Philistine*, Volume 21, June 1905 to November 1905.

<sup>52</sup> L. GREENE BOWMAN, *American Arts & Crafts. Virtue in Design. A Catalogue of the Pavlevsky Collection and Related Works at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, Boston, Bulfinch Press, 1990, p. 64.

from New Orleans in Louisiana with similar engraved designs, or that from the Van Briggle Pottery Company from Colorado Springs in Colorado with its sculptural floral forms<sup>53</sup>.

This short overview makes clear that the production of Poterie Flamande art pottery in Kortrijk was, until the outbreak of the First World War, an international sales success that aroused interest among a broad public of art lovers and decorative art dealers specializing in innovative ceramic decorative objects.

After 1914-1918, this type of pottery had a short and rather limited revival. It was then mainly bought as a tourist souvenir, which quickly reduced the general aesthetic qualities of the entire production. The interest of the avant-garde circles then went to high quality ceramics in art deco style that were also produced in Belgium<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Martin EIDELBERG, “Art Pottery”, in: R. JUDSON CLARK e.a., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America 1876-1916*, Princeton, University Press, 1972, p. 119-186; T.M. VOLPE & B. CATHERS, *Treasures of the American Arts and Crafts Movement 1890-1920*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1988, chapter “Ceramics”, p. 71-126; L. GREENE BOWMAN, *American Arts & Crafts*, chapter “Ceramics”, p. 133-209.

<sup>54</sup> Mario BAECK, Marc LOGGHE, Anne PLUYMAEKERS, Norbert POULAIN (ed.), *Belgische art deco keramiek. Céramiques de l’Art Déco en Belgique*, Torhout, Museum Torhouts Aardewerk/Andenne, Musée de la Céramique, 2011.

## **Curriculum Vitae**

Dr. Mario BAECK

Mario Baeck (1958), post doctoral researcher on Belgian art nouveau ceramics and tiles. Took his doctoral degree in 2015 at Ghent University, Belgium, with a thesis on the development of the Belgian industrial wall and floor tile 1840-1980 in a European context.

Published and lectured widely in different languages on various aspects of ceramics and tile history (See for some papers: <http://independent.academia.edu/MarioBaeck/Papers>).

Was curator for national and international exhibitions in which the Belgian ceramic production is put in the spotlight.

As a member of several scientific societies he regularly advises public heritage institutions in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia on tile restoration projects.

Was co-promoter of several master's theses in the field of conservation / restoration of ceramics and on Monuments and Landscapes (Royal Academy of Fine Arts & Henry van de Velde Institute, University of Antwerp)