

Théo Van Rysselberghe and the Architecture of Decoration



Théo Van Rysselberghe

Artiste-Peintre

1862-1926

254

J A N E B L O C K

Portrait of Théo Van Rysselberghe by Henri Quittelier, in Gaston Lebrun, *Grandes Figures de la Belgique Indépendante 1830-1930* (Brussels: A. Bieleveld, 1930), 245

In the decades before and after 1900, Théophile Van Rysselberghe (1862-1926) was a major figure in the artistic capitals of Brussels and Paris, heralded by a host of artists and writers with whom he shared a common outlook. A prolific portrait painter, this versatile artist also excelled in the Decorative Arts, designing posters, book ornamentation, and furniture. While much has been written about him, surprisingly little pertaining to his relationship with some of the leading architects of his day, including his brother, Octave, Victor Horta, and the French architects Louis Bonnier and Auguste Perret. This paper seeks to explore these relationships and their impact on securing for the artist important decorative and portrait commissions.

Born in Ghent on 23 November 1862 Théo was the youngest of six children (5 boys and a girl), among whom were two engineers, François (1846-1893) and Julien (1852-1931), both professors at the University of Ghent; and two architects, Charles (1850-1920) and Octave (1855-1929). Their sister, Sylvie-Marie (1848-1930) married Valentín Martínez (1843-?), an engineer and Director of bridges, roads and hydraulic works in Chile.¹ Although Théo began studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, he moved to Brussels in 1880 where his brother Octave, working for the Neo-classical architect Joseph Poelaert, took him under his wing. At the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts Théo studied with

Jean-François Portaels, who had painted in northern Africa, and instilled in him an interest in the exotic. In 1883 he met the poet, Emile Verhaeren, who was to become a life-long friend. The next year he contributed a frontispiece to Verhaeren's *Contes de minuit*. Van Rysselberghe subsequently produced decorations for fourteen books written by Verhaeren and published by Edmond Deman between 1893 and 1911.

In 1883, Van Rysselberghe became a founding member of the avant-garde exhibition society, *Les XX* (1884-1893), where he encountered the work of the French Impressionists and James McNeill Whistler. In 1887 Van Rysselberghe was profoundly moved by Georges Seurat's new pointillist method and became an early convert to Neo-Impressionism. Among his first such works was the stunning portrait of Alice Sèthe, future wife of the Vingtiste sculptor, Paul Dubois, shown at *Les XX* in 1889.

Van Rysselberghe employed the Neo-Impressionist style for many years, only abandoning it around 1907. During these years he produced the largest group of Neo-Impressionist portraits of any painter. He was drawn to several large, ambitious canvases, including Henri-Edmond Cross' *l'Air du soir* (1894) and Paul Signac's *Au temps d'harmonie* (1895), which depict a golden age of harmony and peace using the south of France as the setting. Van Rysselberghe created a similar monumental work, *L'Heure embrasée* (1897), which depicts female bathers frolicking at the water's edge while rejecting the utopian and anarchist underpinnings of Signac's composition. Working at this grand scale unleashed Théo's unbridled enthusiasm for the physicality of painting long held in check by the rigors of Neo-Impressionist theories. He rediscovered the im-

Louis Bonnier, Flé House at Ambleteuse, in Charles Schmid, *Villas et Cottages des bords de la mer* (Paris, Ch. Schmid, n.d), plate 38.



Paul Verlaine

Je ne sais pourquoi..

Assez animé.

Je ne sais pour-quoi Mon es-prit a -

- mer D'une aile inquiète et fol - le

vo - le sur la mer. Tout ce qui m'est

41

Theo Van Rysselberghe, vignette for Paul Verlaine's 'Je ne sais pourquoi' in Georges Flé, *Poésies mises en musique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1898) 41.

portance of drawing as well as a freer brush-stroke, while creating large-scale nudes set in nature reconnected him to an art historical past which paradoxically allowed him to cover large surfaces in a more decorative manner, one that proved to be attractive to clients.

Vignettes and posters

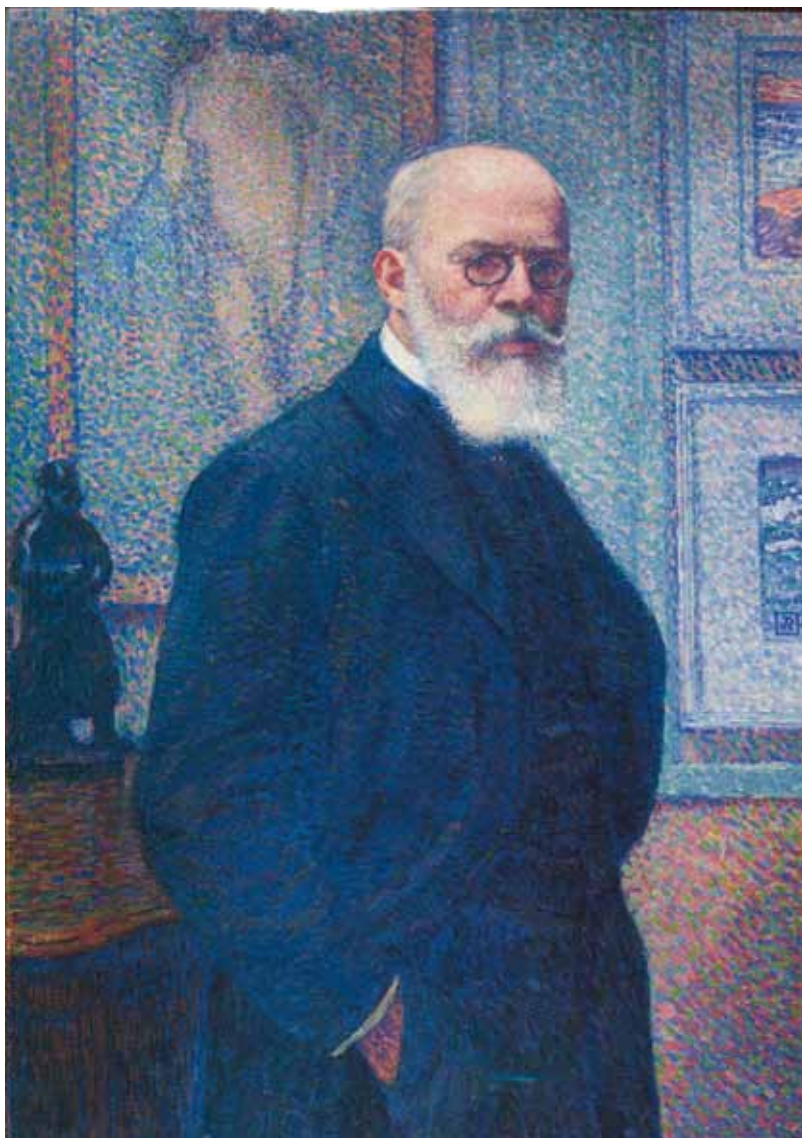
The trajectory of his career as outlined above was often interlaced with architectural interests. In 1893 his brother Octave designed and built his house and atelier on the rue de l'Abbaye in Ixelles. One year later, Octave collaborated with Theo's fellow Vingtiste, Henry van de Velde, newly converted to the decorative arts, in designing a town house for businessman Paul Otlet. When in



Théo Van Rysselberghe,
Royal Palace Hotel. 1898 or
 1899. Lithograph, 120 x 85
 cm. Courtesy Archives of the
 City of Brussels.

1895 Théo's good friend Paul Signac moved to St. Tropez and needed the villa enlarged to accommodate his atelier, the work was most probably carried out by Octave, while Signac called on Théo to provide rustic furniture and fireplace designs.²

Van Rysselberghe probably met the French architect, Louis Bonnier, when in 1893 Bonnier designed a villa in Ambleteuse on the English Channel for his friends Georges and Laure Flé. Between 1890 and 1892 Bonnier had built four such seaside 'cottages' for family members and friends, and the Flés now wanted their own. The Flés were accomplished musicians. Georges' (1862-1937) choral settings *Chants de la mer et des grèves* were sung at the Maison du Peuple in December 1892.³ Laure sang Charles Bordès' setting of Paul Verlaine's *Promenade nationale* at la Libre Esthétique in 1907.⁴ Bonnier's house for the Flés is picturesquely composed of brick, stone, concrete, and



Théo Van Rysselberghe,
Portrait of Louis Bonnier.
1903. Oil on canvas, 100 x
80 cm. Private Collection,
France.

slate. Van Rysselberghe, a regular guest at the cottage, painted several large compositions there, including *Soleil couchant à Ambleteuse* (1899), *Plage à marée basse à Ambleteuse* (1900), and *La Promenade* (1901). Pleased with the set, Van Rysselberghe wrote to Van de Velde that *the series of sunsets at low tides with arabesques in the water in the sand...are among my best canvases...*⁵ Van Rysselberghe captured Laure Flé several times, in pastel wearing a green dress and white belt leaning on a piano (1897), and in oil, as elegantly attired in a ruffled dress, green belt, and white gloves (1898). In 1898 Van Rysselberghe and Georges Flé collaborated on the publication of the composer's *Poésies mises en musique pour chant et piano* containing twelve poems with ornamentation and a cover design by the artist. Van Rysselberghe's gorgeous vignettes decorated the verses of Victor Hugo, Paul Verlaine, Théophile Gautier, and Villiers de l'Isle Adam.

Théo Van Rysselberghe,
La Lecture au Jardin. 1902.
Oil on canvas, 320 x 448 cm.
From the Hotel Solvay. Cour-
tesy of the Horta Museum.



Following work on the Flé villa, Bonnier and Van Rysselberghe were brought together for renovations to Japanese art dealer Siegfried Bing's gallery at 22, rue de Provence in Paris, which opened on 26 December 1895. The gallery, *l'Art nouveau*, designed by Bonnier was to become a focal point of Franco-Belgian artists and decorative artists. For the gallery's various spaces Maurice Denis created a bedroom; Henry Van de Velde and Georges Lemmen a smoking room; Edouard Vuillard a waiting room; and Albert Besnard a boudoir. Van Rysselberghe assisted Van de Velde by designing a fireplace in the dining room which contained wall decoration by Paul Ranson.⁶

In 1895 Octave Van Rysselberghe became the architect for the *Compagnie des Grands Hôtels Européens*, a subsidiary of the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits*, for which he designed hotels and casinos built in Ostend, Cherbourg, Monte Carlo and St. Petersburg. Octave clearly recommended his

brother to design travel posters for the company. As Théo wrote to Signac on 22 October 1895, '*The company of Wagons-Lits asked me to make two posters for their new service "Orient": absolute freedom, all expenses paid and 1000 francs for each poster.*'⁷ To create some half dozen, Théo traveled to various sites studying the architecture, including Constantinople and Athens between September and November 1895, followed by trips to Hungary and Romania.

In 1897 Van Rysselberghe was brought into a project with Bonnier and the Brussels geographer and anarchist, Elisée Reclus (1830-1905). Reclus wanted to erect an esthetic and educational representation of the world - a globe terrestre - at the 1900 Paris Universal Exposition. Bonnier was to create the metallic structure, some 60 meters tall, while Van Rysselberghe was responsible for the globe's decoration, following the subjects chosen by Reclus. To create designs for the sixteen ceramic panels illustrating the progress of humanity, Van Rysselberghe invited four Neo-Impressionist colleagues, Paul Signac, Henri-Edmond Cross, Maximilien Luce and Pierre Angrand, to join him. Unfortunately, the expensive undertaking never came to fruition.⁸

Covering large surfaces

In 1898 the Van Rysselberghes moved to France - Octave to Neuilly and Théo to Paris. Théo first settled at 59, rue Scheffer, in the 16th arrondissement. Several years later, finding the house too small and the atelier not workable, he commissioned Bonnier to create a larger studio for him at 44, rue Laugier, in the 17th arrondissement. Van Rysselberghge moved to the completed Villa Aublet in October 1901. Two years later he executed an iconic portrait of the bearded and bespectacled Bonnier at the height of his career. Shown with three paintings by Van Rysselberghe, part of his extensive art collection, the seascape in the lower right hand corner prominently displays the unmistakable VR monogram.

Van Rysselberghe's opportunity to produce a large decorative panel came when Victor Horta invited him to decorate a stair landing for the Armand Solvay townhouse at 224, Avenue Louise. Recounting the intrigue surrounding the commission to Van de Velde in summer 1902, Van Rysselberghe explained that he accepted immediately because '*the opportunities to create for a site specific place are too rare.*'⁹ Asked to supply a sketch, Van Rysselberghe set to work depicting bathers in a park, which he dutifully submitted. When no response arrived from architect or client, he assumed erroneously that the sketch had been accepted. Horta eventually confessed that Solvay found the subject '*assez lascif*'. While the '*infamous*' sketch seems not to survive, the subject presumably resembled the bathers in *l'Heure embrasée*. Van Rysselberghe considered abandoning the project but, because of the considerable time and energy already invested, he decided to try again. Admitting to Van de Velde that it was difficult to regain his enthusiasm, he judged that if this was Solvay's only objection to his work, Solvay must be '*doctrinaire et bourgeois*'. Van Rysselberghe eventually produced a large canvas of a completely different subject which today still decorates the grand staircase of the Hotel Solvay. *La Lecture au Jardin* depicts women strolling, sitting and standing around an oval pool. In the fall of 1902, he wrote Van de Velde of his pleasure in painting the work, adding '*It is very sure that I am the most qualified to cover large surfaces. It is at any rate what tempts me the most.*'¹⁰ Van Rysselberghe delivered the canvas to the Hotel Solvay in



late December and supervised its backing and wall placement.¹¹

The success with this decoration led to later commissions, including panels for Paul Nocard, owner of the Piver perfume company. Van Rysselberghe probably met his wealthy client through the double auspices of Bonnier and Octave, residing in Neuilly. Théo created five wall panels and a series of medallions containing floral decorations for the sky lit atrium of Nocard's villa at Neuilly. Two of the panels depict women fully clothed (*Réunion sur la terrasse* and *Réunion dans le jardin*). The three remaining show monumental female bathers in the south of France frolicking at the water's edge.¹² Van Rysselberghe, writing from Rome in February 1909, revealed the difficulties of the site to Signac: *'The setting, unfortunately, is hideous architecturally - and there is nothing that can be changed there. But the light is good and the distance sufficient. But the panels are cut by columns and the arches of the vault, which prevent me from making a continuous decorated surface.'*¹³ The artist also decided to supplement an existing mosaic decoration with additional mosaic to unite the composition. Van Rysselberghe continued to inform Signac of his progress relating his wish to have four large panels, three round smaller ones, and floral medallions that would culminate in a fountain-basin also composed of mosaic.¹⁴ He estimated that this scheme would take anywhere from eighteen months to two years to

Théo Van Rysselberghe,
Baigneuses au bord de l'eau,
1909. Oil on canvas, 168
x 274 cm. For the Hotel
Nocard, Neuilly. Courtesy of
Tajan auction house, Studio
Sebert, sale of 30 July 2007,
lot n7.

complete.¹⁵ In February 1910 the artist, referring to five large decorative panels instead of original four, noted that he had already completed three of the five. He planned a two-week sketching trip to the coastal towns of Saint Tropez, Cagnes, Monaco, and Menton and the Provencal cities of Arles and Avignon. He added Lyon to his route in order to study the famous murals by Puvis de Chavannes in the Museum of Fine Arts.¹⁶ Although the panels survive as removed from the house, it is not known whether the client agreed to all of Van Rysselberghe's architectural suggestions.¹⁷ However, Van Rysselberghe did paint a portrait of Nocard's wife, Marie-Marguerite Delmas, sitting in a wicker chair, most probably at the villa in Neuilly.¹⁸

Re-shaping of the domestic interior

Just as they had moved from Brussels to Paris, the brothers eventually moved to the French Riviera. Octave had acquired property in St. Clair, adjacent to the home of Henri-Edmond Cross, and offered his brother the gate house which also included a small garden. Octave built himself a house and renovated the cottage for Théo, adding an atelier into which Théo moved in 1911. Here Théo lived until his death on 13 December 1926.

Despite his new quarters in St. Clair, Théo felt the need to maintain a closer connection to Paris. In 1913 French architect Auguste Perret built him a private hotel in Auteuil, at 14, rue Claude Lorraine. In reality, the artist spent little time there and, with his health failing, sold the property in 1921. Perret, famous, after World War I, for the concrete church at Le Raincy, would later specialize in such studios, which he built for A.M. Cassandre and Georges Braque, but Théo's studio was among his first. In return, Théo executed a portrait of Perret (1914), shown in a relaxed stance smoking with his arms folded.¹⁹

Van Rysselberghe's last panel decorations were created between 1920 and 1924 for the hall of the château of Pachy near Mariemont, the home of Léon Guinotte, for whom Octave was renovating the villa. Théo himself, some nineteen years earlier, had executed an enchanting triple portrait of Guinotte's daughters, *Trois enfants en bleu* (1901). Working in the parks of Saint-Cloud and Versailles, he created numerous studies for the seventeen panels; by September 1924 he had completed almost twelve of them. For the remaining panels, he gathered inspiration from the landscape around Marseille.²⁰ Three days before his death on 8 December 1926, an ailing Van Rysselberghe, unable to finish the last four, entrusted their completion to his young friend and follower, Jean Vanden Eeckhoudt.²¹

Théo's desire to create decorative, harmonious ensembles for the homes of his prosperous clients was fundamental to the expanding definition of the artist. No longer content to create mere easel paintings, artists of his generation, including Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, wanted to participate in the re-shaping of the domestic interior. Van Rysselberghe's close relationship with architects who admired his versatility allowed his vision of reform to flourish. But then he had counted architects among his closest friends all his life. ■

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Françoise Cachin and Marina Ferretti for access to the Signac Archives; Prof. Caroline Szylowicz of the University of Illinois; Fabrice Van der Kerckhove of the Museum of Literature, Royal Library of Belgium; Françoise Thomas, Royal Academy of Belgium; Robert Hoozee, Director of the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts; Ronald Feltkamp for assistance on the Nocard and Guinotte commissions, and Constance Lemasson, Director of the Department of Modern Art, Tajan.

NOTES

1 The major texts on Van Rysselberghe include three exhibition catalogs: *Rétrospective Théo Van Rysselberghe*, Paul Eeckhout, (Ghent Museum of Fine Arts, 1962); *Théo Van Rysselberghe néo-impressionniste*, Robert Hoozee, (Ghent: Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp: Pandora, 1993); *Théo Van Rysselberghe*, Olivier Bertrand, (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2006 and the catalogue raisonné by Ronald Feltkamp, *Théo Van Rysselberghe 1862-1926* (Brussels: Editions Racine, 2003). Although the year 1927 has appeared in recent literature as the death date of Octave Van Rysselberghe, he was very much alive until his actual demise on 30 March 1929.

2 Philippe Thiébaud, "Art nouveau et néo-impressionnisme: les ateliers de Signac," *Revue de l'art* (1991): 72-78.

3 The copy in the Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels, is dedicated to Théo's wife, Maria Van Rysselberghe.

4 "Petite Chronique," *l'Art Moderne* (25 December 1892): 414. Seven years later at the new Maison du Peuple designed by Victor Horta, a free concert of popular song was organized by G. Flé; See "Petite Chronique," *l'Art Moderne* (30 April 1899): 154. Flé was also part of the committee bidding farewell to M. Seguin, director of La Monnaie and offering him a statuette of Wotan commissioned for the occasion from Constantin Meunier, also 154). For Laure Flé, see Madeleine Octave Maus, *Trente années de lutte pour l'art* (Brussels: Editions Lebeer Hossmann, 1980), 367.

5 Van Rysselberghe to Henry Van de Velde, undated letter, Royal Library of Belgium, Museum of Literature, Van de Velde archive, FSX 800/12.

6 For Bing's Parisian gallery see, Gabriel P. Weisberg *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986) and Weisberg, *The Origins of l'art nouveau: the Bing Empire* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2004).

7 Van Rysselberghe to Paul Signac, 22 October 1895, Signac Archives, Paris.

8 Entry on Bonnier's Globe Terrestre in *Paris-Bruxelles: Bruxelles-Paris* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1997), 404.

9 Théo van Rysselberghe to Van de Velde, [summer 1902], Royal Library of Belgium, Museum of Literature, FSX 800/23.

10 Van Rysselberghe to Van de Velde, 5 November 1902, Royal Library of Belgium, Museum of Literature, FSX 800/24.

11 In 1913 a second mural decoration by Van Rysselberghe was added to the Hotel Solvay, "Les jardins du generalife à Grenade." For an illustration, see Feltkamp, *Théo Van Rysselberghe*, 404, #1913-010.

12 For illustrations, see Feltkamp: *Réunion sur la Terrasse*, 392, #1910-044; *Réunion dans le jardin*, 393, #1910-049. For the bathers: *Baigneuses au bord de la Mer*, 382, 1909-025; *Baigneuses au Cap Bénat*, 386, #1910-001; and *Baigneuses autour d'un Rocher*, 387, #1910-006. The most detailed description of the decorative scheme in situ can be found in «Théo Van Rysselberghe,» by Albert Dreyfus, 29 *Die Kunst für Alle*, (September 1914), 534. The panels were exhibited three years earlier at the Parisian Gallery Druet. See, Octave Maus, «Théo Van Rysselberghe : une décoration murale,» *l'Art Moderne* (5 March 1911) : 73-74.

- 13 Van Rysselberghe to Signac, 14 February 1909, Signac Archives, Paris.
- 14 Van Rysselberghe to Signac, 21 February 1909, Signac Archives Paris.
- 15 Van Rysselberghe to Van de Velde, 25 July 1909, Royal Library of Belgium, Museum of Literature, FSX800/68.
- 16 Van Rysselberghe to Van de Velde, 5 February 1910, Royal Library of Belgium, Museum of Literature, FSX 8900/71.
- 17 Van Rysselberghe exhibited five panels for this ensemble at La Libre Esthétique of 1911. His letter of 25 July 1909 to Van de Velde still holds to the idea of four large panels with figures, which he claimed absorbed him totally. Royal Library of Belgium, Museum of Literature, FSX 800/68.
- 18 See Feltkamp, 395, #1911-005.
- 19 In 1911 Van Rysselberghe had executed a portrait of Perret's wife; see Feltkamp 394, #1911-003.
- 20 Van Rysselberghe to Marie Closset, 24 August 1924 and 17 September 1924. Ghent, Museum of Fine Arts, Archive.
- 21 For illustrations of three of these, see Johanna Ruyts-Van Rillaer, *Jean-Vanden Eeckhoudt 1875-1946* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1990), 197: 27-5; and 198: 27-6 and 27-8.

Man files woman's teeth.
n.d. Leopold II Lake, Congo.
Photo by Vanden Broeck.
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Royal Museum for Central
Africa in Tervuren.



Chronicle