

# CHRISTIE'S

## MAGAZINE

The Art People

October 2015



Vik Muniz, *Mario Testino (Jam & Bugs)*, Unique, 2002

### *The new buzz around* **MARIO TESTINO**

The Collectors: DON AND MERA RUBELL

*What to see at* **FRIEZE**

MEET THE PICASSO OF FLOWER DESIGN

**DON McCULLIN** *in focus*

JONATHAN MEADES goes off-piste in Rome

PLUS

*Damien HIRST, Peter DOIG & Michelangelo PISTOLETTO*

[ TRAVEL ]



Left, detail of a statuette in a room at the Horta Museum, opposite, dedicated to art nouveau pioneer Victor Horta

## Private view

At this month's biennial of art nouveau and art deco architecture in Brussels, great buildings that are normally off limits to the public throw open their doors. By William Cook. Photographs by Frederik Vercruyse

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Above, the study of David Van Buuren in what is now the Van Buuren Museum. Right, art deco stained-glass windows in the museum



the carpet. She was delighted to discover perfectly preserved mosaics underneath.

Not all the private properties in the biennial are domestic. My next stop is the École Communale, an art nouveau school built by the philanthropic architect Henri Jacobs for the local education authority. ‘They wanted to educate the children, but to give them a taste of beauty, too,’ explains my guide, Albert Dewalque, an architect with a passion for art nouveau. You can see why he admires this school. It’s grand yet welcoming, spacious yet intimate. For the children who came here a hundred years ago, it must have seemed like a palace. It still feels palatial today. As in all the best art nouveau buildings, the attention to detail is incredible. The stairwells are intricate ironwork, the stone floors covered in minute mosaics. From banisters to door handles, every artefact is an objet d’art. ‘There was no ideological edge to it,’ says Dewalque. ‘It was an architecture of pleasure.’

We end our tour of private properties at the Palais de la Folle Chanson, an art deco apartment block built by Antoine Courtens in 1928. Philippe Leblanc shows us his ground-floor flat, a serene geometric space flooded with natural light. He’s an artist and architect. You can understand why he loves living here. From elevators to radiators, everything is art deco. We finish up on the top floor, high above the city. It’s like the sun deck of an ocean liner. From this rooftop terrace you can see the evolution of art deco, in the styles of the adjacent buildings. ‘From the 1950s to the end of the 1980s, people didn’t like this style at all,’ says Leblanc. ‘You could buy an apartment here for less than €100,000 in today’s money – 200 square metres!’ In 1988, the Palais de la Folle Chanson finally became a protected building. Since then, happily, attitudes have changed. At the last biennial, there were 2,000 visitors in one weekend.

It’s a special treat to peep inside buildings that are normally off limits, but there are lots of art nouveau and art deco buildings in Brussels that you can visit at any time of year. The Horta Museum, housed in the architect’s former home and studio, tends to draw the biggest crowds. It’s a stunning building, inside and out (Horta designed virtually everything in it), but for me the biggest thrill is finding art nouveau structures that are still functional, rather than architectural relics. Cité Hellemans, by Émile Hellemans, is still a council estate; Horta’s Jardin d’Enfants is still a school. Other art nouveau buildings have found new functions. A museum devoted to musical instruments now occupies the Old England department store, built by Paul Saintenoy in 1898. The Waucquez Warehouse, built by Horta as a furniture showroom, now houses the Belgian Comic Strip Centre (a must for fans of



#### Where to eat

##### Comme Chez Soi

Located on the same site in Place Rouppe since the 1930s, this elegant yet cosy restaurant is a Belgian institution. Its guest list reads like a potted history of the last century: Hergé and Delvaux doodled in the visitors’ book, and Churchill and Roosevelt are among the famous statesmen to have eaten here. ‘Many thanks for the best dinner I’ve had in years,’ wrote FDR, ‘especially the sole and the pheasant.’ However, you don’t need to be a prime minister or president to feel at ease here. The restaurant’s name echoes

a compliment from a customer, who said he’d eaten just as well here as he did at home. With two Michelin stars (it used to have three, and still should), the classic haute cuisine is a lot more fancy than most home cooking, and it’s presented with finesse and flair, but the ambience isn’t remotely haughty. The art nouveau decor is a perfect fit – you’d never guess it was reproduction; and the *saumon marine* and *croquant de chocolat* still linger in my memory. 23 Place Rouppe, [www.commechezsoi.be](http://www.commechezsoi.be), +32 2 512 2921



Above from left: the Palais de la Folle Chanson apartment block; resident Philippe Leblanc

Hergé, whose lucid style follows the clean lines of art nouveau illustration).

All these are in the city centre, but there’s another cluster in Ixelles, one of the most attractive suburbs. Here you’ll find the best examples of domestic architecture, particularly the work of Paul Hankar, who might have eclipsed Horta if he hadn’t died in 1901, aged 41. Don’t miss his sublime Ciamberlani House, with its delicate graffiti.

Ixelles is also a fertile hunting ground for art deco. Its centrepiece is Flagey, a chunky tower block beside the pretty Ixelles Ponds. Formerly the National Radio Broadcasting Institute, it’s now a cultural centre and rendezvous. The bustling Café Belga, on the ground floor, is a great place to refuel.

For the complete art deco experience, head for the Van Buuren Museum, an idyllic villa on the green edge of Brussels. David Van Buuren was a banker, but his chief passion was art, and the home he built here with his wife Alice is an artwork in its own right. David died in 1955 and Alice in 1973, but it feels as if they’re still around. This house is their memorial, their gift to Brussels and the world. Built by Leon Govaerts »