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## Henry van de Velde's use of the concept of *art nouveau* in his early writings

### Introduction

I would like to express my gratitude to the organisers of this interesting conference on a very important period of European art and history. I also wish to thank Partage Plus, the European project which made it possible for me to relaunch my interest in *art nouveau*, especially in Belgium, and to facilitate my participation to this conference.<sup>1</sup> At last, a very special and warm thank you to my lovely colleague, Marie Ressler, for helping me in making our institute's contribution to Partage Plus a success for as well the project as for the advancement of our scientifically described photographic inventory of cultural heritage in Belgium. We both work for the Royal Institute of Cultural Heritage of Belgium, situated in Brussels, the capital with hundreds and hundreds of magnificent *art nouveau* houses. But also in the provincial towns we discovered and rediscovered interesting *art nouveau* buildings to document photographically with expanded art historical information.

But let us focus on Henry van de Velde, this young man, eager to change not only the world of art, but the whole world altogether, as a key figure in this emerging European style and movement. I would like to start with a citation, in French, because although he was from Flemish decent, historical reasons made that most of his writings were in French and later in German.<sup>2</sup> What is important here is his use of capital letters for "Art Nouveau" to emphasize that it is more than just another new style: «Or, ceux qui goûtent l'art ainsi et les artistes qui le pratiquent se doutent bien que l'apparition d'un *art nouveau* est impossible sur notre sol et que toutes ces tentatives et toutes les luttes ne relèveront pas la tige qui

s'est inclinée vers la terre; que la fleur flétrie que les siècles piétinent dans leur marche disparaîtra à son tour dans la nuit quand le total anéantissement intellectuel du vieux continent sera accompli. Ils pressentent que l'*Art Nouveau* se bégayera par un peuple innocent et ravi qui suivra d'amour et de soins les diverses phases de sa transformation, s'extasiant à chacune d'elles, persuadé qu'aucune de plus splendide ne sera possible et que l'Art, une fois de plus, se transplantera vers l'ouest, à la suite des hommes, pour reflleurir dans les Amériques».<sup>3</sup>

The anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus once pointed out in a letter to his friend van de Velde that in the East they think civilisation came from the West and in the West they think it came from the East, which is after all not surprising because of Babylon, in the middle, being the cradle of our civilisation.<sup>4</sup>

First we need to quickly consider van de Velde's biography, but only from the specific angle of the early years, regarding the scope of this small article. His life was too long and too rich to be treated extensively here.

<sup>3</sup> H. van de Velde, *Déblaiement de l'Art*, "La Société Nouvelle", 10, no. 112, Avril 1894, p. 444–456 (p. 449). "Art lovers and artists doubt in good reason that the appearance of a new art (*art nouveau*) is impossible on our soil and that all these attempts and struggles will not lift this stem which is inclined towards the ground; that the withered flower will disappear too in the night as centuries have marched upon it until the total intellectual annihilation of the continent will be accomplished. They sense that this New Art (*Art Nouveau* with capitals) will be hesitatingly approached by the people, innocent and delighted, but willingly with love and care to follow the different phases of its transformation, convinced that nothing beautiful anymore will be possible and that art, once again, will be transplanted to the west, to flourish, following mankind, in the Americas".

<sup>4</sup> Élisée Reclus to Henry van de Velde, Bruxelles, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1901. Cited in: L. Ploegaerts (ed.), *Henry Van de Velde. Les Mémoires inachevés d'un artiste européen. Édition critique*, vol. 1–2, Académie royale de Belgique/Koninklijke Academie van België, Bruxelles/Brussel 1999, p. 49.

<sup>1</sup> The content of this paper reflects heavily its origins as a conference presentation.

<sup>2</sup> All translations into English of Dutch, French and German original texts are by the author.

## Portrait of the artist as a young painter (1883–1893)

Henricus Clementius van de Velde was born in Antwerp on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 1863. We make a leap to 1878–1879, when he met his lifelong friend, the writer and poet Max Elskamp in an Antwerp high school.<sup>5</sup> They were 16 years old, intellectually rather advanced, and ready to change the world. This would inevitably lead, for both of them, but mostly for Elskamp, to periods in which life would be the hardest thing to suffer, for the world is after all not that easy to change. It was for Elskamp that van de Velde produced his first book designs.

Another important moment in life was going to the Royal Academy of arts of Antwerp, following courses by the painter Charles Verlat, who in a certain way motivated van de Velde to go beyond the mere classical work in the academy. Nevertheless, he stayed in the academy from 1880 to 1882, but then got disappointed by the very academic way of working in such institute. Imagine for instance studying landscape painting inside a building, where branches, rocks and sand were placed and students had to use this to paint realistic landscapes. Let us not forget that *plein air* painting was already a rather common practice from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century on. Van de Velde joins then *Als ik kan* (When/If I can), a circle of young Antwerp painters, who allegedly wanted to reform the academic milieu, but he soon realises they are not so avant-garde at all and only their personal career was important. His eyes get opened even more when in 1884 he leaves the academy for a stay in Paris. Not only he learns more about the other ways of painting, he also gets the feeling the lonely life of an unrecognized artist befits him. And he moves to the countryside near Antwerp trying to live a simple life.

## Influences

### Painting and poetry from France

During the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the influence from French cultural, political, artistic life was enormous on the

<sup>5</sup> H. van de Velde, *De poëtische vorming van Max Elskamp*, Zielens Lode (vert.), vol. 39, De Seizoenen, De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, Antwerpen 1942. See also: H. van de Velde, *Henry van de Velde entretient ses Collègues de l'Académie libre Edmond Picard de la formation poétique de Max Elskamp et d'une amitié de plus de 50 ans (15 juin 1933)*, 1933, <http://artsrtlettres.ning.com/profiles/blogs/henry-van-de-velde-entretient-ses-colleagues-de-l-academie-libre-e> (laatste update: 2011-11-05 / laatste bezoek: 2015-05-31).

young Belgian state. In the case of van de Velde special attention could be seen through his discovery of the impressionists and maybe even more the post-impressionists. The reason had mainly to do with the use lines as decorative elements. It is van de Velde himself who refers in one of his articles, published in 1890, to the affinity Seurat had with Puvis de Chavanne, in the ways they used decorative aspects in their paintings, which in the case of the latter was evidently based on the use of clear lines. And thus the line, this indefinable element in the arts, as well an independent object as a divider and a facilitator, has put itself at the root of all van de Velde's work, from painting and architecture to the decorative arts.<sup>6</sup>

One of the "problems" with van de Velde is the multitude of his work. He combines elements from neo-impressionist painting with Arts & Crafts design and theories. At the same time, the political readings he undertook were mixed with religious or semi-mysticist elements; here we probably could even detect the influence of Elskamp, who was much more inclined to mystical experiences.

Then there were his contacts with French poets as Stephane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine to enforce his beliefs in the way the artistic ego has to play its role in all development. His work spans different periods in which styles changed and evolved, although a clear line is still discernable in his work as an evolution in which the line as a painterly element becomes almost an element on its own, and could even be seen as a kind of prelude to abstract art.

But Georges Seurat probably left the biggest impression (pun intended). When van de Velde, in 1887, stood before the large pointillist painting *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte*, on which Seurat started to work in 1884 to only finish in 1889, he got deeply impregnated with this new style of painting. But moreover, van de Velde also started a writing career. In 1890 he already published an article on Seurat in *La Wallonie*, a Belgian literary journal, which served as a bridge between French and Belgian symbolist writers of that period. In 1890 Stéphane Mallarmé, on a postcard to van de Velde, dated April 28<sup>th</sup>, refers to his critiques "Notes on the arts" which appeared in this journal.<sup>7</sup> Arrived at the end of the 80s

<sup>6</sup> See his article *Die Linie* in "Die Zukunft X", H. 49, 6. September 1902.

<sup>7</sup> Mallarmé à van de Velde, 28 avril [1890]: Fabrice van de Kerckhove, e.a., *Henry van de Velde dans les collections de la Bibliothèque royale Albert Ier*, vol. C 240, Catalogue des Expositions, Bruxelles: Bibliothèque royal Albert Ier, 1993, p. 15.

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century van de Velde became in the meantime an active and respected participant at the avant-garde art circles in Brussels.

### Arts & Crafts: the past as future (and the politics of Ruskin, Morris and Crane)

And then an even more important influence in the evolution of van de Velde's art was the Arts & Crafts movement in England. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, John Ruskin's interest in gothic art, related to the craftsmanship of the cathedral builders, influenced generations of artists who saw in the rejection of "art for art's sake" a possible revival of the so-called lower arts. Learning that the wonderful woman, his future wife Maria Sèthe, he just met – this was during a stay at the coast together with other artist friends Théo van Rysselberghe and his wife and a friend of her, Willy Finch and the writer Émile Verhaeren – and to whom he expressed his beliefs in the possibility of a new and better world, based on and anarchist ideas, was going to London.<sup>8</sup> He asked her to bring as much as possible information and objects of the Arts and Crafts movement back to Belgium.<sup>9</sup> The ideas developed by William Morris and Walter Crane, especially the former one, seemed to coincide with how van de Velde had started to look at society, its problems, and possible ways to overcome them. This evolved clearly into a turning point, where van de Velde needed to stop doing the things he did now for many years, to make a new start in which the artist became a craftsman and the other way round. His interest in a social art was of course not new; he admired Millet and tried to acquire this sense of the land with its hard working labourers while taking refuge in the countryside near Kalmthout and Wechelderzande in the province of Antwerp. As he wrote in his memoirs: "Die Meditation zog mich mehr und mehr an. Vor allem im Zusammenhang mit der neuesten Entwicklung der Philosophie und Soziologie. Die im „Kommunistischen Manifest“ und auf den ersten internationalen Sozialistischen Kongressen geforderte Aktion der Massen war in Frage gestellt und überrundet durch die anarchistische Agitation und die Theorie der individuellen Revolte. Von diesem Augenblick an beschäftigte mich die Vorstellung einer neuen sozialen Gesellschaftsordnung mehr als die Frage, ob die En-

<sup>8</sup> E. Buelinckx, *Henry Van de Velde, Art Nouveau and Intellectual Anarchism*, [in:] *Uncommon Culture*, 4, n° 7/8, 2014, p. 33–42, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/UC/article/view/4768> (laatste bezoek: 2015-05-31).

<sup>9</sup> L. Ploegaerts, op. cit., p. 52.

twicklung der Malerei sich auf dem Wege des Pointillismus oder auf irgendeine andere Weise vollziehen würde."<sup>10</sup>

### A look at Henry van de Velde's library in 1889–1895\*

He mentions in his autobiography the books he read and while a look at one's library may not reveal the complete thinking process of a person it proves to be sometimes very interesting. So, once again through his own writings, we discover a man of his time. He is reading books on religion politics, philosophy and art. He is acquainted with the new communist and anarchist thinkers popular among intellectuals of that period. The avant-garde artists saw themselves as similar to oppressed workers and often cultivated a so-called bohemian life in poverty. The rich and powerful not only exploited the workers but they also didn't understand this new avant-garde art. Nietzsche was read and appreciated because the iconoclastic nature of his writings. A remark should be made here. Since most of our sources are in fact van de Velde's own writings and memories, it is clear that correctness may be sometimes lacking. When mentioning certain books linked to a certain period, a search for the publication dates of some of these books, uncovers a few dating problems. Nevertheless, most of the authors were previously published in the literary, sociological, political and artistic journals van de Velde and his friends devoured. A good example of this was the journal *La Société nouvelle*, so we know van de Velde was familiar with their writings before some of the texts were officially translated and published in French. Here are some of the titles he mentioned:

- Bakounine, *Dieux et l'État*, Genève: Impr. Jurassienne 1882 [préface de Carlo Cafiero et Elisee Reclus]
- Tomas a Kempis, *L'imitation de la Vie de Jésus-Christ*
- Marx & Engels, *Le Manifeste Communiste*, 1892
- Kropotkine, *Le Journal d'un Révolté* (= Paroles d'un Révolté), Paris: C. Marpon et E. Flammarion 1885

<sup>10</sup> H. van de Velde, *Geschichte meines Lebens*, München: R. Piper & Co, 1962, p. 55. "Meditating attracted me more and more; especially in the context of the latest developments in philosophy and sociology. The actions of the masses, called for in the 'Communist Manifesto' and the First International Socialist congresses were outdone by the anarchist agitation and the theory of individual revolt. From that moment on I employed the idea of a new social order of society more than the question of whether the development of painting was to take place in the way of pointillism or in any other way".

\* H. van de Velde, *Récit de ma vie. Anvers – Bruxelles – Paris – Berlin 1863–1900*, vols. 1–2, Bruxelles / Paris: Versa / Flammarion, 1992, p. 147. L. Ploegaerts, op. cit., p. 32–33.

- Nietzsche, *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra*, Paris: Mercure de France 1898 [Traduction partielle, sous le titre *Ainsi parla Zarathoustra* (fragments), de W. P. (nom inconnu), [in:] "La société nouvelle", année 8, Paris-Bruxelles 1892, T. 1, p. 390–401]
- Saint-François d'Assise, *Fioretti*
- Dostoïevski, *Les Frères Karamazov*, 1888

Et tout le restant de ma collection de livres s'alignait à l'avenant dans une désordre aussi extravagant ! En apparence seulement!<sup>11</sup>

When we look at the early texts he wrote from (see below), we realize that indeed influences could be found of this list he twice, and both a bit differently, talks about. A first bigger article of interest is *Du paysan en peinture*, based on a lecture he gave in 1891. Through mentioning the artist Sebald Beham, who together with his brother Barthel and their friend Georg Pencz got judged because of their involvement in the peasant wars and their criticism of the powers of church and state, van de Velde shows some understanding of a historical relation between art and social struggle.<sup>12</sup>

## Henry van de Velde's writings until 1918

We could divide his early writings in three periods: Belgium, Germany and Switzerland:

### Belgium

- *Du paysan en peinture* (1891, 1899 with changed ending)
- *Première Prédication d'art* (1893–1894)
- *Déblaiement d'art* (article: 1894, book: 1894)
- *Déblaiement d'art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Bruxelles: Mme. Vve. Monnom 1895 (it is important to note here that van de Velde explicitly had withdrawn some anti-Semitic paragraphs)
- *Aperçus en vue d'une synthèse d'art*, Bruxelles: Mme. Vve. Monnom 1895
- *Une Prédication d'Art. D'une série de trois constituants une préface au cours d'art, d'industrie et d'ornement*,

- Institut des Hautes-Etudes*, Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles. La Société Nouvelle 1895 und 1896
- *Variatiën en gevoluttrekkingen*, Van Nu en Straks 1896
- *William Morris, artisan et socialiste*, Bruxelles, La Presse socialiste 1898

### Germany

- *Allgemeine Bemerkungen zu einer Synthese der Kunst*, Heft 4, Pan 1899
- *Die künstlerische Hebung der Frauentracht*, Krefeld: Kramer & Baum 1900
- *Die Renaissance im modernen Kunstgewerbe*, Berlin 1901, Bruno und Paul Cassirer
- *Was ich will*, "Die Zeit", Wien, 9. März 1901
- *Kunstgewerbliche Laienpredigten*, Leipzig: Seemann 1902 [= Déblaiement d'art (1895), Première prédication d'art (1893), William Morris, artisan et socialiste (1898), Das vierte Kapitel "Prinzipielle Erklärungen" ist eine Zusammenfassung von Vorträgen, die van de Velde um 1900 gehalten hat.]
- *Die Linie*, "Die Zukunft X", Heft 49, 6. September 1902
- *Über den guten Geschmack*, Zeitung "Deutschland", Weimar, 8. Oktober 1905
- *Der Neue Stil*, Vortrag, gehalten in der Versammlung des Verbandes der Thüringer Gewerbevereine zu Weimar, Weimar 1906
- *Pro Domo*, "Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration" (Bruckmann), X. Jahrg., Nr. 2, November 1906
- *Vom neuen Stil (Der "Laienpredigten" II. Teil)*, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag 1907
- *Rückkehr zum Biedermeier*, Insel-Almanach, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag 1908
- *Amo*, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag 1909
- *Essays*, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag 1910
- *Amo*, Leipzig: Insel-Verlag 1909 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1912)
- *Die Entstehung des Modernen Stils*, "Sozialistische Monatshefte" 1912, S. 163
- *Das Werkbundtheater*, Katalog der Werkbund-Ausstellung Köln 1914

### Switzerland

- *Werkbund-Diskussion*, [in:] H. Muthesius, *Die Werkbundarbeit der Zukunft*, Jena 1914
- *Les formules de la beauté architectonique moderne:*

<sup>11</sup> And the rest of my collection of books lined up in the same extravagant disorder, but only in appearance.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance: J. Müller, T. Schauerte (hrsg.), *Die gottlosen Maler van Nürnberg. Konvention und Subversion in der Druckgrafik der Beham-Brüder*, Emsdetten: Imorde 2011.



- ce livre contient et résume des essais, se rapportant au "style nouveau", parus dans l'intervalle des années 1902 à 1912*, Weimar: Cranach-Press 1916–1917
- *La Conception rationnelle et conséquente*, "Schweizerische Bauzeitung", Jahrg. LXXI, 1918, Nr 13–14
  - *La triple offense à la beauté*, Zürich: Rascher 1918
  - *Die drei Sünden wider die Schönheit*, Europäische Bibliothek, herausgegeben von René Schickele, Zurich 1918
  - *La Présence du Coeur*, "Die Weißen Blätter", Zürich, Juli 1918

Through the texts he published during the years 1894–1898 we find an artist with a mission – "prédication" means "preaching". His first published articles in German, after moving to Germany in 1901, were mostly translations of the texts he wrote 5 to 10 years earlier, so from the French "Prédication" he went to the German "Laienpredigten". Preaching for the ones without the knowledge, and hopefully open to the meaning. Van de Velde however, in his mission for this new art, had first to get rid of something.

### Déblaiement d'art

This is indeed a key to understand van de Velde's early thinking, and as seen in the introduction as the place where *Art Nouveau* got introduced. While it is certainly not like a futurist manifesto, the same spirit of these iconoclastic artists can be felt when van de Velde tries to explain that for a new art, the old has to be purified. Art has to get rid itself of its own sense of importance. Paraphrasing the anarchist Bakunin, for whom the creative urge is a destructive one, van de Velde states that the "Déblaiement d'art" (clearing of art), which has to be understood in clearing the way, is a necessary step to create a new art, an *Art Nouveau*.

Another nice example to show the shift from the so-called fine arts to the decorative arts, and the clearing of the old for the new, is the way he describes how paintings have to break their frames.<sup>13</sup> He stated that painted panels or canvases were some of the most retarded expressions of what painting really should be. He showed this indirectly in the cover in typical *art nouveau* style he made for "Van nu en straks", the Flemish avant-garde journal he was heavily involved with.

<sup>13</sup> H. van de Velde, *Déblaiement de l'Art*, 1894, p. 452–453.

Van de Velde, looking back on this period of his life not without immodesty (by asking the audience to indulge), held an interesting conference titled "La Voie sacrée" in the *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1933, for the celebration of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>14</sup> He referred to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and his role as one of the first who pickaxed the monuments of the established arts. He refers once again to his voluntary solitary confinement on the countryside and once again mentions the authors he was reading: Stirner, Kropotkin, Tolstoï, Nietzsche and, earlier not mentioned, the English socialist poet Edward Carpenter. These men taught van de Velde to distance himself from the egoist concept of an artist's life. He cites himself (as always not in exact wordings) with *Ce qui ne profite qu'à un seul est bien près d'être inutile et dans la Société prochaine, il ne sera considéré que ce qui est utile, et profitable à tous*, which comes from *Déblaiement de l'art*.<sup>15</sup> Here this becomes *Ce qui ne profite qu'à un seul est bien près de ne server personne, et que dans un avenir prochain, il ne serait considéré que ce qui est profitable A TOUS*.<sup>16</sup>

According to van de Velde, still in the same conference speech, what made him different regarding other artists with similar preoccupation about beauty and ugliness, like Ruskin and Morris, is that they didn't go far enough in the search for the causes of this ugliness, and he did. There was a bifurcation in this new art: esthetical and moral. He considers for instance the art of René Lalique as *perruques sur des squelettes*.<sup>17</sup> It is not enough to create just something beautiful if the underlying (moral) ugliness is kept. He felt this need for not only an esthetical revolution, but also a moral one, in his mind before he used it in his art. And he rediscovers a style as old as the world: pure forms, beautiful by their unconditional being, by being just there. To show this to the world, Paris was the right place he thought. Through the opening of Bing's *Art Nouveau* at the end of 1895 in the capital of the (avant-garde) art, of which he was an important protagonist, van de Velde learns a hard lesson: the French didn't understand, or didn't want to understand and accept a "denationalised" art. But in Germany

<sup>14</sup> Idem, *Déblaiement d'art – suivi de "La triple offense à la beauté", "Le nouveau. Son apport à l'architecture et aux industries d'art", "Max Elskamp", "La Voie Sacrée", "La Colonne"*, Bruxelles: Archives d'Architecture Moderne, 1979, p. 159–181.

<sup>15</sup> Idem, *Déblaiement de l'Art*, p. 455.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, *Déblaiement d'art – suivi de "La triple offense à la beauté", "Le nouveau. Son apport à l'architecture et aux industries d'art", "Max Elskamp", "La Voie Sacrée", "La Colonne"*, 1979, p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 166. Wigs on skeletons.

he got better reviews. That is why he decides to change his base location and he moves to Weimar a couple of years later. By creating there the Grand-Ducal School of Arts and Crafts, which he calls *LA CITADELLE AVANCÉE du Style nouveau*<sup>18</sup>, van de Velde opens the way for what will become later Bauhaus and as such he could really be considered as one of the most important artists of not only *art nouveau* but of the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 170.

## Conclusion: from *Art Nouveau* to modernism

Van de Velde is indeed the living proof of the evolution from *Art Nouveau* to modernism. The ideas he developed in his early years made way for the "line" to become an independent element in art in its broadest sense. Modernism, as put into practice by van de Velde is an ode to this line. The liberation of this line, natural and wild in *art nouveau*, seemingly controlled and sure of itself in his modernist appearance could be understood as symbolic for the person who van de Velde was.