

THOMAS DEPRez FINE ARTS
19th & 20th Century Belgian Works of Art

A REDISCOVERED MASTERPIECE OF BELGIAN SCULPTURE



Pierre Braecke's
L'Humanité (1906)
from the Hôtel Aubecq

A UNIQUE AND MONUMENTAL MARBLE SCULPTURE, MADE SPECIALLY
TO ADORN THE GRAND HALL OF ONE OF THE MOST LEGENDARY
ART NOUVEAU BUILDINGS IN THE WORLD...

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Some buildings, like some works of art, are the stuff of legends... That certainly is the case for Victor Horta's famous *Hôtel Aubecq* (Avenue Louise 520, Brussels). 75 years after its shameless demolition in 1950, those in the know are still hoping for the promised reconstruction of its dismantled facade. For the better part of a century, this Art Nouveau gem has been laid out for theft in hangars, moved, damaged, and moved again. Parts of its interior, saved and sold, have been eagerly collected around the world. As such, part of the dining room furniture, a doorway and its stained glass windows, have been on permanent display at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris for decades. But many objects and elements from the *Hôtel Aubecq* might sadly be lost forever. This was believed to be the case for what is arguably the greatest artistic treasure that was housed at the *Hôtel Aubecq*: Pierre Braecke's more than 2 meter high marble sculpture *L'Humanité*, which dates from around 1906. *L'Humanité* was displayed in a niche in front of the staircase of the grand hall, at the very center or the architectural heart of the house. It was positioned so, that it could be admired even from adjacent rooms through windows and passages. Sold off privately to an unidentified American collector by the Vanderperre family, who bought the house with the intent of demolishing it for its prime real estate location, it was believed to be unretrievable. That is, until now...



One of the earliest photographs of the *Hôtel Aubecq* (after completion - post 1904), given and dedicated by Victor Horta to his close friend, the sculptor Pierre Braecke.
(Coll. Musée Horta, inv. HM-FJD, Schrobiltgen 28L, remastered and retouched).

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With both the exterior and its majestic interior and furnishings finished to the degree of perfection by 1904, Victor Horta's Hôtel Aubecq has always been considered a prime example of the architect's vision on a total work of art or so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It was commissioned by the wealthy industrialist Octave Aubecq, active in the production of enameled wares and the later founder of Le Creuset (1925). No cost was spared in order to make the house an astounding and exceptional work of art... A huge stained glass dome towered the grand stair case, all furniture exclusively designed and executed for the house, in which every room was finished with another type of exotic wood. Stemming from the height of Horta's career, Aubecq presented some of the most luxurious Art Nouveau aesthetics ever envisioned, and should have been classified as an architectural masterpiece alongside its close neighbor, the famous Hôtel Solvay (UNESCO World Heritage). During its demolition, the Royal Institute for Artistic Patrimony of Belgium (KIK/IRPA) came on site to document what was left to photograph before it was too late... Needless to say, a lot has been written about the Hôtel Aubecq over the years on the basis of mere speculation and assumption. While its importance is underscored by the amount of knowledge and information we do have about the house, with the distance of time, there's seems to be a growing need for cleaning the sources. The rediscovery of Braecke's sculptural masterpiece can help us with that.



Photographed by the Royal Institute of Artistic Patrimony of Belgium (KIK/IRPA) in April 1950, we see *L'Humanité* still standing proudly in its original setting. The luxuriously gilded Art Nouveau bannister has been dismantled and part of the original furniture is displaced before moving out.

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Presented by the artist for the first time at the Ghent Salon of 1906 (plaster cast), it is safe to assume Pierre Braecke's *L'Humanité* wasn't finished alongside the rest of the house in 1904. Victor Horta's great and lifelong friendship with the sculptor sheds more light on how this sculpture came to be at the very heart of the renown Hôtel Aubecq. More than just friends, Braecke needs to be seen as one of Horta's close collaborators. As a founding member of the artist society *Pour l'Art* in 1892, Pierre Braecke's delicate art managed to capture the attention of the young and ambitious architect early on. By the turn of the century, Braecke had become a household name and one of the leading figures in Belgian sculpture. Firmly based in the new Symbolist movement, and with a penchant for the decorative, Braecke's sculptures would soon prove to be a perfect complement to Horta's Art Nouveau architecture. The artist even got first-hand insight in the workings of the architect, when Horta designed and built Braecke's personal house between 1901 and 1903. During the same period, Braecke contributed to Horta's own home too, and was asked to collaborate on several of Horta's ongoing projects.

The photo of the facade of the Hôtel Aubecq, reproduced here above, was given and dedicated by Horta to Braecke. It was arguably the project the architect was most proud of. This was the cue for Braecke to include it in one of the low reliefs made to adorn Horta's personal dining room: an Allegory of the Arts, the female figure representing architecture proudly presenting a scale model of the Hôtel Aubecq. It seems therefore only natural that, when Horta saw room for a large-scale sculpture in the grand hall of Aubecq, he immediately thought of his friend Braecke.



Vintage photograph from Braecke's personal portfolio (private coll.), showing a bas relief representing an Allegory of the Arts, executed by Braecke for Victor Horta's personal dining room. The figure personifying 'Architecture' proudly presents a scale-model of the Hôtel Aubecq, admired by the figures of 'Painting', 'Music', 'Sculpture' and 'Literature' (Left to right)

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Plans for the grand hall and staircase of Aubecq, dated to 1902, show later modifications for the inclusion of the sculpture in the ensemble. However, a sculpture of about 2 meter 20 high, with two larger than life-size figures, isn't made in a day... On Braecke's end, two versions of the sculpture seem to have been made, in plaster, with the first being datable to around 1902. Once reworked and finished, it had to be reviewed and accepted by both Octave Aubecq and Victor Horta. Only after this double green light was given, it could be sent out to the studio of practitioners in order to be executed in marble. Being a commission, it seems unlikely to have been shown publicly before the patron has had his fill first. Therefore it makes sense that *L'Humanité* was only first shown at the Salon of Ghent in 1906. Presuming that the unique marble was already finished by then, it would still not make sense to use the marble for exhibition purposes. A plaster version was at hand, and is much easier to transport and install for temporary exhibition. Furthermore, having already been sold, there was no direct commercial or monetary interest for the artist to show the original. Finally, it makes perfect sense, for simple ease and safety reasons, that the marble sculpture would have gone from the practitioners studio directly to the place it was destined for. We're talking, after all, about a monumental and exceptionally heavy work of art..

Upon its exhibition, it had been given the title *L'Humanité*, and was very much admired by both the general public and art critics alike. The sculpture shows a symbolic and idealized couple, nude yet intelligently draped, who lovingly share the joy of new life in the form of a son. The power of this simple and harmonious composition rests almost solely on the realism of the attitudes, with the woman standing on the tips of her toes while reaching out to kiss her beloved son, and the individual expressions of a calm sense of happiness.



A detail of *L'Humanité*, showing the tenderness of the figures individual expressions, which remains today the foundation of the sculpture's power and elegance.

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All sorts of things have been suggested about the sculpture, such as the fact that it would have been initially designed for Solvay or the fact that the marble was presented on a turning base in order for the sculpture to be seen in the round. Simple logic easily sweeps these speculations off the table. Octave Aubecq certainly wouldn't have wanted a second-hand masterpiece as the crowning jewel of his home; and the practical execution of a turning base for a 1.8 tonnes sculpture seems like a ridiculously complex feat for an artwork in a private home, even today. Moreover, we read about its peculiar placement at the Ghent Salon in the contemporary press. The famous art critic Sander Pierron lamented the fact that the placement committee chose to display the work against the wall, with numerous plants on either side, thus effectively hiding its back (*L'indépendance Belge*, 07/10/1906). We like to argue that Braecke might have chosen such a positioning himself, or would at least have had peace with it. *L'Humanité*'s intended placement in a niche, and its subsequently intentional frontal viewing, excluded all need for a detailed finish at the back. The only known plaster version of the sculpture still in existence (given by Braecke's widow to the artist's home town of Nieuwpoort after the war), does differ from the marble in that it doesn't need the extra reinforcements at the back. However, in the original marble sculpture the difference in finish between front and back becomes very evident, with only the rough shape of the back executed and chisel marks left unpolished.



A detail of *L'Humanité*, showing the literal and figurative 'backs' of the sculpture. While given their coarse shapes, note the unpolished chisel marks, as well as the roughly carved reinforcement pillar which keeps the marble sculpture safe and steady as a whole.

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For our own presentation of this rediscovered sculptural masterpiece at the BRAFA Art Fair in January, we've carefully studied how we wanted to exhibit the sculpture ourselves. Focusing on a frontal viewing, with a hint to its unique and now lost destination, we did leave room for all to come and discover the sculpture up close and from all sides!

We look forward to welcoming you at BRAFA, on our **new stand N° 99**.

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