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NICOLAS VAN BEEK & FLORENT VERSTRAETEN



# SECRET BRUSSELS



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

## MAGRITTE'S PHYSIOGNOMICAL FOUNTAIN 15

*Find the painter's face*

*Place de Ninove*



On Place de Ninove, nothing clashes with the humdrum Brussels routine – not the rows of neoclassical houses, not the old trees, and especially not the blue stone fountain gracing the centre of the square. And yet, if you look closely at the moulded base of the fountain, which seems rather ordinary at first, you'll see a double profile emerge in the negative on both sides, delimited at each end by the thin stream of water falling from the basin. Perhaps you recognize him? It is Magritte's face that is so skilfully depicted here in a manner dear to Luca Maria Patella, the artist behind this work placed here in 2002. The inventor of "physiognomical vases", this Italian artist has already sculpted the profiles of the likes of Goethe, Diderot, Duchamp and Annunzio in marble using the same technique (to learn more, visit his "official and unofficial site": <http://lucapatella.altervista.org/index-english.htm>). But here, he has surpassed himself: what better homage could be paid to the painter of mysteries than this ghostly apparition that haunts an ordinary local fountain?



## AN ALCHEMICAL INTERPRETATION ① OF THE GRAND-PLACE

*The seven operations to obtain the philosopher's stone are represented here*

Access: metro Gare Centrale

The world-famous Grand-Place of Brussels, which has been showered with so much praise and commentaries of various kinds, has also been the object of an esoteric analysis which is less well known but nevertheless interesting. Put forward by Paul de Saint-Hilaire but disputed by many other experts, this theory contends that the Grand-Place is one of the key locations for Freemasonry in Brussels. Without recapping the entire history, we simply note here that most of this site was destroyed in 1695 under the bombardment ordered by Maréchal de Villeroi, who sought to seize the city on behalf of the French monarch, Louis XIV. This is the historical starting-point on which Saint-Hilaire bases part of his Masonic interpretation of these surroundings. According to him, the reconstruction of the Grand-Place was carried out by Freemason architects who riddled their constructions with Masonic and alchemical symbols.

First of all, Saint-Hilaire sees in the superposing of the three major architectural orders (Doric, Ionic and Corinthian), frequently found in the buildings around the square, a correspondence with the three Masonic ranks of apprentice, journeyman and master. But some will no doubt reply that this succession is common in all Baroque compositions on such a colossal scale. But Saint-Hilaire pursues his explanation: according to him, seven streets lead into the Grand-Place, dividing it into seven groups of constructions, most of which are composed of seven houses, and corresponding to the seven operations required to obtain the philosopher's stone.

The first operation can be discerned in the houses numbered 39 to 34, to which should be added the seventh house, located at 46 rue au Beurre, called Notre-Dame-de-Paix. The seven houses to the north-east (No. 20 to 28) comprise the second operation. Anne and Joseph, placed under the same roof in the house at No. 22, would thus represent the preparation of the male- female alliance, symbolized by the alliance of sulphur and mercury. The Maison du Roi stands for the third operation: the two-headed eagle above the entrance would thus indicate the successful amalgamation of the male and female principles, of the King and the Queen, which was evoked in a motto inscribed on the façade in 1767 but since disappeared. The Maison du Roi leads to the famous "Roi d'Espagne" building (No. 1 and 2) whose octagonal dome would thus represent the athanor, the furnace in which the amalgam is produced. Then the crucible must be

removed from the fire with the help of a "wheelbarrow" (No. 3), before it is isolated in a "sack" (No. 4). Next, air is blown on the vessel by means of a special horn, the "cornet" (No. 6), an action also symbolized by the four winds visible at the top of the ship's prow.

And alchemists also gave the name "boat" or "fish" to the solid matter that appears on the surface of the liquid as it congeals. The fifth operation is alluded to by part of the eastern group of buildings, the Maison des Ducs de Brabant; and the sixth by the southern group, running from No. 14 to No. 8, called L'Étoile, the alchemists' star: this shines brightly like the philosopher's stone just obtained. Lastly, the Hôtel de Ville would symbolize the seventh and final operation. According to Saint-Hilaire, the building's asymmetry can also be explained by alchemy: the first method for obtaining the philosopher's stone included twelve steps corresponding to the twelve arches of this building, whose first stones were laid in 1402. But the alchemist Nicolas Flamel, who died in 1418, invented in Santiago de Compostela a new method requiring only seven steps, the "short" or "dry" way, represented by the seven arches of the right wing, added later. For those who would like to learn more, see the guidebook *Bruxelles Mystérieux* by Paul de Saint-Hilaire (now out of print, but still to be found second-hand in some bookshops), or else the brochure *Itinéraire de la franc-maçonnerie à Bruxelles*, published by the Société Royale Belge de Géographie.



## ICEHOUSES AT PLACE SURLET-DE-CHOKIER

13

*Hooks where the butchers stored their meat*

Place Surlet-de-Chokier 15-17

Access: metro Madou

Accessible on heritage days or on request by telephoning 02 801 72 11



On heritage days, or on request to the Government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation which occupies the premises (see telephone number on opposite page), it is possible to visit the little-known and astonishing icehouses at place Surlet-de-Chokier.

These two large halls, which are reached by a small, narrow stairway, were rediscovered in 1989 by pure chance during the construction of the building for the Government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. While carrying out excavation work under the building for a new car park, the workers discovered this immense icehouse measuring 19,000 m<sup>3</sup>. The hooks used by butchers for storing their meat allowed historians to determine the previous function of this space.

Since the Bronze Age, mankind has looked for methods of preserving ice accumulated during the winter months, by storing it in underground cavities, caves, wells or ice cellars. Icehouses became more common in the 17th and 18th centuries, not only for preserving foodstuffs and beer production but also for medicinal and industrial uses. Indeed, many stately homes and estates had their own icehouses.

In the cities, large communal icehouses were constructed. In winter, the natural ice was cut out of nearby ponds or transported by boat from colder regions.

Thus, in 19th-century Brussels, there were more than 30 active ice companies. Around 1860, the arrival of the steam engine made new artificial ice-production techniques possible, which brought this trade to a halt shortly before the First World War. Initially, the icehouses continued to be used as a storage facility for artificially produced ice, but eventually they became redundant and fell into obscurity.



## COMMEMORATION OF TSAR PETER THE GREAT'S VOMIT (22)

*As he sat on the edge of this fountain, he ennobled its waters with the wine of his libations...*

*Brussels Park: Pits of Brussels Park*

*Access: metro Parc*



In the Parc Royal, opposite the palace, two strange 8 m deep pits can be seen on either side of the main path. Head towards the one on the left, but keep an eye on your virtue and your wallet, as it is often a site of debauchery, despite the presence of a sculpture of Mary Magdalene repenting in a rock grotto.

This pit, like its twin, is a vestige of the old park belonging to the castle of the Dukes of Burgundy. The castle, parts of which are still visible in the underground sections of Place Royale, was destroyed in a fire in 1731. In the late 18th century, its former park, called Warande, was levelled to create the current Parc Royal and the neighbourhood of the same name.

These two pits were not filled in during the renovations, as the scope of the task dissuaded the town councillors. Instead, they were converted into an English garden. In 1717, this site witnessed a strange spectacle.

While Peter the Great was visiting the region, he quite simply vomited here. A bronze statue given to the city by Prince Demidoff in 1856 serves as a reminder of this incredible scene, while just a few metres away a small blue stone basin surrounds the site of the incident and narrates the adventure in dog Latin along its edge: “...Insidens marcini huius fontis aquam illius nobilitavit libato vino...” [“As he sat on the edge of this fountain, he ennobled its waters with the wine of his libations”].



## SGRAFFITO AT RUE MALIBRAN 47 ⑥

*A remarkable sgraffito made by the building workers*

*Rue Malibran 47*



Constructed in 1900 by architect Edouard Pelseneer, the house at 47 rue Malibran has several important sgraffiti drawn by Paul Cauchie. But they have been very clumsily restored and lost much of their original colours and charm. The big window painted in yellow that has replaced the original bow window is also lacking in taste. There remains, however, one original drawing by Cauchie. All the sgraffiti decorating this house, originally built for an entrepreneur, represent workers erecting a house.

## NEARBY

### *Petite Rue Malibran* ⑦

Petite rue Malibran, apart from its charming name, is a picturesque and semi-rural alternative to rue Dillens, with which it runs almost parallel.

### *Plaque at rue du Viaduc 71* ⑧

*Rue du Viaduc 71*

*Access: bus No.71, Fernand Cocq*

At rue du Viaduc 71, a very amusing plaque recalls an important event: "On 17 April 1891 absolutely nothing happened here." Placed on this very spot by the owner of the house, who collects plaques of all kinds, the plaque has been mass-produced and fixed to other facades in a number of French towns.



## THE TEMPLE OF HUMAN PASSIONS

31

*Representing a tangle of naked bodies, the sculpture was condemned as an outrage to decency*

*By the Schumann round about, next to the mosque*

*Access: metro Schumann*

*Accessible Tuesday to Friday 2.30pm-3.30pm (Tuesday to Sunday 2.30pm-4.30pm May to September inclusive)*

*Tickets sold at the cash desk in the nearby Musée du Cinquantenaire*



Commissioned by the Belgian state in 1890, the high relief created by sculptor Jef Lambeaux (1852–1908) is one of the public works of art least familiar to the residents of the capital. And for good cause: when it was unveiled in 1898 it caused an immediate scandal. Representing a tangle of naked bodies, it was condemned as immoral and an outrage to decency. The *Pavillon des Passions Humaines* that housed it was forced to close its doors three days later. And it has never really reopened. Since 2004, however, the situation has evolved slightly: you need to make an explicit request to the cashier at the *Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire* in order to have any hope of seeing the inside of the pavilion.

The notorious sculpture is still to be seen within the small temple designed by Victor Horta. This neoclassical building was the first public edifice built by the young architect and fails to match any of the Art Nouveau masterpieces of his more mature period. Nevertheless, it does contain this crowning artistic achievement by Jef Lambeaux, an ode to life and gaiety rarely equalled in its power and intensity.



### NEARBY

#### *Impasse du pré*

32

*Next to rue Jean-André de Mot 31*

A rustic impasse that curves to the right, lined with small, two-storey houses for workers built around 1850 and restored.

## GÉO DE VLAMYNCK STUDIO AND WALKING TOUR

14

*You'd think the artist had just gone out for a moment*

Rue de la Constitution 7

02 215 01 26

Tours every second Sunday of the month, at 2.30pm Meeting point at the Halles de Schaerbeek

Duration of tour: 3 h

[www.geodevlamynck.be](http://www.geodevlamynck.be)

Access: Tram No. 92 and 94, or train to Gare du Nord



The tour of sites associated with the artist Géo de Vlaminck (not to be confused with Maurice de Vlaminck, the celebrated French Fauvist painter) starts with his former studio. Preserved intact, it is a superb example of a 19th-century artist's studio, the oldest to be found in Brussels after that of Antoine Wiertz. It has a warm, cosy atmosphere, as if the artist had just gone out for a moment and was about to return: there are documents spread out on the desk, jars of pigment on a little shelf, and frames stacked in a corner ready for use. An old stove with a blackened pipe sits in the middle of the room.

Danielle de Vlaminck, the artist's daughter, then invites visitors to take a little walk through Schaerbeek to the Neptunium pool at place de Houffalize. It was there that Vlaminck created in 1957 a monumental mosaic, 2 m by 15 m. Lastly, you go to 72 rue Rankin where the *Association des Amis de Géo de Vlaminck* is based. Over a drink, Madame de Vlaminck will show you other works by her father, with frescoes and canvasses adorning the walls of an entire floor in this house.

### *Géo de Vlaminck (Bruges 1897 - Brussels 1980)*

Géo de Vlaminck moved to Brussels in 1919 to escape from the artistic dullness that held sway in the city of his birth and hindered his creativity. He became the student of Constant Montald who would influence him considerably. In 1921, he won the Grand Prix de Rome for his painting, *The Repentant Sinner*. It was in 1924 that he bought the studio in rue de la Constitution. Built in 1862 for the sculptor De Hane, the house was later occupied by a number of artists, including the Impressionist painter from Schaerbeek, Eugène Smits. Exercising his talents in the different domains of painting, mosaics, stained glass with works such as *Marie mother of Christ at the Lake Shore* at the Koekelberg basilica, frescoes (including those carried out with his pupil Nicolas de Staël for the 1935 Universal Exposition in Brussels), and ceramics, Vlaminck is famous above all for his female nudes.



## COMMUNITY SCHOOL NO.1

### Schools in rue Josaphat

15

*The almost perfect example of an ideal school*

Rue Josaphat 229-241 and Rue de la Ruche 30

Access: Tram No. 92, Saint-Servais

Open during class hours



The school at rue Josaphat and rue de la Ruche in Schaerbeek is probably the most beautiful example in Brussels of Art Nouveau applied to school architecture. As in the case of most schools in the city, they'll probably let you have a quiet look around during class if you ask tactfully. Although there is an entrance on rue de la Ruche, the main entrance is in rue Josephat.

Inaugurated on 6 October 1907, the *École Primaire* No. 1 is the most famous building by the local Schaerbeek architect Henri Jacobs. Full of praise at the time, the review, *La Ligue des architectes*, spoke of "the almost perfect example of an ideal school."

Initially containing 24 classrooms in all, with a nursery school, a primary school for boys, another for girls, and a technical school, the complex made an impact due to the quality of its facilities: gymnasium, swimming pool, library and several open-air playgrounds. Nothing was too good for this project costing over 2 million Belgian francs, a considerable budget at the time. *La Ligue des architectes* even wondered whether "it was not too much luxury being spent on children: we are of the opinion that simplicity should be the first concern of the author when designing a work of this nature."

But beyond the wealth of its amenities, Jacobs, who was a disciple of Hankar, carried out a veritable work of art here, both in terms of architecture and of decor.

Created by Privat Livemont, numerous sgraffiti are to be found within the building, which explains why, protected from the weather, they are in such a rare state of preservation: the colours are for the most part original. For his motifs, Privat Livemont was partly inspired by local history. You thus find the donkey of Schaerbeek and beehives, which allude to both the name of the local street and to bees, synonymous with hard work.

## NEARBY

### *Avenue Louis Bertrand 59-61*

16

At the corner of rue Josaphat, a handsome building designed by Strauven in 1906. Note the pretty ceramic tiles beneath the awning of the restaurant, signed "Céramiques Wezel, 16 rue Kessels". The building opposite is also Strauven's work. At 10 avenue Louis Bertrand, there are some beautiful sgraffiti, although they are now very faded.

## CARRÉ TILLENS

③

*1.5 hectares of vegetable plots cultivated  
by local residents*

*Rue du Fossé between Chaussée d'Alseberg 561 and 565*

*Rue Joseph Bens 9-11*

*Rue Roosendaël 192*

*Access: tram No. 51, Bens*



Carré Tillens, practically invisible from the street, is a marvellous place. Occupying an entire block, it consists of 1.5 hectares of vegetable plots open to the public: the paths across the area, unlike most of the Brussels allotments, are also through routes from one street to another and are completely accessible.

The easiest way to get in is by rue Roosendaël. Coming from chaussée d'Alseberg, go past several buildings before you reach an eye-catching fence. On tiptoe, try to get a look at the greenery in what appears to be a large garden. Don't waste your energy trying a little door that won't open, but carry on a little further until you come across a narrow path that winds lazily down to the left, opposite 192 rue de Roosendaël.

And there it is. After a short distance a feeling of well-satisfied curiosity fills you. A kindly-looking woman is busily digging her plot, three local retired people quietly chatting are delighted to help you. There are 44 plots here, offered for rent by the *Institut Bruxellois de la Gestion de l'Environnement* (IBGE).

Although in theory anyone can rent some land, in practice the plots are reserved for local residents to ensure that the gardens are well maintained. Carry on down the path and you'll meet a couple embracing on a patch of lawn. Further still, a woman brings along some of her kitchen rubbish (orange peel, wilted salad leaves, etc.) and adds it to a large container to rot down into compost, which will later be used as fertilizer. Just like in the country.

## NEARBY

*Square Coghen*

④

An attractive housing estate which, on very sloping ground, offers fine inter-war houses. Look out particularly for No. 42 to 46 (architect Pierre Verbruggen) and 9 and 11 (Josse Franssen), as well as those from 75 to 87 (Louis Herman De Koninck).



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**SECRET**

# BRUSSELS

A 'love hotel' where one can say a prayer, a stretch of the Senne reconstituted in Saint-Géry, a farm in the centre of the city, a Freemasonic reading of the Brussels Park, the amazing physiognomical fountain of Magritte, the place where the Tsar of Russia vomited at the park of Brussels in 1717, the former rotunda of Panorama parking, a tribute to the soldier pigeon, from speleology to The National Basilica of the Sacred Heart, a panoramic swimming pool, a scandalous pavilion in the park Cinquantaire, a huge vegetable garden in Uccle, a 19th century artist's studio in Schaerbeek, a campsite in the heart of the city, a garden forgotten in the Forest ...

For those who can observe, push the doors and exit beaten tracks, Brussels is full of curiosities and surprising details that will amaze its inhabitants as well as its visitors who thought they knew it well.

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