

Kunstwerkstede De Coene

Kortrijk, Flanders

Introduction

For many, the Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede Gebroeders De Coene is still an unknown. Yet three generations have grown up with De Coene furniture and their interiors. Whether or not they were aware of it, many people have spent time in De Coene constructions: immediately after the Second World War, in prefabricated temporary schools; later, in market halls, warehouses, sports facilities and exhibition spaces constructed from elegantly curved, laminated wooden beams. All bearing the De Coene signature. When visiting Expo 58, how many people were aware that the Kunstwerkstede assisted in the construction of at least 28 pavilions? Which of the many visitors to the Royal Library in Brussels notices the perfectly functioning interior, designed as a total work of art? Few design-lovers know that over the course of the twentieth century, the Kunstwerkstede De Coene won countless prizes at national and international fairs and world exhibitions. Only fans of Art Deco will know that Kortrijk was the largest interbellum production center of Art Deco furniture in Belgium – and that its reputation and market were international in scope. After the Second World War, De Coene was one of the most important distributors of modern furniture in Belgium for people from all walks of life, as well as the Benelux producer of the exclusive Knoll furniture line. The firm collaborated with such well-known figures as Marcel Breuer, Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé.

Members of the art-loving public began to realize that the key figures of the Kunstwerkstede – Joseph De Coene, Arthur De Leu and Albert Saverys, all artists in their own right – were well-received in Flemish artistic circles. They were friends with prominent artists, writers and architects like Constant Permeke, Stijn Streuvels, Herman Teirlinck, Henry van de Velde... even the French surrealist Jean Cocteau could be counted among their acquaintances.

This ‘workshop for the arts’ – a literal translation of ‘Kunstwerkstede’ – grew to be the largest in Belgium, and helped shape the development of modern furniture, interior design and architecture at a national and international level for a better part of the twentieth century. This issue of *Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlaanderen* is dedicated to the rediscovery of this driving force. It serves as an introduction and guide to the multimedia exhibition *Kunstwerkstede De Coene 1888-1977* and the associated book. It tells the fascinating story of the products, styles and partners of this many-sided company and its international triumphs – from Antarctica to Reykjavik, from Bogota to Saudi Arabia.

Monumental depiction of the naval battle of Sluis in what was then the gaming room (the former concert hall) of the Casino-Kursaal in Blankenberge, design by Albert Saverys, 1946



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An unstoppable trajectory

De Coene-Frères, 1905-1925



Employees of the wallpaper concern De Coene-Tavernier with the young Joseph De Coene at the right, circa 1890
FROM: F. GERMONPREZ, JOZEF DE COENE. TIELT, LANNOO, 1967.

At that time, the furniture business was in a bad way: no artistic taste at all, and no notion of style or unity in ornamentation." So begins the Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels in the catalogue *Ateliers d'Art De Coene Frères* (1929), his version of the genesis of the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede, a history which can be said to begin in 1888. It was then that the thirteen-year-old Joseph De Coene became involved in the family's wallpaper and interior decoration business in Kortrijk – De Coene-Tavernier – after the unexpected death of his father Adolphe. As the eldest son, he was trained as a paper-hanger in spite of his dream of becoming an artist. Business was going well, which gave Joseph the chance to go to Brussels in 1893 in order to gain professional experience and follow lessons at the drawing academy. During his short stay in the capital, he visited museums and theaters and became acquainted with the ideas of architect Henry van de Velde. This left an indelible impression. The international cultural climate in architecture and the arts, in which art, craft and industry worked hand-in-hand, proved to be inspiring. The expansion of the wallpaper/interior decoration business into a real interior design firm became Joseph De Coene's new mission. First, art, craftsmanship, technique and industry were not to be opposed; rather, they were to strengthen one another. Secondly, the spirit of Arts & Crafts, Art Nouveau and Jugendstil was to fill the ateliers, but without losing sight of 'indigenous' – that is, Flemish – tradition. Making furniture, interiors or architecture which was both modern and Flemish, which participated in progressive tendencies in Europe – that was the new message.



De Coene personnel and guests
during the jubilee celebration of
the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede,
May 12, 1956
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



A division of the cabinetmakers'
atelier at De Coene in the 1920s
DE EIKELAAR 2, 1927

Art Nouveau interior by De Coene, circa 1905, represented as a modern reception room at the exhibition Art Décoratifs in Brussels, 1908
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW

A FAMILY AFFAIR IN KORTRIJK

When he returned from Brussels, Joseph De Coene set about realizing this ambitious project. His younger brother Adolphe was sent out to learn the tricks of the trade with the Kortrijk furniture-maker Victor Acke sometime around 1895, and a few years later with the trend-setting decoration firm Mercier Frères in Paris. In order to make the expansion of their wallpaper business possible, the family looked for more spacious quarters on Leiestraat, one of the most important commercial streets in the city center. It was strikingly furnished: the showroom displayed two dining rooms with green furniture, and the facade was painted in a dark, glossy color.

By the beginning of 1900, the chosen path had become a definite reality. At an exhibition held by the association 'Onze Kunst om Beters Wille' (Our Art for a Better World) in the Kortrijk city hall, an Art Nouveau ensemble built according to Joseph De Coene's designs was presented. It made a considerable impression on the people of Kortrijk. With a small team of three craftsmen under the direction of Adolphe De Coene, the firm De Coene-Tavernier began to make their own furniture. Their mother, Coralie, had no end of confidence in her sons and limited her role to looking after the wallpaper and textile division, together with her eldest daughter Marie. Her younger daughter, Anne De Coene, did the bookkeeping. Arthur De Leu, trained as an artist and textile designer, joined the firm in 1903 as a draftsman and co-designer of furniture. His marriage to Madeleine De Coene, the youngest member of the family, was a life-long asset for the business. Together with brother-in-law Arthur De Leu, Joseph and Adolphe De Coene set out the firm's artistic lines. Already in 1903, their wall unit took first prize in applied arts at the triennial furniture salon in Brussels. In order to be able to create interiors entirely according to their own designs, De Coene-Tavernier supplied not only wooden furniture and wainscoting but also carpets, stained-glass, lighting fixtures, fabrics and marble. The expansion of their activities once again resulted in a shortage of space.

HIGHER AND HIGHER STANDARDS

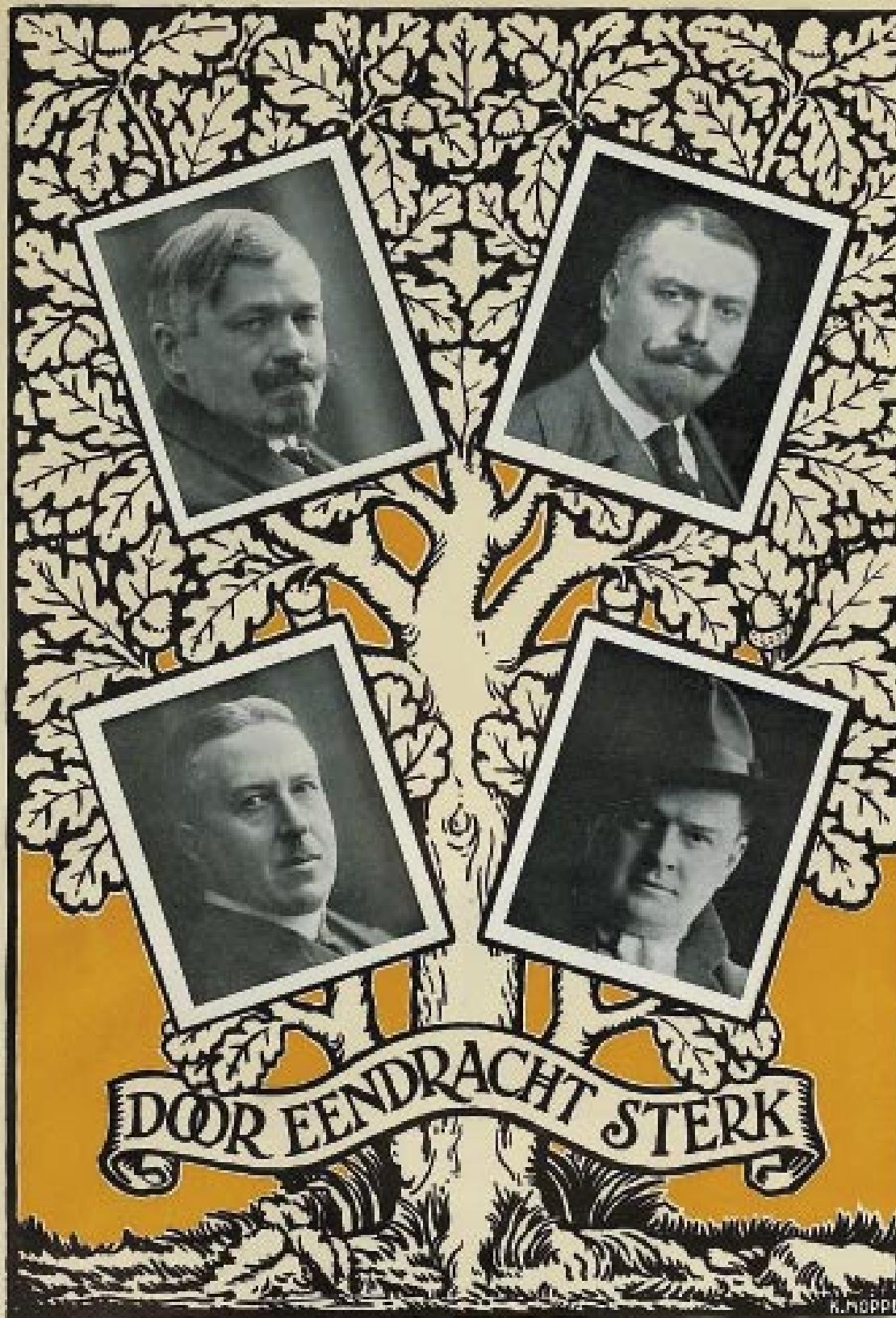
The founding of the Wiener Werkstätte in Austria in 1903 was an inspiration for De Coene. The great step forward came in 1905 with the establishment of a new

Furniture design by Joseph De Coene from the early period, circa 1900
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW

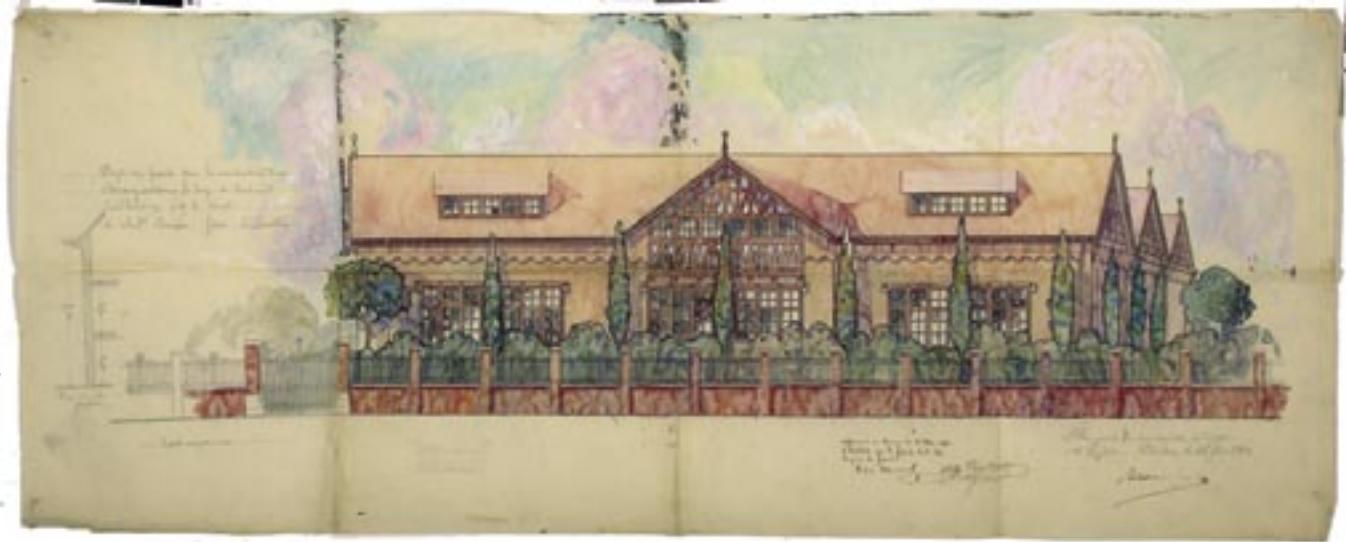


*The "first-fruits" of Joseph De Coene, exhibited in the Kortrijk city hall at the beginning of 1900
FROM: DE EIKELAAR, NO. 1, 1926*





Factory warehouse designed by Joseph De Coene, 1912; watercolor drawing on transparent paper
STADSARCHIEF KORTRIJK, BOUWAANVRAGEN, 1912



Letterhead from the family company
De Coene Frères, 1924
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW

family company, De Coene Frères. The furniture ateliers in the heart of Kortrijk were moved to a site near the freight station on the Pottelberg at the outskirts of town. There was plenty of room for expansion, and the prospect of swift and efficient provisioning from the adjacent railway was an important plus point. The proposed goal of unifying the various artistic trades under one roof took shape in a remarkably short amount of time.

By 1906 the new complex, designed by Joseph De Coene and consisting of ateliers, warehouse space and showrooms, was fully operational. That same year, De Coene Frères won their first international grand prize at the Exposizione Internationale del Sempione in Milan. With that, the standards of performance had been raised. In order to guarantee the quality of their products, the firm sought out the most highly-trained craftsmen and hired artists like Karel Noppe, Arthur Dutoit and Emmanuel Viérin. The vision of arts and crafts advocated by De Coene Frères and the high wages paid by the company proved irresistible. In 1910 and 1911, De Coene Frères landed the grand prize at the International World Exhibition in Brussels and the International Exposition of Northern France in Roubaix. The reputation of De Coene in Belgium and the north of France was definitively established.

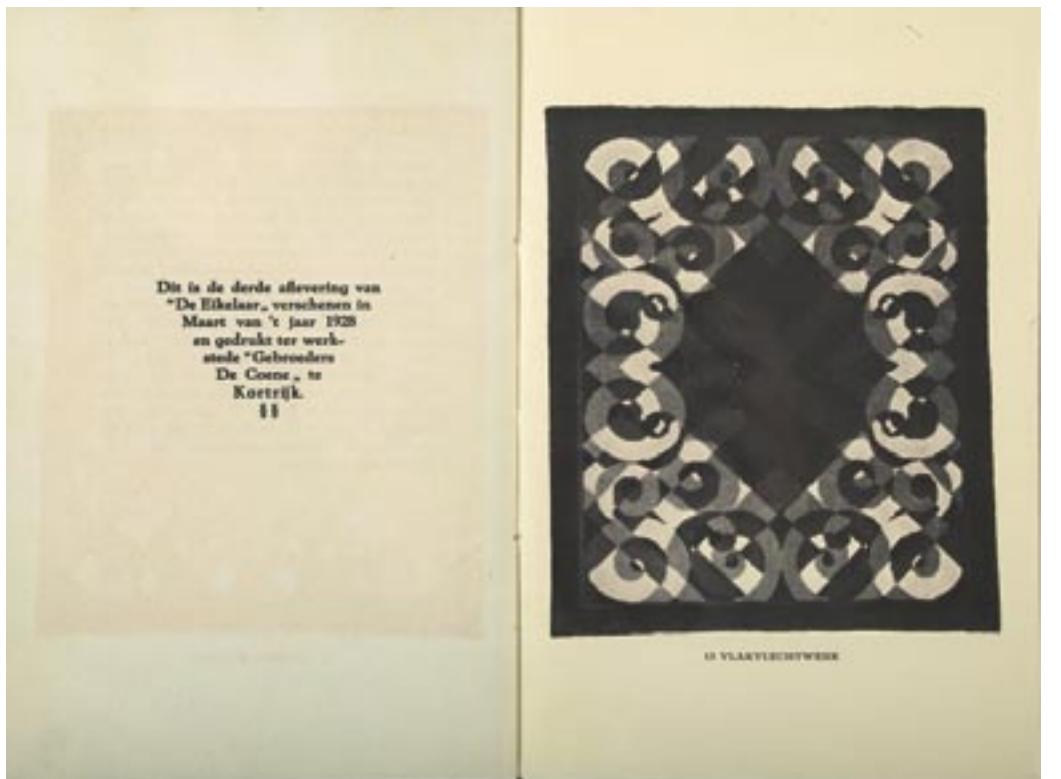
Their specially decorated exhibition spaces seduced potential clients with a wide selection of stylish ensembles and interiors. Not all the designs were equally innovative. De Coene Frères followed up contemporary trends in the arts, but also took into account the tastes of a broader public. Belgium was experiencing its belle époque and De Coene Frères were able to profit from the high demand for luxury goods. The firm worked its way up to being one of the most important interior design companies in the country. Commissions for the decoration of country houses on the Belgian coast rolled in one after another.

In 1913, the family business was joined by brother-in-law Marcel Brunein, an experienced banker, who took charge of the company's unbridled drive toward

The four pioneers of the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede.
Top: Joseph De Coene (left)
and Adolphe De Coene (right);
bottom: Marcel Brunein (left)
and Arthur De Leu (right)
FROM: DE COENE FRÈRES
COURTRAI 1900-1925.
KORTRIJK, DRUKKERIJ JOS VERMAUT,
1925 (ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW)



Art Deco chair, circa 1925
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



*Illustration of a carpet by
Gebroeders De Coene from
De Eikelaar ('The Oak Tree'),
the monthly periodical of the
Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede
edited by Stijn Streuvels
during the interbellum period
FROM: DE EIKELAAR, NO. 3, 1928*

expansion and guided it into more productive channels. On the eve of World War I, De Coene Frères could boast of nearly six hundred employees exercising some fifteen different trades between them.

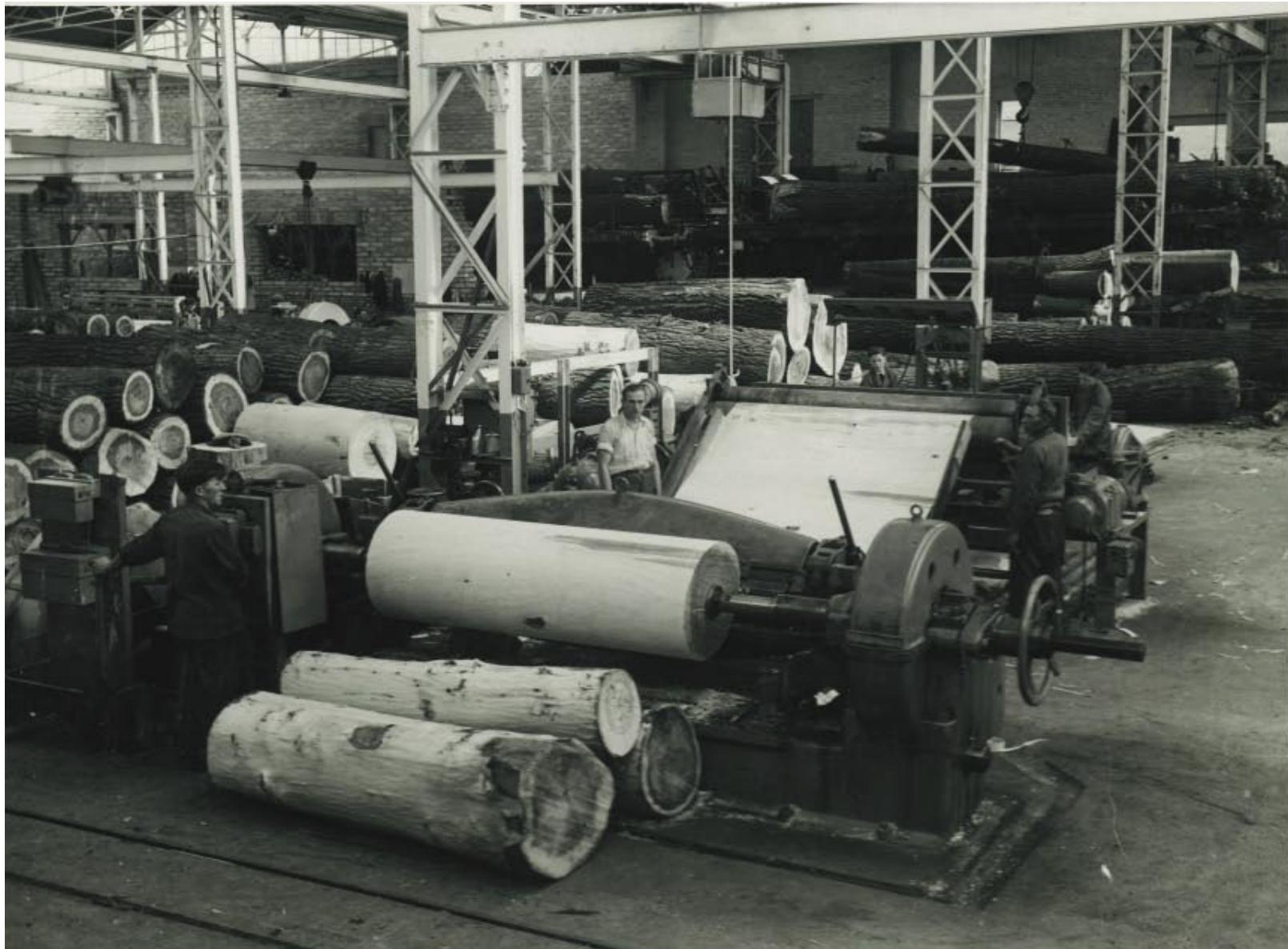
THREE-PLY SUCCESS

World War I caused a number of difficulties for De Coene Frères. German bombardments in 1914 destroyed one third of the factory buildings. Kortrijk was occupied territory for four years. The firm was only able to retain two hundred employees. The city council, obliged to deliver wooden barracks, beds and other furniture to the occupying German troops, appealed to De Coene Frères. At the end of the war, the ateliers assisted in the Belgian reconstruction effort by mass-producing furniture for temporary dwellings and barracks. However, it became apparent that the reconstruction would not last forever and it was necessary to seek new opportunities for expansion.

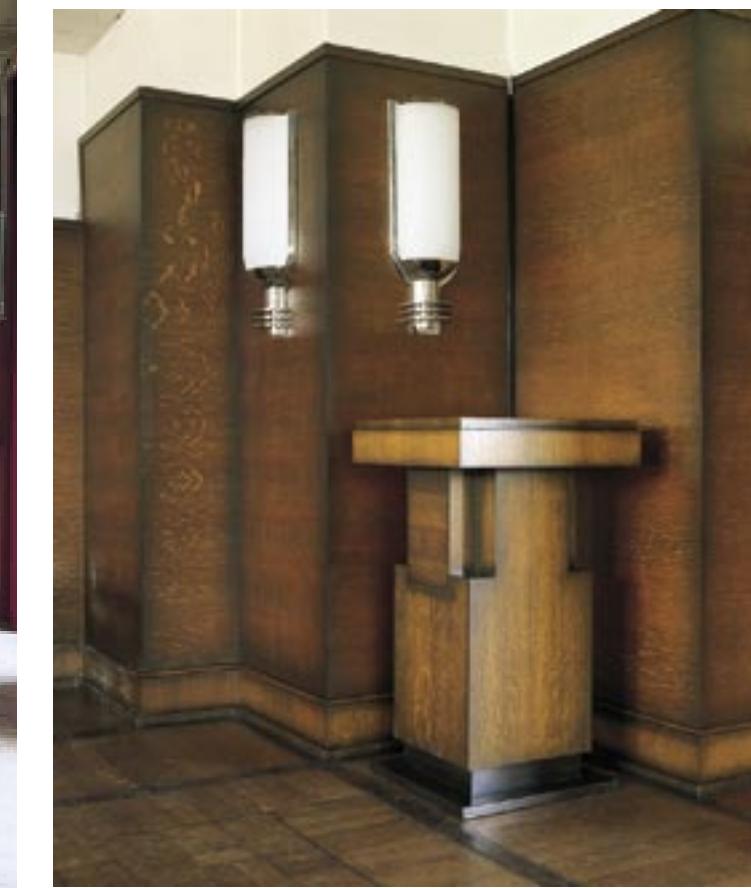
In the summer of 1921, Joseph De Coene and a personal friend, the Brussels architect Jean-Baptiste Dewin, embarked from Antwerp on the Red Star Line. Their mission: a study tour of the wood industry in the United States. Together they visited various lumber concerns and became acquainted with the bustling plywood industry. Greatly impressed, De Coene purchased the necessary machines immediately, but the methods of plywood production were a well-kept industrial secret. Only after a year of experimentation with different types of adhesive were De Coene Frères able to produce the first Belgian sheets of plywood on an industrial scale. In the end, they practically managed to corner the domestic market. It appears to have been an ingenious move. Solid wooden panels were expensive, and they could now be replaced by cheaper plywood panels clad with a veneer of a more expensive wood. The resulting financial success made it possible to invest even more in the quality of the design and execution of the furniture ensembles and interiors. De Coene Frères allowed industry, art and craft to merge seamlessly. In the wood industry, the company was considered one of the pioneers of industrial design. The formula was a resounding success.



*Art Deco chair with
bent plywood back,
circa 1923-1935
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW*



*A wood-peeling machine
makes tree trunks into long
strips of veneer
ARCHIVE LUC ANDRÉ
VANDENBOGAERDE*



Wall covering making liberal use of wood in the council room of the city hall at Vorst, 1935-1938

Photo: Sarah Blee

Council room in the city hall at Vorst, 1925 - 1938
furnished by De Coene between 1935 and 1938
after designs by architect Jean-Baptiste Dewin

Photo: Sarah Blee



De Coene in artistic circles

Around the turn of the century, Joseph De Coene and a number of artist friends founded the local arts association 'Onze Kunst om Beters Wille' (Our Art for a Better World). The association agitated not only for the preservation of the city's old monuments and artistic treasures but also for the development of modern art. At the time, Kortrijk's medieval belfry, the Hallentoren, was threatened with demolition. The brothers-in-arms at De Coene were the furniture-maker Victor Acke, architects Richard Acke and Joseph Viérin, painters Emmanuel Viérin and Victor Veroustraete, draftsman Karel Noppe, potter Pieter-Joseph Laigneau and amateur photographer Romain Ickx. Thanks to their efforts, the Hallentoren is still standing on the Grote Markt in Kortrijk today.

The members of 'Onze Kunst' shared an interest in the Arts & Crafts philosophy and organized exhibitions and lectures at the city hall. Architect Henry van de Velde and Flemish author and poet Hugo Verriest were among the first speakers. And the first viewing day held by 'Onze Kunst' at the beginning of 1900, Joseph De Coene exhibited 'new-fashioned furniture' of his own design for the very first time.

'Onze Kunst' was not destined to enjoy a long life, but it did give rise to a close-knit circle of friends interested in the arts who are often referred to as the Kortrijk School. They met regularly in the company of writer Stijn Streuvels and other art-loving figures of the period. Joseph De Coene and Arthur De Leu usually acted as hosts. They even started a new ritual. Between 1922 and 1940, a gathering was held every Monday at an important place in Kortrijk: usually luncheon on the Grote Markt followed by a visit to the Kunstwerkstede and dinner with the De Leu family at their house, the 'Welgemoed', or at Joseph De Coene's chateau, the 'Walle'. Every now and then they were joined by other artists and prominent figures: Latem-school artists Constant Permeke and Albert

Joseph De Coene, Sailboat on the Leie, oil on panel, 40 x 70 cm
FROM: J. DE GEEST, 'JOZEF DE COENE, DE KUNSTENAAR - L'ARTISTE.' TIELT, STICHTING DE COENE AND UITGEVERIJ LANNOO, 2005

Joseph De Coene painting at the water's edge
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



Joseph De Coene, Stijn Streuvels, Albert Saverys and Arthur De Leu raise their glasses during a cruise along Flemish waterways, 1924
AMVC LETTERENHUIS, ANTWERP

Saverys, writers Herman Teirlinck and Gerard Walschap, various politicians and industrialists. Even the socialist Camille Huysmans was welcome at the home of Flemish liberal

Joseph De Coene, whose opposed views were often quite outspoken. Work and art were united by the close ties of friendship.

Joseph De Coene, Stijn Streuvels, Arthur De Leu and Albert Saverys formed the solid core of artistic life in Kortrijk. The four friends made frequent trips together in the twenties. An account of one such outing even found its way into Stijn Streuvels' *Op de Vlaamsche Binnenwateren* ('On Flemish Waterways'). Saverys, De Coene and De Leu painted while Streuvels looked on. The four undertook a 'rolling trip' through Normandy in 1925 with Joseph De Coene's Minerva, visiting the Paris Exposition Internationale along the way. Saverys had designed the carpets for the furniture ensembles that De Coene exhibited there. Saverys was a painter, but he also worked as a designer for the Kunstwerkstede, while his friend Streuvels took on the function of artistic director for the in-house press De Eikelaar, or 'The Oak Tree', from 1926 to 1938.

The group of painters to which Joseph De Coene and Albert Saverys belong is often viewed as a Kortrijk variant of the Latem School. However, their approach is more figurative and true-to-life, using impasto and color to translate the heaviness of the Flemish landscape. Both Saverys and De Coene were successful as artists. Seen from an art-historical perspective, Saverys

was far more open to new trends and artistically somewhat more experimental. De Coene, by contrast, was less interested in the new – Cubism appears not to have interested him in the slightest. The oeuvre of Joseph De Coene, which consists largely of idyllic landscapes, seascapes with sailboats, and still lifes, exudes a sense of compensation – of flight from the toils of running a business. Only in the years just before World War II do signs of industry and progress – cranes, hoists, tankers – begin to turn up in his seascapes.

Herman Teirlinck and Joseph De Coene became good friends. Teirlinck was originally active in the wood industry on the family's behalf. Later, he served as secretary of the professional federation of wood-related industries in Belgium. Joseph De Coene himself was the initiator, founder and ultimately chairman of the federation. Through Teirlinck, an advisor to the king, Joseph De Coene cultivated relations with the royal court in

Brussels. On June 1, 1931, this resulted in a private visit – much contested by the French-speaking community – from Queen Elisabeth of Belgium. While cruising along the Leie in the De Coene brothers' converted mussel-boat, De Waterhoen, the queen had the opportunity to meet some of the most renowned figures of Flemish literary and artistic life: Isidore Opsomer, Cyriel Buysse, Stijn Streuvels, Gustave van de Woestijne, Henry van de Velde, Herman Teirlinck, Albert Saverys, Arthur De Leu, Marcel Brunein, Gaston Martens, Ernest Claes, Albert Servaes, Valerius De Saedeleer and August Vermeylen.

Modern ‘traditionalists’

Art Deco on an international scale, 1925-1952



'The Modern Flemish Living Room' by De Coene at the international exhibition for modern decorative and industrial arts in Paris
FROM: SAVOIR ET BEAUTÉ, NUMÉRO SPÉCIAL, OCTOBRE 1925

ARCHIVE NORBERT POUAIN

In 1925, De Coene Frères celebrated twenty-five years of furniture production. The family business became a limited liability company: Ateliers d'Art de Courtrai De Coene Frères / Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede Gebroeders De Coene. Participation in the prestigious and in the meantime famous Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris (1925) was therefore a must. The firm designed a modern Flemish living room and executed all the furnishings in-house, down to the last detail.

"This luxurious living room bore stylistic witness to an art-deco style imbedded in Flemish tradition, characterized by the robust character of the interior elements, sober palette and use of costly materials. This was an individualistic stylistic path, one which the firm had tread since 1903. Its characteristic style would grow into one of the most influential forms of Belgian art deco." An apt description of De Coene's manner, mission and impact, proposed by Werner Adriaenssens in Art Nouveau & Design. Sierkunst van 1830 tot Expo 58 ("Art Nouveau & Design. Decoration from 1830 to Expo 58").

After pulling a few strings behind the scenes – after all, De Coene had snapped up a sizable chunk of the French market – the Kunstwerkstede's submission was awarded the highest distinction by the French jury. The manner in which De Coene employed its artists and specialized craftsmen was praised by all. The firm worked intensely with figures like the painter Albert Saverys, stained-glass makers Louis Malfait and Karel Noppe, sculptor Geo Verbanck and Brazier Karel Bresous. De Coene set the standard in Belgium with perfect sim-

De Coene carpet with
scarab motif by
M. Grootaerts, 1933
COLLECTION AND PHOTO:
DESIGNMUSEUM GENT



plicity of design executed in rich materials, with ingeniously functional drawers and cupboards combined with a high-quality finish. International fame had become an established fact, and this translated into a new wave of expansion.

HIGH-PROFILE COMMISSIONS

The Flemish writer Stijn Streuvels assumed leadership of the recently-established in-house press, De Eikelaar (literally, ‘The Oak Tree’), in 1926. He was in charge of the company’s written promotion, a little-known aspect of his literary career. In a 1929 catalogue he writes: “Today, the workrooms, storage spaces, lumberyards, drying sheds and showrooms occupy a surface area of 8 hectares, with 2400 workmen and -women; 20 different trades are practiced here. Extensive new workshops have risen from the ground which are dedicated exclusively to the production of ‘Triplex’ intended not only for the furniture company’s own use but also for domestic and international sale. A weaving atelier for upholstery fabrics and wall-hangings, silk and velvet, has also been added. The weekly production of finished pieces of furniture fills an entire railway train and 10 delivery trucks.”

Commissions from home and abroad (particularly France, Great Britain and the Netherlands) come pouring in. Restaurants, hotels, cafes, trains, banks and other large-scale installations were decorated according to the client’s wishes: the Résidence Palace in Brussels, the Casino of Blankenberge, the Vorst City Hall, the Hotel du Château Royal d’Ardenne in Houyet... More than ever, the affluent middle class turned to the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede for the decoration of their interiors. A visit from Albert I in 1929 marked the beginning of good relations with the royal family. The king was a high-profile guest at exhibitions in Brussels featuring paintings by Joseph De Coene. In 1931, Queen Elisabeth of Belgium accepted an invitation to take a cruise along the Leie with the crème de la crème of the Flemish art world on De Coene’s own boat. In 1932, Crown Prince Leopold visited the Kunstwerkstede with an eye toward finding out more about the various woods of Congo. A few years later, after the unexpected death of Albert I in 1934, the Kunstwerkstede was asked to execute Henry van de Velde’s designs for the furnishings of Leopold III’s private study.

CRISIS AND RENEWAL

By the end of the 1920s, plywood production had been perfected and was running full-speed ahead. Exports were increasing considerably. The Kunstwerkstede could now afford to manufacture less expensive lines of furniture and began to offer models for the ‘common man’ with greater frequency. The variety of products on offer increased. The firm designed a number of suites especially for the English market, with names like Manchester, Cardiff and Glasgow. The export of ‘English furniture’

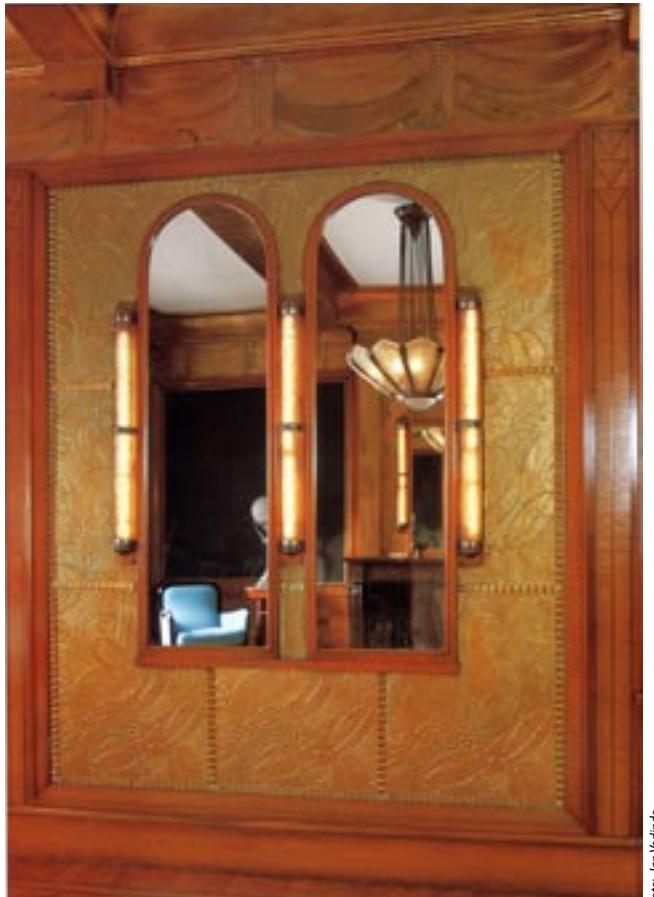


Foto: Jan Verlinden



Private study of King Leopold III, executed by De Coene according to designs by Henry van de Velde, 1935
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



Outing on the Leie with Queen Elisabeth of Belgium on De Waterhoen, June 1, 1931
Left to right: Stijn Streuvels, Albert Servaes, Count de Grunne, August Vermeylen, Queen Elisabeth, Herman Teirlinck, Adolphe De Coene, Gaston Martens (seated) and others
AMVC-LETTERENHUIS, ANTWERPEN



was a financial success. However, this sector dried up after the stock-market crash of 1929, when the British government adopted a number of protectionist measures. The economic crisis of the early thirties also caused problems for the Kunstwerkstede. To make matters worse, Adolphe De Coene – a brother-in-arms from the very beginning – died unexpectedly in 1933.

At the same time, new industrial products were being developed because, as the past had shown, an innovative approach paid off. The Kunstwerkstede devoted its energies to the manufacture of hard sheets of plywood in oak, a material for which there was a great demand in the transportation sector. The company was again able to penetrate a new market: not only the Belgian railways but also ship-building companies in France and the Netherlands were interested in the new product. The builders of the legendary Queen Mary called on De Coene in the 1930s to supply the doors and wainscoating of the transatlantic cruise ship (1934). Not a single British firm had mastered the technique.

FOR THE ELITE AND THE COMMON MAN

The Kunstwerkstede was at the top of the European wood industry. From 1934 onward, De Coene produced wooden radio cabinets for Philips Eindhoven at the rate of one thousand per day. Nevertheless, luxury furniture and interiors continued to be their best form of advertisement. At international exhibitions they continued to occupy pride of place. During the interbellum period, the 1935 General World Exhibition in Brussels was the zenith of the Kunstwerkstede in terms of maximum visibility. On the fairgrounds, De Coene was granted its own plot, on which it erected a large, modernist pavilion after designs by Arthur De Leu. The name 'De Coene' and the iconic acorn of De Eikelaar had never been displayed so prominently. Once again, the company managed to capture a grand prize. When brother-in-law and finance wizard Marcel Brunein died in 1936, the entire weight of the operation fell on the shoulders of Joseph De Coene and Arthur De Leu. But this did little to dampen their ambition. In 1937, the Kunstwerkstede profited from the overall trend toward a more social, democratic and therefore less expensive domestic culture – without, however, losing sight of their more elite creations. At the International Exhibition of Applied Arts and Techniques in Paris, they were represented in both the 'Luxury furniture division' and the 'Popular division'. Furniture for the elite (bridge table, dining room, inglenook) and furniture for everyday people (bedroom suite and living room) reveal the Kunstwerkstede's sensitivity to the spirit of the age.

The threat of war was increasing daily. The Kunstwerkstede took advantage of current events and began to produce barracks for Belgian and French troops in large quantities. Just before the war, it is estimated that there were no less than 2500 employees working in the ateliers. However, the economic advantages of being situated near Kortrijk's switchyard would again prove to be a liability for the Kunstwerkstede in times of military conflict.



Internationale tentoonstelling van Parijs, 1937: bridgehoek van De Coene met stoelen waarvan de rugleuning versierd is met speelkaarten, naar een ontwerp van Albert Saverys
ACHIEF STICHTING DE COENE VZW NOG TE VERTALEN

Pavilion of the Kortrijk
Kunstwerkstede designed by
Arthur De Leu at the world
exhibition in Brussels, 1935
DE COENE FAMILY ARCHIVE

Left: 'Living-room suite for the craftsman' with inglenook and table in oak,
presented by De Coene at the world exhibition in Paris, 1937
Right: 'Bedroom suite for the craftsman' in wood from Belgian Congo,
presented by De Coene at the world exhibition in Paris, 1937
FROM: KUNSTAMBACHTEN EN NIJVERHEID IN BELGIË 1937.
BRUSSELS, 1937 (ARCHIVE LINDA SMISMANS)



Ruins of the De Coene
factory after the
bombardment of 1940
ARCHIEF LUC ANDRÉ
VANDENBOGAERDE

BOMBS AND BARRACKS

The German invasion of May 1940 was a disaster not only for Belgium, but also for the Kunstwerkstede. The combined effect of German bombers and Belgian artillery laid waste to the entire factory complex. A life's work destroyed at a single blow. "I can find no words to tell you how I felt, how desperate and defeated I was. Everything I had built up over all those years, my joy, my pride, was one big rubbish heap." (Excerpt from Joseph De Coene's unpublished memoirs, Kortrijk, 1946.) The reconstruction of the Kunstwerkstede was begun immediately with the financial support of Belgian state organizations in occupied territory.

During the occupation, a number of top Belgian industrialists put their heads together and organized the Galopin Committee. They decided in favor of temporary economic collaboration with the Germans. In doing so, they hoped to avoid the outright commandeering of labor and machinery by the occupier. The Kunstwerkstede – without consulting the committee – resumed its production of barracks and furniture, this time for German military and civilian services. In addition, they continued to make plywood and furniture for the Belgian market. The profits were for the most part invested in the rebuilding of the bombed-out complex. The adjacent switchyard, however, continued to be a strategic target – also for the allied troops. Three heavy bombardments by the British air force in 1944 proved catastrophic for the center of Kortrijk and the Kunstwerkstede. Friendly fire took the lives of some four hundred people, among them more than three hundred workers at the Kunstwerkstede.

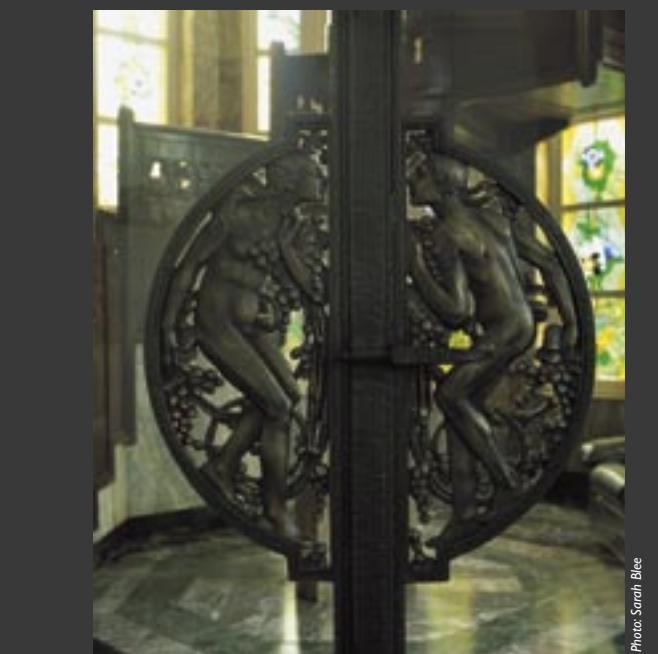
After the liberation, the leaders of industry were tried before a military tribunal. The charges of economic collaboration were serious: delivery of 'ammunition' to the enemy in the form of barracks, furniture and decoy airplanes for motives of profit. The court placed the company in receivership and ordered that the leadership thereof be placed in the hands of directors appointed by the Belgian state. The male heads of the Kunstwerkstede were all sentenced to prison for a number of years, and heavy financial sanctions were imposed. Joseph De Coene was sentenced to 20 years hard labor and died a broken man in 1950.

In 1952, however, after seven years of state receivership, the De Coene family was once again allowed to assume leadership of the company, this time under the dynamic direction of Pol Provost.

Architects and projects

The Swiss architect Michel Polak turned to De Coene for part of the decoration of the Résidence Palace in Brussels. This enormous, luxurious living complex was built between 1923 and 1926 as a piédestal for the affluent middle class. Only large concerns like De Coene were capable of taking on an assignment of this scale. Moreover, Polak would only work with decoration firms which were fully in command of modern techniques and styles. The Kunstwerkstede was responsible for several furnished bedrooms, delivered furniture for the restaurant La Pergola and made stained-glass windows for the Zaal Maelbeek, the patio restaurant and present-day Polak conference room. Projects like the Résidence Palace were an excellent source of publicity and led to other prestigious assignments. Architect Jean-Baptiste Dewin, a good friend of Joseph De Coene, brought in the Kunstwerkstede to furnish the interior of the Vorst City Hall. This monumental building was erected and furnished between 1926 and 1938. The chamber of aldermen, meeting room of the city council and wedding rooms are splendid examples of the Kunstwerkstede's abilities, particularly in their use of refined wood sorts. The furniture and fixtures are characterized by beautifully rounded forms: a testament to De Coene's veneering technique. The metalwork division of the Kunstwerkstede also earned distinction with its chandeliers and brass door handles.

Architects also called on De Coene for the decoration of numerous villas. Well-known examples include the two villas erected in 1927 for textile barons Louis and Léon Verbreyt in Sint-Niklaas after designs by architect Jan-Albert De



Stairwell of Villa Léon Verbreyt, designed by architect Jan-Albert De Bondt, 1927; the entire ensemble was executed by De Coene, including the stained-glass windows and chandelier

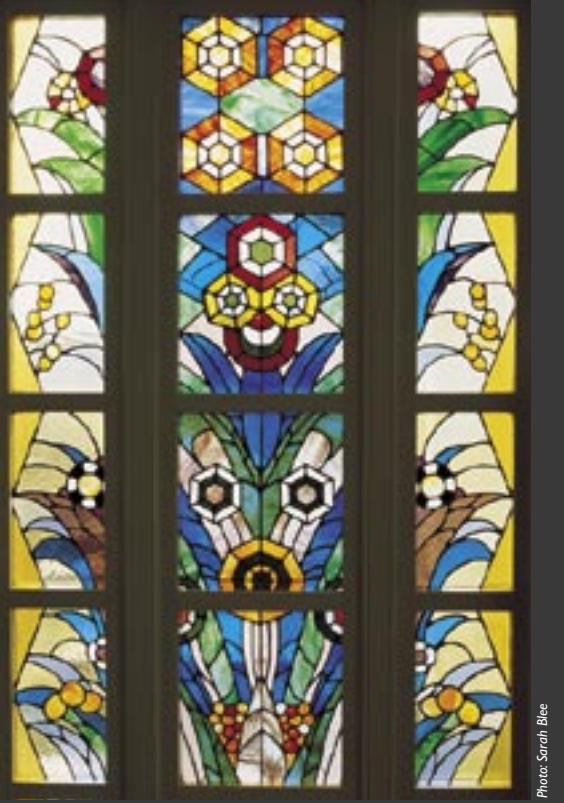


Photo: Sarah Blee



Photo: Sarah Blee

Bondt. All of the different trades plied by the Kunstwerkstede are represented here, from the stained-glass windows of Karel Noppe to the bronze fixtures of Geo Verbranck. De Bondt was apparently satisfied with their work, because sometime around 1931 he ordered furniture and stained-glass from De Coene for his own villa in the 'Millionaire's Quarter' in Ghent.

In 1930, Henry van de Velde designed the unique double villa Noordhinder-Westhinder for Maurice Colman and Albert Saverys in Knokke, an exclusive resort on the Belgian coast. The Kunstwerkstede De Coene produced the interior after drawings by Van de Velde. De Coene worked with him regularly throughout the 1930s. In a letter from 1956, Van de Velde writes: "I went nearly every week, once a week to the ateliers in Courtrai, where I discussed matters with the workers who executed all the furniture I created during that happy period, when I was still directing my ateliers at the Société Van de Velde." When Van de Velde was appointed artistic advisor to the Belgian Railways, it was De Coene who supplied the wooden panels for the train interiors. Around 1935, De Coene also produced the furniture designed by Van de Velde for Leopold III's private study.

THE LURE OF QUALITY

After the Second World War, the Kunstwerkstede continued the company tradition by realizing increasingly numerous – and increasingly large-scale – international projects. The research bureau established by De Coene in 1956 specialized in the execution and design of decoration for large institutions. Among other things, the Knoll connection resulted in a fruitful collaboration with architect and designer Marcel Breuer. In 1956, De Coene furnished part of the interior of the large department store De Bijenkorf in Rotterdam and the headquarters of Van Leer in Amstelveen. The decoration and furnishing of the conference rooms of the UNESCO building in Paris (1958–1960), of which Breuer was one of the architects, led to other international projects. Later, De Coene worked with Breuer on the interior of the IBM building in Nice.

From 1959 on, De Coene contributed to the modernization of various conference and meeting rooms of the United Nations in the Palais de la Société des Nations in Geneva. French designer Charlotte Perriand, long-time collaborator of Le Corbusier, was responsible for the plans. She visited the factory in Kortrijk on a regular basis and was more than happy to make use of the Kunstwerkstede's technical know-how. Together with Perriand, De Coene furnished the residence of the Japanese ambassador and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris.

Through the development of beams and prefab systems, De Coene was also able to offer its services as a construction company. Architect Renaat Braem liked to experiment with wood as a construction material in the 1950s because, according to him, it restored the balance between man and nature. In addition to designing the exhibition *Hout, vriend van de mens* ('Wood, man's best friend'), Braem was also responsible for two buildings featuring wooden beams in his hometown of Deurne, near Antwerp. Braem used the Kunstwerkstede's Gulam beams for both the market hall (1957) and the Arena, a center for sports and culture (1959). His designs underwent a radical change on account of his collaboration with De Coene, which had its own special research division for wooden beam constructions.

Escalator in the department store De Bijenkorf in Amsterdam. De Coene produced the wooden paneling under the supervision of architects Breuer and Elzas in 1956

ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



Meeting room of the United Nations in the Palais de la Société des Nations in Geneva, furnished by De Coene under the supervision of designer Charlotte Perriand, 1959–1969

● ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



Designs for the interior of the sport and culture center Arena in Deurne, built by architect Renaat Braem in collaboration with De Coene, 1959–1960

A.A.M. BRUSSELS



Interior of sport and culture center the Arena in Deurne, erected in 1959–1960 with beams by De Coene after a design by architect Renaat Braem

De Coene new trajectories

Knoll + Beams = Interior Design + Architecture 1952-1977

In spite of the heavy financial sanctions, the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede managed to revive. Pol Provost, assisted by Adolf Jr. and Pierre De Coene, both sons of Adolphe, pursued a path of innovation and modernization. The Kunstwerkstede conquered all opposition as an interior design firm. De Coene chose resolutely – but not exclusively – in favor of modern design and dared to venture into the world of architecture. The company dropped a number of traditional crafts in the process.

POL PROVOST

Pol Provost, after 1952 the new leader of the Kunstwerkstede, followed in the footsteps of his predecessor and friend Joseph De Coene but managed to build a political as well as an artistic network. In addition to his impressive career in the business world, crowned in 1970 with position of chairman of the Verbond der Belgische Nijverheid (Union of Belgian Industry), Provost was active in numerous commissions for the promotion of the country's national artistic heritage.

Provost was also an active promoter of industrial design in Belgium, where the integration of design and industry was not yet fully underway. In 1956 he played a prominent role in the establishment of the Instituut voor Industriële Vormgeving van België en het Groothertogdom Luxemburg (Institute for Industrial Design of Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg). The Institute was primarily devoted to theoretical research. Several years later, in 1964, Provost was one of the founders of the Design Centre in Brussels, a non-profit organization for the promotion of industrial design in Belgium. He was chairman of both the Institute and the Centre.



Knoll interior with table in white carrara marble and Tulip Chairs (armchair 150A and chair 151C), design by Eero Saarinen, 1956
PUBLICITY RELEASE FOR KNOLL INTERNATIONAL BRUSSELS, [ND]
(ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW)



Three representatives of the new leadership after the return of the De Coene family in 1952:
Pol Provost (left), Charlotte De Coene (center) and Pierre De Coene (right)
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW

Reading room in the Royal Library Albert I with table by De Coene and Knoll chairs by Eero Saarinen
DE COENE DESIGN DIVISION
PHILIPPE NEERMAN, 1956-1969



Photo: Sarah Blee

Periodicals reading room in the Royal Library Albert I
DE COENE DESIGN DIVISION
PHILIPPE NEERMAN, 1956-1969

Reading table in the manuscript room of the Royal Library Albert I in Brussels, executed in 'Bakeliteized' plywood laminate held together with stainless-steel screws
DE COENE DESIGN DIVISION
PHILIPPE NEERMAN, 1956-1969



Photo: Sarah Blee



Photo: Sarah Blee



Photo: Sarah Blee

Large meeting room of the Royal Library Albert I with furniture and wall covering by De Coene; in the photo, Knoll armchair 180A designed by Vincent Cafiero, 1964
DE COENE DESIGN DIVISION PHILIPPE NEERMAN, 1956-1969

At the end of the 1960s, Provost became one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Hallen, a commercial market hall in Kortrijk, and the organization of the successful biennial Interieur. This fair – devoted to contemporary creativity in the domestic sphere – formed a perfect complement to the activities of De Coene.

KNOLL, SOURCE OF RENEWAL

Classic furniture and increasingly simple, sober furniture with a hint of Art Deco remained an important De Coene staple. But times had changed since the war – the market had become more international, more transatlantic. With all the advantages of modern transportation, the United States and Belgium were practically neighbors. Contemporary furniture from places like the United States and Scandinavia was characterized by a certain purity, clarity of function and form, the use of natural materials – all of which were highly attractive. The company's leaders sensed that war-related difficulties were causing the Kunstwerkstede to miss the boat with respect to modern design. The crucial question was whether the pre-war vision of artistic ateliers still had a future. Pol Provost started negotiations with the American design firms Miller and Knoll. By 1954, De Coene had acquired a licence for the production and sale of Knoll furniture in the Benelux and Belgian Congo. New forms and industrial production methods made their entrance.

Banks, trade organizations and government administrations liked the new furniture because it embodied the future. The new generation of architects and the wealthy middle class likewise fell for Knoll's excellent designs. De Coene opened Knoll showrooms in Brussels, Antwerp, Liège and Amsterdam. The collaboration between Knoll and De Coene was a hit. The furniture of Florence

Knoll, Eero Saarinen, Harry Bertoia and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe appeared in De Coene catalogues. For the elegant Bertoia chairs – a resounding commercial success – the Kunstwerkstede used steel wire from Bekaert nearby Zwevegem. And the cushions for Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chairs were originally made by Delvaux. Knoll was both a stimulus to greater retail sales and a stepping stone to large-scale interior contracts. The Kunstwerkstede set up its own bureau under the direction of Philippe Neerman for the decoration and furnishing of large institutions. One of its triumphs was the decoration of the Royal Library Albert I in Brussels, which opened in 1969. Many American institutions – such as the American embassies in Brussels and The Hague, as well a number of multinationals – were eager to have Knoll furniture and a decor to match in their Benelux headquarters. Others followed suit, notably Philips Eindhoven in the Netherlands and the department store À l'Innovation in Brussels. Having recovered its international markets and ability to function at the highest levels of diplomacy, De Coene was able to thrive as never before. The rooms of UNESCO in Paris and the Palais de la Société des Nations in Geneva bear witness to this fact. Knoll was ultimately the source of inspiration for the development of an in-house line of modern furniture. The Kunstwerkstede's reputation for quality would again serve as its chief ambassador.





Façade of the Sint-Laurentiuskerk in Lokeren after designs by architect Jan Windels; the bell tower was also executed in laminated wood. First prize, Belgian National Architecture Contest, 1955

ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW

Workers from De Coene on the site of a beam construction, after 1952

ARCHIVE WILLY DELAERE



BEAUTY IN BEAMS

At the tenth Milan triennial in 1954, the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede received an honorary diploma, their first official distinction since the liberation. Their entry consisted of a ‘beam made from laminated wood’ and a triumphal arch made from wooden beams impregnated with Bakelite designed by house architect André De Poerck. This time luxury furniture and interior decoration were replaced by wooden construction materials, a reflection of De Coene’s ambitions as a construction firm. Relying on years of experience making simple barracks, the company made a concerted effort to develop new construction applications for wood in the 1950s and 60s.

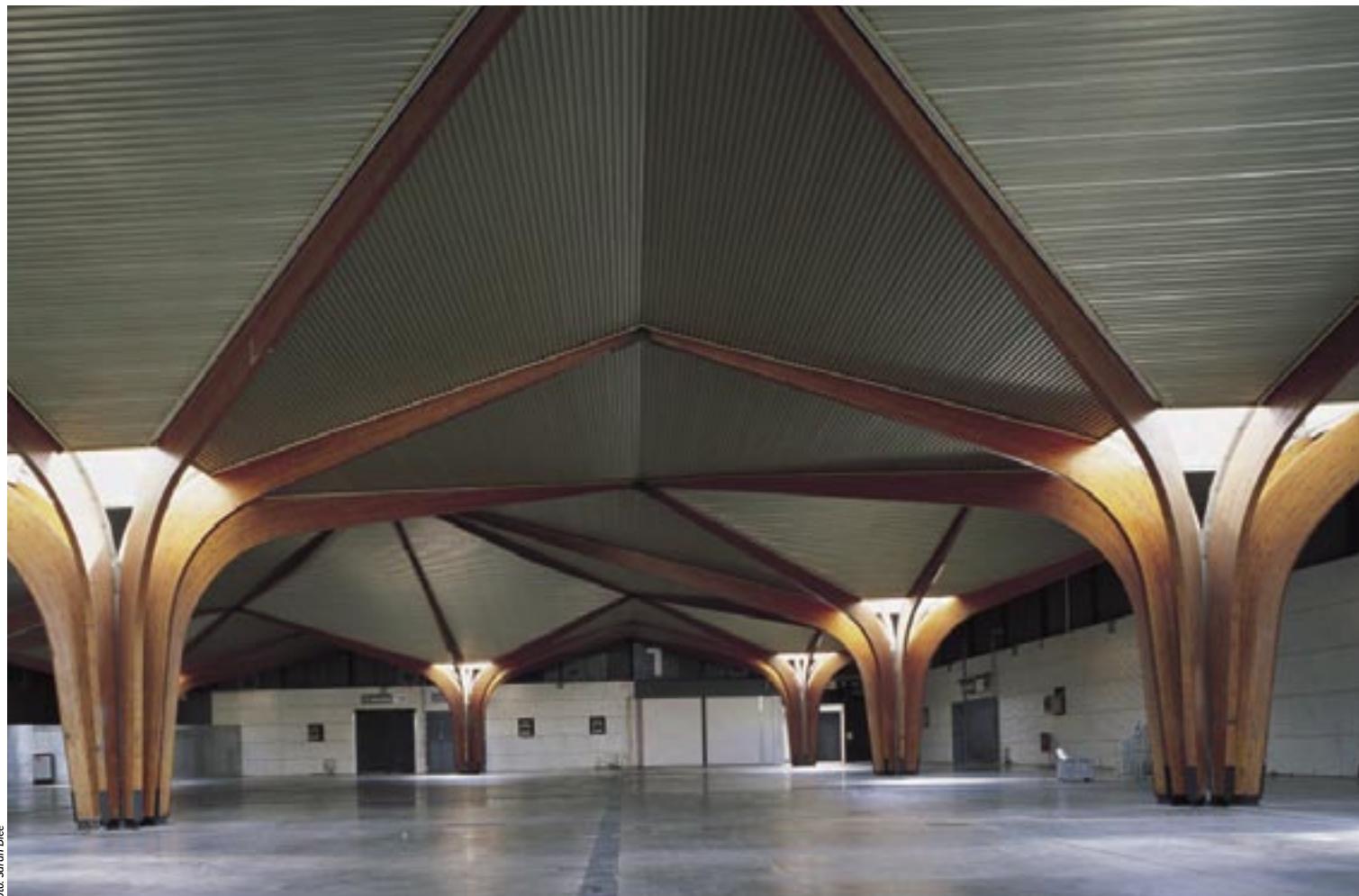
The advantages of glued, laminated beams (Glulam) were highlighted: light, stable, durable, available in several forms, quickly installed and capable of spanning distances of up to one hundred meters. Large structures could be erected in only a few weeks’ time. In one folder, we read: “Perfectly suited to the most daring construction techniques, the De Coene beam construction answers beautifully to the harmony of contemporary and avant-garde architecture, for which they provide an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Apart from their technical value, their future worth is primarily determined by their functional beauty.” Many architects began to use them and were pleasantly surprised by the spatial possibilities these building elements afforded.

The temporary church of Sint-Laurentius in Lokeren, between Antwerp and Ghent, was one of the first buildings with which De Coene demonstrated the great potential of wooden beam construction. Architect Jan Windels designed a church with parabolic roof-beams and also used wooden beams for the church tower. It proved to be a perfect way of promoting Glulam beams, because the building won first prize at the Belgian National Architecture Contest in 1955. The initial mistrust of the architects, engineers and industrialists evaporated. Result: in 1956 the Kunstwerkstede was commissioned to build the Belgian pavilion at the Feria Internacional in Bogota (Colombia). This was a great honor for the firm from Kortrijk: “We are proud – and not without reason – that our firm has been chosen to represent Belgium in that distant country, and that it also in a certain sense has become the ambassador of the Belgian building construction industry.” The pavilion, designed by architect Jacques Dupuis, was the harbinger of intensive use of beam constructions at EXPO 58 in Brussels. Nine years later, in 1967, De Coene could boast of more than a thousand structures in Belgium and France: industrial and covered market halls, sports facilities and recreation centers like the sports hall in the Basque country for the world pelote championship, or tribunals like the one made for the Ghent soccer club La Gantoise. The construction of umbrella beams for the Kortrijk Hallen in 1964 was a considerable technical feat.

*Belgian pavilion at the Feria Internacional de Bogota, 1956, built by De Coene after designs by architect Jacques Dupuis
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW*



*Interior of an exhibition space in the Kortrijk Hallen (now Xpo Kortrijk), built circa 1964 with beams by De Coene
Umbrella beams designed by architects Guy and Francis Van Oost*





Transportation of the signal mast for Expo 58 through the streets of Kortrijk
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW



De Coene at Expo 58

The wooden signal mast near the main entrance of Expo 58 made by De Coene in collaboration with the engineer André Paduart
ARCHIVE WILLY DELAERE

De Coene tried to land a number of commissions for Expo 58. At least initially, the organizers were not interested. Wrongly so, in the eyes of the Kunstwerkstede, because their expertise in rapid beam construction was extremely well-suited to the temporary structures of a world exhibition. So they decided to invite several of the organizers to the restaurant Auberge de la Pergola in Brussels. It was not the food but the original De Coene veranda with lightweight, curved beams which motivated the choice of location. The stratagem worked: the firm received an order for enough Glulam beams to build eight temporary structures.

The closer the opening date of the Expo and the greater the deadline pressure, the more commissions the Kunstwerkstede received for the construction of individual pavilions for different countries and firms. As a heavy-weight in the wood industry, the firm was responsible for building the pavilion of the Belgian employers' organization Febelhout, situated near the Atomium. The design was by architect Wenceslas de t'Serclaes de Wommesson, the decoration by Fabrizio Carola. The better part of the pavilion consisted of a large exhibition space in the shape of a spherical segment with a span of 25.5 meters. In addition, there was a beam-shaped volume with more exhibition rooms and – why not – a De Coene bar. The entire complex was awarded a Silver Star. The relatively small-scale pavilion of the Kortrijk Dakpannenkantoor (the Kortrijk Roof-tile Bureau) was another crowning achievement of Glulam construction. This gem came into being as the result of a fruitful collaboration between the De Coene research bureau, architect Geo Boninck and the Dakpannenkantoor itself. The pavilion took the form of a hemisphere





Construction of the Expo 58 cable-car with beams by De Coene, design by Roger Thirion

ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW

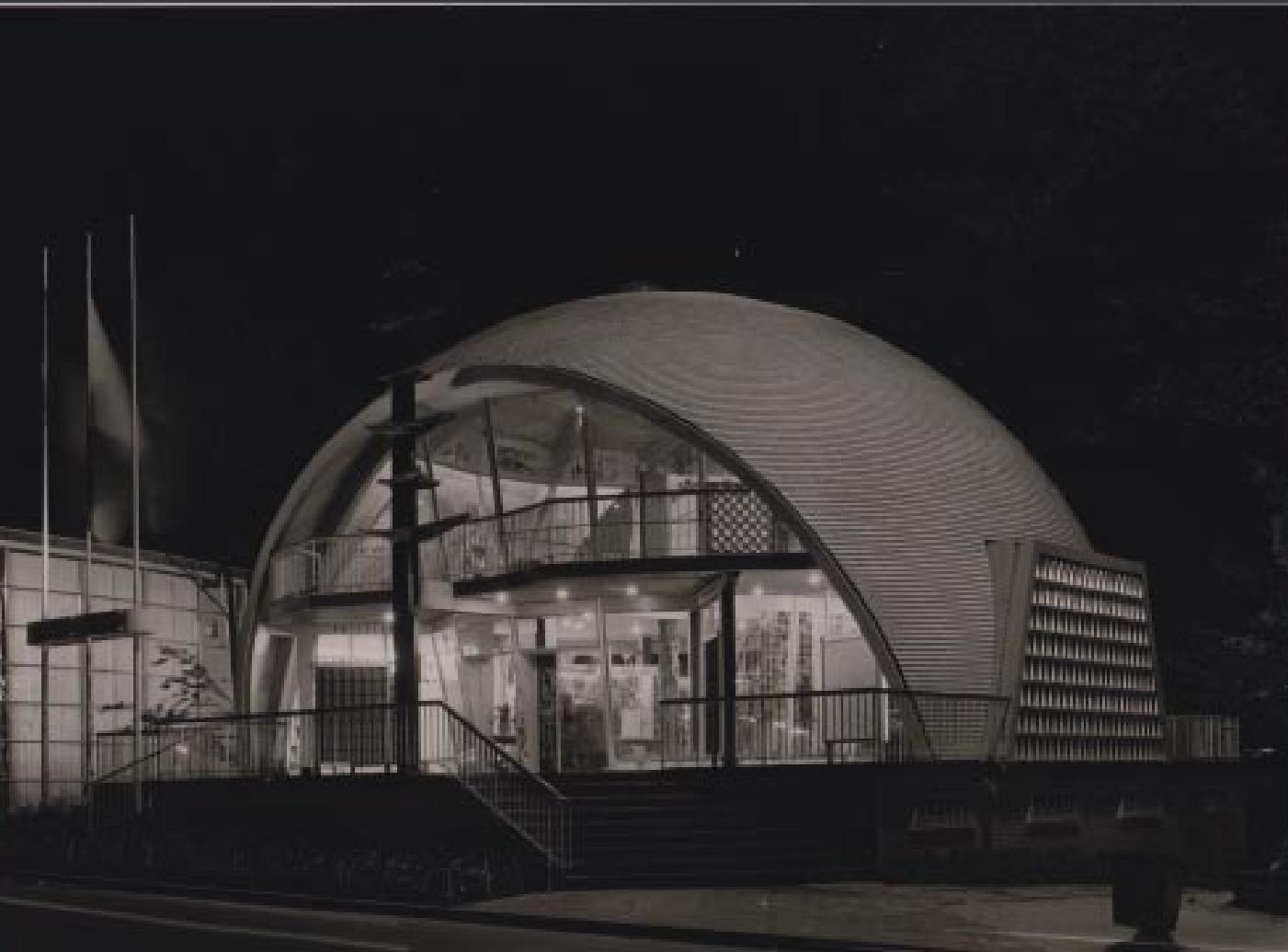
resting on four pairs of Glulam beams. De Coene provided the arched construction, wooden cladding and spiral staircase, also in wood. The project received a grand prize for originality.

The pedestrian bridge of *Vrolijk België* ('Happy Belgium') was another eye-catcher. Fabrizio Carola, one of De Coene's in-house architects, designed a frivolous bridge over the tram tracks using beams as supporting elements. However, the most daring construction of all was undoubtedly the wooden signal mast near the main entrance. This colossus of 33 meters, assembled from twelve continuous Glulam beams, was crowned with a revolving star, symbol of Expo 58. Resting on a steel sphere only 20 cm in diameter, the mast was kept in equilibrium by means of an ingenious system of intertwining cables. The *Kunstwerkstede* also helped to build quite a number of structures in the foreign sections.

Expo 58 was the largest post-war project in Belgium: 49 nations and 7 international organizations participated. Nearly 42 million people visited the exhibition grounds. In the end, De Coene was responsible for no less than 28 different projects at Expo 58. The firm supplied wooden beams, furniture and panels, designed its own structures, participated in exhibitions and built several pavilions. Expo 58 became its post-war calling card.

Night-time view of the Kortrijk Dakpannenkantoor at Expo 58, a pavilion by architect Geo Bontinck executed by De Coene and the Dakpannenkantoor (Roof-tile bureau)

ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW



Gas station near Brussels Central Station built on the occasion of Expo 58 with beams by De Coene

ARCHIVE WILLY DELAERE



Spanning the world

Prefab architecture

A thousand homes for Africa": this was the first large commission to announce the revival of the Kunstwerkstede in 1952. Even before the breakthrough of the beams, De Coene designed various types of prefabricated homes. The first (relatively primitive) houses were intended for the African quarter of Leopoldstad in Belgian Congo and were ordered by the Belgian ministry of colonies. The erection of such prefab constructions was quite simple. Under the direction of a foreman from De Coene, local workers could finish the job in three months' time. In the 1950s, the Kunstwerkstede usually employed the self-supporting, reddish-brown Decoba panels for building a wide variety of structures. An advertising pamphlet sums up the numerous advantages of Decoba panels: "rational construction – quick execution – attractive appearance – dry construction – high insulation – little maintenance."

The Kunstwerkstede illustrated the possibilities offered by its construction kits by displaying model homes at important exhibitions. In 1957, the architect Guchez built a European House using Decoba panels for the Internationale Jaarbeurs der Vlaanderen (Annual International Fair of Flanders) in Ghent. De Coene brought numerous modern and classic prototypes to market, but they were not successful with private individuals. Sales never got off the ground. Nevertheless, prefab constructions had a considerable market. Important government commissions for building schools came thick and fast. Dozens of modern, colorful Decoba schools were erected throughout Belgium and in West Germany. With the delivery of special Super-Decoba panels with additional

A Decoba schoolhouse by De Coene, 1960s
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW



The De Coene team and local workers open the 369th and last container of furniture for the royal palace in Riyad, Saudi Arabia, 1958
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW (PAUL DE GROOTE)



Congolese workers building one of approximately 1000 prefab homes by De Coene in Leopoldstad, circa 1953
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW

insulating properties for the Belgian scientific research station on the South Pole in 1959, the Kunstwerkstede conquered yet another challenging project. Throughout the 1960s, De Coene developed new industrialized construction systems which permitted both low- and high-rise building. The construction of shops, offices, bowling alleys, an international school and a mess hall for the headquarters of NATO in the Belgian city of Mons are just a few examples of how these systems could be applied. But the most striking are undoubtedly the youth centers in France. Thanks to its new French affiliates in Comines and Paris, De Coene succeeded in winning a contest held by the Ministère de la Jeunesse et des Sport (Ministry of Youth and Sports) on two different occasions. The assignment consisted of designing and executing a thousand youth centers: Clubs de Jeunes. After the revolt of May 1968, the French government hoped to keep young people off the streets by giving them their own clubhouses which they could build and decorate themselves. Designers from De Coene immediately set to work, and the end result was the DC 333. The youth club was assembled from spatial modules of three meters on a side. The instructions were presented in the form of a comic strip. In the second contest, in 1971, the winning entry was the Tridim 120. Jean Prouvé, who had worked with De Coene in the past, had missed his chance. The new model resembled an erector set: progressive and colorful, playful and minimalist at the same time. The Clubs de Jeunes were set up all over French territory, including the Caribbean. A number of them are still in use today.

THE BREAK-UP OF DE COENE

As a progressive company, De Coene sought to operate at the highest level of performance both nationally and internationally. From 1952 onward, the company experienced a remarkable period of expansion. Fueled by the climate of optimism, De Coene undertook dozens of new activities. By the 1960s, however, the family business could no longer take the strain of rapid growth, and in 1966 they had to resort to the financial means of the Generale Maatschappij, Belgium's national bank. The bank acquired the majority of shares and the Kunstwerkstede became an industrial group specialized in wood products: NV Houtindustrie De Coene & Co, in 1973 known simply as NV De Coene. Although ambitions were running high and the company had experienced a new period of intense growth, this did not translate into the expected profits. Management carried out various reorganizations but never succeeded in making the increasingly heterogeneous group into a profit-generating whole. In the late seventies, faced with mounting losses, the Generale Maatschappij decided to break up NV De Coene and sell off its component parts. The Dutch group Internationale Bouwcompagnie, the Cameroon group Khouri, Knoll Europe in Italy and the Belgian groups Potteau (now De Coene Decor), Despriet and Van Marcke in Kortrijk each took over a share of the company's activities or manufacturing facilities. Many of De Coene's successors are still active today and continue to build on the good reputation of the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede.



The Belgian-Dutch expedition to the South Pole (1964-1977) in front of the research station, built with prefab elements by De Coene
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW



Luxurious bed for the palace of King Ibn Saud in Riyad, Saudi Arabia, 1958
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW

Youth club of the type TRIDIM 120, circa 1971, De Coene delivered 500 kits of this type throughout France and its overseas territories
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW



Crane with the new logo of NV Houtindustrie De Coene (1966-1977) at the company's lumberyard
ARCHIVE STICHTING
DE COENE VZW

ARABIAN NIGHTS AND COLD POTATOES

From the very beginning, the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede looked to markets beyond Belgian borders. Under the De Coene brothers, the company conquered northern France with its luxurious furniture. From the 1920s onward it exported sheets of plywood and mass-produced goods to the Netherlands and Great Britain. Deliveries outside of western Europe were rare, but this changed after the Second World War. The new management which took over the helm in 1952 was able to expand the company's foreign networks considerably.

Although most orders were still placed by neighboring countries, De Coene sent teams to the four corners of the earth. One particularly special assignment was the furnishing of the royal palace in Riyad in 1958. After the Suez crisis, French and British furniture-makers had fallen from grace with the Saudi royal family. The Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede became the new supplier to the court and received a commission for 100 bedrooms, 5 dining rooms and 45 salons for King Ibn Saud and his extensive harem. This project fired the imagination of contemporaries. De Coene was eager to profit from the extra attention, because furniture ensembles from the project were exhibited to the public in Kortrijk. "Eastern fairytales created in Kortrijk", read the headlines of Het Nieuwsblad, and concerning PR-man Pierre De Coene, the paper wrote: "With his two thousand employees, the man has become the most particular supplier of the brightly colored, gold-embroidered, heavily decorated thousand-and-one-nights world in which, believe it or not, eastern princes and veiled princesses do their best to taste all the pleasures life has to offer." Thirteen workers from De Coene went to the Middle East for four months in order to install the furniture on location. They had to adjust to life in a foreign country with no cafes or other western forms of entertainment. A game of soccer with the locals provided the necessary rest and relaxation.

The royal palace was the first but certainly not the last adventure of De Coene. Among other things, the firm was responsible for a pavilion in Colombia, the decoration of Belgian embassies worldwide – including Australia, the construction of a hotel in Cameroon and the delivery of prefab elements for two expeditions to the South Pole. The Kunstwerkstede received commissions from all over the world: from the tropics of Congo to the chill of Iceland. Halfway through the 1960s, the firm sent fifteen employees to Reykjavik, where they were going to provide the hotel Loftleidir with two extra floors. The existing foundation could only support a lightweight construction and De Coene was able to provide it. Transportation and lodgings were no problem, since the client was an airline. But Icelandic cuisine gave director Jérôme Dervichian cause for concern: he stipulated in the contract that sufficient potatoes be shipped over for his workers and treated them to a bottle of whiskey at appropriate intervals. After all, potatoes would not grow on Icelandic soil, and liquor was prohibitively expensive.

By the end of the 60s, De Coene had transformed itself into an industrial wood group with international branches. Houtindustrie De Coene had sales branches in the Netherlands (Kunstwerkstede Amsterdam), France (SEDECOParis) and Germany (De Coene Holzbetrieb in Ratingen). In addition, the group had representatives in Aarhus, Athens, Jeddah, Kinshasa, Kuwait, London, Montréal, New York, Oslo, Reykjavik, Stockholm and Utrecht. De Coene also had a production facility in Comines, in the north of France (Bois Sciés Manufacturés), and the company was engaged in exploiting a number of forests in Europe and Africa.

On art and industry



Illustration of the production process from tree trunk to finished furniture, drawing by Karel Noppe, 1925
FROM: DE COENE FRÈRES COURTRAI 1900-1925. KORTRIJK, DRUKKERIJ JOS VERMAUT, 1925 (ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW)

The Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede represents the realization of an ideal: the bringing together of every possible craft necessary for the furnishing of interiors. John Ruskin and William Morris, animators of the Arts & Crafts movement, with their impassioned plea in favor of the beauty of craftsmanship, was an important source of inspiration for De Coene. Adolphe De Coene taught his assistants the fine art of furniture-making. In the early days, each worker finished an entire piece of furniture in solid wood single-handedly. The firm expanded to include smiths, painters, marble-cutters, mirror-grinders and tapestry weavers. The new factory supplemented existing business functions with ateliers for stained-glass, carton pierre, plaster, brass, bronze and chandeliers. Tasks were divided among draftsmen, furniture makers, laminators, varnishers, etc.

The brothers De Coene attached great importance to the training of new employees, who were required to learn the tricks of the trade either in the company workshops or at the Kortrijk academy of arts. In contrast to Ruskin and Morris, the leaders of the Kunstwerkstede were not averse to machines and believed – as did Henry van de Velde – in the reconciliation of art and industry. Joseph De Coene kept a close eye on developments in the wood industry. A visit to American plywood manufacturers in 1921 convinced him of the immense potential of this new technique. He had two wood-peeling machines, a cutting machine and a press shipped from the United States.

'Triplex' was the name for sheets of plywood composed of three thin layers of wood (veneers) glued together with the grain of each veneer running crosswise to that of its neighbor. When more than three layers are used, the product is referred to as multiplex. At the time, the methods of plywood production were a well-kept secret and only after a good deal of trial-and-error did De Coene succeed in finding the right formula. In 1922, De Coene Frères was the first company in Belgium to produce plywood. The use of plywood resulted in better-quality furniture: "With this procedure, it is not only possible to make clean, well-finished furniture that fits together and stays as solid as steel – it also delivers the most complete guarantee against cracking and warping caused by the sun or the use of steam heating in the home." Because plywood production was considerably more efficient than traditional methods, De Coene was also able to produce less expensive models for everyday people. The furniture lines which were shipped to England from 1925 until the early 30s are a good example. Moreover, this new technique allowed the furniture to be designed with attractive rounded forms, an art which De Coene had mastered perfectly.

In its publications, the Kunstwerkstede proudly announced that it controlled the entire production process from start to finish: "In our workrooms, the tree is brought in on one side and goes out the other as furniture." The firm was constantly on the lookout for the best timber and even purchased entire forests in France, Poland, Hungary and Sweden. In addition, De Coene was specialized in the use of exotic woods. Joseph De Coene was one of the first to process wood from Belgian Congo on an industrial scale and thereby managed to secure large quantities of the best quality stock before anyone else did.

The innovative spirit of De Coene continued to live on after the Second World War. In 1952, the new management purchased a large press for the production of 'Bakelitized' wood. Beech veneer impregnated with Bakelite (a phenolic resin invented in the U.S. by the Belgian chemist L.H. Baekeland around 1909) is watertight and this allows it to be used for architectural purposes. The Decoba-panels, for example, could be used for either interior or exterior walls of prefabricated homes. De Coene also developed two types of laminated beam, an application which had already been discovered in Switzerland in 1901 but which only made a breakthrough after the discovery of synthetic glues. The Kunstwerkstede was thoroughly familiar with adhesive technology through its work in plywood. The plywood industry was the source of a number of new products. One such successful innovation by De Coene was the Decowall, an easy-to-assemble set of decorative wall panels.



Advertisement for Decowall, an easily assembled decorative wooden wall panel, after 1960
ARCHIVE STICHTING DE COENE VZW

The shadow over the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede

In Belgium and elsewhere, the general public has very little idea of the Kunstwerkstede's international dimension. The question is: why has this important cultural legacy in the decorative arts remained so long hidden from view?



In Belgium, at least, scholarly interest in the applied arts of the twentieth century has until very recently been rather low. When it does arise, it is usually in connection with an architectural vision associated with a major personality: Henry van de Velde, Victor Horta, Paul Hankar, Renaat Braem, Louis H. De Koninck, Alfred Hendrickx or Willy Van Der Meeren.

In general, research into the applied arts must also meet a second requirement. All too often, the subject has to be linked to avant-garde or modernist dogmas, to notions of 'radical innovation' and 'innovative experimentation' or 'originality'. Hence, the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede has remained under the radar for potential researchers. Indeed, in terms of form or vision it is difficult to count De Coene's projects among those of the avant gardes or modernists of the interbellum period. But in excluding them one fails to take into account an essential dimension of pre-war modernist thought – namely the continual experimentation with new techniques and production processes which made mass production possible. The methods of mass production had a social, democratic effect in view. The avant gardes were interested in new techniques and materials but had little patience for developing and perfecting the production process. The Kunstwerkstede De Coene, by contrast, took an avid interest in production and implemented its findings on a large scale. The company never ceased to invest in the making of new sorts of cheap but durable wood products and construction materials. It was this powerful capacity which made Kunstwerkstede De Coene the most important wood-working concern in Belgium. As suppliers of inexpensive plywood – ironically enough – they made possible many of the experiments of the avant garde.

Those who can look beyond the at times blinding aura of contemporary design perceive that mature, timeless design is created from a continual exchange between 'function', 'design', and 'making' – not a linear path from idea to execution. This type of exchange has been the basis of the Kunstwerkstede's production methods for the entire period of its existence. In this sense, De Coene was and is modernist – without acquiring the epithet, let alone claiming it. Designers and makers enjoyed equal footing. Logically, the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede profiled itself not so much as a 'school of creative geniuses' but rather as a 'workshop in the applied arts', where every employee had an essential role in the overall machinery. In the spirit of that age, one did not rely on the cult of personal-

ity surrounding designers and architects, a trend which has asserted itself with increasing force since the beginning of the 1980s. For De Coene, it was not the designer but the high-quality product that was given pride of place. Perhaps for this reason, De Coene has failed to attract the attention of art and architectural historians. Either the names of the designers had simply been forgotten, or the history of the firm was not sufficiently focused on a single 'genius' or particular individual. There are still other reasons for the general lack of interest. On the one hand, there is the enormous variety of De Coene products, coupled with the dramatic loss of historical sources. The company archives were largely destroyed in the bombardments of two world wars, and with the break-up of NV De Coene in 1977, much of the post-war archival material was lost or dispersed. Finally, the conviction of the company's leaders for economic collaboration during the Second World War has probably prevented many an art historian from researching De Coene and its products. Social historians have made serious work of the Second World War. Art historians, by contrast, are often reticent with respect to art associated with collaboration in any form. Perhaps now that the dust of this turbulent period in Belgian history has settled, the moment is ripe for rational analysis. In the last ten years, moreover this trend has begun to gather momentum internationally.

The exhibition *Kunstwerkstede De Coene* hopes to arouse interest from all sides – both within academic world and without. Thanks to the efforts of former employees, who joined together to form the non-profit organization Stichting De Coene, the Stedelijke Musea Kortrijk, and the cultural heritage units of Kortrijk and Antwerp, hundreds of projects have been catalogued and thousands of photographs and other archival materials have been brought together for the first time. And new information continues to pour in daily. Therefore, this issue of OKV is also a warm invitation to specialists – academic or otherwise – to contribute their expertise. There are many subjects worth exploring in domains as diverse as De Coene itself: not only the applied arts, but also fine art, architecture, engineering, literature, history and even political science. To give but one example: the name of Henry van de Velde was associated with De Coene from the very beginning and continued to turn up in connection with the Kunstwerkstede for decades. However, the exact nature of this relationship and the motives behind it have yet to be explained in detail.

Practical information

From September 15, 2006, until January 7, 2007, the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede Gebroeders De Coene is the source of inspiration for a major exhibition and variety of activities in and around the city of Kortrijk. The core event is the exhibition *Kunstwerkstede De Coene 1888-1977* in the Broelmuseum, where the ateliers of the Kortrijk Kunstwerkstede come to life on the Buda Island for four months.

EXHIBITION

Kunstwerkstede De Coene 1888 – 1977

Masters of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Design

Broelmuseum Kortrijk

- From 15 September 2006 until 7 January 2007
- Open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., closed Mondays
- Closed on 24 and 31 December 2006
- During the Biennial **INTERIEUR 06** from October 14-22, the exhibition is open daily from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- Tickets: individual € 6 – group € 4 pp – students and 55+ € 2.5 – Children 12 and under admitted free Guides (N-F-E-D): € 50 per guide, 1 guide per 20 persons
- Info and reservations: Stedelijke Musea Kortrijk, tel. 00 32 (0)56 27 77 80 or musea@kortrijk.be
- Corporations: specially arranged business events, info and reservations: tel. 00 32 (0)56 27 74 44 or info@kunstwerkstede.be

PUBLICATION

The publication **Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede Gebroeders De Coene** brings to life the history of the firm, its personalities and projects. The pre-war period of expansion and interior production, the Second World War, its aftermath and the revival of the De Coene as a progressive interior design and construction firm are extensively handled. The book is richly illustrated.

Uitgeverij Groeninghe, Kortrijk, 242 pages, € 24.

On sale at the exhibition and in quality bookstores.

Available in Dutch and French.

DE COENE TOURS

Walking, cycling and auto routes featuring structures by De Coene

- Brochure with walking and auto routes: € 2.50
- Walking tour with guide: € 3 pp, every Sunday at 3 or by request, reservation required:
Toerisme Kortrijk, tel. 00 32 (0)56 27 78 40 or toerisme@kortrijk.be
- Cycling tour with guide: € 5 pp, reservation required: Toerisme Kortrijk, tel. 00 32 (0)56 27 78 40 or toerisme@kortrijk.be
- Auto-routes: see www.kunstwerkstede.be

EXTRA PROGRAMS

Many artistic partners are taking the opportunity to organize walking tours, theater or dance performances and design projects which take the Kunstwerkstede as their point of departure. The international biennial

INTERIEUR 06 opens in the second week of October.

More information: Cultuurwinkel Kortrijk, tel. 00 32 (0)56 23 98 55 or cultuurwinkel@kortrijk.be

GENERAL INFORMATION

The program brochure is available free of charge at all major cultural institutions in Kortrijk via tel. 00 32 (0)56 27 74 44 or info@kunstwerkstede.be

WWW.KUNSTWERKSTEDE.BE

KEY PARTNERS

The exhibition Kunstwerkstede De Coene 1888-1977 (Broelmuseum, Kortrijk, Belgium, 15 September 2006 – 7 January 2007) is a joint initiative of the city of Kortrijk, the Stedelijk Musea Kortrijk, the non-profit organization vzw Stichting De Coene and the cultural heritage units of Kortrijk and Antwerp, with the support of the Flemish government and the cabinet of minister-president Yves Leterme. The project is in part supported by the inter-community cooperation agreement (2005-2008) between the Flemish government and the cities of Kortrijk and Antwerp, respectively.



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WORKED ON THIS ISSUE

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AUTHORS

Ruben Mayeur

(°1980, Lic. History; studies in International Relations and Conflict Management, KULeuven,) wrote his thesis on the city councils of Kortrijk and Rollegem during the Second World War. As research assistant for the cultural heritage project Kunstwerkstede De Coene, he carried out archival investigations and put together the history of the firm. His interests include political science and socio-economics.

Frank Herman

(°1957, Lic. Archeology, KULeuven, MA in Anthropology, Univ. of Pennsylvania) is, together with Terenja Van Dijk, curator of the exhibition *Kunstwerkstede De Coene 1888-1977, Kortrijk* (2006). After 20 years of archeological field work, he has been coordinator of cultural heritage policy with the Erfgoedcel Antwerpen since 2000. Among other things, he coordinated the exhibition circuit *Rubens in the Monumental Churches of Antwerp* (2004) and the book & video *Schoonselhof nu!* (2005). He was also curator of the double exhibition *Van Moderne Makelij 1952-1977, de Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede De Coene in Antwerpen*, in Merksem and Deurne (2002).

Terenja van Dijk

(° 1959, Ir-Architect, Universiteit Delft) is curator of the exhibition *Kunstwerkstede de Coene 1888-1977* together with Frank Herman. She has given courses at the faculty of architecture in Delft. As researcher, film- and exhibition-maker, she works primarily on projects relating to architecture, landscape and urbanism, such as *Home-ward, Contemporary Architecture in Flanders* (Venice Biennale 2000, Le Magasin, Grenoble, and elsewhere), *Van Moderne Makelij 1952-1977* (Merksem-Deurne, Antwerp 2002), *Werken, Maarten Van Severen* (Designmuseum Gent, MARTa Herford 2004, and elsewhere), and *Recollecting landscapes* (SMAK, Ghent, 2005).

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE OF OKV

This issue was produced in the spirit of the Kunstwerkstede. It is the result of a great deal of effort and teamwork. It is based in part on contributions to the book *Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede De Coene, 2006* (Groeninghe, Kortrijk), by: Werner Adriaenssens, Rita Devos, Marc Dubois, Lieven Douchy, Freddie Floré, Marc Goethals, Noël Hostens, Paul Thiers, Sophie Vlieghe and Norbert Poulin.

In this sense, the authors – again in the spirit of the Kunstwerkstede – are only spokesmen for the project.