

# THE ACADEMY PALACE

## HISTORY

The Academy Palace is today the seat of the "Académie royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique" (ARB - The Royal Academy of Science, Letters and Fine Arts of Belgium), the "Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten" (KVAB - The Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts), the "Académie royale de Médecine de Belgique" (ARMB - the French language Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium), the "Koninklijke Academie voor Geneeskunde van België" (KAGB - the Dutch language Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium), and the "Académie royale de Langue et de Littérature françaises" (ARLLF - the Royal Academy of French Language and Literature). It was built to serve as the Brussels residence of Prince William of Orange, the heir to the Dutch throne.

In 1815 Napoleon's armies were defeated at the battle of Waterloo and the northern and southern Netherlands were united under the sovereignty of King William I. The States General informed the King of their wish to honour his eldest son who had fought valiantly in the battle of Waterloo. William I agreed and decided on 18 December 1815 to build a palace in Brussels for his son.

In the same year, the architect, Charles Vander Straeten, was given the task of designing the project. Preliminary studies together with the decisions to acquire the necessary land were completed in September 1821. A suitable district was what is now the Place du Palais, the Royal Palace and the Park. This had been the seat of the ducal court since the eleventh century and, after the fire at the old court in 1731, had been transformed in the French classical style under the Austrian regime at the end of the eighteenth century. The act of purchase was signed in 1822 and included 85000 florins for a building which had served as a refuge for the Park Abbey near Leuven and had become the property of the t'Kint Vanderborcht family together with 83907 florins for land belonging to the town of Brussels on which the then demolished ramparts had been situated.

After the Prince of Orange had accepted one of the several projects submitted by Vander Straeten, the work of preparing the ground started on 7 May 1824 and, by the end of the following year, the fabric was complete. The interior work could begin at the end of the winter of 1824-1825.

Vander Straeten was dismissed from his role as architect of the royal palaces and state buildings on 11 March 1825 because he frequently carried out work without waiting for permission and he often exceeded the agreed costs. Tilman-François Suys followed him. The total cost of the Palace was 1215000 florins (ca € 8675000).

The Prince of Orange, with his family, visited the Palace on 4 October 1828 and gave the workmen a present of 200 florins. He moved in with his family on 17 November 1828 and occupied the Palace until 3 September 1830 when he was driven out by the Revolution.

On 9 October 1830, the Palace was placed under sequestration; an inventory of its contents was made in November and December of the same year.

The building remained empty under the supervision of maintenance staff until the sequestration was lifted on 2 December 1839. A battalion of grenadiers occupied the stables during this period. The building was open to the public from 1832.

The building was transferred to the Belgian State and the furniture was returned to the Netherlands (the Soestdijk Palace in particular) under an agreement of 5 November 1842. In 1848, the first mounted artillery battery and the first infantry fusiliers took over the ground floor and stayed until 1852.

Finally in 1853, the Duke of Brabant (the future King Leopold II) was invited to live in the building but, owing to a disagreement between the Duke and the public works department as to the work necessary, this project was not carried out. In 1859 it was proposed to use the building as a permanent centre for public ceremonies and festivities. In the same year, the architect Gustave Deman was given the task of carrying out the necessary work, which was completed in 1862.

In order to make a larger central hall for these public ceremonies, he replaced the two staircases at the north and the south by a single staircase built in an annex, which he joined, to the Palace at its north side.

A proposition was put to the House of Representatives at its meeting on 20 July 1859 to use the building for art exhibitions, for concerts of the Royal Music Conservatory, for public ceremonies, for the Museum of Modern Art and for the Royal Academy of Science, Letters and Fine Arts of Belgium. Subsequently, the Museum of Modern Art installed its collections in the Palace where they remained until 1876 when the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, built by Alphonse Balat in the Rue de la Régence was ready.

On 30 April 1876, the Royal Academy of Science, Letters and Fine Arts of Belgium and the Royal Academy of Medicine of Belgium were jointly given the use of the Palace. The installation ceremony took place on 15 December 1877.

Other academies moved in later: The "Académie royale de Langue et de Littérature françaises" was in Academy House from 1920 to 1934 when it moved to the Hôtel Trazegnies in Rue Lambermont, which is now the



residence of the Prime Minister. In 1945 it had to move out and it returned to Academy House. They were joined in 1941 by the "Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en schone Kunsten van België", renamed the "Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten" in 1999, and in 1942 by the "Koninklijke Academie voor Geneeskunde van België". Today, five of the seven academies in Belgium are housed in the palace. The "Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde" (the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature), founded on 8 July 1886, is housed in Gent. The Royal Academy for Overseas Science (under this name since 9 April 1973 as the successor to the Belgian Colonial Institute) has its seat in Rue Defacqz in Brussels.

From September 1914 until November 1918, the building served as a German Military hospital with a pigsty in the garden. The Academies, driven out in 1914, returned in March 1919.

The worst was yet to come. From 1949, the building showed signs of dilapidation and the need for restoration was felt. The architect, Paul Bonduelle suggested some improvements and in 1951 Eugène Dhucicque drew attention to the sorry state of the woodwork. In 1965, the detection of dry rot, which was attacking the woodwork, made a decision urgent.

The Academies left the Palace in 1969, to facilitate the work of repair and of restoration to a state similar to that of the early nineteenth century. This was carried out under the direction of the architect Simon Brigode who made use of the original plans, which had been kept in the state archives. The restored building was brought back into use at a ceremony on 4 May 1976.

The residence of the Prince of Orange was built in a very sober style, verging on the austere. It was thus in the classical tradition of the environs of the Place Royale, laid out at the end of the eighteenth century under Austrian domination by Barré, Guimard and Montoyer.

The palace is stylistically close to seventeenth century French and English buildings. The rigour of the four façades is relieved by the choice of rectangular shapes and their restrained ornamentation. The ground floor is in the form of a plinth with arched windows. Large pilasters divide the upper parts of the façades with Ionic capitals reaching to the cornices. Between them at first floor level are high windows capped by horizontal drip mouldings. A projecting double cornice, above which is an attic, completes the building.

The ornamentation is limited and consists principally of recesses and projections such as decorated surfaces, different types of architectural ledges, lintels, stanchions and, above all, pilasters. The colour scheme of the materials used (Arquennes limestone and blue stone, Houdain white stone and Caen limestone) plays an important role.

The ornamented base in grey Arquennes limestone gives the façades an appearance of solidity, while a too heavy impression is avoided by the presence of the arched windows, of which the lintels contribute to the rhythm and harmony. The two storeys are supported by Arquennes blue stone piers and capped by a horizontal cornice in Houdain whitestone that catches the light.

Notwithstanding the horizontal separation, the massive pilasters in Houdain white stone link the two storeys and thereby create a harmonious whole. The whiteness of the pilasters contrasts with the Arquennes blue stone piers and gives life to the façade which is thus structured horizontally (by the stringcourses and the attic) and vertically (by the pilasters and windows).

Small pavilions are attached to each of the lateral façades in the middle. Their roofs form terraces at first floor level. They were part of Vander Straeten's project and are shown in an engraving in the Royal Library. The south pavilion was joined to the hall and to the stables by an arcaded porch. A closed gallery with blind walls extended the north pavilion.

However, another engraving shows a terrace, attached to the north façade of the Palace, which has a pathway leading from the first floor to the garden.

Bas-reliefs representing the Arts (by A.J. Van Rasbourgh) Letters (by Herman), Medicine (by A. Braekeveld) and Science (by H. Sterckx) were placed in the triangular pediments of the projecting windows in 1879.

The Palace was one of the last examples of pure classical architecture in nineteenth century Belgium.

THE STYLE OF THE BUILDING



## THE MARBLE ROOM

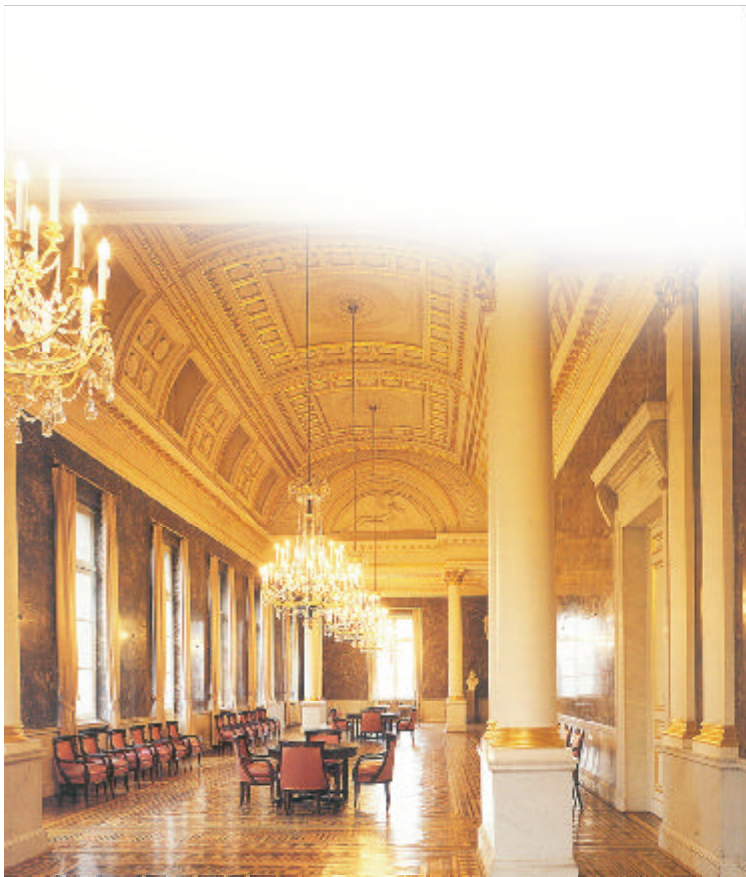
This room, which was probably destined to be an official dining room, extends along the entire south side of the Palace, above one of the entrance corridors. To the west, it gives a view of the Royal Palace and the centre of Brussels. Its artistic motifs (ornate parquets, decorated ceiling and abundance of marble), which immediately strike the visitor, are characteristic of the ceremonial rooms of the Palace.

The floor covering is parquet in Brazilian rosewood and kingwood in the form of geometrical patterns and stylised plant motifs. The ceiling, arched in its central part, is decorated with gilded white stucco panelling.

This long room is divided into three parts by two pairs of Corinthian columns on plinths set out from the walls towards their eastern and western ends in a style resembling some of the work of the French architects Percier and Fontaine as in the Tuileries and the Malmaison. The tympanums of the arches supported by these columns have bas-reliefs by Calloigne (1775-1830) representing angel musicians.

The door lintels in white marble were inspired by those of the Erechtheion of Athens and are an example of the frequent borrowing by nineteenth century architects of themes from antiquity.

Red fleury marble slabs from the Beaumont quarries line the walls from floor to ceiling. This amount of marble decoration, which is found throughout the building, gives it its special character owing to the rarity with which marble is used to cover walls completely. It has been suggested that the design was influenced by the Princess of Orange, Anna Pavlovna, sister of the Tsars Alexander I and Nicholas I, who was inspired by palaces in the region of St. Petersburg. In the marble slabs, there are still some metal hooks, which were used to hang part of the Princes picture collection.



The Palace's second largest room, the Throne Room or Ballroom, is in the middle of the first floor. It is two storeys high and has a glass roof in order to allow natural lighting. Some of the second floor rooms give onto a gallery, which looks down on the Throne Room. This room suffered most from the changes made during the second half of the nineteenth century. The parquet in oak and rosewood has survived and has the date (1828) when the building was completed in marquetry in a curved niche in its north wall. The walls are now faced with grey marble.

During the changes made between 1859 and 1862, the architect De Man removed the main staircases at the north and south so as to increase the surface of the Throne Room, which was to be used for public functions. He transformed the two central rooms at the sides into boxes with a view of the Throne Room. He also extended the glass roof.

In the eighteen sixties, the marble slabs, which were doubtless considered too simple for the period, were removed and the long side walls were divided, by chocolate-coloured columns with cornices in imitation green bronze, into nine bays crowned by semicircular arches. The decoration was completed in 1880 by Ernest Slingeneyer who painted twelve pictures showing important moments in the development of Belgium such as: the first Belgians, Christian civilisation, etc. These were in the style of the historical paintings, much in vogue in the nineteenth century. In the north was a work bringing together the glories of Belgium. These paintings are now in the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels.

The refurbishment was completed by the replacement of the columns on the second floor by caryatids of which two examples remain in the north corridor.

Furthermore, from 1861 until 1876, an organ for the use of students of the Royal Music Conservatory was kept in the old Ballroom, awaiting the installation of a new instrument in the Conservatory which Cluysenaar was building in the rue de la Régence and which was ready in 1876.

This nineteenth century restoration had a mixed reception. When it was suggested, shortly after the second world war, to refurbish this room, the classes of the ARB objected. They expressed their views as: The Academy ... considering the need to conserve the legacy of the past with respect, rather than to destroy it, opposes the destruction of the ornamentation of the Large Room. In 1967, Lacoste had a different opinion: Today, we have a central room too long for its width, darkened by an unfortunate arrangement of columns .... During the most recent restoration, Brigode used documents still in existence and re-established the Throne Room to its original dimensions and form, only enlarging the glass roof. He closed the boxes, removed the paintings and caryatids and recovered the walls with marble.



## THE THRONE ROOM or BALLROOM

## THE GARDEN

In the middle of the central lawn on the west side is a marble statue of Adolphe Quetelet by Charles-Augustin Fraikin which was unveiled on 11 May 1880.

On the north side, from west to east, are bronze statues of Jules Destrée by Armand Bonnetain (1937) and of Jean-Servais Stas by Thomas Vinçotte (1897) and, concealed in the foliage, Zephyr carrying off Psyche, a cast iron replica of the nineteenth century marble statue in the Louvre by Henri-Joseph Ruxthuel.

On the east side, from south to north, are The Curse of Cain in bronze by Louis Jehotte (1850), The Race Winner in the Stadium in bronze by Jan and Theodoor Geefs (1855), The Discus Thrower a bronze copy of a statue by Matthieu Kessels (ca 1880), made for the Duke of Devonshire and finally Astonishment (of a dog on seeing a tortoise) in bronze by Jean-Baptiste Van Heffen (1869).

This building was erected between 1825 and 1828 by Vander Straeten and Sluys. It was used as the Prince's stables until the 1830 revolution when it suffered the same fate as the palace. This neo-classical rectangle with a central court was built in the quadrilateral enclosed by the Boulevard du Régent, the Place du Trône, the Rue Ducale and the Palace. It was completed in 1856-1859 by the addition of a stone balustrade in the form of a rotunda.

When Leopold II came to the throne in 1865, the Queen Marie-Henriette riding school was built in the courtyard and the building was named the "Royal Stables". From 1911, it was used for the royal motor cars for which a covered garage was built in 1924. In the same year, a riding school was built on the north side of the stables, in the Palace garden.

In 1962 King Baudouin made over the stables to the academies. The stable buildings were restored between 1989 and 1994 according to the original plans and the annexe was demolished.

The building is currently occupied equally by the ARB and the KVAB. The KAG and the Royal Commission for History occupy some rooms.

## THE ROYAL STABLES



### Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts

The Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts is an independent learned society for the practice and promotion of science and arts in Flanders. To achieve that goal the Academy organizes an array of scientific and cultural activities. Also it encourages the collaboration between the Flemish universities, it delegates representatives to international organisations and discussion meetings (contactfora), it attracts foreign scholars to develop research activities, it advises on matters of social importance on behalf of the government, industry, educational establishments and research centres and finally the Academy awards prizes to talented and promising researchers and artists.

The Academy is governed by a Management Committee consisting of 14 members. Every second year a new chairman is elected. The chairmen since 1997 were Marcel Storme, Yvan Bruynseraede, Carl Van de Velde, Mark Eyskens, Jef Van Landuyt and Frans Boenders (current chairman). To perform its numerous tasks the Academy can rely on an administrative office staffed by ten collaborators and managed by the permanent secretary, Niceas Schamp since 1997.

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