A Case for Thresholds: Redefining Interior Spaces in Art Nouveau Architecture and Paintings'

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his paper makes the case for exploring the connections between the painting of interiors and interiors in architecture in the late nineteenth century, through their shared interest in threshold spaces. The nineteenth century has been described by many scholars as a society that relied heavily on categorization and on a separation of spheres: the private and the public realms, coinciding with gender, class and economical boundaries.¹ Yet, as Victoria Rosner has shown, threshold spaces are difficult to deal with in an economy of separate spheres. Just as society assigned roles to people, it assigned roles to different rooms and spaces:

A way of life built around separation and specialization encounters difficulty when faced with transitional or in-between states that resist categorization. Such states are architecturally embodied in the threshold, the space that forms a bridge between two discrete rooms.²

Although the relevance of the separate spheres model has been substantially questioned,³ it remains true that boundaries within the home were undergoing material changes, which had consequences on how interior spaces were physically and emotionally experienced. This shows the relevance of studying thresholds as architecturally, but also symbolically and socially, significant spaces. While corridors, doors and smaller rooms appeared in the eighteenth century to enhance intimacy, the end of the nineteenth century saw a different evolution towards the progressive removal/blurring of spatial boundaries in the home, particularly in the Art Nouveau style. Architects such as Victor Horta began to experiment with removing walls and designing open plans. They were focused on the linkage and fluidity of spaces: transitions between reception rooms were mediated by glass doors, shelves, curtains or steps. Vincent Heymans has described these changes brought about by Art Nouveau architecture:

La faiblesse de la maison bourgeoise classique réside dans son manque chronique d’ambiance : les lumières, les couleurs, les enchaînements de perception restent souvent médiocres. Par contre, l’Art nouveau tend vers un aboutissement et une unification des expressions spatiales.⁴

He highlights the unification process that (tends to) merge different spaces together. It gives an impression of fluidity in moving through these spaces and adds to the sense of a pre-choreographed “journey” which Art Nouveau interiors offer. However, it is useful to note that Art Nouveau architecture, however revolutionary it may be considered, retained many of the boundaries and ideologies that were characteristic of traditional bourgeois houses. Because it had no load-bearing walls, the interior of the house the architect Victor Horta (1861–1947) built for his family between 1898 and 1901 could technically have made no distinction between rooms. However, they still existed to some extent, particularly on the upper floors (considered as private rooms). The structure also remained faithful to class boundaries: the servants’ quarters were carefully concealed and intended never to interact with the main part of the house. The ability to move freely through different spaces was the privilege of only a few people.

For painters, threshold spaces also became particular spaces of interest. Artists frequently depicted doors, windows or halls and framed interior spaces in such a way that several rooms were represented in the same image. It was not limited to a particular style: Henri de Braekeleer (1840–1888) was nicknamed “le peintre de la fenêtre” by the poet Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916).⁵ Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) relied heavily on liminal spaces

¹ For a classic example, see Wolff, J., Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
which reinforced the symbolic quality of his artworks: just as thresholds are “in-between states”, symbolism mediates another reality, which stays elusive.

At the end of the nineteenth century, thresholds were places that embodied a reflection around interior spaces and their reconfiguration, whether in architecture or in representation. While it is not the aim of this paper to uncover direct interactions between both media, it considers them as expressive of this larger reflection and sensibility to which they contribute. Taking a wider perspective, I intend to go beyond approaches that have considered interior architecture and paintings of interiors as unrelated. For example, Vincent Heymans has argued that interior paintings cannot be used as a reliable source for tracing changes in interior architecture, because they mainly reflected the creativity of the painter. Furthermore, according to Guxholli, Symbolism and Art Nouveau — the two most prominent artistic movements of the time — would be strangers to each other, because of a lack of direct collaboration.

7 Guxholli, A., forthcoming.
In fact, while few paintings of interiors depict existing interiors, there are subtler links between interiors in architecture and painting. Major Belgian painters (James Ensor, Fernand Khnopff, Georges Le Brun for example) were involved with the interior beyond their pictorial œuvres, whether through decorating, collecting or house design. Beyond using their domestic environment as a backdrop for their paintings, they were fashioning that interior and using it as a source of inspiration. For these artists, there was a to and fro between their own interiors and their representations. It highlights the closeness between interiors as both architectural spaces and images, which the historical definition underscores. Indeed, in French historical dictionaries, the definition of “intérieur” as “the interior of one’s home” appeared in 1798. However, as early as 1835, it had both the meaning of the interior of a house and one’s domestic life as well as representations of both, especially in painting. In The Emergence of the Interior, Charles Rice has pointed towards the doubleness of interior’s meaning: it exists both as a spatial reality and as an image. This doubleness proves useful for looking at how boundaries between rooms and their traditional roles are challenged or blurred in represented and existing interior spaces. While Art Nouveau interior architecture can be interpreted as rendering transitions between rooms seamless, this very fact also highlights them. In the Horta home, the staircase leading from the ground floor to the bel-étage is not hidden in a hallway but directly connected to the living areas. In The Children of Mister Nève, by Fernand Khnopff, the staircase is used as a theatrical device to portray the children. Although there is an open door at the top of the stairs, what lies behind remains invisible. Therefore, the focus is on the threshold itself, which the eponymous children literally inhabit. In the same way that Horta’s staircase has an ambiguous function and location (is it an element of décor, is it functional? Is it part of the room, or outside it?), this painting transforms it into an appropriate space to be portrayed in, to linger and to look at.

Khnopff is of particular interest to us, because his reflection on space led him to reinvent thresholds in both his paintings and the house he built for himself with architect Edmond Pelseneer in 1902. In the Portrait of Marie Monnom, there is a blue curtain hanging behind the sitter. The background is unclear and difficult to identify precisely: the blue curtain hides what might be a door, as we see a lock.

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and on the right is a wooden panel which might be another door. Khnopff portrayed Marie Monnom in a peculiar space on the edge of several other unknown spaces. Her body is contained within a precise architectural framework, a recurring device used by Khnopff to transform a portrait into a symbolic work of art as well as to create a fictional space — that of the image. 

Yet, these fictional spaces provided inspiration for the design of his own Villa. The architectural framework used in paintings such as *Arum Lily* and *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* echoed the interior of the house. Blue curtains similar to those in the portrait of Marie Monnom were introduced as room dividers. They were part of what has been described as a staged environment, or theatrical experience: the visitors allowed inside the Villa related the strict itinerary they had to follow inside the house, with several ritualized steps to go through. For example, they had to pause for a few moments, blocked by Khnopff’s butler, before being allowed to enter the painter’s studio, so that he could receive his guests while posing in a theatrical way.

Khnopff was not unique in using curtains as room dividers at the time. They interested other architects for their theatricality, inherent mobility and flexibility, such as the Austrian-Czech architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) who used them in his own house in 1903, as well as in several other projects. They were also a regular feature in Art Nouveau architecture, for example in the Hotel Tassel built by Horta and the Hotel Ciamberlani built by Paul Hankar (1859–1901). The architect Gustave Serrurier-Bovy (1858–1910) first experimented with them in his own house, L’Aube

**FIG. 7**, to separate the dining room from the drawing room. They acted as a framing and theatrical device, enhancing the visual qualities of what can be glimpsed through their opening. In La Cheyrelle, a castle designed by Serrurier-Bovy and René Dulong between 1903 and 1909, the use of curtains allowed an even more radical redefinition of interior spaces: the traditional categories of drawing room, dining room, smoking room, etc., were replaced by a single space, the living room. The curtains were used to demarcate subsections of the room, allocated to particular functions. They played a role in dismantling spatial boundaries by replacing doors with a mobile fabric that could be opened, closed or anything in between.

Ultimately, thinking about transitions would lead to their erasure in open-plan designs — but there is a world of possibility between fixed spatial boundaries and their complete erasure. Architects and painters experimented with several options. By subverting the expected function of a space and juxtaposing different rooms, interior paintings rendered the spaces they depicted more fluid and ambivalent, echoing the changes in architecture and interior design. In both cases, rooms were no longer thought of as isolated units but in accordance with the way they related to one another. These relationships were managed by means of glass doors, stairs, curtains, etc. Such devices indicated the need to reach a careful balance — linking different spaces while still distinguishing between them, which resulted in a different way of experiencing interior spaces.

The examples that I have covered demonstrate that there was a general movement towards flexibility and blurring rigid spatial boundaries. My research project aims to investigate this phenomenon more widely through examples such as the folding screens Paul Hankar designed for the restaurant of a hotel, which allowed an ever-changing reconfiguration of its interior, or the multi-functional furniture designed by architects Henry Van de Velde (1863–1957) and Serrurier-Bovy at the time, such as benches with integrated bookcases or a coat hanger with an integrated mirror.
FIG. 7  Villa L’Aube, built by Gustave Serrurier-Bovy (1858–1910) between 1902 and 1905, Liège, Belgium © Wikimedia Commons.