

From shadow catalogue to commercial art.

Servranckx's works in avant-garde magazines (1920-1930)

The catalogue of *L'Abstraction géométrique belge*, exhibition organized in 2015, presented the Flemish artist Victor Servranckx (Diegem, 1897-Vilvoorde, 1965) as follows. “Starting in the 1920s Victor Servranckx developed an art based on the language of abstract geometry. His fascination with factories and machinery, when translated into an artistic philosophy, went far beyond the canvas, embracing a range of artistic disciplines. Victor Servranckx is emblematic, not only of the versatility of the artist – he was painter, manifesto writer, wallpaper designer, architect, cabinetmaker, etc. – but also of the degree to which the modernism of the 1920s truly impacted all aspects of daily life. His work evolved from mathematical constructions to experimental use of materials, from symmetrical structures to abstract and surrealist subjects.”¹

The following article undertakes to recount, from the reproduction of Servranckx's works in avant-garde magazines of the period 1920-1930, the circumstance which led to his international discovery. The “paper gallery” thus established, without

¹ Fabienne Grasser-Pulchéri et al., eds, *L'abstraction géométrique belge. Espace de l'Art Concret. Centre d'art contemporain/Mouans-Sartoux* (Éditions Snoeck, 2015), 93. I thank Professor David Adams for having provided corrections and suggestions for this article. Oleh S. Ilnytskyi (University of Alberta) and Anna Molchanova (National Library of Russia) graciously provided scans of the magazine *Nova generatia*. Muriel Collart, Peter J. H. Pauwels and my wife Alice supported as usual or discussed my research.

regard to the quality of the scans made from periodicals, could first indicate works that are supposedly forgotten, unknown, lost or inadequately identified. The corpus of references to currently known works is provided by the monograph entitled *Victor Servranckx. De Jaren twintig (Victor Servranckx. The Twenties)*, published in 2012 in Ostend by the Mu.ZEE.² This “paper gallery” could also open different perspectives or chronology of Servranckx’s production.

1. From Brussels to Italian Futurism (1923)

A decisive step of Servranckx’s rise in reputation was reached in 1923 when he exhibited at the Galerie Royale in Brussels. The December issue of the monthly magazine *La Cité. Architecture-Urbanisme-Art public*, praised his work and recalled that, according to the daily *Het laatste Nieuws (Latest News)*, Marinetti, “Servranckx’s master,” granted that he had a “powerful and original talent.” Fernand Léger also called him “the strongest of the Belgian painters of the new generation.” A fundamental difference, explained *La Cité*, separates Servranckx’s technique from that of “the cubists and expressionists”, as there is “no back and forth between subject, artist, plastic fact and spectator, everything being based on the intrinsic values and properties of colour and form.”³

The reference to Marinetti as “Servranckx’s master” may cause surprise. Yet the relationship between the Flemish avant-garde and Futurism was already an old

² Philip Van den Bossche, eds., *Victor Servranckx. De Jaren twintig* (Mu.ZEE - AsaMER, 2012).

³ *La Cité* 4, no. 6 (1923) : 116 – <https://bluemountain.princeton.edu/bluemtn/cgi-bin/bluemtn/31-05-25>.

story.⁴ In 1912, the exhibition *Les peintres futuristes italiens*, first presented in Paris, made a stop in Brussels. The catastrophe of the First World War imposed, as elsewhere, the idea of a *tabula rasa*, of a conception of life that would allow the reconstruction of humanity on other basis. In Belgium, S. Servellón writes, the activism and privilege granted by the German occupier to Flemish nationalism forced the intelligentsia to invent a new community spirit that rejected individualism and art for art's sake.⁵ Thus, Flanders developed a “revolutionary climate” and a rebuilt nationalism notably defined in the magazine *Ruimte* (Room).⁶ Another magazine, *Ça ira*, in Antwerp, made its own “political leanings” clear in its issue number 5 of August 1920.⁷ “Already several years before the war, a certain

⁴ Francis Mus and Hans Vandevoorde, “Streetscape of new districts permeated by the fresh scent of cement’: Brussels, the avant-garde, and internationalism,” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Volume III. Europe 1880-1940 Part I*, eds. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 343-4.

⁵ Sergio Servellón, “Gemeenschapskunst en Zuivere Beelding: twee kanten van dezelfde constructivistische medaille. Victor Servranckx in de Jaren 1922-23,” in *Victor Servranckx*, eds. Van den Bossche et al. (Mu.ZEE - AsaMER, 2012), 37-56.

⁶ Daphné de Marneffe, “Antwerp circles: languages, locality, and internationalism,” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Volume III. Europe 1880-1940 Part I*, eds. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 325-7.

⁷ *Ça ira* 5 (1920): 1 ; Marneffe, “Antwerp circles,” 331-5. The magazine’s “Flemish” commitment is more discussed by de Marneffe as its “more radical trends” – and international commitments. The indexing is furthermore particularly defective: the first name of André de Ridder –

movement of emancipation of the masses had been seen to be taking shape, which we would nevertheless be afraid to call revolutionary. And that this movement has not, until own day, found any very strong expression should not surprise us much.” Indeed, the “spirit of revolt” of the working class had fallen asleep “in the high-sounding – and empty, as so often happens! - phrases of the leaders of the so-called socialist party.” Thus, the masses have been drawn into “the capitalist war,” etc.

Futurism and even Cubism, which perpetuated elements of a represented reality, became a hot subject of debate in *Ca ira* and in *Het overzicht (The Survey)*. The debate animated the Second Congress of Modern Arts held in Antwerp in January 1922, whose organization involved, as Van den Bossche recalls, the left-wing futurist Ivo Pannaggi.⁸ It is probably through him and his friend Vinicio Pelegrini that a Sevrancx’s work was reproduced in the magazine *Noi*, published in Rome from 1917 and created by Prampolini.⁹ Its issue of May 1923 opened with futurist articles on “L’arte meccanica” and “L’estetica meccanica” by Prampolini, Pannaggi and

mentioned as “Ridder” or “De Ridder” – is omitted; Paul-Gustave van Hecke is indexed under « Hecke » and “Van Ecke.”

⁸ Annouck Clissen, “Een toonbeeld van veelzijdigheid. Victor Sevrancx in de jaren twintig,” in *Victor Sevrancx*, eds. Van den Bossche et al. (Mu.ZEE - AsaMER, 2012), 23.

⁹ Chris Michaelides, “Futurist periodicals in Rome (1916-39): from effervescence to disillusionment,” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*. eds. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 562-3, 568-71.

Paladini,¹⁰ Then, between Paladini's *Ritmi meccanici* and Prampolini's *Ritmi meccannizzati*, the magazine reproduced a work that it entitled *Costruzione meccanica* but which was sold by Christie's in 2024 under the title *Opus 8, Construction mécanique ou L'Usine de papiers peints*.¹¹

Two points may be added here. The effective title of *Opus 8* refers to Servranckx's employment as draughtsman and designer at the wallpaper factory Peters-Lacroix in the village of Haren (Brussels), after he had finished his studies at the Brussels Academy.¹² The work *Opus 8* mixes composite elements that first evoke paintings or gouaches from the years 1920-22, when Servranckx multiplied the most diverse forms in a sometimes confused manner.¹³ Circles and rounds, complete or incomplete, large or small, dominates as in the *Opus 11* of 1920. A long and fragmented triangle which points towards the upper right corner and is discreetly repeated below recalls another triangular shape, partly rounded and hatched, which runs through the *Opus 29 – 1920*, entitled *Naakt met zwarte kousen* (*Naked with Black Stockings*). The triangle with intersecting lines of the *Mechanical Construction – [1923]* is also typical of the *Opus 27 – 1922* whose title, *Ombelzing* (*Hug*), suggests a relationship with *Naked with Black Stockings*. This painting shows a painted figure

¹⁰ *Noi*, 1, 2 (1923). <https://monoskop.org/Noi> <31-05-25>.

¹¹ <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6476753> <31-05-25>.

¹² Phillip Van den Bossche, "Inleiding," in *Victor Servranckx*, eds. Van den Bossche et al. (Mu.ZEE - AsaMER, 2012), 9.

¹³ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 78, 81, 87, 94.

inside, as well as the *Opus 27 – 1922* and the *Opus 1 – 1922*, entitled *Ik streef de paarden der vrouwen* (*I Caress the Women's Horses*), which could also be interpreted erotically. The *Opus 27*, dated from 1922, includes tubular forms which definitely seems to link the *Opus 8, Construction mécanique ou L'Usine de papiers peints* sold by Christie's to the transition phase between 1922 and 1923.

More generally, the inclusion of Servranckx in *Noi* opens a decisive chapter of his work associated with the Futurist project according which a creative use of the machine would make the worker the master of it instead of being its subject: an idea treated differently by Romain Rolland and Frans Masereel in *La révolte des machines* (1921).¹⁴

Another point to be considered relates to Servranckx in Italy. In Liège, a lover of modern art, Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert, a professor at the university, was promoted general curator of the Prima Mostra internazionale di arte decorativa di Monza which opened in May 1923 at the Villa Reale, and he was able to invite Servranckx to the exhibition.

2. From Brussels to Paris: *L'Esprit nouveau* (1924)

In 1924, the issue 22 of *L'Esprit nouveau* simply announced “Servranckx” in its title-page. Some paintings were reproduced. The first is well known as the *Opus 46 –*

¹⁴ Daniel Droixhe, “Paratextual Masereel and Love Trap. When Thomas Mann, Max Brod and Herman Hesse Were Reading Graphic Novels (1927-1933),” *Interfaces: Images Textes Language* 52 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.4000/13p0p> <31-05-25>.

1923 entitled *Tedere constructive (Tender Construction)*.¹⁵ The following page shows two works which seem to be unknown to the authors of the Servranckx monograph (fig. 1).

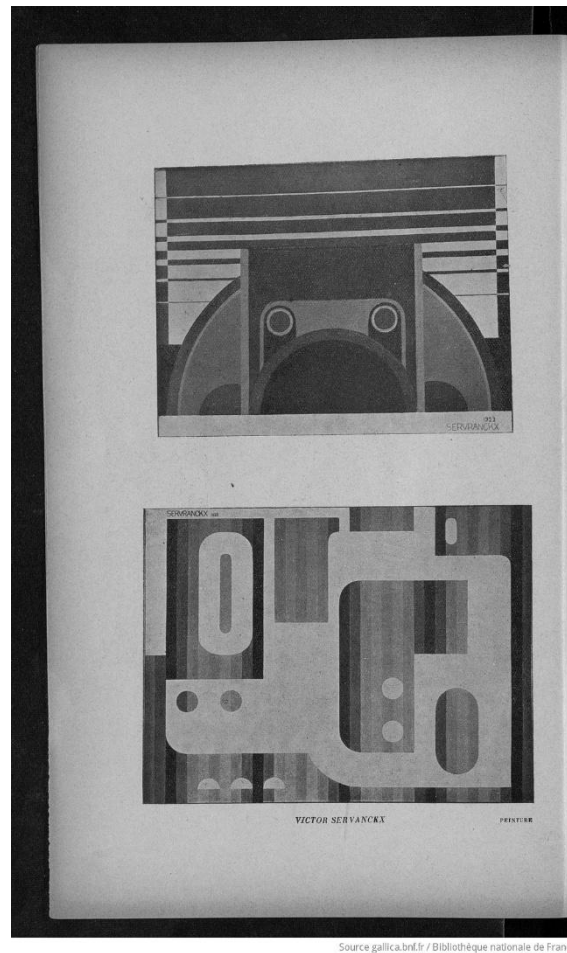


Figure 1.

[Victor Servranckx], dated 1922 in lower right corner (above) and Victor Servranckx, *Peinture*, dated 1923 in upper left corner (below), in *L'Esprit nouveau* 22 (1924). <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6963631k/f36.item> <31-05-25>. The first (above), dated 1923, is really different from those of the same year. The upper part, which could suggest a view towards the horizon, seems opposed to a

¹⁵ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 109.

body and face whose two circles are looking at the spectator. This composition is uncommon in his works.

The other work (below) is characterized by a square on the right, with an extension (up), rounded corners, a hole showing vertical stripes in black and shades of grey, an oblong shape and two circles. It shows structural similarities with Servranckx's work reproduced on the following page, identified as the *Opus 55 – 1923*, entitled *De heerschappij van het gepolijste staal* (*The Reign of Polished Steel*), now held in the Musée de Grenoble: the same square with rounded corners, a hole with vertical stripes, etc.¹⁶ *The Reign of Polished Steel* was also reproduced in the issue of December 1924–January 1925 of the magazine *Anthologie*, published by the Groupe d'art moderne de Liège and directed by Georges Linze.¹⁷ The issue recalls Servranckx's participation in the exhibition at the Brussels Galerie Royale mentioned before and announces that he would exhibit in Liège and Bucharest. There could be a relationship between the *Opus 55 – 1923* and the *Opus 45 – 1923* entitled *Het paar* (*The Couple*), held in the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna.¹⁸ This last

¹⁶ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 114.

¹⁷ *Anthologie* 5 (1924-1925): 15; Brussels, KBR, B 1560. Les Amis de Georges Linze, eds., *L'exposition Georges Linze et son époque 1920-1940. Anthologie. Le Groupe moderne d'art de Liège* (Musée de l'Art Wallon, 1975/2013). The magazine *Anthologie* only appears in Przemysław Strożek, "Cracow and Warsaw: becoming the avant-garde," in Brooker et al., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 1204.

¹⁸ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 107.

painting adds to the *Opus 55* the tubular shapes in the form of ship chimneys that will develop in other works.

L'Esprit nouveau reproduces one more work by Servranckx which does not deserve much comment as it is identified as the *Opus 17 – 1922* held in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza of Madrid.¹⁹

3. From to the *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne* (1924-25)

Another Parisian magazine was interested by Belgian avant-garde. In 1925, the *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne* became a hotbed of discussion and exchange on modern art, as it was represented by Marcel-Louis Bagniet, Georges Van Tongerlo or Pierre-Louis Flouquet.²⁰ In its June issue, Bagniet argued that Belgian Cubism was challenging its French counterpart as the latter was not completely detached from figuration and – so to say – Impressionism. Among the artists considered as being more respectful of the non-figurative prescription of Mondrian and van Doesburg, Servranckx was named with Maes, Flouquet, Peeters, Magritte and De Boeck. In the same issue, Servranckx took the floor in turn to express his break with a delayed Cubism and reported that he discussed it with Picasso in his studio.²¹

In July 1925, the-issue number 17 of *l'Effort moderne* added to the continuation of Servranckx's first article two paintings entitled *Éléments mécaniques*. One is well known for it is held in the Collections of the State of Belgium as *Zuivere Beelding*

¹⁹ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 92.

²⁰ *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne*, 4 (1924) : 13-4 ; 14 (1925): 11-4 ; 16 (1925): 6-10, etc.

²¹ *Bulletin de l'Effort moderne* 16 (1925) : 11-4, « Les Voies nouvelles de l'Art plastique ».

(*Pure Imagery*), dated 1922.²² The other is *The Reign of Polished Steel* which has taken on the status of an iconic work.

4. Access to *Der Sturm* (1928)

In April 1928 (19th year, book 1), the famous magazine *Der Sturm* showed on its title-page Servranckx's painting entitled here *Gemälde 9 – 1922* and now, in the Centre Pompidou, *Rode rotatieve (Red Rotary)*.²³ The *Red Rotary* must have impressed Walden, as it is again reproduced after one of his poems in the same issue of *Der Sturm* with the title *Gemälde 1922*.²⁴

The same book 1 of the 19th year provides two paintings by Servranckx (fig. 2).

²² Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 98.

²³ *Der Sturm*, 19, 1 (1928/29). <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0005> <31-05-25>.

Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 89; Douglas Brent, McBride, "A critical mass for modernism in Berlin," in Brooker et al., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 773 sq.

²⁴ *Der Sturm*, 19, 2-3 (1928/29): 219. <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0041> <31-05-25>.

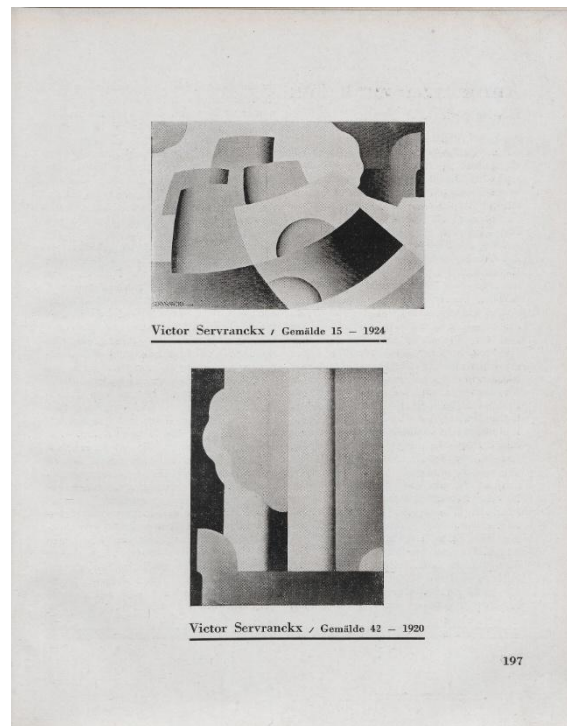


Figure 2.

Victor Servranckx, *Gemälde 15 – 1924* (above) and *Gemälde 42 – 1920* (below),
in *Der Sturm* 19, 1 (1928/29): 197 –

<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0019> <31-05-25>.

Both paintings seem to be unknown. The first (above), entitled *Gemälde 15 – 1924*, shows a rare combination, in Servranckx, of quadrilaterals which are either of uncertain shape with half-circles or which appear in a row, with a tubular shape in the upper right corner. In 1920, the artist experiments with various components of his future paintings. The same can be said of the *Gemälde 42 – 1920* (below), which only shows a combination of elongated vertical or horizontal bars, a tubular shape in the lower left corner and a pie-edge shaped outline which characterizes the *Opus 55 – 1923 / The Reign of Polished Steel*. The *Gemälde 42 – 1920* belongs to a transitional stage which prepares the great flowering of 1923.

Book 2/3 of the 19th year provides a painting by Servranckx which, in *Der Sturm*, is entitled *Gemälde 1924* and is known now as *Opus 15 – 1924* or *Spanning van de ruimte* (*Tension of Space*).²⁵ It concludes an article by Franz Wilhelm Seiwert (Cologne, 1894-1933) on “Amerikanische Wissenschaft und neue Kunst” (“American science and new art”).

5. From the “4 modified sides” to the “ship chimneys”: *Der Sturm* (1928)

Book 8 of the 19th year provides five paintings by Servranckx. It was devoted to celebrating Walden’s fiftieth anniversary. The first painting, entitled *Gemälde 9 – 1923*, seems to be forgotten and opens an article on Servranckx by Georges Linze (fig. 4). It shows a set of trapezoidal shapes. They also characterize, eventually combined with cut circles, the *Opus 4 – 1923* entitled *Bruine brug* (*Brown Bridge*), the *Opus 16 – 1923* entitled *Nachtelijke landschap met trainlawaaï* (*Light Netscape with Train Noise*), and the *Opus 37* entitled *Muurgedeelten tegen de lucht* (*Wall Section against the Sky*). These latter are reproduced in pages that follow one another in the 2012 monograph on Servranckx so that they constitute a compact and narrow series with the *Gemälde 9*. They represent a stage of his research where experimenting with the shapes of quadrilaterals varies their general form and cancels out any superfluous ornamentation. This is the stage of the “4 modified sides.”

²⁵ *Der Sturm* 19, 2/3 (1928-29): 217. <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0039>

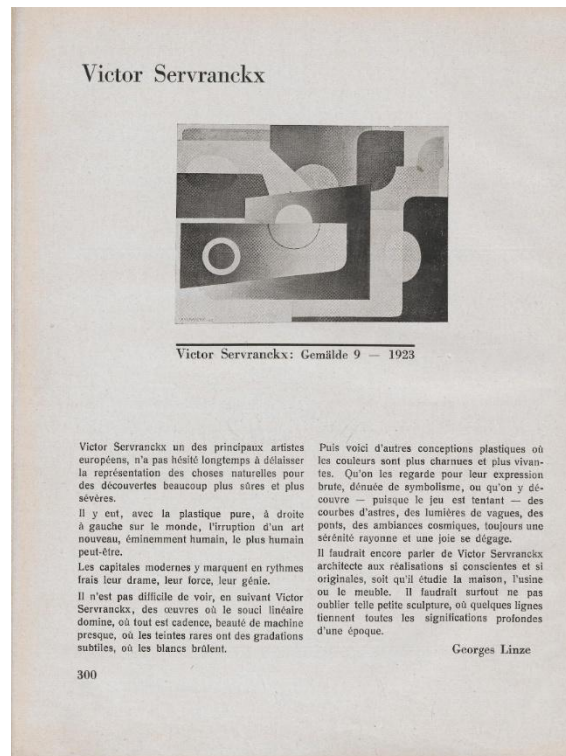


Figure 4.

Victor Servranckx, *Gemälde 9* – 1923, in *Der Sturm* 19, 8 (1928/29): 300.

<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0122> <31-05-25>.

Gemälde 9 dated 1924 is unrecorded (fig. 5). It shows quadrilaterals and a curved shape that evokes the chimney of a ship. This pattern is illustrated by other works from 1923-1924: *Opus 45* – 1923 or *Het paar* (*The Couple*), *Opus 46* – 1923 or *Tedere constructie* (*Tendere Construction*), *Opus 8* – 1924 or *Heroïsche muziek* (*Heroic Music*), *Reign of the Polished Steel*, etc. Another stage is defined: that of the “ship chimneys”, in which Servranckx’s painting reaches its climax.

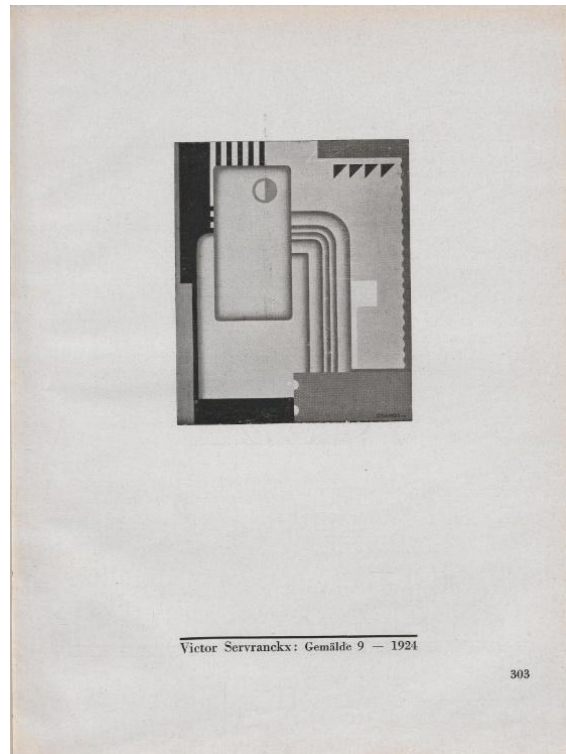


Figure 5.

Servranckx, *Gemälde 9 – 1924*, in *Der Sturm* 19, 8 (1928/29): 303.

<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0125> <11-06-25>.

In the same issue as *Gemälde 9 – 1924*, *Gemälde 11 – 1924* demonstrates the “ship chimneys” pattern (fig. 6).

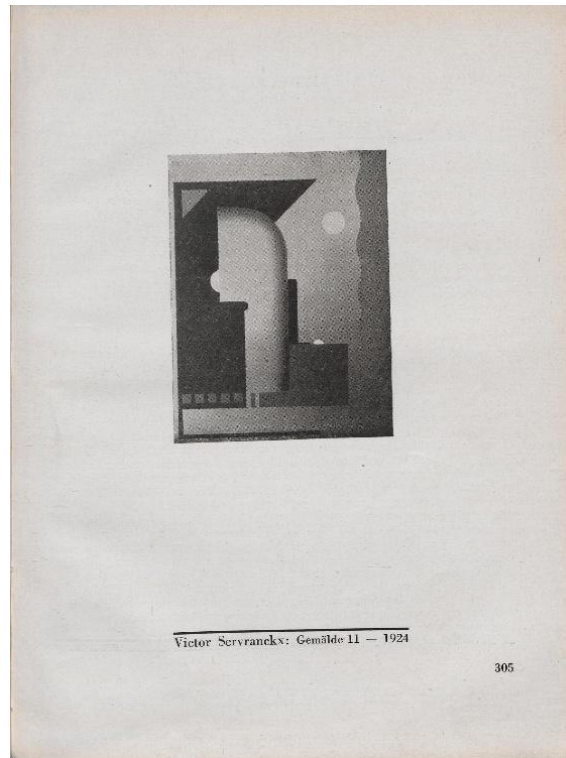


Figure 6.

Victor Servranckx, *Gemälde 11 – 1924*, in *Der Sturm* 19, 8 (1928/29): 305.

<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0127> <31-05-25>.

6. Back to the bottom of the drawer: *Der Sturm*: (1928)

The two other Servranckx's works reproduced after the Linze's article on the artist are interesting as they date back to the beginning of his career. The first is the one known as *Opus 5 – 1919*.²⁶ The other, entitled *Gemälde 13 – 1919* (fig. 7), marks like *Opus 5 – 1919* a radical departure from the figurative works of 1917 such as *Walgenbewondering (Disgust and Admiration)*, reminiscent of *Stilleven met rode meloen en*

²⁶ <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0123> <31-05-25> ; Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 77.

komkommers (*Still Life with Red Melon and Cucumbers*, 1913).²⁷ But *Disgust and Admiration*, as *Moeder en kind* (*Mother and Child*, 1917), shows an interlacing of thick volutes which tend towards the characteristic and symmetrical round shapes of the *Opus 5- 1919*. We propose to classify these two works into a stage called the “chrysalis state.”²⁸

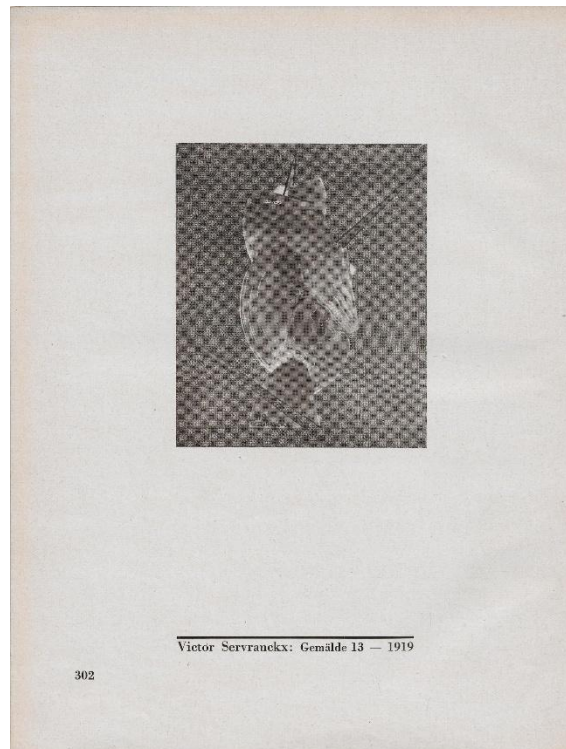


Figure 7.

Victor Servranckx, *Gemälde 13 – 1919*, in *Der Sturm* 19, 8 (1928/29): 302.

<https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.47219#0124> <31-05-25>.

²⁷ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 47-48.

²⁸ A work by Servranckx held at the MoMa shows at a surprisingly late date (c. 1927) non-geometric motifs in a set reminiscent of a geographical map:

https://www.moma.org/collection/works/37699?artist_id=5354&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

<31-05-25>.

7. On the way to America and Eastern Europe

By jumping from the Parisian magazines of 1924-25 to *Der Sturm* in 1928, we have bypassed the dissemination and reputation of Servranckx's work. In 1925, he participated to the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes held in Paris. In 1926-27, he was invited to show his production at the International Exhibition of Modern Art organized at the Brooklyn Museum by the Société Anonyme founded by Katherine Dreier, Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray (fig. 8). The catalogue recalled that Servranckx, "a painter of distinction," is "also a designer of modern furniture, where simplicity is emphasized."²⁹



Figure 8.

²⁹ *Société Anonyme. International Exhibition of Modern Art, 1926*. John Henry Bradley Storrs paper, 1790-2007. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

International Exhibition of Modern Art arranged by The Société Anonyme for the Brooklyn Museum. November December 1926, private collection.

At the same time, it is a bit surprising that his paintings aroused in the USA an imagination evoking figurative landscapes while these paintings were supposed to belong to the Mondrian/van Doesburg Plastic Pure movement and to illustrate a “pure imagery”. In May 1926, Jacques Maury published in the New York magazine *The Arts* an article where he wrote: “Though all young artists have a cubist tendency, there are very few pure cubist pictures. In the paintings of Victor Servranckx, I see the beauty of steel-making in a Belgian town described in a cubist fashion.”³⁰ It is ironic that such a descriptive qualification was more suited to his architectural vision or to that of Servranckx’s compatriot, Masereel, and that it is followed by a critical appraisal of Ozenfant’s and Le Corbusier’s “purist” achievements. In 1927, *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* reprinted from *American Art News* the review of the Brooklyn Exhibition of 1926-27 and suggested that Servranckx’s paintings show “a city of rhythmic steps and repeated arches...”³¹ Servranckx’s work also attracted attention in Eastern Europa, under Soviet domination and strong cultural influence. In 1927, an Exhibition of Belgian Art was organized in Budapest under the direction of the architect Henry Van de Velde, the director of the Institute of Decorative and Industrial Arts at Weimar,

³⁰ *The Arts* 9, 3 (1926): 276.

³¹ *The Brooklyn Museum Quarterly* 14 (1927): 22.

which will become the core of the Staatliches Bauhaus.³² But the most interesting case is provided by Lithuania because it illustrates the ideological and political link which unites it to Russia and its Revolution, like in other modernist movements in the West.

In 1928, the Ukrainian magazine *Nova generatsiia*, which defines itself as a “left-wing periodical,” published in its issue number 11 an article on Servranckx. He deserved it as his work was mentioned “in most left-wing art magazines in the West”: in Belgium, this “small country,” contemporary art “absorbs the quintessence of the creative processes and modern technology of its neighbouring large capitalist countries – Germany, France, and England.”³³ The cover of the issue provides an unidentified copy of Servranckx’s *Opus 1 – 1921*, which today reaches astronomical prices in these same “capitalist countries” by a singular twist of History.³⁴

8. Conclusion

We have found around ten works reproduced from 1924 to 1928 which do not seem to be recorded in the monograph of 2012 devoted to Servranckx. Of course, this does not mean that they may not be recorded and reproduced elsewhere. Our

³² *La Cité* 6, 8 (1927 : 123 - <https://bluemountain.princeton.edu/bluemtn/cgi-bin/bluemtn> <31-05-25>.

³³ *Nova generatsiia* 11 (1928): 352. From Oleh S. Ilnytskyi as a courtesy.

³⁴ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 153-9. <https://www.group2gallery.com/servranckx-sculpture.html> <31-05-25>.

research only concerns four countries: France, Germany, Italy and Lithuania. But it details and illustrates – in black and white – an artistic evolution and even progress that starts in 1919 with the first experiment in abstraction through vague curved shapes, various sorts of shells, simple lines and complete circles (fig. 7).

Some paintings suggest a preparatory or transitional state. *Gemälde 42 – 1920* (fig. 3, below), mainly composed of elongated vertical or horizontal bars, shows Servranckx searching for the elements of his future works. *Gemälde 9 – 1923* (fig. 4) seems to mark the transition from the 1922 to the 1924 productions, when the virtuosity of the previous state must be surpassed by an emerging composition of simple trapezoidal shapes and cut circles or semicircles.

It could be said that Servranckx’s art reaches its climax in 1924, as illustrated by two unrecorded paintings: *Gemälde 9 – 1924* (fig. 5) and *Gemälde 11 – 1924* (fig. 6).

An abstract geometry governs the balanced distribution of simple shapes and a use of “inverted t” curves which develop a regional link with the reality of port and the Antwerp graphic tradition. This “ship chimneys” stage recalls the other avant-garde that was represented, before abstraction, the *Zuivere Beelding* and the Belgian movement of the Plastic Pure, by the Group of Five in Antwerp.³⁵

In 1923-1924, the Italian and Parisian magazines *Noi*, *L’Esprit nouveau* and the *Bulletin de l’Effort moderne* reproduced some of Servranckx’s more advanced or

³⁵ Daniel Droixhe, *Le catalogue de l’Exposition de l’œuvre gravé de Joris Minne à la Bibliothèque royale de Belgique (1933). Version informatique et illustrée* (Université de Liège, 2022).

<https://orbi.uliege.be/handle/2268/296696>

sophisticated works, such as *Pure Imagery* (1922) and in particular as *The Reign of Polished Steel* (1923), which became iconic. But what was reproduced in *Der Sturm* in 1928 mixes some of his best productions and... some bottom of the drawer items (fig. 7). In fact, Servranckx was no longer so interested in painting. He had suffered, like other Belgian avant-garde artists – Baugniet, Peeters – the break of 1925, which directed the most creative of them towards the applied arts, furniture or architecture, which were more profitable.³⁶ The Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes de 1925 had been there.

This Exhibition was mentioned by Edward Bernays in his *Propaganda* of 1928, as it was supposed to provide an example of the good use of treatment or manipulation of popular opinion.³⁷ Businesses “that capitalize on the sense of beauty to increase their markets and profits” contribute to art and to its dissemination to the public. The latter – attracted by “related values” as selling price or by “and spectacular incidents” – integrates “new inspirations” which could promote “a very technical

³⁶ Van den Bossche et al., *Victor Servranckx*, 58-73 ; Peter J. H. Pauwels, *Jozef Peeters en de strijd tegen den tingeltangel. Het (inter)nationale netwerk van een Antwerpse pionier in de avant-garde van de jaren 1929* (Ronny Van de Velde/Ludion, 2022).

³⁷ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda. L'art de manipuler les esprits* (ABP Éditions, 2024), 49-52. The Paris exhibition, “under the patronage of the Minister of Fine Arts, Paul Léon, will include silks from Cheney Brothers, South Manchester and New York, whose designs were inspired by Edgar Brandt, known as the modern Bellini, and creator of marvellous works of iron art.” Thus, “Paris can give American silk an official stamp that will help it gain a solid position in the United States.”

and abstract beauty” (modern cars, planes, etc.): which precepts could better especially serve Servranckx’s abstract geometry?

Bernays put these ideas to the service of an economy of “mass production” which was compatible with those of the creator on a “community or collective art”.

Ideology, politics and artistic commitment could easily and honourably be endorsed by the conversion to applied and industrial arts that was adopted by Servranckx after 1925, as by other Belgian modernists like Baugniet or Peeters (fig. 9-10). We must ask ourselves whether, through this conversion, he deviated from the vocation which is imposed on the artist as on the scholar, according to Max Weber, to “put himself purely and simply *at the service of his cause*” (“‘Persönlichkeit’ auf wissenschaftlichem Gebiet hat nur der, *der reinder Sache dient*’)³⁸.

³⁸ Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf* 1919, 485-6; Max Weber, *Le savant et le politique*. Traduit de l'allemand par Julien Freund, révisé par E. Fleischmann et ric de Dampierre. Préface de Raymond Aron (Plon 1963) : 86-7 : « Je ne connais point de grand artiste qui ait jamais fait autre chose que de se mettre au service de la cause de l'art et d'elle seul ».

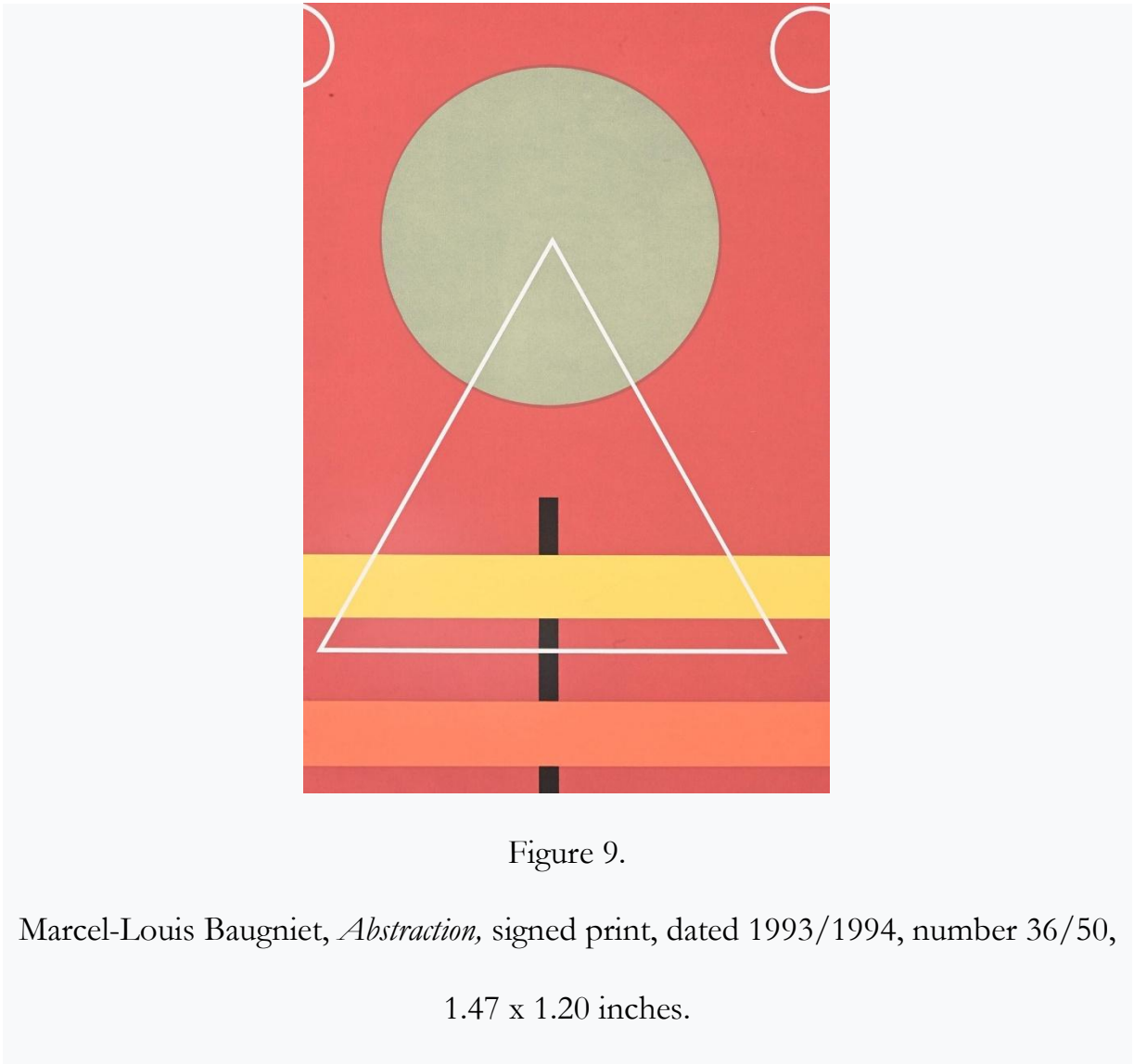


Figure 9.

Marcel-Louis Baugniet, *Abstraction*, signed print, dated 1993/1994, number 36/50,

1.47 x 1.20 inches.



Figure 10..

Marcel-Louis Baugniat, *Stackable Anodized Aluminum Chair*, watercolour and pencil on paper, signed lower right corner, 11.42 x 7.97 inches. Oupeye, D. Droixhe and A. Piette Collection.

In 1929, Pierre-Louis Flouquet published in the Liège magazine *Anthologie* a philippic entitled *Poème du mépris* (*Poem of Contempt*) dedicated to “the upstarts of Modernism”.³⁹ He specified: “I want to speak of those who, without difficulty, without having known the pangs of joy and the delirium of doubt, have arrived at such a stage of evolved art where we camp, bleeding, and whose astonishment had

³⁹ *Anthologie* 5 (1924-1925): 3 ; Daniel Droixhe, « Victor Servranckx. La plastique pure et la revue liégeoise *Anthologie* (1921-1940) », *Koregos* 338 (2025). <https://koregos.org/fr/daniel-droixhe-victor-servranckx/341/>

barely taken measure”. Flouquet particularly attacked the supposedly predominant place taken by architecture in the modernist movement: he designated these builders of “horizon-eating skyscrapers, uncomfortable stone tents for the poet’s traveling spirit”. May these “sepulchre builders” give us back “our sweet and wild forest, so in love with the wild beasts and the stars that fight in its grass and in its sky”: “this pure soil where your utilitarian intentions will not be able to germinate, where your greed and your manipulations will be ineffective”. The shift towards applied arts surely illustrated these “utilitarian intentions.”

Flouquet abandoned art for poetry and will not paint no more. In Belgium, another artist, Paul Joostens (Anvers, 1889–1960), perhaps the most original of the Flemish modernism, has written: « My artistic career ends in 1923. I have been surviving since.”⁴⁰ The Belgian avant-garde of the years 1914-1930 was over.

⁴⁰ Rick Sauwen, « D’un monde à l’autre : Michel Seuphor et Paul Joostens », in *Seuphor*, ed.

Herbert Henkels (Mercator Fonds, 1974), 124 quoted by Philip Van den Bossche, “Moi, toujours moi,” in *Joostens, 1889-1960. Manuscripts – Essays*. ed. Philippe Van den Bossche et al. (MuZEE, 2014), 16-17; Daniel Droixhe, “Erased from Existence. Paul Joostens overtaken by Floris Jaspers in avant-garde magazines (1924-1927),” forthcoming.

