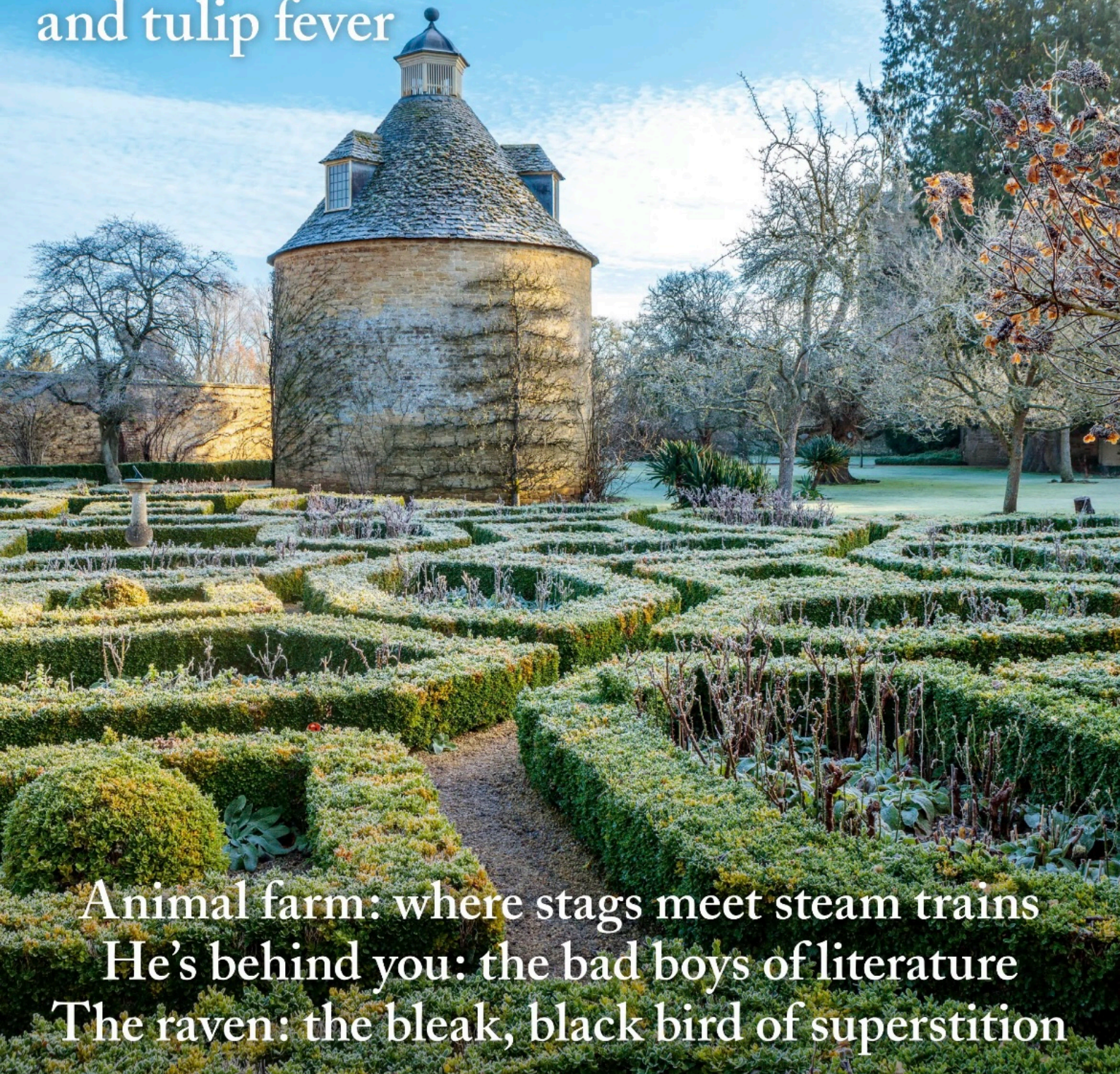


COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

JANUARY 18, 2023

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Animal farm: where stags meet steam trains
He's behind you: the bad boys of literature
The raven: the bleak, black bird of superstition



Brussels sprouts into life

Belgium is marking 2023 as the year of Art Nouveau



Fig 1: A walnut sofa made by Eugène Vallin. With Galerie Mathivet

PRECISELY why the Belgians have decided to celebrate 2023 as the year of Art Nouveau in Brussels, I am not sure, but I am very glad that they have, as I recently enjoyed a two-day tour of some of the highlights and hope to see more when visiting the BRAFA fair next week.

Art Nouveau was a multinational phenomenon. Some of its roots lay in Britain, with William Morris and the Arts-and-Crafts Movement and the japonisme fashion promoted by Liberty's department store—it is known as Stile Liberty in Italy—but, in the early 1890s, it emerged almost simultaneously in centres across Europe and around the world soon after.

For Brussels, the key date was 1893, with the first townhouses designed by Victor Horta and Paul Hankar, but the heyday of the opulent, sinuous, style was short; it was a casualty of the First World War, after which the austerity of Art Deco felt more appropriate.

BRAFA staged a catch-up fair last June, which went fairly well,

despite clashing with the TEFAF catch up in Maastricht and Masterpiece in London. A benefit was the chance to try out a new venue in a hall at Brussels Expo, the site established at Heysel in the north of the city for the International Exhibitions of 1935 and 1958. That was a success and larger space has now been



Fig 2: Two chairs and a stool by Victor Horta. With Thomas Deprez

taken to return at the traditional date, with a tally of exhibitors that is back to pre-Covid levels. Naturally enough, Art Nouveau has been selected as a theme.

Like Morris, the artists who created Art Nouveau tended to be multidisciplinary. Although best known as architects, Horta and Hankar were also furniture-makers and designers in a number of other fields. Examples of their furniture will be found on several stands at the fair, prominent among them two chairs and a stool made by Horta for the

shop of Wolfers Frères (Fig 2). These are with Thomas Deprez, a specialist in Belgian 20th-century art with a Brussels gallery in the Sablon.

The Wolfers brothers were both suppliers and makers, and Epoque Fine Jewels of Kortrijk, Belgium, has exceptional examples by Philippe Wolfers (1858–1929), including a unique and recently rediscovered gold, silver, enamel, diamond and opal peacock (Fig 5), the centrepiece of a missing tiara known only from the company's archive. There is more



Fig 3 left: Punu mask. With Dalton Somaré.

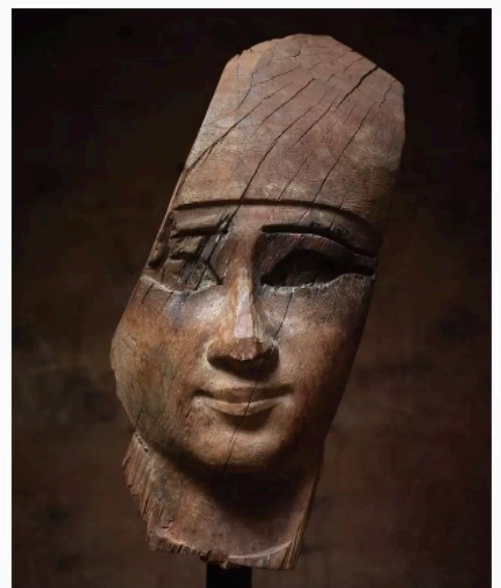


Fig 4 right: Egyptian wooden face. With Axel Vervoordt



Fig 5: A recently rediscovered gold, silver, enamel, diamond and opal peacock made by Philippe Wolfers. With Epoque Fine Jewels

work by Wolfers, a silversmith and sculptor, as well as jeweller, with Bernard De Leye of Uccle. His patinated-bronze ewer decorated with an orchid (**Fig 6**) is quintessential Art Nouveau.

Another of the many centres of Art Nouveau was Nancy in Lorraine, where Eugène Vallin

(1856–1922) was an architect and furniture-maker in the Horta manner. His walnut sofa (**Fig 1**) with the Parisian Galerie Mathivet perhaps owes something to Horta's sinuous bannister rails.

One of the characteristics of BRAFA is the wide variety on offer, from antiquities to *bandes dessinées*. Something of this is demonstrated by the heads and faces at the fair, including another Art Nouveau piece, a 14in-high earthenware bust of a girl made in about 1898 by Arthur Craco (1869–1955) and offered by Marc Heiremans of Antwerp. Craco trained as a traditional sculptor, but came to prefer working in ceramic rather than wood or stone and, in doing so, helped to boost the medium's standing.

One of the older offerings comes from the eminent Antwerp dealer and designer Axel Vervoordt. →

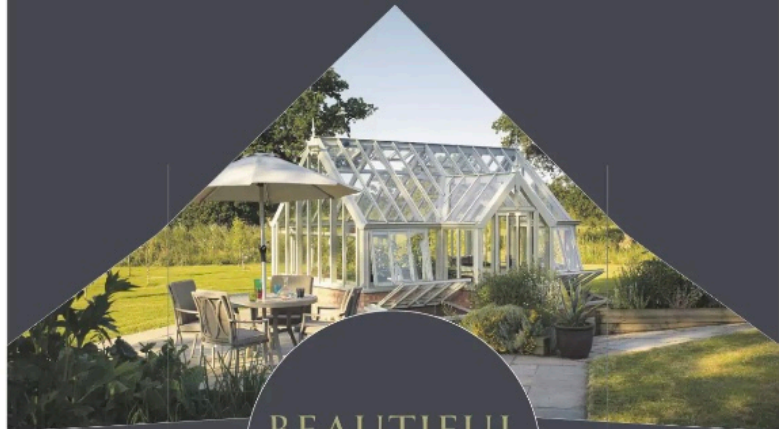


Fig 6: A fine patinated-bronze ewer by Philippe Wolfers. With Bernard De Leye



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Art market



This is a 17in-high wooden face (Fig 4) from an Egyptian coffin dateable to the Third Intermediate Period-Late Period (between 772BC and 426BC). Unlike outer mummy cases, this inner coffin was probably inlaid, but never painted, wood being rare and valuable. The face would have had a false beard, the attribute of Osiris, whose protection was desired in the journey to the afterlife.

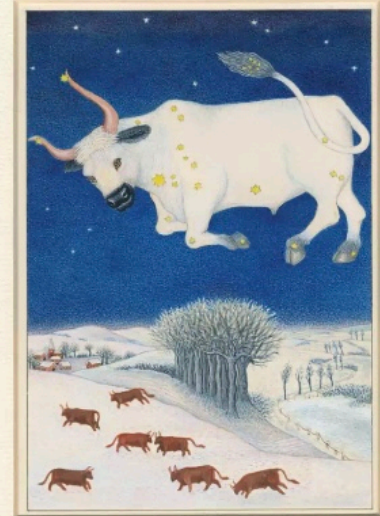
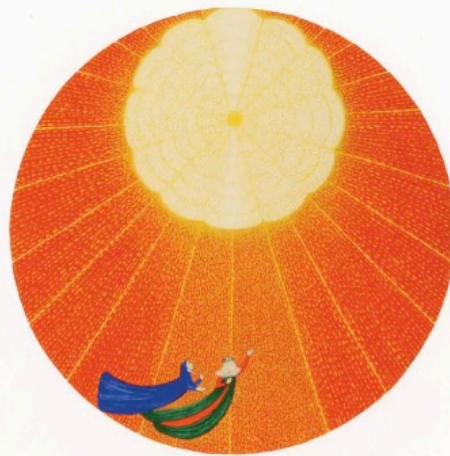
Although the performers of *mukudj* stilt dances among the Punu people of southern Gabon were male, their masks were likenesses of the most beautiful women in the community. The carved wood was painted with white kaolin to invoke spirits. This fine late-19th-century example (Fig 3) is with Dalton Somaré from Milan.

Naturally, 17th-century Flemish painting will be represented. I am looking forward to seeing a pair of 5½in diameter heads of a *Landsknecht* and a peasant woman by the younger Pieter Brueghel (Fig 7) with De Jonckheere of Geneva and a 53in by 62½in family group (Fig 8) described as Antwerp School, about 1620, with Klaas Muller of Brussels. The *Landsknecht*, or German mercenary soldier, is based on one by Brueghel's father, but, unusually, is more lively, and the woman is sweet-featured. The family group movingly expresses humanity and kinship. There is an intriguing tension between the protectively circling arms and the slightly anxious expressions of the adults. Could the Diana of Ephesus fountain suggest that the mother might be pregnant again? 🐣

Next week Signs and wonders



Fig 7 far left: A portrait of a peasant woman by Pieter Brueghel the Younger. With De Jonckheere. Fig 8 left: A painting of a family group, described as Antwerp School, about 1620. With Klaas Muller



Pick of the week

As so often, the writer and novelist Dame Marina Warner gets it right. She says of Monika Beisner's work that 'illuminations' in both senses of the word is a more apt description than 'illustrations': 'Her pictures illuminate the stories she tells, and they also resemble the jewel-like images found in medieval and renaissance manuscripts.' I am equally surprised and thrilled that I have not come across Frau Beisner before. Her children's books were coming out during the years that bedtime reading was a high point in my day, but, somehow, I missed her *Heavenly Zoo* (1979) (above right), *Fabulous Beasts* (1981), *Book of Riddles* (1983), *Topsy Turvy* (1987) and others. Now, as a recent grandfather, I have another chance to discover them, but first I must visit her exhibition, 'Forest of Things' at the Art Space Gallery in Islington, N1 (January 20–March 3; www.artspacegallery.co.uk).

The German artist excels in the use of both watercolour and pen and ink and, although her drawings are full of treats for art historians—here a dash of the Limbourg brothers, there a pinch of Sendak or a twist of Tenniel—the confections are entirely her own, infused with poetry, mystery and wit. In the present century, she has turned her hand and eye to older literature, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (above left) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with the oldest poem of all, *Gilgamesh*, in the works.