

# ELLE DECORATION COUNTRY

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# MEDIEVAL MODERN

*Arguably the world's leading interior designer, Axel Vervoordt has a reputation for melding the simple and the opulent. His rambling 12th-century castle near Antwerp, filled with a vast collection of contemporary art and antiquities, is a showcase for his talents*









Built in the 16th century and featuring an onion dome, the gatehouse lies on the east side of the moat and is the main entrance to the rest of Axel Vervoordt's castle



**B**elgian luminary Axel Vervoordt is regarded as one of the world's most original interior designers. He's also an adventurous collector and art dealer with a profound knowledge of history and fine art. Despite this, his work remains remarkably accessible, spanning multiple eras and cultures. The Axel Vervoordt Company was established in the 1960s when Axel acquired 16 Renaissance houses in the Vlaeykensgang – a narrow alleyway in Antwerp. The inventiveness of his restoration of the properties gained him instant recognition.

By 1984, the business had outgrown its urban location, so Axel and his wife May relocated to s'Gravenwezel Castle, which is just north of Antwerp. Ahead of them lay an exciting four-year mission to uncover the history of this 12th-century building, which had undergone numerous alterations over the years. The most significant of these occurred in 1740, when it was

rebuilt as a contemporary country mansion by the eminent Antwerp-based architect Jan-Pieter van Burscheit the Younger, who updated the castle with a fascinating mix of 15th- and 18th-century architecture. The closed courtyard was replaced by a magnificent terrace, from which a stone bridge led across the moat to the surrounding park. Another bridge was built on the eastern side of the terrace to connect the gatehouse, coach house and stables.

The castle has 50 rooms, each now decorated in a different scheme to display Axel's and May's collection of priceless antiques and paintings. There's a sense of the past being gradually revealed as you move from room to room – a narrative that incorporates pieces ranging from ancient Egyptian vessels, Renaissance bronzes and Régence-style pieces to contemporary paintings by leading international artists.

Perhaps most notable is Axel's interest in oriental art and Eastern philosophy, which encompasses diverse movements such as Taoism and Zen Buddhism. This is manifested in a collection of serene and understated spaces that were designed for reflection, the newest additions being inspired by the Japanese spirit of *wabi-sabi*, which embraces transience and imperfection. 'The lack of decoration encourages one to appreciate the silence and instils a deep sense of spiritual freedom,' says Axel.

In true Vervoordt style, nothing in the house is faddish or fashionable – the entire interior is infused with a timeless purity that allows it to remain relevant. 'It's a universal vision that is above fashion,' the designer explains.

'From this, new ideas will always surface.'

[axel-vervoordt.com](http://axel-vervoordt.com)











In the entrance hall, a Louis XV bench sits beneath a painting by Victor Vasarely and an 18th-century French chandelier. A set of chairs in the same style line the walls



A number of rooms have oriental-style interiors that reflect Axel's interest in Eastern philosophy and *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese design ethos centred on the beauty of imperfection













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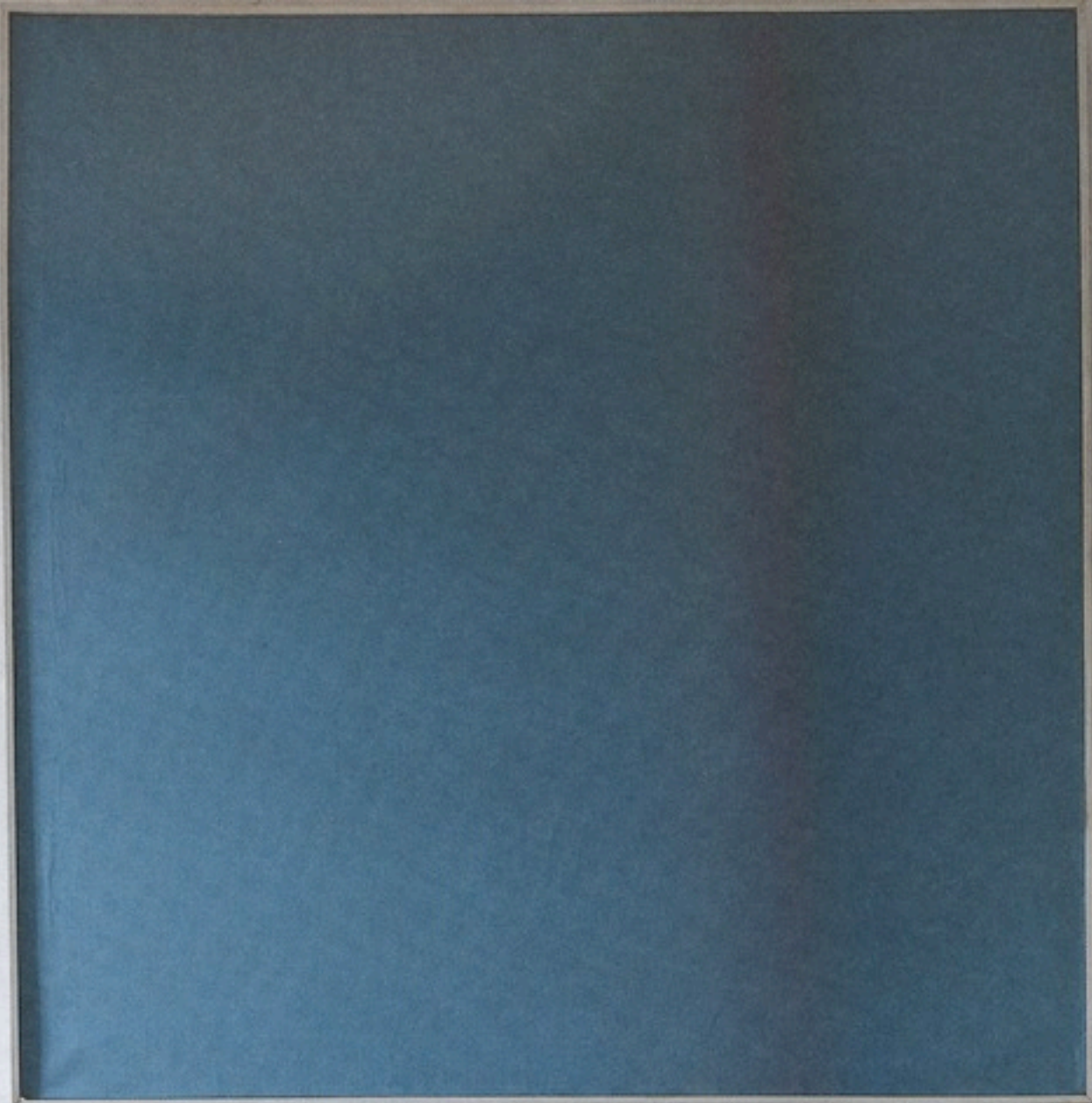


The Oriental Salon on the first floor is a comfortable place to relax. The painting behind the sofa is a 1958 piece by Kimiko Ohara, while the standing sculpture originates from tenth-century Thailand









**Kitchen** The blue cupboard is a French design dating from the 18th century  
**Cellar** A painting by Belgian artist Jef Verheyen sits above a hollowed-out log









**Cellar** A selection of glassware sits beneath a painting by Flemish artist Frans Snyder.  
**Reception room** A blue artwork by Jef Verheyen contrasts with a marble bust









*Library* The tall, open shelving unit is a cabinet of curiosities  
*Staircase* An Italian bench is paired with a painting by Otto Piene titled *Nachstück*



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*Hallway* The door opens into the Red Bedroom  
*Bathroom* Above the antique Italian marble bath  
in the Venetian Bathroom is a rare Roman frieze





The Venetian Bedroom has a muted palette and a wooden *trompe-l'œil* floor



