



RENAISSANCE MAN

Designer Axel Vervoordt's magnanimous castle on the outskirts of Antwerp, Belgium is a testament to the talent of one of the great tastemakers of our time

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PERSONAL GALLERY

The original carriage room is now used for concerts and entertaining. The table is designed by the homeowner and designer Axel Vervoordt, and the treasures scattered around the room include a replica sculpture of Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* (left), a rare 16th-century Madonna with child (back left) and an 18th-century urn (back, on plinth) by Jan Pieter van Boursheit the Younger, the architect who renovated the castle in 1745.



RUSTIC LIVING

An Axel Vervoordt Home Collection 'Brian 275' sofa is combined with a selection of rough-hewn country furniture in a small sitting room in one of the outbuildings' old beamed hayloft.

SPACE FOR EXHIBITION

In the Loft Room, which hosts pottery classes, a plank and disc from the 2007 'Artempo: Where Time Becomes Art' exhibition—which Vervoordt curated at the Venice Biennale—are displayed as artworks. Vervoordt designed the black slate table.





Axel Vervoordt occupies an exceptional place in the art and design world. A celebrated art collector, curator, antiquarian and interior designer, his knowledge and personal philosophy has resulted in a unique approach to design. His timeless, yet accessible aesthetic has garnered him a client list that includes Calvin Klein, Robert De Niro, Kanye West and Sting.

Vervoordt's interiors contrast classic antiques and contemporary art with rustic pieces and ethnic treasures. Centuries and cultures collide to create a dialogue between old and new, East and West. Yet his overriding penchant is for simplicity. His spaces are tranquil and relaxed and seem to have evolved naturally. Vervoordt says, "I try to create spaces that do more than please the eye, but allow for quiet contemplation and reflection. Silence is golden."

APPLYING ONESELF

His 2010 book, *Wabi Inspirations*, in collaboration with Japanese architect Tatsuhiro Miki, illustrated another approach to his work. "Wabi" is my interpretation of an enlightened Japanese philosophy [wabi-sabi] that values the beauty of imperfection and things in their simplest, most natural state," Vervoordt explains. His 2013 book, *Living With Light*, shows the depth and

breadth of his company's work and demonstrates that his interiors correspond to a philosophy rather than an expression of style or fashion.

This philosophy is executed with great panache in his family home, the 12th-century medieval Kasteel van 's-Gravenwezel on the outskirts of Antwerp, where Vervoordt showcases his work and displays art and antiques for his clients to view. Rich in history and romance, the castle has withstood wars, family feuds and the loss of fortunes.

When Axel and May Vervoordt bought the property in 1984, it had undergone numerous alterations—many of which were out of character with the architecture's integrity—so the couple undertook a two-year restoration programme. "This took an inordinate amount of time and was no easy task," Vervoordt says. "Despite wanting to simplify things, we

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MIX AND MATCH

This neoclassical headboard and a Chinese vase converted into a lamp adorn the Red Bedroom in the old hayloft.

(Facing page, from top)

ART HOUSE

In the Manoir Room, a collection of 18th-century French furniture mixes with the Axel Vervoordt Home Collection 'Eric 290' sofa and 'Howard' club chair; above the fireplace is Ida Barbarigo's 1964 painting, *Fabio Ti Buttano Per Terra*; on the left wall is *Lente* (1968) by Jef Verheyen, and behind the shutters near the window is *Work (#34)* (1985), by Japanese artist Chiyu Uemae. The library dedicated to botanical books is decorated with 19th-century French pottery.





GREEN ROOM
Looking into the new orangery, an Axel Vervoordt Home Collection 'Brian 275' sofa sits in front of a rough-hewn country table. A 19th-century French pottery bowl is displayed in the foreground.

< were very careful to respect those alterations made by previous owners that were in keeping with the original style.”

A REINTERPRETATION

The most recent renovations, to the castle’s outbuildings, were finally completed in 2014, precipitated by Vervoordt’s son Boris’s wedding on the estate, which underlined the need for more guest bedrooms and reception spaces.

Originally comprising the gatehouse, stables, carriage houses, haylofts, grooms’ and coachmen’s quarters, these external buildings were added to the east of the castle in about 1740, when the entire structure was rebuilt as a country mansion by the eminent Antwerp architect Jan Pieter van Burscheit the Younger. “The man was a visionary,” Vervoordt says. “His finest achievement was to demolish a dingy enclosed courtyard and replace it with a magnificent terrace and a pair of opposing stone bridges, one leading to the castle grounds, the other across the moat to the outbuildings and entrance.”

Today these outbuildings are a fascinating mix of 15th- and 18th-century architecture, while providing a transition between the castle courtyard and the formal gardens beyond. At an early stage, Vervoordt added a swimming pool and pool house to the south of the old stables and original orangery. In 1986, a new orangery was created in the north end of the formal gardens to cover plants in winter and provide an evocative setting for family lunches.

SHARED LEGACIES

On the ground floor, in the main group of outbuildings, a suite of large reception rooms is decorated in different styles to underscore Vervoordt’s diversity as an interior designer. In the old coach house, now used for concerts or as a large dining space, ancient urns, fragmented Roman and Hellenic statues, and medieval salvaged architectural stone relief work adorn the room.

Next to the old coach house, the Loft Room, decorated in Vervoordt’s ‘wabi’ style, is used for pottery classes and is filled with antiques and a mix of contemporary and Japanese Gutai artworks. “Here time has become art,” he explains. “The beauty of its walls and contents are enhanced by the caress of the centuries and benign neglect.”

The Loft Room leads to the French-influenced Manoir Room: a comfortable place to sit by the fire on one of the sofas or club chairs from the Axel Vervoordt Home Collection. This leads on to smaller living and dining rooms, all in different styles. There is also a library devoted to a collection of garden books and journals, and adorned with antique maps of the property and Provençal pottery. The top floor, where hay was stored and grooms and coachmen once slept, has now been converted into simple but comfortable guest bedrooms. As Vervoordt explains: “Under the ancient wooden rafters, where man has left his mark, you still get a feel for the practical purposes of these buildings.”

Thanks not only to these intriguing outbuildings, but also to the estate’s ever-evolving collection of art and furniture, this ancient castle has taken on a new energy and modern-day relevance under the tenure of Axel and May Vervoordt. The feeling that these inspired spaces have always been part of the castle’s centuries-old legacy is the greatest possible testament to the couple’s talents. ❖

(Clockwise from this picture)

LARGER THAN LIFE

The 18th-century orangery windows are reflected in the new pool, which has been carefully landscaped to fit with the architectural style of the old buildings; an ancient wisteria vine—manicured for many years—creates shade over an outdoor seating area. The view in the morning, from the main terrace to the castle outbuildings across the 18th-century stone bridge built by Van Bourscheit. The view of the north tower of Kasteel van 's-Gravenwezel and the gatehouse through the large doors of the old carriage house.



