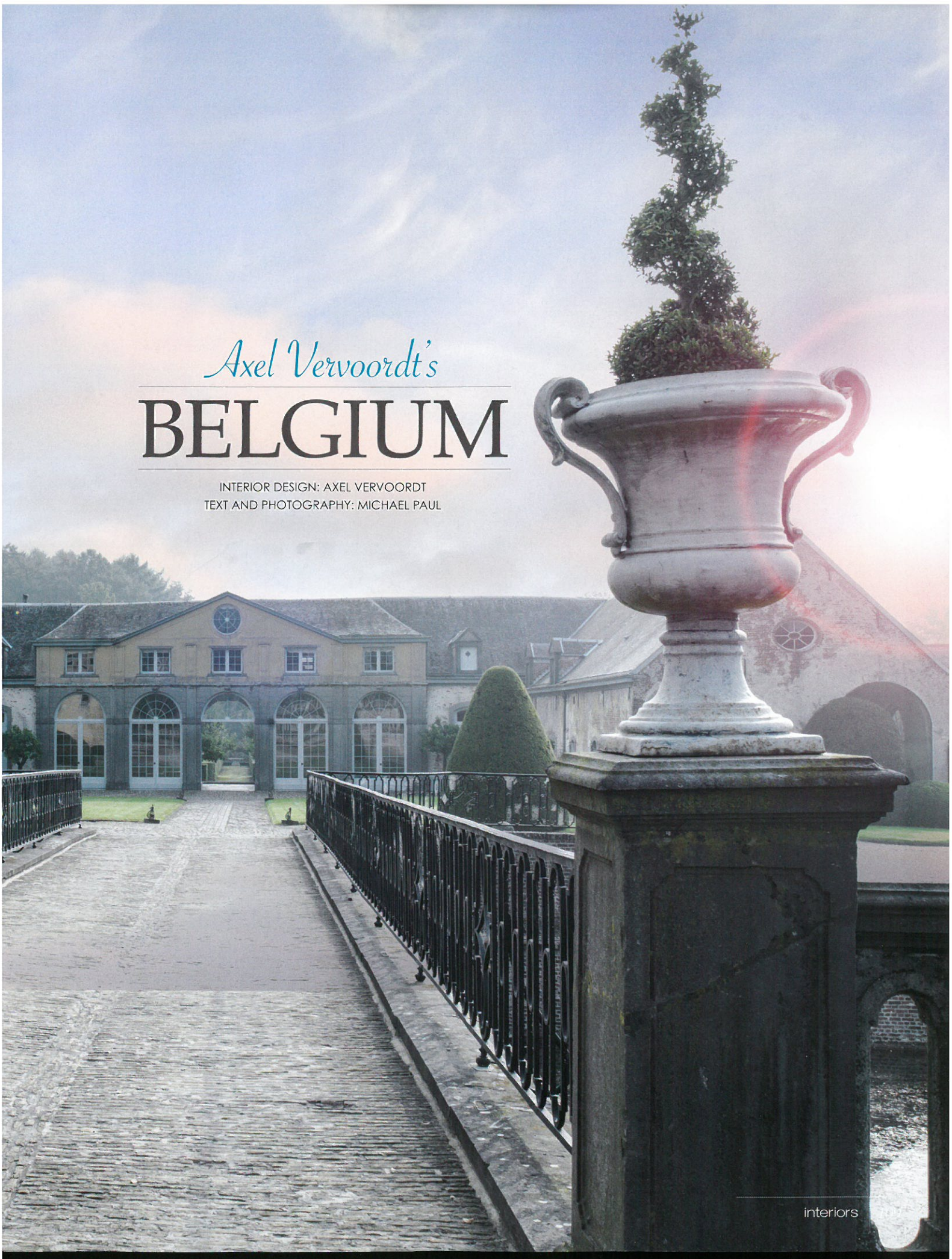
interiors

$7.99 05
09281 02699 0



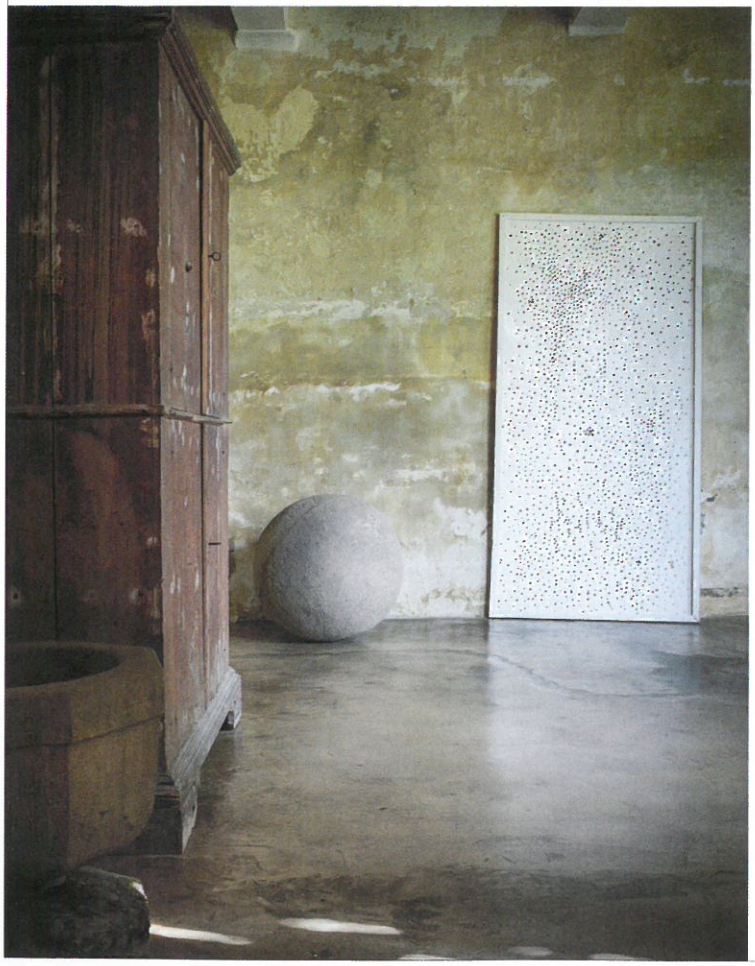
Axel Vervoordt's BELGIUM

INTERIOR DESIGN: AXEL VERVOORDT
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL PAUL

Celebrated collector, curator, antiquarian and interior designer

Axel Vervoordt occupies an exceptional place in the world of art and design. His wealth of knowledge and his profound personal philosophy have resulted in a distinctive aesthetic, a prestigious client list and enduring popularity. His "rough-yet-refined look" combines noble materials, classic antiques and contemporary art with rustic pieces and ethnic treasures. Different centuries and cultures collide to create a dialogue between old and new, East and West, rich and poor. Yet his overriding penchant is for simplicity. His spaces are calm, tranquil and relaxed, and they seem to have evolved in a natural, unforced way. "I try to create spaces that do more than please the eye," says Vervoordt. "They allow for quiet contemplation and reflection. Silence is golden."

His recent book *Wabi Inspirations,* on which he collaborated with Japanese architect Tatsuro Miki, captivated the design world. "*Wabi* is my interpretation of an enlightened Japanese philosophy that values the beauty of imperfection and things in their simplest, most natural state," Vervoordt explains. As the book illustrates, the defining factor that sets his understated *wabi* spaces apart is a purity and harmony based on ancient wisdom coded in tradition and ritual. That said, Vervoordt's most recent book, *Living with Light,* shows the breadth of his company's work, demonstrating that his taste corresponds to a way of life rather than to one specific style or fashion.



That philosophy is evident in Vervoordt's family home, the 12th-century Kasteel van 's-Gravenwezel on the outskirts of Antwerp, where the designer showcases his work and displays art and antiques for clients. Rich in history and romance, the medieval castle has intriguing stories to tell. Over the centuries it has withstood wars, family feuds and the loss of fortunes. When Vervoordt and his wife, May, acquired it in 1984, the building had undergone numerous alterations—many of which were out of character with the integrity of the architecture—so they undertook a two-year restoration to "cleanse" the castle and rid it of unnecessary additions. "This took an inordinate amount of time and was no easy task," states Vervoordt. "However, despite wanting to simplify things, we were very careful to respect those alterations made by previous owners that were in keeping with the original style." A building of this age and size is forever being repaired or refurbished, but the most recent renovations, those to the castle's outbuildings, were completed only last year. (They were precipitated by the wedding celebrations that his son, Boris, held on the estate, which underscored the need for more guest bedrooms and reception spaces.)

Originally comprising the gatehouse, stables, carriage houses, hay lofts, and grooms' and coachmen's quarters, these external buildings were added to the east of the castle around 1740, when the entire castle was rebuilt as a contemporary country mansion by the eminent Antwerp architect Jan-Pieter van Baurscheit the Younger. "The man was a visionary," says Vervoordt. "His finest achievement was to demolish a dingy enclosed courtyard and replace it with a magnificent terrace and a matching pair of opposing stone bridges, one leading to the castle grounds and the other across the moat to the outbuildings and entrance." Today these outbuildings are a fascinating mix of 15th- and 18th-century architecture, and they provide a transition between the castle courtyard and the elaborate formal gardens beyond. At an early stage Vervoordt added a swimming pool and pool house to the south of the old stables and orangerie. Although strategically hidden from view, these new elements are integrated with the architecture and surroundings. In 1986 a new orangerie was created at the north end of the formal gardens to provide a setting for intimate family lunches, which are often enjoyed under the spreading boughs of an ancient apple tree.

On the ground floor in the main group of outbuildings, an enfilade of large reception rooms are decorated in different styles to display Axel 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 salvaged medieval architectural stonework provide sculptural interest. In an adjacent loft room, used for pottery classes, Vervoordt's *wabi* style instills an uplifting sense of spiritual freedom. "Here, time has become art," Vervoordt explains. "The beauty of the walls and contents are enhanced by the caress of centuries and years of benign neglect." The loft room leads to the Manoir room, a comfortable place to sit by a roaring fire on one of the opulent sofas or club chairs from the Axel Vervoordt Home Collection.

The larger rooms lead to a variety of smaller sitting areas and dining rooms, all done in different styles and providing intimate spaces for guests or family to gather. There is even a library room devoted to an impressive collection of garden books and journals and adorned with decorative garden ornaments, antique maps of the property and Provencal pottery. On the top floor, where hay was once stored and grooms and coachmen slept side by side, simple but comfortable guest bedrooms now occupy the spaces. "Here, under the ancient wooden rafters where man has left his mark, you still get a feel for the practical purposes of these buildings," Vervoordt notes.

Kasteel van 's-Gravenwezel has been enriched by these intriguing outbuildings, whose diverse rooms and delightful gardens are a tribute to the talents of Axel and May Vervoordt. Under their stewardship, and with an ever-evolving collection of art, furniture and unique interiors, this ancient castle has taken on a new energy and a modern-day relevance. Yet despite the contemporary spirit that pervades these rooms today, there is an abiding sense that these inspirational spaces have always been part of the castle's centuries-old legacy. ▪

Axel Vervoordt axel-vervoordt.com