

Renaissance man

Designer, curator and antiquarian, *Axel Vervoordt's* latest renovations to his family's castle are a testament to all his talents.

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The original carriage room is now used for concerts and entertaining. The table is designed by 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 (lower left) and an 18th-century urn (back, right) by Jan Pieter van Duynhoven the Younger, the architect who renovated the castle in 1745. Details, last pages.

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."

His 2012 book, *Wabi Inspirations*, in collaboration with Japanese architect Tatsuro 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 most recent 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. »





An Axel Vergeerdt Home Collection 'Brian 275' sofa is combined with a selection of rough-beam country furniture in a small sitting room in the old outbuildings old barned barloft. OPPOSITE PAGE: in the Loft Room, red velvet pottery, chairs, a plank and blue from the 1920s. White Time Becomes 24c exhibition, which Vergeerdt curated at the Venice Biennale, are displayed at the Vergeerdt. Vergeerdt designed the black slate table.

THIS ANCIENT CASTLE HAS TAKEN ON A NEW ENERGY AND A MODERN-DAY RELEVANCE UNDER THE VERVOORDTS' TENURE



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 program. "This took an inordinate amount of time and was no easy task," Vervoordt says. "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."

The most recent renovations, to the castle's outbuildings, were finally completed only last year, 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, hay lofts, 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 Bourselet 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 orangerie. In 1986 a new orangerie was created in the north end of the formal gardens to cover plants in winter and provide an evocative setting for family lunches.

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.

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 onto 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 Provencal pottery. The top floor, where hay was stored and grooms and coachmen once slept, has now been converted into simple but comfortable guest bedrooms.

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. *PL*

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 Lia Barbarelli's 1964 painting, Fabio To Buttano Per Terra. On the left wall is Lente (1968) by Jef Verheyen, and behind the shutters near the window is Work (234) (1985), by Japanese artist Chiyu Uemura.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: looking into the new orangery with an Axel Versteeg Home Collection 'From 175' until the library dedicated to botanical books and decorated with 18th-century French pastiche; the view of the castle's north tower and gatehouse seen from the old carriage house; this neoclassical headboard and a Chinese vase converted into a lamp adorn the Red Bedroom in the old bachelors' wing; the view of the castle's north tower and gatehouse seen from the old carriage house; this neoclassical headboard and a Chinese vase converted into a lamp adorn the Red Bedroom in the old bachelors' wing; the view of the castle's north tower and gatehouse seen from the old carriage house; this neoclassical headboard and a Chinese vase converted into a lamp adorn the Red Bedroom in the old bachelors' wing.

In the new orangery, built in 1986, an Axel Verwoerd Home Collection Brian 275 sofa faces a rustic table, while behind it two 18th-century iron urns rest on 19th-century sculptor's tables. A French pottery bowl sits beside the sofa.

