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Les XX in the City: An Artists’ Neighborhood in Brussels

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Abstract
In this article we focus upon the spatiality of the artistic circle Les XX, in Belgium and in Europe. We study the installation of the circle's members in both Brussels and the context of the city's local artistic geography. One zone seems to have been a focus of the group's creative and social life: the suburb of Ixelles, in particular, the neighborhood around the rue de l'Abbaye. This area was home to many artists, including Anna Boch, whose villa became a sort of second home to Les XX. Through cartographic analysis and the description of this environment, we bring into question the possible existence of an artistic neighborhood in Brussels at the turn of the 20th century.

Résumé
Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons à la spatialité du cercle des XX, à l'échelle belge et de l'Europe. Nous étudions ensuite l'inscription des vingtistes au sein du territoire bruxellois et de la géographie artistique locale. Un espace semble avoir polarisé la création et la sociabilité des XX : le faubourg d'Ixelles et, en particulier, les alentours de la rue de l'Abbaye. Celle-ci a hébergé de nombreux artistes, dont Anna Boch, qui fera de sa villa un foyer pour les XX. A travers une analyse cartographique et la description de cet environnement, nous questionnons l’existence d’un quartier artistique au tournant du 20ème siècle.
This research was conducted as part of an interdisciplinary project called “Culture, Mobility, Territory. Emergence and Transformation of Brussels’ Metropolitan Identity (18th-21st Centuries)” known by the acronym “MICM-arc.”

The project brings together historians, specialists on art, literature, and music, sociologists, geographers and urbanists in the goal of investigating the possible convergence between notions such as cultural neighborhoods, sites of mobility, and metropolitan identity, using maps and cartography as the principal tool of dialogue between disciplines.

In this article, we seek to show what cartography can bring to the study of a celebrated group of artists from Brussels, Les XX, as well as an emblematic member of their group, Anna Boch. It is our intention to revisit the questions of Les XX’s specificity by combining the study of art history and urban history in a reflection upon the notion of the artistic neighborhood.

Some of the questions we address include: Did there exist a particular “Brussels of Les XX” which might be definable through notable concentrations of artists in particular zones? Do these areas deserve the label “artistic neighborhoods”? What can they tell us about the urban and social structures of the city at the end of the 19th century? The members of Les XX were influential on both a national and international level at the turn of the century, but did they, in one way or another, leave their mark on the city of Brussels through their choice of residence, mutual proximity, mobility within, and usage of the cityscape? By seeking to reconstruct the space within which the members of Les XX circulated on a small scale, by considering where they came from (in the case of international members) and the areas which they occupied in Brussels, we also hope to question the specificity of this geography in comparison to both that of artists in general during the same period, and to their clients and patrons that frequented Les XX.

Following this analysis, we continue our inquiry at a local level, focalizing on the area around the rue de l’Abbaye – address of choice for many members of Les XX and their immediate circles. We focus in particular upon the house of an artist who, as a painter, musician, and art collector, as much as through the circles of sociability generated by her home and place of work, brought together artists and bourgeois art-lovers in a liminal zone of the expanding city.

The fact that certain cities or neighborhoods of today have greater concentrations of artists has caused researchers to question the limits and conditions of these areas. Taking their place in a line of theories on human capital and discourses on creative cities, much of this research has resulted in city rankings showing gradations in the concentration of artists or cultural industries, whereas others have been more concerned with showing the outlines of the zones occupied by artists on an intra-urban scale in a desire to analyze urban transformations and the economic redevelopment of particular neighborhoods.

Still other authors take a different approach, concentrating their analyses and reflections upon zones of artistic activity as a subject in and of itself. The presence of artists and cultural institutions is no longer seen as an element of economic growth


or the result of policies of urban renewal, but studied as an important, structuring dimension of contemporary cities. The work of geographers Boris Grésillon and Camille Boichot belongs to this category. Through the mapping of artistic activities in Berlin and Paris, both authors interpret the creation of these centers of artistic activity (centralités artistiques), their interactions, and their insertion within the urban landscape. Although Grésillon and Boichot use different methods and have different ambitions, as with the first two groups of studies, the contours of the zones they define result from the superposition of multiple dimensions of artistic endeavor (education, creation, dissemination, etc.). This superposition of function can also be found in the definitions created by historians and art historians interested in the spatial dimension of artistic phenomena (although only a few of them actually produce maps). Instigator of a thematic issue of Histoire urbaine devoted to artistic neighborhoods, Mélanie Traversier explains, “The ‘artistic neighborhood’ designates an infra-urban zone concentrating the activities of artistic creation and consumption, defined more or less as such by its participants.”

Alongside artists’ places of residence and the existence of “artists’ neighborhoods,” it is also necessary to consider the geography of artists’ working spaces, places of education and socializing, as well as those of other actors in the art world (critics, gallery owners, clients) to be able to define the contours of the artistic neighborhoods that compose urban cultural scenes and take part in the development of the city on a general level. Particular spaces and unique practices have been revealed through this sort of comprehensive analysis, such as the activities which brought together artists, antique dealers, and a bourgeois clientele in the developing suburbs of late 19th century Paris. As artistic neighborhoods are also spaces of human experience, other kinds of sources (interviews, correspondence, fictional stories, documentaries, etc.) can lend insights beyond those revealed through statistical sources.

Through the information found in the exhibition catalogs of Les XX and recollections of Anna Boch's home, we attempt to retrace the spaces of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique and their ramifications on a national and international level before investigating the development of a particular artists’ neighborhood centered around Boch’s domicile.

Brussels' Artistic Scene Studied on a Small Scale Using Les XX: A Macrogeographic Approach

Les XX

The group Les XX and its “successor,” La Libre Esthétique, have been the subject of numerous studies. Given the avant-garde logics of such circles, these studies tend to concentrate on the groups’ aesthetic choices, function, and exhibitions. The latter were marked by the desire to innovate – and an elite audience was attracted to the salons thorough a program of concerts, and lectures, and other activities. It is our desire to extend these studies by considering the role of space, posing questions about the residences and urban practices of the artists involved in Les XX and La Libre Esthétique.

The international perspective of these circles' salons, under the direction of their organizer, Octave Maus, contributed toward the

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7 It is only recently that cartographic efforts have multiplied notably specific research projects such as ARTL@S. See for example Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "ARTL@S: Une histoire spatiale et transnationale des arts. Origines et positions d’un programme de recherche," ARTL@S Bulletin For a Spatial History of Art and Literature 1, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 9-26; Félicite de Maupoue and La Saint-Raymond, "Cartographie des lieux d’exposition à Paris, de 1850 à nos jours," ARTL@S Bulletin 1, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 41-47.


10 Most recently, see for example the collective volume Bruxelles, convergence des arts (1880-1914), edited by Haine and Laoueux in 2013.
“deprovincializing” of Brussels. Maus, profiting from Brussels’ geographic position at a cultural intersection, hoped it would become a pioneering center of modern art, “avant-garde” in the truest sense of the term. He therefore sought out to discover new talent, be it in art, music, or theatre. Many other writers, critics, artists, and leaders of the Belgian art world hoped to play the role of trail-blazers, intermediaries, veritable midwives of an exchange between North and South, between Germanic and Latin cultures, perhaps with the idea of shifting the axes of cultural influence in Europe. In the mid-19th century, the romantic painter Antoine Wiertz had already dreamed of erecting Brussels as the capital of Europe and of constructing an axis running from London through Brussels to Berlin without passing through Paris! At the turn of the 20th century, Brussels seemed to finally reach this goal, shedding its peripheral position and provincial reputation, a shift in which Les XX surely played a certain role.

Considering Les XX and La Libre Esthétique from a geographic point of view allows for a departure from the approaches that have marked studies of these groups – more qualitative than quantitative, more aesthetic than sociological. While drawing from these previous studies, recent research has attempted to isolate the collective reasoning that motivated the salons, their organizers, artists, members, patrons, and publics. In her doctoral dissertation, “Un Monde pour les XX. Octave Maus et le groupe des XX : analyse d’un cercle artistique dans une perspective sociale,” Noémie Goldman concentrated upon the role played by the “protectors” of Les XX, the Brussels patrons and collectors that were central in the art market that emerged in the group’s wake.11 Thanks to her work, it is now possible to map the residential logic of the enlightened elite so involved in Octave Maus’s enterprise. Laurence Brogniez and Vanessa Gemis have looked into the presence of women in Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, which was far from limited, as it has often been implied, to that of Anna Boch (to whom we shall return further below).12 The study of addresses of women who showed art, sang, gave lectures, acted, and served as patrons or models to Les XX would allow for a “gendered” topography of this turn of the century Brussels art microcosm while also revealing the urban practices of a particular group of Brussels women during the period.

What Exhibition Catalogs Reveal

Every year during the ten years of Les XX’s existence, a salon was organized at the Palais des Beaux-Arts13 to allow the public to discover their latest work. A catalog was published for each salon, and today, these documents allow us to reconstitute the exhibitions and their related events. The catalogs reproduce not only the names of the forty-some artists whose work was shown, both members and guests, but their addresses as well. Using this information, it is possible, as has already been done for the artists of the Salons des Beaux-Arts in Brussels,14 to retrace the residential geography of the participating artists, not only for the city of Brussels but, to a lesser extent, for Europe. This information was encoded in a database and georeferenced to create maps which allow us to analyze the spatiality of Les XX, as well the extent of its networks on an international level.15

All of the addresses, including second homes, given by the artists participating in exhibitions from 1884 to 1893 were taken into consideration, whether residents of Brussels or beyond. At this stage in our research, we have not yet distinguished between individual years. The maps presented here combine the residencies of all of the exhibiting artists, members and guests, each of

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13 This is current Musée d’Art ancien, on the rue de la Régence, not to be confused with today’s Palais des Beaux-Arts/BOZAR, which was inaugurated just down the hill in 1928.


15 Of course, the material collected from catalogs is not sufficient for understanding the whole of Les XX’s networks – these were a mélange of personal and professional circles, both of the artists, their patrons, and that of the professionals of the art world (critics, dealers). Still, this information offers a first step toward situating the privileged foreign ties developed by Les XX.
which may be present at multiple addresses – be they second homes or the trace of address changes during the period in question.

Geographies of Les XX, from Europe to Brussels

On the occasion of their annual exhibitions, the “vingtistes” invited many foreign artists to show in their salons. They were chosen in function of their aesthetic affinities or the novelty of their work, but not allowed to show as many works as the actual members. A great number of the guest artists were French, and most of these were Parisian, as is illustrated in map 1. This translates the reality of 19th century art world, which centered on Paris long before London, New York and other international cities which would later appear on the map of 20th century avant-gardes. Many invited artists participated in the Les XX’s activities on multiple occasions: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Georges Seurat, and Alfred Besnard were present at four salons, Camille Pissarro, Philip Wilson Steer (Great Britain), and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (United States) showed work three times, as did other artists from The Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia. Artists from countries neighboring Belgium were the best represented.

Within Belgium, it is interesting to note where the artists from beyond Brussels lived. The best known among these is undoubtedly James Ensor, a member of Les XX who lived in Ostend and participated in every salon the group held. The coast was well represented through the towns of Ostend and Knokke (not to mention Scheveningen and The Hague, on the Dutch coast further north), as well as the Flemish cities of Antwerp and Ghent. The presence of Knokke is a reminder that the city was a prized destination for Belgian artists. Stays on the coast often played an important role in the development of social and artistic networks, and were an activity that took place outside of the capital. A group of artists even imagined creating a residence in Knokke through the Société Coopérative Artistique, confiding its design to the architect Paul Hankar before ultimately abandoning the project.16

Today, it is interesting to note a continued presence of artists in the area of Knokke and Ostend, thanks to the existence of numerous art galleries.17 Beyond the coast, the Belgian Ardennes were also a residence of choice among artists, attracted to the natural beauty of the region’s steep valleys.18 Fernand Khnopff, for example, declared a second address in the village of Fosset, with other artists listing second homes even farther afield (map 2).

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17 In 2007, the province of West Flanders contained some 22% of Belgium’s art galleries, a share equal to that of Brussels. Most of these were centered in Knokke and Ostend, Debroux, Ph.D. Dissertation, 304.
Many among the best known and wealthier artists often traveled and indicated a second address to which correspondence should be sent – often quite far from Brussels. Apart from the heiress Anna Boch, who had the occasion to travel regularly, Théo Van Rysselberghe and Frantz Charlet joined Dario de Regoyos in traveling to Tangier. Jan Toorop mentions an address in Jakarta, Indonesia, where he was born, as well as his home addresses, first in Brussels and later in The Hague.

In Brussels, the catalogues show some 130 different addresses, corresponding to about 40 different artists (map 3). Over the course of the period in question, address changes were frequent, translating to a reorientation of the city’s artistic geography to which we will return below.

The geographic distribution of the vingtistes and their guests in Brussels must be compared to the distribution of artists in general if we hope to distinguish any particular originality or conformity on their part. In map 3, along with the addresses collected from the salon catalogs from 1884 to 1893, we have added addresses found in the local directories (the *Annuaires du Commerce et de l’Industrie*, published by Mertens & Rosez), found under the headings “Peintres-artistes” and “Sculpteurs” for the years 1881 and 1901. The data from the directories predate and postdate that of the vingtistes and offer a more general picture of the distribution of artists in Brussels in the last decades of the 19th century, thanks to both the greater number and broader social range of artists listed.

The resulting maps suggest several interesting observations. Generally speaking, the distribution of Les XX followed trends observed among artists in general. Artists preferred to live in the close suburbs rather than the city center, which was more expensive, and this in spite of the center’s social and cultural importance. Artists also showed a marked preference for the eastern side of the Senne River Valley – including when they chose to live in the city center. This reflects a more global trend among Brussels’ petite bourgeoisie, and is a visible trace of Brussels’ artists gradual accession to a new social category over the course of the 19th century.19

The artist members of Les XX, an elite circle that brought together innovative artists (certain of which came from privileged backgrounds) and an enlightened bourgeoisie, often preferred the southeastern suburbs of Ixelles and Saint-Gilles to a greater degree than population of Brussels’ artists as a whole. These areas, which were developed some twenty years later than the northeastern suburbs of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and Schaerbeek (which counted the highest concentration of artists during the period), were home to a liberal bourgeoisie that was interested in artistic innovation. Members of this class constructed grand hôtels de maîtres, and became enthusiastic supporters of Art Nouveau and the avant-garde works they saw in neighboring European capitals. Given that the artists of Les XX were often issued from the same circles and classes, shared their tastes, and attended the same artistic and intellectual events, it is not surprising

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to see that they lived in close proximity to their clientele, even if their means generally led them to opt for more modest dwellings (map 4 compares the addresses of the subscribers and artists of Les XX in 1889).

This preference for the southeastern suburbs, when compared to the group of artists as a whole, is nevertheless also part of a general trend toward a new center of artistic activity and a relative shift in the artistic geography of the city that would create new concentrations in the last quarter of the 19th century. It is also interesting to note the individual movements of certain artists of Les XX over the course of the decade in question (map 5). Among the six artists to have listed three different addresses over the course of ten years, often at quite close intervals, five seem to have moved from north to south and toward the still semi-rural edges of the city limits, such as the rue de l’Abbaye, where Van Rysselberghe moved – an area we address in greater detail below.

The frequent address changes noted in our study stand as a reminder that maps never represent more than a fleeting and particular instant which could shift at any moment. This is the reason that it seemed necessary to envisage the movements of individual artists within larger, collective contexts which allow us to grasp the spatial logic of particular groups before focusing upon the distinguishing details of individual trajectories.

Similarly, it is possible to study smaller centers of artistic activity within the larger context of the
city’s development and its cultural poles. We will now focus our attention on one such group.

Map 5
Address changes of artists over the course of the decade 1884-1893. Names are at the last address.

An “Artists’ Neighborhood”
Around the House of Anna Boch: A Microgeographic Approach

We have already mentioned that Anna Boch was not the sole woman to have participated the activities of Les XX, but she was the only woman to be an official member, and her presence at the heart of the circle was enduring and decisive from the beginning. Born to a privileged milieu, cousin to Octave Maus, the organizer of Les XX's salons, Boch regularly exhibited her work with both Les XX, and later, La Libre Esthétique. As a collector and committed patron of the arts, she acquired works at the circle’s exhibitions including Gauguin’s Le Pouldu in 1889, Van Gogh’s La Vigne rouge in 1890, and Seurat’s La Seine à la Grande Jatte in 1892. These were artists whose paintings caused intense aesthetic debates and the purchase of their work can be interpreted as a veritable aesthetic statement.

Anna Boch was the student of Isidore Verheyden, another member of Les XX, who also owned a house on the rue de l’Abbaye.

Verheyden painted two portraits of Anna. The fact that she was careful to keep and display them, the first in her bedroom, the second in the front hall of her home, is testimony to the personal and artistic affinities between teacher and student. She would later distance herself from her former teacher, siding with Théo Van Rysselbergh in the debate over Neo-Impressionism that divided Les XX in 1888 and 1889. Van Rysselbergh lived in the rue de l’Abbaye before Anna Boch’s arrival, in a house built by his architect brother, Octave.
The Rue de l’Abbaye

In 1903, Anna Boch set up house at number 26, rue de l’Abbaye, a house which has since been destroyed. It was designed in 1901 by the architect Paul Hermanus whom Boch asked to integrate the decorative elements designed by Victor Horta for her former home situated on the avenue de la Toison d’or.

The rue de l’Abbaye could have been considered an “artists’ street” – indeed, this was how Anna Boch saw it:

My future house continues to develop on paper [...] I think it will be a nice little home20 for my old age? It’s a street where artists, musicians, and painters live – we ought to have fun together a few more times.21

Apart from Verheyden and Van Rysselberghe, the rue de l’Abbaye attracted Constantin Meunier, also a member of Les XX. Anna Boch, one of his first admirers, would acquire two of his sculptures. His former house and atelier is now a museum dedicated to his work. On the same side of the street one notes the presence of another artist from Boch’s collection, Henri Cassiers, as well as the pianist Théo Ysaÿe, brother of the celebrated violinist Eugène Ysaÿe and one of the pillars of Les XX’s concerts. Both Ysaÿe brothers were faithful participants in the “musical Mondays” that made Boch’s house a center of cultural and social life.

The 1903 directory shows that the Rue de l’Abbaye housed another musician, Duart, as well as a framer (figure 4). The streets in the immediate vicinity were also home to painters and sculptors that, although not members of Les XX, completed Boch’s artistic environment (map 6).

20 In English in the original.
21 Translated letter from Anna Boch to Anna Nelis, Meise, arch. Wim Pas, in Thérèse Thomas and Cécile Duhée, Anna Boch. 1848-1936 (Tournai: La Renaissance du Livre, Morlanwelz, Musée royal de Mariemont, 2000), 123, endnote 37.
The front hall, hung with notable works from her collection, was organized around a grand staircase ornamented by a slender metal column topped with a light (designed by Horta). It is known that Anna Boch commissioned a mural painting by Maurice Denis to decorate the front hall and the landing of the staircase, but this project unfortunately never came to fruition.

Figure 4
Composition of the Rue de l'Abbaye in 1903. Not yet fully urbanised, the street counts nevertheless 3 visual artists, 2 musicians and one framer. One can still notice the rural aspect of the street with the presence of a country house, a "maison de campagne" at number 32.
Source: Mertens & Rosez, 1903 (digitalization: Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles)

Figure 5
Rue de l'Abbaye (demolished). Plan of the ground floor of Anna Boch's mansion, arch. Paul Hermanus, 1901. On the right, the large salon where the artist used to receive her guests for her 'Musical Mondays.' Source: Archives communales d'Ixelles, ACI/Eth. 312-282 (1901)

Boch also had a studio and a large music room where she organized numerous concerts that were well attended by Brussels' artistic elite. Participants recalled that on certain crowded evenings, guests often had to sit on the stairs. The music room was the heart of the house and had been designed to contain an organ of considerable dimension. It was here that some of the most beautiful works from Boch's collection hung, including Gauguin's Le Pouldu.

Anna Boch’s “musical Mondays” were well known and she often played in them herself (she played the piano, the organ, and the violin) before showing her atelier to her guests. Her salons served as a sort of antechamber to the expositions of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, as well as a

Inside Anna Boch’s House

The arrangement of Boch’s house, both its architecture and its decoration, reveals how social standing, artistic identity, and aesthetic stance can be combined and translated in spatial terms.22

Map 6
The artistic population in the area around the rue de l’Abbaye and Anna Boch’s house (*) in 1901.
Source: Exhibition catalogs of Les XX (1884-1893); Mertens and Rosez almanacs (1881 & 1901). Base maps: ICM, 1893; ICM, 1930 (Copyright: IGEAT)

rehearsal space (Maus rehearsed a chorus of young girls there with the intention of creating a Chorale des XX). The “salon de musique” also opened upon the garden, a space which was no less important to the artist.

Au jardin

Anna Boch’s house was built on a substantial plot of land which afforded the artist a large garden of which she was particularly fond. Her home was situated in a neighborhood with a particular atmosphere that was linked to its site on the edge of the spreading city. Plans from the period show that when Anna Boch moved into her home on the rue de l’Abbaye, there remained a number of unbuilt parcels on her street and throughout the area (see the background of map 6, showing the area ten years before Anna Boch arrived). Large villas adjoined lengths of street built in townhouses, and the directories of the 1890s mention a number of “country houses” that still stood in the area – houses one passed on the popular strolls when leaving the grand avenues to go to the Bois de la Cambre. Passers-by also saw Anna Boch’s house, with her first name on the pediment, lending it a suburban appearance.

Who among Brussels’ promeneurs is not familiar with the exterior of the grand pavilion of gray brick and white stone? Vines and roses dispute its walls and wisteria entwines itself upon the balconies. A bed of hydrangea hides the basements. It presents itself, somewhat askew, on the corner of the chaussée de Vleurgat and the rue de l’Abbaye, the corner of a vast garden that surrounds it with lawns and parterres. An Italian poplar attracts one’s attention. Out of respect for the handsome tree and its branches, which, one might say, serves as its emblem, the entrance side of the imposing home curves inward to enclose the tree between its wings, which are connected by a glass and metal awning...24

23 Madeleine Octave Maus, Trente années de lutte pour l’art 1884-1914 (Bruxelles: L’oiseau bleu, 1926).
24 Translated description by the critic Lucien Jottrand, a habitué of Anna Boch’s home – Thomas and Dulière, Anna Boch. 1848-1936.
This suburban environment, on the edge of the expanding city, is characteristic of the spaces that attracted artists during the second half of the 19th century, first in the suburbs northeast of the pentagonal trace of the former city walls, and later to the southeast and east. Henry Van de Velde in Uccle, Auguste Oleffe in Auderghem and Constant Montald in Woluwé-Saint-Lambert are among the famous artists who found refuge on the outskirts of Brussels and whose houses attracted other artists to the zones beyond the capital's center.

Midway between the city and the country, in areas still spared from the housing pressure that made the price of real estate climb, these neighborhoods were an extension of the bourgeois fabric of the city that allowed artists to find the contradictory conditions they sought – proximity to the city center without paying the price, but situated in the natural environments they so assiduously frequented.

Through the representations they gave of their daily environment, there also spread, among their bourgeois clientele, a taste for nature, promenades, and the bucolic neighborhoods where the artists themselves had moved. The cohabitation of creators and their bourgeois clientele in the city suburbs is a result of multiple interests which provided both parties with the advantages they sought (economic accessibility, the affirmation of an elite social status, mutual frequentation, the possibility of art patronage). The valorization of nature through public declarations and the creation of associations where artists and the bourgeoisie also crossed paths, was an implicit translation of the intellectuals’ stance to preserve the city’s remaining periurban natural spaces, threatened by modernization and the city’s development. The canvases painted by the “painters of the Forêt de Soignes” serve as sounding boards of this phenomenon, expressing through art the need for the forest’s preservation. By taking part in the 1904 foundation of the circle Vie et Lumière, a group of artists from the Libre Esthétique that wished to create a particular development of outdoor painting, Anna Boch herself took part in this movement, her inspiration often coming from her garden and her surroundings.

Provisory Conclusion

The initial results of our research trace the outlines of the space inhabited by Les XX, including the homes of its members and the guest artists of its salons. Although the majority of those affiliated with the circle came from Brussels, one of its founding ambitions, openness toward the international scene, is quite perceptible. To the artists from other Belgian cities can be added artists from other European countries (with the exception of the American Whistler), whose origins tend to be concentrated in neighboring countries, and primarily, Paris. This reflects not only the state of artists’ mobility during the period, but also the extreme importance the French capital played in the art world. Although certain artists hoped to remove themselves from this influence and establish Brussels as a cultural capital, this did not mean abandoning contact with the Parisian avant-garde, which was itself interested by the innovation that was happening in Brussels.

The space studied here is also a space of sociability in which artists crossed paths with and met the art collectors that were the circle’s patrons. One of them, Anna Boch, was both artist and collector, a cosmopolitan woman, and musician, a figure around which the milieu of Les XX tended to gravitate – all reasons for which it seemed pertinent to study her case. Residing first at the avenue de la Toison d’or, where she was close to many of Les XX’s subscribers, she later moved to a suburban house in the rue de l’Abbaye. During the musical salons organized by Boch, often preludes to official events organized by the circle to which numerous people were invited, the rue de l’Abbaye became a veritable center of activity for

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25 As in the case with the Amis de la Forêt de Soignes, an association created in 1909 by the outdoor painter René Stevens.  
26 Emmanuel Van de Putte, Les peintres de la Forêt de Soignes (Bruxelles: Racine, 2009).
the artists of the group. Because many of them lived in the same street or neighborhood, an area which was still only partially urbanized, at the heart of which social networks existed (beyond the “musical Mondays,” as the relationships Anna Boch shared with many of her neighbors), it seems possible to qualify the zone as an artists’ neighborhood.

The presence of a framer in the neighborhood in 1901 seems to foreshadow the activity that was taking place in the local studios – it also calls for a more in-depth study of other dimensions of artistic creation and its reception. This would allow us to compare the geography of artists (on small and large scale) with that of their protectors, their critics and dealers, and other actors linked to their profession, as well as the spaces of their exhibition and education. With this information in hand, it would be possible to reflect upon the existence to artistic neighborhoods in which all of these dimensions are taken into account, and to establish, if needed, a typology capable of distinguishing between various sorts of neighborhoods, such as those that were predominantly residential, as was visibly the case with the area around the rue de l’Abbaye.

It would also be useful to enlarge this study’s perspectives by working on other artists who took part in the activities of Les XX and La Libre Esthétique, as has already been done for women artists. Musicians, writers, critics, and actors all brought life to these circles, as did polyvalent figures of the art scene such as Edmond Picard, Octave Maus, and Camille Lemonnier. The paths of their residential trajectories were traced largely in the bourgeois southeastern suburbs and attracted artists, at times in great number, when they were welcomed to artistic events. Cécile Vanderpelen has already described this phenomenon in the case of Edmond Picard.27 The house of Lemonnier on the chaussée de Vleurgat was famous for having housed the association Jeune Belgique at the beginning of the 1880s:

At the bottom of the chaussée de Vleurgat, in Brussels, there was a little old bourgeois house, the garden of which, composed of a round lawn, looked out through a green lattice upon the long view of the old Ixelles ponds. [...] Who would have imagined that this little house that resembled so many others would play such a serious role in the history of literature in Belgium and abroad? With the ten or fifteen steps that led up to my “office” [...]; with, on the other side, the movement of those on a Sunday stroll down the country roads toward the hills of the Bois de la Cambre, it would take a place among other well-known houses. It was still in the suburbs, on the edge of the old faubourg of Ixelles.28

One other aspect that will need to be developed in future studies concerns the participation of foreign artists in Les XX’s activities – a guarantee of a certain amount of the aesthetic exchange and open mindedness desired by the circle’s founders. Its existence, as well as that of La Libre Esthétique, are often cited as factors of Brussels’ artistic attractiveness at the turn of the 20th century. But did these two circles truly serve as site of integration for foreign artists? What were the existing traditions in welcoming foreign artists to the city? Such an inquiry might profitably continue the work done by Saskia De Bodt on the Dutch colony in the city between 1850 and 1890,29 or that of Katia Vandenborre on Polish intellectuals in Brussels at the turn of the 20th century.30

Other players from abroad also deserve our attention for the key roles they played in the art world’s recognition of fin de siècle Brussels. These artistic intermediaries – gallery owners and dealers, critics, publishers – developed close ties with Paris and allowed the Brussels art scene to develop its own identity and affirm itself as a smaller, individual cultural capital.

29 Saskia de Bodt, Bruxelles colonie d’artistes : peintres hollandais 1850-1890 (Bruxelles : Crédit Communal, 1995).
The study of the spatial practices of these foreign actors, their insertion in local networks, their investment in institutions, their participation in local spatial dynamics, and the transposition of foreign practices to the Belgian capital would serve not only to refine the notion of the artistic neighborhood, but also redefine questions of mobility on both a local and European scale – ultimately allowing for a better understanding of the mechanisms that constitute the cultural identity of a city, constructed by taking neighboring major capitals as models and mirrors of its own development.

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