

# LOCALIZED ORNAMENTATION: ART NOUVEAU IN THE WORKS OF EISENSTEIN AND BASCOURT



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# Introduction

The architectural heritage of Art Nouveau is a unique phenomenon in which the style acquires distinct local features. This study focuses on the work of Mikhail Eisenstein and Joseph Bascourt, architects who have made significant contributions to the development of Art Nouveau in Riga and Antwerp. This work examines buildings on Alberta Street in Riga and the Zurenborg district in Antwerp, analyzing their façade composition, ornamentation, and symbolism. The research focuses on the localization of Art Nouveau. Based on this, a research question was formed: «How do the architectural contributions of Joseph Bascourt in Zurenborg, Antwerp, and Mikhail Eisenstein on Alberta Street, Riga, demonstrate the localization of Art Nouveau principles within the urban fabric of these cities, and what elements are used to achieve it? ».

The research methodology is based on a diverse approach. First, a visual analysis of the façades of buildings is carried out, including the study of ornamental details and compositions by visiting both locations. Next, the historical context of the creation of buildings is analyzed, which includes a study of archival materials and modern publications. Comparison is also used in the work to identify the common and different approaches of Eisenstein and Bascourt.

The structure of the study is organized as follows. The first chapter is devoted to the Art Nouveau style in Riga, emphasizing the work of Mikhail Eisenstein. It looks at his work on Alberta Street, including buildings at Alberta 13, Alberta 4, and Alberta 2a. The second chapter analyses the Art Nouveau style in Antwerp, focusing on the works of Joseph Bascourt, in particular, his buildings in the Zurenborg area: “De Vier Seizoenen,” “De Morgenster” and “House Boreas.” The third chapter provides a comparative analysis of motifs used in the buildings of Eisenstein and Bascourt. The final part of the study concludes the results.

# Chapter 1 - Art Nouveau style in the work of Mikhail Eisenstein in Riga

## Introduction

Significant economic growth occurred in Riga in the latter part of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The population increased due to the expansion of industry, which in turn supported the construction boom. Riga had become the fifth-biggest city in the Russian Empire by 1901, and its port had the highest amount of cargo handled (Krastiņš, 2023, pp. 5-23). The city's rapid expansion required new residential buildings and a new approach to shaping the urban environment. Functionally significant territories began to be connected by boulevards, a unified system of green spaces was developed, and at the end of the 19th century, the importance of squares increased (Ozola & Research Institute of Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Planning, 2014, p. 18).

Alberta Street was founded around 1900 on the site of the former Friedrich Wilhelm Thime garden (Figure 1) and was one of the last urban development projects in the suburbs of Riga before the First World War. The development of the street was rapid and consistent, with plots of the same size and multi-storey apartment buildings forming a dense continuous block around the perimeter. (Karlštrēma, 2024)

The Art Nouveau architectural style became popular in Europe during this period. Close cultural interaction with Germany and ideas from Vienna, Prague, and Paris played an important role in Riga becoming one of the cities inspired by Art Nouveau (Grosa, 2019). The visual expressiveness of this style, based on natural motifs and stylized anthropomorphic images, perfectly corresponded to the city's desire for renewal. A wide range of sources of inspiration – from architectural magazines to illustrated publications on decorative art – contributed to the active spread of Art Nouveau among Riga architects (Figure 2) (Grosmane, 1994).

Mikhail Eisenstein (1867-1920) has a special place among the key figures who left their mark on the architectural appearance of Riga during the Art Nouveau period. After graduation in 1893 and he moved to Riga, working as a civil engineer. He started developing apartment complexes in the late 19th century after a prosperous civil service career. His famous Art Nouveau buildings on Alberta, Elizabetes, and Strelnieku streets marked the beginning of his significant architectural era in 1903. After World War I, he left Riga in 1917 and immigrated to Berlin, where he passed away in 1920. (Grosa, 2019).

Even though his designs stand out from most Art Nouveau buildings with their extravagant and rich ornamentation, his works, especially the buildings on Alberta Street, became a kind of symbol of Riga Art Nouveau. Unlike his colleagues' more restrained and rational buildings, Eisenstein's buildings represent a burst of decorative expression, where architecture becomes an authentic artistic canvas (Krastiņš, 2023). In the next chapter, three buildings of Eisenstein on Alberta street will be discussed. They were chosen due to the broader range of available literature.

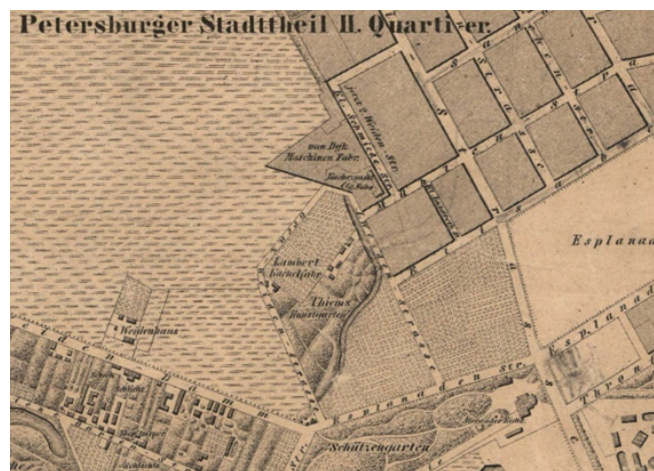


Figure 1- Thiems Kunstgarten Fragment from the plan of the city of Riga and its suburbs. 1867. Author Ferdinand David Wieckmann. (Karlštrēma, 2024)

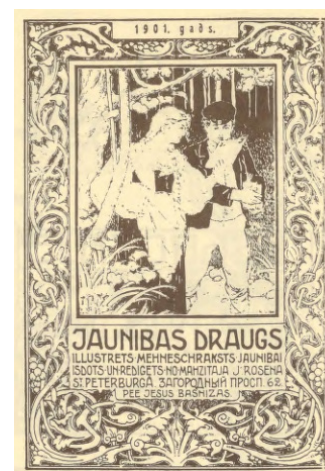


Figure 2 - Illustration in Art Nouveau style, 1901. (Grosmane, 1994)

## Eisenstein's work on Alberta street

### Alberta street 13

The building at Alberta 13 (Figure 3) in Riga is one of the most expressive examples of Art Nouveau created by Mikhail Eisenstein. It was built in 1904-1906 by order of Professor A. Lebedinsky and is characterized by rich decorations and symbols. The architectural design of the facade includes two central avant-garde buildings, multi-level topped with pediments that create a dramatic contrast of light and shadow due to protruding and receding elements. The rounded corner of the building unites the two wings (Figure 4).

The building remained one of the most impressive residential buildings in Riga for a long time, but its condition deteriorated significantly during the Soviet period. In 1999-2002, a large-scale restoration was carried out, during which the facade and interiors were restored, taking into account the historical features of the building. It currently houses the Higher School of Law, as well as offices of various organizations (Krastiņš, 2023, pp. 110-113).

The facade of the building is horizontally divided by colonnades, deep cornices, and rusticated elements of the first two floors. The window openings vary in shape and size, creating a complex rhythm of the facade. The facade decor is an encyclopedia of symbolist motifs and classical images (Figure 11). The central composition is a mask with a shining tiara, symbolizing freedom and victory (Figure 5). The sculptural decor includes images of female figures in various emotional states: dreamy, thoughtful, frightened, or laughing. Expressive masks with open mouths, as if screaming, complement the dramatic effect of the facade (Figure 6).



Figure 3- Alberta street 13 façade. Created by Eliza, 2025.

A special place in the decor is occupied by images of Artemis (Figure 7), the goddess of hunting and chastity, and Pan (Figure 6), symbolizing nature and music. There is an Art Nouveau symbol of splendor - a peacock with a flowing tail (Figure 8), the heads of knights guarding female beauty (Figure 9), as well as symbols of caution and betrayal - writhing snakes (Figure 10), appropriately depicted in the form of winding lines of geometric shapes. Above the pediment stands the image of Apollo (Figure 5), personifying light, truth, and poetry. His calm facial expression contrasts with the anxious and frightened female images below, which can be interpreted as an allegory of the struggle between light and darkness, reason and emotions (Rush, 2003, pp. 70-83).

Alberta street 13

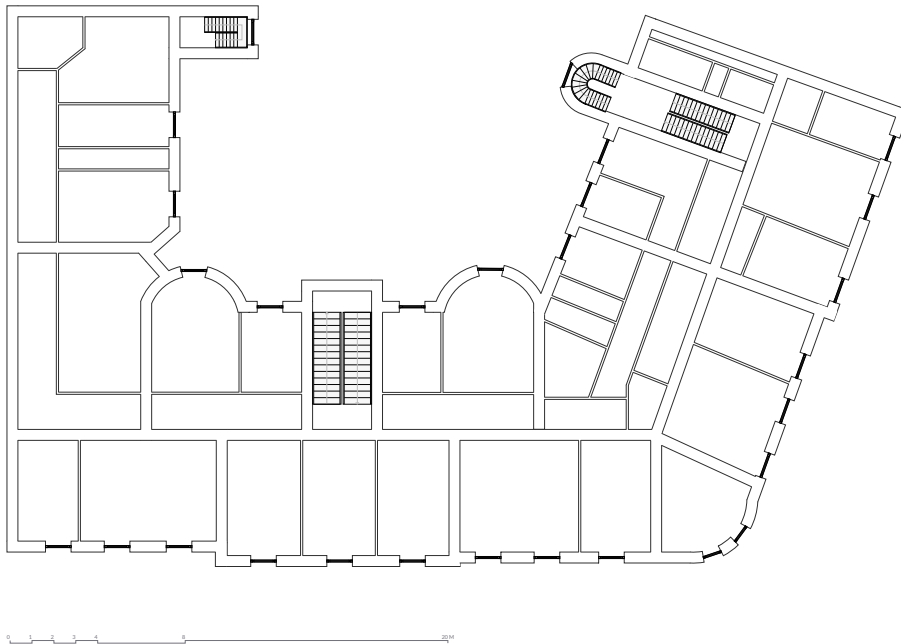


Figure 4- Alberta street 13 floor plan. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 5- Apollo. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 6- Pan. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 7- Artemis. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 8- Peacock. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 9- Guard. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 10- Snakes. Created by Eliza, 2025.

# Facade element analysis

## Alberta street 13

### Riga, Latvia

Human Figures & Faces



Floral & Geometric Elements



Mythological & Zoomorphic Elements



Figure 11- Alberta street 13 façade elements. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Eisenstein's work on Alberta street

### Alberta street 4

The building at Alberta Street 4, which was built in 1904 for A. Lebedinsky as well, is less ornamental than building number 13 but stands out for its expressive play of forms. The central axis of the facade is emphasized by a massive rectangular balcony supported by decorative brackets that extend upward, framing an oval window (Figure 12).

The key symbolic element of the building is the image of the Medusa Gorgona, located above the cornice. Her solemn face symbolizes power and protection. In the ancient Greek tradition, the gaze of a Medusa Gorgona turned people into stone, and its presence on the facade of a building can be interpreted as a protective sign (Figure 13). The images of screaming male heads on the pillars of the facade echo with the Medusa Gorgona; their silhouettes are enhanced by contrast with the sky on the back (Figure 14).

Two sculptural lions (Figure 15) are placed on the corners of the building, whose tense poses and high-raised heads create the impression of protection. These lions resemble Otto Wagner's sculptures on the Nussdorf weir, as well as in the ancient Greek - lion served as guardian of sacred sites. The symbolism of the defenders is increased by winged lions (Figure 16) facing the entrance of the second floor; their wings symbolize the sun's rays and the idea of protection (Rush, 2003, pp. 64-69).

The house's interior illustrates the principles of comfortable housing of the early 20th century, combining elements of functional zoning. The building layout follows the classical scheme: spacious apartments with high ceilings and formal suites are oriented to the street, while utility rooms and stairwells are located at the back of the house (Figure 16).



Figure 12 – Alberta street 4 façade. Created by Eliza, 2025.

The apartments in the house have a flexible layout. For example, living and dining rooms are united by wide doorways, allowing residents to adapt the space depending on their needs. Moreover, tall windows allow daylight to penetrate deeper into the building, and courtyards provide additional daylight and natural ventilation. Five homes on Alberta Street, including house 2a, which will be covered in more detail, all have the same U-shaped layout (Figure 24) (Krastiņš, 2023, pp. 142-144).



Figure 13- Medusa Gorgona. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 14- Male head. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 15- Lion. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 16- Winged lion. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Alberta street 4

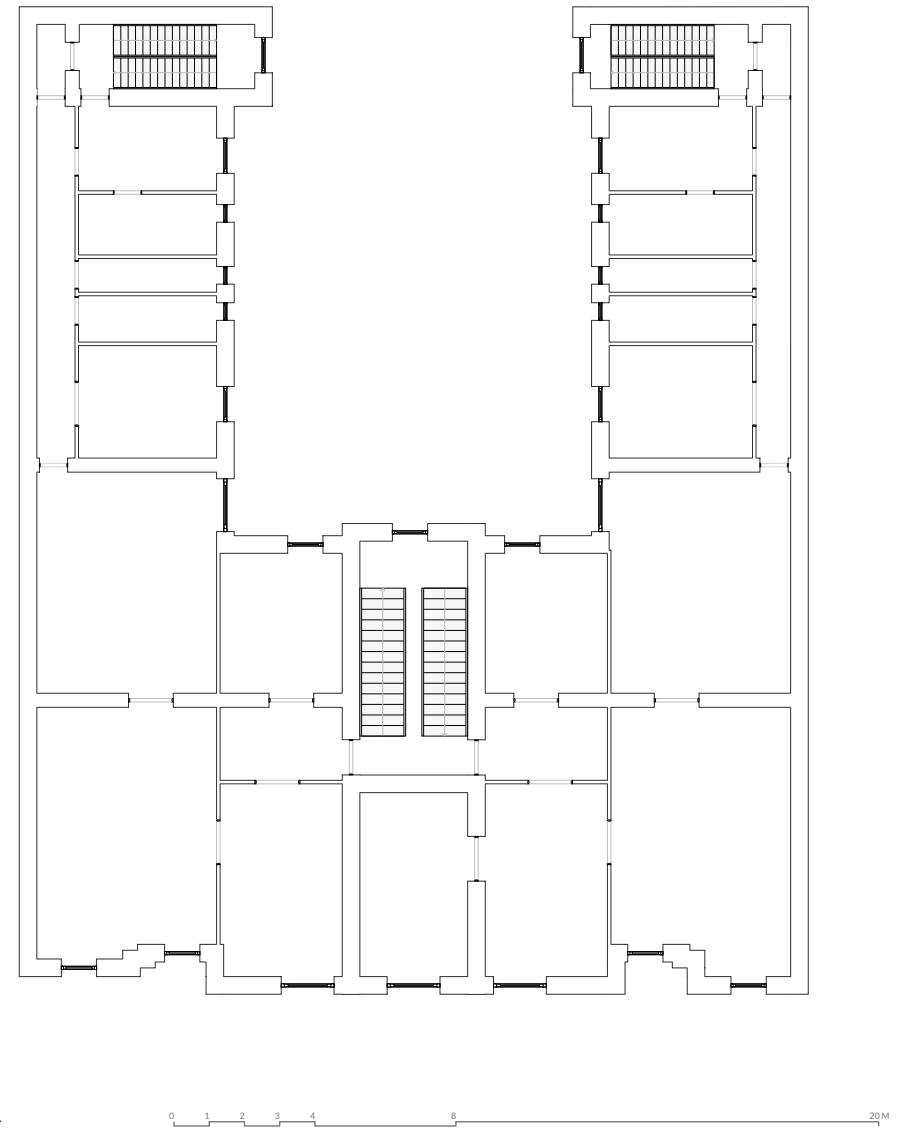


Figure 17 - Alberta street 4 floor plan. Created by Eliza, 2025.

# Facade element analysis

## Alberta street 4

### Riga, Latvia

Floral & Geometric Elements



Human Figures & Faces



Mythological & Zoomorphic Elements



Figure 18 – Alberta street 4 façade elements. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Eisenstein's work on Alberta street

### Alberta street 2a

The building at 2a Alberta Street, built for V. Boguslavsky in 1906, is the last work of Eisenstein on that street (Figure 19). The rich color combinations of red-glazed tiles and stone structures give the building expressiveness. The visual direction of the facade is oriented upwards: vertical inserts of red tiles and horseshoe-shaped arches create a feeling of movement to the sky (Krastiņš, 2023, pp. 142-144). The central entrance to the courtyard is made in an arched shape and decorated with sphinx figures on the sides (Figure 20). These sculptures symbolize power and wisdom. Their static poses and restrained grandeur create an atmosphere of mystery and protection.

The facade of the building is additionally decorated with stylized abstract floral motifs and masks of male heads, from the horns of which grow fantastic plants (Figure 21). Two figures of young men with torches stand out above the pillars (Figure 22).

The crown of the composition, standing on the parapet, is a row of female figures in helmets, presumably Valkyries (Figure 23). Their faces create an atmosphere of seriousness and mystical purpose. Thus, the facade of the building at 2a Alberta Street becomes a real theatre of symbols, combining elements of ancient Egyptian and Northern European mythology (Rush, 2003, pp. 90-95).



Figure 19- Alberta street 2a façade. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 20- Sphinx. Created by Eliza, 2025.

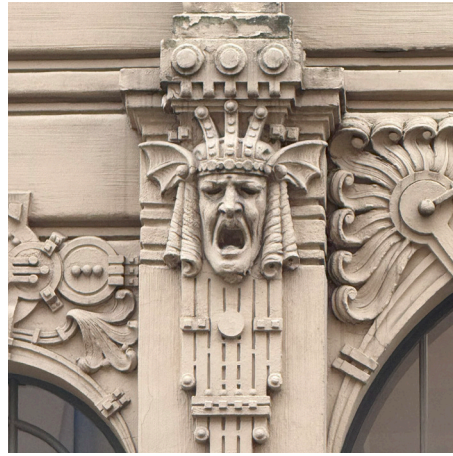


Figure 21- Mask with horns. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 22- Human figure with torch. Created by Eliza, 2025.

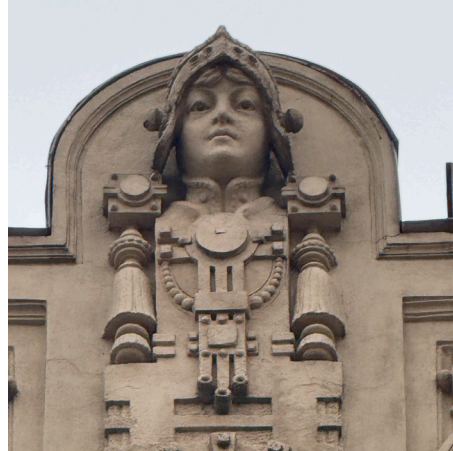


Figure 23- Valkyrie. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Alberta street 2a

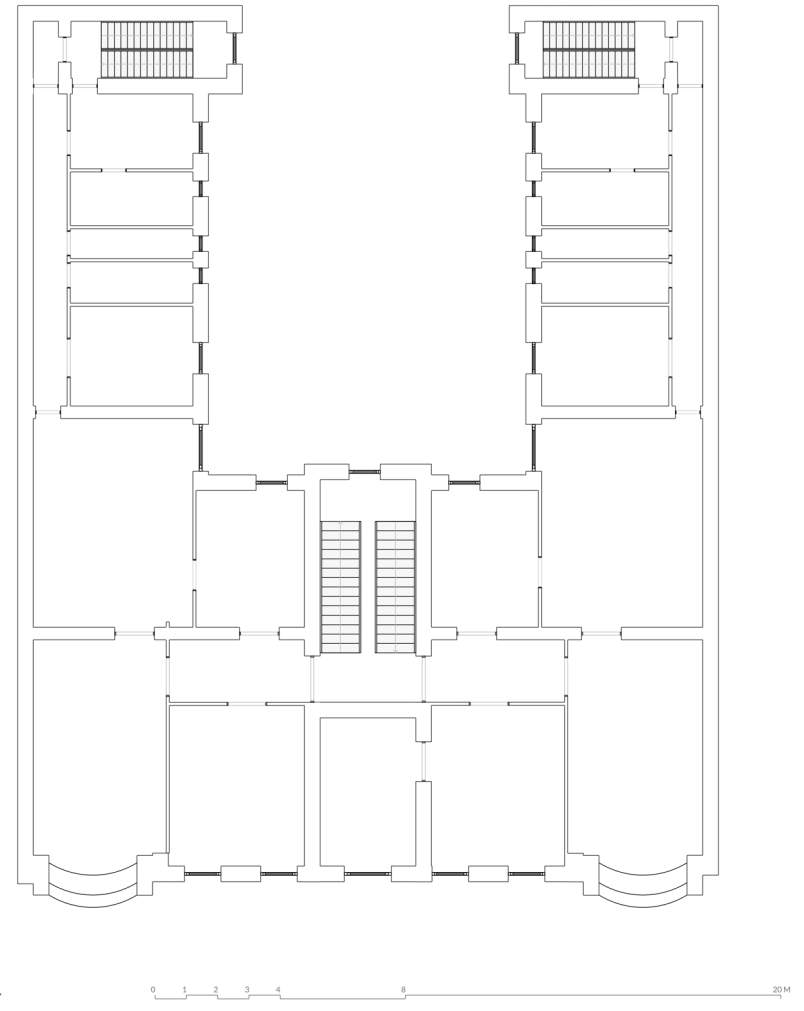
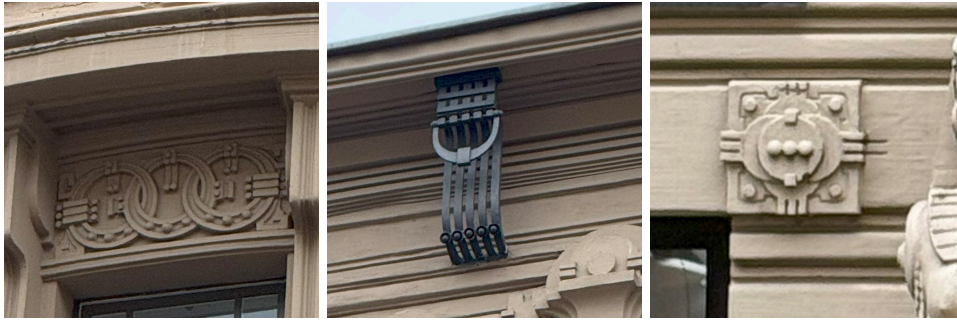


Figure 24- Alberta street 2a floor plan. Created by Eliza, 2025.

Floral & Geometric Elements



Mythological & Zoomorphic Elements



Human Figures & Faces

# Facade element analysis

## Alberta street 2a

### Riga, Latvia

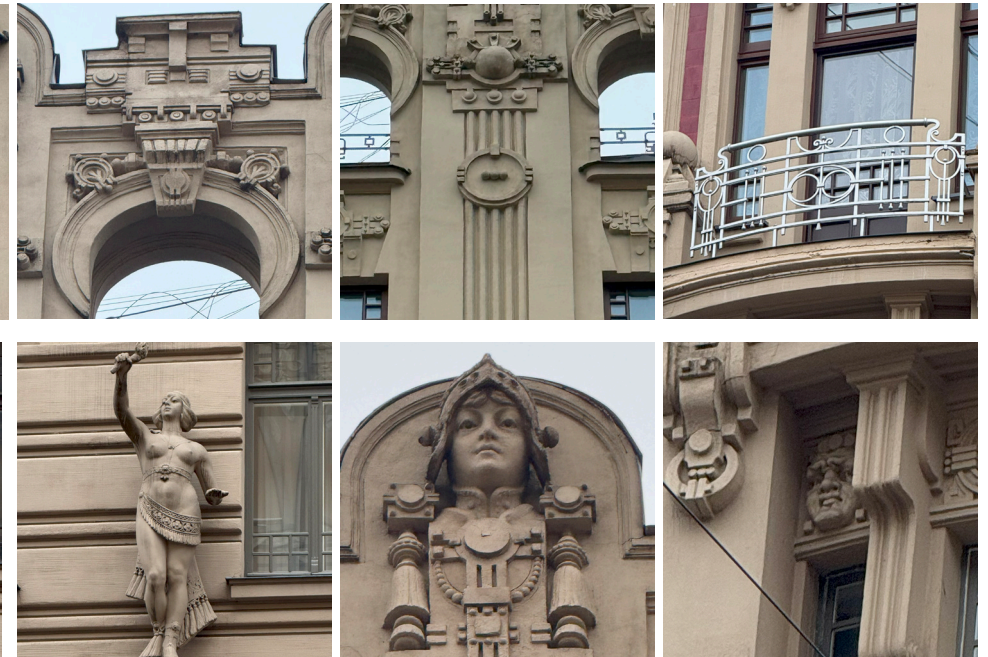


Figure 25 - Alberta street 2a façade elements. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Chapter 2 - Art Nouveau style in the work of Joseph Bascourt in Antwerp

### Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, Antwerp experienced an economic boom due to active trade and the expansion of the port. At this time, the Belgian aristocracy and the bourgeoisie sought to leave the cramped historical center of the city and settle in new, more spacious areas. So, in 1881, the construction of Zurenborg began – the territory between Antwerp and the then-still separate city of Berchem (Figure 26).

The area was designed considering the latest urban planning trends: wide streets, spacious squares, and luxurious apartment buildings were supposed to form a prestigious residential area. The key street was Cogels-Osylei, named after the influential Cogels family that owned land in this area.

Zurenborg quickly became an experimental site for architects working in various styles. From 1894 to 1914, many mansions were built there, each reflecting the architect's individual style and customer preferences (DBNL, 1993).

Joseph Bascourt (1863-1927) became one of the key figures in the development of Zurenborg. He worked in different styles, reflecting the architectural diversity of the area. His early works include the Neoclassical “Corner House” (1893) and the neo-Flemish Renaissance “Café du Dôme”. On Cogels-Osylei, he created a Neo-Flemish Renaissance villa, “In de Sterre, de Sonne en de Mane,” with castle-like towers. His works have demonstrated diverse influences: Neo-Flemish Gothic (“De Zevensterre”), Neo-Italian Renaissance (“Minerva”), and half-timbered proto-modern (“Het Molentje”). In a restrained neo-Renaissance style, his private residence on the Klein Hondstraat was distinguished by innovative window mechanisms (Strauven, 1993, pp. 9–37). By

1897, after he married, Bascourt had adopted the Art Nouveau style with “Boreas,” followed by “De Vier Seizoenen,” a quartet of corner houses. Moreover, his last Art Nouveau work in Zurenborg became “De Morgenster”. Therefore, this work will focus on these three works of Bascourt in the Zurenborg.

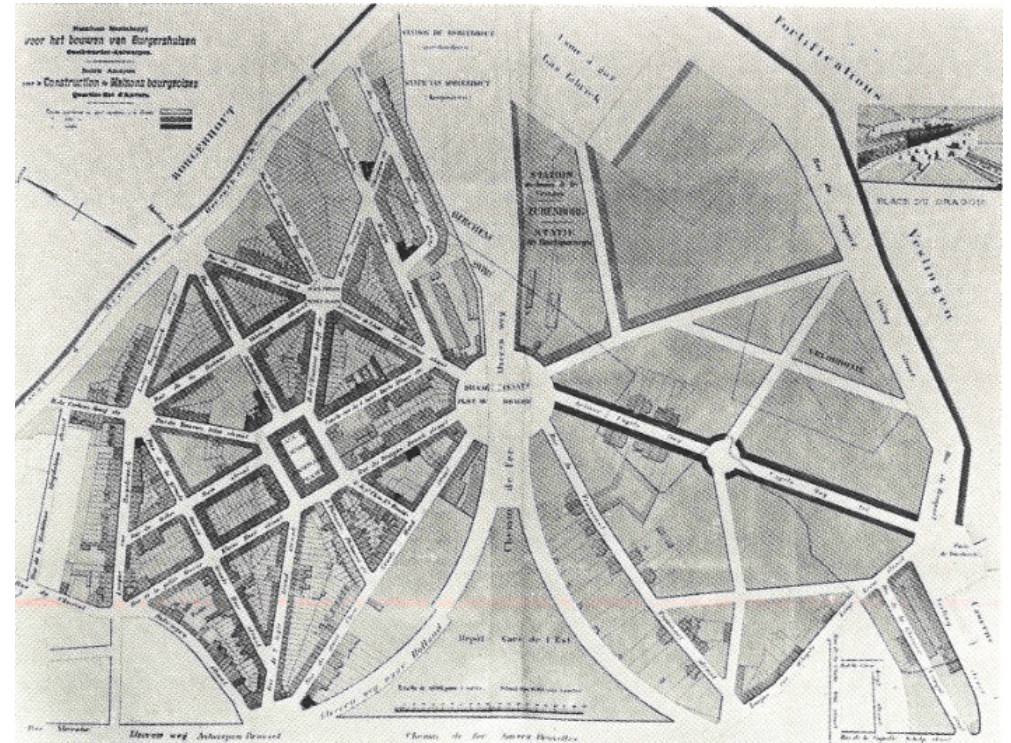


Figure 26 – General plan of Zurenborg in 1895. (Strauven, 1993, p. 33)

## Bascourt's work in Zurenborg Transvaalstraat 56 – “House Boreas”

Boreas (Figure 27), designed in late 1897, marked a turning point in its architectural style. This building marks the architect's departure from eclecticism and decorative splendor towards a new style of Art Nouveau. The house was commissioned by a private client - J. Kolsteren, who acquired the site on Transvaalstraat.

The architectural composition of Boreas combines traditional elements of an urban house with new modernist solutions. Instead of the classic three-room structure, Bascourt added a reduced volume with a spacious hall and kitchen on the ground floor and an additional room on the second floor. Initially, the façade of the building was made of light-yellow glazed brick, and iron lintels accentuated the vertical rectangular window openings. They were united by horizontal rows of dark brown bricks, creating a precise rhythm (Figure 29). However, nowadays, the quality of the brick color and the rows of dark bricks are no longer visible because the façade is covered in white paint.

One of the most expressive details of the house is the bay window on the first floor. It stands out for its multifaceted shape, supported by graceful metal balustrades that pierce it like spears. In this element, two things can be seen - the floral motifs characteristic of Art Nouveau and the reference to the pavilions of the 1894 World's Fair, which gives the building an almost heraldic character. The bay window is placed strictly on the central axis between the windows of the ground and first floors, creating a balance of asymmetry (Strauven, 1993, pp. 47-51).



Figure 27 - “House Boreas” facade. Created by Eliza, 2025.

Looking into symbols that can be seen in the façade of the house, a stained glass with a picture of Iris draws attention. According to the Victorian language of flowers, the iris symbolizes message, faith, and wisdom, which can indicate a new artistic chapter in the architect's work. In addition, the building name is named after Boreas (Figure 28)– the Greek god of the north wind, emphasizing the natural motifs in the design of this house (Dumont, 2015; Greenaway, 1993).



Figure 28- "House Boreas" . Created by Eliza, 2025.

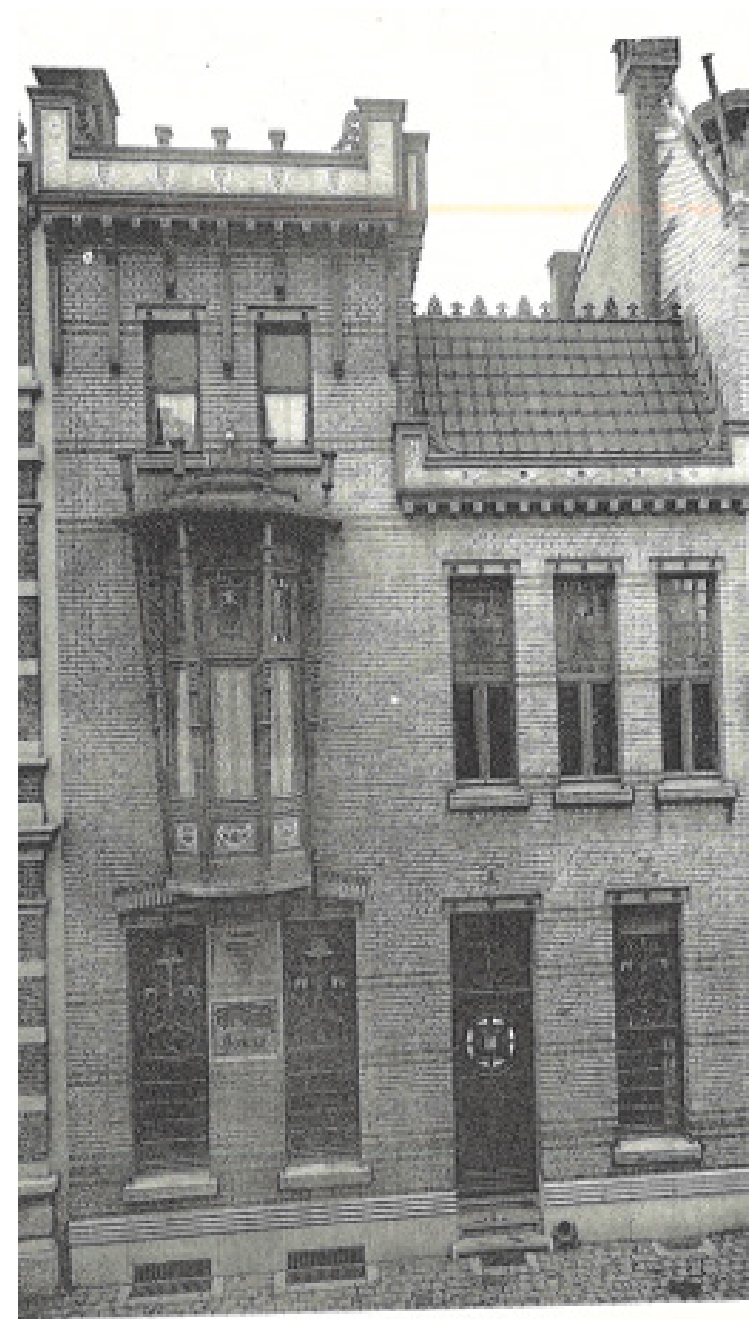


Figure 29- "House Boreas" façade in 1987. (Strauven, 1993, pp. 50)

## Bascourt's work in Zurenborg

### Generaal Van Merlenstraat 29 – “De Vier Seizoenen”

After a successful experiment with Boreas, Joseph Bascourt continued to develop his style and created the ensemble De Vier Seizoenen (Four Seasons) (Figure 30). This complex of four corner houses is located at the intersection of Generaal van Merlenstraat and Waterloostraat - two new streets built in 1897 to the west of Cogels-Osylei.

A unique feature of this section is the slight curvature of Generaal van Merlenstraat Street at the intersection, which visually closes the perspective. It is unknown whether Bascourt was involved in the design of the street itself, but his architectural solution fits perfectly into this context (Figure 35).

The architectural integrity of the complex is emphasized by its unified language, which first appeared in Boreas. Four almost identical houses are made of white glazed brick, with tall vertical windows, accented with iron lintels and finely matched rows of colored bricks. As in Boreas, there is an asymmetrical rhythm moving from one level to another and characteristic decorative cornices with painted glass panels.

Again, one of the most expressive details is the bay windows, located on each house on both sides of the street. These bay windows are shaped like triangular prisms and are topped with metal spears. This detail creates a visual connection between the houses opposite each other; they seem to “talk” across the street.

One of the most poetic elements of the ensemble was its symbolic connection with the four seasons. Mosaics can be seen on the rounded corners of the buildings, which were probably created by the decorative artist H. Verbuecken. Here are allegorical images:



Figure 30 - “De Vier Seizoenen” facade. Created by Eliza, 2025.

- Spring (De Lente) is represented by a young woman with a wreath of lilies of the valley, symbolizing modesty and the return of happiness, and bluebells, signifying constancy. These images emphasize the awakening of nature, the beginning of a new life cycle, and the immutability of natural rhythms (Figure 31).
- Summer (De Zomer) depicts a woman surrounded by ears of wheat, combined with bluebottles, symbolizing delicacy, and poppies, personifying solace. This mosaic picture conveys images of maturity and the transition to a busy phase of life (Figure 32).
- Autumn (De Herfst) is represented by an image with bunches of grapes, which in the Victorian language of flowers means charity, and red chrysanthemums, which symbolize love. These motifs convey the idea of harvest, completeness, and warm feelings, linking autumn with the period of summing up and giving back (Figure 33).



Figure 31 – Spring mosaic. Created by Eliza, 2025



Figure 32 - Summer mosaic. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 33 - Autumn mosaic. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 34 - Winter mosaic. Created by Eliza, 2025.

Winter(DeWinter)isembodiedintheelder,whose beard merges with the snowfall, and the main floral symbol is the holly, embodying foresight and charm. This image speaks of the wisdom accumulated over the years and the hidden power of nature, preparing for a new awakening (Dumont, 2015; Greenaway, 1993) (Figure 34).

Each house also has a different color palette of decorative elements. In De Lente and De Zomer, wooden details, bay windows, windows, and doors are painted green, symbolizing the awakening of nature. In De Herfst and De Winter, these elements have a brown hue associated with hibernation.

Cornices became another subtle decorative solution. Spring and Summer houses are decorated in the form of green climbing plants resembling vegetable tentacles covering the upper part of the building. In Autumn and Winter, this motif is absent, and the cornices are painted brown, emphasizing the passage of time (Strauven, 1993, pp. 51-55).



Figure 35 - "De Vier Seizoenen" overview. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Bascourt's work in Zurenborg Cogels-Osylei 55 – “De Morgenster”

In 1904, Joseph Bascourt finished his period of Art Nouveau work by building the Morgenster (Morning Star)(Figure 36). Located in the heart of an eclectic architectural ensemble, the house stands out for its purity of form and small scale compared to its neighbors. Morgenster's architectural language resembles his previous works, Lotus and Papyrus. Segmental arches can be seen in the lower part of the building, and the first floor is decorated with elegantly decorated biforas – double windows in thin decorative frames (Figure 38). On the attic level, which seems almost hidden, two small round windows (oculi) let in a minimum of light. However, the primary impression is created by the unique facade. Unlike most buildings on the street, it does not represent a flat plane but seems to taper upward, ending with an unusual cornice in the shape of a horn painted in bright colors (Figure 37). This facade creates the effect of a smiling face facing passers-by. This “smile” became the final chord of the Basque style in the Art Nouveau era (Strauven, 1993, p. 59).



Figure 36 - “De Morgenster” facade. Created by Eliza, 2025.



Figure 37 - “De Morgenster” facade in 1904. (Strauven, 1993, pp. 59)



Figure 38 - Bifora. Created by Eliza, 2025.

## Chapter 3 - Comparison analysis

The architectural approaches of Mikhail Eisenstein in Riga and Joseph Bascourt in Antwerp represent two different interpretations of the Art Nouveau style, shaped by multiple factors. This section is devoted to comparing the Art Nouveau style in two different contexts described earlier.

### Integration into the urban context

At the turn of the century, Riga and Antwerp began developing rapidly economically. Due to this, the wealthy people of these cities began to build up the more remote areas of the city according to their plans and desires. However, all the houses in Riga were built on the orders of private individuals. The houses themselves were equipped with several apartments, usually two per floor. Moreover, it can be noted that Eisenstein focused on one facade of the house, while the layout of the house itself was repeated several times on Alberta Street itself. In Antwerp, on the contrary, construction was not so high since each house served as a family home, and usually, one family ordered only one house on the purchased plot. Accordingly, the size and context of the Bascourt's house were always different.

### Facade composition and plastic

Eisenstein's façades are characterized by more active plasticity: deep reliefs, contrasting shadows, and expressive volumes. The buildings seem like theatrical sets, where each element emphasizes the emotional impact on the viewer. Bascourt created more restrained compositions, emphasizing the proportions and rhythmic organization of the facade. His works have dynamics due to the combination of vertical and horizontal lines but remain stricter and more minimalistic than Eisenstein's façades.

### Material and design solutions

Eisenstein extensively used stucco decoration, artificial stone, and plaster details, allowing for a rich plastic effect. His buildings were built using traditional technology - with brick walls in the building structure and plaster covering the brick. Bascourt, on the contrary, preferred brick and glazed ceramic tiles, which gave his buildings a modern character. He used different brick colors as one of the methods of enriching the facade and visual separation. Despite all the differences, both architects used innovative solutions, for example, original bay windows and window openings in their façades. Moreover, the metal forged parts on both buildings can be seen.

### Ornament and symbolism

Eisenstein actively used rich decorative elements filled with symbolism. Its façades are covered with masks, sculptures, and reliefs, referring to mythology, nature, and allegorical images. Ornamental compositions often included fantastic creatures, female figures, and motifs that emphasized the emotional expression of buildings. In contrast, Bascourt used more geometrized and abstract forms in his Art Nouveau works. His buildings, especially in Zurenborg, are characterized by stylized natural motifs such as plant ornaments inscribed in the general tectonics of the facade. The ornament visually is less saturated. Despite these differences, both architects gravitated towards symbolism. Eisenstein expressed it through the richness of the decor, and Bascourt expressed it through subtle metaphorical elements and the integration of symbolism into the facade composition itself.

## Conclusion

Summing up the work done, the Art Nouveau style in Riga on Alberta Street and the Zurenborg district in Antwerp has been analyzed from various angles. At first glance, the façades of Eisenstein's and Bascourt's buildings may seem to belong to entirely different architectural languages. However, delving into the philosophy and symbolism of their work, the similarities become more noticeable.

Both architects used plant, animal, and mythical motifs as the basis of their façades. Moreover, the female image has become one of the main features of both of them. Thanks to these ornaments on the facade, the viewer discovers the story that the author wants to tell when looking at them in general. However, the storytelling of Eisenstein and Bascourt is different.

Eisenstein was characterized by a facade that was more saturated with figures and elements. However, due to the variety of elements, a certain balance was maintained in the materialization of the facade itself. Because, for the most part, only a few materials per house can be seen on the façades of Alberta Street. Moreover, the story reflected on the facade is unclear at first glance. The number of elements may seem overwhelming to the viewer. Nevertheless, analysis reveals recurring themes, particularly protection and safety, conveyed subtly through repeated symbols across multiple buildings.

In Bascourt's case, the balance was maintained due to a smaller number of ornaments but a more significant number of materials used in the facade. His architectural narratives are more legible at first glance—the names of the houses often indicate their core theme. However, his work remains rich in detail, rewarding closer observation with unexpected layers of meaning.

To sum up, these architects and the works which were studied undoubtedly belong to the same style. Even though, as mentioned

earlier, the approaches were quite different, their work reflects the movement's defining characteristics: the fusion of fine art with design and the creation of a new visual language rooted in nature and emotion. Art Nouveau, as seen through the works of Eisenstein and Bascourt, is not defined by a single visual formula but by a shared commitment to storytelling.

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