

Indian in Brussels lovingly restores neglected Victor Horta house



Nupur Tron, an Indian in Brussels, fell in love with an Art Nouveau jewel designed by Victor Horta, the Frison House, promptly bought it and has spent two years painstakingly restoring it - while using it as the venue for an ambitious cross-cultural programme to bring Indian and Belgian cultures together.

The Hôtel Frison, the only Horta building in the Sablon, has a spectacular glass canopy that runs through the ground floor, one of the many ways Horta devised to bring natural light into the heart of his buildings. It was commissioned by Maurice Frison, a lawyer and friend of the architect, and was built in 1894-1895. Horta designed not only the house, but also all its furniture and decoration, right down to the smallest detail: from door handles to marble fireplaces, from mosaic floors to elegant banisters, from wall lamps to the gratings for the cellar openings.

But the house had been neglected and the new owner soon found herself involved in an elaborate labour of love restoring it, which she has chronicled in a new book. Tron has breathed new life back into Horta's masterpiece. She pieced together bits of the old chandeliers she found in one of the cellars. She had items of furniture designed by Horta lovingly restored. With great passion, she continues to search for the funds that will allow her to restore the entire house to its former glory, one step at a time.

When the house was occupied by German officers during the war, they painted over Horta's beautiful, delicate wall treatments with white paint. "During the lockdown we've been peeling off the whole house with a scalpel," Tron tells *The Bulletin*. "Peeling off 12 layers of paint while we listen to Mozart, we've uncovered the original frescos. It's excruciating, tedious and very time-consuming work. I have cuts all over my fingers, but it's all worth it because now we can see the beautiful frescos of Victor Horta which were hidden for almost a century. They're in a very good state."



A graduate of FIT in New York and a creator of fine jewellery, Tron had spent a decade in Paris as Goodwill Ambassador and Promoter of Art & Culture for India in Europe, working with the Comité Colbert and the Comité Vendôme, before swooning for this Horta landmark and moving to Brussels.

"What I love about this house is the connection with India which I find omni-present in this house," she says. "The first time I was in the house I thought: 'I'm home!' It felt like I was back at my mother's in India. That's what seduced me to buy it.

"I would like to convey the story to the world, because it's an important story and Art Nouveau is not as well known as Art Deco, but I find it richer, I find it extremely beautiful.

"It has the 360 degrees of art de vivre, a whole lifestyle to it. It's not just architecture but it's objects, furniture, art de table, the more I learn the more I discover, and I think it's a beautiful story yet to be discovered by many.

"So the inspiration was very strong, and I decided that I had to write a book. From the moment I bought the house I was writing in a journal every day. And I started to discover who was Maurice Frison, what he did for Belgium.

"He was an important pillar of the civil and social reform in Belgium in the 19th century. And he did a lot of work with laying the foundation of what became the CPAS, the whole social welfare structure, but he's not very well known by the general public.

"So I wrote this book with Dutch publisher Sterck & De Vreese, and it's published in Dutch, English and French. It's my first book but it's a very personal version and I think that's why it resonates with people immediately."



The book, which is filled with beautiful photos, features many details about the Frison House, which was an early Horta house, in fact his second house, and was a sleeping beauty unknown by many.

"It's not one of those Art Nouveau houses where it's overwhelming, hard to live in," says Tron. "Here the story is unique because I live in it with my daughter. That's what people love and it bonds immediately with them - it's not a museum but a living home. We discovered the house's furniture in the cellar and we are restoring it and returning it to each room. The restoration process has been quite a passionate and fascinating journey for me."

Tron created the non-profit [Foundation Frison Horta](#) to organise cultural programmes, music and performing arts with the aim of fostering greater understanding of the heritage and traditions of the Indian sub-continent in Europe - and vice-versa.

"The legacy that I would like to give to my daughter and to the foundation is to carry this on and bring people together from all different cultures - because culture has no boundaries and right now it's suffering terribly," she says.

"I want to bring together different musicians and craftsmen and writers and music and contemporary art. There's endless subjects that one can touch with east and west." Among the activities are monthly concerts and Tron also personally gives tours of the house.

The current temporary exhibition, The Maharanis, features black-and-white photos taken mostly by Cecil Beaton and Henri Cartier-Bresson "showing the lifestyle, the saris, the costumes, the jewellery, all the art de table, how these queens lived at that time", says Tron.

"It also underlines that connection between east and west as the luxury goods purveyors of Europe such as Cartier, Boucheron and Val Saint-Lambert all flourished because the queens came with their entourages and they bought jewellery and all sorts of goods."



There is a permanent exhibition which will open in the lower gallery this year. Produced in conjunction with the Horta Museum and the City Archives Museum, it will tell the story of Maurice Frison and what he did for Belgium.

There are also plans for a second book "which will focus on the research of the restorer, everything that has been done on the masterplan that we have created and will contain photos of the new restorations such as the wall and ceiling murals".

The purchase and restoration of the house is a heavy ongoing investment and Tron is looking for financial partners among like-minded individuals and institutions.

"I'm putting together a programme under the umbrella of the tax-exempt foundation, to bring together governmental cultural funds as well as corporate actors looking to fulfill their corporate social responsibility and committed individuals," Tron says.

"Additionally we are doing crowdfunding for restoring the facade, which will make a huge difference in the visibility of the house. Bringing culture in the heart of the City of Brussels, how fantastic is that? Bringing colour, diversity, exotic smells coming from the Far East - I think the idea clicks with everybody."

*Written by **Richard Harris***