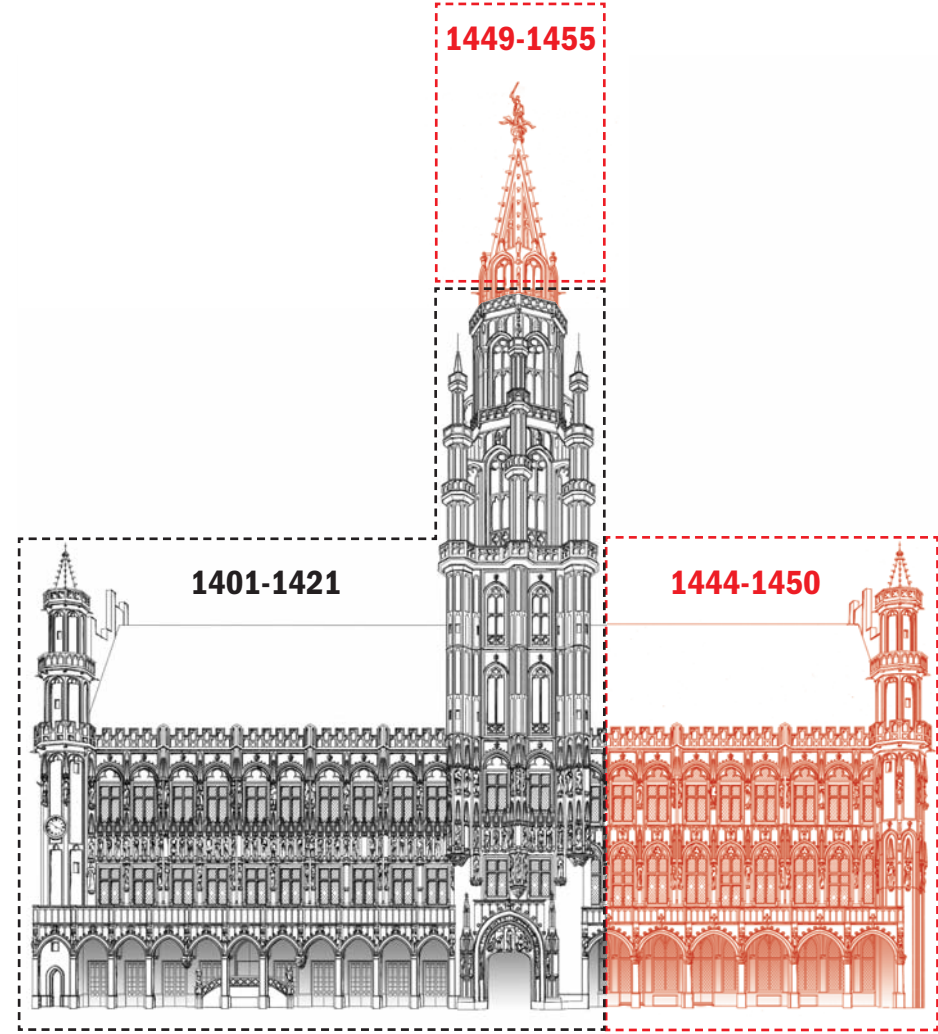


THE HISTORY OF BRUSSELS' TOWN HALL

Brussels' Town Hall dates back to the first half of the 15th century. The position of alderman was established in 1229 by a charter issued by Duke Henry I of Brabant, but Brussels had already had aldermen from the moment that the settlement actually became a town.

These aldermen initially met in the market halls, certain private homes and even in the churchyard of the nearby St Nicholas' church, close to the *Nedermerct*, as the future Grand-Place was called from the 12th century onwards. The economic centre of the city therefore also came to play a political role. Since the administration was developing, from the 14th century onwards the municipal authorities wanted to have their own buildings and they expropriated several houses situated where the left wing and the tower of the Town Hall now stand. At the same time, they had a municipal cloth hall built that was extremely modern for its time on what is now rue de l'Amigo, to provide competition for the Duke's hall on the opposite side of the square.

By the end of the century, it was clear that the aldermen's houses were too small. Brussels followed the example of Bruges and decided to build a town hall, a new type of building whose monumental design was intended, amongst other things, to confirm the autonomy and authority of the city.



Brussels' Town Hall was constructed in three phases. The first of these began in 1401-1402. Architect Jacques Van Thienen designed an L-shaped building with a side wing on what is now rue Charles Buls, a main wing in the square and a belfry in the far right-hand corner. Work on this building was probably completed in the period from 1417-1421. About ten years later, the City decided to extend the building and from 1536 they began expropriating the houses between the belfry and the rue de la Tête d'Or. The right wing, the first stone of which was laid in 1444 by the Count of Charolais, the future Charles the Bold, was completed around 1450. Although greater emphasis is placed on the vertical aspect here, the general structure of the two wings is basically the same and together they form a harmonious whole. In 1449 a leading architect of the time, Jan Van Ruysbroeck, was entrusted with the task of adding to the tower. A late-Gothic pyramid-shaped

summit was added to the impressive tower, with its square base and octagonal top. In 1455 this was to be crowned with a weathervane in the form of a statue of St Michael almost five meters high - a masterpiece created by the renowned Brussels coppersmith Martin Van Rode.

The restoration of the weathervane (St Michael) in 1996

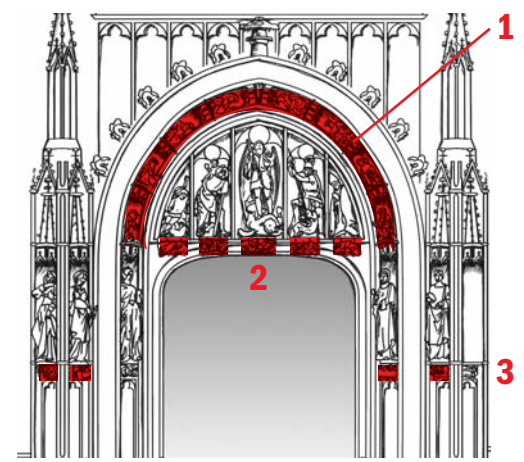


The Town Hall and the Cloth Hall in the 17th century

The sculptures in this room relate to the first two phases of construction. For many years it was believed that the belfry was older than the Town Hall, which led some people to attribute the Prophets and the other sculptures in the porch to the most famous sculptor of the 14th century, Claus Sluter, who had been in Brussels before creating his famous sculptures in the Carthusian monastery in the Champmol on behalf of the court of Burgundy. Nowadays, however, it is assumed that the belfry and the left wing were constructed at the same time and the sculptures are attributed to the Master who created the *Hakendover* altarpiece, a no less prestigious artist who was probably influenced by André Beauneveu. The latter was both a sculptor and an artist specialising in miniatures who played an important role in the introduction of perspective into painting and the acquisition of a feeling for volume in sculpting. The Prophets in the archivolt (1), the corbels of the tympan (2) and the posts of the porch (3) are part of the same iconographic programme. Despite the uneven quality, the whole is attributed to the Master of *Hakendover* and his workshop. The statues from the right-hand wing, small corbels (4) and above all three large capitals (5) which are unfortunately heavily damaged, belong to the second phase. Their ornamentation refers to the names of

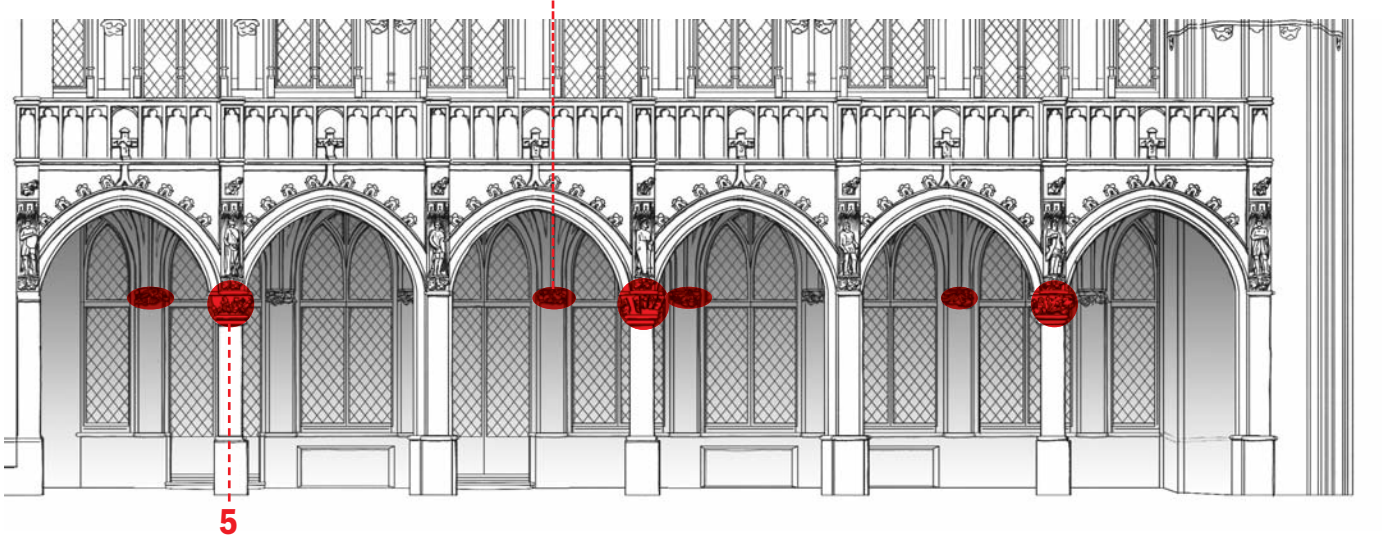
the houses located between the belfry and the rue de la Tête d'Or before this wing was built. They were also used as a sort of stone sign for the taverns that had again become established in the cellars of the new construction. From right to left, there was the *Papenkeldere* (monks' cellar with a depiction of brothers celebrating), the *Moor* (here a black man in a turban with his harem is depicted) and the *Scupstoel*. The somewhat enigmatic subject of this latter capital, characters who pile up chairs using shovels, can be more clearly seen in a drawing in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The *scupstoel* was a strappado, a form of punishment in which the victim was hurled away. This appliance is said to have stood on the site of the later house in the 14th century. The artist portrayed a pun: he interpreted *scup* (which can mean 'shovel' or 'kick') as a spade and not as a powerful thrust. The fact that the drawing is attributed to Roger vander Weyden or his workshop raises questions about the precise role of the official painter of the City, a title that he received around 1435 when designing the decoration for the Town Hall.

1401-1402



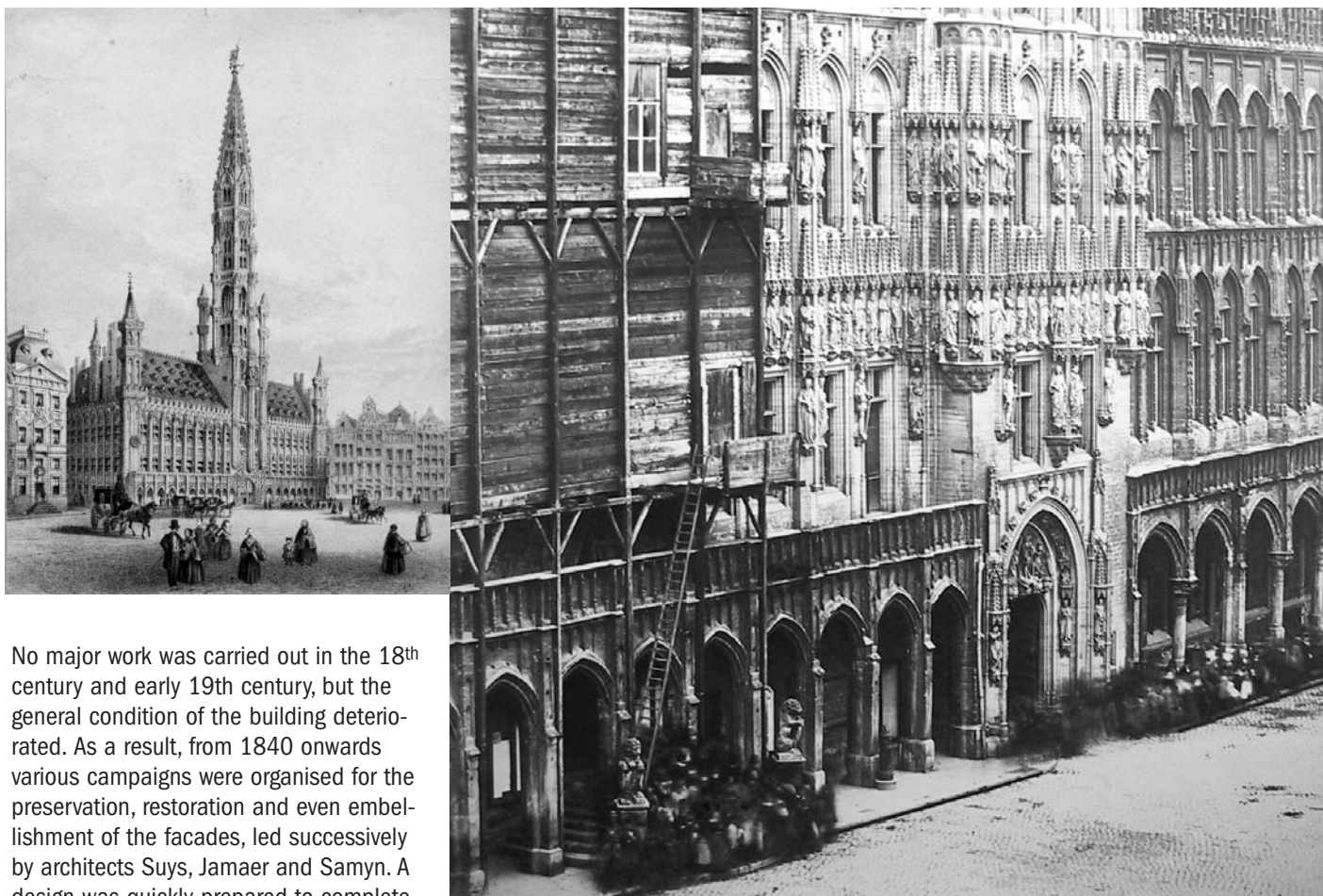
The porch after the restoration in the 19th century

1444-1450



The Town Hall circa 1840

During the bombardment of Brussels in 1695, the interior of the Town Hall was completely destroyed. A large proportion of the archives were lost, along with paintings by vander Weyden, Van Dyck, Coxie and Rubens. The outside of the Town Hall was restored. Adjacent buildings such as the Cloth Hall were not rebuilt and the town gave the land on which they had once stood to the States of Brabant. They had two wings built, connected to form an L-shape. The inner courtyard thus created was decorated with two allegorical fountains depicting the Meuse and the Scheldt. Corneille Van Nerven led the work which lasted from 1706 to 1717.



No major work was carried out in the 18th century and early 19th century, but the general condition of the building deteriorated. As a result, from 1840 onwards various campaigns were organised for the preservation, restoration and even embellishment of the facades, led successively by architects Suys, Jamaer and Samyn. A design was quickly prepared to complete the facades by placing statues in the niches that had remained empty for centuries. As a result, the restoration, in addi-

tion to replacing all the original sculptures by copies, also included an adaptation of the original niches, which were not deep enough. The iconographic programme that was called into question on various occasions and the basis of which was drawn up by the archivist Wauters, included almost 300 statues of leading figures in the history of Brussels: the princes of Brabant and their family, prominent town magistrates, philosophers and artists. Most of the statues were produced by artists who had been trained at the Brussels Academy for Fine Arts. This huge undertaking drew a great deal of criticism in the 19th and even in the 20th centuries. Only at the end of the 20th century, following a provisional final restoration of the building, were they appreciated at their true worth.

The restoration of the Town Hall in the second half of the 19th century



The bombardment of 1695



The Gothic room today

The rooms inside the Town Hall were furnished in several periods and display various styles. In the rear wing, intended for the States of Brabant, are opulent rooms in the style of Louis XIV from the early 18th century. Two of these are now used as meeting rooms for the College and the Municipal Council.

In the Gothic section, two former state rooms were refurbished in the 19th century by city architect Victor Jamaer in a pure neo-Gothic style: the Wedding room and above all the Gothic room, where official ceremonies still take place today. The other areas form the official rooms used by the aldermen. They are decorated with works of art which the City purchased in the 19th and 20th centuries and can be visited on occasion.

The Council room today

