ALMINE RECH

SKETCHING FOR THE BASILICA
Albert Van huffel Art deco & 100 years of Arts and Architecture

Mar 30, 2025 — Mar 31, 2026 | MMRK - Museum of Modern Religious Art, Brussels, Belgium

In 2025, the Brussels region is focusing on Art Deco in architecture, design and art. As part of this initiative, the Museum of Modern Religious Art (MAMR/MMRK) is using the design period of the Basilica, the country's largest Art Deco monument, as the starting point for its new exhibition.

The MAMR's new exhibition, entitled ‘Sketches for the Basilica. Albert Van huffel, Art Deco & 100 years of art and architecture', combines the architect's creative genius with the new Art Deco style, covering the period from 1925 to the present day. The exhibition traces a century of evolution in art and architecture, as well as the evolution of the Catholic Church's vision of itself, its liturgical celebrations and its spaces. The MAMR is the first to present enlarged sketches by the architect Van Huffel, as well as photographs of the building site. It is also adding works of art from its own collection and giving contemporary artists a voice. These artists have explored the relationship between space and light, focusing on new materials and the experimental use of typical Art Deco materials such as ceramics, glass and textiles.

Sketches for the basilica - Planning and construction

In the 1920s, the architect Albert Van Huffel (1877-1935) was commissioned to design a national basilica on the north-western plateau of Brussels. The basilica was to become one of the capital's three emblematic buildings, along with the Palace of Justice and the Mont des Arts. For his project, Van Huffel, who was also an interior architect, opted resolutely for an overall concept in the Art Deco style, which was very recent at the time. Van Huffel used reinforced concrete, a fairly new material that was cheaper and offered more possibilities. The model for the construction of the National Basilica of the Sacred Heart was presented at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris in 1925, where it won a prize. At this world exhibition, the Art Deco style was definitively recognised as a contemporary style for architecture and interior design. That same year, the construction project for the basilica was approved and got under way.

A total work of art

In his search for the right forms, architect Van huffel found inspiration in the Romanesque-Byzantine architectural style, which he admired for its simplicity, and in the motif of the flower as a source of beauty. Beauty, art and religion were inextricably linked for him. This attraction can be seen in his very first sketches and ideas for the basilica. This is the first time that the MAMR/MMRK has exhibited these drawings in a comprehensive way. The simplified and radically modernised style of his designs is immediately in line with the evolving vision of his client, the Catholic Church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Church was looking for new ways to combat the alienation of its faithful. In the end, the Church opted for a renewal of the liturgy that brought greater transparency and openness. Mass was celebrated in the language of the faithful and the altar took pride of place in the church building (visibility). Later, at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, this vision evolved even further.

Van Huffel was not content to simply design buildings. Always in search of the profound meaning of ornament in architecture, this architect is the prototype of the perfect craftsman, who knows how to link all the fields of the applied arts. The sketches and drawings on display also show his concepts of interiors, furniture, glassware and decorative elements. With the exception of a few sculptures by Georges Minne and Harry Elstroem, this is a truly total work of art. The whole inspires reflection on the connection between the whole and the parts, creating a link between earthly matter and divine mystery.

For the execution, the architect opted radically for new materials and new techniques, entirely in the spirit of Art Deco, in order to link art with industrially manufactured and therefore less expensive products. The new materials also clearly help to shape the building: the hollow, glazed, industrially manufactured clay sections also serve as supporting pillars. They are filled with steel and cement for this function. Apart from the stained glass windows, these are the only decorative elements. The great uniformity of the whole is the result of this austere filling, this sober interpretation.

1925 - 2025: Contemporary religious art and architecture

A contemporary vision of religious architecture might describe the religious building as a safe space for individual reflection and communal celebration. The building is also God's house and should therefore have a spiritual dimension, with transformative lighting effects, for example. A garden around or inside the church acts as a space of silence and also makes reference to paradise and Creation.
This arrangement and interpretation of space, as an ideal programme for contemporary religious architecture, is the main theme of the exhibition from the outset.
In addition, the MAMR/MMRK is looking at how today's artists view religious art and architecture. The MAMR/MMRK is inviting a number of contemporary artists to create an itinerary on this subject, using their works of art in the context of the Basilica's architecture, a medium that encourages visitors to engage in exchange and dialogue, silence and meditation. The result will have a place in the exhibition.