

# ALMAS DE PEDRA

ESCULTURA TUMULAR: DA CRIAÇÃO À MUSEALIZAÇÃO

Giulia Rossi Vairo  
Joana Ramôa Melo  
Maria João Vilhena de Carvalho  
eds.

## **ALMAS DE PEDRA**

ESCULTURA TUMULAR: DA CRIAÇÃO À MUSEALIZAÇÃO

## **SOULS OF STONE**

FUNERARY SCULPTURE: FROM CREATION TO MUSEALIZATION

IEM – Instituto de Estudos Medievais

Coleção ESTUDOS 20

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## **The Salu Company in Laken: an unique funerary plaster collection**

*Tom Verhófstadt (Bruxelles, Epitaaf vzw)*

### **Abstract**

The former studio Salu is a unique place! Three generations of funerary sculptors kept business between 1874 and 1984; Ernest Salu I (1846 - 1923), his son Ernest Salu II (1885 - 1980) and his grand-son Ernest Salu III (1909 - 1987) were all academically trained sculptors. This Company provided the guarantee of artistic quality combined with professional entrepreneurship; a healthy corporate culture that recently is been identified in a systematic collection and archive recording software (Adlib).

Hundreds of plaster models are preserved *in situ* and were recorded. These models are supplemented with hundreds of sketches, drawings, pictures and photographs. These archival documents are complimented with traditional business technical documents such as order books, statements, invoices and correspondence; an artists' records as part of a company archive, all preserved *in situ*! A remarkable location where the production process can be followed meticulously in all its aspects.

### **Keywords**

Plaster moulds, registration process, Adlib, Ernest Salu

### Presenting Epitaaf NPO

Epitaaf NPO is an association with a particular interest in funerary heritage: dealing with collections, offering expertise and awareness-raising initiatives. This association was founded in 1984 as a non-profit organisation of volunteers who – either professionally or out of a personal interest – are involved in architecture, arts, conservation, photography, museums, etc.

From the start, Epitaaf NPO aimed to alert the general public and public organisations on the cultural significance of funerary heritage. This is obtained by awareness-raising initiatives such as offering guided tours, developing a series of publications and articles, the organisation of thematic exhibitions, focusing on different aspects of funerary art, developing a website<sup>1</sup> and participating in Open Monuments Days, Heritage Days or other cultural or heritage events.

Epitaaf NPO also acts as coordinator of funeral heritage projects. We offer expertise and specific references to support private initiatives as well as public organisation who are dealing with inventories, evaluations, protection, conservation and restoration of their funerary heritage. In 2004 the association developed an inventory model or 'registration form' for tombstones. This tool can support local councils with recording their funerary heritage. This tool has been successfully implemented in a number of municipalities and cities in Flanders and Brussels Capital-Region.

Epitaaf NPO offered consultancy at the restoration of important funerary monuments. Through the collaboration with official authorities and scientific organisations Epitaaf NPO gained valuable experience regarding restoration methods and techniques. At the Laken cemetery several monuments underwent already an exemplary restoration; for example the restoration of the Ghémar<sup>2</sup> monument in 1990, a remarkable monument created in 1872 by the French sculptor Albert-Ernest Carrier Belleuse (1824-1887), or the restoration of the mausoleum of the famous pianist Marie Pleyel<sup>3</sup>, in 1996, which was the work of the sculptor Hendrik Pickery (1828-1894) in 1876. The composition of the monument was inspired by the mausoleum of Vittorio Alfieri in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence, made by Antonio Canova (1757-1822).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.epitaaf.org](http://www.epitaaf.org)

<sup>2</sup> Louis Joseph Ghémar (1819-1873) was a Belgian lithographer, painter and photographer.

<sup>3</sup> Marie Félicité Denise Moke (1811-1875), later known as Marie Pleyel a famous concert pianist, considered as one the best pianists of her time and well respected by Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt.

More recently the Salu monument underwent a gentle restoration and was inaugurated September 16<sup>th</sup> 2017 to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ernest Salu III death, in presence of his two daughters and family<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to awareness, raising and offering our expertise, we also manage collections and archives, among an important plaster collection consisting of four different, but complementary funds (collections). Our association has proudly installed his Museum of Funerary Art and Documentation and Information Centre for Funerary Culture in a genuine 19<sup>th</sup> century sculpture-studio next to the Laken cemetery.

### **The former Ernest Salu workshop in Laken (Brussels)**

In 1989 Epitaaf NPO took residence in the former studio (fig. 109) of sculptor Ernest Salu (1846-1923). For more than 100 years, this studio accommodated three generations of Salu sculptors. From 1874 until 1984 Ernest Salu I, founder of the company, his son Ernest Salu II (1885-1980) and his grand-son Ernest Salu III (1909-1987) created and executed their (funerary) sculptures in this studio. As stone-masons and sculptors they were responsible for innumerable tomb monuments both in Laken and in the rest of Belgium.

This studio is a hybrid complex of buildings that reflects the successive expansions of the studio: around the previous turn of the century it housed over forty employees, including ten sculptors.

When Ernest Salu III ended his professional activities in 1983, the studio was still in its original state. The authentic atmosphere is still present in the exhibition spaces, the winter garden, the modelling workshop and other parts of the studio. The Salu workshop is one of the last nineteenth-century Brussels artists' studios and certainly one of the last belonging to a nineteenth-century sculptor. It is the perfect place to have a look inside the scenes of a sculptor's workshop.

### **A unique funerary plaster collection**

The studio hosts the plaster collection of Epitaaf NPO, which in turn is divided in four sub collections (or funds): the Salu collection, the Beernaert collection, the Houtstont collection and the collection of acquisitions.

Naturally, the focus of the Epitaaf collection is the Salu collection, composed of over 500 plaster models in relation with funerary monuments. Complemented with the various types of archive documents (drawings, letters, plans, etc.), the studio-

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<sup>4</sup> We'll come up later to this emotionally meaningful monument when dealing with some specific cases in the second part of this text.



photographs and the Company archive, it gives us a very detailed insight of how the company Salu functioned artistically and economically. This collection was actually hand over with the studio infrastructure and is therefore an inseparable part of the building; it defines the true spirit of the place. Some of the original plaster casts are still on site and enables the visitor to experience 110 years of funerary art within one collection. In the successive rooms – the winter garden, the fountain room, the modelling workshop and the exhibition space – visitors can see permanent and temporary displays of original plaster models made not only by the three generations Ernest Salu but also by – *statutaire du Roi* and tutor of Ernest Salu I – Guillaume Geefs (1805-1883), Ernest Salu's classmate and future tutor of his son Ernest Salu II, Juliaan Dillens (1849-1904), and his numerous colleagues and/or in some cases even involved employees. All of them offers a true range of Belgian funerary sculpture of the last two centuries.

The Emile Beernaert (1859-1930) collection was hand over, or rather saved of destruction, in 2002. This collection is as remarkable as the Salu collection and counts 250 plaster models with a strong architectural connotation, but still in relationship with funerary architecture. Therefore, this collection is a valuable and complementary addition.

Within a similar context, the Georges Houtstont (1832-1912) collection was saved from disappearance in 2010 following the demolition of the artists' workshops in the Brussels region. This collection however has nothing to do with funerary art. It is a quite extensive collection of over two-hundred 19<sup>th</sup> century plaster ornaments – interior as well as exterior.

The collection of the acquisitions is related to the Salu workshop or funerary heritage in general.

### **A Registration Project**

In order to manage this unique collection, and to make it accessible to researchers, or to anyone interested in the funerary heritage, a systematic inventory clearly is essential. Therefore, recently the inventory of the Epitaaaf collection has started. Thanks to the financial support of the *erfgoedcel* (Heritage cell) of the Flemish community, two registration projects were conducted.

During 2014 and 2015, a basic registration of the entire Salu and Beernaert plaster collection was made, and a total of 750 models were integrated. I call it basic in the sense that the objective was to register as much as many plaster objects as possible in a period corresponding of one year. Therefore, every model was photographed, measured, inventoried – which was done automatically by the

catalogue system – and in some cases, if the information was known, completed with a summary description. So, in a sense, we could say that the essential characteristics of each model were inserted in the Adlib database – a product of the Swedish Axiell-Group, a professional database for collection – and archive management. The Adlib-system is well known in documentation centres, museums and libraries, and even considered as a registration standard. The Adlib software provides three separated managing registration modules: museum – which was used for the above cited registration of plaster objects – archive and library. Even though, in terms of research the three modules offer cross references and so complement each other.

In 2016 a second registration project was initiated, this time in the archive-module of Adlib. Various types of archival documents from the Salu collection contain precious information on the sculptures and funerary monuments. After inventorying, scanning, photographing, restoring and packing the Salu's firm archive, only a small selection of drawings, letters, plans, studio-photographs and internal accounting documents was inserted in the same Adlib database as a test. From then on, some plaster models are linked with their corresponding drawings, plans and photographs....

#### **First research results through five cases.**

One of the best documented cases is the design process of the Halot monument<sup>5</sup> probably by Mathieu Desmaré (1877-1946), collaborating and/or employed in the Salu Company under direction of Ernest Salu II. A project that started in 1931 and was finished in 1935. It was always assumed that Ernest Salu II was the author of the sculpture – after all, the monument is signed E. Salu. Nevertheless, when archiving, packing and registering this file, it became clear that Matthieu Desmaré was the author of the sculpture and was also being paid for a sum corresponding to about 15% of the total cost of the monument<sup>6</sup>.

The monument for Robert Halot (1873-1931) was commissioned by the Brussels Commission of Public Welfare, to which Halot bequeath an immense fortune in which a sum was provided for the creation of his grave monument with the specific request to be mentioned as a «bienfaiteur des pauvres»<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> CELIS, Marcel, «Het grafmonument Robert Halot: Een caritas van Ernest Salu II op het kerkhof van Laken», *EpitafPeriodiek*, 5, 2007, pp. 1-7.

<sup>6</sup> On the cover of the Halot-file we can read following amounts: «4.650 Pierre Blanche; 1.500 Pierre Bleu; 5.000 Pratique; 800 Moulage; 300 Modèle; 2.300 Desmaré; 1.000 Placement...». The monument had a total cost of 15.550 francs. 2.300 francs was payed to (Mathieu) Desmaré, surely the author of the figurative sculptures of the monument.

<sup>7</sup> Laken cemetery, concession-file B375 – Halot Robert.



The iconography chosen for his grave of a 'benefactor' is a classical one. The *Caritas* or Charity is personified by a woman or a mother taking care of two children. The youngest child, still a baby, is carried on her arm, while her other hand protects the shoulder of the young girl who's kneeling down.

The grave monument was prepared with the utmost care and shows a very interesting 'design cycle'; gradually from an architectural, more 'distant' composition towards a sculptural, more 'empathic' representation. Several drawings, sketches, clay- and plaster models were produced demonstrating how the sculptural form is overruling the architectural principle.

The collection registration collected for the first time all the elements from the Salu archive in a relational database. Those elements consist of plans, drawings, sketches, glass-negative images and photographs printed on paper, scale models in clay, plaster models and financial accounts. Therefore, a good overview of the different steps in the design process became apparent. Thereafter a timeline needed to be outlined starting from 1931 – short after the death of Robert Halot until 1935 when the finished monument was delivered and placed. Thirteen steps can be distinguished; the first eight of them are purely design based, and are definitely endorsed by a signed and dated design plan by the commissioner on September the 7<sup>th</sup>, 1933. From that moment started the actual implementation of the sculpture using an also approved plaster scale model (fig. 110) which is translated into French white stone. Meanwhile, *in situ* trial installations were taking place with a full-scale plaster model able to evaluate the monument in relation to its environment.

The case of the monument of Belgian musician and composer Jules Emile Strauwen (1863-1943) is also worth a short presentation<sup>8</sup>. Jules Emile Strauwen was the founder and president of the Royal Federation of Harmonies and Fanfares of Belgium, author of tens of compositions for wind orchestras, instrumental solo pieces for piano and violin, for chamber music and orchestra, genre, waltz and adaptations of Peter Benoit and Georges Bizet. The monument is dominated by a three meter high pedestal of trapezoidal shape, which form the foundation of a female standing, bronze figure of 1,80m height. She stands, resting on her left leg, her long cloth floating with the wind wrapped around her figure, her naked arms towards the sky in a V-shape. The statue is titled *Vers l'Avenir*.

In the front of the pedestal there is a smaller console, where in a later stadium, in 1943 – but sadly stolen in 1992 – the bronze bust of the deceased composer was put.

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<sup>8</sup> CELIS, Marcel, «Vers l'Avenir, van fotografie tot grafkunst: de grafmonumenten Salu, Duysburgh en Strauwen», *Epitaaf Periodiek*, 6, 2007, pp. 5-9.

The concession contract dates from early spring 1936, after the death of Emile Strauwens' wife in 1935. The monument was temporarily finished and – despite the installed bronze bust in 1943 – paid in three tranches, the last one on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1938: «Caveau de 4 cellules. Monument en pierre bleue suivant plan. Figure en bronze – inscription caractère en relief convenue – fond en sapins. 24.000 frs. Buste en plâtre à tête gracieux» [cave with 4 cellars. Monument in blue stone as designed on plan. Bronze figure – inscriptions in relief as agreed – Pines in the back [of the monument]]. 24.000 francs. Plaster bust with graceful head].

Of course, the point of attraction of the composition was the sculpture of *Vers L'Avenir* with her naked arms towards the sky in what one might interpret as the Christian prayer posture or the orans position of worship. However it can also be linked to the so-called *Redemption Dance* of Isadora Duncan (1877-1927). This American avant-gardist dancer would inspire many artists like Bourdelle, Rodin, Walkowitz, but also Belgian fauvist painter and sculptor Rik Wouters (1882-1916). The latter artist witnessed a performance of the charismatic dancer in 1907 in the Brussels opera house of *La Monnaie* and immediately started working on what would be his *magnus opus*: *het Zotte Geweld* or *Foolish Violence*. The history of the dance is one of ambiguous appreciation. From ancient Greek to contemporary moralists: sometimes dance was seen as a symbol of status or health, then again as a sign of disease or moral destruction. Undoubtedly, that dancer also had an impact not only on the artist Ernest Salu II, but all the more on the client, composer and musician Strauwen, or even, who knows, on his wife. Should we see this tomb monument as a kind of a tribute to the dancer who died in Paris in 1927? Does the Strauwens family have a specific remembrance of this charismatic dancer, this being so she danced on Bizet's work, which was adapted by Strauwen? Did Strauwen worked with her as a conductor? All of them very interesting questions which requires further in-depth research.

For the making of *Vers l'Avenir*, Ernest Salu started from a nude model. A remarkable set of photographs of the nude model demonstrates this academic approach. We see a young woman revolves around her axis into seven poses while the camera is recording motionlessly. The white screen ensures contrast, a small pad supports her left foot. The model is emotionless, her body is pure shape, the expression of a transcendent concept. Pay attention to the subtly staging of the scene... in the background, the plaster bust of the protagonist is remarkably present.

The four preserved plaster scale models then show how the sculptor modelled the so-called *drapage mouillé* razor-thin with wax on the naked female figure. Again, contemporary photographs show, at different times, the same scale model, draped



with genuine textiles, held together with headers and – in the loins and under the chest – with small strings. The modelling equipment is displayed, the sketches in the background refer to the grave monument of Joseph Duysburgh, which we will be referring to later on.

Finally, we have another set of three photographs depicting the scale models of the complete monument: one with a funerary urn; and two with the bust of the composer replacing the funerary urn, to be installed after the death of Emile Strauwen.

This was clearly a key project in the history of the Salu Company. The fact that we still have the four plaster models showing the steps towards the study of the *drapage mouillé* is not coincidental. It proofs a lot of craftsmanship, skill and study. Ernest Salu II was obviously proud of this particular work and he would systematically exhibit *Vers L'Avenir* in his show-room and workshop.

Also, the Joseph Duysburgh (1846–1936) monument was erected for a musician and composer. Similar to the typology of the Strauwen monument, it is composed of a sarcophagus marked by a higher vertical element, in this case a wide base upon which the bronze bust of the artist is placed. Leaning against the base we see a full-length bronze mourning figure or *pleurant*, in garment, holding a lyre in her left hand, while the right hand is collecting the mourning tears. The actual monument dates from 1927, the *pleurant* is signed and dated 1928 and the bust, also signed, is dated 1936!

While scanning the glass negatives of the Salu archive, images of a similar monument appeared. Several identical characteristics were noticed, especially the base with the mourning figure. However, for this monument – and the picture evokes an interior setting of the monument (pay attention to the stone or brick wall and the church pillar) – the mourning figure is holding a catholic cross in her left hand (fig. 111). Possibly this model was made for another client. Given the high quality of the glass negatives, and the scanning of these objects, zooming onto the tomb stone gives us this information in Dutch: «Hier rust / Pieter Joop Van den Gugten / ... Geb.[oren] 22 maart 1922 – Overl.[eden] Malang 23 maart 1930» [Here rests Pieter Joop Van den Gugten / place of birth is unreadable March 22nd, 1922 – Deceased Malang March 23th, 1930]. In other words: this eight year-old boy died on 23th March, 1930, in Malang, which is a city on the Isle of Java, Indonesia, while it was still a Dutch colony. Further investigations on this monument could lead us to the only catholic church of Malang, the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. A big challenge...

Therefore, the Van der Gugten monument was erected or designed after the Duysburgh monument which served as a model. Which in turn is referring to other foreign models, not least to Antonin Merciés *Le Regret*. The artwork of this French sculptor was well known in the Salu workshop. Tens of glass negatives of workshop views are showing us Merciés masterpiece of 1874 *Gloria Victis*. Also *Le Souvenir* of ca. 1885 was a big inspiration for the De Meyer monument of 1907 made by Ernest Salu I.

The mourning figure is referenced in dozens of model books and catalogues. The lyre in her left hand is an evident reference to the Lyric poet Sappho. Other plaster examples for bas reliefs in the Salu workshop were following the Duysburgh pleurant, among others the bas relief of the tomb plate of singing teacher Jeanne Latinis, signed by Ernest Salu and dated 1930.

The creation of the bust was traditionally subject to an academical approach using a model. A prior extensive photo report was conducted: three exterior portraits and as many as eleven interior portraits, including two upright with baton were taken. Then two photographs of the clay bust in actual scale including one picturing Ernest Salu II at work inspecting his work with a photograph in his hand.

Thanks to the registration process, which is basically merging different iconographic sources, another monument, the Gauthier-Stofs monument, was identified. The monument is documented in three glass negatives, one of which showing a living model, and two of them displaying a clay model. Some critical approach is, nevertheless, required. The image in which we can recognize with certainty the monument is the poor-quality photograph showing the clay scale model somewhat analogue to the technical plan. We recognize the architectural setting of the scene. After all, this grave monument is to be found in the underground funerary galleries of the cemetery of Laken in Brussels<sup>9</sup>.

By 29<sup>th</sup> February, 1916, right in the middle of war time, Gauthier asked the municipal authorities of Laeken (Brussels) to «placer à la mémoire de mon épouse

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<sup>9</sup> The similarities with the tomb of Nola - Da Casto family at the cemetery of Genoa (Italy) are striking. The same resemblances are to be seen in the Carrara stone quarry catalogue model, on which Ernest Salu noted some measurements. Ernest Salu I was very familiar with these examples. In the letterhead of his company a clear reference to the use of Carrara marble is made: «Carrière de Marbre et atelier de sculpture à Carrare». This reference appears on his letters until the first decennia of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The letterheads also say the workshop dispose of «Albums de cimetières de Gène, Turins, Pise, Italie». We're certain he undertook several journeys to Italy visiting without any doubt the famous cemeteries of Genoa and Milano. In the archives of the sculptor at least one album entitled *Il Cimitero Maggiore di Milano* and published in 1885 is still present. The book depicts a great number of funeral tombs which must have been an unlimited source of inspiration. There is proof that Salu went more than once to Italy. During one of these travels, in March 1890, he made sketches of the Carrara marble quarries. Of course, this sketchbook is one of our collection finest objects.



une entrée de chapelle, avec figure en bronze dans l'intérieure des galeries» [to place in the memory of my wife a chapel entrance, with bronze figure, in the [underground] funerary galleries].

It seems that the statue was never installed, or even created or bought in Carrara, yet various steps were undertaken to produce the figure: the study with a living model, the possible clay modelling of the model and the monument... although there is no trace left. Also the monument on the overground part of the funerary galleries seems to have never been executed. All that is preserved is the hardstone platform. Even thirty years after its first placement, when Gauthier died, in 1947, and was put aside his wife in the family tomb, the monument was still unfinished, as it remains until today.

The final case I want to address is an impressive example. It is the tomb erected for Ernest Salu I in 1927. This monument was embellished with a large sculpted bust in white marble portraying the founder of the sculptors' generation. It was designed by his son, Ernest Salu II, who took over the workshop around 1909.

This monument was surely inspired by Italian examples. Still we must notice that the young Ernest Salu did not fully copy the Italian models but managed to give the monument a delicate, intimate character. The making of the monument of the old Ernest Salu is documented by a set of photographs, which gives us again a view on the creation process. Some photographs depict the granddaughter of Ernest Salu, the 6 six year-old Denise Salu, posing for the 'mourning' girl, who is literally looking up to her grandfather, which stands aside the monument's base. Also the plaster model is still present in the workshop and consist of two pieces: the base with the mourning-girl figure and the bust of Ernest Salu I.

Other photographs show what appears to be the delivery of the gigantic block of marble in the workshop. These are the only photographs of such kind in our archives. The delivery of the blocs for what should be the key-monument of the Salu workshop by then was certainly an event worth registration. Unfortunately, the archives of the Salu workshop does not preserve the bills and delivery orders of the stone and marble blocks used for this funeral monument. The creation in 1927 of the beautifully designed Salu monument executed in only two large Carrara blocks is not without significance. The monument of the workshop's founding father can be read as a distinct statement of the artistic capacity of the father's heirs.

### **First conclusions**

The launching of the two mentioned registration processes support and improve the identification, managing, preservation and valuation of the Epitaaf



collection. If they are continued, the collection can be the subject of numerous research projects in the fields of art history, funerary culture, conservation and restoration of plaster models, etc.

However, being carried out by an association of volunteers, the registration process has, unfortunately, been made on the basis of making choices. Obviously the Salu plaster collection was registered first; it is the *in situ* core of the Epitaa collection and therefore very valuable. But therefore it is also the most vulnerable part of the collection, once most of the larger pieces are continually displayed in the former workshop or are selected to be exposed for temporary exhibitions.

To register a collection is a specialists' work; over and above a technical, serial activity it is even more an intellectual process: while registering, knowledge is constructed and that can lead to new insights, but also new questions.

Linking an artistic process to business like activities is very challenging; actually it is an ongoing process of confrontation ... in a sense you're pulling out the romance of the workshop; the artistry, the craftsmanship face the fact of economic reality.

But, then again, realizing the economic relevance of artistic quality acts as a kind of a boost; people were ready to pay a lot of money for it. It is proven that from grandfather to grandson, artistic quality was highly regarded, and, for all three Salus supported on an academic training at the Académie des Beaux-Arts of Brussels.

In general, much remains to be identified, registered and archived from the Salu collection. This applies even more to the Beernaert collection, but less for the Houtstont collection.

### The Salu Company in Laken: an unique funerary plaster collection

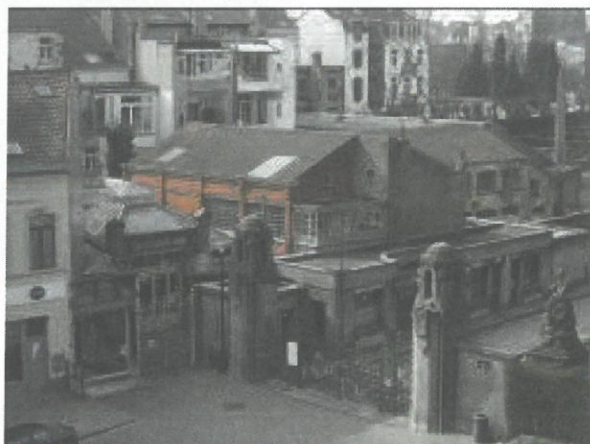


Fig. 109 - Aerial view of the Salu workshop just near the entrance of the Laken cemetery, 2011 ©vzw Epitaaf



Fig. 110 - The approved clay model from which a plaster model was made to 'translate' it into French white stone. Glass negative f1059 © Fonds Salu, vzw Epitaaf

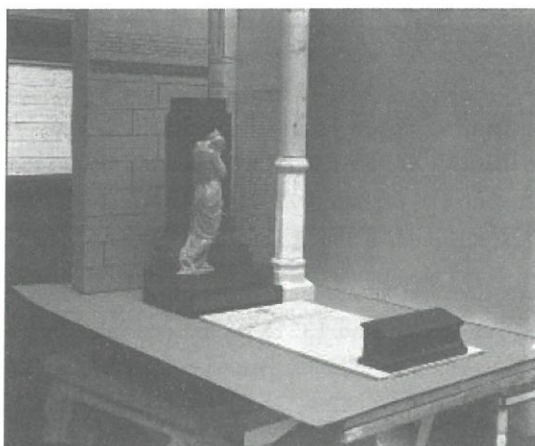


Fig. 111 - Set up of what appears to be the Van der Gugten monument in an architectural (interior) context. Glass negative f126 © Fonds Salu, vzw Epitaaf

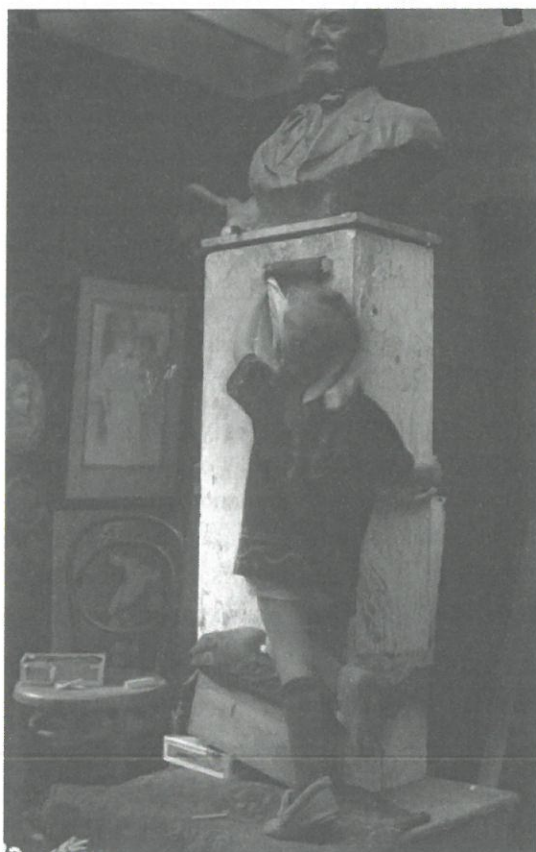


Fig. 112 - Six year-old Denise Salu is posing for her grandfather's monument Ernest Salu I. Glass negative f433 © Fonds Salu, vzw Epitaaf

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