Belgium was born following an operatic aria. On the evening of 25 August 1830, the performance of Daniel Auber’s *La muette de Portici* at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels concluded with a riot, which led, as the history and myth that grew up around this event would have it, to separation from the Netherlands. In 1986, in his *Histoire de l’histoire de l’art de Vasari à nos jours*, Germain Bazin mentioned Belgian and Dutch historiography in the same breath, in a single section entitled ‘Pays-Bas’. This alignment, motivated by geographical and historical as much as artistic reasons, may well be pertinent; the geographical entity of Belgium has always had a variable geometry. Annexed to France, and then to the Netherlands, it has seen its borders constantly revised and corrected, its malleable geographic and cultural character has inevitably raised the question of its identity, a powerful issue which, since 1830, has been ceaselessly raised with different degrees of intensity. Henri Pirenne indicated this right at the outset of his *History of Belgium*: while this territory was distinguished by its lack of political, geographical and linguistic unity, it had been able to establish the semblance of coherence in a unified ‘social life’, which was itself determined by its multiple links to the cultures on its borders. Belgian art history has played its own part in this particular destiny since the founding of the state in 1830.

As Paul Philippot has emphasized, this notion of identity has only gained historical relevance by the rejection of the ideas of the ‘determinism of the milieu’, of a ‘historical, ethnically based, national constant’, and by continually changing the point of view from the interior to the exterior. The idea of a Belgian history of art, in the sense of a national heritage as well as that of a discipline, is thus inseparable from that of the constitution

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3 Pirenne, *Histoire de la Belgique*, XI–XVI.
of the nation. Nevertheless, rather than viewing the contours of art history through the prism of this question of identity—which would take us away from the domain of historiography and into that of the political and cultural history of ideas—this chapter will trace out chronologically the principal issues and developments in Belgian art history from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present.

The Field of Research

Let us start by emphasizing that art history has been taught not just in an academic milieu, but has taken many other routes, including the publications and events organized by various local and national archaeological and historical societies, or the training and education of artists. At the same time, the organization of art history as a recognized rigorous scholarly discipline taught in the academic domain, only dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. As Léo Van Puyvelde reminds us, it was only in 1903 that the teaching of the history of art was established by royal decree. The latter authorized the curriculum, the degrees and the setting up of the Advanced Institutes of the History of Art and Archaeology (‘Instituts supérieurs d’histoire de l’art et d’archéologie’) as central components of teaching in the university. This decree led to the creation of the Society of Courses in Art and Archaeology (‘Société des cours d’Art et d’Archéologie’) in Brussels, the Institute of the School of Advanced Studies (‘Institut de l’École des hautes études’) in Ghent as well as the institutes of the University of Liège and the Catholic University of Leuven.

The precursor to this was the work of two striking personalities, who reveal, in their clearly different ways, not only the integration of art history into the universities, but also the evolution of the different axes that were characteristic of research in the years to come: Hyppolite Fierens-Gevaert (1870–1926) and Georges Hullin de Loo (1862–1945). Fierens-Gevaert followed a quite distinctive path; having been forced to give up a career as a

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5 It should be noted that courses in art history were delivered before then, although not in an organized way, by Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert at the University of Liège, or by Auguste Vermeylen at the École des sciences politiques et sociales de Bruxelles.