

Audioguide for English adults

# HAUS HOHE PAPPELN



## Overview of commentaries

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## 225: Welcome

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Hello and welcome to the Haus Hohe Pappeln!

From 1908 to 1917, this was the home of Henry van de Velde, a leading Belgian architect and designer. Henry van de Velde designed the house, interior furnishings and garden himself as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* - a synthesis of the arts – where every artistic detail was harmonised.

Today, you can view the garden and the rooms on the ground floor. The upper floor is not open to visitors.

On your tour flyer, there are three-digit room numbers – and these are also the numbers for the audio guide. To hear the commentaries, simply key in the numbers and press play. The audio tour takes around twenty minutes; if you listen to all the second level commentaries, the tour is slightly under half an hour.

Before we explore the rooms inside, we'd first like to show you the beautiful garden and the different facades of this unusual house.

To start the tour with the exterior of the house, just go back outside and key in the number 226.

And now enjoy your tour exploring the world of Henry van de Velde!

## 226: Introduction

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In spring 1902, van de Velde moved to Weimar with his family. Wilhelm Ernst, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar, had appointed him as artistic advisor for the trades and industry. Van de Velde's remit was to support craft businesses in Thuringia in all design issues – with the aim of making them competitive.

Initially, the van de Velde family – van de Velde himself, his wife Maria and their three daughters – all lived in an apartment in Cranachstrasse. But after the twins Thyl and Thylla were born in March 1904, the apartment was just too small.

After a long search, van de Velde finally moved with his large family into a more spacious apartment – though they really wanted to have a house of their own.

In late 1906, that plan began to take a more definite shape when van de Velde bought the plot of land we are on now. At that time, the land was outside the town, and only surrounded by spreading fields.

Between July 1907 and March 1908, the house you are visiting today was built after van de Velde's own designs. Since the plot of land was surrounded by poplars, van de Velde's young son Thyl christened his new home 'The House under the High Poplars'.

Van de Velde lived here with his family until 1917. Then, as the hostility towards foreigners during the First World War became unbearable, he left Weimar. But his family were not allowed to travel with him, and had to stay in Germany; they were only allowed to leave the country the following year.

Their house 'Hohe Pappeln' – literally 'High Poplars' – was sold, and then changed hands several times over the next decades. In 1985, the house was listed as a heritage building; since 2002, it has been used by the Klassik Stiftung Weimar as a museum.

## 227: Exterior form and interior design

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No matter from which side you view the house, you'll notice how the entire façade is asymmetrical, seemingly made up of a complex system of interlocking sections. There are edges, angles and projecting elements everywhere, with a few bay windows here, and a loggia there. The secret of this unusual shape is that van de Velde planned his house from inside out – in other words, the shape of the façade was determined by the layout of the interior rooms.

Van de Velde's design for the layout of the rooms allowed for the movement of the sun – so the bedrooms were facing east, and the nursery facing south.

Such an approach reflected the ideas advocated by the *Lebensreform* movement, which propagated a back-to-nature lifestyle. Around 1900, the followers of this movement also wanted to completely revamp home décor. They rejected the gloomy rooms with overlaid interiors that had been standard for almost fifty years. Instead, they called for bright rooms with lots of fresh air.

For the *Lebensreform* movement, the ideal residential house was designed down to the last detail, merging and fusing art and life to create an aesthetic, practical and positive environment to serve the balance and harmony necessary for psychological and emotional health.

This was a view also shared by van de Velde – as you will see here in his Haus Hohe Pappeln, since he not only designed the house, but also its entire furnishings. All the individual elements were harmoniously balanced, down to the colours of the individual rooms.

In this way, van de Velde created Haus Hohe Pappeln as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – as a unity of the arts expressing a progressive life-style.

## 228: Garden

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Not only did van de Velde design Haus Hohe Pappeln and its interior furniture and fittings but, working closely with his wife Maria, he also designed the garden.

Since van de Velde planned his new home as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the garden design also played a major role.

The different sides of the house were designed to match their own particular area of garden. In front of the entrance, there was a small ornamental garden with a circular flowerbed set in the drive to create a circle where horse-drawn coaches could turn.

Along the side of the house with the living quarters facing Belvederer Allee, van de Velde laid out a rural garden with fruit trees. This area of garden included a shaded area known as a pergola – and this has only recently been reconstructed. Especially in summer, it was one of the family's favourite places.

In front of the south-facing terrace, also a popular place to relax, there was a gravelled area and fountain. Thanks to the large kitchen garden at the back of the house, the family was mainly self-supporting.

The garden and rural surroundings had the major advantage that the five children could grow up here quite freely. This was especially important for both Henry van de Velde and his wife Maria, who believed

that their children should have a childhood as natural and unconstrained as possible.

The five children not only shared their garden with the family dog, but also four chickens and a goat – as well as a sculpture, the 'Kneeling Youth' by Flemish sculptor George Minne. The fountain to the south side of the house is still decorated by a bronze copy of the original sculpture.

To find out more about this famous work, just key in 95.

## 95: Second Level AG-Nr. 95: Minne Kneeling Figure

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For a time, van de Velde was a close friend of George Minne and recommended him to many of his customers – including, for example, Karl Ernst Osthaus in Hagen, a leading collector and patron of the arts.

The ‘Kneeling Youth’, with his lowered head sunk in reverie and arms protectively wrapped around his upper body, is an allegory of humility.

Moreover, the extremely thin torso and limbs gives the figure the air of an ascetic who rejects worldly pleasures. In 1901, Julius Meier-Graefe, a well-known contemporary art critic and friend of van de Velde, wrote rather acerbically of Minne's ‘emaciated youths’, yet in the same article he praised the kneeling figures as ‘the first sculptures of our new age’.

In fact, Minne was very influential in the early 20th century – especially among avant-garde artists. His admirers not only included van de Velde, but also, for instance, the Vienna Expressionists Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele.

## 229: Vestibule

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The porch at the entrance of the house serves to separate the exterior and interior of the building. Even in his design for this simple space, van de Velde demonstrated his considerable skills as an interior architect.

The transitions between floor, wall and ceiling are gently curved, with wooden struts on the wall providing a unifying feature to combine all the elements in the room. As a result, you almost feel as if you are inside a ship – an impression only reinforced by the slotted-head screws visible everywhere. For van de Velde, these were a sign of functionality and honesty in design.

The three-part window on the right, next to the door, provides the room with light. When the post arrived, van de Velde only need to raise the window to collect his letters personally – and so the postman did not even need to come into the house. The letter box with writing desk below is just as discretely integrated into the wall panelling as the hidden electricity box.

The colours in this room are subdued. One remarkable aspect here is that you can find exactly this reddish tone on many Japanese colour woodcuts – hardly a coincidence, since in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many European painters and designers were strongly influenced by Japanese art.

## 230: Hallway

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A narrow hallway leads from the porch to a large lobby or hall which was also a living area, connecting all the other areas of the house.

Where the information desk is today, there used to be an open coat rack with a guest washroom behind it. The ceiling and upper section of the wall are finished in a rough, light grey plaster, while the lower section is panelled in the same Japanese red as in the porch.

The round brass ventilation grilles you see on the wall are a very interesting feature. They may well have been installed by van de Velde himself, since when he moved in, the house was still more or less a building site, and he wanted the brickwork to dry as quickly as possible. Moreover, the ventilation grilles serve as a decorative feature, giving the hallway a more aesthetic look. In that sense, they are a good example of one of van de Velde's main design principles. He was convinced that there was no inherent contradiction between functionality and beauty. As early as 1897, he noted in an article for the renowned arts and literary magazine PAN:

“Anyone starting out only to create a thing useful in all its details will end up with sheer beauty.”

## 231: Living hall

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Van de Velde regarded his Haus Hohe Pappeln as a carefully thought out organism – and just like the organs in a body, every room had a specific place and function.

This hallway living area was the heart of the house. From here, you could access all the different areas in the house, from the imposing reception rooms on the ground floor to the private rooms on the upper floor.

This hallway living area is light and friendly – an effect due particularly to the alcove with the bay window under the staircase. Originally, this was a cosy corner with a seating unit, and decorated with two first class art works – a sculpture by George Minne and a painting by the Flemish artist Théo van Rysselberghe.

When van de Velde left Weimar with his family he took the furniture with him, so that the furnishings you see here today are no longer the original. But the armchair with the adjustable back is an accurate replica of a chair which stood here in those days. Moreover, the white varnished bedroom furniture to the right was designed by van de Velde in 1903 for the Weimar apartment of journalist and playwright Max von Münchhausen – as was, incidentally, nearly all the other furniture on show here.

The door in front of the staircase leads to a set of access stairs directly connecting all the floors of the house. These service stairs were designed primarily for the domestic servants and the five children.

Van de Velde deliberately designed the interior to allow the children to move freely without getting too much in the way of the adults.

To find out more about the rather unusual life of the van de Velde family, just key in 96.

In their approach to their children's upbringing, van de Velde and his wife Maria were very progressive. They had five children - Nele, Helen and Anne, and the twins Thyl and Thylla – and they wanted them to grow up as freely and naturally as possible. Since they even thought that school regimented the children's development far too much, Maria initially taught them at home. But this liberal approach to education was not always an advantage. At times, the older children especially created so much noise and commotion that van de Velde could hardly work at home. His friend Harry Graf Kessler noted in his diary in 1906:

“In the afternoon, van de Velde called. He complained that he was at his wit's end with his situation at home. Their oldest girl Nele made any kind of peace and quiet impossible. His wife's method of education had failed totally (...). V. said that he was ready to pack it all in and take the remainder of his (...) capital and move to the South of France with his family, and start painting again.”

But van de Velde soon abandoned this plan. Instead, he build his 'High Poplars' house. In 1908, when the family moved, it came just at the right time since by then his five children, all between 4 and 11 years, had become quite a handful.

In van de Velde's new house, the layout of the rooms was perfectly designed to meet the needs of his family. To give the children as much space to play undisturbed as they needed, van de Velde built their playroom in the basement. From there, the children could get into the garden or their bedrooms directly from the service stairs behind the door – and could do so without disturbing their father when he was working or when he was entertaining guests here on the ground floor.

## 232: Salon

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The hallway living area opens to the salon which, in turn, is connected by large sliding doors to the dining room on the right and van de Velde's study on the left. When the doors are opened, the entire ground floor seems to be very spacious, almost as if it is one single coherent organic space. This impression is underline by the same style of elegant parquet floor throughout.

Originally, there was a carpet here covering the centre of the room with a large triangular table in the middle, surrounded by three elegant matt red sofas. Van de Velde's wife, Maria, had her curved writing desk next to the window on the left and her Blüthner piano in the right hand corner – she could play the piano exceptionally well.

As in so many other rooms in the house, the salon also illustrates van de Velde's love of fluid transitions – evident, for instance, in the way the wall and ceiling meet in a gentle curve. One especially ingenious feature in the room is the picture rail – just as in an exhibition room. The works which hung from the rail in van de Velde's day included paintings by Bonnard, Vuillard and Renoir.

The salon was Maria's realm, but it also served as the venue for all kinds of social get-togethers. This is where they gathered to receive visitors, sit with friends, or listen to readings, lectures or a private musical soirée.

To find out more about the prominent guests who met in this salon, just key in 97.

Van de Velde's 'High Poplar' house rapidly developed into a meeting point for a wide range of people from the German and European arts scene.

The most frequent visitors were van de Velde's friends from Weimar, for example, art collector and diplomat Harry Graf Kessler and Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, sister of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In addition, van de Velde also met influential art patrons here such as Carl Ernst Osthaus, who had founded the Folkwang Museum in Hagen in 1902. But Haus Hohe Pappeln often hosted literary figures too, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Richard Dehmel or André Gide, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947. And of course, this is also where van de Velde met fellow artists such as Ferdinand Hodler, Hermann Obrist and Pierre Bonnard.

The van de Veldes regularly issued invitations for festive dinners, and for private musical soirées and readings. In her memoirs, writer Helene von Nostitz, a family friend, described the special atmosphere at a lecture evening here in the salon:

“And I can still well remember how intense my impression was at a lecture when women were sitting around the black piano in the hall-like room wearing the dresses and jewellery of the day which van de Velde had himself designed. Exotic batik materials with high necklines, and usually green stones on long, simple necklaces (...). With his Spanish-looking head and an intelligent, yet definite glance from his black eyes, van de Velde's small, wiry figure moved vivaciously in between it all. His wit always hit the spot with the speed of a flash of lightning.”

## 233: Work room

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Here in the study, van de Velde could concentrate on finishing his new designs or his articles. If he found the main house too noisy, he just needed to close the sliding door to the salon. If he had guests, he could also let them in through a side door.

The study is a good example of how van de Velde already had the interiors planned, and kept that in mind when designing the overall structure of the house.

For instance, if you look at where the ceiling joins the walls, you'll notice a kind of recessed step – and this just goes to show how van de Velde designed the room and furniture as a unit. Originally, there were teak fitted elements all around the study – not only shelves and bookshelves, but also two integrated desks in front of the windows, as well as drawers, space for filing documents, and panelling for the radiators. These elements stretched from the floor to the ceiling, and fitted flush under the ceiling where today we can see the recessed step.

The chaise longue was not part of the house's original furnishings, but is one of van de Velde's designs from his Weimar years. It was made in 1903 for the wife of journalist and playwright Max von Münchhausen. The elegant writing desk dates from around the same time, and its curved shape reflects the natural radius of the human arm so that anyone sitting at the desk could easily reach all the writing implements and documents.

Today, the walls are decorated with copies of graphic works from the Klassik Stiftung collection, including a portrait of van de Velde by Edvard Munch. Harry Graf Kessler had brought Munch to Weimar, just as he did with many other avant-garde artists. Without Kessler, van de Velde's life would probably have taken a very different course – and to find out more about the fascinating Harry Graf Kessler, just key in 98.

## 98: Second Level AG-Nr. 98: Harry Graf Kessler

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Harry Graf Kessler was born in 1868, and was one of the most colourful figures in the very different Germanies before and after the First World War.

Harry Graf Kessler was a diplomat, writer, art collector and art patron. Today, he is best known for the diary he kept for over fifty years from 1880 until his death in 1937. His diary mentions the names of around 12,000 of his contemporaries, from German Chancellor Bismarck to Albert Einstein and Joséphine Baker – so no wonder Kessler was regarded as someone who keenly ‘collected people’. He was also an outstanding connoisseur and patron of contemporary art. The walls of his Berlin bachelor apartment, and later his apartment in Weimar, were hung with works by van Gogh, Cézanne, Renoir and Seurat. He commissioned the elegant furniture for both those apartments from van de Velde, who he had known before he moved to Weimar.

Together with Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Kessler was also instrumental in bringing van de Velde to Weimar in 1902 as a source of inspiration and innovation in the applied arts. Förster-Nietzsche and Kessler wanted to turn the little town of Weimar into a flourishing culture centre for a third time – after Weimar Classicism and the age of Wagner and Franz Liszt. To achieve this aim, Kessler took up an appointment as the director of the Grand Ducal Museum of Arts and Crafts in 1903.

Through Kessler’s excellent contacts, the museum was able to show the very latest European art. But Kessler’s all too ambitious plans soon had conservative circles in Weimar up in arms. In 1906, he was attacked in the press for allegedly obscene nude studies by Rodin – and as a result, Kessler resigned from his position in Weimar.

## 234: Dining Room

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The room's original furnishings are now in museums in Belgium and Switzerland. The furniture on show here today was designed by van de Velde in 1903 for the Weimar apartment of the writer Max von Münchhausen. The legs of the square table form a shape distantly reminiscent of pointed Gothic arches. The chairs have simple rattan seats and inlays in the backs, but their angled front legs are certainly their most noticeable feature. The glass cabinet on the left also comes from the dining room of Max von Münchhausen.

To find out more about Max von Münchhausen, just key in 74.

The dining room to the south is the last room in the suite of rooms on this floor. This room was decorated completely in pastel shades. The walls were hung with neo-impressionist paintings by Paul Signac and Georges Seurat, as well as a sketch by Vincent van Gogh. The view outside to the garden, framed by the windows, also resembled a sequence of pictures. In summer especially, as soon as the colourful hollyhocks and sunflowers were in bloom, you could see far across the fields – as far as the slopes around Belvedere Palace. There was a back porch leading directly onto the terrace and, from there, into the garden.

The access stairs are on the left of the sliding doors to the salon. In those days, there was a little lift known as a dumb waiter to carry food up from the kitchen in the basement. The servants could then look discretely through the window to see whether it was the right moment to serve the food.

## Second Level AG-Nr. 74: Max von Münchhausen

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The writer Max von Münchhausen, born in 1868, was an ardent admirer of Friedrich Nietzsche. His most fervent desire was to belong to the Weimar circle around Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth, Harry Graf Kessler and van de Velde – even though he could not abide Kessler and was initially rather sceptical about van de Velde as well. Certainly, van de Velde believed that his interior design artworks were directly supporting Nietzsche's call for a new kind of person. But Münchhausen found it unbearable to have van de Velde's name constantly mentioned in the same breath as Nietzsche's. Münchhausen wrote scornfully to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche in November 1902:

“Compared to the divinity of a Zarathustra, Mr van de Velde – with all the high regard I have for his person and his works – is really just like a pathetic cheese mite clinging to the bottom of a stirred layer of mould.”

Nonetheless, Münchhausen was convinced by van de Velde's furniture designs – so much so, that before he moved to Weimar with his family in 1904, he commissioned van de Velde to produce a complete set of furniture for his new home. There are elements from that complete set on show here in Haus Hohe Pappeln.

Until 1907, Münchhausen lived in the town but was only ever a marginal figure in the circles around Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. He is not even mentioned in van de Velde's autobiography.

Incidentally, it is only totally by chance that the furniture which van de Velde designed for Münchhausen has largely survived intact. Many of the interiors created by van de Velde were destroyed in the Second World War – or have been scattered across the world together with their owners, often Jewish members of the upper middle classes forced into emigration in the 1930s.