

THE ROOTS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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GAMES AND SPORTS



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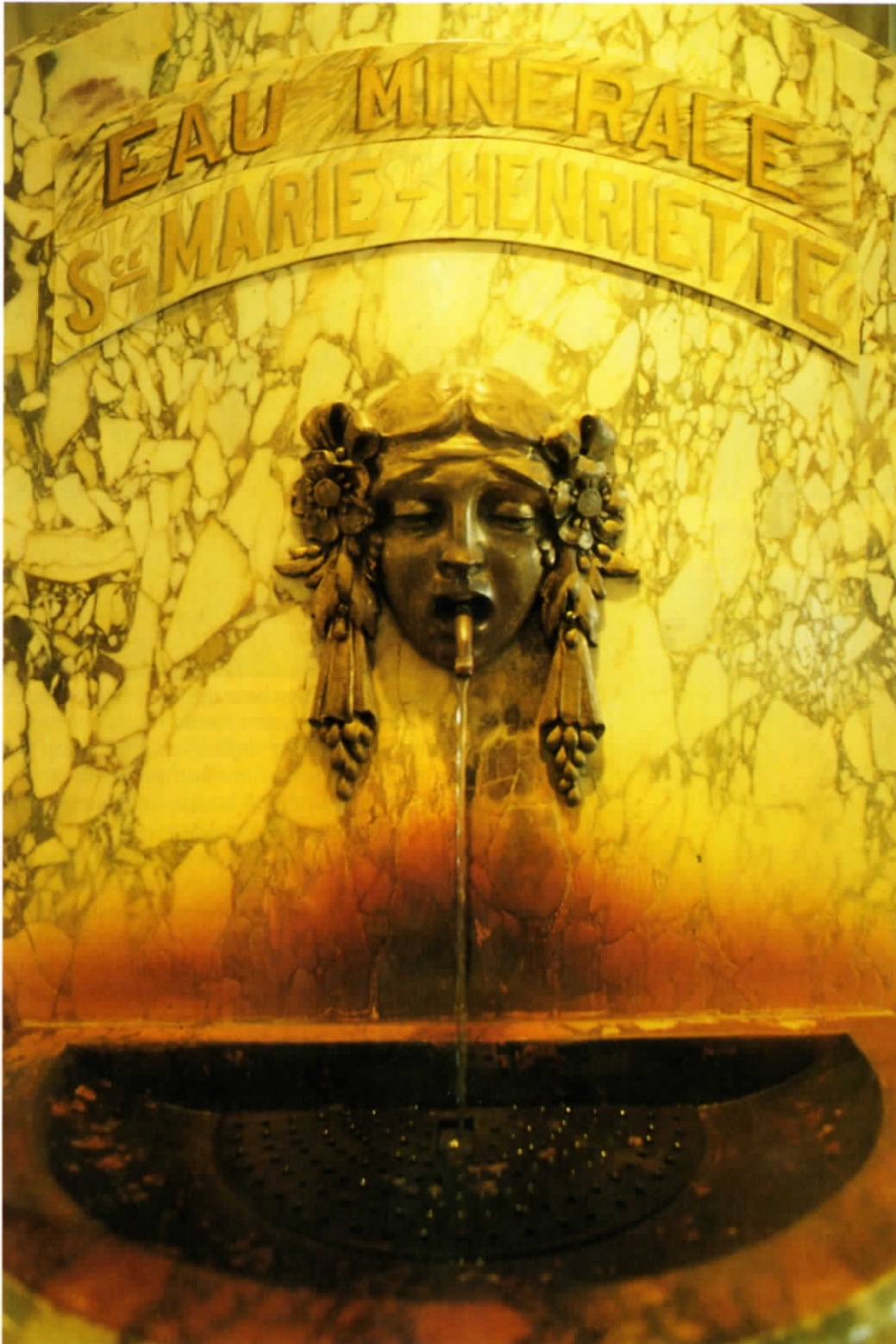
Taking the waters

The leisure age in eighteenth century Europe

Taking the waters was clearly more than just a pretext at the disposal of the wayward aristocracy. The eighteenth century spas mark the origin of one of the major themes in our society and culture: self-cultivation, which in turn gave rise to the concept of leisure and prosperity which we all share today. Spa, and a few other eighteenth century resorts, was one of its first and foremost expressions.

Carl Havelange

The carbonated and ferri-ferous Spa water was promoted for its qualities by many medical authorities as miraculous medicine against any disease. Till after World War II, Spa remained a favorite health and vacation resort for the rich. In the English language, the word 'Spa' became synonymous for healing spring water or thermal health resorts. The Spa spring Marie-Henriette, or the *Source de la Reine*.





General view of the town of Spa. As early as the 16th century, Spa enjoyed international fame. 16th century engraving by Jean Valdor.



In the 16th century, it was not bathing in the clear spring water but drinking it which formed the basis for the success of villages like Spa, which even outgrew cities like Aix-la-Chapelle and Bath with their ancient Roman tradition. Here some Swedish visitors during a course of treatment at Spa, painted by D.K. Ehrenstrahl in 1686.

Aix-la-Chapelle, Brighton, Bath, Deauville, Baden-Baden, Spa: favored by the English gentry in a Europe which was overwhelmingly anglophile, these towns rose rapidly to fame over the eighteenth century, becoming legends. Somewhere in our collective consciousness there is a lingering echo of their bygone splendor; now and again it surfaces as a backdrop for one of so many novels or films suffused with dewy-eyed nostalgia for a world of luxury, lightheartedness and display. A handful of spa towns survive today, more or less tastefully patched up, to ensure that the myth continues. The myth itself is a collective one, and its significance stretches far beyond the mere evocation of that micro-society of aristocrats and rich worthies who, in the Europe of the Enlightenment, could afford to flaunt their wealth beside the springs before going off to spend it at the gaming tables. Like the heroes of Olympus whose unseen presence shapes our culture, attitudes and emotions, those bygone princes, countesses, well-heeled clerics and industrialists hold up to us a magic mirror in which we see a whole culture and society reflected in the spa. The characters may seem somewhat unreal, the plots contrived and the dialogue stilted, but is it not the role of heroes to speak the language of excess? By refining the art of repartee to the point of caricature, these characters help encapsulate the essence of what we truly are. Unreal? Of course not. The eighteenth century spa towns most certainly existed. Those taking the waters

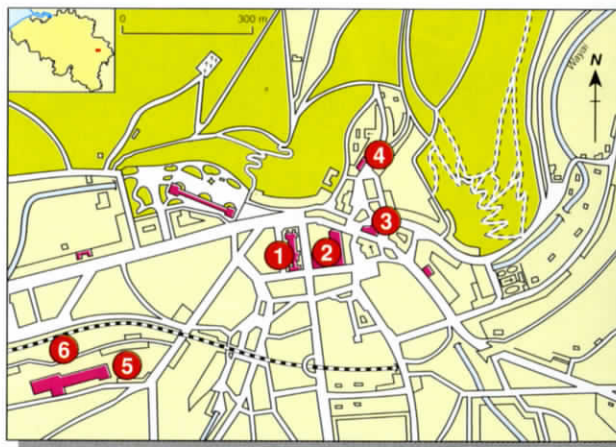


Allaert van Everdingen sketched the crowd around the Géronstère spring at Spa (17th century). The water coming from this spring filters through sand and is very pure but highly ferrous, giving it a disagreeable taste. In 1717, Czar Peter the Great, suffering from chronic stomach problems, was healed after drinking large quantities of this spring water on an empty stomach.

most certainly believed in the privileges – of birth or fortune – which brought them there to mingle together; they believed in the legitimacy and the veracity of their presence and their existence. The history of these people is heroic or mythological only by virtue of the place which it occupies in present-day culture. Though it may have been long ago that the final curtain fell on the play which ran in those eighteenth century spas, it nevertheless marks the origin of one of the major themes in our society and culture today, for at the heart of that play is a motif which has been subsumed somewhat unwittingly by a wider European culture and repeated and amplified to such a degree that we can all now identify with the characters, so much so that, for a few weeks every year we – those not consecrated to work – foster the illusion that we are all actors in it.

The spa town – a cultural microcosm

This particular play, like any other well-constructed play, conforms to certain rules: unity of place, unity of



Ground plan of the Belgian health resorts at Spa:

1. *Etablissement Thermal*, (bathhouse from 1868);
2. Casino from 1906; 3. *Pouhon Pierre le Grand* (Czar Peter the Great's well); 4. The former *Grand Hotel*, (built between 1762 and 1768, now City Hall); 5. Bottling plants of Spa Monopole S.A.; 6. Railway station.



The water was collected in glass bottles like this one.

time and unity of action. Let us begin with *place*. Let us first of all reflect on the unfamiliarity of the setting within the eighteenth century context, on its quaintness or exoticism. The typical spa was a faraway place, set in the midst of a bounteous natural scene, and this in itself was a draw to the visitor. There were, to begin with, the charms of the mountains and hills of hot springs country, to be followed in turn by the poetic fascination with the awesome deep, as the first seaside resorts began to appear. Let us next consider the unity of *time*, that is to say the *season*, which, from May to September, drew visitors – the first true tourists – to the European spas in droves. Finally, the unity of *action*: the element of *play* which was so central to the whole experience.

What kind of games were played? Games of chance and gambling games, of course, which marshalled, for a season, a crew of wealthy leisured folk whose abiding joy it was to sharpen their emotions on the potential gain or loss of substantial sums of money. Every seaside resort or mountain spa had a casino and gaming tables. Cards or dice, however, were just one facet of a social and cultural setting dedicated entirely to the cult of pleasure and play. To restrict the study of play within the spa environment to this single dimension would be to fail to explore the question in the round and grasp the overall coherence of what might be called *spa culture*. It is the aim of the following pages to give a picture of this culture by taking as an



Besides Spa, French thermal resorts such as the one in Vichy were favored as early as the 17th century. It was a meeting place for the most influential people. In the course of time, society life became more and more important: the drinking cure took place in the mornings, after which the days were filled with eating, strolling, dancing, games and spectacles in the casino. Here the Vichy *Grand Casino*, situated in a splendidly laid out park.



example that most famous of eighteenth century spa towns, the town of Spa itself, which was so well-known in its day that its name came to represent the whole concept.

Spa, an obligatory stop on the Grand Tour of European spas, attracts our interest both because of its fame and its typicality. It cannot, however, strictly be considered a model or an archetype of all the attractions and amenities available at a spa. It differed, for instance, from nearby Bad-Aachen and a great many other spas in Italy, Germany and England in that its waters were for the most part prescribed for internal use, or drunk; it was only later on, during the second half of the eighteenth century, that the vogue for therapeutic baths eventually caught on at Spa, triggered basically by a desire on the part of its medical staff both to modernize the existing amenities and to catch up with some of the therapeutic techniques adopted by the other spas. Set deep in the Ardennes hills, Spa is, of course, not a seaside resort; it can thus indicate only dimly the new role which the sea and its shoreline – intimation of the infinite and source of renewal – were beginning to take on as the century progressed.

Spa, for all that, remains a landmark, and, for a time the most celebrated, prestigious and most frequented of all spas, it survives as a symbol today. Water and nature; the body and health; play – not only cards and dice but also verbal games, games of encounter and of



The Vichy *Hal des Sources* was executed in the same grand style as that of the Paris Opera House.

Turn-of-the-century posters advertising the many attractions and dance evenings which the Chaudfontaine health resort near Liège could offer its guests.



Coach outings in the beautiful wooded surroundings was one of the attractions of Spa. Here a ride in the neighborhood of the Geronstère spring. Colored litho by Jean-Baptiste Madou (1796-1877).



Walking and parading along the health resort's many avenues was a daily pastime. To see and be seen was the motto. Here the 'Grand Parade at Bath', c. 1780.

display: games of the ephemeral – begun again with every season. Every year from May to September, as in Brighton, Deauville and Baden-Baden, the same extraordinary cultural alchemy came into being in Spa which defined the quintessential nature of eighteenth century spa life.

The coffeehouse of all Europe

The medicinal properties of the ferruginous waters of Spa, known since the sixteenth century, grew steadily in repute over the course of the seventeenth century, but it was not until the first half of the eighteenth century and the resurgence of interest in Hippocratism and the physio-pathological theory of humors (as expressed by Hoffmann, Boerhaave, Sydenham) that Spa's medical fortune was truly made. The publicity which attended the visit of a number of crowned heads (Peter the Great in 1717) to Spa in its early days; the ambition of its medical staff and their awareness of the economic value of visitors and intelligent use of propaganda; the enthusiasm of the English, and the gradual modernization of Spa's therapeutic amenities and entertainments sufficed to do the rest. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the town was one of the most luxurious resorts in Europe. Unrivalled by other spas, be they English or continental, it became *the coffeehouse of all Europe*. Thousands of tourists went there each summer, their ranks swelled by Europe's aristocratic elite.

What attractions – what enticements – drew these gentry to undertake the long, tiring and sometimes dangerous journey to gather around the springs for a few weeks each summer? A partial answer, at least, is to be found in eighteenth century 'tourist guides', travellers' memoirs, the treatises written on mineral

waters, handbooks intended for spa visitors, and the numerous descriptions of Spa itself.

Casanova, for example, a cynical observer of his time and of himself, visiting Spa in the summer of 1767, summed up in one stroke of the pen the motives of 'those who flock to throw themselves into the bottomless pit that is Spa': the waters, he wrote in his *Memoirs*, 'are but a pretext for most visitors'; 'people come to do business, to hatch plots, to gamble, to make love and to spy'. Casanova was essentially a moralist, and his trenchant observations echoed those of the town's outspoken enemies who regarded Spa as an outright den of vice, ruled by the power of money and the lure of the gaming table. Let us here examine this counter-image of Spa in more detail, since it had considerable currency in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. 'What do people go there for?' asked the author of *Nouveau Tableau de Spa* in 1788. 'To drink the waters of the Pouhon? ... My dear Sir, to ask such a question you must have been born yesterday! Listen: women go there to be more at liberty with their lovers, or in search of such a paramour; girls go there to find a husband, or to assuage the irksomeness of waiting for one; rogues, who are always in the majority, go there to find gulls; and imbeciles to have their pockets emptied by the croupiers at *faro*, *trente-et-un* or *biribi*, the proprietors of the public establishments, the inn-

keepers, the merchants, and the police (so-called) who take their share of all the spoils'.

Gambling, debauchery, low life: a black picture indeed, bringing together every hue of vice imaginable; but should we really be surprised? Spa was the focus of considerable economic interest. The organization of gambling was an exclusive monopoly fran-



Every thermal town had a luxurious hotel where wealthy guests were served hand and foot and could count on proper comfort and discretion. Here the Vittel Grand Hôtel which was built in the thermal park in 1863. It had a roofed gallery, connecting it with the Casino and the baths.



The 'Pump Room' in Bath, depicted by John Claude Nattes. Here people hoped to lose excess weight by drinking great quantities of water.



The 18th century tearoom in the Bath Assembly's Upper Room. During the dance break at nine o'clock in the evening, sweating guests hurried here after the English Country Dance to have a rest during the tea break. Until eleven o'clock they could amuse themselves further in the Lower Rooms.



A 1900 poster announcing the great international horse races, organized by the City of Spa in August.

chised out in 1762 by the Bishop Prince, head of the State of Liège, to the shareholders of first one, and then two gaming houses: *la Redoute* and *le Vaux-Hall*, glittering establishments both, and, commercially, the brightest jewels in the Liégeois crown! The Bishop Prince, not over-punctilious on moral matters, received enormous sums in royalties from the owners of the gaming houses every year.

While one can easily appreciate the disputes, motivated by self-interest, jealousy, economic preoccupations and political concerns, which shaped the history of Spa, the town remained an easy target for criticism. How, for instance, were contemporaries to reconcile themselves to the fact that, under the benevolent stewardship in all matters temporal and spiritual exercised by the Bishop Prince, gambling, anathematized both under Roman law and the laws of the Christian West, had gained the status of an institution? How, in the context of the *ancien régime*, could it be seen as fitting for a town to be so wholeheartedly committed to the cult of the body, pleasure and play? For Spa, in the teeth of criticism from moral zealots and commercial rivals, grew at such a pace throughout the eighteenth century that its rise was thought unstoppable. In order now, however, to transcend the merely economic and assess the cultural significance of this success, we must step through to the other side of the looking glass and consider the more uplifting aspects of spa life.

A new literary genre was coming to the fore in Spa and other European resorts: the tourist guidebook. Often tellingly referred to as *amusemens*, these guides sought to initiate the visitor to spa life, supplying him with all the information he needed to make the very best of his stay. 'Spa', wrote the author of one such book, *Les Amusemens de Spa*, the doctor Jean-Philippe De Limbourg, 'is the general meeting place of all the European Nations; here they assemble each summer, allured as much by the prospect of pleasure as out of concern for their health. It is between these two subjects that attention is divided'. Health and pleasure: these were the two axes around which the town orientated its whole existence, and it would be a mistake, not to say a deliberate misinterpretation to regard 'reasons of health' as no more than a pretext, an excuse to indulge the compulsion to gamble.

Health-giving waters

There is no doubt that Spa waters benefitted from a considerable degree of medical fame in the eighteenth century. They had been the subject of many a treatise, and were enthusiastically recommended by several learned authorities (whose names were dropped at every conceivable occasion). It was also true that water from the town's main spring, *le Pouhon*, was exported for its medicinal properties throughout the world. The whole concept of the spa tallied nicely with the Neo-hippocratic views of the contemporary medical establishment. If an ailment stemmed from congestion, coagulation or other impairment of the humors, then mineral water, with its active principles, would undoubtedly provide an effective cure, restor-

The lottery

In these times of state-owned casinos, legal betting shops, soccer pools and bingo games, it might be hard to imagine that for centuries the lottery was the only form of organized gambling available to the general public. It is without a doubt one of the oldest gambling traditions known to man, not least because of the relative ease with which people could organize one.

Sources describing lotteries can be traced back to the Bible, in which many references to the practice are made, among other uses to distribute parcels of land to the people. In Roman times, the Emperors Nero and Augustus were known to give away property and slaves during the Saturnalian Feasts and other festivities.

The oldest European records date back to the late Middle Ages. In fifteenth century Burgundy and the Low Countries, the lottery was established as a state approved (and sometimes even state sponsored) event to raise money for public works and charity, and was as such even condoned by the Church.

Lottery tickets could be bought with money, but could also be gotten in exchange for all kinds of goods; farmers brought cattle, horses, cheese and peat, merchants used wool and linens, as well as barrels of beer and wine. While the well-off offered jewelry and carpets, hoping to win more valuable goods, the poor exchanged



weapons, boots and clothing. The prizes were at first also material goods. It was not until 1530, that Florence held the first *Lotto de Firenze*, in which sums of money were given away as prizes. This idea quickly spread to other Italian cities and slowly became popular throughout the European continent. Frances I of France permitted

the establishment of the lottery for private and public profit in several cities between 1520 and 1539, and it rapidly became an easy means of obtaining revenue all over Western Europe to finance the building of orphanages, bridges, aqueducts, roads and even museums.

In 1566, Queen Elizabeth I chartered a general lottery in Eng-

land for raising money to repair harbors, and in 1612, the English Virginia Company obtained permission from King James I to finance the settlement of Jamestown in the New World by lottery as well. As was written in one of this company's reports, the lottery was thought to be 'the first and most certain' way of obtaining funds.

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The happy winners of a kettle in the Grootebroek Lottery of 1494, engraved by Jacob Cole.

ing balance to vitiated humors and regulating those present in excess. To those doctors who claimed to be free of the 'long delirium' of the theory of systems, gaining their inspiration from Hippocrates and confident of the virtues of *natura medicatrix*, mineral water appeared to be the ultimate in remedies.

Taking the waters is clearly associated with the idea of a beneficent nature, with water as its purest expression. When this was combined with the other major ritual of spa life, the daily constitutional, the concept was complete: a therapeutic revitalization of body and spirit through contact with nature. There are countless descriptions of walks around Spa; delightful strolls around the springs and farther-flung excursions, all of them leading the visitor towards health, and making Spa 'the setting for the most agreeable of medicinal Gymnastics' (De Limbourg).

Neither was walking the only of Spa's attractions to be so explicitly linked to health. Here, 'all is play'; for according to eighteenth century medical theories, the 'dissipation' of the spirit formed an integral part of the therapy: gatherings, games, balls, concerts, spectacles, outings, banquets, galas, musical luncheons. The whole of Spa culture rested on this duality, not to say ambiguity. It could even be used to justify gambling, since, as the doctors and the devotees explained, this was harmful only to those who abused it.

Considered from this angle, card and dice games – *faro*, *craps*, *piquet*, *trente-et-un* or *biribi* – were just one element among many in a cultural environment founded entirely on the twin principle of health and play. For spa therapy to succeed, it was crucial that the mind be free of all concern, and that every moment of the day be lived out in what was essential-

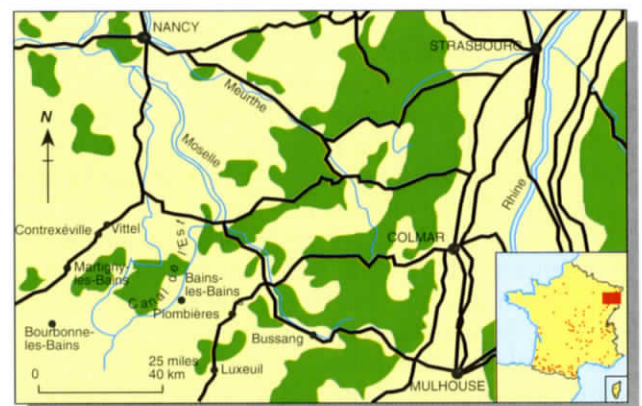


The closed down *Pavillon des Sources* at Martigny-les-Bains, is still a witness to the luxurious *Belle Epoque*. The Great War was the final blow for many small health resorts.



According to this poster from 1897, designed by Victor Mignot, trapshooting was very popular too.

ly a spirit of playfulness. There were many pleasures to be had: excursions, of course – all manner of them: country picnics, sightseeing visits to neighboring villages; hours spent browsing around the shops, observing the artisans at work and collecting mementos – marquetry work and varnished wooden items – to take back home. Dancing, too, was a boundless source of enjoyment, be it in the form of lavish organized balls or improvised quadrilles in public gardens.



The thermal health resorts in the French Vosges, which flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries and most of which have seen a revival since the 1970s. The small map indicates all the thermal health resorts in France.



The thermal possibilities were regularly extended and, in 1868, a new bathhouse was opened. In Spa, the copper bathtub, being a better heat conductor, was preferred to the marble one.

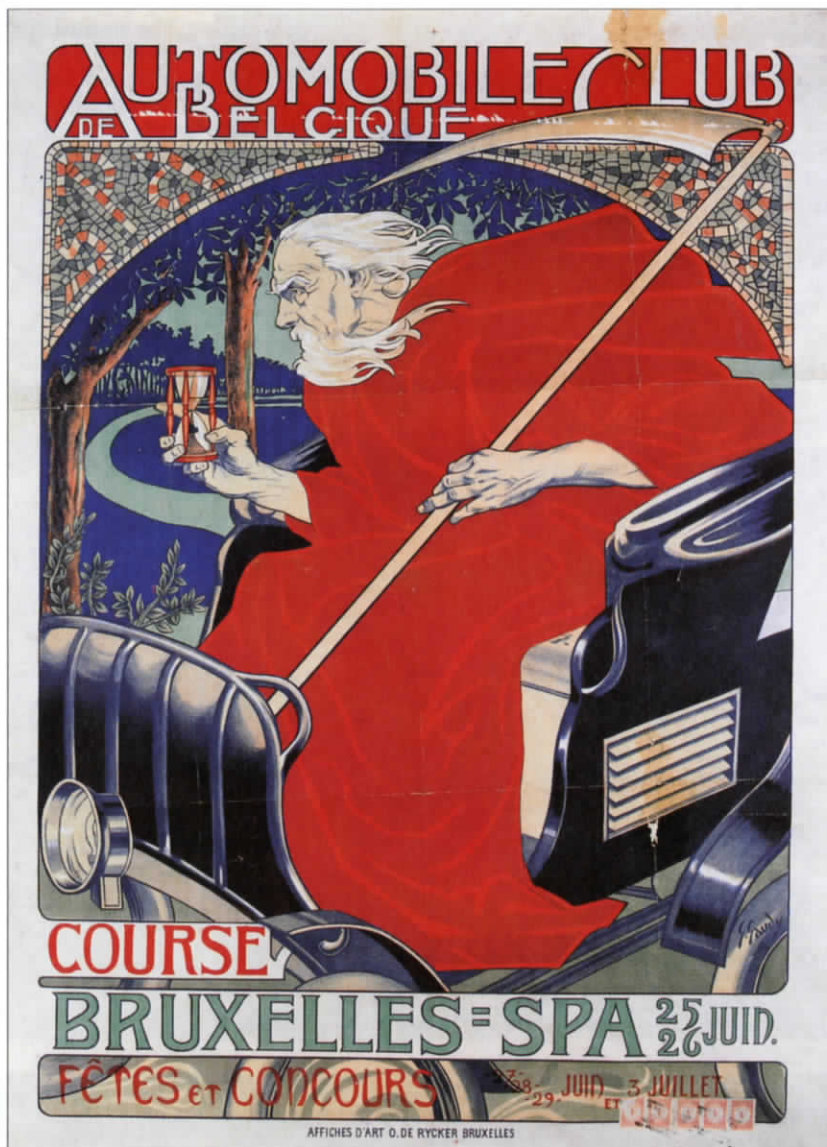
There was also the pleasure of the daily performances and concerts at *la Redoute* or *le Vaux-Hall*; and, last but not least, there was the pleasure of the informal get-together, the intimate suppers on return from the springs.

For everyone apart from the odd shrinking soul or misanthropist ensconced in his solitude, each one of these pleasures was preeminently collective: the main game played at Spa was undoubtedly that of social contact and conversation, codified into a sort of conviviality which represented one of the major delights of spa life. There was no rigid etiquette here.

Everyone, men and women together, people of all nationalities and religions, socialized freely, joked and conversed uninhibitedly, coalesced over the course of a season into small groups of friends taking endless delight in the joys of togetherness and the game of conversation. Spa, *the coffeehouse of all Europe*: naturally, this conviviality had its codes and its rituals. The lack of etiquette so greatly prized by the champions of the spa was a means not only of tempering but also of sidestepping convention. When a gentleman arrived at Spa, he exchanged his sword for a cane decorated with favors, a mandatory accoutrement for the stroller and *de rigueur* on a tour of the springs. Prior to the evening's ball or performance – a daily pageant of elegance – visitors felt able to attire themselves in light and simple costume, the symbol of a



Besides Ems and Wiesbaden, Baden-Baden was the outstanding health resort in Germany where royalty and, in the 19th century, the wealthy bourgeois hoped to find entertainment and romantic adventures under the pretext of a bath cure. Here a view of the casino's gambling hall.



Car races became extremely popular by the end of the 19th century. Spa took advantage of this trend.



freedom and lightheartedness sparkingly encapsulated in the permanent spectacle of 'Europe in informal dress'. 'The informal costumes of the Ladies', writes Jean-Philippe De Limbourg, 'were so very stylish that I felt myself transported into another world – a world where such was the collective engrossment in pleasure that people conspired mutually to secure it for each other'.

All was play, performance, talk. This applied also to the morning ritual of taking the waters which took the spa visitors on a lengthy progression from one spring to another – le Pouhon, le Tonnelet, la Sauvenière, la Géronstère – a progression full of as many delights, opportunities for meetings and chances for banter as there were springs themselves. The visitors struck up conversations without ceremony; they exchanged pleasantries; they commented on the flavor of the water and its qualities; occasionally they danced and had music played to them; they counted the number of glasses consumed by each using tallies made of wood, ivory or mother-of-pearl suspended from their button-holes or set into small boxes containing 'sweeteners' for enhancing the flavor of the water: orange blossom, cardamom seeds, juniper berries, aniseed, cumin and mint. Here too gaiety was the order of the day, for the visitors knew that this 'spirit of lightheartedness' contributed as much as the waters to a speedy recovery of health. One might indeed hazard a guess that the health of most visitors was not a cause for grave concern. This gave the moral zealots their chance to fulminate against the daily jaunts around the springs at the same time as they censured gambling.

Romance, of course, was not the least of Spa's attractions. Just like cards, outings, dancing, conversation, music, culinary delights and freedom from convention, it was just one element among many in a cultural environment entirely given over to the idea of play and pleasure. This environment was, of course, essentially artificial. The rules by which it was governed, by simple virtue of the fact that they ran counter to the usual social norms, were valid only insofar as they were restricted to a given place and time. The journey to Spa was necessarily a journey away from one's normal surroundings.

Viewed in this context, taking the waters was clearly more than just a pretext at the disposal of the wayward aristocracy. For taking the waters in itself was a game. It was a game firmly rooted in the novel phenomenon of self-cultivation, a phenomenon which, nurtured in the medium of our individualism, gave rise, in turn, to the concept of leisure and well-being which we all share today. Spa, and a few other eighteenth century resorts, were one of its first and foremost expressions.

In 1761, the Luxueil-les-Bains bathhouse was built. Its construction was classic, according to the very trendy conceptions of Nicolas Ledoux, whose pupil was in charge of the Luxueil complex.