



## Dirty pretty things

It's odd how something pretty much all over the place can be so easily overlooked. Have you noticed those little ground-level niches with the horizontally attached iron piece next to the entrances of Brussels' buildings? Reminiscent of oversized mouse holes, these so-called "boot-scrapers", antique versions of today's doormat, can cause confusion for modern-day walkers – even though they've been an integral part of Brussels' urban landscape for centuries. While

some are plain and functional, others are more like artworks in themselves. They're remnants from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when they were used to scrape mud off shoes. Recently, these hidden treasures have attracted some attention: from academic research in Brussels' universities to an exhibition in Halles St Géry, where over 1,000 photographs show boot-scrapers in all shapes and sizes. "When streets had not been asphalted yet, they were common in all big European cities," explains Laurence Rosier, professor of Linguistics at the Free University of Brussels, who has delved deeper than most into the rather obscure subject. But the scrapers only started appearing when the first footpaths were constructed: "It wasn't until the upper classes

in London, Paris and Brussels left their horse carriages and walking became socially acceptable that a market for the iron-made objects emerged," Rosier continues. Although the scrapers can be found in a number of countries including Algeria, the ones in Brussels stand out for their sheer beauty inspired by art deco and art nouveau architecture. Today, the moveable version, banned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of public safety concerns (that's when the scrapers started to become attached to house walls), can be found on eBay as a decorative item. And even though the streets are tarred nowadays, they can still come in handy as dog poop removers for example, something that's much-needed on Brussels streets, we think you'll agree. (SS)



1050 Décrottoirs!  
From 13<sup>th</sup> June to 7<sup>th</sup> July  
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