

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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More than 300 Art Nouveau objects, ranging from jewelry to buildings and including posters, paintings, books and furniture will be on exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art from June 8 through September 6. Selected from 45 museums here and abroad and many private collections, it is the first comprehensive survey shown in America of Art Nouveau, the style of fashion and of the avant garde in the late 90s, later rejected and now considered a significant early phase of the modern movement.

Art Nouveau developed during the 1890s when artists made a conscious effort to break with what they regarded as worn-out formulas of the past. Painters and sculptors rejected the imitation of nature; architects and designers denounced the imitation of hand-craftsmanship and accepted the machine as a means toward creating a new art form. They sought a unified style in which paintings or tapestries on the wall were echoed by furniture in the room, glass and flatware on the table, and even dress and jewelry.

The chief characteristics of the style were evocative and richly symbolic forms and meanings, emphatically decorative and two-dimensional. It mattered little whether such linear decoration was applied to a book title page or a building facade.

The international character of the Art Nouveau style is seen in the artists represented who include: Beardsley and Voysey from England; Guimard, Gallé, Lalique, Bonnard and Gauguin from France; Mackintosh from Scotland; Picasso and Gaudí from Spain; van de Velde and Horta from Belgium; Munch from Norway; Klimt and Hoffmann from Austria; Eckmann, Riemerschmid, Barlach, and Behrens from Germany; Tiffany and Bradley from America. A major book accompanies the show.*

Summarizing the contributions of this movement which dominated European art from about 1895 to 1905, Peter Selz, Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions and director of the exhibition says:

We can now understand the liberating function of this style: it discarded outworn conventions and set the stage for the extraordinarily rapid developments of the 20th century. We can now appreciate the free-flowing asymmetry of Guimard's furniture in relation to contemporary work. We can enjoy equally Tiffany's sense of organic form and the more severely rectilinear invention of the Scottish and Viennese Art Nouveau designers. We can see that this movement, which received so much of its impact from Gauguin and the Symbolist painters, also encompassed many of the leading painters at the turn of the century - Munch, Toulouse-Lautrec, Hodler - and finally gave a starting point to artists such as Picasso, Bonnard and Kandinsky. The movement also contributed to the range of expressive possibilities in typography and poster design, and to the use of open space in architecture.

*Art Nouveau, edited by Peter Selz and Mildred Constantine, with articles by Greta Daniel, Alan M. Fern, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Peter Selz. 192 pages, 193 illustrations (color frontispiece) \$6.50. Published by the Museum of Modern Art, N. Y., October 21, 1960. Distributed by Doubleday and Co., Inc.

England - One of the most important and influential Art Nouveau graphic artists was the Englishman Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898). Beardsley received his first encouragement from Burne-Jones, who was the connecting link between the Pre-Raphaelites and the New Style, and a life-long friend and collaborator of William Morris. His illustrations for Sir Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur and for Oscar Wilde's Salome, are among examples of his work in the exhibition. Mr. Selz describing his flat, decorative patterns, says "his drawings no longer illustrate specific scenes in the play but are commentaries that start where the text ends. His cold biting line no longer delineates realistic forms, but leads a life of its own."

Scotland - The dominant figure in Scotland was Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928) who evolved the Glasgow style which added an element of pure geometry to Art Nouveau and was particularly influential in Germany and Austria. His rectilinear, simple furniture, elongated silverware and design for the mural decorations in Miss Cranston's Buchanan Street Tea Rooms are in the exhibition with photographs of the Glasgow School of Art (1897-99).

France - The term Art Nouveau, which was finally accepted in most countries, derives from S. Bing's shop, Maison de l'Art Nouveau at 22, rue de Provence, Paris. There Bing showed paintings by Munch, rooms by van de Velde as well as sculpture, glass, jewelry, and posters.

Another center of the New Style in France evolved in Nancy where the glass industry dated back to the 15th century. The Nancy School, led by Emile Gallé, (1846-1904) was influenced by the Symbolist movement and was based on a deep belief in nature as the source of inspiration. Six examples of Gallé's glass, unconventional in form and original in technique, are included in the exhibition. Symbolist poetry was often incorporated in the glass and in his precious and fragile inlaid furniture.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) is one of the Symbolist painters represented in the exhibition: Still Life with Three Puppies, an oil of 1888, a wall panel, a vase and woodcuts are shown. His craftsman-like pre-occupation with the material in these prints relates him as closely to Art Nouveau as does his starkly formalized stylization.

Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) who visited the Art Nouveau leader van de Velde in Brussels in 1894 and met Wilde and Beardsley in London in 1895, is represented in the exhibition by an 1891 oil At Nouveau Cirque: The Dancer and the Five Stiff Shirts, two lithographs of the dancer Loie Fuller and a poster and lithograph of the singer Jane Avril. Selz says:

Like his friends, like most of the important painters of his generation, Lautrec became absorbed by the expressive possibilities of line.... In his At the Nouveau Cirque...he yields completely to an Art Nouveau arabesque, which moves here with a spirited and vivacious flow. Hat, hair and dress of the lady have taken on bizarre shapes, as has the dancer bending her body backwards to create a sharply exaggerated curve.

France's most important Art Nouveau architect was Hector Guimard (1867-1942) whose cast iron orchid-like stalks for the Paris Metro stations were a part of the street scene in the late 1890s and today still form the entrances of several stations. They are shown in the exhibition in enlarged photographs along with photographs of the Humbert de Romans building which has been destroyed. An actual gate is installed in the Museum garden.

Belgium - Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), Belgian painter, architect and designer who became the most articulate advocate of the new style, is represented in the exhibition by almost a score of objects: an abstract painting of 1890, a wall hanging, book illustrations, title pages, book bindings, chairs, a candelabrum, table flatware and a coffee service.

In 1895 van de Velde built a house near Brussels for which he designed the interiors, the furnishings, even his wife's dresses. The house attracted wide attention and the next year he was asked to design four rooms for Bing's shop in Paris. Later he moved to Germany where he assumed leadership of the Art Nouveau movement there. He also taught at the Weimar School of Applied Art, which evolved into the Bauhaus after World War I.

Van de Velde believed that a unity of form and meaning resulting in a new decorative totality of the arts would lead to a new and healthier environment for contemporary life. His woodcuts are a "culmination of the Symbolist attitude of evoking an emotion without resorting to literary statements or allegorical description."

Victor Horta (1861-1947) built the first Art Nouveau structure in 1892-93 in Brussels. He was influenced by the constructive principles of Viollet-le-Duc, neo-baroque elements of form, and plant motifs. He is represented in the exhibition by a foot rocker, wall light, ink stand and door handles as well as enlarged photographs of four buildings.

In his buildings Horta abolished a clear distinction between floors, walls and ceiling by creating a fluid baroque space based on plant decoration. In the Tassel House the stair hall is framed on all sides by exuberantly curving and snapping ribbons which rise like flames from the bottom of the stairs, assymmetrically covering a section of the wall and reaching up to the next landing.

Austria - Josef Hoffmann (1870-1955), architect, graphic artist and designer, was a founder of the Vienna Secession in 1897. His approach, stressing geometric forms, paralleled the work of Mackintosh in Glasgow but he retained his own Viennese style. He is represented in the show by table flatware, jewelry, vases and enlarged photographs of the Palais Stoclet in Brussels (1905-11). The rich ornamentation of so much of Art Nouveau depended on a continuous flow of invention, with each object being treated as a unique event. The simpler relationships of flat surfaces, such as

Hoffmann favored, pointed toward the next generation's esthetic of unembellished geometric form.

Germany - Munich was the center of the New Style in Germany. Otto Eckmann (1865-1902), who auctioned his paintings in 1894 and devoted the rest of his life to applied arts, became one of Germany's foremost graphic artists and designed the best known Art Nouveau type face as well as tapestries, furniture and metalwork.

In the spirit of the English Arts and Crafts Movement, workshops were formed in Munich and later in other parts of Germany where artists, craftsmen and manufacturers joined in the production of everyday goods. Richard Riemerschmid (1868-1957), a founder and most active contributor to two of these organizations, is represented in the exhibition by a straightforward and original small side chair that reveals an emphasis on clarity of structure which was exceptional to the period, and by silver flatware which anticipated later 20th century forms. Peter Behrens (1868-1940), a founder of the Munich Seccession and later a teacher of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe in Berlin, is represented by two banners, a bench and graphic designs.

United States - The most important American Art Nouveau artist was Charles Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), glass designer and jeweler. The Bing shop in Paris was the exclusive European distributor for his famous favrile vases and other pieces, and Bing commissioned French artists including Bonnard, Vuillard and Toulouse-Lautrec to design windows for him to execute in stained glass. Among the Tiffany work in the exhibition is a large leaded picture window from the William Skinner House, 36 East 39 Street, New York City.

Other countries represented in the exhibition include Holland, where the traditional batik designs from the Old Dutch Colonies influenced Art Nouveau, Norway, whose famous painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944), used the Art Nouveau style with great psychological insight and whose work was exhibited at Bing's shop in Paris, and Switzerland, whose major muralist, Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918), painted landscapes, portraits and major Symbolist compositions of simplified form and bold outline.

The sources of Art Nouveau mentioned by Peter Selz in the exhibition wall label are: the English Arts and Crafts Movement, Rococo, Celtic Art, Flamboyant Gothic, Javanese batiks, Etruscan vases and particularly, the Japanese woodcut.

The exhibition will be shown at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, the Los Angeles County Museum and the Baltimore Museum of Art during the coming months. It is under the direction of Peter Selz, Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions who also selected the paintings, sculpture, prints and drawings. Arthur Drexler, Director of the Department of Architecture and Design, installed the exhibition and selected the examples of Art Nouveau architecture. Greta Daniel, Associate Curator of Design and Mildred Constantine, Associate Curator of Graphic Design selected the decorative objects and graphics.

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