

20TH-CENTURY DESIGN FROM COTSWOLD TO

by Harold Kellar

The end of a century can be a spur to reassess everything—from the shape of a tea cup to the shape of society. With the gradual demise of the basically British-inspired Arts & Crafts movements, roaring with idealism but too often fading into historicism, the center of interest shifted from England and centered itself in France.

While the Arts & Crafts exponents were looking to the past to solve problems that were associated with a changing century, the French were doing the exact opposite. In previous articles we discussed how the English Arts & Crafts Movement sought refuge from the ravages of the Industrial Revolution by retreating to the simpler times of the Middle Ages. At the same time in France, a group of artists were also looking forward to the new century. They established a style and art form that had no roots in the past. It was a revolutionary movement both in architecture and in design. Its creator's desire was to develop a new

art, based on living, organic forms and to create something entirely new in anticipation of the approaching century.

During a period roughly corresponding to the heyday of the American Arts & Crafts Movement, Art Nouveau's swirling botanical and arabesque forms left their mark on European architecture, furniture, jewelry, and virtually all home furnishings (especially in France and Belgium).

Skilled craftsmen and architects such as Emile Galle produced furniture that combined fine materials

with the sweeping curves and delicate ornamentation inspired by nature. In an age that was increasingly dominated by machine-produced simplicity and synthetic materials, a new appreciation of both the careful craftsmanship and the sheer exuberance and spontaneity of the Art Nouveau style developed. The furniture became an inspiration for the full range of decorative arts: stained glass, jewelry, wallpaper and lighting, that expressed an unsur-

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Above: This chair, made in 1182, was designed for the Century Guild by Mackmurdo and made by Collinson and Lock. There is painted decoration on the back and the letters 'CG' for Century Guild can be seen in the left-hand corner.

Right: This reconstruction of a formal French Interior shown at the 1900 Paris Exhibition shows furniture and piano by Majorelle. The painting is by Albert Besnard.

Below: The carved decoration of this table, made by Farago c.1900, is cleverly emphasized by this light finish that exposes the grain of the wood while providing a surface shade.

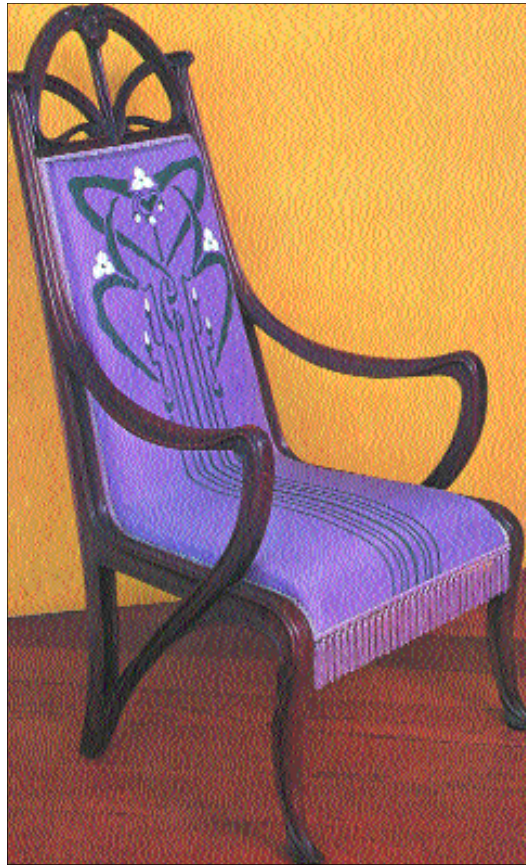


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passed attention to details and feelings of harmony.

In France, as is true of the rest of the western world, the Industrial Revolution had an influence on almost every level of manufacturing, from factories to cottage industries, and created in its wake a growing, prosperous middle class. This middle class could afford, and demanded, improved home decoration. Homes in late nineteenth-century France were all too often dismal. The rooms were usually large and impersonal, their walls were often obscured with superficial wall coverings. This emerging middle class was looking for something new. They wanted exotic items and *objets d'art* decorating their homes.

The decorative arts field became ripe for innovation. This innovation included the areas of production, design and technique. This meant that historical styles and traditional designs had to be thrown out. However, the powers that be—the Academy and the Ecole des Beaux Art—maintained an official stranglehold on accepted artistic taste. The Academy and the Ecole des Beaux Art gave little recognition to the so-called “minor” arts, and decorative art objects were rarely seen in their official exhibitions. Because of this resistance to design reform (perhaps seen as a wicked threat to the status quo) a stalemate resulted that, in the end, prevented France from enjoying a blossoming of their arts. This fearful attitude was also flowering in other countries. Many saw the growing movement’s alliance of social and artistic reformers, as well as the influx of foreign influences as a threat, aided and abetted by other such unacceptable elements as liberals and the nouveaux riches. England had William Morris’ Arts & Crafts Movement advocating a return to skilled hand work. America had Gustav Stickley, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Greene brothers. The rest of Europe had Mackintosh and Der Style. In France, an enlightened art dealer was destined to produce that change. Previous articles in this series have shown how design in this



Left: This Marjorelle armchair was first displayed at the 1900 Paris Exhibition. The upholstery was specially printed with a design that echoes the construction of the cabinet which was inlaid with several woods.

Below: Marjorelle designed this cabinet c.1900. It is one of the most inventively created objects in the Art Nouveau style and was shown at the 1900 Paris Exhibition.



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century has been influenced by designer-craftsman and architects. Now we introduce a third group: collectors and connoisseurs.

By the end of the nineteenth century, an entrepreneur could deal in art as both an investor and a patron. Among these wealthy businessmen were a few who thought that capitalism could be put to the use of art and, in turn, art could serve society. The most influential in this group were the art dealers themselves. They knew well enough how to accumulate wealth by selling art and they were also willing to invest money to promote that art. In their efforts to make the decorative arts enjoyable and useful to more people, they encouraged displays in large museums and organized international expositions such as the 1900 Paris Expo, to give the decorative arts equal footing with the fine arts of painting, architecture and sculpture. They felt that if this could be accomplished, art could then be useful to the ordinary family as well as the rich collector, by applying refined design principles to practical items required to furnish any home. The founders of the English Arts & Crafts Movement wanted the fruits of their labors to benefit the average family; however, the most likely recipient of their work was someone who was far removed from the working class.

The emerging movement in France was probably no different. As we will see, the emerging Art Nouveau style due to its intense need for large amounts of hard work and attention to detail, doomed it to be a product for the affluent. A classic example of such a dealer-entrepreneur was the dynamic Parisian art dealer Siegfried Bing (most references erroneously refer to him as Samuel Bing). He bargained his enormous talent for anticipating public taste for art objects into a fortune, and with almost messianic zeal, used that wealth to better society through art. The fortune he accumulated through *Japonisme*, the French fasci-



Top: Designed by Louis Beigaux, this interior is a more cautious interpretation of Art Nouveau. It is precise and almost formalized, exhibiting little of the French flair.

Above left: Eugene Gaillard (1862-1939) designed this walnut and leather chair for Bing's establishment, where he often showed his work.

Above: This beech armchair was designed by Otto Eckmann for Siegfried Bing between 1891 and 1900. Eckmann's attention to surface decoration is seen clearly in this chair where the interest lies completely in the flat areas used to display his designs.

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nation with anything Japanese, was used to revolutionize the applied arts of France. He began his career as a promoter of Japanese art objects. He firmly believed that a new design could be stimulated in Europe simply by applying Japanese aesthetic principals to everyday objects and by adapting their attitude of making no distinction between the fine or the applied arts. His achievements in the decorative arts, his commitments to design reform, his contributions to formation of an international art form and the education of the masses are amazing.

In 1885, the artist Emile Galle formed a co-op of architects, painters, sculptors, cabinet makers and decorators to produce decorative arts. Their work was influenced by the many new forms of art that were emerging from a shrinking world; among these influences were the English Arts & Crafts Movement and the sparse design ethic of the Japanese. The co-op established a shop with a staff that included cabinet makers, carvers and carpenters. Their work consisted of carving and marquetry showing elaborate concoctions of flowers, lily pads, butterflies and vines. Their shop stocked hundreds of varieties of exotic solid woods and veneers.

In the fall of 1895, Bing opened a shop in Paris with the idea of exhibiting the work of young French designers, called Maison D'Art Nouveau. The name, Art Nouveau, was not intended to represent the movement, but the name was picked up, and it stuck. Through 1904 he expanded his commercial galleries into workshops that produced total interiors that worked in complete harmony: furniture, objects, lamps and wall coverings, all created in a single design concept. Bing's original reliance on foreign artists, especially English, Belgian and American (Louis Comfort Tiffany was a major contributor), provoked that same status quo establishment into action.



This desk, c. 1900, attributed to Hector Guimard, is made of rosewood and embellished with brass mounts.

From England, too, there arrived an Art Nouveau stripped of all adornment, based on straight lines and cubes. It prefigured Purism, Neo-Plasticism and Constructivism. Its chief exponent was the Scottish architect, Charles Renee Mackintosh and the setting was the city of Glasgow. His reliance on outside sources for his gallery clearly indicated that other countries had outdistanced the French and had ended that country's traditional role as leader of the arts and as arbiter of public taste.

Organic motifs were assertively expressed both sculpturally and decoratively. A cabinet with a free-flowing base seems to have grown out of the ground as a natural form, a chair

appears to be rooted to the floor—always trying to harmonize structure with decoration. Gustav Stickley, the father of the American Arts & Crafts Movement, said in an advertisement for his furniture, “the piece is first, last and all the time a chair, and not an imitation of a throne, nor an exhibit of snakes and dragons in a wild riot of misapplied carving.” (This appeared in a 1907 ad for an Arts & Crafts chair.)

In time, Art Nouveau came to be expressed in standardized motifs particularly suited to graphic designs: women with clinging gowns and long, flowing hair; lilies, tulips, and irises with long, twisting stems. The European Erte is a prime example. Tiffany, the American master of leaded stained glass is so well known that his style has become symbolic of Art Nouveau design.

These designer-craftsmen based their activity on the logical premise that as the supply of well-designed and well-made objects for the middle class depended on the use of machinery, then these designers must familiarize themselves with the new design possibilities that were created by these machines. With artists in control, the idea was, that new designs suited for factory assembly

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would herald a new era of design. (This idea was probably most successful during the American Arts & Crafts Movement). As it turned out, nothing could be further from the truth. Like most styles, some are more successful than others. One reason that this idea never really caught on in this country is that by its very nature, Art Nouveau requires lots of hand work and attention to detail. The leaders of the trend produced, in the name of social and industrial art, an elitist art which had practically nothing to do with the industry. As soon as industry took over the forms and decorations of Art Nouveau with the aim of popularizing them, the results were deplorable. The only achievement was to disgust the public.

The majority of the Art Nouveau furniture that reached the United States was nothing more than cheap machine-made imitations of the real thing. After the Paris Exhibition of 1900, several American manufacturers attempted to duplicate French Art Nouveau furniture but in simplified versions for a mass market, with machine-made carvings. These American copies seemed to lack the thought, craftsmanship and the style inherent in the one-of-a-kind French pieces, however, and were also made of less expensive woods. Marquetry, as well as carvings, were frequently bought ready made and did not necessarily relate to the form or the function of the furniture on which it was applied. In an attempt to copy the designs without understanding the reasoning, too many American manufacturers produced quaint overwrought furniture that lacked the artistry and attention to detail that made Art Nouveau unique. In fact, arabesque elements would often pop up as an afterthought on the standard mahogany furniture already in favor in this country. Never really hooked on the organic style that originated in France, Americans were embracing a simple straightforward Mission-style of furniture suiting their



An elegantly carved ash marquetry worktable by Emile Gallé bears the inscription "Travail est Joie"—"Work is Pleasure."

image of American craftsmen.

Europe, in the first decade of the twentieth-century, was overrun by converging and contradictory tendencies which took advantage of the rapid development of transportation and the appearance of varied and rapid means of communications. Juxtapositions were made immediately, frontiers were abolished in the quest for a lifestyle appropriate for the twentieth century. Whether one was for or against decoration, for or against industry, it was around a certain art of living that discussion and research were centered. Having set

itself the goal of integrating art with social life, Art Nouveau had revealed itself to be, in the final analysis, an exhalation of individualism.

Contrary developments were occurring across the continent. In Vienna, in 1908, Adolph Loos, in his pamphlet, "Ornamentation and Crime," wrote, "As culture develops, the ornamentation of common objects disappears." He was one of the first to have felt the importance of industry and the contributions that it could make to aesthetics. He began to assert truths that seem revolutionary even today. He recommended the abandoning of decoration, and campaigned for a purist attitude toward architecture and design that the Bauhaus advocate Le Corbusier was to directly inherit.

As we journey through the emerging designs of the twentieth century, one of the common threads that emerges in every successful design evolution is that no civilization will ever be built or undone by the shape of a picture frame or a lamp. But these products that evolve in response to other products, attest to the spirit of inventiveness in all design. They show that designers are paying attention to even the most trivial details of how we go about our daily lives. ■

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