

# Art Nouveau 1900

## Background Notes

*Dr Anne Anderson - 27 February 2013*



**The hôtel Ciamberlani, Brussels**

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## ART NOUVEAU 1890-1914

Art Nouveau was much more than a movement in architecture and the decorative arts. It expressed the mood of the 'Nineties' and the *fin de siècle* or the dying years of the 19th century. In its outlook and character it was related to Symbolism in painting, exemplified by the work of Gustav Klimt in Vienna, and literary Decadence, as seen in the poetry Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde. In London Wilde would have been the natural leader of an Art Nouveau movement but following his trial in 1895, there was a moral backlash in England against Aestheticism, an earlier movement in the arts from which Art Nouveau sprung.

Art Nouveau tackled modernity and change. Influenced by Decadence, it attempted to deal with complex issues such as sexuality and gender and the rapid changes taking place in society. In London, where the arts scene was dominated by the rather wholesome Arts and Crafts fraternity, the new daring approach was condemned as corrupt and unwholesome, seen at its worst in the degenerate and androgynous art of Aubrey Beardsley. It was nicknamed the 'spaghetti' style, 'squirm' and the 'decorative disease'. There was no consolidated Art Nouveau movement in England, where ironically the new design ethos originated; European art manufacturers were inspired by William Morris and Arthur Lazenby Liberty. Sources can be found in Pre-Raphaelitism and the rediscovery of William Blake; the Arts and Crafts; the Celtic revival; Aestheticism and the art of Japan; the cult of the House Beautiful, which promoted interior decorating as a means of self-expression and personal fulfilment; the designs of Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo and the Century Guild (1882-88); and the later designs of William Morris. But leading English designers such as C.R. Ashbee (1863-1942) and Ernest Gimson (1864-1919) were locked into the 'puritanical' Arts and Crafts, which perceived Art Nouveau, with its emphasis on hedonistic pleasure, to be immoral. It was rejected as unethical, as it stimulated a commodity culture, encouraging consumerism and materialism, often relied on factory production and rarely cared for the quality of the life of the worker. Commercial companies like Liberty's responded, selling 'populuxe' goods such as Moorcroft pottery and

*Cymric* silver and *Tudric* pewter designed by Archibald Knox (1864-1933).

Although a short-lived phase, lasting around twenty years or less, the influence of Art Nouveau was pervasive, spreading across Europe and even beyond. It is known in each country by a different name and there are marked regional differences- in Barcelona it is Catalonia Modernism, Jugendstil in Germany and the Scandinavian countries, the Secession in Vienna, Berlin and Munich and Liberty style in Italy, as seen in the work of Carlo Bugatti. In France, Art Nouveau takes its name from the gallery, *La Salon de l'Art Nouveau*, opened by Samuel (Siegfried) Bing in Paris in 1895. In all its manifestations the movement is associated with urbanism, developing in major industrial centres, and was led by avant-garde elite in Glasgow, Paris, Brussels, Vienna, Darmstadt, Munich and Barcelona. Each city is characterized by the architects, designers and painters who responded to the call to be modern, with the different approaches adopted reflecting the individuality of the artists involved.

In Brussels Victor Horta created the Hotel Tassel (1893), said to be the first Art Nouveau house in Europe, while Henri van der Velde, who began as a painter, considered form and function in his furniture and interiors. In Paris the key architect was Hector Guimard, creator of the Metro style. Nancy developed an entire provincial school headed by Emile Gallé, most famous for his glass, who was the catalyst for l'École de Nancy, formed in 1901 three years before his death, and Louis Marjorelle, a cabinet maker who revived the traditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although in architectural terms, Nancy is undoubtedly provincial and lacks the originality of a Guimard or Horta, in the decorative arts she surpassed even the capital. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow Four made a lasting impact on the Vienna Secession, a group which included Gustav Klimt, Otto Wagner, Joseph Hoffmann and Kolo Moser. Joseph Maria Olbrich was enticed from Vienna by Ernst Ludwig of Hesse to found the artist's colony in Darmstadt, Germany. In America Art Nouveau is represented by the glass of Louis Comfort Tiffany. Tiffany took a particular interest in stained glass and subsequently blown glass, forming the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company in 1892.

But there was a common thread that bound this generation of artists together, a determination to shock the middle classes out of their complacency and to shake off the stranglehold of Historicism, the imitation of old styles, which for them had no place in a modern world driven by technology and progress. Although Art Nouveau never quite shook off the past, and could be distinctly nationalistic in its use of folk art, artists attempted new forms and decoration based on nature or the organic. Flower and plant forms were expressed in a highly stylized and symbolic idiom; decoration was to express form, which was itself related to function. Broadly speaking the style can be divided into two schools, the curvi-linear versus linear. The former was given over to unbridled 'decoration for its own sake', exemplified by Horta in Brussels and Guimard in Paris. The linear was more controlled, even sober by comparison, and can be seen in Glasgow, Vienna and Darmstadt. But all manifestations of Art Nouveau relied on the line, often in the form of a plant stem, a strand of hair or a wave of water, and the interplay of the solid and the void (the horror vacui). Sinuous, undulating, swirling, unending lines, forming a whip-lash, or reflexive line, are everywhere. Whole buildings become flowers straining to the sun. Flowers, dragonflies and peacocks abound. Such forms simulated energy, the life-force, the cycle of life, and the concept of life out of death, very apt for the *fin de siècle*.

Art Nouveau embraced change, graphically seen in physical transformations or metamorphosis, as the key note of modernity and took Woman, whose body was seen to be unstable due to its child bearing capabilities, as its main motif. French designers particularly relied on the symbolism of Woman to represent Nature or 'universal wisdom' embodied in the mysterious sphinx. The decadent element transformed her into the *femme fatale*, her desirable form signalling death to those she entrapped. She can be seen metamorphosing from a flower or a beast on vases, lamps and tables. The type was most dramatically embodied in Loie Fuller, the American dancer who created, with the assistance of Henri Savage, her own theatre at Paris 1900. Fuller's dancer was based on swirling veils of diaphanous material held out on batons. Using electric lighting and mirrors, she swirled around the stage transforming herself into a rose, a butterfly or a serpent. Seen as the 'apotheosis of Art Nouveau', Fuller inspired the posters of Alphonse Mucha and the jewellery of Rene Lalique. The theme of the dance encapsulates the sensual movement and

sexual undertones which many artists sought to capture in their work, be it a painting, a vase or a piece of jewellery.

Although it began amongst the avant-garde, mass production enabled Art Nouveau to become the popular style of the 1890s. By Paris 1900 it had reached its apogee: the Exposition Universal temporarily creating a 'universal' style which was now purely decorative and had lost much of its symbolism and elitist status. Art Nouveau could be seen on the streets as metro stations, cafes and theatre interiors but the centrepiece of the style was the House Beautiful, the house conceived as an architectural unity or a 'total work of art'. The architect and designer, who saw himself as an artist, was to have total control of the domestic environment. The downside of this approach was that the patron, or owner, found it very difficult to express his own personality in such interiors. Art Nouveau was killed by exploitation, devalued by a plethora of cheap commodities. The German and Austrian designers, always more intellectually rigorous, moved into Modernism, completely rejecting decoration, while French and Belgium Art Nouveau died a natural death, although echoes remain in post-war Art Deco.

### **Hector Guimard:**

Guimard was the leading architect and designer working in Paris. His greatest work was the creation of the Paris Metro. He created the Style Guimard, which was based on curvi-linear, whiplash and abstract motifs. Inspired by Horta, who advised him to 'grasp the stem, not the flowers or the leaves', relying on line to create form; abstract, non-representational. Guimard's designs were to synthesis nature. Sometimes has the appearance of a skeleton, sometimes very fluid. His forms can be unusual ie three legged table. He was a major contributor to the Exposition Universelle in 1900. He designed private houses and apartment blocks. The spectacular Coilliot House, designed for a ceramics manufacturer, is in Lille.

## **Rene Lalique: Jewellery**

Lalique began his career as a jeweller by training in London from 1878-80. Here he learnt the value of craftsmanship, individuality and artistic design. He preferred to use interesting materials, like glass and enamel, than very expensive stones. He was more concerned about the design and the quality of his jewels than anything else. He did not create his famous Art Nouveau designs until c.1895. Like many Art Nouveau designers he included the female form in many of his jewels. He often employed 'shock tactics', like the inclusion of a naked woman, and his jewels could be both seductive and disturbing. His most famous piece is a large dragonfly that has a woman's head emerging from its body. The dragonfly was a favourite motif, along with the peacock, fish and exotic flowers. Many of his fish jewels include enamel and pearls, as well as mermaids, to create the sinuous effect of the sea. Women and water were often linked together in Art Nouveau, as Venus was born from the foam of the sea. These jewels express the ideas behind Art Nouveau, as the women struggle against the waves, or their sexuality, towards a new century and new freedom. Some of Lalique's jewels are very large, perhaps influenced by the pieces he made for the actress Sarah Bernhardt to wear on stage. In 1900 Lalique was at the peak of his fame and popularity. He made many beautiful jewels for Paris 1900, including one based on Rodin's famous *The Kiss*. But many jewellers had now started to copy his style and techniques. Lalique felt he had exhausted the potential of jewellery as a means of expression. So he turned to glass first for jewellery and then for the creation of perfume bottles. Today he is better known for his glass than his jewels.

**Anne Anderson BA PhD FSA**

**Hon. Research Fellow University of Exeter**

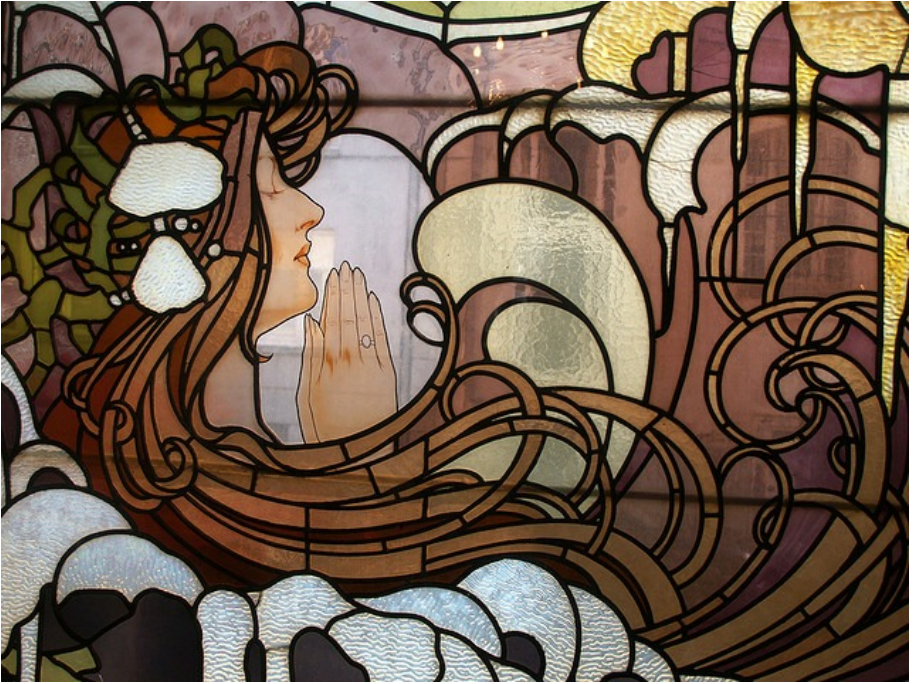
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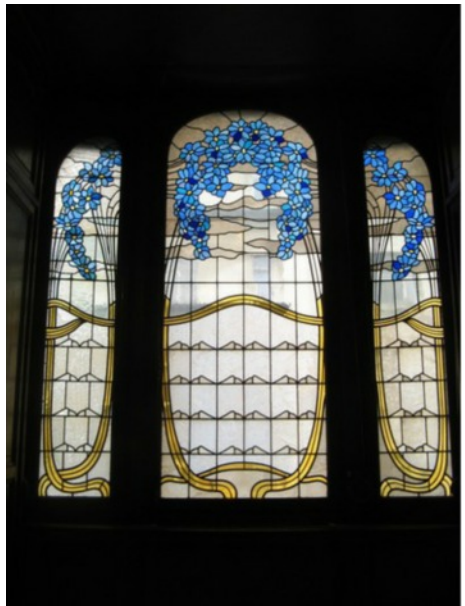
**Fletcher Jones Fellow of the Huntington Library, CA**

**Cumming Ceramics Research Fellow**

Dr Anne Anderson FSA author, broadcaster, international speaker, exhibition curator and Fellow of the Society of Antiquarians, was a senior lecturer at Southampton Solent University for 14 years, specializing in the Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and Modernism; she is currently Hon Research Fellow at Exeter University. Her 2008 exhibition *Ancient Landscapes, Pastoral Visions Samuel Palmer to the Ruralists* attracted some 47,000 visitors. Her exhibition, *The Truth About Faeries*, has been seen in Southampton, Carlisle and Sunderland. In 2010 Anne worked on *Closer to Home*, the reopening exhibition at Leighton House Museum. A NADFAS lecturer since 1994, Anne's career as an international speaker has taken her all over the world, including Spain, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA. She has lectured on Swan Hellenic's *Minerva II* and Saga's *Spirit of Adventure*. Her television credits include BBC's *Flog It!*



**Stained glass window in the hôtel Saintenoy, Brussels**



**hôtel Hannon, Brussels**