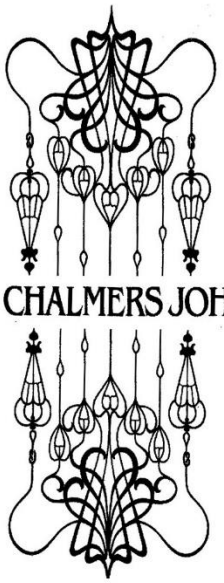
AMERICAN ART NOUVEAU



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INTRODUCTION

ART NOUVEAU: A GENERAL DISCUSSION

ORIGINAL DEFINITION

The term "Art Nouveau" entered the vocabulary of art when Samuel Bing opened his first *Salon de l'Art Nouveau* in Paris on December 26, 1895, presenting to the public the first representative collection of works in what he considered a "new style." He later wrote that "really the title of the salon should have been 'Le Renouveau dans l'Art' ":

> In certain branches of art, painting for example, which has steadily continued its development in a normal and regular way, no revival was called for. It was only in relation to art as applied to decoration, to furniture, to ornamentation in all its forms, that the need of a new departure was felt. . . .[1]

As used by Bing, Art Nouveau referred mainly to the applied arts, and he also called it "a movement, not a style." The basic principles of this movement were "to subject each object to a strict system of logic relative to the use for which it is destined and to the material from which it is formed"; to emphasize "purely organic structure"; to show clearly the part played by every detail in the architecture of an object; to avoid, "as one would flee leprosy," the fictitious luxury of falsifying every material and of carrying ornament to extremes.

Bing wished to raise the stylistic level of design in the applied arts to that evident in paintings by young French artists, such as those in the group recently formed called the Nabis; he thought their art best expressed "the general spirit of the age," and their paintings, prints, and designs for stained-glass windows by Tiffany dominated Bing's first *Salon de l'Art Nouveau* (see plate 87). Followers of Paul Gauguin, these artists held an ideal not so different from the medievalism of the Arts and Crafts artists in England, stressing the need to make painting part of a unified scheme of decoration.

> No more easel paintings! Down with useless objects! Painting must not usurp the freedom which isolates it from the other arts. . . . Walls, walls to decorate. . . . There are no paintings, there are only decorations.[2]

James McNeill Whistler had already made this attitude a reality in the 1870s in England with his carefully designed interiors, the Primrose Room and the Peacock Room (plate 1). Maurice Denis' exhortation to artists in his 1891 "Definition of Neo-Traditionalism," to "Remember that a picture before it is a war horse, a naked woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order,"[3] is likewise similar to the English Aesthetic attitude of the 1870s and 1880s, expressed in Oscar Wilde's own Whistlerian statement of 1882, that "a painting is a beautifully coloured surface, nothing more."[4] Samuel Bing's concern to raise the aesthetic level of the ornamental arts to that of contemporary painting is itself similar to the preceding English "renaissance" in these arts initiated by the Pre-Raphaelites about 1850, then by William Morris, Whistler, and the Arts and Crafts Society founded a decade later by Walter Crane and Lewis Day. Indeed, both Whistler and Crane were included in Bing's first *Salon de l'Art Nouveau.*

The blending of these two factions, English Arts and Crafts ideals with the aesthetics of French Post-Impressionist painting, was hastened by the important exhibitions of these arts held by the avant-garde Belgian group, *Les XX.* In 1891 their Fine Arts exhibit, which usually centered on Post-Impressionist and Symbolist painting, admitted English applied art—children's books illustrated by Crane, ceramics by A.W. Finch—as well as the new French applied art, the poster.[5] In 1893, the English Arts and Crafts periodical *The Studio* began to use photographs to illustrate works by artists and craftsmen, making these available internationally.[6] The results of this peculiar mingling of French and English aspects of late nineteenth-century art were evident in Bing's 1895 salon, and Bing, by his promotional talent and wide business acquaintance, distributed the "new art" throughout Europe and America.

Bing's title "L'Art Nouveau" served mainly as a label, consolidating and identifying the design concepts that gained popularity through subsequent exhibitions in the 1890s and dominated the 1900 Paris and 1902 Turin international expositions. Bing cannot be said to have "begun" Art Nouveau, but his definitions give a firm starting point for further analysis of what the "new art" involved.

ART HISTORICAL DEFINITIONS

Recent books on Art Nouveau offer a number of alternatives for defining its style, its place within the historical development of modern art, and the level of aesthetic quality of its various works. Nikolaus Pevsner defined the stylistic element of Art Nouveau as "the sinuosity of vegetation-inspired floral forms," its "leitmotif" the "long sensitive curve, reminiscent of the lily's stem, an insect's feeler, the filament of a blossom or occasionally a slender flame, the curve undulating, flowing, and interplaying with others, sprouting from corners and covering assymmetrically all available surfaces."[7] Stephan Tschudi Madsen preferred to see a broad set of variations within works from four countries: "the abstract and plastic concepts of Belgium; linear and symbolic in Scotland; floral and plant-inspired in France; and constructive and geometric in Germany and Austria."[8] With this degree of stylistic variety in the Art Nouveau movement, the variety itself should be discussed, rather than be denied in favor of "finding" one central visual "style."

Even more disparate than the stylistic descriptions are the estimates of Art Nouveau's place in the overall history of modern art. Pevsner, in *Pioneers of the Modern Movement,* 1936, considered Art Nouveau to be "a style of decoration around 1890, which appeared occasionally in architecture, but which mainly referred to a style of handicraft and of art

for art's sake items." For him, its historical significance lay in the initiating of a period of original forms, a transition that became "a blind alley," a "short but significant fashion in decoration." Tschudi Madsen also considered Art Nouveau an "anti-movement," seeking the new for its own sake, and essentially an "interlude" in the history of art. Robert Schmutzler defined it as a style of ornament which soon spent itself in becoming internationally fashionable, each nation developing its own short-lived variant.[9] Likewise Renato Poggioli described Art Nouveau as a fashion based on "eclectic aestheticism or vulgarized decadence."[10] On the other hand, James Grady saw Art Nouveau as neither a beginning nor an interlude, but as a culmination of the nineteenth-century idea of Nature as an aesthetic experience.[11] The constant reevaluation of Art Nouveau is evident in Pevsner's revised discussion of the movement in 1973, in *The Anti-Rationalists.*[12] Noting a trend in architecture toward individualism, plastic and sculptural values, and picturesqueness and fantasy, Pevsner reconsiders Art Nouveau works as early expressions of the anti-rationalism which seems to alternate with the rationalism of classical and International Modern.

These few definitions (the list could be much longer) pose many questions. Was Art Nouveau so complex that it encompassed certain essentials of all these ideas? Did the movement include ornament as well as architecture, objects of handicraft as well as art-for-art's-sake paintings? Were its styles both plastic and linear, floral and geometric, abstract and symbolic? Was it a style as well as a fashion, and at once an end, a transition, and a beginning? Did it revere tradition, while stressing originality at the same time? If the answer to all these questions is possibly yes, then Art Nouveau loses importance as a concept and gains importance as a reflection of the times that produced it.

Emerson's statement that begins this book expresses the desire of most nineteenth-century thinkers to find laws in literature, philosophy, religion, science, or art that would unite the multitude of "things" in reality. The search was on for "correspondences" or underlying relationships that would overcome the increasing sense of meaninglessness created by the cultural fragmentation pervading the "century of progress." Although it is now a cliché to speak of the nineteenth century in terms of industrial and democratic revolutions, the breakdown in many areas of personal, social, cultural, political, and religious life, as well as in art, undeniably came from these two revolutions and the drastic changes they brought to man's life. Industrialization fragmented and mechanized every profession, creating more specialization, faster changes, and a market based on quantity and cheaper materials. Its devastating effects on art, especially the so-called minor arts of design, became evident in the exhibits at the world's fairs in London and Paris in 1850 and 1855. As Samuel Bing later stated so clearly, "The present century, to its unprecedented shame, has not been able to forge a style of its own. The thread of tradition is broken, and the fragments scattered."[13]

From 1850 on, groups of artists, designers, and critics organized in many places with one idea in common—to synthesize a new aesthetic for the modern world. Many Europeans looked to America as having a distinct advantage in the attempt to develop a "new art," because, as Bing expressed it:

> . . . her brain is not haunted by the phantoms of memory; her young imagination can allow itself a free career, and, in fashioning objects, it does not restrict the hand to a limited number of similar and conventional movements. America, taken all in all, is indeed only a ramification of our ancient sources, and consequently the heir of our traditions. But again, she has a special destiny, occasioned by the fact that she does not possess, like us, the *cult,* the *religion* of these same traditions. Her rare privilege is to profit by our old maturity and, mingling therein the impulse of her vigorous youth, to gain advantage from all technical secrets, all devices and processes taught by the experience of centuries, and to place all this practical and proven knowledge at the service of a fresh mind which knows no other guide than the intuitions of taste and the natural laws of logic.[14]

ART NOUVEAU IN AMERICA

What is America's place in the international "new art" movements of the 1880s and 1890s? Most surveys of Art Nouveau, if they include America at all, mention out of proper context Louis H. Sullivan's architectural ornament, Louis C. Tiffany's glassware, and Will H. Bradley's posters and graphic designs. How are these artists and their works related to the various movements of European Art Nouveau? Do other American artists deserve inclusion? How, when, where, and why does Art Nouveau occur in America?

The following chapters will proceed chronologically, beginning with the events and ideas from approximately 1876 to 1893 which laid the groundwork for Sullivan, Tiffany, and Bradley. The years 1891 to 1898 seem to mark the most creative "Art Nouveau" phases of all three men, and we will emphasize the works that they produced during this span. But the American public did not become familiar with Art Nouveau, either European or American, until the late 1890s, particularly after the 1900 Paris Exposition; and the second, more derivative and commercial phase of American Art Nouveau that developed in the first decade of the twentieth century followed direct contact with European styles.

After 1893 American architecture turned strongly toward European historicism. Meanwhile, the arts of painting and sculpture, with European traditions of naturalism to overcome, proceeded along a slow and irregular path, from the first Japanese-inspired compositions and suggestive symbolism in works of the 1870s and 1880s by such artists as Whistler, Inness, Vedder, La Farge, Blakelock, and Rimmer, to the development of abstract art early in this century, coming from contact with European Post-Impressionist and Cubist art, and leading to "modern" works by Demuth, O'Keeffe, and Dove.

The art of the European Post-Impressionists that underlies all of Art Nouveau is crucial to the development of modern American art as well. Among the few Americans of the 1880s and 1890s who achieved a "new style," Louis Sullivan's very "original" ornamented architecture stands out as the most creative and most deeply expressive. Louis Tiffany's productions are somewhat haphazard; among his many excellent works are mixed a few poor ones, and an eclecticism is sometimes apparent. Will Bradley's graphic art often achieves a high excellence and individuality of design and expression, but essentially it is derivative from that of Aubrey Beardsley and other major European graphic designers. Certain works by a few painters—Vedder, La Farge, Ryder, Inness, and others—correspond in form and expression to European Post-Impressionist concepts; in general, American painters had no thorough understanding of these until the second decade of the twentieth century.

American art at the turn of the century and its interrelationships with European developments offer many intriguing aspects which we will consider here, but a great deal remains to be done of specific research and documentation for many American artists. This book seeks to present to the curious reader some of the excellent works of art and the concepts underlying them which suggest fascinating interactions within American art and between American and European art, in hopes of stimulating investigation into the modern artist's continual attempt to unite the fragments, to synthesize a visual expression meaningful for the modern world.

LOUIS H. SULLIVAN AND MAURICE DENIS

The achievement of Louis Sullivan, once called the "only American modernist," was described in 1904 by H. W. Desmond:

> He has evolved and elaborated a highly artistic form of . . . decorative expression in logical connections with the American steel skeleton building. . . . There is not a vestige of the past in Sullivan's work. It is as modern as the calendar itself. . . . Here is L'Art Nouveau indigenous to the United States, nurtured on American problems. . . .[13]

This early recognition of the necessarily "logical connections" between Sullivan's new architectural designs in skyscraper construction and his elaborate ornament is often denied by later twentieth-century writers, who prefer to stress Sullivan's own statement of 1892:

> Ornament is mentally a luxury, not a necessity . . . it would be greatly for our aesthetic good if we should refrain entirely from the use of ornament for a period of years, in order that our thought might concentrate acutely upon the production of buildings well formed and comely in the nude.[14]

To isolate this passage from the rest of Sullivan's article is to give only a partial idea of his statement; he went on to insist that the stage he called "organic ornament" should follow this purge. In *Kindergarten Chats* he clearly stated his belief in the purpose and necessity of decoration in architecture:

> The decoration of a structure is, in truth, when done with understanding, the more mobile, delicate and sumptuous expression of the creative impulse or identity basically expressed in the structure; it is the further utterance, the more sustained and delicate rhythmical expression thereof. For the *new architecture* a new decoration must evolve to be the worthy corollary of its harmonies, a decoration limitless in organic fluency and plasticity, and in inherent capacity for the expression of thought, feeling and sentiment. And when this power of plastic modulation, of rhythmical fluency, shall characterize your expression, throughout the entire being of a structure, you will have arrived at the heights of that art of expression I wish you to attain.[15]

Sullivan did not conceive of ornament as extraneous to the structure of his buildings, nor as "dictating their shape"; it was the completion of their structural identity, expressing more delicately and rhythmically the harmonics and inherent meaning of the buildings (plate 391). That final expression was to come from the rhythm of the ornamental elements, through the "inherent capacity" of its forms to express thought, feeling, and sentiment.

Sullivan's ideas on ornamentation can be directly compared with those of the French Post-Impressionist theorist Maurice Denis (plate 392), who wrote of the art of illustration:

> Illustration is the decoration of a book . . . without slavery to the text, without exact correspondence of the subject with the writing; but more of an embroidery of arabesques on the pages, an accompaniment of expressive lines.[16]