

The Museum of Modern Art

No. 27
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11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

HECTOR GUIMARD (1867-1942), an exhibition of the work of France's most original and important Art Nouveau architect and designer, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from March 11 to May 10. The first comprehensive survey of Guimard's work ever assembled, this exhibition contains approximately 200 items and photographs which illustrate Guimard's interest in molding his entire environment. Included are furniture and design objects, textiles, graphics, industrial designs, original drawings, photographs, and architectural accessories drawn from all over Europe and America.

The exhibition was directed by F. Lanier Graham, Associate Curator of Collections, in the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design. It was organized under the sponsorship of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was assembled in collaboration with the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris where the exhibition will be on view from January through March, 1971. Subsequent showings also include the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco (July 23 - August 30, 1970) and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (October 2 - November 9, 1970).

While Guimard has long been famous for the system of subway entrances he designed for the Paris Métro in 1900, surprisingly little was known about the rest of his work. Even specialists are familiar with little more than three or four buildings and one or two suites of furniture despite the fact that Guimard's contemporary reputation as the Parisian "Pontiff" of Art Nouveau was based on considerably more.

According to Mr. Graham, the research done in connection with this exhibition has uncovered more than 50 buildings executed between 1890 and 1930, hundreds of decorative objects and more than 2,000 drawings which now make it possible to evaluate Guimard's important contribution as a whole. He says:

"The desire for a Gesamtkunst -- a total work of art -- was widespread throughout Art Nouveau. But in the many attempts at such an ideal, the quality of the architecture and design were of equal interest in the work of only a few architect-designers. For comparisons appropriate to Guimard's distinctive achievements there are no parallels in France. One must look to such figures as Victor Horta in Belgium, Antoni Gaudí in Spain, Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland, and Frank Lloyd Wright in the United States."

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In addition to Guimard's concern for totality in his art, Mr. Graham points to his search for fluid form -- a search that has growing significance today in view of the lessening of technical limitations and the waning influence of the machine-age aesthetics of the Bauhaus. In discussing Guimard's contributions, Mr. Graham also points to the fact that in his ornament, Guimard posed and resolved fundamental questions of nonfigurative abstraction a decade before the idea entered the mainstream of modern art. He also notes that Guimard anticipated Surrealism through his ability to represent natural processes rather than illustrate natural appearances.

Summing up Guimard's relevance to our own time, Mr. Graham says:

"Ultimately the value of Guimard's work is its own quality, which is all the more outstanding for having been realized with materials and spatial conceptions that had to be coaxed out of traditional configurations. What is relevant today is Guimard's unrestrained sense of form. He came very close to treating materials and spaces as amorphous lumps of clay. With such sculptural freedom, the only limit is one's imagination."

The Museum of Modern Art has long had a particular interest in Guimard, first exhibiting his work in 1936. Several items of furniture in the exhibition such as the couch (ca. 1897) and the desk (ca. 1899) are in the Museum's own design collection. The latter was a gift of Guimard's American widow in 1949. A Métro entrance archway, a gift of the Régie Automne des Transports Parisien, was permanently installed in the Museum Sculpture Garden in 1958.

Other objects in the exhibition, lent by various private collectors and museums, include a mammoth couch with overhead cabinet (1897), recently discovered in a Paris garage where it had lain for 70 years; an entire bedroom suite (ca. 1907) designed for Nozal House, a palatial mansion Guimard built for a client in Paris; and chairs from various sources which are shown with a series of related chair studies drawn by the artist in pencil, crayon and pastel. Other objects on view include vases, doorknobs, nail covers, drawer pulls and other architectural accessories which demonstrate the thoroughness with which Guimard treated the interiors of his buildings.

The exhibition is divided into a series of galleries holding furniture and objects with photographs and transparencies of Guimard's related architectural achievements hung

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on surrounding exterior walls. A more intimate space is reserved for showing accessories and textiles. A final segment, devoted to Guimard's public monuments and industrial designs, leads the spectator out into the garden where he may view an example of Guimard's most famous industrial design project: the gate from the Paris Métro.

One wall in the exhibition galleries will be covered with an authentic reproduction of wallpaper originally designed by Guimard for his Castel Béranger Apartment House in Paris in 1896. The reproduction of this wallpaper in the original scale and color scheme was undertaken by Jack Lenor Larsen in cooperation with the Museum. Karl Mann Associates is planning to produce this wallpaper commercially.

The wallpaper design is also being used for the poster, invitation and cover of the illustrated checklist which has an introductory essay by Mr. Graham and is being sold at the Museum. The major publication which Mr. Graham is preparing, HECTOR GUIMARD (1867-1942): A CRITICAL STUDY, with contributions by Alain Blondel, Ralph Culpepper, Yves Plantin and Stan Ries, will be published by the Museum later in the year and will be available at the bookstore.

HECTOROLOGIE, a 12-minute documentary film on Guimard made in 1966 by Alain Blondel and Yves Plantin, lenders to the exhibition, will be screened twice in the Museum auditorium on Wednesday, March 18, beginning at noon.

Additional information and photographs available from Diana Goldin, Coordinator, Press Services, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. (212) 956 - 7297, 7501.

by F. Lanier Graham

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

SCHEDULE OF THE EXHIBITION

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
March 10–May 10, 1970

The California Palace of the Legion of Honor,
San Francisco
July 23–August 30, 1970

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
September 25–November 9, 1970

Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris
January 15–April 11, 1971

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An exhibition of this scope, with so many of Guimard's most important works, would not have been possible without the sponsorship of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères of the French Republic, and the Association Française d'Action Artistique, which has underwritten the transportation and insurance of the French loans; the close collaboration of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, which has been instrumental in arranging many of the French loans; and the cooperation of the numerous lenders themselves, whose names are listed above. On behalf of the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art and of the participating museums, I wish to express sincere appreciation for their generosity.

During the preparations for this exhibition, which began in 1965, and for the critical study of Guimard's work, which will be published later this year, I have been fortunate to enjoy considerable assistance from many individuals. Gaston Diehl of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères; Edouard Morot-Sir, formerly Cultural Counselor to His Excellency the Ambassador of France to the United States; François Mathey and particularly Yvonne Brunhammer of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs have been particularly helpful.

To Alain Blondel, Ralph Culpepper, Yves Plantin, and Stan Ries, who have collaborated with me on the forthcoming monograph and *catalogue raisonné*, my debt

is immeasurable. Their tireless research into the details of the life and work of an artist about whom very little was previously known has provided the basis for the entire project. Special gratitude also is owed to the sensitive photography of Stan Ries and Laurent Sully Jaulmes, who has provided almost all of the illustrations in this catalogue.

Limitations of space make it impossible to thank here all the individuals whose contributions will be acknowledged in the forthcoming book. But of those who have been particularly helpful, I am especially grateful to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., for his encouragement at the inception of this undertaking; Arthur Drexler for allowing time away from regular responsibilities; Ludwig Glaeser and Mildred Constantine for their curatorial assistance; Richard Palmer for solving innumerable administrative problems; Helen M. Franc for invaluable editorial suggestions; Harriet Schoenholz for sensitive editing; Patricia Maka for sympathetic graphic designs; Eric B. Rowilson and Judy Walenta for skillful registration; Emily Fuller and Stuart Edelson for not only their secretarial and custodial assistance, but also for their unfailing good spirits.

F.L.G.

INTRODUCTION

Hector Guimard has been recognized as the most important French Art Nouveau architect and designer in all the major surveys of the period. However, this evaluation is based on very few examples of his work. His only famous monument is the system of subway entrances he designed for the Paris Métro company in 1900. These entrances, many of which are still standing, are so distinctive a synthesis of many Art Nouveau qualities that the entire movement was popularly referred to at the time as "Style Métro." Besides that series of designs, even specialists are familiar with little more than three or four buildings, and one or two suites of furniture. Guimard's contemporary reputation as the Parisian "Pontiff of Art Nouveau" was based on considerably more. Recent research has uncovered more than fifty buildings executed between about 1890 and 1930, hundreds of decorative objects, and over two thousand drawings. Although there remain many gaps in our knowledge, it is finally possible to view Guimard's work as a whole.

In 1885 Guimard entered the Paris École des Beaux-Arts where he was encouraged by the principles of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and other Rationalists to study the past, not in order to imitate it, but to make use of it in the development of an entirely new style. This departure from the accepted tradition of creative copying was so radical that Guimard's fellow students compared him with a notorious political anarchist named Ravachol who was bombing churches at the time, and dubbed him the "Ravachol of architecture."

Guimard began his practice in 1888. Convinced that the eclectic works around him were "cold receptacles of various past styles in which the original spirit was no longer alive enough to dwell," and that every aspect of architecture and design must "bear as proudly as an heraldic crest, the mark of contemporary art," he undertook his "*recherche d'une style nouveau*." His first houses of the early 1890s, for which he drew upon the most progressive structural and ornamental aspects of the Neo-Gothic tradition, were exhibited as "*maisons modernes*." By 1893 he had created his first Early Art Nouveau designs, which seem to be the earliest known examples in French architecture. His independent activity was confirmed by an interview with Victor Horta in the summer of 1895, when they discussed the advantages of abandoning "the leaf and the flower, retaining only the stem." Catalized by Horta's rationale of abstract linearity, Guimard continued to develop his new style of ornament with revolutionary fervor during the outfitting of the Castel Béranger apartment house.

The animating idea behind Guimard's High Art Nouveau style may be described as "abstract naturalism." His aim was not an illustration of the appearance of nature, but an abstraction of its fundamental processes. Holding up his cane (page ■) as an example, Guimard once used the analogy of sap running through trees to communicate his abstract idea. He said that the flowing of sap through trees is an essential characteristic, like the qualities he wanted to represent in his art, not something like the flowing of sap in particular, but the "sap of things" in general. The best-known examples of his "abstract naturalism" are the structural "stalks" of the Métro (pages ■ and ■) and the Humbert de Romans Concert Hall (pages ■). But the abstract rendering in naturalistic form of the intrinsic properties of whatever material he was dealing with typifies all his work after about 1896.

An indication of the precise manner in which Guimard approached nature survives in a report written by the distinguished critic, Gustave Soulier, in close collaboration with Guimard. The following excerpt refers to a design for *papier mâché* wainscoting (page ■): ". . . we do not see . . . clearly recognizable motifs which are only interpreted and regularized by a geometric ornamental convention. But neither is it merely withered and graceless floral or animal skeletons that Mr. Guimard draws. He is inspired by the underlying movements, by the creative process in nature that reveals to us identical formulas through its numerous manifestations. And he assimilates these principles in the formation of his ornamental contours. . . . [Thus] the floret is not an exact representation of any particular flower. Here is an art that both abbreviates and amplifies the immediate facts of Nature; it spiritualizes them. We are present at the birth of the quintessence of a flower."

(*Études sur le Castel Béranger*, 1899.)

By the mid 1890s Guimard was convinced it was his duty as an architect to preside over the design and execution of every detail of his buildings. Toward that end, he apprenticed himself to every type of structural and decorative craft. As he subordinated his formal impulse to techniques of fabrication his animated sense of objectivity gave a fresh reality to his materials.

... in the iron foundry, is it logical to give a calm form to the iron stalks which carry weight, and consequently exert effort? Also is it right to model flowers, ribbons, or fruits with this iron? Guimard did not think so; he believed it was more logical to preserve in the iron its slender rigidity and its nervous suppleness; he preferred that iron retain its ironness. And let anyone say he was wrong while looking at the gate of Castel Béranger [page ■] . . ." (Gustave Soulier, *Études sur le Castel Béranger*, 1899.)

Before Castel Béranger, individual decorative specialties had been "modernized" by artists such as Émile Gallé and Victor Prouvé. But no one in France, before or after Castel Béranger, took hold of every kind of domestic design problem with contemporary sensibility. Within each subdivision of the decorative arts, Guimard has left a body of work which normally would be enough to insure an enduring reputation for a specialized artisan. Throughout all of Art Nouveau, perhaps only Henry van de Velde, who was also a painter, worked as successfully in more media.

With the outfitting of this one apartment house, Guimard came close to achieving the first of his stated ambitions—the total modernization of French decorative arts. He was proud of his achievement as a *mâitre d'oeuvre*, and in 1898 produced a lavish portfolio of hand-colored plates illustrating every brick and bolt and branch that had been the object of his meditation. Assisted by a large publicity campaign, supervised by Guimard himself, the influence of the building and the book was enormous. The difference between the Early Art Nouveau decoration in the France of 1895, when ideas from around the world were still being assimilated, and the mature High Art Nouveau decoration that France exhibited at the Paris Exposition of 1900 owes a fundamental debt to Guimard.

Guimard was hardly content with having "modernized" the decorative arts. He wanted to expand the formal principles he had developed in his architectural decoration to encompass his architectural construction. This widening of focus is reflected in his ego image; by 1899 he had begun to sign his work "Hector Guimard, Architecte d'Art."

The long chronology of Castel Béranger made it inevitable that its architecture of 1894-95, and its outfitting of about 1896-99, would be stylistically inconsistent—the flowering of Art Nouveau decoration on Neo-Gothic construction. But in a brilliant series of buildings between 1898 and 1901 Guimard achieved his ultimate ambition of creating complete works of art, which were entirely original, formal unities. The major monuments of this short period, in which he designed and personally supervised the construction of at least ten projects other than the Métro, include the Coilliot House in Lille, Castel Henriette in Sèvres, and the Humbert de Romans Concert Hall in Paris. In all these buildings, the stylistic traits which had enlivened the nonarchitectural aspects of Castel Béranger became primary characteristics of both the exterior and interior design. Gradually, first in elevation and then in plan, the whole of his architecture and decoration became totally integrated environments.

Soon after the Paris Exposition of 1900, Art Nouveau began to lose its short-lived popularity. Increasingly isolated by fewer commissions, Guimard began to differentiate himself from other practitioners and imitators of Art Nouveau by insisting that his work be identified as "Style Guimard." Again his idea of himself corresponded with a stylistic change, a refinement of the Art Nouveau style, which lasted from about 1901-2, to about 1910-12.

During this "Style Guimard" period the exuberance of his earlier years gradually became more restrained. He was no longer questioning with an intense series of extraordinary experiments the assumptions history had handed down about what a house or a chair should look like. By this time he had formed his own fundamental principles. Confident of their validity, he proceeded to refine them with a more controlled vibrance.

As is clear from the difference between the furniture for Castel Béranger (page 00) and Nozal House (page 00), the frenzied disparities disappear. Transitional intervals, once distinctly dissident, become smoothly polished. Attention shifts from raw, undecorated linearity to highly plastic volumes of space enriched by "civilizing" ornament. Hard, dark mahogany is replaced by soft, blond pearwood. Symmetry eventually replaces asymmetry. Although the flow of energy was under tighter discipline, his imagination was no less productive. Long after most of his colleagues had abandoned Art Nouveau, Guimard continued to produce work of surprising originality such as Guimard House and the interior of Mezzara House.

Several years before World War I another stylistic transition began from "Style Guimard" to the Art Moderne or Art Déco style that he continued to use throughout the 1920s for a series of apartment houses, and with which he completed his career. Even in the mid-1920s decorative elements of his prewar style remained an integral part of his compositions, making Guimard not only the first but also the last Art Nouveau architect in France.

During these two decades, another generation of progressive architects, freed from eclecticism by Art Nouveau, was attempting to achieve another kind of architecture and design. These efforts, culminating in the practices of the Bauhaus, employed wholeheartedly those industrial techniques of greater social utility with which Guimard had only begun to experiment. The romanticism of the machine replaced the romanticism of nature as the muse of architecture and design.

In 1925 Guimard, as an elder statesman of the old school, was uncertain as to the lasting value of machine-inspired art. "Today's Fashion of the Naked," he said, "corresponds to a whole state of mind: we no longer believe in mystery." But he was positive enough to hope that for the simplicity appropriate to mass production

there would be found a set of formal ideals as basic and enduring as his own naturalistic aesthetic. Guimard himself was not able to contribute a great deal to these efforts even though he experimented with industrial design and prefabricated architecture. His particular brilliance belonged to an age of spontaneity.

In evaluating Guimard's work, there are certain difficulties in isolating its various aspects. Rarely did he design a building without also outfitting it with individual solutions for every exterior and interior detail. And seldom did he design a decorative object outside of a specific architectural context. Whether one singles out his designs for buildings, furniture, wallpaper, or doorknobs; whether one discusses his treatment of space, mass, light, volume, color, texture, or line; whether one considers him as an architect, planner, craftsman, draftsman, graphic designer, industrial designer, jeweler, or sculptor; more often than not, these aspects are only partial components of a single, comprehensive aesthetic.

The desire for a *Gesamtkunst*—a total work of art—was widespread throughout Art Nouveau. But of the many attempts at such a ideal, the quality of the architecture and design were of equal interest in the work of only a few architect-designers. For comparisons appropriate to Guimard's distinctive achievements there are no parallels in France. One must look to such figures as Victor Horta in Belgium, Antoni Gaudí in Spain, Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland, and Frank Lloyd Wright in the United States.

The totality of his concern for the quality of life, and the humanity of his planning with a new style for a new age, are only part of Guimard's relevance to our own time. The less obvious value of his formal contributions has lain dormant during the rise of machine-age aesthetics. As a lyric poet, his approach to design problems was not so straightforward as the more muscular prose of his better known contemporaries, whose formal vocabularies anticipated more directly the geometrically oriented compositions of economically superior production techniques.

The fact that in his ornament Guimard posed and resolved fundamental questions of nonfigurative abstraction a decade before that idea entered the mainstream of modern art is more a part of the history of painting and sculpture than the history of architecture and design. It is indicative that Guimard's work received a far greater response from Dali and Picasso, for example, than from Le Corbusier. The manner in which Guimard was able to represent natural processes rather than illustrate natural appearances is as suggestive of Surrealism, as his "*art du geste*" is suggestive of Abstract Expressionism.

Nevertheless, modern architects have never entirely lost interest in the kind of compositional ideal Guimard's work represents. The same dream of formal freedom preoccupied a number of important figures, from Eric Mendelsohn, Rudolf Steiner, and Hermann Finsterlin in the 1920s, before the Bauhaus systematized its aesthetics, to Le Corbusier, Eero Saarinen, and Frederick Kiesler in the 1950s, when the influence of the Bauhaus began to loosen its grip on the avant-garde. But the search for fluid form has been severely restricted by technical and economic considerations. There are indications that some of these limitations may be disappearing. Houses are being made out of a thin cement mix sprayed over elastic webbings, urethane foam sprayed over balloons, and furniture simply poured.

Ultimately the value of Guimard's work is its own quality, which is all the more outstanding for having been realized with materials and spatial conceptions that had to be coaxed out of traditional configurations. What is relevant to the most advanced technical investigations of today is Guimard's unrestrained sense of form. He came very close to treating materials and spaces as amorphous lumps of clay. With such sculptural freedom, the only limitation is one's imagination.

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HECTOR GUIMARD

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