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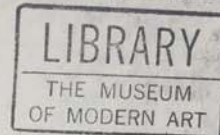
'Objects - 1900 and Today'

Catalogue of the exhibition, The Museum of  
Modern Art, New York, 1933, pp. 1-15

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# OBJECTS

## 1900 AND TODAY

AN EXHIBITION OF  
DECORATIVE AND USEFUL  
OBJECTS CONTRASTING  
TWO PERIODS OF DESIGN

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

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EXHIBITION

OBJECTS 1900 AND TODAY

April 3 to May 1, 1933

This exhibition of decorative and useful objects is arranged with the purpose of contrasting the design, and the attitude toward design, of two modern periods. One is not necessarily better than the other. If it appears so, it is because we lack historical perspective on contemporary design, and have a falsely conditioned perspective on that of 1900.

Separated by scarcely thirty years the two periods, each with a consistent and characteristic discipline, have totally different points of view.

In 1900 the Decorative Arts (L'Art Nouveau, Jugendstil) had a style independent of the architecture of their day, based on imitation of natural forms and lines which curve, diverge and converge.

Today industrial design is functionally motivated and follows the same principles as modern architecture: machine-like simplicity, smoothness of surface, avoidance of ornament.

Perhaps no thirty years have witnessed a greater change in the aspect of objects and motivation in their design.

Philip Johnson

There is appended an article from Creative Art, April 1933, on the period of 1900, and a check list of objects exhibited, with comments.

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OBJECTS 1900 AND TODAY

by Philip Johnson

Most of us today can remember the curved and flower-covered bric-a-brac of the period of 1900. In most houses there are still a few such pieces,--perhaps a Tiffany glass lampshade, a bud vase, or a bronze lady whose billowing skirts received calling cards. These objects are now regarded with fashionable horror.

Such shudders are, however, unjustified. It is only that the proper perspective on the period is lacking. The style has been judged on the basis of the poorest examples rather than on the best. We have all seen dull Gothic and ugly François I but we do not condemn these periods. The style in the decorative arts in 1900 -- the Jugendstil, or as it is called in French (and English!) Art Nouveau -- is one that merits reevaluation.

The essence of the style whether in painting or the decorative arts lies in the double curving lines which approach and diverge, often ending in a whiplash swirl. Usually these lines also were imitative of natural forms: waves, plants, or flowers.

Contrast of the decorative objects of this period with those of modern design does much to clarify both types. The exhibition of Objects 1900 and Today at the Museum of Modern Art has been arranged to illustrate this contrast. Both periods considered themselves modern and

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entirely free from tradition. The Jugendstil was based on the curved and the linear. Modern work is based on neither. The style of 1900 took its motifs from nature. Modern work finds its inspiration in the machine. The Jugendstil can be called fundamentally a **style** of ornament. The basis of the modern style is lack of ornament.

The factors, historical and aesthetic, which enter into the design of objects today are too involved to be treated in a short article. The style of 1900, however, is now far enough removed in time to enable us to analyze its origins.

The strongest impetus toward the Jugendstil was the Arts and Crafts movement in England under the leadership of William Morris. The movement was a reaction against unordered eclecticism and the growing drabness of machine-made traditional ornament. The ideal of "Art in Everything" was coupled with the belief that beauty could be revived only by reviving the handicraft tradition. But the movement instead of leading toward a new system of design looked back to the mediaeval for inspiration.

The Arts and Crafts movement stimulated a search for the modern, but the actual principles of design came rather from painting. In trying to escape the Gothic and Baroque traditions the design followed the popular trend in contemporary painting. Primitivism and Japonisme were the especial influences. As Gauguin had

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retired to the south seas to find inspiration in the primitive, the decorators sought the fundamentals of design in the forms of nature, especially the primitive forms of animal life such as polyps and mussels.

Imitation of nature was mistaken for the natural. Designers unable to invent abstract forms relied on those of nature. Only the great designers of the Jugendstil succeeded in freeing the curvilinear quality of the style from the realistic representation of natural forms.

The influence of the French Japonisme was even more direct. The prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige had a strong effect on painting in the middle of the last century. Men like Degas, Whistler and Van Gogh learned from them a new sense of placement and spatial relations. But what the designers of the period got directly or indirectly was the quality of linearity. The tangential curves, the sinuous continuity of line of the Japanese prints later became characteristic of the Jugendstil.

Indeed, it is in painting itself that the double curving lines of the Jugendstil first appear. Van Gogh has been called the greatest painter of the Art Nouveau, and men as widely distributed geographically as Klimt and Munch are also included. But certainly the most typical painter of the Jugendstil is Toulouse-Lautrec. In the Jane Avril the repeated double curves of the outline of the body, the snake on her dress and in the corner ex-

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press satire and humor. On the other hand these curving lines as used by the English "aesthetes" could express decadence, as in the pattern of smoking candles or dripping blood in the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley.

Simultaneously in Munich a group of illustrators and decorators including Bruno Paul, Pankok, Riemerschmid and Eckmann were independently working out naturalistic curves in their designs. Their contributions to the magazine Jugend, founded in 1896, defined the style as a definite mode in the decorative arts and gave to it its name, Jugendstil.

But it was the genius of Henry van de Velde of Brussels which made the style universal on the continent. In his youth Van de Velde had been impregnated with the ideas of William Morris. When he was still a young man he made designs for chairs, book jackets and even for doorknobs in the Arts and Crafts manner. In 1896 he built his first house which was designed throughout in the spirit of the English handicraft tradition. His ideas on the fine arts were however not derived from the Pre-Raphaelites as were those of the English, but rather from the Neo-Impressionist revolt then raging in Paris. Van de Velde cannot be classed as a follower of Morris. Especially foreign to the handicrafts idea was Van de Velde's belief in the possibility of machine



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production and in functionalism as the basis of design. In this he was surely influenced by the buildings of Victor Horta who in the early 90's, perhaps following the ideas of Viollet-le-Duc, had dared to reveal the metal skeleton in the facade of his buildings. In his interiors also, besides the usual curvilinear forms of the Jugendstil, Horta used metal and glass with a functionalism that foreshadowed much recent work. Van de Velde therefore brought to the ideal of the Arts and Crafts a point of view fresher and sounder than the sentimental mediaevalism of the English. The Jugendstil lay ready to hand as a style which could easily be adapted to Van de Velde's point of view. He did not invent the curvilinear ornament, but he saw its possibilities and developed it into a logical style.

The year 1896 saw the founding of the style as the modern style in decoration. The magazine Jugend was founded. Hector Guimard built his Castel Béranger in Paris, which although derivative of Horta's work, was considered outrageously modern by the Paris of that day. In the same year the German Siegfried Bing opened his shop with four rooms designed by Van de Velde. This shop which became the center of the movement in the contemporary decorative arts, was called "L'Art Nouveau", whence came the French name for the style. Although the style was appreciated intellectually (witness the Paris Exposition

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of 1900) it never became popular and "L'Art Nouveau-Bing" was a failure financially.

It was in Germany that Van de Velde and the Jugendstil were popularly accepted. The exhibition of 1897 in Dresden where Bing showed a suite of rooms designed by Van de Velde gave the architect instant popularity. Aside from building a number of important buildings in the Rhineland, Van de Velde founded, and directed until the War, the famous Kunstgewerbeschule at Weimar which after the War became the Bauhaus.

The Jugendstil itself was, however, short-lived. Just as the architecture of the period 1895-1900 was more daring and original than the architecture of 1910, so in the minor arts the trend in this period was toward more traditional design. The continent settled into a phase which has been called the New Tradition, best exemplified in architecture by the work of Berlage in Holland, Perret in France and Behrens in Germany. The furniture designed by these men naturally suited the restrained mediaevalism or classicism of their buildings. It was not until about 1922 that an entirely new impulse was felt in architecture. Since that time the minor arts cannot be considered as separate from the new architecture.

It is perhaps the most fundamental contrast between the two periods of design that in 1900 the Decorative Arts possessed a style of their own, independent of the

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architecture of the time, whereas today the discipline  
of modern architecture has become so broad that there  
can be no sub-category as that of the decorative arts.

From "Creative Art"  
April 1933

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1. JEWELRY BOXES

1900 (Designed Birmingham, England)  
The choice of materials, the curvilinear shape of the box, and the interweaving detail of the clasp are typical of 1900.

MODERN (English, located by Saks Fifth Avenue)

Convenient in size, simple in outline, utilitarian in design and unadorned save for the texture of the material used.

2. ORNAMENT VS. USEFUL OBJECT

1900 Carved Rock Crystal. (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, located by Tiffany Studios)

MODERN Table Lighter. (English, located by Wedgwood, Inc.)

Beauty of natural material and hand carved floral forms

vs.  
Beauty of machinery.

3. BOWLS

1900 Favrill glass, designed by Louis C. Tiffany, located by Tiffany Studios)

Deriving from the working-class in shape and cost, but not for its beauty of variation of pattern and color, and on the unadorned quality of the glass itself.

MODERN (Porcelain, designed by the Staatliche Porzellan Manufaktur, Berlin)

Pure white, shaped functionally without unnecessary rim, depends for its beauty on the simple expression of medium and function.

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4. COFFEE SPOONS

1900: (American, loaned by Mrs. F. T. Van Beuren)  
Lilies of the valley motivate shape as well  
ornament.

MODERN: (Adaptation of modern German design)  
The ideal of functionalism has here arrived  
at a traditional shape.

5. DESSERT SPOONS

1900: (Designed by Marcus & Company)  
Typical floral decoration.

MODERN (Covington Plain, loaned by Black Starr & Frost -  
Gorham)  
A traditional design

6. CLOTHES BRUSHES

1900: (American)

MODERN: (German, loaned by Saks-Fifth Avenue)

Silver vs. chromium  
Wavy ornament vs. simple surface  
Handle vs. no handle

7. TRAYS

1900 (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany  
Studios)

The restrained, curved lines of the decoration  
form an integral part of the tray. This abstract  
ornament, rather than more literal naturalistic  
design, is characteristic of the best work of the  
period.

MODERN: (Designed by Rena Rosenthal, loaned by Rena Rosenthal,  
Inc.)

Glass and chromium have replaced tarnishable silver,  
and sharp, straight lines supersede the curved.

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8. TABLES

1900: (Designed by Eugene Colonna for L'Art Nouveau-Bing, loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art).  
Curved corners and curvilinear ornament.

MODERN: (Designed by Le Corbusier and Charlotte Perriand, loaned by Thonet Brothers, New York)  
New materials in functional forms.

9. CENTERPIECES

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)  
Sumptuous, elaborate, large and purely decorative.

MODERN: (Designed by the Staatliche Porzellan Manufaktur, Berlin)  
Smaller, simpler, and at least partially useful.

10. HANGINGS

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)  
Velours wall hanging hand-painted in a design of corn and pumpkins.

MODERN: (French bourrette and domestic serge, loaned by Howard & Schaffer Inc.)  
Variation in texture and weave takes the place of decorative design.

11. FINGER BOWLS

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany)  
Irregular in shape and color. Inspired by flower petals.

MODERN: (Bohemian)  
The simplest functional form.

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12. CEILING LIGHTS

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)

MODERN: (German, loaned by Schwintzer & Graeff, New York)

Elongated hand painted bowl vs. a sphere of ground glass.

13. VASES

1900: (American, loaned by Mrs. F. T. Van Buren)  
An ornamental trophy cup. The whiplash curves of the handles are especially typical of the period.

MODERN: (Designed by Paul T. Frankl)

The cylindrical shape is the simplest in manufacture and use.

14. TEA POTS

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)

MODERN: (Designed by Schot & Company, Jena, Germany)

Tarnished silver surface vs. transparent unbreakable glass.  
Curvilinear floral ornament vs. the clarity of glass and the color of tea.

15. BUD VASES

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)

MODERN: (Designed by Staatliche Porzellan Manufaktur, Berlin)

An orchidaceous form vs. simple cylinder.

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16. PLATES

- 1900: (Haviland China, designed by Georges de Feure, loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art) Inspired by the foamy waves of Japanese prints.
- MODERN: (Urbino design, Staatliche Porzellan Manufaktur, Berlin) Reduced to the simplest possible shape and color.

17. TRANSLUCENT GLASS

- 1900: (Opal glass, designed and loaned by Tiffany Studios)
- MODERN: (Magnalite, manufactured and loaned by the American 3 Way Luxfer Prism Company Inc.)

Both panes have the similar purpose of admitting light without visibility. The Tiffany pane is designed to be ornamental and its wavy pattern is the result of irregularities of manufacture. The regular pattern of the Magnalite pane is the result of considerations of machine production and of function: best distribution of light and ease of cleaning.

18. INTERIORS

- 1895: (House in Brussels, Victor Horta, architect) Audacious use of metal and glass. Typical curvilinear ornament.
- 1930: (Tugendhat House, Brno, Czechoslovakia, Miés van der Rohe, architect) Audacious use of metal and glass. Growing plants and luxurious materials form only decoration.



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19. ORNAMENTAL OBJECT VS. BLANK SPACE

1900: (Object designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)  
An ornamental object for the sake of ornament. Inspired by the shape and color of a tulip.

MODERN: Blank Space  
Ornamental objects d'art are avoided in modern interior architectural schemes.

20. ORNAMENTAL TILES VS. STRUCTURAL GLASS BRICKS

1900: (Opal glass tiles, designed and loaned by Tiffany Studios)  
The beauty of iridescent lustre and irregular texture.

MODERN: (Structural glass bricks, German, loaned by the Structural Glass Corporation, New York)  
The beauty of clarity and machine produced units.

21. WALL FIXTURES

1900: (American)

MODERN: (Designed by Miës van der Rohe)

Imitation of natural forms vs. machine-like smoothness.

22. CHAIRS

1900: (Designed by Eugene Colonna for L'Art Nouveau-Bing, loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

MODERN: (Designed by Miës van der Rohe, 1927)

Stylistic curves, derived from the aesthetic of the Art Nouveau, vs. curves resulting from the functional use of steel tubing in chair construction.

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23. BOOKBINDINGS

1900: (Published Berlin, 1901)

MODERN: (Designed by Jan Tschichold, Potsdam, 1931)

Curvilinear design in the Arts and Crafts tradition vs. design formed by placing of titles and choice of type.

24. CARD TRAY VS. ASH TRAY

1900: (Loaned by Rena Rosenthal)  
A dancer whose billowing skirts form a card tray.

MODERN: (Orrefors glass, designed by Edvard Hald, Sweden, loaned by Orrefors Glassware Shop, New York)  
Thirty years has substituted the ash tray for the card tray. A large, flat, glass dish is at once the most functional and the most decorative.

25. SALAD BOWLS

1900: (Loaned by Rena Rosenthal)  
Subordination of function to ornament. The glass bowl is concealed in a silver casing of elaborate floral design.

MODERN: (Leerdam glass, Holland)  
Simplest possible expression of medium and function.

26. LITHOGRAPH VS. PHOTOGRAPH

1900: (ETE, lithograph by Mucha, Paris, loaned by Rena Rosenthal)

MODERN: (Photograph by Edward Steichen, New York)

LIKE: in subject matter  
in being reproducible

UNLIKE: in medium  
in artistic approach  
in sentiment

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27. BROOCH VS. SCARFPIN

A typical floral ornament of the period vs.  
a design based on the safety pin.

28. STANDARD LAMPS

1900: (Designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)

MODERN: (Designed by Werkstaetten der Stadt Halle, Germany)

Cluster of flowers as a motivation  
vs.  
efficient lighting as a motivation.

29. TABLE LAMPS

1900: (American)

MODERN: (Designed by Bauhaus, Dessau, 1926)

An ornamental hall table lamp  
vs.  
an efficient desk lamp.

30. TEA CUPS

1900: (Haviland China, designed by Georges de Feure, loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art)  
Typical ornament of the period applied to a shape derived from the English Arts and Crafts tradition.

MODERN: (Designed by the Staatliche Porzellan Manufaktur Berlin)  
A traditional shape unornamented and uncolored.

31. DISHES

1900: (Solid glass dish designed by Louis C. Tiffany, loaned by Tiffany Studios)  
Motif of primitive undersea life as induced by the discoveries of the microscope and the romantic primitivism of 1900.

MODERN: (Chinese jade plate, loaned by Mrs. Ralph Ellis)  
An old jade plate which exemplifies all the principles of modern design.