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Decorative Art a Generation Ago

BY PHILIP JOHNSON

MOST OF US 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 were a receptacle for 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 of those days has been judged on the basis of the poorest examples, rather than the best. We have all seen dull Gothic and ugly François-I, but we do not condemn these periods. The style of 1900 (the *Jugendstil* or, as it is called in French—and English!—*l'art nouveau*) is one that merits reevaluation.

The essence of this style, whether in painting or in 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. Both periods considered themselves modern and 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. *l'art nouveau* was a style of ornament; the basis of the modern style is lack of ornament.

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 un-ordered 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 medieval for inspiration. It stimulated a search for the modern, but the actual principles of its 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 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 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 *l'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 his *Jane Avril*, the repeated double curves of the outline of the body, the snake on her dress and in the corner express satire and humor. On the other hand, these curving lines,

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Lithograph poster by Toulouse-Lautrec

as used by the English "aesthetes," could express decadence, as in the patterns of smoking candles or dripping blood in the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley.

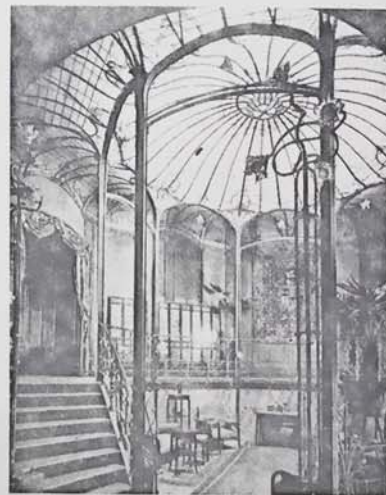
Simultaneously, in Munich a group of illustrators and decorators, including Bruno Paul, Pankok, Riemerschmid and Eckmann, were independently working out naturalistic curves in their designs. Their contributions to the magazine *Jugend*, founded in 1896, defined the style as a definite mode in the decorative arts and gave it the 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. While still a young man, he made designs for chairs, book-jackets and even doorknobs in the arts-and-crafts manner. In 1896 he built his first house, 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 his belief in the possibility of machine production and in functionalism as the basis for design.

In this he was surely influenced by the buildings of Victor Horta, who in the early 'nineties, perhaps following the ideas of Viollet-le-Duc, had dared to reveal the metal skeleton in the façades 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 medievalism of the English. The *Jugendstil* lay ready to hand as a style which could easily be adapted to his 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 this style as the modern style in decoration. The magazine *Jugend* was launched. Hector Guimard built his Castel Béranger in Paris, which,



Entrance Hall, Brussels Residence
Victor Horta, architect (1896)

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although derivative of Horta's work, was considered outrageously modern by the Paris of that day. In the same year Siegfried Bing, a German, opened a shop in Paris with four rooms designed by Van de Velde. This shop, which became the center of the movement in 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 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 medievalism 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 architecture of the time, whereas today the discipline of modern architecture has become so broad that there can be no sub-category of the decorative arts.



Metropolitan Museum
Designed by Eugène Colonna (1900)



Museum of Modern Art
Designed by Mies van der Rohe (1925)