

Topic page:

Art Nouveau

Art nouveau describes a movement in the visual arts extending from Europe to North America and dominant between 1890 and 1910, characterized by organic, naturalistic forms open to a wide range of interpretations, from complex fluid arabesques to simple geometric explorations and progressions.

During this extraordinarily fertile and creative period, few areas of architecture and the decorative arts remained untouched. Indeed, the language of Art nouveau proved remarkably versatile, with architects and designers exploring its potential through the design of objects as diverse as apartment blocks and lamps, book covers and posters, ironmongery and furniture.

The movement marked the end of one century and heralded the new, the label "art nouveau" coming into use at the time. At the height of the belle époque, a period noted for economic prosperity and the prominence of the middle classes, art nouveau built a bridge between the past and tradition on the one hand and growing industrialization, production, and imminent change on the other. With the rise of the new industrial classes, a new breed of patron emerged, embracing the new style and supporting its development and dissemination. The turbulence of the period and the tensions between rich and poor, conservative and radical, can be traced in the diversity of artifacts produced, from the bespoke to the mass produced.

Although seen as evoking the spirit of the age and embraced by many as a form of personal and national expression, art nouveau also provoked extraordinary criticism. It was particularly pilloried as an excess of ornament and decoration without functional substance.

Early centers of design and production flourished in Nancy, France, Brussels, and Munich, but within many countries in Europe similar movements of designers and craftsmen were evolving, often exploring national and regional identity, distinct in name and output yet recognizable as part of the wider art nouveau family: in Britain, the arts and crafts movement led by William Morris and the merchandise of the Liberty department store in London; in Austria, the secessionists of the Wiener Werkstätte; in Spain, the modernista; in Germany, the *jugendstil* movement. Basing their work around notions of regional identity, Catalan architects such as Antonio Gaudí i Cornet (1852-1926), Josef Maria Jujol (1879-1949), and Luis Domenech e Montaner (1850-1923) sought to use the narrative opportunities of art nouveau as a catalyst for artistic and political discussion and expression while reinterpreting Catalan themes and history as sources in their designs.

The 1900 Paris Exposition became the showplace for the art nouveau style and for the prosperity and creative strength of France itself, evident through the architecture of key pavilions and many of the goods and works of art displayed. The Metro stations and street furniture of Hector-Germain Guimard (1867-1942), commissioned to deal with the anticipated congestion the exhibition would create, have become the most lasting evidence of the exposition. Guimard's innovative solution involved a modular range of wrought iron and glass components that could be combined to create many alternatives. His synthesis of industrial production techniques and lightweight forms, sinuous and curvaceous, produced an effective and aesthetically challenging solution. Elsewhere, shared preoccupations and mutual interests led to creative alliances and collaborations, and the growing number of design journals and new reproduction techniques led to the wider dissemination of the style across and beyond Europe.

Art nouveau developed a parallel yet independent strand in the United States, conscious of the European work but not restricted by it, innovative and autonomous. The glassmaker Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933) became known for the technical virtuosity and fluidity of his glassware including Favrite ware, whose surface sheen and iridescence amplified its curving lines. His collaboration with Greene and Greene (architects) produced some of the few notable art nouveau homes on the Pacific coast. Chicago architect Louis H. Sullivan (1856-1924) experimented with both the functional and decorative opportunities the skyscraper presented. The Carson, Pirie, Scott, and Co. store, completed in 1904, displayed a complexity of ornament seldom matched in design or realization.



Poster announcing the Cincinnati Fall Festival show. Here a woman is shown wearing art nouveau jewelry. (Library of Congress)

The onset of World War I marked the end of art nouveau. The radical changes that ensued as a result of that war, in particular the desire to look to the future, meant that it was not until the 1960s that a resurgence in interest in art nouveau and a reappraisal of its effect and legacy led to a renewed appetite for the style.

See also:

Architecture; Exposition universelle (1900); Painting; World War I.

References

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Definition

art nouveau from *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*

noun: a style of art, architecture and interior design that flourished towards the end of the 19c, characterized by the use of flowing curved lines that resemble plant stems interlaced with highly stylized flowers and leaves.

[1899: French, meaning 'new art'.]

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