

About Art Nouveau*

There has always been trouble with the designations of styles. Art experts usually assign names to artistic phenomena in retrospect. It is true that the works of art which constitute the core of styles correspond to an ideal stylistic type, but difficulties arise when the temporal limits of a certain style need to be defined, and a map of its geographical distribution to be drawn.

Since art history developed into a science in Europe, and, in proportion to it, the self-confidence of artists grew stronger, the naming of movements and trends has, as a rule, been simultaneous with their emergence. It could even be said that the very names of artistic movements have become part of their programmes and manifestoes, a kind of trademark which contributes to the recognition of their identity. Roughly speaking, the era of such movements began in the middle of the nineteenth century. An early example is the English Arts and Crafts movement. It is characteristic of such movements that, as a rule, they link several fields of arts. They base their identity on a criticism of the existing state of affairs, and enthrone themselves as the originators of the "modern" trend. The wider public is thus familiar with various "-isms": Impressionism, Expressionism, Futurism, etc.

It must be said that architectural movements, with few exceptions, did not associate with painting and sculpture as the two pure fine-arts activities, and vice versa. More often, architecture was associated with various kinds of applied arts. Thus we cannot speak of impressionist or realist architecture, or of functionalist painting. Some authors, however, do use the notions of expressionist or futurist architecture, but the meaning of such terms is limited. The only exception is the movement which will be discussed in this paper and boasts three, or even five names: *Art Nouveau*, *Secession/Sezessionstil*, *Jugendstil*, *Modern Style*, and sometimes even *Liberty*.

Experts agree that Art Nouveau¹ is a multifaceted and significant artistic phenomenon. To put it briefly, the main characteristic of the best Art Nouveau creations is that each represents a so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk* (complete, unified or total work of art). This refers to works of art created according to a unified programme and existing as a joint product of several fields of art. Architecture, and fine and applied arts are obligatory, in combination also with other derived or autonomous fields of art, such as scenography, costumography, theatre art, and music. The most characteristic example of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is Baroque opera as a totality of the building, staging, performance, and realization. Similarly, fin-de-siècle theatre is also a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. However, the difference between Baroque opera and fin-de-siècle theatre is great: the former was a spectacle, both on the stage and in the pit, meant to be viewed from the Lord's box. The latter was only an illusion, whose task was to produce, for a short time and within the limited scope of a stage, an impression of harmony as a living opposition between the inner world of the performers and the audience, and the outer, chaotic world.²

As a fine-arts and architectural style, Art Nouveau reached its purest expression as *Gesamtkunstwerk* in houses that were their designers' dwelling places and studios at the same time. A prototype of this kind is the celebrated Red House by Phillip Webb from 1859, built for Charles Morris. To this type can be added the Bloemenwerf house in Uccle (1895), by Henri van de Velde, and Hvittrösk near Helsinki from around 1900, by Herman Geselius, Armas Lindgren and Eeliel Saarinen. In these cases the *Gesamtkunstwerk* does not refer only to the fact that architects designed every detail and every object in the house, but that they also lived in them according to their artistic principles and general lifestyle.

There can be no doubt that the Historicism of the 19th century, in its representative works, also created *Gesamtkunstwerks*. Its power was based on the established aesthetic conventions and programmatic canons. It was supported by academism, positivism, the conservative taste of clients, national ideology, and an infatuation with the past. In its late phase, approximately from the 1890s onwards, the great majority of the homogenizing elements of Historicism which we have just enumerated, proved to be its great disadvantage. A series of criticisms were levelled at historicist architecture and fine arts, whose meaning was becoming increasingly hollow and their forms ever more inflated. A desire for change was in the air, so it was not surprising that a new style "erupted" simultaneously in various cultural environments all over Europe, embracing architecture, interior design, applied arts, book illustration, poster design and other graphic media. The main body of painting and sculpture went its own way. We usually speak of Art Nouveau painting and sculpture when such works of art represented the assertion of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The concurrent outbreak of the style in several places also accounts for its different names. Literature abounds in explanations as to where individual terms originated or what schools held priority and were more influential than others. The fact is that the term Art Nouveau dates from 1895, Jugendstil from 1897, and Secession from 1898.³ However, individual artists, e. g. Victor Horta, Hector Guimard, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Otto Wagner, created works that anticipated the new style even before 1895. Earlier still was the above mentioned Arts and Crafts movement,⁴ which is justifiably considered the immediate precursor of the new art.

I have neither the intention nor ambition to contrive a new view of the general definition of Art Nouveau, or to alter the time limits of this artistic phenomenon. The following guidelines will suffice as an introduction to the present outline.

Secession/Jugendstil/Art Nouveau is characterised by a heterogeneity of formal expression and diversity of "programmatic" profundity. In terms of the decorativeness of the language, two main tendencies can be distinguished. The first, in principle earlier, employed plant, floral and other stylized dynamic elements, such as curves, undulating lines and concave-convex surfaces, edges and borders. Such elements often intermingled with elements of neo-Baroque, neo-Renaissance (mostly its northern variant) and other historical styles. The second trend derives mainly from the Arts and Crafts and Glasgow School. Its peak was achieved in the architecture of Joseph Hoffmann and in the designs of Wiener Werkstätte. The usual term used to designate it is the "geometric style".

A refreshing side of the new artistic sensibility in this period was that artists sought inspiration, and found fresh models, in environments other than European or Christian: from Japanese and ancient Egyptian cultures to those of the Pacific Ocean and other

“primitive” peoples. In this respect, artistic intentions went side by side with the emergence of anthropology and the first systematic endeavours of the history of art to explain decoration as a stylistic, and consequently artistic, phenomenon.⁵

Art Nouveau artists also drew inspiration from natural forms, in which they relied on books on botany, geology and zoology to great advantage. Books containing designer’s and architectural patterns also emerged at that time.⁶ In general, training in all the architectural academies was based on knowledge and copying of architectural-decorative patterns from various cultural, geographical and temporal environments. As the turn of the century approached, travels to countries more exotic than classical Italy and Greece became an increasingly essential element of an architect’s education. An outline of such examples of designs is presented in Part 4 of Graf’s voluminous monograph on Otto Wagner, which offers a real treasury of ideas from the sketchbooks of two of Wagner’s teachers at the Vienna Academy, August Siccard von Siccardsburg and Eduard van der Nüll.⁷

Of course, books on architecture and related publications containing patterns for builders and designers had always existed, at least from the Renaissance onwards. But in the last decades of the last century, new techniques of reproducing pictures were invented, which made magazines, catalogues, and other prints cheaper, and also raised their quality. This had an immediate effect on their circulation, and indirectly resulted in the rapid spread of new ideas. Various exhibitions played an important role in the process of publicizing innovations and their interchange, from those of local value only, to regional and even world exhibitions. The first world exhibition of 1857 in London launched a period of world shows and other exhibitions which has continued until today. The most important world exhibition to promote Art Nouveau was in Paris in 1900. The end of this movement was marked by the exhibition entitled *Arts décoratifs et industrielles modernes*, 1925, that also took place in Paris.

A more detailed account of the dissemination of new architectural ideals by means of exhibitions would greatly exceed the purpose of the present paper. So I shall only indicate some data. In 1897, there was an international industrial exhibition in Brussels at which some Belgian representatives of Art Nouveau participated. The first exhibition of the Vienna Secession was organized in the spring of 1898; the Paris world exhibition followed in 1900, the first exhibition of the artists’ colony at Darmstadt in 1901, the international exhibition of decorative arts in Turin in 1902, the world exhibition at St. Louis in 1904, and the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne in 1914, etc.

Art Nouveau architecture is generally recognizable by its external, formal characteristics. However, those of its characteristics that built bridges to the new architecture, urban planning and design of the twentieth century are of greater significance. These include the change of principles of and views on architecture, urban planning and design which appeared at the end of the nineteenth and in the first decades of this century. Generally speaking, this development had its roots in the theories of Viollet-le-Duc, Semper, Ruskin, and Morris, to mention at least some of the pioneers. This trend led to an emphasis on sincerity in the use of materials; employing contemporary constructions not only in engineering building tasks but also in monumental architecture and “common-place” residential houses; refining the sense of functionality; searching for new technical and structural solutions and spatial concepts. The best architecture by Horta, van der Velde, Mackintosh, Gaudí, Behrens, Wagner, Lechner, and many others certainly represented a bridge between the new ideas, the demands of contemporary life and the modern architecture of the twentieth century.

The majority of Art Nouveau buildings from the turn of the century, up to the end of World War I, were only outward imitations of the new metropolitan architecture. If earlier façades had been decorated with endless cornices, cartouches, pilasters, columns, and other historicist oddities, then these were now replaced with stylized flowers, tendrils, and female heads, all of them cast to one and the same pattern. As the negation of the old means of artistic expression and the search for something new, in tune with the time, Art Nouveau very soon slipped into fashionable imitation of outward, decorative elements of the “new” style. This, together with a change in public taste, can also be seen as one of the main reasons for its relatively rapid decline.

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⁴ In the present text, translated from Slovene, *Art Nouveau*, as the most general term and most often occurring in English texts, appears interchangeably with *Secession*, which is the established term in the Slovene language, as well as Hungarian, Czech, Slovak, Croatian, etc., thus in countries that were parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

¹ In German-speaking countries, the name “Secession” was applied to new artistic trends by contemporaries. Paul Clemen also uses it in this general sense in his article *Von neuer deutschen Kunst*, published in the Munich magazine *Die Kunst*, 1908. He says there that the latest artistic movement in Germany was mostly known under the name of Secession (p. 356). Artists in Munich founded a group called *Sezession* as early as 1892; in 1897, an artists’ association of the same name was founded in Vienna, followed in 1899 by one in Berlin.

² Jürgen Nautz, Richard Vahrenkamp (ed.), *Die Wiener Jahrhundertwende: Einflüsse, Umwelt, Wirkungen*, Vienna, Böhlau, 1993, introduction by the same authors, p. 27.

³ The name, Art Nouveau, comes from an art shop called *Maison de l’Art nouveau* which was opened in Paris in 1895 by a Hamburg art dealer, Samuel Bing. Jugendstil was named after the Munich illustrated weekly “for art and life”, *Jugend* which was started in 1896, but its name was adopted to designate the art style only a year later. The first exhibition of the group of Viennese artists called the Secession took place in 1898. Karl Eschmann, *Jugendstil: Ursprünge, Parallelen, Folgen*, Gottingen (etc), Muster-Schmidt., 1991, pp. 13-14. The Munich Secession, founded in 1892, cannot be regarded as an art movement guided by a uniform programme.

⁴ Its beginning can be placed in 1861 when William Morris founded a firm for applied arts manufacture. The classic work by Nikolaus Pevsner *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius* of 1936 was among the first to point out the leading role of Arts and Crafts in the appearance of modern architecture and design of the 20th century.

⁵ Thus in 1893 Alois Riegl, when he was still a keeper of textiles in the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, published a treatise indicatively entitled *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*. In the first place, he analyses in it the development of old Egyptian and old Greek decorative motifs.

⁶ The British Modern Style was mainly influenced by two books, i. e. Owen Jones’s *The Grammar of Ornament* from 1856, and Christopher Dressler’s *The Art of Decorative Design*, 1862. See Françoise Dierkins-Aubry, Jos Vanderbreen, *Jugendstil in Belgien. Architektur & Interieurs*, Eupen, Grenz-Echo, 1991, p. 12.

⁷ Otto Antonia Graf, *Otto Wagner 4. Siccard und van der Null: Zu den Anfängen der Moderne*, Vienna (etc), Böhlau, 1994.