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| Art Nouveau |
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| From the 1880s until the mid-1910s, Art Nouveau was the dominant style in art, architecture, and design in Europe, with innovative and thoroughly modern production in graphics, furniture, and applied arts. Though it incorporated elements from a range of diverse sources, the most characteristic forms of Art Nouveau were those inspired by nature, but nature that had been adapted, stylized, and aestheticized to reflect the cultural climate of the turn of the century. The origins of Art Nouveau developed out of the ideas of several leading figures during the mid-19th century in their efforts to reconcile art with the increasingly industrialized methods of production dominating in the applied arts. In Britain, William Morris advocated for a unity among art, design, and applied arts that valued handcraftsmanship in well-made objects made available to the middle classes. The Arts & Crafts movement sought to counter the array of poorly designed consumer goods seen at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, in which individual objects were frequently overwhelmed by ornamentation. |
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The Arts & Crafts movement sought to counter the array of poorly designed consumer goods seen at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, in which individual objects were frequently overwhelmed by ornamentation.  The theorist John Ruskin evoked the example of past historical eras, such as the Renaissance and the Medieval periods, in which the applied arts were appreciated at the same level as art and architecture and every art medium shared an all-encompassing decorative program. Ruskin called on architects and designers to find in nature their inspiration for a modern style to realize this integrated vision. A mahogany and leather chair by Arthur Mackmurdo, made in 1882-83, shows the beginning of the Art Nouveau incorporation of these natural motifs, in its long, undulating plant stems and flowers that cover the chair’s pierced back.  In France, the architect and theorist, Eugène Viollet le-Duc, who was passionately devoted to the Gothic style, similarly maintained that a renewed sense of unity attuned to contemporary life was needed. He shared the growing sentiment of many that a modern style must rely on its own language of form rather than imitate the past or rely exclusively on the classical example. In Belgium, Henry van de Velde also worked to breath new life into applied design, aligning craft production with the best output in the fine arts and architecture, and to integrate all individual parts as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or ‘total work of art.’  A pervasive spiritual anxiety loomed over Europe with the approach of the turn of the century. This mood was due to the dramatic, life-altering changes that had prevailed themselves upon urbanites over the preceding decades, including political upheavals and nationalist conflicts; population growth and the rise of dense urban centres; and the many technological innovations and increased mechanization that impacted daily life. Out of this atmosphere, Art Nouveau developed, drawing inspiration from nature and other varied influences to result in distinct stylistic variations based on regional location, with initial centres in France, Belgium, and Britain, followed quickly by important centres in Nancy, Glasgow, Vienna, Munich, Barcelona, Prague, Helsinki, Moscow, and New York.  In France and Belgium, designers frequently sought forms reminiscent of plants and organisms as a means of breaking free from the tyranny of past historical styles or the continuation of the outmoded academic traditions. These stylized forms provided something novel yet consoling for individuals within the modern urban landscape as many were rapidly losing their physical connection with nature and the psychological solace found from traditional rhythms of life.  One of the most significant examples of Art Nouveau is Hector Guimard’s marquees and station entrances for the Paris Metro, created around 1900. Here, the thin steel columns take on the appearance of plants and vines, turning all straight lines into organic forms. The same principle is found in Victor Horta’s Tassel House, made in Brussels in 1893, the first full expression of the style in domestic architecture. The reinterpretation of nature is also seen in August Endell’s façade for the Elvira photography studio, made in Munich circa 1895-98, on which appears the whiplash curve, a defining feature of Art Nouveau.  The Art Nouveau vocabulary spread beyond architecture and design to fully redefine the entire visual landscape of culture, art and media. This is seen in the explosion of graphic work, including journals and posters that popularized the style’s curvilinear exuberance to broad audiences. The term ‘art nouveau’ was first used in the periodical *L’Art Moderne* in a discussion of twenty painters known as *Les Vingt* who were seeking reform through the arts in Belgium in the 1880s. The British journal *The Studio* featured the work of Aubrey Beardsley, including his illustrations for Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomè,* in 1895. The posters of Jules Cheret, Alphonse Mucha, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec similarly relied on bold and dynamic curvilinear forms to beckon urbanites to lose themselves in products, pleasure, and entertainment.  In 1895, the German art dealer Siegfried Bing opened a large gallery and emporium called *L’Art Nouveau,* in Paris, where fashionable Europeans could acquire goods in the new style. Bing was also a leading purveyor of Japanese woodblock prints and other objects of Japanese origin, which were proving influential on artists for their heightened aestheticism; the decorative quality of their surfaces; and their unique spatial and representational techniques such as asymmetry and two-dimensional, flattened surfaces, all of which were quickly absorbed into the Art Nouveau vocabulary.  The Art Nouveau repertoire of forms incorporated other sources. Arabic interlacing and its dynamic calligraphic line were merged with organic forms. Meanwhile the adaptation of the Rococo curve was at once a continuation and variation on the grand tradition of cabinetmakers, evident in the glassware of Émile Gallé and the furniture of Louis Majorelle. An idiosyncratic view of organic matter is seen in the architecture of Antoni Gaudi in Barcelona. An interest in metamorphosis, symbiosis, science, and sex resulted in the fusion of plants, insects, and female forms in much of the exquisite jewelry of René Lalique, which relied on similar symbolic and spiritual forms that proved liberating to artists throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The female figure, often intertwined with natural forms, became a key motif in the vocabulary of Art Nouveau.  In Scotland, the Medieval and Celtic history of the region merged with interests in Japanese, geometric, and natural forms, resulting in a rectilinear variation, such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s furniture. This variant greatly influenced the restrained and geometric *Jugendstil*, or ‘youth style,’ as Art Nouveau was called in Germany; or the Secessionist style, as it was called in Vienna, where the luxurious materials and curvilinear line of the French variation were rivalled using rectilinear and geometric forms, such as those seen in Josef Hoffmann’s designs. In the United States, the lure of nature prevailed in the lamps of Louis Comfort Tiffany, and in architecture, where modern materials—including steel and glass—co-existed with natural forms, as seen in Louis Sullivan’s design for the Carson Pirie, Scott, and Company department store in Chicago, built between 1899 and 1904.  The climax of Art Nouveau was the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900. The style had now become ubiquitous with production and industry. The artists and designers of the Art Nouveau had so fully succeeded in creating an all-encompassing atmospheric and sensory style that cheap reproductions now began to debase its exuberant originality of form. The tendency towards abstraction that guided avant-garde painters and the growing interest in streamlined forms provided alternatives to the sinuous curve. By the 1920s, Art Nouveau would be replaced by the next defining style of the age, Art Deco. |
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