Architecture: It's a Long Way From 1900
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Architecture

It's a Long Way From 1900

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WHEN Hector Guimard died in New York in 1942, his estate was valued at $500. When his wife went back to Paris after the war, she tried and failed to interest the French authorities in acquiring their house at 122 Avenue Mozart — designed and furnished totally by Guimard in the Art Nouveau style from 1909 to 1912 — as a Musée Guimard. She sold it then, allowing New York's Museum of Modern Art first purchase of the furnishings because Alfred Barr had recognized Guimard's existence in an earlier show.

A good number of the objects in the Museum of Modern Art's current exhibition, "Hector Guimard (1867-1942)," which will run to May 10, are from that purchase. Not one of them could be bought today for $500. And the stripped-out shell of the Guimard House is now a classified Monument Historique.

So much for economics. And the ironies of history and French custodial attitudes toward culture. Now for art. The one thing everyone knows that Guimard designed is the system of 1900 Paris Métro entrances. "Style Métro" was the popular Parisian name for Art Nouveau, that sinuous, whiplash, turn-of-the-century manner in which vegetation and structure are so handsomely confused, with the *élan vital* of Bergson and the force of natural forms (the "sap" of growing things, according to Guimard) turned into an esthetic as wayward as it is seductive.

Art Nouveau has long been exemplified by those subway entrances, a few superb textbook photographs of such things as Victor Horta's staircase at 12 Rue de Turin in Brussels, and increasingly popular and expensive decorative objects. It is Jugendstil in Germany and Austria, Stile Liberty or Floreale in Italy, and Antonio Gaudi in Spain. For a more general public it is Maurice Chevalier's unforgettable bedroom in Gigi. And Maxim's restaurant in the Rue Royale, still as it was decorated by Louis Marney in 1899, as memorable to several generations for the languid elegance of its interiors as for its formidable *croquembouche.* (Chicago has a rather remarkable replica of both that are not without interst in the unexpected Middle Western translation.)

Five years of research by F. Lanier Graham, Associate Curator of Collections at the Museum of Modern Art, have put together the work of Hector Guimard in the kind of scholarly documentation of the modern movement that, whatever the controversies that swirl around the museum today, has been its continuing, legitimate pride. A catalogue raisonné will be issued later this year.

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This research has uncovered more than 50 buildings executed between 1890 and 1930, hundreds of decorative objects and over 2,000 drawings. The exhibition is divided into the High Art Nouveau production of the 1890's and the more restrained "style Guimard" of about 1901 to 1912. The show contains everything from the embroideries Guimard designed for his wife's wedding gown and his own immensely covetable silverheaded cane — one of the loveliest *luxe* objects of all time — to excellently photographed buildings, an almost indigestible amount of writhing furniture, outstanding examples of crafts and graphics, even models of ironwork for mass production, all from the master's own hand.

The exhibition has the sponsorship of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the collaboration of the Paris Musée des Arts Décorafifs. Mr. Graham was assisted by Alain Blondel, Ralph Culpepper, Yves Plantain and Stan Ries, four young men who do not find history irrelevant.

One of the most interesting points about Art Nouveau—a kind of esthetic flash fire that burned brightest in the decade from 1890 to 1900 and then virtually burned itself out in the next ten years — is that many serious students and practitioners of the arts have always considered it irrelevant, overtly or privately. Most architects act as if it is slightly obscene. It is collectable, but not quite acceptable.

What the Guimard show proves is that while Guimard was a major talent with a notable sculptural flare for linear, space-moulding design, his work adds up to less than the movement as a whole. It also proves that there is an enormous appeal in the smaller objects of Art Nouveau and considerably less appeal in the architecture, except in those passages where the decorative elements of glass, wood and iron define and embroider the spaces so effectively. Some of these spaces are a tour de force of neo-baroque. The interior of Guimard's Humbert de Romans concert hall (1897-1901, demolished 1905) is a serious loss to history and art.

The problem of appreciation for today's viewer is essentially one of hindsight. Guimard and his contemporaries were revolutionaries in their own day. They were breaking out of the mold of the past, and quite correctly, called their work modern.

But we are looking at it over the rest of the technological and social revolution that totally transformed the 20th-century world. These men sought a formula that, in essence, reworked the familiar in new ways, and we—the inheritors of a half century of cataclysmic change—see Guimard's portières, fireplaces, redoubtable whatnots and large, old-fashioned double beds as a straining after new expression using all the old totems and artifacts of a comfortable 19th-century culture.

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Since then, the house and everything in it has been exploded through technology and a changing society. The chairs of Charles Eames, the conveniences of General Electric, the advent of plastics, the application of aircraft manufacture, the factors of mobility and expendibility, new processes and new life styles, make the Paris of Guimard a nostalgic period piece. That is its charm, of course. But esthetic exploration was the whole game.

It is essential, therefore, to keep two things in mind. First, that we are now looking through the wrong end of the telescope. And second, in the words of Russell Hitchcock, that "Art Nouveau was actually the first stage of modern architecture in Europe . . . (It) stands apart both from the architecture of the preceding hundred years and from the modern architecture of the following fifty . . ." That "apartness" is very important and perfectly rendered at the museum, and that is the way to look at the show.

Still, one has reservations. If "the scent of heliotrope" has been said to pervade the rooms of Guimard's Scottish Art Nouveau contemporary, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the scent of an all-too-solid French bourgeoisie clings to Guimard. In an inevitable comparison, it is the work of Mackintosh that clears the air with an esthetic impact as stunning today as when it first appeared. Those bare, sensuous rooms, those straight, silent, unsittable chairs, that subtly shocking color, add up to high art in a sense that "le style Guimard" does not. But Paris, and the world, would be infinitely poorer without those Métro stations.

Art Nouveau at the Modern—Castel Henriette by Hector Guimard
A splendid documentation of a wayward and seductive style