

# Art Nouveau

## A Gentle Revolution: A Short History of the Art Nouveau Movement

by

Kandace Merric

*Editor's note:* Kandy received Level II Certification in Canvas at Assembly earlier this year and received the Louise Downing McGinty Scholarship to pursue Honors Certification. The handout that accompanied her presentation is reprinted here with permission. Thank you Kandy for sharing your research with us.

Towards the end of the 19th century, a gentle revolution by some young artisans against revised and traditional styles caused the flowering of a "New Art" movement. It began in England and quickly spread to Europe and America. The name Art Nouveau was first used by art dealer Samuel Bing, who opened a gallery in 1895 in Paris, and called it L'Art Nouveau. Some of the artisans exhibiting their work were Aubrey Beardsly, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and Walter Crane.

The Art Nouveau period was a short one, lasting from the mid-1880's until around 1910. This new style had its roots in the Arts and Crafts movement of designers, artists, and architects, such as William Morris, William de Moran, John Ruskin and A. W. N. Pugin who promoted craftsmanship and good design over the shoddy products being created since the Industrial Revolution. In the 1880's, the American architect Louis Sullivan used a style he called "Quaint Style" which was a jumble of entwined lines, shell-like leaves and various items from the sea.

Grace, light and simplicity to create the essence of a design was a complete change from the heavy, ornate styles of the Victorian Era. Some artists of one group favored designs created from natural forms. Even motifs using such usually unappealing things as bugs, snails or frogs were done so elegantly that they seemed just as beautiful as flowers. Faeries, centaurs, satyrs and sensually clothed or unclothed figures were also popular. Another group favored an infusion of Celtic and Cymric designs and the sleek uncluttered lines that were the forerunner of what we consider the Modern style. If we remember that this was a revolution against the styles of the day, we can see how different groups perceived their designs. The criticism that this was a decadent style for the wealthy had some merit. The materials used were often luxurious and the craftsmanship was painstakingly done. The designs were not favored by those on the lower end of the marketing scale.

The New Age movement assumed many national names: in Austria, *Sezessionstil*; France, *Style Moderne*; Germany, *Jugendstil*; Spain, *Modernista*; and in Italy, *Stile Liberty*, which was named after Liberty's of London. Artists were just as nationally diverse. The best known were William Morris and Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo of England. Austria was

the home of the ultimate Art Nouveau artist Gustave Klimt. France claimed Emile Gallé, René Lalique and the trans-planted Czechoslovakian, Alphonse Mucha. Scotland's "Glasgow Four" (Charles Rennie Macintosh and his wife Margaret MacDonald, Herbert and Frances McNair), the Dane, Georg Jensen; the Spaniard, Antonin Gaudí; and Norwegian Edvard Munch were other countries contributors.

Morris and his beliefs initiated the movement. A. H. Mackmurdo, the English architect, graphic artist and craftsman showed early practical use in design. Arthur Liberty played a great part in the early marketing of Art Nouveau decoration in his shop, "Liberty's," on London's Regent Street. The style was most successful in the graphic arts of Walter Crane, Aubrey Beardsly, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Mucha and William Bradley.

In the later part of the 19th century, the decorative arts brought forward an exploration into the use of iridescence. The Art Nouveau movement introduced glass with a rainbow-like glaze. The cloudy, mysterious looks of opals and moonstones were also used. Louis Comfort Tiffany, René Lalique and Emile Gallé employed these colors to great effect in their glassworks and jewelry.

The colors used for clothing were also affected. Designers discarded the dark maroons, browns, and blacks of the earlier Victorian era and made their creations using soft pastels. Young women wore crisp white fabrics. Older ladies wore soft mauves, taupes, and pale grays. Evening wear was adorned with sparkling beads and spangles.

Furnishings of exotic woods were complemented with the softer pastels. The natural vegetable dyes favored by the Arts and Crafts movement were still fashionable. Gone were many of the harsh reds, purples, and greens made from the new aniline dyes.

Brighter colors were also used by some designers such as couturier Paul Poiret who favored cerise, scarlet, and apple green. Explosive colors filled the designs of Leon Bakst, the Russian painter who created the scenery and costumes of the Ballet Russes.

When World War I broke out, color would once again undergo changes. Unfortunately, the style started to deteriorate into the grotesque. In an article in the *Art Journal* of October, 1900, Lewis F. Day wrote that Art Nouveau "shows symptoms...of pronounced disease." While attending an exhibit in Budapest in 1909, early promoter Arthur Liberty was quoted as saying, "It is painfully evident that the very name L'Art Nouveau has been brought into contempt by the gross exaggeration of its principles and aims.

The majority of the exhibits were not only crude, but meaningless. Nearly all the clever ones were either obtrusively revolting in subject...or else erotic imaginings of morbid brains depicted with a mastery of technique only too wickedly perfect."

So, after a meteoric climb to glory, the Art Nouveau movement plummeted in the same fast way. There was a revival of this style in the 1960's. Even though the period was short lived, the work of some of the artists of the movement still continues to be popular with many.

### Bibliography

- Amaya, Mario. *Art Nouveau*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966.
- Buckle, Mary and Day, Lewis F. *Art Nouveau Embroidery*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 1994.
- Calloway, Stephan. *Liberty of London*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1992.
- Duncan, Alastair. *Art Nouveau*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1994.
- Duncan, Alastair, Eidelberg, Martin, and Harris, Neil. *Masterworks of Louis Comfort Tiffany*.

- London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1989.
- Ellridge, Arthur. *Mucha*. Paris: Terrail, 1992.
- Grafton, Carol Belanger. *Treasury of Art Nouveau Design and Ornament*. New York: Dover Publications, 1980.
- Jones, Anthony. *Charles Rennie Macintosh*. London: Studio Editions, 1990.
- Neret, Gilles. *Gustav Klimt 1862-1918*. Berlin: Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH, 1993.
- Selz, Peter and Constantine, Mildred. *Art Nouveau—Art and Design at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959.
- Sterner, Gabriele. *Art Nouveau*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1982.
- Varnedoe, Kirk. *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986.
- Vergo, Peter. *Art in Vienna*. London: Phaidon, 1975.
- Waddell, Roberta. *The Art Nouveau Style*. New York: Dover Publications, 1977.

## The Editor's Soapbox

Yes, once again it is time for what has become my annual plea for articles. There is a difference this year from past years: the next time I see you I can get down on at least one bent knee and wail...sorry, but no one is exempt from my begging, pleading and cajoling be you a Friend, Associate, Graduate Member, Director or member of the Education Advisory Committee! Without input from you and your articles I can not continue to publish *NANthology* with news that is about and of interest to you. I can, however, give you issue after issue of book reviews as our Teacher Preparation Candidates, at least some of them, heeded my plea and have forwarded theirs to me. While that would make my job easier in some ways, it would soon wear thin for all of us. Some of you reading this have been approached and asked to send articles. You even agreed to my request. So, where is that article you promised you would write?

Now a word of explanation for the lateness of the last two issues. I have built in time between the copy due date and mailing date to allow for proof reading by Jean who may be "out of pocket" when the copy arrives on her door step, a busy printer who may need extra time to get the job back to me, and to bring the issues from my office to my home via our "wonderful" subway system where I then collate, fold, seal, label, and stamp each issue. In May it became painfully clear that I could no longer postpone knee surgery. I carefully chose the date to fall between *NANthology* issues (no joke!) and though the August

issue would go out on time. What I did not count on was a longer recovery period than the last time I had knee surgery. Thus the proofed copy arrived at the printer's later than expected, and it took more time to carry home the copies as I had to carry a relatively light load on the few days I went straight home and not to physical therapy. Getting them into the mail was another problem as I could not drive and bring them all to the post office at one time. So they went out a bunch at a time. Accept my apologies for any inconvenience the late arrival may have caused you. As I write this I am still going to "physical torture" and am beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. While I can not yet bend or kneel, on doctor's orders, I should be able to do so when next I see you so be ready for my pleading, begging and cajoling!

### Roster Update

Inserted in this issue is a US stamped postcard addressed to Barbara Edmonds. (If you reside out of the United States, please affix the appropriate postage.) In an effort to update our roster of Friends, Associates, and Graduate Members please complete the card with your full name, address, phone number and indicate your membership status. If you are a Graduate Member, please include the year you graduated and your area of certification. The roster will be used to ensure that you receive copies of *NANthology*, the Assembly brochure, and an updated teacher listing will also be compiled.