ART NOUVEAU

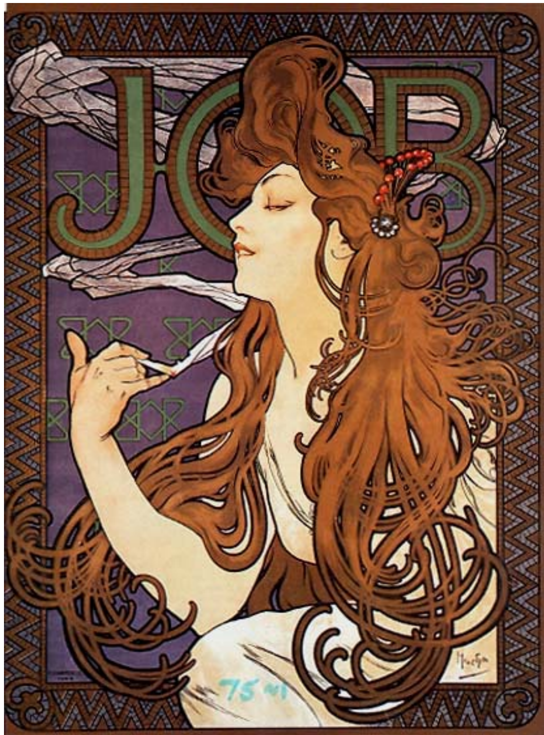
The exuberant *fin de siecle* style is celebrated in a sweeping exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington

By Stanley Meisler, *Smithsonian*, October 2000

As the 20th century neared, more than a hundred years ago, artists and intellectuals and merchants throughout Europe and in the United States tried to whip art into new shapes so it could keep pace with the ever-changing modern world. This frenzy to throw off the stultifying past and become modern, excited architects, painters, sculptors, illustrators, jewelers, potters, furniture makers, glassblowers, metalworkers, writers, dealers and shopkeepers. Since they believed they were creating everything anew, their style is best known today as Art Nouveau, French for "new art."

The 1896 Favrile Glass flask by Louis Comfort Tiffany clearly owes a debt to the 19th-century "swan-necked" Persian flasks pictured next to it.

The new art, popular from the early 1890s to the eve of World War I, took many different paths and drew inspiration from many different sources—Japanese, Chinese and Islamic art, Celtic and Viking revivals, 18th-century rococo furniture, the British Arts and Crafts Movement and literary trends such as symbolism. At its most typical, the highly decorative and ornamental style was lavish with arabesques and whiplash curves, botanical and zoological forms, portraits of seductive women and a decadent symbolism. At their best, Art Nouveau artists worked in several disciplines—architects designing armoires as well as buildings, for example, and furniture makers designing jewelry as well as armoires. Harmony was their ideal, so that a room's paintings, wallpaper and furniture would all fit together. Some of the ornamentation was so excessive that it seems kitsch now, but much of Art Nouveau is still delicate, beautiful, dynamic and free.



Art Nouveau's signature whiplash curves were employed with great flourish by Czech-born artist Alphonse Mucha in his enticing 1897 advertisement for Job cigarette paper.

A number of cities emerged as busy workshops for the new creativity, including Paris, Nancy, Brussels, Barcelona, Glasgow, Vienna, Munich, Turin, New York and Chicago. Giants dominated the style: the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the Austrian painter Gustav Klimt, the French architect Hector Guimard, the Czech illustrator Alphonse Mucha, the Belgian architect and interior designer Victor Horta, the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí and the German-born dealer Siegfried Bing. The style had a host of different names a hundred years ago: Secession in Vienna, Jugendstil in Germany, Stile Liberty in Italy, Modernismo in Barcelona and, most famously, the one that stuck, Art Nouveau in France.

The style had enormous popularity at its height but always provoked detractors as well. Designer Walter Crane, a leader of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, called Art Nouveau "a strange decorative disease." British sculptor Alfred Gilbert sneered that it was "absolute nonsense" and belonged to "the young lady's seminary." A French critic derided it as "the art of vegetarians." And for much of the 20th century, champions of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse and modern art treated Art Nouveau with contempt.

In recent decades, however, there has been renewed, almost nostalgic, interest in the styles that came before the age of modern art, and Art Nouveau has benefited from the attention. In April, London's Victoria and Albert Museum opened the largest exhibition of Art Nouveau ever assembled. Not since the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 has Art Nouveau been on display before so many people.

Pioneering Art Nouveau architect Victor Horta graced bourgeois homes such as the Van Eetvelde House with ironwork and multiple windows.

The show in Washington, which is sponsored by DaimlerChrysler, will feature some spectacular masterpieces. A cast-iron entrance wrought by Guimard for the Metropolitain, the Paris subway, with lampposts like giant tendrils and grillwork twisting in audacious curves, will be on view. So will the ladies' lunchroom that Mackintosh designed for Glasgow's Ingram Street tearoom, complete with high, straight-back chairs, gleaming silver-and-white walls and a mural of the languid figures of women, created by Mackintosh's wife, Margaret Macdonald. Turin designer Agostino Lauro's double parlor for an Italian villa, with curved mirrors, hand-carved woodwork and the same green-gold floral-patterned silk moire adorning both the furniture and the walls, has been installed as well. On a much smaller scale, French jeweler Rene Lalique's *Dragonfly Woman*, a corsage ornament in the form of a nude woman with the lower body and diaphanous wings of a dragonfly, all crafted in gold, enamel and precious stones, is also on display.

Rene Lalique's *Dragonfly Woman* was exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition.

It is fitting that the Victoria and Albert mount an Art Nouveau show of such magnitude and quality. "In the 19th century, the Victoria and Albert, which was then known as the South Kensington Museum, was virtually the only real decorative art museum in the world," says the V&A's Paul Greenhalgh, curator of the exhibition and editor of the accompanying catalog. Many Art Nouveau artists, he says, came there to look at designs and gather ideas.

Although British Arts and Crafts designer Walter Crane created works such as this swan wallpaper (1875) that anticipated Art Nouveau, he railed against the style's decadence and hedonism.

The museum, in fact, purchased a large selection of the Art Nouveau works displayed at the 1900 Paris Exposition. When the museum exhibited them soon afterward, however, there was an outcry by detractors, some of them prestigious leaders of the British art establishment. The museum gave in and shipped all the pieces to a satellite venue in east London. When that building was transformed into the Victoria and Albert's Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, the works of Art Nouveau were arrayed alongside a trove of toys and dollhouses. It was not until the 1980s that the V&A recuperated the Paris Exposition purchases for its main building.

Art Nouveau owed much of its early popularity to marketing, and Siegfried Bing, a dealer in Paris, served as guru, merchant and public relations flack for the movement. Bing came from a German mercantile family that had imported French porcelain and glass for many years. After attending school in Hamburg, he joined the Paris branch of the family business and eventually embarked on his own in France. Bing found it "an astonishing anachronism" that so much of contemporary decoration was copied from previous centuries. Insisting that decorative arts deserved a standing as high as fine arts, he persuaded young painters to try their hands at textile and furniture design. He preached that a room should have a harmonious style and not look like an agglomeration of bric-a-brac and disparate furniture.

At first, Bing acted primarily as a merchant for artists. But finding that his shop had become a hodge-podge of unrelated items, he solved the problem by organizing his own workshops, becoming a partner in artistic creation by, as he put it, "having the articles made under my personal direction, and securing the assistance of such artists as seemed best disposed to carry out my ideas."

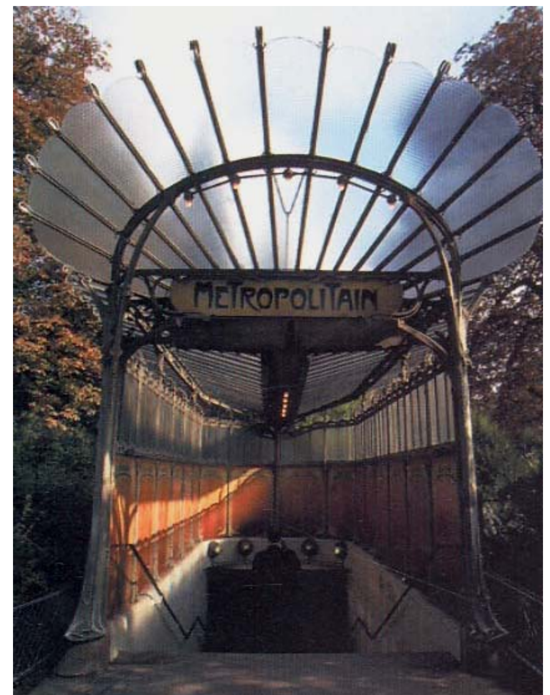
In a celebrated commission, Bing purchased designs from colorist painters such as Pierre Bonnard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec for Louis Comfort Tiffany to transform into stained-glass windows at his New York studios. Bing displayed these windows when he opened a new gallery, L'Art Nouveau, at 22 rue de Provence in Paris. He was so influential by then that the style swiftly assumed the mercantile name. Bing conceived of his enterprise as an international marketplace, but this concept upset some critics who accused him of hurting French culture and artisans by lavishing so much attention on foreigners like Tiffany and Belgian architect Henry van de Velde.

French novelist Edmond de Goncourt wrote in his journal, "Are we to be denationalized, conquered morally in a conquest worse than real war? ... No! This cannot be the new furniture of France! No! No!" Designer Charles Genuys admonished that "we cannot violate our Latin and Gaulish nature by capitulating to the Saxons."

Bing was stung by the accusations. Although born in Hamburg, he was a recipient of the French Legion of Honor and regarded himself as a French patriot. But he retreated in the face of the criticism. When the Bing pavilion opened at the Paris Exposition of 1900, it exhibited art almost entirely by French artists or foreign-born colleagues who had adopted France as their home.

Bing was not the only merchant specializing in the sale of Art Nouveau. His British counterpart was Arthur Lasenby Liberty, whose shop on Regent Street in London sold fabrics, silver, pewter, jewelry and furniture. Liberty's exports to Italy were so well-publicized that Art Nouveau was known there as the Stile Liberty, or Liberty Style.
For France, the architect and designer Hector Guimard epitomized Art Nouveau more than any other artist. His 141 Metro entrances, after all, graced the landscape of Paris. Even today, 86 still stand, all now classified as French historic monuments. His Castel Beranger, a large apartment building completed in 1898 when he was just 31, is an obligatory stop on the itinerary of any Art Nouveau aficionado who comes to Paris.

Guimard looked on nature as the model for his curves and twists and exuberant botanical forms. "Beauty appears to us in perpetual variety," he said. "Forms are engendered from movements which are never alike.... Let us bend before... the examples of the great architect of the universe." This idealization of nature led him into sinuous and sensuous forms, infused with femininity.



The dragonfly, a popular Art Nouveau motif, takes flight in Hector Guimard's entrance to the Prte Dauphine station of the Paris Metro.

Guimard attracted a good deal of notice when the Castel Beranger won a prize from the city of Paris for the best facade created that year. A self-promoter, he rented an apartment in the building and organized guided tours of the premises. He even published 24 postcards advertising what he called the "Guimard Style." The artist Paul Signac was also a tenant. Soon after he moved in, he wrote a friend, "Come soon, our blue staircase will amuse you."

Most architects proposed little stone buildings resembling railroad stations as entrances to the new subway system that opened in time for the 1900 Exposition. But Guimard's design of cast-iron gates and grilles—in myriad modular combinations—struck the fancy of officials looking for a modern motif. The Spanish Surrealist Salvador Dalí, who extolled Guimard long after Art Nouveau fell out of favor, insisted that "those divine entrances" led one to "descend into the region of the subconscious...."

Guimard, whose wife was American and Jewish, took refuge in New York before the outbreak of World War II and died there in relative obscurity in 1942. When an admirer tried in vain to prevent the destruction of a Guimard building in

Sevres in the late 1960s, the novelist Andre Malraux, President Charles de Gaulle's minister of culture, told him, "You like that stuff ?... Everyone to his own nasty taste." Despite Malraux's derision, a swelling movement of artists and intellectuals had already emerged determined to safeguard and restore the works and reputation of Guimard.

The career of Czech-born Alphonse Maria Mucha illustrates the range of the best Art Nouveau artists. Working for a Paris printer, he was the only illustrator available in the shop in 1894 when the great actress Sarah Bernhardt ordered a poster advertising her in the play *Gismonda*. That chance commission made him an instant celebrity. Bernhardt was so pleased with his design (**right**) that she signed him to a six-year contract to produce more posters for her. He would also design theatrical sets for her plays and jewelry for her to wear onstage.

News of the Bernhardt commission prompted others to seek him out, and Mucha was soon swamped with orders to create posters, lithographs, murals, magazine covers, book illustrations, theater programs, restaurant menus, carpets, fabrics, furniture and jewelry. Although Mucha's drawings of "the Divine Sarah" portrayed her as dignified, almost regal, he created erotic, exotic, heavy-lidded women with luxurious hair for his other commissions. In one poster, Mucha, anticipating modern advertising, hawked Job cigarette paper through a seductive woman with cascading hair that tangled below her waist like vines in a forest.

In 1900-1901, Mucha designed a shop on the rue Royale for the jeweler Georges Fouquet. The store, which was closed in 1923 and later reassembled in the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, is practically a primer of Art Nouveau, a fantasy of all the symbols of the style. A bronze frieze of a slightly draped woman with heavy jewelry dominates a facade that also displays ten stained-glass portraits of women. The interior features sculptures of peacocks, fish and nude women, curved furniture, floral designs and wallpaper patterned with strange insects.

The heyday for Art Nouveau came with the Paris Exposition of 1900. The fair, which attracted 48 million visitors and included exhibitions from 40 nations, stretched alongside both banks of the Seine from the Eiffel Tower to the new Alexandre III bridge. Art Nouveau works could be found throughout the pavilions. The lavish main entrance—the Porte Binet—incorporated many Art Nouveau themes. And so did the wonderful Pavillon Bleu restaurant on the Seine. Bing's own pavilion—L'Art Nouveau Bing—featured six rooms designed and decorated by three different artists. Some 35 Art Nouveau pieces from the 1900 fair, including important works by the master Paris jeweler Rene Lalique and Nancy furniture maker Louis Majorelle, will be featured in the exhibition at the National Gallery of Art.

Loie Fuller, an American dancer who starred at the Folies Bergere, also had her own pavilion, its Art Nouveau facade rippling with curves. Shimmering under the colored lights of electricity, a novel source of energy in those days, Fuller twirled her billowing, diaphanous robes to metamorphose herself into birds, butterflies, flowers and some less recognizable forms of Art Nouveau. A short video, played continuously at both the Victoria and Albert and the National Gallery of Art, shows her swooping like a bird and then accelerating into a tornado of curving motion. The celebrated dancer Isadora Duncan praised Fuller for dancing with all the "magic of Merlin." Artists were entranced by Fuller's movements and used her as a model for posters, sculpture and lamps.

The topaz-studded "Apparitions" brooch was designed by Eugene Samuel Grasset for Maison Vever Jewelers.

Klimt, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1903

Despite all the hoopla in Paris, Art Nouveau was hardly a French exclusive. Bing, in fact, credited Belgium, where architects Henry van de Velde and Victor Horta worked, as "the cradle of this species of art." Van de Velde championed the idea of creating harmonious rooms, while Horta changed the face of the new bourgeois neighborhoods of Brussels. Although conservative King Leopold II refused to commission Horta for any public works, rich Belgians sought him as architect for their private homes.

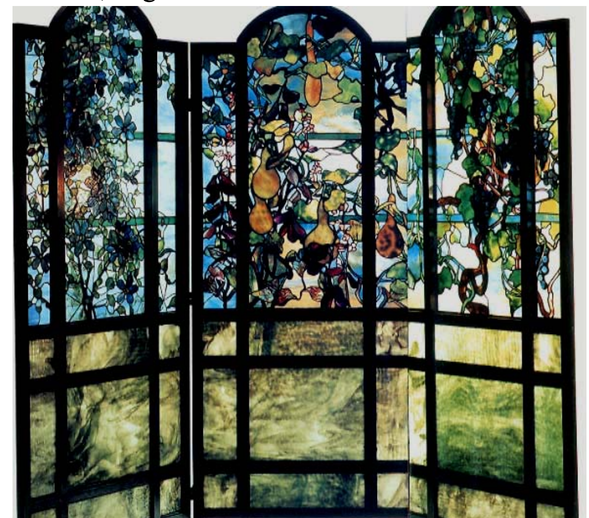
The Art Nouveau phenomenon spread across Europe and spanned the Atlantic as artists and craftsmen exchanged ideas and techniques through travel, international expositions and a growing number of art magazines. Moreover, the urge to break with the past, to feel new, to feel modern, struck artists everywhere from Helsinki to Chicago.

The new look took on different shapes in different cities. In Barcelona, the buildings of Antoni Gaudí were so ornate and curvaceous that they seemed to pulse with life. In Glasgow, however, the Art Nouveau of Charles Rennie Mackintosh (Smithsonian, January 1997) was far more subtle, his wonderful buildings and furniture made exciting by soft touches of curve, color and asymmetry.

Sometimes the style took different directions even in the same city. In Vienna, Gustav Klimt was surely the most decorative of Art Nouveau painters, his portraits of femmes fatales bathed in a mosaic of gold and brilliant color. Yet designer Josef Hoffmann, allied with Klimt, designed silver products so geometric and functional that their decoration seems secondary.

Although Chicago architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright worked in the style, the most prominent Art Nouveau personage in the United States was Louis Comfort Tiffany, son of jeweler Charles Lewis Tiffany, who founded New York's renowned Tiffany & Co. Louis was a painter, decorator and designer who profited from his father's connections and from the appetite of the new, wealthy American industrial elite for the latest fashions in arts and crafts. As a young man, he and his associates received commissions to decorate the Connecticut home of Mark Twain and the Red and Blue rooms of the White House under President Chester A. Arthur. Louis Tiffany was best known, however, as the creator of exquisite glass. Like many of his European cohorts, he loved lavish color, admired Middle Eastern and other exotic ceramics, and pored over books about insects and flowers in his search for subjects for design. He developed new methods for mixing an amazing variety of colors and for rendering glass iridescent. "I have reached the point," he said, "where it is possible to produce any color and any luster that may be required."

Tiffany became as much an entrepreneur as an artist, employing scores in his workshops on Long Island. He was known as a high-handed boss who tolerated no lapses in the quality of the work from his crews of specialists and apprentices. The host of Tiffany pieces in the current exhibition includes what was regarded as his masterpiece at the 1900 Paris Exposition—a tri-panel glass screen decorated in an intense, color-rich tangle of vines, vegetables and fruit.

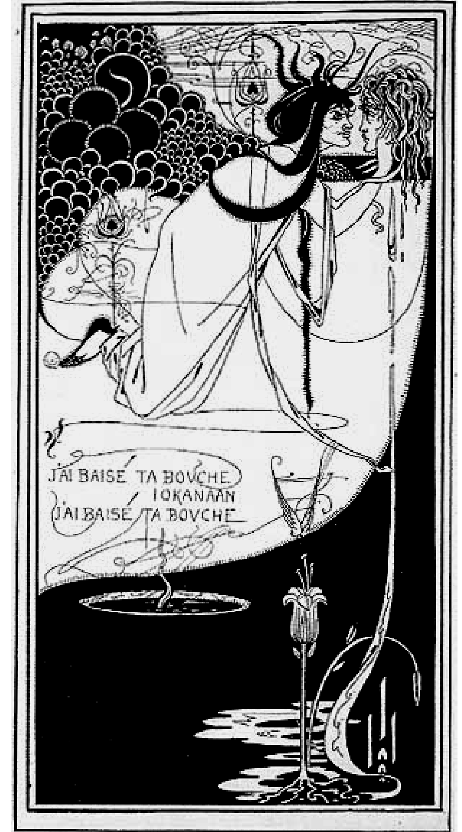


An eloquent expression of the Art Nouveau style, this c. 1900 leaded-glass folding screen, with its asymmetrical organic motifs, was created by renowned artist Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Art Nouveau emerged at a time when writers, following new neurological theory, believed that the tensions of modern urban life weakened the body but sharpened the senses. This belief spawned a movement of writers with a penchant for describing intense sensitivity. Members of the movement became known as the decadents. A French novel, *A Rebours (Against Nature)* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, the story of an aesthete searching for exotic pleasures, was hailed as "the breviary" of the decadent movement. The English writer Oscar Wilde, closely allied to Art Nouveau, used the Huysmans novel as a device in the plot of his own decadent novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The heightened sensitivity of the decadents led their literary movement close to Art Nouveau and its sensual imagery.

One aspect of that closeness was the obsession of many writers and artists with female sexuality. An extraordinary number of erotic inkwells, candlesticks, lamps and figurines—most small and inexpensive—entered middle-class homes as Art Nouveau. The zeal of the artists sometimes went too far. In 1896 the furniture maker Rupert Carabin produced a wooden chair that features the sculpture of a trussed-up nude woman clinging to its back.

This obsession led to anxiety about *femmes fatales*—evil, usually exotic women who manipulated their charms to destroy men. Salome—the princess famed for her seductive dancing and for ordering the decapitation of John the Baptist—was one of the most popular. British artist Aubrey Beardsley, who was reputed to own a collection of the "finest and most explicitly erotic Japanese prints in London," created a series of illustrations based on Oscar Wilde's French dramatization of the story. One panel, a supreme achievement of Art Nouveau design, with tensile lines and mannered arabesques, shows a determined Salome with serpentine hair clutching the head of John the Baptist while mocking him with the boast that she has just kissed him on the mouth.



Deemed the first fully mature Art Nouveau image, Aubrey Beardsley's 1893 illustration inspired by Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*.

After the first decade of the 20th century, Art Nouveau began to experience a loss of favor. By 1914 it was moribund, barely selling at all. "The speed with which it died is amazing," says exhibition curator Greenhalgh. A growing uneasiness over the association with decadence and erotica was a factor in the decline. But, perhaps more important, the style was also hurt by the intensification of nationalist feelings that tended to deride Art Nouveau as too international, by a growing distaste for conspicuous consumption, by a nascent preference for geometric abstraction over nature in design, and by a reaction against Art Nouveau's love of decoration.

Adolf Loos, an influential Vienna architect, won numerous converts to his plea for purity. "The man of our time who daubs the walls with erotic symbols to satisfy an inner urge is a criminal or a degenerate," he wrote in 1908. "The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use."

All in all, Art Nouveau was simply not modern enough. As a teenager, Picasso spent a good deal of his time at Els Quatre Gats, the tavern that served as a center of Art Nouveau in Barcelona. He listened to the advice of the city's leading Catalan painters and tried to follow their style. But in 1900, at the age of 19, he turned his back on Els Quatre Gats and left for Paris to create what he would regard as true modern art.

For Picasso and other pioneers of 20th-century art, Art Nouveau had not broken far enough from the styles of the 19th century. The views of such modernists prevailed during the next few decades. But that ideological battle need not concern us anymore. No matter where it stands in art history, Art Nouveau a hundred years later strikes us as pleasing, often refreshing, sometimes worthy of awe and always kind of fun.

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