

## Synopsis

Art Nouveau was a movement that swept through the decorative arts and architecture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Generating enthusiasts throughout Europe and beyond, the movement issued in a wide variety of styles, and, consequently, it is known by various names, such as the Glasgow Style, or, in the German-speaking world, *Jugendstil*. Art Nouveau was aimed at modernizing design, seeking to escape the eclectic historical styles that had previously been popular. Artists drew inspiration from both organic and geometric forms, evolving elegant designs that united flowing, natural forms with more angular contours. The movement was committed to abolishing the traditional hierarchy of the arts, which viewed so-called liberal arts, such as painting and sculpture, as superior to craft-based decorative arts, and ultimately it had far more influence on the latter. The style went out of fashion after it gave way to Art Deco in the 1920s, but it experienced a popular revival in the 1960s, and it is now seen as an important predecessor of modernism.

## Key Ideas

- The desire to abandon the historical styles of the 19th century was an important impetus behind Art Nouveau and one that establishes the movement's modernism. Industrial production

was, at that point, widespread, and yet the decorative arts were increasingly dominated by poorly made objects imitating earlier periods. The practitioners of Art Nouveau sought to revive good workmanship, raise the status of craft, and produce genuinely modern design.

- The academic system, which dominated art education from the 17th to the 19th century, underpinned the widespread belief that media such as painting and sculpture were superior to crafts such as furniture design and silver-smithing. The consequence, many believed, was the neglect of good craftsmanship. Art Nouveau artists sought to overturn that belief, aspiring instead to "total works of the arts," the infamous *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that inspired buildings and interiors in which every element partook of the same visual vocabulary.
- Many Art Nouveau designers felt that 19th century design had been excessively ornamental, and in wishing to avoid what they perceived as frivolous decoration, they evolved a belief that the function of an object should dictate its form. This theory had its roots in contemporary revivals of the gothic style, and in practice it was a somewhat flexible ethos, yet it would be an important part of the style's legacy to later movements such as modernism and the Bauhaus.

## Beginnings

Art Nouveau (the "new art") was a widely influential but relatively short-lived movement that emerged in the final decade of the 19th century and was already beginning to decline a decade later. This movement - less a collective one than a disparate group of visual artists, designers and architects spread throughout Europe was aimed at creating styles of design more appropriate to the modern age, and it was characterized by organic, flowing lines- forms resembling the stems and blossoms of plants - as well as geometric forms such as squares and rectangles.

The advent of Art Nouveau can be traced to two distinct influences: the first was the introduction, around 1880, of the **Arts and Crafts**

movement, led by the English designer William Morris. This movement, much like Art Nouveau, was a reaction against the cluttered designs and compositions of Victorian-era decorative art. The second was the current vogue for Japanese art, particularly wood-block prints, that swept up many European artists in the 1880s and 90s, including the likes of Gustav Klimt, Emile Galle and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Japanese wood-block prints contained floral and bulbous forms, and "whiplash" curves, all key elements of what would eventually become Art Nouveau.

It is difficult to pinpoint the first work(s) of art that officially launched Art Nouveau. Some argue that the patterned, flowing lines and floral backgrounds found in the paintings of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin represent Art Nouveau's birth, or perhaps even the decorative lithographs of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, such as *La Goule at the Moulin Rouge* (1891). But most point to the origins in the decorative arts, and in particular to a book jacket by English architect and designer Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo for the 1883 volume *Wren's City Churches*. The design depicts serpentine stalks of flowers coalescing into one large, whiplashed stalk at the bottom of the page, clearly reminiscent of Japanese-style wood-block prints.

## Concepts and Styles

Although Art Nouveau has become the most commonly used name for the movement, its wide popularity throughout Western and Central Europe meant that it went by several different titles. The most well-known of these was *Jugendstil* (Youth Style), by which the styles was known in German-speaking countries. Meanwhile in Vienna - home to Gustav Klimt, Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffmann and the other founders of the Vienna Secession - it was known as *Sezessionsstil* (Secession Style). It was also known as *Modernismo* in Spain and *stile Liberty* in Italy (after Arthur Liberty's fabric shop in London, which helped popularize the style). It also went by some more derogatory names: *Style Nouille* (noodle style) in France, *Paling Stijl* (eel style) in Belgium, and *Bandwurmstil* (tapeworm style) in Germany, all of which made playful reference to Art Nouveau's tendency to employ sinuous and flowing lines.

Art Nouveau's ubiquity in the late 19th century must be explained in

part by many artists' use of popular and easily reproduced forms such as graphic art. In Germany, *Jugendstil* artists like Peter Behrens and Hermann Obrist, among many others, had their work printed on book covers and exhibition catalogs, magazine advertisements and playbills. But this trend was by no means limited to Germany. The English illustrator **Aubrey Beardsley** perhaps the most controversial Art Nouveau figure due to his combination of the erotic and macabre created a number of posters in his brief career that employed graceful and rhythmic lines. Beardsley's highly decorative prints, such as *The Peacock Skirt* (1894), were both decadent and simple, and represent the most direct link we can identify between Art Nouveau and Japonisme.

## **The Architecture of Europe**

In addition to the graphic and visual arts, any serious discussion of Art Nouveau must consider architecture and the vast influence this had on European culture. In urban hubs such as Paris, Prague and Vienna, and even in Eastern European cities like Riga, Budapest, and Sveded, Hungary, Art Nouveau-inspired architecture prevailed on a grand scale, in both size and appearance. Turn-of-the-century buildings, like **The Museum of Applied Arts** in Budapest and the **Secession Building** in Vienna, are prime examples of Art Nouveau's decorative and symmetrical architectural aesthetic. The arrival in the same period of urban improvements such as subway lines also provided an important outlook for Art Nouveau designers. Hector Guimard's designs for entrances to the Paris subway (c.1900) are particularly fondly remembered examples of the style.

## **The Vienna Secession**

No other group of artists did more to popularize and spread the Art Nouveau style than the Vienna Secessionists, the collective of visual artists, decorators, sculptors, architects and designers, who first banded together in 1897 to promote their own work and organize exhibitions that resisted the conservatism that still prevailed in so many of Europe's traditional art academies. Arguably the most prolific and influential of the secessionists was painter Gustav Klimt, creator of such definitive examples of early modernism as *Hope II* and *The Kiss* (both 1907-08). The elaborate decorations in his paintings, including gold and silver

leaf, and rhythmical abstractions, make them some of the most widely revered examples of the style.

## Later Developments

Despite its popularity - both in terms of its geographical spread and its influence on the creation of so many media - Art Nouveau enjoyed very few moments during its heyday when all artistic elements came together to be recognized as a coherent whole. One exception was the 1900 World's Fair in Paris (*Exposition Universelle*), where the Art Nouveau style was present in all its forms. Of particular note was the construction and opening of the Grand Palais in 1900, a building which, although in the **Beaux Arts** tradition, contained an interior glass dome that clearly adopted the Art Nouveau decorative style. Other exhibitions took place throughout the continent during this time, but none could claim to be celebrating Art Nouveau in such a comprehensive manner as had the Paris Expo.

If Art Nouveau quickly stormed Europe in the late 19th century, artists, designers and architects abandoned it just as quickly in the first decade of the 20th century. Although the movement had made the doctrine that "form should follow function" central to their ethos, some designers tended to be lavish in their use of decoration, and the style began to be criticized for being overly elaborate. In a sense, as the style matured, it started to revert to the very habits it had scorned, and a growing number of opponents began to charge that rather than renewing design, it had merely swapped the old for the superficially new.

*Original content written by **Justin Wolf***

### Key Artists:



#### **Gustav Klimt**

Austrian painter Gustav Klimt was the most renowned advocator of Art Nouveau in Vienna, and is remembered as one of the greatest decorative painters of the twentieth century. He also produced one of the century's most significant bodies of erotic art.



### **Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo**

Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo was a late-19th and early-20th-century English architect, furniture maker and interior designer whose work was influential to the Arts & Crafts Movement. Mackmurdo enjoyed success at an early age, opening his own architecture practice in London at age 28, and was involved in the craft guild The Century Guild of Artist, which encouraged members to participate in the production as well as design of homes, furnishings and other projects.



### **Arthur Liberty**

Sir Arthur Lasenby Liberty was an English merchant and the founder of London's Liberty & Co, a store that sold ornaments, fabrics and various art objects from the Far East. Liberty's store became a popular destination for artists and designers working in the Art Nouveau style during the turn of the 20th century. In fact, Liberty & Co's reputation grew to the point where in some circles, particularly among Italian practitioners of the style, Art Nouveau became known as Stile Liberty.



### **Alphonse Mucha**

Alphonse Mucha was a Czech painter, designer and illustrator commonly associated with the Art Nouveau movement. Although largely forgotten in the annals of decorative art, Mucha is perhaps best known for his outspoken Slavic nationalism, which greatly informed his work. In particular, Mucha's The Slav Epic, a series of 20 large paintings depicting the history of Czech and Slav peoples, survives as the artist's greatest masterpiece



### **Josef Hoffmann**

Josef Hoffmann was an Austrian architect, designer, and one of the founders of Wiener Werkstatte, a production company of visual artists. Arguably Hoffmann's most famous work was his Art Deco Palais Stoclet, a private home in Brussels, for which Gustav Klimt provided some of the wall decorations.



### **Otto Wagner**

Otto Wagner was an Austrian architect and urban planner. His approach is considered part of the Art Nouveau, or Jugendstil, style of architecture, characterized by clean lines and ornate decoration. In 1897 Wagner became one of the founding members of the Vienna Secession.



### **Adolf Loos**

Adolf Loos was a 19th and 20th-century Czech-born Austrian architect, and one of the key promoters and designers of turn-of-the-century modern European architecture. Loos' designs represented a unique blend of classical Baroque-style ornamentation and modern Art Nouveau aesthetics.



### **Antoni Gaudi**

Antoni Gaudí was a Spanish Catalan architect, and the most popular representative of the Catalan Modernista movement, which combined elements of Art Nouveau, Japonisme, Gothic design, and geometric forms. Gaudí's design style has been referred to as "global," indicating a profound attention to every detail of his work, from a building's structure and placement down to its smallest decorative details. Gaudí's masterpiece is considered to be the Sagrada Família, a distinctly modern Roman Catholic church in Barcelona.



### **Louis Comfort Tiffany**

Louis Comfort Tiffany was an American glass designer, painter and decorative artist, and undoubtedly the American most associated with the Art Nouveau movement. Tiffany's hand-made glass designs, which used opalescent glass in various colors to create a uniquely modern style of stained glass, are very much synonymous with the aesthetic luxury and opulence of the era. Tiffany's father, Charles Lewis Tiffany, was the founder of Tiffany & Co jewelry, and Tiffany himself was the company's first design director.



### **Aubrey Beardsley**

Aubrey Beardsley was a 19th-century English illustrator and author. Beardsley's preferred medium was black ink, which he used to create highly erotic,

grotesque and decadent drawings, much in the style of Japanese woodcuts. Beardsley's work was part of the Aesthetic movement, and was highly influential to the subsequent Art Nouveau movement of the early 20th century.



### **Koloman Moser**

Koloman Moser was an Austrian painter, designer graphic artist, and a co-founder of both the Vienna Secession and Wiener Werkstatte. In addition to designing many book covers and the magazine for the Secession, Moser was an incredibly versatile designer who worked with jewelry, tapestries, blown and stained glass, ceramics and much more.



### **Joseph Maria Olbrich**

Joseph Maria Olbrich was an Austrian architect and one of the founders of the Vienna Secession. In 1897 Olbrich designed and built Vienna's Secession Building, which housed all of the group's exhibitions. In his later years Olbrich branched out and began designing furniture, pottery and musical instruments



### **Franz Matsch**

Franz Matsch was a Viennese painter and sculptor, and for a time, was one of Gustav Klimt's closest collaborators during turn-of-the-century Austria. Along with the Klimt brothers Gustav and Ernst, Matsch was one of the leading ceiling painters and architectural decorators working in and around Vienna's Ringstrasse.



### **Charles Rennie Mackintosh**

Charles Rennie Mackintosh was an Scottish architect, designer, sculptor and decorative artist, associated with the Arts & Crafts Movement, but is best known as the United Kingdom's greatest proponent of Art Nouveau. However, unlike many of his Art Nouveau contemporaries in the field of architecture, Mackintosh preferred simple design and economy of form as opposed to ornate decoration. Mackintosh was also a founding member of the Glasgow School movement and the so-called "Glasgow style" of architecture.



## Rene Lalique

Rene Lalique was a French industrial and decorative designer who is associated with both the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements of the late-19th and early 20th centuries. Known primarily as a glass maker, Lalique created chandeliers, jewelry, vases, perfume bottle, clocks and automobile hood ornaments, among other decorative objects. In addition to designing works for jewelers such as Cartier and Boucheron, Lalique is perhaps best known for designing lighted glass walls and other objects for the "grand salon" of the SS Normandie steamship.

## Major Works:

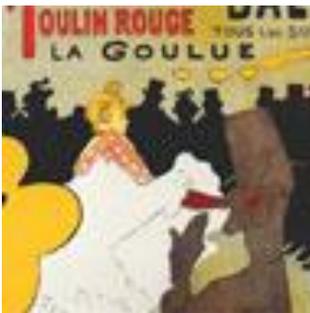


**Artist:** Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo

**Title:** Cover design for "Wren's City Churches" (1883)

**Materials:** Woodcut on handmade paper

**Description:** Mackmurdo's woodcut print is an example of the influence of English design, and by extension the Arts and Crafts movement, on Art Nouveau. In particular, Mackmurdo's use of positive and negative space, his abstract-cum-naturalistic forms, and the trademark "whiplash" curves, are all characteristic of the visual and decorative energy that would eventually define Art Nouveau. However, despite Mackmurdo's print being commonly referred to as the very first work of Art Nouveau, its obvious differences with later works still make it a key precursor rather than definitive example of the movement's style.



**Artist:** Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

**Title:** La Goulue at the Moulin Rouge (1891)

**Materials:** Lithograph

**Collection:** Philadelphia Museum of Art

**Description:** Toulouse-Lautrec is not typically associated with the vast number of Art Nouveau artists, but some of his later work deserves consideration as an example of the movement's output. His late lithographic posters in particular bear comparison to the Japanese prints that so widely influenced Art Nouveau. *La Goulue at the Moulin Rouge* takes the flourish and messiness of a French can-can dancer's dress and breaks it down to a few simple, rhythmic lines. The way in which the poster sacrifices spatial depth to create a bold impression of linear surface design is also typical of the movement.



**Artist:** Aubrey Beardsley

**Title:** The Peacock Skirt (1894)

**Materials:** Ink illustration

**Description:** Beardsley's *The Peacock Skirt*, an illustration made for Oscar Wilde's 1892 play *Salome*, is comparatively polite in comparison with some of the illustrator's more erotic, borderline pornographic, works. It is a fine example of how many artists influenced by Art Nouveau laid great emphasis on surface design, often abstracting their figures to produce the fashionable sinuous lines so characteristic of the style. One might also take it as an example of how the formal vocabulary of the style could be used with exuberant excess, a quality that would later attract criticism. The influence of Japonisme on Art Nouveau is also evident in Beardsley's work. But this illustration might also be taken as an example of the contemporaneous Aesthetic movement, and in that respect it demonstrates how Art Nouveau overlapped and interacted with various other period styles.



**Artist:** Odon Lechner and Gyula Partos

**Title:** The Museum of Applied Arts (1893-96)

**Collection:** Budapest, Hungary

**Description:** The Museum of Applied Arts is characteristic of both the Art Nouveau architectural style (precise lines, ornate decorations and grand scale) and the architectural style popularized by the Hungarian Odon Lechner, who was known for infusing his designs with elements drawn from Hungarian folk art. Lechner was an early representative of the Hungarian Secession, a fringe movement of the Vienna Secession,

and his late-19th and turn-of-the-century work can be found throughout Budapest and other eastern European cities.



**Artist:** Henri Delagne, Albert Louvet, Albert Thomas and Charles Girault

**Title:** Interior of dome of the Grand Palais, Paris (1897-1900)

**Collection:** Paris, France

**Description:** The Grand Palais, like many Parisian buildings erected during that time, is a wonderful example of modern architecture finding its style. While it is in some respects typical of older, Beaux Arts design, the architects' use of reinforced concrete and steel framing, and the glass vault ceiling in particular, are all examples of attempts to find modern solutions to old problems. The dome ceiling itself - reinforced with steel that both supports and complements it visually - resembles a grandiose flower in bloom.



**Artist:** Gustav Klimt

**Title:** Hope II (1907-08)

**Materials:** Oil and gold leaf on canvas

**Collection:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Description:** With the exception of Picasso, no other modern artist could be said to have produced so many definitive early-century works of art as Gustav Klimt. Known primarily for his occasionally somber, occasionally ecstatic, but always visually luscious paintings of women, Klimt's *Hope II* is an example of the artist's unique combination of the figurative, the decorative and the abstract. Although commonly associated with Art Nouveau, Klimt's paintings could very well represent the movement's demise. Art Nouveau's influence is evident in *Hope II* and similar works, but so is the overelaboration that, to many critics, seemed like a betrayal of the movement's original desire to match a work's forms to its function.



**Artist:** Hector Guimard

**Title:** Entrance Gate to Paris Subway Station (1900)

**Materials:** Painted cast iron, glazed lava, and glass

**Collection:** The Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Description:** When Hector Guimard was commissioned to design these famous subway station gates, Paris was only the second city in the world (after London) to have constructed an underground railway. Guimard's design answered the desire to celebrate and promote this new infrastructure with a bold structure that would be clearly visible on the Paris streetscape. The gate utilizes the sinuous, organic forms that are so typical of the Art Nouveau style, yet while it appears at first to be a single component, it is in fact made up of several parts that could be easily mass produced in Paris. In effect, Guimard had concealed an aspect of the object's modernity beneath its soft forms, a strategy that is symptomatic of Art Nouveau's ambivalent attitude to the modern age. Ironically, perhaps, Guimard's design was instrumental in popularizing Art Nouveau, and making the style an important early stage in the evolution of modernist design.



**Artist:** Victor Horta

**Title:** Hotel Tassel (1893-4)

**Collection:** Brussels, Belgium

**Description:** Victor Horta's reputation as one of the foremost influences on Art Nouveau is based in part on the *Hotel Tassel*, a townhouse he built for the scientist Emile Tassel. Most distinctive is its decoration, whose curvy forms avoid the references to historical styles that has been so prevalent throughout most of the 19th century. But Horta also introduced innovations in the plan, effectively splitting the building down the center and using modern materials to create a steel and glass-covered ceiling that let light down into stairs and landings which link the rooms together. The *Hotel* exemplifies the Art Nouveau desire for a total approach to design, since Horta designed every element of it, from the mosaic flooring to the stained glass. As a feat of creation, it is stunningly successful, though its rich embellishment made it less useful as a template for popular design. Nevertheless, it is thought to have been an important influence on the French designer Hector Guimard. In 2000, along with three other Brussels townhouses designed by Horta, the *Hotel Tassel* was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.