CDf III art nouveau international congress
BARCELONA 27-30 JUNE 2018

Les Fleurs du Mal: Style in a Troubled Age

Paul Greenhalgh

Introduction

This paper is about Art Nouveau as a revolt. I want to look at a certain aspect of that revolt, which, I will claim, gave Art Nouveau much of its raw energy, but was also responsible for the rapid decline of the style, and the acrimony leveled at it as it slid, and afterwards. At the end of the paper, I will focus briefly on Art Nouveau ceramic, as this is an area functioning internationally, which illustrates the major points being made.

Art Nouveau is a style. It isn't a movement. Rather, it is a collection of movements, which accumulate into a style. And in 1890, the term 'style' meant something very particular, and really quite different from how we understand it in our own times. For British, French, and German thinkers such as Owen Jones, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, and Alois Riegl, style implied the visual condition of a whole society; it was not only to do with appearances, but also with the meaning of those appearances. Since the fin de siècle, we have expanded the definition of 'style' exponentially. So much so, that we might go as far as to say that social, economic, and technological conditions have changed so much, that in terms of how it was understood at the fin de siècle, style no longer exists in contemporary society.[1]

This largely explains why, when Art Nouveau designers and patrons talked about style, and the need for its renewal, there was often a sense of political anger, aggression and defensiveness: they thought they were discussing the condition of civilisation, not simply how things look, or what good taste might be. Siegfried Bing, for example, the brilliant entrepreneur operating out of Paris, and master propagandist for Art Nouveau, developed a vocabulary that was virtually violent:

[1] See Greenhalgh, *Postscript: the end of style?* In Adamson and Pavitt (Eds), *Postmodernism: style and subversion 1970-1990*, 2011, London, V&A Museum.

> The title *L'Art Nouveau* designated a field lying outside of the narrow boundaries within which, beneath the pressure of a time-honoured slavery, a class of degenerate products was approaching extinction. It designated a free soil upon which any one could build according to his own desires. Therefore, there was no preconceived idea, no restraint as to the form of expression. But there was, nevertheless, a common idea: (…) the true bond between the innovators resided in the hatred of stagnation… an energetic protest against the hiatus which, for an entire century, had suspended animation in that branch of art…

It is an aggressive assault. For him, the "time-honoured slavery" of historicism[2], implied a far deeper social collapse, and a need for renewal. For him, Art Nouveau:

> ...was necessary to urge forward in a manner conformable to all other branches of contemporaneous aesthetics, in a manner adequate to our form of society and our actual needs. In a word, we were forced to subordinate the general character of our environment to all the conditions of modern life.[3]

Style was a signifier of civilisation, and previous design apparently had a lot to answer for, not least, in Bing's view, "slavery, degeneration, extinction, and stagnation".[4] Moreover, Bing perceived that architecture and the decorative arts were indeed 'art' with a capital 'A' – a controversial assertion in itself – and that art was the key to the improvement of modern life. He felt that the Art Nouveau designers were "forced to subordinate the general character of our environment to all the conditions of modern life."[5] Art Nouveau signified a rejection of the past, and was coupled to an intense embracing of everything understood to represent the new. He was a shrewd dealer, entrepreneur, and businessman, but he also perceived the new style to be a form of revolt against the status quo of existing Western society.

[2] Siegfried Bing, *The Craftsman* October 1903, p.3.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid
[5] Ibid

Which brings me to my core theme for today. Taken as a whole, Art Nouveau represents a radical shift in social outlook that is tantamount to a call for wide-sweeping cultural change. Essentially, if style was about civilisation, then clearly, some Art Nouveau designers were calling for significant change not simply in art, but in society. It is no coincidence, then, that the style provoked a negative response from a range of social commentators, given that underneath the organic forms and whiplash lines, a significant proportion of the designers and apologists for the style had an agenda for change of one kind or another.

It is important to remember that the spirit for change wasn't a single, orchestrated movement with an agenda and a political manifesto. Rather, the style represented an amorphous, multi-faceted, not wholly articulated sense of revolt. Taken as a whole, Art Nouveau cannot be characterised in the manner of a political party or revolutionary council. It was an amalgam of like-minded dispositions, scattered across Europe, connected principally by exhibitions and magazines. In most of the movements, there was a local agenda as well as an international one.

1. The nature of revolt

More accurately, the style embodies a number of inter-related revolts. There are essentially three at work across the European movements:

- *Utopian socialist revolt*
- *Generational revolt*
- *Psycho-sexual revolt*

Utopian revolt: The English Arts and Crafts Movement, and thinkers like William Morris, had been promoting the idea of a socialist revolution since the early 1880s. Essentially, Morris understood design and architecture to be connected to material prosperity, and the quality of life of the masses. He wanted no less than a Marxist revolution in order to address the consequences of neo-liberal capitalist economics. Aspects of this vision, often articulated more generally, can be found in across the various Art Nouveau movements. It is often expressed in terms of anti-technology, and anti-machine production. Alternatively, it is expressed through the desire to improve and transform the urban environment. Perhaps Henri

van de Velde was the most articulate expresser of utopian design. It is a clear presence in the thought of Hector Guimard, August Endell, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, Louis Sullivan, and the young Frank Lloyd Wright. The broad utopian vision is clearly there also among the Catalonian Modernista designers. The utopian vision survived, and was by 1920 absolutely central to the intellectual formation of several of the Modern Movements, including Purism, and the Bauhaus.

Generational revolt: It is no coincidence that a number of the 'named' movements within the Art Nouveau style are identified with the rejection of what was understood to be establishment art: 'new', 'youth', and 'breakaway' all imply generational shift. With a number of notable exceptions, including Gaudí, Gallé, and Tiffany, if we take any one year from the 18 that the style was a presence in Europe, 1893-1911, a large number of the practitioners were younger than thirty when they engaged with the style. Across the range of avant-garde practice, in fact, the key players were usually in their mid-twenties. They were often also romantic, bohemian, extrovert, and ambitious beyond the confines of the design industry. An interesting parallel would be the 1960s, when a considerable part of the political and cultural energy was to do with the rejection of a previous generation. Indeed, this partly explains the revival of interest in Art Nouveau during the 1960s. Perhaps we are once again in the throes of a generational revolt, as today's youth increasingly rejects the existing political, economic and cultural status quo.

Psycho-sexual revolt. Broadly speaking, the period saw a greater questioning of the nature of human consciousness since the early Enlightenment. This brought with it a questioning of orthodox religion, and accepted sexual identities, behaviours and practices, in a rejection of lifestyle as exemplified by the predominant neo-liberal, imperial vision of society. The supernatural, the mythological, the psychiatric, and the sexual intertwined, in a radical reappraisal of mental life. It was the period in which psychology and anthropology were first fully developed as disciplines. Havelock Ellis published *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* in 1897, and Sigmund Freud published *Interpretation of Dreams* in 1899. While such works in themselves had little immediate impact on Art Nouveau, or any other artistic movement, they are evocative of the age, in which curiosity around the workings of the mind, and particularly

sexuality, came to the fore. A generation later, Freud's work was positioned as being absolutely central by the Surrealists.

What we would now term LGBT issues came to the fore, as urban social life became more complex and multi-layered. The Symbolist and Decadent movements were both associated with such alternative lifestyles, as was, in due course, the Aesthetic Movement. The illustrations for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, by Aubrey Beardsley, powerfully conveyed a sense of decadent and complex sexuality. The *Salome* prints are considered to be among the first wholly pure works of Art Nouveau. Aspects of Art Nouveau, then, were widely understood to be part of the sexual liberation that conservative Europe loathed. Famously, the Oscar Wilde trial in 1895 threw a great deal of light onto gay life, and was undoubtedly a factor in the rejection of Art Nouveau in England.

Vital in this was the steady rise, albeit faltering and uneven, of feminism, as expressed in various forms across Europe. A number of countries, most notably Britain and the USA, saw powerful suffrage movements come to the fore. More generally, the changing shape of Western economies saw the steady rise and consolidation of women's employment as a core element in middle class economics. Women increasingly positioned themselves at the heart of what was normatively considered the male preserve: professional employment and wage-earning. Seminal historian Eric Hobsbawm tells us that "Whatever the complexities of the process, there is no doubt about the striking change in the position and aspiration of women, at all events in the middle classes, during the decades before 1914".[6]

Gender is a complex and core issue in Art Nouveau design. Without doubt, there is a considerable amount of misogyny in depictions of woman within the canon of Art Nouveau. This was a presence throughout visual culture in the period. What can also be detected, however, is a significant increase in the number of women practitioners internationally, and especially in the USA, and depictions that give us a far more confident, self-possessed vision of women. Art Nouveau woman, as it were, succeeded Pre-Raphaelite woman. The similarities are clear, in that Pre-Raphaelitism influences the later vision, and they both have

[6] Eric Hobsbawm, *The age of empire 1875-1914*, 1987, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, p.201

Symbolist lineage. But the differences are also very evident. Art Nouveau woman is sexually confident, coquettish, and is anything but passive. She has the sense of a middle-class woman out to make a living. Pre-Raphaelite woman, by contrast, is a passive icon: untouchable, but disempowered.

Art Nouveau woman signifies social change. Particularly striking is the increased function of women within the economy, which in due course, changed their cultural presence and profile. Seminal historian Eric Hobsbawm tells us that:

> Both working and middle class women saw their position begin to change quite substantially for economic reasons in these decades... The most striking change... was the rise of occupations which are now primarily feminine: employment in shops and offices. Female shop assistants in Germany rose from 32,000 in 1882... to 172,000 in 1907... In Britain central and local government employed 7000 women in 1881 but 76,000 in 1911; the number of 'commercial and business clerks' had risen from 6000 to 146,000.[7]

Female education also speedily increased through the period. This inevitably led to a steady rise in the public presence of the confident, professional woman. In some countries, and in some disciplines within the visual arts, it also led to a rapid rise in the number of front-rank women practitioners. The theatre was one such area; ceramic was another. Particularly striking, was the rise of American women practitioners across the arts.

2. Decadence, and Les Fleurs du Mal

The title of this paper, and of a section of this conference, obviously makes reference to the seminal collection of poems by the great French poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire. *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Flowers of evil) was collected and published in 1857. Baudelaire himself had a tragically short life (1821-1867) and was dead decades before there was any hint that his own poetic vision might impact design and architecture. But it did. Symbolism, a generic, open-ended movement, that emerged in France, first in poetry, owed much to Baudelaire: *Les*

[7] Ibid p.200

Fleurs du Mal set an agenda for the succeeding generation. The wilful mixture of the physical and metaphysical in these poems, often triggered by sexual desire, and the complications it evokes, and exacerbated by an obsessive interest in metamorphosis - the fusion of human and animal - could have been a manifesto for the dangerous end of Art Nouveau practice. The poems make a direct connection between urban life and the mystery of sexuality, between the cityscape, mythology, and the dream.

Principally, we would say that Baudelaire's contribution was in his ability to start with *the real* - the crushing, banal, sordid, actuality of life (and love) in the city - and to push it into the realms of dream and myth, without ever leaving reality behind. Like the best Art Nouveau practice, his work isn't in the least escapist. It isn't to do with fantasy. Rather, it takes the reality of the physical world he found all around him, and carries it into another, more intense reality. The streets of Brussels, Paris, Riga show us that the poetics of Symbolism impacted modern architecture:

> Eyes fixed on mine with speculative glare
> of a half-tamed tiger, she kept altering poses
> and the incorporation of candor into lust
> gave new charms to her metamorphoses;
>
> calmly I watched, with a certain detachment at first
> as the swanlike arms uncoiled, and then the legs,
> as the sleek thighs shifting, shiny as oil,
> the belly, the breasts – that fruit on my vine…[8]

In 1886 the Symbolist Manifesto, written by poet Jean Moréas, was published in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*. By the 1890s, Symbolist poetry dominated the avant-garde in Paris, with Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud, among others, leading the exploration of the modern condition through complex, contradictory webs of imagery, that

[8] From *Fleurs du Mal*, *20. Jewels*, 1857, Paris, this translation by Richard Howard, 1982, London, Picador, p.27

were at once universal and archetypal, and intensely subjective. In the collage-dream-flow of Mallarmé's verse, in which one appears to be in conversation with the poet, the body, nature, and the psyche intertwine:

> But your thick tresses are a tepid river
> to drown the soul that haunts us, without shudders,
> to find this Nothingness to you unknown.[9]

Across Europe, Symbolism impacted major poets. Oscar Wilde's novels and short stories are saturated in the dream-like melancholia of Symbolism, which Wilde read in the original, and the greatest of the Irish poets, W.B.Yeats, carried the combination of history, myth, and sexuality, to its greatest heights:

> He Remembers Forgotten Beauty (1896)
> When my arms wrap around you and I press
> My heart upon the loveliness
> That has long faded from the world;
> The jeweled crowns that kings have hurled
> In shadowy pools, when armies fled;
> The love-tales wrought with silken thread
> By dreaming ladies upon cloth
> That has made fat the murderous moth;
> The rose of that old time were
> Woven by ladies in their hair,
> The dew-cold lilies ladies bore
> Through many a sacred corridor
> Where such grey clouds of incense rose
> That only God's eyes did not close:
> For that pale breast and lingering hand

[9] From *Tristesse D'Été*, this translation C.F. MacIntyre, 1957, University of California Press, p.15

> Come from a more dream-heavy land.[10]

Much in the manner of Archibald Knox, and to an extent C.R. Mackintosh, Yeats carried the Celtic vision into the heart of the European avant garde.

Perhaps also we should acknowledge in the popular sphere that this was the age proper of the vampire. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published in 1897. This is hugely symptomatic of the combination of sexuality, mythology, and history, which pervades a wide swathe of Art Nouveau practice. And as with Bram Stoker's novel, Art Nouveau enjoyed a mass public, which led historians and critics for generations after it not to take it seriously. Dracula is one of the most important novels of the 19th century, yet its presence on school and university curricula is still not wholly established.

In England, the literary avant garde that was associated with Symbolism was collectively known as the Decadent Movement, or simply as Decadence. Essentially a hedonist version of the late Romantic School, and the literary wing of the Aesthetic Movement, Decadence reached a high influence in the 1880s, and effectively collapsed and went 'underground' with Wilde's trial in 1895.
The entrepreneur, publisher, and writer Arthur Symons, who had championed Symbolism and Art Nouveau in the period, talked about the style having

> a diabolic beauty; sin, conscious of itself, of its inability to escape itself… Here then, we have a sort of abstract spiritual corruption, revealed in beautiful form; sin transfigured by beauty. And here, even if we go no further, is an art intensely spiritual, an art in which evil purifies itself by its own intensity.

The English wanted to avoid any such beauty after Wilde's fall, and eventually, this vision of art proved too much for increasingly conservative institutions and governments. The diabolic beauty of Art Nouveau was killed off by the nationalist and conservative environment of pre-War Europe.

[10] A.Norman Jeffares (Ed) *Poems of W. B. Yeats, a new selection*, 1984, London, MacMillan, p.169

Art Nouveau Ceramic

The psycho-sexual revolt was as much and more an atmosphere and an outlook as it was a consolidated movement within Art Nouveau. Perhaps this is best demonstrated by ceramic.

Ceramic is one of the most prolific media within Art Nouveau, and it is fundamentally international in its spread. Ceramic is ubiquitous – everyone has it, it is everywhere, and cheap – The organic, polychrome nature of ceramic makes it conducive to symbolic treatment. It was also a discipline, that in some countries, was aggressively colonized by women practitioners.

The fusion of symbolic and organic imagery was perfect for pot, tile and figurine. It allowed a metamorphic treatment of form that would lead to the biomorphic imagery of Surrealism several decades later.

Across Europe, the use of grotesque imagery, that is, mythological, exotic, and highly eclectic use of animals, plants, and the human form, became a distinct thread within psycho-sexual Art Nouveau ceramic work. The use of the owl, and the orchid, for example, both highly charged symbolically, was extremely common. Also, the use of the mask, and grimacing faces, were common. Extreme use of natural form, where it is effectively metamorphosed into human form, including genitalia, is also a feature of the ceramic world.

But perhaps depictions of women provide the most archetypal Art Nouveau imagery. By turns Medusa-like, vampiric, coquettish, comatosed, or intensely erotic, typically long hair creeps across the face and surfaces of these post-Pre-Raphaelite women, framing the face and body of the vessel.

This aspect of ceramic is particularly French, and bound up in what we usually term the stone-ware revival. Major works were produced in Italy, England, the USA, and Belgium. Heavy, Chinese-influenced glazes sit on top of imagery bound up in a mixture of sexuality and death. Interesting ceramic practitioners in this regard are:

France:

Rupert Carabin
Jean Carriès
Les Mougin Frères
Gabriel Jean Paul Moreau-Vauthier
Alexis Boissonnet
A. Bruyas
Ernest Bussière
Jean Baptiste Clésinger
Pierre Adrien Dalpayrat
Jules Desbois
Thimoléon Guérin
Loewengut Jeannerey

Italy

Quaglino Poggi
Achille Calzi

England

The Martin Brothers

USA

Artus Van Briggle
George E Ohr
Adelaide Robineau
Maria Storer
Mary Louise McLaughlin.

Conclusion: the decadent cityscape

What is most remarkable about this fin de siècle moment, was that such visions might be embraced and used to create art an architecture for public spaces, as in the ceramic and metal work of Hector Guimard, which adorns buildings all over the 16th arrondissement, and provided Parisians with the station entrances of their first underground rail system. This was a public art that invited commuters to contemplate their inner compulsions, fears, and sexual desires. Inevitably, this moment was never going to last long.

In an atmosphere in which nationalist and imperial politics was reaching a frenzied height, both in terms of individual small nations seeking independence, and larger nations looking to protect empires, such a liberal, complex, open discourse as was presented by the psycho-sexual aspect of Art Nouveau was destined to lose its position. This was especially the case when we recognise that design and architecture are controlled and ordered by the marketplace. The consumer environment was increasingly conservative, and competition was as aggressive as ever. Nations abandoned Art Nouveau when it didn't sell goods, and in 1910, as opposed to 1895, 'diabolic beauty' wasn't the way to accomplish sales.

What happened to the three revolts? The first transmuted into the utopianism of the pioneer Modern Movements in design. The Bauhaus, Purism, and Suprematism, for example, were nothing if not utopian. The second slowed noticeably when young designers became older and - always a problem for such revolts – some of them became successful. The psycho-sexual revolt was less fortunate. It was aggressively quashed, and subject of criticism from all directions. It was very clearly the aspect of Art Nouveau that was hated, not just by conservative thinkers, but also by the utopian left. Most followers of the Modern Movement regarded its former bed-fellow as being decadent, individualistic, and anti-social. The spirit of this aspect of the style, however, without doubt, later fed into Surrealism. In retrospect, we can see then that within he Art Nouveau style as a whole, an internal, fundamental contradiction resided from the start. Utopians were anti-individualist, and committed to a collective idea of culture: the Symbolists were obsessed with the power of the individual psyche, and its role in art. The tension that emerged in the 1920s, between Surrealism and International Style abstraction, therefore, existed in embryo decades before, in the 1890s, inside the Art Nouveau style. This is principally why the style unraveled.