

Strand 3. Les Fleurs du Mal: Style in a Troubled Age

Eros and Thanatos in Norwegian Art Nouveau

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Abstract

The worship of fertile and pure youth in Art Nouveau iconography, with its frequent symbols such as rosebuds, eggs, and the shy gaze of maidenhood, is well documented. However, as the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig tells us in his autobiographical novel *The World of Yesterday* (1942), the Art Nouveau movement was as much a youthful revolt that explored taboos and the limits of established attitudes as it was an aesthetic movement devoted to the worship of beauty and innocence. How is this represented in Art Nouveau iconography in the visual arts? Using Sigmund Freud's theoretical concepts of Eros and Thanatos, which address phenomena like the subconscious, morality, decadence, desire, sexual liberation and sexual identity, I will focus on the movement's darker side, with special reference to Norwegian Art Nouveau.

Keywords: Rebellious, Kristiania Bohemians, Taboos, Erotic, Death, Intoxicants, The subconscious, Femme fatal, Male seduction, Liberation

The worship of fertile and pure youth in Art Nouveau iconography, with its frequent symbols such as rosebuds, eggs, and the shy gaze of maidenhood, is well documented. However, as the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig tells us in his autobiographical novel *The World of Yesterday* (1942), the Art Nouveau movement was as much a youthful revolt that explored taboos and the limits of established attitudes as it was an aesthetic movement devoted to the worship of beauty and innocence. How is this represented in Art Nouveau iconography in the visual arts? Using Sigmund Freud's theoretical concepts of Eros and Thanatos, which address phenomena like the subconscious, morality, decadence, desire, sexual liberation and sexual identity, I will focus on the movement's darker side, with special reference to Norwegian Art Nouveau.

This is not a research project that has found its final formulation, but rather a theme I am in the early stages of exploring, and one that will hopefully help to show that, as a style, Art Nouveau is far more complex than is usually assumed.

The dates of the Art Nouveau period in Norway tend to vary, but roughly it can be fixed as running from the late 1880s to around 1914. For Norway, this was a period of dramatic change in a number of ways; it saw the arrival of modernity and the end of the struggle for independence in the form of dissolution of the political union with Sweden. Historically, Norway had been ruled over first by Denmark, and then by Sweden, since 1380, which meant that it was on the outskirts of Europe not just geographically but also culturally.

Even so, Norwegians were not isolated. The so-called "Second Industrial Revolution" had brought technical improvements, in the form of railways and steamships, that made travel much easier. New and less expensive printing techniques led to a massive increase in the number of newspapers and journals in circulation. In combination, these factors ensured that ideas spread more rapidly and had a greater impact than they had done in the past, also in the field of art.

Moreover, in Norway, anyone who wanted an art education had to travel abroad, since the country lacked an academy of its own until 1909. Most aspiring artists chose to go to Denmark, Germany, or France. In addition, it was common to undertake study trips,

especially to Italy, Austria and Great Britain. Accordingly, Norwegian artists were well-informed about contemporary trends and developments in art and culture elsewhere in Europe.¹ Many of the most significant Art Nouveau artists in Norway also contributed actively to newspaper debates and wrote frequent letters as a means to present and discuss the latest developments in contemporary art. So even if Norway was geographically rather remote from what were then the centres of culture, the country's Art Nouveau artists were still well-informed about – and a part of – the international movement.

But did they also show an interest in the darker aspects of Art Nouveau? And are there any indications that the Norwegian art scene was influenced by the youthful rebellion that Stefan Zweig witnessed in Vienna in this period?

In 1905, Norway's struggle for national independence ended in the dissolution of its union with Sweden. It could be argued that this event led to a rather one-sided dominance of the nation-building perspective and the “grand national narrative” in the interpretation of Norwegian Art Nouveau among historical researchers. Accordingly, anything that did not fit this national narrative has either been ignored by the research literature or else forced to fit that interpretative framework whether or not it was appropriate. This has been especially true in the field of fine art. Few scholars have shown much interest in exploring the darker aspects of Art Nouveau, a neglect that tends to deprive the style of its explosive force and to render it innocuous.

One fine example of the lighter side of Art Nouveau is *Melkeveien* (The Milky Way) (1898) (fig.1), a depiction of a night sky full of stars by the Norwegian textile artist Frida Hansen (1855–1931). The ambiguity of the title alludes both to the actual celestial structure and to female fertility. A row of chaste young women are presented as exalted celestial beings with halos. With modestly downcast gazes, they are dressed in white robes of virtuous innocence.

¹ Øystein SØRENSEN: «Kampen om Norges sjel 1770 – 1905» in *Norsk idéhistorie*, bind 3, Aschehoug & co, 2001, p. 266

At the other end of the spectrum we have Edvard Munch's (1863–1944) polychrome lithograph *Madonna*,² (fig. 2) from his *Frieze of Life* series, which Munch began working on in the late 1920s. This work has a similarly ambiguous title, and like Hansen's tapestry, it is linked to the night. But in Munch's pictorial universe, the woman is very much a sublunary creature with sensual and erotic qualities. Munch's *Madonna* also has a halo, but she seems to wear it like a blood-red beret, suggesting both passion and a freedom from conventions; the beret was associated with a Bohemian, artistic lifestyle that had liberated itself from the constraints of established bourgeois morality. Her hair flows freely down her naked body, and her eyes are closed with an inward-looking expression of sensual pleasure. In the artistic manifesto Munch wrote as a young man, he declared he wanted to paint "living people who breathe and feel and suffer and love".³ A version of this picture was first exhibited in Berlin in 1893 beneath the vignette *Studie til en serie: Kjærligheten* (Study for a Series: Love), together with other works, including *Kyss* (The Kiss) and *Fortvilelse* (Despair; known today as *The Scream*). When the series was shown for a second time in Berlin in 1902, it also encompassed the theme of death. On this occasion the series was divided into three thematic parts *Love's Awakening*, *Love's Blossoming and Withering*, and *Despair and Death*.⁴ The *Frieze of Life* depicts "the life of the modern soul" and had the ambition to reach down to the forces that lie beneath the visible surface of the world.

Youthful rebellion involves the exploration of boundaries and established forms of behaviour. For Norwegian Art Nouveau, one major influence in this regard was the English artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872–98), who is often described as the *enfant terrible* of the style.⁵ Although Beardsley's career was famously short – he died at the age of just twenty-five – the impact of his work was considerable. Beardsley was an audacious artist who tackled a range of taboo subjects including eroticism, depravity, corruption, hypocrisy, greed and moral decadence, as is well seen in his illustrations for Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*.⁶ Based on the Old Testament

² Munch made several versions of *Madonna*, some as paintings, others as prints, in the years 1893–1902. This version is dated to the period 1895–1902.

³ Poul Erik TØJNER: *Munch med egne ord*, Forlaget Press a.s, Oslo, 2000, p.60

⁴ Arne EGGUM: *Edvard Munch. Livsfrisen fra maleri til grafikk. Kjærlighet – Angst – Død*. J. M. Stenersens forlag AS, Oslo 1990

⁵ Alistair DUNCAN: *Art Nouveau*, Thames and hudson, New York, 1997 / 1994

⁶ Wilde's play was first published in 1881. Beardsley's illustrations date from 1884.

story, Wilde's play describes the young Salome's seduction of her step-father by means of a sensual dance and her demand for the head of John the Baptist to be brought to her on a plate as a reward. Beardsley's Salome is a far cry from Frida Hansen's virtuous maidens. What he gives us instead is a dark and dangerous *femme fatale* who manipulates by means of lust, desire, temptation and evil – a world where eroticism is the counterpart of death rather than fertility. The same connection between eroticism and death is evident in the Book of Judith, another popular literary source for Art Nouveau's iconography.

Olaf Lange (1875–1965) was one of Norway's most important Art Nouveau artists. His painting *Salammbô*⁷ (fig. 3) refers to the historical novel of the same title by Gustav Flaubert, which is set in Carthage in the 3rd century BC and was published in 1862. Lange's work is a depiction of the priestess Salammbô, who uses seduction and sacrifices her virginity in order to secure the return of a sacred veil that was stolen from the goddess Tanit by the soldier Matho. Lange's depiction of Salammbô dancing naked with a snake beneath a star-spangled night sky is both beautiful and explicit in its idiom. The serpent was in itself an important symbol in the iconography of Art Nouveau. In purely formal terms, it was the perfect subject for one of Art Nouveau's most distinctive stylistic features, namely the whiplash curve. In terms of significance, it was typical of Art Nouveau's penchant for rich symbolism. With its complex web of associations, it references what were for Art Nouveau a number of key themes, from eroticism and the fall from divine grace to fear and death. People were certainly not reluctant to display this kind of art in their homes – works such as the 1906 bronze python by the Italian sculptor Rembrandt Bugatti.

Another important source of inspiration for the darker aspects of Art Nouveau was the work of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, and in particular his *Les fleurs du mal* from 1857. Decadence and eroticism, the morbid and the macabre are constantly recurring themes in this collection of poems, six of which were originally refused a licence for publication because they were considered too depraved – a ban that remained in place until 1949. Baudelaire's poetic exploration of taboo themes and his idea that modern industrialised society had

⁷ One of a total of nine etchings from the period 1904–12. Marit Ingeborg LANGE: «Olaf Lange – en Norsk symbolist» in *Olaf Lange* (Exhibition catalogue by Jugendstilsenteret 2005) p. 9

fundamentally changed the essence of beauty had a major impact on many young Norwegian artists. So too did the stories about Baudelaire's own life. Characterised by the pursuit of eroticism and the experimentation with various drugs and narcotic substances as a means to stimulate the creative imagination, his biography fired the imagination of many young Norwegian artists. This influence was particularly apparent among the so-called Kristiania Bohemians, a political and cultural movement that flourished in Kristiania (present-day Oslo) in the 1880s and early 1890s. This movement brought together young radical students and artists, with Edvard Munch one of its central members. References to this social group form a leitmotif in Munch's art during this period. The Grand Café⁸ in central Kristiania, the principal meeting place for the Kristiania Bohemians, became known as the "shadow institution of the civilised family".⁹

Sensual female figures are a familiar feature of Art Nouveau. With good reason, they have frequently been described as representing a demonisation of the woman, as is well illustrated by Bram Dijkstra's classic work *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* from 1986. Clearly, Dijkstra has a point – the images described above of women who display chasteness, for example, were the work of women artists, whereas the sensual *femmes fatales* were painted by men. Even so, one should not forget that this was also the era of women's liberation. In Norway, for example, women won the right to vote in 1913. When seen from this angle, the sensual and erotic depictions of women in Art Nouveau can be interpreted as exploring more liberal attitudes towards women in opposition to the hitherto dominant bourgeois ideal of female chastity.

Another factor, in addition to Munch's paintings, that helped to immortalise the rebellious and alternative lifestyle of Norway's young artists was a notorious novel by the writer Hans Jæger. Published in 1885, Jæger's *Fra Kristiania-Bohêmen* (From the Kristiania Bohemians) was an attack on social hypocrisy that argued for the abolition of monogamous marriage and the acceptance of open and free interaction between men and women on the basis of love. Jæger also advocated higher wages for women in order to increase their independence and

⁸ The Grand Café has been an institution of major cultural significance as a meeting place for generations of Norway's cultural and social elite. It still exists today.

⁹ Halvor FOSLI, *Kristianiaboheemen. Byen, miljøet, menneska*. Oslo, Det Norske samlaget, 1994. p. 42

reduce their need to resort to prostitution as a means of survival.¹⁰ The book was considered so offensive to established morality that it was banned, and its author punished with a fine and imprisonment. The young radicals responded by declaring free love a matter of freedom of expression.¹¹

It was an important aspect of the Kristiania Bohemian movement that it also included female members. They too wanted to shake off the narrow constraints of bourgeois morality and to live more freely.¹² One woman who was central to the group and who later became a symbol of the liberated, independently-minded and erotic woman in Norway in the period around the turn of the century, was the artist Oda Lasson Krohg (1860–1935). Having divorced her first husband in order to marry the painter Christian Krohg, Oda became a regular at the Grand Café, where she flirted, smoked and drank openly. In addition, she wore tight-fitting, low-necked clothes that were widely regarded as audacious. But despite her capacity to provoke and scandalise polite society, Oda Krohg came from an upper-middle-class background, and possessed sufficient cultural capital to sustain her independent lifestyle. And it is Oda Krohg's lifestyle which posterity – perhaps all-too typically – has tended to focus on. As a painter, she is remembered largely as emphasising the rather conventional female themes of the family and children. But her painting *Kvinneakt med kinesisk lykt* (Female Nude with Chinese Lantern) (dated to the 1890s) shows that she could also strike a different note. In this work she depicts a woman with features much like her own, sleeping naked with a wreath of flowers in her hair. This sensual female figure suggests the erotic dreams often associated with Nordic summer nights.¹³ Oda Krohg helped to make eroticism and the enjoyment of life acceptable aspects of women's self-realisation. It was, however, a lifestyle that brought with it a number of typical problems – hangovers, anxiety and depression¹⁴ – as clearly illustrated by the woman in Edvard Munch's painting *Dagen derpå* (The Day After) (1894). In Paris, intellectuals and artists such as Charles Baudelaire and Eugène Delacroix had begun exploring the effects of alcohol and other intoxicants, from the fabled absinthe to hashish, in

¹⁰ Bjørg VINDSETMO in Hans Jæger: *Fra Kristiania-bohemien part 1*, den Norske bokklubben, Norge 1997, p.11

¹¹ Halvor FOSLI, *Kristianiabohemen. Byen, miljøet, menneska*. Oslo, Det Norske samlaget. 1994 p. 266

¹² Halvor FOSLI, *Kristianiabohemen. Byen, miljøet, menneska*. Oslo, Det Norske samlaget. 1994 p. 422

¹³ Anne Wichstrøm: *Oda Krohg*, Helsinki, Gyldendal norsk forlag p.44

¹⁴ Halvor FOSLI, *Kristianiabohemen. Byen, miljøet, menneska*. Oslo, Det Norske samlaget. 1994 p. 422

the 1840s. Many had to pay a high price, as did Edvard Munch himself, who suffered major psychological problems that required treatment in an asylum.¹⁵

Although the female temptress was clearly the dominant trope, there are also examples of male seduction. In the 1880s and 1890s, a new generation of young British sculptors came to prominence, artists such as Alfred Gilbert and Frederic Leighton. In their work, they developed new aesthetic ideals that made use both of explicit symbols and more subtle allusions as a means to visualise intangible themes including love, death and eternity.

As part of this thematic cluster, they also focused on the male body as an erotic object and a source of sensual interest and emotional expression. Their depictions of the male body tended towards greater introversion and mixed eroticism with melancholy. This softer sensuality represented a change in attitude away from the traditional male stereotypes that idealised masculine athleticism. Several of Gilbert's sculptures in particular can be interpreted as displaying a homerotic element. This new departure in British sculpture also led to a "statuette cult", which was closely linked to the notion of the beautiful home as an arena for displaying the new aesthetic ideal.¹⁶

Although the erotic male does not feature conspicuously in the literature about both Norwegian and international Art Nouveau, still he is there. Among Norwegian Art Nouveau artists, it is a theme that is perhaps most clearly explored by the sculptor Gustav Vigeland (1869–1943). Vigeland was a close friend of Jens Thiis, the one-time director of the Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum (National Museum of Decorative Arts) in Trondheim. Thiis had a particular fascination for Art Nouveau and built an important collection at the museum. This may well have encouraged Gustav Vigeland to adopt the Art Nouveau style. In

¹⁵ Arne EGGUM: *Edvard Munch. Livsfrisen fra maleri til grafikk. Kjærlighet – Angst – Død*. J. M. Stenersens forlag AS, Oslo 1990

¹⁶ Robert UPSTONE: «The new skulpture» in Stephen CALLOWAY and Lynn Federla ORR (-eds.): *The cult of beauty. The Aesthetic Movement 1860 – 1900* (Exhibition catalogue, Victoria and Albert Museum, London 2011) London, V& A Publishing, 2011, p. 242 – 246

addition, earlier research shows that he was well-informed about British art of the period and the Arts and Crafts movement.¹⁷

In 1901, Vigeland began work on a large fountain installation. Like Edvard Munch, he defined his artistic programme first and foremost in terms of representing living people. One of the preliminary studies for his fountain sculptures depicts a male figure and a tree that merge in a symbiotic relationship. A clay model for this group includes climbing plants weaving sinuously through the crown of the tree. The relationship man-eroticism-nature is thus fairly explicit, and it is worth noting here that Vigeland was not averse to depicting male eroticism in works intended for public spaces.¹⁸ A reworked version of this sculpture can now be viewed as an element in the fountain square in the Vigeland Park in Oslo.

The frequent use of dream and fantasy imagery in Art Nouveau can also be interpreted in relation to Freud's theory of the subconscious. The Norwegian artist Theodor Kittelsen explored the Norwegian folk tales from this angle. Fear and death are prominent themes in several of his best-known works, such as his series on the Black Death, and pictures featuring water sprites and other underworld creatures from Norwegian fairy-tale literature. The work *Nøkken som hvit hest* (Water Sprite as a White Horse) (1909) alludes to dark forces that lure a young man to his doom. The water sprite has been a part of Norwegian and Swedish folk beliefs and oral traditions since Norse times. An inhabitant of rivers, tarns and lakes, he entices people to him with beautiful songs and other music. The water sprite can take the form of a young man with golden locks, or he can transform himself into a sleek white stallion. Kittelsen's works carry subtle erotic overtones. The artist himself apparently once said about the water sprite: "He knows just how easy it is to ensnare us with his gorgeous, quivering reflection."¹⁹

¹⁷ Tone WIKBORG: «Urnenes metamorfose» in Nils MESSEL (-ed): *I ledige stunder. Gustav Vigeland og kunsthåndverket* (Exhibition catalogue, Vigeland-museet 1997 – 1998) Vigeland-museets skrifter nr. 13, Vigeland-museet, Oslo 1997, pages 35 – 47.

¹⁸ Ibid p. 35

¹⁹ Theodor KITTELSEN: *Troldskab*, Kristiania, Aschehoug & co, 1916 / 1892, p. 55

As we have seen, Art Nouveau was very much about confronting boundaries and addressing themes that were considered taboos. One of these themes was homosexuality. So far, I have found no examples of this in Norwegian Art Nouveau. But another painting of the water sprite, *Näcken* (The Water Sprite) (fig. 4) by the Swedish painter Ernst Josephson from 1882–84 clearly contains a homoerotic element; here the sprite is depicted as a naked young man with seagrass hair playing the fiddle.

Eros and Thanatos can thus be found hand in hand throughout Art Nouveau, giving it nuances that are often overlooked. This is a style that is not just beautiful and harmless, but which also possesses layers of intrigue and profundity. Norway's Art Nouveau artists prodded at taboos and narrow-minded attitudes with results that have lasted well beyond their own lifetimes. They took a moral stance that it was difficult to ignore, even if they themselves preferred an alternative lifestyle. Like Oda, most of them came from the privileged classes and could live that lifestyle because they were part of an elite in a poor society. With their rebellious art and approach to life, they helped to pave the way for greater tolerance in Norwegian society today.

Curriculum Vitae

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