

In Search of a European Style

Our European Community built upon an economic base is being increasingly defined as a shared socio-cultural space. Within this new spirit, art and architecture are, like music, universal languages and have become an indisputable reference point for overcoming social, religious or linguistic differences in the various countries. Furthermore, a simple analysis of the evolution of art throughout history shows that styles have always spread across the continent at an amazing speed. Artistic styles have defined specifically European models such as the Romanesque, Gothic or Renaissance, etc. These spread across Europe but always left a trace of each nation's indigenous values. This process has been appreciated since the appearance of the first Medieval styles and was also evident in Art Nouveau, probably the most cosmopolitan and international of European styles. On the other hand, these thoughts can also be used to criticise traditional historiography for the way it has constructed a history of art using only a European perspective as its driving force.

Art Nouveau was a movement started by the new middle-classes, who established themselves in cities such as Glasgow, Brussels, Nancy, Berlin and Barcelona, where it laid the roots for this emerging social class. There is nothing better, therefore, than a network of cities to explain this movement. The Art Nouveau European Route-Ruta Europea del Modernisme is a project whose aim is the cultural dissemination and promotion of the values of Art Nouveau heritage, offering a tour through the different cities comprising this network, where one can enjoy the ornamental wealth of the movement and the beauty of its forms. All of these cities sought a common project of modernity in the diversity of their Art Nouveau styles. The narrative thread of this book can be found in a collection of photographs that allow for imaginary journeys to each city. In many cases, these have been provided by the cities themselves and selected in the aim of promoting their most important heritage buildings. This concept of the book as an



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Victor Horta built the Maison du Peuple for the Belgian Worker's Party in 1895-1899. The building was demolished in 1965

imaginary journey has led us to highlight buildings that can still be visited today and present only those that have been preserved, leaving to one side other major buildings that have since disappeared, either as a result of the two World Wars – such as the Wertheim Department Store in Berlin by Alfred Messel (1896-1898) – or because of real estate speculation – the ill-fated Maison du Peuple (House of the People) by Victor Horta (1895- 1899) in Brussels.

“Art Nouveau” is the generic term describing the new expressions of architecture and the applied decorative arts at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Historical models were abandoned to make way for free, creative forms inspired by nature. Each European region developed its own style, and “Art Nouveau”, “Modernisme”, “Vienna Secession”, “Liberty” or “Jugendstil” are simply different terms referring to the same innovative attitude.

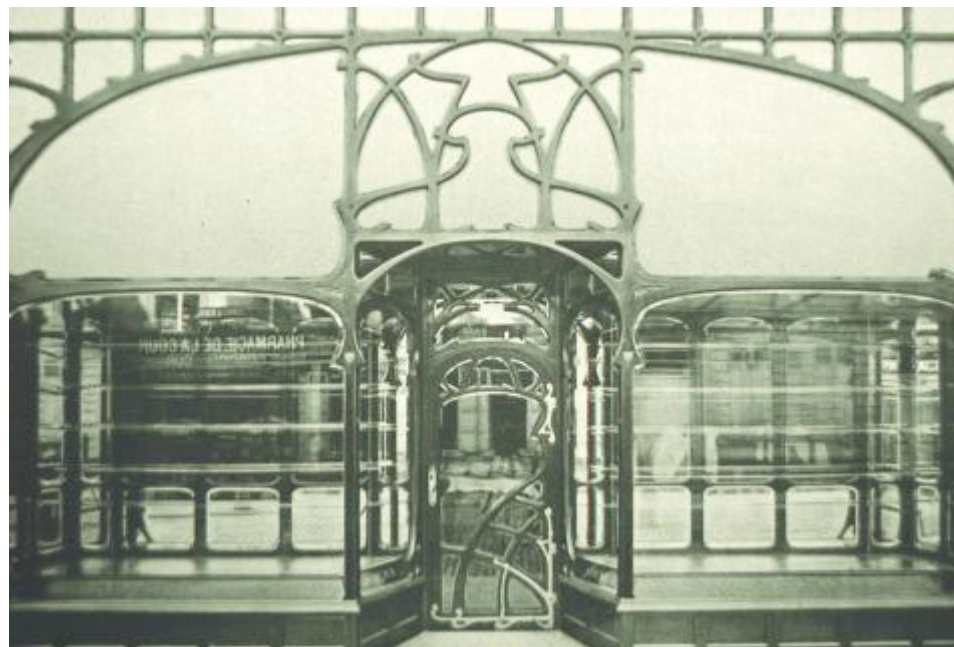
From the second half of the 19th century, stylistic renewal became unviable without the adoption of new industrial processes. But the integration of art and technique also experienced strong opposition. A lack of aesthetic quality in the products at the World Exhibition in London in 1851 triggered the first campaigns for the return of art into everyday life through crafted objects and quality homes. Henry Cole founded his Schools of Design and William Morris started a manufacturing firm following a Medieval workshop model where he created a simple, utilitarian, artisanal style based on forms in nature and the linearity of Japanese art. During the 1880s, Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo and the members of the Arts and Crafts Society perfected this natural abstract style and spread it across Europe.

Towards 1900, Brussels became a fashionable meeting place for modern artists. A need for renewal burst upon the scene and resonated to the sound of the progressive spirit of Octave Maus' cultural projects: *L'Art Moderne* magazine and the *Des Vingt* and *La Libre Esthétique* societies, which brought together French symbolism and British design, hitherto unknown on the continent. In the same way, Victor Horta and Henry Van de Velde provided spatial dimension to flat graphics and created a rhythmic, floral, skilful style using a distinctive motif: the undulating line of the *coup de fouet*. Horta was a master of diaphanous architecture and used plant forms integrated into metallic structures. Van de Velde was a theorist and designer who simplified the curvilinear style and assured its spread across Germany.



Lounge designed by Henry van de Velde as it was shown at the International Exhibition of Dresden in 1897

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Paul Hankar, 1896. The Niquet shirt shop, now a flower shop



Henry van de Velde's works for the Munich Secessionist exhibition of 1899

© Decorative Kunst

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Period postcard of Hector Guimard's 1900 underground station at Bastille

The Paris 1900 and Turin 1902 Exhibitions signified a victory for this new style and its reach throughout the world. Art Nouveau triumphed in Paris as the modern decorative style and paved the way for the commercialisation of "l'objet 1900" thanks to Siegfried Bing's shop. The French capital, until then reticent of this new architecture, incorporated the floral elements of this new style into the functional entrances of its underground railway stations. Hector Guimard created ornamental plant-shaped sculptures with these iron and glass structures. With the Turin Exhibition, exclusively dedicated to the decorative and industrial arts, workmanship won over function.

Nancy was the true productive centre of French Art Nouveau. It was a city of artisan tradition and, prior to 1900, many art industries began their work there based on an English social programme, Belgian symbolism and Japanese prints. The grace and refinement of their Rococo roots defined the objects they made, which were more suggestive than functional. Emile Gallé was the driving force, making highly accomplished multicoloured floral-styled glasswork and creating lively volumetric plant-shaped "talking objects". Following the success of the Paris World Exhibition, he founded the Nancy School, bringing together a community of artists-artisans who made genuine luxury articles out of everyday objects using plant forms.



Siegfried Bing's L'Art Nouveau art gallery in Paris



Henry Gutton and Joseph Hornecker, 1902-1904.
Fournier-Defaut Villa in Nancy, demolished in 1974

Glasgow was the centre of British Art Nouveau. Working within the city's School of Art environment was the group known as "The Four Macs": Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Herbert MacNair and the sisters Margaret and Frances MacDonal, who were inspired by the reforming spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the simplicity of Japanese art. Contrary to the excesses of Belgian Art Nouveau, the Glasgow School was noted for its sobriety. It was dominated by a combination of simple geometric forms with a minimal ornamental presence that was also geometric, contrasted by a few highly stylised human and plant forms. The Glasgow Style had a limited impact in Great Britain but was a determining factor in the development of modern architecture.



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Charles Rennie Mackintosh designed the Buchanan Street Tearoom in 1897

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Josep Puig i Cadafalch, 1902-1904. Casa Trinxet, in its time considered to be one of the jewels of Barcelona Modernisme, demolished in 1966

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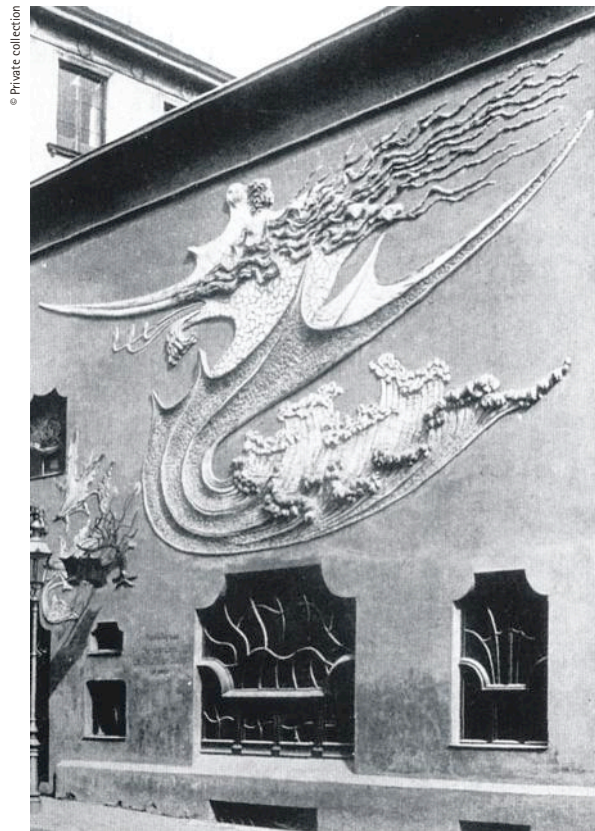


Original aspect of Reus' Casa Navàs, by Lluís Domènech i Montaner (1902). Some elements, like the corner turret, were lost during the Spanish Civil War

Meanwhile, history and traditions were being re-examined in Catalonia by a society that wanted to be both cosmopolitan and modern. During the 1890s, architects and interior designers were reviving the past with styles that were simultaneously Medieval, archaic and creative. After 1900, an added preference for the abstract sinuous forms of European Art Nouveau was introduced. During the last stages of the movement, Modernista artists like Rafael Masó saw in the Vienna Secession a way of recovering rationalism in construction.

Modernisme spread across Catalonia and into all areas of human activity, becoming the style of the middle classes in cities linked to industry and trade and in provincial capitals. Houses, summer villas and public buildings, as well as

factories, industrial estates and agricultural cooperatives, became identified with the abstract forms of Modernisme. The three great figures of Modernista architecture left some of their best works in Barcelona and other towns: Antonio Gaudí, with his abstract conception of architecture; Josep Puig i Cadafalch, who had a more historical perspective, and Lluís Domènech i Montaner, who surrounded himself with a whole band of artisans and industrial designers. But many others also contributed with the same enthusiasm, such as the architects Joan Rubió, Enric Sagnier, Josep Maria Jujol, Lluís Muncunill and Jeroni Granell; furniture and interior designers such as Gaspar Homar and Joan Busquets, or companies such as Indústries d'Art Vidal, Escofet i Cia. (flooring), Pujol i Bausis (applied ceramics), Rigalt Granell i Cia. (stained glass), etc. Catalan Modernisme was characterised by its plurality.



The Munich Elvira workshops, reformed by August Endell in 1897, were destroyed during World War II

The name "Jugendstil" was derived from the magazine entitled *Jugend* (Youth). In this and other publications such as *Pan* and *Simplicissimus*, which helped to introduce Art Nouveau to Germany, texts were surrounded by decorative frames and borders made up of highly stylised, flat, asymmetric floral motifs. These forms really took shape in Munich, which was the main centre of the movement around 1897, when the United Workshops for Art in Handicraft were founded, promising to break down the traditional division between pure and applied arts. Thanks to these workshops, a new model of interior decoration began to take hold, based on research into luxury and beauty through everyday objects.

Jugendstil became successful in Munich in 1897. At that time, August Endell reformed the Elvira Workshops, employing severe organic forms on the façade, and the International Exhibition took place, where Herman Obrist presented his floral-style objects. The naming of Henry Van de Velde as director of the Industrial Arts Museum in Weimar in 1902 converted the city into the new centre of Jugendstil, with a new concept in industrial design. Endell and Van de Velde also introduced Jugendstil to Berlin, where the process of purifying the style began. A concern for functionality substituted ornamentation with the use of brick and ironwork, in the same way as they were soon to be used to characterise the aesthetics of the Modern Movement.

The Rennberg Villa, by Christian and Hans Fürst (1904), was torn down in 1973 to build the new Ålesund Town Hall on its site





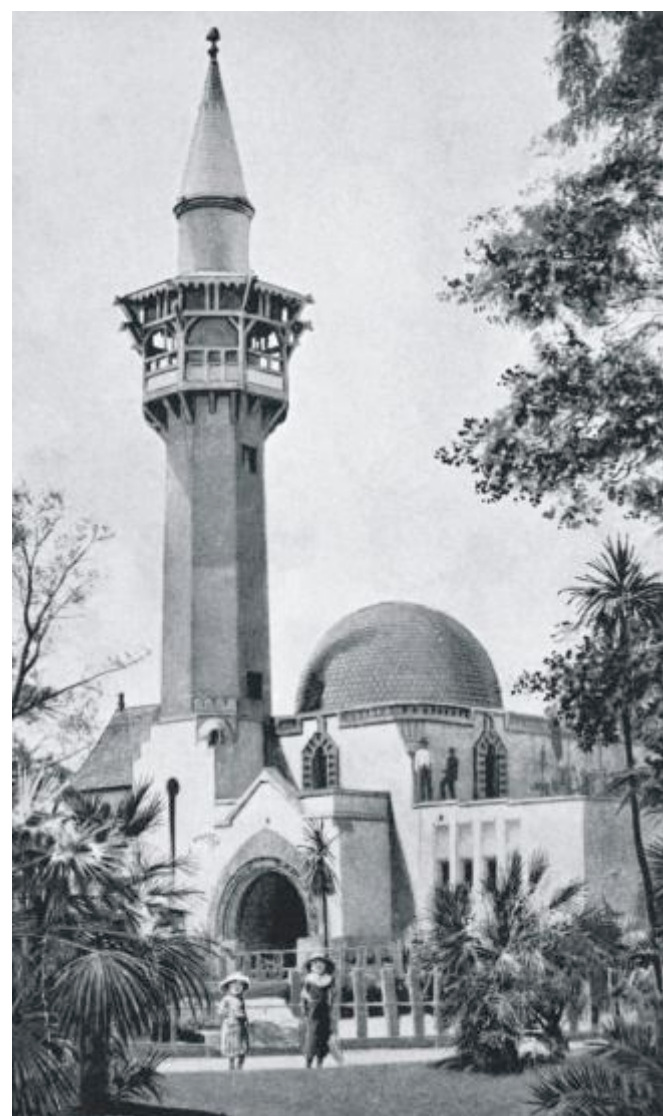
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The artists of the Wiener Werkstätte designed the Viennese Cabaret Fledermauss in 1907. The venue closed in 1950

The second phase of German Art Nouveau was structured around groups of artists, called "Secessions", who disseminated their ideas of rupture by using their own publications and exhibitions spaces. This renewal brought with it a style dominated by cubic compositions and the repetition of squares and circles as decorative elements, giving equal importance to both surface and line. Gradually, the desire to create more rational spaces led to the abandonment of applied ornamentation and an appreciation of buildings as functional elements, thereby moving closer towards the new ideals of the Modern Movement.

The geometry that defined the Vienna Secession came from the Glasgow School. Moreover, the profound sense of moral and cultural decadence that reigned there provided art with the new role of saviour and last refuge. This was the line of thinking adopted by Koloman Moser and Josef Hoffmann when they founded the Vienna Workshops in 1903 with the industrialist Fritz Waerndorfer. There, they proposed an interaction between art and life through highly refined objects produced using high quality materials. The architects Otto Wagner and Josef Maria Olbrich renounced historical styles but preserved the grandeur and balance of classical buildings, using sculpture and decorative art to highlight function and structure.

In 1899, a group of German and Austrian artists arrived in Darmstadt invited by the Grand Duke of Hesse and founded an association that aimed at transforming the arts. Amongst them, Josef Maria Olbrich should be noted for introducing the geometric lines of the Secession movement to the city through the construction of the buildings for the artists' colony. In competition with Vienna, Prague and Budapest, the new style was adopted from 1900. In Holland and Scandinavia, solid cubic buildings were also dominant, decorated with elements deriving from local flora and mythology.



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Kornél Neuschloss, 1912. Original aspect of the Elephant House in the Budapest Zoo. Abandoned for decades, the house was fully restored in 1999



© Raiti Tikkanen, Helsinki

Interior of the Frederikintori pharmacy in Helsinki, designed by Eskil Juslen in 1908. The shop operated until 1996

The style of Art Nouveau evolved from an international and cosmopolitan project. Following a number of formal proposals, there was a common desire to create a universal art within a modern progressive spirit. The basic principles were the replacement of historical forms with natural forms, the adoption of new materials, the recognition of craftsmen and a freedom of expression by integrating all the arts. Thanks to the ease of communication and trade, fruitful intercultural exchanges were established and these ideas were spread via exhibitions, books, magazines and artists' associations. From 1900, all entrepreneurial centres, however provincial, wanted to adopt the cultural, refined, middle-class nature of the big cities.

Art Nouveau became the language of the new middle classes, the symbol of modernity. Emulation of the main European cultural centres and the prestige of their schools of architecture motivated visits by many architects from far and wide, as did the cry of European architects. The new style was welcomed by prosperous cities, ports, tourist centres, industrial centres and colonial cities. But this ornamental style, which came largely from Paris, was successful for its reformist ideas and global concept of buildings. One example of this phenomenon is that of Spanish summer resorts, where new leisure constructions, houses, small businesses and industrial buildings incorporated these new decorative elements.

Casa Romero by Rodolfo Ucha (1909-1910) in Ferrol



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Outside of Europe, the presence of Art Nouveau was limited to ornamental additions and newly constructed one-off buildings. The only exception was in the case of Latin America. The stimulus of a re-examination of craftsmanship and new architectural interior design took root in a unique manner in a number of ways. In Havana, for example, an important series of buildings were constructed in the so-called "Catalan style". Ponce in Puerto Rico and Rosario in Argentina are examples of small colonies built in the new style. In the United States, comparisons with Europe were more difficult. Here, the diffusion process was reversed. The architecture in Chicago, pragmatic and functional, with no historical references, opened up new horizons for the architects of the Old Continent.

The Art Nouveau European Route has allowed people to discover many cities with an important Modernista or Art Nouveau heritage that had disappeared from history books. Knowledge of these cities has contributed to defining the movement in another way. Therefore, alongside the great capital cities like Brussels, Paris, Glasgow and Vienna, whose roles were essential in spreading Art Nouveau, other cities like Barcelona or Darmstadt also developed highly original styles without having the protagonism of the aforementioned cities, as well as La Chaux-de-Fonds, Bad Nauheim, Helsinki, Tbilisi and many other cities and towns that provided the movement with a great wealth of content and subtleties of style.

The building at Calle Cárdenas 101 in Havana, a fine example of Cuban Modernismo, began a full restoration process in 2004



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Main hall of the bank built in 1910 by M. Oganjanov in Gudiashvili St. in Tbilisi