

ART NOUVEAU AND NATURE

Art Nouveau came into being in 1893 when Victor Horta introduced iron and casting into the homes of the bourgeoisie in Brussels. These industrial materials enabled him to breathe space into home interiors, allowing air and light to circulate. By choosing to decorate with abstract curves he was able to express the malleable nature of metal, whose varied composition provided the decorative theme of mural paintings and mosaics. He thus created a teeming universe where lines expressed vitality, the power of plant growth.

Nature was one of the fundamental sources of Art Nouveau theoreticians such as Eugène Grasset in his work “La plante et ses applications ornementales” showed how motifs borrowed from nature could be used in a logical way. The rediscovery of Japanese art in the latter 19th Century led to a new perspective that would wonder at the beauty of a wave, a kimono motif or the curve of a courtesan’s neck. The fluidity of lines, asymmetrical compositions without geometric perspective and delicate shades of colour created a new ornamental vocabulary, freeing itself from historicism, from the grand “carnival of styles” which prevailed for a large part of the 19th Century.

The languishing and mysterious image of the female became a decorative theme adopted in advertising (Mucha’s posters) before appearing in architecture and the decorative arts in the same way as plants or abstract lines. Art Nouveau has two faces: that of a style appropriate to new ways of life (lighting, hygiene, transport) and that of a quest to embellish daily life (artists trained in the traditional fine arts devoting themselves to the applied arts). The creators pondered the lasting nature of craft production methods as well as the need to provide industry with models of high quality in order to raise the esthetical level of mass production.

Traditional products created by William Morris and Arts and Crafts were costly and only accessible to the well-heeled. In Weimar or Darmstadt, creators of Art Nouveau such as Henry Van de Velde or Josef-Maria Olbrich were employed to revitalise the local industries and increase the prosperity of the states that employed them. In Vienna, the Viennese Workshops were wholeheartedly committed to costly craft production in the belief that it was time for the bourgeoisie to play its part in artistic patronage.

Art Nouveau spread quickly throughout Europe thanks to photo-illustrated art magazines as well as international exhibitions. The name differed according to country, it was called “Modernisme” in Catalonia, “Jugendstil” in Germany, “Liberty” in Italy or “Secession” in Vienna or Prague. The Art Nouveau movement was to develop more quickly in countries or regions which claimed greater cultural autonomy (such as Catalonia, Czechoslovakia and Finland) or those experiencing economic prosperity and distancing themselves from tastes dictated by capitals (Glasgow or Nancy). The whole of Europe was to adopt Art Nouveau to a greater or lesser extent because the style was able to cohabit with forms inherited from the past. It was more often dominant in new areas constructed to cope with increasing urbanisation at the end of the 19th Century (Riga or Barcelona). The Art Nouveau fashion was to diminish from 1906, disappearing almost completely during the First World War.