

BRUXELLES-BRUSSEL - XII 2010

Paul Greenhalgh

Director of the SCVA
University of East Anglia
Sainsbury Centre 01.52
P.Greenhalgh@uea.ac.uk

LIFE AND AFTERLIFE: OBSERVATIONS ON THE DECLINE AND RESURRECTION OF ART NOUVEAU

Abstract:

In 1995, the V&A Museum in London began planning a major exhibition on the Art Nouveau style. One of the key debates among curators at that time was whether the public would attend the exhibition, and therefore, whether it was worth doing. When the exhibition opened in 2000, it broke the museum's attendance record.

Art Nouveau as a style had perhaps one of the most complex developmental phases: its formation is still the subject of scholarly exploration and debate. But if anything, the decline of Art Nouveau, and its very chequered afterlife through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is even more complex and difficult to explain. So much so, that it was unclear in 1995 what the public thought of the style. In key periods in the twentieth century, it was reviled in ways which few styles have ever been. The level of castigation often belied the idea that this was simply a visual style: for many writers, it was a contagion. At yet other moments, the style enjoyed spectacular popularity and prosperity. This paper will use examples from England, Belgium, France, and America, and seek to explain and describe two phenomena: first, the actual reasons for the decline of Art Nouveau and second, the changing attitudes of collectors, critics and institutions in the century after its demise as a living style.

Introduction:

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Art Nouveau as a historical style is the way in which it has been treated over the last one hundred years. For a style that is clearly so popular with a wide public, it has attracted often extreme criticism, and it has been victim of negative outlooks that have seen major architectural masterpieces demolished, and museum collections purged and ignored. Perhaps most marked, Art Nouveau was most attacked through the twentieth century by intellectuals, historians and leading critics in the arts, rather than by a wider popular audience.

Interestingly, from the mid-1980's onwards, the negative vision on Art Nouveau has dissipated, and is even difficult to find even among intellectuals and historians.

During the twentieth century, the extremity of negative views was at times everywhere: in Brussels, Glasgow, Vienna, Chicago, Barcelona and other great centres of the style. And many buildings were altered or demolished. But perhaps the negative outlook was at its loudest in England, a nation that we might argue never really developed an Art Nouveau movement of its own. Insofar as the style was embraced in Britain, its greatest pinnacles were in Scotland.

Today, I wish to do several things:

1. I would like to spend a little time looking at the decline of Art Nouveau as a style in Europe and America, to clarify the reality of its demise.
2. I would like to review the afterlife of Art Nouveau, and explain perhaps the major reasons why Art Nouveau became a victim.

BRUXELLES-BRUSSEL - XII 2010

3. I would like to present two case-studies of English figures who, from the 1960's, contributed significantly to the resurrection of the Art Nouveau style: Victor Arwas and Sir Colin Anderson.

1. The Decline

Art Nouveau was the first self-conscious attempt to create radical modern style based on decoration. Arguably, the second attempt to create a radical modern style based on decoration was postmodernism, but this is a discussion for another day. My first point would be though that it is no coincidence that the Postmodern decades – the 1980's and 1990's – were also good ones for the reception and promotion of Art Nouveau.

Art Nouveau as a style was deserted by a number of its key figures well before the First World War, and in some cases, well before 1905. This is absolutely the case, for example, for the great Belgians Victor Horta, Henri Van de Velde and Gustave Serrurier-Bovy. They all moved on early in the century. Nevertheless, the style as a whole was still a great presence in urban life in 1910; it still dominated in Salons in Paris, Munich and other cities, it still filled magazines and progressive department stores through the first decade of the century. In 1910, its supporters could easily boast that it was still the dominant modern style, despite the quiet rise of new approaches. It would be a mistake also to suggest that it was solely a victim of the First World War, as many writers have claimed over the decades.

If we look to magazines, exhibitions, and new commissioned buildings, it is clear that the general decline of Art Nouveau, its slide as a widespread visual phenomenon, is really quite quick, and occurs between 1910 and 1914. Prior to that, it reached such widespread ubiquity, that it can be found decorating tea-caddies and kitchen implements, and photographic evidence shows that it was used to design the stage a strip-tease club in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century.

But by the opening of the First World War, it was finished as a commercial style across design, fashion, furniture and the decorative arts, and was a spent force in architecture. Modernism proper, and Art Deco, had already manifested themselves, and would merely be slowed up a little by the War, before they could fully take the international stage. Both these styles at the time were hostile to Art Nouveau.

A number of things contributed to the decline generally:

- The growth of nationalism in Europe undermined a style that clearly wished to see itself as international. In France, for example, many conservative writers began to depict Art Nouveau as international, and therefore foreign. One writer condemned it as a style that was invented in Japan and England, and perfected in Belgium. i.e. it was not French. In England, it had never been understood as anything other than a foreign style. Charles Rennie Mackintosh's career, of course, did not reduce this image in London: Mackintosh was a Scot. In America, the idea of an American Art Nouveau style never took off, though Tiffany was understood to be part of the wide Art Nouveau universe.
- The return and growth of social conservatism alongside nationalism meant that the liberal, exotic and even erotic imagery in Art Nouveau was increasingly thought to be inappropriate for styling products of all kinds. The imagery of Aubrey Beardsley, Loie Fuller, Rupert Carabin, Georges de Feure and many others no longer suited the European climate. Incidentally, in England, of course, the spectacular decline of Oscar Wilde

completely killed off the idea of an exotic avant garde in the decorative arts even before Art Nouveau had a chance to take root. Wilde was *the* famous writer on the decoration and design.

- Conservative designers and critics had always rejected Art Nouveau and embraced historical styles. By 1910, this lobby was consolidating into a single vision of using historic styles to create a new, eclectic, modern style. Ultimately, this would become Art Deco. Left wing thinkers within Art Nouveau itself began to develop new views of style, which would eventually become Modernism and the International Style in Design. In other words, from 1910, Art Nouveau was ripped apart politically simultaneously by both the left and the right, in a struggle that would leave Art Deco and the International Style (right and left) facing each other.
- Relating to all the previous points, design is about selling produce. In a number of countries, not least France, international trade figures after 1908 in the decorative arts and furniture began to decline. There were most certainly a number of reasons for this, not least the unstable international climate, which was affecting trade, and also dramatic and continuing rise of the Arts and Crafts Movement as a fashionable style for domestic produce. But Art Nouveau style took a lot of the blame for declining trade figures among manufacturers, and in government agencies. These began to call for a return to the Louis', as the Louis', it was believed, sold well.
- And of course, there was the ever-growing modern art world itself. Avant gardism was invented and perfected in this period. Manifestos and movements had become the norm. Art and design were young, aggressive, and energetic, and art journalism was new, hungry and always looking for fresh stories. Art Nouveau – by its very name – was meant to be 'new'. By 1910, it was no longer new. It had reached middle age, and the voracious art world it had helped to create, set about knocking it off its throne. You can't really have a style with 'new' in its name if it isn't really new. To a considerable degree then, the art world itself destroyed the style, alongside many former Art Nouveau designers, who now rejected their earlier creations and moved onto the next intellectual fashion. This process happened steadily after 1902-3.

Thus, Art Nouveau was strangled to death over two or three years by a mixture of economics, politics, and the new conservative morality. It would follow therefore, that its fortunes in the twentieth century, after its end, would still be fixed by these things. Its legacy has also been dictated by the ideological forces emerging from economics and politics. When Europe and America entered into a more liberal, economically prosperous period, the view of Art Nouveau lifted. And vice versa, when the social-economic climate changed again, attitudes to the style changed again.

2. The Afterlife

In 1995, the V&A Museum in London began planning a major exhibition on the Art Nouveau style. One of the key debates among curators at that time was whether the public would attend the exhibition, and therefore, whether it was worth doing. At that time, it seems to me as I look back, the Postmodern debates was still raging in art galleries and museums, and many of us were aggressive supporters of the idea of decoration and ornamentation as a social means of expression. As such, we were defending the Art Nouveau as being a decorative style that wished to create a Modern approach without rejecting ornament. As such, it lined up with part of the agenda of postmodernism. I quickly add, this is only in the most general terms: Art Nouveau and Postmodernism have little in common aesthetically, or even politically. But they

BRUXELLES-BRUSSEL - XII 2010

were both engaged in modern society, they were both trying to create something new, and they were both enthusiastic about complex decorative forms. It was decided, after much discussion, to go ahead with a very large Art Nouveau exhibition at the V&A. When the exhibition opened in 2000, it broke the museum's attendance record, and went on to create a record at the National Gallery of Art in Washington (later beaten by Vermeer), and drew vast audiences in Tokyo. It was clear that the style had a huge popular following.

As part of our research, we started to uncover attitudes to Art Nouveau in the twentieth century. In fact, a number of great thinkers in architecture and design attacked Art Nouveau. Prominent among these in the 1920's was Le Corbusier, who came very much from a progressive, left-wing perspective. But at the same time that Le Corbusier attacked the style from the left, many Art Deco and historicist designers attacked it from the right. As in the 1910 to 1914 period, it seems, Art Nouveau was not wanted either as an historic or a modern style: it was hated by the left and the right, and so its intellectual space disappeared.

Interestingly, and to get to my last major theme, as we did our research on the 2000 Art Nouveau exhibition, it became evermore clear that one decade above all others was key to the lasting heritage of Art Nouveau in the twentieth century: The 1960's.

The 1960's of course, was a very complex decade. It was – obviously - the age of the Beatles and Woodstock, of Pop Art, strong economy, James Bond, futuristic expos, the Space Race, and free love. It was also a hawkish period in which the West waged wars, European colonial empires bristled as they came to an end, and the Cold War threatened the entire planet. It was also the age of Modernist city planning, *very* aggressive support of Modernist architecture and design, and *very very* negative attitudes to what was perceived as Victorian or historic architecture and design.

In this brutally dynamic period, a large number of Art Nouveau buildings were demolished – not least of course – the Maison du Peuple in Brussels, in the name of progress. Many great Victorian Museums, such as the V&A Museum in London, were brutally remodelled internally in order to eliminate their decorative and ornamental aspects, to develop clean white modernist space. Many museums de-accessioned works considered to be in Victorian and the Art Nouveau styles. Again, the V&A dispensed with many of its works of Art Nouveau at that time. As we organised the V&A's 2000 Art Nouveau exhibition, we felt the loss of Art Nouveau works from all over Europe, de-accessioned in that previous age, and we set about travelling around Europe to borrow works of a type which the museum had previously owned itself.

3. Victor Arwas and Sir Colin Anderson

But there was another thing going on in the 1960's. It was also the period in which a number of pioneering collectors, curators, historians and architectural activists were recognising and supporting the Art Nouveau heritage. There were a number of interesting exhibitions held on the style in Europe and America, several books appeared, and a number of significant collections began to surface. Interestingly also, Art Nouveau graphics, illustrations and posters became widely popular, and influenced the development of a certain kind of 1960's style.

BRUXELLES-BRUSSEL - XII 2010

I want to focus now on two English figures in this revival activity: Victor Arwas and Sir Colin Anderson.

Victor Arwas:

- From 1960 Arwas developed a private gallery and dealership which, by 1980, was one of the largest – if not *the* largest – dealership of Art Nouveau material.
- From the late 1960's he began to publish on Art Nouveau and Art Deco. He wrote over 20 books on Art Nouveau and Art Deco, working almost exclusively with Andreas Papadakis, who owned the Academy Publishing House. *Key works: Art Nouveau; Art Nouveau Glass; Art Deco; Art Nouveau the French Aesthetic.* Papadakis was also himself to become a champion of Art Nouveau.
- Arwas supplied many Museums and galleries with their Art Nouveau works from the 1980's onwards, including many American and Japanese museums, and the V&A.
- Arwas was centrally concerned with ceramics and glass, but also had a major business in posters and graphics. He was deeply interested in Art Nouveau erotica, and had a large collection of it.
- He was a major player in the increasing value of Art Nouveau works in the last three decades. As a dealer, he undoubtedly was one of the central figures for establishing the market, and in so doing, he gave profile and durability to Art Nouveau as an historic style.
- He died in 2010, and his collection and dealing business remains with Gretha, his widow.

Sir Colin Anderson:

- Born in 1904. He was born into the family that operated luxury passenger ships, ultimately, his family controlled the Orient Line, which ran ships to Australia. He designed the insides of these ships, including (famously) the *Orion*.
- In 1962 he and his wife began collecting Art Nouveau, focusing mainly on French material, though they did acquire great examples of Belgian, Viennese, German and British Art Nouveau (Minton).
- Despite the French emphasis of their collecting, Sir Colin and Lady Anderson said that their inspiration to collect Art Nouveau came after a visit to Darmstadt in 1962.
- They collected mainly furniture, glass, ceramic and jewellery. While they did collect much 'high' expensive items, they also hunted bric-a-brac, and so many inexpensive things in the Art Nouveau style entered their collection: boxes, tins, hair combs graphic etc.
- The Anderson Collection was donated to the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts in 1978. The Sainsbury Centre is at the University of East Anglia.

Conclusion

Art Nouveau as a style and as a heritage for us all would appear to be safe. However. However, the twentieth century has shown us that the style had a difficult journey before this present age of support and preservation. Perhaps we should never forget this, just in case the age of neglect should ever threaten to return. Thank you.