

INTRODUCTION TO ART NOUVEAU AND ART DECO

It is generally accepted that the style we call Art Nouveau was born out of the Arts and Crafts movement, and peaked in popularity during the late 1890's and early 1900's. By the onset of the 1st World War, its demise was certain, but, during this very short span of time, a revolution in design had taken place. Artists and designers were inspired by the free forms and sinuous lines which were to become synonymous with the Art Nouveau style. Having discovered a new found freedom from the ordered but over fussy Victorian ideas of decoration, they set out to explore and exploit this freedom.

In France Emile Galle and Daum were the leading exponents of the art of Cameo Glass. Many of their designs were inspired by the delicate plant form motifs found in Japanese art, whilst the asymmetrical inlaid and marquetry furniture designs of Louis Marjorelle, displayed a totally new and uninhibited approach.

Credit must be given to Arthur Lasenby Liberty, the creator of the famous London store which bears his name. His far sighted approach to retailing led him to commission the work of individual artists, the most notable being Archibald Knox, whose work in silver, pewter, and jewellery has come to epitomize the English style of Art Nouveau.

The semi-clad, slightly innocent, but teasingly erotic portrayal of the female form was surely the most oft-repeated image of the era. Whether captured on the canvas by Toulouse Lautrec, incorporated in poster designs by Alphonse Mucha, or cast with sinuous free flowing hair amidst floral motifs in the pewter designs of the German company W.M.F. Today we may find Art Nouveau charming and almost coquettish, but there is no doubt that at the time, the Art Nouveau style appealed largely to the Bohemian and Avant Garde. One cannot but help imagine that amongst polite post-Victorian society, the portrayal of sensuously half-clad females may have 'sat' rather uncomfortably.

It was impossible for the gentle poetic forms of Art Nouveau to survive alongside the horror of War. The Art Deco artists emerging after the 1st World War eschewed the romantic forms of Art Nouveau, preferring the sharper angles, straighter lines, and more austere materials which reflected the machine age fast growing up around them. They looked to, and were influenced by Hollywood and its stars.

In Egypt, the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb explains the strong Egyptian forms seen in the sculpture and ceramics of the period. Sometimes called 'The Jazz Age', it was certainly art imitating life, with an immediacy as never before.

The Tantalus was replaced by the cocktail shaker and Ladies danced The Charleston in revealing beaded dresses. Fashionable society travelled in limousines adorned with the stylized mascots designed by René Lalique. The mass production techniques he employed in his glass making allow today's collectors the opportunity to build collections of his work. His jewellery designs though, were unique. He combined the use of non-precious materials with the rarest of gems to produce what can only be described as sculpture to adorn the body. His work, and the work of many contemporary artists, was displayed at the Paris Exhibition of 1925, from where the term 'Style Moderne' was hailed.

Whether ones passion is for 'Jugendstil' from Germany, 'Art Nouveau' from France, 'Style Liberty' from England, or Art Deco, described through a myriad of terms which evoke the style, there is no doubting the immense appeal of the artifacts of these times to today's collectors.

Arts and Crafts furniture has for some time been emerging as a major interest to collectors. Individually designed and made, it is almost always of fine quality, and if unsigned can often be attributed to the artist responsible.

Bronze, and bronze and ivory figures by Preiss, Chiparus, Colinet, Lorenzl, Zack and others have a sustaining appeal. The hand-finishing techniques involved make them prohibitively expensive to reproduce today, and although copies do exist it is not without some sacrifice to quality.

Whilst the work of the larger pottery companies such as Moorcroft and Doulton have always found a ready market, the smaller ones have sometimes struggled to achieve the same level of interest. I am pleased and not a bit surprised to see a resurgence of interest in the Royal Lancastrian lustre wares produced by the Pilkington Company, the Isnic inspired designs of the Burmantoft factory, and the scraffito decorated wares of Della Robbia, amongst others.

It is not surprising that the output of the Art Nouveau and Deco movements was so tiny when one considers the very short time span involved. Whilst the finest examples of work by the major artists are out of reach of the average buyer, it is still possible for a discerning novice with modest resources to acquire good examples of the work of the less famous designers. Examples across the spectrum are still available to the new collector, who would be well advised to seek the assistance of a reputable dealer, whose stock is sympathetic to their taste, and who can guide them at their own pace.

AUDREY STERN SHINE - 1995