Twentieth-Century Architecture and Design

Paul Greenhalgh, editor

Art Nouveau, 1890–1914

Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, and Ghislaine Wood, editors

Art Deco, 1910–1939

Since its initial appearance in the late seventeenth century as a slim publication describing works displayed by the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture in Paris, the exhibition catalogue has evolved into an essential guide replete with definitive information about each work on view. Recently, however, catalogues have become massive compendia of essays that extend far beyond the material and intellectual dimensions of the exhibition they accompany. Discussion of objects not on display serves the interest of an exhaustive presentation, but comes at the expense of the careful compilation of details about the individual object. Far too heavy to lug about in the galleries, catalogues are no longer so much the record of an exhibition as a meditation on it.

Over the last three years, the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) has weighed in with two such blockbusters. Art Nouveau (reviewed in JSAH 60 [Sept. 2001]) contains thirty essays by twenty-two contributors; Art Deco (reviewed in JSAH 62 [Dec. 2003]) features forty chapters written by twenty-nine authors. Although the phenomena the publications chronicled suffered first opprobrium, then oblivion, they eventually were rehabilitated and accorded extensive bibliographies. Nevertheless, the V&A volumes are scarcely redundant; in addition to summarizing previous explorations (one of the few omissions from Art Nouveau is Walter Benjamin’s perceptive article “Paris—the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” but he merits two brief references in Art Deco),1 they cover more territory (literally) than earlier publications and offer fresh insights about familiar material. Art Nouveau explores previously overlooked regions, such as Scandinavia and Eastern Europe; Art Deco demonstrates the truth of the movement’s claim to universality by including studies of its heady presence in China (mainly Shanghai) and Japan, Australia, Brazil, India, and South Africa.

The growth of serious scholarly interest in the decorative arts and increased recognition of the role of design in our culture coincided with a decrease in the obsession with unique, fine art “masterpieces.” This shift fueled the production of the volumes under discussion and the V&A’s imprimatur guarantees their probity. Many of the contributors are curators or research fellows at the institution, and have at their disposal not only its archival resources but also its superb collection of furnishings, architectural models and fragments, drawings for every manner of design, photographs, and so on. A good number of its holdings were purchased at the international expositions where Art Nouveau and Art Deco first flourished. Preceded by the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers in Paris, the V&A, founded in 1852 as a Museum of Manufactures, today comprises the world’s most extensive assemblage of applied arts. However retrospectively deplorable its imperialist foundations, these brought treasures that are extraordinarily global in origin. Although museums of decorative and industrial arts typically privilege national contributions, the V&A has covered the world since its conception at the first Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, held in London in 1851.

Each publication opens with an essay titled “The Style and the Age” and concludes with a consideration of the demise—and revived fortunes—of the style. Individual chapters explore sources—some broadly cultural (“The Cult of Nature” and “Collecting and Constructing Africa”) and others located specifically in previous or concurrent artistic movements (such as Japonisme and symbolism for Art Nouveau, and Cubism and Surrealism for Art Deco). The nuances engendered by various regional, national, and personal interpretations are analyzed, and the manifestations in applied arts and crafts are expounded by a specialist in the field. The impeccably researched pages on distinct media are useful, especially to the collector, and may be recommended to students of textiles, wood, ceramics, jewelry, glass, and so forth.

Perhaps the most original aspect of Art Nouveau is part four, “The Metropolis and the Designer,” which widens the focus from objects to the site of their making and consumption and encourages a synthetic consideration of art, architecture, and design. In some cases, the discussion is dominated by one
individual—Brussels by Victor Horta, Helsinki by Eliel Saarinen, and Paris (mostly) by Hector Guimard—but the entries on Barcelona, Budapest, Glasgow, Moscow, Munich, Prague, Turin, and Vienna include less familiar figures as arbiters and practitioners of the *art nouveau*.

The two contributions on America incorporated under this rubric, however, are at odds with its intention. In “Louis Sullivan and the Spirit of Nature,” Lauren Weingarden writes exclusively on the man she calls “unique among the Chicago School architects” rather than addressing America’s second city. Similarly, Alice C. Frelinghuysen’s “Louis Comfort Tiffany and New York,” a cogent survey of the artist’s work, belongs elsewhere in the catalogue, for only token attention is accorded the urban setting. The U.S. gets short shrift generally. Inexplicably, Frank Lloyd Wright is scarcely mentioned and none of his designs is illustrated. Another country that is unfairly slighted is the Netherlands: Nieuwe Kunst is as compelling as any other national version of Art Nouveau, yet only three objects are pictured.

The emphasis in *Art Deco* lies elsewhere, thanks to the movement’s transitory and commercial nature and the fact that its character underwent alteration after the Depression. Transport, the cinema, and celluloid images of Manhattan skyscrapers were more definitive in its evolution than any actual city except Paris, the guiding muse throughout. Part three is devoted to “The Paris 1925 Exhibition”; in addition, the architecture and contents of the national pavilions of Austria, China, Czechoslovakia, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden are investigated in parts four and five, “The Spread of Deco” and “The Deco World,” which contain both topical and topographical surveys. Although numerous buildings are described in the chapters on national manifestations, and there is a separate essay on architecture, Art Deco seems most potently represented by more intimate and ephemeral media—fashion, cocktail sets, book jackets and bindings, and by machines that move and permit rapid movement over long distances—ocean liners, airplanes, airships, automobiles, and high-speed international trains. Posters and magazines promoting travel are particularly relevant as are the monochrome photographic images of the period. In “Photography and the New Vision,” Mark Haworth-Booth, the V&As curator of photographs, tellingly describes Art Deco photography as “angular, commercial, decorative, innovative and in love with the same shining materials of modernity—chrome and silver, for example—used by the movement’s architects and designers” (285).

Since style is the leitmotif governing these books, readers who reject the very notion may dismiss them. For this reviewer, however, style, “a coherence of qualities in periods or people,” is a legitimate, not to say indispensable interpretive tool.2 The editors and authors offer much more than formal analysis in any case: these pages contain investigations of socio-economic, political, and technological junctures, the organization of crafts and industry, literary, musical, and theatrical connections, and theories of consumption, to cite but a few themes. Paul Greenhalgh, acknowledging that previous commentators could not agree on whether Art Nouveau was a style or a movement, declares it “a style in the visual arts that was a powerful presence in Europe and North America from the early 1890s until World War I. The style emerged from an intense activity of movements, manufacturers, public institutions, publishing houses, individual artists, entrepreneurs and patrons, located all over the urban industrialized world” (18). In their turn, Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton, and Ghislaine Wood note that although it has often been considered merely a “taste” (14), Art Deco (named as such only in 1966) denotes “the ‘modern,’ but not Modernist, twentieth-century style that came to prominence in the inter-war years and left its mark on nearly every visual medium” (13).

The V&As successive treatments of these two styles are not fortuitous. Greenhalgh, the driving force behind *Art Nouveau*—he is wholly or partially responsible for six of the chapters—was not directly involved with *Art Deco*, but virtually bequeathed the idea of the exhibition and book to Wood, his co-curator on the earlier venture. The two styles shared an obsession with the new, yet were eclectic and historically allusive, subtly in the case of Art Nouveau, more blatanty on the part of Art Deco. Both were composed of conflicting elements and intentions, appealed simultaneously to the worker and the plutocrat, and were propelled initially by the decorative arts. At the end of the century, however, technological innovations and social betterment were integral to the agenda of Art Nouveau, and architects influenced the birth and shaping of the style. Art Deco, in contrast, was complicit with the capitalist system, and architects were more often on the receiving than the formative end of its novelties; toward Art Nouveau’s ethical seriousness it turned a fleeting and frivolous face.

Despite their differences, the styles are conjoined by a passionate search for the “modern.” Indeed, the problematic issue of modernity consistently roils these texts. Greenhalgh finds that despite its “diverse roots, meanings and results . . . there was one defining characteristic that held Art Nouveau together . . . modernity” (18). In *Art Deco*, Tag Gronberg titles her essay “Paris 1925: Consuming Modernity”; chapter thirty-eight, on the style in Australia, by Christopher Menz, is called “A Growing Enthusiasm for Modernity.” Rafael Cardeno, in “Ambiguously Modern: Art Deco in Latin America,” vividly illuminates the conundrum, invoking Jorge Ramos’s phrase “the other modernity” to suggest “the complex tangle of secondary meanings and contradictory connotations hidden within . . . a concept as broad as modernity, never so simple an affair as Modernist commentators would have us believe” (397–98). The many references scattered throughout both volumes offer satisfying if necessarily incomplete definitions.

But what about modernism—the
ghost at both feasts? If Art Nouveau’s elevation of the role of ornament is the thread that links it to Deco, its partiality to structural innovation and the exploitation of new materials like metal and glass, together with its moral commitment to social and economic reform, constitute its legacy to modernism, the avatars of which misrepresented its contributions and denigrated its successor. Yet contained within Art Nouveau were seeds that blossomed not only into Art Deco but into its hostile sibling, modernism—and Greenhalgh’s brilliant concluding chapter, “A Strange Death,” puts into perspective these vexing issues. The third piece of the fascinating mosaic that makes up the story of design and architecture in the first part of the twentieth century will be put in place in 2005, when the V&A plans to tackle modernism, providing its own challenges to the simplistic assumptions that often govern consideration of this irresistible topic. Thus a significant segment of architectural and design history from 1890 to World War II will have been illuminated by the curators and researchers attached to this extraordinary institution.

Art Nouveau and Art Deco merit high praise both for their intellectual content and their superb material quality. The illustrations, printed on fine glossy stock, are as dazzlingly evocative of their subjects as they are abundant, and the layout serves the text rather than subverting it. The thorough bibliography is organized into meaningful categories. The twin indices—by name (artist, firm, patron, author) and by subject (including ceramics, Die Jugend [a magazine], decadence, Le Chat Noir [a literary club], streamlining, vacuum cleaners, Zaire/ Democratic Republic of Congo)—make it possible to compare individual essays and obtain their authors’ differing or complementary viewpoints.

The two books reach beyond a narrative of two complex twentieth-century styles to raise questions that have continued resonance. Some historians have yet to acknowledge modern architecture’s debts to Art Nouveau, even though Henry-Russell Hitchcock had presciently enumerated these in his essay for The Museum of Modern Art’s catalogue Art Nouveau: Art and Design at the Turn of the Century (New York, 1959). At least MoMA has purchased examples representing that movement, egged on as early as 1933, astonishingly, by Philip Johnson. But, as Wendy Moonan reported in the New York Times (26 Sept. 2003, E37), the museum does not collect Art Deco. She quoted two curators in the department of architecture and design as follows: “Modern has a certain clarity of purpose. The transparency of ideas is missing from Deco. It’s too decorative” (Paola Antonelli); and “Individual pieces can be pretty gorgeous, but Art Deco is very stylized and hasn’t any ideology” (Peter Reed). These catalogues may open minds and help restore validity to the “decorative” in the arts of design and architecture.

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Notes
1. Benjamin’s text was originally published in English trans. in New Left Review 48 (Mar.-Apr. 1968).

Ali Cengizkan, foreword by Uğur Tanyeli
Modernin Saati. 20. Yüzyılda Modernleşme ve Demokratikleşme Pratıgünde Mimari, Kamusal Mekan ve Konut Mimarılığı (The Hour of the Modern: Architects, Public Space, and Housing in Modernization and Democratization Practices of the Twentieth Century)
Ankara: Mimari Dernegi ve Boyut Yayın Grubu, 2002, 263 pp., 49 color and 287 b/w illus. 20,000,000 Turkish liras (paper), ISBN 975-96041-7-5

An excellent piece of scholarship by a Turkish architectural historian, Modernin Saati will convince even the most skeptical readers that a broad international perspective on architecture can be highly rewarding. Although the fact that the book exists only in Turkish limits its accessibility, the historical and methodological rigor it displays merits the attention of a much wider public. At a time when academic interest in the histories of “other modernities” beyond Europe and North America is growing rapidly, these thoughtful and original essays on urban and architectural sites, actors, and struggles of twentieth-century Turkish modernity bring a refreshing local vantage point to the field. They offer a new level of historical detail and a wealth of new knowledge—a view from within that one does not always find in the more general studies or overviews produced in western academic circles. Combining meticulous primary research (often a challenge in inadequate Turkish archives) with the insights of cutting-edge theoretical literature in English on modernity, public space, and collective memory, the essays focus predominantly on the urban history of Ankara, the “mirror of Turkish modernization,” as the author calls it.1

The primary preoccupation underlying the eighteen essays (many reprinted from Turkish architectural journals) is “modernity” as a profound historical and philosophical problem— one that different societies experience at different times and paces. Modernity is a sweeping historical force in constant flux, transforming the social, urban, and architectural fabric of all cultures in ways unforeseen by modernizers, colonizers, and social engineers. Taking as a point of departure the crucial but frequently collapsed distinction between modernity (the experience), modernization (the socio-economic process), and modernism (the artistic and cultural expressions), the author draws attention to the time lag between these dimensions of the modern as they have unfolded in Turkey. He writes about the absence of synchrony between “the hour of modernity” and the hours of “modernization” and “modernism,” which he likens to clocks striking at different times. The author uses the double meaning of the Turkish word saat—which signifies both

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