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L'ART NOUVEAU*
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Translated from the French by IRENE SARGENT

THE CRAFTSMAN having decided to open its columns to a discussion of “L’Art Nouveau: its Significance and Value,” the initial article appeared in December, 1902, over the signature of Professor A. D. F. Hamlin of Columbia University. This article actuated a reply from M. Jean Schopfer of Paris, which was published in the June issue, 1903. And now it would seem fitting, before closing the debate, to hear the argument of the one who, eight years since, had the good fortune of aiding the latent aspirations of the period to assume a visible existence, and of serving as sponsor to the new life.

The article of Professor Hamlin is without doubt one of the most conscientious and impartial studies of the question that have yet appeared. I am, however, far from sharing all the ideas of the writer, and, although some points have already found an eloquent opponent in M. Schopfer, I willingly again revert to them.

To begin: I fully support Professor Hamlin, when he opens the discussion with the following statement:

“‘L’Art Nouveau’ is the name of a movement, not of a style; it has come into use to designate a great variety in forms and development of design, which have in common little, except an underlying character against the commonplace. . . .”

I interrupt the quotation at this point because I do not agree with the end of the sentence, which declares that the followers of the movement concur only in “their common hatred of the historical style.”

Before presenting my objections, I must say that it appears to me illogical to apply the same scale of criticism to two sides of the question which can not be included within the same field of vision. A separate judgment must be granted to the initial principle of the movement and the infinite multiplicity of its applications, which are all individual and a forced combination of the good, the indifferent and the bad.
I. THE PRINCIPLE OF L'ART NOUVEAU

Is it accurate to say that no definite aim has been generated by L'Art Nouveau, and that its disciples are united only by a negation? The truth is this: that no definite style was prescribed, since the work to be done was a work of liberation. The could build according to his own desires. Therefore, there was no pre-conceived idea, no restraint as to the form of expression. But there was, nevertheless, a common idea: differing from the one ascribed to the followers of L'Art Nouveau by Professor Hamlin. The true bond between the inno-

title of L'Art Nouveau designated a field lying outside the narrow boundaries within which, beneath the pressure of a time-honored slavery, a class of degenerate products was approaching extinction. It designated a free soil upon which any one vators resided in the hatred of stagnation. If, therefore, Professor Hamlin is right in speaking of a negation as the point of departure of the new movement, this negation consisted solely in an energetic protest against the hiatus which, for an entire
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century, had suspended animation in that branch of art. Far from proceeding as Nihilists, the initiators of L'Art Nouveau sought beneath the accumulated ashes of old systems the spark of that former life which had developed the arts of the people, slowly, generation after generation, from the distant cradle of human civilization down to the sudden paralysis caused by the brutal shock of the French Revolution.

Here, therefore, side by side with the departure “from a fixed point” there is a first step “toward one”: an initial agreement established in view of an “affirmative purpose,” consisting in the determination not to despise the work of our predecessors, but to do what they would have done in our place: they who would never have debased themselves to counterfeit the genius of their ancestors; who would never have wished to sterilize the genius of their own generation.

But our minds being heavily burdened with old memories, how was it possible to resume the march of progress so long interrupted? Where seek a trustworthy guide? What rules were to be observed? A reversion to free Nature could alone restore and rejuvenate our spirits. From this infallible code of all the laws of beauty we were forced to ask the secret of a new advance, capable of enriching the old formulas with a new power of development. And this development it was necessary to urge forward in a manner conformable to all other branches of contemporaneous aesthetics, in a manner adequate to our form of society and our actual needs. In a word, we were forced to subordinate the general character of our environment to all the conditions of modern life. It was necessary, at the same time, to restore certain essential principles which had long previously fallen into neglect. These necessities were: to subject each object to a strict system of logic relative to the use for which it is destined and to the material from which it is formed; to emphasize purely organic structure, especially in cabinet-making; to show clearly the part played by every detail in the architecture
of an object; to avoid, as one would flee from leprosy, the falsehood of a fictitious luxury consisting in falsifying every material and in carrying ornament to extremes.

Such, in essence, are the principles which formed the basis of agreement for the initiators of the movement, whose effects, during its active period, we are now to observe.

THE PRODUCTIONS OF L'ART NOUVEAU

It has seemed to me judicious not to confuse the doctrines which gave birth to L’Art Nouveau with the applications which have been made of it. I shall protest much more strenuously against the custom of subjecting all these productions indiscriminately to a sole and summary judgment. I do not direct my protest against Professor Hamlin, nor solely against the very limited number of other writers who have treated the question: I accuse the whole body of art critics of having, in this instance, seriously failed in professional duty. In the presence of a sudden and disconcerting growth, in the face of the daily mounting flood of productions contrasting not only by reason of their novelty with familiar forms, but often also differing among themselves, the critics have left the public absolutely without guidance. The special publications devoted to applied art, which arose in great number, had no object other than to make pass in review before the eyes of the reader (it were better to say the spectator), after the manner of a kaleidoscope, in a chance order of appearance, the assemblage of all new efforts, whether more or less successful. But among those who assumed the somewhat grave responsibility of instructing the public regarding the artistic phenomena of each day, among those even who declared with emphasis that there should no longer be an aristocratic art, and that all artistic manifestations: painting, sculpture or the products of the industrial arts, had equal rank, no one assumed the duty of making a serious study of this subject,—that is, no one in position to speak with authority. L’Art Nouveau, it is true, if it be considered as a whole, has no cohesive principle.* It could not have such, when

*Professor Hamlin rightfully says: “Its tendencies are for the present divergent and separative.”
employing its activity upon a virgin soil, in a field where every one was bound to display his individual temperament. But in the midst of the myriad attempts whose tangled skein can not be straightened by the layman, we, the critics, point out certain efforts, each one of which in the respect that concerns it, converges toward a definite ideal, an aim clearly perceived. We say: Reject the mass of worthless efforts, eliminate all abortive work, imitations, and commercial products, but save from irreparable destruction anything that can contribute, though it were only as a very germ, to future fertility, if you do not intend to pronounce death sentence upon all those of our faculties whose exercise beautifies our dwellings!

It is not to be expected that I should produce in these pages an extended critical work. Not only would my militant attitude in the question prevent me from such audacity, but such an endeavor would considerably exceed the limits of the present plan. I shall content myself with making here a rapid examination of the path followed by *L’Art Nouveau*: beginning with its first general manifestation, which, as I have previously stated, occurred in 1895, in the galleries of the *Rue de Provence*, Paris.

It would be difficult to say which, for the moment, triumphed in this fateful struggle—the chorus of approval, or the cries of indignation. The fact remains that the impression then made was powerful enough to create a large following of recruits, impatient to enroll themselves beneath the banner displayed by the vanguard. Unhappily, it is much easier to submit a new order of productions to public examination than to make the public understand the reasons which governed the creation of such objects and prescribed to them their forms. The adepts of the second hour were divided into different classes. There were artists, sculptors or painters whose somewhat vagabond imagination was more familiar with dreams and poetry than with practical ideas. They designed tables supported by nymphs with soft, sinuous bodies, or by strange figures savage in their symbolism, with muscles swollen and writhing under efforts which had no sign of
humanity. There were also young middle class women who abandoned the needle, the crochet-hook and the piano, that they might pyrograve leather, or hammer copper into works which were almost touching in their artistic poverty: all these being, of course, more or less sedative and too restricted in their reach to compromise seriously the good cause and prevent its progress. The dangerous evil: that which could strike at the vital part of the idea, and possibly occasion its utter failure, was to arise elsewhere.

Throughout the course of history no epoch-making idea of idealistic tendencies has ever arisen, which has not been quickly counterfeited by the army of profit-seekers who have enrolled themselves beneath its banner to protect their purely mercantile schemes. But never, perhaps, has this phenomenon been so strikingly instanced as in the case in point. Owing to the feeble state of certain industries, as, for example, that of cabinet-making, an opportunity was afforded to profit by the effect produced by the rise of L’Art Nouveau. But it must not be believed that, spurred by this impulse, the leaders of industry set themselves without loss of time to a deep study of the necessary principles. Far from that! Nothing, in their minds, was more easy than to produce L’Art Nouveau, since that, according to their point of view, must be simply the art of improvising something else than the works of yesterday. They therefore gave the pencil into the hands of their designers with orders to trace upon the paper outlines interlacing in all directions, writhing into fantastic expansions, meeting in snail-spirals, framing asymmetrical panels within which bloomed the reproduction of some natural growth, exact to the point of photography. In fact, it was not difficult to produce L’Art Nouveau of this species. Nor was it costly, since it required neither preliminary studies, nor the use of valuable material, nor great care in execution. The product was abundant, too abundant, and the public, accepting the name for the thing in itself, did not hesitate to accept this product under the official title which assured its success. It need not be explained that the more eccentric it was, the more quickly it was received as L’Art Nouveau. I might—but I refrain—cite the instance of a museum, the most famous of its class, whose representative selected for his collections a coffer overburdened with fantastic floriated orna-
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ment, preferably to a wardrobe full of symmetrical grace; explaining meanwhile that the character of the latter piece was not sufficiently accentuated to deserve the name of L’Art Nouveau.

But slowly, vision having grown more experienced and critical, begins to distinguish the true from the false. In the midst of the obscuring chaos, there are discernible clear ideals of art tending toward a definite purpose. The work of elimination being complete, each one will choose the species of production that shall best adapt itself to his taste, while waiting for future generations—the supreme judges of men and things—to make final classification, according to degrees of merit. Future judges will all acknowledge the indelible mark of our epoch, without it being necessary, as Professor Hamlin would desire, for all our artists to concur in an absolute identity of style, as once they did. Such freedom will leave a wider field open to the imagination of those who create, and will permit each individual to impress his personality upon the places in which he passes his life. Far from regretting this variety in the forms of expression, let us enjoy the proffered riches, and let us now seek to acquaint ourselves with the origin and the nature of these divergences as well as to compare their merit.

Two principal and parallel currents can be discerned in the direction of the movement: the system of purely ornamental lines already indicated by Professor Hamlin, and the system of floral elements; each of the two systems having fervent champions and active detractors. In every new cause it is well that uncompromising elements arise, exaggerating partial virtues, which later, wisely proportioned, unite in a definitive, well-balanced whole. The divergences in the first phases of L’Art Nouveau are attributable less to questions of individual temperament than to questions of race. In these first phases, the principal part was not played by the country which had long occupied the first place in European decorative art. France remained attached with

Pendant: gold enamel and pearl, by Marcel Bing

what might almost be termed patriotic tenderness to traditions whose roots struck into the lowest depths of the soil of the fatherland.

The initial movement, as Professor Hamlin himself observes, began in England, under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites and the ideas of Ruskin, and was carried into practical affairs by the admirable
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genius of William Morris. But if insurrection arose then against the frightful ugliness of contemporary productions, it did not declare the imperative need of a renewal of youth conformable to the modern spirit. Highly aristocratic natures, who would willingly have witnessed the destruction of railways guilty of killing the beauty of the landscape—such as these necessarily produced works echoing the art of primitive times dominated by the poetry of an abstract dream. They projected over the world a soft light, full of charm indeed, but which, as a distant reflection of extinct suns, could not have a prolonged existence, nor even a warmth sufficient to light new centers. This episode will remain in the history of art as an attractive chapter too rapidly closed. Latterly, Eng-

To Belgium belongs in all justice the honor of having first devised truly modern formulas for the interior decoration of European dwellings.*

In the year 1894 there was founded at Brussels, under the guidance of M. Octave Maus, a society of artists designated as La libre Esthétique, having as its object to assemble in an annual exhibition all works of essentially modern character. This was the first occasion when the aristocratic arts of painting and sculpture admitted without blushing to their companionship the commonalty of industrial productions. Already there appeared manifestations of a real value, the outcome of reflective minds steadily pursuing individual aims. I have always retained a most favorable memory of certain model tenements exhibited at

*In order not to extend unduly the length of this article, I must set aside architecture, which, it must be said, has not sufficiently acknowledged the progress of other branches of art which it should have assisted, since it had not, as leader and chief, been able to guide them by a bold initiative.
La libre Esthétique by Serrurier-Bovy of Liège, who had succeeded in uniting with a low net cost all desirable requisites of beauty, hygiene and comfort. But the man sufficiently gifted to engender really bold ideas and to realize them in all the perfection permitted by their species, was Henri van de Velde, professor of aesthetics at one of the free institutions at Brussels. He executed in 1895 for the establishment of L'Art Nouveau, Paris, a series of interiors, which he followed by other works exhibited at Dresden in 1897, and which not only constituted in Europe the first important examples (ensembles) of modern decorative art, but, have since remained the most perfect types of the species. This species was the development of the line—the decorative line shown in its full and single power.

The cradle of this species of art was, therefore, Belgium, the country belonging to the Flemish race, whose tranquil and positive mind demanded an art of austere character adapted to patriarchal customs: hostile to the principles of the light fancy which willingly takes inspiration from the slender grace of the flower. If, through an apparent failure in logic, France served as the stage for the first appearance of an art so little French in its essence, it was because at that time, only eight years since, there was as yet nothing beside it; no conception sufficiently mature to serve the projected uprisal which had as its first aim to sound the awakening call, while waiting to give later an impetus and aim more conformable to the national spirit.

In Germany, the situation, for several reasons, was altogether different. First, a close relationship unites the German with the Flemish character. Further, it must be recognized that Germany, long wanting in intuition, has always shown a great receptivity toward all external influences. Now, the novelty shown in the exhibits of L'Art Nouveau, Paris, at the Dresden Exposition of 1897, produced an impression strong enough to be echoed throughout Germany: this was the real point of de-

Pendant: gold enamel, by Marcel Bing
Interior, by Henri van de Velde
sort of art for exportation devised by England for the use of the unthinking masses of the continent, followed, in her turn, the same path. By a kind of fatal law all imitators seem condemned to an impulse of exaggeration, which changes into shocking defects all doubtful portions and details of the model. It was thus that in Germany and especially in Austria the insistent scourge of tortured, swollen and tentacular lines grew more and more aggravated, thus causing an abuse most harmful to the reputation of *L'Art Nouveau*. Artists of solid worth have, nevertheless, arisen in the Teutonic countries, but they have need of casting off the foreign *impedimenta* which weights their inspiration and occasions the cruel errors by which the taste of Professor Hamlin is so justly offended in presence of the works of the Darmstadt colony: a body now dispersed.

To sum up, we may say that combinations purely linear permit the designer to obtain, particularly in cabinet-making, broad and robust effects, a clear and logical structural arrangement. The reverse of these qualities, if they are formulated into intangible and exclusive rules, gives rise to a monotony which does not delay its appearance. Quickly the artist reaches the limits of his possibilities, inspiration ceases, and astonishment arises at the fact that all power was expended in the initial effort.

At such a moment it is evident that a return to Divine Nature, always fresh and new in her counsels, can solely and incessantly restore failing inspiration. In reviewing the history of the decorative arts in France, one will remark that always the artists of this country, with the exception of those of the sixteenth and a part of the seventeenth century, have had an acute sense of this truth. By receiving inspiration from these lovers of nature, the artists of our own time will accomplish each day more happily a difficult task which they alone, perhaps, are capable of fulfilling. The work before them consists in fusing into a harmonious whole the two apparently hostile principles of robustness and grace: the solid and crude art asserted by the Northern countries, and the delicate refinement peculiar to the Latin races; it con-
sists in giving prominence to the strongest structural laws with a constant regard for practical results; but, at the same time, in banishing all heaviness of effect, all sterility of line, and, if the limits of value permit, in adding a flavor of fine elegance; it consists, in a word, in satisfying the demands of strict logic, in providing pleasure for the eye, and even in inviting the caress of the touch. Thus will France prove that, during her long sleep, she has not allowed the qualities with which Nature so generously endowed her to fall into decline.

But the influence of France will never again dominate the world so completely as in former times. As communication between the different nations becomes easy and constant, as frontiers grow nearer, and the exchange of ideas multiplies, one may imagine each separate people as fearing lest the formidable leveling wind that is now passing over the world, seize and carry away the last traces of independence. As one retires from the great central fires of humanity, lesser flames start upward with fuller impetus and force.

We have seen Belgium set up within her narrow limits an art possessing a distinct savor of the soil, but still an art of somewhat broad characteristics. Beyond her frontier, Holland, on the contrary, engendered, a decade since, a local style extremely accentuated, revealing at times beauties too striking not to deserve mention in every study of the present movement and development. It is the more necessary to speak of these works for the reason that they are little known to the outside world. Not only does their strictly national character, strongly marked with ancestral Javanese influence, predestine them to local adaptations within the frontier limits, but it must be added that the greater number of Dutch
artists show a mysterious and singular disdain for cosmopolitan reputation. There is now in Holland a large constellation of talents which deserves the honor of a monograph. But let it suffice here to cite as especially worthy of mention the names of Dysselhof, Toorup, Thorn-Prikker and Huytema.

Mounting higher toward the North, we find Denmark, who, beside her celebrated porcelains, has developed in all branches of her art, under the wise direction of Pietro Krohn, the affable curator of the Museum of Decorative Arts, Copenhagen, a national growth: a style extremely pure in its robustness. Still farther Northward, Sweden and Norway have participated no less ardently in the universal impulse toward a renewal of the ancient Scandinavian art, revived without essential weakening of its original character.

Finally, it would be wanting in strict duty to pass over in silence a similar movement of the highest interest which has been observed for several years on the extreme limits of Northern Europe: that is to say, in Russia. There, in the midst of a peasant population of primitive manners and customs, great colonies of art-workers—weavers, embroiderers, sculptors, potters, iron-workers and cabinet-makers—have been founded under the patronage of the highest personalities of the Empire. Artists of reputation—such as Monsieur S. Malioutine and Mademoiselle Davydoff—indicate the paths and the models to be followed. The enterprise is directed with unflinching activity by ladies of the high aristocracy, among whom it is impossible not to mention the Princess Marie Ténicheff, the generous founder of the remarkable peo-

Cabinet: designed by de Feure
ple's workshops at Talachkino, and also Madame Jakouchikoff, founder of
the workshops at Smolenka, in the Government of Tamboff, a lady who, with un-
wearying devotion, consecrates her life to an admirable task. The productions of
these colonies are not repeated and unvarying copies of old Russian models, nor are they, what one could fear still more, pretentious imitations of objects more recently created in Western Europe. There truly exists something resembling a species
of Russian Art Nouveau; for it is very new and, at the same time, thoroughly Russian. It is possible for these noble institutions to pass onward to a future of extraordinary possibilities, if no social catastrophe occur to destroy them.

I have waited until the end to acknowledge that America has already furnished a contribution to the universal efforts of our times, which is now sufficiently noteworthy and valuable to merit for her the immediate mastership is in the conception and execution of objects destined for practical use in household interiors. No designers have more clearly understood that the first impression of beauty, of the most essential beauty, emanates from every object which assumes the exact character of its use and purpose.

I express the conviction that America, more than any other country of the world, is the soil predestined to the most brilliant
bloom of a future art which shall be vigorous and prolific. When she shall have acquired, in the province of ideal aims, a consciousness of her own possibilities, as precise and clear as the confidence already gained in other domains of intellectual force, she will quickly cast off the tutelage of the Old World, under which she put forth her first steps upon the sunlit path of art. America, as I have already said elsewhere, has a marked advantage over us, in that her brain is not haunted by the phantoms of memory; her young imagination can allow itself a free career, and, in fashioning objects, it does not restrict the hand to a limited number of similar and conventional movements. America, taken all in all, is indeed only a ramification of our ancient sources, and consequently the heir of our traditions. But again, she has a special destiny, occasioned by the fact that she does not possess, like us, the cult, the religion of these same traditions. Her rare privilege is to profit by our old maturity and, mingling therein the impulse of her vigorous youth, to gain advantage from all technical secrets, all devices and processes taught by the experience of centuries, and to place all this practical and proven knowledge at the service of a fresh mind which knows no other guide than the intuitions of taste and the natural laws of logic.

This paper excited the interest of several distinguished French critics, who, while awakened to admiration by the knowledge and justice displayed by the American writer, found yet occasion to differ with his opinion that L’Art Nouveau was based upon a negation and tended toward no definite aim.

This opinion was opposed in the issue of July, 1903, by M. Jean Schopfer, a Parisian authority known in the United States by his writings, as well as by his repeated appearance in the lecture-rooms of the Eastern universities.

M. Schopfer’s article was a criticism of the Art Nouveau movement, judged from the historical point of view. It was calm, broad, logical and masterly: in every way calculated to remove the prejudice created in America by the vagaries of those whose position in regard to the movement may be compared to that of the lawless camp-followers of a well-disciplined army marching to the conquest of liberty. This second article was comprehensive in its treatment and included in its survey the decorative and “lesser arts.” It was, therefore, of wide general interest, and it obtained the appreciation and comment which it deserved.

The third division of the discussion just now presented bears the signature of the highly distinguished critic and patron of art, M. S. Bing of Paris. He it was who gave the name to the latest phase of modern art: watching its development from germ to bloom; seeing abortive growths fall away from the parent source of life, and other fairer types poisoned by hostile and noxious influences; but permitted at last to witness the definite success of a persistent and healthy organism, whose infancy he had wisely fostered. M. Bing’s article appeals not alone to artists and those interested in aesthetic subjects: through it throbs the pulse of that modern life which is supremely creative, and capable of reducing the ideal to the real, the definite and the practical. M. Bing has proven that L’Art Nouveau is neither based upon a negation, nor destructive in its aims. He gives account of his sponsorship over a young cause which, a decade since, agitated within the narrow boundaries of an old Parisian street, has since spread over the world. He makes also a prophecy for the future of art in which there is no racial exclusiveness. He shows that nothing that is artistic is foreign to him.

EDITOR’S NOTE.—The editors of The Craftsman regard themselves as most fortunate to have been able to present in the pages of their magazine an extended and just appreciation of a great art movement, concerning which there is so little definite information among the people.

In the issue of December, 1903, Professor A. D. F. Hamlin of Columbia University offered a judgment of L’Art Nouveau, bearing principally upon its manifestations in architecture.