

Werkbund Exhibition, Cologne, 1914:
Bruno Taut,
Glas pavillon, the pavilion built for the German glass industry association.



Jolanda
Nigro Covre
Italy

Art Nouveau - at the Crossroads of Symbolism and Proto-rationalism



Henry van de Velde,
Desk, 1897-98

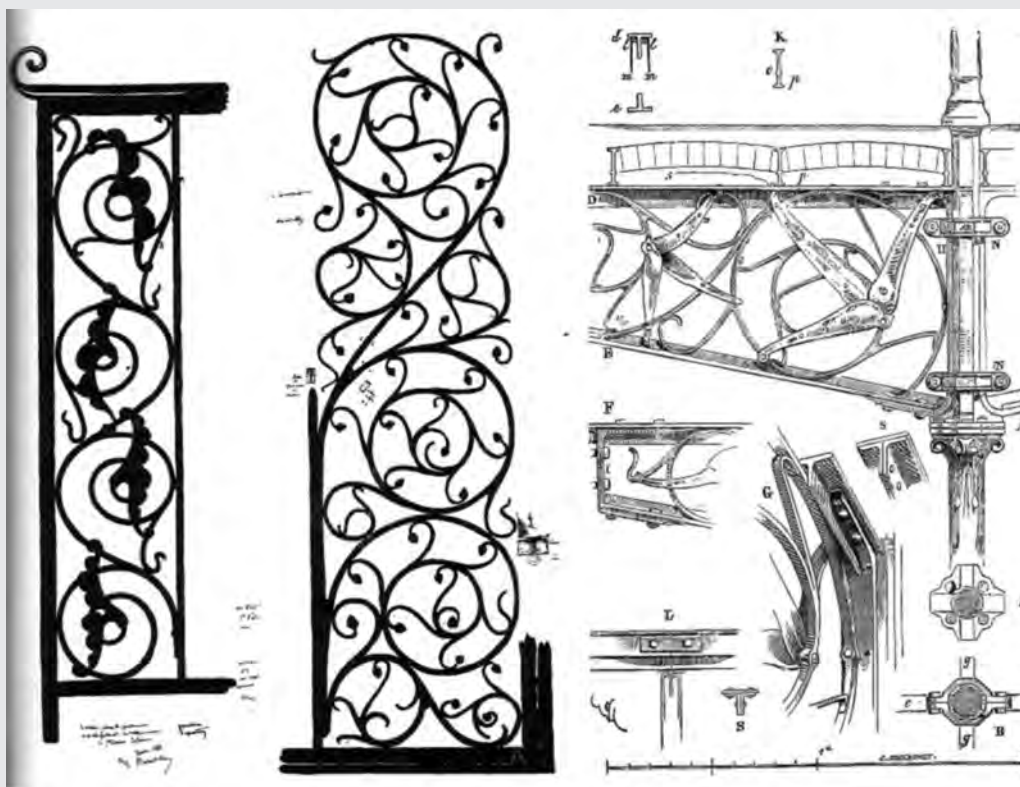
The *Deutscher Werkbund* organized a major exhibition in Cologne in 1914, where three buildings display the three features that characterized the full maturity of the Jugendstil movement in Germany, whose features can be traced back to Art Nouveau in Brussels and Paris, and to the Vienna Secession. These are van de Velde's Werkbund Theatre, Bruno Taut's Glass Pavilion, and Gropius's Model Factory. By 1902, the Brussels-trained Henry Clément van de Velde was in

Henry van de Velde,
Silver buckle
with amethyst, 1898



Germany, where he directed the Weimar School of Applied Art, and was already a well-established Art Nouveau architect and designer. Bruno J. Taut would later become better known for his utopian work - dubbed *expressionist* - after the end of the Great War in 1918, and eventually turned to a rather personal version of the rationalist school. Walter Gropius's architecture around this time was defined as *proto-rationalist*, and his approach matured with the foundation of the Bauhaus school in 1919, where he initially stressed a rather expressionist approach, and after a few years shifted to his typical rationalist focus. He was backed up by the example of Peter Behrens, who created the template for a new concept of industrial architecture and related design, characterized by a lean and generally abstract-geometrical interpretation of Jugendstil. Behrens, along with Joseph Hoffmann, attended the 1914 exhibition. The indications coming from van de Velde, Taut and Gropius's buildings remain highly symbolic to this day, albeit in different ways.

Van de Velde had already achieved a structural synthesis inspired by an organic concept of form, where the purpose of curved lines was neither decorative nor phytomorphic, but rather functional. His artistic debut was as a painter influenced by Neo-impressionism and especially by *Les Nabis*, a group of Post-Impressionist avant-garde artists: one need only compare his 1893 tapestry *Angels' Wake* with Maurice Denis's *Season Series* from 1892 - particularly *April* - to see



Eugène-Emmanuel
Violler-le-Duc,
Illustration from
*Entretiens
sur l'architecture*,
1872



Victor Horta,
Hôtel Tassel,
Brussels,
1892-93



already constitute the basis for a functionalist orientation; conversely, some of Gropius's statements, along with the output of the *De Stijl* movement, combine simple geometry with idealistic components.

The organic shapes of the furniture and everyday objects designed by van de Velde do not originate from a phytomorphic repertoire, but rather from the structure of the human bodies which are meant to use them, in both a physical and psychological sense. The correspondence between the shape of the object and the way it is used rests upon a structural analogy, which is entirely consistent with the analogy formulated by the body of theory of *Einfühlung*. In 1902 he wrote: *The line is a force which acts much like the basic forces of nature: multiple lines-forces put together, acting one against the other under the same conditions, produce the same results as forces of nature in reciprocal opposition.* Later, referring to his previous output, he would add: *Structural-linear and dynamographic ornaments, understood as the adequate complement for the forms assumed under the principle of rational and consistent conception, are the image of the interplay of interior forces which we sense in every form and matter. These are the activities that seem to have given life to form and defined its aspect. [...] We can conceive forms without the aid of ornaments, and these are the most perfect forms. In their simplicity they have achieved a linear model which itself constitutes - without any addition - a perfect and eternal ornament. However, it would be going too far to conclude that the presence of the ornament is a secondary element compared to beauty. It is not secondary unless it is inorganic, without any ties to form, without additional and structural activities. The slightest sentimental weakness,*

similarities in composition. Behrens and Gropius's lean, angular structures can also be compared to paintings, and more precisely to those of artists from *Die Brücke* group between 1910 and 1913, when the group moved to Berlin: it should be noted that *Die Brücke* was officially formed in 1905, while the Werkbund was founded in 1907. The exaltation of glass - present in the work of Taut, but also in that of Gropius and later Ludwig Mies van der Rohe - allows for comparisons with the *crystal* structures favoured by Franz Marc - who founded *Der Blaue Reiter* (*The Blue Rider*) journal in 1911 between 1912 and 1913.

The different stances of the three architects can be traced to the alternation between *Einfühlung* and *Reine Sichtbarkeit* - both concepts belonging to poetics related to symbolism and its repercussions on the early historical avant-garde - which Renato De Fusco identified in their Art Nouveau output and what immediately followed. Van de Velde shows how an organic repertoire, where curves predominate, can

August Endell,
Atelier Elvira, Munich, 1897-98



the most minor of all naturalistic ties threaten the eternity of this ornament¹.

In Gropius's factory, and perhaps even more so in the Fagus Factory built in Alfeld an der Leine (1911-1914), the essential structure of the polyhedron houses extensive glass walls and highlights the uninterrupted continuity of the windows, the immediate communication between interior and exterior, and transparency, particularly in Alfeld's attractive angular appearance, which was subsequently

adopted in the sector dedicated to workshops in the Bauhaus building. During that same year of 1914, Gropius explained his concept of form: *The fundamental problem of form had become an unknown concept. Crass materialism was matched in every way by the overestimation of the purpose and material of the work of art. Substance was neglected in favour of the packaging. As much as a material concept of life might still prevail today, it is now impossible to overlook the stirrings of a strong, unitarian desire for culture [...]. Art once again has a spiritual matter to be represented symbolically in its works [...] the idea is to build, for structures of the present era, which are to be used for communications, industry, and commerce, definitive forms of expression (formal types) on the basis of new technical premises and new spatial premises. [...] the stability of the material is invisible, while the harmonious proportions emerge only in the perceptible intuition of the visual surface. All secondary details are subordinate to a large and simple figurative form which, once its definitive lines are established, will have to point to the symbolic expression of the interior meaning of modern construction [...]. Their clear image, perceptible at first glance, does not betray the slightest hint of the complex nature of the technical organism. Technical form and artistic form are fused together in an organic whole.* All of the above is in line with the search for rhythm and clarity and with the spiritual symbolism present in a strain of expressionism linked to Konrad Fiedler's theory of pure visibility².

In his Pavilion, Taut combined technical virtuosity and expressionist symbolism in the purity of the great crystal that stands atop an Art Nouveau-influenced concrete pedestal. The building also clearly references the Orient in the profile of its dome, which is entirely consistent with the primitivist references that are particularly numerous in the production of utopian drawings that appeared after the foundation of the *Novembergruppe* (November



Max Pechstein,
Head of a fisherman 9,
1921



Raoul Dufy,
Window with
coloured glasses,
1906



1918). The celebration of crystal on the part of the architect, who was nicknamed *Glas* (glass) to set him apart among the group's various tendencies, began at that time. The term *expressionist architecture* and the concept of *sachlich* both appeared for the first time in the expressionist magazine *Der Sturm*. *Sachlich* indicated a positive assessment of all which was objective and functional; in the mid-1920s, this concept would be associated with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, an antagonist of the early avant-garde. In 1915 Adolph Behne, writing in the magazine *Expressionistische Architektur*, cited Adolf Loos (who also wrote for the magazine and was friends with Oskar Kokoschka) and Taut as examples of expressionist architecture and argued in favour of the principle of *Sachlichkeit*.

The origins of Art Nouveau have generally been linked to the re-assessment of artisanry and the minor arts, a phytomorphic and zoomorphic repertoire, bourgeois decorative tastes, and especially to the diffusion of symbolism in Belgium. However, the precedent of William Morris, who was programmatically adverse to the capitalist management of industry (although ultimately the bourgeois clients prevailed), along with the widespread anarchist and socialist sympathies in the world of painters, should provide food for thought on the hedonistic inclinations of the movement, which was also strongly tied to functionalist demands and a new awareness of the inherent formal qualities of the new techniques. Victor Horta was able to ponder the proposals

Otto Wagner,
Kirche am Steinhof,
1903-1907

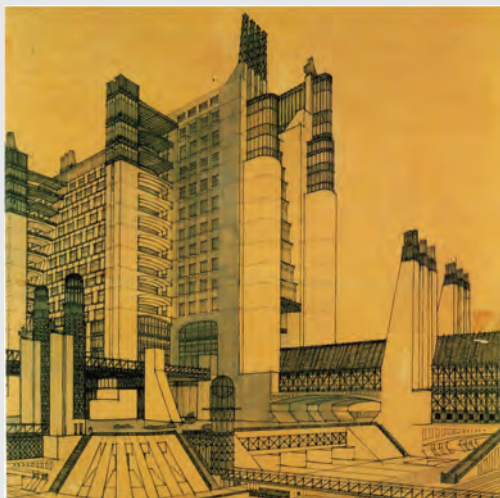




Erich Mendelsohn,
The Einstein Tower,
Potsdam, 1919-20



Antonio Sant'Elia,
illustration from
La città nuova,
1914: housing
with external lifts and
connection systems to
different street levels



contained in Eugène Viollet-Le-Duc's drawings, in which the elasticity of Gothic art, whose dynamic potential he had always kept in mind, is combined with the flexibility of metal structures. Indeed, Horta created moments of pure structural reflection, such as in the interior of the *Maison du peuple* theatre, or in the facade of this same building, which was not only organically curved, but also characterized by visible metal load-bearing structures, whose interest lies more in their engineering technique than in the technical architectural solution: art and architecture historians have struggled to get away from this dualism much more than building practice at the turn of the century

did. There is still a tendency to refer to the facade of August Endell's *Atelier Elvira* (which in any case was far from insensitive to technical and structural innovations) as an example of the new German style rather than to the abstract and functional elegance of Richard Riemerschmid's furniture; by the same token, the new French style is more often exemplified by the works of Hector Guimard (perhaps together with Émile Gallé's marvellous creations) rather than those of Auguste Perret. Although the latter building contractor, much like the engineer Gustave Eiffel, was often likened to the composition technique of Georges-Pierre Seurat (one need only think of the Eiffel Tower, painted in 1889), he is generally overlooked as part of the architectural context of Art Nouveau.

Moving to France, and exploring the relationship with figurative art, the creations of Guimard can be likened to Henri Matisse's arabesques; however, Perret's geometric motifs were closer to another strain of the *Fauves* movement, that of the *Le Havre* group that also included Georges Braque - see Raou Dufy's 1907 *Window with coloured panes*. If we compare the house on Rue Franklin built in 1903 by Perret (Le Corbusier's teacher), the first to be made of concrete, with Horta's Solvay House (1895), we must keep in mind that the two buildings belong to the same historical arc, although the subtle majolica decorations of Perret's building are limited to its surface and to rigorously geometric-linear panels. Its lean, austere character reflects a concept of form that is far from rigidly functionalistic, and which looks with favour towards organic approaches, further confirming that the process of linear geometrization is just as much a part of symbolist culture as soft, curvy solutions. According to Perret, architecture follows universal laws, which are linked to the conditions imposed by nature (*the laws of stability, the nature of materials, atmospheric variations, optical illusions*), according to a principle that would be directly passed down to Le Corbusier; conditions that are *permanent*, while *temporary* conditions include *destinations, functions, uses, regulations, fashion*. *Style is more important than correspondence with destination, defined as a character: Style is the art of using matter, which the work will testify to, and getting the most out of harmony. A locomotive only has character. The Parthenon has character and style. A few years from now, the most beautiful*

locomotive we have today will be nothing but a heap of scrap metal. A frame is to a building as a skeleton is to an animal. Like the skeleton of an animal put to rhythm, balanced and symmetrical, contains and supports the most disparate organs, placed in various locations, so must a building's frame be composed, put to rhythm, balanced, and even symmetrical³.

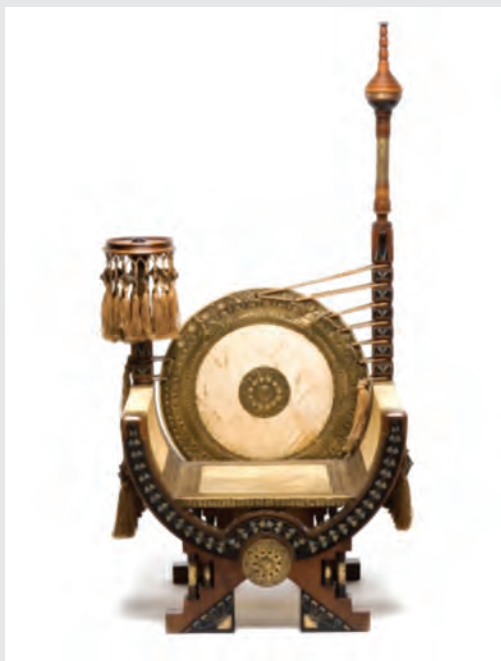
The surface projection of decorative elements was similar to the works of Otto Wagner. The solutions proposed by the architects and designers of the Vienna Secession, halfway between the simplifications of the Arts and Crafts movement and the worldview of Art Nouveau, left a lasting mark on German culture. I will limit myself to comparing the cutlery of van de Velde with that of Josef Hoffmann: while the former were more organic and perhaps psychologically functional, the latter were more *modern*, and certainly more often imitated over the course of the 20th century. The fact that linearism, with its hostility to curves, also belongs to a symbolist aesthetic can be seen, once again, in the collaboration between *the square* Hoffmann and Klimt in Brussels' Stoclet Palace.

Adolf Loos's anti-secessionist polemic is a case of its own, which once again requires a comparison with figurative arts. Loos was not interested in the formal possibilities introduced by new techniques. His furniture is inspired by Otto Wagner's austerity and his ascetic relinquishment of any type of ornament and beauty leads to a singular reconciliation with classic approaches and an idea of functionality approaching that of Carlo Lodoli (Argan). This relinquishment was most of all a moral statement, and this explains his closeness to Berlin's expressionist circles, to which he invited his friend Kokoschka, and to the magazine *Der Sturm*, where he published numerous essays along with other authors who focused on architecture. Loos and Kokoschka were united by a desire to strip the flesh from language, to exhibit a style of being inimical to any attractiveness or hedonistic formal satisfaction. Without admitting it, Loos is the abstract-geometrical counterpart to the secessionists, who admittedly paved the way for him.

In an Italian context, references to organic or abstract-geometrical lines are made more complicated by the different types of interactions between theoretical premises and technical-structural issues, and by the fact that Italy's relationship with the European culture of Art Nouveau was established quite late, albeit with excellent results. These achievements have only recently been given their due, not just in the fields of architecture and furniture (D'Aronco, Basile), but also in the artisanal tradition of wrought iron and ceramics. I would only like to point out that the relationship between Art Nouveau and primitivism in Italy was at its most original especially when the decline of the former began, and Art Nouveau - leaping over early rationalist efforts, which had also arrived in Italy late - linked itself with the architecture and design of the mid-1920s and with the Art Déco movement. The best-known among the artists who presided over this shift from *art for everyone* to a more bourgeois circulation was perhaps Carlo Bugatti, whose lengthy career was not always as appreciated as it is today, after its reappraisal, and whose extensive traces at Paris's Musée d'Orsay are proudly highlighted by some. The bewildering multiplicity of references in his decorations, sometimes combined with abstract-geometrical circular elements, keeps him suspended between the decline of eclecticism and the precursors of modernity. His position was close to that of Galileo Chini, whose work was also reappraised



Carlo Bugatti,
Throne chair,
1900 ca.



recently. It proved perhaps more difficult to accept the role of innovators played in different ways by the likes of Duilio Cambellotti and especially Gio Ponti, both highly skilled in transfiguring reminiscences of Art Nouveau and classical traditions. While the former paid particular attention to the social function of art, the latter focused on the shift from a sophisticated artisanal tradition (consider his works for Richard Ginori in the 1920s) to designing structures for serial production that were only moderately rationalist but in a very original way. The fact that the Coppedé district in Rome (a neighbourhood remarkable for its contribution to the diffusion of decorations in an urban context) has for a long time drawn critics' attention away from less conspicuous and more subtle functionalist approaches, confirms the impasse in which critical attention towards structural rationality and decoration has found itself.

Notes:

1. Henry van de Velde, *La linea è una forza*, 1923, "Casabella" 1960, no 237 March, pp.37-42.
2. Walter Gropius, *Il contributo delle strutture industriali alla formazione dello stile*, "Der Verkehr", Jena 1914, In : Maldonado, *Tecnica e cultura*, Milan 1979, pp. 202-207.
3. From a 1933 conference and a 1924 interview with Christian Zervos cited in G. Fanelli, R. Gargiani, *Auguste Perret*, Rome-Bari 1994, pp. 70; 49; and from a 1952 essay cited in L. Benevolo, *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, Bari 1960 (and subsequent editions), pp. 459-461.

Gio Ponti,
Ceramics designed
for Richard Ginori,
1923-1930

