

Modern Art: Collecting Art Nouveau at Budapest around 1900

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The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest is one of the first such institutions in Europe. Modeled on the South Kensington Museum (which today is known as the Victoria & Albert Museum), the institution was founded in 1872, closely following similar museums of art and design in Vienna and Berlin. The museum was created by allocating state funds for the purchase of works at the 1873 World's Fair in Vienna. The international collecting activity, which began at this point, continued at an amazing speed until the beginning of World War I. Right from the start, the museum collected historic artefacts as well as contemporary works.

As the collection grew, it was soon decided that a new, permanent building needed to be erected for the museum, and as a result, an open architectural competition was announced in 1891. The winner was the team of Ödön Lechner and Gyula Pártos, whose groundbreaking design was then built in a short time, to be opened ceremonially in 1896. The new building, which was built for the museum as well as the School of Applied Arts, is generally regarded as the first major work of Art Nouveau in Hungary. Lechner, the architect, was looking to create a Hungarian architectural style, for which he looked for models in the East. The resulting building - which merges the masses of French renaissance architecture with motifs of Indian Mughal style and motifs from Hungarian folk art - is in a truly unique style. The modern, flat treatment of the facade, the great open spaces created inside, and the fluid lines of decorative details justify classifying the building as Art Nouveau. Moreover, the entire facade and the roof of the building are covered with ceramic tiles and ornaments created in the Zsolnay manufactory, a leading ceramics workshop of the time based in the southern Hungarian town of



View of the Museum of Applied Arts around 1900

Architects:
Ödön Lechner
and Gyula Pártos.
Photo by
György Klösz

Pécs. The cooperation of Lechner and the Zsolnay manufactory - which extended to several other buildings - created unique ornaments, which belong to the highest achievements of the period.

Just the building alone indicated that the museum in its new home was a place of modernism and innovation. This was reinforced with the appointment of Jenő Radisics as the director of the museum in 1896. As deputy director, Radisics had already supervised construction and exhibitions during the preceding years, but as the new building opened, he was fully in charge of the development of the collection as well as the exhibition policy of the museum. Radisics remained the director of the museum until 1917, and his leadership marked a high point in the history of the museum. Naturally, through donations and purchases, the historic collection of the museum grew at this time as well. The significance of this collecting activity can be grasped even today with a simple survey of the collection, while the details of the process can be clearly seen, thanks largely to the archival research of Hilda Horváth of the Museum of Applied Arts (see list of her publications in the bibliography).

In the period before he became director, Radisics had extensive international relations.



The core of the collection represents what was thought to be the best of Art Nouveau at the time the style was flourishing. All this material was recently digitized in the framework of the EU-funded Partage Plus project, and is now available to everyone online, through the Europeana portal.

Vase
Designer:
Alf Wallander
- Rörstrand
Porcelain Factory,
Linköping,
1896-97.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



In 1882 and 1884 he organized the Hungarian exhibition at the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, and he developed a successful cooperation with Louis Delamarre-Didot, a member of the Board of the Union Centrale. Delamarre-Didot became the French representative of the museum, and started supplying the museum with exceptional works. The first significant purchase of *modern* works of arts was from the Paris World's Fair of 1889. Here Radisics selected significant French and British works, which were then purchased by Delamarre-Didot for the Museum. The collection included the works of Émile Gallé and Ernest Baptiste Lévêillé as well as Christopher Dresser. Many of these works exhibited technical novelties and their forms and decoration showed the way towards Art Nouveau. In fact, their makers were often those who later became the leading masters of Art Nouveau - such as

Émile Gallé. Delamarre-Didot gave further pieces to the museum by Gallé in 1890, and soon the museum had a similar agent in England, Herbert Minton Cundall. It was thanks to him that the museum purchased textile works from William Morris in 1895. It was, however, the series of various international exhibitions as well as exhibitions organized in Budapest that provided the main occasions for new purchases during the next few years, directly after the opening of the new building in 1896.

Radisics recognized the importance of Art Nouveau, and wanted to build up a collection of the best works, to serve as models to Hungarian designers and manufactories. After all, the museum had been conceived as an educational institution associated with the School of Arts and Crafts, open to all. Radisics was most interested in French and English developments, as well as Scandinavia. He also purchased German works for the museum, but the art of Viennese Secession did not interest him. Perhaps he was looking for models farther afield, in order to encourage Hungary's independent artistic development within the joint kingdoms of Austria-Hungary.

To prepare exhibitions and acquisitions in the new museum building, Radisics travelled a lot. In 1897, he went to Scandinavia to visit the Exhibition of Decorative Arts at Stockholm and to see museums and manufactories. From the exhibition, he purchased a magnificent tapestry by Frida Hansen, as well as other works. Radisics also established contacts with the Kunstindustriemuseet in Copenhagen and with the Danish Royal Porcelain Manufactory. It was perhaps during this trip that the idea of a large contemporary exhibition was formed in his head, as these Scandinavian firms were

Peacock vase.
 Designer: Louis Comfort Tiffany:
 New York, c. 1898.
 Budapest, Museum of Applied Arts



Vase with vines.
 Design:
 Zsolnay factory: Pécs, 1899
 Budapest, Museum of Applied Arts



all represented in it. He also invited the Copenhagen museum to provide loans for the planned exhibition.

The exhibition was organized in the spring of 1898, and Radisics titled it *Modern Art*. The exhibition's intention was to showcase the new, trend-setting artistic movements and centres of Western and Northern Europe. The 1898 exhibition was accompanied by a checklist, with a short introduction by Radisics. In addition, a long essay was published in *Magyar Iparművészet* (Hungarian Decorative Arts), a leading art journal of the period, which was closely associated with the museum. In the journal, József Mihalik argued for the new artistic movement, Art Nouveau, stating that it resulted in breaking down the

barriers between artists and craftsmen, where craftsmen were no longer looked down upon, and where the fine arts and the decorative arts were at the same high level. As such, it served as a model for Hungary - simple copying of Art Nouveau forms would lead to nowhere; rather, the renewal of Hungarian art had to stem from cooperation between artists and industry.

The exhibition in fact consisted of two parts. One part consisted of posters, which included works primarily from France, Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, the US, and even some Hungarian examples. The main part of the exhibition consisted of works of the decorative arts. This provided an opportunity for Radisics to display the works purchased in



Soup plate.
Designer:
József Rippl-Rónai
Zsolnay Factory
Pécs, 1898.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



Pendant
with chain.
Designer:
René Jules Lalique
Paris, c. 1900.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



Scandinavia the previous year. Two institutions lent works for the exhibition: the Kunstindustrimuseet of Copenhagen and the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg. A large selection of works was provided by the *Art Nouveau* gallery of Siegfried Bing from Paris. This included various works by French masters, such as Gallé and Alexandre Bigot, as well as a sizeable collection of glass by the American Louis Comfort Tiffany. 27 of these were also shown at the Winter exhibition of the Museum für Kunst und Industrie (today's MAK) in Vienna, but Radisics was dissatisfied with the selection, so Bing sent another 23 pieces directly from Paris to Budapest. The works of Tiffany were no doubt among the highlights of the exhibition, and received a detailed description



in the accompanying publications. Other works arrived from the Danish Royal Porcelain Manufactory in Copenhagen as well as the Rörstrand porcelain manufactory in Sweden. Other Danish ceramic manufactories - including the works of Bing & Grøndahl and Hermann August Kähler - were also introduced. French ceramics were brought by Bing, while from Germany, Max Leauger sent works to the exhibition. Among textiles, Frida Hansen's tapestry was proudly displayed, next to works by the Scherrebek weaving manufactory in Germany, lead by Otto Eckmann. A few pieces of French furniture were also displayed, as well as metalwork by Alexandre Charpentier. A great feat of Radisics was that Émile Gallé sent a series of glass works directly from Nancy. English works at the exhibition mainly consisted of wallpapers, including works designed by Walter Crane. To round out the picture, leather works - especially bookbindings - were also displayed. The final section of the exhibition called attention to Hungarian masters working in the new style. First among them was József Rippl-Rónai, who worked at that time in France. His works were not well received, as they failed the test of functionality according to critics. Of other products, the ceramic works of the Zsolnay manufactory of Pécs were the most numerous.

Radisics used the exhibition as an occasion to enrich the collections. He purchased a large series of works by Tiffany from Bing, together with 50 more works. To this day, these works are among the most important pieces of the museum's *Art Nouveau* collection, and are often featured in exhibitions at home and abroad.

The exhibition truly represented a breakthrough in Hungary. Already at the end of the same year, the annual Christmas exhibition at

Pair of
andirons.
Designer:
Louis
Majorelle:
Nancy,
1895-1900.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



Gong.
Designer:
Frigyes
Spiegel:
Budapest,
c. 1900.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



the Museum of Applied Arts was full of Art Nouveau designs by Hungarian artists. Even such conservatives as the Herend porcelain manufactory started experimenting at that time. Other factories - most notably Zsolnay of Pécs, and furniture makers such as Pál Horti or Ödön Faragó - started producing Art Nouveau works of the highest quality. József Rippl-Rónai, who was based in Paris at the time, exhibited his work in Siegfried Bing's Salon Art Nouveau. Starting from 1897, he designed an entire dining room in Art Nouveau style, for the Budapest palace of Count Tivadar Andrásy - complete with stained glass, tapestries and tableware. The room, which was later moved to the Andrásy-palace at Tiszadob, was destroyed in 1945, but several objects from it later entered the collection of the museum.

Radisics also provided further opportunities for inspiration. Still in 1898, the prizewinning works of the English National Competition were shown. In 1900, an exhibition of Walter Crane was organized (at which the artist was also present), and in 1907, another exhibition was dedicated to Arthur Beardsley. In 1902, a comprehensive exhibition was dedicated to contemporary British decorative arts. The Christmas exhibition was held every year, providing a showcase for Hungarian artists, and a chance for the museum to add new works to the collection. Thus, along with the collection of European Art Nouveau, Radisics also systematically built up a collection of Hungarian Art Nouveau, including wonderful pieces of Zsolnay ceramics.

In addition, for a long time Radisics was in charge of organizing Hungary's participation at various World's Fairs and international exhibitions of decorative arts, the material of which was also generally shown at the Museum



Tapestry
with scene of a fair.

Designer:
János Vaszary
and
Sarolta Kovalszky:
Németelemer,
1905.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



Sphaera
imaginationis
Design
for a stained
glass window.
Designer:
Walter Crane:
London,
1899.
Budapest,
Museum of
Applied Arts



of Applied Arts before being transported abroad. Hungary's successes at the 1902 international exhibition of Torino in 1902 or at the 1906 World's Fair in Milano as well as the St. Louis World's Fair (the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) of 1904 were thus in no small part due to Radisics.

As in the case of the exhibitions above, Hungarian material to be shown the 1900 World's Fair in Paris was gathered and displayed in the Museum of Applied Arts. Planning started in the year of the Hungarian Millennium celebrations of 1896, and thus at this time Hungary put together predominantly historicizing material, with very little Art Nouveau. An example of the office of the Mayor of Budapest was shown in the decorative art section of the exhibition. Radisics secured a significant amount from the Hungarian Parliament for the purchase of new artworks at the World's Fair. Once in Paris, he re-established contacts with Siegfried Bing, and started purchasing for the museum. Once again, he bought predominantly French works: furniture by Charles Plumet, Eugene Gaillard and Georges de Feure, jewelry by René Jules Lalique, metalwork by Louis Majorelle and the Cristofle company, lamps by Raoul Francois Larche, bookbindings by Saint-André de Lignerieux, ceramics by the Glatigny ceramics workshop and Paul Vever. In addition, in what was probably his biggest feat there, he bought the entire exhibition pavilion of Alexandre Bigot, comprised mainly of architectural ceramics. Radisics also bought significant British as well as Japanese works in Paris.

In addition to the Museum, several other collectors, including aristocrats and rich burghers of Budapest, bought important works at the Budapest exhibitions, especially at the 1898 exhibition of Modern Art as well as at



the Paris World's Fair. In later years, either their full collections or just some of these works enriched the museum's Art Nouveau holdings. An example is the collection of Vince Wartha. A chemist, he worked with Vilmos Zsolnay in experimenting with ceramic glazes and amassed a huge collection of samples of various types of ceramic and glass objects, which entered the museum in 1948. The collection includes works he had purchased in 1898, and a number of Zsolnay ceramics, among other objects. The collection of György Ráth, the first director of the museum who bought pieces from Walter Crane and commissioned contemporary works, such as the enameled Rapaport vase was donated to the museum in 1905, along with his villa. Also in 1905, the Art Nouveau ex libris collection of Kálmán Rozsnyay was donated to the museum. Significant works probably coming from one of these exhibitions still occasionally turn up on the art market - in 2012, the Museum of Applied Arts was able to acquire a wine-jug set by Alexandre Bigot at an auction. Based on the silver marks, the set has been in Hungary since about 1900.

As a result of the activity of Radisics, the Museum of Applied Arts had already built up one of the foremost Art Nouveau collections in Europe by the turn of the century. Although during the second half of the 20th century, many other Art Nouveau collections were developed, the collection of the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, by now historic, still ranks among the finest. The core of the collection represents what was thought to be

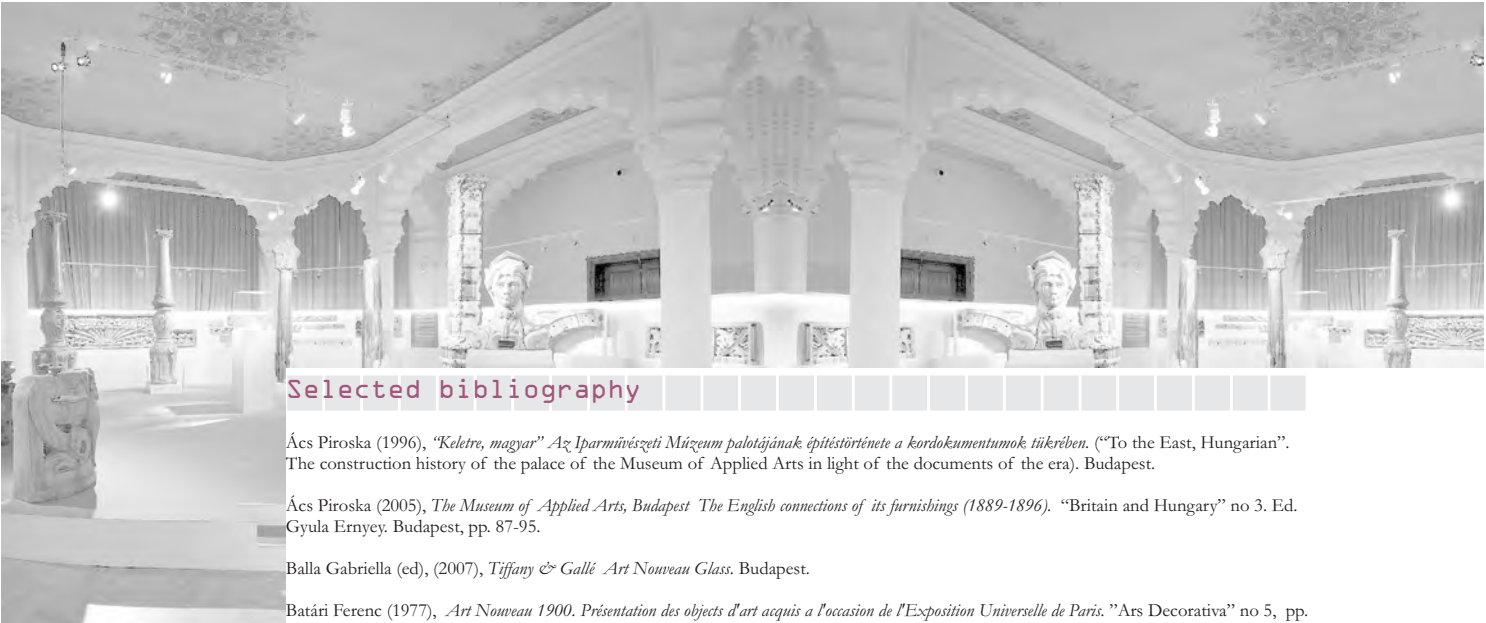
the best of Art Nouveau at the time the style was flourishing. All this material was recently digitized in the framework of the EU-funded Partage Plus project, and is now available to everyone online, through the Europeana portal. The museum digitized 4200 objects overall from the collection, including works on paper alongside the traditional fields of the decorative arts. In addition, 3D scans and models of 240 objects from the collections (mainly ceramics) were also produced. This freely available material once again makes tangible the unparalleled collecting activity of the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts at the time of Art Nouveau.

Exhibition of the Bigot Pavilion at the Museum of Applied Arts, 2013
Photo: Gellért Áment



Cover of the catalogue of the exhibition of Modern Art at the Museum of Applied Arts (1898)





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Internet resources:

Collection database of the Museum of Applied Arts: <http://collections.imm.hu>
 Back issues of the museum's journal, *Ars Decorativa* are available in the Hungarian Digital Museum Library:
<http://muzeum.arcanum.hu/kiadvanyok>