

From Ashes to Jugend Norwegian Jugendstil in Ålesund.



Stina
Aadland
Jensen
Norway

Introduction

This article will give a short introduction to Norwegian Art Nouveau (referred to as Jugendstil) and how this is especially visible in the town of Ålesund. I will focus mostly on architecture and give some examples on some of the most outstanding examples of the style. I will use the German term Jugendstil, which covers the Norwegian version of Art Nouveau. Even though one can find elements that coincide more with the international Art Nouveau, in Norway it is most commonly referred to as Jugendstil.

Nationality, identity and independence

Art Nouveau manifests itself in different ways depending on the country in which it originates. The idea about breaking with past styles and form, and embracing modernity and industry, gave it its universal dimension. But this also resulted in a quest for national and

regional versions, depending on the different nation's history, culture and language¹. This was also the case in Norway.

Still a relatively young nation at the end of the 19th century and still a part of the political union with Sweden (1814-1905), there were heated discussions about art and culture that became a question of self-assertion. With the struggle for independence came a renewed interest in local traditions and the quest to find a national style, independent from any Danish or Swedish influence. Even though these discussions were not new, unlike the previous National Romantic period with its emphasis on depicting the Norwegian landscape and the farmer, the focus was turned to the Middle Ages and folk-art. Mythical creatures found in folktales, like trolls, were incorporated into art, for instance through the painter and drawer Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914).

Other artists tried to find ways to express a new, national style, often based on Norse



Book.
M. Skeibrok, *Sandfærdige Skrøner* (*Truthful tall tales*).1891
Ill. by Theodor Kittelsen



Gerhard Munthe
Mørkredd
(*Afraid of the dark*). 1892.
Tapestry

A style that flourished side by side with Jugendstil in Norway was the Dragon Style, inspired by Viking ship ornamentation and stave churches. For some artists and architects this style sometimes blended with Jugendstil, making it a symbiosis of styles.

leading naturalist painter and designer Gerhard Munthe (1848-1929) found inspiration from folktales and medieval times to make his decorative art, trying to renew the national folk art and raise the level of craftsmanship.

A style that flourished side by side with Jugendstil in Norway was the Dragon Style, inspired by Viking ship ornamentation and stave churches. For some artists and architects this style sometimes blended with Jugendstil, making it a symbiosis of styles. This is most noticeable in wood architecture dating back to the last decade of the 19th century, but later it also became popular in silverware and furniture design. Dragon Style was to become the official representative of Norwegian building tradition and cultural heritage at the end of the 19th century, and was presented at exhibitions around the world. The Dragon Style is sometimes referred to as a movement and a national offshoot of the Gothic revival in Europe².

Jugendstil in Norwegian architecture

In Norway, like in the rest of Europe, the architecture of the last decades prior to 1900 was mostly dominated by historicism, but in the mid-19th century many architects felt it was time for a renewal and to break away with the past³. The Jugendstil period in architecture in Norway lasted for about 10 years (1900-1910). The claim for honesty and a coherent look, like in the Arts and Crafts movement in England, was important for the Norwegian architects and a young nation needed a new identity. Architecture would serve this purpose, and represent the nation through aesthetics, practicality and symbols⁴. Even though few architects used the term Jugendstil to define their work, one can clearly see elements that coincide with what is considered Jugendstil, and many architects looked to Germany and Austria for inspiration. The theatre in Bergen (Norway's second largest city), *Den Nationale*

Bergen's theater
Den Nationale
Scene,
Architect:
Einar Oscar
Schou,
1909.
Photo by
Stina Aadland
Jensen



Scene (1909) by Einar Oscar Schou is a good example on monumental architecture inspired by Viennese Jugendstil.

To understand the impact Jugendstil had on Norwegian architecture, and especially in Ålesund, we have to look at some socio-economical and historical facts.. It is important to stress that Art Nouveau did not have the same impact in art and architecture in Norway as it did in other European countries. Norway's industrialization and the growth in economy had given rise to a new economic structure, which meant that not only high officials and land-owners could afford to build big mansions, but also the growing bourgeoisie. They hired some

of the best architects in the country, and most of these architects were educated abroad, taking the international impulses with them to Norway⁵. The town where this is most visible is Ålesund, on the west coast of Norway.

Ålesund

The internationally well-known Norwegian architect Christian Nordberg-Schultz once stated that: *Among Norwegian cities, Ålesund has a unique position. Hardly anywhere has such an extensive and complete environment been preserved; thus we are provided with a rather unique example of what a city environment once meant*⁶.

A devastating fire in 1904 left almost the entire



Svaneapoteket
(Swan Pharmacy),
Architect:
Hagbart
Schytte-Berg,
1907
Photo by
Stina Aadland
Jensen





town of Ålesund in ashes, making 10000 people homeless. But this tragedy soon turned into a stroke of luck for architects and craftsmen in Norway at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1899 Norway's two largest cities (Christiania and Bergen) experienced a collapse in the building industry, leaving many people unemployed. The fire of Ålesund resulted in one of the biggest makeovers a Norwegian town has ever experienced and over 50 architects and hundreds of builders and craftsmen were employed to rebuild the town. In only three years, from 1904-190, a new town was erected from the ashes. The fire also resulted in an obligation to build in stone or brick within the city limits in Norway, and this had a direct impact on the architecture in Ålesund⁷. This historical and stylistic shift made Ålesund the most significant Jugendstil town in Norway. Even though there is Jugendstil architecture in most of the big cities in Norway, Ålesund stands out due to the confined area in which the buildings are found and because of the vastness in buildings with a more or less coherent look. But to understand why Ålesund was rebuilt as

it was we need to look at some important factors. Henrik Nissen, the man in charge of the rebuilding and one of Norway's most acclaimed architects at that time stated that: *One had to avoid using historicism and classicism. A new, Norwegian style, based on the Dragon Style from the Middle Ages would best suit this purpose*⁸. His importance to the development of Ålesund cannot be underestimated.

Another important factor already mentioned were the impulses the architects had from their studies abroad. Many of them had been to Germany and Scotland, thus giving them inspiration and knowledge about Jugendstil and the Arts and Crafts movement. The simplicity and rationality of the Arts and Craft movement were especially well looked upon. Most of the architecture in Ålesund can therefore be seen as a symbiosis between simple neo-baroque form and Jugendstil ornamentation and asymmetry. Medieval masks and Norse ornamentation are features seen throughout the town, as well as the medieval tower constructions. From the beginning of the 20th century there was much debate about ornamentation and the need to focus on the purpose of the



The pharmacy in 1917. Photographer unknown



The pharmacy in 2013. Photo by Stina Aadland Jensen

building among Norwegian architects⁹. These issues were also addressed by Henrik Nissen in his writings about the town planning in Ålesund¹⁰.

The strong emphasis on the functional aspects linking the architecture to its surrounding space is highly visible in Ålesund. Both the mountains and the sea form an important backdrop and some of the architectural elements reflect the scenery, mostly visible in the ornamentation. If we look at some of the architectural drawings for warehouses, this can be seen.

Some of the most significant buildings in Ålesund have similar features, and this is the reason why so many have argued that Jugendstil is highly visible throughout the town. Some of these elements are asymmetrical built up façades, detached arches on windows, and rounded corners.

The Swan Pharmacy

To exemplify the discussion about Jugendstil in Ålesund, I will turn my attention to one of the most important buildings in Ålesund, the former Swan Pharmacy (today the Art Nouveau Center) in Apotekergata 16. It was built in



Detail of the main entrance.
Photo by Stina Aadland Jensen

1907 by the architect Hagbart Schytte-Berg, who brought new ideas to Norwegian architecture from Europe, as well as individually renewing them.

The building is actually made up of two sections, divided by a firewall in the middle. But both sections were still owned by the employer J.A.J Øwre.

The Swan Pharmacy is one of ten listed buildings in Ålesund and most of the interior has not been changed since 1907, as shown on the two photographs of the pharmacy from 1907 and 2013.

The Swan Pharmacy expresses both national and international impulses through materials and the asymmetrical façade, and is a good example of the combination of function and aesthetics in architecture, as well as being a good example of the architect's individual style. The owl, the symbol of knowledge, is fused with modern times through the clock on the tower. The façade is entirely made of granite rouble stone cut from quarries in Fredrikstad, adding to the national element the architects admired and sought after. Many of the architects knew the rouble work technique from Scotland, and the architect Hans Backer Fürst, who worked in Ålesund during the rebuilding period, noted that he had been to Scotland to study the use of this technique¹¹.

The use of corner towers is a repeated element in Ålesund, and can be traced back to medieval castle architecture as well as church architecture. The asymmetrical form is further accentuated by the placement of gables near the south wing and the uneven window placement. The ornamentation is held to a minimum, but is still an important element of the building. Schytte-Berg preferred an organic ornamentation that was structurally integrated rather than superficially applied. His ornaments were often sculpted by hand in mortar as part of the wall, and he restricted them to specific ele-



ments such as doors, frieze or the capitals, as seen on the main entrance¹².

The woodwork both outside and inside the building is mostly made of oak, with a few exceptions, and is a nice contrast to the grey stone. The woodwork was probably hand-carved by local craftsmen. Fable animals and Norse or Celtic ornamentation, are repeated throughout the building, as well as the owl.

The employer, the pharmacist J.A.J Øwre, was one of the most prominent persons in Ålesund. He chose the architect because *He was the most talented, determined, independent and competent architect*¹³. Any further information as to why he chose the architect is unknown.

Gesamtkunstwerk

An important aspect of Art Nouveau was the idea of gesamtkunstwerk (total works of art), about equality between the arts and an all-embracing art. This was also an idea which spread to Norway, especially through the artist Gerhard Munthe. Sadly the examples are few, but the ones that still exist are an important source for understanding this thought and philosophy. We have only to look at the aforementioned Swan Pharmacy in Ålesund. Hagbart Schytte-Berg, who also designed the interior, gave it the same coherent look as the exterior, repeating the ornamentation and material from the façade.



The dining room
Photo by Stina Aadland Jensen

The dining room is where the idea of *gesamtkunstwerk* can be studied up close. Every detail in this room was executed by the architect himself and the furnishing was especially made for this room, including the chairs. The skilled woodwork was done by carpenter Anton Helseth, a local craftsman. The ornamentation from the exterior is repeated on the wainscot. It is carved into the wood, rather than superficially added to its surface, and the interior is entirely made of oak. The handles on the doors and drawers are all metal and richly adorned with the same type of ornaments as the rest of the furniture.

The floral wallpaper, a Balmoral-type, is an imitation of Japanese gilt leather paper (*Kinkarakawa-gami*) a wallpaper with its golden age alongside the Art Nouveau period in Europe (about 1880-1900). It was made by the English company Rottmann & Company in Yokohama, and dates back to 1903.

The big cabinet is a fine example of a symbiosis of Norwegian woodcarving found on stave churches, 18th century romantic cottage style, and the rounded off corners more reminiscent of Art Nouveau. On both feet the owner's initials is carved into the wood, a sign of his status. This is repeated on the chairs. The tradition with carving or painting the owner's signature onto the furniture can be found in traditional Norwegian rose painting¹⁴.

Hagbart Schytte-Berg erected several buildings in Ålesund, both private homes and a combination of home and commercial buildings, like the Swan Pharmacy.

Summary

Highly influenced by both the Arts and Crafts movement, especially the thoughts of John Ruskin and William Morris, and Jugendstil, artists and architects in Norway sought to find a national style that could give the young nation a new identity based on its cultural heritage. The purpose was not to copy the past, but to be inspired by it and use this inspiration to develop something new. Inspiration was found in woodcarving from the Middle Ages, folktales, and art. In architecture, Jugendstil was most visible in ornamentation, though there are fine examples of a more extensive use of Jugendstil around the country, like *Den Nationale Scene* in Bergen.

What characterizes the architecture at the beginning of the 20th century in Norway is a stylistic blend. The influences were many, in particular from Germany, Austria and England. The architecture in many ways reflected the new industrialized and modern society, but architects also searched in the past to try and find something unique and Norwegian, resulting in the Dragon Style blending with Jugendstil. This fusion is highly visible in Ålesund, and throughout the town there are examples of architecture that through form, ornaments and material is a manifestation of the new, national current that swept across the country at the beginning of the 20th century.

Acknowledgement:

This article is based on a short presentation at the conference *The New Bourgeoisie taste* in Rome on the 21st of March 2013.





Oak Cabinet,
Hagbart Schytte-Berg, 1907.
Photo: Stina Aadland Jensen

Notes:

1. Breda Mihelic, *Nationalism, the Driving Force of Art Nouveau*. "Coup de Fouet", 2005 no 6, pp.13-15.
2. Stephan Tschudi-Madsen, *The sources of Art Nouveau*. New York: Dover Publication 2003 [1956], pp. 207-221.
3. But like William Curtis so accurately states in *Modern architecture since 1900*, 2003 [1982]: *But if Art Nouveau artists rejected historicism, they could not altogether reject tradition, for even the creator intent on producing new forms will rely, in some degree, on old ones*, New York: Phaidon Press, p.54.
4. Siri Lexau, *Nasjonsbygging og industrialisering*. In: *Norsk arkitekturhistorie*. Bergen: Det norske samlaget, 2003, p. 286.
5. Siri Lexau, *Nasjonsbygging og industrialisering*. In: *Norsk arkitekturhistorie*. Bergen: Det norske samlaget, 2003, pp.286-290.
6. Norberg-Schultz. Chr (1975), *Ute og inne*. Oslo, Byggekunst no.5.
7. Siri Lexau, *Vestlandet bygger steder*. In: *Vestlandets historie*, Ed. Knut Helle. Bergen: Vigmostad og Bjørke AS, 2007, p.253.
8. The Chief architect Henrik Nissens lecture in Ålesund, republished in the newspaper „Søndmøre Folketidende“, 25.11.1904, p.3.
9. Åse Moe Torvanger, *Tradisjon og fornyelse. Norsk arkitektur rundt århundreskiftet*. In: *Tradisjon og Fornyelse. Norge rundt århundreskiftet*. Oslo: Nasjonalgalleriet, 1995, pp 330-347.
10. Henrik Nissen quoted in the newspaper *Søndmøre Folketidende*. 8.oktober 1906.
11. Quoted in Helga Stave Tvinneim, *Arkitektur i Ålesund. 1904-1907*. „Aalesunds Museum skrift“, 1981 nr. 13, p. 227.
12. David Aasen Sandved, Hagbart Schytte-Berg. *Art Nouveau Scandinavian Style*. „Coup de Fouet“, 2006 nr. 6, p. 31.
13. The son of J.A.J. Øwre quoted in Helga Stave Tvinneim, *Arkitektur i Ålesund 1904-1907*. Op.cit. p.66.
14. Helga Stave Tvinneim, *Arkitektur i Ålesund 1904-1907*. Ålesund, Aalesunds museums skrift. Op.cit p.102.