

ART NOUVEAU

(Article by Suzanne Waters British Architectural Library, RIBA)

BUILDINGS IN ART NOUVEAU STYLE:

29 Avenue Rapp, Paris, completed in 1901. © RIBA Library Photographs Collection

Hotel Tassel, Brussels, completed in 1895. © Architectural Press Archive / RIBA Library Photographs Collection

Translated literally as 'new art', this was a short-lived movement which developed from a fundamentally new approach to architecture and design that flourished in Europe and the USA at end of the 19th century and lasted until just before the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. It came from a desire to break away from set formulas and the proliferation of historical styles. The name came from art dealer Siegfried Bing's (1838-1905) shop in Paris, Maison de l'Art Nouveau which stocked artefacts that weren't reproductions of earlier periods, but were modern and oriental in style. International in scope the movement acquired different names in different countries. In France and Belgium it was Art Nouveau, in the Netherlands it was Nieuwe Kunst (New Art), in Germany Jugendstil (Youth Style), from an arts magazine called Jugend founded in Munich in 1896. Similarly in Spain, Art Joven from a journal published in Barcelona in 1901, also called Modernismo. In Austria it was referred to as Secessionist, derived from avant-garde artists reacting against the academic art establishment and in Italy it was Stile Floreale or Stile Liberty, named after the famous London store founded by Arthur Lazenby Liberty in 1875. In the USA, it was sometimes known as Tiffany Style after Louis Comfort Tiffany the glassmaker. Also referred to as Art Nouveau in Britain it can be seen most notably in the work of the Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who combined slender curves and soft opalescent colours into a crisp geometric framework.

This concentration on the new, youthful, and modern was manifested in the different interpretations of the style in various countries. But, overall there was an emphasis on the fluidity of line based on natural forms, including flowers, leaves, animals and insects, with structure and decoration perfectly integrated. This was expressed with flowing, undulating lines (sometimes referred to as whiplash), floral and geometric shapes, bright colour, sculptural decoration, murals and elaborate ironwork, contained within asymmetrical compositions.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN ART NOUVEAU BUILDING:

Exaggerated, flowing, undulating lines

Rich ornamentation

Emphasis on the decorative and structural properties of materials, especially glass and ironwork

Use of colour and gilding

Asymmetrical composition