Meubles Parlants:
Franco-German relations and narratives of
Art Nouveau in fin-de-siècle France

Jocelyn Bailey/ September 2013
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1. Introduction

The relationship between France and Germany was a defining one for both countries at the end of the nineteenth century. ‘Franco-German antagonism’ had been a central feature of European politics since the French Revolution, however after the war of 1870-1, and the unification of the German states under Prussia, that antagonism intensified. In France, the shock of invasion, defeat, and ‘amputation' at the hands of the Prussians conditioned discourses on many things in the years that followed.

The national neuroses engendered by humiliation by a nation France had long seen as culturally and militarily inferior were further inflamed by the spectre of German economic expansion. After 1870, German industrial output grew unexpectedly quickly, and the newly unified Germany knocked France down the world rankings. France, by contrast, was growing only slowly, a fact ascribed by some historians to her earlier industrialisation. The French 'body social' had had time to understand, and develop resistance to, the 'vices of modernisation'. The sudden gap that now appeared between the French and German economies provoked alarm, and exhortations to find an antidote to the 'somnolence of the French economy'.

Productivity was coupled with a third source of anxiety, in the guise of population growth. Germany's birth rate was rapidly increasing, France's was fairly steady. This was not, as it turned out, a real problem, but it was most definitely a perceived one, and moreover one that called into question the essential virility of French men and the fertility of their women.

It is in the context of this troubling set of circumstances that I want to look at the 1890s movement for renewal in the decorative arts, a phenomenon that spread across most of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, and had its highpoint in the stylistic form which has become synonymous with Paris. In particular, I am interested in – rather than the objects themselves – the narratives that developed in France around the question of delivering an art moderne, or art nouveau. The title of

[2] This is Deborah Silverman’s observation in Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology, and style, but see also the discussion of this fact as it was reported in the pages of the Revue des Arts Decoratifs in chapter 3 of this paper
[3] David Landes, The unbound Prometheus: technological change and industrial development in Western Europe from 1750 to the present, p236
this dissertation, ‘meubles parlantes’, literally translated as ‘talking furniture’, is taken from a quote attributed to French glassmaker Emile Gallé, who was deeply interested in the way objets d’art communicated ideas or feelings. I have borrowed and subverted his meaning here, to refer not only to what objects themselves say, but to what people say about objects, and to what these discourses signify. In this paper I will explore the ways in which the haunting of the French psyche by the relationship with their eastern neighbour both drove the demand for renewal, and conditioned the terms in which it was discussed. It not only affected the ways in which French critics talked about German decorative arts, but more interestingly, it led them to see, and praise or denigrate, certain qualities in French decorative arts. As a coda to the main enquiry, I shall also look briefly at the ways in which the French discourse around art nouveau set the terms by which later scholars understood and classified it.

The impetus for this enquiry has grown from an interest in the loaded ways in which fin-de-siècle domestic interiors, furniture, and objets d’art, were often described. To modern eyes, it is sometimes surprising that a seemingly innocuous chair, or a vase, or whatever it might be, could elicit such descriptive exclamations of acclaim or abuse. Journalist Arsène Alexandre's disdain for gallerist Siegfried Bing's first art nouveau exhibition linger in the mind for their venom, but also for their explicit imagery:

It all reeks of the vicious Englishman, the morphine-addicted jewess, or the crafty Belgian - or a delicious cocktail of all three poisons.5

Inferred qualities could also be positive. Speaking of the French section at a Brussels exhibition of decorative arts in the mid-1890s, art critic Victor Champier notes that France presented a 'harmonious unity' in the midst of the 'jumble of other nations' and, once inside, the visitor had the sensation of literally being in France, 'in a country of elegance and light, where the need for order, lawfulness and moderation are innate to the national spirit.' Such comments are typical of art criticism at the time. These discourses were a vehicle not only for the spectacle of scholarship, but for nationalisms of varying degrees. The decorative arts were being made to carry a heavy burden of communication.

Of course this is not a new observation. Debora Silverman, in her seminal study of art nouveau, argues that objects were infused with meaning in accordance with the fin-de-siècle obsession with the interior, with the psyche, and with the restoration of the Rococo, none of which I am disputing. However, although she alludes to the importance of German victory in 1871, and economic competition, as a driver of the demand for renewal, she doesn't elaborate further

4 Quoted in Silverman, p232

5 Alexandre’s article appeared in Le Figaro, but is quoted in RdAD 1896, ‘les expositions de l’art nouveau’, p5
6 RdAD 1897, ‘L’Exposition Universelle de Bruxelles’, p393
on the impact of the German relationship. Nancy Troy examines the interdependency of French and German developments in the decorative arts in her comparative study, *Modernism and the decorative arts in France*. She writes:

> Against the background of political and economic conflicts between France and Germany… French decorative artists were caught between the necessity – indeed, the inevitability – of modernisation, and the equally pressing need to ground modern design in forms that were recognisably French, not German.\(^8\)

She analyses the influence in France of German achievements in craft reform after the turn of the century (the *Vereinigte Werkstätten*, the *Werkbund*, etc). But the French need to be distinctively French (and not German) begins long before the Germans get into their craft renewal stride after 1900. I think that there is more to be found in exploring the implications of Franco-German anxieties in the run up to 1900, when France turned itself into the defining example of *art nouveau*. My argument is that although Germany itself was not then necessarily perceived in France as a recognised leader in the field of *art nouveau*, yet the Franco-German relationship was an important driver of developments in France.

In order to pursue this topic I have relied on primary source material in the form of a selection of articles published in the *Revue des Arts Décoratifs*,\(^9\) a journal in circulation from 1880 – 1902. I chose this journal as a subject for scrutiny partly for its institutional significance, being the mouthpiece of the main lobbying organisation for the French decorative arts, and central to much of the debate in fin-de-siècle France about *art nouveau*; but also for practical reasons: the entire collection is accessible online.\(^{10}\) I have also drawn heavily on two books that analyse Franco-German relations through the nineteenth century in great depth. Scholarship in English on this topic seems to be rare. *The Inverted Mirror*, by Michael E Nolan,\(^{11}\) and *A History of Franco-German Relations in Europe*, edited by Carine Germond and Henning Türk,\(^{12}\) were two very useful exceptions.

It would have been most interesting to make this study a comparative one, to look at narratives in Germany and France simultaneously, and indeed this was my original intention. Here I was somewhat thwarted by lack of available material and time, and so my focus is primarily France. However it seems to me, from the reading I have done, that


\(^9\) Where I have quoted from the *Revue* (abbreviated in footnotes as RdAD), I have used the following format of ‘year, title of article, and page number’: eg, RdAD 1897, ‘L’Exposition Universelle de Bruxelles’, p393. All translations are my own.

\(^{10}\) Via the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: [http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32858171s/date](http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32858171s/date), accessed 28.09.13


Germany might be an even more fruitful context in which to apply this question – of how the pivotal relationship with France conditioned discourses on the decorative arts. Not only was Germany traditionally seen as ‘behind’ France in this field, but as the newly founded German Reich sought to establish its national identity at the end of the nineteenth century, ‘the rhetoric and politics of the visual arts were articulated with more polemic than in neighbouring European countries.’ This could make an interesting sequel to the present study.

2. The Revue des Arts Décoratifs

My main task in this project is to look for the reverberations of Germano-centric anxieties in the pages of the Revue des Arts Décoratifs, to determine how narratives around the decorative arts were conditioned by political and social narratives. So first, a little background on the Revue.

The Revue des Arts Décoratifs was the main publication of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, published from 1880 to 1902. Its stated intention was to be a means of educating the general public about the decorative arts, partly in order to increase public awareness of the qualities of French decorative arts, and encourage consumers to buy wisely (and buy French), and partly to educate the artisan: to improve the quality of French production by bringing a greater appreciation of art to the producers.

Its founding mission was inherently political, then, but in the 1880s and '90s, the Union morphed from the coalition of producers it had originally been, into a coalition of aristocratic amateurs, preoccupied with the restoration of the Rococo of the late eighteenth century as an important national artistic agenda. The publication initially reflected this aim, with the majority of articles revolving around issues of connoisseurship. Interspersed amongst these erudite pieces aimed at collectors, however, was a stream of light lobbying for the improvement of French arts in the face of German industrial progress, of calls for readers of the Revue and 'fellow countrymen' to 'open their eyes...to the efforts of the German people to contest, by all possible means, the artistic supremacy of France.' In response to these calls for modernisation, in the mid-to-late 1890s discussions of an art moderne, or art nouveau, began to appear in the Revue, reaching a highpoint with the 1900 Paris Expo and the extended discourse on both Siegfried Bing's Art Nouveau pavilion, and the 'modern' contributions of other countries in the field of decorative arts. In Silverman's words, the Revue, and the agenda of the Union, underwent 'a slow redirection...from craft restoration to craft renovation' thus becoming one of the prime advocates of art nouveau in France.

The Revue was only one of many journals circulating at the time with a focus on the arts. In fact, in Europe, 'during the hectic decade from 1890 to 1899 the Union morphed from the coalition of producers it had originally been, into a coalition of aristocratic amateurs, preoccupied with the restoration of the Rococo of the late eighteenth century as an important national artistic agenda. The publication initially reflected this aim, with the majority of articles revolving around issues of connoisseurship. Interspersed amongst these erudite pieces aimed at collectors, however, was a stream of light lobbying for the improvement of French arts in the face of German industrial progress, of calls for readers of the Revue and 'fellow countrymen' to 'open their eyes...to the efforts of the German people to contest, by all possible means, the artistic supremacy of France.' In response to these calls for modernisation, in the mid-to-late 1890s discussions of an art moderne, or art nouveau, began to appear in the Revue, reaching a highpoint with the 1900 Paris Expo and the extended discourse on both Siegfried Bing's Art Nouveau pavilion, and the 'modern' contributions of other countries in the field of decorative arts. In Silverman's words, the Revue, and the agenda of the Union, underwent 'a slow redirection...from craft restoration to craft renovation' thus becoming one of the prime advocates of art nouveau in France.

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14 See Silverman’s documentation of the development of the Union and its publication in Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology, and style, chapters 6 and 7

15 RdAD 1896, 'L'Exposition de Berlin', p332

16 Silverman, Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology, and style, p132
1900, about one hundred periodicals connected in various ways with applied art were started.\textsuperscript{17} This was a time when the growth of mass literacy meant that pamphlets and publications became an important way of constituting the nation.\textsuperscript{18} Because of their blend of industry and art, the decorative arts were clearly of mainstream national interest, and journals on the topic were frequently platforms for a wider agenda. A German equivalent, \textit{Pan}, based in Berlin, famously fired its editor, Julius Meier-Graefe, for daring to propose the reproduction of Toulouse-Lautrec’s \textit{Portrait of Marcelle Lender}. According to Kenworth Moffet (a Meier-Graefe scholar) this reaction was indicative of the German fear of ‘internationalism and Europeanism infiltrating what they had hoped would be a specifically German magazine.’\textsuperscript{19}

The masters of the \textit{Revue} were not quite so protective. Being a scholarly publication in the French tradition, it was really quite balanced in its discussion of the artistic output of other countries. The intellectual need to objectively appraise often overruled patriotic fervour, a sign perhaps that artistic and intellectual networks can frequently rise above national and political disputes. But, arguably, they also actively encouraged the publication and discussion of German works, as a necessary tactic in the ongoing ‘struggle’ to compete. They kept abreast of developments in ‘competitor’ nations, for many years publishing a feature called 'missives from abroad', where correspondents in other countries would write with news of artistic developments, and also of contemporary discourse in the country in question. The \textit{Revue} wanted its readers to know what France’s competitors were saying as well as what they were doing.

So in spite of its academicism, the \textit{Revue} did have a firmly political agenda, which was not surprising, given the political origins of many of those involved in the Union. It was deeply embedded in the growing bureaucracy around aesthetic matters in France, and it was founded on a political agenda: namely, the revitalisation of French industry. Antonin Proust, president of the Union, and a politician who had previously held the post of Minister of the Fine Arts, articulated the Union’s lofty agenda in a speech reported in the 1884-5 edition of the \textit{Revue}:

\begin{quote}
The Central Union is a French society, founded for the purification of French taste, for the restoration of French methods... devoted to everything that relates to the glory of the nation.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

‘The glory of the nation’: powerful language when one considers the topic in question is not military might, but the decoration of bourgeois homes. The revival of interest in the role of applied arts in restoring French pride makes the \textit{Revue} an interesting place to look for the currents of national concerns.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Statistics quoted by Tschudi-Madsen, S., \textit{Sources of art nouveau}, New York: Da Capo Press, 1976, p14
  \item \textsuperscript{18} This is a central argument in Anderson, B., \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism}, London: Verso, 1983
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Moffett, K., \textit{Meier-Graefe as art critic}, München: Prestel-Verlag, 1973, p16
  \item \textsuperscript{20} RdAD 1884-5, p231
\end{itemize}
3. Sources of Germano-centric anxiety

The war made manifest the end of French hegemony on the continent after more than two centuries.\textsuperscript{21}

In this section I will set out exactly what one might be looking for in interrogating the pages of the Revue.

In 1871 the French had experienced a three-fold blow to their confidence and national pride. They had been invaded – Paris had been laid siege and Versailles had been desecrated. In so doing, as Wilhelm I was declared ‘German Kaiser’ in the Palace of Versailles, the German states had been unified under Prussia, an eventuality France had been attempting to stave off for decades. They had lost a part of their territory, Alsace-Lorraine, to Germany which, in an age of national self-determination, seemed barbaric and was bitterly resented.

Since 1871, the ill-feeling provoked by the outcomes of the war was compounded by a new economic reality, where Germany swiftly displaced France in the rankings of world industrial powers. And the low birth rate in France, together with industrial stagnation, led to widespread fears about the health of the nation: ‘far-reaching social, cultural and moral conclusions were drawn from statistics of what people and machines produced.’\textsuperscript{22}

However in 1881 it was still clearly a sore point. An article in the Revue entitled ‘Un Danger’ (which discusses the declining export rate of French products) demonstrates the continued resonance of 1871, opening with the observation that ‘these days we have

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{21} Nolan, M. E., \textit{The inverted mirror : mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany} p26
\bibitem{22} Nolan, M. E., \textit{The inverted mirror : mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany} p48
\end{thebibliography}
become accustomed to the mantra of defeat.\textsuperscript{27} If, by the 1890s, the question of the lost provinces was felt less acutely (years later in the \textit{Revue} the Alsace-Lorraine question has been downgraded to ‘painful memories’) it is still true that the Third Republic was founded in a context of enmity towards the newly unified Germany (and vice versa), a phenomenon Reiner Marcowitz describes as ‘negative integration’.\textsuperscript{28} Both places defined themselves according not only to internal measures, but crucially \textit{against} the other.

This meant that from 1871 onwards, the idea of the ‘enemy’ on both sides ‘became a constitutive element of the national consciousness, that in crisis situations created a union of the nationalist minimal consensus.’\textsuperscript{29} It was this context, this assumption of antagonism, which fanned the flames of the Dreyfus affair. It also gave birth to the concept of France and Germany being ‘hereditary enemies\textsuperscript{30}, the idea that they were born rivals. As an ideological construct this was projected backwards onto their mutual history, but contemporary historians have shown that the relationship up to 1871 really did not warrant this label.\textsuperscript{31}

Rather than a lasting demand for redress for the specific grievance, the ‘amputation’ of Alsace-Lorraine seems to have fed a mythology of patriotism and general revenge. It is interesting to contrast this with the reaction to the quite crushing indemnity payments (two and a half times the national budget)\textsuperscript{32} that were demanded by the Germans, which France seemed to accept without protest. The offence of compromising the integrity of the French national body was far more keenly felt.

The perception that the Germans had made unwilling exiles of the Alsatians led to, in writing about the artistic output of those regions, an underlying agenda of proving their Frenchness. And this seems to extend to other parts of Germany in the borderlands zone, particularly those principalities that had lost their autonomy in 1871. In 1898, an account by Antony Valabrègue of German decorative arts in the Grand-Duchy of Baden reads as oddly complementary, the warmth of praise perhaps explicable as the author being at pains to demonstrate kinship:

Carlsruhe is reminiscent, to a Frenchman, of Nancy... and the Grand-Duke’s palace is built in the style of Louis XV... In the museum, (one can see) a well in the feudal style, very similar to the kind one finds in Lorraine.\textsuperscript{33}

He reads into the regional style a note of protest, observing that in these parts it is evident that artistic production has been inspired by France, and that they have

\textsuperscript{27} 1881, Un Danger, p79
\textsuperscript{28} From his essay, “Attraction and Repulsion”, in \textit{A History of Franco-German Relations in Europe}, Carine Germond and Henning Turk (eds)
\textsuperscript{29} As above, p20
\textsuperscript{31} See above
\textsuperscript{32} This figure quoted in Sowerwine, C., \textit{France since 1870: culture, society and the making of the Republic}, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009
\textsuperscript{33} RdAD 1898, ‘Les Industries d’Art en Allemagne’, p262-4
resisted adopting the ‘official and pompous Berlin style’.

Economic woes

The threat of economic competition from Germany, that so took the French by surprise in the 1880s, is introduced early in the life of the Revue, in the article of 1881-2 mentioned above: 'Un Danger'. Although the piece is not specifically about German imports, it opens with a reference to the defeat of 1870, and goes on to set out the ‘menace’ that French manufacturers were facing from abroad as other nations increased their industrial output, thereby linking psychologically the events of 1871 to French economic stagnation.

The article focuses particularly on the import and export of 'luxury items' (furniture, porcelain, jewellery, textiles and tapestries, glassware), a category of product the French had assumed was their strong suit. It compares trade statistics from the French customs agency from 1859 and 1880, and is alarmed by the change that has occurred in the intervening years. In 1859, France imported 25m francs worth of luxury (artistic) manufactured goods. In 1880, twenty years later, that figure was close to 148m francs, an increase of 488%. Evidently, the French people were consuming far too many foreign products, and at the same time, foreigners were consuming ever fewer French products: over the same period French exports had only grown by 15%. It concludes:

The development of foreign art industries appears quite clearly in these figures, as does the stiff competition already facing French manufacturers.

This piece set an agenda for the Revue in the years that followed, and is echoed in 1896 in a review of the Berlin Expo, which notes – bitterly – new trade statistics that show that Germany has knocked France from its former position as second only to England, down to fourth place:

The German empire has been enriched by all that we have lost, and then some.

This idea that the economic fate of the two countries were entwined, and that German gains could only have been achieved at the expense of France, is one that it is easy to see may have been informed by the horse-trading of borderlands, and specifically the recent loss of Alsace Lorraine.

Although there are only a handful of articles detailing the stark facts and figures, they prompted a campaign in the 1890s to revive French industry through the renewal of applied arts styles. Many critics concluded that to compete economically the French needed to update their models. Eugene Grasset, for example, says quite explicitly that the French market is only being subjected to such an ‘invasion’ of foreign goods because French manufacturers are lazy and keep churning out objects in the same old-fashioned styles.

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34 RdAD 1898, ‘Les Industries d’Art en Allemagne’, p307
35 RdAD 1896, ‘L’Exposition de Berlin’, p333
36 RdAD 1897, ‘L’Art Nouveau’, p132
The Health and Virility of the French Nation

The last specific source of anxiety to mention was around population stagnation in France. As mentioned in the introduction, Germany’s population was growing rapidly, and although this had some problematic consequences for the Germans, in France it seemed to lead to concerns about their own national health, and reproductive health especially.38 Christopher E. Forth presents an interesting argument in his book on the Dreyfus affair about the French ‘crisis of masculinity’ that surfaced in the late nineteenth century. The rise of intellectual and bourgeois life, although in some senses idolised, also ran counter to traditional, more action-based tropes of masculine identity.39 There was a deep preoccupation with health – with the ‘force’ and ‘vigour’ of the body and its appetites, and the manly willpower associated with restraint, and an athletic physique. This new concern manifested itself in, for example, the appearance of ‘restorative remedies’,40 guaranteed to return men to their full force, and the rising celebrity of body-builders such as Edmond Desbonnet.41 The crisis of masculinity was of course also fuelled by the recent evidence of military defeat.

The preoccupation with health switched easily between the individual body and the nation, with one often used as a metaphor for the other. It was in this mode that the losses of 1871 could be conceived as an ‘amputation’. Hippolyte Taine (whose thoughts on this subject may well have been influenced by his own illness), in order to explain ‘how and why France had lost its primacy among nations’, popularised the idea that France was in ill-health, as though it was suffering from ‘a brain lesion, syphilis, or an addiction to liquor or morphine’.42 The very fact of it being the turn of the century seemed to encourage some to believe in a natural phase of decline before a moment of renewal.43

The interest in bodily health and male virility was balanced by a growing fascination with mental health: a very fin-de-siècle phenomenon. Thanks to Freud, Bernheim and Charcot, nervous disorders were studied, idolised and stigmatised in equal measure. There was very clearly a gender aspect to this: nervous disorders were more commonly associated with women, or with femininity anyway. Virility and hysteria were not conceptually compatible, and yet due to the ravages of modernity, men seemed to be increasingly commonly succumbing to nervous disorder. The notion of the hypersensitive ‘neurasthenic’ popularised by the de Goncourt brothers was a controversial, feminised, form of masculinity.

And yet in spite of their colonisation by these effeminate Parisian types, the arts

38 See Nolan, The inverted mirror: mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914, chapter 3
39 Forth, C.E., The Dreyfus affair and the crisis of French manhood, Baltimore, MD; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004
40 Forth, C.E., The Dreyfus affair and the crisis of French manhood, p181
41 Forth, C.E., The Dreyfus affair and the crisis of French manhood, p217
43 See West, S., Fin De Siecle: Art and Society in an Age of Uncertainty, London: Bloomsbury, 1993
were still seen as a source of prowess and pride. Philippe de Chennevières explains in his introduction to his colossal ‘inventory’ of the nation’s artistic assets, ‘taking stock of national greatness…would regenerate those virile forces that had languished on the battlefields against the Prussians.’\(^{44}\) So immediately the French turn to their art for the source of their virility.

**Industrial warfare**
The ‘hereditary enemies’ concept was given a fatalistic edge by the prevalent belief in social Darwinism, a view that held that nations or races couldn’t just be different, one had to be better. Therefore, in the 1890s, ‘many observers of the international scene tended to construe differences between nations as signs of superiority or inferiority, strength or weakness.’ This was exacerbated by the activities of colonial expansion, the ‘carving up of the non-European world by European powers’.\(^{45}\) The paradigm for international relations was one of a struggle between nations for supremacy, and this carried over into discussions of industrial matters.

The French had been alarmed, and somewhat provoked, to hear the German Kaiser talk of ‘defeating the French on the battlefield of industry.’ So even in a scholarly journal like the *Revue*, the metaphor of war was frequently invoked in discussion of artistic reform. An article of 1898 notes how the Germans are ‘marshalling their forces’ in preparation for the Paris Expo of 1900.\(^{46}\) And later, seeming to confirm the Expo as an industrial battleground, the *Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs* is praised for its valour in a discussion of its pavilion:

> The Union has passed from words into action, it has become valiantly militant, and entered into the fray where the struggle goes on between those who hold on to the old styles and those who seek the new… If abstaining is often a sign of prudence, to take part is always a sign of courage.\(^{47}\)

For France, then, the complexity of feeling towards their neighbours over the Rhine had a potent mix of practical, economic, emotional and mythological dimensions. As we will go on to see, this blend of anxieties led French critics, writing in the *Revue*, to conceptualise the search for an *art nouveau* as an industrial and artistic battle where the true virility of France would be demonstrated.

### 4. ‘L’esprit de notre race’: nation, character, art

Around 1900, the decorative arts were frequently implicated in discussions of national strength and health, because of the widespread deterministic world view that linked race, to national character, to art. It is this crucial condition that allows us to contemplate searching for the echoes of national rivalry in debates about *art nouveau* in France.

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\(^{44}\) Quoted in Silverman, _Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology, and style_, p114  
\(^{45}\) Nolan, _The inverted mirror: mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914_, p2  
\(^{46}\) RdAD 1898, ‘Les Industries d’Art en Allemagne’  
\(^{47}\) RdAD 1900, ‘Le Pavillon de l’Union Centrale des Arts Decoratifs’, p169
Readers of the *Revue* would have been left in no doubt as to the strength of the link between a nation's material and environmental conditions, its character, and its artistic output. In 1884, Philippe Burty, art critic and collector, writes:

It is clear that each race follows its own laws… The conditions of our climate, the earth on which we stand… the air that we breathe and the physical beauty that surrounds us are the matrix of a race.\(^{48}\)

The extension of this determinist interpretation of things to the nature of artistic production is commonplace in the *Revue*, and appears both in bald statements of fact, and more implicitly in arguments made about the search for an *art nouveau*.

In 1897, Charles Genuys, architect, critic, and staunch advocate for a revitalised, unadulterated French art, argues that a proper national art springs from ‘the climate and the morals, the traditions and the ideals’ of a people, and indeed this constitutes an ‘artistic language, just as we have a language of words.’ This statement is made in the context of an article entitled, ‘Soyons Français!’ which is often interpreted as a reaction to Bing’s 1895 multi-national *Art Nouveau* exhibition.\(^{49}\)

Similar ideas are expressed earlier, in 1883, by Paul Mantz, who describes the expressive power of the decorative arts in an article on the furniture of the eighteenth century:

The furniture of… Marie Antoinette still speaks… It has preserved the spirit of the time, it remembers, and it can tell us things about the mores and whims of that *époque* that books only leave us to guess at.\(^{50}\)

In 1894, Julius Lessing, a German art historian and director of Berlin’s Museum of Decorative Arts, making a guest appearance in the *Revue*, also refers to the link between race and art, and the importance of getting this right in the case of a ‘new art’:

…in the new objects created by modern society, it is how they are decorated that reveals the particular spirit of each nation.\(^{51}\)

Evidently, Hippolyte Taine's trinity of *race, milieu et moment* as the determining factors for artworks had long seeped into popular consciousness. But, as these remarks reveal, if the artistic output of a nation is a product of its nature, then that output could also be a mirror, and a gauge for judging a nation's health, character and spirit. In discussing the state of French decorative arts, the French critics in the pages of the *Revue* are also answering for the state of their nation.

Thus, some critics took the lack of a distinctive French art to be sign of troubled times. Revealing a classic fin-

\(^{48}\) RdAD 1884-5, p388

\(^{49}\) Literally translated as ‘Let’s Be French! – See RdAD 1897, ‘A Propos de l’Art Nouveau, Soyons Francais!’ p3

\(^{50}\) RdAD 1883-4, p313

\(^{51}\) RdAD 1894, ‘La Recherche d’un Style Nouveau en Allemagne’, p492
de-siècle mindset. Charles Genuys explains that artistic confusion accompanies all times of ‘transition’. Victor Champier, editor of the Revue, remarks as part of a discourse on Hector Guimard, enfant terrible of French art nouveau:

At the present time we find ourselves in art in a period of cacophony, which corresponds to the sort of moral and intellectual anarchy through which our individualistic society is endeavouring to find its way. We shouldn’t be surprised by the distraction of artists: it’s a natural consequence of this anarchy.

Individualism, as a theme, appears again in the words of Charles Genuys, who is concerned about the ‘moral consequences’ of French political culture, and specifically the enshrining in law ‘of the principle of individual liberty’. He worries this will mean the prizing of the individual ‘at the expense of the collective community’, and comments that this characteristic, ‘possibly the most marked of our time, is clearly visible in the domain of thought and art.’ Whilst many were proud of the founding French ideals of liberté, égalité, fraternité, and sought to prove the presence of these qualities in French artistic production, others saw the downside of 1789’s ‘political and social upheavals’, which ‘bear the responsibility for the attrition of strength we are suffering in the domain of applied arts’. The decorative or applied arts had a particularly special significance at this time, because of their presence in the everyday lives of the people. Whilst the fine arts may not have been for everyone, the lesser arts were accessible by greater numbers, and the phenomenon of mass consumerism was on the rise. The consumption of a nation was thus a question of national identity: what would it mean for France if its people decorated their homes with foreign styles? Because, as Genuys explains in ‘Soyons Français!’ , nations have needs beyond the purely ‘material’. They have ‘intellectual needs, moral needs, without the expression of which a work of art has no real meaning as a work of art.’ Concern in France about the importation of German goods was not just about economics and balance of trade; it was also a question of the corruption of the French spirit. In the mission for national consolidation, the objects of everyday life had a crucial role to play.

Whilst today we would readily challenge the assumption that art is tied to national and racial characteristics, the ‘spirit of our race’ was an easily digested fin-de-siècle concept, and people looked for signs of national character – good and

53 RdAD 1899, ‘Le Castel Beranger’, p7
54 RdAD 1894-5, ‘La Recherche du Style Nouveau’, p354
55 Gabriel Mourey in RdAD 1900, ‘L’Art Nouveau de M. Bing’, p279
56 RdAD 1897, ‘A Propos de l’Art Nouveau, Soyons Francais!’ p3
bad – in a nation’s art. However it was also a rather woolly concept, which enabled all manner of hopes, fears and ideals to be projected onto it, as we will go on to see.

5. The turn to nature

My roots are in the depths of the woods.58

One of the distinctive features of decorative arts renewal at the turn of the century was a heightened use of natural forms, a move which had clear nationalistic and patriotic roots, but was also an interesting industrial strategy.

The role of nature as inspiration for new artistic forms is clearly evident as a trend in the Revue, in both France and Germany, and particularly in the discussion of art and artisanal education. Teaching designers and craftsmen how to copy and use natural forms was discussed often. In one of the ‘missives from abroad’, the correspondent is relating the events of an assembly of the German Society of Masters of Drawing, in which the primary focus had been ‘the necessity of returning to the study of nature, and especially that of plants, which offers a new and virtually infinite field for the decorative arts.’59

Subsequent historical accounts of art nouveau have ascribed this trend to a William Morris-esque reaction to urbanism and industrialisation (particularly strong in Germany)60, and the need to locate national pride in artistic output. I would also propose international competition in industrial markets, and the economic need to differentiate to succeed. We have already discussed the link between fatherland and artistic production: a reliable way of ensuring products were truly French, that their style was firmly rooted in French soil, was to draw inspiration from the soil, the flora, the fauna itself.

Charles Genuys argues that just as foreigners flock to French seaside towns to enjoy the sun, so they will increasingly buy French objets d’art if they reflect the joys of French nature, ‘rich, sunkissed and cheerful’.61 And he uses the metaphor of regional wine production (for which France was of course famed) to argue for the importance of applied arts being rooted in place, as the source of their value. But it was not only Genuys. Many others believed that attempts at an art moderne could only be valid by being true to their nation of origin. To be successful, French practitioners of new styles should ‘aim to shield themselves from outside influences, and to renew the traditions of the true French style, instead of – according to changing fashions – ‘Parisianising’ English, German or Belgian styles.’62 Siegfried Bing finally receives the accolades he sought in 1900 by his achievement of creating ‘a truly French work, one that was the honest

59 RdAD 1894-5, ‘Courrier de l’Étranger’, p90

61 RdAD 1897, ‘A Propos de l’Art Nouveau, Soyons Francais!’ p4
62 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p265
expression of the sensibilities of our race, and not an adaptation of foreign ideas. (Ironically, only one of his exhibiting artists was actually French, which shows how far removed from reality the rhetoric of art nouveau could be.)

In all of this, practical concerns – around regenerating the national ‘brand’ – are mixed with the patriotic. It may well have been the case that the French needed to update their ideas in order to compete in the international market for luxury goods – and that taking inspiration from the forms of nature was their way of doing so. But the reliance on French flora is also a point of national pride and identity. It is particularly telling that nowhere is the use of distinctively French natural motifs more pronounced than in the borderlands. Leading a community of decorative arts practitioners in Nancy, Emile Gallé was clearly inspired by the world of flora and fauna, but this has also been interpreted as ‘nationalist fervour’ on his part. Items of furniture with names such as ‘I hold tight to the heart of France’ would seem to support this claim. And as evidenced by a Revue article on the subject, Lorrainian applied arts in general drew very heavily on regional flowers, such as the thistle, and locally renowned figures, such as Joan of Arc.

In the 1890s, natural forms were somewhat in vogue across Europe, and their popularity was due to their ability to be both a statement of protest and identity, and an industrial diversification strategy.

6. Superiority/ inferiority complex

In an essay comparing the German and French nationalist historians, Heinrich von Trietschke and Jacques Bainville, the authors comment on a contradictory feature of nationalist rhetoric from both sides, where ‘the nation's rival is stigmatised as inferior but is then, equally, perceived as a deadly threat.’ To a certain extent this ambivalence is reflected in French writing about German decorative arts, where casual arrogance and alarmist calls to action sit side-by-side.

Playing second fiddle in Europe to the Germans was a new and uncomfortable position for the French. After decades of manipulating the various German states, the 'different groups of collaborating, neutral and dispossessed princes', to work against each other, France had become accustomed to seeing itself as the arbiter of German affairs. As the military defeat of 1871, and the rise of an evidently powerful, unified Germany, had forced France to reconsider its standing on this front, they held even more tightly to their identity as

63 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p262
64 Silverman, Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology, and style, p230
65 ‘Je Tiens au Coeur de France’ was produced in 1889, according to Garner, P., Emile Gallé, London: Academy Editions, 1976, p49-50
artistically superior.

The French belief in ‘the artistic supremacy of France’ in Europe, indeed in the world, and their power as ‘tastemakers’ was a major premise of French industrial strategy. In a Revue article in 1891, regarding the reorganisation of the Sèvres manufactory, the author discusses Leon Bourgeois’s attempts to revitalise the porcelain industry, and stresses the importance of his actions in ensuring that France remains ‘the international school of taste’.

Elsewhere in the Revue, writers comment on the tendency of other nations to follow France’s lead in artistic matters:

We can see that the example given by France in the Salon du Champ-de-Mars has not been lost.

Or,

It is clear that our frequent practice at staging exhibitions permits us to give to all foreign peoples this lesson: better than anyone we know how to exhibit.

There is a particularly clear note of superiority running through much French writing on German art. Commenting on an applied arts exhibition in Dresden, the weary French critic is rather underwhelmed:

The German entries, unfortunately, were few and presented nothing original. The glass of M. Koeffing contained little that was new to us, and everything has already been said about these timid, charming, but pointless fancies. The pots of M. Lenger… are inventively decorated and amusing…but once you’ve seen 4 or 5 pots, you’ve seen a hundred.

By contrast, French correspondents writing back to the Revue from Germany were quick to point out how popular French art was across the border, noting, ‘with pleasure’, that ‘our illustrious compatriot (Gallé) has met with his usual success’, and that there was a ‘deep interest amongst educated circles in the latest works of our contemporary art scene. The work of our ceramicists, glassworkers, enamel workers has not gone unnoticed in Germany.’

Sometimes there are mixed feelings about the German appropriation of French styles. There is a very interesting little article on ‘Marie Antoinette’s Boudoir’, lamenting the sell-off of Versailles furniture to German hoteliers, as though they weren’t artistically worthy of caretaking such exquisite pieces.

There is a clear assumption that in artistic matters Germany seeks the approval of France. For example, in discussing the German preparations for the 1900 Expo, one writer explicitly says that the Germans will be coming to Paris

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68 RdAD 1896, ‘L’Exposition de Berlin’, p333
69 RdAD 1891-2, ‘A Propos de la Reorganisation de la Manufacture de Sevres’, p164-170
70 RdAD 1894, ‘courier de l’étranger’, p60
71 RdAD 1897, ‘l’exposition universelle de bruxelles’, p393
72 RdAD 1897, ‘Exposition Internationale de Dresde’, p319
73 RdAD 1897, ‘A Munich’, p321
74 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’, p259
75 RdAD 1896, ‘le boudoir de Marie Antoinette’, p337
to seek French approval. Repeatedly we hear examples of the Germans following the French lead. Artistic originality was not permitted them.

We can see the signs of French elegance, and charm in German work.

The French influence is easy to recognise... copies of French motifs adapted to German taste... but nothing very original.

The decorative arts of Germany are always somewhat guided by foreign ideas, whereas in France we have no need of such help.

In some cases this seems to lead to a bit of rewriting of history. For example, the claim that 'art nouveau, once the preserve of France, Belgium and England, is swiftly penetrating into Germany and Austria,' is a somewhat misleading description of how the movement spread through Europe. France arguably was not the instigator.

But the tendency to superiority was not all arrogance on the part of French critics, and not all unfounded. Indeed there seems to have been a degree of German acquiescence in the fact of their artistic inferiority, some feigned, some real. Philippe Jullian quotes the rhetoric around the German Pavilion for the 1900 Expo, which was filled with the (mainly French) collection of artworks of Frederick II, the objective being to recall ‘the memory of what the German people owes to French civilisation and art’ Elsewhere in ‘missives from abroad’, accounts of German attempts to improve their applied arts sector often make reference to France as the gold standard:

The museum administration has always believed that Germany could produce bronzework ‘at least as good as those of france’. They are trying by all means at their disposal to spread this notion amongst the public, so that they stop buying foreign products...

I want to prove to Germany that Berlin can make tapestries like Gobelins.

They say to us, in Carlsrhue: ‘whatever the strength of our establishments, we are still no rival to France, you have the natural superiority of French taste.’ Without doubt it would be easy to retreat back to the comfort of believing in this superiority...

As above, occasionally coupled with these self-congratulatory lines is a hint of wariness. In response to the economic threat that Germany now posed (‘The Germans are not asleep!’), some articles in the Revue warned against French

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76 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’, p258
77 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’, p266
78 RdAD 1896, ‘Le Papier Peint en Allemagne’, p88
79 RdAD 1894, ‘courier de l’etranger’, p60
80 RdAD 1900, ‘les essais d’art moderne dans la decoration interieure’, p285
82 RdAD 1894, ‘courier de l’etranger’, p444
83 RdAD 1894, ‘courier de l’etranger’, p542
84 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’
complacency in the field of decorative arts. For example, in 1896, two articles on the Berlin Expo appear consecutively. The first is rather disparaging, and jokes that the highlights of the fair were the beer and sausages. However a few pages on comes this admonishment:

And as for the Berlin expo, which we made fun of in Paris, and about which our papers joked, and mocked the apparent defects… the Expo has actually just provided new and decisive proof of the victorious forward march of the German art industries.  

In the mid-late 1890s, critics and politicians could see that the tide was turning, and desperately pleaded for France not to squander its artistic advantage:

Our manufacturers must find within themselves a little of the spirit of our ancestors, and the patriotic loyalty, to pull them from the torpor which will be their ruin.  

If not, bemoans Charles Genuys, ‘from the planet that we once we were, are we destined to become a mere satellite?’  

So we can see that in the 1890s the French are in two minds: aware of the stark economic reality, but still unwilling to relinquish their belief in their own innate artistic brilliance.

7. The projected qualities of ‘French’ decorative arts

As we have discussed thus far, the Revue was a political vehicle, and there was a recognised connection between the quality of decorative arts output and the state of the nation. In this section I will look directly at some of the language used by French critics, which relies a number of popular metaphors that hint at certain national concerns. These fall roughly into a few recurring dichotomies: of health/ sickness, sobriety/ disorder, elegance/ heaviness, and femininity/ masculinity. Most of these pairings were positive/ negative (with the exception of femininity/ masculinity, where the situation was more nuanced) and they were all at least partly rooted in Germano-centric anxieties.

Although for the purposes of analysis I have separated them into distinct themes, they often appear blended together in statements. For example here we have the slightly odd juxtaposition of ‘rigour’ and ‘logic’, with ‘harmony’ and voluptuous curves:

‘a rigorous harmony… the science and the taste of the architect is evident from the perfection of the panelling’

‘sweeping arabesques that undulate in harmonious lines… expressing very logically the plan of the room’

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85 RdAD 1896, ‘L’exposition de berlin’, p333  
86 RdAD 1896, ‘L’exposition de berlin’, p334  
87 RdAD 1897, ‘A Propos de l’Art Nouveau, Soyons Francais!’ , p2  
88 RdAD 1901, ‘une salle a manger moderne’, p344  
89 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p262
And here we have descriptions of furniture and interiors that read like lists of idealised French characteristics:

‘good sense, logic, a healthy balance of ideas and things, the satisfaction of a happy and easy life, in a mild climate, amongst the beauty richness and fertility of nature.’

‘an art which reflects the French character, with its qualities of moderation, clarity, elegance and spiritedness; an art wise and gracious, distinguished, sumptuous, inventive, delicate’

Clearly these were very loaded statements. I will now go on to unpack some of the underlying drivers.

Health/ sickness
As previously discussed, the fin-de-siècle preoccupation with bodily and mental health was strong, and this in part stemmed from anxieties set in train by the robust productive and reproductive health of Germany. So in appraisals of new forms of craft and decorative arts we hear the word ‘santé’ often used as a word of praise, and ‘malsain’ to register distaste. For example, in 1900 Bing and his exhibiting artists are praised for ‘the health of their tendencies… the contempt they quite correctly show for complications, contortions, epileptic decorative gestures’ (an imagery popularised by the pseudo-medical experiments of the Salpetrière).

Similarly, also in 1900, the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs is praised for establishing in its exhibition, ‘a healthy, fruitful direction for the future of art.’ ‘Fruitful’ was a powerful attribute to invoke when part of the art nouveau aim was a regeneration of French industry.

But perceiving ‘health’ in inanimate objects is clearly a highly subjective pastime. For example, only five years earlier, Arsène Alexandre had condemned Bing’s Art Nouveau exhibition – which in reality he probably objected to on protectionist grounds – for its ‘confusion of lines and colours, the absence of science… the architectural indigestion… it is all confused, incoherent, practically unhealthy.’ Although there may conceivably have been distinctive differences between Bing’s offerings in 1895 and 1900, the use of medical terms to indicate what is liked and what is not is particularly striking here. We can see this also in the terms chosen by those who wanted to belittle the attempts at an art moderne, which was disparagingly referred to variously as the ‘tapeworm’, ‘whiplash’, or ‘sheep bone’ style.

Sobriety/ disorder
Related to the health/ sickness paradigm, but moving more into political territory, was the axis of sobriety/ disorder. Sowerwine, in his analysis of the beginnings of the Third Republic, describes its cultural bases as ‘reason, realism and progress’, ‘materialism, positivism, and anticlericalism’ – and masculinity (French citizens were of course male). He suggests that the high

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90 RdAD 1897, ‘A Propos de l’Art Nouveau, Soyons Français!’ , p5
91 RdAD 1896, ‘les expositions de l’art nouveau’, p2
92 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p283
93 RdAD 1900, ‘le pavillon de l’union central des arts decoratifs’, p170
94 RdAD 1896, ‘l’exposition de l’art nouveau’, p5
point of this cultural mythology was the 1889 expo, the Eiffel tower being its ultimate expression.

Politically, the events of 1789 had instilled in the French a mythology of themselves as enlightened and advanced, with ‘a duty to bring their neighbours the blessing of liberté, égalité, et fraternité.’ And after 1871, the Third Republic was anxious to position itself as very much a part of the French political tradition. The ideals of cultural and political superiority through reason is reflected in the use of words and phrases, applied to the composition of rooms and the design of furniture, such as ‘tact’, ‘balance’, ‘sober and wisely conceived… delicate’. The French qualities of ‘moderation, sobriety and measure’ are often invoked.

The collective production of Bing’s workshops is praised for its soundness of judgement:

The whole ensemble is very successful, of a judicious originality, a skilful balance, and without the least defect of eccentricity. One can say of the Art Nouveau artists that their primary trait is the sense – so rare nowadays – of measure.

The counterpoint to this is partly artistic misjudgement (which we will go on to see is very much assumed to be a typically German fault). For example, Edouard Colonna, a Bing protégé, is praised for his ability to ‘achieve opulence without being tawdry, comfort without ugliness or heaviness, elegance without sentimentality, refinement without being excessively subtle.’ But it is also something more disturbing, more akin to mental disorder. Decor that gets it wrong, a line out of place here, the wrong colour palette there, is accused of being ‘tormented… charged’, and ‘executed in such a way as to give one a nervous breakdown.’

The fin-de-siècle preoccupation with mental disturbance is frequently projected into interior environments. Silverman concludes that the simultaneous rise of interest in both the psychological interior, and the interior of the home, was no mere coincidence. In this vein, there is a fabulously descriptive passage, quoted at length in the Revue, which details the mental unravelling of a sober and rational gentleman made to stay a night in a house decked from top to bottom with the eccentricities of the style moderne. Elsewhere, criticisms of poor attempts at the modern style are compared to ‘torture chambers’ that would incite ‘terrible nightmares’.

Lightness/heaviness

I am using ‘lightness’ here as a shorthand for a cocktail of supposedly ‘French’ qualities frequently invoked which comprised things like ‘grace’, ‘charm’, and ‘elegance’. This is a direct resurrection of the language used to

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96 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p267
97 RdAD 1900, ‘l’exposition universelle de 1900’, p134
98 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p265
99 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p266
100 RdAD 1900, ‘les essais de l’art moderne’, p256
101 RdAD 1900, ‘l’exposition universelle de 1900’, p134
102 RdAD 1901, ‘Une Salle a Manger Moderne’, p337
103 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de M Bing a l’exposition universelle’, p268
describe the Rococo. For example, a line from the description of Marie Antoinette’s boudoir (‘on this simple background, deft hands have traced, with lightness of touch and great finesse, bouquets and garlands of flowers in white and green silk’ could just as easily find itself in a passage praising the achievements of Art Nouveau artists, where grace, a refined interpretation of nature, and the skill of the artisan all come together. For example:

‘the floor resembles a lawn sown with bluebells and forget-me-nots, under the silver sheen of a frost’

‘a particularly elegant composition…a delicate taste…a delicious little display…a pretty salon…a lovely silhouette’

‘the appearance is charming, it’s a true visual delight… a blossoming dream’

‘fine lines, frail stems, harmonious curves’

‘all exquisitely harmonised, each detail precious and rare and of a new charm’

‘there is infinite suppleness and charm in the lines of this grand bed’

‘here, the lines soften, become more graceful, more svelte, the colours are refined into even greater harmony’

‘singing colours, undulating lines, a rare harmony… women, flowers and symbolic landscapes… smiling and shining… joy and clarity… elegant and svelte figures… a true magician of refinement and subtlety… wild and simple…’

‘and it is all bathed in the golden light that sifts through the stained glass windows and ceiling canopies’

The image conjured by such descriptions is almost saccharine. This is partly to do with the actual forms of the objects being described, but then again it would be hard to draw a picture from the descriptions given. These are value-rather than fact-laden inventories, and the obsession with harmony, delicacy and charm is striking. This can partly be ascribed to nostalgia for a time of ‘power and good taste’, when French style – mimicked the world over – was dictated by Royalty. For Frenchmen of the late nineteenth century, an easy way to conjure glory was to ‘turn to Versailles’, to reproduce the forms that had once signalled the greatness of France. This is certainly reflected in the descriptions of the Grand and Petit Palais built for the 1900 Paris Expo. The Grand Palais, ‘the big brother,

104 Much as Silverman has argued the resurrection of Rococo style itself was an important part of the Third Republic’s artistic agenda
105 RdAD 1896, ‘le boudoir de Marie Antoinette’, p338
106 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p266
107 RdAD 1897, ‘l’exposition universelle de bruxelles’, p394
108 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p266
109 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p266
110 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p267
111 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p267
112 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p264
113 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p257
114 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p264
with a heavy and borrowed (meaning forms mindlessly copied from elsewhere) look’, gets short shrift. The Petit Palais, by comparison, is praised in a very specific way:

It has the air of a delicate miniature, a trifle picked out of the glass vitrine of a collector of 18th century bibelots. There, at least, French grace triumphs. No effort at novelty, nothing original. It’s the art of the Trianon in all its known effects, according to all the classical formulae. But what exquisite elegance and what charm in this fine architecture.\(^{116}\)

The implication is that although an appropriately modern style would be preferable, a safe alternative is to mimic the glorious Rococo past. And in fact, there is a general concern that these inherited qualities of ‘charm and grace’, which have been an expression of French superiority in past times, have been lost:

It is odd to witness the absolute disappearance of these qualities, which gave such value to the works of the past. How did the treasures of elegance, beauty, and delicacy, which were left to us by the 18th century, become so dilapidated?\(^{117}\)

The obverse to all of this love of ‘grace’ is a profound distaste for ‘heaviness’ (as in the Grand Palais), or clumsiness, which we will go on to see is a characteristic often ascribed to Germanic art.

**Femininity/ masculinity**

It is hard not to perceive a clear feminine flavour in the lines quoted above. Indeed, mythologies of femininity carried some very useful positive connotations, and were purposely exploited by the French *art nouveau* movement. An 1896 *Revue* article by Gustave Larroumet, on the subject of ‘women and the decorative arts’, discusses the ‘campaign to link a French modern style to women, as both the artists and the ornaments of the home’.\(^{118}\)

And their symbolic fertility was a useful metaphor. Feminine imagery had long abounded in mythologies of the French spirit: think of the traditional Marianne figure (reincarnated in the great Art Nouveau woman atop the entrance arch of the 1900 fair). Michael Nolan observes that in both France and Germany, in caricature France was frequently pictured as a woman, Germany as a man.\(^{119}\) Both drew, respectively, negative and positive conclusions from these associations. For the Germans femininity was a metaphor for impotence. And they were thus seriously concerned about the invasion of artistic styles from France, such as impressionism, which represented ‘femininity, frivolity, and moral laxity’: threats from which ‘Germanic masculinity’ must be protected.\(^{120}\)

\(^{116}\) RdAD 1900, ‘l’exposition universelle de 1900’, p132

\(^{117}\) RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p279

\(^{118}\) Quoted in Silverman, D., *Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: politics, psychology, and style*, chapter 11

\(^{119}\) There are some interesting illustrations in Nolan, M. E., *The inverted mirror: mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany*, chapter 3

\(^{120}\) From West, S., *The visual arts in Germany 1890-1940: utopia and despair*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p19
contrast in France, the ‘hyper masculine military machismo’ of German culture was a source of amusement, and confirmation of their cultural inferiority.

So if French art was characterised as feminine, this was partly a way of differentiating from the perceived masculinity of Germany. However, given the aforementioned national concerns about health and virility, it was impossible, and undesirable, for the French to renounce masculinity in art altogether. It had to be found in other, more subtle ways. Either in relation to the masculinity of the artists themselves, such as Victor Champier’s description of quintessential art nouveau practitioner, Hector Guimard – ‘through thorns and undergrowth he boldly strikes his path… overflowing with an impetuous vitality’ – but more commonly in descriptions of the work itself. The need to find both grace and femininity and an underlying masculine power leads to some odd feminine/masculine juxtapositions in the descriptions of art nouveau rooms, such as:

The impression, from the doorway, is one of decided intimacy, of honesty, and of strength.

The idea of strength and masculinity is often paired with health, and, just as in the 1890s the movement for fitness (and against overweightness) began to pick up speed, masculinity in the decorative arts is directly opposed to heaviness:

This furniture is vigorous, not through over-emphasis or heaviness, but simply through the logic and fitness (santé) of their structures; underneath these forms are muscles.

The chairs and the demi-fauteuils that complete this dining room reveal the same qualities: of a healthy strength, a grand vision, full of suppleness, and a commendable effort to make the ornamentation serve or fit the structure.

Intellectual and physical qualities are combined to imbue these elegant chairs with a specifically French cocktail of masculinity.

So we can see that various aspects of the French fin-de-siècle psyche, conditioned on their relationship to Germany, conditioned how they talked about design: a hyper-awareness of health, the confirmation of French political ideals, a nostalgia for a time of Royal power expressed through Rococo feminine grace, and a need to find a distinctively French masculinity, all found their way into the assessments of art nouveau.

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121 Nolan, M. E., *The inverted mirror: mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany*, chapter 3
122 RdAD 1899, ‘le castel beranger’, p2
123 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p263
124 See Forth, C.E., *The Dreyfus affair and the crisis of French manhood*
125 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p263
126 RdAD 1900, ‘l’art nouveau de m. bing’, p263
8. The projected qualities of ‘German’ decorative arts

So if this was how French critics saw French art, how did German decorative arts fare on the pages of the Revue?

At the outset, in the 1880s, German work gets few column inches, beyond the ‘missives from abroad’, but the number of scholarly articles on German art gradually increases throughout the 1890s. Because of the academic bent of the Revue, often the analysis is really quite balanced: thoughtful critique trumps jingoism – as perhaps it may not have in more mainstream press. One recurring theme is the mixture of admiration, awe and fear at the efforts being poured by the German state into craft renewal, and the sense the visiting scholar to Germany had of the appreciation ‘of a need to rally together, to unite on a common ground.’

But as for the perceived characteristics of German decorative art, whilst in places Revue critics could be quite complementary, it was rarely unqualified praise. Usually a positive comment on the quality of work was coupled with the assumption that it must have been copied from elsewhere: ‘at the root of the art which (Germany) has produced is the influence and the memory of all the experiments made before, by France, England and Belgium.’

And even when the tone is pleasant some of the adjectives feel somewhat barbed:

He intentionally reproduces the plain strong colours; he makes huge casts, not worrying too much about the details, he likes to depict blossoms – vibrant, full of sap, fleshy and bulbous. This rustic colour, very vivid, a bit crude in appearance, is very close to real life.

The merit of German artists will be, although inspired by progress made by foreigners, to have remained German, to conserve, in assimilating new ideas, their own character, true to their race: of logic, solidity, of crudeness even, and to conceive an art wholly national, of a grandeur in conception and a character corresponding to a different ideal from our own.

It was a crucial mission of French critics – even when recognising artistic value – to preserve the sense of distinct and qualitative difference between German and French art. For example, in discussing the furniture of a Jugendstil artist, a critic writes:

M. de Berlepsch has studied carefully the sculpted and cut wood of the Japanese – but not too much: he has remembered that he is a painter and a German one at that. Born a Swiss German, he studied in Munich, and he preserves the true Germanic feeling...

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127 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’, p341
128 1900, ‘les essais d’art moderne dans la decoration interieure’, p288
129 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’, p350
130 RdAD 1900, ‘les essais d’art moderne dans la decoration interieure’, p288
131 RdAD 1897, ‘A Munich’, p325
‘Crudeness’ seemed to be a favourite word, and although on the one hand it might have meant ‘rustic’, or signified an admirable connection with nature, it also appealed to the French desire to think of the Germans as a rather uncouth and barbaric race. It was certainly not a word that carried positive connotations in relation to French work. And it was one end of a spectrum that had, at the other, rather haughty denunciations of German artistic efforts, such as the following insults written in relation to the Munich exhibition of 1897: ‘Prof. M. Lenbach…paints in shoe polish and rancid butter…’ The monuments of Munich are in highly questionable taste… The effect produced by this conglomeration of varnished, gilded, faked staff, with all the accessories of pomposity, is one of a comedy that defies all description.

The quotes on the previous page all mention another quality that was regularly noted in German decorative arts: that of heaviness, and of unnecessary scale. This was certainly at least partly inspired by real events. Jullian notes that the German pavilion at the 1900 Paris Expo dominated all others in size, with the entrance hall ‘a grand Wagnerian affair’. And in the pages of the Revue itself, the huge scale of the 1896 Expo in Berlin is remarked upon. Even though ‘the Berlin industrial exposition is not a ‘universal’ exhibition, it’s not even a national exhibition, because the 4000 exhibitors are Berliners,’ yet, however, ‘it has managed to surpass in size all the other preceeding world expos of the old and new worlds.’ What could be interpreted as a French anxiety about German world domination ambitions, comes out in their assessment of the objects themselves, in expressions such as ‘exuberant and powerful decoration’, ‘firmness and strength’, and in judgements such as the following:

We can see in this imposing work…the exaggeration of proportions which is one of the peculiarities of contemporary German art. We wouldn’t adopt in France perhaps the same dimensions with regard to a museum door. We would be afraid that doing so would not conform to our traditions of, above all, elegance. The misjudgement of scale is evident…

A timber construction that has no building to support – that must only support itself – has no need for such a display of strength. In short, looking at this heavy wooden structure, one thinks of an upturned boat.

Heaviness was the ugly flipside of masculinity, the kind believed to be embodied by the Germans, beer-swilling and militant. The political nature of these comments is confirmed by the contrasting and more positive appraisal of the furniture of Austria (a fellow victim of German expansionism):

132 RdAD 1897, ‘A Munich’, p321
133 RdAD 1897, ‘A Munich’, p322
134 RdAD 1897, ‘A Munich’, p323
136 RdAD 1896, ‘courrier de l’etranger’, p237
137 RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en Allemagne’, p268
138 RdAD 1901, ‘le mobilier moderne’, p50
139 RdAD 1897, ‘l’exposition internationale de Dresde’, p319
The Austrians occupy an equally important place in interior decoration; their art is more supple, more pleasing than that of Germany: a question of character and race.\textsuperscript{140}

Heaviness in German art was believed by some to be a consequence of the ‘heavy and pedantic German soul’, and therefore a necessary characteristic of their artistic output. This was in contrast to ‘the lively intelligence of the French’, which produced, as we have seen already, light, graceful, charming forms.\textsuperscript{141} The ‘German soul’ manifested itself in the more homely nature of their interiors, again believed to be a reflection of the German lifestyle:

Germany is the nation which best understands the true meaning of the word ‘comfort’. And this is clearly a result of their climate, and the habits of the people... In Germany one lives inside, with the family... and so this interior is the focus of attention, cosy, comfortable...\textsuperscript{142}

There is often a focus on the parochial nature of German crafts. Sometimes this is a fond appraisal,\textsuperscript{143} but more frequently it is a snub. And links are drawn between the ‘obscure and macabre stories’, the ‘vague and dark tales’ of German folklore (which the French ‘clear and certain spirit refuses to understand’),\textsuperscript{144} and the confusion of German artwork:

In general, the composition of German furniture, as far as we can judge from the works on show, lacks simplicity; we see neither the contrasts one might expect in an ensemble display, nor the right use of relief or veneer decoration which is appropriate for wood work.\textsuperscript{145}

The apotheosis of this tendency in the Revue is the essay on the artists’ colony in Darmstadt. The Grand-Duke of Hessen, inspired by the artist and artisan colonies of Morris and Ashbee in England, attempted to create his own utopian community in Darmstadt, and brought together a number of architects, designers and artists to help realise his vision. Ultimately the venture failed to take root, and history has not judged the enterprise too kindly.\textsuperscript{146} Neither did the Revue at the time. The critic in question seems utterly baffled by the earnest and maudlin nature of the opening ceremony, and the bizarre expression of the buildings and décor: ‘All of a sudden, jaws drop open... is this the den of a gnome, the palace of a valkyrie? German art is still looking for itself.’\textsuperscript{147}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{140} RdAD 1900, ‘les essais d’art moderne dans la decoration interieure’, p289
\item \textsuperscript{141} Nolan quotes Jules Huret, En Allemagne: De Hambourg aux marches de Pologne in The inverted mirror : mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914 p112
\item \textsuperscript{142} RdAD 1899, ‘le nouveau palais grand-ducal a Darmstadt’, p94
\item \textsuperscript{143} See for example Antony Valabregue in RdAD 1898, ‘les industries d’art en allemagne’ – assessment of the work of the ‘peaceable’ peasantry and artisans of Carlsruhe
\item \textsuperscript{144} RdAD 1897, ‘A propos de l’art nouveau, soyons Francais!’, p5
\item \textsuperscript{145} RdAD 1901, ‘le mobilier moderne’, p50
\item \textsuperscript{146} A useful overview of the Kunstler-Kolonie is provided in the essay collection Werkbund: History and Ideology
\item \textsuperscript{147} RdAD 1901, ‘l’exposition de la kuenstler-kolonie de darmstadt’, p396
\end{itemize}
So although occasionally German work (and especially historical works of art) received objective art historical criticism in the *Revue*, mostly it could not escape the French anxiety to prove it was at least different, if not markedly inferior. The French need to skew German superior military power into evidence of them being racially incapable of sound artistic judgement meant that genuinely interesting German experiments in *art nouveau* were overlooked.

9. Coda

In 1910, the German *Werkbund* association, a coalition of designers and manufacturers (to which the Darmstadt colony was something of an ideological precursor) had seen such success that it presented a number of rooms at the Paris *Salon d’Automne*. By this time, the *Revue des Arts Décoratifs* was no longer being published, but French critical reactions to the display are documented by Nancy Troy in her study of Modernism in France. On the one hand, French critics had to recognise the superior organisation and ‘discipline’ of German industry, and its implications for France:

> The Sedan of commerce, with which we have been threatened for so many years, is a fait accompli.¹⁴⁸

But the inbuilt distaste for German design still reigns, and seemingly with more venom than before – perhaps a sign of increasing hostilities between the two nations. Again, the differences are judged to be a ‘question of race’, as French writers mock the lack of ‘suppleness, restraint, harmony and grace’ in the German exhibits, and denigrate the ‘large, heavy forms, involving dark, lugubrious colours, or strident contrasts of acidic tones’.

This characterisation of German fin-de-siècle design as heavy and unsubtle, has proved a rather tenacious one. Many years later, Tschudi-Madsen, writing one of the first pan-European surveys of *art nouveau*, defines the qualities of each nation in turn, and displays a clear masculine-feminine/ heavy-light bias in his descriptions of Germany and France – a language which seems to reflect that of fin-de-siècle narratives:

> An essential feature of German design is its striving towards a constructive form...with ample use of arched struts and rectilinear components. Together with the blunt arches, which have none of the pliancy and grace we find in other countries, this gives the style a somewhat ponderous effect.¹⁴⁹

The rest of the page on German *art nouveau* is littered with adjectives such as ‘heavy’, ‘coarse’, ‘rectilinear’, ‘simple’, ‘firm’, ‘straight’, ‘ponderous’, ‘rigid’. It may well be that German art just was more square. But, as I hope to have demonstrated, such words carry meaning beyond pure visual description of the art. Once certain narratives become established and normalised, they


are resistant to change, and are as worthy of analysis as the work itself.

10. Conclusion

Competition between nations takes many forms, and in times of economic stress, political uncertainty, and military threat, nationalisms of varying kinds will come to the fore. For those early adopters of industrial processes, the notion of international economic competitiveness – of the need to sell to the rest of the world more than one buys from it – was quickly assimilated into the dominant existing paradigm of competition between nations: that of war, of winners and losers. This presented a new battleground at a very interesting moment in European history, when social and lifestyle change was demanding new forms of design. Art nouveau was at the heart of the struggle to differentiate to compete in a new industrialised world.

But in France this was not merely a matter of industrial strategy. The flowering of new design styles across Europe (collectively termed art nouveau) was attributable to multiple factors, and the fact that it happened in many countries simultaneously can distract from attending to the specific conditions in each place. In accounts I have read to date of art nouveau in France, there seems to be something of a black hole around the role of the place that Germany occupied in the French national psyche. To return to Reiner Marcowitz’s notion of ‘negative integration’: when one looks more closely at what is being said in France about art nouveau, it seems so often to be conditioned by an unspoken need to prove the otherness of France to Germany. It is this that I hope to have demonstrated herein.

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