The Political Sources of Art Nouveau

How were political and social concerns in late nineteenth century France manifested in movements for craft reform?

Abstract

The following essay is an articulation of the political drivers of craft modernism in fin-de-siècle France, and an assessment of the effectiveness of craft modernism as a cultural policy, and as an industrial policy. Two policies that, as often happens, turned out to be somewhat contradictory. The political concerns of the Third Republic led to two overarching strategies – of responding to the threat of international industrial competition, and the construction of a new French identity – which played out through policies for craft reform. But the brand of French identity favoured by the Third Republic was ultimately at odds with developing a national culture of mass manufacture. The conclusion reached herewith is only partial, as we will go on to see, and in part this is due to the incompleteness of information available in secondary material. The impact of political life, and an understanding of policy, seems absent from many accounts of the movement, although not all. This would merit further exploration, particularly of original source material.
Images

Emile Gallé, Vase, 1896

Georges de Feure, Suite, c.1900

Interior, Fouquet Jewellery Boutique, 1901 (Mucha and others)

Hector Guimard, Paris Metro, 1899 - 1905

Rene Lalique, Dragonfly brooch, c.1897-98

Alfons Mucha, Job Cigarettes, 1898
Introduction

Recent academic work on the fin-de-siècle Art Nouveau movement as it unfolded in France – the curvaceous, organic, feminine style that permeated posters and advertising, jewellery, furniture, glassware, interior design, and Parisian metro station architecture, to name but a few instances, and which indelibly stamped its mark for French identity abroad – has begun to position it within broader initiatives for craft reform and industrial improvement during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, having been pinned for many years to a highly specific style and limited number of practitioners, a re-examination of its first mention in France, in the context of Siegfried Bing’s Gallery, L’Art Nouveau, reveals the intention to inspire a movement of renewal in the fine and decorative arts. Writing in the Architectural Record in 1902, Bing said,

…it was simply the name of an establishment opened as a meeting ground for all ardent young spirits anxious to manifest the modernness of their tendencies, and open also to all lovers of art who desired to see the working of the hitherto unrevealed forces of our day.1

This first hand admission of its dual purpose – supporting the avant-garde, and prototyping a new form of industrial process – gives permission for historians to place what became a recognisable and marketable style within a far grander mission. Thus, historians of Art Nouveau as a period style have, over the last century, opened out their perspectives, from pure stylistic and formal analysis, to the broader social and cultural context. Gabriel Weisberg’s bibliography of design reform, 1885 to 1910, provides a useful overview of the thematic expansion.2

A handful of examples demonstrate this evolution clearly.

Nicholas Pevsner in 1936 treats Art Nouveau, somewhat dismissively, as ‘the transitional style between historicism and the modern movement’.3 Stephan Tschudi Madsen in 1955 takes a similar approach, looking at the development of the style across Europe, although

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1 This extract from the Architectural Record is reproduced in Debora L. Silverman, Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style, University of California Press, Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ Oxford, 1989, p281
3 As quoted in the introduction of his 1973 revision of this earlier text: Nicholas Pevsner and JM Richards, eds., The Anti-Rationalists: Art Nouveau Architecture and Design, 1973
his approval of, and interest in, the movement is greater. Both historians belong to the school of art history which views stylistic development as an internally motivated lineage, a steady marching progress, where the main activity for the historian consists of tracing the passing of ideas between autonomous artists – the evidence consisting of what may be gleaned through formal analysis of the objects themselves.

Later, texts and exhibitions began to consider other external influencing factors – such as the taste for *Japonisme*, the impact of the Dreyfus Affair, and the activities of the Parisian art dealer and gallerist, Siegfried Bing. In 1989, the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York and the Comité Colbert (in an alliance reminiscent of early American patronage of Art Nouveau work) staged an exhibition of French decorative arts 1789-1989, which situated Art Nouveau within a specifically French evolution of design over a two hundred year period.

In the same year, Debora L. Silverman published what now seems to be the definitive work on the period – drawing on developments in politics, psychology and feminism to set out a holistic analysis of French fin-de-siècle fine and decorative arts. Her book is dedicated to, and inspired by the example of, Carl Schorske, who performed much the same service for the history of Viennese fin-de-siècle arts. In 1996, Jeremy Howard took up the European argument again, building on Madsen’s earlier work, but looking further afield – in particular further east – than Madsen had ventured, to show that Art Nouveau went far beyond the dominant centres of Western Europe. Also in 1996, Leora Auslander published an exploration of the changing relationship between power, style, and the function of taste over the course of the nineteenth century in France, which deprioritises ‘Art Nouveau’ in favour of a more detailed picture of widespread consumption habits.

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6 Kenneth Silver wrote about two concurrent exhibitions on Bing, and the Dreyfus Affair, which took place in the late 1980s in New York, in his article, “The Other Fin de Siecle”, in *Art in America*, December 1987, pp104-111.
8 See footnote 1
Silverman’s book – which is more like several books in one – is fascinating and incomparably valuable for its detailed delving into original source material (parliamentary debates, contemporary art journals, newspaper commentary), and wide-ranging analysis of fin-de-siècle intellectual life. It is also one of very few accounts that addresses political factors. Although Silverman and one or two other analysts of Art Nouveau are clearly well-versed in political and industrial history, there are still some interesting omissions.

If one were to ask whether the Third Republic administration developed measures for craft reform as an active government policy to improve industrial competitiveness, or as a nationalist cultural policy, the answer would be only partially apparent in existing secondary literature. Further, it is not clear whether this is an academic blind spot, a question that has fallen between disciplines, or because the answer is more or less ‘no’. Silverman’s survey contains a detailed exposition of the relation between politics and craft reform, however her argument focuses on the ideological appeal of decorative arts to the Third Republic, and higher-level machinations to elevate the decorative arts within the academy. Practical steps the state may have taken to improve the wider artisanal, or even industrial, workforce, are harder to identify.

It is the political context of Art Nouveau (using the term to denote the wider movement for renewal and unity in the arts and crafts) that this essay will develop, partly because it frequently seems incomplete. Historians of art, politics and industry perhaps rarely have the opportunity to collaborate, however in the case of craft and design – which sit at the boundary of the arts, industry and commerce – looking across disciplines is important.

Some cross-disciplinary topics seem to meet greater favour. For example, the study of Expos cannot help but acknowledge the role of politics. Or, analysis of the ‘rise of the consumer’ has recently become a popular prism through which to view fin-de-siècle culture. The introduction to Weisberg’s abovementioned research guide states that ‘the struggle to create affordable, artistic room interiors decorated with inexpensive yet well-crafted objects led to the era of design reform.’ While this is necessarily a generalised comment that must serve to cover four different nations, in the context of France it is

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hard not to think that the tumultuous political climate, and the massive state bureaucracy, not least around controlling the arts, must have also had some bearing on the emergence of a new art for modern times.

Whilst political context is never the whole story, it undoubtedly determines the milieu. It is not incidental. This essay will elucidate the political imperatives in late nineteenth century France that manifested themselves in measures to reform the artisanal and industrial sectors, and in support for cultural policies that focused on the identification of a new uniquely French ‘style’. Further, it will demonstrate that the very particular politics of fin-de-siècle France meant that parallel movements to drive improvements in mass manufacturing industry, and in decorative arts and craft reform, appear to have remained largely divorced. Indeed, it does seem that Jules Méline was accurate when he said ‘French taste conflicted with mass production’.12 As we will see, French concern with artistic heritage was at odds with attempts to modernise industry.

**The European Context**

Although the focus of this essay is France, Jeremy Howard’s insistence on Art Nouveau as a ‘pan-European manifestation’ is apposite. At around the same moment, across much of the European world, artists and intellectuals were peculiarly preoccupied with a similar question, of how to throw off historicism and identify a ‘new’ art, or style, appropriate to modern times. If this is the case – that there was a common artistic struggle underway, there must be some corresponding common socio-political factors.

Clearly, in 1900, the political situation across much of the continent was turbulent, with new states recently formed or amalgamated, territories and boundaries contested, and many new ideologies flourishing across the political spectrum. At the same time, and not coincidentally, industrialisation was causing massive upheaval. Both socially, as the middle classes emerged more fully, and working people’s lives and identities were permanently altered, and economically, as capital amassed and international competitiveness became a very relevant metric. The practice of staging regular international trade exhibitions, after 1851, fuelled the new industrial competition anxiety, as well as being a product of it.

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12 Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style*, p53
Together these two phenomena meant that ‘style’ – in arts, domestic furnishings, architecture – had become increasingly arbitrary. Technical limits to production were dramatically reduced by mechanisation, and no longer (in France) was style set by a Royal household. The French fin-de-siècle citizen-consumer ‘suddenly had a startling array of spiritual, political and social choice in front of them.’ Multiplicity of choice posed an entirely new kind of problematic question.

The Preoccupations of the Third Republic

1. Endless Crisis

Eugen Weber has characterised the Third Republic as being in ‘endless crisis’: riddled internally by political turmoil, with frequent oustings of Ministers, and besieged by chaotic external forces which even succeeded in a Presidential assassination. The Third Republic also had to contend with the short-lived precedents of the First and Second Republicans – both of which quickly collapsed into Imperial regimes. It was certainly founded in crisis. The French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war was followed by the brief Paris Commune in the Spring of 1871, which ended in bloody conflict. Such ‘occasional bouts of murderous hostility’ between classes and political groups were both fresh in memory, and ongoing.

Concerns about the politicisation of the workforce, social unrest, and indeed ‘the social question’, as it was termed, dominated political discourse. Various strains of left-wing para-political organisation – socialists, unions, anarchist terrorist groups and Christian associationalism – were all ‘construed by the elite as a single block of marauders against property’, decidedly evil in the eyes of a regime founded on the virtues of free market capitalism. This threat was apparently crystallised in 1893, when fifty socialists won seats in Parliament. Silverman suggests the danger posed by these groups was likely overestimated by the ruling political order, however it succeeded in forcing a new direction in Republican ideology. In the 1890s, the Republic sought political stability through reconciliation with the clerical and monarchist right, as well as pursuing a more

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13 Howard, Art Nouveau: International and National Styles in Europe, p4
14 Eugen Weber, France: Fin-de-siècle, Harvard University Press, 1986
16 Silverman, Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style, p46
socially benevolent attitude towards the crowd. This had a bearing on its decision to become involved in the aristocratic world of *arts décoratifs*.

2. Visual Culture

The ideological about-turn was indicative of a maturing Republic attempting to assert its permanence and hold France together. The centralised nature of government – and the large bureaucratic administrative system, which had not only survived the Revolution, but grown throughout the nineteenth century – did not diminish the fact that France was still not conceptually one nation, but made up of a ‘large variety of groups which had lives of their own.’

To promote unity, the need for a definitive Third Republic style, or visual code, was acute: the relatively abstract concept of the nation and its qualities could be made more tangible through consumer objects, and the visual arts. Contemporary theories proposed that a shared visual culture would help to constitute the nation:

…living on the same soil, subject to the same climate, having the same examples before our eyes… out of all these common things, we constitute an image or an idea of the patrie.

In 1889 a new seal was adopted and applied to various public works. However the Third Republic had yet to find the contemporary equivalent of any of the Louis’ or the Empire style.

This search for a singular style was unfortunately contradictory to Republican ideology. According to industrial historian Sanford Elwit, ‘the Third French Republic was constituted on an alliance of industrial capitalists, petty bourgeois, and farmers.’ Industrial development, alongside egalitarian democracy and the secularisation of the state, was a founding tenet of the Republic. The commitment to articulating one French soul, through one French style, was at odds with a commitment to economic liberalism. A free market, without regulation, necessarily results in diversity. This may be one reason

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17 Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style*, Chapter 2
21 Silverman p44
23 This is Elwit’s argument in an earlier book, *The making of the Third Republic: class and politics in France, 1868-1884*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1975
that the Third Republic’s artistic interests frequently took the form of old-style patronage rather than more active intervention.

Auslander argues that this conundrum also led to the development of a new cadre of ‘taste professionals’, whose advice guided the impressionable consumer to buy correctly, and decorate French homes that would nurture good French citizens.

3. German Rivalry

The problematic relationship with Germany was a key determining factor in the development of French politics and identity, and industrial policy. More than any other country, France seems to have defined itself against Germany.

Following the Franco-Prussian war, France was embittered by a history of loss at the hands of the Germans. The Third Republic started life on the back of an embarrassing military defeat (Napoleon III and a portion of the French army were captured by Prussian troops at the Battle of Sedan), the desecration of Paris by siege (when conditions were so extreme that the only two elephants in the city were slaughtered for food), and the annexation of half of Alsace-Lorraine in the 1871 settlement which also established the German Empire.

It is an interesting coincidence (or perhaps not) that the two most prolific centres of avant-garde decorative arts output – Paris and Nancy – were two places that had been particularly affected by German invasion. The split of formerly French departments in Alsace-Lorraine led to some very strongly nationalist decorative arts production in Nancy in years that followed: Emile Gallé’s work frequently drew on the natural flora and fauna of the region. Roger Marx, one of the most outspoken advocates of craft reform, was a Lorrainian.

But anti-German sentiment was a national phenomenon. Having been victorious militarily, it now seemed as though Germany intended ‘commerce and industry’ to be the next battlefield, as per Kaiser Wilhelm’s oft-quoted remark on opening the
Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin in 1881.24 Military metaphors invaded the language of industry. Charles Gide, critic of laissez-faire, invoked a warlike mentality when he urged state intervention in technical education to deliver ‘victory in the industrial struggle’.25

A chauvinistic strain of anti-German nationalism – and anti-Semitism – came aggressively to the fore in reactions to the Dreyfus affair, perhaps one of the defining political events of the 1890s. High profile artists publicly took sides, and fell out, and Emile Zola’s pro-Dreyfusard article ‘J’Accuse’ sent him into exile. The same spirit can be seen in contemporary reactions against Bing’s opening exhibition at his Art Nouveau Gallery in 1895, thought on the whole to contain far too much work by foreigners. One critical article in the ‘Revue des Arts Décoratifs’ was entitled, ‘A propos de l’art nouveau, soyons Français!’ and denounced the dilution of French taste with Belgian and English ideas. Bing was likely to be viewed with suspicion in any case, being both German and Jewish.

4. Industrial rivalry
Nationalist sentiment was fuelled by international industrial competition. The first decades of the Third Republic coincided with a long recession, during which French industry did not grow nearly as quickly as American, German and British industry, and which meant that French exports (and therefore presumably national income) dropped off. This led to a policy of protectionism. Méline’s tariff on foreign imports was introduced in 1892, the intention being to curb industrial imports and help France excel in what it believed to be its innate national advantage, born of French soil and a rich artistic lineage: the more refined decorative arts and luxury sector. However French supremacy even in this sector had started to look doubtful.

After 1870 France’s competitiveness in craft production began to decline. Exports of French jewelry, ceramics and furniture… began to contract sharply after 1873. Between 1873 and 1889, exports of furniture from France as a whole dropped by one-third, those from Paris by two-thirds… (In the same period) the volume of European furniture

24 ‘We defeated France on the fields of battle in 1870, now we want to defeat her again in the fields of commerce and industry’. Quoted in Nancy J. Troy, Modernism and the decorative arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier, New Haven, Conn/ London, Yale University Press
25 As quoted in Sanford Elwit, The Third Republic Defended: Bourgeois Reform in France, 1880 - 1914, p288
entering the French market as a whole increased fivefold, from one to five million pieces.\textsuperscript{26}

As well as causing a balance of trade problem, this marked increase in imports shows that although French consumers were spending their money, they weren’t buying French products. The need to create and sustain both a patriotic internal market, and a healthy export market, was frequently expressed by politicians and commentators.

Worries about foreign encroachments into France’s ‘antique royalty in the decorative arts’ had been simmering since the first great international exhibition in 1851. In 1882 and 1894 officials were dispatched to Germany and the USA to comment on the state of affairs in their respective decorative arts system, and their reports (as well as those prepared by official delegates to international expos) only served to exacerbate concerns, confirming the rapidly developing artistic sensibilities of competitor nations. Vachon’s report on Germany was even called ‘Nos Industries d’Art en peril’.\textsuperscript{27}

In the 1890s, the calls for state intervention to ‘lend aid to the national manufactures’\textsuperscript{28} and regenerate the applied arts, received a more favourable response after a political change of personnel. The government moved away from the old economic liberalism espoused by Ferry and Gambetta, to a more interventionist government, economically and socially. Méline’s leadership of 1896-98 promoted a strategy of ‘protectionism, patriotism, and social defense’.\textsuperscript{29} The administration became increasingly pro-craft reform and actively supported it in a number of ways.

Thus the political preoccupations particularly relevant to the fin-de-siècle call for a ‘new art’ can be broadly divided into two drivers: alarm over international competitiveness and the economic health of the nation, and the internal building of legitimacy and identity for the new Republic. As we will see, these two drivers – economic competition and the construction of a national identity – played out in contradictory ways. Latent within both of them is a degree of nationalism.

\textsuperscript{26} Silverman, p54
\textsuperscript{27} The frequently quoted parts of these reports usually discuss the state of affairs in the respective country, but tend to be remarkably light on exactly how this had been brought about. It is difficult to know whether that analysis of levers or contributory factors happened at all, without access to original source material.
\textsuperscript{28} Philippe Burty, a publicist for the Central Union of Decorative Arts, writing in the Revue des Arts Décoratifs, quoted in Silverman, p132
\textsuperscript{29} Silverman, p50
Nationalism and style

Facos and Hirsch\textsuperscript{30} trace the evolution of modern European nationalism back to the late nineteenth century. The charged political atmosphere across the continent provoked strong statements of national identity. Countries tended to look to their artistic and cultural traditions, including folk art and vernacular architecture, to articulate a distinctive and historically verifiable identity, defining themselves against other nations. Contemporary understanding linked the artistic output of a nation strongly to its language, religion, race, geography, and history (rather than individual creative genius), as per Hippolyte Taine’s literary theory of art’s contingency on ‘race, milieu et moment’.\textsuperscript{31}

Creating the nation – an ‘imagined community’ – was a different process to creating the political entity of the state, and nation-builders relied on visual codes:

\ldots visual culture unquestionably constituted the most potent vehicle for the dissemination of cultural ideas in an era in which literacy was far from universal.\textsuperscript{32}

Further, an apparent lack of a national style was itself a cause for concern in France, as evidence of an identity vacuum.

Taste has been uniquely salient to both national identity and to export production in France. As early as the seventeenth century, the French understood themselves as possessing, as a nation, more refined taste than other European nations… France competed economically through taste… French commentators were more likely than others to declare “crises in national taste”.\textsuperscript{33}

Auslander, quoted above, has a compelling theory about the functioning of style and power in France at this time. Before 1789, the ‘culture of production’ was tightly controlled by the crown and the guilds, and style was set from the top, by the King.

\textsuperscript{30} Michelle Facos and Sharon L. Hirsch, \textit{Art, Culture and National Identity in Fin-de-siècle Europe}, Cambridge University Press, 2003

\textsuperscript{31} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolyte_Taine\#cite_note-20 accessed on 2013-01-02

\textsuperscript{32} Facos and Hirsch, \textit{Art, Culture and National Identity in Fin-de-siècle Europe}, ‘Introduction’. In France in 1900, literacy was around 60%.

\textsuperscript{33} Auslander, \textit{Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France}, p25
When the political system was founded upon the concept of the nation in the King – when the King, the King’s things, and the nation were one – objects meant something very different than they did under the Republican system of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\(^{34}\)

The loss of the singular embodiment of the nation in the King and ‘the King’s things, and transformations in the system of production, meant that there was no longer ‘a hegemony of one style’, but a multiplicity of possible styles. If, as desired by the Third Republic, there were to be a singular French national style, it would have to be forcibly produced.\(^{35}\)

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**Political support for craft modernism**

The search for a stylistic identity for France under the Third Republic, and the more interventionist attitude to improving industrial competitiveness in the 1890s, manifested itself in support for the revitalisation of the decorative arts sector in a number of ways.

Silverman documents in great detail the political support for the Central Union of the Decorative Arts, the most significant organisation working for craft reform in fin-de-siècle France. By the 1890s the Union had evolved somewhat from its early days as the ‘Society for the Progress of Industrial Arts’. Originally an alliance of industrial designers and producers, galvanised into existence by the 1851 exhibition, it called for greater support for the decorative arts by way of a museum, a school, and yearly salons, or exhibitions, following the British example in South Kensington. A private association, through the 1860s it changed its name to the ‘Central Union of Fine Arts Applied to Industry’, and its leaders took it upon themselves to organise free lectures, exhibitions, competitions and a library.

However in the 1870s, the Central Union was prompted by the destruction waged to older properties during the Paris Commune to take a more conservationist stance, and a number of well-known collectors joined the Union. In the 1880s the Central Union of the Decorative Arts emerged out of the amalgamation of the 1864 ‘Central Union’, and the

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p19
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p142
Society for a Decorative Arts Museum, which had already been jointly producing a journal (the ‘Revue des Arts Décoratifs’) and exhibitions.

By the 1890s, the Union had attracted significant financial and political capital. With notable aristocratic collectors, intellectuals and politicians on its steering group – many of whom loaned their own objects for exhibitions – it was well connected. The new make-up of the Union also redefined its mission, to become a ‘public consortium dominated by collectors and oriented towards the elite cultivation of the decorative arts.’ This elitist focus has all the semblance of a conservative retreat, rather than a proactive strategy to compete internationally, and drew some such criticism at the time.

However accounts of the Union’s history demonstrate a unique situation in France at this time, where the strength of the arts establishment was hard to resist. This was partly because state bureaucrats, art critics, tastemakers and politicians could all be embodied in the same person. The marquis Philippe de Chennevieres, for example, was both President of the ‘Society for a Decorative Arts Museum’, director of the Ministry of Beaux-Arts, historian, critic and eighteenth century collector. Roger Marx was another key figure who combined a civil service career with art criticism. An influential ‘taste professional’ and a respected bureaucrat, he played an important role brokering the peaceable split of the Salon in 1889. Antonin Proust – former Deputy and Minister, and President of the Union from 1882 – took the bid for a Museum of the Decorative Arts straight to the heart of government. He was also a personal friend of Manet and Rodin. Georges Berger, director of works for the 1889 Paris Expo, served both as Union President and a member of the Beaux-Arts Budget Committee.

The list of Union associates reads rather incestuously, a web of relationships that today would be subject to strict ‘conflict of interest’ scrutiny. But not in nineteenth century France. Parliament voted funding to the Louvre to be tripled in 1890, with the majority being channelled into new decorative arts acquisitions, collections and exhibitions. And with such connections and official sponsorship, the Union finally succeeded in its bid to establish a museum – what is now the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in the Louvre. The original concerns of the Unions founding designers had been sidelined by the interests of

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36 Nancy J. Troy, p21
aristocratic collectors, whose journal was far ‘better suited to elite *amateurs* than to artisans or the mass public’.

But why did so many politicians become so enthusiastically involved with the Central Union of the Decorative Arts?

Silverman’s suggestion is that they saw it was directly relevant to the policies of *ralliement* – of reconciliation with the aristocratic right – and solidarism, in as far as it advocated a non-hierarchical approach to the arts. Eugène Spuller, another prominent Republican leader who helped organise the first ‘Congress of the Decorative Arts’, saw a unifying national art as a key strand of the ‘esprit nouveau’, ‘a bond above the vicissitudes of politics’. In the context of the mass manufacturing might of Germany and America, some saw France’s economic salvation in the luxury artisan. It was also at least partly social. The salons of the artistic and intellectual elite were where people met, mixed, and shared ideas. The cross-pollination of politics and the decorative arts sector demonstrates just how important the concept of ‘taste’ in itself was for the French government’s sense of identity and validity.

Another success of ‘the official coalition for craft modernism’ included the readmission of decorative arts to the Salon in 1889. Jacques-Louis David had decreed the decorative and applied arts inferior to painting, sculpture and architecture during the Revolution, because unlike those higher disciplines, they were unable to carry ‘moralising’ messages. Subsequent attempts to overturn this doctrine failed, largely due to the vested interests of those in control of the yearly salons. In 1889, when they were finally readmitted, it entailed a split into two new bodies – the Society of French Artists, who were against admission, and the National Society of the Beaux Arts, who were in favour. This represented a major victory for the craft reform coalition, but it also moved the decorative arts yet further away from industry.

Some measures were taken to improve the artistic quality of the output of larger manufactures, namely in the renovation of those traditional craft institutions that were formerly Royal manufactures and had passed into state ownership, such as Sèvres porcelain, and Gobelins and Aubusson textiles. At Sèvres, Leon Bourgeois, then Minister of Public Instruction and Beaux-Arts, replaced the chemist-trained head of the factory
with an artist, a policy which seems to have been successful. Sèvres proceeded to produce some highly innovative work, and of course is still active as an atelier-factory today.

In another area under direct government control, Paul Doumer, an ally of craft reform advocate Roger Marx, and Minister of Finance, implemented a redesign of French coinage. Marx had chastised the Republic for living on borrowed emblems from former regimes, and urged it to create its own coinage. In one way, this was an interpretation of William Morris’s dicta to invest the objects of everyday life with art (although there is plenty of evidence of the selective interpretation of Morris’s writing by the French), but for the Third Republic this was also a powerful way of articulating a new national identity through a form that every French citizen-consumer would encounter.

The rehabilitation of Rococo

The Third Republic worked hard to institutionalise the celebration of eighteenth century art and decorative arts as an innately and proudly French tradition. The restoration of Versailles and the Bibliothèque Nationale, and state use of Rococo furniture are examples of this effort. In Silverman’s account, the Central Union was in large part responsible for the resurrection of a taste for the riches of the eighteenth century – the time of the Old Regime, and of pre-Davidian unity and equal status in the arts.

In some sense this institutional devotion to the Rococo is curious. The Third Republic was, as the name suggests, the third attempt since the seachange of 1789 to establish a lasting republican political system. Previous attempts had been shortlived. So why – when the goals of the Revolution had finally been achieved a hundred years later – should a young republic have chosen to enshrine the style patronised by the overthrown autocratic monarchy?

One answer is that they could mentally divorce the artistic output of the Old Regime from the politics that engendered it. But it was also a key tactic of ralliement, the ‘effort by bourgeois republicans to find a basis for unity with the older aristocratic forces, an ongoing quest to solidify the ranks of one elite’. It reveals an interesting French

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37 Silverman, Chapter 7
38 http://www.sevresciteceramique.fr/
39 For more detail see Silverman ‘Chapter 6’
phenomenon: the unique ability for elitist institutions to dictate style and, to some extent, lead the avant-garde in the arts. The recognisable Art Nouveau style was built in France on the eighteenth century Rococo, which, as we have seen, the state-backed Beaux-Arts community was working hard to lionise. Unlike in England (for example) the leading artists of fin-de-siècle France, even the controversial ones, were a part of the capitalist, mercantile establishment, not opposed to it. Unlike in Austria, there was no need for these artists to ‘secede’.

The Third Republic also followed the example of the monarchy and the aristocracy in acting as a patron to the arts, and thus reinforcing the latent assumption that what the decorative arts in France required was patrons rather than customers or consumers. The Republic continued the Old Regime tradition of purchasing works from the Salon every year, and extended this patronage to the decorative arts. From the 1880s onwards, in response to both public demand and parliamentary recommendations, state *envois* of artworks to provincial museums and collections (yet another way of constituting a unified national visual and material culture) began to include increasing numbers of applied arts objects: ‘prints, ceramics, Sèvres porcelain and even glass.’

**Artisanal culture and mass manufacture**

As we have seen, by the 1890s the decorative arts sector had become the darling of the establishment. The rest of the artisanal workforce, by comparison, went relatively undersupported. Although it continued to flourish throughout the nineteenth century, it did so without much helpful intervention. The old guild system – which supported and regulated the trades – was disassembled in 1791 and never reinstated. The guilds were seen as too closely linked to the royal culture of production, and antithetical to a free-market nation. They had been concerned with the regulation of production and the upholding of standards, and unpopular with those not admitted to their ranks. Zeldin characterises them as ‘a privileged aristocracy with many working class enemies’. But their abolition left something of a vacuum, and there were attempts (all failed) throughout the nineteenth century to reactivate the system.

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It quickly became apparent in the early nineteenth century that the old workshop system could not meet the needs of a rapidly industrialising nation – the network of artisans couldn’t equip the army, for example. Assessments of the size and shape of the industrial workforce in the nineteenth century that exactly agree are hard to come by, but most analysis has the industrial sector growing, even through a depression. Between 1886 and 1896, France saw a roughly 50% increase in the manufacturing workforce, and a tendency towards greater concentration, away from the old world of the petit patrons. By 1906, 1% of industrial enterprises were employing 50% of the workforce. Small workshop culture clung on, but it was squeezed by the pressures of commerce, the competition from mass manufacture, and the demands of the grands magasins. Maintaining quality in these conditions was tough, leading to frequent calls for government support for the traditional craft industries. The political response of privileging the decorative arts and reigniting a love of the eighteenth century were not very practical measures in this regard.

**The education question**

One of the ways the Third Republic could have most effectively supported all of industry was through access to, and quality of, technical education. However the French were comparatively late in enacting technical education reform – a Parliamentary report in 1880 on the poor state of technical education was eventually followed by new laws to create a mass technical education system – and they kept the more privileged system of artistic education quite segregated.

General educational reform had been a key priority of Jules Ferry’s administration in the activity of nation-building, and concerns about the quality of technical education began to be addressed in the 1890s by the more interventionist administration. The traditional technical education system – also known as apprenticeship – had been undermined by the abolition of the guilds, and the financial pressures exerted on workshops. Public-private initiatives – societes industrielles or societes d’enseignement – sprang up in places with

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41 ‘From Artisan to Worker: Guilds, the French State, and the Organization of Labor, 1776-1821’ (review) in *Journal of Social History*, Volume 45, Number 2, Winter 2011, pp. 531-533
42 Zeldin p210
44 See Silverman Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the pressures on the traditional artisan workshop
well-established manufacturing communities, with provision closely tailored to local skills needs.\textsuperscript{45}

There was a recognised need for national measures to increase the quality of the workforce at a time of declining prices and rising international competition, to improve efficiency and productivity. However the system of artistic education remained at a far remove from the new technical system to create low-skilled workers for the industrial machine. Auslander and Elwit both describe a very deterministic approach to the idea of educating workers: access to types of knowledge was split along class lines. In general, it was more expensive to receive an artistic and creative education, and these roles in industry were reserved for those who had been born to lead rather than remain an industrial footsoldier. The identity of the average worker came to exclude aesthetic skills.\textsuperscript{46}

Ultimately, the main and most consistent focus of state sponsored activity in support of the workers was the system of international exhibitions. Labour delegations were sent to attend and report back, and this performed an educational function – a primary way artisans could increase knowledge of their trade – and an opportunity to discuss ideas and lobby.

**Cultural policy or industrial policy?**

As a result of market pressures and political decisions, during the nineteenth century the previously unified artisan class split into separate functions: designers, artists, and unskilled industrial workers. Only the *haut luxe* workshops managed to combine artistic integrity with mechanised production. The decorative arts were absorbed into the world of art rather than industry. Although the craft reform movement was started by producers keen to improve the state of industry, it never escaped the world of elite arts bureaucracy, already strong in France.

With the split of the old artisan identity, the question of authorship became a frequent site of debate. Protecting artistic identity was clearly of concern to decorative arts professionals. One of three days at the ‘Congress of the Decorative Arts’ was taken up

\textsuperscript{45} See Elwit, Chapter 7: Accumulating Mental Capital
\textsuperscript{46} This is Auslander’s argument, and in fact the central question motivating her inquiry
debating it. A table produced by the workshop of Emile Gallé had the names of all twenty collaborating craftsmen incised into its base.47 This inclination to privilege the individuality of the artisan encouraged the further divorce from industry and mass manufacture. As Molly Nesbit points out in her paper ‘What Was an Author?’:

Industry did not want authors in its ranks; it wanted control over the property rights to every phase of production, from technical drawing to finished commodity.48

The Third Republic position on the decorative arts set cultural policy in conflict with industrial policy, and therefore limited the effectiveness of industrial policy. This had some contemporary critics. In 1880, Prime Minister Gambetta, in an attempt to democratize the arts, bring them closer to industry, and improve education for artisans, proposed the demotion of the Institut de France and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and the reorganisation of the Arts Ministry. The reorganisation lasted only a year, the proposed educational reforms did not materialise.49 Marius Vachon condemned both the Central Union and the ‘Sociétè d’Encouragement à l’Art et à l’Industrie ‘for their aristocratic presumption and their failure to work toward meaningful reform.’50 Further, the opening pages of the journal ‘L’Art Decoratif’ complained that the French reverence for its artistic heritage risked stultifying the development of new industries.

France’s glorious tradition of painting and sculpture, of which she has a right to be proud, pursues artistic France and dominates her activity in this new field.51

In Germany the opposite prevailed: the cutting edge in industrial design had the artistic community much closer to industry. Small work units comprised artists, designers and manufacturers.52 Siegfried Bing, and another gallerist, Julius Meier-Graefe, tried to emulate the example of the Vereinigten Werkstatten in the structure of their own craft workshops. Unfortunately attempts to reshape French industry along German lines were doomed to fail. Following the German example was, for reasons already discussed, politically unpalatable.

47 Silverman, p165
48 See Molly Nesbit, ‘What was an author?’, Yale French Studies, 73 (Winter 1987), pp 229-257
49 Silverman, p119
50 Quoted in Nancy J. Troy, Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier, p22
51 ibid., p30
52 As described in Nancy J. Troy, ‘Art Nouveau in Paris: From an Eclectic Movement to a National Style’ (Chapter 1), in Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier, pp48-51
‘L’Art de Vivre’ mentions one or two haut luxe workshops which, unperturbed by Morrisian anti-capitalist concerns, evolved into mass manufacturing businesses: Gallé, Majorelle, Lalique. These businesses succeeded by combining ‘the mystique of the unique object with efficient production techniques’. High-end glass, furniture and jewellery products from these factories, with all the appearance of the handmade object, became more accessible to a middle class market. This suggests that even the leaders of the decorative arts field were not averse to pandering to the consumer market. But did France have enough such businesses to match German mass manufacturing might?

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**Conclusion**

One wonders at the viability of privileging the luxury goods sector – inevitably quite exclusive – as a national economic strategy. Because in the face of economic competition, it does seem that France adopted an antagonistic attitude to the conditions of modern life and industrial production, one that prized ‘aristocratic traditions of style and individual craftsmanship’\(^5\), and traded on their historical identity as tastemaker.

This strategy had some successes. Several US Presidents, including Washington, patronised French furniture makers.\(^4\) The objects from Bing’s Gallery and 1900 ‘Art Nouveau’ Pavilion were quickly bought up by foreign collectors and museums, if not actually by the French themselves. And it was a powerful diplomatic strategy: Silverman argues that the French exploited a mutual love of eighteenth century arts to foster good relations between France and Russia.\(^5\)

As a nation-building tactic, one could speculate that the process of *ralliement*, and the privileging of the decorative arts did work in creating a new and convincing identity. The Republic lasted longer than any other regime since the Revolution, eventually brought down only by the turmoil of the Second World War. As an institutional base from which highly commercial versions of ‘Art Nouveau’ flourished, it supported the creation of a distinctive visual identity for fin-de-siècle France, one that has perhaps persisted far longer than any other imagery.

\(5\) ibid., p50
\(4\) Catherine Arminjon, & Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *L'art de vivre: Decorative arts and design in France 1789-1989*
\(5\) Silverman, Chapter 9
However as an industrial and economic strategy, it was limited, and the fallout can be observed in 2013. Germany has an innovative and highly trained manufacturing culture. Britain has an enviable design and creative industries sector. France has neither of these to the same extent. It continues to trade on its cultural supremacy, and increasingly its creative highpoint during the fin-de-siècle, which now has a preserved quality. The Art Nouveau strategy, as much as it existed, privileged an articulation of French intellectual and artistic identity at the expense of an effective industrial policy.

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