

PETER SELZ

# ART IN OUR TIMES

A PICTORIAL HISTORY 1890-1980



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**Peter Selz**

University of California, Berkeley



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*TANYA AND GABRIELLE*

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

The history of art is a study of the changing perceptions of the inner and outer environments. In our times there have probably been more diverse attitudes and individual styles than at any other period in the history of art. This book begins with the art of the 1890s. The last decade of the nineteenth century produced revolutionary changes in architecture, painting, and sculpture ranging from the early development of the skyscraper as a new building type to the affirmation of the autonomy of the work of art in painting and sculpture. The new forms and expressions generated in the 1890s shaped many features of the art of the twentieth century. For the vanguard artists at the end of the last century a work of art was no longer a reproduction or definition of the palpable world but a new exploration of visible and invisible reality. If one general statement can be made about the art of our times, it is that one by one the old criteria of what a work of art ought to be have been discarded in favor of a dynamic approach in which everything becomes possible. The purpose of art was stated beautifully by Paul Klee in 1920, when he asserted that “art does not reproduce the visible; rather it *makes* visible,” taking us “into the land of greater insight.” The quality of a work of art can perhaps best be judged by its potential yield of new experiences. Nobody has said this more cogently than Robert Rauschenberg: “If you do not change your mind about something when you confront a picture you have not seen before, you are either a stubborn fool or the painting is not very good.”

It is the distinctive quality of the work, its inherent character, that provides specific meaning and affords aesthetic pleasure. Therefore, instead of adhering to older methods of categorizing modern art as a sequence of movements, I decided to bring the unique aspects of each work into focus by means of visual juxtaposition. In the first chapter, in discussing “Portraits of Women,” the contrast of portraits by Boldini, Cassatt, Cézanne, and Toulouse-Lautrec gives immediate insight into their differences in approach, purpose, and form.

To look at art in terms of successive movements or “isms” was a useful didactic method when modern art was first studied seriously. But it is a very unsatisfactory method that has outlived its usefulness. Most major artists cannot be categorized and made to fit into these conceptual pigeonholes. Where does Brancusi belong, or Bonnard, Beckmann, or Bacon? How does one classify Frank Lloyd Wright or Georgia O’Keeffe? Matisse was a Fauve for a very short time in his long career; Duchamp outlived his brief Dada period by more than half a century; and to call Picasso a Cubist is to miss the cataclysmic complexity of his work. Both De Kooning and Rothko have been classified as Abstract Expressionists but De Kooning was rarely abstract and Rothko never expressionist. Categorizations of this sort are simplifications, often meaningless if not misleading. Artists themselves have always felt very uncomfortable when restrictive labels were affixed to their styles. David Smith spoke for many of them when he stated that “names are usually given to groups by people who don’t understand them or don’t like them.”

To label a landscape painted by Georges Braque near L’Estaque in 1908 a “Cubist” painting is correct but does not lead the viewer “into the land of greater insight.” A comparative study of contemporaneous treatments of the landscape motif by artists as diverse as Monet, Cézanne, Hodler, Homer, Vlaminck, Mondrian, and Kandinsky as against Braque might indeed lead to greater understanding of artistic problems and particular solutions. It is this methodology which seems most promising. In this book, therefore, painting and sculpture are discussed according to themes, architecture according to building types.

In addition to being a unique object, a work of art belongs to its time, and each age has its own kind of art. It was created under certain circumstances in a particular cultural context, serving a definite purpose. This general time context can be established most conveniently by dividing the art of the last ninety years into decades. For each decade-chapter I have

provided a synoptic table and an introduction to place the artistic development within its general cultural framework. Too often art has been treated as existing in a rarefied, detached realm. The misjudgment of formalist criticism, however, has clearly revealed that art cannot be separated from the thoughts and ideas of its time, from the political and intellectual concerns during the period in which the artists lived and made their art.

This book, with its 1,600 illustrations, provides a comprehensive and inclusive visual record of the art of the twentieth century. It contains not only the most significant monuments but also works of art that are now neglected but were important at the time of their creation. I am including examples of architecture, painting, and sculpture made under fascism, Nazism, and Communism, works which heretofore have been largely disregarded in histories of modern art. Yet, no political historian would or could ignore Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin in a study of modern European history. Why then do many art historians feel that the art of fascism or Socialist Realism can be overlooked? Perhaps because they imagine there is some invariable "mainstream of art." But art has never been that simple, and work that seems to belong to a side alley at a given time may suddenly turn up in the next generation's mainstream. Nobody, for example, considered the architecture of war of the 1940s very significant aesthetically, yet it may very well have had an impact on the Brutalism of the next decade. In the most recent decades I draw attention to new media such as Happenings, performances, body art, video, and various forms of conceptual art, although many critics would still question their validity as art.

This book is limited largely to painting, sculpture, and architecture with some reference to prints, drawings, posters, and design. Photography, both still and cinematic, could not be included because of the vastness of the body of work produced in these fields. These mediums deserve a comprehensive treatment in their own right.

I want to express my thanks to the friends, colleagues, and students who have helped significantly in completing this book. Above all, I wish to acknowledge Kristine Stiles, whose suggestions were particularly helpful in the final chapters of the book, and Grey Brechin, Brian Horrigan, and Bruce Radde for their knowing advice on the architectural sections. I am greatly obliged to Suzaan Boettger, Mildred Constantine, Andrew Fabricant, Deirdre Lemert, Ned Polsky, Merrill Schleier, Elizabeth Tumasoni, Barbara Williams, and Anne Williamson for their assistance. I profited from the critical judgment of Nan Rosenthal and the encouragement of Moira Roth. Robert Yagura made important suggestions for the design of the book, and Lorna Price was of great help in the original editing.

At Harry N. Abrams, Inc., my greatest gratitude goes to Phyllis Freeman, who for a period of two years worked with sensitivity, much sympathy, and a great deal of endurance on *Art in Our Times*. Appreciation is due to the late Harry Abrams, who helped launch this ambitious project, and to Margaret Kaplan, who nourished it to its completion, as well as to Judith Tortolano, Ellen Grand, Christopher Sweet, and Anne Yarowsky.

Work on this book was done in many libraries. I want to acknowledge especially the Louise Sloss Ackerman Fine Arts Library at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and its knowledgeable librarian, Eugenie Candau, who also prepared the bibliography. Once again, I found the libraries of The Museum of Modern Art and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in New York, of great value.

My gratitude is also due to the many public and private collections and photo archives here and abroad that have granted us permission to reproduce the works of art and provided the necessary photographs and color transparencies.

P. S.  
Berkeley, California



# One: The 1890s

The 1890s were filled with even more contradictions than are most decades. The century which saw the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie was reaching its conclusion. It had been a century of continuous and incredible progress in which one great scientific and technological invention followed on the heels of the previous one with accelerating speed. Gaslight replaced the kerosene lamp only to be supplanted by the incandescent light bulb which could be turned on by flicking a switch. Mankind looked forward to a new order of ever-expanding production of goods and services with ever-decreasing human toil.

Life in Europe appeared secure. A long period of peace and colonial and industrial expansion had brought with it the promise of full prosperity; “civilized” man could look forward to the uninterrupted continuation of a well-established social order. Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897 symbolized that apparent stability. In Central Europe the long reign of the Emperor Franz Josef—paternalistic, remote, exceedingly oppressive—seemed to ensure the continuity of the prevailing social system. Even a relative upstart like Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany, it was thought, could eventually be absorbed into the fabric of this linear cultural evolution. The entrenched order was buttressed diplomatically and militarily by the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy).

With the assurance of incomprehension, Darwin’s theory of evolution was misapplied from the

field of biology to cultural history. Most citizens shared a supreme confidence that the whole world would eventually attain the civilized standards of European culture, which appeared absolutely superior, morally and spiritually, to any previous or contemporary civilization. This attitude rationalized European domination of most of the earth’s surface and was highly profitable to the British aristocracy, France’s *haute bourgeoisie*, and the Junker class and rising industrialists of imperial Germany, not to omit the Roman clergy. Relatively few individuals were aware of Nietzsche’s pronouncement of God’s demise, as Christianity continued to be implanted among the heathens of Africa and Asia.

Belief in progress and a bigger and better future within a capitalist society was perhaps most pronounced in the United States—the only major nation except Japan to remain relatively independent of European domination. The Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890 continued the genocide of the native American population, and the Spanish-American War, with the subsequent annexation of the Philippines and the brief occupation of Cuba, set the United States on its own imperialist course, which proved to be primarily economic rather than territorial.

But the 1890s were also a period of profound trouble. France was shattered by deep internal dissensions which surfaced in the antagonisms over the Dreyfus Affair. This scandal had broad political repercussions, as did the disastrous Boer War (1899–1902), in which Great Britain was embroiled. The conserva-

tive ruling class persisted in its view that capitalism was the best system to ensure social and economic well-being. But many intellectuals disagreed. In England members of the Fabian Society, aware of the terrible social, political, and economic injustices which were an inevitable result of the Industrial Revolution, worked for the emancipation of women and children and for greater sexual freedom. They believed in the orderly, rational transformation of institutions and looked forward to a non-Marxist socialist society in which a good life would be possible for all.

Others believed that more radical means were needed to end the oppression and exploitation for which they held the prosperous and complacent ruling class responsible. Presidents of France and the United States, the prime minister of Spain, the king of Italy, and the empress of Austria were assassinated between 1894 and 1901 by anarchists, who, as Pierre Proudhon had taught, believed that "property is theft." They formed a loosely organized movement to eliminate property, law, and government, thereby hoping to bring about the destruction of the bourgeois world. Peter Kropotkin, a Russian prince who became a revolutionary writer and leader, inspired terrorists throughout Europe and beyond with his calls for the "propaganda of the deed." Bombs were exploded with the goal of establishing a more equitable and, above all, free society.

Most of the artists of the period identified with the Establishment, enhancing and glorifying it with their own conservative works, but others refused to accept

bourgeois values which dominated their lives and frustrated their careers. It was especially the scientifically oriented Neo-Impressionists, such as Camille Pissarro, Maximilien Luce, and Paul Signac in France, who adhered openly—at least in theory—to the anarchist movement. The old world may have given the appearance of perfect order, but many artists could not share its optimistic and mechanistic view of life. During the same years in which brilliant scientists began to break down the concepts and theories of classical physics, chemistry, and psychology, artists too were engaged in the "transvaluation of values." Friedrich Nietzsche was aware of the danger of modern ideas. He did not share the liberals' faith that rational knowledge and human intellect alone could solve all human problems. He no longer shared the Neoclassicists' belief in measure and calm as the paradigm of Greek art; he understood also the struggle and Dionysian frenzy, especially of the early tragedies. Nietzsche's writings opened a new access to the irrational, and his belief in primordial sources deeply influenced intellectuals and artists in the 1890s.

Having little sympathy for the optimism and utilitarianism which dominated the era, many artists turned to religion, mysticism, and a new transcendentalism, or escaped from the bourgeois life in metropolitan centers to find new strength among the people living in primitive or peasant cultures. Others, in contrast, sought personal salvation by cultivating exquisite sensations and raising the artifice of urban life to an art in itself.

	Political Events	The Humanities and Sciences	Architecture, Painting, Sculpture
1890	Battle of Wounded Knee Sherman Anti-Trust Act becomes law in the U.S.	William James, <i>Principles of Psychology</i> James Frazer, <i>The Golden Bough</i> Henrik Ibsen, <i>Hedda Gabler</i>	Brussels: Significant international exhibitions of art by Les XX (1884–1893)
1891	Triple Alliance linking Germany, Italy, and Austria renewed Franco-Russian entente established	Oscar Wilde, <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> Frank Wedekind, <i>Spring's Awakening</i> Gustav Mahler, <i>Symphony No. 2</i> James Whistler, <i>The Gentle Art of Making Enemies</i> Thomas Edison patents a motion-picture camera and projection device Sergei Rachmaninoff, <i>Piano Concerto No. 1</i>	Tahiti: Paul Gauguin arrives Brussels and Paris: Posthumous retrospective exhibitions of Vincent van Gogh
1892	Labor unrest in the U.S.: injunctions and troops used to break strikes of unionized steel and railway workers (–1895)	Henrik Ibsen, <i>The Master Builder</i> Rudolf Diesel patents an internal-combustion engine Maurice Maeterlinck, <i>Pelléas and Mélisande</i> Henry Ford finishes his first motorcar	Paris: Joséphin Péladan organizes the first Rose + Croix exhibition Paris: Auguste Renoir and Camille Pissarro have successful exhibitions at Durand-Ruel's Munich: Secession founded
1893	Grover Cleveland becomes U.S. president Financial panic in the U.S.	William Butler Yeats, <i>The Lake Isle of Innisfree</i>	Paris: Gustave Caillebotte leaves his collection of Impressionist paintings to the French government Adolf von Hildebrand, <i>The Problem of Form in the Plastic Arts</i> Edvard Munch settles in Germany Chicago: World's Columbian Exposition
1894	Trial and conviction of Alfred Dreyfus in France Czar Nicholas II succeeds to the Russian throne Sino-Japanese War establishes Japan as a major power	Claude Debussy, <i>Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun</i> George Bernard Shaw, <i>Arms and the Man</i>	Brussels: La Libre Esthétique supersedes Les XX as the focal point of avant-garde art

## Political Events

## The Humanities and Sciences

## Architecture, Painting, Sculpture

1895 Cubans revolt against Spanish rule

Trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde on charges of homosexual practices  
Wilhelm Roentgen discovers X rays  
Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*; founds psychoanalysis  
Richard Strauss, *Till Eulenspiegel*

Paris: Samuel Bing opens his Salon de l'Art Nouveau  
Paris: Paul Cézanne's first one-man show at Ambroise Vollard's gallery  
Paris: The Lumière brothers give the first public motion-picture showing

1896 William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech  
Klondike gold rush

Anton Bruckner, *Symphony No. 9*  
Anton Chekhov, *The Sea Gull*  
Richard Strauss, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*  
Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*  
Johannes Brahms, *Four Serious Songs*, Op. 121  
Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*  
Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*

William Morris publishes the Kelmscott Chaucer with illustrations by Edward Burne-Jones  
Munich: Vasily Kandinsky arrives to study painting

1897 War between Turkey and Greece  
Queen Victoria's Sixtieth Anniversary Jubilee

Stefan George, *Das Jahr der Seele*  
Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy*  
Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (–1928)  
Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés*

Brussels: World Exhibition  
London: The Tate Gallery opens  
Vienna: Secession founded, headed by Gustav Klimt  
New York: Alfred Stieglitz founds the review *Camera Work*  
Ferdinand Hodler formulates the theory of parallelism  
Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa*

1898 Empress Elizabeth of Austria assassinated by anarchists  
Spanish-American War  
Annexation of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii by U.S.  
Fashoda crisis, pitting Britain against France in Egypt and Ethiopia, resolved

Pierre and Marie Curie discover radium and polonium  
Paris Métro opens  
Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*  
Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Works*

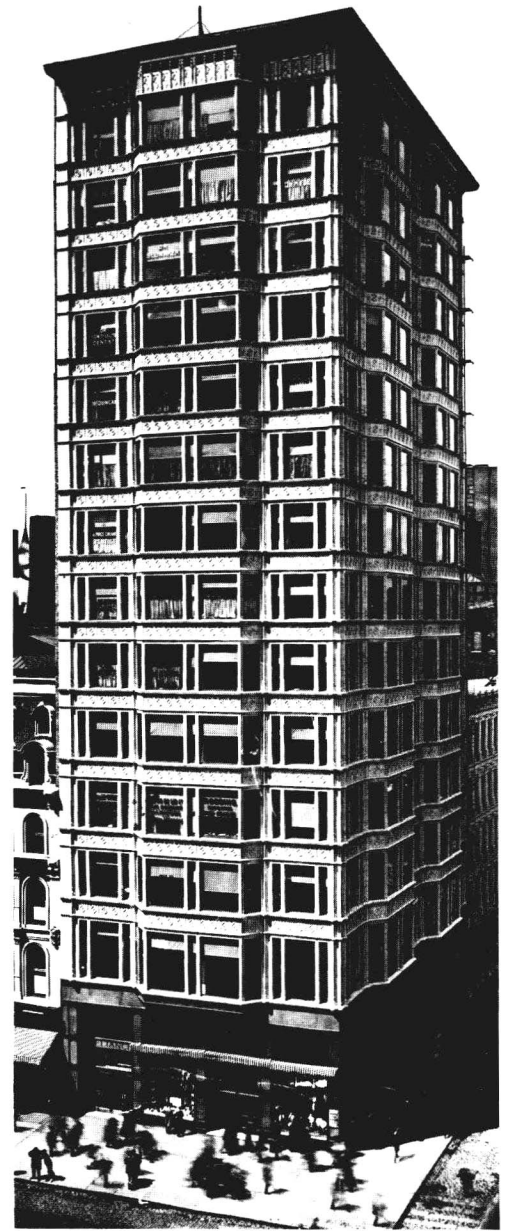
Paul Signac, *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*

1899 Boer War begins in South Africa

Berlin: Secession founded



1



2

In the New World a new kind of architecture emerged. Little bound by tradition, it gave palpable form to the optimism of a rapidly growing economy. It was in faraway Chicago that the new architecture took shape. The great Chicago fire of 1871 had destroyed the city almost completely, and it became profitable to use advanced building methods based on modern engineering techniques rather than on historical precedent to construct new commercial build-

ings in the city center. The Monadnock Building and the Reliance Building, both created by the partnership of Daniel H. Burnham and John Wellborn Root, represent the passing of old construction methods and the start of a new technology.

The Monadnock, designed by Root in 1889 and completed in 1891, with wall surfaces wholly without ornament, asks to be accepted on its own aesthetic terms of austere geom-

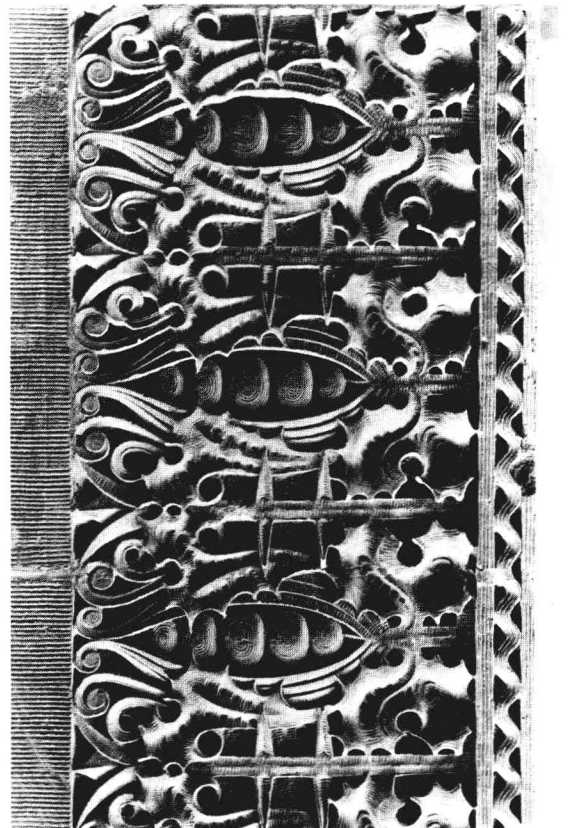
etry and pure functionalism. It was the last Chicago building with load-bearing walls—that is, walls that support themselves rather than being carried on a metal frame. It is thus the logical and ultimate end of the long tradition of masonry construction for major urban buildings.

The Reliance takes the next logical step—use of a steel frame. The fourteen-story office building is dramatically prescient of the aesthetic of dematerialized “curtain” walls, the





3



4

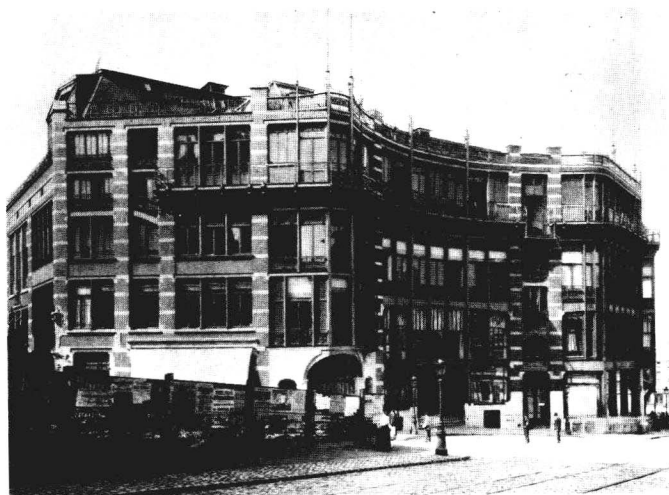
standard formula for high-rise buildings in the post-World War Two era. The exterior of the Reliance is nothing more than a thin skin of glass and terra-cotta that frankly reveals the basic structure within.

The Wainwright Building in St. Louis was Louis Sullivan's first and in many ways definitive essay in what was to become the archetypal American building, the skyscraper. Though its ten stories are now dwarfed by surrounding struc-

tures, it was originally a towering presence in downtown St. Louis. Spandrels and windows are pulled back from the front plane of the building so that the rhythmically repetitive piers rise in a swift, uninterrupted thrust. The broad expanse of its cornice dramatically defines and halts the vertical rhythm.

**1** Burnham and Root. Monadnock Building, Chicago. 1889–91 **2** Burnham and Root. Reliance Building, Chicago. 1890–95 **3–4** Louis Sullivan. Wainwright Building, St. Louis. 1890–91 **4** South entrance (detail)

## Commercial Buildings in Europe



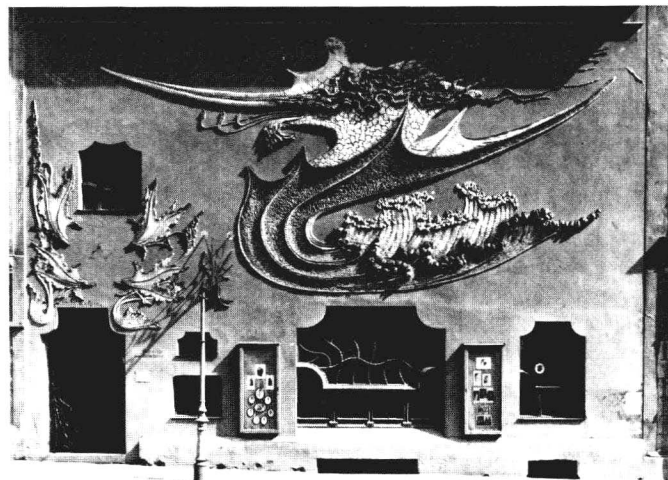
5



7



6



8

In Europe the most innovative buildings were done in the Art Nouveau style, a style which was determined to break with the long series of historic revivals throughout the nineteenth century. It was largely based on decorative linear patterns and placed great emphasis on exquisite craftsmanship. It spread throughout the European continent and also reached the Americas, after its first flowering in Belgium. Some four years after completing the Tassel House (see plate 14), Victor Horta designed the Maison du Peuple in Brussels, which was commissioned by the Belgian Workers' Party. This

avant-garde structure has justifiably been called the most important Art Nouveau building. On an awkward site on a circular plaza, Horta pulled the exposed metal frame of the facade into a series of gently undulating curves. He achieved what few other Art Nouveau architects, with their overriding concern for surface decoration, were able to do—the creation of space-shaping urban architecture.

The basically rectangular space of its auditorium is activated and changed by the graceful open metalwork of curving beams and balustrades. The walls, composed of glass

and thin metal panels, were held in place by attenuated metal frames. The effect, even in photographs, is stunning—a dazzling volume of light, reconciling strength with delicacy. (Unfortunately this building, like so many other architectural masterpieces of the time, has been torn down for the sake of "progress.")

In Germany in 1898 Bernhard Sehring was able to combine the glass curtain wall supported by a metal skeleton with Art Nouveau (in Germany the movement is termed Jugendstil) ornament in the Tietz Department Store in Berlin. This large shop is typical of the commo-



9

dious kind of merchandising establishment that made its appearance in urban centers at the end of the century.

August Endell's *Atelier Elvira*, a photography studio in Munich, was destroyed during World War Two. It was one of the first, and certainly one of the most vivid, examples of Jugendstil architecture in Germany. A bright green stucco facade is virtually engulfed by an immense abstract purple relief. The whiplash forms of this flamboyant gesture shift from waves, to clouds, to some kind of fire-breathing dragon. The studio provided an almost perverse, unex-

pected shock on an otherwise staid street. The interior is no less disquieting. The comparison of the stairwell with that of Horta's *Tassel House* is obvious. Both employ a snaking decoration for ironwork balustrades and wall surfaces, but the self-conscious suavity of the French and Belgian Art Nouveau is absent here, and in its place Endell substitutes something disturbing and violent, a preview by twenty years of the work of the German Expressionist architects and set designers.

5-6 Victor Horta. *Maison du Peuple*, Brussels. 1897-99 7 Bernhard Sehring. *Tietz Department Store*, Berlin. 1898-1900  
8-9 August Endell. *Atelier Elvira*, Munich. 1897



10

Historicism prevailed in American architecture during the second half of the nineteenth century, but at the end of the century archaeological correctness took the place of eclecticism and license. Richard Morris Hunt, who was called the father of Beaux-Arts architecture, developed a style that was considered “more French than the French.” He was able to design Gothic, Renaissance, or Imperial Roman buildings, and he received important commissions from the members of the newly rich American aristocracy, such as the Astors and the Vanderbilts, who welcomed French fashions and ideas. At Newport, Rhode Island, the summer playground of the very

wealthy, Hunt designed The Breakers for the Cornelius Vanderbilts—a mansion of ostentatious magnificence modeled carefully after a sixteenth-century merchant’s palace in the city of Genoa. The Breakers, however, is in the country, facing the ocean, and is three centuries behind the time. When it was built, with its loggia of mosaic, its grand double staircase, its frescoes and imported marble, its seventy rooms (with thirty-three for the servants), it was greatly acclaimed and Hunt was widely admired. At a time when traditions of the European past had enormous appeal to the Americans of the Gilded Age—precisely because such traditions were lacking in the

new country—the demand was not for original ideas, but rather for the felicitous manipulation of well-proved forms, and Richard Morris Hunt was certainly a master at reproducing Renaissance splendor.

The young Frank Lloyd Wright, working for Louis Sullivan’s firm, Adler and Sullivan, designed the Charnley House in Chicago, an outstanding example of urban elegance. Soon after establishing his own office, Wright designed a house for William H. Winslow in the suburb of River Forest, in which he stressed function and materials rather than historical styles. The elevation of the Winslow House is highly formal—a few simple square