

# ART NOUVEAU

KLAUS-JÜRGEN SEMBACH



TASCHEN

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UTOPIA: RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE

BENEDIKT TASCHEN

Illustration page 2:  
Henry van de Velde: Door handles, Nietzsche Archive,  
Weimar, 1903

#### Acknowledgements

Wilfried Burkard, Berlin, was a wily and witty assistant in the search for historical facts and illustrations. The opening pages of several chapters could not have been written without his help. A great debt is also owed to Dr Paul Tauchner, Munich, who put his excellent collection at the author's disposal for the illustrations in this book. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help provided by all the colleagues who were consulted:

Dr Ingeborg Becker, Bröhan-Museum, Berlin

Dr Renate Ulmer, Museum Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt

Dr Georg Himmelheber and Dr Nina Gockerell, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich

Dr Winfried Nerdinger, Architektursammlung der Technischen Universität München, Munich

Dr Hans Ottomeyer, Dr Andreas Ley, Dr Norbert Götz, Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich

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# CONTENTS

## 6 MOVEMENT The Modern Style's first steps

---

### 32 UNREST Uprisings in the provinces

---

- 40 Brussels
- 64 Nancy
- 72 Barcelona
- 80 Munich
- 120 Weimar
- 140 Darmstadt
- 170 Glasgow
- 186 Helsinki
- 194 Chicago

### 204 EQUILIBRIUM Vienna: the Modern Style arrives

---

- 238 Bibliography
- 239 Index of names
- 240 List of illustrations

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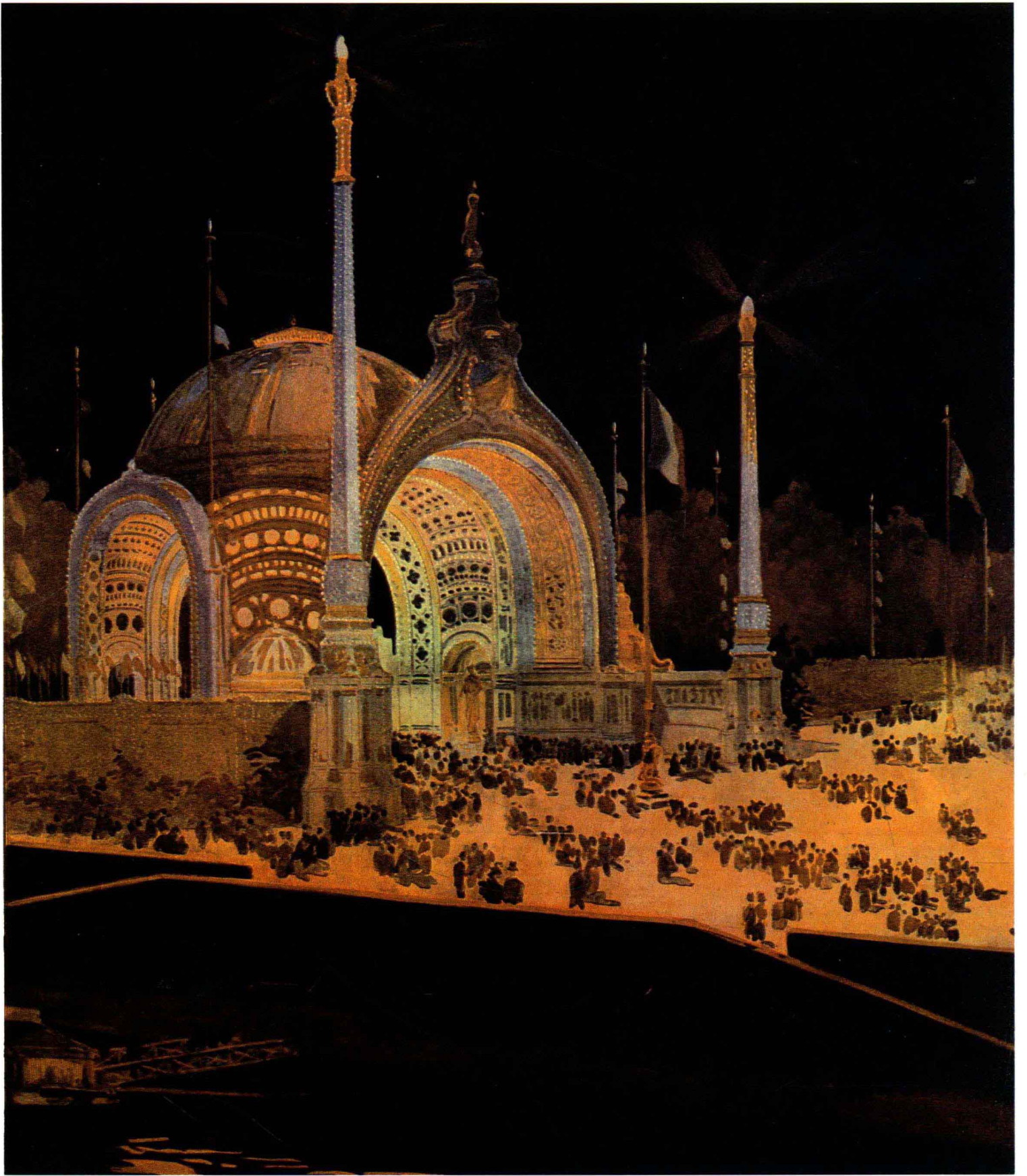
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- 80 Munich
- 120 Weimar
- 140 Darmstadt
- 170 Glasgow
- 186 Helsinki
- 194 Chicago

### 204 EQUILIBRIUM Vienna: the Modern Style arrives

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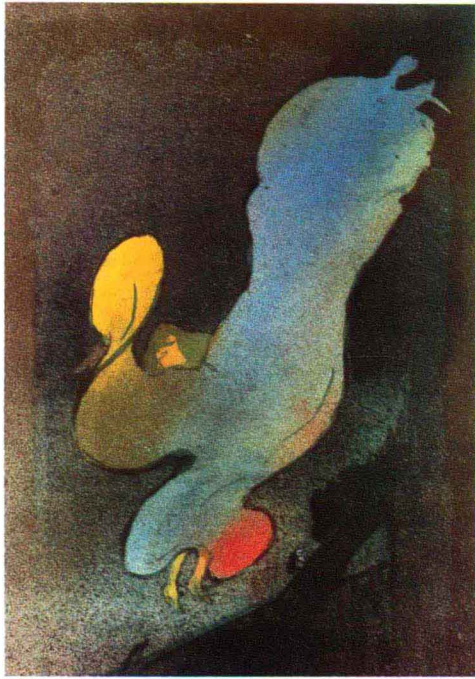
- 238 Bibliography
- 239 Index of names
- 240 List of illustrations



# MOVEMENT

## THE MODERN STYLE'S FIRST STEPS

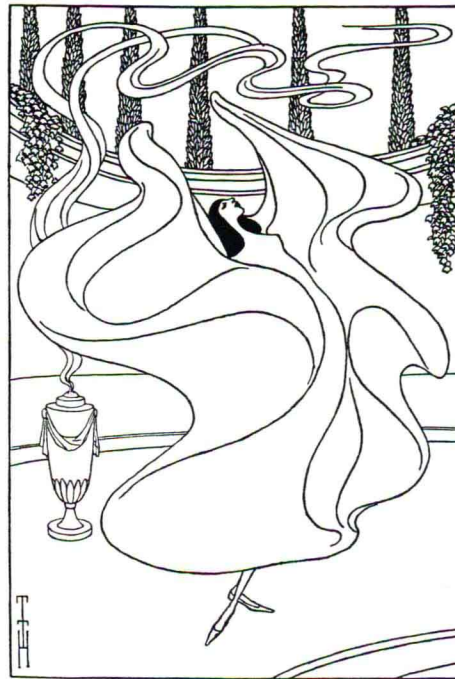




*Title page: Main entrance to the Paris World Exhibition by night, watercolour by M.F. Bellenger, from: Le Livre d'Or de L'Exposition de 1900, Paris 1900.*

*Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Loie Fuller, Paris, 1893, lithograph (detail).*

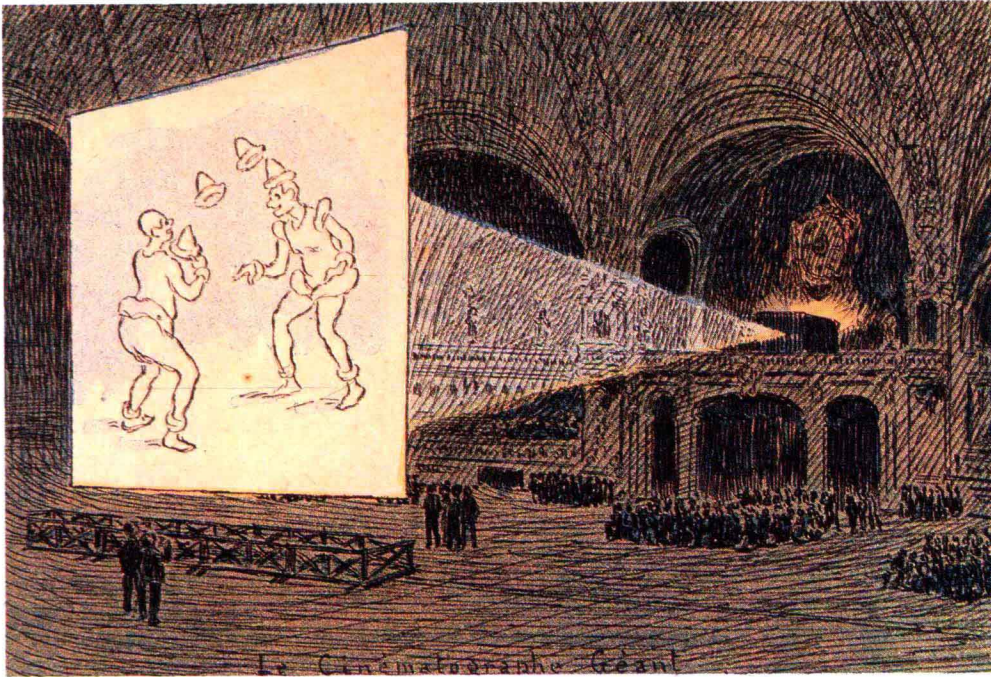
*Thomas Theodor Heine, Loie Fuller, Munich, c. 1900.*



The 1890s gave the world two innovations: cinema and Art Nouveau. The two are not unconnected, since they started from the same premisses, their aims were comparable and they shared similar yearnings. Motion pictures and stylistic animation both resulted in one way or another from the industrial age – directly, as one of its inventions, or indirectly, as a search for greater refinement. They felt the need for silent, but nevertheless expressive communication, with film thereby somewhat sensationalist, at least in its early days, and style aesthetic to naïve, sometimes frankly vulgar. Both wanted to be popular; here the cinema had more immediate success, but Art Nouveau's success was more long-lasting. It is not possible to provide evidence of direct links between the two; by the time the cinema revealed its aesthetic ambitions, the Art Nouveau era was almost at an end. We do not know whether Henry van de Velde drew support for his dynamic style from the suggestive powers of moving pictures in the cinema, nor whether Frank Lloyd Wright's remarkably elegant picture palace design really dates from as far back as 1905. Georges Méliès' early screen phantasmagoria were inspired by Jules Verne and created a highly individual visual world, but do not seem to owe anything to the Paris style of Art Nouveau. Yet their almost simultaneous emergence – cinema in 1895 and Art Nouveau a few years earlier – suggests the great relevance of these two phenomena to one another.

If they shared a generating factor, then this was the fascination of movement – every area of life seemed to have been set in motion. The increasing pace of transportation, of mechanical efficiency and human achievement, was affecting everyone. The cinema's first endeavour was to reflect this dynamism, while Art Nouveau strove for its aesthetic sublimation. Although there may have been other contributory factors, it is undoubtedly the case that for some time artists had been concerned to come to terms, in their own way, with the technological progress that was





changing the world from one day to the next. The Impressionists had been the first to find an aesthetically satisfying form for the transient, for what could not be contained within firm contours. There was a recognition that impressions did not have to be registered in stasis – they too could shift.

Leaving aside the aesthetic impotence of historicism, such ephemeral contacts as there had been before this time between art and technology had been determined more by a spirit of rejection than by any desire for symbiosis. Art Nouveau must be given credit for attempting to alter this situation, for striving to bring about a reconciliation between traditional expectations of art and the modern face of technology. There may have been suspicion that the two were irreconcilable, but it was Art Nouveau that provided the painful evidence; the lasting popularity of the style must be ascribed to the irrational desire to repeatedly defer the moment of truth. Although Art Nouveau was short-lived, it seems to have gained eternal life as a metaphor of Utopian hope.

The fact that cinema and Art Nouveau came together at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900 is an indication of their closeness in contemporary eyes. From the beginning these great exhibitions had presented the latest innovations of the day. Art Nouveau featured in many of the national pavilions, and its reputation was secure from that time on, but it is also of especial significance that the enormous auditorium, constructed at great expense but with little taste in what had been the "Galerie des Machines" of 1889, should have been chosen for the showing of films. Certainly it was in the french interest to present the invention of the moving picture as their own; no-one in Germany had given such public acclaim to the Berlin film pioneer Max Skladanowski, whose work was undertaken independently of the brothers Auguste and Louis Jean Lumière, and not much later. But the expense must have been considerable.

*M.E. Vavaseur, contemporary illustration showing the installation of a film show in the auditorium at the Paris World Exhibition, from: Le Livre d'Or de L'Exposition de 1900, Paris 1900.*

*August Endell, foyer of the dress circle in the "Buntes Theater" in Berlin, 1901. On the floor, strange animals appear to be making for the exit. From: Berliner Architekturwelt, 1902.*





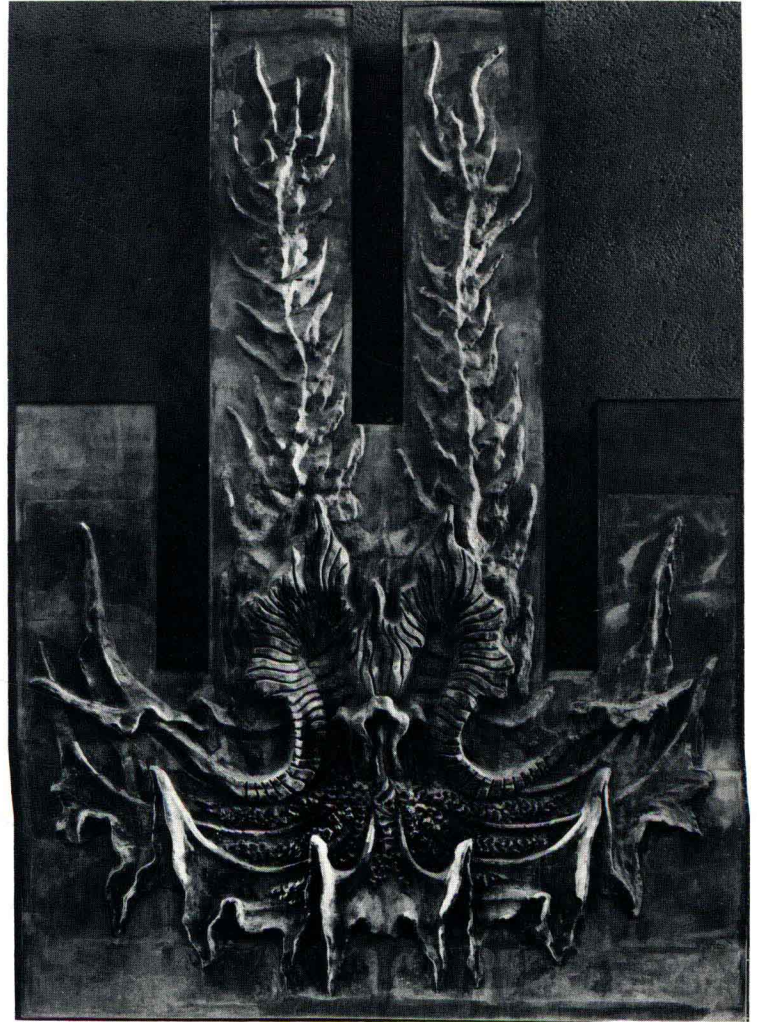


*Unknown architect, stairwell in Moscow, c. 1900.*

*Hermann Obrist, design for a memorial, Munich, c. 1895, plaster, 88 cm high. Kunstgewerbemuseum, Zurich*

Film projection was a convincing alternative to a different means of telling stories by means of moving pictures: in the Russian pavilion a journey through Siberia was dramatically presented by means of panoramic pictures painted on the windows of jacked-up trucks rolling past, a mechanical means of suggesting movement familiar from the theatre. A special feature of the Paris exhibition was a pedestrian roller conveyor which circulated right round the show – this, too, a departure from earlier types of vehicle and moving platform. The continuous movement of the pedestrian conveyor gave an entirely different view from that gained by moving straight from one point to another, and back again. The same year, 1900, saw a further appearance by Loie Fuller in Paris. Her serpentine dancing, in a shimmer of coloured light, was such an inspiration to Art Nouveau artists that it is impossible to enumerate all the resulting illustrations and pieces of sculpture. They all represent an attempt to fix on a surface or in space something fundamentally intangible, but betray impotence rather than success. Nor could it be otherwise, for this was movement for its own sake, with few concessions to tangible gestures or mood. The most successful pieces are therefore those which reproduce no more than the swirling of robes, head and limbs subsumed within them. The personal element is abandoned in favour of pure movement.





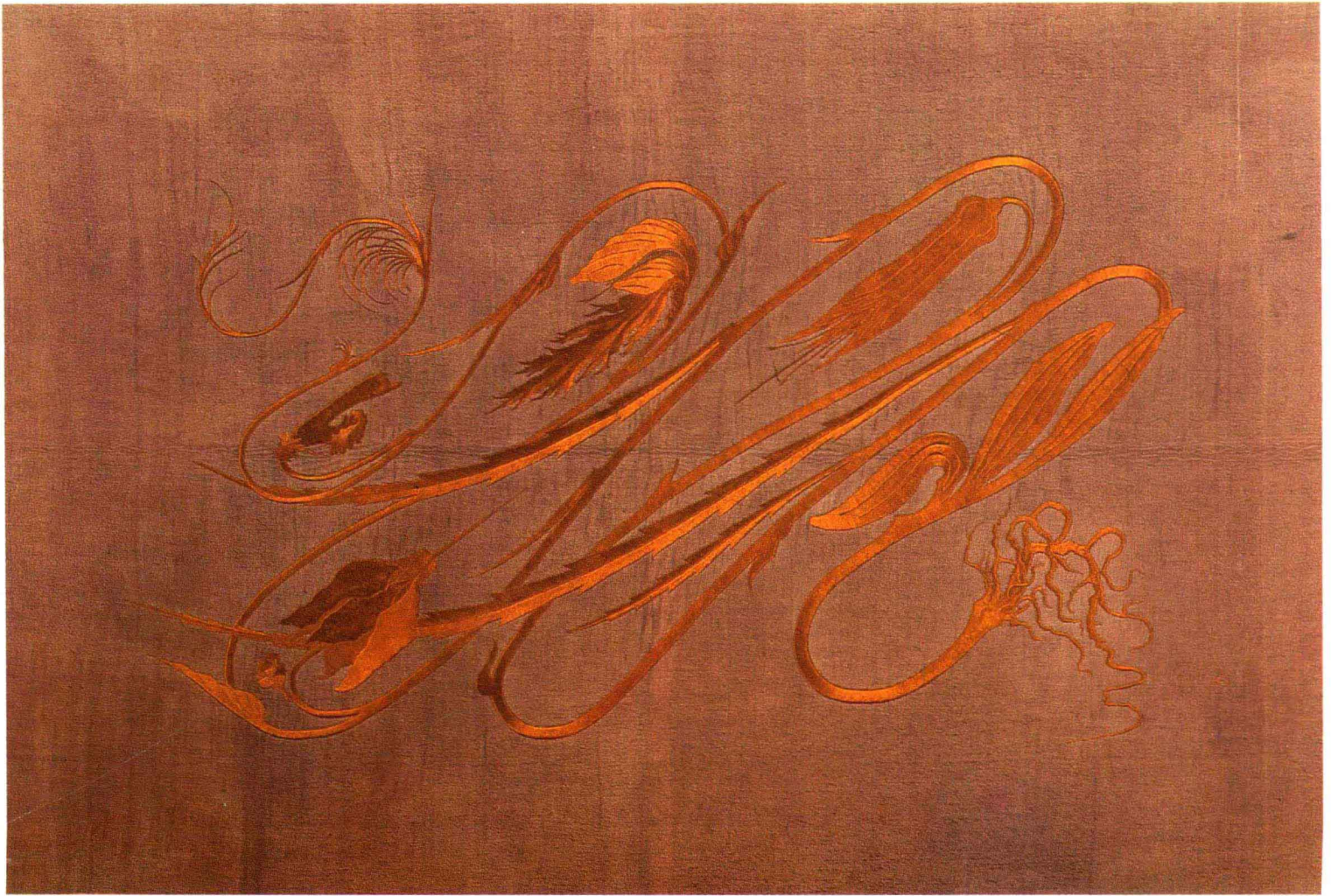
Loie Fuller was a phenomenon in more ways than one: like a piece of abstract sculpture she made movement an absolute, comparable perhaps to the beauty of a ship's propeller in water, except that the latter created propulsion, Loie Fuller only herself. When not in motion she must have broken the illusion; photographs which show her dancing in a meadow reveal the lack of sophistication in the twirling canes which she used to create her effects. She relied on the distancing artificiality of the stage to make her instruments invisible and create pure effect. The spell she cast could wreak havoc.

Immune to artifice and narcissistic excesses were those who could convey the magnificence of a mood or a gesture, like Hermann Obrist and August Endell in Munich, or who could convey compellingly the constructive nature of their thinking, like Victor Horta and Henry van de Velde in Brussels, Hector Guimar in Paris and Richard Riemerschmid in Munich. They were the torch-bearers, setting standards and justifying the identification, in the new experiments being made, of a new style. One feature common to all these artists is that their works seem mobile rather than static – shapes glide and leap backwards and forwards, up and down, interlocking and cleaving. In furniture, utensils and houses, too, an inner dynamism becomes visible. There is also a high degree of abstraction in these works which is distinctive and which distances from them the

*Raoul François Larche, the dancer Loie Fuller, Paris c. 1900, bronze gilt, 46 cm high. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich*

*August Endell, relief, 1898, 425 cm high, formerly part of a sanatorium on the island of Föhr. Kunsthalle, Kiel*





*Hermann Obrist, embroidered "Whiplash" wall hanging, Munich, c. 1895, wool with silk, 120 × 185 cm.  
Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich*

products of those artists who favoured the caprices of flowing hair, swans in flight and entwining mermaids.

In the light of these remarks it will come as no surprise that this book does not draw on paintings for its illustrations. The link between painting and Art Nouveau has always been controversial. To ascribe entirely, or in part, the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Jan Toorop, Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt and others, to Art Nouveau involves narrowing a concept which is too complex to be reduced to simple handling of line. There were often symbolist features in the subject matter of a painting which happened to be expressed in a form similar to Art Nouveau. The movement of a line is a less reliable criterion than the motivation behind it. This motivation is bound to be different when applied to an ornament, a chair or a house when relating to pictorial composition. The following pages will hopefully show that Art Nouveau did indeed manifest itself only in the applied arts, and that the term can therefore only be applied to objects, furniture and buildings. One of its paramount aims was to give useful things a useful, though enhanced, form, and it is by its own criteria and tenets that Art Nouveau must be judged. To bring in "art" in the form of painting simply confuses the picture and impinges on the avowed claim of the spokesmen for Art Nouveau, namely to proceed in the manner of artists, but not to create art.



So much has now been written on the subject that there is little point in embracing, generously but indecisively, the weighty and the fragmentary, the sublime and the trivial. The times in which these works were created are remote from ours, and a wealth of catalogues have provided detailed information on many matters. Important today is no longer the material in itself, but our attitude towards it, the view it offers us, and the insight it can bring. Critical appreciation may be distressing at times, but it is more appropriate than sentimental partisanship which applauds everything it sees and is unjust in its failure to differentiate.

It might be argued that there was inherent in Art Nouveau a tendency towards contradiction, ambivalence and indecision. Great claims were made, but far less was achieved – a reproach heard often, then as now. And why attempt to tie down a phenomenon so intent on freedom? It is an enigma, difficult to resolve. Yet there is in Art Nouveau's most successful products something deeply serious which can and must be pursued.

The ambivalence of Art Nouveau, and the protean shapes it took, were not generated by waywardness but by the situation which gave rise to it. Put in the simplest terms, this ambivalence resulted from the dissonance between art and technological progress which had been growing increasingly apparent throughout the nineteenth century and which now demanded urgent resolution. By 1900 the moment had come. Tension was released in an explosive burst of creative energy whose impact was felt far and wide. It explains, perhaps, why so much was produced in such a short space of time; but it suggests, too, that the situation was not one in which things could mature. Frenzy often propelled events, and something of the artificiality which characterized the climax – the 1900 World

*"Out of the unruffled spirit of the last twenty years of the nineteenth century a fever of enthusiasm suddenly arose throughout Europe. No one knew exactly what was developing, no one could say whether it was to be a new art, a new man, a new morality or perhaps a regrouping of society."*

Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930



August Endell, the Elvira studio in Von-der-Tann-Strasse in Munich, 1896/97.