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Paris, the Performing Arts and the Formation of Art Nouveau

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Opposite: Georges Clairin, Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Izevl, c.1894, oil on canvas. Jack Kilgore Gallery.

~Beauty's Awakening~

Paris,
the performing arts
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of Art Nouveau

~Barbara Bessac~



The growth pattern of the Art Nouveau style across Europe and beyond has frequently been explained with narratives about seminal artists who imported its forms and ideas into their respective cities. The case of Paris in this regard is particularly conspicuous: starting in 1894, the collaboration between the celebrated actress Sarah Bernhardt and Czech artist Alphonse Mucha became symbolic of the birth of the new style in the city. The subsequent opening of Siegfried Bing's gallery in 1895, *La Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, sealed the affiliation of Paris with the modern style. But these two major events, as crucial as they were, have tended to hide the complexity of the context, the rich and disparate network of lesser known craftspeople, art critics, playwrights, actors and actresses who contributed to the rise of Art Nouveau in Paris. In reality, the style was generated more through myriad incremental contributions, than through a few seminal occurrences.

The theatre and the decorative arts generated a dense, multifaceted artistic nebula from which Art Nouveau derived. At the crossroads of different crafts, the stage became the meeting place of artists, and a fertile ground for the new aesthetics. In the context of continual international interaction, the coming together of performance and the applied arts, exemplified by Bernhardt and Mucha's collaboration, reveals the role of theatre in the blossoming of Parisian Art Nouveau.

If Sarah Bernhardt's influence helped to spread the new style in Paris, it was, more than anything else, symptomatic of the connections and circulations between the applied arts and performance in the 1890s. The stage, deeply nested in the artistic spheres of that era, concentrated the delicate blend of tradition and modernity that was so characteristic of the new style. The exchange was constant and, partly because of it, ideas and aesthetics kept circulating between Paris and London: one was always keeping an eye on the other across the Channel.

In both capital cities, epicentres of cultural activity at the *fin de siècle*, theatre – at all levels – was the regular rendezvous of a broad and influential audience. Cinema was just beginning to emerge, but theatre was the central visual spectacle, and the audience expected veracity and attention to detail, crafted by numerous decorative artists: scene-painters, costume designers, jewellers and cabinet-makers. Design and its new forms were omnipresent in these productions: stages were filled with furniture, textile, decorative panels, graphic design and costumes, creating scenes from far-away ideal worlds or the interiors typical of those lived-in by the bourgeois audience. From fantastical ancient sets to re-created modern households, the stage was an excellent playground for theatre designers. Artists and stage directors exploited it as a showcase for the new aesthetics. Street posters, press illustration and photography contributed to spread theatrical designs outside the theatre world. Working both on- and off-stage, some of these artists belonged to the newest artistic circles. Furniture, jewellery, dresses – as seen on-stage – could be purchased by the audience in the newly established department stores. This very particular dynamic and urban environment stimulated creativity and promoted it, embodying the new decorative forms. The aesthetic world of Art Nouveau was highly eclectic and related both to pre-modern worlds – the Middle Ages, Byzantium, Classical Antiquity – and to contemporary interiors, and these were brought together onstage.



Above and opposite: Alphonse Mucha, poster for *Gismonda*, 1894, colour lithograph. Victoria and Albert Museum.



So in Paris it was very significantly through the theatre that Art Nouveau was launched and became visible, in no small part thanks to Sarah Bernhardt's direct intervention, her taste and her stage direction. Beyond the performance itself, she lent her network, her influence, her theatre and her image to upcoming artists: she carried the new art with her on her tours around the world. Following in her idol's footsteps, the American dancer Loie Fuller used performance as a vehicle for the promotion of the new art, fusing dance with design and the decorative arts. Her performances became a site of interdisciplinary activity, which was a characteristic of the new art in a number of spheres. By 1900 Fuller herself became a symbol of Art Nouveau and the subject matter of numerous designers. In fact a number of them started their careers working for the stage, since it was an excellent way to show their work, gain notoriety and attract new clients. Theatre was fully immersed in the ideological debates circulating around art, and was in many ways the physical and public realisation of the aesthetic reformation in Paris and London. If the development of an Art Nouveau movement was problematic in England, a number of late-Victorian productions nevertheless had a shared taste for the new decorative forms. A performance such as the enchanting masque *Beauty's Awakening* in 1899, written, crafted and played by members of the Art Workers' Guild, resonated in France, where art critics reported it as '*un théâtre d'artistes*'.¹ For them it embodied, both visually and theoretically, the characteristics of *gesamtkunstwerk*, a modern total work of art, which was the same intellectual ideal Art Nouveau designers across the Channel pursued. The performing arts contributed to intensify the production as a decorative revolution.

Sarah Bernhardt had been triumphant in Paris since the beginning of the 1870s. Her success became international in 1879 with her first tour in London with her troupe, the Comédie-Française. In 1893 – the year Victor Horta completed the first fully realized Art Nouveau building in Brussels – she started to direct the Théâtre de la Renaissance, allowing her to schedule and produce the plays of her choice. At the end of 1894 she was preparing the production of a new drama by Victorien Sardou, entitled *Gismonda*. When organising the production of the graphic materials for the play – the programme and poster – the very demanding actress was disappointed by the submissions, and eventually decided to commission the artist Alphonse Mucha, via the Imprimeries Lemerrier for which he had previously worked. The director of Imprimeries Lemerrier, André Marty, was no stranger either to the theatre or to the decorative arts. In 1893 he had produced posters for Loie Fuller, and in 1894 he opened L'Artisan Moderne, a gallery specialising in domestic accessories, *objets d'art* and costume jewellery.²

Alphonse Mucha was no stranger to the stage: he had already drawn Bernhardt when he worked for the magazine *Le Costume au Théâtre*, notably for Cléopâtre in 1890.³ He knew how to capture the essence of a play, and how to summarise it in the poster medium. The *Gismonda* poster was an immediate success, and started a six year collaboration between the Czech artist and the Parisian actress. The designs were widely disseminated through 1895, a few months before Siegfried Bing opened his Maison de l'Art Nouveau. The '*style Mucha*' quickly became synonymous with Art Nouveau. The decorative aspect, using friezes and rosettes with floral outlines, was predominant, melting the feminine figures in a whirlwind of dynamic curves and stems. On *Gismonda's* poster, the costume and the mosaic evoked the



Above: Alphonse Mucha, *La Rose*, 1898, colour lithograph on silk. Sainsbury Centre.

historical context of fifteenth-century Greece in which the play takes place, contrasting with a resolutely original style, illustrating the balance between modernity and tradition in Art Nouveau productions. The famous poster very much overshadowed the other artists and craftspeople who worked on the performance, and played a decisive role in the unique appearance of *Gismonda*. The stage direction was an intense reflection of Sarah Bernhardt's style: she chose every costume, set design and accessory, oscillating between historicist references, modern creation and exoticism. The Gothic Revival and Aesthetic Movement across the Channel drew her attention.

Being friendly with her British counterpart Ellen Terry, Bernhardt absorbed Terry's taste, especially with regard to Terry's enthusiasm for Japanese culture, which had dramatically arrived in the English capital after 1862, when it was first shown at the London Universal Exhibition of that year. Bernhardt adopted Terry's tea-gown, inspired by the Japanese kimono.⁴ And in turn Bernhardt was influential on British fashion. As early as her first appearance in front of a London audience in 1879, the art critic Matthew Arnold celebrated the influence of Sarah Bernhardt and her taste on the English cultural scene.⁵ The two actresses weren't simply friends: they were also very similar in the way they managed their images through the visual arts. Both were widely depicted in contemporary paintings, and sold massively in postcard form. Ellen Terry's most famous costume for Lady Macbeth in 1888 was created by Alice Comyns Carr, her loyal costume designer, who was inspired by French couture and design, especially by Viollet-le-Duc's decoration dictionaries.⁶ After being designed in London, the costume was sent to Paris to be made up. This sumptuous dress, covered with 1,000 beetle wings – which took 700 hours of work when it was recently restored – was directly comparable with the opulence of Sarah Bernhardt's costumes, which required the labour of at least twenty craftspeople, embroidering the dresses with gemstones and gilding.

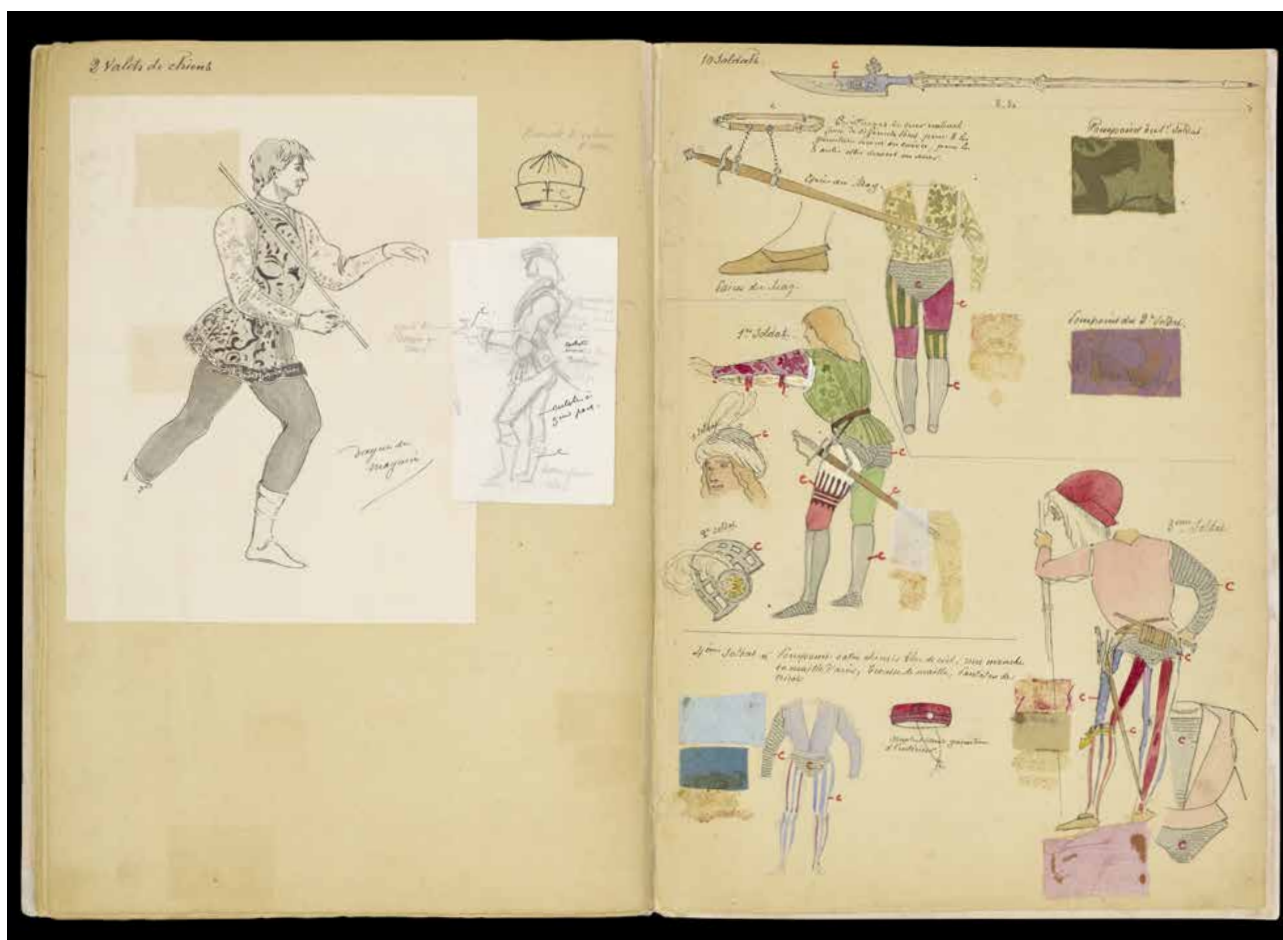
The London shop Liberty & Co. supplied silk and cashmere fabrics for Ellen Terry's costumes, in typical Aestheticist colours: pale green, peacock blue, ancient gold, silver grey and emerald green. Terry's stages had to be harmonised, from the scene cloth to the costumes – a coherence that Bernhardt was also very committed to. And as with Terry, who had been compared to Rossetti's paintings onstage,⁷ the French actress was often described through references to contemporary painters. The journalist Ernest Prosnier, in his report on *Izeyl*, wrote that she was the 'delicious and uncanny synthesis of all mysterious painters such as Gustave Moreau or Edward Burne-Jones'.⁸ With both stage stars there was no frontier between theatrical and civilian life – they wore costumes on and off stage. The theatrical costumier Ada Nettleship made daily outfits for Ellen Terry, following the principles of Artistic Dress, the movement that promoted dress reform; and Sarah Bernhardt wore some of her outfits as exuberant instruments of expression, both on stage and in daily life.

While Bernhardt controlled sets and costumes, she would also work closely with the playwright, who would conduct studies to guarantee the historical correctness of the appearance of the play.⁹ For *Gismonda*, Théophile Thomas was commissioned. The costume designer had already worked repeatedly with Victorien Sardou and Bernhardt, his most striking item probably being *Theodora's* coat, an exact replica of the dress of the Byzantine Empress, and famous for its exorbitant price.¹⁰ Thomas's plates for *Gismonda*

Below: Georges Clairin, *Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Izeyl*, c.1894, oil on canvas. Jack Kilgore Gallery.







Above: Théophile Thomas, album of costume designs for *Gismonda*, c.1894. Victoria and Albert Museum.

– now in the Victoria and Albert Museum – relate closely to costumes in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and show the intense and meticulous work carried out by the costumiers: up to eighteen embroiderers worked day and night on a single item.¹¹ Bernhardt's dresses were so heavy that she struggled to move around the stage. On most of them, arabesque patterns were ubiquitous: brocades were covered with vegetalised ornaments, punctuated by gemstones. In an interview to *Le Matin*, she estimated the number of costumes as amounting to up to 160 items.¹² Only five of them have survived, but they prove the unabashed attempt to mesmerise and dazzle the audience, while respecting a certain historical accuracy. They were an integral part of the living picture framed by the set designs, and contributed vitally to the character of the subjects of the epic.

Impressively, for the accessories Sarah Bernhardt brought into play the renowned jeweller René Lalique. Recognised as being at the heart of the Art Nouveau style, he met the actress in 1893 via Victorien Sardou.¹³ He designed various jewels for *Gismonda*, providing mutually important publicity for both.¹⁴ All the crafts made for the play came to be seen by a massive international audience, as the play embarked on tour abroad from May 1895, first to London at Daly's Theatre, and then to the United States. In each venue, all the costumes and sets were brought from Paris, as was advertised in the programmes.¹⁵

Gismonda's role in the development of French Art Nouveau was decisive, and it wasn't limited to the promotion of luminaries like Mucha and Lalique. The play positioned theatre generally at the heart of Art Nouveau, and

Opposite: Théophile Thomas, costume for *Gismonda*, 1894/1902, velvet and silk. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

The Nature of Dreams



resulted in collaborations among designers beyond theatre itself. In 1899, still under contract with the Czech artist, Sarah Bernhardt commissioned the jeweller Georges Fouquet to make the bracelet that Mucha drew in *Médée's* poster (1898). The result of this first collaboration between the two artists was one of the most important ensembles of French Art Nouveau: Fouquet's shop on rue Royale, designed entirely by Mucha.¹⁶ While it would be inaccurate, and somewhat anachronistic, to see *Gismonda* as an 'Art Nouveau play' *per se* – it was as much an eclectic and historicist work as an expression of modernity – the general aesthetic was broadly reflective of the ethos, and it was the first play to incorporate Art Nouveau accessories onstage.

Art Nouveau quickly became recognisable by its contemporaries, above all by its distinctive profiles, which were pejoratively described by the English designer Walter Crane in 1902 as

long drawn-out, irregular spiral stem, often multiplied, and varied with "kinks" and elbows, and terminating in formal rows of disks and floral forms.¹⁷

Referred to at the time and later as *coup de fouet*, or pejoratively as style *nouvelle* (noodle style) this use of line became the visual identity of the new art.¹⁸ Whatever harmony the new art had, however, this barely masked what were strong differences in opinion with regard to substance: artists were often uncomfortable with Art Nouveau, characterizing it as 'foreign'. This wasn't unconnected to the context of competitive nationalism. Walter Crane, a leading light in the Arts and Crafts Movement, for example, reveals this prejudice when discussing the work at the *First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Arts* in Turin in 1902. If he was positive in admitting that

Left: René Lalique, hair ornament, c.1902, gold, diamond, glass, horn and enamel. Sainsbury Centre.
Above: Georges Fouquet, brooch, c.1898, gold, ruby, pearl and enamel. Sainsbury Centre.

Opposite: Alphonse Mucha, interior design for the Boutique Fouquet, pencil on paper, 1900. Musée Carnavalet, Histoire de Paris.





in the latter phases of modern decorative art we have the results of modern intercommunication of ideas, of the constant intermingling, through modern commerce, of travel, colonisation, scientific discovery and historic research fused together.¹⁹

Above: Walter Crane for H.R. Dow, box, c.1900, wood. Sainsbury Centre; and Walter Crane, tiles, date unknown, ceramic. Private Collection.

He was critical however of foreign attempts to 'modernise' decorative art. French marquetry and cabinet-making, in his opinion, obeyed a 'principle of decomposition and decay', a thoughtless and irrational use of material and pattern, opposed to the 'principle of health, of life and growth' that he saw in British works exhibited in Turin.²⁰ As a leading light in the Arts and Crafts Movement he understood the crafts to be the physical embodiment of socialist idealism.

In contrast to Crane's dismissal of French artworks, French art critics mainly praised him, starting with novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans in 1881, who considered Crane's illustrations to be the only works of art worthy of that name, together with Japanese prints.²¹ Admiration for Crane continued through to the end of the century, and his essays were published in socialist magazines such as *La Révolte* from 1893.²² Parisian artists and art critics rose against the decision to exclude him from the Salon du Champ-de-Mars in 1896.²³

This Anglophilia in French artistic and intellectual spheres in the 1890s cannot be detached from the development of the decorative revolution in Paris. Art Nouveau rose in the same years that literary men were importing the British Arts and Crafts Movement. In 1892, three years before Siegfried Bing's gallery opening, the writer and art critic Jean Lahor advocated the

establishment of 'artistic shops' mimicking the English prototype of Liberty & Co., to 'call, bring closer, unite the main representatives and reformers of decorative art, gathering and exhibiting their works, helping this movement to begin'.²⁴ Lahor considered England to offer a role model for the renewal of art, not least because its artistic production had formerly been so belittled and disdained by continental taste. According to him, the English had found a way to come alive again as an artistic culture.²⁵ His conference speech in Geneva in 1897 sounded like an appeal to the new generations of French designers to follow the example of William Morris.²⁶

Like Lahor, the journalist, poet and translator Gabriel Mourey played a key role in the transfer of Art and Crafts ideals into the artistic spheres of Paris. He met William Morris while traveling to London. In 1895 in his *Chroniques de Londres* he defined Morris as the 'first worker and the first master [of the] resurgence of the decorative arts'.²⁷ A correspondent at *The Magazine of Art*, he also ran the French edition of *The Studio*, which was very much a vehicle for the promotion of British Arts and Crafts. Mourey was also a major figure in the theatre, creating controversial and political plays; he closely followed the drama productions of his contemporaries. Mostly unknown today, Mourey exemplified the link between theatre and the decorative arts as well as the powerful connection between London and Paris. He wrote the preface of Alphonse Mucha's *Documents décoratifs* of 1902, in which he explained the rise of a new decorative art around a common vision: 'only one thing left: our modern vision of nature'.

Some art critics were also designers themselves, like the extraordinary character Bojidar Karageorgévitch, a Serbian prince who lived for most of his life in Paris. Regularly writing for *The Magazine of Art*, he participated in the translation and propagation of the British Arts and Crafts into the Parisian cultural environment. He was close to both Sarah Bernhardt and Loie Fuller. Moreover, the prince was a silversmith and designed a range of wares, such as cutlery in the Art Nouveau style, which was advertised in 1901 in the same *Magazine of Art* that he wrote for.²⁸

A number of French art critics were particularly envious of what they perceived to be the corporate instinct of English craftspeople; they lamented a lack of unity and direction in the French decorative revival, which they felt prevented a 'common overall plan'.²⁹ A fascinating demonstration of this English coordination, of Arts and Crafts ideals, and their fusion into theatre, took place in 1899 in London. Looked on by the French with an admiring eye, *Beauty's Awakening* was created and performed by the Art Workers Guild. Founded in 1884 by five architects and designers – W. R. Lethaby, Edward Prior, Ernest Newton, Mervyn Macartney and Gerald C. Horsley – the Guild aimed to create a meeting space between artists and craftspeople, so generating a total equality between the major and minor arts. In their regular meetings the members debated and entertained themselves, but perhaps more important, they learned from each other, and expanded their areas of artistic and technical expertise. In 1888 members of the Guild, including Walter Crane, founded the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society. The Guild, which was defined by one of its famous members, Charles Robert Ashbee, as 'the last citadel of traditionalism',³⁰ applied the principles of William Morris and John Ruskin and also acted them out. The members proclaimed a commitment to collaboration and collective activities, and condemned all forms of individualism. The Guild generated numerous participative projects



Opposite: Prince Bojidar Karageorgevitch, cutlery set, c.1900, silver. Victoria and Albert Museum.



Above: Walter Crane, *Dance of the Five Senses*, 1899, printed paper. British Museum.

and events, a number of which were related to theatrical performance, taking place at the Guild's headquarters in Queen Square. Various meetings were theatricalised, as shown as in the 'entertainment' organised on March 2nd 1897.³¹ Starting with a musical introduction, Walter Crane and Leonard Raven-Hill then performed a speech giving a short history of modern art.³² Staying in the limelight, Crane then presented his artworks, before the members were invited to attend a living picture, the main attraction of the event. The tableau depicted Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, with special lighting effects and hand-stitched historical costumes. The creation of *Beauty's Awakening* two years later appeared as a culmination of this practice to embody and perform their artistic ideology.

Premiered at the Guildhall of London on 28 June 1899, the performance – inspired by Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Beauty* (1608) – brought a contemporary vision to an Elizabethan genre, becoming emblematic of the Arts and Crafts Movement determined syncretism of modernity and tradition. This was a major component of Victorian crafts and theatre.³³ The masque intended to disrupt the very concept of performance, defining it as a symbiosis of all arts, past and present, minor and major, oral and written, aural and visual. The plural roles of the Guild members, functioning simultaneously backstage and onstage, broke down barriers between the arts, placing craftspeople in the spotlight. The cooperation of multiple personalities in the creation of a unified scenic space emphasised the idea of collaborative work as the ideal art form, claiming that

there is something still possible to do when Artists who are Designers, but who do not confuse their aim therein with too much attempt at realism and illusion, try to produce an allegory of the Beautiful which is their particular sphere and concern".³⁴

The plot itself embodied Arts & Crafts ideology: alongside allegorical characters and natural elements (four winds, forest leaves, the five senses), the main protagonists were nine 'Fair Cities' each symbolized by an artist: Thebes, Athens, Rome, Byzantium, Florence, Venice, Nuremberg, Paris and Oxford. London was the main character, but was not considered a Fair City.

The main plot-line of the story was for London to achieve this status, thanks to the allegorical characters of Art, Invention and the Seven Lamps of Architecture – a direct reference to the eponymous essay by John Ruskin in 1849.³⁵ If broaching the theme of architecture and crafts onstage was not common, creating allegorical characters based on an essay about the renewal of art was even more unprecedented and innovative. Near the end of the performance, London reappeared onstage as a Fair City, richly dressed and ornamented, guided by Freedom and Commerce, and receiving from Labour and Invention the crystal sphere and the sceptre, then taking her place among the other Fair Cities while the song of triumph resonated.³⁶ With more than eighty actors and actresses onstage, the show offered a visually astonishing experience, together with a strong ideological message about art.

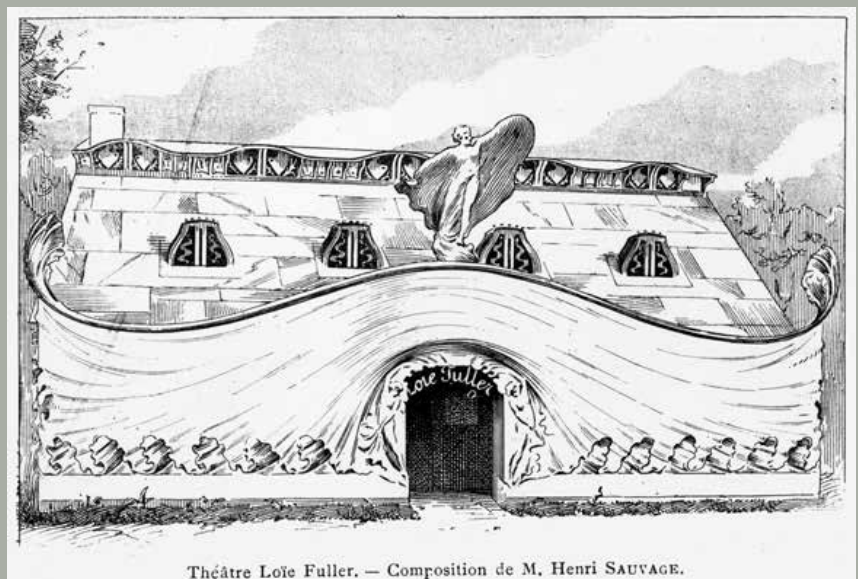
Through the 1890s Sarah Bernhardt and Alphonse Mucha continued working closely together, involving other Art Nouveau craftspeople, and in this way the links between the new style and the performing arts kept growing. French painters living in London linked up directly and abidingly with the Arts and Crafts Movement. Among them was Lucien Pissarro, who met William Morris and Walter Crane in 1891 and was also very close to the designer and sculptor Alexandre Carpentier, one of the founding members of the group *Les Cinq* in 1896, later called *Les Six* and finally *L'Art dans Tout*.³⁷ This was the first in France to fully apply Art and Crafts ideals, in advance of the Ecole de Nancy. When the group swelled in 1898, it welcomed several artists working in the performing arts, including the architect Henri Sauvage. His training in Brussels made him familiar with the Art Nouveau style, which had fully formed there first, and shaped his sensibility as an architect. At the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 he worked on several theatrical commissions which became of Parisian Art Nouveau: the Théâtre de Guignol Parisien and the Théâtre Loïe Fuller, collaborating with designer Francis Jourdain. The highly expressive theatre Sauvage created for the American dancer was inspired by her famous serpentine dance: the building itself replicated her choreography in white stucco.³⁸ Above the door, her statue, sculpted by Pierre Roche, dominated the edifice. The ceramist Alexandre Bigot also worked on the building, which contained works by a range of other craftspeople. Sauvage continued to work closely with Fuller in the following years, notably with his project for the construction of an Art Nouveau dressing room for an actress, created for the first *Salon des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris in 1904.

Loïe Fuller became an icon of Art Nouveau. She had been performing in Paris since 1892, and was concomitantly connected with poets and visual artists, most of whom were inspired by her serpentine dance. She often travelled to London, to engage with the culture of the music hall, which for her was a bigger inspiration than ballet.³⁹ She was probably influenced by the 'skirt dance' developed by the London burlesque artist Kate Vaughan.⁴⁰ This alter ego was adored by John Ruskin and Edward Burne-Jones, who called her 'Miriam Ariadne Salome Vaughan'.⁴¹ Fuller was also attracted and influenced by the biblical myth: in 1895 she created a new performance, *Salomé*, written by Armand Silvestre.⁴² While the show was not a great success, it gave rise to two dances used in 1900 at the Universal Exposition, the *Dance of the Lily* and the *Fire Dance*.

Fuller was ferociously ambitious and independent. Instead of performing at the Palais de la Danse, a structure tailor-made for the purpose at the



Above: Henri Sauvage, dressing room for an actress, 1904, ink on paper. Centre d'archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.



Right: Henri Sauvage, Théâtre de la Loïe Fuller, 1900, ink on paper. Centre d'archives d'architecture du XXe siècle.

Théâtre Loïe Fuller. — Composition de M. Henri SAUVAGE.



Opposite: Riessner, Stellmacher and Kessel, figure of Loie Fuller, c.1900, earthenware. Sainsbury Centre.

Exposition, She created her own *Théâtre-Musée* on the Rue de Paris.⁴³ Besides the performance space, the building contained an exhibition room that housed over one hundred works in various media representing her.⁴⁴ The art critic Arsène Alexandre referred to this room as: “the preliminary poem of statuettes, statues, pastels, paintings, celebrate the frail and agile dancer with large wings”.⁴⁵ After discovering these paintings, statues, lamps and other objects, the audience could attend the dancer’s famous performances, involving electricity and optical illusions, very much in the taste of the Exposition as a whole.⁴⁶ With this double function of harmonising objects and performance, the *Théâtre-musée* simultaneously animated the crafts, and froze the dance into a permanent work of art. It celebrated the symbiosis between decorative and the performing arts.

While the *Exposition Universelle* was still open, on 29 September 1900 the comedy *Les Demi-Vierges* premiered at the Théâtre de l’Athénée. This play showed once again how interwoven Art Nouveau and the theatre were. Unlike *Gismonda*, *Beauty's Awakening* or Fuller’s *théâtre-musée*, this play did not aspire to mesmerise the audience with ancient worlds or fairy-tale universes, but simply intended to represent a bourgeois interior in the style of the day. Five years after its first scenic adaptation from Marcel Prévost’s novel, *Les Demi-Vierges* had a stage designed entirely in the Art Nouveau style. The decorator, M. Roncin-Rubé, was well known and admired for his realistic and detailed stage designs in the world of theatrical reviews. To ensure that the interiors would be plausible, furniture and decorative objects were rented from the Maison Soubrier, a shop selling furniture while also renting it to theatres for performances. This practice spread throughout the century, enabling shops to promote their products on-stage. In England, popular comedies also advertised the department stores from which the stage furniture originated. The theatre indicated the name and location of the shop on the programme, such as Oetzmann & Co., a department store often showcased at the highly successful Daly’s Theatre.⁴⁷ From costumes to the detailed drawing-room decoration, all the designs in *Les Demi-Vierges* were in the latest fashionable style, with glass roofs and foliage-motif ironwork, chairs and sofas decorated with *coup de fouet* curves, and walls ornamented with stucco flowers. The care given over the sets was so fastidious that it delayed the premiere of the show for several days. Despite this, the decor was unanimously approved of by the critics, in contrast with the play itself, which was deemed to be poor.⁴⁸ *Les Demi-Vierges* was a performance anchored in its time, and illustrates how theatre is capable of crystallising collective representations of a society.⁴⁹

The *fin-de-siècle* theatre was effectively an alternative exhibition space. Spectacular and visual, it was a unique site, and engaged fully with the concept of *gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art. The fusion of literary and visual art induced the spectator to believe that the world being represented was a continuation of their own. As shown in *Les Demi-Vierges*, the bourgeois audience was probably expecting to see the same furniture onstage as they had at home. The methodology met the audience’s desire to have an omniscient and detailed perspective on what they were seeing.⁵⁰ The profusion of images in the press, the thriving city and quick-growing architecture played a part in stimulating the Victorian eye. Producing a play also meant producing these “concrete images of historical and contemporary reality craved by the public”.⁵¹



Above: Les Demi-Vierges, 1900.
Fondazione Giorgio Cini.

The spectator also perceived the theatre as an extension of their own domestic space. Loie Fuller's exhibition room, ahead of the performance hall, organised the visitors' route through a foyer designed like a "mediating space between the home environment and the world of the stage".⁵² It also transformed the primary function of the foyer as an exhibition space for the graphic and decorative arts.

The theatrical site was both the anchorage point of decorative creation and the crossroads of the artists' professional trajectories. The personalities whose careers were highlighted there were not isolated or special cases; rather, they represent a wider international and interdisciplinary system, a network of *fin-de-siècle* artistic communities.

The decorative arts play a major role in giving tangible form to imaginary places, using the public language of patterns and shapes. *Fin-de-siècle* theatre production was an attempt to create a collective work – to make the stage a total experience by fusing all the modern decorative arts. This was epitomized by performances that were completely created by craftspeople, such as the unique and extraordinary case of *Beauty's Awakening*. The stage was a showcase for the decorative arts. The double function of fashionable shops in Paris and London – of creating costumes and selling dresses, or renting furniture that could also be purchased – shows that theatre influenced new trends and patterns of consumption. As summarised by the contemporary art critic Arsène Alexandre, "Theatre starts fashion and fashion can largely provide from theatre."⁵³

§

ENDNOTES

- 1 Octave Uzanne, 'Visions de notre heure, Choses et gens qui passent', *L'écho de Paris*, 7 July 1899.
- 2 Rossella Froissart-Pezone, *L'Art dans Tout: Les arts décoratifs en France et l'utopie d'un Art nouveau* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2005), p.68.
- 3 Alphonse Mucha, 'Illustrations pour Cléopâtre', *Le Costume au Théâtre*, 1890, BnF LJ W-142.
- 4 Mariella Rizzi, 'Sarah Bernhardt: le théâtre et l'art de la mode', in *Arts et usages du costume de scène*, Collection 'Le Studio-Lo Essais' (Paris: Editions Lampsaque, 2007), pp.105-17.
- 5 Matthew Arnold, 'The French Play in London', *Nineteenth Century*, 6 August 1879, p.229.
- 6 Lady Macbeth's dress was copied from Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire du Mobilier Français*; see Alice Comyns-Carr, *Mrs J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences* (London: Hutchinson, 1926). The design she used can be found in the third volume of the dictionary entitled *Vêtements, Bijoux de corps, objets de toilette* (Paris: Librairie centrale d'architecture, 1873), pp.187-9.
- 7 E. R. Russell, *Liverpool Daily Post*, 31 December 1888.
- 8 'Sarah Bernhardt s'est montrée une artiste prodigieusement complexe et raffinée. Elle est, dans son art si magnifiquement corporel, un Gustave Moreau, un Burne-Jones. Elle est à elle seule une synthèse délicieuse et troublante de tous ces peintres mystérieux', quoted in Claudette Joannis, 'Sarah Bernhardt et le costume de théâtre ou le corps sublimé', in *Arts et Usages du costume de scène*, pp.398-9.
- 9 See Victorien Sardou, 'Notes sur *Gismonda*, 1894-1895', BnF Arts du spectacle RF 47 806.
- 10 A later version of the costume made in 1902 by Théophile Thomas is kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France collection.
- 11 Especially for the dress of the fifth act, which involved day- and night-labour for an entire week; see Joannis, 'Sarah Bernhardt et le costume de théâtre'.
- 12 'La Duchesse d'Athènes: conversation avec Sarah Bernhardt', *Le Matin*, 8 September 1894, no. 3844.
- 13 According to René Lalique and Lucien Lévy-Dhrumer correspondence, quoted in Anne Jamault, *Sarah Bernhardt et le monde de l'art*, doctoral thesis (Paris: Presses Universitaire Paris Sorbonne, 2000) p.283.
- 14 See his contemporary's essay: Henri Vever, *La bijouterie française au XIXe siècle (1800-1900)*, (Paris: H. Floury, 1906-8), Vol. 3, pp.714-16. 'De 1891 à 1894, Lalique composa deux importantes séries de bijoux pour les rôles de Sarah Bernhardt dans *Iseyl* et *Gismonda*. Il déplore ne pas avoir été mis au courant du scénario de *Gismonda*, parce que ses créations auraient été plus appropriées au caractère de l'œuvre, tandis que se souvenant des recommandations qui lui avaient été faites pour *Iseyl*, d'être très sobre dans l'ornementation et d'éviter le clinquant, il fut amené à composer des bijoux du même genre qui étaient trop fins, trop atténués pour un rôle tel que celui de *Gismonda*.' If his collaboration for *Iseyl* could not be proved to this day, his works for *Gismonda* were attested in Emile Moreau's correspondence (Correspondance d'Emile Moreau, BnF Archives et Manuscrits, Collection Rondel, RMn 1050).
- 15 See Daly's Theatre programmes, season 1894-5, D'Oyly Carte Archive, V&A, Blythe House, THM/73.
- 16 See the reconstruction at Musée Carnavalet, Paris.
- 17 Walter Crane, 'Modern decorative art at Turin: General Impressions', *The Magazine of Art*, 1902, p.449.
- 18 Phrase by Paul Morand in his essay 1900 (Paris: Les éditions de France, 1930).
- 19 Crane, 'Modern decorative art at Turin', p.448.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 'On peut hardiment, entre gens ayant la lassitude et le dégoût des pauvretés de peinture qui nous encombrant, convenir que ces albums sont aujourd'hui avec ceux des Japonais, les seules oeuvres d'art vraiment dignes de ce nom qu'il nous reste à contempler, à Paris, quand l'Exposition des Indépendants se ferme.' *Revue Littéraire et Artistique*, 15 August 1881.
- 22 *La Révolte*, created in 1887 by Jean Grave, who met William Morris and Walter Crane and was the first to translate Crane into French in 1893; see Catherine Meneux, *L'art social de la Révolution à la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2014).
- 23 Camille Maclair, 'Les Salons de 1896', *La Nouvelle Revue*, 1896, No. 5, p.349.
- 24 'magasins qui devraient appeler, rapprocher, grouper les principaux représentants et rénovateurs de l'art décoratif, réunir, exposer leurs oeuvres, aider à ce que ce mouvement qui commence, mais qui chez nous, tarde à se manifester, par manque d'une action d'ensemble, par faute d'unité et de direction.' Jean Lahor, *William Morris et le mouvement nouveau de l'art décoratif, Conférence à Genève le 13 janvier 1897* (Geneva: Ch. Eggimann & Cie, 1897), pp.25-6.
- 25 'L'Angleterre, à la stupéfaction de ceux qui l'ont connue jadis et qui la revoient en ce moment, est devenue un pays singulièrement artiste, singulièrement curieux des arts de la décoration, de la beauté, du charme ou de l'élégance, dans la maison, la rue, la cité, dans la vie privée ou publique.' Ibid., p.30.
- 26 'Il ne lui aura pas été donné de faire une réalité décisive: ce sera la tâche des artistes qui procèdent ou procéderont de lui.' Ibid., p.10.
- 27 Gabriel Mourey, *Passer le détroit. La vie et l'art à Londres* (Paris: P. Ollendorff, 1895), p.241.
- 28 M. H. S., 'Prince Bojidar Karageorgévitch as a silversmith', *The Magazine of Art*, 1901, pp.185-6.
- 29 Lahor, *William Morris et le mouvement nouveau de l'art décoratif*, pp.25-6.
- 30 C. R. Ashbee, quoted in Gavin Stamp, 'A Hundred Years of the Art Workers' Guild,' in *Beauty's Awakening, the Centenary Exhibition of the Art Workers' Guild 1884-1984* (Brighton Royal Pavilion, 1984)
- 31 'Souvenirs of some AWG revels with 4 playbills', Art Workers' Guild archives, AWG 5/3/1.
- 32 'A Short History of Modern Art: from the earliest period to the present day, with original and striking illustrations by eminent artists. Never before seen - and once seen not likely to be forgotten!', London, 2 March 1897.
- 33 To the Guild, this Elizabethan masque is the symbol of the *contrepoints* [MEANING = counterweight: HOW DOES THAT WORK WITH 'WHO?'] of Shakespeare at that time, who paid too little attention to the visual aspect of his performances. The masque format brings a new dimension to the performance: 'There are certain things more necessary to Masque than they are to Drama, such as Poetic and Ethic Aim, Beauty of Design and Ornament.' Bound volume of the script and illustrations for the AWG Masque of 1899 *Beauty's Awakening, a Masque of Winter and of Spring*, p.5.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 The first scene showed all seven lamps switched off and covered with forest leaves. In the following scene, a group of characters, led by the Trueheart knight, sang praises to their glory: 'Each lamp uplifted let us raise / Our paean of triumphal praise'. Ibid., p.24.
- 36 Ibid., p.36.
- 37 Rossella Froissart-Pezone, *L'Art dans Tout: Les arts décoratifs en France et l'utopie d'un Art nouveau* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2005), p.84.
- 38 Frantz Jourdain, 'L'Art du décor à l'exposition universelle de 1900', *L'Architecture*, 1901, pp.27-30.
- 39 Guy Ducrey, 'Le mythe Loie Fuller', in *Corps et graphies. Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 1996), pp.433-530.
- 40 Sylvia Ellis, *The Plays of W. B. Yeats: Yeats and the Dancer* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p.160.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 The 1907 version of *Salomé* was performed in a melodramatic libretto by Robert d'Humières, an Anglophile theatre manager and playwright who worked with Edward Burne-Jones for his play *La Belle au bois dormant* (*Sleeping Beauty*) in 1894.
- 43 Claudia Palazzolo, *Mise en scène de la danse aux Expositions de Paris, 1889-1937. Une fabrique du regard* (Paris: L'œil d'or, 2017), pp.53-83.
- 44 Jean-Baptiste Minnaert, 'Henri Sauvage et le théâtre de Loie Fuller à l'Exposition universelle de 1900', Musée de l'École de Nancy; Valérie Thomas; Jérôme Perrin (dir.), *Loie Fuller: danseuse de l'art nouveau. Catalogue d'exposition*, Réunion des musées nationaux, 2002, pp.53-62.
- 45 Arsène Alexandre, 'Le théâtre de la Loie Fuller', *Le Théâtre*, No. 40, August 1900, pp.23-4.
- 46 Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- 47 See, for instance, *Facciamo Divorzio*, an adaptation of Victorien Sardou's *Divorcions*, performed at Daly's Theatre in 1894. D'Oyly Carte Archive, V&A, Blythe House, THM/73.
- 48 See the reviews in *Le Pays*, 26 September 1900, and *La Lanterne*, 25 September 1900.
- 49 Jean de Guardia, *Théâtre et imaginaire. Images scéniques et représentations mentales (XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2012), p.283.
- 50 Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.50.
- 51 Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910*, Theatre Production Series (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p.14.
- 52 Hugh Maguire, 'The Victorian Theatre as a Home from Home', *Journal of Design History*, 2000, Vol. 13, No. 2, p.107.
- 53 'le Théâtre lançant la Mode et la Mode pouvant largement s'alimenter du Théâtre', Arsène Alexandre, *Les reines de l'aiguille, modistes et couturiers* (Paris: Théophile Belin, 1902), p.154.