

The Ecole de Nancy

By François LOYER, general curator of the year of Ecole de Nancy, 1999

Art Nouveau was one of the highpoints in the history of art in Lorraine. A major factor in its success was the dramatic economic growth in the region during the last quarter of the 19thC, but this on its own would not have sufficed. The movement's international reputation was the result of a variety of activities, often far removed from those involved in creating the works. For cultural change to last it needs to become an established part of a regional economy, to become more than a trendy fashion supported by the local artistic elite. It needs to draw its resources from the region and subsequently become its emblem. The Ecole de Nancy successfully achieved all this in its heyday and is still today considered a model of its kind.

When the Alliance Provinciale des Industries d'Art was formed in 1901, two generations of artists had already contributed to the renaissance of Lorraine's culture. With the arrival of the railways (1850) and the founding of the University (1854), conditions were ripe for the region's economic and intellectual development. In spite of the shock that followed France's defeat in 1870 and the massive emigration of the people of Alsace following that region's annexation by Prussia, Nancy's economy grew rapidly. The expansion of the chemical and steel industries transformed it into one of the most important economic centres in France. Nancy itself expanded to become a major town in the region. Traditional industries, such as ceramics and glassmaking, took on a new lease of life, adding more dynamic consumer-oriented sectors.

By giving manufactured goods an artistic quality, the founders of the Ecole de Nancy effectively sealed the alliance between art and industry that the 19thC world had long dreamed of. The idea had been in the air since the Romantic period. In Victorian England, John Ruskin vigorously denounced the bad taste of the middle class, satisfied with styles that imitated those of the past, and further limited by the technical requirements of series production. In opposition to the production methods at the time, he advocated a return to craftsmanship as the only way of resolving the apparently conflicting requirements. One of Nancy's major contributions (in particular that by Emile Gallé) was to go beyond this opposition by arguing, as did William Morris, for close collaboration between art and industry. The two parties should work together on a production line producing unique works and limited and series runs, and sell these objets d'art to a wider market.

Dedicated to the one-off production, Gallé did not share all the aims of the Arts and Crafts movement. While he wanted to ensure that craftsmanship dominated series production, he was well aware that the latter was unavoidable. The market he was aiming at (and which he successfully attacked) covered more than just individual collectors and private galleries. Thanks to Gallé, the Ecole de Nancy helped accomplish the transition from the production of luxury goods to that of a range of more everyday products, thus bridging the gap that had grown up between unique and ordinary items. One can easily understand Roger Marx's crusade in favour of social art, whose objective was the application of art to objects in everyday use. The modernity of his project is remarkable; it has since become one of the main concerns in 20thC art.

The rejection of the academic insistence on considering “fine art” as superior to the “minor arts”, and the belief that the decorative arts had a promising future as part of “modern life and progress” (to use William Morris’ words), were at the origin of this new orientation. It was hoped, as often happens today, that this would lead to craft-based applied arts and short-run series production giving the artists the task of creating models without forcing them to sacrifice quality. These changes depended on a broader distribution system, i.e. covering department stores and an international clientele. Nancy’s art industries thus did not limit their sales to Lorraine, or even to France. In fact they were able to sell their objets d’art in markets all over the world, from Chicago to Turin, via London, Munich and Brussels, thanks to international exhibitions and artistic events that earned them an enviable reputation abroad.

The final step in the process was the international consecration of this regional movement whose roots were deeply embedded in Lorraine. Aesthetically, the Ecole de Nancy was local in that its sources were based on a renewal of the flamboyant Gothic and Rococo styles that had been so popular in Lorraine in earlier periods. Nevertheless the School’s style was neither a copy of historic designs and objects, nor a simple matter of nostalgia. While it drew its inspiration from medieval floral decorations, it reinvented them, drawing on France’s long Neo-Gothic tradition (tradition that it refused as a whole while accepting certain aspects). Extensive research into the stylisation of floral designs had already been carried out by Ruprich-Robert, Viollet-le-Duc and Grasset amongst others; but in their use of earlier sources they all tended to consider floral art as a simple exercise in graphics. Late 19thC artists clearly rejected this approach. When Eugène Vallin turned to Flamboyant Gothic for inspiration, it was to insist on its inexhaustible fantasy, abundance and diversity, the perpetual changes... Other artists added a symbolic, dreamlike dimension typical of the period. The result was works whose shapes were not limited by the past, that were highly emotional and full of references.

The Ecole de Nancy artists also considered the natural sciences as an authentic way of examining and expressing life. They attended the Nancy Forestry School and enthusiastically sketched wild flowers before transposing them onto glass, bronze or wood. In the 1880s, ten years before Art Nouveau was recognised as such, one can already see this enlightened alchemy in the works of Emile Gallé and Louis Majorelle. Long before ecology had become fashionable, nature was ever present in the objects they produced, a reminder of a world that was as precious as it was fragile.

The Ecole de Nancy, the place where the hopes and dreams of the artists and intellectuals met those of the manufacturers and businessmen, was an all-embracing movement. Its essential values involved a commitment to freedom and progress (political, social and scientific). And when it finally turned into a sort of regional nostalgia, it was already on the decline. The renewal of styles after World War I was all the more remarkable. Far from retiring into art craftsmanship, which had become far too expensive, Daum, Gruber and Majorelle started long series productions. Leaving the floral theme behind they launched a new style based on a fantasy of colours and materials, thus creating Art Deco, giving the Ecole de Nancy a new image, but one to which it was still closely linked. One can in effect only clearly understand the collective nature of a cultural movement in the highly individualistic signs of creative genius manifest by its most illustrious artists.

However, the lessons one can draw today not only concern our artistic heritage, but also suggest that the dynamism of a city or region is inseparably linked to the artistic value of what is produced there. Art is not just for museums and galleries; it is also a crucial aspect of everyday life and objects to which it gives a particular quality without which there is no real culture. The Ecole de Nancy's success is proof enough.