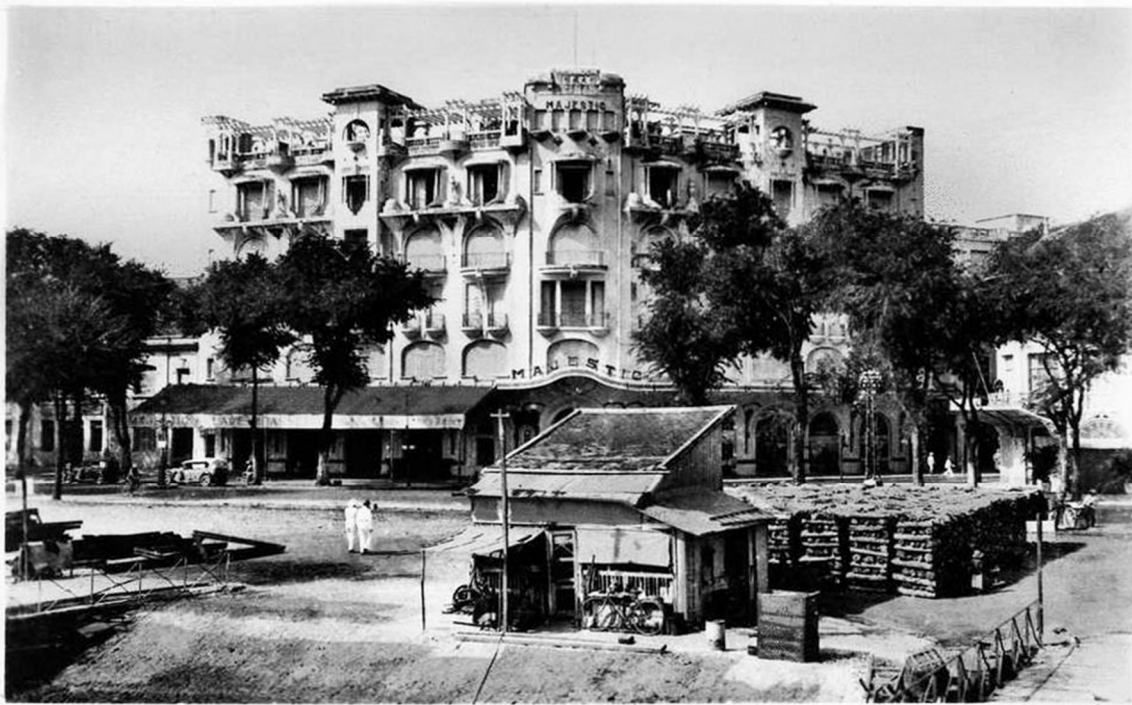


ART NOUVEAU IN VIETNAM

CHASING L'AVENIR DU PASSÉ OF THE 1900s

It was known as Art Nouveau in France, Jugendstil in Germany, Stile Liberty in Italy, Secessionstil in Austria, Szecesszio in Hungary. It was both international and regional for that reason. It spanned officially only two brief decades, but at the same time, two centuries.



Often overshadowed by the preceding art movements such as Romanticism, Impressionism, Beaux-Arts-cultivated ones (id est Renaissance Revival, Greek Revival, Neo-gothic, all things Neoclassical), and even more so by the immediate successors like Art Deco, De Stijl, Bauhaus et cetera, the term "Art Nouveau" seems to be somewhat neglected in many modern art discussions. In fact, Art Nouveau was meant to be a "total" movement, encompassing fine art, architecture, furniture, glassware, textiles, and jewelry, which it indeed became. Though short-lived, this movement cast

considerable influence upon a handful of other art movements that followed, either as direct derivatives or as antitheses of Art Nouveau. The style served as the transitional link between the classical and the modern, bridging the old and the new, paving the path for the 20th century Modernism. It encapsulates the zeitgeist of an era on the fringe of the very late 19th and the very early 20th century.

Nevertheless, that is how it was in the Western hemisphere. What does it have to do with Asia, let alone Vietnam? One would not even begin to imagine, or bother to do so, the outreach of Art Nouveau in Indochina at the turn of the 20th century. With this piece of writing I wish to provide a quick "survey" of such outreach of Art Nouveau in architecture, in hope of shedding some light on the matter for some discussions to follow, of waging an argument that in fact, Art Nouveau once made a tour de force in the heart of French Indochina: Vietnam.

I. THE UNCERTAINTY IN THE WEST

It was nearing the end of the 19th century. The Western art world was in a pandemonium: Romanticism, or Realism, or Classical Revival, or something else? Architecture was in no better luck, as the struggle between classical orders and glass-and-iron was real. All this was thanks to the Industrial Revolution(s) that created a huge impact on technology and the French Revolution(s) that did so on society. Everything was moving so fast away from what was perceived as "traditional". École des Beaux-Arts was created as an attempt to reestablish and maintain the classical root in world art. The school had its success and culminated in several Revival movements that were well received by people the world over and are still treasured to this day. However, everyone felt in the air the advent of a new epoch: the modern time. And thus, the "traditional" simply would not do.

Mass production was advancing. Modular designs became popular, because in terms of scale, what would have taken years to build now would only take weeks; what would have required a select cadre of trained craftsmen to construct now could use a larger group of average workers. This allowed for fast turnaround and rapid production of projects such as the Crystal Palace and the Eiffel Tower. Of course, by no means are these of mediocre quality or inferior beauty. However, back then, they were subject to controversies and thus a clash of ideologies was inevitable.



Crystal Palace with intricate iron framework and curved glass (all modular). This elm tree at transept was among a few more.

Collection: Getty Images

Notwithstanding such effective workflow, people with *goût* (classic *goût*, at that) had yet to question the very nature of mass-produced architecture and the aesthetics of industrial art: Does "modern" mean to sacrifice the poetic as a trade-off to the pragmatic? Must one compromise between the ethereality of art and the practicality of production? Is art a production or a creation? Are there no longer artisans but only workers? Obviously, there ought to be a solution that could give answer to both sides of the matter.

II. THE CERTAINTY IN JAPAN

Parallel to the changes in the West were those of the East. Emerging from the feudal shogunate, Japan under what's known as "Meiji Restoration" had a strong reform in central government, military, and foreign policy, making the country the first in Asia to be modernized into an international modern structure (much of which was borrowed from the Western revolutionary ideas). The purpose was to strengthen the country from within, so that it would not fall into the same fate of neighboring countries that had become or would eventually become colonies. That means, instead of falling prey, Japan must share an equal position among the international great powers.

In order to “learn from them”, scholars and statesmen were sent overseas as missions to gather as much insight of the other side of the globe as could. Another action that must be taken was to abolish the Confucian and Han ideologies that could do nothing but drag the system in a backward direction. During this time, exchange of ideas with the West was established, and Japan became increasingly known to the world. Centuries of seclusion came to an end at last.



The first and current Wako buildings (completed in 1894 and 1932 respectively). Wako Clock Tower has been an iconic department store at the heart of Ginza, Tokyo. It is a legacy of the olden golden days after Meiji Restoration. Collection: Wako Co.

III. HOKUSAI, SIEGFRIED, AND VAN GOGH

As people in the West were seeking a unifying force that could solve the crisis of aesthetics, of the identity between modern and traditional, they arrived at the idea that a new form of art must come into being. This new art form was to be elaborate and elegant, yet not exclusive to any social class. It was to be done using modern components and techniques, yet unique and not repetitive. It was to get closer to nature as a source of inspiration, away from the industrial banality of the time, and also away from the classical formality.

Timing could not have been better for Japanese art to be introduced to the West. For a while, the oriental techniques had had the Western audience in awe of simple yet elegant forms, of flat yet dynamic perspective, of the spontaneous yet sophisticated composition. One of many well-loved oeuvres was that of Katsushika Hokusai's. Hokusai was an iconic woodblock print maker, a true ukyo-e master whose work influenced

Vincent van Gogh, Edgar Degas, and Claude Monet, just to name a few. Van Gogh also had a special liking towards Utagawa Hiroshige's (of the Utagawa school) work. Upon having acquired imported art, van Gogh would spend hours on end to study and remake the pieces. Some of his best copies were done in the year 1887, including "Peasants on the Bridge in the Rain" and "A Plum Tree" to pay homage to the Hiroshige originals that he appreciated so much. Van Gogh called such appreciation towards Japanese art "Japonaiserie". His legendary Starry Night was painted in 1889.



"The Great Wave in Kanagawa" by Hokusai and "Starry Night" by Van Gogh. Either is considered the author's magnum opus.

Collection: societies of the artists

The import of art works from Japan by dealers like Siegfried Bing was responsible in making this happen. Bing was also the publisher of his own monthly journal *Le Japon Artistique* from the late 1880s. This only helped bring Japonism - a Western subculture that held high regard to the Japanese arts - to a wider audience. In 1895, he opened and curated a gallery called *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* that has been considered to be the operation base, a form of *siège d'organisation*, of the movement. A trusted contact of van Gogh's, Bing was also a close friend to Louis Comfort Tiffany of United States and Henry van de Velde of Belgium, both of them driving factors of Art Nouveau. (Tiffany lamps were much sought-after pieces of furniture and are still popular today as luxury items. Tiffany stained glass has also been known for quality and beauty in the highest degree. As a result, Art Nouveau interior also went with the appellation "Tiffany style" in America. Tiffany & Co. jewelry needs no introduction.)

Art Nouveau was an attempt for the West to redefine and revitalize itself. Drawn from the inspiration of nature, this movement is characterized by femininity, the use of floral motifs, organic forms, "whiplash" patterns, extensive use of curvature, exaggerated asymmetrical composition, emphasis on the delicacy of fine details, exposed iron and ample glass as decorative features to celebrate machine-made components that became more available as well as affordable, well nuanced and pastel colors in contrast with a few key strokes of very vibrant ones (the method that reminds one of Kabuki stage set). The iconographies or subject matters began to include more items taken from folklores and allegories, with scenes depicting nymphs and deities (particularly of mixed ethnicities), animals, and flowers.

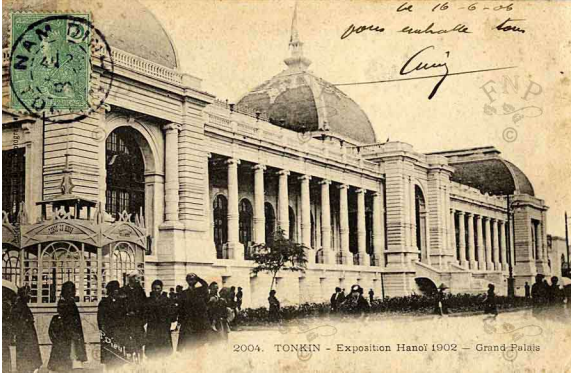
IV. HÀ NỘI - ALONG RUE PAUL BERT

The year was 1902. Ha Noi was crowned the capital of French Indochina. Tonkin and the Red River delta became the central hub of cultural activities at an international scale. In November of the same year, Exhibition de Hanoi was held with the special appearance of Emperor Thành Thái and the new governor Paul Doumer. Besides exhibits of Vietnam (including all three protectorates Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina), galleries and pavilions of Siam, Burma, Cambodia, China, Korea, the Philippines etc. showcased various cultures at the crossroad Ha Noi. During this time, Ha Noi also witnessed the grand opening of Paul Doumer Bridge, now Long Biên Bridge.



An affiche for the exhibition.
Collection: Getty Images

What made this exhibition special is that it occurred right after two other important world expos: the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, France and the 1902 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Decorativa Moderna in Turin, Italy. Both were held to promote Art Nouveau as the emerging international style of the modern world. Was the Exhibition in Hanoi an event tandem to those in France and Italy? Was it meant to be the stem of Art Nouveau in Asia? Of course, such theory does not negate the possibility that the exchange of Nouveau ideas had been established prior to 1902. In any case, the fact that Ha Noi became more au courant as an architectural center was perhaps thanks to this exhibition.



*Grand Palais du Tonkin and Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, two centerpieces at Exhibition de Hanoi and Exposition Universelle. Photos likely taken on their inaugural dates.
Collections: Hanoiavie and Grand Palais' homepage*

On the other hand, as Ha Noi became the capital city, her architectural language was therefore that of high Second Empire/Neoclassical à Paris. Beaux-Arts signatures of mansard roof, Greco-Roman detailing, classical orders, and palatial composition were hard to miss in Ha Noi. After all, the city was meant to represent la Troisième République in colonial Indochina. This also means that those then-contemporary movements like Art Nouveau was in the end not as favored as classically composed buildings. Compared to the flamboyant Sai Gon down south, Ha Noi was pretty conservative, to say the least.

Nevertheless, there were still a handful of locations abreast with new trends, among which was Rue Paul Bert (now Tràng Tiền). This fashionista of a street quickly adopted subtle Art Nouveau components right on classically ordered façades - a design move as simple as modern awnings and canopies that were supported by iron brackets and rods. Beaux-Arts elements like Mansard roof, ornamental moldings, coat of arms, symmetrical composition etc. could be seen with street arches, trolley cars, lamp posts bearing Art Nouveau details.



Rue Paul Bert looking towards the Opera House, a view flanked by the Grands Magasins Réunis on the right. In Saigon, the Grands Magasins Charner was the department store that bore a similar significance in urban development.

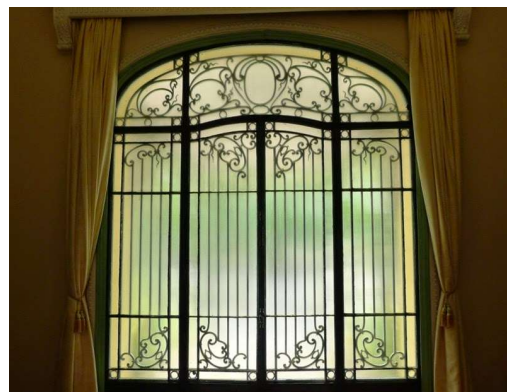
A strong terminal point of the Paul Bert vista, the Opera House of Hanoi represents prime French Neoclassical architecture. This grandiose edifice was referenced upon Palais Garnier – home to the most esteemed Opéra National de Paris – in a rather literal fashion¹. Even so, a minor Nouveau element was added later to the exterior of the building: modern awning.



The canopies were not found in the original design of this particular building. They were implemented at some point after the building was completed.

Collection: Flickr user manhhai

However, awning only signifies but does not define a style. In the case of the Opera House, it most certainly cannot be an adequate display of Art Nouveau. This reality is how far Art Nouveau reached in Tonkin: just an addition to an already-determinate building style, rather than a comprehensive design strategy. The Palais du Résident Supérieur (Dinh Thống sứ Bắc Kỳ) is another example, albeit it also happens to have elegant modern glazing and frames, floral motifs, and a grand stair of Nouveau manner in the interior.



Interior elements of Palais du Résident Supérieur. These Art Nouveau elements may seem faint, but they would influence a lot of residential designs, especially villas, later in Vietnam.

Collection: Ashui.vn



The building served to house the governing body of French officers in Tonkin. Now it is a guesthouse for Vietnam's government.

Collection: Flickr user manhhai

A couple blocks away, but also on the Paul Bert vista and next to Sword Lake (Hoàn Kiếm), l'Avenir du Tonkin was a journal directed by Francois-Henri Schneider, founder of a few newspapers that concerned colonial Vietnam. He was also the person behind Đông Dương Tạp Chí – the first journal published in Vietnamese (quốc ngữ) – which he cofounded with a francophone polymath named Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh. About Hôtel de l'Avenir du Tonkin, it was likely built about a decade after the newspaper itself was established (circa 1893). If this is the case, the building may be an example of pre-1902 Art Nouveau in Ha Noi. Even at the first glance, one must notice the oculus (circular window) on the top of the building (which is rather unusual for Second Empire style), the curvilinear forms of the balconies and gates, and the unmistakable canopy. Though not as well pronounced, the tile mosaic found on the floor of this building bears some Art Nouveau fashion in its color palette, theme, and composition. However, I have not succeeded in confirming the authenticity and the origin of this tiled floor.

L'AVENIR DU TONKIN

JOURNAL DE RENSEIGNEMENTS ET D'ÉTUDES PUBLIÉ À HANOÏ
Publication officielle du MONITEUR DU PROTECTORAT, contenant les actes officiels du gouvernement du Protectorat de l'Annam et du Tonkin
du BULLETIN OFFICIEL DE LA CHAMBRE DE COMMERCE de HANOÏ,
et du BULLETIN DU COMITÉ D'ÉTUDES agricoles, industrielles et commerciales de l'Annam et du Tonkin.
PARAISANT LE SAMEDI

Jules COUSIN, directeur. DIRECTION ET RÉDACTION : Th. CHESNAY, secrétaire de la rédaction.
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TELEGRAMME. Gouverneur à Résident général, Hanoï. Saïgon, 12 octobre 1886. Espagne. Amiral Puzosella, ministre de la marine, a donné son Approbation.

Seen here are snapshots of a digital copy of the quotidien *l'Avenir du Tonkin*. This particular issue dates as early as 1886. Collection: Cornell University

Here's the kicker:



The building is now headquarters to Hà Nội Mới (New Ha Noi). Collection: Flickr user manhhai

V. SÀI GÒN – ALONG RUE CATINAT

Even though Sai Gon relaxed her position as the capital of Indochina to Ha Noi in 1902, the city was still chic and fashionable as ever. Seen as parallel to les Grands Magasins Réunis of Ha Noi, Sai Gon's own Grands Magasins Charner (current Tax Trade Center) used to bear some interior similarities to Galeries Lafayette in Paris until it has been

De nouveaux pourparlers sont engagés entre le Gouvernement du Protectorat et les caudilles aux concessions de mines de houille, sous réserve des lois votées pour que ces négociations aboutissent enfin à un résultat. Dans les derniers jours du mois, M. le Résident général se rendra à Hoi.

ACTES OFFICIELS
Par arrêté de M. le Résident général en date du : 9 mars. — Une somme de 1,200 francs est mise à la disposition de M. le commandant Barthelemy, pour l'organisation des courses données à l'occasion de l'ouverture de l'Exposition.

Considérant que les effets destinés à ces conditions n'ayant pas été remis en temps utile n'ont, par suite, pu être soumis à l'examen de la commission spéciale et subir les épreuves prévues à l'art. 6 et 7.

L'adjudication pour la fourniture d'effets d'habillement d'équipement aux milices du Tonkin, est renvoyée au 1^{er} avril, à neuf heures du matin. Les échantillons des divers effets, doivent être déposés à la Résidence supérieure, le dimanche 2 mars au plus tard, à neuf heures du matin, pour être soumis aux épreuves prévues par le cahier des charges.

Les échantillons présentés qui paraîtront réunir les conditions exigées par le cahier des charges recevront un cachet en raison de leur qualité relative afin que la Commission d'examen puisse, au moment de sa constitution, juger de la valeur réelle des offres qui leur seront présentées le jour de l'adjudication.

L'article premier du cahier des charges susvisé est modifié et complété ainsi qu'il suit : Au lieu de : galles en argent à Marées de 227^{me}, remplacé par : galles en or à Marées de 227^{me}, remplacé par : galles en or à Marées de 227^{me}. Paragraphe ajouté : Tous les galles devront être couvés aux machines de réserve en forme de A non barré et couvés à moitié de la largeur de la manche.

11 mars. — L'examen et le transport à l'extérieur des copies des Châliés extraits de l'Annuaire de l'Avonir, sous réserve des conditions énoncées dans l'arrêté n^o 98, qui sera publié dans le Moniteur du Protectorat du mois de mars 1887.

SERVICE DES AFFAIRES COMMERCIALES

LEGER DES MARCHES FINANCIERS EN RELATION AVEC LES RELATIONS COMMERCIALES EN ANNAM ET AU TONKIN.

AVIS AUX CONTRIBUABLES
Les percepteurs des provinces de Sonay et de Haidong ont prévenu que les rôles primitifs d'impôt des patentes de ces deux provinces sont mis au recouvrement à dater du 12 mars 1887.

Le percepteur de Sonay a prévenu que les rôles primitifs d'impôt des patentes de cette province sont mis au recouvrement à dater du 12 mars 1887.

Le percepteur de Haidong a prévenu que les rôles primitifs d'impôt des patentes de cette province sont mis au recouvrement à dater du 12 mars 1887.

L'EXPOSITION DE HANOÏ

C'est le 2 mai 1886, dans la première séance du Conseil du Protectorat que Paul Bert manifesta officiellement, pour la première fois, son intention d'ouvrir une Exposition à Hanoï. Il s'exprima en ces termes :

« Et comme il nous faut connaître notre point de départ, l'histoire des idées, pour en faire un excellent produit, et une grande Exposition tenue à Hanoï, des produits matériels ou matériels du Tonkin, nous venons immédiatement par où nous devons commencer nos encouragements ; et d'après ce qui, l'histoire que la plupart des exposants, nous abandonneront généralement leurs produits exposés sous le couvert et le bénéfice d'un échantillon de l'agriculture, de commerce et de l'industrie ».

Quelques semaines plus tard, le 10 juin 1886, le Conseil d'Étude agricole, industrielle et commerciale, de l'Annam et du Tonkin, institué dès 1884 par le général Brière de l'Isle,

recently vacated for demolition. Considered an haute Art Nouveau architecture, the ever so famous upmarket department store in Arrondissement 9 of Paris features an intricate steel dome, stained glass, a high atrium, and a grand stair¹ that never fail to astonish the spectators. Similarly, the Grands Magasins Charner also had an equally elegant grand stair, nicely crafted metalwork with bronze coq Gaulois (Gallic rooster, a French national symbol), and a domed atrium right above a strikingly rare piece of Moroccan mosaic, making the building one of the most underappreciated architectural gems in Asia ever.



Grands Magasins Charner.
Collections: ParisSaigon's blog on LeMonde

Rather than an architectural appendix, Art Nouveau in Sai Gon was incorporated into many fibers of the design process to create well thought out strategy, making the building a coherent piece inside out. Lest we forget, the exterior of les Grands Magasins Charner also used to be exemplary to regional Art Nouveau until it got modernized several times later. The remodeling work clearly did not do justice to this quality.



2036 COCHINCHINE — SAIGON — *Les Grands Magasins Charner*
Grands Magasins Charner as originally conceived.
Collection: Flickr user manhhai

This is the prominent Grands Magasins on boulevard Charner in her prime original state with a clock tower, a dome, decorative roofs, and curved structure at the public overhang. As demonstrated, the extensive use of curvature was laced with regional motifs like temple eaves, ocean pattern, and Oriental window mullions.

Another example of an Art Nouveau building whose exterior was reworked into a different style is Hotel Majestic. The original façade with irregular arched windows and billowing three-dimensional curves reminds one of Antoni Gaudi's Casa Batlló³. After a few changes of hands (including Hui Bon Hoa - original owner - and Franchini Mathieu), the building eventually got renovated into a Neo-Renaissance/Italianate appearance as seen today.



*l'Hôtel Majestic then and now.
Collection: MajesticSaigon's homepage*

Taking a stride across erstwhile Rue Catinat (now Đồng Khởi), one would very easily be able to see Art Nouveau at an urban design scale. Whiplash ironwork lamp posts merging into street arches, metal canopy with metal rods for support and “dragonfly wing” style glass and iron modules, unmistakable Nouveau balconies, extensive curvature at façades: this is as Art Nouveau as it could get. The features remind one of Hector Guimard’s style and his commission of Paris Metropolitan gates⁴.



131 SAIGON — Perspective de la rue Catinat

Rue Catinat possibly in mid 1920s. The car parked on the left looks very similar to a Lancia Lambda, and if my humble knowledge of automobile serves, cars like these are of the Vintage era. The “Vintage era” began after the end of WWI (1918) and lasted till the Great Depression (1930).

Collection: Flickr user manhhai



Various angles of rue Catinat suggest that the street used to be an Art Nouveau gallery.

Collection: Flickr user manhhai

A few more buildings worth mentioning (and within a stone's throw) are the Central Post Office with exposed decorative structure, the Catinat building with an ornamental stair wrapping an antiquated elevator and amazing ironwork on railing, and the Opera House⁴ with Nouveau decoration at the tympanum (whose authenticity I have yet to confirm, since the building has undergone several major facelifts).

VI. ART NOUVEAU IN COMTEMPORARY CULTURE

Following such a brief glory between 1890 and 1910, the decline of Art Nouveau was almost unavoidable. The movement could not escape the fate of a highly decorative style, as demonstrated by Baroque and Rococo more than a century earlier. The artists took so much personal liberty that their artworks did not seem having any rationale. Art Nouveau was then deemed unsuitable to convey the ideas of a modern and industrial world. Though it produced a fine generation of artists with a modern attitude like Alphonse Mucha and Gustav Klimt, it failed to incorporate the “new” beyond ornamentation. Moreover, though it was intended to serve all social classes, it ended up only serving the bourgeois, those newly rich people, and thus failing what it was meant to do. Many even regard Art Nouveau as a failure, and sadly dismiss the importance of this movement in the history of modern art.

Nevertheless, in recent years, people have witnessed a comeback of Art Nouveau in residential design, specifically in interior design. Those ornate moldings, organic patterns of window frames, curvilinear forms on armchairs, slender motifs, pastel colors and other remnants of Nouveau style are not at all uncommon, not to say popular even. The style can even be found in the exterior and composition of a few contemporary mansions.

In media and entertainment, manga-and-anime is a Japanese culture that pays much homage to Art Nouveau. Derived from an ukyo-e tradition of woodblock printing, the manga art shares the same inspiration that cradled Art Nouveau in the first place. Thus, Japanese artists are already predisposed to a style comprised of bold contour lines, subtle shading, de-dramatized chiaroscuro, playful interpretation and presentation of

real objects. However, upon a more Art Nouveau treatment of manga, exaggerated curvature, floral and whiplash elements, feminine characteristics, and themes that feature goddesses and deities especially those with mixed ethnicities become even more prevalent. From Sailor Moon to Sakura (by Clamp) and Ponyo⁵ (by Studio Ghibli), a great number of artistic strategies exhibit Art Nouveau influence.

Art Nouveau will continue to inspire generations of artists to come, as people will continue to admire those “fancy curved lines”. With this note, I wish to put the cap back on my pen here.

VII. APPENDIX: PHOTOGRAPHIC REFERENCES



¹Exteriors of two opera houses in Hanoi and Paris.
Collections: Flickr user manhhai and Opera de Paris' homepage



²Grand stair at Galeries Lafayette Paris
Collection: Galeries Lafayette's homepage



³One of the Paris Métro gates designed by Hector Guimard with cast iron, glass canopy, and floral motifs.
Collection: Flickr user Alain Roy



⁴Interior work of Catinat building and the tympanum of Saigon Opera depicting nymphs.
Collection: author



⁵Goddess figures in Alphonse Mucha's art and Studio Ghibli's animation.
Collections: society of Mucha and screenshot of Ponyo movie