

# Art Nouveau

An Art of Transition —  
From Individualism to Mass Society

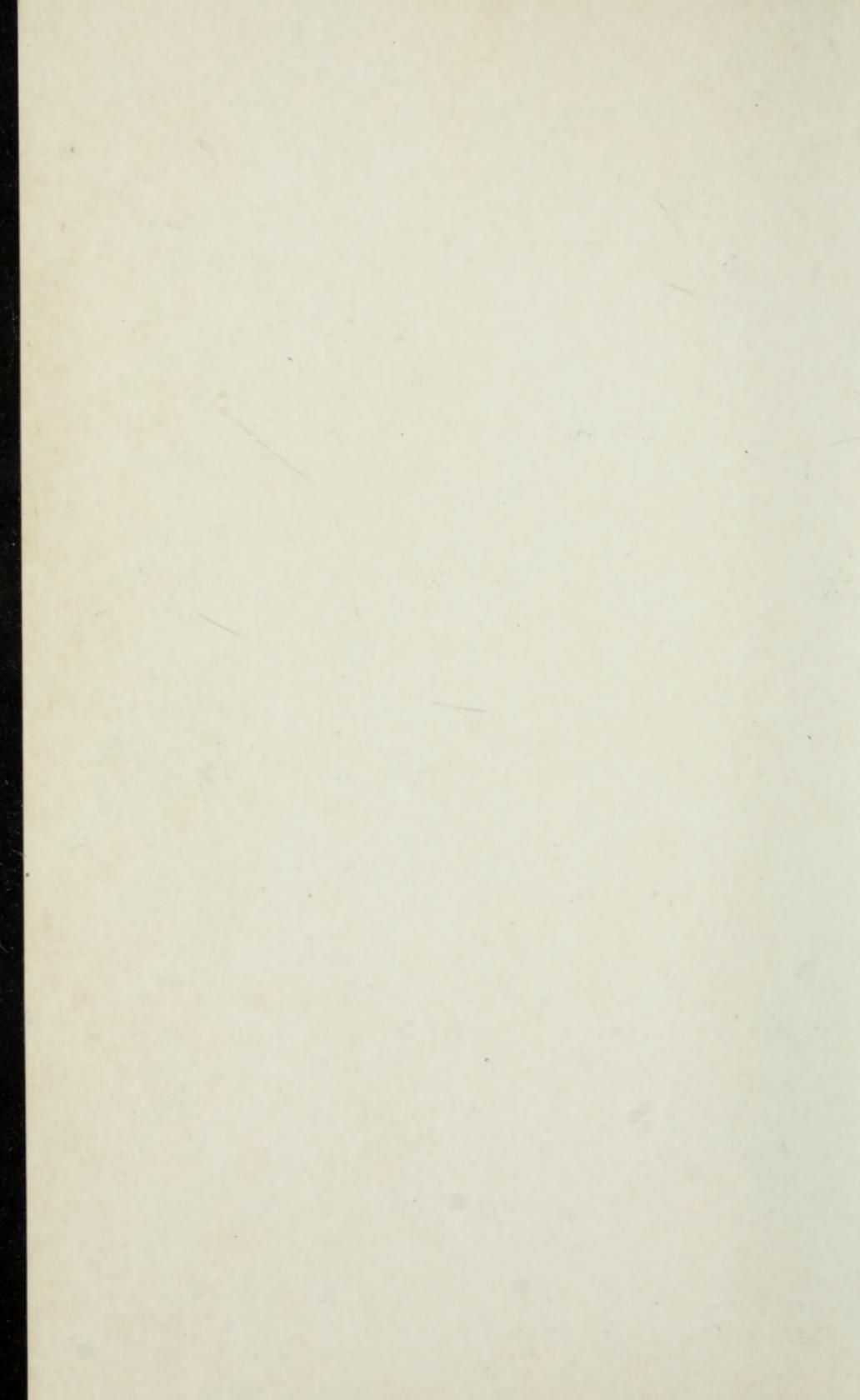


**Gabriele Sterner**

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# ART NOUVEAU

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An Art of Transition—  
From Individualism to Mass Society

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## JUGENDSTIL

by Gabriele Sterner

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## Preface

The term "art nouveau" designates an epoch in art history that extended over a period of fifteen years, beginning in 1890 and ending shortly after the turn of the century. After a long period of neglect and disregard, art nouveau again became the object of extremely lively interest only some twenty years ago. There are several reasons why an objective evaluation of this style was so long delayed. First, a certain distance in time was necessary to let critics put into perspective the exaggerations and abuses admittedly characterizing some of these works. Second, during the period between the two World Wars, the political situation was such that it would simply have been too daring to write about this "decadent" style. The massive production of handicrafts that began around 1900 and the immediate popularity of the new style led to a superabundance of inferior products. These works were held up as examples of an artistic sensibility that was actually, at its best, extremely demanding and highly developed. It was very difficult for critics to free themselves of the dead weight of these inferior examples. Nevertheless, it was absolutely necessary to eliminate this ballast, so that the concepts of creativity underlying art nouveau might be understood and the movement evaluated on the basis of works of genuine quality. As of this writing, this process of sorting out has been completed and the boundaries have been drawn; thus a critical assessment may now be undertaken. Nevertheless, various contradictions in the movement have not yet been resolved, for art nouveau gives rise to the most diverse

responses. The emphasis that each critic chooses to place upon this or that aspect of a highly complex art form necessarily leads to highly subjective conclusions.

Art nouveau has already been subjected to considerable critical study. The question nevertheless remains as to whether such investigations have led to any significant conclusions. The increasing popularity of this style in the 1950s led to indiscriminate collecting, which eventually reached unparalleled proportions. Vases, dishes, and furniture that showed nothing more than a single decorative line or a stylized curve were regarded as beautiful examples of a style that dominated the art world around 1900. Thus art nouveau became fashionable not only in art historical circles but in cultural life as well. This curious phenomenon was examined by later researchers, as was the art form that generated such amazing popularity. Interesting insights evolved that superseded the emotional criticism of the turn of the century as well as that of the prewar period; some of these insights are still valid today. On the other hand, it is necessary to reject such condescending epithets as "a witches' brew of ornamentalism" or "bookworm passion." Similarly, just as it is necessary to put the movement's excesses into proper perspective, it is also important not to overestimate the philosophical intentions of art nouveau. One of the most important tasks facing art historians and critics was to uncover the historical significance of art nouveau which, as a linear form, seemed to be heading toward constantly increasing abstraction. Obviously, this task generated a number of different and conflicting opinions. Several defenders of the movement thought they could increase the importance of art nouveau by connecting it with names of artists who should, in fact, not be mentioned at all in this context. Such errors are easily committed when the period being investigated is of such short duration as was that of art nouveau. Nevertheless, it is quite wrong to call figures such as Gauguin, van Gogh, Kandinsky, and Klee art nouveau painters. The mere fact that these painters once briefly admired this movement does not justify their inclusion in it. With well-intentioned zeal, critics have also hinted at connections between art nouveau and the works of Freud, Marx, Wagner, and Schopenhauer. Although the influence of these men was evident in all the intellectual currents of the turn of the century, they had no substantive effect on art nouveau.