

MARKETING MODERNISM TO THE MAITRESS DE MAISON: ART NOUVEAU AND THE FEMALE CONSUMER

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ABSTRACT

The design reform movement known as Art Nouveau developed in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Its popularity peaked in 1900 at the Paris Exposition Universelle and waned around 1910 with the advent of true abstractionist Modernism in both the fine and applied arts. Art Nouveau appeared simultaneously in multiple European nations and the United States with iterations found mainly in architecture and the decorative arts including domestic goods, personal items like jewelry and graphic design. The disparate strains of the movement developed individual formal styles, but shared a common theoretical foundation based on the desire to create objects which reflected the characteristics of modern society. These artists and designers reacted against the historicist revivalism of Victorian-age design, advanced the dissolution of the hierarchical structure among the arts and protested the poor quality of manufactured goods generated by mass production.

My socio-historical argument centers on the Parisian version of the movement and its relationship to the practice of mass consumption among bourgeois women. Artists and art dealers promoted the movement as a means of modernizing the domestic interior that for them would accomplish the goal of modernizing the society that inhabited those interiors. In France, the domestic sphere was the purview of bourgeois women who created the ideal interior through their practice of consumer capitalism. A woman's home reflected the bourgeois social status of her family but could also express her individual artistic sensibility. The Art Nouveau movement was primarily aimed at the bourgeois class. Discretionary income allowed the bourgeois the economic freedom to express their modernity through consumption. Consumerism and expression of one's individual identity were long-established components of the bourgeois identity.