

Art Nouveau Architecture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Art Nouveau architecture. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the idea behind a "total work of art" in Art Nouveau, and identify examples of Art Nouveau architecture. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

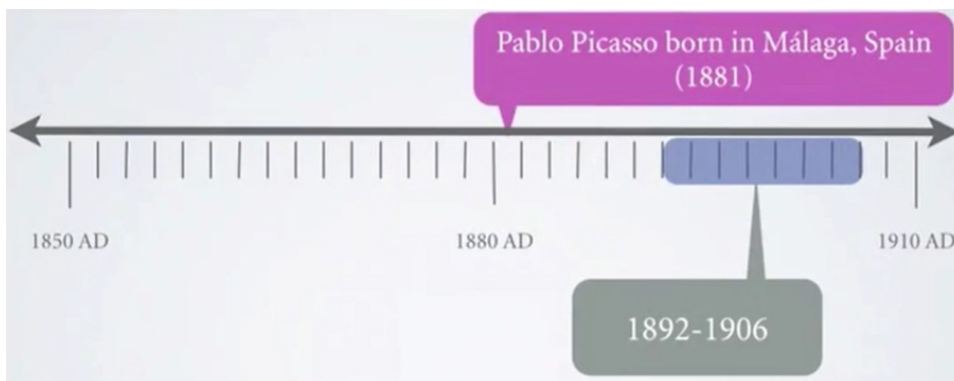


BIG IDEA

The Art Nouveau aesthetic was in many ways a "return to nature." The traits of Art Nouveau were responses against the Industrial Revolution.

1. Period and Location: Art Nouveau Architecture

The examples of architecture that you will be looking at today date from between 1892 and 1906. These architectural works reside in Vienna, Austria; Brussels, Belgium; Paris, France; Glasgow, Scotland; and Barcelona, Spain.



2. Art Nouveau Architecture: Design Characteristics

Not surprisingly, the architectural design characteristics of Art Nouveau were more or less the same as the design characteristics of Art Nouveau art and included:

- Organic forms
- Japanese motifs

- Arches and curves
- Stained glass
- Hyperbolas in windows
- Stylized moldings that take on plant forms
- Natural textures of flames and seashells

However, as this was a movement that strongly emphasized the freedom of artistic production, artists and architects often pushed the boundaries of design and created examples that may not share as many characteristics with each other as you might expect.

3. Art Nouveau Architecture: Examples

You may recall from the previous lesson on Art Nouveau that this movement was called the Vienna Secession in Austria. Although the name was different, the spirit behind the movement was very much the same. The Vienna Secession building, shown below, is an example of the Art Nouveau style in architecture in Austria. Joseph Maria Olbrich designed the building as a temple for the purpose of displaying works of art from this period, which does much to explain the emphasis on the linear and horizontal that's apparent in the exterior.



Vienna Secession building by Joseph Maria Olbrich

1897-1898

Vienna, Austria

This focus on linearity may seem to contradict what was stated before about Art Nouveau architecture being curvilinear and organic, but look at the dome, shown in a close-up view below. It's a beautiful and original interpretation of the classical dome, except it's constructed completely out of metal laurel leaves, the type of leaves you would find in the capitals of Corinthian style columns from ancient Rome, the Renaissance, and the Baroque periods.



DID YOU KNOW

Notice the inscription below the dome. It translates to “To the time, its art, to the art, its freedom.” Below this inscription are three gorgon heads—the ancient Greek monster Medusa was a gorgon—and each symbolizes a form of art: painting, architecture, and sculpture.



Inscription of Vienna Secession building

Victor Horta is perhaps the most important Art Nouveau architect and designer to emerge from Belgium and one of the most important architects and designers in all of Europe due to his influence on and application of the Art Nouveau design aesthetic. The following image of his staircase design of the Maison & Atelier is a classic example of Art Nouveau design elements and is evocative of the curvilinear organic forms and lines inspired by nature.



Staircase of the Maison & Atelier by Victor Horta

1893-1894

Brussels, Belgium

This form of Art Nouveau design is a bit reminiscent of the artwork of Doctor Seuss in how it departs from, and in many ways completely avoids, the use of rectilinear lines. There's a playfulness here that hasn't really been seen before in architectural design.

Next, in the design of the entrance to the Paris Metro, shown below, you can see how Hector Guimard applies the Art Nouveau aesthetic to what can be considered an unusual choice for artistic expression: a Metro entrance. However, Guimard had made his name in previous artistic endeavors and, in the spirit of Art Nouveau, was experimenting with more industrial applications in his attempts to see the aesthetic on a larger scale.



Entrance to the Paris Metro by Hector Guimard

1892

Paris, France

Notice how his Metro entrance seems to perfectly harmonize with the surrounding trees, almost appearing to grow out of the ground itself. It was a brilliant move in terms of exposure. The Paris Metro was very much in its infancy but would become a predominant form of public transportation in France. Guimard's entrance would be seen and used by potentially tens of thousands of people on a daily basis, exposing them to the Art Nouveau design aesthetic.

4. “Total Work of Art” Concept in Art Nouveau Architecture

Like the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement, there was a pervasive idea within the Art Nouveau movement of a “**total work of art**.” That is, in terms of design elements in architecture, everything within the building should work in harmony with everything else. This idea was manifested in many ways throughout Europe.

In Glasgow, Scotland, architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh used this idea of a total work of art in his design of the so-called Willow Tea Rooms. Below you'll see an example of the Room de Luxe. The interior furnishings coordinate wonderfully with each other, creating a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing space.



The Room de Luxe (also known as Willow Tea Rooms) by Charles Rennie Mackintosh

1903

Glasgow, Scotland

What's so interesting about the Art Nouveau movement is how the aesthetic remains consistent across nations, yet each nation or region tends to reinterpret it in a way that reflects aspects of its own culture. One of the best examples of this is in the Casa Batlló, shown below. The architect Antoni Gaudí took the idea of a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing space to an entirely new level in his design of the Casa Batlló in Barcelona, Spain.



DID YOU KNOW

The Spanish “a” sounds like “ah,” and the double “l” sounds like “y,” so Batlló is pronounced “Bah-t-YO.” The accent mark indicates which syllable to stress.



Casa Batlló by Antonio Gaudi

1906

Barcelona, Spain

His creations are entirely original and unmistakably Gaudi. They could be described best as livable sculpture, or sculpture that you can live in, in how they appear to be molded out of clay (see closeup view below). Gaudi takes the sense of playfulness seen in Horta's work, expands upon it, and extends it into the fantastical.



DID YOU KNOW

Gaudi was inspired by the Moresque architecture of his native Spain but takes that inspiration and completely reinterprets it into something that fuses the attention to detail of Islamic and Moresque design with the organic forms and curvilinear lines of Art Nouveau.



Facade of Casa Batlló

Gaudí also maintains the idea of a “total work of art”. Every element of the building’s interior is considered and designed to harmonize with the others, from the lighting features—such as this lamp—to the fireplace, both shown below.



Lamp at Casa Batlló



Fireplace at Casa Batlló



THINK ABOUT IT

As you look at one final example of Casa Batlló's interior below, do you think it's an interpretation with limited practical appeal? Perhaps so, but that wasn't really the point. Perhaps it was created with the intention of pushing the boundaries of architectural design so far that the path was essentially cleared for subsequent artists and architects to explore the possibilities of artistic design.



Central light well at Casa Batlló



TERM TO KNOW

Total Work of Art

The idea that all of the elements in a space (the furniture, fabrics, wall treatments, lamps and other accessories) are designed to work together to create a harmonious and aesthetically pleasing space.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Art Nouveau architecture**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms and how to describe the **design characteristics of Art Nouveau architecture**. You also learned how to describe the idea behind a **total work of art in Art Nouveau**, and identify **examples of Art Nouveau architecture**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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