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**Art nouveau : word and image**

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# ART NOUVEAU

## WORD and IMAGE

### Summary

Interdisciplinary comparative research has a long tradition, from Aristotle via Lessing, Alexandr Veselovsky and others up to the structuralists. Art nouveau – a characteristic synthetic style of the turn of the twentieth century – provides abundant material for an investigation into the relations between literature, the fine arts and architecture.

The present study began with an investigation of literary texts, especially Russian literature, analysed in comparison with important Czech texts other European, as well as American literature. For easier orientation in the complex terrain of the literature and arts of the given period, the author has chosen to use the genological (genre) principle. The Aristotelian trichotomy has, however, been enlarged by a look at the materialized image in architecture and painting. A similarly complex method, along the lines of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk and its development by Otokar Hostinský and Stefania Skwarczyńska is used. These two emphasized the importance of stage performance for the interpretation of drama and theatre. Parallel phenomena both in literature and the fine arts, which are compared in the chapter "Modernism and Art Nouveau", corroborate the fact that all the movements, trends and styles that emerged from the last third of the nineteenth century, culminating at the turn of the century and gradually ending by the first third of the twentieth century, drew on the same philosophical, aesthetic and psychological sources. These developments can be seen in transcendental natural philosophy (Schelling, the brothers Schlegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, Soloviev, important for Russian, in the theological teaching of e. g. Blavatsky), anthroposophy (Rudolf Steiner) and psychology (Freud, Jung). The aesthetics of that time reveals the remarkable fact of the virtually simultaneous appearance of leading European phenomenologists - Husserl, Pfänder, Scheler and the leading aesthetician of Russian symbolism, Andrei Bely. This results in conspicuous semantic and iconic congruities. The phases of art nouveau correspond with the evolution of modernism and its accompanying phenomena, namely with the dualistic trend of neoromanticism, decadence, protosymbolism, symbolism and impressionism. There is a close link with vitalism, with oppositional monistic trends: neoclassicism (Russian acmeism, clarism and adamism) and with the early avant-garde.

A genealogical study of the novella, drama and theatre, including interior iconography and scenography, of architecture, religious painting and poetry, has shown that art nouveau was applied in them on both horizontal and vertical levels. Numerous phenomena in semantics and poetics developed along parallel lines, with modifications only in accordance with the rules of specific literary and artistic genres. The vertical movement, i. e. the development of these phenomena, manifested itself in an intensive interest in discovering new thematic fields and the consequent innovation of the structural means. Art nouveau's attraction to oriental themes with stylization, can already be seen in novellas of the early 1880s (Turgenev, *A Song of Triumphant Love*). The dominant theme in prose and drama was that of a catastrophic Utopia, stylized as reportage and document (Briusov). The theme of tramps (bosiaki) and the gypsy myth led to a chronotopically free art-nouveau gesture, with analogous manifestations in the fine arts (Gorkij – Klimt). The death of a close friend or relative was treated in novellas as a psychological and ethical problem (Chekhov's *Rotshild's Fiddle*). In the folkloristic or buddhist conception, it was a theme of perpetual return in the endless cycle of life, resulting in the union of love and death (Turgenev, Klíma).

A common feature of all these novellas was a variety of stylization types, ranked as they were by different time zones and territorial and social levels. A number of stylistic signs were used, from a narrative reminiscent of the oriental magic fairy-tale to reports of Utopian horrors. Art-nouveau structured prose portrayed characters in their momentary state much as paintings do. They have neither a past nor a future, and if their life is coming to an end, that life appears as a monotonous melody or dream from which they have just awakened (Chekhov). Such novellas express their essence by means of an expressive gesture, as do allegorical paintings. The expression of the author's narrative subject (Gorky's early prose works) refutes Roland Barthes's claim that the author in modernism was dead. It did so with the same vehemence as Mallarmé's theatre performances. The leitmotif of the majority of the prose works analysed was the union of love and death, an appropriate theme for both decadence and art nouveau.

Similar existential problems were tackled in turn-of-the-century drama, which, like set design, took delight in folkloristic or mythical stylization (Aleksandr Ostrovsky, *The Snow Maiden*, Jaroslav Kvapil, *Princess Dandelion*). The iconography of festive theatre curtains turned from allegory to myth (the Klimt brothers, *Match*, Hynais). The art-nouveau set design of the Russian opera and ballet concentrates on works by Glinka, Borodin, Musorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Cherepnin, but mainly Rimsky-Korsakov and the young Stravinsky. Folkloristic, historical and mythical themes became fruitful in-

spirations for a number of outstanding painters and sculptors: Victor Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Bakst, Benois, Anisfeld, Rerikh, Dobuzhinsky and others, whose works soon became well-known abroad.

An important part of the Russian theatre was the Parisian seasons of Russian opera and ballet, organized by Diaghilev and the painter Benois. Russian set designers were also known in the Czech lands; the author of the present book has managed to find some unique, previously unpublished works by Bilibin, showing the painter's development from its very beginnings to the final stage. The comparison of Bilibin's previously unknown early designs for Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Snow Maiden* with an analogical stage scenery by Vasnetsov shows that Bilibin had already found his own specific brushwork style by that time. In the works of such pronounced stylizers as Bilibin, remnant art-nouveau features can be followed up to the 1930s, the more so because some of the works consciously draw on some designs realized as early as the 1910s. It is remarkable that the art-nouveau sign nature, which can be expressed graphically by an isosceles triangle with the three vertexes connecting stylization with symbolism and naturalism, was characteristic both of set and costume design and of drama. It found its expression not only in symbolic drama, which mostly remained unperformed (Soloviev, Gippius, Balmont, Ivanov, Annensky, Briusov, Wyspiański, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Andreyev, Blok et al.), but also in the works of Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky. Art nouveau's themes were not only serious or tragic. An important aspect was irony and grotesque, often even resulting in absurdity. The representatives of this approach in the field of drama included Vladimir Solovyov (*The White Lily*), Arthur Schnitzler (*The Green Parrot*, *The Brave Kassian*) and Aleksandr Blok (*Panopticon*).

The crisis situations which troubled people at the end of the nineteenth century and which led to the development of clinical psychology and psychiatry (see the Briusov's prose works analysed here) also required expression in the field of architecture. The great accumulation of people in large cities led the rich to escape to garden houses and expensive villas with green all around. These requirements were met by works of the Russian art-nouveau architect Fyodor Shekhtel, the Scottish architect Mackintosh and the Slovak architect Jurkovič, who was close to Mackintosh stylistically. Jurkovič worked in Moravia and Bohemia till 1918. The seclusion of their villas, inspiring meditation, corresponded with contemporary symbolic poetry, leading from a real landscape to the landscape of the soul. From here, only one step further is quiet repose in a graveyard garden; such is the place of the orthodox Church of the Assumption in Prague. A lesser known chapter of Russian-Czech cultural relations is connected with that church:

the remarkable frescos, made during World War II using unique, previously unpublished designs by Ivan Bilibin, the originals of which have been preserved in Prague. They make a set of eight sketches on which the painter worked, partly with the help of his son from his first marriage, Aleksandr Ivanovich Bilibin, in the years 1926–1928. The artist put into them all his many years' experience of religious painting, which follows the tradition of Russian medieval icon painting, but also availed himself of his rich practice in illustrating children's books and making many set designs for fairy-tale operas. The orthodox church at the Olšanské hřbitovy (Olšany Cemetery) in Prague houses one of the most remarkable sets of twentieth century fresco.

The fifth, most comprehensive part of the monograph, deals with poetry, which is always highly sensitive to new philosophical and aesthetic impressions. An excursion into the Amielian landscape of the soul brings us to Antonín Sova's world of imagination and to that of Otokar Březina, whose animated gardens make a completely unexpected overture to the metaphor of the younger Russian symbolists, although a direct contact must certainly be excluded.

The philosophical level of Otokar Březina's poetry is compared with the work of his close friend, the sculptor František Bílek, who was guided by the same philosophy of life, which resulted in existentialism. The organic interrelations between art nouveau and impressionism are corroborated by an analysis of Konstantin Balmont's poetry; he overcame the depression of his decadent beginnings and came to be the most characteristic representative of Russian vitalism. Through his translations of Edgar Allan Poe's works, Balmont appeared to be a link between romanticism and symbolism. The futurist Velemir Khlebnikov's early work also shows some connection with symbolism. A comparison of Khlebnikov, the symbolist Alexandr Blok and his contemporary Guillaume Apollinaire indicates that in all the three poets' works, the phenomenon of beauty was modelled by means of sign in a typically art-nouveau style, although the system of imagination of the two representatives of the European avant-garde was based on configuration. The spiritual closeness of symbolism and the avant-garde follows from an analysis of the aesthetic system of the main representative of the Russian symbolism theory, Andrei Bely, a follower of Christian Morgenstern, with whom he was also connected by Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical teaching. When analysed, both Andrei Bely's collection of poems *The Star* and the preserved water-colours accompanying Bely's poetic message addressed to the Austrian poet show that the poetic text was intentionally structured along the lines of R. Steiner's philosophical system. The spirit of this system equally underlies the centre of anthroposophy at Dornach, Switzerland, as well as Steiner's own activity as a sculptor. The folkloristic sources of the art nouveau are analysed in Anna

Akhmatova's early works; she seems to have drawn on sources outside Russia. A hypothesis might be assumed that she was inspired by songs of an Ugric ethnic group who originally inhabited what is now the region of St. Petersburg.

The union of talent for painting and writing, as was found in quite a number of the turn-of-the-century artists, enables us to study the natural relations of various types of art. The original painting and poetry of Nikolai Rerikh, due to their philosophical depth and stylistic simplicity, make a sort of epilogue in the genealogy of art nouveau.

The chosen genealogical principle has brought some important findings. One of them is the fact that some characteristic features of art nouveau go horizontally through all literary and fine art genres. This can be seen in the fields of philosophy, psychology and aesthetics. Even poetics involves some congruities (the frequent use of the symbol of mask or serpent, of the motifs of birds and precious stones, functioning as signs with their original mythological meaning, an escape from the heavy existential pressures of reality to the past, to exotic places or to irony or even absurd grotesque). Congruence can also be found in the field of structure. Literature, the fine arts and architecture show an interest in a certain type of colour scheme and in the structural expression of ancient cults, especially the cult of the sun; they aim to express the desire for height, opening new horizons, have a liking for vegetable sectioning of space and for the iconic character of text, gradually replaced by an emphasis on linearity and the antimetaphoric simplicity of text. All these features, dependent on the nature of the creative individual, are often parallel. Music, which in modernism reaches the highest position in the hierarchy of values, penetrates into the incipits of literary works and into their poetics (it is used both as a theme and as a means of structuring texts into the form of various musical genres, exerts influence on the rhythmical and acoustic aspect of poetry, etc.). Schlegel's perception of music as flowing architecture becomes another model example of the synthesis of art. Linearity, characteristic of the late art-nouveau fine arts and architecture, has its analogy in poetic text: it is the symbolic character of line or the antimetaphoric simplicity, as well as the raising of complex existential problems (Blok, Bely, Akhmatova, Rerikh, Bryusov, Klíma).

It was not only through their mutual influence that art nouveau poetics penetrated various types of art. The decisive factor was above all an agreement between philosophical premises and the aesthetic code. Both the dualistic trends and the monistic neoclassicism were oriented towards the same ideals of beauty and harmony. Even the disharmonic avant-garde based its anti-traditionalist protest on a deep knowledge of tradition. Its programme of anti-aestheticism was only aimed at a rather configured form of the same beauty.