

Museum focus: new displays

The Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris

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Since all objects in museums are part of some kind of narrative, it is the purpose of this short paper to concentrate on how certain silver objects have been deployed within the new displays at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris. For reasons of brevity (and to coincide with my own interests) I have chosen to discuss some key examples from the art nouveau and art deco displays and to discuss their rôle in the museum's strategy of treating individual objects as part of an integrated ensemble. Whether by accident or design (but almost certainly the latter) the inclusion of some key pieces tell a story of change and decline in the fortunes of French silver in the period circa 1889–1939.

In September 1905, the Parisian journal *Art et décoration* published a lengthy description of the new home of the Musée des Arts décoratifs: the Pavillon Marsan, part of the Palais du Louvre. Much excitement was created by this timely canonisation of the decorative arts within the hallowed walls of the Louvre. Hard on the heels of the successes of the *Expositions Universelles* of 1889 and 1900 which gave rise to the primacy of the art nouveau style in France, the opportunity now existed to demonstrate the achievements of French decorative art in a coherent way. One of the principal aims of the collection was to open up a fruitful dialogue between contemporary forms and those of the past.¹ Alongside the permanent collection, retrospectives of key French designers and makers were regularly held from the museum's inception.

The layout of the museum's collections in 1905 was rigorously chronological and dominated by a series of period rooms, evoking the spirit of each époque.² This pattern of display remained more or less intact until the museum was closed in 1996 for a major renovation. Almost exactly 101 years after the collections were first installed in the Palais du Louvre, the museum reopened its doors to the public on 15 September 2006, promising a different set of opportunities for appreciating the collection:

tous ces objets qui traduisent les situations les plus diverses de la vie seront présentés dans une muséographie contemporaine associant à un parcours chronologique une galerie d'étude destinée à approfondir l'approche des oeuvres autour de thèmes choisis et renouvelés.³

[all those objects which convey diverse aspects of life will be presented via a contemporary museology combining a chronological route with a study gallery destined to deepen the approach to the works around chosen themes and new insights]

The promise of a new museological approach is certainly fulfilled in some parts of the museum. For example, the new galleries des études, offer a new dialogue between forms of all periods, concentrating on revealing how the function and form of certain typical objects have changed with the passage of time. One might, for

1 For a discussion of this, see Paul Vitry, 'Le nouveau musée des arts décoratifs', *Art et décoration*, septembre 1905, p65.

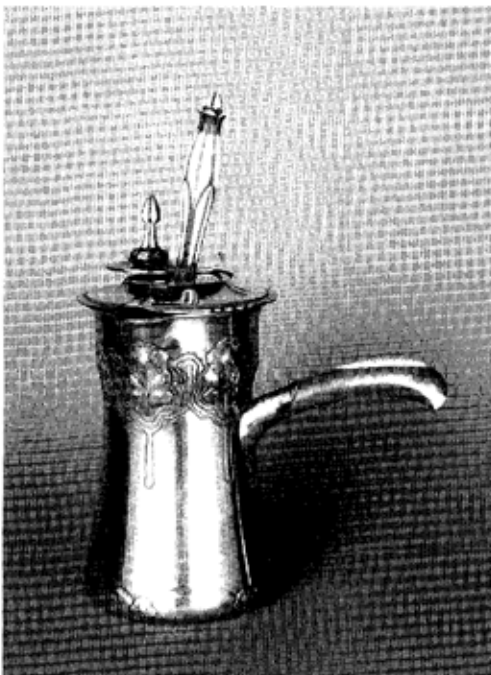
2 As note 1. Vitry's description of the period rooms is extensive.

3 Les Art Décoratifs, Press

Release, April 2006. See also *Dossier de L'Art*, no133, septembre 2006 and *Connaissance des Arts*, no 291/1, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 2006. Both are special issues and contain extensive accounts of the new displays.



1 Tea service, partly chased and gilded, ivory, agate, Germain Bapst and Lucien Falize. Height of teapot: 14.5cm (5 7/8in). Exhibited at the Exposition universelle, Paris, 1889. (*Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*; photo: Jean Tholance) Colour illustration p18



2 Chocolate pot with whisk, Lucien Bonvallet and Ernest Cardheilac, circa 1900, with turned ivory and wood handles. Height (with whisk): 28cm (11in). (*Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*; photo: Laurent Sully Jaulmes)

4 Claudia Kanowski, 'The Way to Art Nouveau Silver', paper delivered at the International Symposium *Modern Art of Metalwork* at the Bröhan

Museum, Berlin, 6–8 October 2001. Records of the proceedings can be found online at www.bröhan-museum.de

example, compare an eighteenth-century 'love seat' with a contemporary essay in the art of sitting. The dominant means of understanding the bulk of the museum's collection remains, however, the *parcours chronologique*.

Art nouveau

The displays and room reconstructions deal with the tastes of the late nineteenth century French *haute bourgeoisie*. The furniture of Guimard and Majorelle are dominant in this respect. The silver objects (and many of those in glass by, for example, Gallé) are largely kept apart. It is an unfortunate separation, for art nouveau works best as an ensemble and one could probably be more satisfied in this regard by the reconstructions of art nouveau interiors at the Musée d'Orsay. Nevertheless, some of the silver objects displayed here are extraordinary examples of that peculiar mix of conservatism, animism and modernity that characterises both the art nouveau style and the characteristically sinister and Janus-faced nervousness of *fin-de-siècle* culture.

The tea service by Bapst and Falize [fig 1] was shown at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889. It represents, if not a fully blown piece of art nouveau fantasy, then a 'transitional' piece. Stylistically, we can place it somewhere between the historicism of the mid nineteenth century and the beginnings of art nouveau. Some of the foliage and other detailing is too literal to be comfortably classified as belonging to the more modern style and the jug (left) is almost a rococo throwback – a style which was very much still in evidence as a French national style at the 1889 *Exposition*. Furthermore, the lizards, snakes and snail recall elements of mannerism. Here, the cult of nature is observed not as an abstraction (as in the fully mature art nouveau style of a decade later) but as an attempt to reconcile quite traditional shapes with an applied language of plant and animal forms.

This attempted reconciliation has been interpreted in an interesting way by Claudia Kanowski. She has pointed out that the formal innovations of French art nouveau could perhaps be seen in another light:⁴

Probably in no other country the requirement for reconciliation of tradition and modern age was so strong as it was in France. Maybe, just the radical political revolutions and the rapid industrialisation led to this strong re-insurance in the common cultural patrimony.

The French *belle époque* was, of course, an age of cultural confidence which allowed for the emergence of modern art in an unprecedentedly peaceful and prosperous era. Amongst all the decadence and luxury, though, lurks a shadow of paranoia and pre-science.

The position of this piece within the beginnings of the art nouveau/art deco museological *parcours* is a useful one, for what follows is a series of rooms dedicated to the full flowering of the art nouveau style after the impact of the later English arts and crafts had been absorbed and the style was heading for its exalted position as the style of *fin-de-siècle* Europe.

In Bonvallet and Cardheilac's *chocolatière* of circa 1900, [fig 2] we encounter a canonical piece in the development of art nouveau. The variety of materials used perhaps renders the piece awkward from the point of view of the silver connoisseur, but interesting for those looking for a way of explaining the nature of the art nouveau con-

tribution to the development of a particular type of material expression. Combinations of precious and non-precious materials are certainly one of the characteristics of jewellery and some hollow-ware of this period and art nouveau, the first truly popular international design style in modern times, was successful in reaching new markets because of this. These combinations also contribute to the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic of complexity and restlessness of form. Not that this piece is a particularly excessive example of this attitude. There is a certain arts and crafts solidity to it which is reminiscent of some of C.R. Ashbee's work, but the flourishes brought to the piece by the combinations of chasing, turned wood and ivory are significant. Another version of this piece (with the handles of the pot and whisk painted green) can be found in the Bröhan Museum, Berlin.

A retrospective exhibition of Lucien Bonvallet's work was held at the Pavillon Marsan in 1913. The catalogue is keen to point out how, in the context of the development of French silver in the late nineteenth century, Bonvallet's efforts were relatively restrained and the stronger for it.⁵

Alors qu'autour de lui règne la fièvre de nouveauté quand même et à tout prix, l'incohérence et l'excentricité ... il demeure mesuré et sage, se discipline, se refrène.

[Whereas all around him still reigned the fever of novelty, incoherence and eccentricity at all costs ... he remains measured and wise, self disciplined and in check.]

However, much more 'measured and wise' than Bonvallet's piece is the pitcher produced by Maison Keller in 1900.[fig 3] If one was looking for a piece which was expressive of the transition from art nouveau to art deco, then this serves us well. There is a fascinating plasticity to this piece which to some extent belies its date. It was presented at the *Exposition Universelle* in 1900 and although one can see in it the generous curves of art nouveau, the total lack of applied ornament and angularity of form points to a style of work that was to become part of the future of modern French silver. At the same time, however, this piece is not in the slightest utilitarian in its aesthetic and remains an object of luxury, but is used strategically (and placed conspicuously) at the entrance to a set of rooms which ushers in the art deco phase.

Art deco

The art deco rooms are a fascinating collection of themed areas, reconstructions of famous interiors and displays of individual objects. Here, the emphasis is placed on the emergence of geometric forms and the challenge to traditional materials with the onset of the machine age. To this end, one of the rooms features a display of utilitarian vessels in polished steel by the silversmith Jean Desprès. However, the silver objects maintain a seemingly obstinate presence in the midst of ensembles that are intended to convey simultaneously the idea of luxury and restraint.

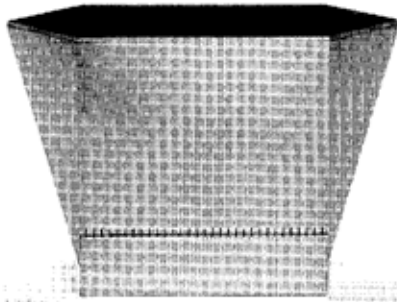
The large silver vase by Jean Puiforcat of 1927 was displayed at the *salon de la société des artistes décorateurs* in Paris.[fig 4] Before Puiforcat made his decisive split with this organisation (to help form the *Union des artistes modernes* in 1929) he was a regular contributor to the salon. The generous size of this piece, together with the suspicion that materials other than silver could have easily been used to produce it without compromising the aesthetic, makes this a useful comparison to the work in base metals by Jean Desprès in



3 Ewer, silver-gilt, Maison Keller. Height: 26cm (10 $\frac{1}{2}$ in). Exhibited at the *Exposition Universelle*, Paris, 1900. (*Les Arts Décoratifs*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; photo: Laurent Sully Jaulmes)

5 Gabriel Mourey, 'Exposition Lucien Bonvallet', Musée des arts décoratifs, Pavillon de

Marsan, janvier-février 1913, *Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs*, 1913, pp6-7.



4 Vase. Jean Puiforcat. Height: 27cm (10½in). Exhibited at the salon de la société des artistes décorateurs, Paris, 1927. (*Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*; photo: Jean Tholance)

the same collection. A restrained classicism prevails here: one row of beaded decoration around the base being the only concession to ornament. The flared sides are dramatic and functional, allowing the flowers to spill out creating, one assumes, a more interesting and dynamic arrangement. (How useful it would be to see pieces like this in use!) This is the Jean Puiforcat who, after his triumph at the 1925 *Exposition*, was beginning to establish himself as a modern metalsmith of renown.

By 1930, Maison Tétard had established a firm reputation as modern silversmiths of renown.[fig 5] As is often the case, some observers stressed the parallels between modern architecture and modern silver in the 1920s and '30s. G. Rémon in a special edition of *Mobilier et décoration* for that year was also keen to point this out:⁶

Toute l'architecture moderne...évoluait de plus en plus vers la simplicité, proscrivait avec une rigueur parfois excessive les moulures et les moindres ornements.

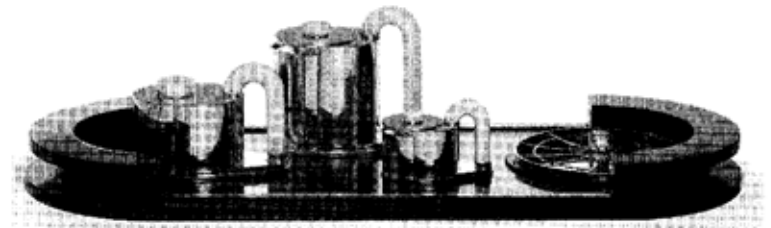
[All modern architecture...was evolving more and more towards simplicity, banishing with often excessive rigour mouldings and lesser ornaments.]

adding that in the case of the work of Tétard frères:

Ce ne sont pas les grandes pièces somptueuses, ce n'est pas un art de vitrine, ou de musée qui force aujourd'hui notre admiration. C'est l'exquise ingéniosité dépensée pour renouveler les formes de l'argenterie usuelle, pour modifier le décor moderne de la table.

[These are not grand sumptuous pieces, this is not an art for the shop window or museum which forces our admiration today. It is exquisite ingenuity expended to renew the forms of ordinary silverware, to modify modern table decoration.]

5 Breakfast service, with gold inlay, ivory and rosewood, Maison Tétard. Height of coffee pot 15.5cm (6in). Exhibited at the salon d'automne (1930) and at the Exposition coloniale internationale, Vincennes, 1931. (*Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*; photo: Jean Tholance)



In these pieces, however, we can observe both the abstractions of modernism, the architectural and industrial aesthetic (which was to become more and more prevalent as the decade progressed) but also a luxuriousness embodied in the combinations of materials. An explanation for the large amount of ivory used in this set may reside in the fact that it was intended to be shown at the 1931 *Exposition coloniale internationale*, at Vincennes. As Ghislaine Wood has pointed out, 'France's extensive African and Asian colonies provided a rich source for exotic materials', including ivory and rosewood as used here by Tétard.⁷ Colonial competition was still, of course, raging amongst the major European powers in the 1930s and this affected art deco design in a number of conspicuous ways, and this is a very good example.

Another interesting combination of materials can be found in the silver cigarette box by Desprès, which is given an extra twist with the addition of Jean Mayodon's small ceramic panel depicting *Leda and the Swan*. [fig. 6] The aesthetic here is classical in that peculiar

6 G. Rémon, 'Orfèvrerie d'argent: Les dernières créations de Tétard Frères', *Mobilier et décoration*, mai 1930, Editions Edmond Honoré. The document is unpaginated.

7 Ghislaine Wood, 'Collecting and Constructing Africa', in T. Benton, C. Benton and G. Wood, *Art Deco 1910-1939*, V&A Publications, 2003, p88.

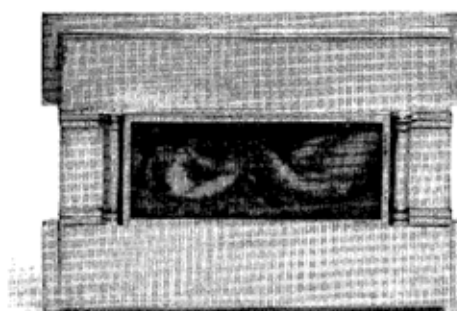
1930s fashion. This cigarette box is not the type to be slipped into the pocket. It is for display on a table. Unlike some of its counterparts by Raymond Templier (which it is displayed alongside) there are no rounded or smoothed edges to facilitate this. The combination of silver and ceramic is not incongruous, though. The geometric form of the silver box and the sleekness of the panel are a perfect complement. The fact that one material (silver) communicates its value partly through its material presence and the other (ceramic) from its aesthetic treatment is a further demonstration of the development of full-blown art deco.

The *surtout de table* by Jean Puiforcat is displayed in its original context atop a circular table by Maison Dominique in a room dedicated to the work of the *Union des artistes modernes* (UAM). [fig 7] The piece was made for the Paris exhibition *le décor de la table* at the Musée Galliera in 1930. An adept combination of rock crystal and silver produces this piece's remarkably modern aesthetic. Clearly, Puiforcat was very keen on it. After the exhibition, he kept it and the table for his own personal use at his modernist house at Urrugne in south-west France. With Puiforcat's well-known love of precision, one can imagine how this centrepiece would have been the object of contemplation of a particular kind: the modern and the Platonic. His passion for order comes across clearly here. The UAM were, of course, always keen to assert their modernity wherever possible and often did so through exhibiting their own modern ensembles throughout the 1930s. At the Musée des Arts décoratifs, Puiforcat's piece takes its place amongst the assortment of modern furniture, carpets, flooring and sculpture destined to remain as statements of the desire to move the applied arts into the territory usually occupied by architects and fine artists as expressions of modernity.

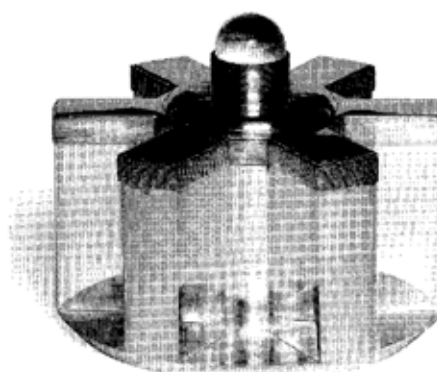
Conclusions

The art nouveau and art deco rooms at the Musée des Arts décoratifs are not replete with examples of modern silver. However, those that are there are deployed effectively to show that the break with historical styles in France was inevitable given the amount of material invention that had emerged from the industrial genius of the nineteenth century. The art deco period (with its backdrop of the Depression and the drift towards war) arguably saw silverware fatally challenged by a combination of social change, economic instability and the impact of modernist design theory. The quest for beauty of form remained, but with the impact of the machine, traditional materials, techniques and markets began to be questioned. The reasons for this are many and varied and must be considered in detail elsewhere. On the other hand, there is something quite defiant about Puiforcat's pristine *surtout de table*, surrounded as it is by objects whose material provenance was less important than their design identity.

In the museum, as one moves from the psychological disturbances of art nouveau to the more restrained art deco forms, one is left with the clear impression that both of these grand styles developed against a backdrop of profound change. In this respect, the museum tells a familiar story but with great clarity and it uses silver effectively, if sparingly, to augment the narrative.



6 Cigarette box, parcel-gilt with ceramic panel, Jean Desprès and Jean Mayodon, circa 1938. Length: 12cm (4¾in). (Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; photo: Jean Tholance)



7 Table centrepiece, with rock crystal finial, Jean Puiforcat. Height: 20cm (8in). Exhibited at the exhibition *le décor de la table*, musée Galliera, Paris, 1930. (Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; photo: Jean Tholance)

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