

Art Nouveau Jewellery

Historical Elegance

FOR A GROWING NUMBER OF CONSUMERS IN TODAY'S JEWELLERY MARKET, ANTIQUE AND VINTAGE PIECES OFFER HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, GENUINE VALUE, AND ORIGINAL BEAUTY. ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR AND ELEGANT PERIODS WAS ART NOUVEAU, WITH ITS ORGANIC LINES, MYSTICAL MOTIFS AND NATURAL FORMS.

By Ioannis Alexandris



French Art Nouveau
whiplash iris belt
buckle in 18-karat gold.
(Lang Antiques)



Art Nouveau tourmaline snake
stickpin. (Lang Antiques)



Art Nouveau natural pearl
and emerald ring in gold.
(Gemolithos)



Brooch with plique-à-jour enamel, rubies and mine-cut and rose-cut diamonds. (Lang Antiques)



Art Nouveau bee pin/pendant with plique-à-jour enamel set in gold. (Gemolithos)

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he Art Nouveau period swept through decorative arts and architecture beginning in the mid-1890s, and lasted until around 1910.

Fabulously creative, this particular style was known by many names throughout the world. In Germany, it was *Jugendstil*. In Italy, it was called *Floreal* or *Stile Liberty*, while in Britain, it was often known as the Glasgow Style.

Its name means “New Art” in French, and can be traced back to a gallery in Paris owned by Samuel Bing that was re-opened in 1895 under the new name of *La Maison de l’Art Nouveau*. For its grand opening, Bing featured artists who were among the founders of this new design style. The name caught on, and for the next 25 years, Art Nouveau gained enormous influence in decorative arts, architecture and jewellery in France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Austria, Germany, Scandinavia and America, among other countries.



Art Nouveau diamond, enamel and gold section of a choker. (Gemolithos)

Art Nouveau enamel and pearl pin/pendant featuring whiplash lines. (Lang Antiques)



What marked Art Nouveau jewellery was the way it broke away from the revivalist style of the 19th century that was considered “the tyranny of the diamond”. The first signs of change came from England under the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement.

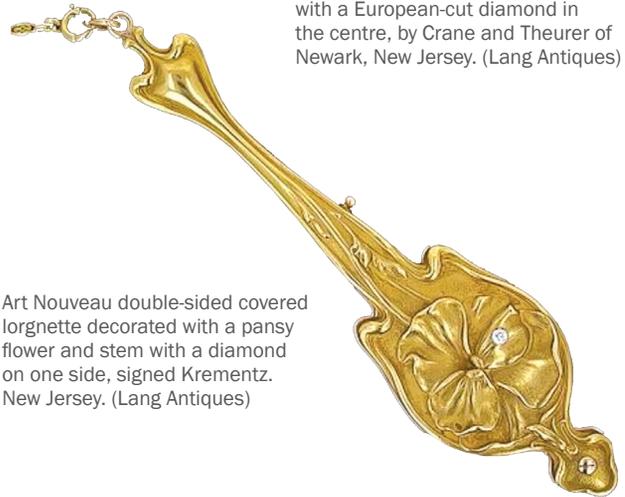
Starting around 1880 and championed by William Morris, the Arts and Crafts style was revolutionary. It promoted self-expression of the individual craftsman, who personally designed and handcrafted the object from start to finish. The cold, mechanical forms of late 19th century mass-produced jewellery were shunned, with emphasis placed on Nature, organic forms and mystical imagery. Gems were selected for their artistic



Art Nouveau enameled brooch with a freshwater pearl centre, depicting two griffins and a pearl crown. (Lang Antiques)



Art Nouveau enamelled pansy brooch with a European-cut diamond in the centre, by Crane and Theurer of Newark, New Jersey. (Lang Antiques)



Art Nouveau double-sided covered lorgnette decorated with a pansy flower and stem with a diamond on one side, signed Kremetz, New Jersey. (Lang Antiques)



Art Nouveau enamel, diamond and gold brooch, signed Lalique. (Gemolithos)



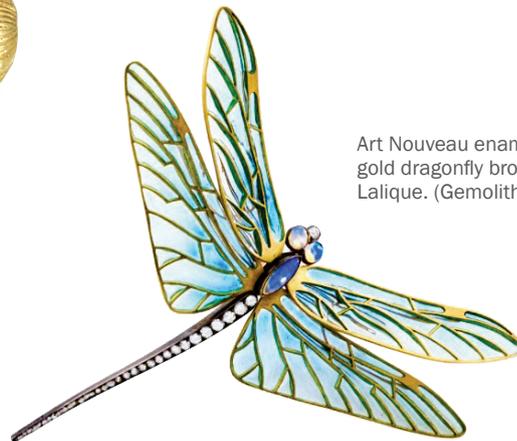
Art Nouveau owl brooch in gold set with moonstone and diamonds, signed Paul Rodin. (Gemolithos)



Art Nouveau gold brooch, signed Vernier. (Gemolithos)



Art Nouveau enamel and gemstone necklace in gold, signed Wolfers. (Gemolithos)



Art Nouveau enamel and gold dragonfly brooch, signed Lalique. (Gemolithos)

merit rather than their intrinsic value. Pearls, opal, moonstone, turquoise and enamel set the standard.

In the early years of the 19th century in Europe, the passionate interest in botany and plant collecting turned into a mania. Expeditions to the Far East and North and South America brought back exotic and colourful species that were immortalised in art. Many Art Nouveau floral motifs were born during this period, and new enamel techniques were brought to Europe. The floral newcomers—such as wisteria, iris, chrysanthemum, tiger lily, certain types of rose, bleeding heart, orchid and fuchsia—took on a new dimension in the hands of Art Nouveau artists. Plant motifs now had the quiver of life. Petals seemed to bend with a breath of air; roses withered; lilies curved in sensuous melancholy. Particularly fascinating to artists were orchids, which became almost surreal, transformed into an erotic form with purplish veined leaves, thrusting stamens and curling tongue.

The dominant theme of Art Nouveau jewellery was Nature and its associations of femininity and fertility. Changing their image from the intricate realism and stiff imitation of 19th century designs, these new jewels interpreted their subjects

in a completely different way. They embraced imagination, creativity and an impressionist vividness with the desire to evoke the essence of Nature, its strength and its sensuality. In art, Art Nouveau suggested a haze of light that epitomised a dreamy veiled reality.

Second to the botanical craze of the time, Japanese art was the most important contributing factor to Art Nouveau design, in general, and Art Nouveau jewellery, in particular. Its fresh simplicity, purity of form and portrayal of Nature were key elements of Japanese design that influenced the Art Nouveau movement.

Perfectly spaced and proportioned asymmetrical compositions that did not overpower the main outline—the detail of a leaf, an insect, flower or bird—were the elements that fascinated the West. The impressionistic style of much of Japanese art produced a striking, almost tense atmosphere using the simplest brushstrokes. Frequently used images were cherry blossoms, irises, blooming chrysanthemums, and the maple leaf burnished by autumn or a sunset. Also incorporated into Art Nouveau were Japanese lacquer work and various enamelling techniques.

The whiplash line

If you had to pick just one major characteristic of Art Nouveau, it would be the flowing whiplash line. This line symbolised and generated passion, movement and vitality. According to critic Robert Melville, the whiplash line was the “visible wave of erotic vertigo”. It was used to interpret undulating lines and shapes found in plants and feminine curves.

In the 19th century, men dominated science, technology, the military and industrial growth. A reaction to this was seen in representations of the female face, hair and body by the Art Nouveau artists. A woman’s profile and her naked sensuous body became emblems of the Art Nouveau movement. These designs provided the restoration of balance and harmony in art and life.

Women of this period were conscious of their new position in society and of their femininity and were not ashamed to wear this new style of jewellery that they felt depicted themselves.

This was also the era of great actresses and opera singers— independent, sensual, passionate, flamboyant and dramatic women such as Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, Lina Cavalieri and Liane de Pougy, to name but a few. They adorned themselves with these beautiful and sensual works of wearable art.

Apart from the female figure, beloved motifs used in Art Nouveau jewellery included insects, which became fantasy creatures, sometimes surprising and quite often truly beautiful. Butterflies and dragonflies were the most common insect motifs and were used in endless variations.

In the hands of Art Nouveau artists, the butterfly metamorphosed into a dragonfly with wings so real that the insect might at any moment flutter to life and fly away. The play of light through the insect’s enamelled gossamer wings is captured in translucent *plique-à-jour* enamel. To emphasise movement, the

wings were often set *en tremblant*, a French term used to describe pieces with a trembling effect that was produced by elements on wires or springs.

Other insects commonly used in Art Nouveau jewels were grasshoppers, bees, flies, cicadas and spiders, sometimes with their web. The scarab, the ancient Egyptian symbol of the cycle of life, was also very popular.

Other animals, especially birds, were a favourite of Art Nouveau craftsmen. Peacocks and their rich glowing coloured feathers were interpreted in brilliant or matt enamel with a gold shimmer and represented pride. Another symbol of pride and metamorphosis was the white swan, as well as swallows, cockerels and even winged night creatures such as the owl and the bat.

Snakes have been used in jewellery since time immemorial as sinuous and iridescent symbols of life, eternity and sexuality. One of the most famous snakes is the magnificent serpent bracelet and head ornament created by George Fouquet for Sarah Bernhardt. Other motifs are frogs, lizards and chameleons in glistening iridescence.

Fantasy characters—mainly fairies and nymphs with iridescent wings and mermaids with undulating hair and curving tails, as well as griffins and dragons—represented a mystical aspect of Art Nouveau. Artists also created beautiful landscapes, with lakes and waterfalls.



Art Nouveau *plique-à-jour* enamel, diamond and red ruby (40 cts) grape cluster brooch. (Lang Antiques)

Section of an Art Nouveau bracelet, featuring enamelled butterfly and flowers, signed Carreras. (Gemolithos)



Art Nouveau sterling silver brooch by William B Kerr & Co of Newark, New Jersey. (Lang Antiques)



Oval pendant locket, featuring an openwork enameled plaque with Swiss-cut diamonds set into the stems. (Lang Antiques)

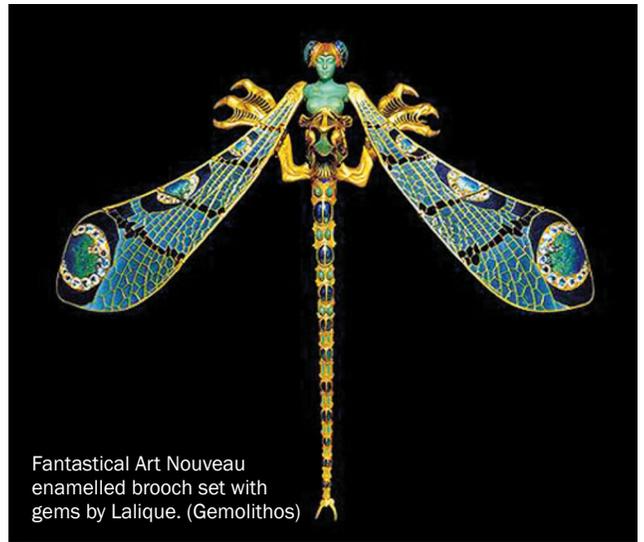
Under the jeweller's hand, the seasons came alive with the melancholy of autumn, the bright colours of spring and summer, and the icy white winter woodlands. Sunrises in amazing colour combinations became the subject of many Art Nouveau jewellery artists.

Importance of design over materials

Materials in Art Nouveau jewels were characterised by softness, with diamonds used only to accent and highlight the pieces. Silver and gold took on organic forms that seemed to come alive. Opal was especially popular for its delicate and ever-changing colours. Artists also used horn, turning this inexpensive material into works of art. Other gems and material included chalcedony, mother-of-pearl, baroque pearls, pale blue sapphires, moonstone, turquoise, coral, bone, chrysoprase and *pâte de verre*.

The preferred material was enamel in its various forms: *plique-à-jour*, *champlevé* and *cloisonné*. For these craftsmen, the most important feature of their creations was the design, not the materials.

In terms of quality, Art Nouveau jewellery included the entire gamut. The high-end pieces, however, continue to be unparalleled works of art. Georges Fouquet and his son Alphonse, Henry Vever, Lucien Gaillard, Lucien Gautrait, Philippe Wolfers, Alphonse Mucha, Louis Aucoc, Gaston Lafitte, C. Deguine, Masriera, Emile Vernier, Wilhelm Lucas von Granach, Theodor Fahrner, Ella Naper and René Lalique, as well as the companies



Fantastical Art Nouveau enameled brooch set with gems by Lalique. (Gemolithos)

Tiffany & Co and Marcus & Co are some of the most important contributors to Art Nouveau art, decoration and jewellery.

A true innovator, René Lalique possessed an extraordinarily fertile imagination. His spectacular pieces are brilliant, startling in their originality and are technically incomparable. His jewellery provided imagery at its most magical.

Lasting only about two and a half decades, the Art Nouveau movement embodied an emotional depth not seen in other jewellery. Yet, its softness, romanticism, and even mysticism continue to be enjoyed by millions of people around the world.

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