

Art Nouveau Anew at the VMFA

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Turn of the century was a busy time in both Europe and the United States. As the Industrial Revolution marked the advent of the age of factories and machinery, creative artists began to rebel against the new technology, choosing instead to extol the value and beauty of hand-crafted objects and return to a recreation of the forms of nature. Art Nouveau blossomed at Richmond's Virginia Museum of Fine Arts because of the patronage of local philanthropists Sydney and Frances Lewis. In 1971, the museum mounted its first Art Nouveau show of furniture and the decorative arts, arousing the interest of the Richmond couple. This prompted them to give the museum \$500,000.00 to purchase more Art Nouveau objects. Shortly after, a gallery opened to showcase the newly acquired masterworks. Then in 1985, the Lewises gave their entire personal collection and \$6,000,000.00 to build a wing to house it, which instantly elevated the museum's collection to world class status.

The magnanimous Lewis gift has yet inspired another major Art Nouveau donation. This time Dr. Karl and Gisela Kreuzer of Munich, Germany have presented the VMFA with their world-renowned collections of belt buckles and rare books, both of the Art Nouveau period. It's a somewhat tricky gift-purchase arrangement, because of art export laws in Germany. The acquisitions establish the VMFA as the top Art Nouveau resource and research facility in the United States.

The museum is jubilant about the gift. With less than six months to organize it, Dr. Frederick Brandt curated a recently opened exhibition of nearly 500 objects which will be on view through January 19, 2003. The belt buckle collection has been supplemented by rarely seen Lewis objects from storage. Two highlights are a Toulouse-Lautrec poster, which was created to become a cover for the trendy *fin de siècle* Parisian cultural journal *La Revue Blanche*. A large stoneware cachepot by Belgian jeweler Phillippe Wolfers is extremely eye-catching.

Mrs. Kreuzer started wearing Art Nouveau buckles during the "wasp waist" era, when it was in vogue to have a tightly corseted tiny waistline, emphasized by a stunning belt buckle. Her husband Karl became fascinated with the sinuous curves and swirls of the mostly sterling buckles, which incorporated the organic characteristics of Art Nouveau. Plant and animal forms are the subject matter; asymmetrical, long, curving stems and twisted tendrils appear on paintings, sculpture, jewelry and even architecture. Many of the Kreuzer belt buckles use butterflies and birds as subject matter and there are also elements of fantasy and symbolism pervading the style. Often the buckles were jewel or enamel encrusted and some were painstakingly hand-painted. The Kreuzers became avid collectors.

Art Nouveau had its origins in Europe, appearing first in France with the Ecole de Nancy, founded by Emile Gallé, devoted mostly to glassmaking. Yet there is an elegant 1900 Gallé table of various woods and marquetry in the exhibition, which is encrusted with bronze and mother of pearl, incorporating the organic design synonymous with the movement. Majorelle and Daum were other Nancy figures engaged in producing Art Nouveau glass.

In 1895 Siegfried Bing, sometimes called Samuel, opened his shop at 22, rue de Provence in Paris' art district, calling it *La Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, thus initiating the name of a brand-new style. In England, some objects were Celtic, then Pre-Raphaelite inspired and many objects were produced by Liberty. Ideology came forth from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin and William Morris and it became known as the English Arts and Crafts movement. In Germany it was the Jugendstil (Young Style) and the Austrians called it the Secessionist movement. Art Nouveau was personified in the United States by the glass vases and lamps of Louis Comfort Tiffany. In Glasgow, severe geometric lines by Charles Rennie MacIntosh replaced the wild, curving tendrils.

The Kreuzer belt buckles are a sort of microcosm of Art Nouveau, ranging from abstract to stylized geometric forms. There are also a few hand painted miniature scenes from opera and literature on a few of the pieces.

A catalog of the buckles is available at the VMFA shop, on line at www.vmfa.state.va.us/bookstore.html or by telephoning 800-943-8632. Further information is available by telephoning 804-340-1400 or by visiting www.vmfa.state.va.us. The VMFA is located at 2800 Grove Avenue, which intersects the Boulevard, in Richmond.

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