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book review of

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Amy Fumiko Ogata

Art Nouveau and the Social Vision of Modern Living: Belgian Artists in a European Context

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At the turn of the twentieth century Belgian designers and architects were emerging as the dominant influence in innovative decorative design and new architectural forms that in turn became models for other countries. Painters such as Henry van de Velde eloquently expressed the importance of design reform as they moved from a consideration of only one medium toward embracing all of the arts simultaneously. Through exhibitions of *Les Vingt* and later *La Libre Esthétique*, many of Van de Velde's colleagues also embraced the concept of design reform as the means to create a universal style—an art nouveau—that would help them achieve a heightened creativity while theoretically assist in improving society at large. It was a moment rich in possibilities; it was also a time when Belgium, as a nation, was trying to define its own social integrity and identity against the competition of other countries, including England, France, and Germany.

By selecting the period of 1880–1910 as the defining moment for Belgian modernism, Amy Ogata sets out five interlocking sections where the major themes affecting Belgian artists during this era are presented and analyzed. In chapter one, Ogata examines the pull toward primitivism and its impact on the crafts tradition, and she effectively demonstrates that it was the craftsman who revived folk art traditions. Through an understanding of the purity of earlier cultures the designers at the end of the nineteenth century regained a sense of directness and simplicity in their own ceramics or furniture. By elevating the crafts to a status similar to that in the Middle Ages, artisans regained their sense of pride; they were, in effect, able to achieve a spiritual revival that was destined to help the life of the country.

In her examination of the contributions of Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, the supreme designer from Liège, Professor Ogata spotlights an oft neglected figure whose interiors, furniture ensembles, and commitment to simplicity put him in the vanguard of this period. When she considers Victor Horta, who in the 1890s was becoming one of the principal architects of new, sumptuous townhouses, Ogata goes far toward identifying groups of individuals who would be appreciative of what Horta was accomplishing as part of the nouveau-riche society of Brussels. It is a substantial foundation from which the other sections of her book evolve with considerable clarity.

In chapter two, "Modern Cottage Architecture and National Identity," Ogata moves to the central core of her thesis: cottage architecture, by maintaining aspects of primitivism, reinforced the belief in an emergent national identity that used the vernacular as a dominant form. The small house, isolated from other buildings, maintained the sanctity of family life at a time when it was being challenged by the degenerative qualities of urbanism. In reconstructing the history of single dwellings and analyzing how this tradition was understood and being revived, Ogata provides keen insights into the ways in which modern habitation evolved. And her selection of illustrations of cottage architecture from contemporary magazines, especially the English periodical *The Studio*, reveals how these

magazines were influential in the dissemination of examples of timbered buildings. Emerging as a central figure in this type of architecture was Paul Hankar, whose *Cottage Buysse* (1899), among others, became in Belgium a model—both inside and out—for others to follow. In the interiors of this building Hankar preserved the "artistic integrity of the ensemble" (p. 85).

Chapter three delves deeper into the ways in which the reevaluation of folk art was crucial to the idea of an art nouveau. Art nouveau designers and architects were driven to reform the "practice of modern living" (p. 89); by redefining the importance of the private dwelling, they were placing emphasis on the significance of daily life. While art nouveau architecture has been seen largely as the creation of buildings for an urban environment, Ogata tries to redress the imbalance by making the argument for an authentic vernacular architecture and decorative art. She does this by examining little-known examples of buildings by Victor Horta, for example *Les Epinglettes* at Uccle (1899–1900), where turreted effects, gables and half-timbered, stucco facades recall older building traditions. From Horta Ogata moves on to consider Henry van de Velde and the construction of his own dwelling at Uccle, *Bloemenwerf* (1894–95), where intimate discussions were often held with international figures of the design reform movement, among them Julius Meier-Graefe and Siegfried Bing. Both as an architectural monument and a series of integrated spaces, *Bloemenwerf* is a classic example of the folk art tradition being united with the desire to create a new form. Van de Velde's political and personal beliefs were interconnected there, and his own artistic persona and that of his wife were revealed; the building became an expression of the artist's will as well as a personification of the new political ideas of an integrated social existence.

Another participant in this debate was Serrurier-Bovy, whose *Villa L'Aube* (1905), as Ogata pointedly demonstrates, became the center of his own familial, commercial, and intellectual life. With this example Ogata shows that the vernacular countryside was continuing as fundamental to artistic innovation.

In chapter four, "Cottage Housing and the Garden City Ideal," Ogata expands her discourse into the ways in which cottage communities could be made to benefit the working classes. She enumerates the history of the construction of housing for workers outside Belgium; she also illustrates the ways in which, after 1830, social improvements helped workers live more wholesome lives in individualized homes that were more congenial to familial ties and in a more idyllic communion with nature. Of major interest to the author is the ways in which people returned to the countryside after finding life in the big city intolerable. This love of land in Belgium led to the decentralization of housing, as people chose to live in Garden City environments and commute to their place of work in the metropolis. Thinkers and builders worked toward the creation of a utopian ideal. City and rural dwelling each offered positive experiences, and writers and architects, especially in the context of "cottage living," saw this both as a symbol and as a realistic form for daily living. As magazines increasingly celebrated this type of architecture, the "cottage" became the symbol of a better life—one that took notice of light, air, and hygiene—and, in turn, became essential for the well-being of the working class.

In the fifth and final chapter, Ogata moves to a consideration of the art nouveau seaside resorts, the new vacation centers that were constructed along the coast of the North Sea.

These symbolized the importance of nature in maintaining the health of the middle class, and seaside cottages are seen as the structures most capable of fulfilling this goal. Architects such as Victor Horta and the almost forgotten Georges Hobbe became the standard bearers for this new type of construction, which met all of the essential points of practicality and hygiene. By focusing on these aspects Ogata brings her study full circle, as she demonstrates the ways in which another segment of society tried to improve itself by adhering to the theoretical construct of a regenerative society under the banner of art nouveau.

The primary contribution of Amy Ogata's thoughtful text is that it compels readers to consider the art nouveau era from a completely new perspective. By showing how the creation and dissemination of the cottage united theory and practice, Ogata has forged a way in which all aspects of Belgian society can appear united. She offers convincing evidence that a type of utopian vision improved personal identity while also forging a new perception of Belgium as a center for creativity. The book is, unfortunately, weak in its consideration of existing buildings and interiors; nevertheless, it does posit a new way of examining the architectural and social context of Belgium at a time when the country was intellectually and creatively competing with other nations. As we reconsider the various strands that make up art nouveau worldwide, the importance of a vernacular architecture becomes increasingly apparent. The importance of architects who used a similar type of building form in France (noticeable in some of the work of Louis Bonnier, for example) or in the United States (where Gustav Stickley's homes and mission furniture espoused a similar type of simplicity) must eventually be seen against a worldwide interest in vernacular buildings. Once this is accomplished, Amy Ogata's study, rooted in reconstructing a historical moment, will be recognized as an excellent model for what happened in one country.

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