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book review of

Nature and the Nation in Fin-de-Siècle France: The Art of Emile Gallé and the Ecole de Nancy by Jessica M. Dandona

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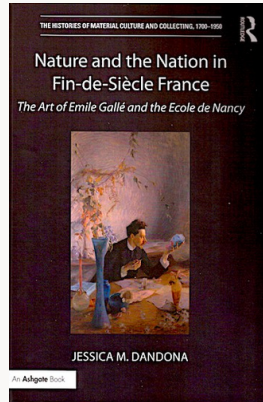
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Jessica M. Dandona,
Nature and the Nation in Fin-de-Siècle France: The Art of Emile Gallé and the Ecole de Nancy.
New York: Ashgate/Routledge, 2017.
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The works of Emile Gallé (1846–1904) have long been prized as exquisite examples of art nouveau glass and furniture. How ironic, then, that his commitment to redefining the role of decorative arts as equal to painting or sculpture—a key element in the design reform movement of art nouveau—has not yet become a routine part of the art historical discourse about his work. Jessica Dandona’s book, *Nature and the Nation in Fin-de-Siècle France, The Art of Emile Gallé and the Ecole de Nancy*, does much to rectify this oversight and to position Gallé not only as an advocate of design reform in late nineteenth-century France, but also as an ardent Republican who believed that the decorative arts served as a vehicle for social change.

The book consists of four chapters, each of which focuses on a handful of objects as a means of illuminating the issues surrounding Gallé’s developing aesthetic and political theories. Dandona has relied on an impressive range of archival materials for her research, presenting her analysis within the context of the social, scientific, and political issues of the time. As she notes in the Introduction, “This book will argue that Gallé and his fellow arts reformers not only placed an enormous and unprecedented importance on the ability of the decorative arts to communicate profound truths, but also perceived them as playing a pivotal role in defining what it meant to be *French*” (1). The question of French national identity was especially pressing in the years following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, an endeavor that resulted in the loss of the Alsace-Lorraine region to the newly unified German Empire and the occupation of France by German troops until September 1873 when the five-billion-franc war debt was finally paid. As the leaders of the Third Republic assumed power, they needed to “foster a sense of belonging among its citizens. . . . Artists, critics and government officials asked themselves how best to represent the nation: through references to artistic tradition, the use of conventional emblems and allegories, or more abstractly, the construction of a specifically French *style*? If the latter, how was this characteristic style to be defined?” (3–4). Having established the framework of her inquiry, Dandona devotes the

following four chapters to an exploration of how some of Gallé's most ambitious works answer these questions.

The first chapter, "Carved into the flesh of France: Gallé and the Franco-Prussian War," begins with an analysis of Gallé's contribution to the Exposition Universelle of 1889, the large table known as *Le Rhin* (The Rhine). In this masterful wooden table, Gallé embodies the network of issues involved in being a native of Lorraine, a Republican and an advocate of design reform.^[1] Although this was the first time that Gallé exhibited a piece of furniture at a major exhibition, he nonetheless took on an ambitious project that showcases technical skill as well as a Republican perspective. From the base up, *Le Rhin* proclaims its roots in the culture of Lorraine: the cross of Lorraine is carved into the walnut of each corner; the thistle signifying the city of Nancy takes center stage on the base of the table; and the wood is all sourced in France. Most important though, is the marquetry scene designed by Victor Prouvé (1858–1943), for the tabletop. The subject ostensibly is an ancient battle between the Gauls and the Teutons, but not surprisingly, it is actually a barely veiled reference to the Franco-Prussian War. Gallé himself pointed this out in his Note to the Jury: "This work is nonetheless, in all its details, alas all too current in its concerns, inspired as it is by the regrets and the hopes that haunt our workshops, located two steps from an artificial frontier carved right into the flesh of France" (19).^[2] The Rhine River, long considered the natural boundary between France and Germany, is shown as an allegorical figure between the Gauls, who defend the Rhine, and the Teutons, who are aggressively attacking it. Thus, the Gauls are seen as the defenders of peace in the face a violent onslaught. As a statement of nationalism and "Frenchness," *Le Rhin* could not be any clearer.

Also in this first chapter is a discussion of the Gallic Pavilion from the 1889 Exposition. Known only from a photograph, this seven-sided wooden pavilion was designed in what Gallé termed a "free adaptation of Celtic art" (39). The critic Paul Desjardins offered a particularly telling interpretation: "The artist wanted to give his arrangements the character of old Gaul. Only, as nothing of this primitive national art has been preserved, he had to invent everything, with the help of a kind of divination and thanks to an exceptional understanding of the symbol. . . . The whole thing, imagined, designed, executed by Mr. Gallé himself, this good and loyal Gaul, [who] breathes the French genius of our ancestors" (39–40). No doubt, contemporary archaeologists would quibble over the nineteenth-century misrepresentation of the Celtic Gauls, but Desjardins's comments clarify the desire for a uniquely French heritage with precision; even if you have to make it up, it's a worthy undertaking. In this first chapter, Dandona establishes the parameters for the book, detailing the social and political issues in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, especially in Nancy, as well as the broader national concerns about defining a uniquely French style in the arts.

The second chapter examines the influence of Japonisme in the creation of a French national design vocabulary. In "Clear water: Japonisme, nature and the formation of a national style" the author covers the more familiar territory of Gallé's Japoniste glass work and his role as a proponent of Japanese art in general. Dandona argues that Japonisme was a key factor in the development of a national French identity: "It was Japanese art, in other words, that allowed French artists to define the *national* through the *natural*" (36). This emphasis on the natural world as a source for national identity may have begun with the writing of Philippe Burty in an article on Japanese porcelain for the *Revue des Arts décoratifs*, where he suggests that

Europeans should cease copying from past masters and ask themselves “. . . if our flora, our fauna would not furnish us with the essential elements of an absolutely personal, absolutely French decoration” (60).^[3] Japanese art reflects this approach according to Burty, and the French might find inspiration there. Other voices, such as the critic Gustave Geffroy, felt that the mingling of Japanese and French art would be marked by “sterility” because they were such fundamentally dissimilar cultures; the “purity” of French art would be diluted (63). Gallé countered this argument with a biological analogy of hybridization, noting that hybrids encourage species to evolve and innovate in response to conditions, while historical revivals tend to be dead ends (63–64).

Dandona illustrates Gallé’s position on hybridity with a discussion of three pieces of glass from 1878, all of them startlingly new aesthetically as well as technically innovative. In *Pique-fleurs* (Flower Holder), for example, Gallé shaped his pale blue *clair de lune* glass into the form of a scallop shell, overlapping it with rectangular cartouches containing landscape scenes and circular discs containing abstracted images of branches or seaweed. Dandona offers a detailed analysis of this piece, cogently describing both the technical challenges involved and the art historical sources for the imagery. Her sensitivity to the art works and her ability to bring them alive in thoughtful and focused prose is a rare gift.

In the next chapter, “Gallé and Dreyfus: A Republican vision,” Dandona addresses a much more thorny topic. As in the earlier chapters, she provides a succinct but well documented overview of the historical context, in this case, the deeply divisive Dreyfus Affair of the 1890s. As a staunch Republican, Gallé supported the cause of Alfred Dreyfus, protesting against the corruption of the government and military officials and the anti-Semitism of both the Catholic church and many of his fellow countrymen. His choice of venue for this protest was his exhibition space at the Exposition Universelle in 1900; there he created the *Glass Furnace* (*Four verrier*), an installation of a real glass furnace from his factory in Nancy. Around the furnace opening, he placed a selection of glassware, and on the ground in front, he scattered shards of broken glass. It was a bold and edgy approach to an exhibition design, and not one that found a great deal of support. In fact, Gallé must have realized that it was also a commercially risky venture; taking a political stand, however metaphorically, would open the wounds of the Dreyfus Affair when they were just beginning to heal. Dandona notes that “by presenting his installation as a provocative encounter between the artist and his public, Gallé sought to rewrite the rules of artistic engagement, perhaps hoping that his work might serve as a model for other artists involved in political struggle. In the process, he proposed a radically new function for the decorative arts—one that no longer defined them as the arts of pleasure but instead reimagined these delicate ornamental works as a point of intersection between the private realm of the individual and the public realm of political life” (96).

In the pieces on display, Gallé made use of several strategies to underscore his points. *The Fig Tree* (*Le Figuier*) offered a blend of Jewish and Christian symbolism as part of Gallé’s call for tolerance. The tall chalice took pride of place on the mantel above the furnace in the display. The shape itself hints at the both the ritual of the Christian Eucharist and the legendary tale of the Holy Grail, which was said to have caught the drops of Christ’s blood as he died. Large glass tears run down the trunk of the fig tree and the cross of Lorraine (with two crossbars instead of one) is engraved into the glass. Most literal is the inscription from Victor Hugo’s poem, *Contemplations* (1856): “Because all men are the sons of the same father, they are the

same tear. They come from the same eye” (99). Likewise, the *Amphora of King Solomon* references the need for tolerance and an awareness of our shared spiritual roots. The largest and most complex artwork in the exhibition, *Amphora* appears to have been salvaged from the sea; there are wrought iron shells and starfish on the neck, blobs of red glass on the surface, and a tangle of seaweed and several inscriptions, some in Hebrew.

Dandona’s focus in this chapter, however, is the piece called *The Dark Men* (*Les hommes noirs*). Designed in collaboration with Victor Prouvé, the “dark men” of the title refers to the black-robed defenders of falsehoods, hypocrisy, bigotry, and cruelty: the judiciary and the Jesuits. The inscription on this piece comes from a song by Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780–1857): “Dark men, where do you come from?” is inscribed just beneath the rim; and towards the bottom of the vase is the answer, “We come from beneath the earth.” The sources for these images are diverse, ranging from Francisco Goya’s *Caprichos* (1797–98) to French caricatures and illustrations in political journals and newspapers. Without fail, Dandona scrupulously documents these sources and how they are connected directly to Gallé’s work.

In contrast to the countless depictions of Dreyfus as a specifically Jewish monster, Gallé and Prouvé placed the spotlight on the monstrosity of fanaticism and intolerance in the form of these “dark men.” Underlying this imagery is the theme of seeing and blindness; these are not specific men, but symbolic representations of the darkness within us all. The viewer is left free to determine who (or what) these dark and menacing figures signify. Dandona remarks that it is not an entirely bleak perspective however: “It also reaffirms the central message of the work, for it is precisely the work’s appeal to personal, subjective experience that asserts the importance of the individual—and thus the legacy of Republicanism” (123). Ultimately, *The Dark Men* also raises questions about the compatibility of Symbolism and political messaging. Gallé’s willingness to leave the interpretation of this piece open to the viewer’s subjective response may preclude the clear transmission of his political message.

The final chapter, “One for all or all for one? Gallé and the Ecole de Nancy,” deals with Gallé’s establishment of the Ecole de Nancy at the outset of the twentieth century. After the inauspicious reception of his *Glass Furnace* pieces at the 1900 fair, the artist returned to Nancy more determined than ever to play a defining role in the debate over the future of France as a nation. What better way to influence that future than through education? The Ecole de Nancy was supported by a group of artists and industrialists from Lorraine working together to achieve three basic goals: 1) create an artistic community; 2) foster regional cooperation; and 3) preserve artists’ independence (137). Rather than focus closely on the political machinations of France, Gallé moves on to the larger question of creating a harmonious and peaceful world. That theme had been present in *Le Rhin*, but it is reinvigorated with the founding of the school. He urges his fellow artists to “seek that which is beautiful, make it beloved through our works [and] constitute through infectious emotion, an amicable solidarity between workers of the ideal and fellow citizens, between contemporaries and artists; be the artists of Union in Beauty” (144).

Dandona illustrates this principle in action in her analysis of the *Roses of France* (*Roses de France*), a large scale *tazza* designed as a commemorative piece for Léon Simon, one of the founders of the Société d’Horticulture de Nancy on the occasion of his retirement. Like so many of Gallé’s pieces, this one involved technical pyrotechnics—combining multiple firings

in tandem with marquetry, engraving, acid etching, and hot glass appliqués (145). The slightly pink-tinged bowl is decorated with *rosa gallica*, a type of rose that was reportedly native to Simon's hometown of Metz, a city that was still under German domination at the time. In addition, Simon's professional specialty was roses. His deep connection to his place of origin is thus referenced in both his work and in the plants that are native to the region.

The theme of evolution runs throughout the book, biological and botanical metaphors abounding, but Dandona investigates it more closely in this final chapter. Gallé was specifically interested in the question of how plants adapt to new conditions? Do they evolve or do they mutate to develop a discontinuous genetic form that becomes a dead end in itself? Dandona explores Gallé's work with orchids, both as an educated botanist and as an artist, placing his drawings in the context of more conventional botanical illustrations. Clearly, the artist dominated the botanist in this regard, but Gallé's drawings offer a fascinating study of the intersection between science, technology, and art. As a result of these studies, Gallé adopts the orchid as a kind of personal emblem. And written on an envelope that Dandona discovered at the Musée Lorraine in Nancy, was the phrase "*Excentricité Transcendental* (transcendental eccentricity)" next to multiple drawings of orchids (163, fig. 4.10). "In this way, Gallé lends the evolution of natural forms an almost mystical aspect, suggesting the uniqueness and yet interconnectedness of all living things. In short, the orchid functions as both a metaphor for the place of the individual in society and an example of the kind of evolutionary processes that engender not only biological but also artistic transformations" (163). One might almost say that Gallé had come to understand the Buddhist concept of individuality within universality.

Dandona's brief final pages, "A Fragile Legacy," offer a lucid summary of her main points, concluding that "Gallé in essence lays the groundwork for modernist artists' efforts to unite art and life" (188). Sadly, as she notes, Gallé died of leukemia in 1904 at age fifty-eight. The Ecole de Nancy dwindled in size and influence after his death and disappeared entirely with the advent of World War I. I would add that the resurgence of interest in Nancy as a center for art nouveau may yet bring the revitalization that Gallé did not live to see.

This review has touched on only a handful of the issues offered by this book. Dandona has done a masterful job of identifying and interpreting archival materials, and she demonstrates consummate skill at interpreting the art works not only through documentation and historical context, but also through careful looking. The reader gains an understanding of Gallé's contribution to the development of a national identity for Republican France and an appreciation of the challenges of that project. Dandona's exploration of evolutionary theory, Japonisme, racism, and nationalism might seem to be an unlikely combination of elements, but in fact, it is this dedication to presenting each of these topics in careful detail that makes this book such an important contribution. It's a "must-read" for anyone interested in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century French culture.^[4]

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Notes

[1] Although the province of Lorraine was annexed by Germany as a result of the Franco-Prussian War, the city of Nancy, where Gallé lived and worked, remained part of France; it was occupied until 1875. Alsace and Lorraine would not be returned to France until the end of World War I.

[2] The original source is Emile Gallé, “Notice sur la production de menuiserie et ébénisterie sculptée et marquetées d’ E. Gallé” in *Ecrits pour l’art: Floriculture—Art décoratif—Notices d’exposition (1884–1889)* (Marseille: Editions Jeanne Laffitte, 1998), 359.

[3] Originally published as an article by Philippe Burty, “La Poterie et la porcelaine au Japon: Première conférence,” *Revue des Arts décoratifs* 5 (1884–1885): 392.

[4] The one concern that I have is not with the content of the book or the author’s impeccable work, but with the publisher. For the second time in less than two years, I received a copy of a book that had the wrong color plates and missing pages. Once is probably a mistake, but twice is a pattern that needs attention.