Chapter 11: Ukiyo-e and Art Nouveau

During the last decades of the 19th century the increased trade and exchange between the east and west fostered a graphic design era both radical and revitalized.

It ultimately led to a design style that dominated the world for 20 years...

**Ukiyo-e**

Ukiyo-e means “pictures of the floating world” and defines the art of the Japanese Tokugawa period 1603-1867.

The Tokugawa period was one of internal stability and flourishing cultural arts but also of extreme isolationism.

Shoguns fearful of western influence and pollution, stopped all outside influence.

People were outlawed from leaving the country, and if one did, was prevented from returning.

Trade was highly restricted to just Dutch and Chinese though only one seaport -- Nagaski.

This caused the development of a very defined national style of graphic art.

Ukiyo-e blended the styles of traditional picture scrolls with influences of decorative design.

The earliest work focused on the entertainment districts of major cities -- kabuki actors, scenes of play, courtesan and prostitutes... much erotic content.

Ukiyo-e artists embraced the woodblock print and Hishikawa Moronohu is considered one of the early masters.

His work presented the everyday life of ordinary people -- street scenes and the like.

Japanese woodblocks were a careful collaboration between artist, printer and woodblock cutter.

The artist provided the drawings, a separate one for each color, they were then pasted upon the blocks, and the negatives were cut away (destroying the original drawing).

The whole design was only visible after all had been printed.
Kiragawa Utamaro (1753-1806) a master woodblock artist, was known for his portrayal of beautiful women and observations of nature.

Utamaro was jailed for 3 days and handcuffed for 50, after making prints of the wife and concubines of a military leader in 1804. He died 2 years later at age 53.

The most renowned and prolific Ukiyo-e artist was Katsushika Hokusai (1760 - 1849) who produced 35,000 works in over 7 decades.

Hokusai's work spanned the gamut of Ukiyo-e subject matter -- rivers, mountains, birds, genre scenes, historical events... just about everything.

Book illustration was a major form of popular art, and Hokusai began his career illustration “yellow-books” ... so names for the color of their covers. They were cheap novelettes.

Throughout his career he illustrated over 270 titles include several books of his own art.

Hokusai produced the “Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji” in 1830-32. It is one of the most famous of Ukyo-e art even to this day.

Japanese woodcut artists followed the strange custom of changing their names often. Hokusai had over 50 names in his lifetime.

Ando Hiroshige (1792-1858) was a rival of Hokusai, and his work ended up inspiring the French Impressionists... due to his masterful use of light and atmosphere.

In “53 stages of the Tokaido” he illustrated 53 waystations along the eastern sea road.

Hirshige was able to capture poetic splendor and relate it to the lives of ordinary people... as in “famous places in Edo” A Hundred Views.”

At about the time of Hirshige's death in the later part of the 1800's saw a major change in Japanese life and culture.

This was due to a revolution that restored power to the emperor as well as a series of treaties signed with American Commodore Perry which opened up trade and exchange with the West.
Industrialization, controlled constitutional government were established.

The late 19th century Mania for all things Japanese was called “japonisme”

Japanese artists were considered mere artisans in Japan, but captivated the European art community.

The difference between detailed representation of a scene, compared to the overall feeling in Ukiyo-e had an impact on European artists.

Of the biggest credit is given to Ukiyo-e is this influence instead of art on it's own.

**Art Nouveau**

Art Nouveau was an international style that dominated primarily two decades: 1890-1910.

It encompassed all design arts -- from furniture to fashion; product design, architecture and graphic arts.

Art Nouveau's identifying quality is an organic, plant like lines.

Art Nouveau is the transitional style that evolved and replaced historicism... the almost servile use of past forms and styles.

Art Nouveau became the first phase of the modern movement, preparing the way by eliminating the backward looking spirit from design.

Modern architecture, graphic and industrial design, surrealism and abstract art have roots in Art Nouveau.

Organic liner movements and color and texture dominate the spatial area. Ornaments were used in the past as decoration -- Art Nouveau integrated objects and unified the overall design.
Because lines were often invented, instead of copied from nature, it created a revitalization of design that pointed toward abstract art.

During this period there was a collaboration and mutual influence between artists and writers -- both rejecting realism in favor of the metaphysical and sensuous.

It was a skeptical era -- with scientific rationalism on the rise and traditional values of the Victorian era beginning to erode.

Many of the Art Nouveau artists had fine arts schooling, yet wholeheartedly embraced the printing industries and the commercial venues for their art.

**Cheret and Grasset**

The transition from Victorian art to Art Nouveau is evidenced by two graphic artists working in Paris -- Jules Cheret and Eugene Grasset.

The French government had lifted a restrictive law upon printing and posting in 1881 that created an outpouring of new work -- especially in terms of poster art.

Painters and fine artists wholeheartedly used commercial posters as a way to showcase their work.

Jules Cheret was the son of a poor typesetter and eventually started a printing firm with his brother in Paris.

Cheret began to evolve away from the complexity of his earlier work and began to feature larger central figures in his posters.

By the late 1890s Cheret's work evolved into bold lines, little detail and bright bold colors.

The women in his work were often self-assured and happy -- with little of Victorian properness of other illustrations.

Cheret has been dubbed the father of women's liberation because of this style.

Cheret was prolific and had produced over 1000 posters by the turn of the century.

Influenced by his studies in medieval and Japanese art, Eugene Grasset was a rival of Cheret.

Grasset's new design concepts were quickly adapted after he published Historie Des Quatre Fils Aymon in 1883.

In this work we see decorative borders framing the pages and the integration of text and graphics as a unified whole. Spatial segmentation is used as an expressive component of the layout.

Grasset's poster commission shows his new "coloring book style" that became one of the major elements of Art Nouveau -- bold fluid lines filled with large areas of flat color.
English Art Nouveau

In 1893 the first edition of The Studio was published -- it started the momentum towards an international art nouveau style. The Studio was the first of nearly a dozen new art periodicals that started up.

The first issue featured work by Aubrey Beardsly (cover) and Jan Toorop. The influence these two artists had on the Art Nouveau period was enormous.

Aubrey Beardsley was very prolific and produced many illustrations during his short career -- as he died at age 26 of tuberculous.

Known for his black-and-white illustrations, he became very famous when he illustrated a new edition of Mort D’Arthur.

Beardsley's work was photoengraved, which retained the complete fidelity of his artwork.

Beardsley combined the style of William Morris and the Kelmscott style with the Japanese block prints... which almost let him to being sued by the former.

Walter Crane thought he had mixed the medieval spirit of Morris with a weird Japanese like spirit of deviltry and the grotesque, fit only for the opium dens.

Despite the controversy, Beardsley received many commissions.

Oscar Wild's Salome received much notoriety due to Beardsleys illustrations that seemed a celebration of evil and erotica.

During the last two years of his life Beardsely was an invalid and his work became softer, with the use of dotted lines.

Beardsley' leading rival during his day was Charles Ricketts.
Richetts had training as a compositor, so he approached his work as an integrated whole, not just illustrations to be placed within the type.

His first total book design appears and a year later he produced The Spinix by Oscar Wild.

Like Beardsly, Ricketts learned how to indicate figures and clothing with a minimum of line.

A strange moment in history is the small island of graphic design created by Beggarstaffs amidst the wave of Art Nouveau.

James Pryde and William Nicholsan, brothers-in-law, were academic painters that decided to open an advertising art studio in 1894.

They felt it necessary to operate under a pseudonyms, so from a sack of corn they adopted The Beggerstaff Brothers (later dropping the brothers part).

During their collaboration they pioneered a new style of graphic design... they cut out pieces of paper and positioned them on a board.

This new technique was later called collage.

They often left areas incomplete, requiring the viewer to fill in the missing parts.

Totally immune to the art nouveau influences around them, they created powerful posters of colors and silhouettes.

While an artistic success, they were a financial failure and they dissolved the partnership, each returning to painting.

The Further Development of French Art Nouveau

During the 1890s Grasset hung out at a nightclub that was a gathering place for artists and writers... he met and shared ideas with guys like Toulouse-Lautrec and T. A. Steinlen.

Lautrec's Poster for the Moulin Rouge broke new creative ground in poster design... a crowd silhouette, stark white underwear, symbolic ovals for lamps along with the flat colors created a sensation in graphic design.

Lautrec was the son of a count and he broke his pelvis when he was thirteen.

It caused him to be a cripple and stunted his growth... he turned obssesively to painting and drawing.
Lautrec only produced about 32 posters. He arranged his commissions while drinking in the nightclubs... more often than not the payment was a good time.

Lautrec often worked from memory and used an old toothbrush to create the splatter technique for tonal quality.

Steinlen was a friend and often rival of Toulouse Lautrec and they influenced each other.

Unlike Lautrec, Steinlen was a prolific illustrator and did over 2,000 magazine covers during his career.

Steinlen had strong political views and his subjects were often of the working class...

He also had a great affection for cats, as these are often seen in his work.

Czech artist Alphonse Mucha was a young illustrator who was at a printing firm on Christmas Eve in 1894, correcting proofs for a friend who had gone on holiday.

The manager burst in and needed some rush art done for a theatre poster... as Mucha was the only one there, he received the commission.

Mucha used middle-eastern patterns for texture, and created excusite detail. His work was an overnight sensation.

Mucha began recieving many commissions and by 1900 was one of the major players in Art Nouveau... at this point the movement become aware of itself and became known. And often it was referred interchangably with “le style Mucha” as well as “Art Nouveau.”

Mucha's women project sensuality, and yet are mainden-like, and express no specific age, nationality or historical period.

Mucha's output was tremendous -- he produced 134 lithographs for the book “Ilsea, Princess of Tripoli” in 3 months.

Mucha also designed furniture, stained glass windows and other manufactured objects.

Mucha, after living and traveling through most of Europe and the United States, returned to his native Cezch homeland in 1917 and worked on nationalistic posters about his country and people.

And in 1939 he was one of the first to be arrested by the Gestapo and died a few months after his arrest.
Emmanuel Orazi also came to prominence during the Art Nouveau period and his poster shows the objects from the gallery as well as the logo of the company.

The General Electric Logo was an Art Nouveau design created in 1890... and is still used today.

Art Nouveau Comes to America

Art Nouveau also spread to America, although the first designs in this style for Harper’s were literally imported... printed in Paris and shipped by boat to be bound into the magazine.

Louis Rhead and Will Bradley were two American art nouveau inspired artists that became prominent designers.

Rhead adopted the French poster style in his work, but rejected the more pastel colors in favor of brighter and more contrasty colors.

William Bradley, whose father died of civil war wounds, moved from Mass to Ishpeming, Michigan. At age 11 he was already an apprentice at a local newspaper.

Unable to afford art lessons, he was entirely self-taught through the use of magazines and library books.

When Bradley discovered Beardsley, he was greatly influenced and his style took on many of Beardsly's qualities.

So much so that some called him merely "the American Beardsley." But Bradley used this style as a stepping stone and took it much further.

He made innovative use of current photomechanical advances to create repeating, overlapping and reversed images.

Bradley moved to Springfield, Mass and started his own printing and book publishing company in 1894.

During an 1895 visit to the Boston Public Library, Bradley became interested in, and studied the small, crudely designed "chapbooks" of the American colonial era.
He then began to design and publish more of these “little books.”

A growing passion for type design and layout led Bradley to become art editor of Colliers magazine in 1907 and became a major influence in page design and layout for the next century.

Ethel Reed was the first American woman to achieve prominence as a graphic designer and illustrator.

Born in Mass, she became well known for four brief years: 1894-98. She traveled to London in 1898, produced a poster there, and disappeared from historical record at age 22.

An art director for Harper’s from 1891 to 1901, Edward Penfield’s reputation rivaled Bradley’s and Reed’s.

His monthly posters for the magazine often showed people reading the magazine.

This advertising style was adopted by other artists and magazines, like William Carqueville for Lippincott’s... and Maxfield Parrish for Scribners.

Maxfield Parrish became a major illustrator of the day and beyond... he produced book and magazine illustrations for the first 3 decades of the 20th century.

Innovation in Belgium

The small country of Belgium was also in the vanguard of art nouveau during the 1890s.

Georges Lemmen was such an artist.

As well as Jan Toorop.

Henri Van de Velde, in his illustration and design, pushed towards a pure abstraction of form and line, while still working within the parameters of art nouveau.
His work was a foretelling of the abstration that was to come in the 20th century.

Rather than communicating about the product or showing people using it, Van de Veld engaged the viewer with symbolic form and color.

Van de Veld felt that all branches of art, from industrial design to sculpture to graphic design, shared a common language and were equally important.

Van de Veld was one of the first artists to express the belief that negative space was as important as positive... that the shadow of an object is as important as the object itself.

Van de Veld brought a moral imperative to design. One of them being that machine made objects of the day should express their truth.

Other Belgium artists were prominent in the art nouveau period like:

Privet Livemont

and

Gisbet Combaz.

The German Jugendstil Movement

The art Nouveau movement arrived in Germany in the form of a new magazine about “Jugendstil” (young style), called “Jugend” (Youth).

German art nouveau had strong British and French influences, yet still remained tethered to traditional German graphic conventions.

German graphic design still clung to Textura, the medieval font.
Jugend, a magazine of popular entertainment achieved a readership of over 200,000 and one unique editorial policy was that they allowed the illustrators of the covers to design the masthead anew every issue.

Along with Otto Echmann, Peter Bohrens became known for large multicolored woodblock prints.

The English art historian Herbert Read once suggested that the life of any art movement is like that of a flower. A budding in the hands of a small number of innovators is followed by full bloom; then the process of decay begins as the influence becomes diffused and distorted in the hands of imitators who understand merely the stylistic manifestations of the movement rather than the driving passions that forged it.

After the turn of the century, this was the fate of art nouveau.

And it vanished in the ashes of WWI.

It’s legacy was the 20th century designers that adopted, not its surface qualities, but its attitudes towards materials, processes, and values.