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Serpentine Drinking Vessels

By Eric Salzano



Photos From the Road

By Ron Fox

Mettlach Artists, Motifs and Styles

Part 5d - Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Poster Art

By Roy De Selms



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Mettlach at the AMOCA Museum - Part 5d

Mettlach Artists, Motifs and Styles

Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Poster Art

By Dr. Roy C. De Selms, SCI Master Steinologist

This is the fourth (and final) section of part five in a series of articles describing 19th Century German history, culture and folklore, and the artists, motifs, styles and techniques of the Villeroy & Boch firm at Mettlach (VBM), using items from the Wilson Mettlach Collection at the American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) in Pomona, CA. This article extends our overview into the early modern era (i.e., the late 19th and very early 20th centuries), with a discussion of Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Poster Art styles.

In classifying objects by artistic style we have to keep in mind that styles have tendencies, not rules, and that artists and designers by nature are attempting to create something distinctive, to differentiate their work from the work of others. Elements of different styles are often used together, and classification of an object as this style or that is consequently imperfect.

The term **Art Nouveau** is used to refer to an artistic style which emerged in Europe in the 1880s, although the name itself is generally associated with the Paris gallery, *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, opened in 1895 and operated by Siegfried Bing. While that connection creates a tendency to think of Art Nouveau as originating in France, it grew from developments all across Europe, in England, Belgium, Scotland, France, Italy, Denmark, Austria and Germany. It also drew inspiration from the stylized features of the woodblock prints of Japan, including "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" by Katsushika Hokusai as early as 1831.

The term is commonly used to embrace all similar developments no matter where they originate, although different countries

generally had their own terminology: Arts and Crafts (England), *Secessionsstil* (Austria), *Style Moderne* or *Style 1900* (France), Liberty style (Italy), *Nieuwe Kunst* (Netherlands) and *Jugendstil* (Germany). (That last name, which literally means "youth style," is attributed to the magazine "*Jugend*", which was first published in Munich as a forum for contemporary art, literature, politics and news of the day.) In Belgium the style was sometimes referred to as *Style coup de fouet* (whiplash style), *Paling Stijl* (eel style), or, by its detractors, as *Style nouille* (noodle style).

The basic character of Art Nouveau lies in inspiration from nature. Echoing the shapes and lines of organic forms, Art Nouveau expression typically consists of S-shaped cyma curves, graceful bends and dancing or wavy lines. In its ideal expression, each element of the design connects seamlessly to form a harmonious aesthetic. Other characteristics of Art Nouveau are a sense of dynamism and movement, often given by asymmetry or whiplash lines, and the use of modern materials, particularly iron, glass and ceramics.

Hans Christiansen (b. 1866 Flensburg - d. 1945 Wiesbaden) was the quintessential Jugendstil designer as attested by his having written articles and provided cover illustrations for the magazine *Jugend*. Based upon an illustration which appeared in that magazine (fig. 1, November 1897, issue #23), we are able to attribute VBM vases #2424 and #2425 (figs. 2-3) to Christiansen. The vases subsequently appeared in the VBM catalog of 1899. These allegorical motifs of night and day are about as Art Nouveau in design as it gets.

The ewer in fig. 4 (VBM #2433) is apparently Christiansen's design as well, as seen by comparison to figure 3.

The literature has not shown any VBM steins attributed to Christiansen, although a small number of Jugendstil steins by Westerwald manufacturers are attributed to him.



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Richard Riemerschmid (b. 1868 Munich - d. 1957 near Munich) also wrote and provided cover illustrations for the magazine "*Jugend*," and was co-founder of the *Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst und Handwerk* (United Workshops for Arts and Crafts, sometimes referred to as simply "VW"). His first works for VBM were three glazed steins which had no surface decoration (figures 5, 6, 7) — the overall shape of the steins, including the body, handle, pewter fittings and glaze treatment provided the entire aesthetic. These steins were designed by Riemerschmid and produced at the VW, and examples were sent to VBM. They were then showcased by VBM at the Paris World's Fair of 1900.

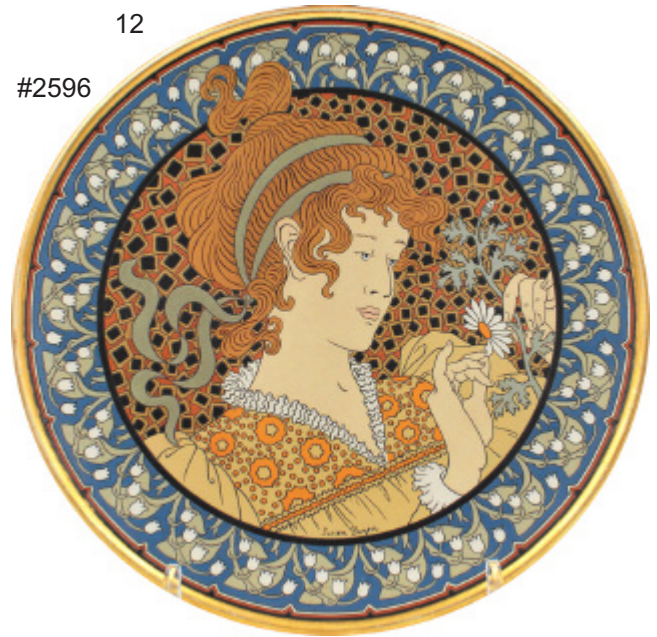
Surface decoration was added to each of these models at a later date by Max Rossbach, an artist who provided ceramic decorations at the VW (figures 5a, 6a, 6b, 7a, 7b). The designs are *Löwenzahn* (Dandelion, DEC. 177), *Hopfen u. Gerste* (Hops and Barley, DEC. 178) and *Rettiche* (Radishes, DEC. 179). The symbolism in these motifs is that wine can be made with dandelions, beer with hops and barley, and radishes are enjoyed with beer.

Riemerschmid's use of a line integrating the handle with a swirl or whiplash on the body is a signature effect which he also used for several steins designed for R. Merkelbach. Note also the split lower handle attachment visible in figure 7b.

A fourth stein provided by Riemerschmid, VBM #2701 (figure 8), is only known with decoration of *Eichenlaub* (Oak leaves, DEC. 180). Here again Riemerschmid continued the line of the handle into a swirl on the body, and the rounded lid of this stein completes an overall spherical design. The oak leaves are widely used in Germany as a symbol of strength.

A fifth stein, VBM #3345 (figure 9), is suspected of being a Riemerschmid design, although firm evidence has not been found. This stein is also found in a dark olive green glaze.





There are many other Mettlach items which evidence Art Nouveau characteristics in their designs. Like Riemerschmid's steins seen in figures 5-8, the shape of the vase in figure 10 is an important aspect of its overall aesthetic, as much as the floral motif and the glaze which transitions from pale green at the top to dark blue or black at the base. A second vase (fig. 11) uses a Nouveau shape, not nearly as dramatic as seen in fig. 10, but the lines, colors and flowers of the decoration are strong expressions of Art Nouveau.

Although plaques are restricted in shape, the large, mostly flat surface and their purpose as display items provided an opportunity for Art Nouveau motifs. Idealized portraits of women accompanied by flowers *à la* Alphonse Mucha were a favorite choice as seen in VBM #'s 2541, 2542, 2544, 2455, 2596 (figure 12, signed by Lucien Payen), 2597, 2898, 2899, 2997, 2998. Many other VBM plaques employ Art Nouveau themes or decorative elements to a greater or lesser extent.

Some examples among the steins are model numbers #'s 2799, 2800, 2801, 2810, 2811, 2812, 2813, 2835, 2836, 2891, 2892, 2903, 2993, 2994 and so on, as well as a number of steins in the BAVARIA line. None of these have been attributed to a specific designer. Most of this list appeared in the late 1890s (VBM #2800, figure 13), but arguably some Art Nouveau traits began to appear in the early 1880s. While #1155 (figure 14) is not considered to be an Art Nouveau design, the stylized hops vine and repeating pattern around the body foreshadows the motif of #2800 (figure 13), which, in the fanciful curves of the vine, is clearly Art Nouveau.

After thirty years of Art Nouveau's reign, its allure began to die down and other artistic movements arose, including **Art Deco**. Somewhat more difficult to define, Art Deco traces back



to France in the 1910s. Although the name probably derives from the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* (International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) held in Paris in 1925, it was not formally applied to this art style until the 1960s.

From its outset, Art Deco was influenced by the sharp shapes and bold geometric forms of Cubism and the Vienna Secession. Sleek, streamlined and symmetrical, Art Deco emphasizes vertical lines, zigzagged patterns and rectilinear shapes. Much of its appearance was inspired by developments in technology. Art Deco and the Bauhaus movement represented the fast-paced, bold and exciting spirit of the early 20th century. The Empire State Building, Chrysler Building, and other skyscrapers of New York City built during the 1920s and 1930s are monuments to the style.

The bodies of work of both Richard Riemerschmid and Hans Christiansen were distinctly Jugendstil in nature, and categorizing their work as Art Nouveau is straightforward. As we move forward in time to consider Art Deco examples, not only are there no prominent practitioners who provided designs for VBM, but artistic styles became more difficult to define and differentiate. Since themes and motifs are often intermixed, we are left to use our best judgment based upon the general principles of the style—Art Nouveau with curving, sinuous or wavy lines and organic themes; Art Deco emphasizing straight lines and angles, and geometric shapes.

Consider the steins depicted in figure 15. While TMB and the BSL refer to all of these as Art Nouveau, there is obviously room for debate. (VBM avoided this problem by simply referring to them as “Modern.”)

True Art Deco with straight lines and/or geometric repetition is found in the master pitcher and drinking stein in figure 16. While many of the steins in the BAVARIA line display a mix of styles, the steins in figure 17 clearly adhere to the principles of Art Deco.



It is interesting to note that the VBM model numbers for Nouveau and Deco steins are interspersed, despite the fact that Art Nouveau preceded Art Deco. It is suspected that the Deco items could

be done easily by in house designers and it took more time to get major artists to bring their Nouveau designs to VBM.



The dining set seen in figure 18 shows both the cyma curves and flowers of Art Nouveau and also repeating geometric designs of Art Deco. The Wilson's admired and collected a complete set of this design, but I've been told they only used it once for a special dinner with friends.

French painter and printmaker Jules Cheret (1836-1932) was a key figure in French painting during the late 19th century, and the first artist to make his reputation in the medium of **Poster Art**. The term refers to a general category of printed two-dimensional artwork which is designed to be affixed to a vertical surface. Cheret developed the three-color lithographic process which allowed artists to achieve every color in the rainbow with as little as three stones. The result was a remarkable intensity of color and texture, with sublime transparencies and nuances which were impossible in other media. The ability to combine word and image in such an attractive and economical format – the lithographic poster – ushered in the modern age of advertising.

In addition to developments in lithography, Cheret made a second valuable contribution to the explosive popularity of Poster Art: he enhanced the aesthetic nature of the poster, endowing it with graceful designs and transforming it into an independent decorative art form. An avid employer of the female form in his works, he produced a wide variety of very popular posters depicting modestly free-spirited females in contemporary settings and



poses which led to Chéret's being called the "father of women's liberation." He completely changed the puritanical way of depicting women in art.

In addition to Cheret, prominent artists who produced Poster Art include Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Mucha, Norman Rockwell and Ludwig Hohlwein.

Although we are not concerned with posters per sé, the idealized images and emphasis on flat colors and shapes also appear in the works of VBM, notably in the designs by Franz Ringer and, to a greater degree, Ludwig Hohlwein who produced a large number of commercial and wartime posters

Franz (Jakob) Ringer (b. 1865 Munich - d. 1917 Munich) (see: [Stein Marks](#)) was a very talented and prolific artist/designer. He worked in all art media and subjects and was a co-founder and associate of the *Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst und Handwerk* (United Workshops for Arts and Crafts). Following the influence of his teachers, Ringer favored depictions of life and costume drawn from the Biedermeier period. It's said that he was a stand-up comedian and that seems to be reflected in most of his light-hearted murals and illustrations. Although Ringer worked during the Art Nouveau era, his works do not reflect much influence of that style. On the other hand, his flat, two dimensional scenes show stylistic influence of Poster Art. The steins in figure 19 (VBM #3000-3005) have scenes and verses reflecting common German Bourgeois life and humorous philosophies.

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Left to right: VBM #3000, 3001, 3002, 3003, 3004, 3005



Figure 20 - From left to right: VBM #3188-3193 by Franz Ringer. These steins pose an interesting question for collectors: Do they form a single set of six, two sets of three with matching shapes, or three pairs by color?



Another group of Ringer steins (figure 20, VBM #3188-3193) reflect a more modern style, with sleek bodies and bright colors with scenes of people enjoying the pleasures of everyday life.

Ringer was very careful to include his monogram within the vast majority of his works..



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[My own very favorite stein (fig. 21) that adorns my desk is a Ringer design on 0.5 L. Reinhold Merkelbach 2164. I've adopted the verse, *Ich sing mein Lied so gut ich kann* (I sing my song as well as I can) as my way of life.]

Ludwig Hohlwein (b. Wiesbaden 1874 - d. Berchtesgaden 1949) was another of the very well known artist/designers whose work appeared on steins made by several different firms. Coming late to the scene, his designs were very much like Ringer's and reflected the poor economic time leading up to WWI.

Hohlwein lived and worked in Munich until 1911 when he moved to Berlin, and he often featured the Munich Child in his artwork. Other favored motifs included both humans and animals, often with a humorous, lighthearted or traditional leaning. On beer steins his motifs often stretched from handle to handle.

Fifteen steins and one punch bowl produced by VBM bear his decorations (#3167-3173, #3276-3281, and two steins in the BAVARIA series, #3079/539 and #3282/539). Except for the punch bowl, all of these include his signature or monogram. Although Hohlwein is only briefly mentioned in the preamble of the Blue Bible and only one stein noted, all fifteen of his steins are listed in catalog supplements of 1909-10, and all of the catalog listings credit Hohlwein for the designs.

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VBM #3279



23



Left to right: VBM #3280, #3278, #3079/539, #3282/539



Figure 24: Left to right: VBM stein #3171; two views of punch bowl #507(3037); steins #3168 (center) and #3169 (right)

In closing, I have tried to point out the difficulty of unambiguously classifying an individual stein as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Poster Style or something else. Just as in baseball, the umpires sometimes have difficulty and may disagree whether a ball is inside or outside the foul lines. The term “Art Nouveau” brings with it an additional problem of context: what time frame is indicated when we refer to something as being “new”? The words “modern” and “contemporary” have similar deficiencies—what was once modern may now be “passé” or outdated. The original VBM catalogs used the term “modern,” which was certainly appropriate for these items at the time. TMB seems to have had an unwarranted tendency to lump Art Deco in with Art Nouveau, or to refer to some pieces as “geometric design”. Similarly, the BSL has used the term Art Nouveau indiscriminately. The point here is not to point out “errors”, but to emphasize some of the difficulties in applying stylistic labels to these steins. Distinctive they are, but they resist being too tightly labeled.

The VBM steins shown in figure 25 demonstrate the point. VBM stein 2034 can be described as Arabesque or Islamic, although it has elements of both Art Nouveau and Art Deco. The next stein, VBM #1132 has pyramids, a geometric form which is associated with so-called Art Deco or Bauhaus. Finally



the VBM stein 2583 has faux-hieroglyphics on the wall, the ultimate in so-called Poster Art. Clearly, elements of each of these “modern” styles were in use centuries if not millennia before modern times.

This is the last in a series of articles comprising more than 70 pages and countless photos over a 3-year period. As author, I am very thankful for the meaningful contributions of Anna Sanchez of AMOCA (primary photographer) and Walt Vogdes (editor)—it was a team effort the entire way. I also need to thank Steve Steigerwald, Ron Fox and Horst Barbian for photos. In addition to photos of some rare items, Horst Barbian freely shared his invaluable knowledge of VBM history.



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