

# A Crucible for the New Man and Woman: A Phenomenology of the Art Nouveau Interior

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Il est possible d'envisager les intérieurs Art nouveau comme une séquence dans la longue histoire de la création d'intérieurs spectaculaires et innovants, destinés à impressionner les visiteurs et à symboliser le goût, la richesse et le capital culturel de leurs propriétaires. Les intérieurs Art nouveau ont également été abordés comme un moment fort du design moderne, qui met l'accent sur l'utilisation de nouveaux matériaux et nouvelles technologies ainsi que de nouveaux principes, tels que la franchise de la construction, la mise en valeur de l'artisanat et le concept de l'œuvre d'art totale. Sans vouloir écarter aucun de ces éléments d'interprétation, cette contribution se concentre sur un attribut des intérieurs Art nouveau qui est bien spécifique — bien que pas totalement unique à ces intérieurs et à leur contexte culturel. De nombreux intérieurs Art nouveau ont été conçus par des artistes et des mécènes comme autant des manifestations d'une forme nouvelle et moderne de conscience. Plus encore, comme des outils de réalisation ou de contribution à cette conscience moderne. Ces intérieurs étaient des espaces pensés pour s'adresser aux individus venant de prendre conscience du fonctionnement de leur esprit et de leur corps. Ils étaient dessinés pour rétablir et protéger les psychés, perçues comme ébranlées et brisées par les pressions de la vie moderne. Enfin, ils étaient conçus pour faciliter la recherche d'une nouvelle unité entre le corps, l'esprit et l'âme, voire une transcendance à un niveau supérieur de l'être.

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his chapter will present a series of case studies from across European Art Nouveau. I shall argue that a full understanding of the often astonishing interiors created during the Art Nouveau period depends on recognizing them not simply as art works, but also as instruments of stimulation. The user was addressed not just on a visual level, but across the spectrum of the senses as designers sought to affect the whole body. The impact of light and dark, enclosed and open space, profusion and absence of ornament, intriguing variations in surfaces and colour modulations, unexpected sightlines and the disruption of expected relationships were more than mere dramatic artifice. The user was transported in their exploration of these new interiors and their connections to the mundane world severed.

This project of transportation was not sought simply for the sake of novelty, but as part of a wider project in pursuit of the new man and woman. The cultural aftershocks of Darwin's theory of natural selection continued to reverberate. The awful simplicity and amorality of the pursuit of new and better forms in nature — "Multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die" — held out the tantalizing possibility of the continued transformation and betterment of the human race.<sup>1</sup> As well as the spectre of its alternative: degeneration through the multiplication of the unfit.

The development of the medical discipline of psychology offered new modes of understanding the human psyche. That this fledgling science was so quick to penetrate contemporary culture was due to its resonances with wider concerns regarding the modern self. Across the fields of the arts, writers and artists sought to dig beneath the surface. Nineteenth-century Symbolist authors, like Huysmans and Maeterlinck, had played with rich imagery, sensory depth and stylistic abstraction to conjure feeling and sensation, to horrify and enchant. Others such as Ibsen and James produced works of challenging psychological depth, exposing the fault lines between human needs and the unforgiving apparatus of modern manners and morals. The visions of these authors fed into wider culture and its understanding of the place of the individual in the world.

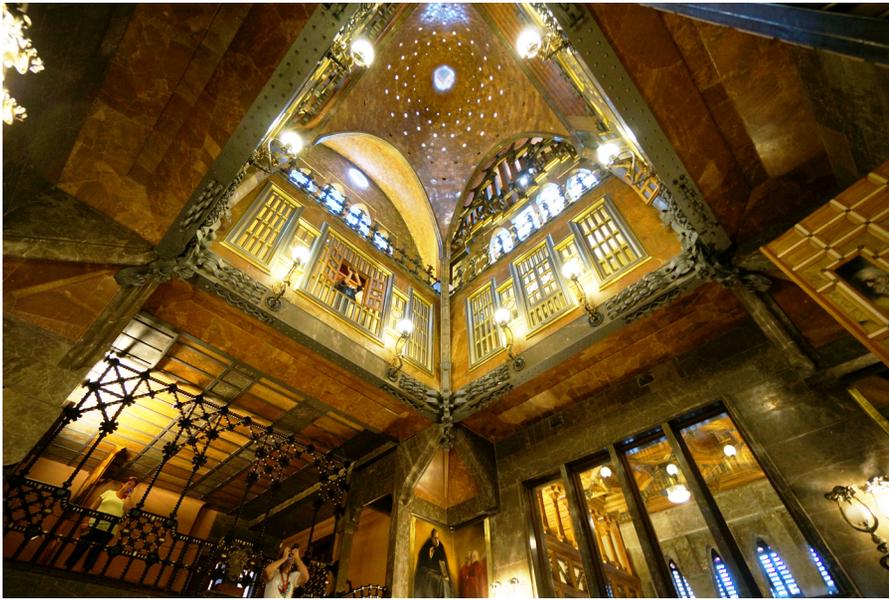
The philosophies of Henri Bergson, Theodor Lipps and, above all, Friedrich Nietzsche sought to acknowledge the power of forces which could not be seen, the intuitive power of the human psyche and relational forces acting on that psyche, both between individuals and between individuals and their environment. In the work of these writers, and the many writers inspired by their ideas, the modern world was represented as having ensnared and enfeebled mankind, cutting it off from the creative forces of the spirit and the psyche. To overcome these toils was the challenge to which humanity must rise. Success in this venture required the breaking of unnecessary fetters of convention, in order to free the human spirit and ascend to a higher state of being. These visions could be either resplendent or terrifying, as the costs were high in terms of traditional faith, morality and human connections, while the costs of failure were the bleakness of alienation, nihilism and despair. In line with Darwin's theories and the empathy theory of Lipps, environment had a vital role to play in this project.

#### ANTONI GAUDÍ, PALAU GÜELL, BARCELONA, 1886–89

The Güell Palace is one of Gaudí's key early commissions.<sup>2</sup> From the rigorous ornamentation to the emphasis on dramatic, processional transitions through the space, the design uses the gothic idiom to create a dynamic, sensory environment, which departed from the familiar to a potentially disorienting extent. If we trace the path of initial visitors through the house, we start at the entrance hall. Visitors would arrive by carriage, turning off the narrow and somewhat disreputable street where the palace stood, conveyed under dramatic iron portals into this

1 Darwin, C., *Origin of the Species*, London: John Murray, 1859, p. 109.

2 González, A., Lacuesta, R., and Baldomá, M., *Güell Palace: A masterpiece by Antoni Gaudí*. Barcelona: Diputació Barcelona, 2013.



**FIG. 1** Antoni Gaudí, *Palace Güell*, Barcelona, 1886–89 © Andrew and Annemarie (CC BY-SA 2.0) <https://flic.kr/p/A5B3XM>.

austere, cool stone hall. A street within the house. Gaudí planned a route for the visitor that took them up through the house. Turns and returns in the route as well as openings between rooms prevented any clear apprehension of the scale or layout of the palace.

The result was one of imaginative disorientations and the illusion of potentially infinite space. The need to control temperature by restricting direct sunlight into the building had the further effect of disrupting potential reorientation in reference to the outside world. The experience of the environment was carefully orchestrated so that, from the grey stone of the entrance, through a progressive enrichment of the palette of materials to include new varieties of stone, wood and metalwork, the spaces became progressively more subtle.

The incremental deprivation of orientation in space, in favour of the steady enrichment of sensory detail, culminated in the main hall **FIG. 1**. This was the spiritual heart and aesthetic apotheosis of the palace. Here diffused light and sound from the hidden organ and musicians' gallery completed the transformative journey.

#### BAILLIE SCOTT, *LE NID*, SINAIA PALACE, ROMANIA, 1897–98

Understanding of the effect of environment upon the psyche developed hand in hand with apprehension of the damaging character of modern environments, both the city and the strictures of polite society. This commission is an example of an attempt to escape through architecture — a tree house, dreamed up by Princess Marie at the Sinaia Palace in Romania and called *The Nest*, by Baillie Scott.<sup>3</sup>

British-born Marie was oppressed by her role as princess consort under the watchful eye of the conservative court. The tree house reflects her interest in fairy tales and childhood as a period of freedom.<sup>4</sup> The route, through the woods, up the wooden staircase of a tower, across a high-rise walkway, marks a retreat into a space of play.

Again, what is found within is simultaneously an aesthetic and spiritual experience and a union of multiple art forms. The decorative scheme is based on floral symbolism, inspired by the verses of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Kallestrup, S., *Art and design in Romania 1866–1927: local and international aspects of the search for national expression*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, pp. 46–51.

<sup>4</sup> Kallestrup, S., "Royalty is no longer quite royal": word and image in the children's tales of Queen Marie of Romania," in *Image & Narrative*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2018, pp. 23–45.

<sup>5</sup> Baillie-Scott, H.M., *Houses and Gardens*. London: Newnes Ltd, 1906, pp. 201–3.



**FIG. 3** Fyodor Shekhtel, Hall staircase, *Ryabushinsky House*, Moscow, 1900–03 © Shesmax (CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=41871357>.

The main room was dedicated to the sun and the sunflower — motifs of love and fertility repeated on many surfaces [FIG. 2](#). The Oratory alcove is lily-themed. Though this can be seen to suit its forest location, embedded in nature, the interior makes little reference to the external world. The fantastic route taken by visitors up into the treetops is part of the journey, but the interior is another realm again. One that addressed the inner life, through embodied experience.

#### FYODOR SCHECHTEL, *RYABUSHINSKY HOUSE*, MOSCOW, 1900–03

The centrepiece of the Ryabushinsky House in Moscow is a sculptural staircase [FIG. 3](#). This creates a dramatic space, opening up the heart of the house, otherwise composed of more domestic-scale rooms. The stairway of this hall is otherworldly and unstable, with diffused light from a stained-glass window and a skylight and electric lights, softly illuminating the wavering forms of the steps. This staircase lies at the heart of the house and makes no reference to the external world, the Moscow street outside. Rather it evokes the dynamic organicism of a rippling, underwater world. It is the manipulated light that unifies the interior and transforms it from aesthetic curiosity into a journey to another world. The Ryabushinsky House was owned by a young industrialist, a member of the network of Old Believer merchant families in Moscow and a prominent collector of Russian icons. The innovative idiom and underwater fairy-tale theme of his home allowed him to embody his aspirations for a Russian cultural revival, but also of a more personal transformation made possible through a departure from the realms of the mundane.

The thematic inspiration is the Russian folktale of Sadko, a musician adventurer who woos the daughter of the King of the Sea. This tale inspired, among other, Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Sadko*, premiered in 1898, and Ilya Repin's *Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom*, 1876. It was also the theme taken by the artist Elena Lutsch-Makowsky for one of her panels for the famous Beethoven exhibition at the Vienna Secession in 1902, where the theme of otherworldly travels and transformation were united.

The interior used innovative materials and technologies (such as the marble aggregate of the staircase itself, with its integrated electric light) as well as more



FIG. 2 M.H. Baillie Scott, *Le Nid*, 1898. Frontispiece in *Houses and Gardens* 1906.





FIG. 4 Eiel Saarinen, *Villa Girardet*, competition entry, *Modern Bauformen*, 7 (6) 1904.

traditional crafts in innovative ways. The parquet floor breaks into wave patterns that echo the themes of the staircase and other details. The stained glass at the head of the stairs ensures that the light filtering down is appropriately blueish and watery. Shekhtel's background was in theatre design, before he was able to break into architectural practice, making the theatricality of his interiors particularly accomplished.

The manipulation of light, a central part of this approach, can be seen in a host of Art Nouveau examples. Eliel Saarinen's Villa Girardet was designed for a competition for a villa for the German publisher and printer Wilhelm Girardet and placed 2<sup>nd</sup> of 186 entries in 1904 <sup>6</sup> FIG. 4. The illustrations published in *Modern Bauformen* reveal a series of richly ornamented interiors, suffused with glowing light. Nearly every window in the villa is given stained glass, so that, though the overall design of the building is closely integrated within a formal garden layout, once inside there is no contact with the outside world. A similar effect can be traced in many of Victor Horta's interiors, which are flooded with light, but primarily from above. In the Hotel van Eetvelde, Brussels (1895–98), roof lights illuminate the main staircase and reception room, which is designed as a dramatized evocation of the exotic, colonized space of the Belgian Congo.

Lluís Domènech i Montaner's Casa Lleó Morera (1902–1902) in Barcelona transformed an existing townhouse into a modern Catalan-Gothic-Moorish palace.<sup>7</sup> The richly ornamented interiors are illuminated by extensive stained-glass windows by Antoni Rigalt i Blanch. In his scheme for the glazed gallery facing the inner courtyard we see a mountainous Catalan landscape, including the mulberry bush associated with the name Morera, as an alternative vista to the dense cityscape outside. The space within is bathed in natural light, but it is not the light of the modern city. Instead it offers a vision of rural Catalonia that speaks both of nationalist nostalgia and of the shared dream of future independence. The interior of Casa Lleó Morera cannot be simplistically framed as a site for escapism and private dreaming. The house, like the Güell Palace, was a meeting place for individuals active within the Catalan revival. Their activities, both cultural and political, were perfectly framed by these spaces, not a retreat from the world but a transcending of the limits of present realities.

#### OTTO WAGNER, CHURCH OF ST LEOPOLD, STEINHOF, 1905–07

Otto Wagner's design for the Steinhof Mental Asylum outside Vienna represents the coming together of new thinking on architecture for mental well-being across both the psychiatric and design professions.<sup>8</sup> The church, placed at the geographical and conceptual apex of the complex, encapsulates Wagner's efforts to contribute to the therapeutic treatment of patients FIG. 5. It represented the heart of the community and its spiritual life, and was the only building Wagner fully planned. In this project he took the opportunity to make a statement as to the role architecture and art might play in alleviating the ills of the modern city. The structure was light and airy, clad inside and out in washable marble slabs. The bodily needs of patients were considered down to the minutiae of design details like the absence of steps to trip over, or the substitution of a holy water tap for the traditional stoup, to prevent the passing on of infection. Subtle control over the patients was facilitated through varying the length of benches, so that calm patients could sit in larger groups than potentially agitated ones. Access to the pulpit and organ loft was also carefully restricted.

If the mental and spiritual needs of patients were addressed through the symmetrical, regular plan of the complex as a whole, this culminated in the self-contained Greek-cross plan of the church, with its central dome. The colour palette of the pavilions was white and green. In the church this shifted

6 Hausen, M. et al., *Eliel Saarinen: Projects 1896–1923*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990, pp. 134–7.

7 Russo Spina, R. and Casals, L., *Lluís Domènech i Montaner: 1850–1923*, Naples: CLEAN, 2014, pp. 13–94.

8 Topp, L., "Otto Wagner and the Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital: architecture as misunderstanding", in *The Art Bulletin*, 87(1) 2005, pp. 130–156.



FIG. 5 Otto Wagner, *St Leopold's Church, Steinhof, Vienna*. 1905–07

to a more celebrational white and gold, with a cool, blue-dominated palette for the stained-glass windows. Abundant light and gentle colour were used to uplift and calm. This attention to detail extended through the iconography of the church, which replaces potentially disquieting images of Christian suffering with a benign, paternal deity and a pantheon of caring saints and angels. All the figures in the windows by Kolo Moser are calm and still, gazing towards the altar with rapt, devotional attention.

#### MARY WATTS, *WATTS CHAPEL, COMPTON, SURREY*, 1895–98

St Leopold's has parallels with Mary Seton Watts's chapel at Compton. Here, the Greek-cross plan and central domed space within represents a phenomenology of balance and a symbology of the cardinal points and the four elements. The building was simultaneously a gesture of love between husband and wife, a realization of Seton Watts's spiritual and ethical beliefs and a release of her creative energies, after her career as an artist was set aside for her role as a wife and helpmate.

The interior was marked by a complex symbology that ranged across times and geographies in pursuit of spiritual resonances that, if not universal, should at least transcend the limitations of the contemporary world. The making of the work, which involved the hand modelling of ornament in terracotta for the exterior and gesso for the interior, meant that every inch of the building bore the mark of human creative endeavour.<sup>9</sup> The vision realised was Seton Watts's, but also that of the over seventy local people who participated in the project, presumably motivated by their own spiritual and creative needs.

Though the iconography of the chapel required Watts to write a special guide book to parse it, the colours and rhythms of the ornamental scheme achieve a more immediate impact, building, linking and repeating as it rises up the walls.<sup>10</sup> Seton Watts's mystical approach can be captured in the following quote from the end of her guide book, *The Word in the Pattern*, describing the main door. The rhythmic, run-on sentences echo the visual form of the interlocking ornaments, and illuminate their transportative spiritual purpose:

9 Gould, V.F., "Mary Watts and the Creation of Watts Chapel" in Bills, M., ed., *An Artists' Village: G.F. Watts and Mary Watts at Compton, Compton, Surrey*: Watts Gallery, 2011, pp. 67–86.

10 Greenhow, D., "The Symbolism of Watts Chapel", in *An Artists' Village*, op. cit., pp. 87–102.

*Behind the cross on the door there is a glimpse through a circle into light; circle within circle, with flames and wings — eternity, mystery, light, motion, spirituality, protection — ruling above the mystery of darkness; the dragon below, smitten through by the cross.*<sup>11</sup>

I would like to conclude by referring to Freud's rooms in Berggasse 19, Vienna. His study and consultation room were full of images and an assemblage of archaeological fragments that aided his and his analysands' free association of ideas. Above the famous couch was hung a print representing the Abu Simbel temples, which had been lost and were rediscovered by archaeologists in the early nineteenth century. Freud often favoured the analogy of archaeology when discussing the function of psychoanalysis in bringing to light that which was buried beneath the surface.<sup>12</sup> In addition to this the couch was covered in a warm, rich pile of turkey carpet and multiple cushions, so that the body of the analysand was both cocooned and gently stimulated by patterns and colours.

These varied examples from across European Art Nouveau all evince the wide spread of awareness that the mind of the subject could be touched and affected by their environment. Going beyond concern for the healthy body, which was another strand of Modernism, these designs and many others addressed the mind. Not simply in pursuit of health, but in pursuit of a more complex and nuanced set of ideas based around the assumption of depths not yet fully plumbed and vistas not yet fully realized. Through the orchestration of light, materials, acoustics, colours and patterns, it was possible for different associations, perceptions and experiences to be set in motion. The conceptual tools of fairy-tale, myth and the distant past, which were commonly employed, were shared by the emerging discipline of psychoanalysis. The inward turn represented by these interiors was not solely a retreat from the harshness of the modern world. It can also be understood as a striving towards the greater depths of perception, consciousness, sensibility and wisdom that would mark humanity's next stage of evolution. ■

<sup>11</sup> Watts, M.S., *The Word in the Pattern: A Key to the Symbols on the Walls of the Chapel at Compton*, London: Wm H. Ward & Co., 1904, pp. 25–6.

<sup>12</sup> Armstrong, R., *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the ancient world*, Ithaca, NY and Bristol: Cornell University Press, 2005.