



West Hollywood Library
- main entrance.
Architecture by Johnson Favaro.
Photograph by Benny Chan

Jim
FavaroMaria
Śliwińska

What do We Think About Art Nouveau Today?

Jim, you are an architect with great achievements. You are a member of the Board of Directors of the American Institute of Architects, Los Angeles and the co-chair of the Political Outreach Committee there. Among your achievements there are five AIA Design Awards to date. Your company was responsible among others for designing new buildings for cultural heritage institutions such as the West Hollywood Library, the Pasadena Museum of California Art, and the Price Art Galleries, plus many other architectural designs. Your buildings are modern, but not all are just simply modern blocks. I noticed some decorations there and care about the natural materials used. We are preparing an issue of the *Uncommon Culture* journal devoted to *Art Nouveau* and I thought it would be interesting to get your opinion about this trend in art from the last century. Is anything else from that period as well known in the USA as Tiffany's work?

The Tiffany lamp is popularly known in the United States as an example of decorative art (or product design) of a certain place and time, namely the eastern seaboard of the country around the turn of the last century - the Gilded Age, Roaring Twenties. Although considered old school now (and of somewhat questionable taste), it is generally held in high regard for its relative originality at the time and for Tiffany's ability to have produced individually crafted objects on a relatively large scale for those who could afford them. Somewhat less well known but perhaps more well-regarded are the works of Louis Sullivan who practiced principally in Chicago, Illinois and the brothers Greene and Greene, builders and product designers (*craftsmen*) who practiced in Pasadena, California at around the same time. Louis Sullivan employed Frank Lloyd Wright as an apprentice and Greene and Greene influenced Wright's early work. Wright in turn influenced the European modernists of the "heroic age". Interestingly Wright's consistent interest in and attention to decorative surface and ornamental detail throughout his life is the one attribute of his work that had the least influence on the European avant-garde who as Adolf Loos most famously remarked that ornament was "a crime".

Well, the Sullivan name is most probably less known than Tiffany's, but his "products" - skyscrapers - became the symbol of the USA. Nevertheless his work, however important, is not counted as Art Nouveau but rather modernism, although very often it's difficult to distinguish between those two styles, especially since Art Nouveau does not have only one "face". Green and Green's Ultimate bungalow,

Tiffany *Daffodil*
lead glass table
lamp, designed by
Clara Driscoll,
Louis Comfort
Tiffany & Co.
head designer,
Ca 1899-1920.
(From a private
collection,
New York City.)
Photograph
by Telome4



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Wiki-Tiffany-daffodil-low-jpg>

an example of architecture of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, presents more functional but less decorative style. But their *Tree of Life* from the Gamble House is really very impressive *Art Nouveau* style decoration.

Semantics aside, Sullivan, Greene and Greene are very much the American face of what was going on in the western world (Europe and the United States) at the time that Art Nouveau emerged as a movement in Europe - and therefore like the major players in the Art Nouveau



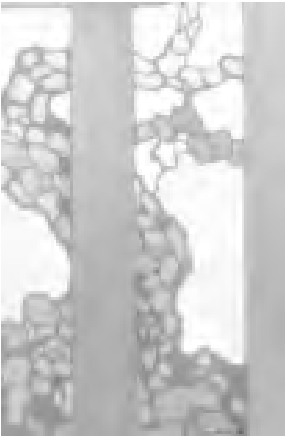
The Gamble House,
Pasadena, California,
by Charles
and Henry Greene,
1908.
Photograph
(2005,
after restoration)
by Mr. Exuberance

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GambleHouse-2005_edit1.jpg

movement in Europe considered at least from the American perspective not traditionalists or classicists but modernists or perhaps more precisely proto-modernists. From an architect's perspective their work is noteworthy because like Art Nouveau and unlike orthodox modernism it was an attempt to cast off the habits of the past through transformation rather than obliteration. The philosophies, ideas, motivations, often the works themselves, even the images employed by Sullivan, his followers, Greene and Greene and others in America - are almost identical to that which was going on in Europe. We just don't call it "Art Nouveau" in America. Tiffany, for example, is never referred to in America as "Art Nouveau". If anything his company's work is referred to as a part of the Arts and Crafts movement in America, even though he himself acknowledged having been influenced by what was going on in the Art Nouveau movement in Paris at the time.

Yes, that's true that the term "Art Nouveau" was not used everywhere. In Spain, where the works of Gaudi are the symbol of this movement for the country, it's just included in Modernism, in a much broader sense. In Poland we call this period Secession or Młoda Polska (Young Poland). Let's get back to Tiffany. The





Tree of life from Gamble House.
Architecture by Greene and Greene.
Photograph by Tim Street-Porter



Tiffany style revolutionized the way things were looked at in New York, and became hugely popular at the turn of the century. His stained glasses windows and lamps are still popular and called by his name. What of the Louis Comfort Tiffany work do you find to be the most interesting?

It is an overstatement to claim that Tiffany revolutionized the way things were looked at in New York. This is to imply that he was more of a leader than he was. His company's work was a commercially successful manifestation of ideas that emerged at the end of the 19th century in response to the fallout of the industrial revolution. This if anything is what distinguishes his achievements from those of the Europeans and sets him apart as American; that he was able to translate elitist philosophical and artistic ideas into a successful commercial venture by hiring lots of talented artisans to work for him. Because of this success he did for a moment enjoy renown and prestige among the business, social and political (not intellectual or artistic) elite. The White House even commissioned him to do a fair amount of interior and glass work-all of which was summarily removed later in order to restore the house to its Federalist roots. (In Washington DC the ornamental language of neo-classical architecture is employed for ideological and symbolic reasons. The classical language of architecture is considered a representation of the ideals of

Interior of the Gamble House.
Architecture by Greene and Greene.
Photograph by Tim Street-Porter

democracy and republicanism that are the philosophical foundations of the country). Tiffany was a commercially successful beneficiary of the ideas (and work) of others, certainly not considered an original thinker as are the architects Louis Sullivan and the Greene brothers.

Sullivan and the Greene brothers did not reject ornamentation but rather sought out more authentic ways to make it and incorporate it into the built environment at around the time when the tradition of the classical language of architecture was collapsing and the Industrial Revolution had enabled the proliferation of meaningless ornament into every aspect of our lives. Sullivan and the Greene brothers sought both an ethic and an aesthetic of hand-made, nature-based ornamentation rooted not in book-learned concepts from the past or rote repetition facilitated by machine production but rather in what they saw as a more direct route: the logic and artifice of craft itself. Their work is of more interest to architects and they influenced Frank Lloyd Wright and other architects more than Tiffany did because they more rigorously and comprehensively sought to integrate ornament with structure and material at all scales of construction - from handrails to doors, windows and whole buildings.

Tiffany was an artist and designer, not an architect, so his role was different than that of Louis Sullivan and the other architects. Let's get back to Tiffany, whose name is really a symbol of the lamps that are still popular and called by his name, but who is not only famous because of the lamps. Tiffany also designed stained glass windows, ceramics, jewelry, and metalwork. As you mentioned, he was the first professional decorator hired to work in the White House. He decorated also homes of the famous and rich, such as Mark Twain, among others. His stained glasses *Education* decorate the famous Yale University, the *Alma Mater* of your brother John. What of the Louis Comfort Tiffany work do you find to be the most interesting?

As an American architect with an American education I can safely say that while Tiffany may have had and perhaps even still has influence in the field of interior design and some artisanal practices in America today, he and his work has had next to no influence in American architecture of the 20th century or now. I can only speak as an architect and unfortunately as an architect I am not





City of West Hollywood Council Chamber.
Architecture by Johnson Favaro.
Photograph by Benny Chan



intimately familiar with Tiffany's work. Interestingly the popular reputation of the company has suffered by exactly what the proponents of the movement from which his work emerged detested or feared most: the proliferation of mass produced objects that degrade the original meaning and value of artistic traditions and the works of the human hand. The Tiffany lamp has been so reproduced in so many bad ways that it has become a symbol of bad taste in America. If there is value in this it is as a rather clear demonstration of a fundamental flaw of the Arts and Crafts movement, or Art Nouveau, or Liberty all of whom failed to apprehend the overwhelming challenges that industrialization and globalization would pose.

Well, bad reproductions of Tiffany's works is not his fault. Many artists have the same problems. Tiffany's *Tree of Life* is different



Guaranty Building in Buffalo. Architecture by Louis Sullivan.
Photograph by Ed Healy. By courtesy of Visit Buffalo Niagara Service

from that of the Greene brothers but beautiful. In the West Hollywood Library designed by you there is also a tree - a different one, but inspired somehow by Art Nouveau or like Gaudi (modernist) works inspired by nature. And we have to agree that Tiffany was also a good manager who hired talented artists working for him. But let's move on now to the topic of your interest - building construction and architecture. You gave the best examples of architecture (California and Chicago) by Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Greene brothers. How about the Art Nouveau architecture in the Eastern part of the USA, especially in New York? What do you think of the works of Herts & Tallant or the New Era Building? Or perhaps the New York Evening Post Building is the best example of Art Nouveau in this part of the USA?

The theaters in New York City from the turn of the last century such as the Lyceum Theater and to a lesser extent the New Amsterdam Theater by architects Herts and Tallant as well as the New Era Building (probably) by architects Buchman and Deisler represent exactly what proponents within the Art Nouveau movement in Europe, the Arts and Crafts movement, Sullivan, the Greene brothers and I imagine Tiffany in America detested: the indiscriminate and unthinking application of traditional "styles" - in these cases Greek, Roman and Egyptian revival - to modern building types that required a whole new way of thinking about ornament. While these buildings were built at around the same time as the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements they are excellent examples of the kind of retrograde mindset that the more progressive thinkers within those movements wanted to reform.

Have you ever thought about why there were more Art Nouveau experiments in Europe than in America?

Louis Sullivan, Greene and Greene, Frank Lloyd Wright and others did engage in Art Nouveau experiments- it's just that the work has not been appreciated in this way. The ornamental aspects of their work did not captivate the purist, modernist mind-set in America that so dominated the dialogue in of



The tree of life, stained glass by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933). Photograph by Isis <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tifftree.JPG>



The white sycamore tree that hovers over the stair,
rendered in ceramic, plaster and sheet metal.
Designed by David Wiseman. Architecture by
Johnson Favaro. Photography by Benny Chan.

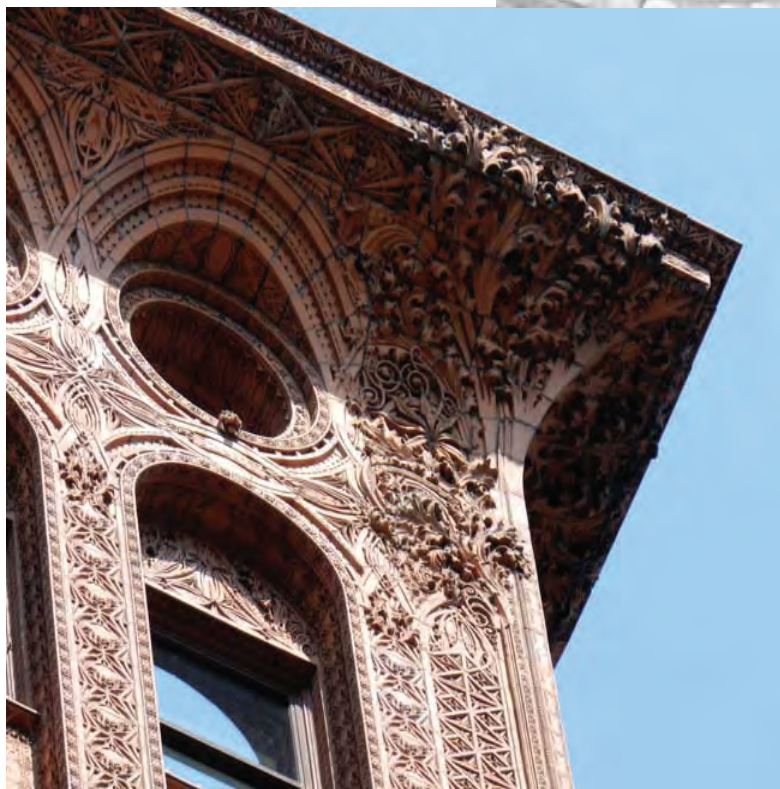
architecture throughout the 20th century. The modernist texts and academies minimized, edited out or ignored altogether the decorative aspects of their work emphasizing instead an appreciation of its more functional and abstract compositional qualities - and therefore in effect censored a lot of what was most characteristic of their work. This was perhaps a consequence of the somewhat unsuccessful and emotionally insecure attempt by “sophisticated” Americans to import and appropriate the ideas, techniques, forms and images propagated by such European luminaries as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. Oddly, this appropriation amounted to in effect the repeating of habits of the past - that is the superficial adaptation of a foreign language and its somewhat disingenuous imposition onto a different set of circumstances. By end of WWII the purist modernist aesthetic had fused with the practical, hyper-functional and reductive mindset of the progressive post-war American and dominated what was considered “good design” throughout most of the century.



Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius all counted as modernists rather. But there is a tendency to lump all those new styles (Art Nouveau, modernism, Art Deco, etc.) at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century together. As such how has Art Nouveau influenced your own work?

Despite all this, the decorative influences of Sullivan, Greene and Greene, Wright and others survived well into the 20th century. One example is the concrete textile block that Wright invented and famously employed in much of his later domestic architecture, particularly in California, and which proliferated across America in the 1950's. I would argue that it is through their work (not Tiffany's) that Art Nouveau has any influence today (on me or anyone in America). And I would argue that the ornamental or decorative impulse survives to this day in especially and most famously the work of Frank Gehry, whose work cannot only be appreciated as merely functional or compositional. Gehry's work perhaps above all demonstrates that the decorative impulse is deeply rooted in our humanity and that to create truly satisfying design we cannot ignore it. (Gehry is an avowed 20th century modernist who like Wright was appreciated first in Europe before America, and who like Wright has disavowed any claim to the “merely decorative” in his work.) That we in our own thinking and in our work are able here in Southern California to

Guaranty Building in Buffalo. Architecture by Louis Sullivan.
Photographs by Chuck LaChiusa. By courtesy of Visit Buffalo Niagara Service



appreciate the work of Gehry and Greene and Greene is perhaps the clearest way in which we can say that “Art Nouveau” influences our work. Perhaps most demonstrably the West Hollywood Library displays an appreciation of Greene and Greene in such details as the main reading room ceiling and the council chamber proscenium as well as an appreciation of the work of Frank Gehry in our shaping of the east and north facades of the building.

Yes, we clearly can see an influence of the Greenes' Gamble House in your design of the West Hollywood Library. This is one of the reasons I wanted so much interview you for our journal. Art Nouveau





exploded at the end of the 19th century and disappeared quickly. Later on, when a new modern design was introduced, Art Nouveau architecture became *démodé* and even some of the buildings designed by such famous architects like Horta have been demolished in spite of protests of architects associations. Do you know examples of pulling down American buildings that were built in the Art Nouveau style?

Some of Louis Sullivan's buildings were demolished including the Chicago Stock Exchange in Chicago, IL. The interiors of the Blacker House in Pasadena, CA by Greene and Greene were



The
Walt Disney
Concert Hall,
home to the
Los Angeles
Philharmonic.
Designed
by Frank Gehry
in 1999- 2003.
Photograph
by Carol M.
Highsmith

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Disney_Concert_Hall_by_Carol_Highsmith_edit2.jpg



notoriously dismantled and sold off in the 1980's. And the original main building of the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Japan by Frank Lloyd Wright was replaced by another building in the 1970's. The reasons for these losses and many others were unique to their circumstances but originated mainly in a widely shared world view that there was nothing to be learned from “old” buildings. This mind set disregarded wholesale the value of experience and wisdom embedded in tradition, especially Western traditions. The principals of the Art Nouveau movement and 20th century modernists in general assured the demise of any long lasting continuity or progression from what they established by underplaying if not discounting altogether their own roots in European traditions. They unwittingly or purposely promulgated the naive belief that whenever we create something we start from scratch, as if nothing had occurred prior - that all we need is nature and our two hands (“the honesty of craft”) to create something beautiful.

It is really sad that, instead of creating new buildings in new places in order to showcase new trends in design, we prefer to demolish our historical buildings, thereby losing the roots of architectural development. Do you feel there is a prejudice against Art Nouveau today? If so, why?

Yes, but mainly because it is so rare, therefore rarely seen and therefore not widely known or appreciated. It is rare because it is difficult to achieve. Sullivan, the Greene brothers, and Wright believed in the creative potential of individuals and the right of freedom from the real and perceived bondage of a common language of ornament. Frank Gehry talks about his work as if it were a reflection of American democracy, when what he really means is American individualism. This mind set built in a fundamental flaw of the Art Nouveau and other modernist movements, which was the conviction that inspired, hard-working individuals could supplant overnight an ornamental language that in the West had developed over 5,000 years of experience (the classical language of architecture rooted in ancient Mediterranean cultures). The successes of the Art Nouveau movement required an almost all or nothing mindset - a belief in the designer's total control over the built environment and the primacy of the individual artist as the supreme creator with special dominion over common culture. It created both spectacular and rare successes because that was its intent.

Many thanks Jim for sharing with us your point of view. I do appreciate that in spite of your many activities you were willing to find, probably not without difficulties, so much time to respond to the questions, to draw our attention to what was the real pride of America, to show the beauty of American skyscrapers, which is difficult to see from the ground. And I hope to be able to visit one day the public buildings designed by you, such as the West Hollywood Library or the Pasadena Museum of California Art, to admire contemporary American architecture, referring to the best examples from the history of architecture. Congratulations on your great achievements. Thank you again for this interesting interview.





The West Hollywood
Library - The Main
Reading Room.
Architecture by
Johnson Favaro;
Photograph
by Benny Chan

The West Hollywood
Library
San Vicente elevation
Architecture
by Johnson Favaro.
Photograph
by Benny Chan