

**The Evolution of Design in the Twentieth Century (Chicago Style)**

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Course

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a large number of changes in design or “movements” beginning with the final stages of the Arts and Crafts movement, and finishing with Postmodernism/Deconstructivism. There is no space to describe all of these movements here so, for the purpose of this essay, I will concentrate on only a few of the major movements in Western society and, in particular, I will focus on the way they reflect changes in society as a whole. Additionally, the main focus is on architecture because, as Jameson argues, it is “in the realm of architecture [...] that modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible.”<sup>2</sup> One problem stands out: Although many things can influence design – culture, economics, fashion, etc. – “[d]esign is essentially a private, idiosyncratic affair.”<sup>3</sup> So even if we can decipher certain trends, there will always be personal elements that are only attributable to the characteristics of the designer.

At the turn of the century the Arts and Crafts movement (c. 1860 – c. 1910) was dying out. It had been a reaction to the mechanization of production during the Industrial Revolution, but handmade products were proving to be too expensive – only the wealthy could afford them. Art Nouveau (c. 1890 – c. 1914) took its name from the gallery in Paris opened in 1895<sup>4</sup> by Samuel Bing called Le Maison de l'Art Nouveau. Famous for its “sinuous, naturalistic style [...] asymmetry and whiplash lines,”<sup>5</sup> this movement also relied on hand craftsmanship thereby making its products expensive. It spread around Europe and the USA occasionally under different names such as *modernismo* in Spain, an example of

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2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 2.

3. Tim McCreight, *Design Language* (Hong Kong: Brynmorgen Pr, 2005), sec. Introduction.

4. Bing had already had a pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1890 so the dating for the origin of the concept is uncertain.

5. Catherine McDermott, *Design: The Key Concepts*, 1st ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007), 19.

which is Gaudí's Basílica de la Sagrada Família (fig. 1). But la Sagrada Família is instantly recognizable as the work of Gaudí – it is not just an expression of modernism.



Fig. 1. Basílica de la Sagrada Família. *Source:* [www.pinterest.cl/pin/369717450630586301/](http://www.pinterest.cl/pin/369717450630586301/)

Alphonse Mucha is seen as a typical artist of the Art Nouveau period. His name is associated with the actress Sarah Bernhardt as he designed posters for her plays, gaining contracts to do commercial posters for cigarettes (fig. 2), champagne, baby food, etc. His work demonstrates the curvilinear style of the French school, often using beautiful curvilinear

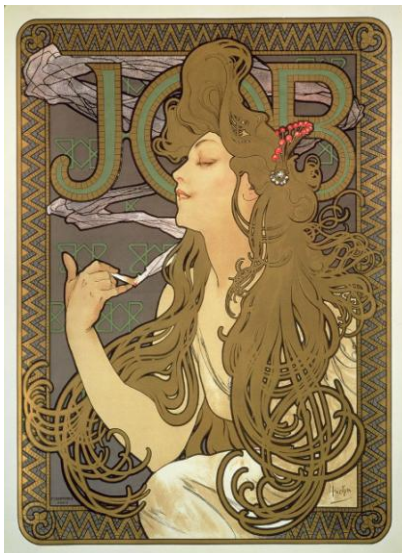


Fig. 2. Mucha poster for COG cigarettes.  
*Source:* <https://www.frammentirivista.it/alfons-mucha-arte-pubblicita/>

women with long curvy hair as his subject. The International Exhibition of 1900 gave him the opportunity to display his work, and his original intention was to design murals to depict the

suffering of the Bosnia/Herzegovina Slavs under Austro–Hungarian rule. The entrance to Châtelet Métro station in Paris (fig. 3), designed by Hector Guimard in 1901, also reflects the curvilinear features of the Art Nouveau period.



Fig. 3. Châtelet Métro station. *Source:*[https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMR0CJ\\_Chtelet\\_Mtro\\_Station\\_ParisFrance](https://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMR0CJ_Chtelet_Mtro_Station_ParisFrance)

Art Nouveau furniture involved similar curvilinear shapes, which tended to make it expensive (fig. 4). By the beginning of World War I the movement was dead and Art Deco



Fig. 4. Émile Gallé bench 1902. *Source:*  
[https://www.wikiwand.com/fr/%C3%89mile\\_Gall%C3%A9](https://www.wikiwand.com/fr/%C3%89mile_Gall%C3%A9)

(c. 1910 – c. 1940) was emerging. An expression coined in 1925 derived from the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, Art Deco rejected the curves typical of Art Nouveau. The movement seems to have been influenced by the exotic, so the

discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in Egypt in 1922 probably had a pronounced effect on it. It was a purely decorative movement inspired by Aztec, Egyptian, and Asian forms (fig. 5)



Fig. 5. Lion Goddess brooch.

Source: <https://www.pinterest.pt/pin/501377370993424910/>

but it also aimed at “elegance that symbolized wealth and sophistication.” The “characteristic features of the style reflected admiration for the modernity of the machine and for the inherent design qualities of machine-made objects.”<sup>6</sup>

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6. “Art Deco,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Art-Deco>.

The period between 1930 and 1950 is one of streamlining in design. World War II had an effect on design, resulting from the need for efficiency and mass made production. Automobiles became as sleek as spaceships, while trains, ships and even buses acquired the new streamlined look (fig. 6). The same shapes were used for domestic appliances, such as fridges, radios, televisions and washing machines.”<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 6. PRR S1 6100 New York World's Fair 1939–40. *Source:* <https://www.are.na/block/1320713>

Modernism has its origins in the Industrial Revolution and, in particular, it dates from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It can be summed up in Louis Sullivan's statement: "form follows function."<sup>8</sup> Sullivan is closely associated with the skyscraper as a functional solution to urban crowding, but probably the person most closely associated with modernism in architecture is Le Corbusier. The skyscraper was, for him a "magnificent instrument for the

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7. McDermott, *Design*, 154.

8. H.F. Koeper, "Louis Sullivan, American Architect," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Sullivan>.



concentration of population, for getting rid of land congestion . . . for internal efficiency.”<sup>9</sup>

His intention was not to make people live in sixty-storey towers – these were for offices.

People were supposed to live in twelve-storey blocks and lower, peripheral dwellings<sup>10</sup> what followed was the building of high-rise blocks, symbolic of architectural “brutalism.”

But modernism is also associated with a rejection of ornamentation best represented in the essay “Ornament and Crime” by Alfred Loos. The interest, here, is not only that Loos argues that “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects,”<sup>11</sup> it is also the racist undertones that would help pave the way to Nazi Germany. Tattoos are okay for primitive Papuans while “the modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate.”<sup>12</sup> What would he say about Miley Cyrus (fig. 7)?



Fig. 7. Miley Cyrus. *Source:* <https://yaay.today/breakingnews/The-tattoos-Miley-Cyrus-got-with-Liam-Hemsworth-and-their-meaning-20210110-0023.html>.

Tattoo design also evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only in the design itself but also in the identity of the wearer. But the essential meaning remains the same: “Whether the

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9. Le Corbusier quoted in Alexi Ferster Marmot, “The Legacy of Le Corbusier and High-Rise Housing,” *Built Environment* (1978-) 7, no. 2 (1981): 83.

10. Marmot, 84.

11. Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” 20, accessed December 12, 2019, [https://kupdf.net/download/ornament-and-crimepdf\\_5a108c94e2b6f5b80ef9acd3\\_pdf](https://kupdf.net/download/ornament-and-crimepdf_5a108c94e2b6f5b80ef9acd3_pdf).

12. Loos, 19.

bearer is a Maori chief in New Zealand or a Japanese mafia lord, tattoos express an indelible identity. “They say, ‘this is who I am, and what I have done.’”<sup>13</sup> In Europe and the US in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tattoos were only for entertainers or members of closed social groups such as convicts or sailors, and they generally had specific meanings. Sailors, for example, would recognize the turtle tattoo as an indication that the bearer had crossed the

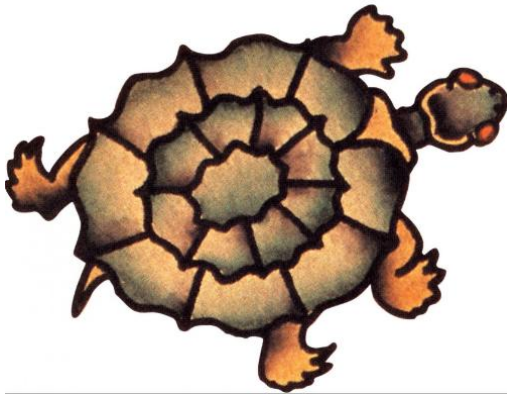


Fig. 8. Turtle Tattoo. *Source:* <http://amorq.com/article/4715/cartoonist-illustrates-the-meanings-behind-traditional-sailor-tattoos>.

equator (fig. 8).<sup>14</sup> By the 1970s, tattoos were becoming popular and celebrities such as Pamela Anderson made it more acceptable for ordinary people to get themselves tattooed. Postmodernism is also reflected in the “anything goes” mentality that allows anybody to tattoo anything anywhere on their body. It symbolizes a society where consumerism is dominant and conformism takes second place to freedom of choice. The turtle is, however, definitely uncool.

Deconstructivism, which dates from the 1980s, is actually a concept that comes from semiotics and the philosophy of Derrida, so it is difficult how it could find expression in design. It is also seen as part of postmodernist philosophy so there it becomes more

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13. Chris Rainier quoted in Abigail Tucker, “Looking at the World’s Tattoos,” *Smithsonian*, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/looking-at-the-worlds-tattoos-60545660/>.

14. Dan Hunter, “History of Tattoos: A Complete Timeline,” *AuthorityTattoo* (blog), November 28, 2019, <https://authoritytattoo.com/history-of-tattoos/>.



identifiable particularly in architectural design. Postmodernism, as the name implies, can be seen as a reaction to modernism or, we might argue, the importance of utility or function.

Among the leaders of the attack on modernism was Robert Venturi who wrote “[i]n substituting “articulation” for decoration, [modernism] has become a duck.”<sup>15</sup> Postmodern buildings are, generally, seen as being more meaningful to the general public than modern buildings.<sup>16</sup> With postmodernism there is a kind of “anything goes” philosophy – the artist leaves it to the observer or recipient of the art to read into it what you will. Jameson argues



Fig. 9. Louvre Pyramid. *Source:* <https://screenbeauty.com/info/louvre-paris-france-133292.html>

that “the extraordinary flowering of the new postmodern architecture [is] grounded in the patronage of multinational business.”<sup>17</sup> If big business is on your side you can do what you want, which might explain how the pyramidal monstrosity (fig. 9) blocking the view of the

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15. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, 2. Auflage. Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977), 101–3.

16. Linda Groat, “Meaning in Post-Modern Architecture: An Examination Using the Multiple Sorting Task,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 1982): 3, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(82\)80002-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(82)80002-9).

17. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 5.

beautiful French Renaissance museum ever got building approval.

In an essay of this length it is not possible to focus on all of the changes in design which took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The important point is that design does not work in a vacuum, it depends on the skill of the designer, but it is also influenced by the society in which it takes place.

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## Glossary

**Brutalism:** A style in art and especially architecture using exaggeration and distortion to create its effect (as of massiveness or power).<sup>18</sup>

**Deconstructivism:** An approach which tries to “examine the nature and function of architecture, in particular the relationship between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, characterized by overlapping, fragmented forms.”<sup>19</sup>

**Postmodernism:** “Broadly speaking, it is a response to, and a reaction against, the absolutes implicit in Modernist theory and practice.”<sup>20</sup>

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18. “Brutalism,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/brutalism>.

19. McDermott, *Design*, 67.

20. McDermott, 181.

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