



The Nouveau Risqué: A Perspective on Women and Progress

The Industrial Revolution changed the world. The working class moved from the fields into the growing urban environment, factories grew out of the ground, and goods were produced quickly and at a much more affordable cost. Mass production allowed the gaudy and over decorated style of the wealthy elite to spread into ordinary homes, exhibitions, and offices.

Design reform criticizing this misuse of machinery began with the first international exhibition, *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, which took place in London in 1851. This event set the precedent for exhibitions to take place in Europe and the United States, challenging Western design traditions and fostering a feeling of unification at the end of the century.

The Arts and Crafts designers argued for quality production, but instead of attacking ornament alone, they pointed to poor design as a reflection of the country's poor spiritual and moral state. A man must become a craftsman to truly have joy in one's labor. Emerging simultaneously with this movement, the Aesthetes believed in "art for art's sake," producing the most beautifully and expensively made pieces, but without an ideological belief system. Art Nouveau combined these two influences to produce an international movement interested in change that was manifested in diverse styles. These reform movements were unified in their belief of good design, proper ornament, quality materials, and equality between the fine and decorative arts. All of these styles and principles melded to form the eclectic tastes within the American domestic interior.

During this time, women entered the workforce, joined women's rights movements, sported bloomers to ride bicycles, and became the stars of bohemian cabarets and nightlife. Their boldness served as inspiration for the principally male artists. Whether they are the can-can dancing femme fatale or an independent femme nouveau, the alluring women of the *Maîtres de l’Affiche* (Masters of the Poster) published 1895-1900, embody the spirit of the times. Entertainers were ground-breaking figures in the arts, immortalized in these posters for their provocative poses. Women sold new technologies, risqué pleasures, and events taking place in the artistic fringe of society. Some, such as traveling women, talented artists, connoisseurs, and bicyclists, were role models for the women who viewed the images.

This exhibition provides an overview of the influences of diverse design movements, new technologies, cutting-edge graphic styles, and artfully made furniture and decorative arts to portray the turn of the 20th century as a changing international scene. This would transform not only the roles of women, but art, advertising, and design, ushering the Western world into the truly modern era.