International Rivalry in the Decorative Arts in the 1890s

Victor Champier
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"L'enseignement de l'art dans les écoles: Conférence faite à l'École des arts industriels de Roubaix par M. Victor Champier " was originally published in Revue des arts décoratifs 13 (1892–93): 248–50.

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Anxiety over international competition in the decorative arts and the need to respond effectively is a theme that runs throughout much of the discourse on design in the nineteenth century. The commercial imperative of maintaining export markets may have been the fundamental issue, but the debate surrounding the role of the decorative arts in modern society was rarely limited to the economic realm alone. National pride was a key motivating factor, and it was this, more than bald economic advantage, that seemed to catch the eye of the public and designers alike.

The British might be said to have started this debate in the 1830s when a Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures was formed to inquire into the best means of extending a knowledge of the Arts and of the Principles of design among the People (especially the Manufacturing Population) of the country; also to inquire into the constitution, management and effects of Institutions connected with the Arts.¹

The underlying aim was to consider why British goods were not achieving their full potential in the international market, especially in competition with their French counterparts. As the century wore on, these concerns expanded due to new competitors—primarily Germany and the USA—but the central problem remained the same: how could the nation that had pioneered the Industrial Revolution, which (in their own view) had established the finest liberal democracy and produced the highest forms of literary achievement, still be lagging behind in the decorative arts and the design of manufactured goods? What emerged from this in Britain was, of course, the entire program of “Design Reform”: initially through the creation of “Government Schools of Design” in London and in the new industrial cities (Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, etc.) during the 1830s and 1840s, then through the hosting of the first international exhibition in 1851, and finally through the establishment of a series of museums and elite training schools in South Kensington.²

The French were not slow to recognize the potential impact of these developments in a field where they regarded themselves as preeminent. As early as 1852, commentators were urging the government of Napoleon III to respond to initiatives in England, and in his 1856 report on the Great Exhibition in
London, Léon de Laborde drew attention to the fact that France was in danger of losing its dominant position in the decorative arts. In particular, Laborde emphasized that the creation of government-sponsored schools of design and museums devoted to the decorative arts gave British design and manufacturing an advantage over its rivals on the continent. Laborde, a former curator of the Louvre, saw this as an issue concerning both national pride and economic policy. In addition, he saw the reform of design training as an opportunity to modernize the styles and techniques of the decorative arts currently being produced in France. On this latter point, he was implicitly advocating that education and sponsorship could help to free French design and craftsmanship from its dependence on historical styles. There was no consensus on this point, however, and the debate on historicism as opposed to “modern” styles would rumble on in France throughout the second half of the century. Nevertheless, in the wake of Laborde’s report, several key organizations were established to
support the decorative arts, the most important being the Union centrale des beaux-arts appliqués à l’industrie, which was founded in 1864.

If there was uncertainty over France’s economic position in the 1850s and 1860s, the succeeding decades proved to be even more alarming for French society as a whole, as well as for the decorative arts industries. The disastrous defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 was followed by an economic downturn in the early years of the Third Republic, thus rendering concerns about France’s status in the competitive marketplace even more critical. In this context, the decorative arts received close attention, not merely as a source of foreign export revenue but as an index of the health of the nation. Publications like Marius Vachon’s “Our Industries in Peril” were typical of a larger discourse in which the decorative arts were held up as the standard-bearers of French status and influence abroad. Indeed, Vachon continued to raise the temperature on this topic in polemics like “The Crisis of Industry and Art in France and Europe” (1885), although his real influence was felt in the series of official reports he prepared on how the structure of industry and education related to the decorative arts in other countries.

In 1882, the year of Vachon’s first polemic, the Union centrale des beaux-arts appliqués à l’industrie, amalgamated with the Société du Musée des arts décoratifs to create the Union centrale des arts décoratifs (UCAD), probably the first effective body for the promotion of the decorative arts industries and their appreciation among the population at large. Through exhibitions and publications, UCAD sought to consolidate the position of the decorative arts in the hierarchy of the arts, largely by focusing attention on the masterpieces of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But UCAD was not merely a bastion of traditional values and historicist principles, evoking the great age of French elite culture. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, an ongoing debate about the role of the machine and factory production, as opposed to the old workshop/apprenticeship system and the activities of the merchands merciers, brought the central questions of modern consumerism back to center stage.

It was into this milieu that Vincent Champier emerged. Born in 1851, he became secretary to the critic and author Gustave Vapereau, with whom he edited La dictionnaire des littératures. This gave him an entrée into the world of publishing, and he was soon contributing to various journals devoted to literature and the visual arts. From an early stage in his career, Champier chose to campaign on behalf of the decorative arts, which he felt had been unfairly
neglected and even downgraded in the eyes of academicians and government agencies he believed should have done more to restore France’s leading position. He served as secretary of the Société du Musée des arts, and in the 1880s he was a strong supporter of the campaign within the Union centrale des arts décoratifs to establish a museum devoted to the decorative arts. His most effective role, however, was as founding editor of La revue des arts décoratifs (1880–1902), the official organ of UCAD, from whose pages he was able to promote his views and engage in the debates of the day. Additionally, Champier participated in a number of official or government-sponsored projects. He was involved in the planning of the Expositions Universelles of 1889 and 1900, and he was commissioned to report back to the government on the representation of the decorative and industrial arts at both exhibitions. Expanding on this role, he was also commissioned to undertake visits to other countries to study the provision of museums and education in the decorative arts, very much as Vachon had done. In fact, Champier contributed the report on the United States alongside Vachon’s reports on Europe as part of the combined résumé on the decorative arts in other countries that appeared in 1894.9 His visit to the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago of 1893 was particularly significant, attracting widespread general interest as well as inspiring a number of publications and lectures by Champier to professional bodies.10 The short newspaper report translated below, “Une mission en Amérique,” gives only a taste of his views on recent developments in the industry and the applied arts of the United States.

Champier had a particular interest in ceramics and printed textiles, which comes through in these texts. For example, he was a close friend and correspondent of the glass artist Émile Gallé, and in 1908 he was strongly favored as the next general director of the Manufacture de Sévres, although that position was ultimately given to another. He was more successful at Roubaix, a leading center of printed textiles on the outskirts of Lille in the industrial northeast of France, where he was made director of the National School of Industrial Arts in 1902. In the light of this appointment, one can perhaps read an element of opportunism into the 1892 lecture translated below where he goes out of his way to praise the design work and general standard of industrial production at Roubaix to his, no doubt, appreciative audience. It is equally significant that his concluding remarks reminded the audience that the competition for markets in manufactured goods could be regarded as a continuation of the ongoing struggle against Germany.
The third piece by Champier, “Les arts décoratifs de l’Angleterre jugés par un français,” is something of an oddity, but it is very revealing as to the differing standards around which the decorative arts were assessed in Britain and France in the 1890s. This was a moment when progressive critics in both countries felt that the new movements in design and crafts had achieved such a degree of confidence and distinctiveness as to constitute a changing of the guard. In Britain, this was the decade that saw the full emergence of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, the organization through which William Morris’s views gained their most widespread acceptance. In France, by contrast, there was much talk about the emergence of a “new art” based upon nature and the Orient, which would find its greatest expression in the decorative arts for the home. At this point, the chauvinism of the leading French spokespeople was probably at its height, and the corresponding opinions of current work in rival countries were particularly loaded with suspicion and insecurity. This would explain some of Champier’s condescending remarks with regard to British history and taste, although such views were already part of a long tradition of hauteur on the part of French commentators about the decorative arts. It is surprising, nevertheless, to read such openly dismissive comments at a time when Champier and his colleagues in UCAD were imploring their government to introduce measures similar to the British so that French designers and craftspeople would not fall behind their foreign rivals. Champier is at pains to emphasize that British design and crafts have undergone something of a revolution at the hands of Morris and his followers, although he sees this as a phenomenon driven more by theory than by design or craftsmanship. There is ample justification for his view, especially since, as Champier points out, most of the leading figures in the movement were also prolific writers on design, politics, and taste. Champier’s attempts to grapple with the theories that inspired many supporters of the Arts and Crafts movement remain fairly simplistic, not to say naïve, but he is drawing attention to a marked difference between the design cultures of the two countries.

Despite Champier’s inability to grasp the central tenets of the Arts and Crafts movement, there remains an undeniable streak of superiority to his views. Any positive developments he identifies in England are only faintly praised, with an implication that the French could do the same if they wanted to. Only one figure escapes Champier’s condescension entirely: Edward Burne-Jones, whom he describes as a “triumphant figure” who “imbues all his creations with an intense, sharp, almost painful grace, so much so that the image is embedded
in the depths of the soul.” This view was not unusual, since Burne-Jones had enjoyed a vogue in France among the Symbolists for almost a decade by this time. The fact that he was a committed participant in the crafts, albeit in a rather hands-off fashion, providing designs on paper for others to make up, granted him admittance to a special category of artist-designers with direct bearing on the current trends in Paris.

This praise for a few individuals notwithstanding, Champier’s views here reveal a great deal about the anxieties that surrounded the decorative arts in France at a moment when the country’s arts industries were entering a period of great prestige internationally. The years leading up to the Exposition Universelle of 1900 were still mired in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war and serious doubts about France’s position in the world, not least in those areas that touched on manufacturing, exports, national prestige, and the decorative arts. Out of this milieu, the confidence of the new generation of designers and makers reasserted France’s lead in the luxury industries, albeit in a critical environment racked with doubts and uncertainties as design reform swept through much of Europe and North America.

—Alexander Watt

Notes


Marius Vachon, *La crise industrielle et artistique en France et en Europe* (Paris: Librairie illustrée, 1886). Starting in 1881, Vachon was commissioned by the under-secretary of state for fine arts to undertake missions in France and abroad to investigate the state of the decorative arts in various European countries. Vachon’s findings were published in a series of government reports between 1885 and 1898, the first of which was *Rapports à M. Edmond Turquet, sous-secrétaire d'État, sur les musées et les écoles d'art industriel et sur la situation des industries artistiques en Allemagne, Autriche-Hongrie, Italie et Russie* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1885). In general, Vachon recommended the decentralization of museums and education and encouraged the creation of regional museums and training establishments to restore traditional craft skills. The model for these proposals was the Musée d’art et d’industrie in Saint-Étienne, of which Vachon became director in 1889. For a more detailed list of Vachon’s publications, see the INHA site: https://www.inha.fr/fr/ressources/publications/publications-numeriques/dictionnaire-critique-des-historiens-de-l-art/vachon-marius.html.


The most sophisticated expression of this debate in UCAD was that of Pedro Rioux de Maillou, “Les arts décoratifs et les machines,” *Revue des arts décoratifs* 15 (February–April 1895): 225–31.


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