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Proposed question:

Art Nouveau and the significance of the recurring features of ornamental feminine figures; are these truly empowering or objectifying?

Within the context of my research project, I will be using three key words; art nouveau, feminism and empowerment, to fuel my exploration of the significance and deeper symbolism of feminine figures within the Art Nouveau movement. Are they central, symbolic, and empowering features within this movement or are they objectified ornaments shaped by the male gaze? I think these three key words will help me break down the question into main sections, while supporting my practice with artists such as Alphonse Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley, Frances Macdonald and Élisabeth Sonrel.

The ornamental female figure became the defining motif of Art Nouveau, yet its dominance reveals a paradox. While women visually structure the movement's aesthetic language, they undeniably remain largely absent and unrecognised as artistic producers. By engaging feminist critiques such as Nochlin and Pollock alongside an iconoclastic analysis proposed by Thompson, this essay aims to examine whether these figures signify empowerment, objectification or a symbolic negotiation of gender at the turning of the twentieth century.

Art Nouveau

Art Nouveau emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as an international movement that pushed the boundaries between fine art and decorative arts. It privileged fluidity, ornaments and expanded to architecture, interior design, glasswork, jewellery, illustration and printmaking. Within this particular aesthetic framework, illustration became a powerful vehicle for the distribution of art, as the popularisation of Lino graphic printing simplified the process and allowed artists to circulate their images widely through posters, books and

magazines. (Silverman, 1989) Therefore, in this context, it is easier to understand how the recurring women figures became so emblematic in this movement. While they were not merely a subject, they were the central structure and ornamental device through which Art Nouveau articulated its identity.



Figure 1: Alphonse Mucha, *Dance*, 1898

In the illustrated works of Alphonse Mucha, the female figure is inseparable from the decorative environment that surrounds her. *Dance*, (fig.1) is a good example of Mucha's work as it features the flowing hair extending into intricate patterns, halos of floral motifs framing the head and the body itself is flattered and stylised in such a way in effects to harmonise with the overall composition. This supports the idea that the body simply becomes an ornament rather than an individual subject which raises questions about whether this integration is empowering or rather reductive. Often produced as commercial posters, they demonstrate how the female form operates as both a focal point and a unifying design element.



Figure 2: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Stomach Dance*, 1907.

Similarly, Aubrey Beardsley employs the female figure in highly styled and often exaggerated forms. In *The Stomach Dance*, (fig.2) we can see how he puts bold contrasts to use to create images that are at once ornamental and provocative. The woman here is not simply represented; she becomes the very medium through which line, rhythm and ornament are expressed. This is a great example where “Women is not represented as herself but as a sign” (Pollock, 1988) which perfectly highlights how stylisation strips agency. Both Mucha and Beardsley use women in their works as products or ideals rather than individuals. It supports the idea that the figure becomes decorative language rather than a subject with autonomy.

The integration of the female body within decorative form reflects broader cultural and symbolic concerns relating to the *fin de siècle*. (Silverman, 1989) As Art Nouveau emerged during a period marked by important social transformation and rapid industrialisation, it reflects in its emphasis on nature, organic lines and overall fluidity, as it can be interpreted as a reaction against mechanisation and modernity. (Silverman, 1989) The female figure frequently operates as a symbolic embodiment of nature, beauty and regeneration rather than as an autonomous subject as I mentioned previously. This relates back to Pollock's argument regarding the female body functioning as a “sign” (Pollock, 1988) rather than a self determined individual.

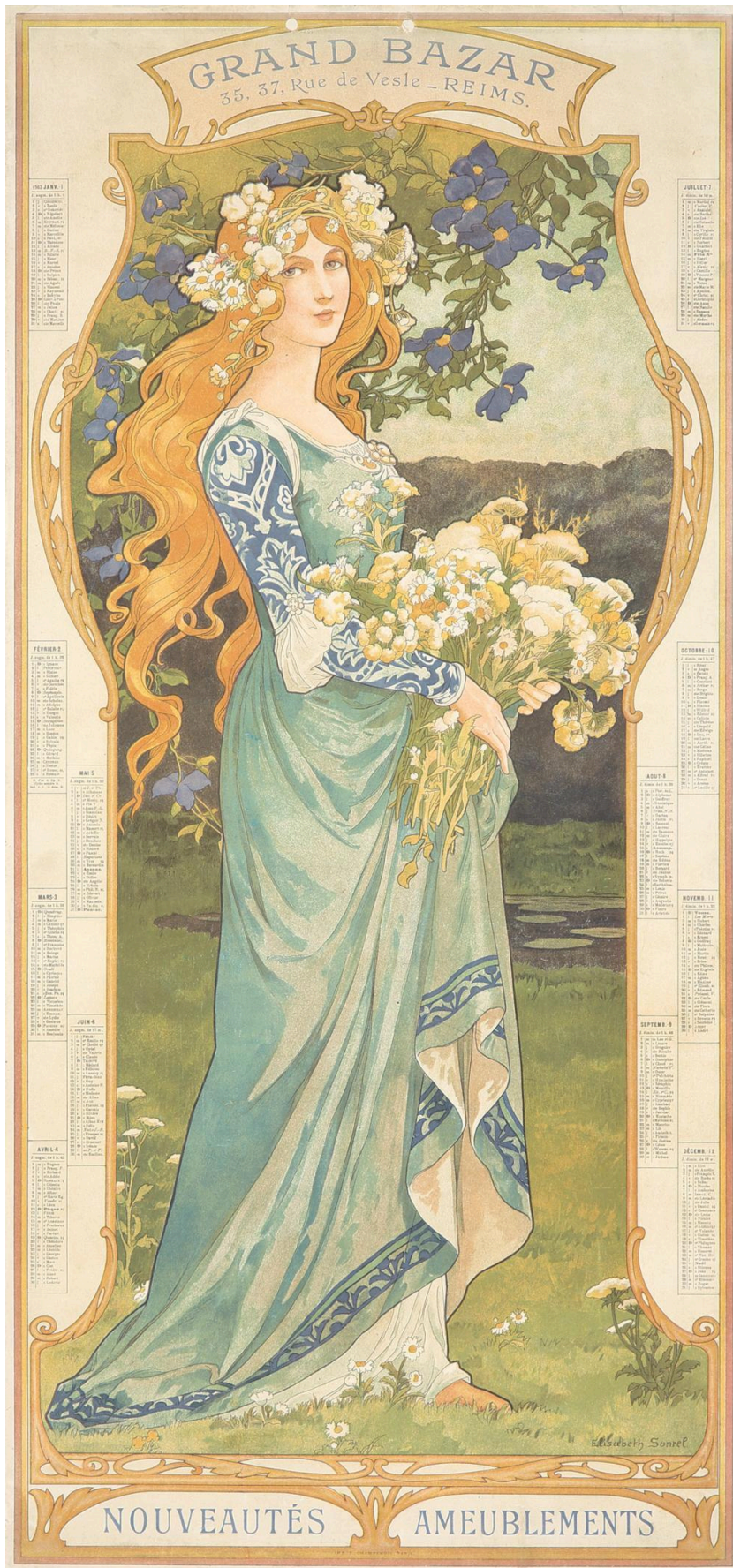


Figure 3: Élisabeth Sonrel, *Grand Bazar*, 1900

Adding to this, this is particularly evident in the works of Élisabeth Sonrel (fig.3), whose images of women intertwined with florals and mythological motifs reinforce associations between femininity and an idealised, timeless natural world. It almost feels like a caricature, it is the romanticising of what we, as a society, picture as the perfect feminine energy. Such representations align with what Linda Nochlin identifies as the construction of the feminine as a “type,” where individuality is subordinated to aesthetic and symbolic coherence. “The very notion of a ‘type’ implies the suppression of the individual in favour of a generalized, ideal form.” (Nochlin, 1971) Beardsley’s work (fig.2) is also a great example of this, as his black and white figures are elongated and exaggerated and can be read as types rather than people, reinforcing Nochlin’s claim that stylisation turns women into aesthetic devices.

Feminism

A feminist reading of Art Nouveau reveals deep tensions between aesthetic innovation and the persistent objectification of women’s bodies. While the movement can often be celebrated for elevating femininity as a central visual motif, this prominence does not necessarily equal empowerment. Feminist theorists argue that instead, such representations frequently reinforce structures of the male gaze, which reduces women to ornamental forms that serve decorative and symbolic functions rather than expressing agency or subjectivity.

Chief to this critique is the concept of the male gaze, heavily studied and articulated by Laura Mulvey (1975), who argues that visual culture tends to position women as objects to be viewed and consumed. Although Mulvey’s theory concentrates mainly on how Hollywood cinema mirrors patriarchal society by objectifying women for a presumed heterosexual male viewer (Mulvey, 2024) it is also highly applicable to Art Nouveau imagery. For instance there is no debate when it comes to analysing the works of Mucha (fig 1). Their flowing hair and elongated figures, while their passive poses invite contemplation rather than engagement,

aligns itself with Mulvey's assertion that women in this instance are merely a construct of objectification and visual desires. (Mulvey, 1975)

A dynamic that is further reinforced by Pollock once again in "Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art" (1988), she suggests that women in art often operate as "bearers of meaning" rather than meaning makers. In Art Nouveau it is easy to see how female figures are recurrently used to personify abstract concepts such as nature, fertility or even beauty- they represent and reinforce an ideal. This is a system in which women are defined by how they are seen rather than who they are. (Pollock, 1988)

Beardsley's work (fig 2) provides us with a more provocative example of this dynamic. His illustrations are often associated with eroticism and are frequently depicted as both alluring and grotesque which reinforces their stature as objects of fascination rather than human individuals. (Zatlin, 2016) From a feminist perspective, this can definitely be interpreted as a form of visual control and dominance in which the female body is manipulated to satisfy the male gaze and cultural desires. (Mulvey, 1975)

Although some feminist critiques, such as Janet Wolff, argue that representations of women often exist within a space of contradiction, in which objectification and symbolic elevation coexist. (Wolff, 1990) However, from a feminist point of view, the dominance of male artists and the absence of female authorship within the movement ultimately undermines any claims of empowerment here. Despite the aesthetic celebration of the female form and its central role within the movement's identity, Art Nouveau largely confines the female figure to the role of idealisation through the lens of the male gaze.

Empowerment

While feminist critiques often portray Art Nouveau as a site of objectification, it is equally important to consider how the movement's visual language can be reinterpreted as a space

of empowerment, particularly when it is viewed through a contemporary feminist framework. Allowing a more nuanced reading in which symbolism and stylisation can be reclaimed as forms of agency and expression.

Art can function as a tool to challenge norms and inspire change, which enables artists to overcome traditional gender roles and reclaim control over representation. Within this context, the Art Nouveau female figure, although once shaped largely by male artists, can be reinterpreted as a powerful visual resource rather than a purely oppressive construct. A key aspect of this reinterpretation lies with the symbolic elevation of women within Art Nouveau. Thompson, interestingly noted that the female figure became central to the iconography of the period, which often surpassed male presence entirely. (Thompson, 1971) This particular visual dominance complicates the argument of objectification as it suggests that women were not merely marginalised. Instead, they are positioned as central to the cultural imagination of the *fin de siècle*. (Silverman, 1989) This perspective depicts women as powerful and mystical figures, which can be understood as a form of symbolic empowerment, even if mediated through patriarchal structures.

Additionally, the fusion of the female body with organic forms, characteristic of Art Nouveau, creates a visual language that emphasises growth, fluidity and transformation. The association between femininity and nature can also be reevaluated as scholars have noted that Art Nouveau aesthetic blurred the boundaries between the female body and its environment, creating a “seamless transition” (Dowell and Bertoncino, 2013) between women and nature. This can be interpreted as a loss of individuality, however it can also be read as a celebration of inter-connectedness, positioning women as embodiments of life and renewal rather than passive objects.



Figure 4: Frances Macdonald, *Spring*, 1897

Empowerment becomes more considered when the role of women as producers within and beyond the movement is recognised. Artists such as Frances Macdonald (fig 4) are associated with Art Nouveau demonstrating that women were not solely muses but active contributors to its development, even while being historically overlooked. (Burkhauser, 1990)

Recovering these contributions and highlighting how female artists engaged and reshaped the movements' visual language is essential. Feminist art historians have argued that their absence as recognised creators is not incidental, but structurally enforced. As Nochlin famously demonstrated, the lack of recognition attributed to women artists is not due to a lack of talent, but rather the result of institutional barriers embedded within art education, exhibition systems, and cultural expectations. Women were historically denied access to training and even life drawing classes, limitations that directly impacted their visibility within movements such as Art Nouveau. (Nochlin, 1971)

Furthermore, feminist scholars argue that the recovery of women artists is not simply a matter of inclusion but of transformation. Their work emphasises that incorporating women into art history requires a rethinking of the categories and values that have historically defined artistic significance. In this sense, recovering female practitioners within Art Nouveau does more than correct omission, it actively destabilises the narrative that positions women solely as muses or decorative motifs. (Parker and Pollock, 1981)

Spring by Macdonald (fig 4) demonstrates a more introspective and symbolic engagement with the female form. She often introduces ambiguity in her work and spirituality and psychological depth that complicates the purely ornamental function associated with the movement. (Burkhauser, 1990)

Therefore, empowerment can be understood not simply through imagery, but through authorship and historiography. The reinterpretation of women's contributions reveal that the movement was not exclusively shaped by male vision but also by female artists whose work critically engaged with the aesthetic and symbolic frameworks. The shift between object to author represents a crucial reconfiguration of power, it allows the decorative female figure to be reread as not only an image but as a site of creative agency and resistance. (Pollock, 1988)

Moreover, in contemporary practice, the concept of reappropriating further strengthens the argument of empowerment. By placing diverse and self defined female identities within this framework, artists reclaim the visual language that once objectified them. This process aligns with what Amelia Jones describes as the feminist strategy to redefining the female body within visual culture, by shifting it from a passive object of representation to an active site of meaning and subjectivity. (Jones, 1998) Therefore, rather than rejecting historical styles such as Art Nouveau, contemporary practitioners engage with their aesthetic codes while reconfiguring their original meanings. Reappropriation challenges the decorative

qualities that once contributed to the objectification of women and can instead be consciously adopted and manipulated by female artists themselves. As Jones argues, the body in feminist art becomes a “site of self-definition,” whereby identity is constructed and performed rather than passively depicted. (Jones, 1998) This strategy reflects a broader shift in feminist art practice towards inclusivity. Reappropriation does not simply reverse objectification, it actively reconstructs meaning which allows the female figure to emerge as both an image and author simultaneously. Choosing reappropriation, in of itself, is empowering.

Practice

Researching the three keywords; art nouveau, feminism and empowerment has allowed me to shape my ideas for next year's project. Through research, I've found that ultimately, the question of empowerment or objectification within Art Nouveau cannot be resolved through a singular interpretation. While the movement undeniably reflects patriarchal structures that work to erase women, it also provides a rich visual vocabulary that can be reclaimed and reimagined. Through contemporary reappropriation, the ornamental female figure can shift from a passive decorative motif to an active site of meaning, identity and creative agency.

My practice will entail developing a collection of large canvases. I will work with mixed media as I usually do in my work, firstly with tissue paper as the background and then acrylic paints to create the contrasts and details in the foreground of my pieces. (Fig 5,6,7) I will distort and incorporate female figures, (fig 6) intertwining them with natural forms to create intricate and abstract works.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

Using some examples of my previous work (fig 5,6,7) I presently share some similarities with the visual language of the Art Nouveau movement. I often paint women involved with organic and natural forms. However, for this project I will work with the intention to source inspiration from this movement that fascinates me. The purpose is to reinvent my work and shape what the Art Nouveau movement means to me as a woman. I aim to reclaim this era, reappropriating and redefining what it means to be a woman artist, while simultaneously being a part of my art. The close link I feel to this movement is largely due to my research and I believe this level of engagement and closeness I feel will also help me create work that will elevate other women. I aim to create a series of 3 to 4 canvases, roughly 100 x 100cm, all linked by meaning in some way and I plan to exhibit these together to create a stronger visual impact. I want to use my art to redefine Art Nouveau by choosing reappropriation and empowerment!

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