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Nouveau deco

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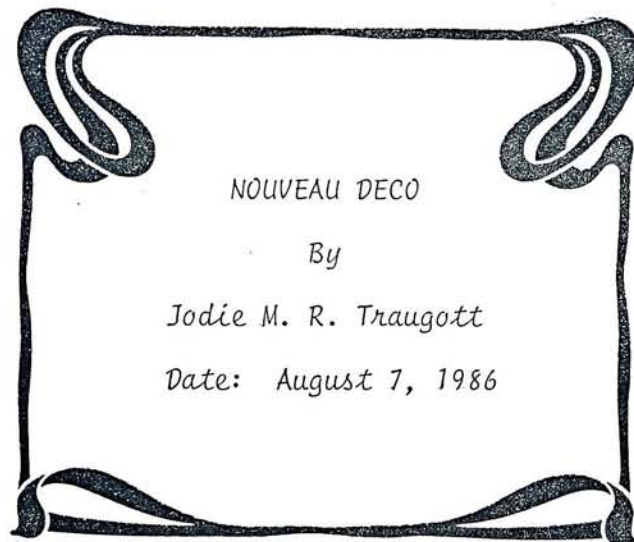
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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

*A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of*

MASTER OF FINE ARTS



APPROVALS

Adviser: Phillip Bornarth / **Philip W. Bornarth**

Date: 8/11/86

Associate Adviser: Donald Bujnowski **Prof. Donald Bujnowski**

Date: 8/10/86

Associate Adviser: Sheila Wells **Shelia Wells**

Date: Aug 6 86

Special Assistant to the
Dean for Graduate Affairs: Phillip Bornarth / **Phillip W. Bornarth**

Date: 8/11/86

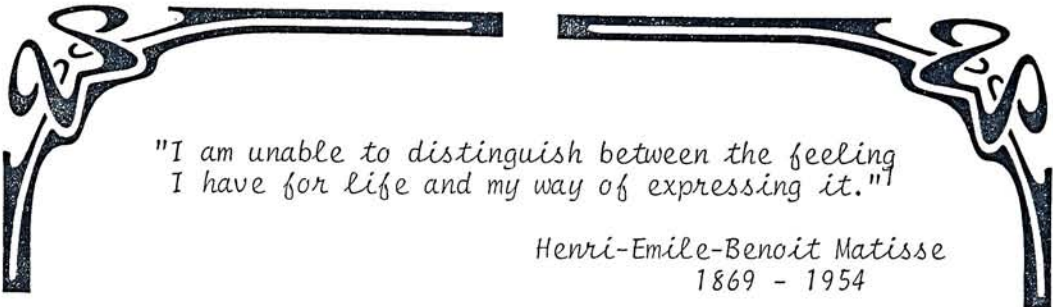
Dean, College of
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Date: 8/22/86

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R. K. Traugott

Date: August 7, 1986



*"I am unable to distinguish between the feeling
I have for life and my way of expressing it."¹*

*Henri-Emile-Benoit Matisse
1869 - 1954*

"The art of any society emerges from the beliefs, attitudes, organizations and structure as well as the inherent creativity and energy of that society."² The art of today, either produced in the venerable halls of R.I.T. or elsewhere, certainly must reflect the above statement; yet I feel somehow art has a more directly personal meaning to many artists, including me, than that statement seems to recognize. My art more closely resembles Matisse's comment. This paper intends to be a chronicle of my feelings towards art and my very own personal way of expressing it. However, the five paintings which comprise my thesis work are the result of thirty-eight years of living. Every second of my life contributed to the way I view the world, and see my place in it. A year earlier, I could not have done this particular work; nor a year later would it have been the same: this basic tenent must be understood. So much has contributed to this work that it would be almost impossible to cite every influence, every nuance of meaning. This paper of necessity therefore will only touch the surface, the supporting skin, of my work and me.

The choosing of the thesis statement was, in my experience, the most difficult aspect of this entire project. Up until the summer of 1985, even though I have been painting for almost twelve

years, I had never painted more than two pictures that were even slightly similar. I've embraced so many styles, I alone could almost represent two thousand years of art history (at least a hundred!). I have experimented so much for two reasons: first, it suits my general personality, I abhor being bored and in my mind, repetition is boredom. As Matisse has said: "I do not repudiate any of my paintings, but I would not paint one of them in the same way had I to do it again."³ Secondly, since the majority of my painting education has been the self-taught variety, every time I'd read an art book, I'd immediately become enthralled with that artist or that time period or style and rush to try my hand at my new-found love.

So the dilemma for me regarding the thesis statement was that I knew (or thought I did) what was expected of me - I had to paint in one style for a whole year and I had to write a paper about it. Well, the paper would be the easy part, research I love so, I put the cart before the horse and decided that I'd write about Art Nouveau/Art Deco, probably two of my most favorite periods in art history. I had also, by coincidence, done one figure study that could be construed as Art Nouveau-ish that preceding year. My professor liked the painting. It was settled. I'd force myself to paint like that for a year...but I couldn't. As it turned out, I did not have to. Another professor finally convinced me that a thesis should be a growth, a discovery, not a cage.

If discovery and growth were to be my key phrases in this thesis, there was no point in doing work similar to anything I'd ever done before. Figure work was a good starting place because I had always shied away from it. I had also never painted anything out of my head before. I never had the courage to look to see if there was anything within me worth painting. For twelve years I painted still-life's, landscapes, florals, anything where I could just look at something and paint it. Even my abstracts were initially based on real objects in my environment. I felt that to paint something out of my head I had to have great visions and Surrealist leanings. I finally convinced myself to stop trying to pre-create the work and let it develop on its own; for once in my life I wanted to see what was truly inside of me, and whether I could put it down on canvas.

...we must conclude that the artist does not make a valid statement about anything but his own way of being...In other words, he paints because he wants to find out who he is; he paints because he is curious to know what comes next. His whole work is his whole life, as a form of self-exploration and self-definition.⁴

I decided to allow my readings only to influence me indirectly. The real work had just begun.

My research started with a style that leaped from society at every turn, which I thought was Art Nouveau and turned out to be Art Deco. I had never really understood the differences (and similarities) of these uniquely tied movements in art. If someone is not sure of the style I'm referring to, look at T.V. and the pink-flamingo Miami Vice sets; or the current interior design floor

in Sibley's. Drive over to the new airport office complex on Scottsville Road; or visit Jon Jerde's Westside Pavilion in Los Angeles. See Albert Paley's just completed ten-ton steel gate for the Virginia Museum of Art, or the recent retrospective of Louis Cartier's Masterworks of Art Deco (clocks and jewelry), at the Memorial Art Gallery here in Rochester. If you have the time and the money ride the newly renovated, splendidly elderly Orient Express, and if you have the money and want the time, buy the 18 karat Movado Museum watch, inspired by the Bauhaus and selected by the Museum of Modern Art for its permanent collection in 1950.

After a bit of unusual leg work I found out that the Art Nouveau revival really started in the middle sixties (a popular local interior designer was my source). And what was in vogue today was a pseudo-Art Deco with late 40's and early 50's flair. Well it seemed obvious that I needed a real grasp of what was and was not Art Nouveau and Art Deco. A definition and some clarification seemed in order.

The term Art Nouveau nowadays conjures up a very specific image covering a type of decorative stylization applied to both pictures and objects. In the eighteen nineties and the early nineteen hundreds the term meant different things. ...It's function...was to deal with the penetration of art into aspects of life, and it allowed no compromises: 'no concessions to the public, no courting of the establishment, no borrowing from the past'.⁵

In essence the style was a reaction against the dissolution of surface and line (impressionism) and...it marked the end of the illusionistic conception of form. The significance of outline and juxtaposition of surfaces

were re-established...the actual line and its course were given their own particular value, acquiring the status of a fully valid pictorial means. This means may either be of importance to content...or else it can evoke ornamental values...In the first case new sources of inspiration were opened up, particularly in landscapes and figure painting, where Man and his setting fuse to evoke a mood to an extent which was previously almost unknown in the history of painting. This trend is a forerunner of Expressionism, while the other...with the emphasis on the decorative and the ornamental and their particular value in the painting foreshadow abstract painting.⁶

Although it is now a cliché to speak of the nineteenth century in terms of industrial and democratic revolutions, the breakdown in many areas of personal, social, cultural, political and religious life, as well as in art, undeniably came from these two revolutions and the drastic changes they brought to man's life. Industrialization fragmented and mechanized every profession creating more specialization, faster changes and a market based on quantity and cheaper materials.⁷

The basic principles of this movement (Art Nouveau) were to subject each object to a strict system of logic relative to the use for which it is destined and to the material from which it is formed.⁸ The style is characterized by a sinuous line which may convey both an elegant languor and taut whiplash tension; a combination which suggests struggling natural growth...⁹

But many other designs that are definitely central to Art Nouveau in both conception and inspiration do not have the sinewy, snakelike motif at all, or if they do it is held closely in check. This reaches out in the direction of logical and geometric construction which strives not so much for the organic as for the architectonic form.¹⁰

This other branch, which led to the Bauhaus school in Germany, is Art Nouveau's direct link to Art Deco and although it is seldom recognized, a very popular element in its own right. Somewhere between the sinuous line and the architectonic form lies my first experiment with "The intellectual concern to understand and delineate as clearly as possible the unanswerable mysteries of life

(which) underlies much avant-garde art of the late nineteenth century."¹¹

To search for a synthesis in the realm of artistic vision belonged within the general state of mind of the nineteenth-century. From Blake's poetic and visionary creations at the beginning of the century to the 'symbolic' paintings of the Post-Impressionists at the end, the search for a new equilibrium, for a modern unity, concerned all major artists and a large part of their public. Nineteenth-century artists and philosophers were aware that traditional modes of thought and belief were dissolving, and they found it terrifying that life might not have an ultimate, rational meaning.¹²

I easily decided that personal growth and my very personal religious discoveries would be the perfect elements to base my work upon, and felt that it even more closely linked me with the concerns of the period. From The Time Before Time is my first thesis painting. As Paul Klee (1879-1940) had found: "The inwardness of expressive content, the glimpse of spiritual realities beyond the material, could not be shown merely by depicting unreal subject matter, but needed a new visual style, a style which merged the painted images with abstract patterns suggesting a reality of the spirit."¹³ Not one line or any color of this painting was predetermined. Again, like Klee, I followed the "...laws of the picture...Never, he says, does he set out to paint an idea or intuition, the idea arrives in the process and presents itself to him when it has taken shape."¹⁴ The resulting female figure, intellectually if not physically, closely resembles one done by Andre Lhote (1885-1962), he..."combined the outward physical reality, which he considered the emotive factor, with the spirit-

ual, which he believed stemmed from the interpretation of this external reality. The result was a new figuration...in which the image is subjected to a degree of geometric analysis, partly disintegrated, than rebuilt using slabs of colour and shading."¹⁵ My color palette runs the gamut from pearly white and silver grey to mauve, powder blue, rose violet and pale pink. These colors are strictly personal on my part and represent no color theory choices. The imagery surrounding and encompassing the female represent "...the quality or essence of a thing rather than the thing itself..."¹⁶

The language of art is based on a private convention which is not binding at all, and that is...because (the artist) ...does not want to say what everybody knows already but he wants to say something which nobody yet knows and he wants to make the unknown known. He speaks a personal language for the communication of a personal experience in his time, and the language is determined by the experience which is the act of painting itself.¹⁷

Only after the painting was completed, and I had taken time for introspection and analysis did I realize what this painting meant to me. Its Art Nouveau-like sinuous decoration, which overcomes and envelopes the body, symbolizes the peace, calm and perfection of paradise. "'I continue to believe that the circle which explains the world in its entirety is the ideal figure, and the curve, which relates to it, is more noble than the straight line,' wrote Jean Puiforcat (1897-1945) in a letter of 1933."¹⁸ I so agree with Puiforcat that I have chosen the circle to be my leitmotiv throughout the thesis work. My choice of the volute swirl also represents the transitory nature of life in an


evolutionary and philosophical concept.¹⁹ The choice and acceptance of certain symbols in a piece of art work allows the viewer to see beyond the symbols shape into the heart and mind of the artist.²⁰ The fact that the figure is limited to a torso suggests the ethereal quality of its place, no need for locomotion and no personal identity, no face. All is subtle nuance except the one strictly vertical element, the tense shaft. This is the dark side of paradise, the inescapable nether world influence. But, its influence does not touch the sojourner, it merely rustles its presence. This then is the inception of life, the gathering place of souls.

While Still In The Garden is the next work to be considered. In his book on Matisse, Sam Lazzaro stated: "One of the great acquisitions achieved by modern art is doubtless the reversal of classic anatomy and its' replacement by a soft anatomy...Now this...summons to mind pre-natal life, for the foetus is a soft being."²¹


...the foetus which, in its pre-natal paradise is a kind of all powerful and infinite God. The ambiguity can also be considered a remembrance of ignorance where one remains for nine months undecided. Boy or Girl? A monster or a normal being? A kind of foetal mutism seen again in the very young whose future seems impossible to predict. It is no surprise that they have the silent expression of (Matisse's) Jeune Anglaise or of Zulma without eyes, nose or mouth. This mystery or at least these secrets which surround life before birth is rather what we assume lies behind the mirror...²²

This ruby colored neophyte dances her way through the Garden oblivious to the chaos and disorder which exists outside of her

neatly striped environment. But the Art Nouveau influences here are becoming very weak; the diagonal geometry beginning to become too dominant. What is happening is the emergence of true Art Deco into my work. My reading continued.



Stephen Tschudi Madsen preferred to see a broad set of variations within (Art Nouveau) works from four countries: 'The abstract and plastic concepts of Belgium; linear and symbolic in Scotland; floral and plant inspired in France; and constructive and geometric in Germany and Austria²³...in Austria, proceeding still further in constructivism and rectilinearism, the geometrical ornament - the square and the circle - became an end in itself; in fact the extremes of what we call Art Nouveau were reached. The development in Austria was such that the style...became an interlude on a two-dimensional plane, lasting a mere two or three years. Austria was not only the last country to make any contribution to the Art Nouveau style. It was also the first to abandon it.²⁴ ...Style and stylisation were the distinguishing marks of Art Deco, which is another way of saying that surface treatment was the essence of the style...Sumptuous became the keynote word for Art Deco conception.²⁵



...I would suggest this as a working definition: an assertively modern style, developing in the 1920's and reaching its high point in the thirties it drew inspiration from various sources, including the more austere side of Art Nouveau, Cubism, the Russian Ballet, (North & South) American Indian art and the Bauhaus;...it ran to symmetry rather than asymmetry, and to rectilinear rather than the curvilinear; it responded to the demands of the machine and of new materials such as plastics, ferro-concrete and vita-glass; and its ultimate aim was to end the old conflict between art and industry...partly by making artists adept at crafts, but still more by adapting design to the requirements of mass production.²⁶

The liberation of colour came first with the Fauvist exhibition at the 1905 Salon D'Automne, four years later Diaghilev brought his Ballet Russes to Paris, and the astonishing costumes and striking colours devised by Bakst were quickly noted by critics and artists. At the 1910 Salon D'Automne, Frantz Jourdain invited the Deutsche Werkbund to exhibit. Extremely well made furniture, an adventurous use of materials and wood stains, strong colours and coordinated style were a revelation to

the Parisians, who were shocked into violent reaction.²⁷

This reaction was the final blow to what had been known as fine art in the western world. Modern art (that of the 20th century) has questioned every known tenet of art and usually has given resounding answers! "...the changes that have occurred in this century - during one lifetime - have no parallel in earlier societies."²⁸

One of the most significant changes that occurred during this epoch was the emancipation of women. "For an understanding of some important aspects of modern art one has to consider the new role of women in social life and with it that of woman in art."²⁹

In Art Nouveau as well as in Expressionism, the artists were obsessed by the idea of woman as the unobtainable dream, as the goddess on the pedestal. In that form she appears in art in complete inversion to her social existence...In Art Deco the woman is presented as the incarnation of sin...and man as the victim. It is man's revenge of woman's emancipation...the woman becomes the fallen idol of bourgeois society, yet she dominates the scene in a way which points to her actual rise in social life.³⁰

Since any analysis of self must take into account the fact that I am a woman, my paintings are only of women precisely because I feel that I must address myself to the question of a women's place in this world (or another). Conceptually, all my women are self portraits for I can speak of no one's existence save my own. The anatomically-soft woman in the Garden displays my joy, my abandon in a dance celebrating what is yet to be. Like a foetus imprisoned within its mother, this being waits contentedly, even happily, for its release, not knowing what lies ahead. The only clue to this future is in the face. Again there is no identity;

a soul needs no name in paradise, but the color of the face is a veil disguising inquietude. "Now, the foetus is...destined to be uprooted, which is perhaps our greatest pain, the infernal pain of birth whose imprint remains with us during our entire existence."³¹ But is it our physical birth that is the greatest pain or is it the wrenching away of our soul from the Light, from the Garden, from our God? Knowledge, the apple imbued upon Eve was perhaps this knowledge of life on earth, a pitifully wretched existence compared to paradise.

At this point we must move to The Awakening. This next painting in my series, captures the moment in the Garden when Knowledge has been already given to one soul and another is just receiving it. "Whoever they are (or will become) - prostitutes, dancers, women, men, the artist himself (herself) - all are doomed. The real problem to them is not death, as in Christian imagery, but life. The ages of man from birth to death is a favourite theme, but the central problem is the life they cannot live."³² We have realized our position and we fight against the 'mask' of life but it is useless, the moment we begin to see, features begin to form, we are restrained, "...the belief of artists and public that every religion may have some portion of the truth and that all art forms are valid in man's search for a new vision..."³³ are ideals that have yet to be attained. All of life has restrictions, its boundaries; its masks. The last hint of paradise and Art Deco sumptuousness dictates the scattering of gold leaf touches in this work

directly leads into the Ties Of The World, my fourth painting.

Our birth has occurred. We are bound by the sterile demands of the world (the white garment). We have taken an identity. But "the fear that women describe of looking into the mirror one day and seeing nothing is an allegory of non-identity, which also reveals fear of desertion, of dependence upon an insufficiently integrated self."³⁴ Most women suffer, some greatly, from this lack of ego. Although given a personality, they never seem to fully explore the depths of themselves. Many create a facade to be offered to the general public; mine is symbolized by a sensual, sensitive mouth. This facade is not always a false front. It can be true to the personality, but, it remains the demarcation of depth the world is allowed to penetrate. There are no eyes, no windows to the soul.

The Ties Of The World is actually the first painting in the series to include elements of both Art Nouveau and Art Deco in a strictly personal adaptation. The two works before it are strongly Art Deco alone, while the first work is essentially Art Nouveau. At this point, with this painting, I have distilled the major elements from both movements, a symbolic patterning, a curvilinear motif and structural simplicity and placed them upon the canvas as only my hand could. I do find however a stylistic kinship with Henri Matisse when something like this is written about his work:

He appears to have been determined to solve the problem of modeling a figure simultaneously with the creation of a sturdy decorative rhythm of line and a powerful contrast of large flat areas of color and value. His goal was perhaps similar to that of the Cubists, but his means

were totally opposite (...to provide, if not literally an illusion, at least a sense of volume for the figure represented, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the canvas's surface through overall design.).³⁵

This is an equally appropriate description of my final painting in the series, The Potential Of Death/Birth. But this work also exudes Antoine de Saint-Exupery's Art Deco philosophy.

It is as if there were a natural law which ordained that to achieve this end, to refine the curve of a piece of furniture, or a ship's keel, or the fuselage of an aeroplane, until gradually it partakes of the elementary purity of the curve of a human breast or shoulder, there must be experimentation of several generations of craftsmen. In anything at all, perfection is finally attained not when there is no longer anything to add but when there is no longer anything to take away, when a body has been stripped down to its nakedness.³⁶



The stripping away of the cloth, the hall-mark of society, could also embody the stripping off of the mask of the world. Only at death are we freed of the constraints, the ties of the world. We become once again the free, joyously exuberant soul. This effervescent explosion of destiny is just about to occur in the vision of my last work. We are to be one with the Light. But is death necessary to discover this rebirth? Perhaps not. As the circle motif gently surrounds the figure, it could again be the symbol of a womb, or perchance "The iridescent bubble about to burst (which) is almost the official symbol of the twenties.",³⁷ but it could also be the mirror of self-discovery, the liberation and education of a heart and mind. I would like to allow it to be all of these things. "We should remember that the appreciation, understanding and evaluation of a work of art are essentially the

result of a personal response, a response subject to change just as the individual making that response must change."³⁸

The art work was finished. By the third term of my second year, I had to paint no more. I truthfully would have liked to paint on more canvases but my scholastic load would not allow it. I continued my readings and for the first time began to take notes for this paper. I found that the readings had done exactly what I had hoped they would; they influenced my work without becoming too obvious, too literal. I had distilled the essence without drowning in the vapors. Six months and 147 note cards later, I'm about done. I have learned more about myself and my art work in these two years than in all of the preceding twelve. I have learned to recognize my deepest feelings, accept them and articulate them. This time has been extremely difficult for both me and my family, but I can honestly say that yes, it was worth the price. When I wrote my thesis statement I titled it: "Quae Fuit Durum Pati Meminisse Dulce Est" which means "What was hard to bear is sweet to remember." How did I know!

Jean Cocteau (1892-1963) wrote: "the greatest possible audacity...is to be simple...This is the only possible opposition to an epoch of extreme(s)..."³⁹ I designate this period in time as one of many extremes and stand firmly on my right as an artist and a woman, to ignore some of the doom and gloom extremists, who choose to display all that is ugly and wretched and disgusting in our 'modern' world. There is still much that is good and beautiful

on this earth and that is where my interests lie. As

Marie Laurencin (1885-1956) said: "My pictures are the love stories I tell to myself and which I want to tell others."⁴⁰

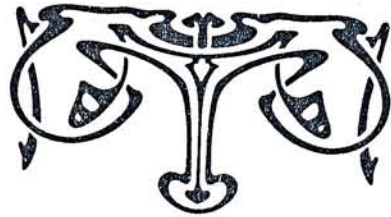
The art of the past tells us a great deal about the past. It also helps to identify our own attitudes to the subjects that have concerned earlier societies and cultures. Art has had a social value even if it has no other.

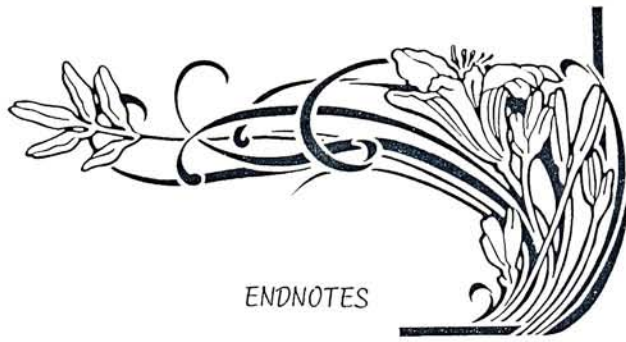
But it is also generally held to provide another valuable part of the cultural life of later observers. The artifacts of earlier societies have contributed to ideas about wisdom, truth, beauty and other imponderable elements which are lodged in human sensibilities somewhere between the intellect and the spirit.

"...Somewhere between the intellect and the spirit."⁴¹ is where my art work dwells. I have taken what I felt pertinent from two unique periods in Art History, and given it my own interpretation. As Paul Emile Berthon (whose work was an Art Nouveau precursor) said: "...I shall never be afraid to paint my figures with green, yellow or red hair, if these tones are wanted in the composition of the design. And then again, my manner will be different, according to place, to object, and especially to the process to be employed."⁴² Whether stated in 1890 or in 1980, this is how I view my work process, a non-process. I choose to eschew the complexities of other art styles and explore the simplicity of Nouveau Deco while it suits my mood. "Although it is convenient to set out what appears to be a sequence of specific developments each following the other, art, like life, is actually less straightforward, and the true course of events is considerably

less tidy. Artists change direction, absorb new influences and make new statements..."⁴³

My work is finished - or has it just begun?





ENDNOTES

¹John Jacobus, Henri Matisse (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.), p.29.

²Trewin Copplestone, Modern Art (New York: Exeter Books, 1985), p. 8.

³Jacobus, Henri Matisse, p. 30.

⁴Hans Hess, How Pictures Mean (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 150.

⁵Victor Arwas, Berthon And Grasset (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1978), p. 53.

⁶S. Tschudi Madsen, Art Nouveau (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967), p. 219.

⁷Diane Chalmers Johnson, American Art Nouveau (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979), p. 15.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹Copplestone, Modern Art, p. 41.

¹⁰Mario Amaya, Art Nouveau (London: The Herbert Press, Ltd., 1985), p. 8.

¹¹Johnson, American Art Nouveau, p. 221.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 221

¹⁴Hess, How Pictures Mean, p.117.

¹⁵Victor Arwas, Art Deco (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1980), p. 190.

¹⁶Bevis Hillier, Art Deco (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 27.

¹⁷Hess, How Pictures Mean, p.115.

¹⁸Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, Untitled Article in The Bulletin by The Metropolitan Museum Of Art, New York, Winter 1979/80. p. 37.

¹⁹Johnson, American Art Nouveau, p.228.

²⁰Hess, How Pictures Mean, p. 92.

²¹Sam Lazzaro, Homage To Henri Matisse (New York: Tudor Publishing, Co., 1970), p. 88.

²²Ibid., p. 93.

²³Johnson, American Art Nouveau, p. 14.

²⁴Madsen, Art Nouveau, pp. 21 & 183.

²⁵Arwas, Art Deco, pp. 17-18.

²⁶Hillier, Art Deco, p. 13.

²⁷Arwas, Art Deco, p. 17.

²⁸Copplestone, Modern Art, p. 7.

²⁹Hess, How Pictures Mean, p. 73.

³⁰Ibid., p. 74.

³¹Lazzaro, Homage To Henri Matisse, p. 93.

³²Hess, How Pictures Mean, p. 73

³³Johnson, American Art Nouveau, p. 279.

³⁴J. J. Wilson and Karen Petersen, Women Artists (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1976), p.4.

³⁵Jacobus, Henri Matisse, p. 23.

³⁶Bevis Hillier, The World Of Art Deco (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co. Inc., 1971) p. 33.

³⁷Hillier, Art Deco, p. 61.

³⁸Copplestone, Modern Art, p. 10.

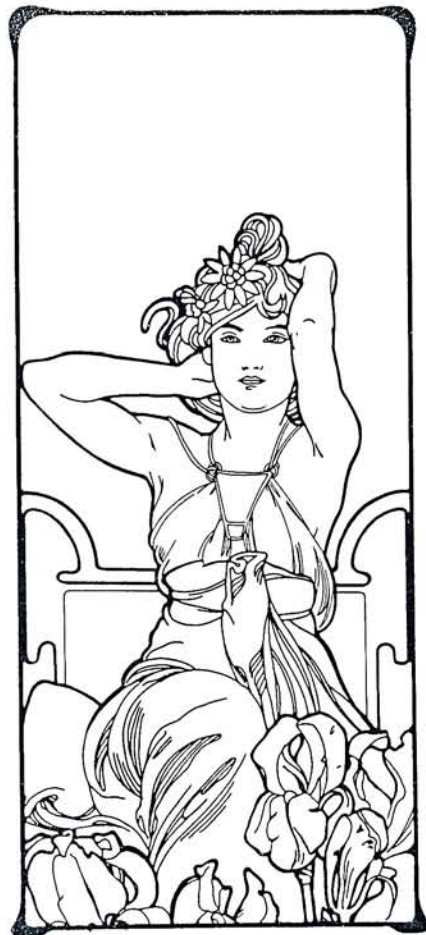
³⁹Giulia Veronesi, Style And Design (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1968), p. 309.

⁴⁰Wilson and Petersen, Women Artists, p. 107

⁴¹Copplestone, Modern Art, p. 7.

⁴²Arwas, Berthon And Grasset, p. 91.

⁴³Copplestone, Modern Art, p. 12.





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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. From The Time Before Time
oil
40" X 60"
2. While Still In The Garden
oil
36" x 48"
3. The Awakening
oil
36" X 48"
4. Ties Of The World
oil
48" X 48"
5. The Potential Of Death/Birth
oil
48" X 48"



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