

Exhibition *Art nouveau - Art déco. Marseille au cœur des styles*

Marseille, Château Borély – Musée des Arts décoratifs, de la Faïence et de la Mode
8th MAY 2026 – 25th APRIL 2027

Room 25 – FASHION GALLERY – Large & small glazed showcases

Digital display - LARGE GLAZED SHOWCASE

Living and entertaining: an Art Nouveau interior

At the end of the nineteenth century, certain artists sought to move beyond the reinterpretation of historical styles and to conceive a modern, coherent art in which architecture, furniture and objects formed a unified whole.

Promoted from 1896 by the group L'Art dans Tout, this approach elevated the so-called "minor arts" as essential components of a living environment in harmony with modern life.

The 1900 Exposition Universelle marked the culmination of these ambitions. While admired for the poetic quality of its decoration, the movement proved a commercial failure: costly, fragile and difficult to industrialise, it struggled to gain wider acceptance. Only the École de Nancy, around Émile Gallé and Louis Majorelle, together with a few Parisian workshops, succeeded in establishing it as a true artistic language.

In this context, cabinetmakers of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine adopted the organic lines and vegetal motifs of Art Nouveau. The Pérol brothers, heirs to a long artisanal tradition, presented a dining room ensemble at the 1900 Exposition Universelle, now preserved at the Musée d'Orsay.

Executed in polished and varnished mahogany, gilt copper and stoneware, the furniture is distinguished by its water-lily motifs. The jury praised "the skilful scattering, against the dark ground, of small leaves executed in gilt copper", as well as the delicate leather of the seats, concluding: "This is modernism of a most commendable kind." Through this ensemble, the Pérol brothers combined technical virtuosity with a modern decorative language, creating an interior conceived both for living and entertaining, reflecting the ambitions and limitations of Art Nouveau in France.

The aquatic world in Art Nouveau

At the boundary between the visible world and the realm of dreams, the aquatic universe fascinated Art Nouveau artists as a source of forms, mysteries and symbolic associations.

Unlike the plant world, which is familiar and close at hand, the marine realm evokes a distant, fluid and sometimes unsettling domain. Water is not merely a natural element; it is a primordial environment, a matrix from which life emerges. It conjures images of seaweed, shells and iridescent fish, but also of fossils embedded in stone, of archaic and silent creatures. These real or imagined forms nourished a decorative language that was as rich as it was enigmatic.

Rather than depicting water or the sea as picturesque landscapes, Art Nouveau artists sought to interpret their structure and energy. The marine world became a reservoir of forms aligned with the intellectual concerns of the period: the origins of life, geological time and the persistence of living matter.

The use of underwater motifs in the decorative arts reflects a shift towards an aesthetic of form without narrative. Artists drew upon illustrated natural history publications and cabinets of curiosities to enrich their visual vocabulary. Across all areas of the decorative arts, particularly ceramics and furniture, one observes a proliferation of stylised aquatic forms, visual echoes of the movement of water and the depths of the sea.

Émile Gallé and the metamorphoses of water

Few artists embody the dialogue between aquatic nature and artistic creation as fully as Émile Gallé. Although renowned for works inspired by the plant world, the theme of water and the marine depths also permeates much of his production, particularly around 1900. His project for the Paris Exposition Universelle illustrates this ambition. There, Gallé presented a spectacular vase, the Amphora of King Solomon, a true manifesto of his aquatic aesthetic. A technical tour de force, it demonstrates the glassmaker's ability to adapt and transpose the world of dreams into glass.

It also reflects the period's fascination with the marine environment. In 1870, Jules Verne published *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*; in describing the ocean depths, he employed metaphors that anticipate the material effects later explored by Gallé in glass.

Expanded objects labels - LARGE GLAZED SHOWCASE

1 – Paul Albert Besnard (1849–1934)

Portrait of Madame Mante and her Children, 1905, oil on canvas

Marseille, Museum of Fine Arts

While travelling to Rome, Albert Besnard paused in Marseille, where in 1905 he painted this portrait of Madame Mante and her children. Juliette Mante (1872–1956), daughter of Eugène Rostand, had married the wealthy Marseilles industrialist Louis Mante (1857–1939), an art enthusiast who assembled a remarkable collection. Alongside the expected Southern painters, it included works by leading figures of the previous century's French school, such as Delacroix, Corot and Gustave Moreau. Juliette Mante herself was an accomplished pianist, and her Parisian residence became a vibrant meeting place for musicians.

A fashionable society portraitist, Albert Besnard enjoyed an exceptionally distinguished official career. His success among affluent patrons owed much to his refined and measured assimilation of Impressionist ideas. He depicts Juliette Mante surrounded by her four children in the summer light of a park, most likely that of their Marseilles residence at Valmante. To their mother's right stand Gérard, who would later marry Suzy Proust, niece and sole heiress of Marcel Proust, and Régine, the future Countess Arnaud de Vallon. To the left are Andrée, an animal sculptor who would become the wife of Jean Rostand, and Odette, the youngest of the four.

From 08.05 to 08.11.2026

2– E. Brochier (dates unknown)

Evening dress ensemble, Marseille, c. 1910, silk, jet, galalith

Marseille, Musée d'Histoire

On the eve of the First World War, Marseille, an industrial capital, was rapidly embracing modernity. In the face of growing internationalisation, regional costume survived only as a marker of popular display. Elegant Marseillaises looked exclusively to Paris, which dictated fashion trends. New styles spread through specialised press, the theatre, the opera, and the salons of private mansions where the elite entertained lavishly. To meet the demands of this clientele, furriers, bootmakers, tailors, lingerie houses, jewellers and perfumers—and soon ready-to-wear establishments such as Armand Thierry, followed by major department stores like La Belle Jardinière and the Nouvelles Galeries—offered a wide range of high-quality goods.

Executed in the style of Paul Poiret, this Directoire-inspired gown bears the label "Mme E. Brochier, 56 rue Saint-Ferréol, Marseille". Located at the heart of the luxury district, between the Canebière, rue de Rome and rue Paradis, the establishment likely belonged to those couturières en chambre who reproduced designs from Parisian fashion journals.

From 10.11.2026 to 25.04.2027

2- Anonymous

Skirt and bodice, Marseille, c. 1905, Silk and linen
Marseille, Musée d'Histoire

This outfit belonged to Rose Caihol, President of the Fishmongers' Guild. Worn to attend the Opera or receptions at the Prefecture, it attests to the official and social role of this prominent popular figure of Marseilles, whose income appears to have been considerable.

Composed entirely of tulle and lace, it rivals the latest Parisian fashions favoured by the city's elite, who, since the eighteenth century, had habitually turned to the capital as the sole arbiter of elegance.

Digital display - SMALL GLAZED SHOWCASE

Art Deco and the call of the sea

Like plant forms, aquatic worlds stirred the imagination of decorative artists. Fish, seaweed, crustaceans and shells thus formed part of the decorative vocabulary of both Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

These motifs, inspired by marine flora and fauna, were applied to Sèvres porcelain vases, stoneware vessels, furniture panels and tapestries. Jean Dunand (1877–1942), for example, explored the motif of the Japanese-inspired fish in a lacquered wooden fire screen.

This same motif of fish and underwater landscapes appears in a silk dress and coat designed by Dunand in collaboration with the renowned Parisian haute couture house Worth. The textile, created by Dunand in 1925, draws directly on the decoration of lacquer panels, illustrating the fruitful collaborations between decorative artists and fashion designers.

Expanded objects labels - SMALL GLAZED SHOWCASE

From 08.05 to 08.11.2026

1- Lanvin, French Haute Couture house founded in 1885 by Jeanne Lanvin (1867–1946)

Afternoon dress, "Bergère Légère" model, Haute couture, Spring/Summer 1926, silk organdie, organza
Paris, Fondation Azzedine Alaïa

Jeanne Lanvin's art library contained numerous early fashion periodicals, which nourished her creative imagination, particularly for her celebrated robes de style. Derived from the "war crinolines" fashionable around 1915, these designs reached their fullest expression at Lanvin during the 1920s and remain emblematic of the house. Also referred to as "dancing dresses" or "garden-party dresses", they featured in every collection for women, young girls and children.

Inspired by the eighteenth century—fitted bodice, full skirt supported by petticoats or hoops, and evocative names such as *Fêtes galantes*, *Versailles* or *Dubarry*—they offered a silhouette in marked contrast to the straight lines then in vogue.

While “de style” in its skirt, this model presents a sleeveless bodice, cut straight like a chemise, recalling the tubular dresses associated with the *garçonne* aesthetic. The large circular motifs reflect the Art Deco idiom, while the subtle gradations of colour attest to Jeanne Lanvin’s passion for chromatic nuance, with soft, faded pink among her preferred shades.

From 10.11.2026 to 25.04.2027

1- **Worth**, French Haute Couture house founded in 1858 by Charles-Frederick Worth (1825-1895)
Evening Cape, Haute couture, 1926, silk satin, gold and silver lamé, velvet, silk taffeta
Paris, Fondation Azzedine Alaïa

Renowned for its unique designs and ostentatious luxury, the celebrated House of Worth—pioneer of French haute couture—continued to expand following the death of its founder in 1895. Over three generations, his heirs adapted to the evolving tastes of an exceptionally wealthy clientele.

In the 1920s, under the direction of his grandsons Jacques Worth, administrator, and above all Jean-Charles Worth, principal designer, the house fully embraced modernity through fruitful collaborations with leading figures of the contemporary art scene, notably Jean Dunand (1877–1942), a major exponent of Art Deco.

A decorator, sculptor, coppersmith, mosaicist and goldsmith, Dunand excelled in the art of lacquer, whose shimmering effects he translated into the many patterns he devised for Jean-Charles Worth, ever in search of vibrant colours and innovative textiles. Created around 1925, the fish motif adorning this cape also appears on several models produced by the house between 1926 and 1927, attesting to its popularity among clients.