

The Detroit News

Trash or Treasure: Chicago exhibition traces iconic designs

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Special to The Detroit News

October 5, 2023

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If you're lucky enough to be in Chicago between now and Nov. 5, don't miss "Hector Guimard: Art Nouveau to Modernism" at the jewel-like Richard H. Driehaus Museum, housed in a 19th-century mansion just steps off Michigan Avenue. On view through Nov. 5, the small but special exhibition explores the life and work of Hector Guimard (1867-1942), the architect and designer whose name is synonymous with the French art nouveau movement.

Guimard is best known for this sinuous and iconic design for the Paris Metro entrances. Those are well represented, with metalwork and drawings tracing the evolution of some of Paris's most recognizable architectural elements, but so too are his less-known but no less worthy contributions to jewelry, metalwork, ceramics drawing and textiles. Brought together for the first time from museums around the world, it's the first major American museum exhibition devoted to Guimard since 1970.



Placards throughout trace the rise of what became known as “the style Guimard,” still represented throughout the City of Light today. During his career, Guimard designed more than 50 buildings, often down to every exterior and interior detail. “Furniture, wallpaper, carpeting, even doorknobs, combined to create a total work of art,” according to exhibition information.

His most famous designs, it explains, are the subway entrances, created for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900. Of the original 141 metro entrances, 86 still stand in Paris as protected historic monuments, although only two still feature the original glass canopies. No less important, exhibition placards explain, are his many other contributions, including his political engagement, commitment to the collective good and interest in standard design.

Displayed chronologically, you can follow Guimard’s career through early architectural efforts, including the then-radical efforts to combine exterior

architecture, interior architecture and the decorative arts into an integrated whole, similar to the efforts of Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland and Frank Lloyd Wright in the U.S. The exhibition traces his growing expertise at marketing and the rise of his distinctive graphics, through his relationship with technology and machines as a means to create a modern style. He later added ceramics, lighting, and cast-iron designs, including fireplaces, all represented in the exhibition.

Through his designs, Guimard brought art nouveau , often associated with luxury, to a wider audience. “He also sought to address the problems of poverty and lack of affordable housing,” placards attest. “Forms found in nature, he believed, would help reform society, and standardization both in form and technique, would lead to more efficient construction,” including a company founded to produce his innovative system of building blocks that were easy to transport and assemble but never caught on as he had hoped.

After his death, his wife, Adeline Oppenheim, worked tirelessly to make sure Guimard’s work wasn’t forgotten. “My contribution to industry has been to put the beautiful within reach of everyone,” he wrote in 1913. More than a century later, that’s still true.

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