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## Introduction: Tastemaking in the Age of Art Nouveau: The Role of Siegfried Bing

by Gabriel P. Weisberg

With the assistance of Edwin Becker, Curator of Exhibitions, Van Gogh Museum



Hugues Krafft, *From the left: Siegfried Bing, Louis Gonse, Mme Roujon, Emmanuel Gonse and Mme Gonse at Midori-no-sato*, 1899.

Photograph. Reims, Musée Le Vergeur, Société des Amis du Vieux Reims, Archives Hugues Krafft

With the recent symposium at the Van Gogh Museum (January 13-14, 2005) during the run of the exhibition *L'Art Nouveau: The Bing Empire*, the importance of Siegfried Bing in framing the debate about what constituted good design for home interiors forcefully came to the fore. Bing's role as a tastemaker, as a connoisseur, as a sponsor of young creators at the outset of a new era, was clearly illustrated. His ability to find new talent in numerous countries throughout the world was given prominence. Bing's successes in sponsoring new design, especially through his gallery, influenced countless designers who saw that by uniting eastern and western sensibilities, "art as decoration" could improve design for home environments and break the stranglehold of tradition. The fact that these ideas were initiated during the era of large-scale redeployments in artistic design reveals that Bing was central to the entire art nouveau era.

While Bing has been the subject of earlier investigations, including the more concise 1986 exhibition dedicated to his work, there now appear many new avenues of research for continued study of his career and his influence on others. The recent symposium demonstrates this quite well. At the same time, what is also apparent is the fact that no great cache of documents has been unearthed, anywhere, that would provide a fuller picture of the manner in which Bing conducted his business. Bing remains, today, just as much a personal mystery as he was forty years ago when concerted research into his career and business began. While much work has been done on his myriad activities with artists, and while objects he sold all over the world have been found, we remain in the dark about Bing's deeply felt motivation and we are incapable of chronicling all his business activities with certainty.

Yet, the papers from the symposium that we are publishing here suggest various ways in which research on Bing and his period can be conducted now and in the future. My own essay, "Lost and Found: S. Bing's Merchandising of Japonisme and Art Nouveau" considers Bing's marketing strategies. It outlines the ways in which his sponsorship of Japanese art provided a direction to his and other Japan lovers' experiments in the applied arts. For Bing, as much as was the case with such noted designers as Henri Vever, the jeweler, or P.A. Isaac-Dathis, a textile decorator, or Bing's colleague, and later friendly competitor, Julius Meier-Graefe, Japan was the creative stimulus. Since Bing knew how to promote Japanese art through exhibitions, catalogues, flyers, and other promotional means, the discovery of new people that he reached, and organizations to which he belonged, such as the Japan Society in London, suggest avenues that can still be followed in order to find deeper wells of influence and promotional expertise. Only by continuing to piece together the disparate documentation pertaining to Bing's business empire, no matter how seemingly innocuous the documents might be, will we be able to assess the scope of the Bing organization at a time when it was trying to

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effectively assert itself internationally.

Bing was always partial to artists, most likely because he was a creator at heart. Trained in the manufacturing of porcelain, Bing was sensitive to the ways in which the talents of creators could be used to his own advantage. Henri Somm, the printmaker and symbolist watercolorist, is an excellent case in point. Somm's work, which humorously depicted Japan as the newest fad with which to attract a feminine clientele, served as the starting point for Bing's promotional campaign that put his shop, its goods, and the dealer himself in the forefront by utilizing new techniques of the graphic arts and of advertising. Elizabeth Menon's essay, "The Functional Print in Commercial Culture: Henry Somm's Women in the Marketplace," concentrates on Somm's advertising prints and reveals how Bing located artists who could help his cause. Continued research in this area may locate other artists with similar ties to Bing while providing insight into the reasons why he selected given artists who could help his business.

Bing's dealing in Japanese art also influenced better known artists, such as Edouard Vuillard. As Vuillard was exposed to the Japanese prints and screens that Bing sold and saw them collected by wealthy connoisseurs, ideas from these objects were gradually assimilated into his own work. In their essay, "Crisis and Revolution in Vuillard's Search for Art Nouveau Unity in Modern Decoration: Sources for *The Public Gardens*," Annette Leduc-Beaulieu and Brooks Beaulieu convincingly show how Bing's flair for the subtle and the harmonious in Japanese art could influence a French artist to create on the walls of a Parisian apartment a full scale appreciation for or transference of eastern ideas to western spaces. Vuillard, under Bing's stimulus, impressively demonstrated in his works how Japanese art became the dominant element in the creation of "art as decoration."

How Bing worked with outside firms in Europe and in the United States is also fertile ground for exploration. Partial to selling objects made by other companies and obtaining a commission on the objects he sold, Bing adroitly worked out favorable business relationships with various firms. He was thus able to market the newest goods in the most remote sections of Europe. A case in point is Bing's working relationship with Louis Comfort Tiffany. Martin Eidelberg's article, "S. Bing and L.C. Tiffany: Entrepreneurs of Style," carefully documents how this relationship evolved, where it went and when it ended, conclusively showing that both men had the same goals: to become tastemakers for their respective countries. This essay goes far toward becoming the definitive piece on the Tiffany/Bing relationship.

Dealers, or shop owners in other countries such as Belgium and Holland, also responded to Bing's example. Marjan Groot's essay charts this new territory, suggesting that there were other shops dealing with objects for home interiors that reached the needs of a public audience at the same time as Bing's shop did in Paris. Groot's essay, "Siegfried Bing's Salon de L'Art Nouveau and the Dutch Gallery Arts and Crafts," suggests that Bing was not alone in his desire to rejuvenate home decoration; she investigates a shop similar to his that catered to a public eager to renew the décor of their home environment. His shop served as an example for other such ventures, thus stimulating the trade for objects of luxury and quality. Bing's L'Art Nouveau demonstrated that a shop could be a place where informed consumerism flourished.

From all of these articles one impression comes into prominence: Bing had few competitors in his time willing to put the weight of

one's own personality, and considerable fortune, behind the quest for design reform. While there were commercial shops such as William Morris & Co., or Liberty's in London, it was Bing's shop that became synonymous with an entire international movement. In this he was both a pioneer and a visionary. He knew how to reach the public while at the same time gaining support from museum professionals around the world. Importantly, he was also a voice for quality in the visual arts and for internationalism, as his global strategies and his openness to the ways in which museums could visually educate their audiences, provided substance and clues for the future. Continued research into Bing's activities and the artists he valued will only continue to affirm his public role as that of a tastemaker.