



Desk

Emile Gallé

Not on display

Title/Description: Desk

Artist/Maker: Emile Gallé (Designer)

Born: 1900 c.

Object Type: Desk, Furniture

Materials: Bronze, Mahogany, Walnut, Wood

Technique: Carving, Inlay, Marquetry

Measurements: h. 1075 x w. 800 x d. 550 mm

Inscription: 'Gallé'

Accession Number: 21000

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: France, Nancy

School/Style: Art Nouveau

Credit Line: Donated by Sir Colin and Lady Anderson, 1978

This elegant walnut and mahogany writing desk reflects Emile Gallé's belief that the beauty of the natural world should be the central inspirational force for furniture design. The traditional structure of the sloping, fall-front desk has been embellished with carefully chosen natural forms associated with Lorraine, the region of France where Gallé lived and worked. The legs are based on the furling forms of arum lilies and the bespoke bronze fittings have been inspired by flowers and woodland foliage. The references to Lorraine are most explicit in the exquisite marquetry panels on the front and sides of the desk, which depict native species of orchid in the regional landscape.

The desk was produced in the cabinet making factory that Gallé had established in Nancy in the mid-1880s to execute his furniture designs. In addition to fully equipped modern workshops, the factory housed an extensive collection of veneers and cabinet woods, and a garden of plants, which served as living models for related marquetry designs. [1]

Gallé's writing desk design was first exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900 and was produced by the factory in various versions. For example, there are two 'Forêt Lorraine' desks, very similar in form and design to this one, in collections at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and at Brighton Museum. These versions are interesting because they include an inlaid inscription which connects the forest of Lorraine with a line of poetry by Charles Baudelaire: 'The forest of Lorraine - here everything would whisper silently to the soul in its own gentle mother tongue'. [2] This signals the spiritual significance that Gallé attached to the natural world as the source of inspiration for his designs. Gallé addressed this directly in his own eloquent texts about the possibilities of furniture design and working in wood. [3]

During his lifetime, Gallé was instrumental in establishing Nancy as a major centre for Art Nouveau. In 1901 he formally organised the École de Nancy, an alliance of local artists and designers, committed to enhancing the design and manufacture of highly crafted products from the region of Lorraine. Influential members included Louis Majorelle and Antonin and Auguste Daum.

The Andersons purchased this desk for their Art Nouveau collection in 1964. The collection includes three pieces of furniture designed by Gallé and ten of his works in glass.

Lisa Newby, June 2020

[1] Philippe Gardner, *Emile Gallé* (London: Academy Editions, 1976), p.69.

[2] Jessica Rutherford, *Art Nouveau, Art Deco and the Thirties: The Furniture Collections at Brighton Museum* (Brighton: The Royal Pavilion, Art Galleries and Museums, 1983), p.14. See also https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/lorraine-forest-desk-7206.html
https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire/commentaire_id/lorraine-forest-desk-7206.html?no_cache=1&S=1&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=846&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=843&cHash=4833d14535 [accessed 21/06/20]

[3] See Claire I R O'Mahony "Ma racine est au fond des bois': Gallé and Wood', *Art on the Line*, 1:4 (2007), http://www.bristol.ac.uk/artontheline/journal_20071/articles/pdf/20071_04.pdf

Further Reading

Johnson, Penny, *Art Nouveau, The Anderson Collection*, 1978, p. 30.

Geitner, Amanda and Emma Hazell (eds.), *The Anderson Collection of Art Nouveau*, Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2003, cat. 140, pp. 69, 155, ill. p.18.
