

‘Ma racine est au fond des bois’: Gallé and Wood

Claire I R O’Mahony

Department of Continuing Education and Kellogg College, University of Oxford

Abstract

Described by Roger Marx as ‘homo-triplex,’ Gallé experimented tirelessly with the expressive potential of ceramics, glass and wood. However, his furniture has received much less critical attention than his work in glass. By examining Gallé’s unique engagement with the distinctive possibilities and effects of wood as a medium, one recognises more fully the degree to which natural forms provided him with dynamic structures and aesthetic complexity, as well as surface decorative effects. Gallé’s nuanced writings on furniture design, his report to the jury of the 1889 Exposition Universelle ‘Notice sur la production de menuiserie et ébénisterie sculptées et marquetées d’É Gallé’ and a pair of articles first published in *La Revue des Art Decoratifs* in 1900 ‘Le Mobilier contemporain orné d’après la nature’, offer helpful insights into the vexed issue of Gallé’s relationship to mechanisation and artisanal ideals. Gallé’s essays assist in recontextualising his furniture within the distinct attitudes and methods of the French tradition of ébenisterie, which was elucidated by the sociological studies of the trade undertaken by Pierre De Marrousem in the 1890s. Our understanding and involvement with Gallé’s work in wood can be deepened, not only by more nuanced consideration of these more technical concerns, but also by devoting more attention to the political and poetic iconography of the pieces themselves, which reveals Gallé’s deeply committed social activism, an issue which still remains at the periphery of much of the critical analysis of his oeuvre.

The art critic Claude Roger-Marx famously gave Émile Gallé the epithet of ‘homo-triplex’, a creator at ease in the disparate three-dimensional media of ceramics, glass and wood.¹ Most of the Gallé scholarship and indeed the exhibitions of his work have focused upon his extraordinary achievement as a glass maker, two notable exceptions being the encyclopaedic exhibition of 1985-6 at the Musée de Luxembourg in Paris, whose catalogue remains a definitive source for Gallé scholars and enthusiasts, and the 2002-3 exhibition at the Musée de l’Ecole de Nancy, devoted to Gallé and Victor Prouvé’s fruitful collaborations in furniture design.² Even in the recent renewal of interest in Art Nouveau typified by the multiple celebrations around the millennium, it was striking to note that although the hugely popular *Art Nouveau 1890-1914* Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum did include examples of Gallé’s glass and Louis Majorelle’s furniture, Camille Martin’s and Prouvé’s book-binding, Nancy itself did not merit a chapter in the vast catalogue which included thirteen essays devoted to particular Art Nouveau metropolitan centres.³ Thus unsurprisingly, the call for papers for the research symposium from which this anthology derives did not attract a single proposal



addressing a core aspect of Gallé's complex creative temperament, his work in wood. Why has Gallé's work in wood been generally overlooked? In what ways did his furniture design reflect and enlarge the expression of his aesthetic and humanist preoccupations? In harmony with Mme Thomas's thoughtful analysis in this special issue of Gallé's relationships to the natural world and poetry in his glass, this essay touches briefly on the importance of organicism in his work in wood as well, but also draws out two other key aspects of his oeuvre and fin de siècle milieu which are often ignored: Gallé's thoughtful embracing of certain forms of industrial practices, and his firm commitment to social justice and its advocacy through his furniture design.

The reasons for the critical neglect of Gallé's furniture are, one suspects, manifold; the place even of his glass within much Art Nouveau scholarship remains somewhat marginalised. Amidst the general Modernist debunking of Art Nouveau organicism in favour of functionalism and 'streamlines', Gallé's minutely detailed evocations of natural form invited particularly vitriolic assaults. Unlike Victor Horta's or Richard Rimmerschmid's arabesques, Gallé's organicism embraced botanical specificities which could never be argued to embrace Modernism's advocacy of conventionalised abstracted form. In his treatise on furniture, published in the wake of the 1900 Exposition Universelle, Gallé himself distanced his work from the sources and aims associated with style label of Art Nouveau:

By contrast, nature, who does not provide garlands and astragalus, grants to the artist many other things than earthworms and flatworms, pseudo-seaweed and crazed vermicelli from which some hoped on the occasion of 1900, albeit with great talent, to make a cradle where the new born twentieth century might shelter, a helminthique and 'larval' style. If modern furniture design is there then we will consent once again to wig and trains.⁴

He ends by pithily declaiming: "To have or not to have a style" does not seem to me as tragic an alternative as Hamlet's poignant question'.⁵ Equally, one wonders if a Ruskinian mistrust of the entrepreneurial, more industrialised processes deployed by Nanceans such as Gallé, Majorelle and Antonin Daum lies at the heart of this particular neglect within English language scholarship.⁶

A re-evaluation of Gallé's work as a designer in wood can perhaps best be begun by examining the physical particularities of, as well as his theoretical writing about, furniture. As with his engagement with the media of glass and ceramics, Gallé published eloquent and multifaceted treatises on his attitudes to working in wood. The two key texts on furniture making, his report to the jury of the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris and the previously mentioned 1900 articles, suggest a coherent, yet distinctively localised vision of working methods and inspirational sources.⁷ These texts focus on the centrality of natural form as a source for inspired design in wood, achieving technical innovation and renewed aesthetic resonance, but also the vital importance in creating responsible methods of production. In his 1889 essay, Gallé explained why he had embarked on his new project of furniture design, realising a vase needed something more to achieve its full expressivity:



It needed [a base] made of some exotic wood of an unusual shade. For the first time I entered into the shop of a precious wood merchant. I felt that I had discovered the Indies and America. What a surprise to see, under the scraper and the wax, the blocks of amaranth flush crimson in the sunlight, the perfumed opals ribboned with rose and violet.⁸

In this passage, Gallé infuses his experience of working with wood with an aura of Symbolist 'correspondance' and imagination; it is not by chance that he invokes a Baudelairean synaesthetic coalescing of senses, olfactory smell and visual hue.⁹ As with the medium of glass, the exotic suggestibility of wood facilitates an imaginative and aesthetic voyage into the unknown. Indeed furniture-making was an utterly unknown terrain for Gallé, and he immediately admits his trepidation. This form, demanding equal technical proficiency in working wood and metal, entails all the three-dimensional difficulties of construction and proportion, as well as the application of surface decoration. However, whilst humbling himself before the skills and traditions of this highly specialised *metier*, he also modestly, but resolutely, indicates the need for new inspiration and conceptions of construction.

His key innovations reside in a broader repertory of woods and a highly distinctive deployment of natural form in the structure, as well as the decoration, of his furniture. He uses indigenous fruitwoods from his beloved Lorraine, as well as the exotic and hard woods traditionally used in French furniture-making. The overall tonality of Gallé's pieces is predominantly lighter; he often dispensed with or minimises the use of stains, allowing natural, lighter hues to delightful effect. An extension of this naturalising practice, he also creates 'portraits' rather than stylisations of nature in the decorative motifs. His intermingling of the distinctively rigid categories of style within French furniture, juxtaposing Renaissance and Rococo effects as pleases his aims, has perhaps been the most difficult aspect of his oeuvre to assimilate, both in his own life time and in recent studies. Even his most staunch and eloquent advocates intimate that this eclecticism, particularly in the early work, belies a certain temerity.¹⁰ Gallé is astutely frank in 1889, realises the need for circumspection about easing his public, and market, into this new work in wood and thus does not abandon historicism from the outset. Interestingly, he seems to have gauged his public more accurately in 1889, where his deployment of Renaissance and Rococo vocabularies met with critical acclaim and official recognition in the form of medals, whilst his 1900 more personalised naturalism met with lukewarm praise and no commendations.

As with his work in ceramics and glass, the inspirational force of the organic world is paramount in the conception, construction and decoration of his furniture. In his 1900 treatise on contemporary furniture, Gallé advocates not only borrowing motifs from botanical form, but also developing the structural framework, joinery and sculptural elements from organic structures as well. His novel and prolific use of the umbel plant, illustrates a multivalent responsiveness to organicism which resonates throughout his work in wood (figure 1). The umbel proved particularly useful in its variety of volumetric structures and junctures, as well as surface shapes and patterns. The masked junctures of main stem



Figure 1 *Umbel plant, also known as cow parsnip or hogweed*

and side shoots offered valuable lessons for designing joints.¹¹ The striation of the main stem offered new rhythms for bevelling edges and narrow supports.¹² The silhouette of the multiple flower heads served to create attractive patterns for the fine sculpted frieze work of chair backs, (figure 2) shelf supports and balustrades, whilst the detailed shape and colour of the seed heads also formed the core motif of the more 'painterly' marquetry panel designs. These effects did not just create a piece that was more stable and visually appealing. Gallé, ever the aesthete as well as the scientist, saw these forms as uniquely serving to infuse furniture with moral narrative and life force. Gallé invokes this profundity as a marker of the unity of the arts; design is likened to the highest genre of painting, the nude:

Behold our ideal is achieved: furniture treated like the nude, ornamented with the equilibrium of its own structure, of its internal parts opening out like those of an animal or a plant, in their nerves, in their flesh, fur and feathers, tissues, membranes, bark, in their budding, flowering, fruitfulness; behold the labour of a sculptor, a work of intellect, of truth, of liberty, - a work of delicacy, difficult, lasting and beautiful, - that we advocate as our own and last efforts.¹³

The elegant nuance of these effects was achieved in part through the greater use of wisely deployed mechanisation, deemed acceptable by many French *haute-luxe* designers as well as Gallé, to minimise the monotony of labour. Machines like the steam powered mechanical saw also achieved more precise results than hand cuts ever could. Béatrice Lauwick's and Anna Ostrup's recent technical analysis of Gallé firm marquetry work offered many fascinating revelations in favour of machine tools; the use of a steam-powered blade rather than a traditional hand saw not only saved on wastage but allowed finer cuts of wood, facilitating a more evocative use of irregularities of pattern.¹⁴ If narrower slivers of wood can be cut, particularly through the natural patterns of knots, multiple pieces



Figure 2 *Umbel Chair, c.1900, Musée de l'École de Nancy*



with minutely variegated patterning can be deployed, achieving very delicate gradients of pattern modulation.

However, two of Gallé's most prolific champions, Françoise Thérèse Charpentier and Philippe Thiébaud, have remained, at times, lukewarm in their praise of the furniture; the spectre of the inadequacy of the *bon marché*, haunting their thoughtful and admiring accounts of *haute-luxe* examples.¹⁵ Even Gallé's *haute-luxe* pieces are the product of divided labour and more mechanised methods of production. As such his oeuvre continues to be regarded with considerable suspicion, bringing together often opposed advocates within the decorative arts and material culture/design history communities. The former denounce these objects as adulterated with the tarnish of kitschy entrepreneurialism rather than the respectability and Morrisian moral virtue of artisanal craft, the latter have tended to ignore them as elitist cultural artefacts. Gallé was not unaware of these tensions in his own life time, and some of his most nuanced arguments in favour of more industrial working practices and mass markets, were articulated particularly in his writings devoted to contemporary furniture. Ironically his 'corrupt' methods of furniture production, were precisely what Gallé felt might finally realise the Ruskinian and Morrisian ideals of the 'joy of labour' and a less costly 'art for all', which were in many ways to prove unachievable in the long term using handicraft.¹⁶

Gallé's own eloquent treatises give the lie to any reductive characterisation of him as a grasping entrepreneur. His working practices must be contextualised within the specificities of French traditions of furniture making, as well as the social aspirations of Morris and Ruskin which held such sway over Gallé and his contemporaries. Significantly much of the tone of the 1889 essay is that of an apologia, devoted to assuaging the potential affront to the contemporary French furniture makers of the jury, provoked by Gallé's temerity in attempting, brazenly uninitiated, to engage in their profession. Woodworking skills had a particularly hierarchical, yet distinct French tradition in the history of artisanal guilds, witnessed, for example, in the highly nuanced distinctions between the skills of carving and joinery implicit within the distinct guilds of *menuiserie* and *ébénisterie*. As Pierre Du Maroussem's 1890s sociological study of the multiple strata of furniture-making in Paris' Faubourg Sainte Antoine *La Question Ouvrière* revealed, *haute-luxe* workshops in France had embraced a much greater division of labour and mechanisation within the guilds than was customary in Britain or Belgium, for example, precisely in order to champion the skills and creativity of individual technicians.¹⁷ Hence by decontextualising Gallé's working practices from the French tradition through the prism of the British arts and crafts principles, there has been a tendency to judge his production methods as uniquely (and reductively) dehumanising, as Deborah Silverman has elucidated:

Du Maroussem clarified the French craft tradition, which associated the increased division of labour with an increase quality of the product. This direct proportion, which inverts Ruskin's and Morris' and Van de Velde's pejorative conception of the division of labour in craft production may be seen in Diderot's *Encyclopaedie* ... Among the many hands collaborating in progression were the *découpeurs*, who cut the wood, the *tourneurs*, who shaped the cut wood to lathe; the *ébaniste* proper, who assembled and carved the piece of furniture; and a proliferation of finishers, varying according to the item: the



marqueteurs who inlaid surface designs; the *ciseleur-doreurs*, sculptors of wood and gilded embellishments, appliers of veneers; and *sculpteurs sur bois*, sculptors of wood adornments.¹⁸

The soul-destroying repetitive work of the *trôleurs*, relentlessly making the same designs to fulfil the mass demand of the Parisian *grands magasins* was just one part of the use of machine tools in French furniture design. As Silverman has argued persuasively, for many Faubourg Sainte-Antoine *haute-luxe* workshops, machinery helped to reinforce a sense of skill and individual creativity.

Gallé eloquently champions the use of machine tools for certain parts of furniture making, recognising that these tools did not undermine the skills of the artisan, but rather saved his energy and skill for the more nuanced, and implicitly creatively satisfying, stages of decoration rather than the mundane tasks of initial cutting work:

The decoration of contemporary furniture will in no way be melancholic. It will be honest. It will thus be innately joyous, because it will be a popular art, which is to say an art in which the worker, the producer, will not be reduced to the state of a machine and will no longer know this 'hard labour' of making, through the sweat of his brow, parts of the piece without being able to grasp the whole work. He will be called upon to play his part, and receive the remuneration owing to intelligent work, and the free joys of the spirit: knowledge, conception, invention, interpretation of a design, a work, adaptation of living models to the skills of his hands.¹⁹

The use of the Morrisian phrase 'hard labour' (in the original English) and the phraseology of 'joy,' 'skill' and 'freedom' is not by chance. Gallé has intelligently reinterpreted Morrisian principles to the distinct conditions and perceptions of French craft production (figure 3). As such Gallé contentedly sets out the methods of his modern *usine* or *fabrique*, centrally heated and lit where labour is indeed divided, *pace* Morris, but in order to affirm rather than quash skill and personal achievement. His method of pricing, minutely tabulating hours worked and materials used, can also be seen as recognising and rewarding individual contribution, rather than timecard punching for authority's sake.



Figure 3 Emile Gallé and his marquetry workshop, c.1897

Gallé's deep commitment to worker education also distances his *usine* from the sweatshops relentlessly serving the Parisian department stores with repetitive copies described by Du Maroussem. The *usine* was surrounded by a botanical garden where workers could immerse themselves in the study of plants, grouped by species to



enhance their scientific and aesthetic awareness (figure 4). Workers were also encouraged by Gallé to avail themselves of adult education courses (on anything from gymnastics to social justice and photography) offered at the *Université Populaire* which Gallé's friend Charles Keller, amongst many others, helped to found in 1899 and where Gallé regularly gave lectures on colour and natural form, and exhibited his drawings.²⁰ Gallé's profound commitment to social justice remains at best peripherally mentioned in most analyses and will form the core strand of the analysis of his furniture.



Figure 4 Gardens at the Gallé factory, c.1886 (original photograph) Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

What has faded from recent critical interpretations of Gallé's furniture pieces is their complex political and pantheist iconography, thus reducing them to handsome, but mute objects. Gallé's committed and multivalent activism has remained virtually unmentioned in the English-language scholarship, and had been underplayed in many French analyses until the 1999 Galeries Poirel catalogue and the recent flurry of centenary interventions.²¹ Gallé's integral involvement in the

Dreyfus case, culminating in his furnace and glass display at the 1900 Exposition Universelle is perhaps the most arresting case study in this respect, but his furniture also addressed such contentious issues (figure 5).²² The remainder of this essay will strive to reawaken awareness of Gallé's passionate, yet peaceful, engagement with fin de siècle political struggles, from the German annexation of his beloved Alsace-Lorraine to the Armenian massacres. These outrages and aspirations resonate within the otherwise dulcet evocations of the Lorraine forests and meadows in his furniture designs.

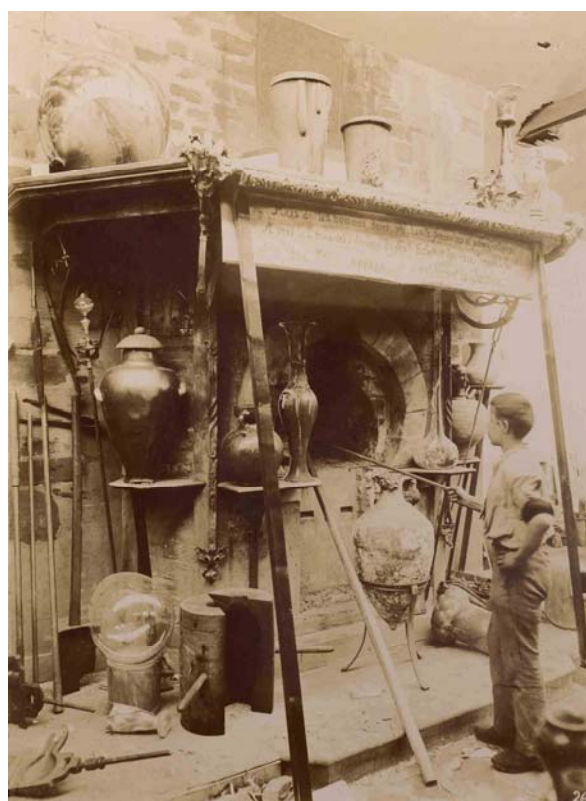


Figure 5 Gallé's Furnace Installation at the 1900 Exposition Universelle, Paris, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

Motifs evocative of the German annexation are the most immediately recognisable and prolific of these socio-political interventions. Gallé's complex 1889 Exposition Universelle installation incorporated many novel references, one kiosk was decorated with paleontological

flora declaring Gallé's knowledge and fascination with Darwinian evolution, whilst another romanticised tent kiosk and three of his furniture pieces directly evoked the rupture of the annexation through their imagery of Celtic Gaul and Lorrain flora and traditions (figure 6). Three furniture pieces suggest the festive, spiritual and historical integrity of the region of Lorraine through its Celtic past. The *Flore d'hiver* cabinet celebrates the winter flora of Eastern France, holly and pine, hellebore 'Christmas rose', the seasonal catkins of the hazel and alder trees, mistletoe and even wrens.²³ This regionalist focus is underlined by the seasonal inscriptions 'Noël! Noël! Mistletoe! New Year!'. Christmas traditions are celebrated in Lorraine with particular intensity, but also through the subtle non-belligose adaptation of a line from Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*: 'A winter's tale, a merry tale or a sad one?'.²⁴ Such bittersweet local resonances are merry in their evocation of belonging, the cabinet was specially designed for Gallé's aunt to house albums and children's toys, but are also infused with a conflicting sense of loss, these associations also suggest a rupture and loss of identity, inflicted by the severance of the 'lost provinces' from France.

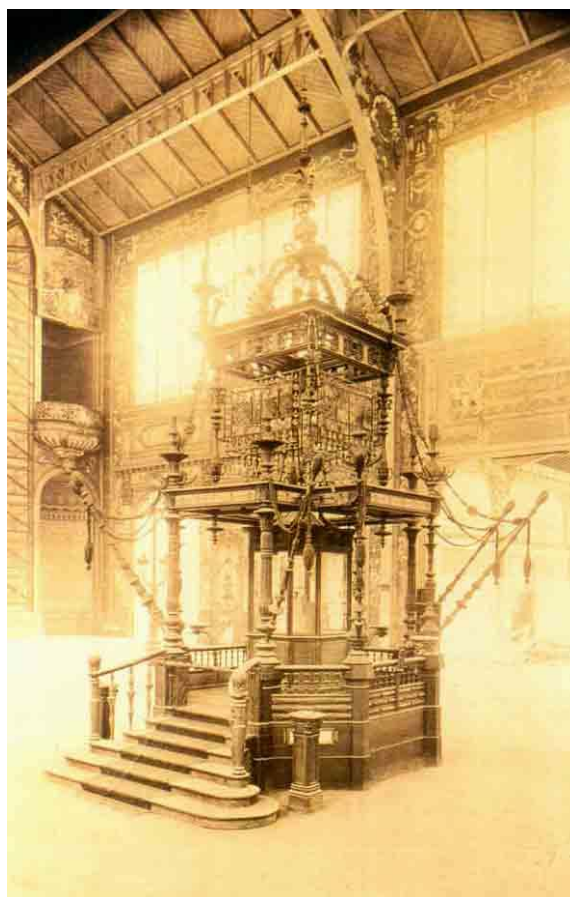


Figure 6 Gallé Kiosk at the 1889 Exposition Universelle, Paris, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

Two other pieces, the *Velleda* cabinet and the *Rhine* table invoke an innate Celtic past for Lorraine before the interventions of war and politics. The massive oak cabinet achieves these associations in a fairly straightforward way, in its heroic, pre-modern scale and the imagery of the carved panels designed by Victor Prouvé which depict a druid and the druidess 'Velleda' collecting mistletoe in a Celtic Lorraine untouched by conflict. Most elaborate of all is the *Rhine* table, designed 'for a museum' which remained in Gallé's own collection and was included in most of his important exhibition installations (figure 7). Made of local fruitwoods (walnut, plum and lemon tree, pepper shrub, holly) and rosewood, the figural panel, floral motifs and inscriptions, all achieve a mood of dissent, but not rancour or violence towards the occupiers. The marquetry of the table is more overtly confrontational showing ancient Gauls and Germans preparing for battle. The two river personifications, in a supportive embrace, fend off these bellicose humans, the Moselle with her extended leg and the Rhine with an imperious gesture. The panel is inscribed with the passage from Tacitus which it illustrates: 'Le Rhin sépare des Gaules toute la Germanie'²⁵. The base of the table is ornamented with a frieze of thistles (the emblem of Lorraine)²⁶ and ivy and forget-me-nots (for faithful remembrance). The baby eagles are part of the insignia of Lorraine but also resonant with German



Figure 7 Émile Gallé and Victor Prouvé, *The Rhine Table*, 1889, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

associations. The base is inscribed with another less immediately visible text 'Je tiens au Coeur de France. Plus me poigne plus j'y tiens'. He signs the table 'Fait par Emile Gallé de Nancy en bon espoir 1889'. These references were not lost upon French commentators, the challenge passed unremarked upon in the German press; however these bellicose resonances were juxtaposed with a subtle imagery of hope, saving the piece from the posture of *revanchisme* which dominated most representations of the annexation.²⁷ Rootedness, 'enracinement', for Gallé has none of the ugly chauvanism and anti-semitism of his erstwhile friend Maurice Barrès, a friendship begun at Bayreuth in 1892, but acrimoniously severed during the Dreyfus crisis, once initial differences of nuance in their views had deteriorated into Barrès' vitriolic attacks on the Dreyfusard Gallé in the Nancy press. The table and Lorrain identity is rooted in French soil, the rivers and flora of Lorraine, but these natural roots fend off the brutality of the primitive Gauls as well as the Teutons of Tacitus and 1870. Gallé's imagery of the annexation is remarkable in its complexity, reflecting the impossible mixture of empathy and resentment felt by a region deeply attached to, yet forcibly occupied by, former neighbours.²⁸

Gallé offers a startlingly modern unwillingness to reduce the complex experiences of occupied Lorraine to a renewal of fratricidal polarities. Lorraine imagery conveyed many messages for Gallé as is attested by his magnificent table, *Flore de Lorraine*, a gift along with a Golden Book to Tsar Nicholas II in honour of the Franco-Russian alliance of 1893.²⁹ This exquisite piece overflows with flowers and trees each symbolising a distinct corner or town of Lorraine. The inscription on the exterior of the table pleads for lasting alliances to maintain a peace: 'Gardez les coeurs qu'avez gagnez'.³⁰ A text was recently discovered within the body of this table during its restoration for the 1999 Galeries Poirel Exhibition. Gallé included this testimonial declaring his hope that 'our work in bronze and wood will be less lasting than the friendship and greatness of the two peoples of Russia

and France'.³¹ This testimonial goes on to decode minutely the complex imagery of flowers and trees each symbolising a distinct corner or town of Lorraine. This referencing is achieved through an almost symphonic variety of methods of allusion in the floral marquetry. Honesty plant, lunaire, works as a homophone for Luneville. Belfort, site of French military victory but also terrible suffering under siege is evoked through a linaire, or lion flower echoing Bartholdi's monument to the brave city, a sculpture of a lion. A virtuous protestant minister Oberlin is suggested by the 'herbe du Pasteur'. The different plants are placed in geographical relationship to each other within the composition, eastern flowers for eastern towns on the right, western to the left. The rectangular section demarcating where the Golden Book should be placed on the table also encourages a subterfuge to mask the most explicitly controversial aspect of the scheme. The double cross of Lorraine is in flames whilst a *Rosa Gallica*, the flower of the lost Alsatian city of Metz, is preyed upon by a spider and weeps glass tears. Bitter herbs, used in the Jewish Passover seder underline the ecumenical nature of Gallé's plea for tolerance and freedom. The three menacing dark birds in the left hand side of the composition surely suggest the tripartite alliance of Germany, Austria and Italy which the 1893 alliance intended to counterbalance with the triumvirate of France, Russia and Britain. However, the inscription on the exterior of the table pleads for deeper alliances between peoples not powers, if any peace is to be maintained: 'Gardez les coeurs qu'avez gagnez'. Gallé's minute observation of local flora operates as a complex signifier of the geo-political debate of annexation. Nature, rootedness can thus celebrate regionalist belonging without serving as a rallying cry for militarism. Organicism carries political agency as well as aesthetic pleasure.

Gallé's political awareness also extended beyond the borders of annexed France; he supported subscriptions and created objects decrying the oppression of Rumanian Jews, Nigerian slaves, the Irish.³² Having faced so much enmity for his vigorous Dreyfusard advocacy, Gallé seems to have felt freed to use his polemical display at the 1900 Exposition Universelle to decry another incendiary contemporary event, the Turkish genocide of Armenia. Between 1894 and 1896 Sultan Abdulhamid of



Figure 8 Émile Gallé, *The Blood of Armenia*, 1900, Musée des Beaux Arts, Rheims

Turkey massacred over three million Armenians, deporting many more and commandeering the property of all. As always, Gallé's intervention took both pragmatic and aesthetic forms. He supported Anatole France's Armenian subscription published in the newspaper *Le Temps*, and created a vase and a chest of drawers speaking to this atrocity. Gallé made two objects entitled *The Blood of Armenia*, each condemning this outrage: a vase

(now lost) and a chest of drawers (figure 8).³³ Made of Turkish walnut, the chest of drawers was inscribed with a quotation from 'The Circle of Tyrants' in Victor Hugo's *La Légende des siècles*: 'Prenez garde à la sombre équité, Prenez garde'. Gallé decided to print his own leaflet for his display at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris and described the iconography of this chest of drawers:

Prunus armenica is the national tree of this martyred country, Armenia. Its branches are inlaid with flowers, with tears, gashed into the Asian onyx which serves as the top of this grieving table... One sees there, passing through the wild fields of tulips, Islam; one sees there fierce madness reddening, the wind of rage and death of a maniac, behind the horizons of murder and rape, churches, villages in flames, regions ablaze, in ruby coloured coagulating swamps, one sees the Crescent moon enmire itself; it is once more drunk with Christian blood.³⁴

Importantly Gallé did not reductively demonise Islamic ruthlessness, he sought to sensitise his viewers to the complicity of the European powers in these atrocities. As Gallé's friend the poet Pierre Quillard explained, the *Armenia Vase* was a cup of blood from which the six powers of Europe were drinking, whilst befriending and supporting the Sultan.³⁵

Thus furniture for Gallé was not just an attractive stage set for his glass and ceramics; it had a power to communicate profound and difficult ideas. The eloquence of the furniture did not always



Figure 9 Émile Gallé, *Aube et Crépuscule* bed, 1903, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy

speak to such horror and injustice. Gallé's majestic last work, made for a key patron and supporter Henry Hirsh and his new bride, the breath-taking *Aube et Crépuscule bed* envisions a wondrous cycle of life and death through the imagery of dawn and twilight (figure 9). This apt image resonates with the dynastic functions of this marriage bed, but also as a poignant final testament to this pilgrim of nature extinguished by leukaemia at the moment of its completion. At the head, a vast moth glides over the verdant landscapes of France closes the day, at the foot the communion of two diaphanous moths create a lustrous glass egg of new life.

Gallé's jubilant, enigmatic pantheism was as lucidly expressed in the humblest of forms as in these epic creatures. In his essay devoted to a dining room table *Table aux Herbes potagère*, whose marquetry depicts kitchen garden plants, he insists on the innate mystery of nature and our place within it (and indicates the source of the citation 'Ma racine est au fond des bois' which he adopted as a sort of motto):

Moleschott argued that plants create the air; he said that through them we hold on to the earth, that they are our roots, that we think that because they vegetate, the virgin forests transform themselves little by little into the fruits of the field and into new men, so that each day greets a new world, that thus everything in the morning sun is eternally new. Me, I don't know. I just transcribe onto my kitchen garden table, under a tuft of strawberries leaning towards a stream that rises up through the grains of the wood, my feeling of gratitude for plants, these nursemaids of our bodies and arts, and for our collective country the ancient forest, its edge cultivated into fields: 'Our roots are in the heart of the woods, amongst the moss, around the river's spring'.³⁶

Gallé asked a fellow activist and friend, the cabinet maker and sculptor in wood Eugène Vallin to build a unique door for the entrance of honour to the Gallé workshops in the rue Garenne (figure 10).³⁷ The stylistic vocabulary of these vast doors synthesise the core point of this analysis. Their low relief gothic arches and stylised chestnut trees in leaf invoke the complex re-articulation of craftsmanship and social responsibility which lay at the heart of this enterprise within.³⁸ The inscription of 'Ma racine est au fond des bois' upon the cruciform shape created by a cross beam should not be associated with the xenophobic and sectarian postures with which Barrès and the proto-fascist Republican right attempted to saturate 'rootedness' around 1900. Rather the woods of Lorraine and their transfiguration into objects eloquent with political and aesthetic significance reveal the rootedness of furniture in the complex discursive possibilities of Symbolist decoration.



Figure 10 Eugène Vallin, *Doors to the Gallé factory*, Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy



Gallé's work in wood achieved expression through mastery of its manipulation by mechanised and symbolic means, rooted in the belief that social justice and mystery were central to fin de siècle decoration and self fulfilment.

I am hugely indebted to all the speakers and participants who contributed to the 2004 research Symposium: 'Émile Gallé and la Lorraine Artiste', and especially to Richard Hobbs and his Centre for the Study of Visual and Literary Cultures in France at the University of Bristol which supported this event, materially, intellectually and collegially. An Event Award granted by The Design History Society financed the presence of continental colleagues one of whose article is a central part of this special issue. I think I may speak for all the authors in this issue in recognising that we have been hugely assisted by the generous and gracious erudition and hospitality of the Musée de l'Ecole de Nancy; my especial thanks go to Mme Valerie Thomas and Mme Blandine Otter. Lastly my greatest colleague, editor and husband Mike O'Mahony has been an unflagging and vital support throughout every stage of this project from the mundanity of washing up wine glasses at the symposium, to his discerning thoughts on subtle points of visual and textual analysis and eagle eyed proof-reading and layout of this special issue.

¹ Claude Roger-Marx *La Décoration et l'art industriel à l'Exposition universelle de 1889*, Librairie Imprimeries Réunis, Paris, 1890, p 26.

² Musée de Luxembourg (François-Thérèse Charpentier and Philippe Thiébaud), *Gallé*, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1985; Association des amis du musée de l'Ecole de Nancy, *Émile Gallé et Victor Prouvé Une alliance pour le mobilier*, Imprimerie Moderne, Pont à Mousson, 2002.

³ Victoria and Albert Museum (Paul Greenhalgh), *Art Nouveau 1890-1914*, V&A Publications, London, 2000; French exhibitions such as Grand Palais (Philippe Thiébaud) 1900, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 2000 and multiple exhibitions in Nancy in 1999 did devote considerably more attention to the distinctive version of Art Nouveau that the city of Nancy engendered.

⁴ 'Par contre, la nature, qui, elle, ne fournit pas les festons et les astragals, prête à l'artiste bien des autres choses que les lombrics et les ténias, les pseudo-varechs et vermicelles affolés dont on a pensé faire, avec beaucoup de talent, à l'occasion de 1900, un berceau où arbitrer le vingtième siècle, un style helminthique et 'larveux'. Si c'est là le mobilier moderne, nous consentons à reprendre la perruque et la queue!' first published in *La Revue des Art Decoratifs* November, 1900, pp 333-42 and December, 1900, pp 305-78; reprinted in Émile Gallé *Écrits pour l'Art Floriculture – Art Décoratif – Notice d'Exposition (1884-1889)*, (1908), Lafitte Reprints, Marseilles, 1999, p 251.

⁵ ' "Avoir ou n'avoir pas de style!" cela ne me semble pas une aussi tragique alternative que l'interrogation poignante de Hamlet.' Gallé, 1999, p 244.

⁶ The two key exceptions being the core study for any one interested in French Art Nouveau, Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France Politics Psychology and Style*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989, and Nancy Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts: From Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier*, Yale University Press, London, 1991.

⁷ Émile Gallé, 'Notice sur la production de menuiserie et ébénisterie sculptées et marquetées d'E Gallé' *Écrits pour l'Art Floriculture – Art Décoratif – Notice d'Exposition (1884-1889)*, Lafitte Reprints, Marseilles, 1999, p 358.

⁸ 'Il y fallait quelque bois des îles d'une nuance rare. Je pénétrai pour la première fois chez un marchand de ces essences précieuses. Je crus découvrir les Indes et l'Amérique. Quelle surprise de voir, sous le raclioir et la cire, les billes d'amarante s'empourprer au soleil, les opeaux parfumés se rubaner de rose et de violet!'. Gallé, 1999, p 355.

⁹ Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', *Les fleurs du mal*, 1856; for contemporary writings about Symbolist synaesthesia see H Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, London, 1994 and Charles Harrison; Paul Wood & Jason Gaiger *Art in Theory 1815-1900 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, London, 1998. Most secondary sources analysing Symbolist art and writing consider these debates, some fine examples are Eric Touya de Marenne, *Musique et poétique à l'âge du symbolisme: variations sur Wagner: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Claudel, Valéry*, Harmattan, Paris, 2005 Joseph Acquisto, *French symbolist poetry and the idea of music*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006; James Kearns, *Symbolist landscapes: the place of painting in the poetry and criticism of Mallarmé and his circle*, Modern Humanities Research Association, London, 1989; Patrick McGuinness, *Symbolism, decadence and the fin de siècle: French and European perspectives*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2000, amongst others.

¹⁰ 'Qu'ils ne soient pas éléments décisifs, jalons dans l'évolution du décor est à peu près certain, mais c'est un rôle auquel Gallé n'avait pas prétendu... Quant à ceux qui sont d'un abord plus difficile et d'un usage pratiquement impossible aujourd'hui, ceux auxquels manqué le charme aussi, sauf dans le détail d'un morceau de décor, les plus ambitieux restent des étonnant témoignages d'un temps, d'une mentalité, qu'ils restituent comme rarement le firent une table, un buffet, une commode'. Charpentier, Musée de Luxembourg, 1985, p 253.

¹¹ Gallé advocates these natural joins in opposition to the confrontational perpendicular angles forced by the classicising architectural 'temple' effects forced by most historicist style from Premier Empire to Renaissance, Gallé, 1998, p 272.

¹² Gallé recognises an important precursor these structural rhythms in the use of bamboo in Asian and French Rococo design, Gallé, 1998, pp 237-76.



¹³ 'Voilà notre idéal réalisé: le meuble traité comme un corps nu, orné du bon équilibre de sa structure, de ses organes épanouis comme ceux de l'animal ou de végétal, en leur nerfs, en leurs chairs, pelages, plumages, tissus, membranes, écorces, en leur bourgeonnement, floraison, fructification; voilà la labour du statuaire, l'oeuvre d'intellectualité, de vérité, de liberté, - oeuvre de tact, difficile, durable et belle, - que nous préconisons à nos propres et derniers efforts.' Gallé, 1998, p 275.

¹⁴ Béatrice Lauwick and Anna Ostrup 'Émile Gallé et les techniques de l'ébénisterie', in Association des amis du musée de l'École de Nancy, 2002, pp 26-33; this catalogue's exquisite close up detail illustrations are particularly helpful in revealing these effects.

¹⁵ See the entries on the 'mobilier aux ombelles': 'Pour en finir avec la variété des sièges aux ombelles dans la production de Gallé, il faut préciser une dernière version postérieure à la mort du maître, en tout cas non surveillée par lui, n'en a plus l'heureuse liberté', Musée de Luxembourg 1985, p 281. It should be noted this aspect of production greatly expands in the firm's output after Gallé's death in 1904, and as such attracts accusations of derivative decline, although flaws are also ascribed to the early work 'La production débute en 1886 par des petits meubles simples de qualité très moyenne et sans originalité.' François Le Tacon, *Émile Gallé Maître de l'Art Nouveau*, La Nuée Bleu/Éditions de l'Est, Strasbourg/Nancy, 2004, p 198.

¹⁶ The arguments about the disjunctions between arts and crafts theory and practise have often been rehearsed, the financial failures of Ashbee's utopian experiment in the Cotswolds, the moral inconsistencies of Morris the theorist and craftsman and Morris and Co's key markets, etc for a representative analysis see Lionel Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen: The Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago*, London, 1980.

¹⁷ Pierre Du Maroussem, *La Question ouvrière vol I: Charpentiers de Paris, compagnons et indépendants (1891); vol II: Ebénistes du Faubourg Sainte Antoine: Grands Magasins, 'Sweating system' (1892); vol III: Le jouet parisien: Grands Magasins, 'Sweating system' (1893); vol IV Halles centrales de Paris et le commerce d'alimentation (1894)*, Arthur Rousseau, Paris, 1891-4.

¹⁸ Silverman, 1989, pp 59-60.

¹⁹ 'Le décor du meuble contemporain ne sera pas de parti pris mélancolique. Il sera sincère. Il sera donc volontiers joyeux, parce que ce sera un art populaire, c'est-à-dire un art dans lequel l'ouvrier, l'exécutant, ne sera plus réduit à l'état de machine et ne connaîtra plus ce *hard labour* de réaliser, à la sueur du front, des parties de l'oeuvre d'autrui sans en pouvoir embrasser l'ensemble. Il sera appelé à prendre sa part, et la rémunération due à un travail intelligent, et ces joies libres de l'esprit: La connaissance, la conception, l'invention, l'interprétation d'un plan, d'une oeuvre, l'adaptation des modèles vivants au métier de ses mains.' Émile Gallé, 'Le Mobilier contemporain orné d'après la nature', first published in *La Revue des Art Décoratifs*, November, 1900 pp 333-42 and December, 1900 pp 305-78 1900; reprinted in Gallé, 1908, pp 237-77; Gallé, 1998, p 358.

²⁰ Bertrand Tillier, *Émile Gallé Le verrier dreyfusard*, Paris: Les Éditions de l'Amateur, 2004, pp 90-4.

²¹ Galeries Poirel, *L'École de Nancy Art nouveau et les Industries de l'art*, Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 1999; Tillier, 2004; Le Tacon, 2004; Philippe Thiébaud; *Émile Gallé le magicien du verre*, Découvertes Gallimard, Paris, 2004.

²² The political agency and Symbolist aesthetic strategies of the École de Nancy will be the subject of a book the author is currently researching.

²³ Now in the Musée D'Orsay, Paris.

²⁴ In Act II, scene I of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the young prince of Sicily, Mamillius, asks this question of Hermione, 'Merry or sad shall it be?' Hermione replies, perhaps unlike the more festive Gallé cabinet, 'A sad tale is best for winter'.

²⁵ The Latin text 'Germania omnis a Gallis Rheno separatur' also appears in a cartouche incised by means of pyrography on the German side of the panel.

²⁶ The emblem derives from the legacy of René d'Anjou Duc of Lorraine who added the thistle and the double cross to his arms, see François Le Tacon, *Émile Gallé ou Le Mariage de l'Art et de la Science*, Editions Messene, Paris, 1995, pp 120-35.

²⁷ The role of nationalism in French Third Republic visual culture has been considered thoughtfully in two recent studies, June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam (eds), *Nationalism and French Visual Culture 1870-1914*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2005 and Richard Thomson, *The Troubled Republic Visual Culture and Social Debate in France 1889-1900*, Yale University Press, London, 2004. However I do differ in seeing Gallé as having created a distinct alternative localised position from the mainstream 'revanchisme' which Thomson analyses so lucidly.

²⁸ Gallé's personal experience, in the form of two anecdotes deserves a mention in capturing this complexity. During the initial occupation of Nancy after the defeat, the Gallé family, like so many others, were forced to billet German soldiers; the father Charles on coming home to find one of the German officer playing the family piano, closed the instrument in front of him, saying it will never be played again until the occupation is over. However the family also eagerly nursed another wounded German soldier, a friend of Émile Gallé's from his younger days in Weimar. Gallé joined up seeking to serve in the final defence of Paris but was sent to serve in the Mediterranean port of Toulon. Gallé chose to continue to collaborate with Meissen glassworks throughout the 1880s and 90s, but also benefited from the influx of skilled workmen displaced from Alsace. See Le Tacon, 2004, p 82.

²⁹ The initiative to create this commission was triggered by the 1892 meeting between the French President Sadi Carnot and Russian Grand Duke Constantin in Nancy, a crucial step towards the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1893, Le Tacon, 2004, pp 87-8 and Silverman, 1989, pp 159-72.

³⁰ This text also appears on a number of small tables, including one in the Musée D'Orsay, Paris.

³¹ Le Tacon, 2004, p 88.

³² The *Dragon and Pelican* vase of 1890, made for Sophie Raffalowitz and William O'Brien spoke to the Irish question, empathising more with the Republican pelican than the English dragon. Le Tacon, 2004, pp 89-90.

³³ This object was referred to by two titles, *Le sang d'Arménie* or *Le Champ de sang*, in contemporary accounts.

³⁴ 'Le sang d'Arménie est un meuble console en noyer turc, mosaïque de bois naturels. *Prunus armenica* est l'arbre national du pays martyr, l'Arménie. Ses rameaux en fleurs, en pleurs, s'incrudent, entaillés dans l'onix oriental qui sert de tablette à cette console douloureuse... On y voit passer sur les champs fauchés de tulips, l'islam; on y voit rugir la folie féroce, le soufflé de rage et de mort de l'homme maniaque, derrière les horizons de meurtre et de viol, églises, bourgades en flammes, provinces embrasées, dedans des marais de rubis caillés, on voit se mirer le Croissant; de sang chrétien, il est encore une fois saoulé.' Le Tacon, 2004, p 114.

³⁵ Passage from Quillard cited in Tillier, 2004, pp 84-5 and Le Tacon, 2004, p 114.

³⁶ 'Moleschott a constaté que les plantes créent l'air à leur tour; il disait que par elles nous tenons à la terre, qu'elles sont nos racines, que nous pensons parce qu'elles végètent, que les forêts vierges se transforment peu à peu en fruits des champs et en nouveaux hommes, que chaque journée salue un monde nouveau, qu'ainsi au soleil matinal tout est éternellement neuf. – Moi, je ne sais pas. Je transcris simplement sur ma table potagère, sous une touffle de fraises inclinées vers un ruisseau qui vient sourdre des veines de bois, mon sentiment de gratitude pour les plantes, ces nourricières de nos corps et de nos arts, et pour notre commune patrie l'antique forêt, pour sa lisière cultivée pour les champs: 'Nos racines sont au fond des bois/Parmi les mousses, autour des sources.' Moleschott was author of *La Circulation de la vie* Paris 1866. Gallé includes a footnote explaining that Moleschott's aphorism 'C'est par les plantes que nous tenons à la terre: elles sont nos racines', inspired the inscription on the factory workshops door.

³⁷ For an admirable study of Vallin see Frédéric Descouturelle, *Eugène Vallin Menuisier d'art de l'Ecole de Nancy*, Association des amis du musée de l'Ecole de Nancy/Imprimerie Moderne, Pont-à-Mousson, 1998.

³⁸ This gateway served as the entrance for all, workmen and visitors. For the most detailed analysis to date of the Gallé usine see François Le Tacon and Flavien De Luca, *L'usine d'art Gallé à Nancy*, Association des amis du musée de l'Ecole de Nancy, Nancy, 2004.