

Stamp boxes and cases in the style of Art Nouveau and Art Deco

As the peak period for the Art Nouveau style, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coincides with the peak period for the production of stamp boxes and cases in the UK, many were made in this style, in a variety of materials. The subsequent development of the Art Deco style was also reflected in stamp box design, but the number of such boxes compared to those displaying earlier Art Nouveau influences is much smaller.

The name Art Nouveau derives from “La Maison de l’Art Nouveau”, a gallery for interior design which opened in Paris in 1896. The style is full of movement and is inspired by nature, by flowers, with sinuous flowing lines and non-geometric “whiplash” curves and curvilinear depiction of leaves and flowers, often in the form of vines. Among the prominent European artists associated with this style were Gustav Klimt (Austrian, 1862 – 1918), Alphonse Mucha (Czechoslovakian, 1860 – 1939), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1861 – 1901), Aubrey Beardsley (English, 1872 – 1898), Antonio Gaudi (Spanish, 1852 – 1926) who said “Art is nothing without movement” and Hector Guimard (French, 1867 – 1942).

Art Nouveau is rooted in Romanticism, Symbolism, and the English Arts & Crafts Movement, in which William Morris (1834 – 1896) was a major figure, whose advice “to have nothing in your home which is neither beautiful nor useful” is frequently quoted. In America, Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848 – 1933) was among those inspired by this style, which in Germany was termed *Jugendstil*.

In its turn, Art Nouveau was gradually overtaken by Art Deco and other modernist styles.

The name Art Deco derives from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925. It is essentially a style of the late 1920s and early 1930s with an emphasis on geometric pattern – richly coloured, dramatic, abstract and angular in the earlier part of the period, using symbols such as the ziggurat and lightning flash, and cooler, more elegant, with pastel colours and rounded forms subsequently. Influences include the streamlined shape of transatlantic liners, trains and planes, Hollywood films and the jazz age.

Art Deco buildings can be found in many cities across the world – examples include the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building in New York, Broadcasting House in London, the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill, and the town of Napier in New Zealand (rebuilt after an earthquake).

To sum up, the influence of both styles extended across art, architecture, interior design, pottery (Clarice Cliff in the Deco period), glassware (Lalique and Gallé in the Nouveau period), fashion, poster art, cinemas (Deco) and radios (also Deco).

And – also influenced stamp boxes and cases, as their design naturally followed the prevailing fashions of the day.

The finest stamp boxes in Art Nouveau or any other fashion were those made by Fabergé and his competitors in Russia. The House of Fabergé is perhaps best known for the manufacture of grand presentation pieces for the wealthy around the end of the nineteenth century. However, much of the production of this artist-jeweller was of smaller, more affordable pieces, which could be bought commercially from branches in Russia and London. Numerous stamp boxes are recorded (not all with Art Nouveau designs) as part of this extensive range. The boast of Fabergé was that he seldom repeated a design so that each box is a unique production.



At a somewhat less elevated level, WMF (Württembergische Metallwarenfabrik) in Germany manufactured several stamp boxes and cases as part of their extensive range of household articles designed in the Art Nouveau style. These boxes were often made in pewter and silver-plated. In 1906 this firm published a catalogue in English, with more than 300 products and many pages of illustrations, and this was reprinted for collectors in 1988. Each style had its own identifying number – one neat design is an almost square box, with a hinged lid and four stamp compartments.

The base of larger, six-compartment boxes could be a solid apron-style or with a foot on each corner connected by flowing art nouveau swirls.

Liberty's of London and Tiffany's in New York are both associated with the promotion of Art Nouveau design, and both firms produced stamp boxes, Liberty's in silver in their Cymric range and in pewter in their Tudric range; Tiffany Studio's stamp boxes were generally designed as part of desk sets – these are three-compartment boxes, with hinged lids. Some of their well-known patterns in Art Nouveau or Art Deco were Pine Needles and Grapevine, with the box made in bronze and the pierced motifs backed with coloured glass, and Abalone and Graduate, where the metal would have coloured enamel highlights or, as the name suggests, abalone shell. Every Tiffany desk set piece was stamped with the company name and an item number.



A variety of silver boxes and cases were produced in both England and the USA with typical art nouveau designs, and a smaller number with art deco influences. As examples, a small single-compartment American silver case has a flowing art nouveau decoration,



while an English single-compartment silver case, hall-marked at Birmingham in 1906, is set with different colours of agate in a very art deco design.

Stamp boxes with decoration in the Art Nouveau or Art Deco style were also made in a variety of materials other than metal, examples including tortoiseshell boxes with silver inlays, Dieppe ivory and carved wood.

