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The
NOUVEAU
Series

by paul schmidt 2009



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HISTORY

Art Nouveau had its roots in the Arts and Crafts Movement which began in Victorian England in the middle of the 19th century by those who opposed the dehumanizing nature of Europe's burgeoning industrialization. The identity of the Arts and Crafts Movement came from the shared principles of honesty, unity of design, and good craftsmanship that would make for beautiful handcrafted products which would re-kindle the humanness that had been stilted and stalled by the technical progresses so wholeheartedly embraced for financial gain at the expense of human development.

Art Nouveau also had its roots in Japanese art and culture. Japan was a closed culture from the 1640s until 1853, but as more Japanese art began making its way to Europe in the 19th century, its effect was significant. Most important was the use of nature in Japanese art, which inspired Art Nouveau-era artists as diverse as Louis Comfort Tiffany, Paul Gauguin, Gustav Klimt, Victor Horta, and Renne' MacKintosh - all of whom collected oriental art. Leading architect of the day Henry Van deVelde noted, "It took the power of the Japanese line, the force of its rhythms and accents, to arouse and influence us."

The curvilinear and strong linear designs of Japanese art, along with its articulation of space, simultaneously animated, charmed and breathed life into what was to become Art Nouveau.

Art Nouveau was both a style and a movement. It was a style in as much as it represented a society, and connected perspectives, lifestyles and patterns of behaviour with a variety of artistic mediums; and it was a movement in that it had a group of artists that was deeply enamoured with the fruit of its ideologies.

Nature was the single most unifying theme of Nouveau - the sinuous line, asymmetry and a certain exoticism - explosive elegance embracing organic form and dramatic colour creating a sense of awe and mysticism. It had a tendency towards unorthodoxy, and was meant to recover, re-orient, and invent histories that celebrated the unusual in works of extraordinary vibrancy and wholistic vigour. It was essentially reconciliatory in that it embraced eclecticism - part of a plan to make the contrary compatible. And, like nature, it proceeded by continuity - a constant of change, just as all of real life. These characteristics would make expression in glass, ceramics, furniture, metal work, sculpture, prints, textiles, and architecture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

THE NOUVEAU SERIES GUITARS

The ideologies and expressions of Art Nouveau always resonated with me, well before I understood why. And it was some of Nouveau's characteristics that drew me to the guitars of John D'Angelico, Jimmy D'Aquisto, and Steve Klein - the whole being planned organically with a purpose; carefully chosen materials; mindful use of form, colour, texture, and decorative motifs.

I saw these same characteristics in Michael Spalt's resin-topped guitars when I first experienced them while co-curating an exhibit of guitars with Steve Klein for the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art. Experimental guitarist Henry Kaiser had shown me some of Spalt's resin-topped collaged-art electric guitars that were at once whimsical, expressive, and artful.

About Michael Spalt

Born and raised in Austria, Spalt grew up around a plethora of Nouveau art, Vienna being one of the hotbeds of the Nouveau period evidenced by many of the buildings' facades, as well as furniture and decor. His father was a professor for architecture and interior design and the Dean at the Academy of Applied Arts in Vienna - a school where many of the artists working during the Nouveau period had studied and taught.

Michael had studied at The Film School in Austria before he headed to The San Francisco Art Institute, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with emphases in painting, photography and film. This formative work was followed by three years of study at the Academy for Applied Arts in Austria where he focused on painting. After these fine arts studies, Spalt worked in various capacities in the film industry before finally settling on screenwriting as his main occupation. Experiencing the labours of screenwriting as an agonizingly abstract process, he found he needed something he could do with his hands - a tangible craft to balance the excessively cerebral nature of the writing. So by the late 1980s he returned to an early fascination with guitars and started building them in his garage, literally as a form of therapy. His first instruments were rather traditional - and the process invited him to pursue his own avenues. Having worked in special effects and set design and building, his experiences of working with various materials and processes left their mark and informed his future. In his early years he had been instilled with a great respect for craftsmanship and the importance of understanding materials - a foundation that enabled him to appreciate their relationships and various textures.



As experience refined his skills, he continued to engage them in unique and sensitive ways.

Having moved to Los Angeles, the location proved fortuitous as it afforded Spalt access to a great number of fine traditional guitars, many of which would become in need of repair, allowing for experiences that taught him a great deal about lutherie as he began to refine the art and craft of his own instruments and their ever-evolving styles.

The instruments he began creating were an offshoot of his fine art enthusiasms so adroitly grounded in his earlier education and experience. His first instruments featured textured surface decoration to add depth and life to the bodies. The medium of the collaged resin-topped bodies was a natural evolution of that same interest in texture and depth. He was also drawn to things that had been in use and then discarded - he liked how they carried a story, a charge, a life of their own. As his instruments evolved they gained a loyal following by experienced professional players that understood their wonders and uniquenesses.

His electric guitars and basses are among the finest and most artful instruments ever produced.

I chose several of Spalt's instruments for the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art exhibit "Art That Sings", and they were much talked about. Spalt's resin-topped design is a unique medium that I felt offered an internal depth as well as an external skin, not unlike a characteristic I noted and admired in Tiffany's glass. The instruments reminded me of the works of American Abstract Expressionist Robert Rauschenberg. I felt they were equally substantive artistically, as well as fine musical instruments.

In a special arrangement with Klein Acoustic Guitars, I had the idea to incorporate Steve Klein's bold-yet-soft acoustic guitar body silhouette into an electric instrument infused with Spalt's deep artistry. I had a neck and bridge for a Klein acoustic guitar, as well as relics from Klein's shop that encompassed thirty years of Klein's work - these became the theme for the collage. When it was completed the guitar was visually stunning, and very gratifying musically. All in all it delivered a broad array of tones, from sparkly-with-dimension buttery crooning to full-throated textured yelling, and everything in between. The creation of that instrument by Spalt became the genesis of the Nouveau Series. That instrument has been featured in my book on Klein - "Art That Sings", Doctorow Communications, 2003; and in "Hand Made Hand Played" by Robert Shaw, Lark Books, 2008; and in "Gourmet Guitars" - a European-produced DVD Series featuring Spalt (among others).

I was inspired by early Art Nouveau champion Siegfried Bing's commissioning of Louis Comfort Tiffany to produce ten stained-glass windows for his Maison del l'Art Nouveau gallery in Paris to the designs of nine of the era's leading artists - Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard, Eugene Grasset, Henri Ibels, Paul Serusier, Edouard Vuillard, Felix Vallatton, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Paul Ransom. While pondering that inventive collaboration, I had the thought to create a Series of individually handmade guitars using original art from the Art Nouveau period as a unifying theme in the shape of a Klein acoustic guitar, with Spalt's resin-topped collaged-art electrics.

Over a period of several years I selected art that I thought would gesture effectively in the designs, and make for a thematic whole that would exemplify the Nouveau spirit - a marriage of art and craft in the embrace of sweeping curvilinear movement and the rhythms of nature, which would in turn charge the instruments with the intense engagements of clarity, turbulence, and a fantastical poetic ambience. Instruments that would be a reservoir for the deeply beautiful pervaded by a hidden sense of harmony, balance, breadth, and detail-enforced motifs - a stirring wedding of art, design, and technology. Instruments that would make one's blood sing. Notoriously beautiful. These all would become the Nouveau Series.



ARTISTS, THE ART, THE GUITARS

In choosing the art, I first began with the artists. Given that Louis Comfort Tiffany Studios played a major role in Bing's project, and in acknowledgement of my own affinity for Tiffany's work, I thought first of having all of the Series be Tiffany-laden. But as I pondered it, I felt diversity would make the Series more compelling and more in keeping with the spirit of Nouveau.

Other Nouveau artists I knew of and was inspired by were Alphonse Mucha, Emile Galle', and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. As I researched and reflected on the project, a plethora of artists and art came to the fore as good options, and I made my selections based on intuition, thematic coherence, suitability for the medium, and availability.

In the end the Series incorporates original art by Tiffany, Alphonse Mucha, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Emile Galle', Henri Boutet, Lucien Pissarro, the Loetz Glassworks, and artwork from the Nouveau-contemporary magazine "L'Image".



The
NOUVEAU
Series

Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933)

Original glass from the studios of Louis Comfort Tiffany radiated colours with a glowing richness that was without precedent. Unlike some, the studios didn't paint or etch to obtain their vision, but used textures and variations in the colours to create the shadings and hues for effect and atmosphere.

Influenced by nature, Asia, and Arabia, most of Tiffany's designs were woven around asymmetry, organicism, and naturalistic motifs - dragonflies, vines, magnolias, wisteria, all mosaiced into magical and romantic landscapes. But it is perhaps the intense prowess of Tiffany's colour and iridescence that engage and captivate with such transcendancy. In his own words from his filing for a patent for his lustre ware, Tiffany describes the colour as "a highly-iridescent one and of pleasing metallic luster, changeable from one to another, depending upon the direction of the visual ray and the brilliancy or dullness of the light falling upon or passing through the glass." Be it startling iridescence or a softer, gentler pearlized glow, Tiffany's rich lustrous golds and deep blues remain to this day in a class by themselves.





“Tiffany Prototype”

The prototype instrument blooms from multi-coloured Tiffany glass that exhibits a variety of hues simultaneously - blues, purples, golds, browns, greens, rusts, reds - a stirring example of Tiffany's vision. The instrument has Tiffany's glass suspended over gold-leaf, surrounded by hand-carved walnut, ebony, and mango woods, whimsically inlaid with curving stylized Dr. Suess-flower-like mother-of-pearl, abalone, and silver which extend from the body to the neck - deftly placed at the 5th and 12th frets - and into the headpiece face. The custom-to-this-Series Fralin pickups are covered in coloured bone, as is each instrument in the Series, though the colouring varies from instrument to instrument to interact more congenially with the specific instrument's art and design. In this instrument the blue and gold of the pickups is inspired by the glass' spectrum of colours. The neck and body materials are rosewood and old-growth mahogany respectively - another generalized feature to each of the other instruments in the Series, as is the ebony fingerboard, inlaid on the side with handmade circles of silver and pearl, along with the Indian rosewood phantom sound hole. This instrument's knobs are fashioned from rosewood and the selector switch is Catalin - a very early plastic material popular in the 1930s.

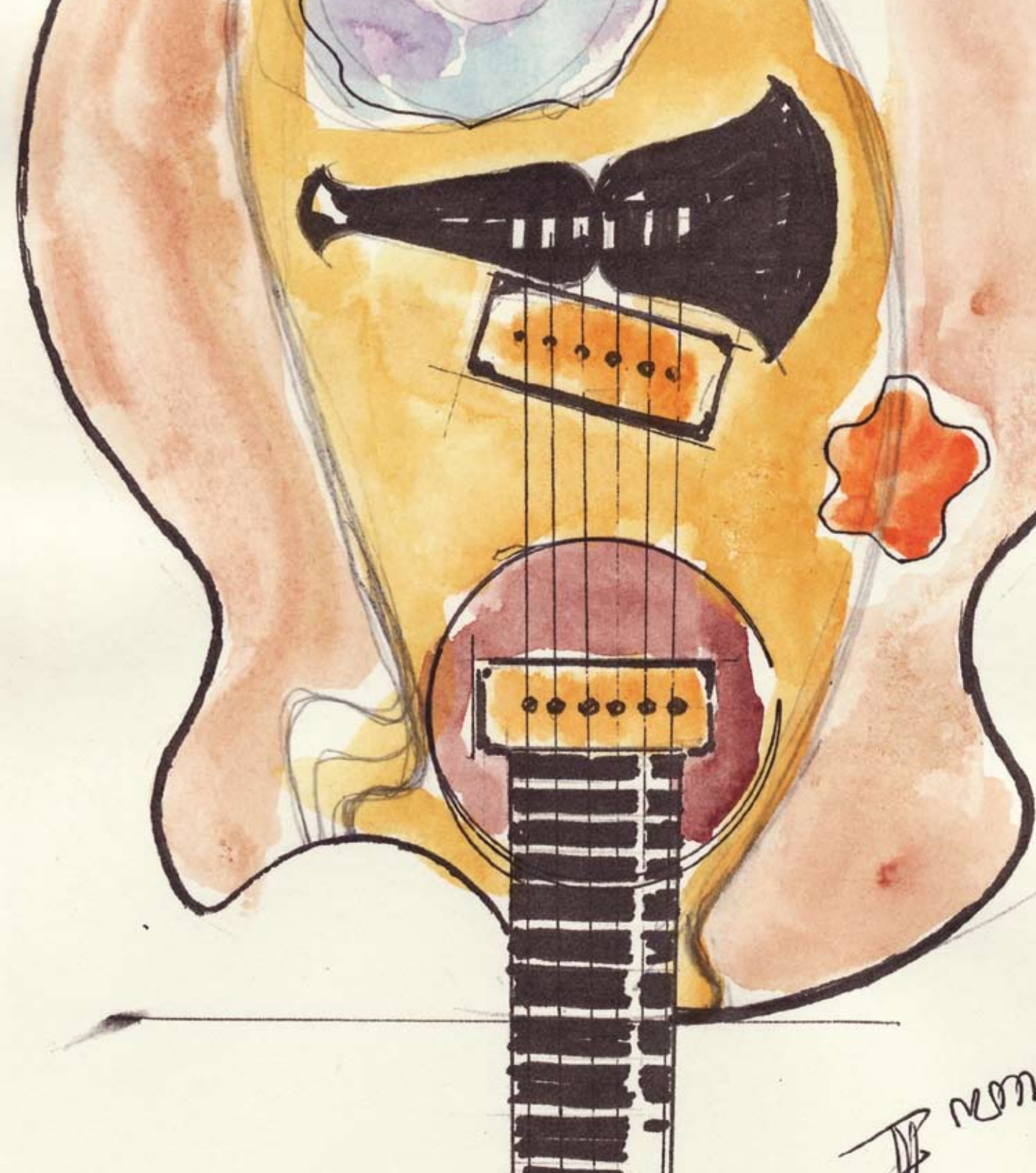
Characteristics for the Series such as neck shape, nut width (1.75"), string spacing (ever so slightly over 2"), and scale length (25.7") are all patterned after this prototype. The prototype instrument sustains beautifully, and the tone is complex and broad - musical characteristics present in each instrument of the Series.

When this instrument was completed and I had the chance to play it for the first time it felt spectacular - something about the solidness and the vibe reminded me immediately of my first experiences with John D'Angelico's guitars - another realm of dialed in greatness.



“Tiffany Bon-Bon”

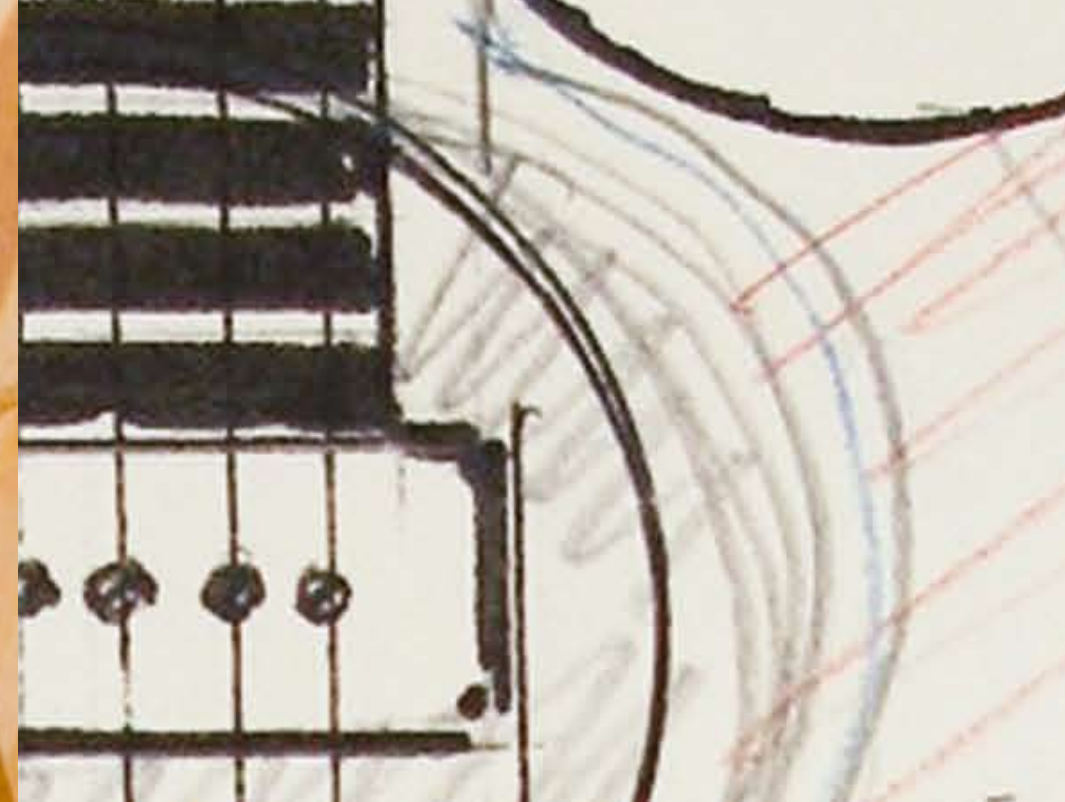
Another of the Series’ Tiffany-themed instruments is highlighted with the soft incandescent sheen of gold coloured bon-bon dishes - classic Tiffany. Two of Tiffany’s Favrite glass pieces (the name Tiffany gave to his glass of this style) gild the body - one right side up to reveal the generous beauty of its colour, and the other turned to reveal an original sticker applied by the studios at its creation. These pieces from Tiffany’s history theme the instrument both in hue and form, as stylized versions of the dishes appear as pearl inlay up the neck and into the headpiece. In addition to the body, neck and fingerboard woods noted for the prototype that became the standard for the Series, the woods used for the top are yellowheart, walnut, and oak, with the bridge fashioned from Amazon rosewood. The wood shapes take their cues from the Tiffany glass forms, while the resin knobs, Catalin switch and bone pickups mirror the colour of the center wood. All gather to produce an instrument that is at once playful and stately.



“Tiffany Scarab”

Yet another Tiffany instrument centers around one of Tiffany's scarabs. The beetle was an often-seen motif in Nouveau - partially for its ties with antiquity, and as a symbol of industriousness. This instrument has the iridescent blue/green/black scarab framed by an original brace made by Steve Klein in the early part of his acoustic experiments, and another artifact from Klein's early work at the lower portion of the body. The movement in the sensuously dramatic figure of the redwood burl simultaneously mirrors and contrasts with the Loetz glass in the upper bout, and carries on the theme of industriousness. Fingerboard decorations inspired by Klein's artifacts are fashioned from pearl, and carry the movement of the body designs upward. The textures of the scarab, wood and glass all compliment one another as the exuberantly red pickups bring sparks of depth and richness that are not unlike the essence of the colour of the scarab. The bridge is fashioned from Amazon rosewood, the knobs are from a 1930s radio, and the Catalin selector switch is rounded like the scarab's back.





Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)

Alphonse Mucha is one of the most highly-regarded exponents of Art Nouveau. His posters and decorative panels are landmark in the history of modern graphic art. Mucha's works were attractive for their freshness and accessibility as well as their idealistic and symbolic constructions. His fusions of woman and nature with an erotic twist via complex constructions of colour and decoration using eastern forms and symbols are illustrative of Art Nouveau at its peak.

“Mucha La Plume”

Mucha's cover for the magazine "La Plume", #241, March 1899, themes another of the instruments. "La Plume" was an important magazine of the era, dedicated to literature, art, and Parisian society. Knowing that his art for the cover would be meant for mass production, Mucha was mindful of its arrangement and clarity of conception - a young woman stands with arms outstretched holding a giant feathered writing quill in her right hand which becomes the stately strident asymmetrical fingerboard motif. Her figure is wrapped up in the wings of Pegasus, the mythological winged horse who sits behind her in a starry backdrop amidst Mucha's stylized lettering and swirling tendrils. The top is fashioned from myrtle, maple burl, and poplar. The colours and figures are all reminiscent of the stylizations in the lithograph - the sweeping panels of curving rectangles (which also inspire the fingerboard inlay), the softness and colour of her tangerine hair. The quiet colours of mustard blonde, coffee-with-creme, and dark green are complimented by the burnt orange and sungold yellow pickups and butterscotch Catalin knobs. The inlays are bone and pearl, and the feather-tip shaped selector switch is from a radio from the 1930s. The bridge is fashioned from Macassar ebony. Mythology, artistry, and lutherie embrace to form an exceptional work of art.







“Mucha Summer”

As technical progress in lithography enabled wider distribution of art, Mucha created decorative panels in themed Series. The Seasons (1896), was one of his most popular Series, and the images often graced calendars and postcards. Perhaps the most sensual of that Series is “Summer” - our lithograph for the instrument. The poppies in the young woman’s hair are another subtle Nouveau motif - evoking a sense of sleep and dream for their narcotic powers. The extended strands of the grapevine, the silent water, the relaxed nature of her posture and slightly-dipping feet, the alluring and confident face - all contribute to it’s sensuality, eroticism, and the mood of the season. The figure is another grand example of Mucha’s brilliance at depicting idealized womanhood.

The lithograph is suspended over gold-leaf and festooned with pearl. The instrument features mother-of-pearl and abalone cat tails flowing with the breadth and sweep of the lithograph through the figured Brazilian rosewood. A stylized dragonfly lights on the Indian rosewood phantom soundhole with its translucent wings revealing the abalone cat-tail stem beneath. The glass exhibits a moonlit soft rainbow of strong orange, purple, blue, green, pink, yellow, amber - all luminescent hues floating over gold-leaf, inspired by the lithograph both in actual colour and mood of the peaceful-warmed summer moment. The earthiness of the Brazilian rosewood is reflected in the colour of the bridge pickup while the water motif is captured by the glass and the blue neck pickup. The Catalin knobs and resin switch are set in myrtle burl neighboring the Macassar ebony bridge.

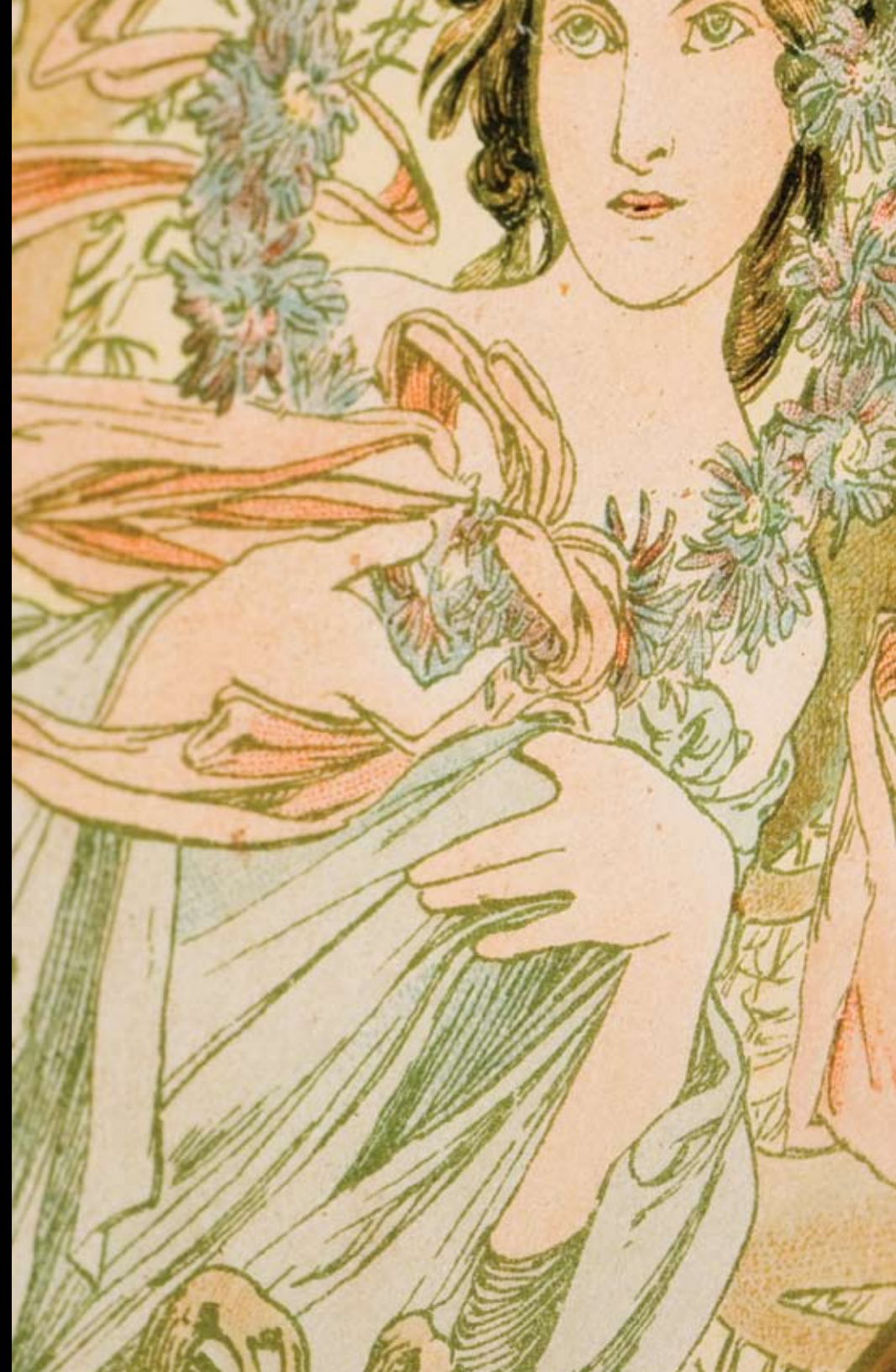




“Mucha December”

In 1899 Mucha created Designs for the Months, all rendered in circular medallions. Our image was originally created for December, though in the several years following their creation, the images were sometimes used in publications for months different than the ones planned by Mucha. Like “Summer”, this lithograph is from an original postcard. The round shape offered a different dynamic and enabled Mucha to capture more movement and flow, even in a small format.

Our image is filled with subtle vibrancy in theme, colour, and atmosphere. The classic curvilinear Nouveau shape fashioned of mahogany in the center of the guitar is surrounded by walnut and flanked by redwood burl that picks up the textures of her hair and echos the voluptuous nature of the instrument’s shape, and the woman herself. The folds in the lithograph are reiterated in the light blue, light pink and orangish-pearl glass suspended over gold-leaf. The medallion shape is repeated in the small pearl accents around the architecture of the center section and up through the fingerboard. Forest green and butterscotch coloured pickups, rosewood knobs, a bone switch and an Amazon rosewood bridge all accent the overall somewhat autumnal mood of softness, depth, and understated complexity of the instrument.





Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901)

Toulouse-Lautrec's style of silhouetted, flat-patterning, asymmetrical composition, elongated figures, and bold outline all reveal the influence of Japanese wood block; but as with all great art, his work embodied that certain 'something' that shared the essence of his scenes in remarkable style. His work with Degas and Van Gogh (among others) and his immersion into Parisian nightlife were fuel for inventive and forceful works which have become legendary.

“Lautrec Yvette”

An original page from the satirical weekly magazine “Le Rire” printed in Paris 10/11/1894 gives theme to another instrument. Lautrec was enthralled with the atmosphere and character of Yvette Guilbert's music hall performances, highlighted by songs with highly scandalous words and themes. They became well known to one another and she became one of his greatest inspirations.

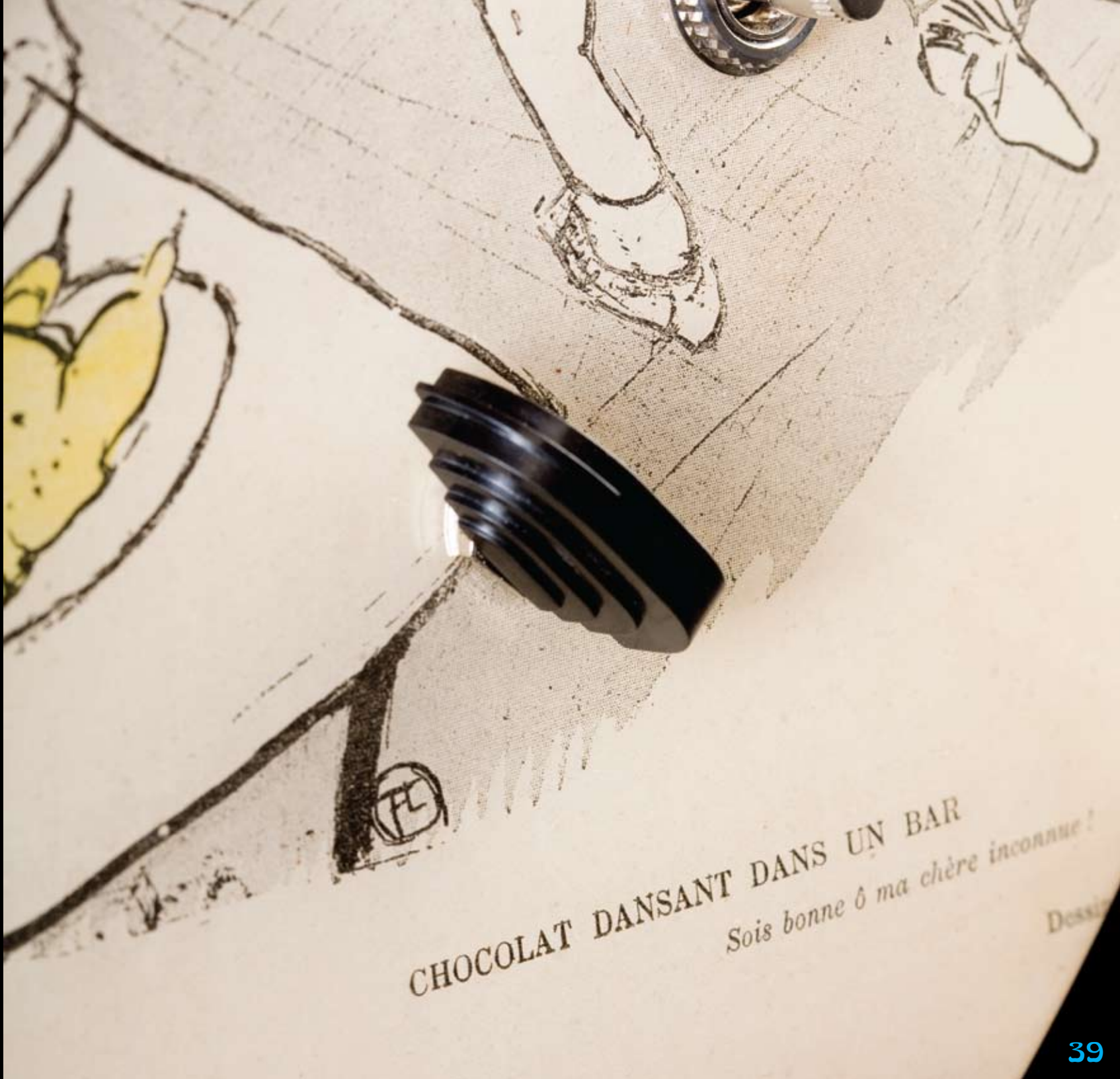
The drama of the long black gloves - one of her hallmarks - and the spatial treatment of the positioning of her body are compellingly inviting. The top is fashioned from spalted maple, maple burl, bubinga pommele, and walnut, while the bridge is Macassar ebony. The walnut and spalted maple shapes in the upper bout are as the ruffles in Yvette's sleeves, and the myrtle burl section that foundations the Catalin knobs and switch is at once like the sweep of her body and the architecture of her gloved hands. The soft vertical and horizontal lines that border her visage appear in the figure of the spalted maple and the maple burl respectively. All of the architecture of the image's lines and developing curves is represented in both the figure and design of the woods. The colours of cream, gold, light blonde, and brown hues of cocoa and red reflect the incandescent mood of the lithograph making for a brilliant thematic whole.

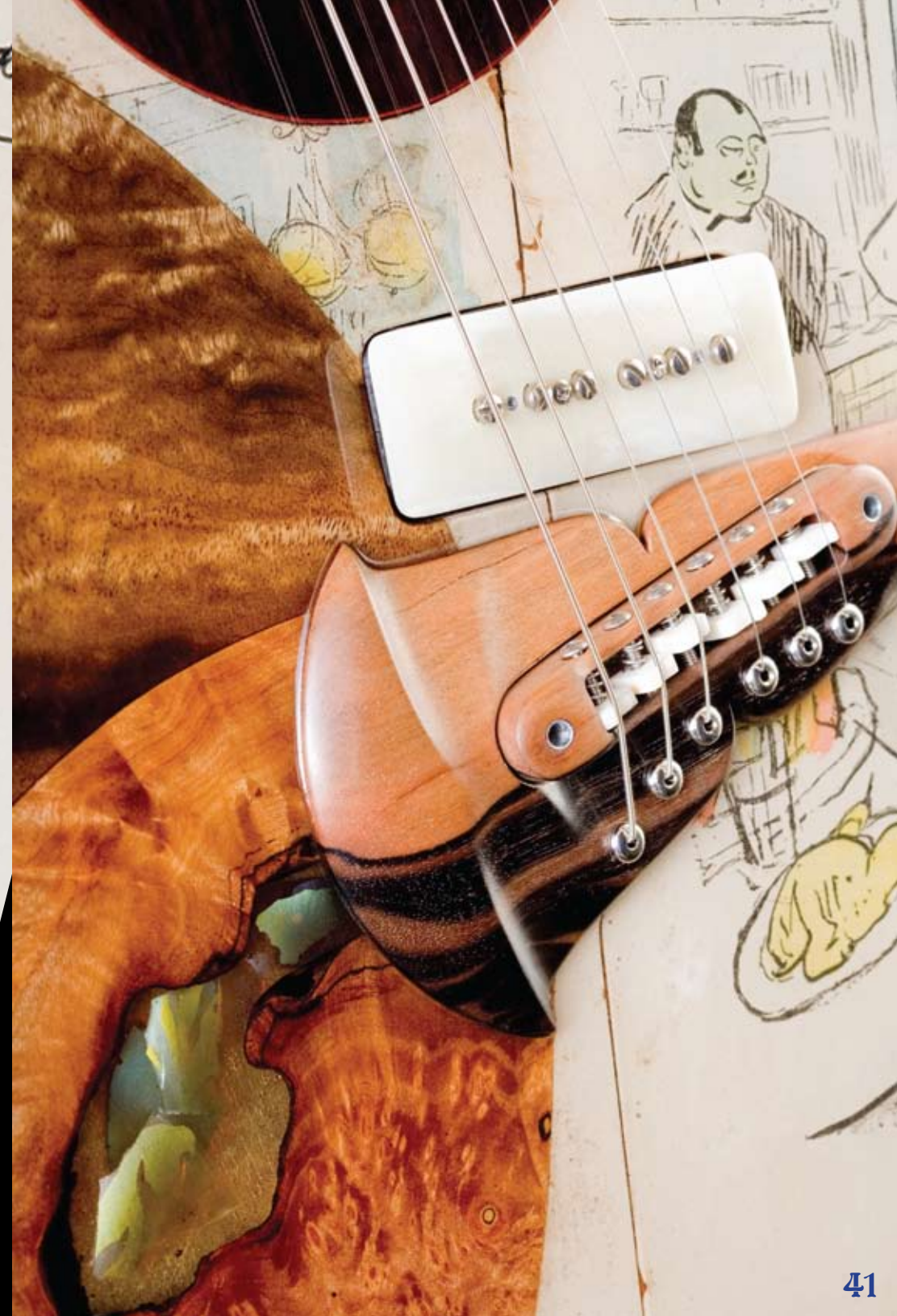
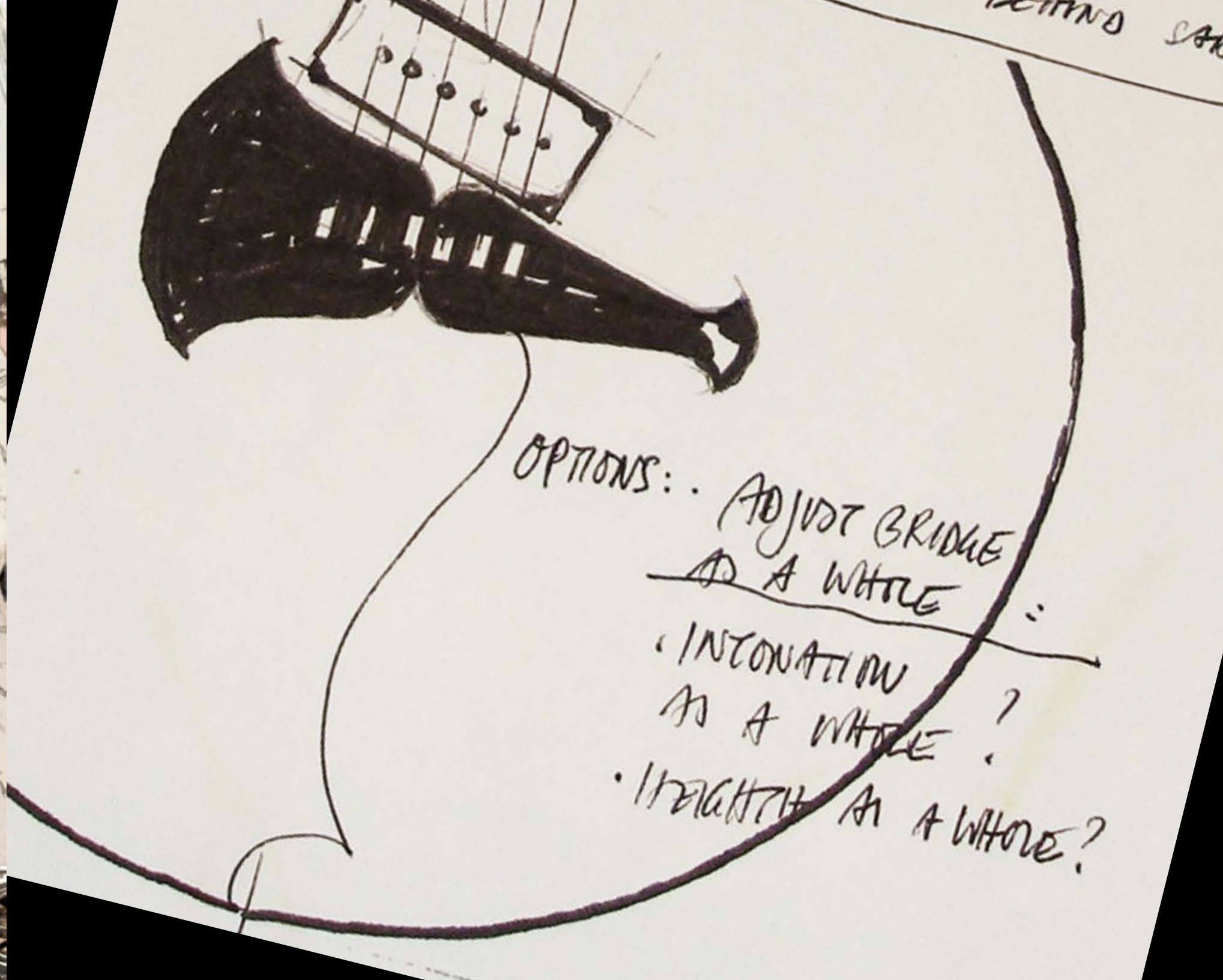


“Lautrec Chocolat”

A second Lautrec-themed work is also an original page from “Le Rire” (3/28/1896) - the very rare print entitled “Chocolat dansant dans un bar”. Chocolat was a famous-to-the-scene clown of African descent who, along with Lautrec, frequented The Irish and American Bar famous in Parisian nightlife for its unpretentious smoky atmosphere and hard-drinking clientele. This unique scene features not only Chocolat, but the barman Randolphe who actually worked the bar, and Lautrec himself in the front of the audience. A unique work of art that captures the mood and character of the moment, and the times.

The positioning of the lithograph in the body of the instrument along with Chocolat’s dancing pose give rise to the manneristic treatment of the maple burl and myrtle burl wood shapes that comprise the top. The lithograph is affixed at an angle reminiscent of Chocolat’s dancing body, and the cutaway portion of the lithograph is set back on the opposite side with the arc following the exact shape of the treble side of the instrument’s body - not unlike Chocolat’s pose. Note the top cutout portion of the lithograph taking its cue from the positioning of his hand, and how the golden glass over gold-leaf picks up the small yellow tones of the print. Also note how the sketch-like quality of the glass’ pattern is as the style of the medium. The little primordial wood form is reminiscent of the roast hen on the table, and with mindful observation one notices how form gives rise to form throughout the instrument’s entire design. The colours are eclectic, numerous, and subtle - cream, black, yellow, light blue, tangerine, pink, pink blue, dark brown, and milk. A dramatically figured Macassar ebony bridge and 1930s radio knobs complete the instrument’s cohesiveness.





“Pissarro In the Field”

Lucien Pissarro, son of Camille Pissarro - well-known French Impressionist painter often called the “Father of Impressionism”, began as a painter but during the 1880s became enthusiastic about woodcuts and wood engravings. This five-colour woodcut from 1897 (catalogued in Fern - #92) was entitled variously “In the Field” or “Gold Cloud”. The poetry of this astounding print spoken through its language of colours and composition thrilled me immediately upon viewing it. The gold was reminiscent of Tiffany, and the muted glow was consistent with so many of the other works of art I’d selected. Mango, koa, walnut, redwood burl, poplar, and Macassar ebony (bridge) comprise the woods selected to enliven this instrument, along with the the silver, pearl, abalone, Catalin knobs and bone switch. The sun-gold yellow orange pickups mirror the character of the lithograph, which weds golds, greens, blues, yellows, and browns to form its disposition. The pearl inlay shaped into ginkgo leaves-inspired-kites sweeps through the body and into the neck for a graceful and strident theme that compliments the stirring quietude of the art. Bountiful, bold, gentle, and startling in its beauty.







“Boutet Corset”

Henri Boutet’s original etching with drypoint entitled “Le Corset” (ca. 1903, signed in the plate; catalogued: Maillard #202; this version is from 1907) is a powerfully alluring work of art. I kept this print where I could view it daily for two months to enjoy and marvel at the wonder of its delicacy and mood - I found it an exquisite example of womanhood in art.

Boutet’s ability to capture femininity earned him the nickname “the Master of the corset” - and this image clearly substantiates the aptness of that moniker. This image is simultaneously candid and sensitive, just as many of his portrayals of pretty women using fine printing techniques epitomized the charm of Paris during the period. The ebony and abalone corset-like pieces floating over zebrawood are actually artifacts from Steve Klein’s rosette construction - an insightful use of materials to echo the theme of the print. The ivory fingerboard inlays are also from Klein’s acoustic guitar-making days, and reminisce of corset buttons. The shaping of the walnut and crushed maple portions of the top all suggest the curving loveliness of the female figure, as does the Klein-designed Macassar ebony bridge surround. The drama of the black and milk coloured pickup covers evidences the etching’s bold dark corset in contrast to the repose of the rest of the print. 1940s radio knobs and a Catalin switch finish the detail of the piece along with the diminutive purple abalone piece in the upper bout.





L'Image Magazine

“L'Image Profile”

This image of a ‘golden woman’ is from the back page of “L'Image” - a magazine of the period (this issue/image from the late 1890s) that depicted art and commentary of the day. I chose this image not because the artist was well-known (the magazine did not even note the artist), but because it was captivating, engaging, and cut from the same spiritual cloth as all of the more well-known artists and pieces in the Series. After several hours of viewing art with a seasoned art dealer who had been working with Nouveau prints for decades, this little wonder appeared and all but jumped into the family of art I'd been gathering. I was immediately reminded of Leonardo Da Vinci's drawings of water, not because the image replicated the style, but because the depth, intensity, and quality were of the same family.

The cream and mossy green image is framed with more Klein rosette artifacts which resemble her stylized hair, and the same rectilinear theme of the frame is represented in the extraordinary jewelry-like abalone and silver body and fingerboard inlays. The woods are poplar, flamed maple, crushed maple, and Macassar ebony. The colours wed nicely - note the poplar in the upper bout and its resonance with the colour of her hair and the neck pickup. The overall atmosphere of gentle is enhanced by the blonde maple and the dark mustard poplar hues. The woods, shapes, and colour choices simultaneously reflect and enhance the strength, character, and beauty of the lithograph. The knobs are from a 1940s radio and the switch is Catalin.



“Loetz Gilded Serpent”

The Loetz glassworks was founded in 1840 by Johann Loetz in Bohemia. Bohemia, along with Italy, had a long history of glassmaking, and glass industries were closely tied to their national identities. Loetz pieces were known for subtlety, innovation, simplicity of form and a vibrant lustrous metallic colour.

The glass chosen for this instrument features contrasting iridescent/ opaque golden hues and organic shapes expressing the vitality and boldness of nature’s pervading strength and wildness. This is some of the most strident art glass from the period. The serpent theme, derived from the shapes found in the glass, is consistent with Art Nouveau’s attentions to the power and mystery of nature. The symbology of the serpent is vast and was often used to represent the sacred primal energy of matter. It was an inspiring figure in the mythologies and rituals of Africa, Ancient China, and many cultures, most notably the Greek gods of poetry, music, healing, and divination. The obvious serpentine shapes in the glass invite the blonde flamed maple serpent images for the body, which, though softer in colour than the golden and light green glass, speak through their size, shape, and historical reference. The earthen-toned spalted maple that comprises much of the top offers a texture and vibrancy that enhances the vividness of both the serpents and the glass. Additional woods are redwood burl, and rosewood. The inlays are artfully rendered in silver and pearl, and the knobs and switch are resin and Catalin respectively. Perhaps the most aggressive instrument of the Nouveau Series brimming with boldness, gold, and more boldness.



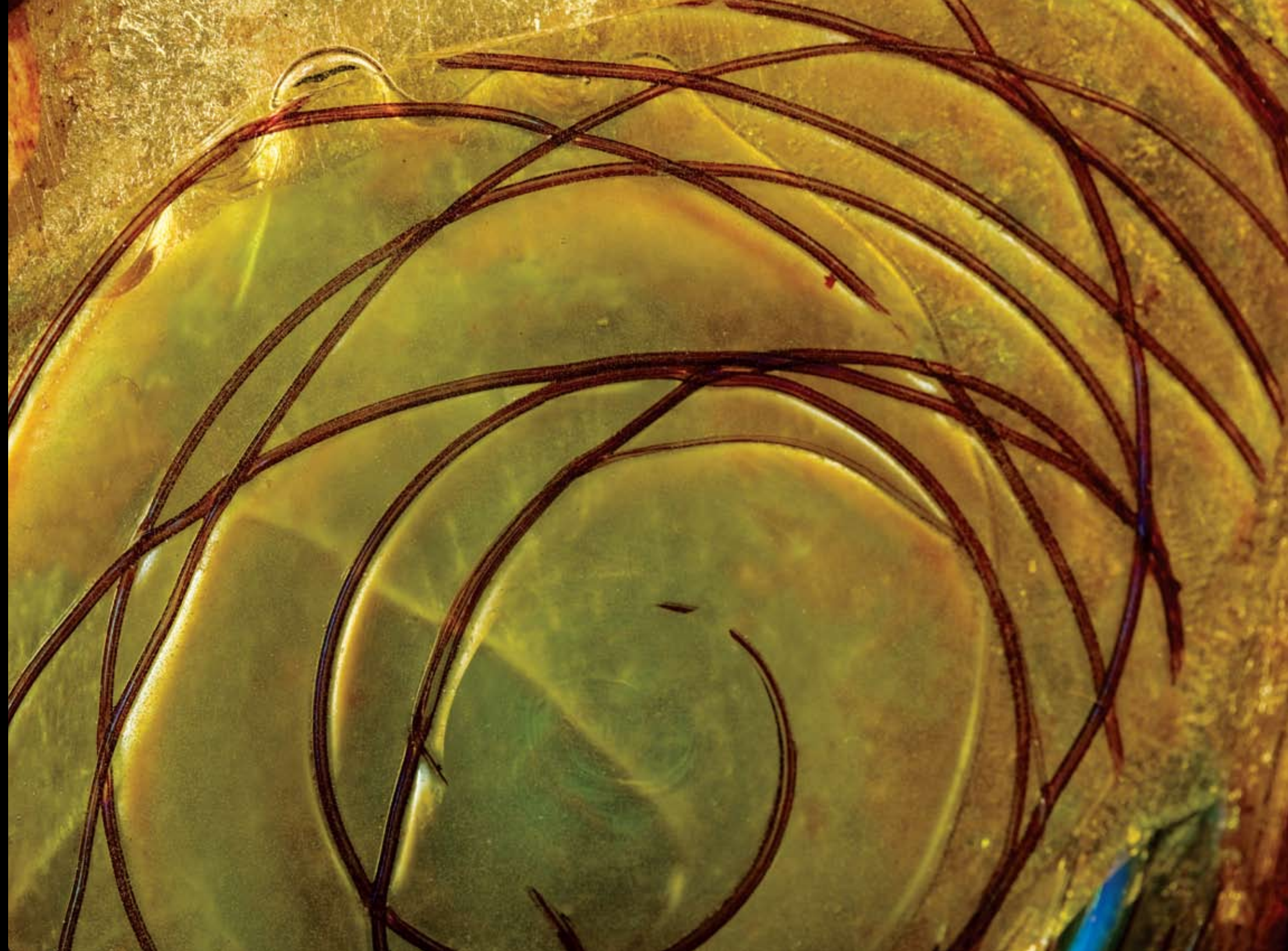




“Spinning Arachnid”

Like our L’Image-themed instrument, the glass selected to theme this instrument was not signed but was still selected for its beauty and uniqueness. The yellow-green glass of swirling brown lines and blue stripes suspended over gold-leaf inspires the startling fingerboard image - a pearl web, abalone arachnid, coloured bone green leaf and orange berries. The spider was also a favoured image for Nouveau for its indefatigable spinning and weaving. Like the serpent, its image is significant to many cultures’ mythologies - Asian, Greek, West African, and Indo-European.

The swirling threads in the glass are reiterated in the web-like dark brown and black spalting in the maple. The shaping of the spalted maple and koa is also inspired by the motion in the glass. The brilliant candy red pickups are bolstered by the lipstick red Catalin knobs and switch in bringing an intensity to the instrument’s personality. Note the fine tracing lines of red surrounding all of the various wood shapes, setting them off with subtlety and vigour. The bridge is Amazon rosewood and weds nicely with the colour and texture of the koa. An exuberant instrument.



Emile Galle’ (1846-1904)

Artistry from the studios of Emile Galle’ was designed to evoke the spirit of nature by creating a powerful sense of an alternative world. Galle’ was a knowledgeable botanist and skilled draughtsman, and even in his earliest works one notes his keen observations of flora and insects overlaid with stylish interpretation. He did drawings and offered ideas, but, like Louis Comfort Tiffany, most of his work was done by the craftsmen in his employ. By the 1880s his glassworks had commercial stability and artistic success, and by 1890 he had shops in Paris, London, and Frankfurt. Galle’ was passionate and sensitive, and these characteristics are evidenced in his designs.

“Galle’ Floral”

The etched glass lid (from circa 1903) that themes our instrument was the first piece of art I purchased for the Nouveau Series collection before I knew there would even be one. I viewed it first in a photograph and was moved by its delicacy, lovely use of space, and subtlety of gorgeous colour. After viewing it in three dimensions over a period of time, I entered a new realm of artistic understanding, and in some ways it evoked the Nouveau Series. I used it as an instructive tool to teach my daughter about the depth of art as an example of how a medium, design, and colour can be organized to create such power and meaning in a life-giving way.

This twelve-string ‘sibling’ of the Series features top woods of jarrah, flame maple, myrtle burl, and padouk - all designed to the theme of the floral scene of the glass coloured in pale dark blue, brownish purple, dark evergreen, light green, and mauve. The fingerboard inlay of stylized flowers is comprised of coloured bone and abalone, again taking its cue from the art. The knobs are from a 1940s radio, the switch fashioned from Catalin, and the bridge is purpleheart. The glass is set into the body so the light can pass through from either direction revealing its delicacy and eloquence.



Michael Spalt’s Recollections of the Nouveau Series

“When Paul and I started conceptualizing what was to become the ‘Klein Downtown’ instrument, the focus was much on Klein and in many ways was a riff on Klein’s designs. Paul had a great appreciation for the artistic design approach Klein used in building his instruments - the ultimate melding of form and function at the highest levels. Klein’s instruments reflected Paul’s loves of art and guitar. Paul and I talked about the role of art in everyday life and its ability to replenish and uplift, about the Nouveau ideal that art should be part of everyday life and not relegated to ‘hanging on the wall’. A musical instrument at its finest would embody this ideal - visual appeal, tonal excellence, the sensuousness of fine craft and exquisite materials; and the unique ability to be the vehicle for creating art - Music! This is also where I found a kindred spirit in my approach.

Using Klein’s parts and working with his shaping of the guitar form allowed a greater canvas for my art and called for a higher sophistication in both materials and workmanship. It was a process of discovery, trying to do justice to Klein’s spirit and workmanship - his sensibilities and the elegance embodied in the parts Paul had sent me. It was also a process of growth which resulted in the finest instrument I had created to date (partially owing to the fact that many of the parts were created by Klein). The large body gave sustain and depth to the notes, the rosewood neck gave colour and definition. I tried to match the quality of Klein’s design with a dynamic, intricate composition which combined bold lines with delicate, small elements in a fresh, colourful whole - representing the sound which I imagined would flow from the guitar - as it did! Throughout the building process Paul and I talked regularly - conversations that reinforced my belief that creating an instrument like this was an almost necessary thing - the logical progression in my work where I was continuously straddling the line between fine art and utilitarian object.

Even before the “Klein Downtown” guitar was completed, Paul had mentioned the idea for the Series. He wanted to create something beautiful, enriching, combining his passion for music and the fine arts. We talked about ways to realize this project. Paul collected art he thought might be included while I started to design the pickups, think about the woods, specifications and parts needed. We organized the funding, then met and went over the art Paul had collected, conceptualizing each guitar in terms of colour, art, and the vibe it would have.

The basic structure unifying the Series was the choice of aged Indian rosewood for the neck and centerpiece, along with body wings of figured old-growth Honduran mahogany. The veneer trim would harmonize with the colour scheme of each guitar.

African ebony and a slightly extended scale to give more string tension characterized the fingerboards. The pickups were designed around a P-90 architecture, which I consider still to be the best sounding design. Each pickup was handmade and wound, the colours then matched to the individual guitars. To retain clarity in the neck position we used a slightly under-wound coil with ceramic magnets, while the bridge was fitted with Alnico magnets for warmth and sparkle. The neck-body joint was the first challenge - the original Klein neck of the ‘Downtown’ had required me to work with its specific configuration. Here the only constraint was that it would have to be bolt-on, since the resin process I use makes glued in necks impossible. I made two prototypes in search of the best joint design - something which was structurally solid, tonally conductive and visually in keeping with the overall conception. The prototypes allowed me to explore other elements that are found in the Series and which create the unique character of these instruments, like the bridge construction. I ordered special tuners and made the ebony buttons for them. I searched for knobs to match the artwork and had custom cases made. Each element had to contribute to the overall excellence of the Series.



Spalt - “Klein Downtown”



The work proceeded in stages: first the basic woodworking, the necks and body blanks. The wood had to be selected and matched. I then started with the art, working from sketches I had made of each guitar based on some of the ideas Paul and I had discussed when we met. I proceeded with several pieces at a time, allowing the designs to mature and come together so each guitar would reflect the art included, be an individual piece, yet clearly be part of the Series. Some came together quickly, the final design almost imposing itself, while others had to be coaxed and prodded into their final completed form. Some of the art was figurative and these elements had to be reflected in the wood choices and shapes of the design. Some of the abstract glass fragments necessitated an approach based more on colour, and on the patterns in the glass. I took inspiration from Nouveau art and period furniture and objects, looking for floral elements or insect designs and ornamental flourishes. I did not want to get too literal, but use the Nouveau elements as found art, commented on and set-off by a contemporary sensibility. Much of my work is a form of decoupage and assembly, an approach which historically dates to a period after the Art Nouveau movement faded from popularity. Staying true to the spirit and colour of the art while integrating fragments and leftovers of it into a new whole was my goal. On another level this integrative approach held for the Series as such - they hold together, linked by a common vibe, even though the art included may be very different in form.

The simple fact that there were, for me, a large number of guitars (14) was something I had not properly considered - and the progressive refinement of each piece required more time and work. I had wildly underestimated the labour necessary and the material cost and as the guitars started to become more complex and refined, we were forced to interrupt the building process several times due to financial and time constraints. Finally the first completed instrument, the “Tiffany Prototype” guitar, could be played and enjoyed. The sound and playability surpassed my expectations. Low action with finely finished frets in combination with the slightly longer scale gives a rich harmonious sound, with good attack and sustain and excellent playability. The large body, comfortable to hold, with a highly carved back, resonates warmly. The bone-top pickups sparkle and sing - the sound is unique yet useful for almost any musical genre.

It took another year to complete the rest of the guitars, which came to fruition mid-summer 2009.”



About Paul Schmidt

Paul Schmidt is perhaps best known internationally for his literary contributions regarding America's musical instrument history. His book about master luthiers John D'Angelico and James L. D'Aquisto - "Acquired of the Angels" (Scarecrow press 1991, second edition 1998) was the first book ever published recounting the lives and works of the most celebrated guitar makers of the 20th century. His "The History of the Ludwig Drum Company" (Centerstream Publications, 1991) was the first book ever published devoted exclusively to the documentation of percussion instruments and their development in 20th century America. Schmidt's book "Art That Sings" (Doctorow Communications, 2003) features the guitar artistry of Steve Klein, whom many feel is one of the most innovative guitar designers of the last two centuries.

In addition to being an internationally-published author, Paul's other experiences/ventures/contributions include:

- co-founder of the National Music Center - the educational component of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum
- recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Selmer Corporation
- released five albums of original songs
- performed and guest-lectured at concert halls, colleges, universities, and museums throughout the U.S.
- served as curator and consultant for various museums and private instrument collectors internationally
- appeared as an artist/scholar in the media internationally (print, radio, television)
- earned graduate degrees in both music, and theology

He created The Art of Music School in 2004 (a school teaching America's indigenous musics and their antecedents), and Art of Music Instruments in 2005 (his collaborations with a select group of artists internationally that create carefully conceived Series' of guitars, drums, and other instruments that exhibit the characteristics of aesthetic sensitivity and artful rendering). He lives in Northern California with his wife and two children.



Praise for Paul's books and music:

"Paul Schmidt writes with exceptional clarity, elegance, and that special grace."

Jonathan Kellerman, best-selling novelist

"Schmidt does a fine job"

Smithsonian Institution

"...intelligent...a remarkable wordsmith...rivals the elegiac verses of the 17th century poets"

Cleveland Plain Dealer

"...guitar expert Paul Schmidt"

Acoustic Guitar Magazine

"...this is really interesting work!"

CKLN Public Radio, Toronto

"...musically very graceful, well-constructed form, excellent guitar playing and tasteful use of ancillary instruments...reflective and loving poetry, at times almost ethereal - sincere and accomplished work."

Tri-C JazzFest, America's Premier Educational Jazz Festival

"...great singing, and I love the songs!"

Keith Barrow, CBS Records

"...fantastic performance!"

Guild of American Luthiers

"...it's top drawer!"

James L. D'Aquisto, pre-eminent 20th century luthier

"...beautiful albums...very good marriage of voice and chord harmonies... effective fingerstyle and fine tone"

Alphonse Valenti, guitar virtuoso

"...truly brilliant, very beautiful, and ever so romantic"

William F. Ludwig Jr., former president of the Ludwig Drum Company

Postlude

Several years in selecting and obtaining the art, and several more working with Michael to bring the project to fruition, now yield this extraordinary Series of guitars.

A beauty of developing curves, textures, and colours inviting the play of light; alive with intrigue, artful themes, and some of the most unique weddings of architecture and style found anywhere, the Nouveau Series is superb in every sense.

Paul Schmidt, The Art of Music
autumn 2009



www.ArtofMusicinstruments.com

Design: andreas pichler Photography: nicholas alan cope & michael spall

