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## **Arte Nuova and the Italian Auto Industry at Early 20th-Century Expositions**

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# *Arte Nuova* and the Italian Auto Industry at Early 20th-Century Expositions

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Italians, as the historiography of modernism repeatedly underlines, suffered from a major inferiority complex relative to the other great powers of Europe and North America at the dawn of the 20th century. Having completed unification only in the 1860s after a series of false starts, by 1900 Italy had neither the manufacturing prowess of its rapidly growing sisters Germany or the United States, nor did it have the extensive colonial empire like Britain or France that its citizens could point to as benchmarks of global influence and hegemony. On the other hand, in cultural fields like the visual arts and architecture, where Italians had been dominant for centuries, they had launched no new movements since the beginning of the Baroque era, until the birth of Futurism in 1909 (and even then, on the front page of a Paris newspaper).<sup>1</sup> But F.T. Marinetti's claims in Futurism's official manifesto, which

The key moment of modernism in Italy, long cited as coinciding with the birth of Futurism in 1909, deserves to be reconsidered. A better date would be nearly a decade earlier, with the country's introduction to *Arte Nuova*, also known as the *Stile Liberty*, the Italian strand of Art Nouveau. This phenomenon was made possible by Art Nouveau's favored status at turn-of-the-century international fairs, including the Turin Exposition of Modern Decorative Art in 1902, the moment when the national auto industry adopted it wholeheartedly. *Arte Nuova* was used by most Italian car manufacturers, led by FIAT, for the ephemeral architecture at major automobile shows for the rest of the decade, linking its rationalist structure with technological advancement, fine craftsmanship, and novelty to reach a broad public. Despite the fluctuating economic fortunes of the nascent industry, FIAT would carry *Arte Nuova* into the 1910s for its permanent architecture and prodigious advertising campaigns.

pointedly assailed the adoption and widespread use of the *Stile Liberty*, or *Arte Nuova*, the Italian strand of the pan-European style called Art Nouveau, as feeble and effeminate, purposely belied an important development in the history of Italian modernity, and modernism more broadly. True to form, Italians had adopted *Arte Nuova* relatively late, some ten years after the style had first appeared in Jules Chéret's groundbreaking lithographed posters of the late 1880s, but in the first decade of the new century they arguably began to make the most

of this new artistic and architectural expression. As I suggest here, Italians discovered that *Arte Nuova* could serve as an ideal language for the projection of a national aesthetic of modernity as emblemized in its adoption by the country's nascent automobile industry. This was particularly evident in the ephemeral architecture constructed by major players in the auto industry at international expositions, through the expression of technical prowess, superior craftsmanship, and novelty. Such a projection of national modernity was mastered most expertly, as we will see, by the only one of these companies to survive to the present, FIAT.

### **Art Nouveau—*Arte Nuova***

The style called Art Nouveau reached its apogee in 1900, at least among the nations that had witnessed its ascent. In Belgium, France, Spain, Austria-Hungary, Finland, Germany, and to a lesser extent in the United States, it flourished simultaneously in architecture, design, and the graphic arts.<sup>2</sup> Art Nouveau's reliance on line—especially the characteristic whiplash curves that defined the work of Victor Horta, Antoni Gaudí, Koloman Moser, and Hector Guimard—and the structural and decorative elements of plants and flora, were the formal results of 19th-century research into structural rationalism, which aimed to define a self-consciously modern aesthetic by returning to architectural design's origins in nature (fig. 1). The style's practitioners sought to marry the new industrial technologies of iron, steel, and glass with the more traditional materials of brick, ceramic tile, and wood (though with innovations in their production). Art Nouveau architects and designers aspired to create a democratic art and architecture, in the sense that their aesthetic would appeal to audiences of every class and background, with its brilliant colors and textures as well as seductive and exaggerated imagery capturing the eye and imagination of even (and especially) the downtrodden proletariat. They strove, with varying success, to thus upend the notion that the enjoyment of art was exclusively a preserve of the privileged elite.<sup>3</sup>



1 Hector Guimard, Temple station, Paris métropolitain, 1899–1900 (Author's photograph)

Indeed, Art Nouveau's reliance on natural forms, universally recognizable and in some cases capable of being read and interpreted regardless of the viewer's socioeconomic rank, aided its practitioners' quest for inclusion. Its complex, often twisted vocabularies, however, often required advanced technologies to realize, which in the end prevented it from truly reaching a broader public, at least for private consumption. Nonetheless, Art Nouveau's demands proved definitively the full capabilities of modern materials using the recently invented techniques of industrialized serial mass production. This ascendance was boosted by the frequent staging of major international expositions in the closing decades of the 19th century, where the style's dazzling qualities, combined with the advances in electric lighting, made it ideal for experimentation in temporary architecture. Hence Art Nouveau would play a prominent if not dominating role in the Paris Expositions Universelles of 1889 and 1900, the Barcelona Exposició Universal of 1888, and the Brussels Tervueren Exposition of 1897. Even at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where a white, old-fashioned classicism enveloped the fair's Court of Honor, Louis Sullivan's red and gold Transportation Building provided a powerful counterpoint that stole the show for posterity.<sup>4</sup>

Art Nouveau's broad appeal—evidenced not the least by the translation of its name into virtually every European language—finally expanded to Italy, the bastion of classicism, in the last years of the 19th century. There the style was known by no fewer than three different monikers: the *Stile Liberty*, acknowledging its introduction to the country from the London purveyor of interior furnishings Liberty & Company; the *Stile floreale*, a nod to its grounding in floral vocabularies; and *Arte Nuova*. Even then one could still find references to it as the *stile moderno* among Italians after the dawn of the new century.<sup>5</sup> By 1899, Italian scions of the transportation industries began to adopt the style in architecture and the graphic arts, with Ernesto Basile designing the country's first Arte Nuova building, the Villino Florio, for a family of shipping magnates in Palermo.

## The Fair and the Automobile: Turin 1902

Italians may not have held international expositions in the 19th century, but they recognized the usefulness of such fairs and used them as the medium for national displays of their own industrial products and design work in the 1880s and '90s, which of course avoided the problematic issue of foreign competition. Such national fairs also employed exotic and adventurous ephemeral architecture, like Carlo Ceppi's Moorish-revival industrial exhibition hall at the General Italian Exposition of 1898 in Turin, with its prominent keyhole-shaped glazed façade, flanked by minaret-like towers, that fronted a monumental tunnel-like main corridor filled with the largest industrial displays (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> In the new century, Italians landed the rights to host their first international exposition, the prestigious First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art, to be held in Turin in 1902, an important event not the least because Art Nouveau was adopted as its official aesthetic.<sup>7</sup> As subsequent events would suggest, this Turin fair marked the apex of the style's popularity in Europe more generally, before Art Nouveau soon fell precipitously from grace in some of the pioneering centers to use it, but after most of the regions and countries to later employ it (including Italy) had discovered its allure.<sup>8</sup> The exposition was assisted by its serendipitous staging at the historical moment just when the relatively new medium of postcards first became widely available, and publishers rushed to distribute myriad images of the 1902 fair. Extremely popular with attendees was a lavish, officially-produced set designed with a gray background and unusually vivid colour lithographs of the pavilions, surrounded by frames formed by whiplash swirls that usually terminated in roundels imprinted with the style's Latin moniker *Ars Nova* (fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> The prominent Italian architect Raimondo d'Aronco was appointed to design most of the buildings for the 1902 Turin exposition, held in the Parco del Valentino east of the city center. D'Aronco was well-aware of the style's appeal, having designed several buildings using it in his capacity as official architect to the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople, and having seen Joseph Maria



**2** Carlo Ceppi, Main façade, Galleria del Lavoro, General Italian Exposition, Turin, 1898. Plate XI from Giovanni Sacheri, *Rivista Tecnica della Esposizione Generale Italiana*, Turin, Camilla e Bertolero, 1898

**3** Raimondo d'Aronco, Entrance gate, First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art, Turin, 1902. Postcard, author's collection

Olbrich's use of the style at the initial exhibition of the Darmstadt Artist's Colony the year before—even borrowing from it for the Turin fair's main gate (see fig. 3). D'Aronco's skill as a designer was evidenced by the way that he managed to unify the sprawling main building, with its central rotunda splaying off into multiple wings to house most of the international exhibits, into a coherent whole. The *pièce de résistance* of the fair, however, was his Automobile pavilion, one of the first stand-alone buildings at any fair conceived specifically for the industry (fig. 4). While it remains somewhat unclear whose decision precisely it was to include a separate pavilion for the industry at the fair, one suspects it was the local scions of the industry themselves, who were already establishing Turin as the center of auto manufacturing. The city was where the first eight Italian cars had been built some four years before, in July 1898, and by 1904, one could boast that upwards of 40 Italian and foreign companies were manufacturing



motor vehicles within the country's borders, to the "benefit" of some 50,000 people nationwide, including the army and King Victor Emmanuel III himself.<sup>10</sup> The industry's early confidence in *Arte Nuova* was already visible in the city's permanent architecture associated with it: finishing touches were then being placed on the home of Alfonso Scott, one of the executives of S.T.A.R. (Società Torinese d'Automobili "Rapid") not far from the exposition, as well as the Casa Fenoglio(-LaFleur), both of which had been designed by the architect Pietro Fenoglio, whose diverse business interests included serving on S.T.A.R.'s board.<sup>11</sup>

At the exposition itself, the Automobile pavilion's program tasked d'Aronco with essentially inventing a new architectural aesthetic that would introduce the general public to cars and convey their innovative advantages: as a practical means of individual transport and for the exhilarating pleasure of unprecedented speed. To do this, d'Aronco used a bowtie-shaped façade whose two wings featured grilles superimposed with circular motifs irregularly entangled with diagonal wavy swirls that together attempted to abstractly recall the rotating motion of wheels and the suggestion of velocity. At the ends of the roofline one saw the silhouettes of automobiles filled with motorists speeding down a roadway with trailing curvy lines evoking jets of exhaust or kicked-up dust. The sense of movement and blurred perception created by racing through space was mirrored by the diaphanous quality of the screen that hung from the arched entrance, fronting a wide triangular window and flanked by two banner-bearing caryatids perched on wheels leaning forward from the supporting columns, as if speeding out of the building (and into the future) (fig. 5). It was further underscored by the checkerboard or woven decoration on the lower façade, with flowering plants stenciled onto the façade, which one might read as symbolic of the blossoming of the Italian auto industry and its promise of a new, modern experience of travel for all.

The stands of individual companies inside the 1902 Automobile pavilion likewise used *Arte Nuova* to convey a sense of modernity.<sup>12</sup> These included not only the displays of auto manufacturers themselves, including local firms Fratelli Ceirano and FIAT



4 Raimondo d'Aronco, Automobile pavilion, First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art, Turin, 1902. Detail of Plate 12 from *Esposizione di Torino 1902. L'Architettura alla Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Decorativa Moderna*, Turin, Crudo and Lattuada, 1902 (Author's photograph)

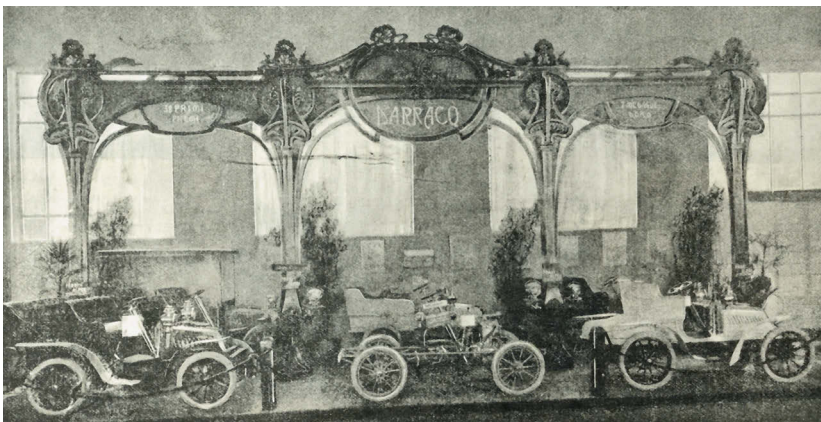


5 Raimondo d'Aronco, Automobile pavilion, First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Art, Turin, 1902. Façade details. Plate 13 from *Esposizione di Torino 1902. L'Architettura alla Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Decorativa Moderna*, Turin, Crudo and Lattuada, 1902 (Author's photograph)



(for Fabbrica Italiana Automobili di Torino), the Roman carmaker Carlo Festa, along with foreign companies like Peugeot, but also the makers of related equipment and accessories, such as Michelin. Among the most notable stands was the “elegant and grandiose” display of the French manufacturer Darracq, where automobiles stood in front of a lithe triumphal arch, whose pillars bowed out at the top into whiplash curves of stems terminating in floral blooms that were superimposed against circular medallions surmounted by floral buds (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> The taller central arch held a wide oval plaque sporting the company name in an asymmetrical typeface and decorated with stylized tangles of curved stems with leafy buds above. The honorific setup was quite similar to the branchlike stems of the arcaded entrances to Hector Guimard’s Métropolitain stations then being erected in Paris, which likewise represented the most modern means of transport for all socioeconomic classes around the French capital, akin to the aspirations of the auto industry to become (eventually) accessible to a broad public (see fig. 1).

6 Darracq Automobile Stand,  
First International Exposition  
of Modern Decorative Art,  
Turin, 1902, from *La Stampa  
Sportiva*, 6 July 1902  
(Courtesy of Museo Nazionale  
dell’Automobile, Turin)



## Specialized Italian Automobile Expositions

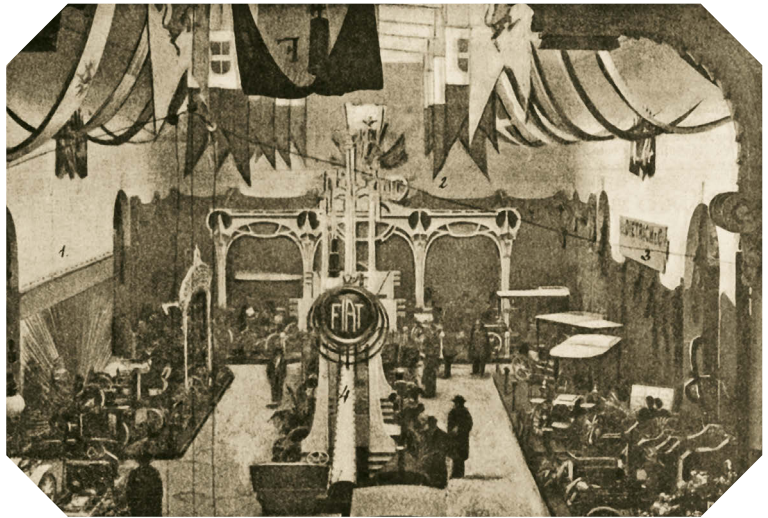
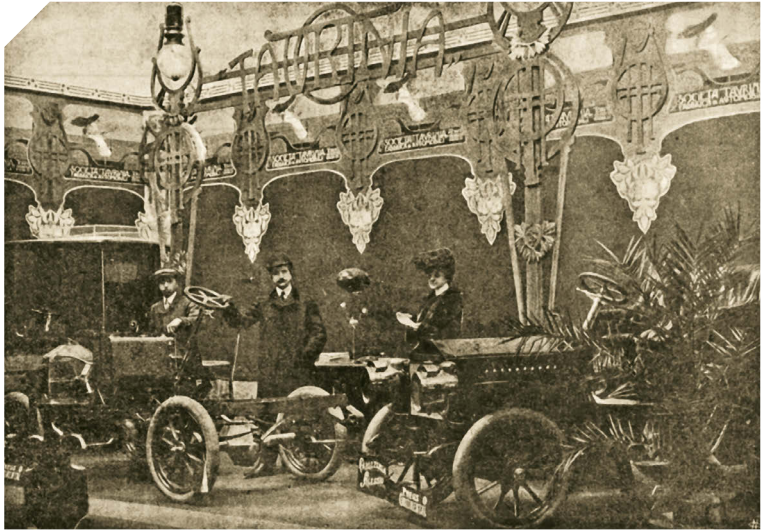
Emboldened by the initial dedicated automobile show at the Turin exposition, various Italian cities sought to hold subsequent exhibitions for the rapidly growing industry on an annual basis. As the journalist Cesare Goria Gatti suggested in his opening remarks in February 1904 at the *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Automobili* di Torino, the country's first specialized automobile fair, these shows had multiple goals: to "facilitate the relationships between producers and consumers [...] provide an opportunity for useful comparisons [...] and serve as] a training ground for emulation and a practical school for rapid improvements".<sup>14</sup> According to news reports, they were an immediate success, surpassing even the most optimistic expectations. Within the first eight days of the 1904 exhibition, some 20,000 visitors had inspected the 70 stands of Italian and foreign companies, both for automakers and equipment manufacturers, inside the Palazzo di Belle Arti in the Parco del Valentino, a number that rose to 50,000 visitors by the end of the fair's fifteen-day run.<sup>15</sup> It was assiduously covered daily by the foreign press, who were not only impressed by the quality of automobiles, but in particular the artistic arrangement of the displays. Paul Rousseau, the editor of *Le Monde Sportif*, reported that the decorations were

of very fine taste, great imagination, and perfect elegance. The Art Nouveau touch dominates somewhat, but it is neither flashy nor garish. This Salon will be the most elegant, I believe, of all those we have seen. I have visited those in Paris and Brussels, and I can say that few exhibitions have been as luxurious.... The electric lighting of all the stands is very well thought out, as is their display with flags from all nations.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the *Arte Nuova* displays at the Turin salon indicated the degree to which each of the automakers recognized that the projection of modernity and style through ephemeral architecture was as important as the delivery of the actual products themselves. However, the stands were somewhat modest in

scale: few companies employed freestanding constructions, as the spaces allotted were for the most part clustered along the walls of the individual galleries. A typical but rather outstanding display was that of the local manufacturer Taurinia, whose corner location comprised a raised platform supporting two full-scale cars with one chassis in front of its signage affixed to the wall behind (fig. 7). This mounted graphic display consisted of a frieze of circular medallions intertwined with interlocking sets of multiple letter “T”s, almost as if to mimic the spokes of automobile wheels, with the vertical arms of the Ts extending beyond the circular rims, also evoking the trails of prize ribbons. These motifs were linked together by a band that repeated the full name of the company, “Società Taurinia Fabbrica di Automobili,” in a stylized typeface between each bay, surmounted by a scene of a driver in an automobile. Directly below each of the medallions hung a bundle of leaves. A large sign spelling “TAURINIA” in capital, asymmetrical lettering was superimposed over the frieze on the back wall, while in the evening the space was lit by two tapering electric lampposts, each crowned by an enlarged version of the T medallions and a horseshoe bracket that held the individual light globe.

Following the example of the Parisian auto shows referenced above, but in a break from the normal practice of larger world’s fairs, the initial Turin exposition did not judge companies based on the quality of their products. Instead, the sense of competition for modernity was heightened by a formal contest for the best decoration of displays, announced at the end of the exposition.<sup>17</sup> In this, Taurinia’s stand came in fourth, topped only by Darracq (third place), whose stand closely resembled its floral-studded display from the 1902 exposition; the Autogarages Alessio (second); and the winner, FIAT, which had one of the freestanding spaces and, from surviving photographs, chose a simpler display with multiple slender tapering fin-like pylons emblazoned with horizontal stripes at their bases, from which hung a bullseye sign on either end with the firm’s acronymic name surrounded asymmetrically by two hoops (fig. 8). The jury did not disclose a



**7** Taurinia Automobile Stand, First International Automobile Exposition, Turin, 1904, from *La Stampa Sportiva*, 21 February 1904 (Courtesy of Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile, Turin)

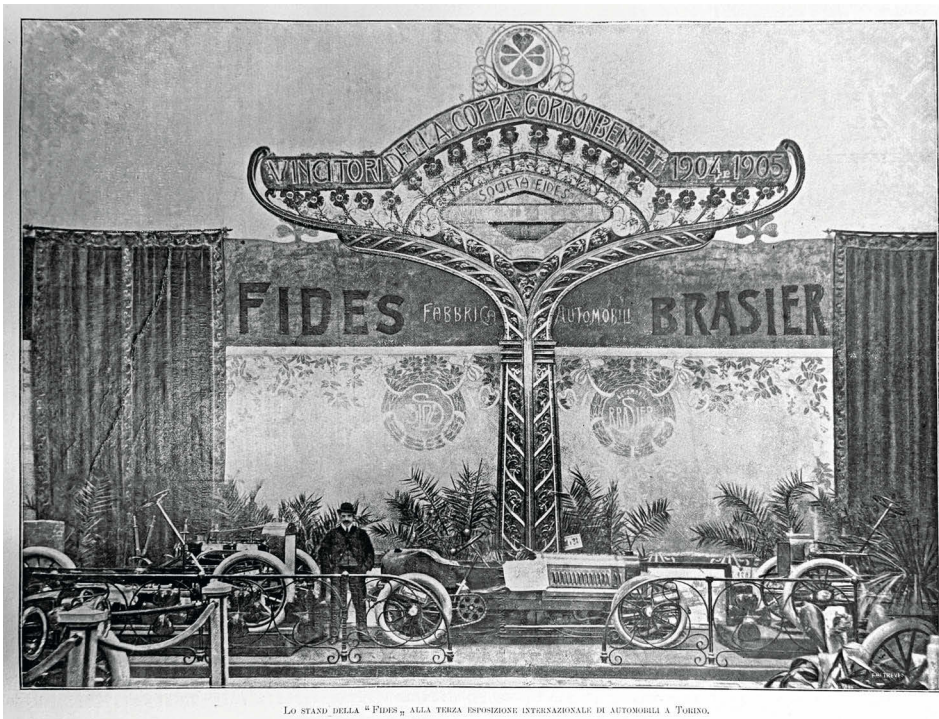
**8** View of First International Automobile Exposition, Turin, 1904, showing the FIAT stand at the center and the Darracq stand in the background, from *La Stampa Sportiva*, 21 February 1904 (Courtesy of Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile, Turin)

reason for their choice—merely a tabulation of their votes—but one might suspect FIAT was awarded first prize based in part on the efficiency of its display given the absence of wall space, as well as the smart simplicity of its signage.

FIAT's victory in 1904 notwithstanding, the competitive luxuriousness of the individual stands only intensified with subsequent automobile shows, in consonance with the reputation of *Arte Nuova* as a complex style that appealed strongly to the senses and imagination, based partly in the reality of nature and partially relying on imagination and an idealized vision of an attainable future. The third installment of the Turin show in February 1906 featured a number of striking examples, most notably that of the stand of the Roman manufacturer FIDES (Fabbrica di Automobili Brevetti Enrico), founded only the year before but which had already acquired the Italian concession to sell the vehicles of reputable French automaker Brasier (fig. 9). Here the eye was drawn immediately to the huge centerpiece, a symmetrical tree-like construction that obviously recalled the rooting of *Arte Nuova* within natural forms. Though no publication described its construction, the piece seems to have been constructed of metal or gilded wood, girded along its trunk with diagonal ribs interspersed with vine-like tendrils. Above an impost block of three horizontal bars, the trunk opened into two volute-like curvilinear branches between which was couched a diamond-like sign, possibly made of stained glass, the top rim of which appeared to be etched with "SOCIETÀ FIDES" above a horizontal bar with the words "AUTOMOBILE BRASIER". This was surmounted between the wide ends of the open branches with an arched row of floral blooms, and then another sign proclaiming Brasier's victory in the 1904 and 1905 editions of the Gordon Bennett Cup, one of the most prestigious early cross-country automobile races, which had been run in the former year in Germany and in 1905 in France; these victories had been jubilantly celebrated in the Italian sporting press.<sup>18</sup> The entire construction was crowned by a medallion of a four-leafed clover, likely intended to symbolize good luck, set within a tangle of

vine-like volutes. Behind the stand stretched a huge painted mural of an almost iridescent design that appeared to mimic the sheen of luxurious velvet. It sported the names of the companies flanking the tree as well as medallions with stylized lettering of their names set within honorific laurel wreaths, tied together with ribbons and surrounded by clusters of leaves and branches, arguably symbolic of how the automobile had provided the means for humanity to more freely explore the natural landscape. This notion was literally underscored at the bottom, where framed photographs on the floor appear to show the cars in action during one of these early motor races.

The high degree of craftsmanship that the FIDES-Brasier stand exuded thus functioned as a metonym for the high quality of its design standards, the evidence of which was provided in the machinery fronting the impressive backdrop. The centerpiece of three vehicles was a finished automobile flanked by two chassis, each surmounted by an engine but not an encasing body. While this seems initially an odd choice, it was not unusual for the carmakers at any of the auto shows from the early 20th century. In those days of the industry's infancy, relatively few members of the general public would have been familiar with the mechanisms of automobiles (particularly specific models) and many people remained skeptical of the modern technologies of transport, even subway trains.<sup>19</sup> Most of the stands such as that of FIDES-Brasier were thus staffed with some of their most capable engineers who were on hand to explain to visitors the inner workings of the vehicle and the purposes of the curious tangle of wires, tubes, conduits, belts, gears, and motors, which of course could not otherwise be further easily dismantled on site. The bare chassis, meanwhile, revealed the solidity of construction of the vehicle's frame in order to assure potential customers and enthusiasts of the stability of the contraption, necessary since most roads of the time, urban or rural, left much to be desired for the purposes of speeding along with little in the way of safeguards against accidents. Much ink was thus spilled in sporting journals explaining to attendees what to look



Lo stand della "Fides" alla terza esposizione internazionale di automobili a Torino.

9 FIDES-Brasier stand, Third Turin International Automobile Exposition, 1906, from *L'illustrazione italiana*, 11 February 1906

for at auto shows and the technical specifications of the individual models.<sup>20</sup> Just as *Arte Nuova* sought to find modernity in returning to the origins of building technology and honestly exposing the structural elements along the principles of rationalism using the new materials of iron and steel, the auto industry understood that only by exposing the honesty of its constructions to the general public, built in steel and powered by gasoline, steam, and electricity, could it move the progress of human civilization forward.

### **Climax: The Paris Automobile Salons of 1906 and 1907**

Despite the success of the first several Italian automobile expositions in the first decade of the new century, they still paled in comparison to the British International Motor Show, founded in 1903 (appropriately, first held at the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, south London, and then informally known as the “Olympia” once it moved to its second venue in West Kensington in 1905), and the even older Paris Salon d’Automobile. The latter, first held in the Jardin de Tuileries in June and July 1898, was organized by the Automobile Club de France, headed by Baron Etienne van Zuylen, a Belgian who had married into the Paris branch of the Rothschild family.<sup>21</sup> The Salon quickly outgrew its venue and by 1901 had moved permanently into the Grand Palais, itself having just been built for the 1900 Exposition Universelle, where it began to be held from late November until late December.<sup>22</sup> The new schedule placed it immediately after the recently founded Salon d’Automne, and the importance of this sequence of events—the avant-garde art show (which included the applied and decorative arts) followed by the cutting-edge display of utilitarian but strategically-designed private transport vehicles—was not lost on observers.<sup>23</sup> Like the Italian auto shows, in its infancy the Paris Automobile Salon welcomed not only automobiles, but also bicycles, motorcycles, mopeds, as well as boats and airships.<sup>24</sup> It attracted automobile and motoring equipment manufacturers from all over Europe, and in less than ten years it had reached impressive proportions, approaching the festiveness and technical capabilities of a major Parisian world’s exposition. In keeping with the European

conception of spectacle and technological prowess at the time—and in part to keep up with the precedents set by the colossal illumination of American fairs over the previous quarter-century—van Zuylen and his cohort decided that electricity was the only appropriate means of expressing modernity (figs. 10 and 11).<sup>25</sup>

The 1907 exhibition, known as the “Décennale” even though it was really only the ninth edition of the show, grew so large (40,000 square meters, up from 28,000 the year before) that an annex was built on the Esplanade des Invalides across the Pont Alexandre III.<sup>26</sup> It was fully lit with electric lights that arched over its concave façade and terminated at the summit in the huge glowing flags and arms of the Automobile Club de France, all flanked by two tapering pylons crowned by giant beacons that projected beams over the entire district.<sup>27</sup> Additional electric bulbs, hung along rows of tall baroque stanchions, were installed on the Pont Alexandre III, the Avenue Nicolas II, and the Esplanade des Invalides. Searchlights inside the Grand Palais, beaming through the glazed ceiling, as well as on the roof itself, illuminated the surrounding grounds in every direction. Inside, a huge chandelier weighing more than three tons and with a base in the shape of a gigantic multifaceted diamond was installed under the apex of the domed roof. Below, the space was filled with corporate stands, with auto manufacturers on the floor of the main hall and makers of auxiliary equipment along the outer niches and the galleries of the upper level; for 1907 the Grand Palais received a new elevator that facilitated access between its two levels, a change greatly welcomed by both critics and exhibitors (fig. 12). At the center, a raised dais displayed a FIAT, a Renault, and a Darracq, the three manufacturers whose models had finished in first, second, and third places, respectively, at that year’s French Automobile Grand Prix.<sup>28</sup> Critics at the 1906 Salon marveled how “the orgy of light [was] an indescribable enchantment for the eyes,” a “phantasmagoria” for which the organizers were to be commended.<sup>29</sup> Building on this success, the following year’s Décennale was documented in an extensive set of at least 20 postcards, demonstrating the impressive capabilities of night photography (see figs. 10–12).



**10** Industrial Vehicles Annex, Tenth Automobile Salon, Paris, 1907. Postcard, author's collection

**11** Illumination of the exterior of the Grand Palais at night, Tenth Automobile Salon, Paris, 1907. Postcard, author's collection

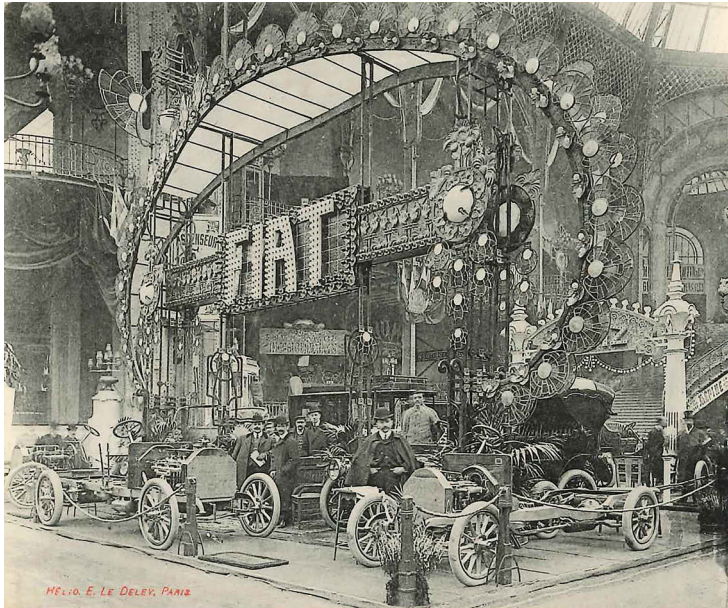
Some 1,400 exhibitors—300 of whom came from abroad—entered the 1907 fair, up from 1,225 in 1906, when 450,000 visitors poured through the gates. The Italian contingent was substantial at both fairs; for the *Décennale* no fewer than 18 Italian automakers erected stands and sent models. In addition to the major players from Turin such as S.P.A. (*Società Piemontese d'Automobili*), S.T.A.R., *Aquila Italiana*, *Itala*, *Fabbrica Automobili Standard*, and *FIAT*, Milan was represented by *Isotta-Fraschini*, *Edoardo Bianchi*, O.T.A.V. (*Officine Turkheimer per Automobili e Velocipedi*), and *Attilio Franco di Sesto San Giovanni*. They were accompanied by *Automobili Alba* from Trieste, *Hermes* from Naples, *Brixia-Züst* from Brescia, *San Giorgio* from Genoa, *Società Automobili Lombarda* or “*Esperia*” from Bergamo, *Florentia* (Florence), and *Wolsit* (Legnano).<sup>30</sup>

12 Daytime view of the interior of the Grand Palais, Tenth Automobile Salon, Paris, 1907. Postcard, author's collection



EXPOSITION DÉCENNALE DE L'AUTOMOBILE 1907-1908  
La Nef du Grand Palais





La F. I. A. T.  
au Salon de 1906

13 FIAT stand, Ninth Automobile  
Salon, Paris, 1906.  
Postcard, author's collection

This bevy of companies reflected the importance of the foreign markets for Italian automakers, many of which then manufactured vehicles primarily for export since Italy did not have the elite socioeconomic base that could afford such a private luxury.<sup>31</sup> The number of Italian companies was aided by the boom of stock speculation on poorly-regulated exchanges in Turin, Genoa, and Milan, which had expanded the country's auto industry in the preceding four years. This vastly inflated the companies' share prices and paid big dividends for their investors; at FIAT, in 1906, Giovanni Agnelli used the opportunity to liquidate the old company and reconstitute it with himself and two other partners as principal shareholders.<sup>32</sup> Of the Italian exhibitors at the 1906 and 1907 Paris Salons, FIAT had the most flamboyant display (the same for both years), a giant ovoid illuminated creation of metal and circular glazed

panes, with electric lights spelling out the company name against a central horizontal panel supported by two vertical stanchions (fig. 13). It was the centerpiece of the Italian displays, and attracted the most illustrious visitors: French President Armand Fallières reportedly spent more time there than anywhere else during his tour of the expo. *La Stampa Sportiva* described it as

a little daring; but beautiful [...] all in wrought iron and copper. Two columns surmounted by two luminous spheres support a curved line crowned with cathedral glass, the shape of which gives the impression of a gigantic butterfly. At the two ends of the immense plaque, on which the word Fiat is written in huge letters, are two enormous medallions with pendants of colored glass, reminiscent of large women's jewels. Over a thousand expertly arranged light bulbs create a vibrant, polychromatic glow.<sup>33</sup>

Critics declined to comment further on the particular design strategy, but what is clear, particularly from this description, is that FIAT achieved a kind of multivalence of imagery that invited multiple readings and thus democratized the experience of promenading through the space and inspecting the cars. In addition to the suggestion that they represented jewelry, appropriate for a luxury item, the various wheel-shaped illuminated panels could have been seen as abstractions of spinning wheels, or the round heads of rivets (they were, after all, joined to a massive iron-framed arch). It is even possible to read the panels directly as floral blooms or even sunbursts (a common motif used in FIAT's own publicity at the time), literally representing the natural landscape to be explored from within the company's various models, or the nascent blossoming of the Italian auto industry itself (fig. 14). For the seasoned automotive critic Mario Morasso, this "incomparable halo of flames" shown in FIAT's display was the ideal expression for the modernity of the automobile. It elevated the company's display above those of its competitors, who instead borrowed



14 FIAT postcard with sunburst, ca. 1910. Author's collection

old monumental and emblematic forms, from funereal ones like the stone and cross, to architectural ones like the arch and the pylon. Here, where the most unusual elements could be combined in graceful and unexpected unions, one sees only common wood, dyed and gilded, and wrought iron, even if it is not stamped tin.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, other Italian companies could take heart: as Morasso argued, the real proof of their accomplishments was not in the décor of their stands, but the cars themselves: their chassis were the “best worked, the most carefully finished, those with the most graceful mechanical line,” thus demonstrating both their solidity for handling the machine’s power and that, from a technical standpoint, they had nothing to envy of foreign automakers.

FIAT's strategy to reuse its stand from 1906 for the Décennale, rather than incur the expense of a new one, was itself a metonym for the broader crisis in the global auto industry and in Italy specifically—a crisis of which the general public was not only fully aware but to a great extent anticipated its imminent collapse. The festive displays and magnetic atmosphere masked the serious financial problems within the industry, which to that point had sought to capture a market that was oversaturated with brands and vehicles, far exceeding the purchasing capacity of the elite socioeconomic class it depended on. As a result, most of the automobiles on display at the Décennale were offered at sharply reduced prices compared to the previous year.<sup>35</sup> The problem was further exacerbated by the rise in the global price of copper—a key component for automobile components such as wiring—driven by the attempts in the United States to corner the market. By October this speculation culminated in the Panic of 1907 in the USA, which severely contracted FIAT's American markets.<sup>36</sup> The problem for FIAT and Italian automakers became especially acute, as not only did costs of manufacture outstrip sales, but workers in Turin went on strike in both April–May 1906 and in May–July and October of 1907. By December, FIAT's stock had plummeted to 17 lire per share from a value of 505 lire that January.<sup>37</sup> It was clear to observers that for the industry to survive it needed to attract a broader clientele, beyond wealthy enthusiasts; hence the construction of the annex on the Esplanade des Invalides for the Décennale to display newly-developed trucks and commercial vehicles that would eventually overtake horse-drawn transport, particularly following the First World War (see fig. 10).<sup>38</sup>

## Aftermath

The Décennale marked a turning point for the auto industry, both in Italy and globally. It was the grand finale of the auto industry's era of extravagant exposition displays. In the year following the panic, at least ten Italian auto manufacturers either ceased operations or were bought out by competitors, including Isotta-Fraschini, FIDES, San Giorgio, Hermes, and Junior. FIAT itself

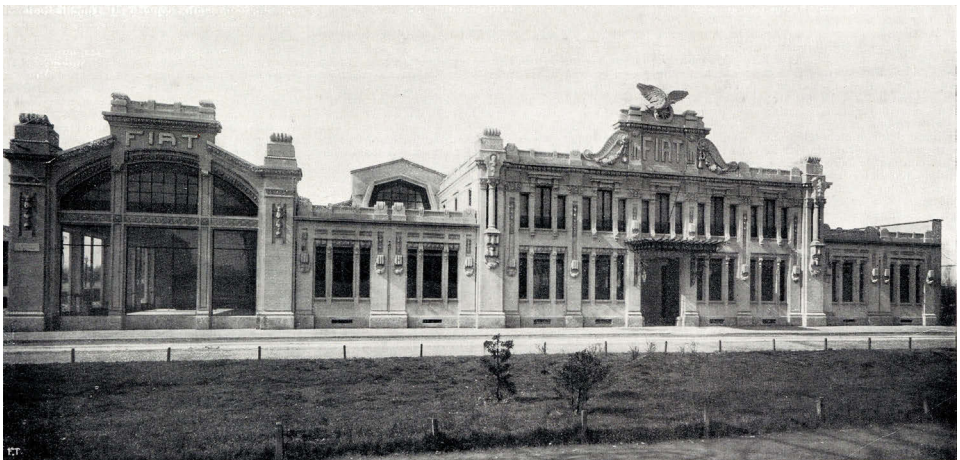
nearly went bankrupt, and the majority of its small investors were wiped out; the company was only saved thanks to the action of the Banca Commerciale, which in May 1908 canceled FIAT's shares listed at 34,19 lire and reissued new ones at 65,85 lire, enabling Giovanni Agnelli to buy up the vast majority and secure firm control of the company. But Agnelli himself was accused of financial mismanagement by a number of the shareholders who had been bankrupted, prompting an investigation by prosecutors in Turin that dragged on until 1912, when Agnelli was finally absolved of wrongdoing.<sup>39</sup> As Morasso had predicted at the *Décennale*, many automakers who survived the crisis began to modify their production lines to reach middle class and commercial consumers, thus marking “the entry of the automobile into the practical life of use and work.”<sup>40</sup>

In the meantime, sustained public attention to the automobile expositions remained noteworthy, and may have even increased, given the new orientations of the automobile companies towards vehicles for utilitarian purposes and away from mere novelty and amusement. The 1909 Turin Automobile Show in February reported in some cases upwards of 10,000 visitors daily for a fair lasting just over two weeks, and FIAT's own display topped all other exhibitors, taking up 450 square meters, including a 90-meter-long frontage. Significant visual coverage of the salons, however, was replaced by methodical reporting on charting the ever-ascending performance of the vehicles that previously had been found in the articles on the salons. Prizes began to be distributed not for décor but for the performance of engines and vehicles overall.<sup>41</sup> Sporting magazines, while still peppered with advertisements for automobile manufacturers with their newest models as well as the producers for auto parts and accessories, instead diverted their photographic coverage to the individual road races and the accomplishments of the healthy crop of mythical, goggle-donning masculine heroes who conquered the landscape.<sup>42</sup>

The association between the Italian auto industry and *Arte Nuova* did not die, however; but rather migrated to different media. Rising almost like a phoenix from the ashes, FIAT refocused its attention

from ephemeral to permanent architecture, expanding through a network of new United Garages throughout the country serving both as dealerships and service centers for its own and other companies' vehicles, most of which were designed in some version of *Arte Nuova* (fig. 15).<sup>43</sup> These static public markers of FIAT's corporate presence dovetailed with its redoubled efforts in graphic advertising, which continued to employ the style to great effect until the mid-1920s, while it survived the First World War and post-war economic troubles, arguably at last ingratiating Art Nouveau with the broader public its founders had intended it to reach. It thus required the era of Fascism, Rationalism, and Art Deco to dethrone the aesthetic that had weathered the fluctuating fortunes of one of the nation's iconic modern industries for a quarter-century.

15 Giovanni Velati-Bellini, FIAT United Garages, Corso Sempione and Corso Domodossola, Milan, 1914. Author's collection



- 1 Marinetti 1909, p. 1; Gentile 2009, p. 20.
- 2 On the style generally, see Greenhalgh 2000.
- 3 Especially true of much of the Art Nouveau produced in the French capital. See Clausen 1987; Froissart-Pezone 2004; Clendenin 2008, pp. 105-137 and 231-282.
- 4 On the World's Columbian Exposition and Sullivan's building, see de Wit 1993, pp. 40-98.
- 5 As in, for example, Deabate 1902, p. 342; Gherardi 1902, p. 284.
- 6 On this building, see Ceradini, 1898, pp. 7-8, 11, 164-165, 200, 213, 229; "L'Esposizione Nazionale" 1898, pp. 274-275, 290, 293.
- 7 Etlin 1991, pp. 23-52.
- 8 Metropolises such as Brussels, Paris, Vienna, Darmstadt, Glasgow, and Chicago were among the earliest where Art Nouveau was employed, but the style was largely discarded by its practitioners in these cities as early as 1905. In others, such as Helsinki, Budapest, and Barcelona, the style was in use by the mid-1890s and continued to survive until at least 1914. They were joined by several other centers, such as Nancy, Turin, Valencia, Riga, Prague, Antwerp, Milan, Lwów, Stockholm, and The Hague, around 1900, where frequently Art Nouveau remained popular among designers until 1914 or later. See Clausen 1987; Greenhalgh 2000.
- 9 Few postcards at the beginning of the century used anything other than half-toned photographic imagery.
- 10 As claimed by Cesare Goria Gatti in his opening remarks to the First International Automobile Exposition in Turin. See "L'Importanza della Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Automobili" 1904, p. 5. Gatti declined to elaborate on precisely what "benefitting" 50,000 people meant, however. The King and high-ranking Italian army personnel were frequently photographed for *L'Illustrazione italiana* in the first two decades of the century riding in automobiles on official business such as inspecting troop maneuvers.
- 11 On these, see Nicoletti 1978, pp. 153-155; Godoli 1979, pp. 205-206; Nelva and Signorelli, 1979, pp. 19-26.
- 12 "L'Esposizione Internazionale dell'Automobile" 1902, pp. 3-4; "Rassegna dell'Esposizione Ciclo-Automobilistico di Torino" 1902, pp. 8-10.
- 13 "Rassegna dell'Esposizione Ciclo-Automobilistica - Le vetture Darracq" 1902, p. 8.
- 14 "L'Importanza della Prima Esposizione" 1904, p. 5. The show ran from 6-21 February.
- 15 "Durante la I Esposizione Internazionale d'Automobili di Torino" 1904, p. 5; "La chiusura della la Esposizione Internazionale d'Automobili di Torino - La data del Il Salon - Il premio reale - Le diverse riunioni" 1904, p. 3; N.C. 1904, pp. 7-9.
- 16 Rousseau, quoted in N.C. 1904, p. 7. It appears this commentary was telegraphed directly to the Turin publication and not reported in *Le Monde Sportif* itself.
- 17 "Il referendum per la premiazione degli stands" 1904, p. 9.
- 18 "La Corsa Gordon-Bennett" 1905, p. 44; also see "L'Éliminatoire Française de la Coupe Gordon Bennett" 1905, pp. 415-417.

- 19 Pedoni 1907, pp. 8–9, originally published in *L'Auto d'Italia*; Pike 2005, pp. 47–57.
- 20 This became especially true in the coverage of larger automobile Salons. See “Il IX Salon Automobile di Parigi” 1906, p. 13; “Ciò che si deve visitare all’Esposizione Internazionale”, 1904, p. 10.
- 21 “Le esposizioni automobilistiche della stagione”, 1907, p. 13. The Paris Salon was initially the Exposition Internationale d’Automobiles; in 1988 it was renamed the Mondial de l’Automobile, then in 2018 the Mondial Paris Motor Show. Both the Paris and London shows are still extant, though the London show has been held biennially since 1976.
- 22 Coulibaly 2007, pp. 63–64.
- 23 “Il decimo Salone dell’Automobile a Parigi: Il successo” 1907, p. 7.
- 24 As evidenced by Valerien Gribayédoff’s photograph of the 1901 fair, *Vue générale du Salon de l’Automobile au Grand Palais*, showing an early dirigible, published in *Revue illustrée* 1902, n.p. [29].
- 25 Paris had struggled to match the illuminations of fairs such as the World’s Columbian Exposition, the Omaha Trans-Mississippi Exposition, and the Buffalo Pan-American Exposition. See Nye 2018, pp. 109–131.
- 26 No automobile salon had been held in 1900, separate from the Exposition Universelle, which had fully occupied the center of Paris.
- 27 Morasso, “Il decimo ‘Salon’” 1907, p. 519.
- 28 “Il decimo Salone dell’Automobile a Parigi: Il successo” 1907, p. 7.
- 29 “Il IX Salon Automobile di Parigi” 1906, p. 8.
- 30 “Attraverso gli Stands Italiani” 1907; “Le esposizioni automobilistiche della stagione” 1907, 13, p. 10.
- 31 Pallotta 1987, pp. 29–32; Brianti 2007, pp. 241, 243.
- 32 Clark 2011, p. 36.
- 33 “Il IX Salon Automobile di Parigi” 1906, p. 13.
- 34 Morasso, “Il IX Salon Automobile di Parigi: Il significato”, 1906, p. 9.
- 35 Morasso, “Il decimo ‘Salon’”, 1907, p. 518.
- 36 Fridenson 1972, p. 572.
- 37 J. Laux, “The First Automobile Boom”, in Bardou et al., 1982, p. 37; Brianti 2007, p. 244.
- 38 Morasso, “L’Industria Italiana”, 1907, p. 9.
- 39 J. Laux, “An Expanding Market, 1908–1914”, in Bardou et al., 1982, pp. 37–38, 72–73; Gasquet 2006, p. 242; Clark 2011, p. 36.
- 40 Morasso, “Il decimo ‘Salon’”, 1907, p. 518.
- 41 “La VI Esposizione Internazionale d’Automobili di Torino” 1909, pp. 4–5; Dalnotti 1909, p. 4; Verona 1909, p. 8.
- 42 See, for example, Morasso, “Il ‘Grand Prix’ Automobilistico di Francia”, 1907, pp. 37–39; Masi 1912, pp. 15, 17.
- 43 “La Nuova Sede Dei ‘Garages Riuniti FIAT’ di Milano”, 1914, pp. 70–72, XVI.

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