

Claire O'Mahony 'Billiard table in Villa la Sapinière, Evian'.

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An 8-foot billiard table designed and created by Alexandre-Louis-Marie Charpentier (1856-1909) is the centrepiece of one of the most elegant rooms created in 1897-9 for a villa, La Sapinière, in Evian-les-Bains (Haute-Savoie, France). Unlike many billiard tables which were traditionally manufactured using dark tonalities of mahogany wood, this table is painted in brilliant white. Instead of dark green baize, the fabric over the playing slate is a sky-blue turquoise. The table is embellished with gilded bronze high relief sculptures and low relief plates. This decoration alerts players to the elements of the furniture which facilitate play. Volumetric sculptures of female figures swirl out from each of the four solid, curvaceous table legs below openings in the table from which balls are collected. These figures, arrested mid-jump, raise dynamic folds of drapery to catch any errant balls that might fall when players retrieve them. This graceful terpsichorean movement also connects the table with the cue holder through the gilt-bronze figure at its apex. The score-keeping mechanisms embedded on either side of the longitudinal marble edge of the billiard table instead each represent a lithe female nude. With belly to the ground plane, the woman tenses her legs and feet to raise and to turn her upper body towards three billiard balls. She counts them with her right outstretched forefinger and notes the score with her left hand. These gilded-bronze low relief plates on the billiard table edge resonate with lock plates on the double doors through which players enter and leave the room. In each pair, a game is played between an upright and a crouching female nude across the divide of the wooden door frame between the two gilded-bronze lock plates. On the doors within interior of the room, two women play a badminton match. The upright figure is about to throw the shuttlecock with her left hand to be struck by the stringed racquet in her right hand, whilst the crouching figure holds her racquet ready to return the serve. These gestures are paralleled in the lock plates situated on the other side of the door facing the vestibule. Here the standing female nude raises her arms above her head to release a sling shot skywards, whilst in the facing plate, the crouching figure holds an axle for spinning a diabolo. The doorknobs on either side of the doors show a half-figure pouring pick up jacks from a cup into her hand. These distinct sporting games all utilise motor and mental skills useful to the billiard player: balance, aim, strategy. Charpentier's high and low relief sculptures in gilt-bronze enliven and connect every part of the room and its furnishing to engage us in the act of play.

The creation of this billiard room engaged an extraordinary spectrum of celebrated designers, critics and patrons all of whom championed the need for a new energy of collaboration and vitality around 1900. It was commissioned by the Vitta family, a Franco-Piedmontese Jewish dynasty of bankers and silk merchants, for the villa on the banks of Lake Léman which they built amidst alpine scenery frequented by seasonal high society. The household comprised multiple generations and relationships: Baroness Hélène Vitta (née Oppenheimer 1837-1901); her son, Baron Joseph Raphaël Vitta (1860-1942) and daughter, Fanny Foà (née Vitta 1870-1952) and Joseph Vitta's working-class companion, later wife, Malvina Bléquette (1881-1948). The decoration of the villa was commissioned and executed by leading designers and artists exemplifying the 1900 style including the French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). The family engaged the artist Félix Bracquemond (1833-1919) to coordinate the design of the billiard room. He devised the sculpted floral ornaments in white painted wood and the patterned silk-embroidered wall-treatments. Charpentier was secured to create the billiard table and attendant furnishings, Jules Chéret (1836-1932) to paint the mural and ceiling decorations. Charpentier was one of five artists who formed an artistic collective

originally formed in 1896 as *Les Cinq* ("the Five"), by Félix Aubert (1866-1940), Jean-Baptiste-Auguste Dampé (1854-1945), Henry Nocq (1868-1944) and Charles Plumet (1861-1928). The group grew to 10 and adopted the more polemical name of *L'Art dans tout* ("art in everything") in 1898 lasting until 1902.

Displayed in multiple art exhibitions, this billiard table and surrounding interior furnishings were celebrated by critics as a perfect embodiment of the *gesamtkunstwerk* championed around 1900. Every detail of the ensemble resonates with the other parts. This symphonic effect is achieved through the immersive white of the whole interior, enhanced by multiple brief instances of colour and volume enacted by low and high relief sculptures of female figures in gilded bronze. In 1902, the famous art critic and respected museum inspector, Roger Marx, championed the Vitta's billiard table and room in multiple articles in the art press as exemplifying the vital importance of enlightened patronage and collective practice in contemporary design. In a luxury commemorative issue of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* issued in an edition of 200, Roger Marx argued the billiard table and furnishings embodied these new collaborative relationships which would forge a 'social art' suited to the modern age. By prototyping new designs for elite collectors, designers could then devise more economical versions to beautify the homes and lives of more modest homes. The neo-rococo feminine and floral motifs, colour scheme as well as the intimate scale of the Vitta billiard table proposed new audiences and players for this indoor sport and its objects.

Traditionally billiards has been regarded as the preserve of exclusively masculine leisure undertaken in public spaces, principally either in elite gentleman's clubs or proletarian "pool" halls. However, the Vitta family billiard table demonstrates how this sport and the multiple objects required for its play were also core elements of nineteenth-century domestic environments involving multiple genders and generations. Visual and verbal representations of billiards and the specialist furniture it required reveal a much wider variety of players than is often supposed. Francophone and anglophone advice manuals and magazines about billiards around 1900 actively encouraged women and children to secure billiard tables to engage in play at home. The sport benefitted all the family, building both physical stamina and strategic thinking. The expense of a billiard table was made not only affordable to the middle classes, but also containable within standard domestic environments, by adopting 'bijou' proportions scaled to as small as four feet. These small tables sold for as little as £5 and 5 shillings in the United Kingdom (equivalent to 15 days wages of a skilled tradesman in 1900). Equally, metamorphic tables were marketed which could easily be transformed into both a billiard or a dining table. The easeful seating, writing desk and mirrors of the billiard room at La Sapinière created a comfortable space for women, children, and the gentlemen of the house to play a family game of billiards together.

The joyful elegance of this gleaming white, turquoise and gilded billiard table created by reformist designers for the villa of a family of new patrons of the artistic interior documents how the synergies between design practice, new players and patrons of sport coalesce in sport objects.

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