Art Deco, 1910–1939
Victoria and Albert Museum, London
27 March–20 July 2003
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto
9 September 2003–4 January 2004
California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco
13 March 2004–5 July 2004
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
22 August 2004–9 January 2005

At the conclusion of the “sensational” Art Nouveau blockbuster of 2000,¹ its curator, Paul Greenhalgh, had a compelling idea: the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) should mount a successor show on Art Deco. This was stunningly accomplished by the assistant curator of the earlier exhibition, Ghislaine Wood. Emulating its intelligent organization, she commenced with the presentation of a few iconic artifacts in a section titled The Style and the Age, proceeded with an analysis of origins and a demonstration of their impact (Sources, The Paris Exhibition of 1925, The Exotic, The Moderne), and, finally, examined the geographic extent of the style and its reinterpretation according to various regional concerns (The Deco World, Manhattan Modern, Streamlining). Some 330 objects—compared with 372 in the Art Nouveau exhibition—were displayed. Clothing, jewelry, furniture, tableware, paintings, sculptures, photography, architectural drawings and fragments, movies, posters, household goods, and items of transport and product design attested to the existence of a movement that, however eclectic the articles associated with it may be, had a recognizable coherence. Music formed a suitable but not obtrusive companion, and a film of Josephine Baker dancing produced an excitement comparable to that of the cinematic revelation of Loïe Fuller whirling her veils in the Art Nouveau show. Once again, we were given a full-scale architectural example of the style: there a Metro entrance, here the foyer of the Strand Savoy Palace Hotel, saved by the V&A in 1969 but stored away until this moment, when it was triumphantly resurrected.

The V&A is superbly suited to host these multimedia exhibitions. Established with the proceeds from the vast 1851 Exhibition of the Art of All Nations, the first international manifestation where art and commerce began their inextricable intertwining, the museum was led by directors who made it a point to purchase the chefs d’œuvre of subsequent expositions in London, Paris—including that of 1925—and other continental cities. Just as the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 popularized Art Nouveau, so the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes of 1925 made Art Deco (named as such only in 1966) all the rage. The V&A was able to recover specific works shown in pavilions—illustrated through black-and-white photographs and slides—financed by department stores, by purveyors of handmade luxury goods (such as Sonia Delaunay, who set up a clothing boutique on the Pont Alexandre III), and by the various nations (those chosen for Art Deco were Britain, Czechoslovakia, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden), which seized the opportunity to celebrate their “modern” artists and artspersons. However, dissenting statements like Le Corbusier’s Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau and the Constructivist Soviet Pavilion did not merit mention here, though the excellent book accompanying the exhibition deals with the perplexities of moderne vs. modernist.

To reinforce their domination of les arts de vivre, the French pulled out all the stops in 1925 (the exhibition in fact had been proposed before World War I and plans had been simmering since then). The partially reconstructed grand salon from the Hôtel du Collectionneur (architect Pierre Patout), coordinated by the famed French designer and ébeniste Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, was a knockout (if not appealing to everyone’s taste, lacking the sense of unity achieved in Art Nouveau interiors), with sculptures by Antoine Bourdelle and François Pompon, the oil Les Perruches by Jean Dupas (dreadful to my eyes but certainly summing up the nature of Art Deco painting), and the magnificent Donkey and Hedgehog cabinet of black lacquer with incised silver ornament by the team of Ruhlmann and the formidable Jean Dunand, among others. A photograph made at the time showed how closely the V&A was able to approximate the room, including the wall fabric, which had been reproduced from the original. Several pieces from the Pavillon d’une Ambassade Française had also been retrieved. The chifforon by André Grout suggested the body of a pregnant woman; its covering in sharkskin with ivory details added to the proto-Surrealist illusion. And the desk by Pierre Chareau from the library of that pavilion illustrated how fluid the boundaries were between Art Moderne and modernism, a point suggested as well by Eileen Gray’s lacquered screen and sleek Piroque dyed.

The thesis of Art Deco, 1910–1939 was that the abrupt decline of Art Nouveau brought stirrings of a new impulse wherein the machine and the exotic replace nature as the fountainhead of design. With growing recognition of the need for nurturing new markets among all social levels, the machine became tool as well as inspiration. The utopian and reformist tendencies of Art Nouveau disappeared in an orgy of commercialism. Among the French, further animus was provoked by the perception that Art Nouveau designers rejected traditional values. Nevertheless, there were continuities, such as the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement and of indigenous folk art, but now Japan shared laurels with China for the first time since the eighteenth century, and the impact of Egypt (visible in the works of artists like Georges Seurat and Paul Gauguin and Dutch architects like J. L. M. Laueriks and K. P. C. de Bazal) gained momentum with the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922. In contrast to fin-de-siècle distaste for classicism, there was a return to symmetry and geometric stylization, along with
admiration for antiquity, especially archaic Greece. Hitherto-untouched and still more exotic cultures, especially those of ancient Mexico and, probably the most vital, sub-Saharan Africa, were mined as well. The preoccupation with black bodies and “Negro” or “primitive” art, in tune with themes of sexual and psychic liberation, was partially fueled by the desire of the imperial countries (chiefly France, but also Britain and Italy) to showcase the economic potentialities of their colonies; it was also spurred by the fascination with African-American innovations like jazz and an interest in the Harlem Renaissance.

Contemporary art played its role. Symbolism, the major artistic trend with which Art Nouveau designers engaged, gave way to avant-garde movements like Constructivism, Cubism, De Stijl, Futurism, Orphism, and Purism, some of whose practitioners became directly involved with the decorative arts. Among those of Cubist persuasion it was primarily Fernand Léger and the “Salon Cubists” of the Groupe de Puteaux (such as Jacques Villon, his brother, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and Roger de la Fresnaye) who did not scorn ornamental design. Pablo Picasso’s only contribution to the exhibition was a costume for the Ballets Russes—another “source,” or was it, more significantly, itself an Art Deco phenomenon? If so, not much was made of it here; the only other object associated with Serge Diaghilev’s enterprise was a set design by Léon Bakst. While the wealthy elite continued to commission and purchase the exquisite, unique, and wildly expensive products of the first phase of Art Deco, the style soon invaded humbler markets, especially as the economic boom of the 1920s slowed and eventually crashed. Here the United States entered the story. America, which had refused the invitation to show in 1925 because “there was no modern design in America,” subsequently embraced and democratized Art Deco, despite Alfred Barr of The Museum of Modern Art, who derided the movement as “half-modern,” representing “the taste of real estate speculators, rental agents and mortgage brokers.” The movies were important disseminators of the most hedonistic aspects of Art Deco, and eventually its glamour afforded affordable and useful objects like home appliances and Brownie cameras, which were assembled in the final section of the exhibition, Streamlining.

Another path along which Art Deco spread, literally, was through travel. The new machines that transported people to distant realms were fashioned along aesthetic lines (one of the first films to be shot in Kodachrome, made during the maiden voyage of the Normandie, illustrated the ship’s magnificent Deco interiors), and travel posters and magazines ratified the style. The exhibition fell somewhat short of its touted revelations concerning the world beyond Europe and the United States: there were a few Japanese objects, a sterling-silver bed and a tea service from India, and two items of Chinese clothing, but for the rest, photographs of Art Deco buildings in Bombay, Johannesburg, and Shanghai had to take up the slack.

In the realm of architecture, the exhibition necessarily privileged interiors, representations, and fragments of buildings. Evocative slides made from photographs by Andreas Feininger and the Wurtz Brothers and a film by Jean Vivé of Manhattan skyscrapers were projected onto two huge screens, one vertical and one horizontal. The American skyscraper not only exemplified Art Deco, but inspired fabrics (Ruth Reeves’s Manhattan pattern, 1930), furniture (Paul Frankl’s desk and bookcase, ca. 1928), tableware (Norman Bel Geddes’s Manhattan cocktail set, 1937; Erik Magnussen’s coffee service known as The Lights and Shadows of Manhattan, 1927; Louis Rice’s Skyscraper cocktail shaker, 1928), sculpture (John Storrs’s Forms in Space No. 1, ca. 1924), and paintings (Fortunato Depero’s Skyscraper and Tunnel, 1930). Like many Europeans, the Futurist Depero had sought his fortune in America in 1928 but, faced with the Depression, returned disillusioned to Italy in 1930. The display included a rendering (37 in. high), by Hugh Ferris of the Manhattan Bank Co. Building, ca. 1929, and Owen Ramsburg’s spectacular 1935 model (41 x 119 in.) of Rockefeller Center, including the RCA Building, borrowed from the Museum of the City of New York. The
only other model, located in the section Avant-Garde, was a replica of the façade of the Maison Cubiste by Duchamp-Villon shown at the Salon d’Automne in 1912. The model was not very informative because it lacked both context and illustrations of the rooms behind its strangely facetted forms, which anticipated Czech Cubist designs such as those by Pavel Janák shown in an adjacent vitrine.

Fragments included an aluminum frieze panel by the British Walter Gilbert, made by Bromsgrove Guild in 1933 for Derry & Toms on Kensington High Street, and the wrought-iron and bronze gates at the entrance to the executive suite in the Channing Building, designed by René Paul Chambellan in 1928. The most stunning of these fragments consisted of the entrance foyer of the Strand Savoy Palace Hotel (1930–31), an essay in gleaming chromium and internally lit molded-glass blocks with a mirrored revolving door. Its author, Oliver Percy Bernard, a stage designer in Britain and the United States, also decorated Lyons Corner Houses, thus making Deco delights accessible to the wage-earner as well as the rentier.

Furniture and objects by architects included Gunnar Asplund’s Senna chair (1925) of leather, mahogany, and ivory exhibited in the Swedish Pavilion and, from the Italian pavilion, a large porcelain vase by Gio Ponti and Libero Andreotti. The sideboard and bizarre armchair by Michel de Klerk (ca. 1915–17), together with the other Amsterdam School objects in the Dutch Pavilion, might have been grouped with “sources” rather than realized Art Deco. The pavilion itself, by J. F. Staal, shown in two small photographs, demonstrated the architect’s ability to conflated De Stijl strategies with the vocabulary of the Amsterdam School.

Some of the objects in the V&A show will not make the transatlantic journey, but there will be appropriate alternatives of local provenance. Art Deco, 1910–1939 opened seven days after the commencement of the war in Iraq, and its vast success, signaled by ecstatic reviews and long waiting lines, may at first have seemed deplorably escapist. Yet, in its heyday, the style—and style it is, and it was presented here as such—also provided pleasure during a troubled political and economic era. The V&A’s promise of “fantasy and fun” has been amply fulfilled in this exhibition.

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Notes


Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting, and Photography, 1907–1922

Langmatt Museum, Baden, Switzerland
30 March–30 June 2002

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, New York
22 November 2002–23 February 2003

Before he was Le Corbusier, self-described as a condor perched on an Alp, master of all that he surveyed, Le Corbusier was Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, the slim, bespectacled son of a bourgeois Swiss family. His first design clients were family and friends in what was then the watch capital of Europe, La Chaux-de-Fonds, and the story of his early career (cost-overruns, disagreements about style, experiments with new materials, failed business ventures) reads as a template for the first ten years of many architects’ professional lives today. Too often caricatured as the cold, controlling designer of all-white, overly rigid, and righteously modern houses, the Jean- neret seen in Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier was looser, funnier, and more conflicted, still choosing his language from the shapes and shadows of history.

Organized by Stanislaus von Moos and Arthur Ruegg, both of whom have written extensively on the later Le Corbusier, the exhibition began as a small display of his little-known furniture designs from 1912 to 1922, intended for installation at Baden’s Langmatt Museum. It grew from there, as the curators discovered more unknown material from the teens in the architect’s Paris archives. Organized not as narrative but, as von Moos writes, as “col- lapse,” the strongest parts of the exhibition dovetailed with the curators’ interests. Ruegg, an expert on Le Corbusier’s furniture designs, provided precise comparisons between the furniture and the architecture of Corb’s Swiss villas. The show as installed at the Bard Graduate Center was endowed with a spectacular assortment of chairs and cabinets, including what may be one of the first casiers standards (Le Corbusier’s domesticated office furniture) from the 1925 Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau in Paris.

Van Moos is more concerned with Le Corbusier’s travels, and in his catalogue essay traces the appearance and reappearance of images and observations from the architect’s two European circuits—one begun in 1907, the other in 1911—in the writings and designs of the 1920s. The ocean liner, the airplane, and the car, so insistently present in Le Cor- busier’s own iconography, reflected a fetish for travel and motion indulged by many during this period.

The second-floor section of the exhibition opened with a map marked by Le Corbusier to show his routes and purposes, indicating with a letter which stops were for folklore (F), which for