

# WHAT IS ART DECO?

BY PASCAL LAURENT

When I am asked, "What is Art Deco?" I often like to answer, "That's a never-ending question!" thereby opening the discussion rather than closing it. In this essay I will try to be more specific as I share my definition of Art Deco. I'm an architect, so I'll use architecture as my primary point of departure.

What makes Art Deco a style in its own

of Art Deco. It sculpts space and is diffused and indirect. Its source is never seen, but it creates the mood conveyed by a space.

Exoticism: Defined as the art of using décor to provide the sensation of being in the here now and at the same time far away. Exoticism is the art of illusion and embellishment. The exotic décor is stylized enough to leave room

## THERE IS CERTAINLY A RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN TODAY'S CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND THAT OF THE INTERWAR PERIOD.

right is the phases it passed through during its evolution, like the Greco-Roman, the Romanesque-Gothic, or the Classical-Baroque. Art Deco burst forth in the 1910s; staked its claim in the 1920s; reached its peak in the 1930s; and finally became more baroque by the 1940s. This evolution took half a millennium for other styles, but for Art Deco, it required less than half a century.

What are the distinctive attributes of this style we call Art Deco? To express verbally what I instinctively recognize as its features, I've used Le Corbusier's Five Points of Modern Architecture as a guide and formulated five main characteristics of Art Deco:

**Stylization:** This point encompasses geometrization of figurative forms; vitality of abstract figures; rhythm of straight lines, and opposition of curved and straight lines.

**Plasticity:** With modern and synthetic materials such as concrete, Bakelite, metal plating, veneer, and plastic, ergonomics and movement figure prominently in the structural logic of both objects and buildings. It is this momentum that gives the skyscraper its forceful presence, the velocity that imprints its walls and surfaces, and conveys a sense of movement.

**Light:** Even more than concrete, electric light is the modern "building block"

for one's fantasies. Every house is a monument of sorts, and every building is, to some extent, a steamer bound for a distant land.

**Uchronia:** Art Deco often creates an alternative reality, a reinterpretation of antiquity, a Hollywood-like ambiance, or a bright future. The present is but a brief passage between the Old World that died in Paris in 1925 and the future world that began in Chicago in 1933.

Although this style eventually became known as Art Deco, those who practiced it called it "contemporary." One wonders what future generations will label the art and architecture of the beginning of the twenty-first century. The word "modern" has been used for every period in the past, but when the modern movement at the end of the 1920s appropriated that term, "contemporary" served as an alternative and united those who didn't define themselves dogmatically as modern. It is perhaps no coincidence that our own era has a renewed interest in those earlier "contemporaries." There is certainly a resemblance between today's creative expression and that of the interwar period. The two eras are linked, even if their means of artistic exploration are quite different.

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Front Cover: Ornamentation detail of the Waldorf Astoria elevator doors from the east elevator bank. Some experts note the design influence of Edgar Brandt, master of Art Deco iron work.  
Photo: Meghan Weatherby

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# ART DECO À LA FRANÇAISE



Aerial view of the Palais de Chaillot, Léon Azema, Jacques Carlu, and Louis-Hippolyte Boileau, architects, 1937.  
All Photos: Meghan Weatherby

The streets of Paris are filled with Art Deco delights just waiting to be experienced. This past June, eleven Art Deco Society of New York Board members and upper-level donors discovered many of them during a special six-day guided tour of the French capital organized by the Paris Art Deco Society. Joined by officers of the International Coalition of Art Deco Societies (ICADS) and Art Deco societies from Chicago, Los Angeles, and Melbourne, the group gained access to locations rarely open to the public, thanks to Paris Society President Pascal Laurent and his team of indefatigable volunteers.

The itinerary included a day in Boulogne-Billancourt, a prosperous neighborhood in the western suburbs of Paris that experienced phenomenal expansion during the interwar period. French automaker Renault and aircraft manufacturers Voisin, Farman, and Blériot all established facilities there in the 1930s. It also became a vibrant artistic center, attracting artists and architects who promulgated avant-garde design. Today Boulogne-Billancourt is known for its residences, public buildings, and artists' studios designed by such Modernist icons as Le Corbusier, Pierre Patout, Robert Mallet-Stevens, and Tony Garnier, the architect of the City Hall.

Boulogne-Billancourt is also home to the Musée des Années 30 (Museum of the 1930s), located in a building constructed in the late 1990s that incorporates the aerodynamic curves of 1930s Streamline Moderne. The extensive collection of paintings, sculpture, graphic design, ceramics, and deco-



Members of the Art Deco societies of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Melbourne with our Paris hosts on the rooftop of the Ministry of Social Affairs.



orative and industrial arts includes furniture by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann and Armand-Albert Rateau and sculpture by Paul Landowski and Jan and Joël Martel.

One of the highlights of the trip was our tour of the Maison de Verre (Glass House), designed by Pierre Chareau and Bernard Bijvoet as a clinic and residence for Dr. Jean Dalsace, an early Modernist masterpiece near the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood. The translucent glass block façade of the three-story structure illuminates the interior while maintaining the privacy of its occupants. The house remains a private residence with limited access to the public.



No Art Deco lover can leave Paris without visiting the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Its stellar collection includes many objects acquired after the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts). Among them are iron gates designed by Edgar Brandt for one of the Exposition entrances and Pierre Chareau's original desk and chair for the library in the French Embassy pavilion, displayed today in a re-creation of that circular space. Also on view is a reconstruction of the boudoir, bedroom, and bath from the private apartment designed by Armand-Albert Rateau for couturier Jeanne Lanvin.

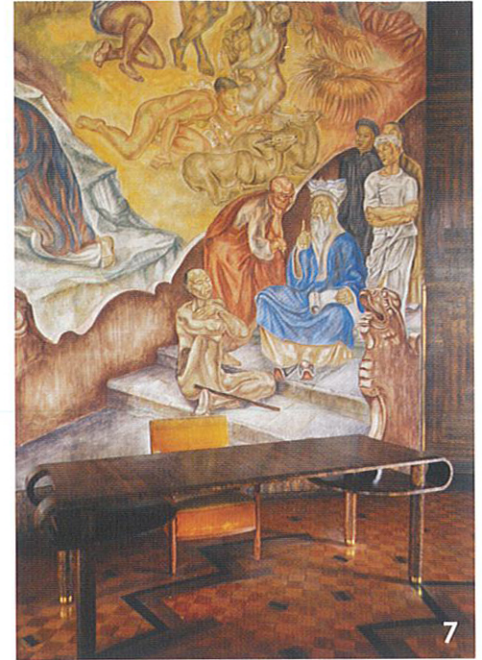
A short ride on the Paris Metro took us to the Bois de Vincennes in eastern Paris, the site of the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale (International Colonial Exposition). The only Exposition building intended to be permanent is the pavilion designed by Albert Laprade for the Musée des Colonies (Museum of the Colonies), now the Palais de la Porte Dorée (Palace of the Golden Door). An Art Deco interpretation of the classical vocabulary, its façade is completely covered with exquisite bas-reliefs by sculptor Alfred Janniot depicting the wealth and resources of the French colonies. Edgar Brandt designed the building's ornamental grillwork, and Pierre-Henri Ducos de La Haille painted frescoes for the auditorium, known as the Salle des Fêtes (Reception Hall).



Gaining access to the two oval lounges flanking the museum's lobby, seldom open to the public, was a major coup. Even our guide, who has worked at the museum for four years, had never stepped inside. One of these spaces celebrates the art and culture of Africa and features furniture by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann and frescoes by Louis Bouquet. The other, inspired by Asia, is furnished with Eugène Printz designs and decorated with frescoes by André-Hubert and Ivanna Lemaître depicting Buddha, Confucius, and Krishna.

We also visited the site of the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life), which centered around the area of the Trocadéro. The monumental Palais de Chaillot, which now houses several museums, is among the extant Exposition buildings.

One of the biggest surprises of the trip was a remarkable building in the 7th arrondissement (district) that originally served as the Ministry of Employment when completed in 1930 and is now the Ministry of Social Affairs. A stunning Art Deco glass roof tops this little-known treasure, designed by architect Guillaume Tronchet with glasswork by Jacques Grüber and bas-reliefs by the Martel brothers. We were delighted



to explore this astonishing structure from the underground shelters constructed just prior to World War II all the way to the rooftop with its spectacular view of the city.

The guide for our behind-the-scenes tour of the 1932 Art Deco Grand Rex invited us to stand on the movie theater's magnificent stage as he related its history. Designed by Auguste Bluysen, this extravagant, atmospheric cinema boasts a ceiling that simulates the star-studded night sky. Its proscenium is reminiscent of Radio City Music Hall, and reliefs of French Riviera villas decorate the side walls.

Throughout the trip, our Paris hosts arranged luncheons, dinners, and cocktails at dazzling Art Deco venues. We relaxed with afternoon cocktails on the outdoor terrace of the 1929 Molitor swimming pool before heading to dinner at Le Relais Plaza in the Plaza Athénée Hotel, a chic Art Deco brasserie dating to 1936 with interiors largely inspired by the SS *Normandie*. We also dined at the brasserie La Coupole, a temple of Art Deco founded in 1927 in the heart of the Montparnasse district.

Sitting in Le Boeuf sur le Toit, one of the best-preserved Art Deco restaurants in Paris and the hub of the city's cabaret scene in the 1920s, we could almost hear Clément Doucet interpreting Cole Porter on the piano or Marianne Oswald singing Kurt Weill. On opening night in 1922, pianist Jean Wiéner played Gershwin songs, accompanied by Jean Cocteau and Darius Milhaud on the drums. They performed for an audience that included Pablo Picasso, Sergei Diaghilev, René Clair, and Maurice Chevalier. The famous Dadaist painting attributed to Francis Picabia, *L'Oeil cacodylate*, now in the collection of the Centre Pompidou, once hung on its walls. The restaurant moved several times during its long history before arriving at its current site in 1941.

Our last night in Paris began with an aperitif at the bar of the Art Deco Hotel Raspail, where we relived the past six days. Then it was on to dinner at the celebrated Jazz Age restaurant, Closerie des Lilas, another favorite of the intelligentsia in the early twentieth century. The Dada movement reportedly ended here in 1922 after a rift between André Breton and Tristan Tzara. When the Dadaists moved out, the literary crowd moved in and the restaurant became popular with such expatriates as Arthur Miller, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway, who labeled the Closerie "one of the best cafes in Paris." A bronze plaque engraved with Hemingway's name in the piano bar commemorates the author's patronage. It was a perfect setting for bidding *au revoir* to our American and Australian cohorts.

We are very grateful to Pascal and the members of the Paris Art Deco Society for their hospitality and for planning this adventure and giving us the opportunity for fruitful exchanges with partners who share our passion for the art, style, and architecture of the interwar years. The Paris group plans to repeat the tour in 2018 for the European Art Deco Societies and hopes to host the Eighteenth World Congress on Art Deco in 2025, the centennial of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes.



- (1) Glass roof of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Guillaume Tronchet, architect, 1930.
- (2) Detail of reliefs by sculptor Alfred Janniot on the façade of the Palais de la Porte Dorée.
- (3) Entrance, Boulogne-Billancourt City Hall, Tony Garnier, architect, 1934.
- (4) Salon de l'Afrique with furniture by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann and murals by Louis Bouquet.
- (5) The Festival Hall of the Palais de la Porte Dorée with frescoes by Pierre-Henri Ducos de La Halle.
- (6) Grand Rex auditorium.
- (7) Salon de l'Asie with furniture by Eugène Printz and frescoes by André-Hubert and Ivanna Lemaître.
- (8) Interior, Le Boeuf sur le Toit.





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