

Art Deco, a never-ending question!

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 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” 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 meantime far away. Exoticism is the art of illusion and embellishment. The exotic décor is stylized enough to leave room 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.