



ART DECO

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Intersecting the worlds of Painting, Architecture and Fashion, Art Deco is as much a state of mind as it is a multi-faceted form of aesthetic expression.

Launched at the Paris Exposition in 1925, this architectural style gained popularity throughout European cities for a twenty year period between the two world wars. In keeping with its eclectic approach to design, Art Deco incorporates

historical styles from a wide range of cultures, including ancient Greece, China and Egypt, while utilizing such modern design products as aluminum and stainless steel. Visually stunning geometric designs, often accentuated by decorative features of beautifully detailed inlaid wood and mosaics, capture the eye and the mind.

In the United States following World War I, the elegance and urban sophistication so closely associated with Art Deco was a welcome change from war time austerities and served as a rallying point for a populous anxious to forget about world conflict and the Great Depression. Reaching its zenith of popularity in America between 1920 and 1940, the novelist and social bad boy F. Scott Fitzgerald believed that the fascination with Art Deco was a relief valve for what he described as "All the nervous energy stored up and expended in the war."

Gotham, the popular nickname for New York coined by the nineteenth century essayist and historian Washington Irving, is the American city forever linked with and defined by Art Deco; this is especially apparent in the city's dramatic skyline. The Empire State Building, Rockefeller Center and the Chrysler Building are testaments to a twentieth century sense of film noir Art Deco romanticism that is at once bold, elegant and forever "moderne." While midtown Manhattan and the Grand Concourse of the Bronx are significant locations for Art Deco structures, other areas of the city also have their own treasured examples.

The borough of Queens possesses numerous expressions of this early twentieth century art form. Perhaps the best known and most admired is the Ridgewood Savings Bank building, located on Queens Boulevard in the heart of Forest Hills. Constructed in 1940, this structure stands in stark contrast to the nondescript high rise apartment complexes that surround it. A winner of the Queens Chamber of Commerce for Excellence in Architecture, the bank won Landmark Designation status in May of 2000. The bank was also awarded the First Prize Award from the Queens Chamber of Commerce for "Excellence of Design and Civic Value."

The interior of the bank offers visitors an opportunity to step back in time to a period before computers and the internet ruled. High vaulted ceiling, gracefully rising three stories and ornately decorated, evokes images of a basilica rather than a bank. The beige and light pink stone of the building's interior walls reflect and sustain a form of beauty from another era. Computer terminals on the desks of bank officers seem oddly out of place here, even

intrusive. Teller cages with old fashioned protective bars line one side of this building. Strong, sturdy client tables, made of brass and richly embellished with copper artwork and design convey a silent yet unmistakable message that speaks of strength, security and, above all, durability in changing times.

Throughout the borough of Queens, numerous examples of Art Deco design still exist. In addition to commercial and residential structures, houses of worship are also focal points for this beloved style. One of the best expressions of Art Deco in Queens can be found at Blessed Sacrament Church, located at 3443 93rd Street in the Jackson Heights section of Queens. Erected in 1930, this Roman Catholic edifice received a "Queensmark" designation from the Queens Historical Society. As far back as 1937, the city of New York honored this local landmark with an Award of Excellence citation.

At first glance, the term "Art Deco" may seem to embrace a wide variety of buildings erected in the early part of the twentieth century. Yet for architectural critic, author, lecturer and tour guide Tony Robins, there are differences. By way of example, the Bulova Building in Astoria, near LaGuardia Airport, is commonly described as Art Deco in its design style. "Not really," says Robins. "That building was put up in 1952, in what I call a 'Late Moderne' style."

An instructor at New York University and a guest speaker at museums and a variety of cultural institutions in Australia, Costa Rica, England and Italy, Robins can well be described as a "Decophile". A one time Director of Survey at New York City's Landmark Preservation Commission, Robins brings a sense of passion, commitment and authority to his love of Art Deco as it is expressed in the urban landscape. On a regular basis, he conducts ever popular walking tours throughout New York City for those who want to know the history and background of Deco art. While these tours are enjoyed by numerous area residents from varied backgrounds, Robins states that, "There are always a large number of people from Europe, especially England, who have a fascination with Art Deco architecture and art in New York City." A schedule of the times and places for the tours is available at his website: www.ArtDecoMetropolis.com

In a very real historical sense, the story of Art Deco along with its evolution and assimilation into the fabric of city life tells a story that goes beyond art, architecture and even history. Rather, it provides, in a graphic and visually dramatic form, a voice for the people who built these magnificent structures, those who lived among them and, perhaps most importantly, those who wish to preserve this priceless heritage for generations as yet unborn. Louis Sullivan, the famed modernist Chicago architect, once observed that "form follows function." This aphorism from another time and place can be applied with an equal measure of accuracy to Art Deco, an artistic expression and world perspective that in many cases leads the way in terms of history, design, architecture and the vast potential of human ingenuity and imagination.

AROUND TOWN