



## WHAT IS ART DECO?

*"ART DECO IS AN ATTITUDE"*

-- Steve Knight, President, ADSW

### OVERVIEW

Art Deco is an influential visual arts design style which first appeared in France after World War I, flourishing internationally in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It is an eclectic style that combines traditional craft motifs with Machine Age imagery and materials. The style is often characterized by rich colors, bold, often streamlined, geometric shapes, and stylized ornamentation. Art Deco emerged when rapid industrialization was transforming culture. Art Deco embraced technology, distinguishing it from the organic motifs favored by its predecessor, Art Nouveau. The term "Art Deco" was coined in the 1960s to describe the modern style exhibited at the 1925 Paris "*Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*". The peak of the Art Deco period is generally described as the years between the two World Wars.

### ORIGINS OF ART DECO

The avant-garde art movement inspired Art Deco graphic style following World War I. Key elements incorporated into Art Deco were the radical use of geometric designs and

extreme simplification of design. Styles such as women's bodies presented in a slightly elongated, tubular form caught on quickly in French and American fashion magazines. Another significant influence was the industrial revolution of the 19th century which led to mass production of consumer goods. The increased efficiencies introduced through machine production lowered prices, but paid little attention to aesthetics. The artistic community response was a machine-age consciousness that art should be applied to the design of everyday objects. Pre-1925 one-of-a-kind hand-crafted items would quickly be supplanted by a style characterized by mass production of machine-made items created by a new class of artists — industrial designers.

## ART DECO IN AMERICA

America did not participate in the Paris Exposition of 1925. Then Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, declined the invitation because, he said, the United States had no modern art. The impact of the Paris Exposition in America was initially muted. High-end department stores like Bloomingdales and Macy's held expositions of French Art Deco furniture and emerging industrial designers like Paul Frankl, Norman Bel Geddes, and Walter Von Nessen, but these exhibits targeted the wealthy.

Most Americans were introduced to Art Deco at the movies. This new style began to emerge with Joseph Urban's use of modern furnishings in *Enchantment* (1921), followed by numerous other films such as *The Young Diana* (1922), *Camille* (1921), *Salome* (1922), and *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), which featured art moderne sets designed by Cedric Gibbons. Screen magazines often featured the Art Deco lifestyles of movie stars, and the movie palace itself was also transformed into an Art Deco showplace.

However, it was the 1933-34 Chicago "World of Tomorrow" World's Fair that ushered the Art Deco style into the homes of everyday Americans. Visitors traveled to Chicago aboard streamlined buses and trains designed by industrial designers such as Raymond Loewy and Henry Dreyfuss. At the Fair, they were exposed to Art Deco home furnishings in a row of model homes furnished by such designers as Wolfgang Hoffman and Gilbert Rohde. They saw the latest in streamlined automobile designs, including Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion. Affordable Art Deco giftware was introduced by such metalware companies as Chase, Revere, Kensington, and Manning Bowman. Glass and pottery manufacturers

brought out new lines, and clock and radio manufacturers created new Art Deco-styled cabinets and cases. Even boilers and caskets took on a streamlined appearance.

The Art Deco “attitude” influenced the full spectrum of American life in the 1930s. The ADSW mission is to enhance understanding of this period’s unique cultural contributions to film, art, fashion, dance, and music, and to preserve this era’s significant architectural, decorative, and industrial achievements.