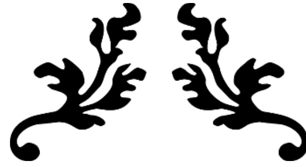
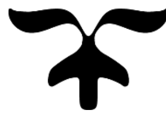


ART DECO: AN INTERWAR MELTING POT FOR A WORLD IN THE SOUP

Final Paper



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Abstract

The goal of the following is to address the international influences of the design style, Art Deco. Although it originates at the 1925 Parisian Design Fair, through traditional and online research, one finds that Art Deco draws inspiration from Africa, the Americas and Europe. Even if these sources appear to be distinct from the early twentieth-century style, one finds that characteristic features of these diverse cultures influenced the three subsets of Art Deco: Zigzag, Classical and Streamline Moderne. Even though Art Deco is an "extinct" architectural style, extant Art Deco buildings still resonant with Egyptian, American and European elements.

List of Key Words

Interwar period; 1925 Parisian Design Fair; American Vertical, Zigzag Moderne, Classical Moderne, Streamline Moderne; Egyptian Revival, Mayan Revival; Carlton Cinema, Pythian Temple, 450 Sutter Street, Aztec Hotel, American Radiator Building, Chrysler Building, Coca-Cola Building; George Coles, Thomas W. Land, James Rupert Miller, Timothy L. Pflueger, Robert Stacy-Judd, Andrew Fouilhoux, William Van Alen, Robert V. Derrah

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"Standard" Text

In the 1968 book *Art Deco*, the British historian Bevis Hillier coined the term "Art Deco" (Gebhard). The word is an abbreviation of *L'Exposition internationale des arts decoratifs et*

industriels modernes: the Parisian Design Fair of 1925 (Vlack). Although the style thrived from 1910 to 1935, the 1925 world fair served as the start of the zenith of the style (McClinton). An interesting remark by a critic pointed out that "All the works of art collected here show a family of resemblance which cannot fail to be noticed by even the least prepared [visitor]" (Wood). Even though the Parisian exposition displayed work from around the globe, there was an undeniable diversity in the exhibition: the traditional craft of the Austrian production community *Wiener Werkstatte*, the exotic pavilion of the Dutch, and the folk-based art of the Poles. These works did share at least one important facet: a return to tradition in the midst of celebrating the modern world. By the early 1920s, American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald had noticed how Art Deco had been shaped by "all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War" (Wood). World War I had triggered the re-evaluation of national traditions and a "return to order" (Wood). The sense of necessity to rebuild Europe after the Great War contributed to the development of a new form of architecture based on the technological advancements of the time: reinforced concrete, high-rise elevators, steel cage construction, and the cantilever (to name just a few!). Even in the United States, the democratic ideal of order seen in grid-based city plans became a precursor to high-rise steel skeletons (Vlack).

The revolutionary architecture of the 1920s and the 1930s changed the skeleton *and* skin of buildings to the extent that, although one could hardly identify this new classification of structures, the architectural style was identifiable as that of Art Deco. In 1928, an observer described the style as characterized by "Straight lines; it is angular, geometric and tends to follow cubic proportions. . . . The lines are unvaryingly plain and severe, with touches of decoration in the way of color, wrought iron and glass work, for relief" (Gebhard). It is because of this general tendency to exhibit exterior walls with little depth that the subset of Art Deco, American Vertical,

came into existence. It emphasizes verticality by incorporating piers and pilasters that represent the idea of a classical portico or the upward-soaring quality of the Gothic style. Ornamentation was integral to the surface and featured figures ranging from classical mythology to the "primitive" culture of Native Americans. The reemergence of classical-inspired proportions and symmetrical plans and elevations demonstrated one way in which Art Deco modernized architectural traditions (Gebhard). Although one could pinpoint the origin of Art Deco to 1925 in Paris, France, one should take a step back away from the map and acknowledge the influence of the historical *world* in shaping this style.

There were two "Egyptian Revivals" in American history. The first occurred in the 1820s when the French decipherer Jean-Francois Champollion translated the hieroglyphic band on the Rosetta Stone. The Egyptian connotations of eternity inspired a style for severe institutions such as courthouses and funerary sculpture (Mason). The catalyst for the second Egyptian Revival was the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in the Valley of Kings, Egypt by the English archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922. It was this second instance that inspired *le style modern* (Art Deco), in which Egyptian elements – lotus flowers, scarabs, hieroglyphics, pylons, and pyramids ("Art Deco: Global Inspiration") - were used in tandem with other exotic motifs on civic and public structures (Bayer). The English architect George Coles designed the Carlton Cinema (Figure 1) in 1930 London based on the Karnak Temple Complex in Egypt. The façade

Fig.1: Carlton Cinema (1930)

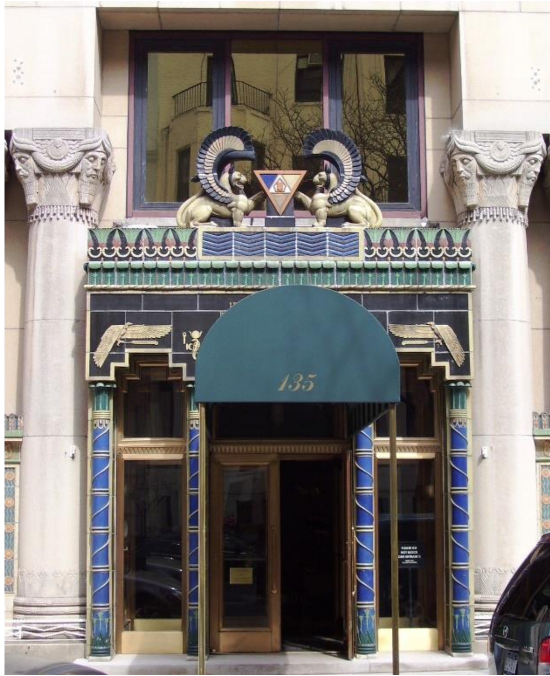

Fig. 2: Pythian Temple (1927)

is in the form of an Egyptian pylon temple and its brightly-colored ceramic tiles are decorated with lotus flowers and buds (Talling). If one goes across the pond, the Pythian Temple (Figure 2) in New York City provides another example of the Egyptian Revival inspired Art Deco style. Designed by the well-known Scottish theater and cinema architect Thomas W. Land, the Pythian Temple comprises of "movie-set Egyptian forms, seated Pharaonic figures, polychrome columns and a setback arrangement . . . Inside, there were thirteen lodge rooms and an auditorium decorated in a striking Egyptian manner" (Gray). In a *The New York Times* article, the American journalist and architectural historian Christopher Gray described how "The Pythian Temple's ground-floor colonnade, with Assyrian-type heads, is centered on a brilliantly glazed blue terra-cotta entry pavilion. The windowless middle section steps back at about one hundred feet up, with four-seated Pharaonic figures similar to those of Ramses II at Abu Simbel. Two more setbacks rise to a highly colored Egyptian-style colonnade, and to giant urns carried by teams of yellow, red and green oxen. . . Published photographs of the lobby show a double-height space in what appears to be polished black marble, with Egyptian décor, like a winged orb, or perhaps Isis, over the doorway" (Gray).

Although Art Deco drew inspiration for its bold and abstract zigzag shapes from African culture, the so-called "Mayan Revival" spurred on the development of the design trend of Zigzag Moderne. Art Deco is subdivided into three design trends: Zigzag Moderne, Classical Moderne,

and Streamline Moderne. The first tendency emphasized angular patterns and stylized geometry. The Mayan Revival – which drew on motifs of Meso-American (Casey) and Native American cultures – demonstrated a resurgence in patterns of circles, snakes and curlicues as well as stepped pyramids, deities in elaborate headdresses, and stylized sunrays. Especially in Canada and the American South and West, the symbols of the Hopi bird, the Navajo stepped cloud, totem-pole pilasters and Indian beadwork motifs adorned public buildings (Bayer). 450 Sutter Street (Figure 3) – built in 1929 by Canadian architect James Rupert Miller and San Franciscan architect Timothy L. Pflueger – was the second tallest building in San Francisco and supposedly the largest medical office building in the world at that time. But what made this edifice truly unique was the Mayan Revival style patterns on the twenty-six floor steel curtain-wall building. A review in *The San Francisco Chronicle* in 1929 noted how "Speculation has been rife as to the meaning of these graceful symbols, but their meaning is negligible – they justify themselves by being graceful and attractive. They give the front of the building just enough feeling of movement to emphasize the general vitality of a severe but thoroughly virile design. They tell the passerby any story he chooses to read into them – and that is poetry" (Casey). Also

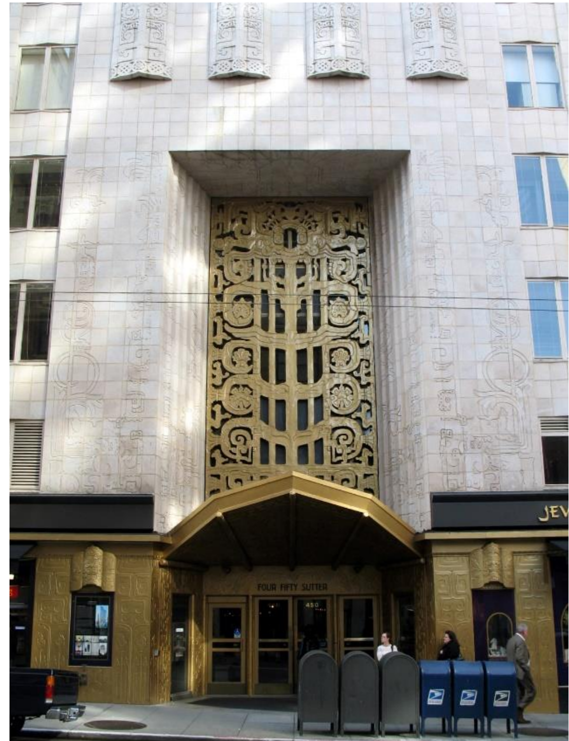

Fig. 3: 450 Sutter Street (1929)

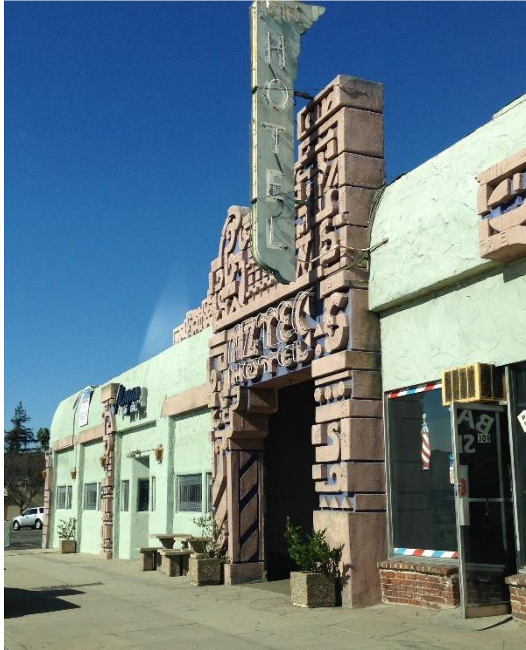

Fig. 4: Aztec Hotel (1924-1925)

in California, the Aztec Hotel (Figure 4) by the English architect Robert Stacy-Judd incorporated abstract patterns inspired by Mayan script with clear Art Deco influences. Built in 1924 and 1925, an observer commented on the reinforced concrete used to create the exterior designs: "The bizarre Aztec forms may create the atmosphere desired, and will serve the legitimate publicity interests of the establishment, but it would be deplorable if an 'Aztec Movement' set in and the style copyists were diverted from noble examples to the forms of a semi-barbaric people" ("Mayan Revival Architecture").

If one finds the Zigzag Moderne aspect of Art Deco to be that of "the forms of a semi-barbaric people", then one can look towards the traditional European influences of Classical Moderne. After World War I, designers sought themes and lyrical imagery of the ancient worlds of Greece and Rome. In fact, classical nude relief decorations and stylized forms of archaic sculptural traditions became central to the practice of Art Deco designers ("Art Deco: Global Inspiration"). Even later European inspirations of medieval and Byzantine architecture are prevalent in Non-European nations. The Bryant Park Hotel (originally the American Radiator Building) (Figure 5) is the product of American architect Raymond Hood and

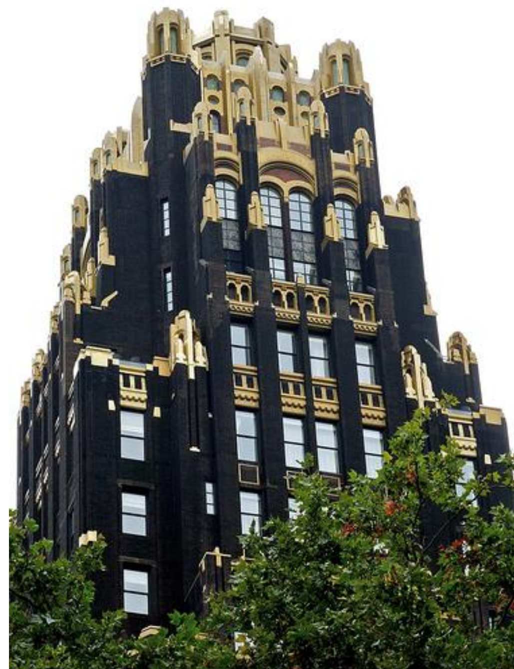
Fig. 5: American Radiator Building (1924)

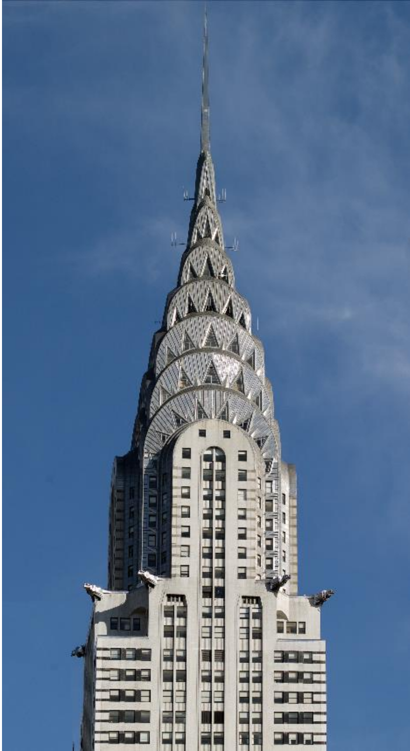

Fig. 6: Chrysler Building (1928-1930)

French architect Andrew Fouilhoux in 1924. Its architectural style is described as "Gothic Art Deco". Its frontage has black brick to symbolize coal and give the essence of solidity while other parts of the façade are covered in gold brick to symbolize fire. The strong use of color continues on the interior with its entry decorated in marble and black mirrors ("American Radiator Building"). On the other side of the country there is the Chrysler Building (Figure 6), clad in stainless-steel with triangular vaulted windows and seven radiating terraced arches ("The Art Deco Splendour"). Built over a two year period (1928-1930) by the New York architect William Van Alen, the windows of the Chrysler Building comprise a radiating sunburst pattern, which transition into the seven narrow setbacks of its renowned terraced crown façade ("Chrysler Building"), which was designed as a cruciform groin vault ("The Chrysler Building").

American music producer Elliot Willensky and American architectural historian Norval White wrote in *AIA Guide to New York* that "The [Chrysler Building's] decorative treatment of the masonry walls below changes with every set-back and includes story-high basket-weave designs, radiator-cap gargoyles, and a band of abstract automobiles" ("The Art Deco Splendour"). One notes the eagles on the corners of the sixty-first floor (Figure 6) and the replicas of the 1929 Chrysler radiator caps as corner ornamentations ("1926 Chrysler Radiator Cap"). As previously discussed, there are three subsets of Art Deco: Zigzag Moderne, Classical Moderne, and Streamline Moderne. Streamline Moderne characterized the recurring theme in the 1920s and 1930s of modifying old forms to express an accelerated tempo of the new age. Austrian architect

Adolf Loos said that, “The black bottom and the Charleston typify the new rhythm of modern life. An architect of today to be successful must be able to translate that rhythm into something of beauty in brick and stone” (Gebhard). Evident in the

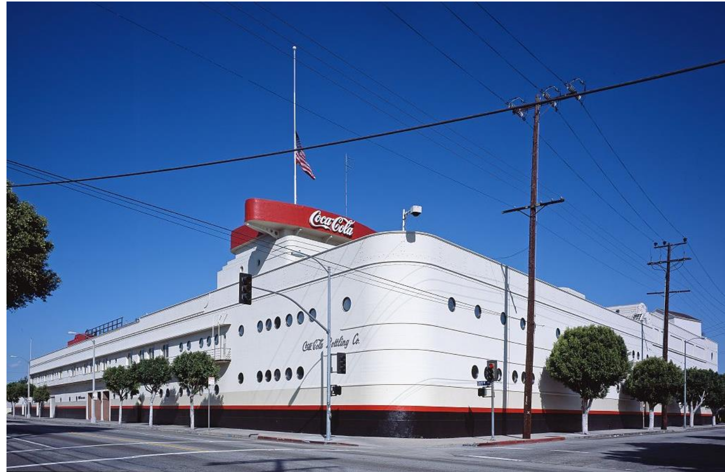

Fig. 7: Coca-Cola Building (1939)

Chrysler building, the rise of commerce, technology and speed was physically manifested with stepped and radiating styles (Mason) and nautical motifs. For example, the Coca-Cola Building (Figure 7) in Los Angeles (designed by American architect Robert V. Derrah in 1939) has the appearance of a ship with portholes, catwalk and bridge (“Coca-Cola Building”). A major reason why Art Deco became so successful is because of its malleability: it embraced modernism while escaping the restricting values of traditional styles (Wood). In fact, it can be characterized into two completely opposing different types: graceful and curvilinear or functional and machine-inspired (McClinton). The all-embracing nature of Art Deco could be due to its origin not at L’Exposition internationale des arts decoratifs et industriels modernes but in Africa, the Americas, and Europe collectively. By borrowing stylistic aspects of the traditional Egyptian, Mayan and European cultures, Art Deco architects could create a new design style that was both traditional and modern, national and international, and one that showed that – in the words of American lyricist Stephen Sondheim - “Art . . . is an attempt to bring order out of chaos”.

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