Reconsidering Art Deco

by Alan Hess

During the decades of the 1940s through the 1960s, no aspect of architecture was held more in disdain than that of the Art Deco of the '20s and '30s. Art Deco, the popularized modern of these decades, was either ignored by our major architects and writers, or it was dismissed as an unfortunate, obviously misguided effort; the sooner it was forgotten the better. — David Gebhard, 1980

David Gebhard knew what he was talking about. As one of the few scholars to take Art Deco seriously, Gebhard saw that most critics separated Art Deco architecture (too popular, commercial, and ornamental) from "high art" Modern architecture ("approved" by academic critics). Art Deco was more like decoration than architecture, they claimed. High art architecture such as the International Style was elegant, austere, and certified as important by any number of learned manifestoes.

Yet as Gebhard pointed, Art Deco's characteristics have proven over time to be its strengths, not weaknesses. Art Deco was not a lesser Modernism; it was another manifestation of the wide-ranging global experimentation to discover an architecture that would reflect the astonishing changes in technology and culture ushered in with the twentieth century.

The term "Art Deco" itself is actually a latecomer, introduced decades after its heyday; in its time it might have been called "moderne," "modernistic," "modern," or (more exotically) "Egyptoid." As we use it today, Art Deco encompasses a variety of styles, each growing out of the search by architects and designers for an architecture that reflected a new era in human history, supercharged by airplanes, automobiles, and scientific advances. There was no single answer to how to express this dynamic, ever-changing world, and Art Deco explored many ideas and directions.

Art Deco could be a newly invented ornamental style based on geometry or nature, today dubbed Zigzag Moderne. It could mirror modern machines and speeding vehicles, today labeled Streamline Moderne. Inspired by amazing archeological discoveries it could reach back to reinterpret historic styles through sleek simplification and abstraction, as in Art Deco's Hollywood Regency and WPA Moderne variations. Malleable and adaptable, Art Deco responded quickly to changing social conditions, leading to the distinctive Late Moderne style.

All of these phases can be seen in Los Angeles, which, as arguably the most modern city in the world, played a unique role in Art Deco's evolution. In the 1920s and 1930s, its population exploded as people surged to work in its nascent industries: oil, Hollywood, media, aeronautics, automobiles—industries that would reshape the coming century. Los Angeles was particularly open to new possibilities, new uses, and new materials, such as glassy Vitrolite and glowing neon.

This environment produced two of Art Deco's definitive landmarks: Bullock's Wilshire by Parkinson & Parkinson (1929) and the Pan-Pacific Auditorium by Wurdeman & Becket (1935). Each defined the rapidly changing appearance of a rapidly advancing epoch. Bullock's Wilshire captured the jazzy, syncopated geometries of Art Deco's early Zigzag Moderne phase. A few years later, Art Deco evolved the sleek curves and smooth horizontal lines of its Streamline Moderne phase seen at Pan-Pacific Auditorium.

Bullock's Wilshire's soaring, tapering tower linking the bustling city streets to the blue sky above was a direct response to Los Angeles: the city in the 1920s was reshaping itself for the automobile. As the first major department store established outside downtown, Bullock's Wilshire was designed to attract modern car-mobile customers along the new Wilshire Boulevard that would stretch all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Its architecture's angular, rhythmic sculpture, ornament, lettering, and signage owes little to previous historical periods. It grew from the new era of machines, speed, and science improving the lives of citizen-motorists.

When a design competition selected an architect for another prominent project, the Pan-Pacific Auditorium, across town a few years later, Wurdeman & Becket's design captured the kinetic energy of that city in motion. Its centerpiece displayed four flagpoles rising from four sculpted streamline towers. They somehow evoked a phalanx of modern ocean liners plowing through the ocean waves. Instead of the rich geometric detail of Zigzag Moderne ornament, this building's curved horizontal and vertical planes suggestively put the building in motion.

The Pan-Pacific Auditorium's lines also echoed the auto show displays held there annually. This cross-cultural connection between Art Deco and autos was already clear to observers, especially in Los Angeles: "The very extraordinary beauty of your Chrysler or Nash or Ford is due to the honest decorativeness out of materials, efficient disposal of parts, massing, stream lines, with a dedicated warmth through color and the flash of metals," wrote historian Sheldon Cheney.

Bullock's may have been the quintessential department store of Los Angeles's upper class, but along its streets, Art Deco would be for everyone. It was becoming the visual signature of the city. Only three blocks away from the Bullock's Wilshire tower, one of many Streamline Moderne Simon's drive-ins by architect Wayne McAllister boasted its own neon-lined tower and circular canopy. Its form followed its automobile function, making it one of the most modern buildings anywhere in the world.

Los Angeles was creating its own unique version of Art Deco. Where the office towers of Chicago or New York's dense traditional cities created vertical Art Deco towers, Los Angeles perfected a horizontal Art Deco. The style was conceptually limber and much more than a decorative fad.

Yet in Europe and New York, high art critics were already promoting the stripped-down International Style as the correct look of the modern technological age. Tellingly, one of the International Style's best examples in Los Angeles, the Lovell Health House by Richard Neutra, was completed the same year as Bullock's Wilshire. Los Angeles, the city of experiment, welcomed multiple ways to be modern.

The Roots of Art Deco

The term "Art Deco" derives from the "Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes" in Paris in 1925. It was not invented there, though.

Historians may pigeonhole Art Deco in the Roaring Twenties and the Depression Thirties, but it was in fact part of an ongoing international search for a new architecture that started before and extended beyond those decades. The 1925 Paris exposition successfully focused the international spotlight on a style that was already established in Amsterdam, Paris, Shanghai, New York, Detroit, Miami, Tulsa, and Los Angeles.

Los Angeles architect Lloyd Wright, for example, had engaged in this exploration since moving to California in 1911; his ideas were rooted in those his father, Frank Lloyd Wright, and his father's mentor, Louis Sullivan, had been building for more than thirty years: a fresh architecture based on the modern age and its technology pointing to the future. It could draw on a wide range of unconventional sources, including nature, geometry, and history. Ornament was integral to their concept of architecture.

Critic Lewis Mumford recognized these roots in 1929: "The attempt to found a modern system of ornament was undertaken a generation ago by Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright…[with] a powerful influence upon subsequent designers, not merely in the skyscraper itself, but in every other department of architecture."

At the Taggart House in Los Angeles (1922) and Palm Springs's Oasis Hotel (1925), Lloyd Wright created original ornament that foresaw the Paris Exposition itself—as had his father in the textile block houses he built in Los Angeles at the same time. Continuing in the Samuel-Novarro House (1928), Lloyd Wright's

home and studio (1927), the Sowden House (1927), and the Yucca Vine Market (1928), Lloyd Wright showed the sophistication of the ideas that would also underlie Art Deco.

Inspiration and Sources

Art Deco's use of ornament on Los Angeles streets made it a mass medium broadcasting the latest trends in culture to the public. The design of airplanes, cars, ocean liners, locomotives, machinery, as well as the world's exotica were all fair game. Art Deco's early Zigzag Moderne phase showcased a lush, angular ornament of crystals, cogs, chevrons, fins, tetrahedrons, stylized flora, gazelles, borzois, and unfurling ferns.

Yet as transportation technology advanced in the 1930s, Art Deco reflected that progress. Airplane design traded gangling biplanes for the DC-3's sleek aerodynamic monocoque. The boxy Model T gave way to the sleek Chrysler Airflow. Art Deco rapidly responded with its Streamline Moderne phase, emphasizing flowing horizontal planes resolving into dynamic asymmetrical curves. The Depression's austerity called for a sober style of efficiency as a hopeful guide to a better future. Architects reflected these changes to communicate the modern era to the public with murals, bas-reliefs, and sculpture integrated into the architecture.

Art Deco ornament proved to be broadly democratic and popular across classes. The crystalline Oviatt Building (1928) in downtown Los Angeles may have housed the swank haberdasher where Clark Gable and Gary Cooper shopped, but Newberry's five-and-dime on Hollywood Boulevard served the general public just as stylishly.

Modern technology inspired architect Robert Derrah to translate the flowing forms of transatlantic steamships into the Coca-Cola Bottling Factory (1939) and Crossroads of the World (1936). Airport control towers (an entirely twentieth-century invention unknown to previous history) as at Glendale's Grand Central Air Terminal (1930) drew on airplane motifs to proclaim its vision of a new age.

These geometric or mechanistic inspirations for Art Deco's Zigzag and Streamline Moderne phases were not the only aesthetic sources that architects tapped. Intriguing Indigenous cultures and the latest archaeological discoveries also inspired Art Deco; the glittering discoveries in King Tut's tomb in 1922 suited Grauman's Egyptian Theater (Meyer & Holler), opening the same year. Contemporary digs at Mayan temples in the Yucatan lead to Robert Stacy-Judd's Aztec Hotel (1924).

While Art Deco's embrace of vivid ornament often misled critics into seeing it as more fashion than architecture, these new transgressive images actually liberated architects from Classical Western architectural precedents in the same way as did Cubism and Surrealism in Modern art.

Even the establishment's Classical architecture provided a source for Art Deco when passed through the lens of modernist simplification. In the 1930s, Art Deco broadened into the WPA Moderne; the name derives from the large number of federal government commissions for post offices or governmental buildings built during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). With Washington DC's Roman Republic formality (decreed by architect Thomas Jefferson) as an initial template, WPA Moderne (also called Stripped Classicism) artfully abstracted and modernized fluted columns, Ionic capitals, and formal symmetry in buildings for Griffith Park Observatory (1933) by John Austin and the Hollywood Post Office (1937) by Claud Beelman.

The Hollywood Regency style offered yet another variation of Art Deco's appropriation of Classical imagery—specifically the attenuated eighteenth-century Regency designs of British architect Robert Adam. Art Deco architects refined, elongated, flattened, and modernized Adam's Neoclassical ornament for houses, Hollywood's Max Factor building (S. Charles Lee, 1928), upscale department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue, and public places of recreation; at Santa Anita Racetrack (1934), Gordon Kaufmann festively and fancifully included Hollywood Regency tented pavilions and exotic palm trees.

California's own Hispanic history also came under the modernizing influence of Art Deco design. Parkinson & Parkinson's Union Station (1939) abstracted the bell tower, broad plastered walls, and arcades of California's historic Franciscan mission buildings for the grand scale of a public monument. Stylized Moderne light standards blended comfortably with Spanish ironwork. Likewise, the Regency Village Theatre (originally Fox Westwood Theater, Percy Parke Lewis, 1931) evokes a Spanish Renaissance church's bell tower with corbels, columns, and cartouches, but stretched and modernized so it would be a visible landmark to the cars driving on Wilshire Boulevard three blocks away.

City Planning

The Fox Westwood tower reveals yet another dimension of Art Deco as architecture: its impact on urban design and planning.

Art Deco concepts offered a fresh strategy for composing tall buildings. Downtown office buildings and department stores usually followed the Beaux Arts model, conceiving them as boxy Florentine palazzi. Art Deco proffered an alternative: a prominent tapering central tower rising above lower flanking wings. Gordon Kaufmann's Los Angeles Times Building (1935), Bertram Goodhue's Central Library (1926), George Simmons's Sears Warehouse (1927), and Claud Beelman's Elks Lodge (1925) offered this model, along with prominent Art Deco sculpture and bas-reliefs.
This new architectural sensibility also shaped an entire urban district in Los Angeles. The Miracle Mile is an innovative stretch of Wilshire Boulevard roughly between Fairfax and Western Avenues, conceived by developer A. W. Ross beginning in the late 1920s at the height of Art Deco's popularity. His vision for a linear downtown mixing office towers, theaters, residences, and shops reflected the modern automobile era in contrast to the traditional pedestrian-oriented downtown.

The twelve-story Pellissier Tower (Morgan, Walls, & Clements, 1931), for example, is the linchpin for the streets and neighborhoods around two major thoroughfares, Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue. Clad in unmistakable turquoise terra-cotta and set on a striking diagonal, the Pellissier building demands attention from near and far. Its asymmetrical tower, rising and stepping in as it reaches into the sky, embodies the Art Deco aesthetic; it is something new in the world, experienced as a modern landmark in four-dimensional space by motorists in motion around its base.

Along with four other Art Deco office towers punctuating the Miracle Mile visually and functionally, the Pellissier Tower with its Wiltern Theater is a vision of a modern city. The E. Clem Wilson Building (Meyer & Holler, 1929), the Wilshire Tower (Gilbert Stanley Underwood, 1929), the Dominguez-Wilshire Building (Morgan, Walls, & Clements, 1930), the Wilshire Professional Building (Arthur E. Harvey, 1929), and the Pellissier bring a rhythmic order and a suite of powerful urban landmarks to the new district.

Decline and Rebirth

As David Gebhard noted, however, the inclusive and innovative designs which we now call Art Deco were dismissed
by a large number of high art critics focused on the minimalist International Style from Europe. New York's Museum of Modern Art mounted its "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" in 1932 with strategic curation by the influential historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock and critic Philip Johnson. It attempted to codify what qualified as Modern architecture, rejecting any ornamented, popular, or commercial Art Deco examples. It gave its name to the International Style. The influence of this exhibit caused Art Deco to be largely written out of serious architectural history.

Yet at least one observer did note the many alternatives to the International Style throughout Europe and North America. Sheldon Cheney collected these examples in his book *New World Architecture* in 1930. Like Mumford, he traced their roots to Frank Lloyd Wright; he included Art Deco examples from the 1925 Paris Exposition, Willem Dudok in the Netherlands, streamlined examples by Erich Mendelsohn in

Germany, and Lloyd Wright, R. M. Schindler, and Frank Lloyd Wright in Los Angeles. Cheney's book is a window into the unheralded variety of possibilities of Modern architecture at the time.

Yet even without official blessing, Art Deco continued to thrive, giving rise to yet another variation, the Late Moderne. Though cut short by World War II, Late Moderne incorporated elements of the International Style, but without its doctrinaire minimalism. Examples such as Bullock's Pasadena (Wurdeman & Becket, 1947) continued Streamline Moderne's flowing, kinetic shapes, but rendered more free form with kidney-shaped canopies and curving corners. Straying from International Style austerity, Late Moderne introduced its own ornamental motifs, including egg-crate screens and bold bezel frames for windows. At Wayne McAllister's Bob's Big Boy in Burbank (1949), strong irregularly shaped volumes (paralleling the modern art of Alexander Calder and Joan Miró) complemented a strong vertical rectangular signboard, decorated with neon.

Claud Beelman's Mutual-Don Lee Television Studio (1948) used bold columns pierced with circular openings as a sculpted, structural expression. While its large planar wings and flat roofs echoed the International Style, its use of decorative screens flanking its entry and jewel box sidewalk display cases place it in the Late Moderne category.

The New York and San Francisco World's Fairs of 1939 boosted Late Moderne's popularity, and it continued for a while after World War II when new domestic building began after years of economic depression and war. It did not become the favored face of post-war Modernism in Los Angeles, however; the Case Study Program of *Arts & Architecture* magazine riveted the attention of most critics after the war. Those powerful, minimalist forms expressing the elegance of their structural skeletons paralleled the International Style's rectilinear forms, then rising in influence and backed by a brigade of high art critiques promoting the International Style's inevitability as the true look of the future.

In spite of Sheldon Cheney's convincing catalog demonstrating the diversity of Modern ideas, the prevailing academic opinion of Art Deco as a second class Modernism held on into the 1960s. Even the respected urban observer Kevin Lynch pointedly described Los Angeles's Richfield Tower (Morgan, Walls & Clements, 1929) as the "ugly, black and gold Richfield Building"—though today it is acknowledged as one of the city's greatest Art Deco designs.

Nevertheless, by the 1960s Art Deco was ripe for revival. Flea markets, thrift shops, and used furniture stores discovered a market for Art Deco jewelry, toasters, cocktail shakers, cigarette cases, vanities, and Erté posters. Sheldon Cheney had anticipated this broad, culture-wide influence thirty years before: "Some of the most exciting industrial craftsmanship and decorative art of today is to be found in automobile fittings, electric refrigerators, cash registers, and the like."

A second Paris exhibit, "Les Années '25: Art déco. Bauhaus. Stijl. Esprit nouveau" at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, reassessed Art Deco in 1966, followed soon by author and *Los Angeles Times* journalist Bevis Hillier's book *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*, which helped to popularize the term Art Deco. David Gebhard followed with his 1975 book *L.A. in the Thirties* with *Tulsa Art Deco: An Architectural Era 1925 to 1942* in 1980. Martin Greif's 1975 book *Depression Modern: The Thirties Style in America* and Laura Cerwinske's 1981 *Tropical Deco: The Architecture and Design of Old Miami Beach* demonstrated the renewed interest in Art Deco across the country.

Preservation

A sad cycle afflicts our architectural judgment: a style is well-received when introduced in one decade, but inevitably becomes old-fashioned in the next. If it is lucky it is later rediscovered and revered—if enough examples remain to be appreciated.

Art Deco has thankfully reached the third stage for a number of its remaining examples. Los Angeles has lost major monuments: the magnificent Richfield Tower with its oil-black terra-cotta cladding bedecked

with gold terra-cotta ornament was demolished in 1969, the neglected Pan-Pacific Auditorium burned in 1989.

Recently, however, a few smaller Art Deco monuments have found new uses: a Zigzag Moderne gas station is now a Starbucks. But the entire set of Streamline Moderne drive-in restaurants, once found on nearly every major corner, has been wiped out in Southern California.

Bullock's Wilshire is no longer a department store, but its building survives and was enthusiastically restored as a law school in 1994. The Eastern Columbia building, built as offices, is now residential. Even the vanished Pan-Pacific Auditorium remains indelible in popular memory, and was rebuilt at Disney theme parks on the East and West Coasts.

Histories of Modern architecture honor many of Los Angeles's innovative architects, including Richard Neutra, R. M. Schindler, Charles and Ray Eames, Craig Ellwood, Pierre Koenig, and Frank Gehry. Los Angeles's Art Deco architects, however, are rarely mentioned. They should be. They were also creative contributors to the broad search for a dynamic new era of technology, transportation, and society.

Though traditionally trained, notable Art Deco architects Stiles O. Clements, Claud Beelman, Paul R. Williams, Gordon Kaufmann, and Parkinson & Parkinson brought original perspectives to the use of modern materials and engineering. Though primarily commercial architects, S. Charles Lee, Wayne McAllister, and Wurdeman & Becket brought their intimate understanding of modern life in modern Los Angeles to their buildings. Los Angeles itself encouraged the freedom to experiment, and perfected new building types to suit its citizens' modern lifestyles: drive-in movies, drive-in restaurants, suburban department stores, suburban office towers, airports. Art Deco was their defining style.

Unlike the International Style coming out of Europe, Art Deco did not reject history, but saw itself continuing the long tradition of architecture, where ornament had always been an essential part of buildings. As a mass medium, Art Deco architecture embraced the popular culture and symbols of its times (and ours) to unify a growing and diverse city. Conceptually rich, Art Deco evolved from Zigzag to Streamline to WPA Moderne to Late Moderne; its aesthetic DNA enabled it to generate new forms and create new building types as society and technology evolved.

With the hundredth anniversary of the 1925 Paris Exposition, the role of Los Angeles and other cities in inventing Art Deco should be spotlighted. For more than forty years Robert Landau has documented Art Deco LA. His photographs guide us through the entire urban fabric, from major civic landmarks to everyday gas stations and camera stores. With Landau's photographic proof, Art Deco can be clearly seen as a significant chapter in the long history of Modern architecture.

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