ART DECO NOW AND THEN:
THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA
IN ITS POPULARIZATION

By Barbara Billauer Bailey

A bit of history:
Expos - their effect on culture, the arts and future technology cannot be underestimated. Indeed most people attribute the popularization of the Art Deco aesthetic to the 1925 Paris Exposition. The *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* (International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts), held in Paris, France from April to October 1925, brought together a host of international avant garde creators employing a new and modern design aesthetic for the first time. (The term Art Deco was derived by shortening the words *Arts Décoratifs.*) 4,000 guests attended the inauguration on April 28, and thousands of visitors came on each of the following days to watch the inauguration of a new approach to design. And whether expressed as Bauhaus Modern or French Deco, these forms translated into new and modern, exemplified by sleekness of line and finesse of form, reducing, if not eliminating, the profusion of sinuous emollients of the earlier Art Nouveau movement.

While the rudiments of the Art Deco style was conceived more than a decade earlier, the birthday of the new form was celebrated at this grand expo. As Waldemar George wrote: “All that clearly distinguished the older ways of life was rigorously excluded from the exposition of 1925.” The new style that would be showcased would be aggressively modern, taking its lead from the cutting edges of other arts in expressing the spirit of the new age.

The new form was characterized by a “streamlined classicism showcasing facettred, crystalline structures,” Its embellishments, if you can use the term in the Art Deco context, consisted of decorative references to sleek machinery, stylized fountains, gazelles, lightning flashes, inspiration from ancient cultures that relied heavily on geometric lines, such as “Aztec,” or other reminiscences of ancient influences, such as Egyptian revival, by interpreting them by incorporating with a repetitive linear form or geometric motifs. The demise of art nouveau, with its sinuous grace of lines, that of soft folds of drapes or reminiscent of languid movements of exotic dancers, was apparent. Instead, it was to be replaced by the Cubism of Braque, Gris and Pi-
casso, heralding a taste for abrupt angularity, an abruptness smoothed into a sleekness we now call “streamlined.” The beginnings of futurism also appeared under the Art Deco rubric; Le Corbusier’s grand housing plan replete with 200 foot skyscrapers, along with Austria’s City in Space by Frederick Kiesler was introduced.

Kiesler also designed the stage design for W.U.R. (R.U.R.). It was the first attempt to design electro-mechanical scenery, which becomes alive, an active part in the play, using: movement of lines, sharp contrasts of colours, transformation of surfaces towards relief and curved human forms (actors), the interplay of moving lights of various colors on the scenery, in rhythm according to speech intonation and the movement of the actors.

Fourteen years later, in 1939, the World’s Fair forever cemented the “novel” Art Deco style into the iconic stratosphere.

Administrative Offices 1939 World’s Fair in Queens, New York, now used as an airline terminal. (Below)

But were these two seminal events enough to catapult the nascent design form into continuing prominence? And what about the pivotal years between the two events? What served to keep the aesthetic alive, and foster its acceptance during the ensuing years of global unrest, world turmoil, economic havoc, the stock-market collapse and the great depression -- events which surely would have interrupted, if not destroyed any other design form – those depending on expensive materials and labor-intensive
details? Indeed, these global developments actually were a boon to production of art-deco designs, which relied heavily on industrial materials and sheared the distracting curly-q with its added cost to produce. Ironically, the plummeting economy was the perfect background to nurture an aesthetic requiring grace and elegance of line and respect for the geometric form, rather than algebraic swirls and spirals and multiplicative embellishments characterized by the Baroque, and even the more restrained Federalist design.

R.U.R. is a science fiction play by Karel Čapek premiering 1921 which introduced the word “robot” into the English language. (R.U.R. stands for Rossum's Universal Robots), serving as the prototype for Isaac Asmiov’s “I, a Robot,” series. The play begins in a factory that makes artificial people called "robots, creatures closer to modern androids or clones, as they can be mistaken for humans and can think for themselves. After finishing the manuscript, Čapek realized he had created a modern version of the Jewish Golem legend. Later, he wrote in War with the Newts, in which non-humans become a servant class in human society. Note the window treatments and the costumes of the robots, the artwork on the wall and the circular motif above the door.

Yet, the popularity of an art form cannot be attributable solely to its affordability or practicality, or even its attractiveness. Art, after all, is an experience, one that needs translation and exposure to the masses to popularize it. And so, without TV or the internet, without home decor magazines or HGTV, the unique characteristics of the 1920s and 1930s found one additional avenue to bring the tableau before the “commoner,” introducing and glamorizing what might have otherwise drifted into a temporary craze – the movies.

The movie theater, the prevalent recreation center of the day, became the milieu to showcase Art Deco through its in set (and costume) design – even its architecture and its own interior design. But freed from the practical con-
siderations of mass production or practicality, the Hollywood set designer was freed to let imagination run wild, to take the pared down and understated and display the designs in the context of spectacle, portraying the designs in the setting of sheer magnificence and grandeur, resulting in the astounding and memorable set designs of the 1920s and 1930s. Sadly, the movies are hard-to-come by and isolated images of the sets are barely accessible. Those that are available are muddy and grainy. But even in the poorly pixilated images, their grandeur becomes apparent. These designs became the style of choice for science-fiction and futuristic themes, and the futuristic forms of the eventually realized technological developments owe their origins to the imaginations of the original Art Deco designers.

Form: While many movie theaters were designed in Art Deco fashion, (following that icon of the design, Radio Center, designed by Donald Deskey) it is the set designs that inspire the magic of its use in interiors. The first recognized use of Art Deco in set design emerged in 1928 and is attributable to Cedric Gibbons in the film “Our Dancing Daughters.” In addition, Mr. Gibbons designed the Art Deco inspired interiors of Private Lives (1931) and the Thin Man (1934-6). Private Lives is the modern Noel Coward adaptation.

“Our Dancing Daughters” (1928) is a silent gem directed by Harry Beaumont. This “Jazz Age” melodrama focuses on three flappers out for a wild time finding men. Socialite Diana Medford, played by Joan Crawford, is an honest and decent girl noted for her love of dancing and wild parties. Diana’s best friend Ann, played by Anita Page, is not only a conniving little tramp who passes herself as a good girl, but also a cold hearted gold digger. Beatrice, played by Dorothy Sebastian, is largely reformed, but she is a girl with a past. Notice the sconces in the background.

Our Dancing Daughters (1928) Set design by Cedric Gibbons, who also designed the Oscar statuette, which he would win more times than any one else, other than Walt Disney. The repetitive geometric shapes graduate in size on the back wall, a hallmark of the Art Deco design. The form is echoed on the wall sconces, a popular Art Deco design feature. And note the ubiquitous high ceilings.
The Thin Man

Set design by Cedric Gibbons (1934)
Simple use of rectangular shapes unify the décor, while the lines are echoed on the bed covering and the window panes, and the desk, a dead ringer for a Parson’s design.

After the Thin Man
(1936)
(from Cinema Style)

A Cedric Gibbons set design reinterpreted by Richard Finkelstein for Private Lives (c.2000).
This is my personal favorite Cedric Gibbons Set. c. 1930s

Night of the Lawyers, a modern Art Deco design created in 1997.
What dazzles me about these two sets, about which I can find little data other than one is from the 1930s and the other is relatively recent (1997), is the high ceiling found in so many Art Deco sets. Coupled with the rectangular marble obelisks, topped with statuettes or gilded spheres, the look is dramatic, yet achievable. In the realm of television, the look was copied in “My Little Margie” a 1950s froth of a sitcom, in the glamorous offices of Margie’s father, Verne. There glass brick added to the industrial-modern chic.

Glamour: “Just Imagine”
“The art deco interiors of this pre-code MGM comedy gave America a glimpse into how the wealthy dealt with the loss of money and power at the height of the Great Depression. Here Jean Harlow luxuriates in her wedding cake of a bedroom. The lush shag carpet, plumed bedposts and ruched drapes demonstrate great use of texture and scale. The unifying power of white ties it all together for total glamour.” 

http://www.elledecor.com/image/tid/4546?pause=0&page=1

While the glamour of these movies may have been innovative for the day, they are the stuff that inspires current interior designers, and offshoots can be seen by just flipping through any current upscale Décor Magazine. The shiny sinuous sheets and bed coverings have been inexpensively recreated with polyester and polished cotton and are motifs easily duplicated in today’s bedroom. Adding mirrored vanities and a rounded opening bordered by sheer drapes effectively copies the look of the Mata Hari Bedroom. (1931).
Certain unofficial “rules” applied to the creation of the Hollywood Art Deco bedroom:

- Only the finest quality materials were used- a feat that can be achieved today by the vast array of superior simulated materials available.
- It was important that the look of the bedroom was sumptuous, luxurious and über-sexy!
• All of the bedroom elements had to portray a similar glam aesthetic, however, the individual pieces were often a very eclectic mix of design styles.

• Non-traditional bedroom furniture such as armchairs, mini-sofas or chaise lounges and coffee tables also started making their way into the boudoir.

• Having a small reading area or cozy vignette in front of a fireplace within the bedroom was the height of luxury and easily portrayed the look of wealth and affluence.

Take a look at the bedroom in “Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day,” a movie made in 2008 that tells a story written in 1939 to see these rules interpreted in modern times. Note the rounded room, and high ceilings, two features very identifiable with Art Deco design, even in the contemporary rendition.

If there is one element that certainly defines Art Deco it is the repetitious use of simple geometric shapes. Here merely the stacking of hemispheric steps in graduating sizes conveys the style. (see below in “Our Blushing Brides.”)
A little art deco glamour: Barbara Leonard from Monsieur le Fox (1930)

Our Blushing Brides 1930

Letty Lynton, 1932
Joan Crawford in an Art Deco Revolving Doorway
Repetition of form

The bold use of stepped forms and sweeping curves (unlike the sinuous, natural curves of the Art Nouveau), chevron patterns, and the sunburst motif are typical of Art Deco. A resurgence of interest in Art Deco came with graphic design in the 1980s, where its association with film noir and 1930s glamour led to its use in ads for jewelry and fashion.

A 1930s film set

Notice the form of wall sconce repeats in the chandelier; the round table repeats the semi-round doorway, which is repeated in the distance.

Mood

If any style conveys the new age of modernism, certainly it belongs to the streamlined form of Art Deco. There could then be only one possible style suitable for the backdrop of Ayn Rand’s, “The Fountainhead.” In his first solo effort on a film, set decorator Edward Carrere gives a prime example
of setting a mood through set design. Through the use of miniature skyscrapers, matte paintings and soundstage sets, Carerre designed prewar modernist apartments complete with spectacular views of the city, sweeping terraces, Alvar Aalto/Scandinavian style modular furniture, seemingly unsupported cantilevered staircases and reflective tabletops, floors and glass everywhere. He was also heavily influenced by German Expressionism.

Scenes from *The Fountainhead* (1949)
But perhaps the most brilliant use of Art Deco design as a backdrop was in King Kong. Can you imagine the giant hairy gorilla grasping the diminutive and fragile Fay Wray with Fontainebleau in the background – or the Alcazar? Only the sleek lines and sinuous array of lit portholes would provide the needed contrast.

Carerre’s design is characterized by themes of shapes - hexagonal grids, rectangular rug with woven pattern of squares in an orthogonal room with a sofa placed on the diagonal.

Film historians note the sets represent the “last gasp of modernism of the times.” Ironically, the very elements the architectural press disputed (such as the contemporary designs of the Enright House) became popular years later in Manhattan.
King Kong battling an airplane atop the Empire State Building in 1933.

1933 Poster for King Kong at left. On the right is a poster for the 1976 remake—hardly conveys the drama even though the plot is far more diabolical.
As much as Cedric Gibbons was credited with popularizing the style in 1938, the initial introduction of Art Deco in film predated this by about a decade, and in illustration by—believe it or not—about 30 years. The “streamlined” form and independence of line associated with the movement was well suited for the newly mined genre of science fiction. Take a look at these photos from the 1927 film Metropolis, and lament how later renditions of robots and a futuristic society pale in comparison:

**Metropolis (1927)**

Fritz Lang’s silent sci-fi may be best known for its wondrous female robot, Eve, but it’s the set design that really takes your breath away. It features a cloud-scraper contemporary Tower of Babel, an industrial workers’ production hell-hole, and super-modern, master-of-the-universe-style offices—all revealing its creators’ in-depth knowledge of the very latest European architectural developments. Whether they’re interpreting Art Deco, Bauhaus Modern or Expressionism, all the buildings shown are terrifying. The overall effect is curiously Gothic, shadowy, elongated, chiaroscuro. And scary.

*It has taken a year, but the only known nearly complete version of Fritz Lang’s Metropolis has finally made its way from where it was discovered in Buenos Aires to Wiesbaden, Germany where it will undergo restoration at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau Foundation.*
**Metropolis**, whose futuristic art-deco look and social criticism has influenced countless films since its release in 1927, has been subjected to numerous trims over the years at the hands of various worldwide distributors. Most of those trims were eventually rediscovered, leading to previous restored versions of the film that have been released over the last two decades.

1920 Version of Metropolis (above)

Based on Fritz Lang’s 1927 masterpiece *Metropolis*, Hollywood Collectibles proudly presents their tribute - the *Maria* robot! Standing over 20" tall on her themed base, this is not only a stunning depiction of the first robot to appear in film, but also a standalone Art Deco work of art! This incredible piece is constructed from heavyweight polystone and then hand-painted to the finest detail.

From the Distributor
Update: September 1, 2010
(Editor’s Note: Electro will be on exhibit at the National Building Museum through July 10, 2011 as part of the museum’s Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s exhibition.)
Compare the modern posters for Star Wars and Star Trek movies (top left and bottom) with the poster for the sci-fi film Metropolis (1927) Somehow, the art deco motif conveys a much more dramatic and ominous feel than the more technically advanced modern creation.
ART DECO EVEN BEFORE THEN ... AND AFTER NOW

While traditionally Art Deco is said to have arisen in 1910 at the earliest, one can find harbingers of the aesthetic in the realms of science fiction (and Egyptian Revival, discussed in an earlier edition of Trans Lux).

In the imaginative free reign appropriated by the creators of science fiction and their illustrators, one can find the seeds of what eventually became a movement of its own.

Consider the illustration below from a Jules Verne novel called “From Earth to the Moon” published and illustrated c. 1863!

“...there were over four thousand illustrations in Jules Verne’s Voyages Extraordinaires—an average of 60+ illustrations per novel, one for every 6-8 pages of text in the original in-octavo red and gold Hetzel editions. Since the publication of Verne’s first novel in 1863, these Victorian-looking woodcut plates and maps have constituted an integral part of Verne’s early science-fiction tales: to such an extent, in fact, that today most modern French reprints of the Voyages Extraordinaires continue to feature their original illustrations—recapturing the “feel” of Verne’s socio-historical milieu and evoking that sense of faraway exoticism and futuristic awe which the original readers once experienced from these texts. And yet, to date, the bulk of Vernian criticism has virtually ignored the crucial role played by these illustrations in Verne’s oeuvre. . . .

‘As I have discussed in somewhat more detail elsewhere, there appear to be four different categories of illustrations in the Voyages Extraordinaires, each of which has a different semiotic and/or didactic function within the narrative. The first offers renderings of the protagonists of the story—e.g., portraits like the one of Impey Barbicane in De la terre à la lune [From the Earth to the Moon] (#1). The second features the places visited by the protagonists and are normally more panoramic and postcard-like—e.g., the many exotic locales, unusual sights, and flora and fauna which the heroes encounter during their journey, like the one from Vingt mille lieues sous les mers [20,000 Leagues Under the Sea] depicting divers walking on the ocean floor.’
Notice the repetitive cross-hatching contained within the modernistic dome. This illustration of Jules Verne’s work was done by Alphonse de Neuville (1835-1885).

George Benett’s rendering of Verne’s novel is considered uniformly banal and boring, yet... This is the work which made Jules Verne world-famous.

Yet, look at the fantastic helicopter airship Albatros in the 1886 novel Robur-le-conquérant.
By 1910, of course, the rudiments of Art Deco had begun to lay roots in art and architecture. But notice how George Roux (1850?-1929), the second most prolific illustrator of the Voyages Extraordinaires—responsible for illustrating 22 novels in the series, mostly during the last years of Verne’s literary production (#48) aesthetic in his illustration of Verne’s Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow; the streamlined design of the wings and engine long preceding modern design.

As Arthur Evans states “In conclusion, I believe that it is not too exaggerated to say that the novels of Jules Verne’s Voyages Extraordinaires constitute a key socio-historical artifact in understanding the dawn of our modern age—not only because of their much-discussed literary status as proto-sf, but also because of their evocative illustrations. The shift from a 19th-century worldview to an early 20th one is evident both in the stylized content of these pictures—the manner of dress, the facial hair, the Victorian
“dream machines,” the Saint-Simonian portrayal of scientists as conquering heroes, etc.—and in their actual published format...."

ART DECO OF THE FUTURE

While the popularity of Art Deco can be seen by the spiraling rates of collectibles, some of which verge on the antique, some of which are merely period authentic, there is a movement afoot to translate and incorporate the Art Deco aesthetic into neo-modernism or what I call “fantastic-futurism.” These creators integrate period Art Deco into thoroughly modern concepts, replete with LEDs and advanced digitalization, or use the Art Deco form to inspire even more futuristic creations.

One of my favorite examples of this is the work of the lighting designer Richard Corrie who conceives of some of the most imaginative and inspiring light designs which can be seen at http://lightengerystudio.com (check out the “Vortex Club Animation” as well). But, by far the best incorporation of Art Deco into modern/futuristic design is Corrie’s imaginative animation called the palace. You may be able to access it at http://lightengerystudio.com/flash/palace/Palace.htm. In Mr. Corrie’s fairy tale adventure one clicks on room after room to see his conception of the fairy tale palace of the future. But notice how Art Deco furniture and lighting is used – either as an inspiration- or exactly as if the futuristic princess were importing Art Deco “antiques” from a long distant past, and how beautifully they integrate with design of the future. (Check out especially the second floor room on the right). The animation is truly a treat to behold, and I strongly recommend it. (Many thanks to Richard Corrie for giving permission to share his work. You can reach him at 818-565-1033 to commend him directly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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